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COMMENTARY

# Viral Culture, Memes in Society and Politics: An Interview with Anastasia Denisova

## WPCC Editorial Board

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*Internet Memes and Society: Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts* (Denisova, 2019) was published in 2019. Much of the book by Anastasia Denisova of the University of Westminster reflected on the roles and meanings of memes, as well as the reasons why so many memes go viral.

This *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* interview with the author reflects on questions arising from the study. It also expands on the relationship between memes and viral media, whether brands can suffer setbacks when trying to manufacture 'creative' memes, global tactics for meme usage, their role in politics and the differences and similarities between meme culture in Russia and the West.

**Keywords:** viral media; memes; Russia; media politics; social media; attention

## Introduction

Dr Anastasia Denisova worked as a journalist in Russia for over a decade in the capacity of news editor and reporter, editor of a travel magazine and a freelance columnist for many titles. She is currently Senior Lecturer in Journalism at University of Westminster. In 2019 as well as co-editing WPCC's special issue on 'Media Activism' (see Denisova and O'Brien, 2019) she published her monograph *Internet Memes and Society: Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts* (Denisova, 2019). This book focuses on the nature of memes, their evolution and relation to affective politics online with extensive material on Russian society, propaganda and resistance in the 2010s and US memes on Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in the 2016 election campaign. Taking its cue from the content of the book, *WPCC* took time out to ask the author about her research, its relationship to viral media and future directions for meme studies.

**WPCC:** Congratulations on a wide-ranging and thought-provoking study (Denisova, 2019). It was especially interesting to see so much reflection on memes and politics in specific contexts notably Russia. Considering the theme of this special issue do you feel that viral media and memes have become even more intertwined in 2019 and 2020 in the political arena than before, or are we noticing this more perhaps?

**Anastasia Denisova:** Memes have been known as an internet darling for a few decades, but now they have entered the communication mainstream. Instead of being limited to 4Chan

and 9GAG, inside jokes and threads, they are ubiquitous. A 70-year old is as capable of sending a meme to their friends and family as a 12-year old. The attractiveness of memes lies in their visibility – it is way easier to notice an image with little text in the flows of newsfeeds and WhatsApp groups – their fun nature, and the ease at replicating them. Memes are viral – but not only memes can be part of virality.

Politics has become viral due to the fact that politicians followed the audience – and the audience is online. Visiting the doorsteps of people's houses has not been as efficient – think of the UK elections – as sharing multiple tweets, stories, memes in social media. We can see in the examples of Trump, Johnson, Salvini and many popular, or populist, politicians, how eagerly they manipulate the public by speaking in one-liners, or being recorded engaging in weird or 'too' relatable activities – all those actions that can help their message and their persona 'go viral'. We will see more viral politics in the years to come.

**WPCC:** Considering the theme of this issue and that a number of writers have devoted space to discussing distinctions between virality/virals and memes … would you say for internet culture in 2020 that you can have impactful memes without virality or have great virality without memes?

Certainly there is a difference. Not every meme goes viral. Memes are popular, this we know for sure. Only those memes that gain considerable interest and sharing become known. Unknown 'meme' is not a meme. However, virality is a phenomenon that enables a message to travel across platforms, contexts, audiences, while keeping its content and shape. Memes are much more flexible – the audience members can remix and tweak them along the way. Adjusting memes is part of the pleasure – see all the versions of the recent Dolly Parton meme (below) that she posted (inviting responses and adaptations) recently. It is known as a 'challenge', because many users took time to offer their iterations and compete in humour and edginess.

There are platforms now that allow even those users without any picture editing skills to create their own version of a popular meme – add a tagline or replace the image.
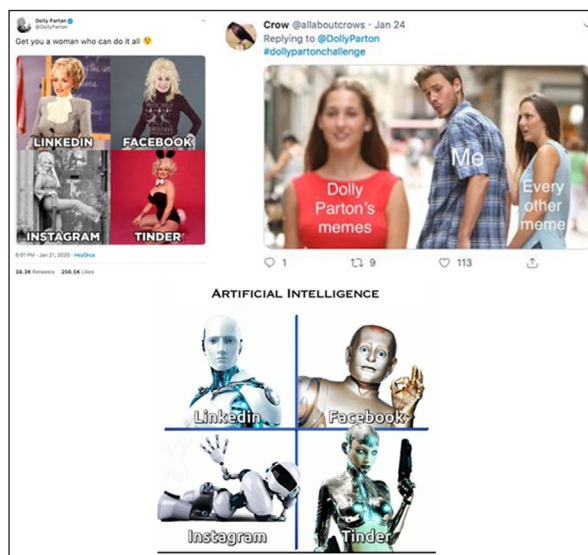


**Figures 1, 2, 3** (above): Dolly Parton's meme challenge https://twitter.com/DollyParton/status/1219681321762656256.

In virality, a tweet, a saying, a dress, a tune, an exclamation, an ad or a headline can go viral, meaning that way more formats of communication can enjoy a sudden and rapid proliferation. 'OK Boomer' can be seen as a catchphrase or a meme. A recent news story about a banana attached to the wall as a piece of contemporary art in LA (that was eaten before going rotten, just to be duly replaced by another fruit) went viral although it is more the story than the format that people found amusing, ridiculous or perplexing.

**WPCC:** In the introduction of your book (Denisova, 2019, 9) you discuss links between memes and the advertising industry in form and in affective intention. What is your sense of how brands have been working with meme culture and whether they have sometimes fallen foul of its creativity or unpredictable mutations?
**AD:** Memes are tricky to get right. There are at least two factors that may present a challenge for advertisers willing to exploit the meme appeal. First, they are time-sensitive. Memes have a really short shelf life; you would not remember a meme that was popular two weeks ago. Given that creating a campaign, pitching to the client, revising and getting the approval from them, then taking the idea to the creative team to complete takes time; this means that the meme-based ad campaign will already be seen as vintage.

The second issue with memes is that they are always charged with an emotion. They are most likely to be ironic or sarcastic – many memes communicate a strong judgemental perspective, which may not fit many brands.

Perhaps, an extra trap can arrive from the remixable nature of memes. A meme-based campaign can be remixed to mock the advertised product or company with potentially detrimental effects for the brand reputation.

**WPCC:** Limor Shifman (2014, 66) drawing upon Jonah Berger and Katherine Milkman's (2012) study, highlighted six elements for viral success, the first and foremost, of which is 'positivity' that audiences are keenest to share. Your work on politics and journalism in this book seems to focus much more on the 'Demotivator' format in memes with numerous interesting examples. In more obviously commercially inspired contexts do you think 'positivity' still rules when it comes to viral memes?
**AD:** There is a strong emphasis on emotional reaction as the trigger for sharing. While I agree that positivity is among the reasons why users forward stories to their social circles, it is still the three psychological triggers that make us fight instead of flight. In this, I agree with the excellent work Berger and Milkman (2010) that you mention – three emotions activate people to take action (share, click, or write a comment, in this case) – awe, anger and anxiety. In my upcoming research, I am looking at the triggers for journalistic stories to go viral. Based on the interviews with the leading editors and journalists from the UK and US, it will show that people are more likely to share concerning stuff, rather than happy affirmations. There is also the effect of relatability to one's social status or stage in life – one of the soon-to-be-published findings of my upcoming work is that people often share the articles that talk about the insights of working in a particular company or struggling with similar issues at work. They are emotionally driven, these stories, for sure, but there is also a remarkable social barometer in this stories – people share these office stories with those whom they perceive to be interested in the same level, same topics, coming from the similar office environment.

**WPCC:** Your book highlights Mikhail Bakhtin's theories concerning the 'carnivalesque' as a key aspect of the disorderly, irreverent humour of meme culture. In this issue Sam Duncan (2020) alludes to Huizinga's (1950) notion of disorderly or corrupted 'play'. There is also the

French idea of bricolage. Do you think these two notions also offer any scope for approaching the study of memes in the future?

**AD:** Absolutely. Memes are playful – they offer multiple avenues to express one's creativity and enjoy creativity of the others, and this can manifest not just in the creation but selection of what and why one shares. Memes are playful – they are always an invitation to cheer up, find humour in the situation. If you think of the French bricolage or Dada, Situationists – all these artistic movements and approaches sought to find new meanings, nuances and twists in daily reality. Memes enable this ironic remix of ideas and context – who knew that Dolly Parton would provide a meme-shaped analysis of social networks! But her challenge is essentially this – seeing something worth saying and expressing it in a light, catchy form.

**WPCC:** There are a very striking analogies in the book: memes as mindbombs and memes as the 'Internet's fast-food vernacular, fast-food media' (32–3; 39) with low 'nutritional value'. To continue that analogy there also seems to be in your account an energy/adrenalin spike attached to a successful meme on the part of the creator. Does that mean sometimes there is an energy crash too or an addiction to meme creation or consumption as well?

**AD:** Well noticed. I like how you expanded the fast food metaphor. Social media interface is gamified, it is addictive in a way that people keep coming for likes, shares and attention. Being successful with your memes can build a reputation of a funny, savvy person, worth following and listening to. Those people who share memes in private networks like WhatsApp can also receive a gratification, although at a smaller degree, just a nod or a smiley from the recipients.

However, what I have noticed in my research and mentioned in the Conclusion is that memes are often a dead-end of a conversation. They rarely spark a debate or facilitate communication between sharers and receivers. I am yet to see a satisfying dialogue consisting of memes alone – it is nutritionally low, if not empty, if the participants only use flavour enhancers, but no real food underneath.

**WPCC:** In the middle of the book there is a very striking sentence considering your experience in journals when you say that in Russia 'meme makers have become the new journalists, civil activists and political protesters at the same time' (75). Is Russia leading the way here – the earliest most obvious instance of a new trend across the world – or just an outlier?

**AD:** The Russian media environment is quite peculiar in a way that free media have been shrinking since mid-2000s. There is a tiny space left for the freedom of information, analysis and opinion that does not follow the line of the state-controlled outlets. Therefore social media have become the alternative spaces for liberal-minded professional and amateur journalists to connect with their audience. Yet even this realm is disappearing as we speak.

**WPCC:** Geert Lovink (2019, 120) citing Morris Kolman an unpaid intern on the 2016 Clinton campaign suggests that memes are 'not only products of an increased connection between human and machine; they also display the cultural anxieties of that shift'. Did your research for the book suggest this might be true? Russian digital political culture seems perhaps to be (not always in good ways) highly pioneering but yet also constantly referencing history or older imagined communities, nostalgic perhaps for a belief in utopias? What would you say about such anxieties?

**AD:** During the Soviet Union, a few generations of citizens learned how to express their thoughts in Aesopian language. The tradition of satire and parody is vast and well respected in Russia – hence the reliance on memes as the grandchildren of Soviet parody posters and

newspaper cartoons. I am not sure Russian memes are borne of cultural anxiety over digital era – they are more the way to let off steam about complex situations that people see every day but those that are not reported in the mainstream press.

**WPCC:** Within your research in Russia and knowledge of the UK, have you got a sense of whether there are a lot of jobs to be had (now or in the future) in meme-making or in their circulation or curation, roles in advertising or in public relations focused solely on memes? Or a lot of freelance work even?

**AD:** It is a good skill to have. As any media artefact that graduated from niche subculture – think Silicon valley outfits, Australian coffee culture – memes have become trendy among many generations and social groups who do not care nor know about the provenance of the trend. Surprisingly, memes are still there, and neither niche nor mainstream users have rejected them yet. This is why they are still the beacons of attention and would be useful to exploit in social media management and public communication. Not sure the whole job can consist of drafting memes 9-to-5, but it can surely be an element of one's job requirements in social media.

**WPCC:** We were struck by your discussion of the 'Polite People' meme in Russia where you say that it generated a special flow in exchange on the Crimean topic, 'non-argumentative, but assertive and sentimental. Congenial design, discreet ideological underlining and branding of this media campaign made the 'Polite People' a household name in Russia, prompting the mass production of Polite souvenirs, which included thousands of T-shirts, mugs and glasses adorned with the words 'polite people' (137). Is this at all comparable with the UK's ubiquitous 'Keep Calm and Carry On' World War II poster?

**AD:** An interesting comparison. The similarity can be seen in the pride and unquestionable respect in both UK and Russia of the troops that sacrificed their lives in World War II. A military agenda is still closely linked with patriotism in Russia. The Polite People campaign suggested the modern re-branding of the army as the delicate guardians of good people. It is an attempt to draw on the respect to the past but also offer a vision of the army for the current generation.

**WPCC:** You note that memes in the 2016 Clinton/Trump election campaign followed the 'global tactics of meme usage – they mostly exaggerate the trending topics from the media, they subvert and challenge traditional media and campaigning messages, and they try to insert new themes in the discussion' (195). Is there another way, or do you think this pattern is set and fixed now?

In Western democracies, users enjoy a variety of media from all sides of the political spectrum, they can find plenty of information, features and viewpoints. This is why, as research by Andrew Guess, Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler (2018) shows, most Americans were enjoying a diet of established media sources and only a tiny percentage – 10% – were regular visitors of fake news websites. This proves that American votes were trusting the journalists as their sources of information and analysis, hence memes and other social media reactions came secondary, as a response to what they read and watched. In limited political environments, social media can sometimes be the only sources of reliable facts and this is why memes would flourish there as action points, not reactionary communication.

**WPCC:** There seems to be a flurry of new research on viral media and memes. Since you completed your study has anything in particular caught your eye? And where would you like to see meme research go next?

**AD:** I am very pleased to see that other scientific brains are trying to make sense of memes and virality. The heavy reliance on us, attention-deficit modern humans, on our social media feeds and gadgets, is here to stay. I would personally like to see more research on the media diet and the decisions of audience members on whether and why they consume professional media and when they just rely on memes. I would love to see the transition point from the fast-food media snack that memes are towards interest in improving one's information intake. Psychology of virality and how to use it for the benefit of our societies is something I am currently working on and inviting colleagues to do more of.

**WPCC:** Thank you for your thoughts!

## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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