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Paper Title:

THE MEME IS THE MESSAGE

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Introduction/Theoretical Framework

The expected doubling of the global demand for milk and meat by 2050¹ has focused governmental and scientific attention on the negative environmental², health³, and animal welfare⁴ impacts of production and consumption. Despite this, the negative impacts of meat consumption, particularly relating to the environment, receive limited media coverage⁵ and powerful stakeholders resist change in meat consumption habits⁶. Social media communication strategies offer novel ways to raise the impacts of meat on the public agenda. This paper explores how strategic use of frames or messaging and rhetorical features employed in infographics or “emergent memes”⁷ can engage social media audiences in a meat reduction campaign. Infographics, featuring strong visuals combined with summarizing text, offer the ability to present complex information in a digestible form and help inform, entertain, or persuade the audience⁸. With research indicating images used in communications can enhance cognition and contribute to changes in behaviour⁹, infographics offer an effective strategy in a crowded communications market experiencing exponential growth in communication¹⁰. The Meat Free Mondays Australia¹¹ social media campaign, “The Meme is the Message” poll, drew on theories of agenda melding¹², rhetorical communication¹³ and culture jamming¹⁴ to investigate communication techniques that

¹ Steinfeld, H., Gerber, P., Wassenaar, T., Castel, V., Rosales, M. & De Haan, C. 2006. Livestock's long shadow, FAO Rome (Food and Agriculture Organisation Rome)

² Steinfeld, H., Gerber, P., Wassenaar, T., Castel, V., Rosales, M. & De Haan, C. 2006. Livestock's long shadow, FAO Rome (Food and Agriculture Organisation Rome); Hoekstra, A.Y., Chapagain, A.K. & MyiLibrary 2008, Globalization of water: Sharing the planet's freshwater resources, Blackwell Pub.; Cordell, D., Drangert, J.-O., & White, S. May 2009, 'The story of phosphorus: Global food security and food for thought, Global Environmental Change, vol.19, no. 2, pp. 292-305.

³ Friel, S., Dangour, A., Garnett, T., Lock, K., Chalabi, Z., Roberts, I., Butler, A., Butler, C.D, Waage, J., McMichael, A.J., Haines, A. 2009, Public health benefits of strategies to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions: food and agriculture, The Lancet vol. Health and Climate Change 4 no. 374, pp.216-25; Friel, S. 2010 16 July, Climate change, food insecurity and chronic diseases: sustainable and healthy policy opportunities for Australia, NSW Health Bulletin vol. 21 (6) 129-133, no. 16 July 2010; McMichael, A., Powles, J., Butler, C. & Uauy, R. 2007, Food, livestock production, energy, climate change, and health, The Lancet, vol. 370, no. 9594, pp. 1253-63.

⁴ Foer, J.S. 2009. Eating Animals, Penguin, Vic; Singer, P. 2009. Animal Liberation. Paladin Books, United States.

⁵ Neff, R., Clegg Smith, K. 2009. Yesterday's dinner, tomorrow's weather, today's news? US newspaper coverage of food system contributions to climate change. Public Health Nutrition vol. 12, pp. 1006-14; Friedlander, J., Riedy, C. & Bonfiglioli, C. 2014. A Meaty Discourse: What Makes Meat News? Food Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal, Volume 3, Issue 3, pp. 27-43.

⁶ Black, J. 2010. Oh, meatless Mondays; The movement has legs, but will it be able to get past the industry's talking points?, The Washington Post.; Meat & Livestock Australia. 2014. Red Meat Green Facts. [http://www.redmeatgreenfacts.com.au/Home](http://www.redmeatgreenfacts.com.au/Home;);

⁷ Wiggins, B. & Bowers, G.B. 2014. Memes as genre: A structural analysis of the memescape. New Media & Society, Sage. May 26, 2014.

⁸ Krum, R. 2014. Cool Infographics: Effective Communication with Data Visualization and Design. Wiley, Indianapolis.

⁹ Houts, P., Doak, C. Doak, L. & Loscaizo, M. . 2006. The role of pictures in improving health communication: A review of research on attention, comprehension, recall, and adherence. Patient Education and Counselling. 64: 1-3. Pp. 393-394.

¹⁰ Gantz, J. & Reinsel, D. 2011. Digital Universe Study, Extracting Values from Chaos. EMC Corporation. <http://www.emc.com/leadership/programs/digital-universe.htm>

¹¹ Meat Free Mondays 2014 <https://www.facebook.com/meatfreemondayaustralia>

¹² Shaw, D. & Colistra, R. 2008. Agenda Melding in Encyclopedia of Political Communication. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.; pp. 12-13.; Ragas, M. & Roberts, M. 2009. Agenda Setting and Agenda Melding in an Age of Horizontal and Vertical Media: A New Theoretical Lens for Virtual Brand Communities. Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly. 86.1; pp. 45-64.; Berger, L. & Freeman, M. 2011. The Issue of Relevance of Agenda-Setting Theory to the Online Community. Meta-Communicate Chapman University Communication Studies Undergraduate Research Journal; 1:1; pp. 1-22.

¹³ Macnamara, J. 2012. Public Relations: Theories, practices, critiques. Pearson Australia, Sydney.; Beebe, S.A., Beebe, S. J. &

have potential to attract more participants to the online community. While the media retains a role in influencing the saliency of issues and attributes that are discussed through agenda setting¹⁵, the individualized view of the agenda melding framework allows for a media of connections¹⁶ where, firstly, established values and attitudes of audience members play a role in how issues and attributes are melded into a coherent individual picture of events¹⁷ and, secondly, the process of individuals joining groups encourages melding their agendas with the overall agenda of the group¹⁸. The Meme is the Message poll aimed to develop insights into the agenda melding process by targeting different niche groups in the animal welfare, environmental, health and food areas to build or meld a broader aggregate audience to increase the reach of the campaign. In this respect, it attempted to, firstly, attract potential members through aligned messaging and, secondly, encourage the broader audience to form a stronger hybrid community through shared interests and values. The research also set out to explore how rhetorical elements, as well as key messages or frames, can influence individuals' preferences for infographics in a meat reduction campaign. Rhetoric involves three core elements – ethos, or credibility, character and trustworthiness of the speaker; logos, or the logic and reasoned approach of the argument presented; and pathos, or the use of emotional appeals¹⁹. Contemporary theorists propose that it is the process of using symbols to persuade others that characterizes rhetoric²⁰. In light of contemporary interpretations of rhetoric and evidence indicating that digestible information and concepts can be more effective in a crowded media landscape²¹, the infographics in this study offered conceptual or abbreviated versions of all three rhetorical elements with credible and well-known characters (ethos), research or empirical evidence (logos), and emotional concepts (pathos) all presented in short-hand or summarized versions. Rhetorical theory also has implications for the practice of culture jamming²², which attempts to resist the dominant ideology of consumerism and employs use of subversive pathos or satiric humour in its practice. While all combinations of rhetoric's three core elements were tested in the Meme is the Message poll, a particular objective was to test research indicating that ironic or satiric communication is effective in engaging digital media audiences²³ and that

Ivy, D. *Communication: Principles for a lifetime*. Allyn & Bacon. Boston; Foss, K. 2009. *Rhetorical Theory in Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, Sage. Thousand Oaks, CA.

¹⁴ Wiggins, B. & Bowers, G.B. 2014. Memes as genre: A structural analysis of the memescape. *New Media & Society*, Sage. May 26, 2014.; Sandlin, J. & Milam, J. 2008, *Mixing Pop (Culture) and Politics – Cultural Resistance, Culture Jamming and Anti-Consumption Activism as Critical Public Pedagogy*. *Curriculum Inquiry*. 38: 3. Pp. 323-350.; Lasn, K. 2009. *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America*. Quill. NY.

¹⁵ Smith, A. 2011. *The Internet and Campaign 2010*. Pew Internet and American Life Project. Pew Research.; McCombs, M. & Valenzuela, S. 2007, *The Agenda-Setting Theory* Cuadernos de informacion, no. 20, pp. 44-50.

¹⁶ Berger, L. & Freeman, M. 2011. *The Issue of Relevance of Agenda-Setting Theory to the Online Community*. *Meta-Communicate Chapman University Communication Studies Undergraduate Research Journal*; 1:1; pp. 1-22.

¹⁷ Shaw, D. & Colistra, R. 2008. *Agenda Melding in Encyclopedia of Political Communication*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.; pp. 12-13.

¹⁸ Ragas, M. & Roberts, M. 2009. *Agenda Setting and Agenda Melding in an Age of Horizontal and Vertical Media: A New Theoretical Lens for Virtual Brand Communities*. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*. 86.1; pp. 45-64

¹⁹ Macnamara, J. 2012. *Public Relations: Theories, practices, critiques*. Pearson Australia, Sydney.; Beebe, S.A., Beebe, S. J. & Ivy, D. *Communication: Principles for a lifetime*. Allyn & Bacon. Boston; Foss, K. 2009. *Rhetorical Theory in Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, Sage. Thousand Oaks, CA.

²⁰ Beebe, S.A., Beebe, S. J. & Ivy, D. *Communication: Principles for a lifetime*. Allyn & Bacon. Boston; Foss, K. 2009. *Rhetorical Theory in Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, Sage. Thousand Oaks, CA.

²¹ Houts, P., Doak, C. Doak, L. & Loscaizo, M. 2006. *The role of pictures in improving health communication: A review of research on attention, comprehension, recall, and adherence*. *Patient Education and Counselling*. 64: 1-3. pp. 393-394.

²² Lasn, K. 2009. *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America*. Quill. NY.; Sandlin, J. & Milam, J. 2008, *Mixing Pop (Culture) and Politics – Cultural Resistance, Culture Jamming and Anti-Consumption Activism as Critical Public Pedagogy*. *Curriculum Inquiry*. 38: 3. Pp. 323-350.

²³ Shifman, L. 2013. *Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker*. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. 18; pp. 362-377.; Wiggins, B. & Bowers, G.B. 2014. *Memes as genre: A structural analysis of the memescape*. *New Media & Society*, Sage. May 26, 2014.; Milner, R.M. 2013. *Hacking the Social: Internet Memes, Identify Antagonism, and Logic of Lulz*. *The Fibreglass Journal*. 22; pp. 62-92.

strong emotional responses to content encourage sharing and virality²⁴. Research also indicates that a culture jamming framework can contribute to the uptake and dissemination of social media messages in the form of Internet memes²⁵ which can be described as units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process²⁶. This study offers one attempt to determine possible seeds and combinations of elements to encourage diffusion and uptake of infographics as Internet memes.

Methodology

The Meme is the Message infographics were developed by final year Design university students who were informed that the major aim of the Meat Free Mondays Australia media campaign was to encourage a reduction in meat consumption and present alternative and engaging concepts, information and visuals. Students were encouraged to create a proportion of infographics that presented subversive, humorous or provocative counterpoints to the images and concepts portrayed in commercial advertising by the meat and livestock industry. The poll was designed to test which combinations of three rhetorical elements – ethos, pathos and logos – and four frames or messages concerning meat, were most appealing to participants. The frames – environment, animal welfare, health and food/lifestyle – emerged from previous research involving Australian media content analysis.²⁷ The poll was promoted on over 15 different Facebook communities covering environmental, animal welfare, health and food interests, and online members were asked to vote for their favourite infographics and post optional comments. Qualitative data research was conducted through two focus groups to elicit more in-depth views and comments on the infographics.

Findings/Discussion

The Meme is the Message campaign determined a number of major themes emerging from the poll's results and focus group discussions and indicates there are novel ways to raise the impacts of meat on the public agenda through strategic combinations of rhetorical elements and messaging and through melding and aligning social media communities.

Graphic humour: Culture jamming at play

The infographics featuring use of subversive pathos or “culture jamming” elements were the most popular in the poll, which is consistent with previous research indicating that ironic communication or satiric humour is particularly effective in engaging digital audiences. Poll and focus group research found that environmental

²⁴ Berger, J. & Milkman, K. 2012. What Makes Online Content Viral? *Journal of Marketing Research*. 49:2. Pp. 192-205.; Nelson-Field, K. Riebe, E. & Newstead, K. 2013. The emotions that drive viral video. *Australasian Marketing Journal*. 21:4. Pp 205-211.

²⁵ Lasn, K. 2009. *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America*. Quill. NY; Sandlin, J. & Milam, J. 2008, *Mixing Pop (Culture) and Politics – Cultural Resistance, Culture Jamming and Anti-Consumption Activism as Critical Public Pedagogy*. *Curriculum Inquiry*. 38: 3. pp. 323-350.; Wiggins, B. & Bowers, G.B. 2014. *Memes as genre: A structural analysis of the memescape*. *New Media & Society*, Sage. May 26, 2014.

²⁶ Shifman, L. 2013. Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. 18:; pp. 362-377.;

²⁷ Friedlander, J., Riedy, C. & Bonfiglioli, C. 2014. A Meaty Discourse: What Makes Meat News? *Food Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Volume 3, Issue 3, pp. 27-43.

messages can be used effectively in a meat consumption reduction campaign, particularly if combined with pathos elements. Participants referred to strong and confronting messages, in particular, relating to the environment, that were made more palatable with humour and found visual metaphors particularly appealing. These findings provide a strategy for environmental campaigners to use social media to seed and circulate Internet memes consistent with their campaign objectives.

Celebrity heads: Ethos effective when represented visually

The rhetorical element of ethos, when presented as a visual metaphor, rated relatively highly, especially in relation to individuals with celebrity or iconic status. Focus group participants' preference for visual representations of well-known individuals as opposed to textual quotes or information from authorities indicates that ethos, as visual metaphor, is particularly effective in engaging social media audiences.

Personal likes and different shares: the potential for agenda melding

Focus group participant responses indicating differences between infographics that were the most liked and those most likely to be shared have implications for the agenda melding framework. This research provides insights into the agenda melding process and its contribution to group consensus and aggregation building through individuals reaching out to affiliates to incorporate their interests and values into the group agenda.

Importantly, this study into the application and potential of infographics and strategic use of messages and rhetorical features, demonstrates how social media can be utilized to promote issue politics, where smaller, yet cohesive groups can be encouraged to develop agency in advocacy agendas. This has relevance for environmental campaigners who experience difficulties in setting the media agenda.