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Analyzing the Mutability of Oral and Digital Media

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Analyzing the Mutability of Oral and Digital Media

The mediums in which works are produced change the way those works behave over their life cycles. Artifacts created in oral media spaces develop differently than artifacts pushed through the multimedia space of the internet. This paper will seek to compare and contrast the mutation over time of two bodies of artifacts: one that was circulated in oral form and one from the digital media of the internet. Both corpora have been thoroughly studied and tracked in their life cycles, and though no new history of either artifact will be charted here, a comparison of their textual stability can give insights to the behavior of the larger media spaces that they exist within. Even though the internet artifacts exist in a more stable medium than oral ones, the quantity of different interpretations as well as the severity of the differences between versions of the digital artifact are far greater than the variance seen in the oral artifact. This pattern seems to go against the predictions of some structuralist theorists like Walter J. Ong, but can be explained by collaborative action and the tendency of digital media to encourage it. Though the lifecycles and mutations of both bodies have many similarities, it is their differences that may give insight to the differences in their media. The specific features of the internet media landscape that encourage these differences are: the differences in proficiency required to create new versions of each, the disseminative or discursive system by which information is distributed within each medium, the level of hypermediation in each medium, and the mechanisms by which each body of artifacts relates to the publics that receive them.

The oral artifact being examined is the family of ballads originating from “The Berkshire Tragedy, or the Wittam Miller,” a broadside poem published in London, 1744 (Anderson 107). The poem was digested into more portable bits, and then exported in the form of songs that mutated to match the localities of the places it traveled, emphasizing those locations. The many variants of this ballad will be compared with each other to determine the breadth of the variations the corpus has undergone as it has spread. Based on the poem that is the source material, and for convenience, this large body of multiple texts will be referred to as “The Berkshire Tragedy.”

From the current digital age, the meme “Pepe the Frog” will be held up in comparison. For this paper, a “meme” will be defined as a single digital artifact that fits within a body of digital artifacts that share critical relationships with each other, distinguishing them as members of the same body. This paper will analyze the wide body of Pepe the Frog memes as one corpus, defined as the group of digital media which makes use of the little green frog character named “Pepe”. While it is true that Pepe the Frog exists in digital multi-media, and is hence not strictly visual, this analysis will focus on the visual artifacts of Pepe since they comprise the majority of easily available and heavily circulated Pepes. Both bodies of artifacts, digital and oral, have changed greatly over the span of their circulation even though they exist in different mediums from each other and across different ranges of physical locations. The murder ballad was primarily spread in person, with most of its mutations being small details used to fit each new location in which it was being performed. Pepe the Frog is an opposite artifact, existing partly or entirely in visual media in most of its forms and circulating through the internet, which de-emphasizes locality as part of its format.

In order to fully compare the mutation of The Berkshire Tragedy to the mutation of Pepe the Frog, some digital vocabulary offers a conceptual foundation to explore the qualitative

differences between oral and digital spaces. Though *The Berkshire Tragedy* is not commonly referred to as a “meme” in modern vernacular, it is useful here to describe it with the concept of a memeplex. A memeplex is the entire collection of artifacts that can be identified as a mutation of a particular “meme” (Hahner 156). For instance, one particular image which features Pepe the Frog is a single Pepe meme, distinguishable from all of the other Pepe memes that still use the frog but are not the exact same image. The Pepe memeplex is the collective corpus of artifacts Pepe has been used in. Described this way, one individual song would be a single meme, and the memeplex of *The Berkshire Tragedy* would refer to every song that is a direct mutation from or reference to “*The Berkshire Tragedy*”. The larger genre of murder ballads, however, is too vague of a category to call a memeplex, as it lacks enough of the critical tension between a mutation’s similarities and the traits that make it original; this tension is called double duality, and it defines the boundaries of a memeplex. A short and easy way to understand double duality is to look again at image memes. Each new individual meme must be different than ones within its memeplex, otherwise it will be considered a repost or simple edit of an existing image instead of a meme in its own right. At the same time, the image must retain enough characteristics of the other memes in order to be recognized as a related image; too much mutation and it will no longer be a recognizable member of the memeplex (Shifman 341, Valdivia 77).

One of the most defining characteristics of a communication medium is its ability to change the way artifacts within them behave. As Walter Ong postulates in “Orality and Literacy”, oral societies create living texts out of their stories, fostering slow and consistent change in their canon over time (33). Meanwhile, modern literate languages crystalize their form and meaning to the point of cementing a text over time. Ong predicts that the stabilizing power of literacy is so great that written language can even freeze the changes in spelling and

pronunciation of their words, changing the language from a dialect to a grapholect, which has standard rules recorded in written texts instead of in the minds of living speakers (Ong 102). Ong traces this pattern of cementation through literacy as cultures become more dependent on writing, however this pattern breaks a bit in the digital age due to the prevalence of mutation that occurs within Internet media. Ong does not give particular focus to the degree to which a medium encourages the behaviors of collaborative creation and recycling of artifacts. In order to understand the analysis of these corpora, though, a short history of each subject is required.

The Berkshire Tragedy has many versions, ranging in locations from Europe to the United States. Every version has minor changes that fit the song to the area, the easiest to spot changes between the artifacts being the titles with each one taking the title of the place it was being ported into: “The Waco Girl”, “The Wexford Girl”, “The Yorkshire Girl”, etc. These poems are traceable from the characteristics of the murder that takes place within them. The original broadside was penned in London, and the memeplex of “The Berkshire Tragedy” was carried from Europe to America in the same way of many ballads in the Cumberland mountains, “(T)he folk-lore of the British Isles yet lingers here untouched and unchanged. Borne westward on the tide of emigration from England, Scotland, and even from Ireland, to Jamestown and Philadelphia, it has radiated by oral transmission thence through the 'gaps' and 'breaks' of the Alleghany ranges into its present seat...” (Shearin 313). The ballad was carried through oral tradition to new locations, with the musicians editing the smaller details of the verses to make the story local. This created unique publics for each version of the ballad, defined by locality and largely unaware of the larger memeplex of the song. The lifecycle of The Berkshire Tragedy resulted in many similar artifacts, but the history of Pepe the Frog is more extreme.

Pepe the Frog was a niche internet comic character intended to bring audiences feelings of comfort by relating to things that felt good but were perhaps not “normal” or completely within the societal pale (Valdivia 1). The signature phrase of Pepe at this early stage was “feels good, man,” usually said as the justifying explanation for some harmless behavior that Pepe was being judged for. It mutated as different chat channels, composed of individuals from across the world, began to create their own Pepe comics. These communities began to expand the use of “feels good, man” as a phrase, applying it to more fringe and less acceptable actions. Eventually, as people began editing the actual image of Pepe instead of simply using it as a reaction to stories in text, a culture of “Rare Pepes” emerged. Internet communities began attempting to create Pepe images and context that were unmistakably original, as a game. One particularly extreme mutation happened as white supremacists began to use the approachable Pepe character to normalize the racist views they held in their chat rooms (Valdivia 2). This created an entirely new meaning of Pepe, and a new public to interpret that meaning. These publics were not defined geographically by proximity, but by ideology and like interests. Many fractal versions of the meme formed, leaving it in the heavily contested space it exists today, with interpretations as an online cryptocurrency, a white supremacist dog-whistle, a socialist dog-whistle created in reaction to the white supremacist interpretation, and even a small online cult that believes Pepe has emerged from a prophecy in our subconscious as foretold by the ancient Egyptians (Valdivia 5). These ideological and political ties to the format of the memeplex elevate it into an ideomeme, or an artifact that is understood to convey ideological arguments by the ways and places it is presented (McGee). The extremity of these mutations can be linked to the main platform where Pepe emerged, the anonymous message board 4chan. The format of 4chan churns posts through short life cycles defined by popularity; if a post doesn’t get sufficient

interaction for several hours, it will be pushed down to the bottom of the site, and eventually out of circulation. Users are difficult to track and impossible to identify, with only a long string of numbers to identify them. With no textual usernames, it becomes difficult to differentiate users who post similar content. These two factors created an extremely powerful environment for collective creation of new meanings of Pepe, new meanings selected for success by their likelihood to be recirculated by their audience. One needed to simply pull a Pepe from a popular post, edit it to be sufficiently inflammatory to gain immediate attention, and then throw their new meme into the ring anonymously, with no worries about their extremely offensive or crass comic being connected to them in real life. In ideological content, the mutation of Pepe is more severe than the mutation of The Berkshire Tragedy, but they have some similarities that may illuminate some core parts of the process of mutation for artifacts over time.

In all the versions of The Berkshire Tragedy, the murderer kills the girl and then posts a reward to find her body as a way of deflecting suspicion, but is eventually found out. More precise details, such as the color of the victim's hair and eyes are also found throughout the texts, so that even when the number of stanzas in each song changes slightly there is enough evidence to say one is strongly connected to the previous. These identifiers of the characters do not change between the different versions of the song (Henry 253). In fact, only one narratively significant change in content occurs in the entire corpus of Berkshire Tragedy ballads: the motivation of the murder. All American versions of the song completely omit the original motivation for the murder, which was pregnancy of the victim (Anderson 111). Compared to this significant factor in the murder, the locality of the story is a small detail to change since it does little to influence the ideological content of the artifact. In general, these ballads demonstrate far more textual and ideological stability across their corpus of related artifacts than Pepe the Frog does. Even though

they feature small narrative change, the mutations that occur between different versions of the same murder ballad are largely non-structural, as is typical of families of ballads. One stanza may be removed, but the beginning, ending, and frame of different murder ballads will remain the same so that the whole structure is recognizable (Long 71). The Berkshire Tragedy falls into this pattern. Every mutation of it contains the same frame and general structure, remaining recognizable as the same song.

When dealing with artifacts in context of larger cultural relationships, two kinds of audience awareness, described by modern semioticians, are useful to examine: synchronic and diachronic awareness (Ramat). Synchronic awareness concerns itself only with the artifact being presently examined and is limited in time and relationship to the creation of that specific instance. Diachronic instance concerns itself with the relationships the artifact has to previous artifacts and social movements in time. These awarenesses are essentially audience reactions to artifacts, and so the central difference shown here is whether the artifacts encourage or necessitate audiences to explore the larger memeplex of an artifact in order to engage with it. The Berkshire Tragedy songs require almost exclusively synchronic awareness from their audience in order to be received. A listener to “The Knoxville Girl” doesn’t need to know anything about the movement of the poem from Europe to the Americas, or even that there are other versions of the song in order to get the full experience. Even knowledge of the larger trope of “murdered sweetheart” ballads, well defined in the Americas, is unnecessary to fully engage with the song (Wilgus 172). Digital memes such as Pepe, however, require a significant amount of diachronic awareness to be interpretable at all, as each successive iteration doesn’t completely do away with the connections to the last. Instead, Pepe memes keep breadcrumbs of the previous versions that become part of the joke, so understanding a timeline of change to the meme is

necessary to even find many of the mutations entertaining or even coherent. This difference in synchronic and diachronic awareness is likely also due to the ease at which multiple authors can contribute to the mutation of a meme in comparison to a song. Songwriting is difficult, requiring several technical proficiencies, plus in order to adapt an existing song one needs to have read or heard it before. That means the author of the new version must have been near the location that the previous version was based on, which requires physical travel or incredible chance. These barriers serve as a limiting factor on the growth of the broadside, preventing the changes to the songs over time from becoming too severe. “Three processes [were] necessary but not sufficient [...] variation, selection, and retention... (Blackmore 10)” The changes within The Berkshire Tragedy songs are largely limited to small aesthetic details that indicate location, such as dialect, as well as the setting of the murder in the song. Larger changes, such as the moral judgement of the song, the actions of the characters relative to each other, and even the descriptions of the characters’ appearances never change between versions (Henry 247-253).

The Pepe the Frog meme spread so far and so diffusely perhaps because it requires so very little technical proficiency to interact with. A person needs only an internet connection, a device to access it, and one of any selection of free, easy to use software to edit the images (Milner 12). In comparison to musical proficiency, the ability to travel, and the luck of being in the right place at the time another performer is performing a particular song, the barriers to meme creation are very low, which may explain the extreme mutations the meme has undergone over time. Simply put, more people have a higher chance of interacting with any given meme than any given song, and when they do they have a greater capacity to mutate and repost it. Further, the mediums that most often hold Pepe the Frog memes (internet forums and chat rooms) are hypermediated spaces that encourage creators of new memes to be relatively

unconcerned with the appearance of transparent immediacy (Bolter, Grusin 210). Whereas a performance of a song in person seeks in form to convince the recipient that the sounds they are hearing are unmediated, the format of virtual spaces featuring Pepe the Frog often incorporate the many signifiers of the mediation as part of the artifacts, seeking to use the quirks of the media as a part of the experience instead of making them transparent, which lowers the bar of technical proficiency required to create an artifact that is seen as acceptable to the space.

The Berkshire Tragedy songs and the Pepe memplex have many similar characteristics in the ways they have changed. Each of them mutates into different forms for specific publics, and each public holds a version of the artifact specific to them. Further, they both behave with some of the characteristics Ong outlines as defining traits of oral artifacts. They both describe things agonistically, as most of the characters and relationships to characters within them are described by their conflicts to other groups (Ong 38). For The Berkshire Tragedy, each character within the narrative is defined by their place in the murder. In the Pepe the Frog memes, many of the most successful variants feature a negative emotional reaction to what the Pepe character is doing. Even the origin of the Pepe the Frog comic, “feels good man” is an agonistic sentiment defined by relief from a societal conflict. This is likely because of memorability and virality, or the likelihood of an artifact to be circulated to new audiences by its former audiences (Fan 2). Because Pepe memes centralize the hypermediated and diachronic nature of their spaces, they engender not only an agonistic depiction of each Pepe within the meme, but an agonistic relationship between Pepe and the publics that receive him. Ong points out that a more agonistic story is easier to remember without the aid of writing, and clearly crystalizes in people’s minds (Ong 57). Further, in online formats, messages featuring conflict and inflamed emotions have an advantage in their ability to spread (Fan 9). Recalling the format of the 4chan boards where Pepe

originally rose to popularity, more inflammatory content creates more interactions. It doesn't matter in this medium if the interactions are positive or negative in their support of the use of Pepe, all of them give a meme staying power on the message board. This agonistic emphasis between the two memeplexes is similar, but it points to an important difference between these oral and digital corpora: the difference between discursive and disseminatory media spaces.

Fundamentally, a media space is discursive if information is conveyed from producers of media to consumers of media, and if those roles are relatively fixed. The only way the information within the discursive space changes is if the producer that feeds that area changes the content being produced. Disseminatory media spaces, on the other hand, present the ability for media consumers to go around their most closely related producer if they prefer different content. In the digital landscape this is due to the nodes of the community being prosumers, or individuals in the media space who have the ability to both consume and create content. When a node has the ability to both consume and create artifacts, it has the resulting ability to recirculate, or re-post as well. Because content can be circulated between all nodes in the system instead of only the dedicated producers, the media in the space can change without the dedicated producers being convinced to change their minds. At the core, it changes the battle of ideas from a debate to a battle of reach. Instead of which content is most convincing, the dominance of artifacts is decided by which content can spread to more consumers, since every consumer also has a chance to recirculate the media (Milner 20).

The differences between the Pepe memeplex and The Berkshire Tragedy memeplex begin with discourse versus dissemination. Pepe's digital landscape is a disseminative one, while the songs of The Berkshire Tragedy function more discursively by changing the content produced by specified creators, who are able to use tools that most consumers are not.

The spread of The Berkshire Tragedy is limited by how convinced the musicians in a specific locality are that the song is fitting of the stage. Note here that unlike an online messaging board, it is the producer musician deciding what artifact will be held in the space instead of combined input from the audiences. They also draw the lines of their publics differently. Each different interpretation of each memeplex has its own public that upholds that interpretation as the truest among them. The different publics that held different interpretations of The Berkshire Tragedy are grouped by locality, while the defining characteristic that creates groups and meanings within the Pepe landscape are ideological characteristics. Possibly the most extreme difference between the two is the different necessity of diachronic awareness. In order to even understand many Pepe memes, one needs to understand the internet communities being referenced within them, as many Pepe memes are directly referential to other material (Shirky). This creates a more severe double duality in the memeplex of Pepe vs the memeplex of The Berkshire Tragedy, with each new artifact having to take greater pains to show itself both as unique and as belonging to the larger community. This is because Pepe memes are created at a much higher rate than new Berkshire tragedy songs, with likely millions of different versions of Pepe and less than one hundred identified Berkshire Tragedy ballads (Anderson). This is likely due to the more approachable creation process and the artifacts being easier to find on their medium. This increased rate of new artifact creation increases the likelihood of a memeplex to become ideologically entwined, centralizing around more political meanings than just location (McGee). A memeplex that is ideologically entwined in this way is called an ideomeme, and Pepe is thoroughly an ideomeme as a person's use of the Pepe online will tell the viewer quite a lot about the political and ideological positions of the author. The Berkshire Tragedy variants don't have the same ideological power. The white supremacist Pepes are intrinsically separated from the

communist Pepes by political lines, with each camp that creates them disagreeing fundamentally on the meaning of the little green frog.

Multi-authorship has an important place in the oral landscape, according to Ong. Artifacts passed through oral mediums mutate and shift with each new performer, meaning that whenever these artifacts are captured in a static medium like text, they have effectively collected the input of many different creators (Ong 33). Pepe functions in a similar way, but with an even more extreme tendency towards multi-authorship. Each individual Pepe is not only inspired by, and often in direct reaction to, another meme, but many times the images that are pulled to construct Pepe memes are old memes themselves (Douglass). The parallel operation for oral songs would be taking a recorded sample of another song and incorporating it into the next iteration. The increased potential of multi-authorship contributes to the mutation of digital artifacts despite their relatively stable nature compared to oral mediums. Particularly, the inclusion of images as the format for meme making makes them much more approachable to a mass of creators, with little textual proficiency needed to understand them. This separates multi-media memes from traditional ideographs, as Winkler says, “Since words have a limited capacity for manipulation before their recognizability is lost, the opportunity for potential audience participation in the linguistic realm is comparatively small”. Since they are more approachable, image-based memes are more viral, mutable, and participatory than other visual mediums. The visual nature of multimedia memes does strongly divide them from oral mediums, however, and still carries many traits of written mediums. Digital memes are permanent in the sense that they can (most of the time) be revisited in their exact form. One can save a Pepe meme, and it will be exactly the same every time it is reexamined, whereas in oral mediums, each performance of an artifact changes, and cannot be captured without the assistance of other technology. The intonations in a

story will change, the tuning of an instrument will be slightly different between performances of a song, etc. It is understandable that Ong predicted the increase in stability of artifacts would lead to less mutation of meaning over time, but the ability for recombination counteracts the force of textual stability. Because Pepe memes can be traced back to their origin, one can use every iteration of Pepe as fuel for the next one, both ideologically by responding to old memes and literally by editing existing images of Pepe. This practice is extremely common in the memeplex, with many Pepes being constructed of older Pepes with new clothing or lighting effects edited onto them (Valdivia). The combined ability for digital media to reference older artifacts and to mutate them is extremely well suited to the creation of visual ideographs, or ideomemes. Because of this, interaction with digital artifacts many times leads to political discourse, more so than with oral artifacts.

On the surface, it is puzzling that an artifact like Pepe, created on stable media, has mutated far more than a far-traveled song carried by oral performances. Upon closer examination, the power of decentralized collaborative authorship reveals itself to be the reason for the mutation. Digital memes do mutate in ways more similar to oral media than literary media, but the rate and scope of their mutation is greater. To extrapolate from these two examples, it seems like the digital medium is an extremely powerful facilitator of collective authorship, both in terms of massive teams working to produce content and in the simple form of recombining and republishing artifacts. This study was limited by the selection of two artifacts, and more scholarship should be devoted to the changes of oral and digital artifacts as it relates to multi-authorship, and to what degree the potential for multi-author impacts the type of media created. In the example of Pepe the Frog versus *The Berkshire Tragedy*, it seems that the wider group of creators and the increased speed they are able to spread new versions accelerated the

digital meme into an ideological status that the ballad did not achieve. If this pattern is found to hold across more memeplexes, it could suggest a relationship between disseminatory digital media and the aesthetics of modern politics, where many symbols that appear to be benign are revealed to have extremely politically motivated ties, however that is beyond the scope of this paper. For now, the most that can be suggested is that artifacts stored in stable media can still mutate more than their oral counterparts with sufficient mass participation.

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