Pepe versus Kermit: A Memetic Battleground about Latina/o/e-centric Immigration and Policy

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ABSTRACT

Alt-right "Pepe the Frog" and left-leaning "That's None of my Business Kermit" memes rose to prominence in the months preceding and the days following the 2016 presidential election. They were used on digital meme-centric battlegrounds to tackle issues related to immigration, immigration policy, U.S.-Mexican relations, and the U.S.-Mexican Border Wall. This article will demonstrate how such memes became the ideal creative outlet for political messaging and discussion to spread, and how memetic activism emerged as a distinctive mode of message conveyance and resistance against alt-right rhetoric.

Keywords: Media activism, Memes

Pepe versus Kermit: Un campo de batalla memético sobre inmigración y políticas centradas en latina/o/e

RESUMEN

Los memes de extrema derecha "Pepe the Frog" y de izquierda "Eso no es asunto mío, Kermit" cobraron prominencia en los meses anteriores y en los días posteriores a las elecciones presidenciales de 2016. Se utilizaron en campos de batalla centrados en memes digitales para abordar cuestiones relacionadas con la inmigración, la política de inmigración, las relaciones entre Estados Unidos y México y el muro fronte-

rizo entre Estados Unidos y México. Este artículo demostrará cómo dichos memes se convirtieron en la salida creativa ideal para la difusión de mensajes y debates políticos, y cómo el activismo memético surgió como un modo distintivo de transmisión de mensajes y resistencia contra la retórica de la extrema derecha.

Palabras clave: Activismo mediático, Memes

文章标题：佩佩蛙vs科米蛙：关于拉美移民和政策的数字模因战场

摘要

2016年总统大选之前的几个月和之后的几天里，另类右翼的"佩佩蛙"和左翼的"这不关我的事——科米蛙"模因受到大量关注。它们被用于以数字模因为中心的战场，以应对与移民、移民政策、美墨关系和美墨边境墙相关的问题。本文将证明此类模因如何成为政治信息传播和讨论的理想创意渠道，以及模因激进主义如何成为一种独特的信息传达模式和抵制另类右翼言论的方式。

关键词：媒体激进主义，模因

INTRODUCTION

Memes comprise a uniquely provocative form of "inter-textual" written matter within which a new "bottom-up expression" produces an interfusion between "pop culture, politics, and participation" that has resulted in a near total "blurring of interpersonal communi-

cation with mass" (Shifman 2015, 7). While memes are primarily shared via person-to-person social media networks, they reflect much larger societal mindsets that illuminate more precise, public sentiment (Xiao Mina 2019; Woods and Hahner 2019). The participatory culture encouraged by meme generation, viewing, and sharing has aided in the creation and solidification of a new cultural niche where issues pertinent to the U.S.-based Latina/o/e experience can exist, defend, and organize in a different capacity than previously seen. Two memetic characters that occupy this niche and have achieved a high level of notoriety in on and offline contexts are of interest: Pepe the Frog (Pepe) and the "That's None of My Business" Kermit the frog (Kermit). Having become two of the most recognizable memetic tokens during the 2016 election process, between 2014 and 2016 a tit-for-tat virtual memetic dialogue featuring these two anthropomorphic personalities took place. Far-right leaning meme posts on the Internet chat boards Reddit and 4chan featuring Pepe would rouse the left-leaning Latina/o/e social justice-oriented Facebook page UndocuMedia to respond with one featuring Kermit. This occurred among such a scale of digital followers that the mere presence of a frog emoji (🐸) in a post or hashtag (#) became an alt-right or leftist pint-sized message.

Reddit and 4chan were selected as sites to collect immigration and/or Latina/o/e themed Pepe memes due to their notoriety and high rate of online participation. In March 2020, Reddit ranked #18 in global internet traffic and engagement and #6 in the U.S. (Reddit.com Competitive Analysis…). It is more politically diverse than other Internet discussion boards with both sides of the aisle well-represented within its subreddits (themed threads that branch off from the main page to home in on a particular topic). While not as high of a rank at #937

(#429 in the U.S.), 41.3% of 4chan's global users reside in the U.S. (4chan.org Competitive Analysis…). It is anecdotally and colloquially recognized as a more politically conservative oriented site (Woods and Hahner 2019). Reddit gives users the ability to share links, images, and comments while 4chan specializes in images (making it a perfect breeding ground for memes). The Pepe memes discussed in the sections to follow were selected based on their ease of access (postings open to the public), shareability (how many comments, likes, "up-votes," or the like that they received), relevance to themes surrounding immigration, the U.S.-Mexican border wall, and Latinos/as in the U.S., and date of publication (specifically between January 2014 and November 2016).

While UndocuMedia was not a social news and opinion aggregate like Reddit or 4chan, it was prolific in the number of public posts that were built around memes, a strategy that aided in amassing hundreds of thousands of followers between Facebook (~295,00), Instagram (~26,000), and Twitter (~13,600) over the years it was operational (2012–2018). They stated in their mission statement that they sought to use "digital and social media to empower the undocumented community throughout the U.S." with the intent to help followers "stay informed and fight for social justice" and promote the stance that (un)documented Latina/o/e immigrants were "#HereToStay." Being a primarily online nonprofit organization aligned with questions posed for this project, namely whether or not memes were specifically being used to inform and rally, what the imagery and catchphrases being used suggested about broader socio-political themes leading up to and following the 2016 presidential election, and how its predominately left-leaning audience received the memes that were being created and shared specifically to tackle alt-right rhetoric. While UndocuMedia has since disbanded, its

memetic activity during the 2014–2016 years of interest rivaled its Reddit and 4chan counterparts in immigration and Latina/o/e-themed content, creating a type of memetic call-and-response.

MEMES: AN IDEAL OUTLET

Memes and meme creators have leveraged communal cultural knowledge over the first quarter of the millennium because of the rapidity and immensity of the Internet, wireless connectability, social networking, and perhaps most importantly, the communicative blurring between digital and non-digital spheres that is a new norm. Each individual who participates in the creation, sharing, or observing of media texts comprises the threads of interaction that "form whole tapestries of public conversations" (Milner 2016, 2). These discourses are not trickling from the top-down (the public being dictated to; the public being handed material for consumption) but rather predominantly emanate from a bottom-up series of actions such as hashtags (#), status updates, and remixed and photo-shopped images featuring characters and catchphrases. The cultural power position has shifted towards the individual and the general public who, either by oneself or within the collective, composes material to be consumed outward and upward.

For both sides of the political aisle, the creation, circulation, and transformation of images and texts have become something much more socio-culturally impactful than what was previously only a "quirky little JPG from the Internet" (Milner 2016, 3). A scholarly perception of being merely "quirky" would have been a best-case scenario in the early days of (social) media while juvenile or even meaningless at worst (blips not worthy of inclusion in sophisticated cultural anal-

ysis). The shifting of where and why memes emanate coupled with their unavoidable pervasiveness in modern media ecosystems has meant that a much more viable and verifiable worth can be ascribed to them. For example, memes have cultural functions beyond superficial banter: jokes detract from political absurdity (similarly to the catharsis of gallows humor), arguing points permits one to assume defensive and protective postures with concise imagery and verbiage that pack a punch, and friends can connect thus expanding the network of allies who extract similar motivation or catharsis from memetic banter. Successful memes are those that achieve a wide distribution of spreadability and recognition, spreading widely and quickly, achieving omnipresence within, and more importantly beyond, the Internet (Milner 2016; Shifman 2014; Xiao Mina 2019). That means that in today's cultural sphere, commonality in one sphere (i.e., online) leads to diffusion in others (graffiti, printing on mugs and t-shirts, stickers used on protest signs, etc.), lending itself to the ongoing dissemination, simmering, and perpetuation of a particular sentiment such as the slogan, "build the wall" on the right or "undocumented and unafraid" on the left. In a political and activist sense, such "reappropriation of messages by numerous users helps in promoting a topic … which in turn draws more attention to it" via actions that have become relatively mundane: liking, sharing, and forwarding memes outward (and upward) (Shifman 2015, 33).

Two examples of successful memes that won relatively mainstream recognition between 2014–2016 are the "But That's None of My Business" meme template featuring Kermit the frog seen in Figure 1 and the "Pepe the Frog" template seen in Figure 2.
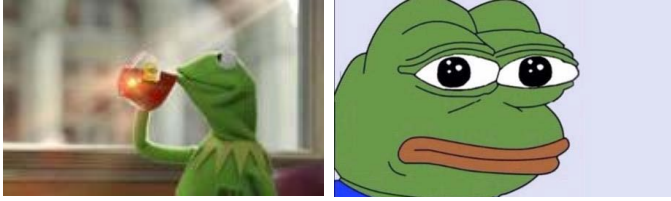
Fig. 1. Left, "But That's None of My Business" Meme Template
Fig. 2. Right, "Pepe the Frog" Meme Template.

Each was manipulated among vastly different groups: the alt-right on one side of the aisle and the liberal millennial and generation z Latina/o/e on the other. The ways that Pepe and Kermit were memetically deployed by 4chan, Reddit, and UndocuMedia illustrate the role that circulated images have had in negotiating "contested terrain in the struggle to define [one's] place" within the social, political, and cultural landscapes of the 2000s (Habell-Palán and Romero 2002, 22).

MEMES AND MAGA

Pepe the Frog (Pepe) is an "anthropomorphic frog character from the comic series *Boy's Club*" created in 2005 by Matt Furie (Zed 2016). Originally, Pepe was an "amphibious dude whose hobbies include[d] hanging out with his roommates, getting stoned, drinking pop, eating pizza, and watching TV" (Frank 2016). The quintessential unmotivated oddball, he spent much of his time "slinging outdated 90s clapbacks at his fellow dude-bros" (Frank 2016). By 2008, Pepe and his catch phrase "feels good man" had become popular mainstay fixtures on the Internet chat board 4chan. He was a "funny animal" who had "an expressive face with an air of mischief suited for many irreverent corners of the internet culture," used by commenters to inject acerbic memetic reactions to discussions (Xiao Mina 2019, 101). By 2009, Pepe and his slogan had spread to other online forums like Reddit, and

five years later, in 2014, he made the leap to more main-stream social media sites like Tumblr, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

The initial mundanity of Pepe cannot be overstated. His face, "whether laughing, crying, or grinning, [was] used to express emotions that words alone fail to capture," and most often in juvenile scenarios (Xiao Mina 2019, 101). How then did this cartoon frog become a visual agent for the alt-right belief that "white identity is under attack by multicultural forces using 'political correctness' and 'social justice' to undermine white people and 'their' civilization?" (Xiao Mina 2019, 100). In part, it is due to the quality of memes examined by Shifman (2015) and Milner (2016) that they can be unique-ly (and quickly) "re-appropriate[d] and adapt[ed] for a new context," depending on the motives of that context (and its corresponding community). Woods and Hahner agree: "It is precisely because Pepe can be drawn and redrawn endlessly that the image is a vehicle for a whole host of viewpoints" (2019, 85–86). Precisely because early Pepe was so mal-leable, the stage was set for his "far right makeover" among uber-conservative pro-Donald Trump groups just as he was becoming one of the most widely recognizable memes with-in online spheres.

One of the first instances of Pepe overtly aligning with then-presidential candidate Trump and his campaign rheto-ric was in July of 2015 on 4chan. Figure 3 shows the version of Pepe known as "smug Pepe" with a Trump-esque hairstyle standing in front of a crude U.S.-Mexican border fence while holding a "Make America Great Again" blue button. The data-base Know Your Meme explains that the creator intended to depict "Donald Trump overlooking a fence at the U.S.-Mexi-can border holding back sad Mexicans" (Frank 2016).

Fig. 3. Donald/Pepe Border Fence. July 2015.

Behind Trump-as-Pepe stands a man with his hands propped up against the fence and a woman holding a baby. The man is baring his teeth as though he were distraught, and his eyes are red as tears stream down his cheeks. They are both presumably immigrants of Hispanic descent seeking to cross the border but unable to do so. Beyond the division implied by the chain link fence and the smugness exuded by the Trump-as-Pepe character, the viewer notices the stereotypical dress of the man. The illustrator's depiction of him with a large black *bigote*, wide brimmed *sombrero*, and pullover *jorongo* (also referred to as a *serape* or *sarape*) is one entirely informed by stereotypes fueled by scholar Leo Chavez's theory, the Latino Threat Narrative (LTN).

Chavez makes the case that the LTN is widely perpetuated by a primarily white-nationalist perspective that reduces Latinas/os/es to tropicalized typecasts that permanently place them in a category of aggressively excluded and often criminalized "other" (Chavez 2013).[1] At its most basic, trop-

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1   "Pan y circo, tacos and soccer, is what Latino culture is all about," or "Latino history is like a crowded fiesta: masks, music, and endless ener-

icalized stereotypes appeal to the "lowest-common denominator ethnic clichés" (Rubenstein 1998, 238). This approach is evident in Figure 3 via the clothing, physical features, and stylizing of the memetic characters, as is the strategy of leaning on the criminal narratives propagated by white-nationalist spheres (that immigrants are law-breaking low-income border crossers breaking into the nation for reasons that are almost certainly nefarious). Such rhetorical strategies are effective in part because there is a long history of recycling nearly identical talking points and merely repacking them according to the popular media outlet of the day (print newspapers to radio to television to social media).

Such hindsight exposes how the U.S.-based Latina/o/e community has not just become a contemporary focus of a threat narrative construction or of pervasive tropicalization but has essentially been one in the U.S. since well-before World War I (Chavez 2013; Chomsky 2014). If societal advancements that span over one hundred years could reasonably include the advancement of collective intellect, why then does something like the LTN retain such effectiveness on such a staggeringly large scale? According to Chavez, an entire society is prey to a deliberate "discursive formation" that creates a passive idealistic legion (citizens and/or the "favored") against entire social sects of the "undesired" (illegals) (2013, 25). Memes that feature Pepe are a part of these discursive formations because visual-text-belief associations are used to influence how and with whom an individual identifies (Miller et al. 2016). Essentially, memes have become meaningful "rhetorical images [because] they can capture public attention and interest more swiftly and enduringly than verbal or written discourse (Woods and Hahner 2019, 92). Miller et

gy" (Allatson 2009, 238).

al. agree that "our relationship to visual images has reached a level of ubiquity that is historically unprecedented" and thus memes are an acceptable method to gauge what is regarded is "normative" (Miller et al. 2016, 156). Normative does not necessarily mean accurate or true; even when information is available that blatantly contradicts that which is a part of the threat narrative, it is not sufficient to change the tone of public reaction or stance or to diminish gullibility once the LTN reaches a critical mass within the collective public opinion.

Figure 4 demonstrates a merging of tropicalized stereotypes with Pepe that reinforced a version of the LTN commonly embraced by alt-right spheres during the 2016 election cycle.

Fig. 4. "Over the Wall" Hot Sauce Pepe. 2017.

"Over the Wall" hot sauce was specifically marketed to an online alt-right clientele by Jeremy Bernstein in 2017 (Cohen 2017). Bernstein's version of Pepe uses much of the same token imagery as figure 3 with the addition of a taco in the right hand and a red chili in the left. He is leaning over what can be assumed to be another version of the U.S.-Mexican border wall proposed by Trump first in 2014 and again in 2015 (Anderson 2019). Little was left to the imagination in terms of who the intended consumer was for the product nor is the LTN component difficult to identify. As stated on the now

defunct website for the product: "Crafted with 100% cultur-ally-appropriated ingredients, it's guaranteed to produce Re-gressive Liberal and SJW [Social Justice Warrior] tears. It is Muy Picante [Very Spicy], my friends!" (Cohen 2017).[2]

There was a growing momentum in the use Trump-as-Pepe images as a type of memetic campaign poster that directly related to rhetoric surrounding the U.S.-Mexican border, construction of the proposed border wall, and overall immi-gration policy. In a move that would solidify Pepe the Frog as a moniker of Trump's brand of politics for the alt-right com-munity, Trump tweeted an image of him as Pepe the Frog standing at a presidential podium in front of an American flag in December of 2015 (Figure 5).

Fig. 5. Donald Trump as Pepe the Frog. October. 2015.

2   The website for Over the Wall Hot Sauce has been placed behind a firewall. It is no longer accessible to the public.

Woods and Hahner explain the significance of this action. While "a cartoon frog might appear to the uninitiated as a rather curious association, the image was far from benign. Instead, the meme was a dog whistle to the Alt-right" (2019, 65). Trump-as-Pepe was "a wink to those 4chan and reddit members attempting to meme Trump into the presidency," and so "[b]y circulating memes of his supporters, Trump demonstrated his investment in their values and ideals" (Woods and Hahner 2019, 67). It essentially "enmeshed his candidacy with a particular group of would-be conspirators" who frequented 4chan and Reddit and leveraged the anonymity afforded by these forums to create and share Pepe and Trump-centric memetic messaging (Woods and Hahner 2019, 65–66). Superimposing Pepe the Frog's face with that of Trump became a strategic move that memetically granted permission for a set of alt-right beliefs to not just continue to circulate, but for users to exploit the phenomena of Internet algorithmic amplification to increase production and disseminate memetic messaging and images that reinforced Trump's campaign (and their connection to it).

Trump-as-Pepe's memetic presence at the border wall continued into 2016 (Hathaway 2016).

Fig. 6. Trump-as-Pepe Machine Gun Border. September 2016.

A September 2016 tweet from the alt-right account Me-melord (@AltRightMemes) stated that if the user were to receive "1000 RTs" (re-tweets) he would "rent a highway bill-board" to display the meme seen in figure 6 depicting two versions of Trump-as-Pepe wielding guns at the U.S.-Mexi-can border. While the merging of Trump's likeness with that of Pepe the Frog is again obvious, there are two additional alt-right specific cues that now accompany him. The first is the inclusion of the frog emoji (🐸) in the user's name, a pint-sized nod to Pepe the Frog. The placement of the American flag emoji (🇺🇸) immediately next to it could be interpreted as Pepe being of and/or for America; Pepe and his alt-right alignment is America/n. The second is the smirking, sun-glasses-wearing, half-moon character in the upper left corner. According to *Know Your Meme*, "Moon Man" was co-opted by the alt-right online community around 2015 to accom-pany content that "speaks of racism and violence against mi-norities" (IDreamAboutCheese 2010). It is an example of an unsophisticated image that the uninitiated would ignore, not fully realizing the implications of its presence in either the virtual or non-virtual worlds. Given that much of the mes-saging does hint at or even overtly encourage violence, the cross-over aspect between virtual and real-world scenarios is significant: the previously labeled "quirky" juvenile meaning-less blip now has the potential to call and rally individuals and/or groups with much more radicalized intent than mere-ly posting on an innocuous online messaging board.

RE-IMAGINING PEPE

Woods and Hahner make the point that because of Pepe's malleability, the "radical possibilities" of content creation "should facilitate innovation and disarticulation from the Alt-right" (2019, 85). If Pepe could be twisted to create such

anti-immigrant and problematically stereotypical content, could the political and social left reclaim him to propagate progressive messaging? Two posts found on UndocuMedia's Facebook page appear to attempt this (Figure 7 and Figure 8).

Fig. 7. Left, Pepe and DACA Renewal. April 2015.
Fig. 8. Right, Pepe and DACA v. DREAM Act, August 2015.

Posted in April of 2015, Figure 7 shows what is known as "sad Pepe" contemplating the renewal process for the federal government program Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), a 2012 executive order that attempted to provide temporary relief while more permanent DREAM Act-esque reform could be tackled.[3] Pepe's dejection is caused by processing delays when attempting to renew one's DACA status in the spring and summer of 2015, delays that were in part the result of program instability that followed campaign threats made by Trump to end it (which he eventually did in 2018).

In Figure 8, posted in August of 2015, with his face turned down and his hand resting on his forehead, Pepe appears to

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3 Before President Trump rescinded the program in 2018, DACA eligibility consisted of not possessing legal immigration status, being younger than 31 on June 15, 2012, having arrived in the U.S. before turning 16, and having resided in the U.S. since June 2007.

be incredulous at the confusion over the months leading to the election regarding the differences between DACA and the 2001 Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act). Originally proposed by the Senate in 2001 and reattempted in 2007, 2009, 2010, and 2011, the DREAM Act never received the votes or bipartisan support needed to be ratified, prompting former President Obama to enact DACA as a temporary stopgap measure.[4]

Both instances of these Pepe appearances break from the alt-right depiction and represent the "disarticulation" of the image proposed by Woods and Hahner. Whether or not the UndocuMedia community felt as though Pepe could be salvaged from his deeply entrenched conservative plight is debatable. After August 2015, the re-imagined Pepe made no more appearances on UndocuMedia and was replaced by his amphibious memetic counterpart Kermit who continued efforts to respond memetically to alt-right rhetoric.

A KERMIT-CENTRIC MEMETIC RESPONSE

The meme character "But That's None of My Business" Kermit and his associated Instagram account @thatsnoneofmybusinesstho appeared in the summer of 2014 and quickly amassed a strong cohort of followers nearly reaching 140,000 followers within less than a week (QuesoFrogger 2015). These memes generally depict Kermit and a beverage with either his head bent down coyly drinking from a straw (Figure 9) or tilted slightly back while sipping a cup of Lipton brand tea (Figure 10).

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4   Consistently since 2012, there have been roughly 800,000–1,000,000 eligible individuals in the U.S., though a more exact number is impossible to know due to reporting challenges. The majority of DACA eligible individuals are between 15 to 36 years old and primarily hail from Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.

Fig. 9. Left, Kermit Drinking Milk Meme Template.
Fig. 10. Right, Kermit Drinking Lipton Tea Meme Template.

The mainstream popularity of Figure 10's tea-drinking version was solidified in 2016 when, while holding the NBA championship trophy, basketball player Lebron James wore a baseball hat with the image.

From August 2015 onward, Kermit became the go-to anthropomorphic meme character of choice for UndocuMedia. "That's None of My Business" Kermit was a way to comment memetically on a "social faux pas" and to insert an acerbic "postscript to an insult or disrespectful remark said towards a specific individual or group" (QuesoFrogger 2015). In October of 2014, "That's None of My Business" Kermit made one of his first appearances on the UndocuMedia Facebook wall tackling the same sentiment seen in Figure 11. The combination of the text at the top of the meme with the conclusion of "But that's none of my business" implies that there are a substantial number of people who remain naive about such particulars, and that the confusion between two very different pieces of policy are detrimentally misleading about Latina/o/e immigration and Latina/o/e immigrants in the U.S. Thus, the underlying commentary is a sardonic critique of those who are not up to date with policy statuses and decisions underscoring immigration-centric dialogue and debate. It essentially flip-flops the standard order of how

one visualizes the stance from which one spouts rhetoric by putting the marginalized (yet experienced) undocumented individual on more sturdy ground directly opposed to the racially, economically, or politically dominant (though ignorant) individual.

Fig. 11. "None of My Business" DACA/DREAM Act. October 2014.

Variations of memes that feature Kermit include "sad Kermit" gazing out of a rain-soaked window (Figure 12) and "evil Kermit" in which he faces his nemesis (a second Kermit dressed in a black face-covering cloak) who encourages various indulgent, lazy, selfish, or unscrupulous acts (Figure 13) (Roy 2016).

Fig. 12. Left, "Sad Kermit" Meme Template.
Fig. 13. Right, "Evil Kermit" Meme Template.

Figure 14 illustrates a third variation in which Kermit is sitting on a couch as though he were a discussant on a panel. One hand rests on his leg while the other is held out as if to emphasize a point or to calm down naysayers. In this particular instance, Kermit responds to mounting campaign rhetoric that suggested that the U.S.-Mexican border region was a lawless zone of murderous banditry.

Fig. 14. "Stop, Just Stop" Kermit. August 2015.
Fig. 15. Trump Television Campaign Ad.

An example of the type of content that Kermit seeks to rebut is Trump's use of "swarm" imagery with his campaign ads (Figure 15). The imagery in one television campaign advertisement was touted as being filmed at the southern U.S.-Mexico border. Indistinct bodies move with a sporadic urgency to cross the boundary. Predictable anti-immigrant and pro-militarized border wall political rhetoric is overlaid as the image plays with the intent to further entice the viewer towards believing that such irrepressible and uncontainable incidents represent the "truth" of what was happening along the border. While the LTN intent is obvious, it was quickly exposed that the video imagery was from the Italian television network RepubblicaTV reporting on migrants attempting to cross into Melilla, a small Spanish-owned enclave on the Moroccan coast.

A year later in August of 2016, as the campaign barreled towards the November election, voting fraud, access to polls, and voting rights became a central talking point.

Fig. 16. Top, Sad Kermit. August 2016.
Fig. 17. Bottom, Emoji Accompaniment. August 2016.

Figure 16 depicts Kermit using a memetic formatting strategy known as "top-line." The uppermost text guides the reader towards the bottom with a combination of punctuation (…) and placing an image in between the two blocks of text. It creates a "visual 'action verb'" that strategically "mov[es] the eye through the image" to take in the top script, pause on the image and conclude at the bottom text and final image where the memetic quip's climax resides (Milner 2016, 68). Here, Kermit gazes out of a rain-soaked window as the top text gives the reader the impression that he is melancholy due to being excluded from the voting process. But then, as he re-

members that such a status does not prohibit him from still taking an active role by encouraging his peers to participate, the viewer is left with a Kermit who appears to be re-energized and proactive.

Interesting to note with this post is the emoji accompaniment see in Figure 17. Just as we saw with the alt-right inclusion of the frog emoji to subtly reference Pepe in figure 5, the cup and frog (☕ 🐸) were identified on at least a dozen UndocuMedia Facebook posts between August – November 2016. Based on the memetic commentary that they were paired with, the emoji combination representing Kermit and his teacup provided a pint-size reinforcement towards a social or political occurrence or policy that impacted U.S.-based Latina/o/e undocumented individuals. If the "That's None of My Business" Kermit meme was born out of the desire to function as the quippy postscript previously described, the incorporation of these two emojis essentially did the same but on an even more micro level.

In November of 2016, immediately following the election in which Trump emerged as victorious, UndocuMedia posted the meme seen in figure 18 featuring "evil Kermit." As UndocuMedia was a left-leaning organization, the viewer can assume that the "Me" is Evil Kermit attempting to dissuade his companion from voicing discontentment at what was a divisive and polarized political moment. "Other me" is perhaps the second Kermit character who refuses to succumb to Evil Kermit's suggestion that discord over politics has to be problematic. Alternatively, the meme could be read as regular Kermit being the villain in attempting to suggest that maintaining status quo and complacence is preferential to Evil Kermit's rogue attitude that politics should be openly and frequently discussed despite potential for discord. In ei-

ther scenario, Kermit is aligning himself with sentiments that would eventually grow into such events as the January 2017 Women's March on Washington, D.C., an event that attracted an estimated 3–4 million attendees in the U.S. (and upwards of 5 million worldwide) ("Women's March").

Evil Kermit
@realevilkermit

Me: Don't talk about politics it always starts arguments

Other me: EDUCATE THE MASSES

UndocuMedia
· 22 de noviembre de 2016 · 🌐

Hahaha! All. The. Time! 😄
#educate #organize #mobilize

Fig. 18. Top, Evil Kermit. November 2016.
Fig. 19. Bottom, Hashtags. November 2016.

Two of the three accompanying hashtags – #organize and #mobilize – seen in Figure 19 represent the "hashtag activism" proposed by Pastel. They encouraged a "socially conscious viewership … a viewing practice that enhances awareness of topical issues and their impact on underrepresented minorities" (2019, 166). They are an "organizing tool for virtual communities; they solidify communities into visible ones and enable them to be found and easily joined" (Pastel 2019, 167–168). Because of the nature of Internet

algorithms and the saturation with which social media dominates millennial and generation z information-sharing habits, groups like UndocuMedia could have confidence that their particularly liberal brand of memetic messaging that encouraged organization and mobilization reached a large audience in part because of hashtags that worked in collaboration with recognizable memetic characters like Kermit and pint-sized emoji reinforcements like the frog and tea combination.

CONCLUSIONS

In the pre-millennial age group, mediums such as bumper stickers, posters, and the like were the principal packaging strategy to combine cheeky phrasing with an eye-catching image in the hope of achieving cultural staying-power and mainstream recognition. Creators operated in a different space than the consumer; creative (and marketing) decisions and directions were theirs to make in order to trickle downwards maintaining a relative distance between creator and consumer nearly the entire way. Post-millennium, with the ease of access and creative potential facilitated by social media networking and applications, cultural producers include the "everyman"/"everywoman" who are now able to guide, influence, and cater narrative output to ensure that their unique take is included.

Pepe and Kermit represent two starkly different examples of meme-based narrative output that had an offline impact guided principally by such demographics. They became what Xiao Mina refers to as a "signaling mechanism about one's political beliefs and values" (2019, 107). While Pepe was perverted into an icon of solidarity with the alt-right, attempts were made to take control of his image and the nationalist and racist rhetoric with which he was often paired. When this

failed to gain momentum, influencers within progressive social media spheres like UndocuMedia began pushing memes that featured a different anthropomorphic icon, Kermit. Each time a Kermit-featuring meme was shared, liked, or commented on it was virtually bolstering a community that used his image to memetically rebut racist and nationalist rhetoric. So much so, that the mere posting of the frog emoji paired with the coffee cup was a micro-level nod of solidarity to resist calls to "build the wall" and other similar talking points of the 2016 presidential election. UndocuMedia's relentless usage of memes falls into the category of a type of message promotion that is important, even when "their quantitative impact is difficult to measure" due to the prolific nature of the Internet-based creation and sharing (Xiao Mina 2019, 107). Due to their nearly instantaneous dissemination powered by social media, and the immortalization that accompanies modern-day Internet, memes have become a medium through which deeply polarizing political and social issues are negotiated. What is possible to measure is the number of memes shared among news aggregate and opinion sites like Reddit and 4chan and by social media influencers like UndocuMedia, and even the number of times that an amphibious anthropomorphic character gains the attention of a President. The real-world actions that result— referencing Pepe or Kermit on a protest sign, voting while wearing a shirt or hat with their image or catchphrase—take place at the intersection of the offline power of memetic messaging and the tit-for-tat position of memetic characters against each other.

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