Know Your Meme and the Homogenization of Web History

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Abstract

As memes circulate and spread throughout different Web communities, their meanings are continually changing. In the last decade, the website *Know Your Meme* (KYM) has become popular among researchers, educators, and day-to-day Web users to understand memes and their meanings. KYM is a frequently cited resource among Web researchers, and as a result it has become instrumental in establishing dominant histories of memes on the Web. Though KYM remains an invaluable resource, it is often cited with minimal context, and an uncritical reliance on KYM's definitions may overlook the polysemy of many memes. Accordingly, this paper uses a discursive interface analysis of the KYM website along with examples of incomplete meme definitions to demonstrate how the website constructs itself as a cultural authority to define and classify memes. Given that memes themselves are artifacts of Web history, I argue the overreliance on KYM as an authority on memes and their history can contribute to the homogenization of Web histories. However, this paper acknowledges that KYM can still be a useful resource and to that end, offers recommendations for how researchers might better introduce and contextualize KYM within their own work.

Keywords: memes, web histories, Know Your Meme, historiography, internet culture

Know Your Meme (KYM) is a website devoted to compiling histories, definitions, and examples of internet memes. KYM is popular resource to learn and understand particular memes and their meanings through its individual meme entry pages with specific definitions and their associated image and video galleries. Given that memes are often highly viral and widely shared, but also like inside jokes—niche and culturally specific—KYM helps provide a bridge between these competing memetic features. Sites such as KYM are invaluable resources among internet researchers, educators, and day-to-day Web users alike because they offer definitions and context for many online phenomena. To achieve its stated goal of "documenting internet phenomena," KYM defines memes, traces their origins, and collects examples of individual meme instances. While much of the website's content is user-submitted, there remains a relatively opaque editorial and curation process before a meme is "confirmed" by KYM. Additionally, KYM's business model—a privately owned and ad-funded website—does not entirely undercut its utility but nevertheless is a factor that researchers should consider when choosing how to situate KYM within their work.

Memes are continually changing as they are circulated and remixed among Web communities. They are often highly contextual and a given meme may not have the same meaning when used within a different Web setting or among a different community. Memes are inherently polysemous and resist any singular definition as they continually mutate and circulate among online communities. On its About Page, KYM compares itself to collaborative wiki projects and notes, "any registered member can submit a meme or viral phenomena for research" (Know Your Meme, n.d.). However, KYM bears few similarities to websites such as Wikipedia which has a non-profit business model, highly active user community engagement, and detailed page edit histories. KYM is a for-profit website, has largely inactive forums, and obfuscates

much of each page's edit history. Additionally, KYM is not entirely built upon user-generated content; all submitted materials are subject to review by KYM editorial staff and moderators for confirmation or invalidation. While this process is likely meant to maintain editorial standards, visitors to KYM have little insight into the specific procedures and policies. In effect, KYM presents itself as an authority to define memes, but largely asks visitors to accept that authority unquestioningly.

On its About Page, KYM also cites a comprehensive list of news publications and other outlets where its work has appeared, including the *New York Times*, NPR, *Le Monde*, and more. KYM declares that it "is considered the most authoritative source on news, history and origins of viral phenomena and Internet memes" (Know Your Meme, n.d.). But what are the possible implications of elevating a single website to such a dominant role in establishing the histories and definitions of memes? Despite the widespread popularity of KYM, it seems that such interrogation has only taken place in limited capacities, if at all. I argue that an overreliance on KYM as singular authority on memes contributes to the homogenization of internet history. Because memes are significant artifacts of Web histories, how they are defined and remembered are significant for how their communities and online spaces are studied.

KYM remains a frequently cited source, in both popular journalism and scholarly work. Limor Shifman (2014) refers to KYM as a "huge database," and uses its material for her typology of memetic photos (p. 89). Phillips and Milner (2017) term KYM a "reference site" and a "meme database" in separate sections. Zannetou et al. (2018) describe it as "a site providing meme annotation," in contrast to platforms such as Twitter, Reddit, and 4chan. Milner (2018) uses the phrase "reference database" to describe KYM (pp. 44-45). Noting the commercial potential of memes, Kate Miltner (2017) terms KYM as a "meme encyclopedia" and situates it

within the phenomenon she describes as the "meme-industrial complex" (p. 423). Elsewhere, KYM has been simply labelled as a "website," but with little discussion of its authority (Thrift, 2014; Vickery, 2014). *The Washington Post* has described KYM as a "comprehensive online directory" in some contexts, but in others cites it similarly to other journalistic sources with phrasing like "according to *Know Your Meme...*" (Cavna, 2021; Sonde, 2020). The common thread throughout these varied phrases is that they broadly introduce KYM with little context and without acknowledging the potential limits of its authority. Following Driscoll and Paloque-Bergès' (2017) call to "[keep] in mind what each source obscures, leaves out or misrepresents," and because KYM has emerged as *the* source for definitions and examples of virtually all memes, it is all the more important to reflect on how scholarship leans upon KYM as a major resource for a historiography of the Web (54).

This widely varied terminology raises questions about what role KYM might hold in the preservation and definition of memes and other viral phenomena. What are the implications of attributing such credibility to a select editorial team? Should researchers be wary of an opaque editorial and curation process? How might researchers situate a website such as KYM within their work? These questions are significant because they are rooted in issues of how the histories of Web communities are written and remembered—or in some cases, ignored and forgotten. In this paper, I analyse the discursive interface elements of the website to show how KYM presents itself as an authority to define memes and discuss considerations for how this resource should be situated within internet research. I then examine a few instances where KYM's definition of a meme is not wholly comprehensive and discuss the potential stakes of such oversights. I contend that an overreliance on KYM without acknowledging its limitations and instabilities will tend to overlook the essential plurality of the Web and instead contribute to the homogenization of a

singular Internet history. I still recognize the value and utility of KYM for much work in Web histories, especially given the sheer volume of online content it contains, and, to that end, I conclude with some suggestions for how best to incorporate this type of Web resource into our critical analyses of memes and other internet phenomena while minimizing the potential of misrepresentation or homogenization.

Internet Memes and Web Historiography(ies)

Studying the histories of the Internet often requires the consideration of specific artifacts that have emerged and circulated within its online spaces. To this end, we can conceptualize memes as evidence of the broader histories of the Web and its associated cultures. How we study and write about memes is situated within a longer history of writing on the Web. How we define and remember individual memes is important, therefore, for how we understand and write the broader histories of the Web. KYM has become instrumental in establishing a dominant history of memes on the Web. At best, a unilateral history of the Web would be an inaccurate portrayal of individual users and their communities. At worst, it could be outright erasure of the unique experiences of specific individuals and communities. Driscoll and Paloque-Bergès (2017) rightly remind us, "each user renders the Net differently, a result of the circumstances within which their own encounter with this now-ubiquitous technology began" (48). This framing echoes Turner's (2017) assertion that, "The Internet is simply too vast and too varied in the forms of life it supports to have a single culture" (39). But a website like KYM implies that it has the authority to grant a meme a clear definition and classification. And because KYM is so heavily relied upon, the website has the potential to inadvertently contribute to the flattening of Web history.

Web resources such as KYM still have utility and offer useful insights into online communities and practices. As a partially user-generated resource, KYM provides opportunities for individuals to contribute to some of the histories it tells. Similarly, Rogers (2017) has emphasized the utility of common Web repositories such as the Internet Archive. Though there have been numerous valid critiques of the Internet Archive, it still remains an invaluable resource (Brügger, 2018; Brunton, 2017; Milligan, 2012, 2016; Rogers, 2017). My aim is to adopt a similar approach to KYM. Because it has become the de facto repository of internet memes and definitions, it is important to critique its authority, and—rather than dismiss it entirely—find ways to adequately contextualize it alongside other similar resources.

Given the Web's general reputation and traditions of dubious credibility, it often faces significant scrutiny when used as a source for scholarly work. This may be doubly so for scholarly work about the Web itself. Rogers (2017) reminds us that the Web "is a space with and without professional editors, and has been subject to the question of its quality, even as the Web further domesticated, in its nearly thirty years of use" (163). Perhaps a website such as KYM becomes popular in part because of anxieties over Web credibility and authenticity; KYM can help ease such concerns by providing a relatively stable reference point for an otherwise ephemeral or unstable medium. However, the KYM site itself should be subject to similar questions of quality and authenticity, especially given it has become such a dominant resource when it comes to defining memes. Historians must not become over reliant upon KYM as a single authority on meme and need to recognize its limits as a research tool. In his discussion of Internet histories, Turner (2017) calls for "local studies of the Internet and cultural change, conducted in different locations around the world, with sufficient respect for and understanding of the local cultural histories that precede the Internet's arrival" (Turner, 2017, pp. 44–45). If we

do not turn a critical eye to KYM, we close off the possibility of such local studies of memes and the communities that create and share meaning from them.

Contextual Specificity of Memes

Richard Dawkins (1976) originally coined the term "meme" to broadly refer to units of culture that replicate, spread, and mutate. The term "meme" itself has evolved significantly from its origins and in contemporary use it may have many definitions—ranging from a specific form of visual humour to any digital text that is circulated online (Kien, 2013). I follow Limor Shifman's (2014) definition of a meme as "(a) a *group of digital items sharing common characteristics* of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with *awareness of each other*; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed *via the Internet by many users*" (pp. 7-8). This definition acknowledges the fluid characteristics of memes and centres replication and transformation in their cultural significance. As a meme circulates, each individual meme instance may be remixed, and every new iteration has the potential to create new cultural significance. Memes are a deceptively complex form of media; though they may appear as a simple image or video, they are rich cultural artifacts that represent the participatory potential of the Web and are often the product of highly specific Web communities.

Reminiscent of earlier idealistic visions of online spaces, Jonathan Zittrain (2014) praises memes because they represent "the ability for anyone to reach anyone else without mediation, and for groups to form around shared ideas" (p. 393). However, the cultural implications of memes are not always so positive. During the 2016 US Presidential campaign, the Pepe the Frog meme was frequently used by white supremacist groups to promote hateful ideologies (Anti-Defamation League, 2016). The importance of studying memes and cultural artifacts is further

underscored by phenomena such as QAnon—a far-right conspiracy theory that began in online settings, spread across platforms via memetic forms, and has since emerged in physical contexts, such as many criminal cases stemming from the January 6, 2021 attempted coup at the U.S. Capitol (Rubin et al., 2021). Memes serve as historical artifacts that we can use to piece together elements of digital culture and the significance of various online communities and, increasingly, their spread into offline settings.

Memes can be understood as a contemporary form of folklore and a prominent artifact of Web culture. Framing memes in terms of folklore attends to their situated, playful, and vernacular processes, while also underscoring the interconnectedness of memes and the communities they appear within (Phillips and Milner 2017). Phillips (2015) notes that, "memes only make sense in relation to other memes, and allow participants to speak clearly and coherently to other members of the collective while baffling those outside the affinity network" (p. 21). Because memes are closely connected to cultural identities and communities, the definition of a particular meme is an unending process. This significantly complicates the task of the Web historian, who must somehow record a stable history of an inherently unstable.

As a meme circulates and spreads to different Web communities, its meaning is continually changing. Kate Miltner (2014) suggests that as a meme moves from subculture to mainstream, it often becomes a site of significant cultural contestation. For instance, in her description of the "Confession Bear" meme, Jacqueline Vickery (2014) outlines the debates that emerged on Reddit about the "proper" use of the meme. KYM explains that the "Confession Bear" meme is intended to share "taboo behaviors and controversial opinions that are often kept secret for fear of being ostracized," though as Vickery highlights, there is much room for ambiguity for what a given community might consider taboo or controversial (Know Your

Meme, 2012). Memes are inherently open-ended, and online communities rarely reach full consensus on their definition. Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017) suggest that memes are frequently contested because they signal membership in a particular community. Individual users and communities may feel that the definition of a particular meme is intwined with their own identity. The definition(s) of a meme are contested and how we situate and contextualize websites like KYM within historical writing on the Web contributes to their continual evolution.

Toward a Reconfiguration of KYM

My interest in KYM builds from Ankerson's (2015) call to reconsider how various facets of the Web are categorized and demarcated. KYM draws fairly sharp delineations between categories of memes which may contribute to the (de)legitimation of particular memes and internet phenomena. How KYM presents itself is critical for anyone who visits the website to consider in order to determine the extent to which they might trust it. Therefore, I employ the method of discursive interface analysis to probe the norms that KYM produces for how individuals rely upon (as well as contribute to) the website's stated goal of "documenting internet phenomenon." Mel Stanfill (2015) describes discursive interface analysis as a method that considers the design of a website and its interfaces as mechanisms that communicate to users what actions are possible as well as endorses certain performances as the preferred modes of engagement. Crucially, there are significant differences between designer expectations and actual user action (Bowker and Star, 2000). Discursive interface analysis attends to such differences by centring how individual users actually encounter a website, rather than taking a technological deterministic approach that merely considers the website designer's intentions.

Niels Brügger underscores the reality that "the Web cannot be archived in a 1:1 form in all its dimensions" (p. 89). Therefore, while my analysis draws upon my browsing experience of the KYM website, I also collected several screenshots to serve as a record of how the website existed at a particular point in time. Although screenshots do not preserve a website's hyperlink structure, they do capture the visual structure of the website. In October and November 2020, I collected 20 screenshots of the KYM home page, the "About Page," 5 separate meme entry pages, the website's organizational menu structure, and its meme entry submission forms. By considering the role of KYM —including how it presents itself as an authority and normalizes certain uses—it may be possible for us to reconfigure how this important resource fits within the Web historian's toolkit.

Discursive Affordances of *Know Your Meme*

The front landing page of the KYM website, as many users would first experience it, features recently posted meme entry pages as well as links to other popular content. The two-column layout shown in Figure 1 resembles that of a print newspaper, albeit with more images than text; one meme entry is featured prominently as if it were the main headline, and there are several smaller images in the right column and top banner. Throughout KYM there are many advertisements, which underscore the commercialized nature of the modern Web. While the KYM website does provide information to its visitors, one of the primary products it creates is an audience that can be targeted by advertisers.
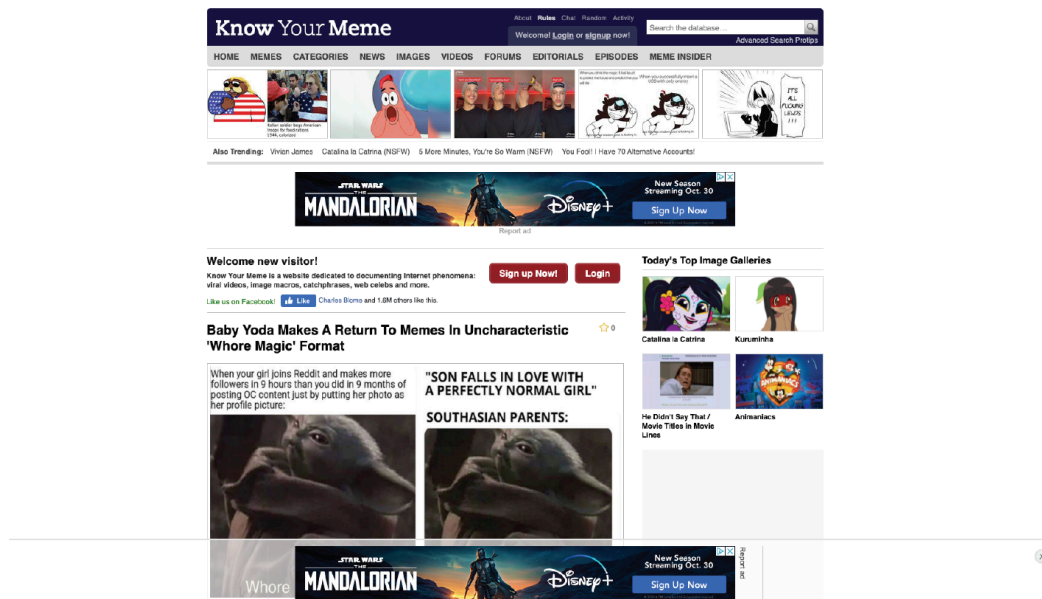
Figure 1. *Know Your Meme* Landing Page. Screenshot by Author. October 27, 2020.

This initial landing page contains several interface elements that interpellate visitors as users and encourage them to engage with the website in particular ways. In addition to links at the top of the page, red buttons at the centre of the page invite the user to "Sign up Now!" or "Login." These invitations position the KYM website as a community rather than mere reference material. These options eventually present the user with entirely different sets of functional affordances which invite further user engagement and participation. For instance, signed-in users can post and respond to Forum messages in categories including "Meme Research," "Books & Comics," and "Meme-ory Lane." But actual interactivity within these forums is limited, with many of the forums' most recent responses having been posted days and weeks in the past. While KYM may present itself as a website that collaboratively defines memes, actual user engagement is limited.

Next, though it is covered by the banner advertisement in the above screenshot, there is a checkbox labelled "infinite scroll" in the right sidebar. This option is enabled by default and

causes the page to continually load new content as the viewer scrolls. This suggests that the normative mode of engagement with the KYM website is to endlessly browse front page content and passively encounter whichever meme entries it presents. KYM operates more similarly to social media platforms rather than a reference website designed to direct the user to their desired information as efficiently as possible. On other online reference sources such as library databases or search engines, the text box to enter a search query is typically featured prominently on the page; it is typically large and centred. This is not the case for KYM though, which has a small search box tucked away in the upper right corner. Before the user even reaches the entry page for a specific meme, KYM's front landing page communicates a particular mode of engagement with the website. Its discursive affordances position the website not as a typical reference material, but instead as a something more akin to a social media platform, where curated contented is presented for the user to consume.

Other KYM webpages, however, specifically *do* call upon users to take an active role in contributing content to the website. For instance, users that have registered and logged into the KYM website have the option to click the "Submit a Meme" link in the top menu bar. As shown in Figure 2, this option directs the user to a blank form to create an entirely new meme entry page, complete with their own title, written description, possible categories, and uploaded examples. Additionally, signed-in users have the option to "Suggest a Change" on pre-existing meme entry pages. This presents the user with a blank form to submit a message with suggested edits or revisions.

The submission form does include a list of recommended "DOs" and "DON'Ts" for users to follow when writing their posts. Additionally, there are links to the full Rules and Guidelines along with a KYM style guide. These resources primarily explain how KYM pages should be

organized, which section headings should generally be used, and how media should be

embedded. Yet the actual criteria for what "counts" as a meme is somewhat vague. Per the KYM

style guide, "meme entry is defined as an article describing a set of images, videos or discussions

that may have mutated from another, but is still bound by a single theme or motif" (Know Your

Meme, 2014). Thus, while the meme submission form does indicate that there are certain

editorial standards that are applied to each submission, KYM is vague about directly articulating

these criteria.

Figure 2: *New Entry*, Know Your Meme. Screenshot by author. November 27, 2020.

Similarly, KYM's review and editing processes are mentioned only briefly throughout

the website. The "Frequently Asked Questions" page explains that "A meme entry is meant to be

a factual, unbiased, and mostly objective explanation of a meme" (Know Your Meme, 2010).

The "About Page" notes that "The editorial staff and moderators then evaluates each entry by

further researching the online presence of the meme for confirmation or invalidation" (Know

Your Meme, n.d.). While KYM acknowledges its internal editorial and review processes, there is little information about what specific standards are applied to each submission. Furthermore, the fact that these details only appear in passing de-emphasizes these processes and instead contributes to the website's overall impression as an authoritative resource. While KYM may appear similar to sites like Wikipedia at first glance, they are quite different in practice. While the Wikipedia model encourages peer collaboration and positions the site as a resource that is always in the process of becoming increasingly authoritative through its various edits, KYM instead simply offers the veneer of collaboration while obfuscating much of its standards and editorial practices.

The KYM website has an extensive tagging and categorization system that it uses to organize its various entry pages. All entries are labelled as Memes, Events, People, Sites, or Subcultures. Within each of these, there are several sub-categories or types—such as reaction, exploitable, or catchphrase within the Meme category. The categorization system grants KYM an air of legitimacy and trustworthiness and presents its content in a similar fashion to the organizational strategies of libraries, museums, and archives. Of course, any categorization of cultural artifacts is imperfect and may require essentialism or editorial determinations of significance. For example, the KYM website notes, "A subculture entry requires proof of significant presence or influence on a meme, event or site that has already been documented by Know Your Meme" (Know Your Meme, 2011). This requirement reveals that that KYM's commitment to "documenting Web phenomena" is not necessarily a claim to document *all* Web phenomena. There may be memes that are entirely missing from KYM, or possibly included but mischaracterized; these possibilities are why it is necessary to avoid an overreliance upon KYM as the sole authority of meme definitions.

In addition to the aforementioned page categories and types, KYM tags each meme with a particular status. A meme is initially merely labelled as "Submitted," and eventually as "Researching" once a member of its editorial staff has begun evaluating the user-submitted content. After this step, the meme is either tagged as "Confirmed," for content that KYM considers to be a bona fide meme, or "Deadpool," content that did not make the cut. Submitted entries may be "Deadpooled" for being a duplicate or poorly written entry, but memes may also receive this label based on seemingly arbitrary determinations from the KYM editorial staff. These labels afford KYM with perceived credibility as well as the implicit authority to make long-lasting determinations about counts as a meme. The "confirmed" and "Deadpool" labels leave little room for nuance and may inadvertently contribute to the flattening of Web cultures into a unilateral history. Content that is widely regarded as a meme within a specific community may be listed as "Deadpool" if it is not circulated widely enough to meet KYM's standards. Additionally, these labels are not adequate for describing the potential changes in a meme's status. Memes that were popular at the time of KYM's creation in 2008 may no longer be widely circulated or recognized as popular memes, such as the "O RLY" owl (Know Your Meme, 2008). Similarly, images that were once dismissed as "Deadpool" may unexpectedly begin to circulate and mutate. The simple act of changing the status label on the entry page would not necessarily reflect this nuanced history. Though KYM entry pages do list when the page was last edited, along with a username, there is no ability to view details on what specific content was changed. On a website such as Wikipedia, detailed edit histories can help a viewer assess the page's trustworthiness. By not providing this level of detail, KYM requires users to unquestioningly accept its authoritativeness. KYM's interface elements invite users to perceive the website as credible and suggests that the definition of a meme can be singular and finalized.

Based on its various interface components, the KYM website has multiple simultaneous and somewhat competing goals. First, it seeks to encourage user engagement in the form of readership—most likely as a part of a business model of selling Web advertisements. Second, it invites users to participate and contribute content to the database, suggesting that "documenting internet phenomena" is a community-driven effort. Finally, it seeks to establish the accuracy and legitimacy of its meme definitions by employing organizational features similar to those found in libraries, archives, and museums. KYM's interface creates tensions among these goals and presents its users a wide set of possibilities for how they perceive and engage with the website. But when it comes to incorporating KYM into writing "the history of the Web" it is necessary to consider how our use of the website is implicated in the political stakes of memes and their role in Web histories.

Politics of Meme Historiography

KYM has emerged as a dominant authority on the definition and categorization of memes. Its editorial staff has significant power to determine what is considered a popular meme and what is categorized as "Deadpool." The website contributes to how popular memes and their meanings are understood by wide audiences. Despite the seemingly humorous and benign nature of memes, these online artifacts are shorthand for culture, identity, and relations of power. This is why it is necessary for scholars to be self-reflexive about how they rely upon resources such as KYM and consider the stakes of defining memes and providing adequate contextualization.

First, it is possible that a meme's definition might completely miss or overlook entire uses of that meme by particular groups and communities. As Fortunati (2017) writes, "the Internet is not the same all over the world" (p. 182). Yet an overreliance on KYM as the sole

authority to define and describe memes only acknowledges a cross section of the internet and will likely miss the plethora of content that exists beyond this narrow context.

Second, the mischaracterization of a meme has the potential to downplay its associations with harmful or hateful ideologies. Though memes may be frequently dismissed as simple forms of internet humour, it is often the case that "fun and funny and apparently harmless things" frequently obfuscate their negative effects from the privileged people who do not have to see them, leaving only those who are most directly affected to endure such harms alone and unnoticed (Phillips, 2019, p. 3).

Third, inaccurate definitions and mischaracterizations may inadvertently become accepted as the primary meaning of a meme, or perhaps even its only definition. Websites such as KYM imply that it is possible for there to be a singular and finalized definition of a meme. As Phillips (2015) explains, one effect of KYM was "inadvertently codifying what once had been an evolving repertoire of shared experience" (p. 39). Though offering definitions in detailed and concise form can democratize and open an online space to more inhabitants, it simultaneously limits the ability for new or differing definitions of a meme to take hold. This is especially worrying for cases where the dominant definition of a given meme excludes its use by certain communities or when it is associated with harmful ideologies.

Pepe the Frog

Rather than continue to speak broadly about the KYM website and its broad possible effects, I turn to a specific meme to demonstrate the potential political implications of defining memes. Pepe the Frog has been widely studied across multiple fields and is frequently cited to demonstrate the cultural significance of memes. The cartoon frog has appeared in a zine (Furie,

2005), simple online reaction images, within Donald Trump presidential campaign, and was eventually co-opted by white nationalists and neo-Nazi groups—to the point that the Anti-Defamation League (2016) designated Pepe the Frog as a hate symbol. While Pepe the Frog has become somewhat of an over-used example (Applegate & Cohen, 2017; Glitsos & Hall, 2019; Greene, 2019; Pelletier-Gagnon & Pérez Trujillo Diniz, 2018), it is useful here because its blatant political associations. For instance, Glitos and Hall (2019) have attributed this meme's popularity to its use by Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. Presidential campaign. Given its overt political associations, Pepe the Frog represents the potential effects of a meme being miscategorized or inaccurately defined through an overreliance on KYM alone.
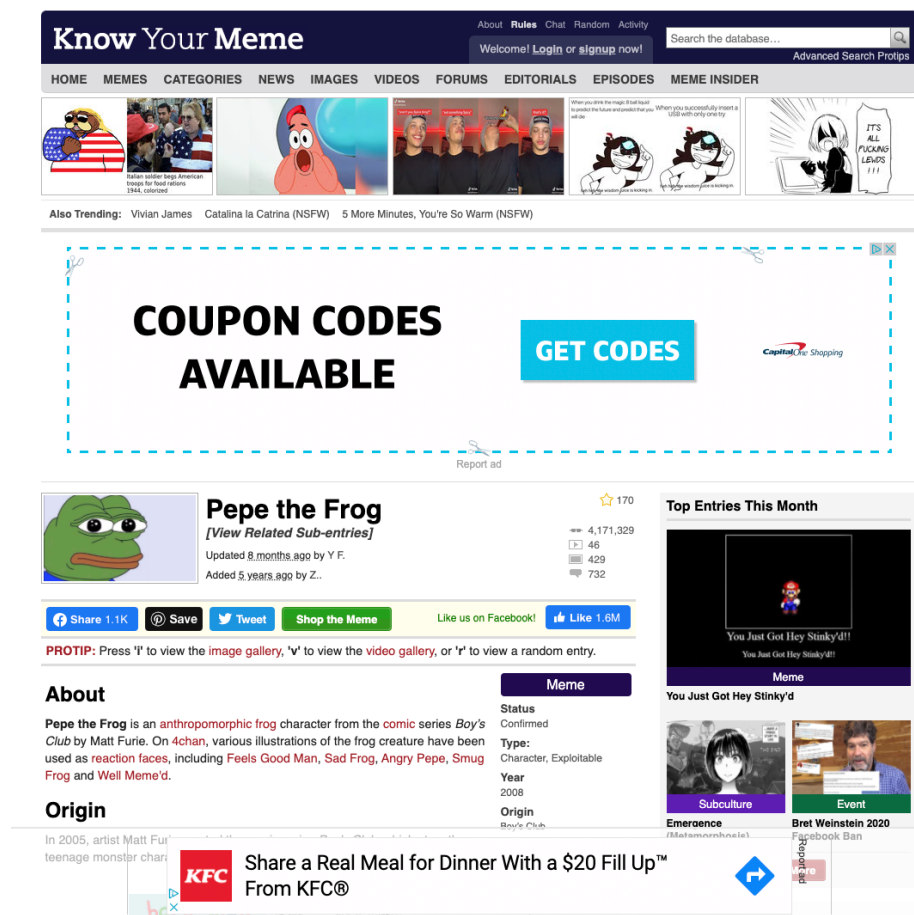

Figure 3: *Pepe the Frog*. Know Your Meme. Screenshot by Author. October 27, 2020.

The interface and layout of the entry page for Pepe the Frog (Figure 3) contribute to how KYM readers are invited to read and engage with the presented content. First, virtually all of the specific information appears "below the fold," that is to say that users must scroll beyond how the page initially loads. This sensory affordance requires that a user manually scrolls to the very bottom of the entry page to encounter the full KYM definition, resulting in an understatement of Pepe the Frog's connections to hate groups and harmful ideologies. By placing all mention of the meme's controversy in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election well toward the bottom of the page, it implies that its association with white nationalism and anti-Semitism is not a significant aspect of its history. Effectively, KYM contributes to the false framing of memes as simply being harmless jokes. This framing downplays the real harms that many people experience as well as creates opportunities for hateful ideologies to spread unchecked. Furthermore, the KYM entry for Pepe the Frog does not wholly encapsulate the varied uses and definitions of Pepe the Frog. KYM misses the nuance of some aspects of Pepe the Frog's history and entirely overlooks its appearance in other contexts. This is not simply a matter of an inaccurate definition; it creates a false impression that the definition of the meme is static and finalized.

For example, there is the discussion of Matt Furie's #savePepe campaign—an attempt by the cartoonist and the Anti-Defamation league to denounce the racist implications of the meme. Though this facet of Pepe the Frog's history is mentioned on the KYM entry, it too is buried toward the bottom of the page, which downplays the controversy and contestation of meaning. Instead, the definition that is initially visible suggests that the definition of Pepe the Frog is simple and finalized. This represents the inherent challenges of defining a cultural artifact as amorphous as a meme; even when KYM includes multiple definitions and meanings, its editorial staff necessarily must also choose how to order and organize such information.

There are also uses of Pepe the Frog that are entirely absent from the KYM entry. In some cases, this may be a simple result of KYM's organizational structure and two related pages not being hyperlinked. For instance, KYM includes an entry for MonkaS, an illustration of a sweating Pepe the Frog that is frequently used as a chat emote in Twitch.tv video game livestreams (Know Your Meme, 2017). MonkaS is a use of Pepe the Frog that is wholly separate from the dominant narrative of the meme's history. While KYM does include an entry describing the MonkaS emote, this second entry is not directly hyperlinked on the Pepe the Frog entry, which means that a researcher who is unfamiliar with Pepe the Frog or Twitch.tv may miss this connection. While this one particular example could be remedied with a simple edit, it nevertheless demonstrates the potential to miss aspects of a meme's history if KYM is relied upon as a sole authority.

In other cases, additional uses of Pepe the Frog are overlooked on the KYM entry and not included anywhere else on the website. In U.S. and European contexts, Pepe the Frog's political associations are generally negative; the cartoon frog has been used by extreme far-right groups and white nationalists. Yet in other contexts, Pepe the Frog can be much more positive, as in the case of Hong Kong's pro-democracy protests. In 2019, the Chinese government proposed legislation to significantly undermine Hong Kong's autonomy, prompting massive demonstrations within the city, during which graffiti of Pepe the Frog began appearing throughout the city (Victor, 2019). There were even Facebook pages and WhatsApp sticker packs featuring the cartoon frog clad in the distinctive yellow construction helmets of the Hong Kong pro-democracy protestors. Within this context, the meme is entirely sutured to ideals of democracy and human rights, and its only connection to the white nationalist and anti-Semitic meanings is the shared illustration. This example illustrates how entirely different uses of a given

meme by certain groups and communities can easily be overlooked. Because the internet is a

global infrastructure and phenomenon, it is virtually impossible for a single website like KYM to

create an entirely comprehensive definition of *all* uses of a meme. However, if internet

researchers become over reliant upon KYM as the sole authority for defining memes, it is

possible to entirely miss large aspects of a meme's history.

Pepe the Frog is possibly one of the most studied memes, largely because of its overtly

political implications and connections. But nevertheless, its KYM entry has several aspects that

can be considered inaccuracies. The KYM Pepe the Frog entry page still overlooks entire uses of

the meme by certain communities and partially downplays its connection to the hateful

ideologies of white nationalism and anti-Semitism. Pepe the Frog underscores the potential role

of KYM in defining memes and their histories, as well as the potential stakes of an inaccurate or

mischaracterized definition.

Beyond Pepe the Frog

The stakes of an inaccurate definition are not limited to high profile examples. Even seemingly

benign memes resist a simple or singular definition. For example, the "OK Boomer" meme may

at first glance appear to be a simple pithy retort, but it nevertheless represents tensions and

differences between generations. The KYM entry explains, "'OK Boomer' is a dismissive retort

often used to disregard or mock Baby Boomers and those who are perceived as old-fashioned

and being out-of-touch" (Know Your Meme, 2019). Like virtually all memes, OK Boomer is

contextually specific and calling the meme a "dismissive retort" may not adequately attend to its

multiple uses. If the phrase is used within groups of similarly aged people, it may be a harmless

joke. But in other contexts, the phrase may actually contribute to generational divisions

(Meisner, 2020). Is it a joke that some people happen to take seriously? Or is it a serious critique of generational differences that some people happen to take as a joke? It is both of these simultaneously; different groups experience and understand the meme differently. But a website like KYM is effectively working to sever any given meme from its individual contexts and asserts that it has the one definition that can apply to *all* contexts. This echoes Marwick and boyd's (2011) discussion of context collapse on Twitter. Just as Twitter flattens multiple audiences into one, KYM's meme definitions have the effect of consolidating the multiple communities for which a given meme may be significant, as well as may hold different meanings.

The stakes of defining even seemingly benign memes are also demonstrated by the proliferation of niche "meme pages" on platforms such as Facebook. With names such as "geology schistposting," "grad school memes with relatable themes," and "Crustacean Memes for Crabby Fiends," these online communities are spaces for people to create, remix, and share meme instances that are hyper-specific to their common interests. Phillips and Milner (2021) write, "Different users might encounter the same words or image or audio or GIF or video, but what that content means for—or does to—each of those users can vary wildly" (196). The polysemy of the modern Web challenges KYM's suggestion that it has the authority to define a singular meaning of a particular meme. KYM presents itself via its interface as an authoritative source of meme definitions and explanations. However, the examples I have sketched out here demonstrate places where KYM falls short on documenting web phenomena. This is no direct fault of KYM or its editorial staff, but instead underscores the inherent difficulties raised by attempting to define an amorphous and unstable Web artifact. However, the fact that KYM's meme entry pages may overlook some uses of a meme or categorize a niche community's

memes as non-noteworthy are anyone who uses KYM to bear in mind as they consider how best to contextualize the website.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Rather than suggest that we entirely turn away from KYM, my suggestion is that future work including KYM addresses how the website is introduced, described, and situated. When used carefully and given appropriate context, KYM remains an invaluable resource for researchers of internet and Web histories. Especially when researchers are not familiar with a given meme, KYM can be incredibly useful in guiding the further development of a research project. However, internet researchers must be careful to avoid relying solely upon KYM. Instead, researchers should seek out the specific communities that are using a particular meme and view them within their original settings. We should turn to the actual users and their communities to fully understand a given meme, and not just accept a definition that has been written by an outside party. And if it is necessary to locate and collect individual examples of meme instances, we should attempt to do so within those same original contexts.

KYM can still be useful to guide the initial stages of research, but it should rarely be the end point. KYM will likely best serve researchers when it is employed alongside other resources and evidence of online phenomena. When selecting resources to support their projects, a researcher should consider factors such as business models, editorial processes, content moderation policies, and community engagement. There is no "one size fits all" approach to guide these assessments, but these characteristics can indicate potential shortcomings and prompt the researcher to supplement a source like KYM with additional resources. And when KYM *is*

used within our writing, we should take the time to contextualize the website with a fitting label and avoid simply calling it a mere "database" or "reference site" without additional explanation. For instance, I might describe KYM as, "a curated collection of user-submitted meme instances and partially crowdsourced definitions." These few extra words can do a lot of work to contextually introduce KYM and avoid granting it undue authority to determine the definitions of memes.

Memes are difficult cultural artifacts to study, largely because they tend to be situated within specific community contexts and evade definition because of their continual processes of remixing and circulation. Websites such as KYM claim to document and define such internet phenomena, but also inadvertently imply that it is even possible for memes to have a single and finalized definition. KYM in particular has emerged as a dominant authority in the definition and categorization of memes. These characteristics have emerged from the interface elements of the website itself, which encourage users perceive it with high credibility. However, there are limits to KYM's authority and several examples where its meme definitions are partially incomplete or inaccurate. Further work is necessary to fully understand how actual users of KYM perceive its interface components and how they might consider the limits of its authority. Additionally, future projects may focus upon the approval processes and editorial standards that KYM staff apply to website content. Finally, throughout KYM's history its interface has undergone minor updates. A potential extension of this project would be to use a resource such as the Internet Archive's Wayback machine to assess how KYM's interface has developed over time and consider how such changes have affected its perceived credibility.

Research on Web histories reminds us that there are multiple histories and intersecting experiences of online spaces, rather than universal experiences and timelines. Yet the

overreliance on KYM as an authority of memes and their history can contribute to the

homogenization of Web histories. As the examples of Pepe the Frog, OK Boomer, and the niche

Facebook groups show, an overreliance on one source for a meme's history can have political

and cultural stakes by overlooking entire uses of the meme within certain communities, by

potentially downplaying its connection to harmful ideologies, and generally implying the

possibility to have a single primary meaning of a meme. While KYM is undeniably a useful

resource, it is important that those who study the histories of the Web are mindful about how we

lean upon this particular website and situate it within our work.

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