**SR 890 Research Project Prospectus**

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“From the beginning of time until 2003 we generated 5 billion gigabytes of data (5 exabytes) – [that is] all the books and news and movies and information in history.  We now generate five exabytes of data every ten minutes” (Detweiler, 2013). This is the startling observation made by Craig Detweiler from his book *iGods* published in 2013. Ten more years have lapsed since this ponderous claim. The data, and the digital mediums built to carry the load, have only *increased*. The information overload is measurable.  It is also proving to be palpable as a deluge of studies signal that the overload is not just intellectual, but also emotional, and inescapably societal (Kegan, 1998). It is taking its toll. In the face of debilitating information overload, new critical literacy forums are essential to assist the reintegration of communal relationships necessary to regulate the medium, the message, and the multimodal-multiliteracy.

The Gutenberg world of the written word has been rewritten, or, more precisely, re-coded. The literacy requirements of the past 500 years are no longer sufficient (Hunt, 2013; Sweet, 2012). Society now drifts in the mixed medium of words, images, slogans, macro and micro biases conveniently packaged in a new literary product called a digital “meme.” A digital meme is a simple mechanism for communicating vast amounts of information in a thumbnail frame of visual stimulus crafted to carry multiple layers of meaning in a digital visual image (Knobler and Lankshear, 2007). We will never be able to think the same way again. Digital Googlers have overthrown Gutenberg. Or, said another way, Googlers have sacked the society created by Gutenberg’s printing press (Sweet, 2012). Sweet concludes, “It’s time for the Gutenbergers to get over their conviction that relationships are real only when they exist face to face in the physical world…Its time for a relationship recalibration” (Sweet, 2012). This is a call for new skills of critical reflection in our new digital world.

In 1967, Marshall McLuhan quite literally penned the now famous maxim, “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1967). This phrase is almost a meme in itself. It is power packed with meaning, instructive, and direct. (It only lacks a visual thumbnail in which to provoke some sort of tribalized emotion). The medium is not neutral, unbiased, nor innocuous. McLuhan argues that the medium profoundly influences the content and value of the message itself. The medium colors the message.

The Gutenberg world which generated the printing press for the written word literally transmitted its messages in black and white, supported linear modes of thinking, and enhanced the critical reflection of concrete meanings of words and the ideas those words put forth (Abel, 2011). The printing press promoted a world of internalization where critical reflection could occur in the deep recesses of the individual mind. The society that resulted embedded itself in facts, reasonability, objectivity, and clearly defined relationships and social responsibilities.

Digital visual media is potent. The digital meme is the new literacy product for communicating in a world of information overload. For five hundred years the written word has worked by addition; adding information into culture one person at a time resulting in a sum total of the cultural milieu. The flow is linear. The digital meme, by contrast, works by multiplication; it is the product of many sources of information in one compact, visual unit. Unlike the sum of words used to articulate a thought or idea, the digital meme arrives already in solution, the product of many ideas already multiplied together. And like the math equation, a process of factoring must be utilized to critically separate the variables contributing to the ideas presented. The adage “a picture is worth a thousand words” is playing out on a global scale amidst a technology capable of rapid transmission with limitless virality.

Critically assessing a meme requires a multimodal sensibility encompassing a multiplicity of cultural modes such as current facts, culture, politics, humor, history, fears, quotes, movies, songs, pop culture, icons, current events, etc. Additionally, a new critical multiliteracy is required to sort the various modes of meaning and reflectively unpack, sort, and prioritize the various levels of influential bits comprising the digital image.

Leonard Sweet (2012) and Arthur Hunt (2013), publishing within a year of one another, present the change in the critical landscape. Hunt (2013), in his book *Surviving technopolis: Essays on finding balance in our new manmade environments* is sympathetic for the reclaiming of the day-gone-by, lamenting that “writing [i.e. the medium of the written word] has objectivity and permanency” and thus, “allows us to examine the past and compare it with the present in order to have some discernment in preparing for the future.” This tried and true 500-year critical thinking endeavor requires the concreteness of a defined word. It is only from this concreteness of the word that writing can describe the abstract. Visual images, according to Hunt, are simply “insufficient to convey things like holiness, mercy, self-existence…” (Hunt, 2013). Yet, Hunt must concede that, “the printing press gave rise to industrialism, which ironically gave rise to the new electronic culture, which shares characteristics with primitive oral cultures.” This new electronic culture operates as a culture of spectacle, not introspection; a key distinction in the message masquerading within the medium.

Leonard Sweet (2012) in *Viral: How Social Networking is Poised to Ignite Revival* offers the positive side to what Hunt laments in his analysis.  Sweet sees the Gutenbegers as the "written word" crowd, and as such, more linear in thinking and projection.  The Googlers are more image rich, contextual, and capable of spherical thinking and analysis, i.e. more "global" in communication modalities. Gutenbergers use words as if from a fixed point, to explain hard facts and stats.  Googlers, on the other hand, utilize words emotively in ideas, the sharing of news, and telling stories.  They both rely on words as a primary medium, yet their approach is different. Sweet sees the power of the Googler approach in this new world of communication where everybody has the power to communicate globally in their pockets.  A digital tweet can go viral.  An internet post can impact hundreds of thousands...in an instant!  Sweet sees the revival implications amidst this new world order of communication.

Singh and Churi’s article *Joy of Learning Through Internet Memes* (2020) acknowledges that the currency of today’s social media is influence. The goal of influence is to drive the thoughts of the content creator into people’s minds by utilizing social platforms. Internet meme-ing is a primary medium for accomplishing this influence. The authors’ note that proliferation of technology and technological devices is directly correlated with the reduction of the ability to concentrate within today’s youth. It is this reduction of concentration, a key component of critical reflection, which must be overcome to reclaim critical thinking lost in the fast transmission of multimodal memes. Dongquian, Malakhov, and Matys’ article *Memes and education: Opportunities, approaches, and perspectives* (2020) promotes that memes are a “potential and progressive useful tool for ideological education.” Thus, the meme is a unit of communication which relays ideological influence, not just informative facts. The medium is coloring the message with embedded and deliberate influence toward ideology, opinions, and worldviews. In other words, a digital meme as medium is a contagion built to influence the mind of the viewer with the underlying value of its multisensory, multimodal influence. The medium is influential. It is built to effectively influence at first sight, even at the cost of established, linear, black and white facts.

If McLuhan is correct, and the medium is the message, then the first critical awareness skill when viewing a meme is to recognize, “I am being influenced.” So, what of the message? Influence is the message. In the 2022 article *More than humor: memes as bonding icons for belonging in donor-conceived people*, the research team of Newton, Zappavigna, Drysdale, and Newman explore the effects of memes on the individual’s sense of belonging. They show how memes “play an important role in collective identity formation.” They conceptualize memes as “bonding icons”, which are, “semiotic (symbol) artifacts which foreground shared feelings and invite alignment around a collective identity.” Based on the research result, it is argued that memes require alignment with the values being construed. This influence toward alignment of values reinforces ties to that community. The medium of influence carries the message, *any* message, to attract alignment and collective agreement.

Nicos Trimikliniotis (2020) presents the idea of the “mobile commons” in the *International Social Work Journal* as the fast-moving, digitally enhanced, concerns of the marginalized masses, readily articulated across multiple platforms. The message of the mobile commons is “defined, changed, and re-made by the praxis of the struggles and claims of rights, the modes of sharing, passing on, extended to others” (Trimikliniotis, 2020). Memes function as beacons joining self-identified “marginalized” individuals into a marginalized collective who then collectively “own” the struggle while their memes propagate and recruit more people who can be influenced to embrace their specific way of viewing the world. Thus, memes as a medium effectively influences, collates, and separates the marginalized into an infinite number of specialized digital ghettos.

Jordan Schonig (2020) argues in his article *“Liking” as creating: On aesthetic category memes*, that the sharing of visual, digital memes “clearly indexes a collective desire within Internet culture: a need to feel connected online by sharing ways of seeing rather than sharing words and images, inside jokes, and subcultural knowledge” (Schonig, 2020). Theses authors are in pursuit of ways to “index” the subjective context, continually in flux within the marginalized experience; essentially attempting to identify what the mobile commons “sees” to be true, if even for a brief moment in time. Y. Katz and L. Shifman (2017) explore in their article *Making sense? The structure and meanings of digital memetic nonsense*, that digital nonsense may “potentially serve as a social glue that bonds members of phatic, image-oriented communities.” (Katz and Shifman, 2017) Examining “social glue” is necessary to access the thought architecture of the participants in each culture/community. The current digital environment is ripe with memes, varying in usage and meaning. The authors, in examining “nonsense” memes, arrive at an interesting theory of communal referential meaning which generate affective meaning. These distortions of thought, many times humorous, must not be overlooked as to their ability to establish frames of influence due to the social connections they foster.

The argument can be made that digital visual memes are creating healthy community relationship by attracting like-minded or interest-based collectives, thus fostering unity to some degree. After all, the stated goal of Meta (parent company of Facebook) is to “bring people closer together and build relationships.” (Adam Mosseri – Meta Head of News Feed, 2018) In many ways, this viewpoint was the hope of Leonard Sweet back in 2012. J. Doorley, Kelso, and Kashdan’s article Psychological flexibility: What we know, what we do not know, and what we think we know (2020) examines the tendency of participants to respond situationally in ways that facilitate the pursuit of goals based on values. They address this tendency as a biproduct of a participant’s psychological flexibility, which “a growing body of research demonstrates…leads to psychological benefits and adaptive behavior change.” This can be a useful marker in considering the emotional health and well-being of a participant. Yet, as their article admits, currently, psychological flexibility is measured by the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (AAQ and AAQ-II) which is “highly correlated with distress itself rather than flexible responses to distress.”

Shouldn’t this be a good thing? Unifying and gathering? The medium is proving to be factious and societally dis-integrating since digital memes algorithmically organize collective tribes around marginalized groupings. Memes have not fostered unity, but collective disunity by isolating “groupings” within the mobile commons. Then, by design of how the algorithms work, the divisions doubled-down with influential content capitalizing on the negatively slanted viewing patterns of the individual. Once influenced, a person becomes hunted by more like-valued content, corralling disintegrated people into disconnected tribes of heavily influenced marginalities. (O’Neil, 2016**)**

The social media experiment, with its stated hope to “do the right thing,” to cite Google’s current corporate motto, does not yet have an algorithm for the human condition. Within the very algorithm-controlled system levering behind the social media platforms, a haunting shadow has elongated: People are simply drawn to negative content. The journal of *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* published the article by E. Niefhoff and S. Oosterwiik entitled, *To know, to feel, to share? Exploring the motives that drive curiosity for negative content* (2020). They found that people are “particularly inclined to explore intensely negative social scenes (e.g. violent social conflicts, rescue workers helping victims)…and were preferred over viewing neutral social scenes.” The digital meme becomes an exploitive force once the algorithm homes in on a person’s tendency to engage negative content more than neutral or positive content. And, as indicated by Doorley, et al (2020), it is the distress itself, purposely sought after in negative content, that produces the gathering of the collective group around these unholy fires of spectacle. Hunt’s warning is prescient; that a visual culture is drawn toward the spectacle, lacking the necessary literacy to process beyond oral (now viral) repetition (Hunt, 2013).

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