**SR 890 Research Project Prospectus**

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**Introduction**

I propose a local community project intended to decipher both individual and community truth architecture from the various fragments of scholastic, memetic, and knowledge bits within the mobile digital commons (i.e. people group) related to a “hot topic” of cultural or spiritual relevance. This project will attempt to measure the acceptability of truth statements pre and post community reflection sessions. It will also consider not only what individuals themselves “think,” but what those individuals think others think, based on H. Gruntterink and A. Meister’s 2022 work with meta-perceptions implication in affect, cognition, behavior, and relationships.

**Statement of the Problem**

The exponential growth of data generation has created an information overload that not only overwhelms individuals intellectually but also negatively impacts emotional well-being and societal structures, necessitating the development of new critical literacy frameworks to navigate this deluge and foster healthier human connection.

**Background of the Problem**

“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.

**Analysis through Sociological Theory**

Symbolic Interactionism, attributed the George Herbert Mead, is a sociological perspective that focuses on how individuals create and understand reality through shared symbols and interactions. It emphasizes that human behavior is shaped by the meanings individuals assign to objects, events, and other people, which are developed and modified through social interaction. Communication, particularly through language and symbols, is central to this process as it allows individuals to interpret and make sense of their social worlds. Symbolic Interactionism highlights the dynamic and ever-evolving nature of social reality, recognizing that meanings are constantly being negotiated and reconstructed through ongoing interactions between individuals.

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.

**Faith-Based Analysis**

Understanding the influence of messages in contemporary society aligns with N.T. Wright's view of relationships as grounded in shared narratives and the ongoing negotiation of meaning within communities of faith. Both perspectives highlight the importance of communication, interpretation, and the dynamic nature of human interaction in shaping individual identities and collective experiences.

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).

Daniel Kahneman’s *Thinking, fast and slow* (2011) concludes through his research experiments that human beings are *not* predisposed to making decisions utilizing logical, critical processes; challenging long-held views that people are first logical, then emotive. Instead, people toggle between two processing systems, one fast, and one slow. Fast thinking, according to Kahneman, is directly linked to emotion. Slow thinking, on the other hand, relates to rational reasoning. Visual stimulus, like a transmitted meme, directly interfaces with fast thinking processes, gaining adherence by attaching to “feelings” of agreement or disagreement, instead of logical critical reasonings. He notes that these two systems of operation often work independently from one another and may result in different outcomes if not somehow joined together.

The digital medium of algorithmic memetic influence creates virtual *Frankensteins*; an eccentric amalgamation of negatively influenced, emotive collective groupings, disconnected from organic relationship due to viral ghettoed, algorithmic barriers. The medium of visual, digital memetics is a negatively slanted, emotionally influenced spectacle. It appeals to the deeper “felt” and emotive impulses due to being image oriented instead of word based. The message produced by this medium is “join in ‘our’ perception of the distress and find comfort in the community of the disquieted.” The Gutenburg world of the written word produced a culture committed to thinking and cognition. The Googler world of visual stimulus gathers adherents more gutturally around emotive and experiential concerns. Interestingly, it is the Gutenburg world which produced the IQ (intelligence quotient) test. Of note, it is the emerging Googler world that produced the EQ (emotional quotient) test.

The solution cannot be to go back to the days of the written word. The visual meme, with its multiplex of meaning and ease of transmission, is here to stay, as it solves the problem inherent in the age of information overload. The good news is that we are not quite 20 years into the ubiquitous effects of this new technology. By comparison, it took until the 1800s for the literacy rates of the nations to break the 60% barrier and begin to catch up to the “new” technology of the printing press unleashed in the 1400s. We have arrived at another such time in history. Digital, visual, memetic literacy must become a primary focus.

In 2021 the *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* published an article by M. Bajovic and K. Rizzo, *Meta-moral cognition: Bridging the gap among adolescent’s moral thinking, moral emotions and moral actions,* the researchers “propose a meta-moral cognition process as an active mediator of the cognition and emotions involved in moral decision making.” By combining perspectives from cognitive-development and social domain theory, the researchers look for a bridge between thinking and feelingtheorizing that both processes are needed to contribute to a healthy balance within the individual.

Critical reflection is a thought vaccine necessary to build up individual and cultural integrity, thus becoming immune to “react first, think later” clustering. Carter and Nicolaides’ 2023 *Transformative learning: An emotional revolution*, distinguishes the process of moving a participant through certain phases of reflection to arrive at critical reflection, which is the most non-biased of the phases; the most non-influenced. The authors specifically enhance the knowledge of “edge-emotions” toward a “comfort zone”, whereby new stages of reflection come more easily. The initial phase, the emotional phase, is termed as the “disorienting dilemma”, requiring a movement toward critical process to rectify the dilemma. They, too, are pursuing adaptive strategies to articulate and accelerate the transformative learning process.

A growing body of social research is being conducted to disperse the deluge of information generated in the digital arena. Research teams are fastidiously probing the negative and positive realms of this new medium of memes. The team of Gina Ugalingan, et al (2022) published their pilot study *The pedagogy of multiliteracy and multimodality through memes* proposing classroom activities utilizing memes to teach logical fallacies in argumentation. Their study reinforces the use of multiliteracies as an aid to growing as critical thinkers. They conclude, “memes generated by students are reflective of the multiliteracies employed in their conceptualization and execution and the interaction between multiliteracies and multimodalities is instrumental in teaching and promoting critical thinking” (Ugalingan, et al, 2022).

B. Zeinedine and C. W. Leach’s *Feeling and thought in collective action on social issues: Toward a systems perspective* (2021) introduces a helpful new literacy concept of a co-evolving “system of systems.” In matters of social issues, they advocate for recognizing the corresponding systems related to thought, feeling, motivation, action, and context that are immediately influencing the current social issue. It is a call for a multiliteracy approach in order to properly orient the relationship modes within society. This terminology, although tangential to memetics, provides a great descriptive for what a meme in culture represents; it is a visual adaptation of a system of systems multiplied together to communicate one overarching influencing agenda. Just as in math, a process for factoring out the component parts is necessary to properly sort the contents of a meme to better understand and reflect upon the various systems being showcased.

K. Matias’ exploratory paper *Integration of internet memes in teaching social studies and its relation to the development of critical thinking skills* (2020) suggests the possibility of integrating memes for the development of critical thinking skills necessary when learning a particular subject. The researcher suggests a meme-based learning method to assist in the cognitive development and competencies for a given subject. This idea is akin to the utilization of the newspaper political cartoon which often combined in a single image a visual representation of political affiliation, social standing, and personality quirks of the person being represented in the image. A reader who understands all three of these categories as it relates to the person in the image would thus “get” the cartoon. They simply had to have the multimodal literacy of each category in representation to follow along. N. Kayali and A. Altuntas (2021) similarly conclude that the utilization of memes in the classroom showed significant results in the vocabulary recall for medical students, and thus advocate for the increase of critical strategies and innovation of meme utilization in education.

It will be through multiliteracies and multimodal critical reflection that our digital visual society will find its way out of the algorithmic ghettos we have each unwittingly been placed into. The division of culture into enclaves of collective distress is systematic, not relational; Each placed into collective units by the influence of a negatively slanted medium. Yet, this “system of systems,” working by dispassionate algorithms, can be critically sorted. It must be sorted in hopes of reintegrating the proper community relationships of human beings living and acting in society alongside one another, properly gathered and appropriately influenced one to another, intellectually and emotively connected to the real world in which we must live and respond together.

**Designing the Intervention**

I will develop a local community project that is intended to decipher both the individual and community truth architecture from the various fragments of scholastic, memetic, and knowledge bits within the mobile digital commons (i.e. people group) related to a “hot topic” of cultural or spiritual relevance.

Each participant will be given a pre-test assessment of the current issue. The test will be a series of “think, feel, know” self-assessments with a 1 to 5 Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Three question/statements will be within a “think” category, three from a “feel” category, and three from a “know” category. A parallel pre-assessment will be given with the same question/statements, only this assessment will be answered by the participants relating how each participant believes his/her community views each statement. This design is intended to account for Bou Zeineddine and Leach’s work in *Feeling and thought in collective action on social issues: Toward as Systems perspective* which draws attention to “systems meta-theory…to view our key concepts not as static, discrete, unitary variables, but as situated and synchronized assemblies of a host of lower-order components.” (Bou Zeineddine and Leach, 2021).

The “think, feel, know” pre and posttest assessment will be used as an indicator of a participant’s thought architecture based on the communication tools of think, feel, know, developed by Shirlaws Group. This project will make specific use of the framework to measure a participant’s movement within each category following community group facilitated discussions on the background, history, and pertinent facts relative to the cultural issue raised on the pre/post assessment. Each of these factors; how a person thinks about an issue, feels about an issue, and facts known about an issue, is understood to be initially formed by multivarious inputs from interpersonal conversations and/or observations, and likely, heavily influenced by the digital and continuous news and social media cycles. The “think, feel, know” markers will be relied upon to assist the detection of current truth markers within the participants and, subsequently, the communities, in which they live.

Carter and Nicolaides’ 2023 *Transformative learning: An emotional revolution*, distinguishes the process of moving a participant through certain phases of reflection to arrive at critical reflection, which is the most non-biased of each phase. The authors specifically enhance the knowledge of “edge-emotions” toward a “comfort zone”, whereby new stages of reflection come more easily. This project will be an attempt to measure this type of critical reflection movement, resulting in a personal and community movement towards truth. The post assessment, using the same frame and question/comments will be given following group exposure and facilitated reflection. Each participant’s Likert scores will be assessed to consolidate any trends of movement.

Assuming that truth markers can be improved through facilitated small group discussions of relevant facts, histories, and background of particular issues, further development of this process would need to be done to more precisely measure truthful critical reflection. Ron Dreher issues a sobering reminder in the fight to keep truth an ever-flowing fountain:

How did people keep hold of reality under communist conditions? How do they know not only what to remember but how to remember it? The answer was to create distinct small communities—especially families and religious fellowships—in which it was possible both to speak truthfully and to embody truth.” (Dreher, 2020)

**Ethical Considerations**

The project will be designed to be ethically sound. Given the sensitive nature of self-assessments and community perceptions, ensuring participant privacy is crucial to fostering trust and encouraging honest responses; therefore, confidentiality will be maintained. The "think, feel, know" assessments may touch upon sensitive or emotionally charged topics. I will be prepared to offer support to participants who may experience distress during or after the assessment process.

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