



Working Group Media Anthropology

The politics and practices of meme culture: ethnographic perspectives on post-digital modes of knowledge production

Workshop of the AG Medien(anthropologie)

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Idil Gallip, University of Amsterdam, founder of “Meme Studies Research Network”

The workshop explores ethnographic approaches to memes as a digital phenomenon characterized by practices of appropriating, commenting on, manipulating, editing, remixing, and disseminating found digital artefacts. By combining text and image or short audio-visual formats and their embeddedness in post-digital environments (a concept that points beyond the online/offline or analogue/digital divide), contested forms of knowledge are produced and circulated. Practices surrounding memes often bring forth subcultural communities, and different meme cultures operate at the intersection of utopias of user empowerment and the media industry. Their potential for mass or even global circulation and “virality” is often counteracted by community-specific and localized addressing and legibility. Meme cultures are playful, often political, humorous or satirical thereby negotiating intersections of race, class, and gender. With their potential to subvert, memes intervene political debates, and while they sometimes might seem trivial or nonsensical, they are easily politicized through their entanglements in political, economic, and social systems of domination.

In this workshop we particularly invite anthropological and media ethnographic perspectives that critically reflect on meme practices and their post-digital cultures from the different angles of production, consumption, and circulation in subversive, political, and popular culture. Case studies could range from political meme cultures, like the alt-right, interventions in election campaigns, or other social movements, to art, digital folklore and the use of memes in popular culture and everyday life.

During the workshop we want to explore the following questions: What is the state of memes in anthropology? How are memes situated as part of ethnographic research? What kind of knowledge is produced through the combination of text and image, or the short audio-visual formats? How are these modes of knowledge intervening in post-digital and decolonial practices or digital sovereignty?