



MEMES AND SMART MEMES

Shifting Culture with Contagious Thoughts

smartMeme Elements

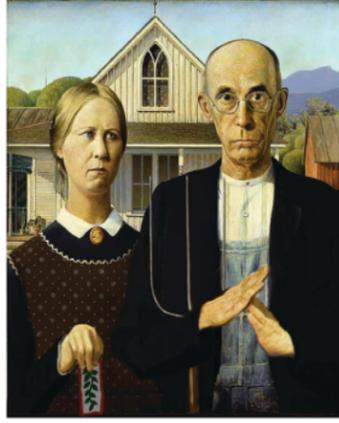
reframe
communicate
AGITATE
change

CHANGING THE STORY



Concepted and co-designed by smartMeme's Creative Director, this meme (attacked as "hate speech" by the Bush Administration) spread from anti-war demonstrations to media and popular culture around the world.

VERMONTERS CALL A TIME OUT ON GENETICALLY ENGINEERED CROPS



The farmers of Rural Vermont (ruralvermont.org) wanted to say "Time Out" on genetic engineering and this ad, designed by smartMeme, helped launch their meme. They succeeded in passing the first GE seed labeling law in the country.



This image, produced by smartMeme colleague Andrew Boyd and informed by a smartMeme training with his students NYU, challenges the story that supporting the troops means supporting the war.



This advertisement, created by smartMeme for the Safe Cosmetics Coalition (safecosmetics.org), has become an icon of the struggle to ensure the environmental health of future generations.

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THE "ATOMS OF CULTURE"

As we go about our day-to-day lives, we constantly encounter ideas, stories, images, and songs that carry meaning for us. Customs, words, symbols, and ideas act as containers for cultural information that spread virally from person to person, moment to moment, generation to generation. These self-replicating units of culture that take on a life of their own are "memes" (rhymes with "dreams").

Memes are everywhere – from personal mannerisms and collective ritual, to the advertising slogans and political buzzwords that dominate the media. Over time memes tend to morph, disappear, or even dramatically change in meaning. For example, we still toss coins into fountains because that was how the Romans once asked aquatic deities for favors; today we simply say we are making a wish.

The concept of "atoms of culture" that spread and act like genes has been around since at least the 1950's. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins first coined the word "meme" in 1976 from the Greek root meaning "to imitate."

WHOSE MEME?

In order to think memetically, we have to make a paradigm shift similar to that of biologists who began to think genetically – we have to see ideas and elements of culture as semi-autonomous and working to replicate and adapt like genes. Memes also shape the evolution of culture since they can carry stories that transform dominant narratives and practices. This is what makes the meme concept particularly useful to people working for social change.

But many memes emerge from a point-of-view that may not be our own, or contain unexamined histories and assumptions. Often times as these memes replicate they carry a specific agenda and re-affirm traditional inequities, from "a woman's place is in the kitchen," to "you can pull yourself up by your bootstraps," to "you're either with us, or you're with the terrorists." Clever memes are constantly being created to sell products, ideas,

political candidates and policies. Unless we're careful someone else's meme may come out of our mouths, carrying with it an embedded story and assumptions that might skew the terms of the debate against us.

The art of containerizing verbal, visual or written memes together to shape the perception of their meaning is known as framing. For example, the word "progressive" describes left-leaning politics by implying an improvement, and therefore suggesting that right-wing politics are a backwards step – a regression. Framing can be a powerful social change tool, particularly when combined with an understanding of memes – or how the story that is framed will spread and become memetic.

MEMES AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

In order to change the stories that shape the dominant culture we need new memes that open space for collaborative storytelling to challenge the "closed" narratives that re-enforce

exploitation and injustice. Our organization is named after the idea of smart memes, that is memes – be they images, songs, rituals, etc. – that help re-frame debates, challenge assumptions and change the story about an issue. Smart also means networked, because memes don't go viral without people power – they are most effective when they emerge from organized communities working for change.

Social movements have always created memes as containers for larger stories that can change the dominant culture – Civil Rights...Think Globally, Act Locally...Hell No, We Won't Go...Si Se Puede! The most powerful smart memes literally change established ideas and shift the status quo stories: Like challenging the patriarchal tradition of defining a woman by her marital status by using the title "Ms.," or renaming Columbus Day as Indigenous Peoples Day.

CHANGING THE STORY

The smartMeme Strategy & Training Project is a nonprofit collective that works to apply meme theory and a narrative analysis of power to

strengthen social change efforts. We use a story-based strategy approach to change the world by changing the stories used to understand an issue or situation. We work as trainers and consultants with a host of organizations from coast-to-coast providing strategy, training, graphic design, and communications support to groups working for human rights, democracy, peace, justice and ecology. SmartMeme is also home to a thriving youth network called STORY (Strategy Training and Organizing Resources for Youth), our program to train young activists in story-based strategy.

At smartMeme we believe it's time for social change strategies that can challenge assumptions and transform the dominant culture. What memes are you spreading? Together we can change the story – and change the world.



smartMeme
Changing the Story...
www.smartmeme.com

SmartMeme is a national holistic strategy project that links storytelling and social change to strengthen movements for peace, justice, democracy, and ecological sanity. We are winning victories today, and supporting tomorrow's visionaries through our youth leadership program STORY – Strategy Training and Organizing Resources for Youth.

"SmartMeme's unique strategy tools and messaging insights will help us not only get our message out but also challenge some of the underlying assumptions that are fueling environmental destruction."

- Phil Radford, Field Director, Greenpeace USA

YES! I want to get involved as a member of smartMeme!

Here is my tax deductible contribution of:

- \$35
- \$50
- \$100
- \$ _____

I am interested in:

- STORY youth program
- Local strategy circles, trainings and other events in my area
- Contracting w/smartMeme to help my organization, _____
- Volunteering
- Annual Giving
- Other: _____

Name (first/last) _____

Organizational Affiliation(s) _____

Email _____

Street Address _____

City _____ State _____

Zip Code _____ Tel. _____

SmartMeme runs on the passion, dreams, and financial support of individuals like you. We invite you to join smartMeme and become part of the stories that are changing our world for the better.

Please mail this info, and your check (made out to smartMeme), to: smartMeme, 180 N. Valley Drive, Skokomish Drive, WA 98584. Or, join online at www.smartmeme.com