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Post-Authenticity and the Ironic Truths of Meme Culture

Jay Owens

Media Isn't Really Real

In the last couple of years, fakery seems to have accelerated. The term “fake news” appeared out of next-to-nowhere in November 2016 (fig. 1).

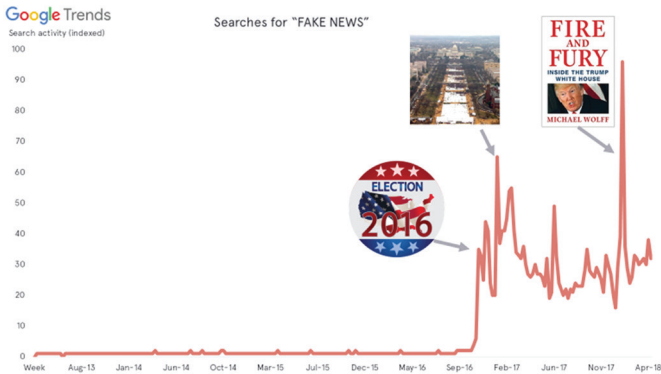


Fig. 1. Source: Google Trends. See <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=today%205-y&geo=US&q=fake%20news>.

The press has published myths, falsehoods, and exaggerations for about as long as there has been a press—and even the term “fake news” dates back to the 1890s, the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary reports.¹ Lying is, surely, as old as humanity.

But the term has twisted. “Fake news,” as used in the last 18 months, doesn’t really mean “fake” in the conventional sense of the word—as in unreal, or incorrect, or false news. As used by the us President, the most mainstream and fact-checked news media is “fake” if he disagrees with it. The term means something more like “troublesome news,” or “news I vehemently disagree with, and wish to discredit.”



Fig. 2. Tweets by us President Donald J. Trump, @realDonaldTrump.

The us President helped spur 29 million tweets about “fake news” in the last year, keeping the topic always present in public discourse (figs. 2 and 3).

Meanwhile, in the UK, “fake news” becomes a political point-scoring exercise in headlines such as: “Theresa May’s ‘Fake News Unit’ Announcement Has Itself Been Branded ‘Fake News.’”² Your boy Kafka is proud.

The work of making real news: the fact-checking and triangulating processes by which news organizations ensure their coverage is accurate, and professional principles of integrity; journalists talk about this continually on Twitter. Yet is the message getting through?

1 See “The Real Story of ‘Fake News,’” *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/the-real-story-of-fake-news>.
 2 See Mikey Smith, “Theresa May’s ‘Fake News Unit’ Announcement Has Itself Been Branded ‘Fake News,’” *Mirror*, January 30, 2018, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/theresa-mays-fake-news-unit-11940423>.

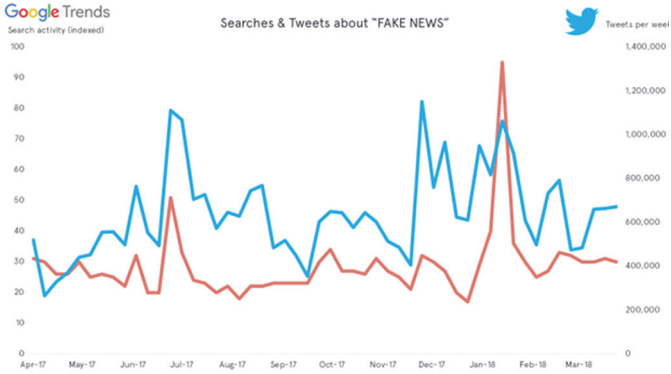


Fig. 3. Source: Google Trends and Pulsar Trends. See <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2017-04-01%202018-04-01&geo=US&q=fake%20news>.

Public trust both is and isn't holding up.

Kantar's 2017 Trust In News survey finds that people still believe in the principle of "real news": Across the USA, UK, France, and Brazil, 73% of people agreed that quality journalism is key to a healthy democracy.³ The reputational impact of the "fake news" issue has been predominantly borne by digital and social media channels: 58% now trust social media coverage of politics and elections less and 41% trust online-only news sources less. Traditional TV and print media channels have held up comparatively well.

However, the stat to remember is that only slightly more than half (56%) believe what they read overall is true "most of the time." The principle of a shared factual reality among the general public has become tenuous, and cannot be taken for granted.

Last month, an anonymous academic posted to Reddit saying: "I'm a college philosophy professor. Jordan Peterson is mak-

3 See Kirsty Cooke, "'Fake News' Reinforces Trust in Mainstream News Brands," *Kantar*, October 31, 2017, <https://uk.kantar.com/business/brands/2017/trust-in-news/>.

ing my job impossible.”⁴ They report how a minority of students who have been reading and watching “internet outrage merchants” come into class no longer merely disagreeing with some of the ideas taught “that I’m used to dealing with; it’s the bread and butter of philosophy”) — but newly angry, deeply hostile, and believing in complete fabrications about what feminist or postmodernist or Marxist philosophy entails. “To even get to a real discussion of actual texts it takes half the [class] time to just deprogram some of them.”

As danah boyd pointed out at SXSW EDU this year, attempts to increase media literacy in schools can often backfire. Examining the credibility of a Fox News article in class risks being perceived by working class or evangelical youth as an “elite” attack on their values. Teaching young people to make sense of the information landscape without exacerbating distrust is, boyd fears, very difficult: “when youth are encouraged to be critical of the news media, they come away thinking that the media is lying.”⁵

In 2004, a previous Republican presidency gave us the concept of the “reality-based community,” a term meant as pejorative: why be so short-sighted as to limit your vision to the way things were, rather than what the Administration’s actions made possible?⁶

“We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality,” the unnamed official (generally understood to be Karl Rove) said.

4 See annoyed_professor, “I’m a College Philosophy Professor. Jordan Peterson Is Making My Job Impossible,” *Reddit*, March 24, 2018, 16:20 GMT+1, https://www.reddit.com/r/enoughpetersonspam/comments/86tnz7/im_a_college_philosophy_professor_jordan_peterson/.

5 See danah boyd, “You Think You Want Media Literacy...Do You?” *Points*, March 9, 2018, <https://points.datasociety.net/you-think-you-want-media-literacy-do-you-7cad6afi8ec2>.

6 See *Wikipedia*, s.v. “reality-based community,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reality-based_community/.

So this present state of things isn't really new. Kurt Andersen dates the rise of this present "truthiness" back to the 1960s, and the rise of an "it's all relative" mode of thinking.⁷ And yet.

Technology Is Warping Reality in New Ways

The post-authenticity of fake news isn't solely a technological or media problem, but a social one, symptomatic of declining trust in a shared civic project. Nonetheless, new media technologies really aren't helping.

In the last year or two,

- Technologies have become available to fake people's voices, so that you can appear to make them say anything you want. In 2016, Adobe released a tool, VoCo, which needed 20 minutes of audio to train on.⁸ In May 2017, Lyrebird, a Montreal-based AI startup, claimed to be able to synthetically mimic any person's voice based on just 60 seconds of speech.⁹
- Faking video has also become accessible. In March 2016, researchers from the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, the Max Planck Institute for Informatics, and Stanford University presented a novel approach for creating fake videos — e.g., making Putin smile, or George W. Bush appear to lipsync to ridiculous material. Through capturing the facial expressions of a source actor on a webcam, and using facial mapping, they demonstrate they're able to manipulate and re-render a YouTube video photorealistically.

7 Kurt Andersen, "How America Lost Its Mind," *The Atlantic*, September 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/how-america-lost-its-mind/534231/>.

8 See Matthew Gault, "After 20 Minutes of Listening, New Adobe Tool Can Make You Say Anything," *Motherboard*, November 5, 2016, https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/jpgkxp/after-20-minutes-of-listening-new-adobe-tool-can-make-you-say-anything.

9 Bahar Gholipour, "New AI Tech Can Mimic Any Voice," *Scientific American*, May 2, 2017, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/new-ai-tech-can-mimic-any-voice/>.

The Face2Face team note that “computer-generated videos have been part of feature-film movies for over 30 years. [...] These results are hard to distinguish from reality and it often goes unnoticed that the content is not real.” What’s new is the way the technology is newly mass-accessible: now, “we can edit pre-recorded videos in real-time on a commodity PC.”¹⁰

- Where video goes, porn is first to take advantage. In December 2017, Samantha Cole of *Motherboard* reported that “AI-Assisted Fake Porn Is Here and We’re All Fucked.”¹¹ She reports how a Redditor by the name of deepfakes worked out how to combine celebrity facial images from Google image search, stock photos, and YouTube videos, with porn videos, using open-source neural-network “deep learning” library Keras and TensorFlow.

A month later deepfakes turned the process into an app — and *Vice* reported that “We Are All Truly Fucked,” as the faceswap porn trend swept Reddit.¹² It then got banned, but you know, that horse had already bolted.

- Various smaller events, too. The ongoing march of fake social media followers and fake “likes,” as reported most recently in the *New York Times*’s snazzy longread investigation “The Follower Factory,” a somewhat late-to-the-party but nonetheless welcome dig into the entirely fictional world of celebrity and

10 See, for a demonstration, Matthias Niessner, “Face2Face: Real-time Face Capture and Reenactment of RGB Videos (CVPR 2016 Oral),” YouTube, March 18, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohmajJTcpNk>.

11 See Samantha Cole, “AI-Assisted Fake Porn Is Here and We’re All Fucked,” *Motherboard*, December 11, 2017, https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/gydydm/gal-gadot-fake-ai-porn.

12 See Samantha Cole, “We Are Truly Fucked: Everyone Is Making AI-Generated Fake Porn Now,” *Motherboard*, January 24, 2018, https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/bjye8a/reddit-fake-porn-app-daisy-ridley.



Fig. 4. Fake fairies. Image credit: Kristian Nordestgaard via flickr/CC BY 2.0.

influencer social media metrics.¹³ More fake metrics over on Trip Advisor, too, as Oobah Butler of *Vice* made his garden shed the #1 rated restaurant in London.¹⁴

Again, none of this is new exactly—in 1917, two young girls went down to a stream at the bottom of a garden in Cottingley, England, and took some photographs of fairies which traveled the world (fig. 4).¹⁵ Doubtless some wily courtier seeing some opportunity for gain painstakingly inscribed fake news on a Sumerian stone tablet.

13 See Nicholas Confessore et al., “The Follower Factory,” *New York Times*, January 27, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/01/27/technology/social-media-bots.html>.

14 Oobah Butler, “I Made My Shed the Top Rated Restaurant on Trip-Advisor,” *Vice*, December 6, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/434gqw/i-made-my-shed-the-top-rated-restaurant-on-tripadvisor.

15 See Rosa Lyster, “The Cottingley Fairy Hoax of 1917 Is a Case Study in How Smart People Lose Control of the Truth,” *Quartz*, February 17, 2017, <https://qz.com/911990/the-cottingley-fairy-hoax-of-1917-is-a-case-study-in-how-smart-people-lose-control-of-the-truth/>.



Fig. 5. Which ones did you date? Source: *Paste Magazine*. See Kate Kiefer, “The Evolution of the Hipster 2000–2009,” *Paste*, December 3, 2009, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2009/12/the-evolution-of-the-hipster-2000-2009.html>.

Yet, something is up — something in culture has moved, quite recently, and now the world is different: the pace and extent of fakery has accelerated. It's not just happened in media, it's happened in pop culture too.

In Fashion, Authenticity Imploded Some Time around 2015

“Authenticity” was the defining value of the late-stage hipster.

How the hipster transformed from trucker-cap-clad 2000s nu-rave machine to bearded artisanal flannel shirt connoisseur is recorded in various lifestyle magazine features — best and most visually in *Paste Magazine* (figs. 5, 6)

Though, seeing as this is my generation we're talking about, I might also comment that we just grew up and slowed down a bit (the UK government also made mephedrone — the “white powder that smells faintly of cat piss [which] defined the UK's party scene from 2008 to 2010” — illegal.¹⁶)

Rewind eight years, to 2010. In this period, as smartphones and digital media took over our lives, the dominant aesthetic of middle-class consumption — fashion, interior decor and lifestyle — went the other way: rough-hewn, wholesome. Authentic. God, do you remember the beards? And the flannel, and the workwear, and the artisan everything: coffee, bread, burgers. Ostentatious unpretentiousness: cocktails in mason jars, wine in tumblers, and ridged, deeply textured wooden tables and walls. Flower crowns and neo-boho festival fashion.

Driving this trend was a small magazine — print, of course, published on heavyweight matte paper stock — run out of Portland, Oregon, called *Kinfolk*. The visual language it defined spread far and wide (fig. 7).

Summer Allen noticed just how much of a template this look was:

16 See JS Rafaeli, “The Story of Mephedrone, the Party Drug That Boomed and Went Bust,” *Vice*, January 17, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/9aa53a/the-story-of-mephedrone-the-party-drug-that-boomed-and-went-bust.



Fig. 7. From left to right: Instagram users @MaryHoagland, @UpTheWoodenHills, and @NuanceAndBubbles Photo coordination credit: SummerAllen.

I started the The Kinspiracy tumblr after I noticed a pattern emerging from dozens of Instagram users — my own personal Beautiful Mind moment. It was suddenly so clear: Every account cultivating that Kinfolk look seemed to follow a specific formula. Every account had a photo (or several) of the following: A latte with a foam leaf design, a fresh piece or two of citrus, a glimpse of a pair of small feet — often in a well-worn pair of boots — an ice cream cone, weather permitting, some glasses here and there, twine, the occasional fixed-gear bike. And always, in every damn account, *Kinfolk*.¹⁷

The “authentic” look wasn’t just shaping people’s Instagram feeds, but real-world spaces and places too in a feedback loop between social media and IRL that journalist Kyle Chayka called AirSpace:

It’s marked by an easily recognisable mix of symbols — like reclaimed wood, Edison bulbs, and refurbished industrial lighting — that’s meant to provide familiar, comforting surroundings for a wealthy, mobile elite, who want to feel like they’re visiting somewhere “authentic” while they travel, but who actually just crave more of the same: more rustic interi-

¹⁷ Summer Allen, “Wood, Citrus, Lattes, Feet, Twine, Repeat: The Kinfolk Kinspiracy Code,” *Gawker*, March 31, 2015, <http://gawker.com/wood-citrus-lattes-feet-twine-repeat-the-kinfolk-1693115156>.

ors and sans-serif logos and splashes of cliché accent colours on rugs and walls.¹⁸

Later, Chayka was blunter about his frustrations — tweeting in October 2017 that “‘authenticity’ is the plague of the 21st century,” in a thread about the cynical falseness of so many of its iterations.

The contradictory appeal of AirSpace was best summed up by artist and designer Lauren Schwulst: “it’s funny how you want these really generic things but also want authenticity, too.”¹⁹

The authentic aesthetic is too clearly a facsimile, too obviously a template rolled out by the operations directors of VC-funded Millennial Pink-branded startups and Airbnb mega-hosts putting the same framed inspirational quotes in every identikit, resident-displacing condo. Airbnb rebranded in 2014 with a campaign about how you can “belong anywhere,” a profoundly inauthentic claim that strips belonging of all meaning.

Around 2015 there was a wave of articles about how “the hipster” was, finally, dead as a cultural archetype (“Why London decided to move on from beards, beanies and fixie bikes” was the title of a Richard Godwin article in the *Evening Standard*²⁰) — and “authenticity” as a cultural value expired along with it:

The typology has become a caricature and the terms once associated with it — craft, artisan, making — have also become cartoonish. When McDonald’s boasts about artisanal chicken

18 Kyle Chayka, “Same Old, Same Old: How the Hipster Aesthetic is Taking Over the World,” *The Guardian*, August 6, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/06/hipster-aesthetic-taking-over-world>.

19 Lauren Schwulst, quoted in Kyle Chayka, “Welcome to Airspace: How Silicon Valley Helps Spread the Same Sterile Aesthetic Across the World,” *The Verge*, August 3, 2016, <https://www.theverge.com/2016/8/3/12325104/airbnb-aesthetic-global-minimalism-startup-gentrification>.

20 Richard Godwin, “Death of the Hipster: Why London Decided to Move on from Beards, Beanies and Fixie Bikes,” *Evening Standard*, April 16, 2015, <https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/death-of-the-hipster-why-london-decided-to-move-on-from-beards-beanies-and-fixie-bikes-10178615.html>.



Fig. 8. All hipster coffee shops have the same stools. Source: Google Image search.

(complete with “artisan chicken” and “artisan roll”) you know the message has gone awry.²¹

What came next? “Minimalist brands” was one answer from marketers — but that mood didn’t last.²² In Spring 2016, Demna Gvasalia shocked the fashion press with bootleg anti-fashion at Vetements — selling meta-referential hoodies, DHL-branded T-shirts, and reworked secondhand jeans for hundreds and thousands of Euros.²³ Meanwhile, in the hipper echelons of design we’re back to postmodernism, with 1980s Memphis Group

- 21 Daniela Walker, “The Hipster is Dead, Let’s Start an Anti-authenticity Movement,” *Campaign*, September 29, 2015, <https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/hipster-dead-lets-start-anti-authenticity-movement/1366143>.
- 22 See Ed Silk, “Authenticity as We Know It Is Dead as Brands Go Minimalist to Express Their Craft and Quality,” *The Drum*, February 12, 2016, <http://www.thedrum.com/opinion/2016/02/12/authenticity-we-know-it-dead-brands-go-minimalist-express-their-craft-and-quality>.
- 23 See Jake Woolf, “There’s an \$800 Hoodie That’s Selling Out Everywhere,” *GQ*, February 22, 2016, <https://www.gq.com/story/vetements-hoodie-buy-sold-out-price>.

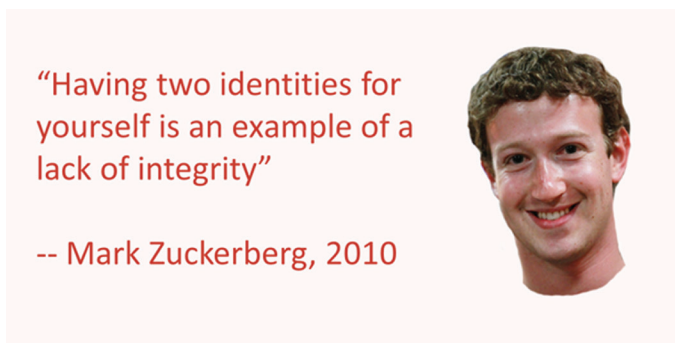


Fig. 9. Quote from Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg.

aesthetics and terrazzo replacing Insta'd-out white marble (if the pages of *Elle Decoration* and the graphic design of Chayka's Studyhall journalist co-op is anything to go by).²⁴ "Authenticity" and the desire to focus on the perceived, more-real "essence of things" is no longer in vogue: surface and clever references are all.

Something similarly playful is happening, I argue, in how the post-Millennial "Generation Z" present themselves online.

Generation Z Are Pioneering Post-authentic Social Media

Back in 2010, Mark Zuckerberg made the case for the single, real-name Facebook account as the "authentic" way to do social media, and sought to impose this model of self-presentation on hundreds of millions of users, with Facebook's controversial (and partially rolled-back) "real names policy" (fig. 9).²⁵

But authenticity became a performance, as we started to speak to audiences of hundreds and thousands beyond our "real" pools of friends and family, and "likes" and follower counts trained us to create the kinds of content that would be

²⁴ See <http://studyhall.xyz/>.

²⁵ See Dave Lee, "Facebook Amends 'Real Name' Policy after Protests," *BBC*, December 15, 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-35109045>.

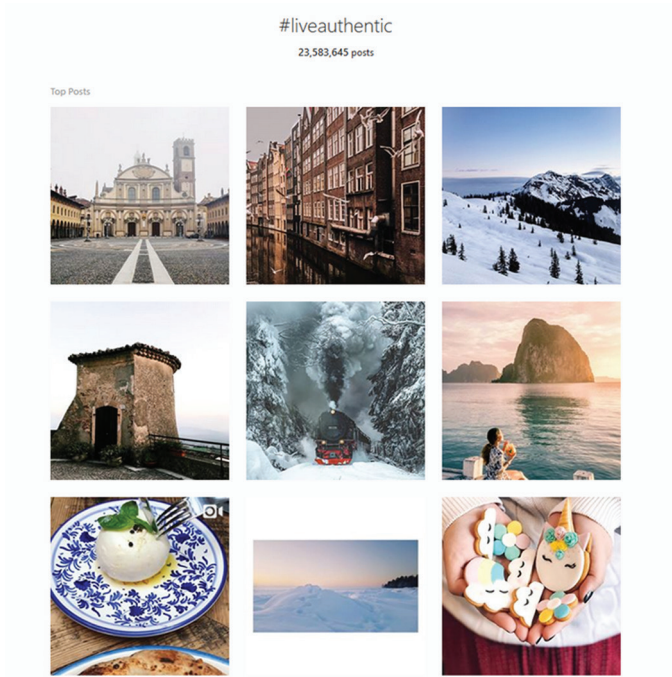


Fig. 10. Instagram #liveauthentic stream.

the most popular, over the realistic depictions of our day-to-day. Our Instagram feeds professionalized: the quality of photography got better, the captions wittier. The relationship to our real lives became more complicated

The ur-point of this, for me, is the #liveauthentic hashtag on Instagram (fig. 10): a compendium of the most *Kinfolk*-perfect depictions of an enviable foodie, travel lifestyle, Rise-filter tinted for that “golden hour” glow.

Meanwhile, young people were reporting that looking right in social media was stressing them the hell out.

A survey from the Girl Guides Association in the us last year found that teenage girls weren’t just seeing social media risks like their parents did, as a place where they might be threatened

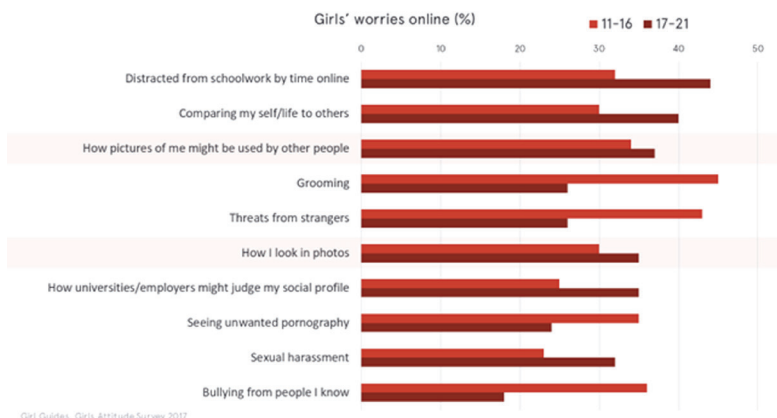


Fig. 11. Girls' worries online (%). Source: Girl Guides, Girls Attitude Survey 2017.

by bullying and “stranger danger.” Instead, their second biggest worry online was the pressure of “comparing my self/life to others.” Their sixth biggest concern, “how I look in photos” (fig. 11).²⁶

Social media has, after all, dramatically changed the field of social comparison, from operating mostly at the transient, real-world social scale of a few hundred people around you at your school and in your neighborhood, to one that’s media-scale, global, and permanent. Eric Herber, then a 17-year-old in high school, wrote in 2015:

When I post a photo on Instagram I know that just about every person I am connected to in the real life will see my photo, decide whether or not to like it, and then judge me subconsciously.

²⁶ See Girlguiding, “Girls’ Attitudes Survey 2017,” 2017, <https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/globalassets/docs-and-resources/research-and-campaigns/girls-attitudes-survey-2017.pdf>.



Fig. 12. Instagram accounts @hahoop and @hoonhap, via Mic.com.

Because of this, Instagram is seen as a huge stressor for many teenagers.
 Your Instagram defines who you are.²⁷

Teenagers, being young and adaptable, have modified their social media behaviors to fit this new landscape accordingly.
 An 18-year-old American high school student, interviewed by journalist Justine Harman, details the heavily strategized social media management playbook she and her peers use:

²⁷ Eric Herber, “Finstagram: The Instagram Revolution,” *Medium*, February 10, 2015, <https://medium.com/bits-pixels/finstagram-the-instagram-revolution-737999d40014>.

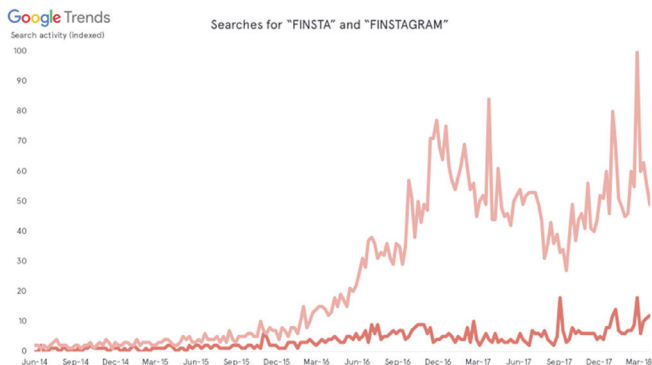


Fig. 13. Source: Google Trends. See <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=today%205-y&q=finstagram,finsta>.

I would never post twice in one day because if I am expecting to get 200 likes on a picture, I have to post sparingly.

First you have to edit the picture, make sure no one in your friend group is already posting it, send it to your friends for approval, think of a clever caption, and then post it at a time of day that will hopefully afford you the most amount of likes.

Yes, it's insane. But this is what girls do.²⁸

As a result, Finstagram.

What? Fake Instagram, for trash pics and the outtakes reel of your main, hyper-curated Instagram account (fig. 12).²⁹

Finstagram has been a thing since, ah yes, January 2016: coincidentally or not, just after hipster "authenticity" died.

28 Justine Harman, "The Crazy Way Teens are Hiding Their Imperfections Online: Finstagram," *Elle*, July 9, 2015, <https://www.elle.com/culture/tech/a29243/finstagram/>.

29 See Taylor Lorenz, "The Secret Instagram Accounts Teens Use to Share Their Realst, Most Intimate Moments," *Mic*, March 3, 2017, <https://mic.com/articles/175936/the-secret-instagram-accounts-teens-use-to-share-their-realst-most-intimate-moments>.



Fig. 14. Finsta tweets.

Freed from having to maintain a singular, authentic, official identity, it turns out young people feel they can be a lot more real on their fake accounts.

Snapchat offers the same promise too: ephemeral social media. It's digital "safe space" in the real sense of that word: setting boundaries and expectations in order to make difficult things—here, your imperfect, unfiltered self—possible to speak about.

The Meme Generation

"Generations" are a bullshit marketing concept, right? Except all of us looking at the remarkable teenagers of Parkland High School and their astonishing media campaigning ways are also aware that damn, something's different about kids today.

For the last two or three years I've been doing a bit of work for a tech company client on understanding first Millennials and then Generation Z: what are they doing, how are they different, and what makes them tick. For Generation Z—born in 2000 onward—there are two interesting, seemingly opposite cultural tendencies in play.

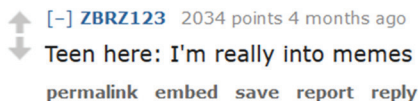


Fig. 15. Comment on Reddit post “Teens of Reddit, what is considered cool right now?”

On the one hand, they're the Sensible Generation. Every measure of risk-taking behavior is down, across the US and Europe: drinking, smoking, drug use, early sexual activity, and teenage pregnancy.³⁰ Spurred on by the prospect of massive educational debt, they try harder in school and have heart-breakingly modest and, well, sensible aspirations for their future lives.

On the other hand...

Let me introduce you to a cultural goldmine. In September last year, an AskReddit thread enquired, “Teens of Reddit, what is considered cool right now?”³¹

The answers are brilliant:

17 here. The word “lit”, trap music, being “THICC”, Vans, Converse, Gucci flip flops, chokers, crop tops, ripped jeans, bomber jackets, Kendrick Lamar, acrylic nails, going to the gym, athletic clothing, taking aesthetic pics of your dog or yourself or both together, being “relationship goals”, grinding at school dances, prom, being confident, being smart, being artistic, ooh and MEMES!!!!

idk what else but those are the basics lol.³²

³⁰ See Sarah Kliff, Soo Oh, and Sarah Frostenson, “Today’s Teens Use Hallucinogens/Fight/Drink/Use Heroin/Have Babies/Use Meth/Binge Drink/Carry Weapons to School Less than You Did,” *Vox*, June 9, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/a/teens>.

³¹ raras4, “Teens of Reddit, What Is Considered Cool Right Now?” *Reddit*, September 9, 2017, 16:55 GMT+2, https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/6z23rj/teens_of_reddit_what_is_considered_cool_right_now/.

³² Majestichuman, Comment on raras4, “Teens of Reddit, What Is Considered Cool Right Now?” *Reddit*, September 9, 2017, 20:20 GMT+2, https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/6z23rj/teens_of_reddit_what_is_considered_cool_right_now/dms4g57



Fig. 16. Comment on Reddit post “Teens of Reddit, what is considered cool right now?”

The most up-voted answers stressed irony as a fundamental orientation (fig. 16).

Youth culture today, in two words: Sensibleness, and Memes. Seriousness, and taking nothing seriously.


Teenagers may be shifting away from posting Facebook status updates — partly because Facebook is where your mum and your aunties are hanging out — but one part of Facebook is thriving: Groups. Zuckerberg emphasized Groups in his “Building Global Community” strategy last year, with a putatively civic-minded goal to “strengthen people’s online and offline connections.”³³ But he probably wasn’t thinking of groups like these (fig. 17).

Frequented mostly by an audience under 25, many of these groups are just sharing funny, ironic, meme-y content. Roots lie in what was called Weird Facebook — as documented by Jordan Pedersen in 2014, the group Shit Memes then had 30,000 followers, and was one of the bigger groups around.³⁴ Prior to that, Internet meme culture in the period 2008–2012 was being heav-


33 Mark Zuckerberg, “Building Global Community,” *Facebook*, February 16, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/building-global-community/10154544292806634/>.

34 Jordan Pedersen, “Inside the Inscrutable World of Weird Facebook,” *Daily Dot*, August 5, 2014, <https://www.dailydot.com/unclick/weird-facebook/>.


Post Memes

- 


Dark Memes For Edgy Teens 2 Join

5.2K members · 10+ posts a day
Sweden
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Anime Memes for Weaboo Teens Join

39K members · 10+ posts a day
Welcome to Anime **Memes** for Weaboo **Teens** Post anime **memes** here or watch others post them (English Only) Here are...
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Yale Memes for Special Snowflake Teens Join

25K members · 10+ posts a day
New Haven, Connecticut · Dank **memes** to comfort yalies' crushed dreams REPOSTS + NON YALE RELATED **MEMES** WILL GET ...
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Form and Function Memes for Architectural Teens Join

4.1K members · 2 posts a day
i m p l y i n g we should build structures this is your premier space for posting hot fresh ---- ARCHITECTURAL ...
👤 Scott Martin is in this group
-
- 

UC Berkeley Memes For Edgy Teens (After Dark) Join

156K members · 10+ posts a day
Hell, Michigan · Stay updated: <http://bit.ly/UCBMFET> WAYS TO NOT GET B&: 1) Don't resubmit the same meme over ...
-
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Haram Memes For Jahannam Minded Teens Join

57K members · 10+ posts a day

Fig. 17. Meme groups on Facebook

adult: What are your plans after LSE ?
me:



Fig. 19.
Source:
Facebook
Group Robust
Memes for
LSE Teens,
<https://www.facebook.com/memes.LSE.Robust/>.

repurposing of other internet meme forms, from dog meme vocabulary where every thing is a “boi” — “sad reaccs only for this r e p l a c e m e n t b o i” replacement bus service — with contemporary meme formats such as the recent *American Chopper* meme made into a debate about Shinkansen vs. Maglev trains, alongside serious discussion about the reforms needed to the transportation systems and urban planning of American cities.³⁸

One testimonial notes: “I joined this group expecting memes and all I got was the equivalent of a bachelor’s in urban planning.”

But teenagers are using humor and irony — through the form of memes — to find ways to face up to and discuss deeper stresses and anxieties, too.

38 See Martin Belam, “Meme Explained: Why Do I Keep Seeing the Same Two Angry Men on Social Media?,” *The Guardian*, April 6, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/apr/06/meme-explained-why-do-i-keep-seeing-the-same-two-angry-men-on-social-media>; “New Urbanist Memes for Transit-Oriented Teens,” Facebook Group, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/whatwouldjanejacobsdo/permalink/946290535530568/>.

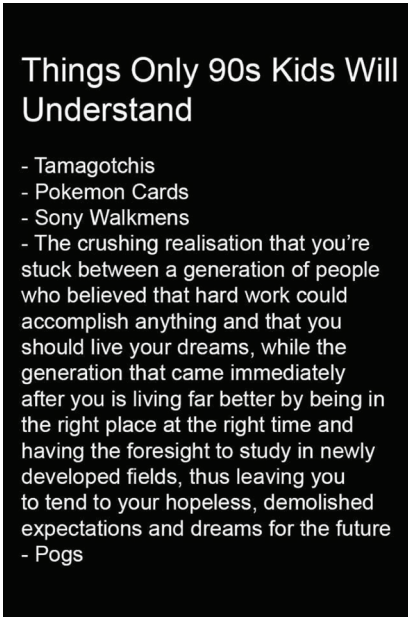


Fig. 20. Source: Facebook Group Nihilist Memes, <https://www.facebook.com/nihilistmemes/>.

My alma mater, the career-obsessed cultural desert that is the London School of Economics, has a good line in memes which are almost entirely about the pressures students face in their studying and to get a good job (read: a banking or consultancy job) after graduation (fig. 19).

The LSE Memes admin gives barbed benedictions to its anonymous contributors: “may they become one of our top banking lizard overlords,” “may their hourly consultancy rate collapse a small country’s economy,” and “may she get an unconditional offer from Rothschild so none of this matters.” The irony here is complex, capturing the students’ ambitions and their doubts and their critics, all at once.

Meanwhile, groups like Nihilistic Memes (1.9M followers) and Dank Memes (890K followers) are some of the biggest in

Facebook, trafficking in — again — a kind of doomy empathy (fig. 20).³⁹

What's going on? Paris Martineau interviewed some of the founders of college meme groups for *New York Magazine* last year.⁴⁰ The admins emphasize the empathetic function of the communities they have created: “my friends and I always say that memes come from a place of stress and anxiety,” notes Ephraim Sutherland, co-founder of Yale Memes for Special Snowflake Teens.

And “before the page, I had never seen anyone get together and talk about these issues,” Tril of UC Berkeley Memes for Edgy Teens recalled. “now, I feel like people aren't afraid to talk about them out in the open.”

So through humor, and exaggeration, and irony — a kind of truth emerges about how people are feeling. A truth that they may not have felt able to express straight. And there's more community here as in many of the more traditionally civic-oriented Groups Zuckerberg's strategy may have had in mind.

But why memes?

The formal properties of the meme make it a particularly effective format for delivering an indirect payload of empathy.

A major vector in meme content in the past couple of years has been “relatability” — from the “Common White Girl” @girlposts Twitter account (fig. 21) celebrating the small failings of the everyday basic bitch (now suspended for stealing tweets), to reaction GIFs turning particularly expressive gestures into reusable, quotable forms (and particularly appropriating the emotional labor of black women, as Lauren Michele Jackson noted last year⁴¹). In consuming these memes — in liking and

39 See <https://www.facebook.com/nihilistmemes/>, and <https://www.facebook.com/PlaceForMemes/>.

40 See Martineau, “The Future of College is Facebook Meme Groups.”

41 *Know Your Meme*, s.v. “Common White Girl,” <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/common-white-girl/>; Julia Reinstein, “Twitter Just Suspended a Ton of Accounts Known for Stealing Tweets,” *Buzzfeed*, March 10, 2018, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/juliareinstein/twitter-dory-girlposts-suspended-accounts-tweetdecking>; and Lauren Michele Jackson, “We Need to Talk



Fig. 21. Tweet by Twitter account @girlposts.

sharing — the social media user is participating in a moment of commonality. They’re saying, “I am like this too.” These memes are predicated on a recognition of common human similarities.

Meme formats — from the recent *American Chopper* dialectic model to the “Exploding Brain,” “Distracted Boyfriend,” and “Tag Yourself” templates — are by their very nature iterative and quotable. That is how the meme functions, through reference to the original context and the memes that have gone before, coupled with creative remixing to speak to a particular audience or topic or moment. Each new instance of a meme is thereby automatically familiar and recognizable. The format carries a meta-message to the audience: “this is familiar, not weird.” And the audience is pre-prepared to know how to react to this: you like, you “haha” emoji, and you tag your friends in the comments.

The format acts as a kind of Trojan Horse, then, for sharing difficult feelings — because the format pre-primed the audience to respond in a hospitable mode. There isn’t that moment of feeling stuck about how to respond to your friend’s big emotional disclosure, because she hasn’t made the big statement quite directly, but through irony and cultural quotation — distanced

about Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs,” *Teen Vogue*, August 2, 2017, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/digital-blackface-reaction-gifs>.

through memes typically using stock photography (as Leigh Alexander notes) rather than anything as gauche as a picture of oneself.⁴² This enables you the viewer to sidestep the full intensity of it in your response, should you choose (but still, crucially, to respond). And also to DM your friend and ask, “hey, are you alright?” and cut to the realltalk should you so choose, too.

So a space is created, to talk about being stressed and overwhelmed and unsure of the meaning of anything we do — space which is, I believe, more open than it has been in the past. As the mod of UC Berkeley Memes for Edgy Teens says, this “gets the conversation going, as I don’t think it would have even started without it.”⁴³

And this is how memes help people speak truths.

What Does “Authenticity” Mean, Anyway?

“Thrown, in spite of myself, into the great world, without possessing its manners, and unable to acquire or conform to them, I took it into my head to adopt manners of my own, which might enable me to dispense with them.”

— Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*⁴⁴

The concept of personal authenticity arises as part of Enlightenment rationality and a new, distinctively modern conception of the self. Rousseau argued that authenticity is diminished by the need for the esteem of others; one’s guide to conduct in life should come not from social pressures or external rules (e.g., the Church), but rather a source within — the sovereign, rational individual.

42 Leigh Alexander, “The Many Faces of ‘Distracted Boyfriend’: On Stock Photography Memes and the Illusion of Reality,” *Medium*, September 29, 2017, <https://medium.com/s/i-o/the-many-faces-of-distracted-boyfriend-299836ba4c89>.

43 See Martineau, “The Future of College is Facebook Meme Groups.”

44 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions* [1781] (Ware: Wordsworth, 1996), 357.

Twentieth-century philosophers — Sartre, Heidegger — recognized that this was perhaps a little more difficult than Rousseau claimed: the external world and its influences is inescapable and not straightforward to slough off, and nature and society shape us as much as our own choices. And so authenticity must always be negotiated in complex interdependency with its opposite — that is, you were never really authentic in the first place.

That tension is what meme culture is negotiating: these unexpected, witty truths emerging through the most inauthentic, borrowed, or stolen stock photograph content possible.

Because people still want to tell the truth about their lives, and the world: absolutely nothing has changed there.

What is changing, I argue, are the cultural formats people are using for discussion — the carrier waves for this signal. This is where “authenticity” isn’t a useful claim any more, having been wholly co-opted and commodified into its opposite. Culture and the way we communicate — shaped by media affordances — have got more complex and ironic and multi-layered than that.

It turns out, even people who share fake news stories are trying to tell a kind of truth too.

At SXSW EDU this year, technology researcher danah boyd argued that we’ve been rather uncharitable in our analyses of why people share fake news. The assumption is that people really believe the claims they share — that is, they’re ill-informed; that is, they’re stupid. It turns out not to be quite so simple:

Yet, if you talk with someone who has posted clear, unquestionable misinformation, more often than not, they know it’s bullshit. Or they don’t care whether or not it’s true. Why do they post it then? Because they’re making a statement. The people who posted this meme [fig. 22] didn’t bother to fact check this claim. They didn’t care. What they wanted to signal loud and clear is that they hated Hillary Clinton. And that message was indeed heard loud and clear. As a re-



Fig. 22. Source: *Truthfeed*. See Amy Moreno, “Breaking: Clinton Foundation Paid Occult ‘Spirit Cooking’ Priestess 10K For ‘Operational Support,’” *Truthfeed*, November 5, 2016, <http://truthfeed.com/breaking-clinton-foundation-paid-occult-spirit-cooking-priestess-10k-for-operational-support/34116/>.

sult, they are very offended if you tell them that they’ve been duped by Russians into spreading propaganda. They don’t believe you for one second.⁴⁵

The people sharing this story are seeking to tell a kind of moral truth through metaphor and cultural quotation (the person shown in the picture is in fact performance artist Marina Abramovic). Not entirely unlike our meme-ing teens on Facebook.

What I’ve sought to argue in this essay, then, is that we are indeed living in an a strange, surface-centric moment in popular, digital culture right now—where the original “essence of things” has indeed become somewhat unfashionable (or just less entertaining). Social and media technologies, optimised for the diffusion of highly emotive, reaction-generating content, encourage a rapid trade in attention-grabbing ideas, over slower-burning systematic, contextualized thinking.

Yet, even as “authenticity” as a claim and as an aesthetic feels outdated, deeper forms of “realness” in our communica-

⁴⁵ See boyd, “You Think You Want Media Literacy...Do You?”

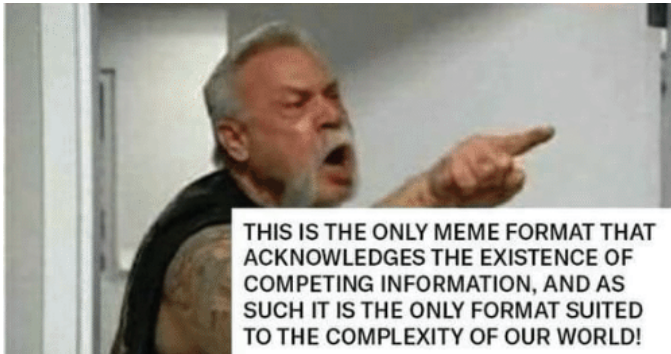


Fig. 23. Source: *Meme*. See <https://me.me/i/american-chopper-memes-are-compelling-rhetorical-devices-that-could-be-f9f92fe24d2f4296afobb20b1a63322e/>.

tions still persist. People are still seeking to communicate their deepest personal truths: their values, hopes, and fears with each other. Through sharing media, we're still creating community.

Nonetheless, the kind of truth in play is changing form: emotional and moral truths are in ascendance over straightforwardly factual claims. Truth becomes plural, and thereby highly contested: global warming, 9/11, or Obama's birthplace are all treated as matters of cultural allegiance over "fact" as traditionally understood. "By my reckoning, the solidly reality-based are a minority, maybe a third of us but almost certainly fewer than half," Kurt Andersen posits.⁴⁶ Electorates in the us and Europe are polarizing along value-driven lines—order and authority vs. openness and change.⁴⁷ Building the coalitions of support needed to tackle the grand challenges we face this century will require a profound upgrade to our political and cultural leaders' empathic and reconciliation skills.

⁴⁶ See Andersen, "How America Lost Its Mind."

⁴⁷ See Eric Kaufmann, "It's NOT the Economy, Stupid: Brexit as a Story of Personal Values," *LSE* (blog), July 7, 2016, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/personal-values-brexit-vote/>.

So perhaps to say that this post-authentic moment is one of evolving, increasingly nuanced collective communication norms, able to operate with multi-layered recursive meanings and ironies in disposable pop culture content...is kind of cold comfort.

Nonetheless, author Robin Sloan described the genius of the *American Chopper* meme as being that “THIS IS THE ONLY MEME FORMAT THAT ACKNOWLEDGES THE EXISTENCE OF COMPETING INFORMATION, AND AS SUCH IT IS THE ONLY FORMAT SUITED TO THE COMPLEXITY OF OUR WORLD!”⁴⁸

May it yet save us.

48 <https://twitter.com/robinsloan/status/982303299264069632>. [URL defunct]

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