

# Hacking the Meme Code

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It is often said that our timeline is, in fact, a filter. We see only what our community of selected friends post. If someone posts things on social networks that we are not interested in, we will “unfollow” or “uncircle” him or her sooner or later – depending on our mood, on the strength of our relationship and the “netiquette”, the rules of courtesy in social media that everyone has to obey to remain an accepted member.

Advertising, in particular, seems to be content that only very rarely passes through this filter, if at all. Just as we would in our “meatspace” communities, we try to avoid people pushing unwarranted business towards us. Thus, the timeline might be the toughest spam-filter there is.

This phenomenon of a highly sophisticated algorithm combined with a social prediction engine has been named “the filter bubble” by author and entrepreneur Eli Pariser. The word bubble in this case has a thoroughly ambivalent meaning: a bubble that surrounds us, in which we are somehow trapped, because we no longer see the reality outside clearly; the second meaning of course is that of a soap bubble that will burst sooner or later like any other piece of online hype. There is concern that this bubble could not only diminish the quality of serendipity inherent in networks such as the internet, but also the ability of advertisers to reach new audiences.

## **The Rise Of Social Media And The Changes For Mass Media**

The rise of social media has been accompanied by the decline of mass media. Although it is undisputed that the 30” TV spot is still the most effective means of advertising and is likely to remain that way for a long time, it is becoming harder and harder to reach some audiences through the classic communication channels.

Advertising is perhaps more sensitive to this development than any other form of communication. However, it also becomes increasingly difficult to reach out to audiences, be it for advertising, political announcements or any other kind of communication. This filter bubble process will add a new dimension to the rising complexity of communications planning that we have to take into consideration.

Social media platforms provide multiple technological means to make this filter process even more seamless, effective and invisible to their users. By organising our contacts into groups, lists or circles, users are encouraged to (re)create hierarchies of relevance (“inner circle”, “extended circle”, “nuisance circle”, “spam”). Thus content posted by someone from the “buddies” circle might get a totally different amount of attention compared to content from someone in the “business partners” or “opinion leaders” circle.

## **My Internet Does Not Look The Same Way Yours Does**

A third layer – after the timeline and the circles – between the user and “outside reality” is created by Google and other search engines that use the selections made by users in their social media profiles (timeline, circles) as input for their algorithms to provide the most relevant results for our queries. These technologies take content posted by our friends to predict what would be relevant for us.

We can no longer expect to be shown any kind of objective search ranking, instead we will get our very own list of results that might be completely different from that of our colleagues or neighbours. Google translates this into what it thinks we would find relevant. This will heavily impact Search Engine Optimisation (SEO). How will searchmarketing specialists in the future be able to guarantee that you’ll get a top-10 search ranking? For SEO purposes it will thus also become important to see the URLs of websites we want to promote recommended as often as possible by being posted or tweeted.

The targeting of display ads can be improved in the same way. This is, of course, a good thing at first, since campaigns will perform more efficiently and the user will experience more relevant advertising. But, at the same time, the inventory that addresses a broad audience, maximising reach – a prerequisite in building brand awareness – becomes more fragmented.

Thus social media works as a filter, induced by the user, but also selects what the user gets recommended by search engines and display advertising. Very few platforms allow users to access and edit the predicted preferences of these algorithms in the way that Google,

for example, does on <http://www.google.com/ads/preferences>. This might become more common following the EU Privacy Directive that became effective in May this year and will be implemented in national legislation soon.

Finally, the media consumption of the classic channels is also affected by the filter bubble. Studies have shown that nothing influences a consumer's choice more heavily than the recommendation they get through their timeline, which thereby becomes a screen that might preselect what someone would watch or read. It's not only media consumption – our brand preferences also start to be affected by the posts from our community to our circles, friends and our timeline.

## Meaningful Brands

One side effect is that the meaning of brands in people's lives changes. With mass media advertising, the most valuable brands would have been those that gave their buyers a sense of prestige. Conspicuous consumption is based on mass communication. It requires that others easily recognise what brands we buy.

When the process of building brand preferences gets somehow atomised, as we experience when enclosed within our filter bubbles, others may no longer notice the significance of our brand-choices. At the same time, it becomes increasingly important to show affiliation to your community, to get acceptance and to be welcomed as a member.

Brands that contribute something of value to a community, something that not only the buyer but the whole community can benefit from, will be the brands that succeed. They will be more likely to show up in their buyers' posts, telling their friends, "look, I care about all of you".

## The Meme

So far we have been mostly looking at what gets filtered out. But what about the content that does make it inside our filter? Since most users follow more people than they know in person, there must be something that gets through.

Umair Haque, a writer for the Harvard Business Review, has coined the term 'meaningful brands' in opposition to the more conventional 'aspirational brands' that we previously bought into.

With the 'meaningful brands' we have a first hint of how advertising within the filter-bubble might still work. Apart from that, and in addition to the obvious – the personal statements, the thoughts, and emotions that people share with their followers – there is a specific type of content that gets propagated from one personal circle to the next, that is repeatedly shared, retweeted, liked or whatever form of handling a certain platform might provide.

You probably know what I am talking about when I mention these viral ideas: LOLCats, dramatic chipmunk, Nyan Cat, Sad Keanu, Goatse and Pedobar. Viral ideas and images like this can be described as 'memes'. But more often, memes consist of more mundane images, such as pictures of food or birds that spread across the web.

'Meme' is an artificial word. It was created in behavioural biology to describe the way cultural ideas, symbols and practices get passed from one generation to the next. These ideas can self-replicate and adapt to a changing environment in the same way that genes do through the standard model of biological evolution. The meme is hence seen to be the cultural equivalent of the gene.

There are different types of memes, depending on their way they propagate. Some get spread very rapidly, globally and evenly. Others are shared only in their own community – which needs not to have been defined otherwise; these images just tend to stop at some invisible border. Some images seem to virtually infect one community and then, after some time, jump over to the next, creating bubble-like structures in the social web, while others fade away proportionally to the distance of their point of origin.

Before joining MediaCom, I did research with my long-time associate Benedikt Koehler, now COO of Ethority, to find out why some images and ideas had the power to become memetic. Even more interesting, we aimed to work out a way to brief creative people how

to shape an image for a certain memetic task. So we set about hacking the meme code.

The results will soon be published. And of course we will deploy our findings to create campaigns that are seen to be valuable and meaningful, or at least entertaining for our clients' target audiences.

BIO Joerg Blumtritt (\*1970) is managing director at MediaCom Germany. After his graduation in statistics and political sciences he started working as a researcher in behavioural sciences, focused on nonverbal communication. Projects were funded by EU Commission, German federal government and the Max-Planck-Society. Subsequently he ran marketing and research teams for TV-channels ProSiebenSat.1, RTL II and magazine publisher Hubert Burda Media, introducing new qualitative methods like Netnography (<interNET ethNOGRAPHY) into media research. As European Operations Officer at Tremor Media, Joerg was in charge of building the New York-based video ad-network's European Enterprises. He is founder and chairman of the German Social Media Association (AG Social Media) and is co-author of the Slow Media Manifesto.

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