
Homogenization And Heterogenization In The Internet

Most activities leave behind a digital trace, a “record of activity” (cf. Howison, Wiggins, and Crowston 2000, 796). This is an unconscious process; most users do not realize that this data is collected. Therefore, methodological problems as raised by Noble (2013, 181) can be bypassed. I argue that the internet functions as a digital proxy for the analog world. Can theories commonly used in globalization scholarship be applied to the internet? Are there evident processes of homo- and heterogenization? One may call the internet a ‘culture’ on its own. One is maybe right when thinking about young successful businessman and programmers in the silicon valley who share a common life and work ethic in the sense of corporate culture as described by Wright (cf. 1998, 11-12). Or one may call platforms such as reddit a ‘subculture’ in which registered users share a common way of language, for instance abbreviations. This way of interpretation refers to what Wright calls “old meanings of culture” with “defined characteristics”, “identical, homogeneous individuals” and an “underlying system of shared meanings” (1998, 8). However, I state that the internet is rather a fluent structure. In this sense it is in line with “new meanings of culture” (Wright 1998, 8-10). Services, content and groups on the internet are constantly evolving and changing (Wright 1998, 10). It is not bounded to any spatial or temporal dimensions. The internet is local, national, supranational and global at the very same time. Online events affect the offline world and vice versa.

Hence, I argue that the internet as a whole reflects homo- and heterogenization processes. One example for homo- and heterogenization processes is the evolutionary application of “Pepe the Frog”, a popular meme used by millions of internet users. The figure was originally designed as a cartoon by Matt Furie. Between 2005 and 2015 the meme became very popular on social networks. It was used homogeneously by internet users displaying all kinds of emotions. During the 2016 US election campaign, the Alt-Right movement reframed Pepe as symbol for the Trump campaign and later as a symbol of white supremacy. Various of those memes show Pepe with Nazi insignia and deride Second World War victims and today’s minority groups. Pepe became a global homogeneous symbol for the Alt-Right movement. I argue that the Alt-Right takeover is a creole process which draws from various historical and popular cultural sources (cf. Hannerz 1987, 552). The movement benefited from the popularity of Pepe and combined it with their own, inherent ideology. Wright (1998, 10) observes a similar process in the aftermath of the Second World War. She argues that the New-Right reshaped the usage of certain words interrelated with “culture” (Wright 1998, 10).

However, the example of the meme also includes heterogenization processes. During the spread across the European Alt-Right movements, the meme was customized according to local circumstances. The customization included change of local politicians, local history and local minorities. I interpret this as a ‘second wave’ of creolisation. The evidence presented above supports the idea that the internet reflects the ‘real’ world. Processes of homo- and heterogenization can be observed. Theories used to describe offline globalization phenomena can also be applied to the internet. Since people are not aware that they leave traces when posting, sharing or deleting a meme, the internet provides an ideal observation environment. This solves to some extent the problem brought up by Noble (2013, 181), because a growing number of internet services results in a variety of “rich, complex data” with multiple dimensions and insights. Nevertheless, a question that derives from the presented evidence is whether

online and offline underlie different spatial or temporal dynamics? Furthermore, can findings from the internet be generalized to the offline world as vice versa?

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