

4.1 MemeMachine

Purpose

Memes are an easy and entertaining digital technique to grab attention and convey a point of view. While memes can become a viral element of popular culture, they can also stimulate productive online discussion about social issues. In this activity, participants create and critique memes and practice their expressive skills. They also discuss how easy it is in the digital era to create media just for shock value (or to “troll” others), and they reflect on how to draw a line in their own media use.

Learning Goals

Participants will:

- Understand how to decipher the rhetorical language of memes
- Create memes about social, cultural, and political issues
- Evaluate the techniques, effectiveness, and civility of certain memes
- Reflect on the role that memes play in expressing and sharing a point of view and contributing to online civic dialogue

Time

30 to 45 minutes

Supplies

- A computer and projector for the facilitator and access to the Internet
- Computers or mobile devices for every participant or pair of participants
- Internet access

Facilitator Preparation

The facilitator should visit <https://emergingcitizens.org/about/mememachine> and view the [MemeMachine Simulation Tutorial](#) video to become familiar with the rules of the MemeMachine game.

It is also recommended that the facilitator read the Meme Machine Learning Guide and conduct research to identify memes which are popular or have gone viral locally.

ADVOCATE ACTIVITIES

MemeMachine, *continued*

Introduce the Activity to Participants

Begin with several quick questions to make sure participants understand what memes are and get them thinking about how memes work to both entertain and share points of view. The facilitator can share popular local memes with the participants during this discussion period.

- How many of you have run into memes on the Internet/social media?
- What is a meme?
(A meme is a single image, video “capture,” short text that is copied—usually with slight edits and variations—and spread over the Internet.)
- Who creates them and why?
(Anyone can create a meme and they may be forwarded without attribution. Some are created just for laughs or for “shock value.” Memes that become viral may offer biting social commentary on a newsworthy topic or prominent person.)
- Have you ever seen a meme that is disturbing or offensive?
(Many memes are “over the top.” This is one of many kinds of expression in the digital era that can easily cross into uncivility...)

Launch the Activity

Part 1:

1. Ask participants to visit <https://emergingcitizens.org/about/mememachine> and view the MemeMachine Simulation Tutorial video to familiarize themselves with the rules of the game.
2. The facilitator, either on a projected screen or computer screen visible to all participants, goes to <https://emergingcitizens.org/about/mememachine> and selects the “Play Now!” button. The facilitator then selects all categories which participants will make memes about during the game. Multiple categories can be selected. Once the categories are selected, the facilitator selects “Launch Game”.

3. Participants, either on their mobile device or personal computer, go to <https://ecplay.org/>. Participants must enter the room code which is visible on the facilitator screen, along with their name, and select “Play”.
4. When all participants have joined the game room, the facilitator selects “Start” and then selects the right arrow button on screen, and the game begins.
5. On their own devices, each participant then selects one meme background image out of the eight choices.
6. After selecting a background image, each participant creates a top and bottom caption by typing them into the text boxes provided.
7. Participants can preview their memes live before submitting. Then they submit their memes.
8. All the memes submitted are displayed on the main projector or computer screen. Each participant decides which meme best matches that round’s displayed “description.” (There is only one description per round. These include descriptions such as “most conservative,” “most inspiring,” etc.)
9. After participants vote for their selected memes, the main screen reveals who voted for which meme and who created each meme. Meme creators receive 25 points for every vote received by their meme.

Each game lasts three rounds. The participant with the most points at the end of the game wins!

Part 2:

Review together several of the “winning” memes:

- What is the purpose of this meme and how did it convey this?
(Comment on intention, design, and visual effects used.)
- Might different people understand or respond to this meme differently?
- Has the creator communicated his/her purpose effectively using this meme?
- How important is humor to making effective memes?

MemeMachine, *continued*

Debrief and Reflect

End the activity with several open-ended questions to encourage sharing and reflection. If you are also going to do Activity 2 (Hashtag You're It), you might wait with this discussion until participants have completed the module.

- Do you think you prefer being a receiver, a sharer, or a creator of different kinds of messages in the digital world?
(In what ways, and why?)
- How difficult is it in the digital world to know how to draw the line between being humorous and being harmful?
(Do you think you can do a good job of drawing this line in your own media use? Do you think you might do a better job going forward?)