

Nick Butler

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Professor Florence Hunt

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Memes and My Political Life

One of my earliest memories is of my brother asking me a simple question: “Who is the President of the United States?” As I pondered this question, and my then 5-year old brain processed everything I knew to that point about politics, I was being infected with a mind virus without knowing it. I quickly realized that I had no idea who the president was, so I responded simply, “I don’t know, who?” He answered joyfully, “It’s Bill Clinton!” I didn’t know it at the time, but this short exchange with my brother would define much of my life. From that moment on, I slowly became more involved politically and began obsessively following the news of the world. I was infected.

There are multiple memes that play into my interest of politics, many of which I encountered at a young age. Defining what a meme is can be challenging, and I believe Richard Brodie does it best: “A meme is a unit of information in a mind whose existence influences events such that more copies of itself get created in other minds” (Brodie 11). The political memes were transmitted to me through a variety of sources, be it television, my parents, my teachers, my friends, books, or any other interaction with society. The spreading of a meme is completed through four stages: 1) assimilation, a host must accept the meme; 2) retention, the meme must be remembered by the host; 3) expression, the meme must be presented to others through communication or observation; and finally 4) transmission, the meme must be spread

to another person (Hunt). I was able to observe the process by which a meme spreads early in life; in second grade, for example, I was an avid George Bush supporter because a rumor had started on the playground that Al Gore wanted to extend the school week into Saturdays. While this wasn't actually true, the meme had spread throughout my school, so when a mock election was held, Al Gore yielded an astounding single vote from my peers and I. The meme was likely started by a parent who was a George Bush supporter trying to infect their child, and from there the meme spread throughout my school.

Throughout life, I continued encountering memes that played into my interest of politics. During the 2004 presidential election, my sixth grade teacher had us do reports on political cartoons surrounding the election. My teacher at the time was a John Kerry supporter, and generally the cartoons we reported on were left-leaning, so I was being infected by the memplex of liberalism. A memplex is when a group of smaller memes are combined to make a single, larger meme (Hunt). Unlike my original support of George W. Bush, the liberalism memplex stayed with me, and I'm still a Democrat today. My interest in politics was renewed in 2008 with the election of Senator Barack Obama. Although I wasn't old enough to vote at the time, I was able to attend his inauguration in Washington, D.C. and witness his swearing in. Attending that event solidified the previous years of political interest and fueled my interest for years to come.

I definitely have spread the political memes I've inherited to my friends. In high school, for example, I helped form a club known as the Political Science Club. The members of the club were mostly me and my friends, and we would discuss current events and issues in politics. As the year went on, I noticed that some of my friends who were more moderate or even

right-leaning began shifting to the left. I had started to transmit the memes that made me a democrat to my friends. Thankfully those memes were passed on, because our club decided to take a trip together to Washington, D.C. later that year. While we were on the trip, due to a freak series of events, we were able to shake hands with President Barack Obama at the White House. That was the ultimate transmission of a meme to me; while I've been pretty underwhelmed by President Obama's job thus far in office, I'm much more likely to support him in 2012 simply because of that event. A year later, the Political Science Club took its second trip to the White House and this time we met with Representative Maurice Hinchey, who was kind enough to give us tickets to the House gallery. Sitting in the same room that John F. Kennedy announced his plans to go to the moon is an astounding feeling. The memes that President Kennedy left for this nation (the missile gap, moon landing, etc.) are so powerful they still resonate a half-century later.

I've also spread memes over Facebook by posting news articles, videos, and commentary as my statuses. It's hard to see what effect this is having on people, but it's undoubtedly spreading memes to others. The Internet is a powerful way to spread memes. It's extremely interesting that memes spread through the Internet the way that they do; it takes such a short amount of time for something to explode on the Internet and get millions of impressions within seconds. For example, I found out the news about Osama bin Laden's death an hour before President Obama announced it by reading it first on Twitter. This does also have a downside, in that people often blindly believe what they read on the Internet so they are often consumed by memes that aren't true. But memes do that, they manifest themselves in your mind even if they're false. In fact, Richard Brodie believes that if you start to believe all

memes are “True” then you become more susceptible to be infected by mind viruses (Brodie 16). Either way, the Internet is a huge forum for the transmission of memes.

I mentioned earlier that the conversation with my brother, in addition to other memes, had a huge impact on my life. These early encounters with political memes shaped the life I live today. During my first semester here at the University at Albany, I’ve become extremely involved in university politics. I currently serve as a Student Association Senator after winning in a special election on State Quad, I’m currently the Web chair for the University at Albany College Democrats, and I’m an organizer for the Youth Empowerment Project which helped register over 600 new voters on campus this semester. In addition to these extra curricular activities, I’m currently in the Honors College studying political science. The memes that I encountered at a young age are what got me to this point in life.

I often wonder what my life would be like had my brother never asked that question, or if I supported Al Gore instead of George W. Bush, or if I had a different sixth grade teacher. The progression of my life has taken twists and turns and different political memes have been there throughout the journey. As I look forward, it’s challenging for me to see where I’ll be in ten or twenty years, but I know that politics will be involved some way or another. My passion for politics started at a very young age and it was driven by the memes I encountered. A few days after he first asked me, my brother once again asked, “Who is the President of the United States?” I was certain I knew the answer this time, but somewhere my memes had mixed. I answered with a smile, “Bill Gates!”

Works Cited

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