Article

What Are You Laughing At? Former Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff's Internet Memes across Spreadable Media Contexts

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Abstract

This article analyses a delimited corpus of Internet memes showcasing former Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff. The theoretical framework is based on studies of memes and Internet memes as phenomena inserted in the online dimension of transmission and cultural production, and principles of the General Theory of Systems. The methodological approach is based on the classification tools developed by Dawkins (1976) to describe memes that spread widely across the digital space (fidelity, fecundity and longevity) and the patterns developed by Knobel and Lankshear (2007) as the main characteristics that contribute to an Internet meme's spreadability (humour, intertextuality and juxtaposition). These classification tools are applied aiming to select and analyse Internet memes that feature the Brazilian president. The goal of the article is to extract from both classification systems relevant tools for guiding understanding about how certain specific sets of memes connected to Dilma Rousseff became memorable and spreadable within the Brazilian media landscape. The result findings show that the categories and patterns applied to the analysis are not isolated and are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they are frequently juxtaposed, which denotes their integrated nature and coherent disposition, corroborating to clarify and identify how certain specific sets of memes spread within the media.

Keywords

Brazil, digital literacy, Dilma Rousseff, Internet memes, spreadable media

Introduction

This article analyses a delimited corpus of Internet memes showcasing former Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, who was frequently in the limelight. The theoretical framework of this article is based on the original studies of memes (Dawkins, 1976) and Internet memes (Börzsei, 2013; Cannizzaro, 2016;

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Dynel, 2016; Jenkins, Green, & Ford, 2013; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Martínez-Rolán & Piñeiro-Otero, 2016; Shifman, 2013a, 2013b; Shifman & Thelwall, 2009; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015) as phenomena inserted in a dimension of transmission and cultural production characterized by the appropriation of Internet technologies that allow the users not only to 'generate, link, evaluate, and share a wide variety of online content' (Warschauer & Grimes, 2007, p. 2) but also to organize available online data via search engines, in a clever way, according to particular interests or needs as seen on the Web 3.0 or the Semantic Web (Santaella, 2013). Moreover, for Börzsei (2013), Internet memes are cultural artefacts that are reaching new meanings and functions as they are breaking more and more into the mainstream, even though once they were seen as a strange output of Internet subculture. Nowadays, they are also a way of communication and genre; therefore, they are significant in the Digital Age. Although the concept of meme became highly debatable, it spread across popular culture and diverse academic fields. Another theoretical approach involved in this article is related to the General Theory of Systems (Bertalanffy, 1993; Bunge, 1979; Gambarato, 2012), in the sense that Internet memes are not isolated cultural information, on the contrary, they are systemic phenomena and cannot be thought of as being simplified units out of context.

The methodological approach is based on the classification tools developed by Dawkins (1976) to describe memes that spread widely across the digital space: (a) fidelity, (b) fecundity and (c) longevity. The study also relies on the patterns developed by Knobel and Lankshear (2007) as the main characteristics that contribute to an Internet meme's spreadability, or fecundity, in Dawkins' terms: (a) humour, (b) intertextuality and (c) juxtaposition. These classification tools are applied to select and analyse Internet memes featuring the former Brazilian president. The goal of this article is to extract from both classification systems relevant tools for guiding the understanding about how certain specific sets of memes connected to Dilma Rousseff become memorable and spreadable within the Brazilian media landscape. Dilma Rousseff was removed from office on 12 May 2016, when the Senate voted to impeach her. The impeachment process was concluded on 31 August 2016. The presidential duties were then carried out by her vice president, now president, Michel Temer (PMDB, Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro, Brazilian Democratic Movement Party).

The national *memesphere* and its political context are closely connected to the (mis)representation of Rousseff. This (mis)representation occurs because she is a woman in a predominantly macho society, she was in her second term as a president (many corruption scandals have been attributed to her party PT, Partido dos Trabalhadores, the Worker's Party) and she has been dealing with economic, and especially political, problems in recent years, as shown by Anderson (2016) in his historical analysis of the Brazilian crisis. On the one hand, politicians all over the world are taking advantage of memes as a kind of visual–verbal communication or 'visual argument' (Hahner, 2013) that can spread rapidly online and help disseminate their points of view. For Howley (2016, p. 158), a political meme 'artfully blends popular culture and politics in entertaining and incisive fashion'. On the other hand, politicians have seen their words being instantly mocked, distorted and replicated by Internet users, particularly by the politicians' opponents. These different perspectives can benefit Internet users interested in discussing certain topics from different points of view. This is the fertile terrain where politainment is growing. Politainment (Berrocal, Campos-Dominguez, & Redondo, 2014) refers to the blending of political matters and entertainment as a communication model that embraces the dialogue between politics and citizenship. As a result of the increasing mediatization of politics, politainment helps politicians expand their media access, as they aim to enhance their own images (Chagas, Freire, Rios, & Magalhães, 2015; Miguel, 2011). In this context, Internet memes function as an inherent part of politainment, and this is what the Rousseff meme series analysed in this article represents.

We first introduce the concept of memes, and more importantly Internet memes, and survey discussions about the biological and cultural perspectives on this subject. Before addressing the analysis of a

meme series related to Rousseff, we consider the Brazilian new media system context, in which the memes appear, and the reality experienced by the first female president in Brazil. Then, we explain the methodological design of this research (the classification tools applied) and delve into the analysis of a selected Internet meme series featuring Dilma Rousseff. We conclude the presentation of our research findings regarding the juxtaposition of the categories applied in the selection and analysis of the memes, the relevance of humour as a facilitator of content diffusion and shared literacy experiences, the success of certain memes as a result of socio-historical and ideological context, and memes as systemic elements of a critique and/or banalization of politics.

The Concept of Internet Memes

The American dictionary Merriam-Webster (2015) recently added the entry 'meme' as 'an idea, behaviour, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture'. The insertion of this entry in a renowned dictionary not only shows the strength and social relevance of memes but also highlights the problematic nature of a confusing definition, mixing ethereal (internalized) forms such as ideas and externalized references such as specific representations (Cannizzaro, 2016). The original concept, as seen in Dawkins (1976), is related to contagious patterns of cultural information that include popular tunes, catchphrases, fashion, architectural styles, icons and so forth 'that get passed from mind to mind and directly generate and shape the mindsets and significant forms of behaviour and actions of a social group', as explained by Knobel and Lankshear (2007, p. 199). In *The Selfish Gene* (1976), Dawkins, the famed British evolutionary biologist, presents the neologism meme (a portmanteau of mimesis and gene) as gene-like infectious 'units' that spread among people a 'cultural corollary to the biological gene and uses the term to explain evolutionary advances from the perspective that a meme is a cultural phenomenon' (Wiggins, 2016, p. 453). However, the analogy built by Dawkins between nature (gene) and culture (meme) is highly criticized to be considered 'reductive, materialistic, and ineffective in describing complex human behaviours' (Shifman, 2013a, p. 364). Edmonds (2005) goes further and deliberately considers the meme–gene analogy a failure, and Cannizzaro (2016, p. 572) reinforces this critical viewpoint by challenging the assumption that memes are units: 'Internet memes must be defined at the very least as *systems*', instead of being understood as isolated information, a single image or video or catchphrase. Although there are several and different definitions of a system, the notion of a system, the notion of a system has become universal and is being extensively used. It refers mostly to an assemblage of parts forming a unitary whole but, since Aristotle, the idea behind it is that the whole is something over and above the sum of its parts, basically due to changeable interactions that form the integrated whole. We will define a system in the sphere of General Systems Theory, which was initially developed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1993), in the 1950s. Nevertheless, his classical approach to scientific methodology will not be discussed; instead, Mario Bunge's scientific ontology will be referred to. Bunge (1979) considers that systems theories are ontological, which implies that they describe extremely general properties of things (Gambarato, 2012).

   According to Bunge (1979, p. 4), a system is a complex object, whose components are more interrelated than loose. The formal definition of 'system' developed by Bunge represents the relationship among the system's components and between the components and its environment (*Umwelt*). A system σ is an ordered triple (Bunge, 1979, p. 5):

$$\sigma = < C, E, S >,$$

where

C = composition (set of components)
E = environment (milieu)
S = structure (set of relations on the union of C and E)

Hence, in the case of Internet memes, we could contemplate C as the cultural information, the message; E as the cultural context in which this information is inserted and S as the interactive relationship between C and E in the sense of how memes are originated, transformed and co-created, and how they grow and evolve while being disseminated across spreadable media contexts.

Internet memes, as established cultural forms in new media, are immersed in what Lotman (2001) defined as semiosphere: an evolving system of signs that goes beyond the sum of its parts. Moreover, culture is not characterized simply by the sum of its parts: '[C]ultural information cannot be a discrete entity that can be studied in isolation from its context' (Cannizzaro, 2016, p. 571) or environment, in Bunge's terms. Deacon (1999) adds that Dawkins 'ignores that what counts as information is context dependent. By ignoring context, he brackets out consideration of systemic origin of gene (and meme) information, and its means of replication'.

In this scenario, the recurrent comparison between the spread of cultural material and the 'virus' metaphor is criticized, for instance, by Jenkins et al. (2013). Jenkins et al. (2013, p. 19) make the point that media viruses are considered self-replicating, which would be contradictory: 'This concept of "self-replicating" culture is oxymoronic, though, as culture is a human product and replicates through human agency'. Notwithstanding, since the 1990s, the advent of the World Wide Web generated the digital counterpart to Dawkins' meme: the Internet meme. The first academic definition of Internet meme was proposed by Davison (2009, p. 122) in his essay *The Language of Internet Memes*: 'An Internet meme is a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission'. Howley (2016, p. 157) emphasizes that applying biological and epistemological analogies to specify Internet memes 'reduces netizens to passive recipients (or victims) of mind viruses, rather than active agents in the production of culture'. However, Shifman (2013b, p. 12) ponders that '[i]t is not necessary to think of biology when analysing memes. The ideas of replication, adaptation, and fitness to a certain environment can be analysed from a purely sociocultural perspective'. Although Dawkins probably could not imagine the prospect of Internet memes when he created the meme in the 1970s, he recently claimed:

> The very idea of the meme, has itself mutated and evolved in a new direction. An Internet meme is a hijacking of the original idea. Instead of mutating by random chance, before spreading by a form of Darwinian selection, Internet memes are altered deliberately by human creativity. In the hijacked version, mutations are designed—not random—with the full knowledge of the person doing the mutating. (Dawkins cited by Saatchi & Saatchi, 2013)

According to Dynel (2016, p. 661), '[T]he Internet meme has emancipated itself as an independent creativity-based species, now omnipresent in online reality'. Shifman (2013a) agrees that Internet memes spread content (jokes, videos, parodies, etc.) from person to person by copying or imitation and often originate user-generated derivatives. Coleman (2012, p. 109) defines Internet memes as 'viral images, videos, and catchphrases under constant modification by users, and with a propensity to travel as fast as the Internet can move them'. Although the propagation of memes occurs at the micro-level (from person to person), the impact is felt at the macro-level (Shifman, 2013a), as our analysis further demonstrates.

In the midst of the discussion of media viruses or viral media, authors such as Dynel (2016) and Wiggins and Bowers (2015) differentiate Internet memes from viral media. As distinguished by Dynel (2016, p. 662), '[A] viral spreads across digital media in unchanged form and tends to die down very quickly, while a meme centers on constant replication'. Wiggins and Bowers (2015) emphasize that

while viral media refers to the capacity for media to quickly spread throughout online spaces, Internet memes refer to spreadable media that have been altered (remixed, parodied, etc.), iterated and spread online. Börzsei (2013) concludes that 'content that is only shared and which has not changed or evolved while being passed on to others is viral content, and not a meme'. Internet memes, because of this remix-ability aspect, are referred by Zittrain (2008, p. 74) as generative systems in that they are 'a set of tools and practices that develop among large groups of people'. Furthermore, in the case of Internet memes, generative systems are formed on another generative system: the Internet itself. Zittrain (2008, p. 71) discusses five main factors that affect the generativity of a system: (a) *leverage,* provided by graphics editing software and meme generators; (b) *adaptability*, the possibility of different uses of a meme; (c) *ease of mastery*, the simplicity to create a meme (cut-copy-paste); (d) *accessibility*, easy access to the Internet and (e) *transferability*, replicability, visibility, spreadability and generativity.

Within New Literacy Studies, Knobel and Lankshear (2007, p. 202) distinguish memes from Internet memes by first arguing that a '"meme" is a popular term for describing the rapid uptake and spread of a particular idea presented as a written text, image, language "move," or some other (…) cultural "stuff"'. The concept of meme could be thought of as a new literacy (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006), in other words, as new social practices of reading and writing, according to an ontologically new way of living; in the same fashion the options for producing texts changed from labour-intensive production to mass production and, now, to spreadable media (see also, Kress, 2009; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

Dawkins, using the roles memes play within particular cultural spaces, identified three major characteristics of successful memes. Knobel and Lankshear (2007) draw on Dawkins' work and present the following three characteristics: (a) *fidelity*, which 'refers to qualities of the meme that enable it to be readily copied [and modified] and passed from mind to mind relatively intact' (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 201); (b) *fecundity*, which 'refers to the rate at which an idea or pattern is copied [and modified] and spread' (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 202) and (c) *longevity*, which refers to 'the longer a meme survives the more it can be copied [and modified] and passed on to fresh minds, thereby ensuring its ongoing transmission', assuming 'optimal conditions for a meme's replication and innovation' (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 202). The present study focuses on how these three major characteristics are associated with Internet memes that showcase former Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff.

Knobel and Lankshear (2007) propose to examine Internet memes using discourse analysis methods and the concept of 'affinity spaces' (Gee, 2004) to (a) identify and examine the qualities that seem to constitute each exemplar as a successful online meme, (b) establish key categories of successful online memes and (c) explore possible ways teachers might discuss Internet memes as new literacy within school-based learning contexts. Analysing the contextual or social systems of Internet memes, Knobel and Lankshear (2007) suggest three distinct patterns that contribute to each meme's fecundity: (a) humour, (b) intertextuality and (c) anomalous juxtapositions, usually of images. We study how each characteristic appears in Internet memes that showcase Dilma Rousseff. First, however, we introduce the Brazilian context (or environment) in which the selected Internet memes have appeared.

Brazilian New Media System Context

In regard to Internet penetration, Brazil is among the 20 countries in the world with the rate of 66 per cent, and in regard to the number of hours spent using the Internet, Brazil ranks second in the world, after Philippines, according to the social marketing agency We Are Social and the social media management platform Hootsuite 2017 report (We Are Social, 2017). Brazilians spent 4.59 hours a day accessing the Internet via a laptop/desktop and 3.56 hours a day via mobile devices, totalling almost 9 hours per day.

The survey also showed strong growth in access via mobile phone and the importance of social networking. By January 2017, in Brazil, the number of active Internet users reached 122 million users (We Are Social, 2017). In Brazil, Internet penetration is related to social media and spreadable media contexts. According to the We Are Social and Hootsuite report, 58 per cent of Brazilians are present on social media. YouTube and Facebook are the preferred platforms with 63 and 62 per cent of users, respectively, followed by WhatsApp with 53 per cent.

This Brazilian user profile is the same one that produces, shares and likes Internet memes. This user profile is so popular that, for instance, the City Hall of Curitiba, a southern city with 1.8 million inhabitants, has used Internet memes on the City Hall's official Facebook page,[1] merging public services and humour, popular culture and references to artists, music and movies. This Facebook page was designed in 2013 and since then it received more than 861,000 Facebook 'likes' and had over 850,000 followers, in October 2017.

Another example of the relevance of Internet memes in Brazil is connected to a video ad created by the Brazilian home appliance brand *Brastemp*, subsidiary of the multinational *Whirlpool*, and posted on the company's Facebook page[2] on 17 October 2017. The commercial, which is a parody, refers to famous memes in the country and, after three days, the video got nearly 11 million views. The two-minute-long video ad was originally planned only to be available on social networks, but because of the resounded repercussion, the company immediately created a 90-second version to be aired on prime-time television (Adnews, 2017). As noted by Cannizzaro (2016, p. 563) in relation to the Grump cat meme, known worldwide, that became part of a television commercial for the Lloyd Bank in the United Kingdom, '[T]his is an evidence that Internet memes have been incorporated into the commercial culture associated with mass communication and broadcast media'. Cannizzaro (2016, p. 563) adds that Internet memes 'have come of age and are fully ripe for media analysis'.

A networked culture is characterized by a wide variety of online communication tools that enable informal and instant sharing, according to a 'continuous process of repurposing and recirculation' (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 27) by individuals, communities and social institutions: a spreadable logic. Overall, Internet penetration in Brazil implies a favourable environment for the spread of Internet memes.

Perspectives on the First Female Brazilian President

On 9 December 2015, Facebook released a report on the most talked-about topics in the social network in 2015 (Olhar Digital, 2015). In Brazil, the top three topics included Dilma Rousseff, former Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and the corruption scandal at Petrobras, a semi-public Brazilian multinational energy corporation headquartered in Rio de Janeiro. Currently, Facebook has 99 million users in Brazil (Innovare Pesquisa, 2016). These Facebook numbers reveal, as we have argued before, the impact of social networks in Brazil.

Dilma Rousseff was the first female president of Brazil. She began her first term on 1 January 2011 and her second term on 1 January 2015. In May 2016, she was removed from office by the Senate on allegations of budgetary manoeuvres (see Greenwald, 2016) and was impeached a few months later. According to BBC Brasil (2015), only 10 per cent of governments worldwide are headed by women, including Dilma Rousseff. Other female leaders in South America include the president of Chile, Michelle Bachelet, in charge from 2006 to 2010 and from 2014 onwards, and the president of Argentina, Cristina Kirchner, from 2007 to 2015.

Although Rousseff was re-elected with more than 54 million direct votes, the political landscape was very unfavourable to her, especially from 2015 onwards, culminating in the impeachment in August 2016.

Her re-election defied the will and interests of powerful international financial capital groups and a significant portion of the population, who were not satisfied with Rousseff's politics and, especially, her economic measures. In this context, the political scientist André Singer (2015, p. 43) argues that her first term (from 2011 to 2014) was marked by state activism that 'would have alienated various businessmen, resulting in a broad anti-developmental front'. The historian Flávia Biroli (2016) adds that this political crisis has been fomented since the first day of her second term, by those who lost the election and by those 'who do not see in the elected government a shield against the corruption cases in which they figure as defendants'. Thus, the 2008 global financial crisis affected Brazil, but within the country, the economic crisis merged with a political crisis associated with mobilization of the elites, the middle class and strong private media groups (Anderson, 2016). In addition, a large majority of the population was dissatisfied with the government during 2015, when public approval of the president's government dropped to a startling 7.7 per cent (Frota, 2015).

Another aspect emphasized in this study is: The fact that the former president is a woman changes the type of criticism and jokes produced in the media landscape. A large empirical study conducted at the University of Brasilia, in Brazil, discussed the intersections of gender, media and political representation (Miguel & Biroli, 2011). The study aimed to understand the relationship between spheres concerning the problems related to the representation of women in politics. Women account for more than half of Brazilian voters but hold, for instance, less than 10 per cent of the seats in the 2015–2019 Congress, represented by 51 female deputies compared to 462 male counterparts. In the Senate, there are 11 women out of a total of 81 senators, or 13.6 per cent of the House (Venturini & Cavalheiro, 2014). When President Michel Temer appointed new ministers, all 23 were male and white, and one-third were the subject of corruption inquiries. Gender stereotypes concerning women are often triggered in the media and reinforced by practices in different social and political sectors. In the case of the former Brazilian president, gender stereotypes modify the practice of legitimacy in politics and fragment representations of the reality people live in (Miguel & Biroli, 2011).

In a less favourable political and economic scenario, in a mostly male workplace, with the support of private media groups that convey their own viewpoint, it is not difficult to understand why Internet memes that criticize the former president become 'successful', in the sense presented by Knobel and Lankshear (2007, pp. 200–203), representing cultural phenomena and *new* literacy practices, from a discursive perspective. In fact, 'Internet memes are emblematic of twenty-first century cultural politics' (Howley, 2016, p. 158).

We examine these conflicts related to a delimited corpus of Internet memes showcasing Dilma Rousseff, regarding the dimension of transmission and cultural production characterized by the appropriation of Internet technologies.

Methodological Design

This article explores the sociocultural practices of disseminating Internet memes related to former president Dilma Rousseff within the Brazilian political sphere. The study follows a qualitative research strategy, encompasses a deductive approach and is supported by a data set. A deductive approach is based on the existing theory and designs a research strategy to test theoretical propositions. According to the deductive principle, Dawkins' (1976) and Knobel and Lankshear's (2007) theoretical propositions to characterize successful memes—in the sense of why certain memes are memorable and widely replicated—are tested in the case study.

The methodological design is based on the taxonomy developed by Dawkins (1976) to characterize successful memes: (a) fidelity, (b) fecundity and (c) longevity. In addition, we consider the patterns

proposed by Knobel and Lankshear (2007) as factors that contribute to an Internet meme's fecundity: (a) humour, (b) intertextuality and (c) juxtaposition. Moreover, it is fundamental to emphasize ideological systems, world views or social positioning (focusing on individual and on collective values and beliefs), as discussed by Knobel and Lankshear (2007), recovering discursive criteria as well. Dawkins' (1976) and Knobel and Lankshear's (2007) classification tools are applied to select Internet memes that feature Rousseff and to analyse them.

The selected memes were collected on the Internet via search engines Google and Bing and using keywords 'meme' and 'Dilma' during August 2015, to define the data set for this study. The Google search generated around 527,000 results, and the Bing search resulted in 355,000 entries. To narrow down the expressive number of memes related to Rousseff, in the first phase, the main criterion applied was fecundity, which is the meme's capacity to be memorable and spread extensively across digital media. Thus, the repeatability of certain memes was the key factor. 'It is the community that insufflates value to a meme when they disseminate it, create it or replicate its content, adapting it to their context or communicative needs' (Martínez-Rolán & Piñeiro-Otero, 2016, p. 146). As a result, a corpus of more than 500 memes was collected.

In the second phase, the selection was limited to a series of memes derived from a relevant meme. Understanding memes as systems, the goal was to identify a series of memes that could represent the entire taxonomy developed by Dawkins and Knobel and Lankshear. As the result of the search, a series of remixed memes related to the expression *é tóis* (we are together) and Rousseff was selected. Although it is difficult or impossible to know the author responsible for every single meme, this anonymity feature is often associated with the web operation mode and is inherent in the case of Internet memes within spreadable media contexts. Websites such as http://knowyourmeme.com/ are important research resources to identify more detailed information about memes, but in this case, memes about Rousseff barely appear in these kind of databases.

To contextualize the expression *é tóis* and its meaning in Brazil, the origin of this slang must be explained. The Brazilian soccer player Neymar, currently considered the best Brazilian player, when scoring a goal, runs towards the crowd and makes the letter 'T' with both arms (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Brazilian Soccer Player Neymar and His Popular 'T' Gesture Related to the Expression é *tóis*, meaning 'we are together' or 'we can do it'

Source: Salvador (2014).

The 'T' refers to the expression *é tóis*, a joke that is a version of another joke: the slang *é nóis*, meaning 'we are together' or 'we can do it'. Here, we can clearly identify a generative system logic in action. Both expressions (*é tóis* and *é nóis*) are grammatically incorrect in Portuguese, denoting a popular feeling of togetherness and informality in Brazil. Rushkoff (1997, p. 49) predicts that everybody will have to be 'equipped to absorb the data flying across our screens, make sense of the postlinear grammar with which it is formatted, and participate in its production' and Dynel (2016) considers the deliberate language mistakes a recurrent phenomenon in memes:

> It is via memes that Internet users respond to current sociopolitical events, some of which might not have been widely recognized otherwise. […] This instance also exemplifies another commonplace phenomenon in memes: deliberate language mistakes, such as 'I can has cheezburger?,' 'much sad,' or 'I has seen' […], that reverberate across memes, contributing to Internet users' peculiar vernacular. This vernacular, replete with not only language mistakes but also abbreviations and acronyms as well as peculiar vocabulary, may be deemed a crucial element of Internet memes, which pivot on replication and imitation. These paramount features of Internet memes are echoed in different definitions, academic and not. (Dynel, 2016, p. 662)

During the 2014 FIFA World Cup, the 'T' gesture was especially used by other players as an homage to Neymar, after he was injured during the game against Colombia. The use of *é tóis* materializes a sense of informality that bonds the one who makes this gesture and the interlocutor. This presumed trait of sympathy will be recovered in another way in the Internet memes series showcasing the Brazilian president.

Analysis of Internet Meme Series Showcasing Former Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff

On 7 July 2014, Dilma Rousseff was asked on Facebook to post a picture of her making the 'T' gesture to pay homage to Neymar, who was forced to miss the rest of the World Cup, and she did. Noticing the positive reception, the president's marketing team reposted the picture, including the expression *é tóis* and the hashtag *#ForçaNeymar* [#BeStrongNeymar] (see Figure 2). 'The capacity of memes to synthe- sise an idea, situation or expression has resulted in their widespread use in the political context' (Martínez-Rolán & Piñeiro-Otero, 2016, p. 146). The post received 12,280 'likes' on Rousseff's Facebook profile, which had 3,189,530 'likes' overall, in October 2017.

This image of the president making the 'T' gesture (see Figure 2) is not just an image but also an idea: The idea that the president is one of the people and that Rousseff and the people together can overcome difficulties, as Neymar did. However, a more ironic interpretation that the president is just trying to be one of the people, to be funny, to show she is accessible, also appears, although she is none other than a presumed incompetent president who cannot overcome the current political turmoil. This mode of (re) circulation of a political image allowed by the development of spreadable media must be understood in the midst of the democratization of a political process in which more people are called to participate and show less deference to their social superiors, as Miguel (2011, p. 189) explains. A politician talks in a different context shaped by spreadable media, but he or she also speaks to a different audience. Consequently, this image of the president making the 'T' gesture became a template and served as the origin of a widespread Internet meme series derived from it, the basis of a generative system. Memes 'replicated if they were useful and powerful or died out if they were not. Just as a species can get stronger
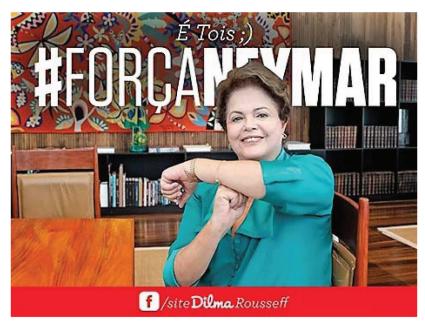
Figure 2. Brazilian President Making the 'T' Gesture as an Homage to Neymar During the 2014 FIFA World Cup

Source: Alcântara (2014).

through natural selection of genes, a society gets stronger through the natural selection of memes' (Rushkoff, 2010, pp. 100–101).

Shifman (2013b) describes nine meme genres, including photo fads (e.g., planking), lip-synching, misheard lyrics and image macros, although meme categories can be extended further, as suggested by Dynel (2016). Dynel (2016) characterizes the types of jokes within humourous memes as verbal, visual and visual–verbal jokes. In the case of the selected Rousseff meme series, there are visual (see Figures 4 and 5) and visual–verbal memes (see Figures 2, 3 and 6). Among the visual–verbal memes is the image macro genre. An image macro meme is basically an image with captioned text (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). 'The image macro genre captures the essence of a prototypical Internet meme: it brings together the old and the new by combining the novelty and creativity of text with the stability of an image' (Dyner, 2016, p. 667). All the image macros of the meme series include one-line jokes: 'A short joke whose setup and punchline are restricted in length and do not involve a narrative or dialogue' (Dyner, 2016, p. 668). This kind of meme that relies mainly on the image but is complemented by very short text characterizes a simple and easy-to-follow joke, and 'receivers may well regard the image macros whose humour resides in both visual and verbal components, especially those carrying previous associations, as more amusing' (Dyner, 2016, p. 685). This seems to be the case of the Rousseff image macro, in which the amusement comes from immediate association with Neymar's 'T' gesture.

Our research question is why this specific meme series is memorable and spread across digital media. To answer, Dawkins' (1976) and Knobel and Lankshear's (2007) classification tools are applied. Table 1 displays a concise description of the taxonomy applied to the selection and analysis of the Rousseff meme series.

Figure 3. The 'T' Gesture Now Represents the Number 7 and Refers to the Final Score of the 2014 FIFA World Cup Germany Versus Brazil match: 7 × 1

Source: Metropolitana FM (2015).

Figure 4. Rousseff's 'T' Gesture Being Compared to the Martial Arts Gesture of Japanese Superhero Ultraman

Source: Teve Copa pra Caralho (2014).

Figure 5. Rousseff's 'T' Gesture Image Juxtaposed on the Brazilian Soccer Team
Source: Bol na Copa (2014).

Figure 6. Meme with the Verb *voltei* (I came back) in a Clear Reference to Rousseff's Re-election, Several Months after the Original Meme Emerged
Source: Último Segundo (2014).

Table 1. Concise Description of the Taxonomy Applied to the Selection and Analysis of the Rousseff Memes.

Taxonomy: Dawkins (1976); Knobel and Lankshear (2007)		Meme	Figure
Fidelity Although the meme is widespread, its main characteristics remain relatively unaltered		*é tóis*	See Figures 1–6
Fecundity The meme has to be memorable and spread across digital media	**Humour** Faculty of expressing the amusing or comical	7 × 1	See Figure 3
	Intertextuality Cross-references to popular culture events, artefacts and practices	Ultraman	See Figure 4
	Juxtaposition Anomalous juxtapositions of images to call attention	Soccer team	See Figure 5
Longevity Long-time availability for a meme to be replicated		*voltei*	See Figure 6

Source: Authors' own.

Fidelity, Fecundity and Longevity

Dawkins (1976) presented fidelity as the first characteristic of successful memes. Success, in this scenario, refers to the meme's spreadability (Jenkins et al., 2013), and the capacity to attract audience attention and to be memorable. Fidelity means that although the meme is extensively copied and altered, its characteristics remain relatively intact. Although certain characteristics of the 'original' meme (see Figure 2) seem to remain the same, in the production of meaning we observe not only a simply content transmission but also a kind of 'slipping' guided by beliefs, understandings that are not individual, but, rather, social, as Lankshear and Knobel (2006, p. 211) argue concerning social learning. Miller et al. (2016, p. xvi) state, 'Memes are particularly significant as a kind of moral police of the internet. By using them people are able to express their values and disparage those of others in less direct and more accept-able ways than before'. Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate that the main element of the Rousseff meme series is the 'T' gesture itself, which remains unaltered in relation to the original gesture performed by Neymar. As can be seen in Figures 3 through 6, the president's image remains 'intact' in all the subsequent memes, although the production of the meaning changes. Börzsei (2013, pp. 22–23) ponders that 'Internet memes seem to be the digital age political cartoons, with infinitely extended participation' and that memes 'can tell the news'.

The second Dawkinian characteristic is fecundity, the capacity the meme has to spread across digital media. One strategy for replicating the same image macro without losing the audience's interest is resig-nifying the sign, as can be seen in Figure 3. 'A meme is a sign', reminds us Deacon (1999). In this meme, the 'T' gesture is maintained but now represents the number seven and refers to the final score of the 2014 FIFA World Cup Germany match vs. Brazil: 7 × 1, on 8 July 2014. The Brazilian team's loss in this match by such a lopsided score became an unforgettable episode in Brazilian history because of the importance soccer has in the country's culture and soul. This situation alone was so tragic that it naturally became a joke and inspired a series of memes as well. People often turn to popular culture and humour to find answers to societal dilemmas (Rushkoff, 1997, p. 68), and since the early 2010s, the Internet meme is one of the ways people are addressing such issues (Börzsei, 2013).

Knobel and Lankshear (2007) consider three patterns that contribute directly to the fecundity, and humour is the first key component. In the 7 × 1 meme, the humour was the triumph of the meme (see Figure 3). Knobel and Lankshear (2007, p. 176, italics in the original text) explain that '*the fabric of*

the text is concerned with the tools used to construct meaning. Predominantly this is about the use of multimodal text to signify group membership, reference to shared understandings and humour'. Regarding the production of meaning, a laugh is triggered by an unusual situation that the female president would be commenting—her smile could indicate irony—the (bad) result of the match, as well by the presumed position of the (hated) opponent (the enemy) for some sectors of society, as the FIFA World Cup event preceded the presidential elections in the country.

Intertextuality, 'such as wry cross-references to different everyday and popular culture events, icons or phenomena' (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 209), is the second pattern. Figure 4 showcases the president's 'T' gesture being compared to the martial arts gesture of the Japanese superhero Ultraman. Ultraman was a Japanese television series first aired in 1966 and became a major pop culture phenomenon worldwide. This is the case of an exclusively visual joke, as 'Internet memes span various formats, for example videos, GIF files, photographs, and drawings, whether or not accompanied by text' (Dynel, 2016, p. 662). In addition to the explicit intertextuality and humour, the comparison of Rousseff and a popular superhero promotes super-valorization of her abilities as the leader of the nation and is an ironic way of referring to these supposed abilities, as Brazil is experiencing numerous political and economic problems, and the power of this Japanese hero is unrealistic and could not save Brazil from danger. 'In digital media, "remixing" an Internet meme would amount to adding information to it. This process allows the original, single media object to develop into an Internet meme' (Cannizzaro, 2016, p. 574).

Anomalous juxtapositions, especially of images, 'as part of their "hooks" for maximizing the susceptibility of the idea being passed from mind to mind' (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 215), is the third pattern. Figure 5 showcases the meme in which Rousseff's 'T' gesture image is juxtaposed on the Brazilian soccer team in the context of the 2014 FIFA World Cup. The original image of the players was an homage to Neymar after his injury during the championship. Rousseff's image is placed in front of the meme with the group of players united in the background. She figures as the 'coach', the leading person of the team—a team that performed poorly against opponents during the 2014 FIFA World Cup. This context could be associated with the leading person of the country and her poor political performance against the adversities of a global economic crisis since 2008 and the adversities imposed by her relationship with opposing political parties in Brazil.

The third Dawkinian characteristic of successful memes is longevity, which is connected to the long-time availability for remixing and assumes 'optimal conditions for a meme's replication and innovation' (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 202). A meme must be bold enough to have its own substantial meaning but cannot be too detailed, because then it 'becomes too specific and less widely applicable' (Rushkoff, 1997, p. 55). The president's 'T' gesture meme emerged in July 2014 and remained in vogue for several months. As suggested by Wiggins and Bowers (2015, p. 1892), '[I]mage macro memes seem to possess greater endurance. Their staying power is likely due to the ease by which members of participatory digital culture can remix and spread macro memes'. For instance, Figure 6 presents the meme with the verb *voltei* (I came back) in a clear reference to Rousseff's re-election as the president of Brazil in October 2014 and the beginning of her second term in office in January 2015. In this case, the 'T' gesture functions as the letter 'T' in the middle of the world *voltei* and represents the original meaning of the slang *é tóis* ('we are together', 'we can do it'), emphasizing her narrow and triumphant victory in the elections, despite the hardships (similar to Neymar) suffered during the campaign. For Neymar, adversity is related to the physical injuries he suffered on the field and to the poor performance of his team. For Rousseff, adversity is mainly related to the supposed division of voters in Brazil, between her party, the Worker's Party and her opponent's party (*Partido da Social* Democracia Brasileira, PSDB, the Brazilian Social Democracy Party), represented by Aécio Neves. The legitimacy of the elections was questioned because the result was the closest in the history of Brazil, especially by those who did not feel

that their interests had been taken into account. She won the election with more than 54 million votes, 8.3 million votes more than her opponent. In Brazil, voting is mandatory.

Conclusion

Working with a data set consisting of Internet memes showcasing former Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, based on Dawkins' (1976) ideas, on Knobel and Lankshear (2007) criteria for successful memes, and the concept of system, we demonstrate users' actual reading and writing process (mainly related to humour effects) and manipulation of images (intertextuality and juxtaposition), according to social practices in a systemic context. 'Essentially, Internet memes have evolved thanks to the new media networks, which thrive on individuals' active participation' (Dynel, 2016, p. 662). Moreover, the systemic logic of remixed memes encourages participation (Börzsei, 2013), inviting people to often anonymously contribute to the 'collective co-creation of Internet memes' (Cannizzaro, 2016, p. 576).

The analysis of the memes shows that the categories proposed by Dawkins (fidelity, fecundity and longevity) and the parameters of fecundity presented by Knobel and Lankshear (humour, intertextuality and juxtaposition) are not isolated and are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they are frequently juxtaposed, which denotes their integrated nature and coherent disposition, corroborating to clarify and identify how certain specific sets of memes become memorable and spread within the media landscape. Humour presents itself as a particularly relevant element in the analysis because humour (a) facilitates the diffusion of content, (b) catches the audience's attention, (c) can inspire positive feelings and alleviate tensions, despite the critical message it may convey (Chagas et al., 2015; Shifman, 2013b) and (d) contributes to the construction of collective identities and experiences of shared literacy (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007).

What could be taken as *literacy* (with 'l' minuscule) can be associated with the concept of *Literacy* (with capital 'L') understood as the construction of meaning attached to life and 'being in the world', as distinguished by Knobel and Lankshear (2007). The success attributed to some Internet memes is the result of a socio-historical and ideological context characterized by the appropriation of Internet technologies and media systems and by 'the interests and values of the people using the spaces in which the meme is unleashed' (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 202). As emphasized by Miller et al. (2016, p. 172), '[T]here seems to be a case for regarding memes more generally as a kind of "internet police," attempting to assert moral control through social media'.

Internet memes in general are composed by simplistic and low-quality images, often in a mundane style because the focus is on the message (Börzsei, 2013). Political memes in particular configure democratic demonstration, allowing the emergence of different and critical discourses and not just perpetuating the discourses of those within a certain party, social class or group in power.

> While some political memes are framed in a humorous manner, others are deadly serious. But regardless of their emotional keying, political memes are about making a point—participating in a normative debate about how the world should look and the best way to get there. (Shifman, 2013b, p. 120)

Rousseff and her marketing team embraced the *é tóis* idea because they could clearly incorporate the message 'we are together' and 'we can do it' in her political strategies in the midst of the 2014 presidential election campaign. 'The communicative value of memes has not only been paramount for social movements; it has also led political parties, leaders and institutions to integrate them in their strategies' (Martínez-Rolán & Piñeiro-Otero, 2016, p. 147). According to Miguel (2011, p. 191), there is a delicate balance between the distinction in the political discourse, which marks the social superiority of the one to whom attributes of seriousness and competence seem necessary for the performance of public

functions, and strategies to approach the audience, necessary to establish communication and to maintain the politician's fight for a position of power. In this regard, memes function as elements of banalization and/or critiques of politics in the midst of the digital media landscape (Chagas et al., 2015).

We highlight the richness of studying the *meming* phenomenon and its appeal for media systems in general and for the political sphere in particular. 'In line with Knobel and Lankshear (2007), studying political memes allows for a concretisation of way of thinking, behaviours and actions both in terms of the political party sending them as well as the community who attaches value to them' (Martínez-Rolán & Piñeiro-Otero, 2016, p. 157). The construction of (new or traditional) meanings with the (re)production of the conflicts between discourse identities could lead to a debate about differences (or similitudes) in different cultures, in different countries. Börzsei (2013) argues that the humour of Internet memes was, for a long time, mainly focused on global topics such as sex, gender, and animals, greatly outnumbering local topics such as politics. The visual form of Internet memes and the predominant use of the English language as the lingua franca have also played a role in this global trend. However, from the late 2000s, Internet meme culture has been increasingly more localized. The process of 'glocalization' highlighted by Shifman and Thelwall (2009), or blending of global and local, turned the Internet meme into a global vehicle, allowing people to talk about their local topics, closer in time, space and language, alongside the more universal themes.

In the political sphere, 'Internet memes enable and encourage non-traditional actors to "speak back" to political authorities in surprising, and surprisingly eloquent, ways' (Howley, 2016, p. 171). This study could be useful for the formation of a critical reader and writer according to new literacies, involved with the treatment of social, historical and cultural issues, understanding that social practices spread not only on the Internet and are made by the not always harmonious coexistence of different worldviews.

Notes

1. See https://www.facebook.com/PrefsCuritiba/timeline
2. See https://www.facebook.com/assimumabrastemp/videos/1682172515155918/

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