

Dank Memes with Exclusionary Themes: Cultural Institutions, Social Media, and Perpetuating Cultural Hegemony Online

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July 1, 2021

Transcript

1: Introduction

Hello and thank you for your interest in *Dank Memes with Exclusionary Themes: Cultural Institutions, Social Media, and Perpetuating Cultural Hegemony Online*. My name is Laura March and I'm a PhD student at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill school of information and library science. You can Tweet at me @theartofmarch or email me at lmarch at unc.edu. My research focuses on social media as a space for informal learning opportunities as well as other intersections of education, creativity, and technology.

I've also created a digital toolkit on this topic for easy reference – please head to lauramarch.com/social-toolkit where I have links to many related resources that may be helpful for you or your organization as well as all of my references.

2: Intro

You're here because you're interested in talking about how power and privilege can manifest digitally.

In this presentation, I'm going to share how Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony can be illustrated through examples of social media content shared by libraries, museums, and archives.

I'll also describe how to use an adaptation of Gillian Rose's visual discourse analysis to learn who and what appears in content, how they are represented, and what is missing.

3: Let's begin by defining hegemony

First off, the word hegemon is ancient Greek for "leader," and the term hegemony came to be known as a type of authority that still allowed its subjects some autonomy. For example, Athens had a hegemony over other Greek city-states, who at that time followed the military, political, and cultural leadership of Athens but remained somewhat self-ruling. Hegemony is not a direct threat of overt coercion but a more surreptitious "organization of consent."

4: Continued

And this concept was further developed by Antonio Gramsci many centuries later, after World War I, to better understand and describe why he and other Italian communists failed while Fascists succeeded. Gramsci expanded idea of hegemony from just politics into a broader understanding of how people understand their own existence. In a world where a person views their own subjugation as a natural state rather than specifically created for the benefit of another, they are unlikely to work towards dismantling the oppressive system they exist within. In other words, Gramsci believed a social group was able to control others not simply through external influences (like rewards or punishments) but also internal influences – by molding personal

beliefs, convictions, and concepts of reality to replicate prevailing norms. This internal control is cultural hegemony. ¹⁻³

5: Libraries & Cultural Hegemony

Libraries have described as institutions of cultural hegemony because they reflect and reinforce a dominant worldview of the culture they're created within. We can see an illustration of this here, where an American library posted a "Today in History" Tweet wishing a Confederate General who fought for the preservation of slavery #HBD, or "Happy Birthday." And if celebrating this man's birthday wasn't enough, the post was made ON Martin Luther King Junior Day!

6: Continued

In the response below, we see the institution Tweet that they regretted publishing the post on MLK day. But this apology didn't address why wishing a Confederate general a "Happy Birthday" would be appropriate for any other day. This could be considered a racial microaggression, or a small encounter with racism that usually goes unnoticed by members of the majority race. ⁴

And this post also shows that social media work isn't just about how to mediate between people, or between people and content. These social media communicators are also mediating between the technology that pre-programmed this tweet, along with people, their institutions, and larger cultural conversations.

7: Museums & Cultural Hegemony

LaTanya Autry, co-producer of the #MuseumsAreNotNeutral project, similarly described museums as "products and projects of colonialism" and, since they "stem from and perpetuate conquest, they are by nature not 'neutral.'" While many library, archive, and museum staff may perceive themselves (and their institutions) as neutral mediators, their practices often maintain and reproduce existing power structures and relationships. ⁵⁻⁷

We can easily see some of the byproducts of colonialism in many national museums' feed, like this post here. And what I find particularly interesting are the responses acknowledging this history and calling it out.

8: Archives

But that's not to say that all conversations happening on an institution's feed are necessarily productive or should even remain on a page without an organizational response. Check out this example from an archive's Instagram, showcasing a publicity photograph taken during World War II. You can see some responses to this image on the right. The first says, "Not snowflakes" and the second says, "Now those look like real heroes to be looked up to and admired."

With hindsight being 20/20, we can see how this image of five white men became a dog whistle.

The puzzle now, however, is to figure out a method for reviewing or assessing content before it's posted to see how imagery can be related to larger dialogues and the surrounding context.

9: Visual Discourse Analysis

Which brings me to Gillian Rose's Foucauldian visual discourse analysis. In her words, discourse analysis of visual culture provides "ways of seeing brought to particular images by specific audiences, or to the social institutions and practices through which images are made, circulated and displayed" (Rose, 2016, p. 188) ⁸

10: Continued

Rose offers 6 strategies for interpreting images, summarized here:

1. Use "fresh eyes"

Meaning try to approach your materials without any definitive answers or preconceptions.

2. Review sources

By allowing yourself the time and headspace to immerse yourself in all the elements that make up an image.

3. Identify reoccurring references

and connections between those sources and elements, which may lead to developing bigger themes.

4. Examine the "effects of truth"

Meaning consider how this image works to persuade people to believe a certain thing.

5. Note complexity and contradictions

Just as images can highlight the process of persuasion, there can be moments where dissent is acknowledged... or not.

6. And finally, consider the invisible

As absences can have powerful effects, too – which we saw in that post of the World War II pilots. There were plenty of pilots and support staff in the Battle of Britain who weren't white men, but we're not seeing them here or on this institution's channel.

11: Bad Hair Day

Let's return to this image from the beginning of this presentation.

Using those visual discourse analysis techniques, we can look at this post with fresh eyes and review its sources as a starting point.

This post does a great job of illustrating how private or personal aspects of our lives are often related to the operation of power.

It also makes use of Gramsci's description of "common sense" as a means of perpetuating cultural hegemony. In this case, "common sense" refers to politically powerful ideas about society, and one's place in, and were the result of socialization and exposure to cultural narratives that justified the values of the ruling class. "Pulling oneself up by their bootstraps" is

the typical example of a “common sense” notion today, which vindicates capitalism as just and valid, as it fosters a belief in social mobility and economic success as being possible through individual efforts while obscuring class, racial, and gender inequities.

Implying this hairstyle constitutes a bad hair day may be “common sense,” to the person who created the snap, but in the United States (where this museum is located), we have a long history of discriminating against people of color wearing traditional or protective hairstyles. There was a Louisiana law requiring Creole women to keep their hair covered in public during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Indigenous Americans and Asian Americans had their hair forcibly shaved by law enforcement. Even within the past few years, Black kids have been expelled from school for wearing their hair loose.

Honestly, if calling natural hair with texture “bad” isn’t an example of perpetuating white hegemony, I just don’t know what is.

1,2,9–13

12: My Tweet

Now before I move on to any additional examples, I think it’s important to recognize that we are all fallible. I’d like to share one of my own Tweets. This post shows how excited I was over a manufacturer offering paid vacation to their employees through a donation from a holiday gift I received. Using the effects of truth strategy, I can see how I’ve been conditioned, through cultural hegemony and common sense, to believe paid vacation is special and deserving of celebration in America – not something deserved or an inalienable right. It’s distressing to realize I was so happy that my gift was used by a very successful company to pay their workers something they ought to have had anyway and paid for themselves!

13: Wedding

Returning to some more examples from cultural institutions. Here is a museum advertising their space as a wedding venue. I think the visual discourse analysis strategy of complexity and contradiction is most fruitful here. We see a set table showcased in a space where food and drink are forbidden. This can lead us to view weddings as so important that they’re capable of breaking one of the most sacred rules of museum spaces – no food allowed.

If we dig a bit deeper into this, we can see how cultural hegemony is used to make weddings and marriage into such a big deal. Some research suggests that as people grow older, women do better than men when living alone, but men do better when they live with a wife. Moreover, the global wedding industry has exploded into a 300 billion dollar per year business. The cynic in me wonders if the wedding and culture industries conspire together to ensure women are socialized into aspiring for something that only truly benefits wedding businesses and heterosexual old men.

I think it’s also important to note that two weeks prior to the day this message was posted, a small wedding reception in a rural area caused a huge COVID outbreak that led to 177 cases including 7 hospitalizations and 7 deaths. We’ve been so indoctrinated by cultural hegemony to believe a perfect wedding is so important, it’s worth dying ...and killing for.

14: Accessibility

There's one more area I'd like to cover today – the idea that inaccessibility is another means of perpetuating cultural hegemony. The post on the left uses colors that do not provide enough contrast for readability by people who are colorblind. Nor does it use audio or alternative text for the 253 million people who are moderately to severely visually impaired.

The post on the right is a screenshot from a “What’s New This Week” video post from a library’s account, in which movie and book covers slide across a screen in between flashing yellow lights designed to look like an animated marquee sign. I’m not playing the video here for you, because the yellow flashes on a red background do not pass accessibility guidelines, which were made to limit photosensitivity-induced seizures. Moreover, this library chose to highlight media overwhelmingly created by white authors. Of the 20 featured, there was only one Black author and one Latina author. Both authors’ books were in the middle of the video and pretty easy-to-miss. This is particularly troubling because this was posted only a few days after the library published a “stand against racism” post, where they stated, “Twenty-first-century libraries like ours strive to be—and must be—pillars of equity, inclusion, diversity, and democracy for the communities we serve...We intentionally curate a collection that contains both mirrors and windows. For everyone should be able to see themselves reflected in a book. And everyone should have the opportunity to view the world from a perspective different than their own.”

More resources on ensuring your social media posts meet accessibility standards are located on my digital toolkit I mentioned previously.

15: More

So.. if there's any interest and extra time during our Q&A portion, I'm happy to bring up more examples of posts for us to analyze together as a group.

16: Why it's important...one more thing?

But before I end, I'd like to make sure the takeaway from this presentation isn't that social media is bad or that communicators are racist, sexist, or classist. Far from it – market research shows social media is key to diversifying and increasing visitors to cultural institutions.

18-20

17

And people trust these institutions – they're viewed as more credible sources of information than governmental agencies, healthcare workers, newspapers, and even personal accounts from family members...¹⁸

18

And people also expect them to recommend actions related to their missions.¹⁸⁻²⁰

So instead of using it solely as a one-way marketing channel or passing it off to the least experienced staff members, cultural institutions can use social media to build collective knowledge, uncover the past, and imagine new futures.

19: Thank you

And with that, I'd like to thank you for time and attention. My name is Laura March and you can always get in touch with me @heartofmarch or through lmarch at unc.edu. Thanks again!

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