The summer of Harambe: The curious case of a deceased gorilla and an animal rights campaign turned online prank

by Brandon Storlie

Abstract
In May 2016, a child climbed into the gorilla enclosure at the Cincinnati Zoo in Ohio. The events that followed — namely the killing of a 17-year-old silverback gorilla named Harambe in order to protect the child — made national news. The story then took on a viral life of its own as a digital meme that turned the gorilla into a pop-culture craze. But Harambe’s position as an Internet phenomenon was a curious one. Despite exhibiting all the characteristics necessary for viral success and encouraging a polyvocal discourse, the Harambe Meme never became the enduring symbol of animal rights it was created to be. Instead, it was co-opted into a widely applicable element of digital humor. While it is difficult to determine what made Harambe the tool of choice for a months-long online joke, the meme’s success as a culture jam highlights the unpredictability of the Internet and underscores users’ ability to influence the fate of digital content.

Introduction
On 28 May 2016, a child climbed into the gorilla enclosure at the Cincinnati Zoo in Ohio. The events that followed — namely the killing of a 17-year-old silverback gorilla named Harambe in order to protect the child — made national news. In the subsequent months, however, the story took on a viral life of its own as Internet culture turned the gorilla into a pop-culture craze — specifically through the proliferation of a digital meme. Just over three months after the gorilla’s death, Venkatesh Rao penned an ode to the resulting Internet phenomenon. “Over the summer,” Rao (2016) wrote for the Atlantic, “Harambe evolved from ordinary tragedy to perfect meme: defined only by its ability to replicate; a medium of cultural evolution with no message, signifying nothing so much as its own virality.” In a reversal of Marshall McLuhan’s paradigm, Harambe was “the message that became the medium, capable of carrying any signal, without becoming identified with any of them.” The gorilla had risen to immense online popularity despite signifying nothing, Rao argued, “except maybe our increasingly weird post-everything world.”

After a meteoric rise to popularity in the summer of 2016, Harambe came to inhabit a strange niche in online discourse. His likeness was used as a lighthearted joke by some and as a scathing social critique by others. In a sudden spike in the fall of 2016, the deceased gorilla was rumored to have even amassed thousands of votes as a write-in...
presidential candidate. What made the gorilla so powerful, Rao suggested, is that Harambe fostered polyvocality; the meme could be worked into almost any online conversation and invited a multitude of voices to join the surrounding discourse.

Despite the gorilla’s popularity and flexibility, however, Harambe’s primary online legacy was as a diversion. The Harambe Meme originated as part of a legitimate animal rights campaign, it was soon co-opted into an Internet-based culture jam. A closer look at the Harambe Meme’s evolution shows that it possessed all the characteristics necessary for viral success. However, where other memes have rallied huge online communities together toward a common goal, the Harambe Meme gathered a diverse audience of pranksters together in the name of humor. As this examination will show, even a seemingly perfect meme’s fate is subject to the whims of the people who engage with it.

What makes a meme?

Memes have become the subject of a growing body of academic research, but even as recently as the publication of her book, Memes in digital culture, Limor Shifman (2013) pointed to a “yawning gap between (skeptic) academic and (enthusiastic) popular discourse about memes.” As a result, digital memes remain difficult to pin down conceptually, suffering from the ambiguity inherent in Richard Dawkins’ original definition of the term. Dawkins (2006) defined the concept of a meme broadly, calling it “a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation.” The examples Dawkins offered for the freshly coined term did little to clear things up; musical jingles, ideas, catch phrases, and clothing trends all fit the bill.

Using Dawkins’ original definition, determining what constituted an individual meme was complicated. Making a comparison to his own definition of the “gene complex,” Dawkins left room for interpretation: “If a single phrase of Beethoven’s ninth symphony is sufficiently distinctive and memorable to be abstracted from the context of the whole symphony ... then to that extent it deserves to be called one meme” [1]. Susan Blackmore (1999) took a broad approach to memes, using the term “indiscriminately to refer to memetic information in any of its many forms; including ideas, the brain structures that initiate those ideas, the behaviors these brain structures produce, and their versions in books, recipes, maps and written music” [2]. Even more than three decades after Dawkins coined the term, a clear definition of “meme” remained elusive. In 2011, Know Your Meme, the online archive of digital meme culture, listed the “Occupy Wall Street” movement as one of its top memes of the year. Curiously, though, the larger movement was the only OWS-related subject to make the list; the Web site did not include any of the digital memes spawned by the OWS movement, including Occupy Sesame Street and Pepper Spray Cop (Bratich, 2017).

Shifman’s interpretation served to clarify the situation. Just as Dawkins used the concept of a “gene complex” to invoke the idea of a “meme complex,” Shifman (2013) also focused on the collective. In fact, by her definition, “meme” is a collective noun, referring a group of cultural elements pertaining to the same subject. As with Dawkins’ definition, a larger meme can potentially be broken into smaller ones — sub-memes, for lack of a better word — but the term, as Shifman put it, “always refers to a collection of texts” [3]. The singular cultural elements — videos, photos, texts, etc. — that comprise a meme are then defined as “virals.” This is an important distinction, and one that I will also employ. Any mention of the “Harambe Meme” will refer to the group of cultural units of which the gorilla is the subject. Taking that idea a step further, I have also chosen not to differentiate between the content produced before and after the significant tonal shift in the days following Harambe’s death; everything said or written about the gorilla is part of the Harambe Meme.

Déétournement and the evolution of culture jamming

While Dawkins coined the term “meme” in 1976, the concepts driving the Harambe phenomenon have even older origins. Fred Turner (2006) traced the roots of modern cyberculture to the beginnings of the Free Speech Movement, citing figurehead Mario Savio’s feelings of resentment toward what he felt was a trend of dehumanization in the increasingly computerized environment at the University of California, Berkeley. Several years after the original Berkeley protests, French Marxist theorist Guy Debord (2014) wrote The society of the spectacle (La société du spectacle), a work that served as the definitive text for the Situationist International. A book that helped spur the May
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1968 protests in Paris, *The society of the spectacle* focused on what Debord saw as capitalism’s false promise of fulfillment through consumption (Harold, 2007). Central to Debord’s text was the idea of *détournement* (French: “rerouting,” “hijacking,” or “misappropriation”), the recontextualization of pop culture artifacts for anti-establishment, anti-capitalist purposes (Malitz, 2016).

More than a decade before his seminal work, Debord laid the framework for Situationist International, co-authoring “A user’s guide to détournement” with Gil J. Wolman. Believing that all forms of artistic expression would become politicized, Debord and Wolman (2006) laid out four simple rules for artistic rebellion. Working from the general belief that anything, regardless of medium, could be recontextualized, the authors stressed that the more distant the shift, the more powerful the result. Recognizing the need for creativity, they argued that a détournement becomes less effective as it approaches rationality. Further, simple reversals of an original concept, though the most direct form of détournement, are the least effective. However, Debord and Wolman argued that the distortions used should still be as simple as possible to avoid confusion and misinterpretation.

By the late 1980s, the larger concept of “culture jamming” began to develop from the groundwork of Debord and others, entering the lexicon thanks to a 1990 *New York Times* article by Mark Dery (Delaure and Fink, 2017). Dery (1990) borrowed “artistic ‘terrorism’ directed against the information society in which we live” [4]. In the years that followed, media theorists developed a set of characteristics that define culture jamming and examine the motives of jammers themselves. Successful culture jams are often playful, participatory and anonymous. Most importantly, though, is an idea at the heart of Debdorian détournement: Culture jammers reappropriate existing cultural elements, often to make a political statement. Popular images are turned against themselves in a critique of the society that created them (Delaure and Fink, 2017).

The Harambe Meme serves as a shining example of détournement in the digital age. Stemming from a real event that sparked genuine outrage, the gorilla’s image was quickly reappropriated by an online community and turned into an all-purpose element of Internet absurdity. Tracing the meme’s development chronologically, it is clear that the resulting digital phenomenon appealed to a wide variety of audiences, for use in countless conversations and contexts. What Venkatesh Rao labeled as memetic perfection also had all the elements of a good culture jam — so good, in fact, that the turn from animal rights symbol to playful prank became the meme’s ultimate legacy.

**The evolution of the Harambe Meme**

Video of the incident that led to Harambe’s death began appearing online shortly after it occurred, and various versions of that video proliferated the Internet in the days that followed. The original upload was eventually removed from YouTube, but it received more than 12 million views and was the subject of more than 41,000 comments in a 48-hour period (“Harambe the Gorilla,” 2016). Early versions of the video showed the gorilla positioned near the child soon after the child entered the enclosure. Various unidentified bystanders could be heard yelling, “Somebody call the zoo!” and “Mommy’s right here!” The next scene featured the child seated in front of the gorilla, with the gorilla helping the child to his feet. Both gorilla and child were largely out of frame for much of the remaining footage, though screams from the crowd could be heard. Other versions of the video, including one published on CNN.com, showed the gorilla dragging the child through a moat in the enclosure — again, to the screams of bystanders (Schneider, 2016).

By 29 May, news of the incident had reached the front page of Reddit’s /r/news forum, where a post that linked to a news story on the *Chicago Tribune* Web site received more than 6,000 comments and 7,000 votes over the next two days (“Harambe the Gorilla,” 2016). The *Tribune* story published online on the morning of 29 May under the byline “Tribune news services,” was simply a reposting of a story that ran on the Associated Press wire. However, this initial coverage was essential to the story of Harambe’s online presence, if only in its contrast with what was to come.

The initial mainstream press coverage of the Harambe incident reflected the conversation that permeated the Internet in the immediate wake of the gorilla’s death. The Associated Press (2016) story that ran in the *Chicago Tribune* and sparked thousands of comments on Reddit used a statement from Cincinnati Zoo Director Thane Maynard that emphasized the difficulty of the situation: “They made a tough choice and they made the right choice because they saved that little boy’s life. It could have been very bad.” The AP then included an excerpt from the zoo’s official news release on the matter: “We are all devastated that this tragic accident resulted in the death of a critically-endangered gorilla. This is a huge loss for the zoo family and the gorilla population worldwide.”
Word of Harambe’s death — and the circumstances behind it — spread quickly on the Internet. A Change.org campaign was launched in the gorilla’s name, and hashtags such as #RIPHarambe and #JusticeForHarambe emerged, leading to competing narratives on social media sites. While some users sought only to memorialize the gorilla and express their sadness over his death, others expressed outrage at various parties involved in the incident — including the child, his parents and zoo officials. Each of these narratives included the use of viral images (Figure 1).

![Figure 1: Early Harambe virals expressed both sadness at the gorilla’s demise and critique of the situation that led to it.](image)

Contextually speaking, that initial reaction to Harambe’s death was vital in the meme’s evolution. In contrast to what was to follow, the sadness and outrage expressed immediately after the incident reflected the gorilla’s potential as a non-satirical agent for animal rights. While the effort never gained online traction, the Change.org petition and like-minded hashtags are evidence that, at one point in the meme’s lifecycle, Harambe might have become a symbol for animal rights activism. More than that, though, acknowledging this potential narrative is essential to understanding the development of the meme itself. The #JusticeForHarambe sentiment provides the foundation on which the meme would be built, and, most importantly, the original text that would soon be reappropriated.

Genuine outrage did not remain the dominant narrative for long. Some users opted for jokes almost immediately, but by the next week, the metaphorical cries of “too soon” seemed to have worn off, and elements of parody began creeping into the discourse. Coinciding with the 3 June death of cultural icon and former world champion boxer Muhammad Ali, virals featuring photo collages of recently deceased celebrities surfaced. Some of these collages included Harambe’s likeness alongside those of Ali, musicians Prince and David Bowie, and actor Alan Rickman (Figure 2). The result was a modern example of détournement with all of the classic elements laid out in Debord and Wolman’s original essay. As the only non-human, non-celebrity element of these virals, Harambe stood out, singlehandedly changing the tone from somber to satirical.
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Figure 2: Virals that circulated after Muhammad Ali’s death illustrate Harambe’s détournement into a satirical figure.

The first week of June signaled full détournement for the Harambe Meme and, in the process, represented something of a demarcation line between Harambe the gorilla and Harambe the cultural phenomenon. Any potential the gorilla had as a symbol for animal rights was long forgotten, and its reappropriation became increasingly less rational (Figure 2). If the memes that circulated in the wake of Ali’s death served as the first indication to the wider Internet community that it was now permissible to make light of Harambe’s demise, the rest of the month only cemented it. On 23 June, the gorilla was the subject of a Twitter Moment — a subsection of the Web site that evolved from the platform’s “trending topics” — entitled “Remembering Harambe through song” (2016). Users from around the world, including some professional musicians, rewrote the lyrics of popular songs to include mention of the gorilla or the incident that led to his death. One particularly popular tweet included a reworking of Queen’s 1975 hit, “Bohemian rhapsody”:

Is this the real life?  
Is this just fantasy?  
Caught in that zoo life  
No escape from the bars for me  
Opened my eyes  
Looked down near the moat, I see  
It’s just a poor boy, it fell in here with me   
Because it’s easy to get in, hard to go  
Guess the fence was a little low  
Anyway that kid’s close, I guess I’ll carry him around with me
As the summer progressed, the Harambe-related jokes turned more serious. In a July prank, a group of Ohio teenagers successfully convinced Google that their high school was located on Harambe Drive (Mack, 2016). A tweet from one of the teens about the name change was retweeted more than 5,000 times and favorited more than 9,000. In a Buzzfeed story that followed, one of the pranksters summed up the progression of the gorilla’s online presence: “(The death) was all over the news and it was actually pretty sad at first. But after a couple of weeks, it just became this point of humor on the Internet” (Mack, 2016).

In the late summer and early fall, a pair of Harambe-related stories found their way into the mainstream press. The August hacking of Thane Maynard’s Twitter account — in which several pro-Harambe tweets were posted and the zoo director’s avatar was replaced with a picture of the gorilla — prompted an Associated Press article discussing Harambe’s status as a cult figure. That story, written by Julie Carr Smyth and Dan Sewell, included an excerpt of an e-mail message from Maynard, which read: “We are not amused by the memes, petitions and signs about Harambe. Our zoo family is still healing, and the constant mention of Harambe makes moving forward more difficult for us. We are honoring Harambe by redoubling our gorilla conservation efforts and encouraging others to join us” (Smyth and Sewell, 2016). Then, in September, a pair of resident assistants at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst echoed the severity of the zoo’s tone in their own e-mail. The message, which was eventually uploaded to Twitter, warned the residents of their dorm floor that racially and sexually motivated iterations of the Harambe Meme would be considered “microaggressions,” and that students should be careful not to engage in this kind of activity. UMass student Jarod Sasdi tweeted a photo of the e-mail, with the caption “My RA killed Harambe.” The post received more than 500 likes, and the story was picked up by local and national media outlets (Clauss, 2016).
The Harambe Meme finally began to fizzle in October. In November, however, its popularity spiked again when rumors circulated via social media that more than 10,000 people wrote in the gorilla’s name for President of the United States. The alleged vote total was quickly scrutinized (Cho, 2016), but 9 November saw Twitter ablaze with users expressing outrage over a dead primate with a five-figure vote total. Election Day marked a final surge in the discourse involving the Harambe Meme, however, and the gorilla largely faded into Internet oblivion soon after.

Two sides of polyvocality

A handful of characteristics contributed to the Harambe Meme’s viral success. In their 2013 book, *Spreadable media*, Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green outline five key principles that often govern how well digital memes and other viral content spread in the online environment. These five attributes give memes the sharable quality necessary to spread successfully:

**Availability** — The material to be shared must be in a location that promotes easy access to it.

**Portability** — The material must not be confined to one environment or medium. The authors note that the material should be “quotable” (easily edited) and “grabbable” (easily transferred to another medium) in order to be fully utilized.

**Reusability** — In order to spread, a meme must be applicable in a variety of situations. The best memes have the ability to cut across genres and can be reworked to fit almost any conversation.

**Relevance to multiple audiences** — Content that appeals to more than one audience, or can be easily reworked to do so, has a greater chance of viral success.

**Part of a steady stream of material or larger narrative** — Creators, particularly in the corporate world, should maintain a steady stream of material to ensure continued resonance with audiences.

The traits laid out by Jenkins, Ford, and Green do well to separate the good memes from the bad in terms of virality. The first two (availability and portability) are essentially ubiquitous to the medium. Reusability and relevance to multiple audiences, however, are what truly set the Harambe Meme and other wildly popular Internet virals like it apart. Together, these characteristics broaden the discussion around a meme and allow for a key component in online activism: polyvocality.

Polyvocality, in the simplest of terms, means that more voices have an opportunity to join the conversation (Milner, 2013). Where social movements are concerned, the ability to foster polyvocality allows memes to play a useful role. Ryan Milner’s examination of Occupy Wall Street showed that the memes associated with that movement — both for it and against it — brought diverse groups of people together around common talking points. As people engaged in these online, meme-centric conversations, Milner argued, their voices were amplified. As a result, memes helped accomplish one of the Occupy Wall Street’s goals: to give the public a means by which to “engage with issues of wealth, power, and inequality” [5].

The Harambe Meme and the memes associated with Occupy Wall Street each fostered polyvocality, allowing diverse sets of users to engage in conversations and interact with the content and each other in whatever way they wished. But the divergent paths they followed illustrate an unavoidable variable: the unpredictability of the Internet. Like the Occupy Wall Street memes, the initial content that featured Harambe’s likeness was associated, however briefly, with a legitimate social campaign — #JusticeForHarambe. In the gorilla’s case, though, online pranksters saw something they liked. After the meme was hijacked, the same characteristics that allowed other virals to be incorporated into social movement discourse turned Harambe into 2016’s hottest culture jam. The gorilla proved that, while the best memes do successfully engage a wide and diverse audience, polyvocality itself can be a double-edged sword. Whether a meme is used to further a social movement or purely for humorous purposes is, ultimately, up to those engaging with
The uncertain fate of digital memes

Over the course of a single summer, a deceased gorilla took the Internet by storm. After his reincarnation as an online phenomenon, Harambe morphed from a potential symbol for animal rights into a seemingly universally applicable element of digital humor. Harambe’s reusability and relevance to multiple audiences enabled a polyvocal discourse, and as 2016 wore on, it was clear that the gorilla had all the elements necessary to spread like memetic wildfire.

While Harambe’s popularity was undeniable, the meme’s fate is more difficult to define. It is certainly unrealistic to expect every Internet meme to inspire real-world change (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). At the same time, however, it seems inaccurate to label the Harambe Meme a failure. Though it did not inspire a mass movement for animal rights, Harambe’s reappropriation arguably turned the gorilla into one of the most significant online culture jams in recent memory — a textbook example of détournement for the digital age. Harambe’s hijacking points to a key element of any polyvocal conversation: unpredictability. The gorilla had all the traits necessary for viral success — just as memes that ultimately became part of larger social movements did. But instead of becoming a lasting symbol for animal rights, as the author of the Justice For Harambe campaign might have imagined, the Harambe Meme was co-opted by its user base and became a symbol of absurdity.

The virality of the Harambe Meme highlights the need for more research into the specifics of culture jamming — a practice that is arguably more popular than ever in the modern digital world. However, there are implications for social movement studies, as well. Jenny Pickerill and John Krinsky (2012) alluded to the potential nuance associated with memes and other digital media in their own study of Occupy Wall Street, arguing that “there is still a need to move beyond the superficial celebration of digital mediation and unpack the (particularly scalar) implications of the use of mixed media” [6]. In the meantime, Harambe remains a reminder that virtually anything can be hijacked in digital space, and then potentially remade into a viral sensation.

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