

Brkich, Christopher Andrew & Barko, Tim. (2013). The meme and trolling as vehicles for understanding the human condition.

When it comes to much of the work Tim and I do together, we typically seek out ways to do things which are precisely *atypical* in the realm of academia—be it composing research theory in iambic pentameter, fictively creating dialogues between dead European continental philosophers wearing *Star Trek* costumes whilst discussing cinema, or employing the mimetic nature of the internet’s intellectual cesspools to advance our understanding of the human condition—because, hey, why not? As self-identifying qualitative research trolls, we view it as our personal responsibility to challenge the research *status quo*, pushing people into a state of intellectual *malaise* and forcing them to wrestle with several questions, including: 1) Can one justifiably consider this new manner of work scholarship? 2) Can one make light of the serious and serious of the light simultaneously? and 3) Can pure self-entertainment, to the exclusion of all else, constitute sufficient grounds to legitimate our endeavours?



Image 1. Tim Barko and Chris Brkich. Scholarship is *srs bsns*

We answer in the affirmative to all three, and simply considered our wives’ irritation regarding our most recent project a bonus.

Being intimately familiar and personally experienced with the mimetic nature of the internet—from its roots in *Something Awful* and *Homestar Runner* in the late 90s through *4chan* and *Albino Blacksheep* at the turn of the 21st century to *Reddit*, *Memegenerator*, and an innumerable plethora of others in the here-and-now—we stopped to consider the implications of online *mimesis* on a culture’s collective consciousness. The impulsive necessity to explore this came about in mid-2012 near the end of the GOP presidential primary, as the vitriol both between the candidates and toward President Obama exploded onto the internet and soon, having reached a tipping point, seemed to enter a state of self-replication—a truly viral state of thought (Blackmore, 2000; Brodie, 2011; Lynch, 1996).

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Image 2. Welcome to the Internet!

Thus, we created for ourselves the opportunity to explore the ways in which people expressed their political frustrations, and through these their political identities. Applying Harper's (1998) concept of visual sociology, we immersed ourselves into the genre of political scumbaggery and analysed hundreds of Scumbag Obama and Scumbag Romney memes through Charmaz' (2006) three levels of coding to construct a theory on Americans' political dissatisfaction:

The American public employs *mimesis* to express its dissatisfactions and frustrations with both individual politicians and ideology as a whole, with the hopes of engendering a shift in public thinking. Through the "Scumbag" genre, they respond to hypocrisy with demands for *sincerity*; to duplicity with demands for *honesty*; and to casuistry with demands for *delivery*.

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Image 3. Political scumbaggery and the frustrated response.

As politically jaded as we are—be it a product of age, experience, or some combination thereof—and as our constructed understanding was not overly surprising, we nevertheless find value in our sociopoliticotechnological immersion. Coming to understand the meme as a legitimate tool for researching, understanding, and presenting the inherently complex nature of human social relations makes these relations more accessible to all—and the value of this cannot be overstated.

While our work may be unconventional, it still meets the standards of rigorous scholarship. While it surely makes light of the serious, it also makes serious of the light. And while others may look upon our endeavour with pretentious scorn, that we were able to invoke such scorn in others is sufficient legitimation for us.

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Image 4. Presenting memes *as* memes. *Oppan Gagnam Style!!*

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