

Meme: analyzing the traces of a discursive micro-action

Meme: análise dos rastros de uma microação discursiva

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Resumo: O objetivo deste artigo é descrever o meme como uma das microações discursivas articuladas na mediação da realidade, cujo efeito subjetivo específico é o contágio. Recorremos a uma análise comparativa entre os riscos de fabricar o mundo digital assumidos pelo homo digitalis e os riscos de fabricar o mundo subterrâneo assumidos pelos indivíduos de Fragmentos de uma história futura, obra literária de Gabriel Tarde (20143). Assim, sob a orientação da teoria ator-rede (LATOURE, 2019), defendemos que o meme, longe de ser uma postagem, uma imagem, uma piada ou o remix disso, embora atravesse tudo isso como uma rede homogênea, é um continente do discurso; é uma resposta da linguagem para um problema referente à criação e manutenção de grupos nas condições sociotécnicas das relações digitais.

Palavras-chave: Homo digitalis; meme; modo de existência; produção de subjetividade; teoria ator-rede.

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to describe the meme as one of the discursive micro-actions articulated in the mediation of reality, whose specific subjective effect is contagion. We resort to a comparative analysis between the risks of fabricating the digital world assumed by homo digitalis; and the risks of fabricating

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the underground world assumed by the individuals in Fragments of a Future History, a literary work by Gabriel Tarde (2014). Thus, under the guidance of actor-network theory (LATOURE, 2019), we argue that the meme, far from being a post, an image, a joke, or the remix thereof, though it crosses all these as a homogeneous network, is a continent of discourse; it is a language response to a problem concerning the creation and maintenance of groups in the socio-technical conditions of digital relations.

Keywords: *Desinformation; Media literacy; Lateral Reading; Post-truth; WhatsApp.*

Introduction

Often, we hear that “An Internet meme is a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission” (DAVISON, 2020, p. 144). Such a piece can be shared by thousands and “reproduced with any text-editing computer program” (CANI, 2019, p. 252). Therefore, “remixing is the process of construction/elaboration of this textual materiality, while the meme ends up being the finished product that circulates on social media” (LIMA-NETO, 2020, p. 2257). But what product is this? What social media are we talking about? We argue that the meme, far from being a post, an image, a joke, or a remix of all that, even if it is part of all of that, is, in fact, a container of the act of chatting.

The term meme refers to the invention of something that does not seem quite finished yet, that can be confused with jokes, pranks, the post itself, images, or opinion. However, instead of analyzing funny posts that go viral in digital relationships resulting from infinitesimal associations always capable of subverting classifications, we propose studying this phenomenon through its discursive effect. Given the multitude of agents it can mobilize, the important thing is the effect the meme causes; it is an increase in social quantity, the birth or expansion of a group. That discursive technology, however, suffered adaptation to problems relating to creating and maintaining groups in the digital world. Like any world, the digital world depends on discursive actions to exist. Hence, we start from the analogy between the risks of fabricating the digital world assumed by *homo digitalis*³ and the risks of making an underground world taken by the individuals of *Underground Man*, a literary work by Gabriel Tarde (2014).

We find the analogy on the need to reinvent ourselves as a group, that is, to save society in the face of adverse conditions. Like the individuals in *Underground Man*, *homo digitalis* also need to reinvent themselves to save social life in the digital world, following opposite paths but

3 *Homo digitalis* is the inhabitant of the digital world, individuals whose relationships are foreign to spatiality. They do not come together physically. In broad terms, they have a digital profile and strive vehemently to optimize it (HAN, 2018).

necessarily shuffling socio-technical resources to guarantee the crossover of values that maintain the groups. Bruno Latour (2002) explains that social creations suggest the fullness of something ready and given, which would, theoretically, explain the residual aspects of relationships between individuals. However, Latour advises us to think about social issues strictly in the opposite direction. Under his approach, we start from the understanding the digital world is made up of each residual aspect that comes together in its favor. That is not an easy task, given it requires articulation between networks. After all, “a leak in a pipeline forces the operator to close the valves, a displacement of three meters in the Wi-Fi area, and goodbye, the connection is lost” (LATOURE, 2019, p. 38). However, Latour advises us to think about social issues strictly in the opposite direction. Under his approach, we start from the understanding that the digital world emerges out of each residual aspect that comes together in its favor. That is not an easy task, given it requires articulation between networks. After all, “a leak in a pipeline forces the operator to close the valves; a three-meter displacement in a Wi-Fi zone results in a lost connection” (LATOURE, 2019, p. 38).

Without the shelter of the real world, there is no way for a group to exist. The actor-network theory emphasizes the necessary fabrication of this shelter, highlighting that there is more than one type of network following the previous one, giving continuity and overlapping. Moreover, the term network refers to the heterogeneity of available devices⁴ (smartphones, cables, a cat, caves) and the crossover of services or values (discourses), the latter inevitably made possible by the former. Establishing material and artificial conditions for reality articulates these two types of connectors. That said, we argue that the meme is a discursive technology inherent to the need to survive as a group in the face of digital conditions, which crosses over by heterogeneous associations (network as a process) and happens as a service or value (network as a result) dear to associations between individuals.

4 The actor-network theory technically calls it a hybrid network, the gathering of unpredictable elements in which everything can associate with everything to sustain a social event (LATOURE, 2019).

That implies the meme's definition depends on its specific tone or contrast relative to other services or values emphasized in the discourse. However, perceiving this contrast is difficult due to the obsessive effort of moderns to keep practice away from theory, the object from the subject. It is as if the reality in which modern people live depends on their completely unmade condition: suddenly being faced with the exuberance of a fully ready group or social event. However, all human activity requires intense work that allows the truth of facts and spirit mediated by hybrid networks, which set the world of things in motion, and homogeneous networks that, in turn, put modes of discourse into action.⁵

To underscore the difference between the two types of connectors mentioned above, we draw attention to the difference between what is displaced and the displacement, realizing that “an oil pipeline is no more made ‘of’ gasoline than the Internet is made ‘of’ e-mails” (LATOURE, 2019, p. 38). We can replace the word e-mails with posts without loss in meaning. So, we begin to discuss a process that measures the quality of interactions between individuals through how they deliver discourse. The effect of memes' action on this process becomes evident once we fragment discourse until reaching what we call speaking memetically, as it is an action added to other discursive actions driven by beliefs and desires.⁶ Therefore, talking is a process made of many elementary actions combined, articulated in the effort to make and remake groups, in which contagion is the effect of the meme.

The “catastrophe” of “homo digitalis”

Making and remaking groups in the digital world corresponds to a collective challenge to some extent like the experience lived by the

5 To highlight precisely the articulation of this movement and action, Latour (2002) suggests the term *factish* to think about the fabrication of reality. This combination of fact and fetish aims to show modern people are comparable to the “others” of so-called primitive cultures.

6 For Tarde (2003), beliefs and desires are forces of the soul and have a quantitatively variable character, starting from the lowest propensity to believing and desiring up to the apex of certainty and passion.

victims of the planetary catastrophe narrated in *Underground Man*. In it, the author thinks about the future of humanity after a disaster that radically changed the availability of material devices for human existence: the extinction of the Sun. Such adversity had forced all individuals who wanted to survive to reorganize themselves in underground life. They had to look for a place to live in the center of the Earth. Fortunately, they managed to preserve most of the knowledge produced during life on the surface of the Earth, finding ways to improve the quality of social relationships, as the narrator living around the 31st century tells.

This science fiction corresponds to a mental experiment in which Tarde (2014) exposes his sociological theories, stressing the essential character of social life:

It consists in the complete elimination of living nature, whether animal or vegetable, man only excepted. That has produced, so to say, a purification of society. Secluded thus from every influence of the natural milieu into which it was hitherto plunged and confined, the social milieu was for the first time able to reveal and display its true virtues, and the real social bond appeared in all its vigor and purity. It might be said that destiny had desired to make in our case an extended sociological experiment for its own edification by placing us in such extraordinarily unique condition. (TARDE, 2014, p. 578)

But how can we imagine this experience? It starts from a core idea, from an imaginative and eloquent mind, from the capacity for seduction and perseverance, or better yet, from a leadership driven by passions. The character who embodies this leadership is Miltiades:

He had no trouble in proving that, on condition of burrowing sufficiently deep into the ground below, they would find a deliciously gentle warmth, an Elysian temperature. It would be enough to excavate, enlarge, heighten, and extend the galleries of already existing mines in order to render them habitable and comfortable into the bargain. The electric light, supplied entirely without expense by the scattered centres of the fire within, would provide for the magnificent illumination both by day and night of these colossal crypts, these marvellous cloisters, indefinitely extended and embellished by successive generations. With a good system of ventilation,

all danger of suffocation or of foulness of air would be avoided. In short, after a more or less long period of settling in, civilised life could unfold anew in all its intellectual, artistic, and fashionable splendour, as freely as it did in the capricious and intermittent light or natural day, and even perhaps more surely. (TARDE, 2014, p. 413)

Miltiades defends the idea that civilization, its few survivors, was destined to return to the caves. Showing sketches, calculations, and plans, he vehemently says:

For ordinary drinking purposes we first of all shall have melted ice. Every day we shall transport enormous blocks of it in order to keep the orifices of the crypts free from obstruction, and to supply the public fountains. I may add that chemists undertake to manufacture alcohol from anything, even from mineralized rocks, and that it is the A.B.C. of the grocer's trade to manufacture wine from alcohol and water. ('Hear! hear!' from all the benches). As for food, is not chemistry also capable of manufacturing butter, albumen, and milk from no matter what? Besides, has the last word been said on the subject? Is it not highly probable that before long, if it takes up the matter, it will succeed in satisfying, both on the score of quantity and expense, the desires of the most refined gastronomy? And, meanwhile.... (a voice timidly: 'Meanwhile?') Meanwhile does not our disaster itself, by a kind of providential occurrence, place within our reach the best stocked, the most abundant, the most inexhaustible larder that the human race has ever had? Immense stores, the most admirable which have hitherto been laid down, are lying for us under the ice or the snow. Myriads of domestic or wild animals—I dare not add, of men and women (a general shudder of horror)—but at least of bullocks, sheep and poultry, frozen instantaneously in a single mass, are lying here and there in the public markets a few steps away. Let us collect, as long as such work is still possible out of doors, this boundless quarry which was destined to feed for years several hundreds of millions, and which will well suffice, in consequence, to feed a few thousands only for ages, even should they multiply unduly, in despite of Malthus. If stacked in the neighborhood of the orifice of the chief cavern, they will be easy to get at and will provide a delightful fare for our fraternal love-feasts. (TARDE, 2014, p. 426)

Miltiades' proposition is similar to the myth of Noah's ark, trying to salvage all that was most precious. However, in Miltiades' words,

"But we, in our new ark, mysterious, impenetrable, indestructible, shall carry with us neither plants nor animals. These types of existence are annihilated; these rough drafts in creation, these fumbling experiments of Earth in quest of the human form are for ever blotted out. Let us not regret it. In place of so many pairs of animals which take up so much room, of so many useless seeds, we will carry with us into our retreat the harmonious garland of all the truths in perfect accord with one another; of all artistic and poetic beauties, which are all members one of another, united like sisters, which human genius has brought to light in the course of ages and multiplied thereafter in millions of copies: all of which will be destroyed save a single one, which it will be our task to guarantee against all danger of destruction. We shall establish a vast library containing all the principal works, enriched with cinematographic albums. We shall set up a vast museum composed of single specimens of all the schools, of all the styles of the masters in architecture, sculpture, painting, and even music. These are our real treasures, our real seed for future harvests, our gods for whom we will do battle till our latest breath." (TARDE, 2014, p. 464)

Driven by their passion for the original idea, the survivors immediately began efforts to save knowledge from collections of all genres produced up to that point to save the future of civilization.

With infinite precautions they were lowered one after another, bale by bale, into the bowels of the earth. This salvage of the goods and chattels of humanity was methodically carried out. It included all the quintessence of the ancient grand libraries of Paris, Berlin, and London, which had been brought together at Babylon, and then carried for safety into the desert with the rest. The cream of all former museums, of all previous exhibitions of industry and art, was concentrated there with considerable additions. There were manuscripts, books, bronzes, and pictures. What an expenditure of energy and incessant toil, in spite of the assistance of inter-terrestrial forces, had been necessary for packing, transporting, and housing it all! And yet, for the greater part, it was useless to those who voluntarily this task imposed upon themselves. They all knew it. They were well aware that they were probably condemned for the rest of their days to a hard and matter-of-fact existence, for which their lives as artists,

philosophers, and men of letters, had scarcely prepared them. But—for the first time—the idea of duty to be done found its way into these hearts, the beauty of self-sacrifice subdued these dilettanti. They sacrificed themselves to the Unknown, to that which is not yet, to the posterity towards which were turned all the desires of their electrified spirits, as all the atoms of the magnetized iron turn towards the pole. (TARDE, 2014, p. 480-496)

For these individuals, the extinction of the Sun implied a situation in which there was a simplification of the socio-technical means available. However, they also experienced an intensification of intellectuality as knowledge became the only thing one could have more than others. That implied, for future generations, the possibility of aesthetic activity surpassing utilitarian activity and the suppression of the producer/consumer relationship by the valorization of artistic and scientific knowledge. Then, drawing from the exchange of admiration, criticisms, and favorable and unfavorable judgments, this underground world changed its old ideal: people no longer used each other. They used themselves. They no longer sought individual enjoyment and satisfaction. They sought to produce for the delight of others. In other words, by living with the minimum, they could produce the maximum amount of reflection and consideration.

Using imagination, then, Tarde (2014) talks about what, in his view, is the purest social life: “social tonics” dosed by handshakes, conversations, and other reflex exchanges.

The problem, in a way, was to learn, what would social man become if committed to his own keeping, yet left to himself—furnished with all the intellectual acquisitions accumulated through a remote past by human geniuses, but deprived of the assistance of all other living beings, nay, even of those beings half endowed with life, that we call rivers and seas and stars, and thrown back on the conquered, yet passive forces of chemical, inorganic and lifeless Nature, which is separated from man by too deep a chasm to exercise on him any action from the social point of view. The problem was to learn what this humanity would do when restricted to man, and obliged to extract from its own resources, if not its food supplies,

yet at least all its pleasures, all its occupations, all its creative inspirations. (TARDE, 2014, p. 578-591)

Victims of a planetary “catastrophe” of another order, *homo digitalis* also risks facing the need to review the values that must circulate to maintain relationships and, thus, establish a world that survives the new conditions. But, instead of sociotechnical simplification, *homo digitalis* deals with the entry of new actors into the social scene and the expansion of these networks, which also requires transformations in the quality of associations. In that case, it is a question of knowing how the social animal can survive being physically distant from other individuals with whom it needs to group. The digital world was conceived and delivered to store accumulated knowledge; it is a world made up of reflections and intense exchanges, whose extension, however, exhausts time and increases contradictions.

Tarde’s catastrophe was the extinction of the Sun. However, individuals in his story developed ways to survive that allowed them to gain time to improve values and exchange reflexes. The catastrophe of *homo digitalis*, in turn, is the extinction of time and physical proximity. From another perspective, while individuals in Tarde’s imagined catastrophe managed to save knowledge on life on the Earth’s surface and, thus, save human civilization, the individuals in the digital catastrophe managed to accomplish an even greater feat: making widely available the knowledge built in life essentially constituted by people’s physical contact, improving technical reproducibility and social expansion.

A huge conversation

The ontological condition of the meme means the existence of a specific space that needs filling in the process of manufacturing reality. Without this action, there is a hiatus in the task of regrouping the social. Therefore, it is essential to think about the new needs and possibilities that the socio-technical conditions of the digital world create. When entering the digital environment, it is usual to come across posts that have an

impact because they are absurd or impressive, content that generates curiosity and the desire to tag a friend, comments that reveal what others think, and interactions that show what they like. In this regard, we must note the meme is not a post that conveys an idea that the people who share and like it identify with. It is not an image/video with a caption shared by a given audience. The meme is, first and foremost, content that somehow meets a discursively created condition of happiness. Research may even underestimate the mediation memes provide because it is so well hidden, subtle, and necessarily disguised. But their effect is perfectly palpable. As active in establishing reality as they are confusing in their delimitations, memes have mobilized classificatory efforts, from the classic definition by Richard Dawkins (2007) to perspectives more linked to content creation and sharing, demonstrating a widespread concern to establish categories, like longevity, fecundity and copy fidelity (DAWKINS, 2007), humor, intertextuality, and anomalous juxtaposition (KNOBEL; LANKSHEAR, 2007), and content, form, and stance (SHIFMAN, 2013).

In Dawkins (2007), the concept of meme aims to indicate that cultural evolution occurs in a way analogous to biological evolution through a minimal agent that he classifies by the three aspects mentioned above: longevity concerns duration in time, fecundity corresponds to continuity through replications in successive brains, and fidelity concerns the level of similarity of such copies. Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear (2007), focusing directly on the digital world, point to three patterns that contribute to the fecundity of the meme: humor, ranging from the peculiar and unusual to the eccentric, the bizarre, and parodic; rich intertextuality, making multiple ironic references to different events, icons, and phenomena from popular culture; and anomalous juxtapositions, mainly of images.

Limor Shifman (2013), in turn, proposes thinking about memes, not as isolated ideas or formulas that spread easily but as a group of content items created with mutual awareness and that have common characteristics. Based on Dawkins' (2007) concept, which understands

the meme is a unit of imitation, Shifman suggests isolating three dimensions: content, referring to the ideas and ideologies conveyed; form, meaning the physical incarnation of the message perceived by the senses; and stance, which is the information the meme transmits concerning its own communication.

These understandings are lost in border areas. They feel the effect of the phenomenon they seek to understand but fall into thought traps that separate the world of things and words, object and subject, exteriority and interiority, matter and spirit, practice and theory, fact and fetish, or rather, are too modern. The point is that the action of the meme crosses hybrid networks and intersects with other values, but its effect characterizes it. We should note that posts generally called memes are difficult to classify, as they can be edited in infinite ways. Moreover, these edits can serve any group. In other words, the same image, phrase, or video base of a given post can, through quick editing, be used by left- and right-wing political groups. For example, Catholic, Protestant, or Umbanda religious groups can use the same image without compromising the act of speaking memetically. In short, there is no left or right meme. Since the truth of the meme precedes the group itself, it does not serve a specific opinion. Its commitment is not with what is said but how it is said.

By way of clarification, it is convenient to dispel the common notion that confuses a meme with a post. A post consists of establishing a conversation with physically distant people. Therefore, forming groups requires an entirely mental cohesion, what Tarde (2005) called public, a type of human grouping whose growing importance comes from the invention of the printing press. As a gift to researchers of the future, Tarde discussed the strength of the public, the ways of feeling and acting of a type of social aggregate that does not essentially require the proximity of bodies, which, once sheltered in the digital world, found an environment suited to its nature. The post is its form of expression par excellence.

However, the digital world still requires adaptations and experiments on the transformation in the quality of associations. After all, the not-so-subtle detail of it consists in the fact that reagggregating the social requires more sophistication of discursive values to delimit itself, mediate interests, and deal with new and small gaps, solutions, and flaws in reality. Finally, we can say with Tarde (2005) and Latour (2019) that establishing social reality is conversing. Therefore, the digital world is an immense conversation of unprecedented length and speed. However, we are still learning how to talk, and time is not as abundant a resource as in the Tarde's tragedy. Groups require much more effort to be made and remade. Without something as valuable as time, a problem arises: how can we learn what links physically distant people? How can they know they are connected and notice their common interests?

The hiatus

If the hybrid network's maintenance is up to date (cell phone, internet, images), we must think about the articulation of the mechanisms responsible for keeping the group alive. It is precisely in the effect of how it is said that lies the trajectory of the discursive action and where we must assess the quality of the connection. Where there is a hiatus, there is also an articulation. Where we can define antecedents and consequents, it implies the existence of meaning. However, modern people's fixation on the idea of perfect and pure information hides the fact that "mediators are reason itself, the only means of subsisting in being" (LATOURE, 2019, p. 133). This negative view of mediation places the notion of construction in opposition to truth, even though mediations are the only ones capable of maintaining the continuity of networks. Modern thought always seeks to look behind the institutions of truth, beauty, goodness, and wholeness for multiple dubious manipulations, translations, and metaphors, that is, transformations that invalidate their value as if there were an already given and, therefore, true and pure substance that remains unaltered (LATOURE, 2019).

To the extent that it committed itself to the impossible task of hiding mediation, modern language assumed the mission of hiding the traces

of practice, operating a suture between theory and practice. Hence, the moderns always live in ruins: “The ruins they have just toppled, the ruins they had put in place of the ones they toppled, ruins that others, for the same reason, are preparing to destroy” (LATOURE, 2019, p. 43-44). In the digital (and, yes, real) world, the principal factish is to ensure bonds for assembling groups between physically separated individuals. As a result, victims of the scarcity of time develop techniques to measure the temperature of passionate interests or, better yet, measure the cohesion of spirits that do not necessarily see each other and do not vibrate by looking each other in the eye.

Passionate interests guarantee the bonds of any group in any world built to be inhabited by humans. However, in digital circumstances, discovering that you like the same things, admire the same leader, and agree with the same ideas requires updating values, ways of changing, and factishes, in short, the mode of talking. This physical distance from individuals, which prevents the transmission of magnetism, the penetration of the gaze directly, and contagion through physical proximity, delimits the hiatus in reality to be filled by the micro-action of the meme. Based on Tarde’s theory of contagion (2005), the lively curiosity of individuals is trapped in the unconscious illusion that their feelings are common to many spirits⁷, and the lack of interest is sudden upon noticing that they are the only ones there. This arrangement encourages the establishment of skilled beings capable of helping to fill the gap that arises in the process of forming groups in digital environments.

If organizing and populating this world is desirable, adapting to the hiatus created by its socio-technical conditions is imperative. Furthermore, as the object is neither enchanted nor a cause, it is essential to activate factish or slightly autonomous beings who surpass their creators to a certain extent and, in this way, possess them. In this way, the act of speaking memetically manufactures its beings linked to

7 If the same feeling is imbued in many individuals, they are on the verge of forming a group.

prestige⁸ so that they articulate and plot together in the arduous work of keeping a group alive in the digital world. They are the temperature gauges of common interests, such as likes, emojis, reposts, and favorable comments.

Meme: “We have common interests. We are linked!”

The action of the meme has its own hiatus to risk coping with the arduous task of fabricating the real: not knowing the temperature of passionate interests. Because undertaking and promoting beliefs and desires in the digital world requires adapting contagion to physical distance and the tragedy of lack of time. So, if, as Latour (2019) states, a passionate interest is a mediator par excellence that comes between two entities that, before that interest arose, were unaware they had a link, the meme is a kind of messenger of the digital world sent to warn “we have common interests. We are linked!”.

The message, however, no longer relies on the timbre of the voice, penetration of the gaze, or magnetic transfers of gestures. The adaptations of such aspects are closely related to the choice of the appropriate record (image, phrase, audio, video) because, as already pointed out, the meme occurs much less when someone identifies with the beliefs and desires conveyed in any post that speaks memetically than when it manages to invite, mediate a sense of belonging, and signal: “you are the recipient of this message because we have common interests.” The subtlety that camouflages this is that the specific action of the meme ceases when the message reaches the recipient, transforming it into a frozen image or a reproduction. That means it is not about “what is the meme” but “when is the meme.”

The meme occurs when a lapse of negativity or a stop interrupts the flow of positivity in the digital world. That lapse is timely amidst what Byung Chul-Han (2017) calls the tyranny of visibility because it reduces the intended message to a dimension empty of meaning, from which

8 Perhaps it is more appropriate to think of “being” as an ongoing process instead of “beings” as conditions.

new meanings can arise. And the meme continues as speech guarantees the certainty of the bond. When it begins to circulate as posts created to serve the opinion of a group or a particular thought, the repeated record is frozen by its reposting, posting countless times, or echoing on various digital platforms. In brief, since the continuity of the record consists in its ability to betray any uttered idea-suggestion, it is not the meme that serves the group but groups that serve the meme factish gods (likes, replies, favorable comments) as a kind of cult to stay alive.

It is still necessary to allude to the cunning inherent in the meme, used not necessarily to enchant others, as the individuals did in *Underground Man*, but to start a conversation and change the other or infect and gain social quantity. Just like individuals in Tarde's tragedy, *homo digitalis* needs, in the face of their tragedy, to "Mutually ape one another, and by dint of accumulated apings diversely combined to create an originality is the important thing" (TARDE, 2014, p 609). However, this paper is dedicated only to the traces left by the meme: a hiatus in reality, the factish beings established to assist in the creation of something that goes beyond individuals and, finally, in the condition of happiness of this action: offering a path of beliefs and desires to be imitated.

The ontological condition⁹ of the meme comes before reaching the condition of happiness because the group or opinion resulting from it is not ready. So, what matters (the trajectory that constitutes the ontological condition of the meme) is what happens because the meme is social; it is a movement constituted by all the actors involved in its performance. Its trajectory carries the hidden message of contagion but also reflects the disturbing instability a group must face to exist in the digital world. *Homo digitalis* even managed to bring with them the knowledge produced, like the Tarde's survivors of the extinction of the Sun. However, far from having time to benefit from this knowledge and improve conversations, *homo digitalis* accumulated so much information, contradictions, and conflicts that, to guarantee their possibility of social life, they depend

9 A condição ontológica do meme será desenvolvida em outra oportunidade, este artigo foca apenas nos rastros dessa ação.

much more than any other people on invoking beings capable of influencing.

The transformations in the conditions that govern the social environment require plotting and germinating a work of adaptation to mediate reality. In the digital world, by some distant intuition, this work was called a meme because it is “funny,” “silly,” “playful,” and “repetitive.” However, the meme is funny, silly, playful, and repetitive because it is a profound regression to the elementary conditions of social life.¹⁰ Such regression is arbitrarily necessary in the face of tragedies that compromise the articulation of hybrid networks, be it the extinction of the Sun or of time and physical proximity. It is necessary to update social values and the way of talking.

In the extinction of the Sun, the individuals who survived this tragedy desperately needed to save the articulations of hybrid networks. In the extinction of time and physical proximity, individuals desperately need to ensure that they can imitate, oppose, and adapt, that is, talk. In it, the meme is not a technology that appears out of nowhere; it goes back to the experience of contagion through physical contact, though it cannot be confused with the contagion of face-to-face relationships or with other discursive technologies because it has its hiatus, factish beings, a condition of happiness, and a specific effect. Conflict surrounds the digital world; there is no way to escape it. So, the digital world needs to learn to deal with it to offer a path to imitation. In short, to speak memetically is challenging: “Will we be able to stay together in this world?”

The meme is one of the actions to maintain social reality, whose effect on relationships between individuals is crucial to regrouping the social in the hostile circumstances of physical distance and time scarcity. The meme corresponds to a restoring action or, if you prefer, a restoring discourse. Though its practical dimension is hidden, we can feel its specific patch because it fills a space in the break between theory and

10 Tarde (2011) defines three categories as elementary conditions of the social: imitation, opposition or conflict, and adaptation.

practice, subject and object, even if mixed in the heterogeneity of the elements that come together in its favor. In short, modern people create fetish languages capable of forging any “being” (an event) that goes from creation to action, such as deities, deeds, works, etc., which help them establish artificial conditions of existence (LATOURE, 2002). And the meme is one of those factish languages that precede the formation of individuals, groups, institutions, or identities.

Final considerations

According to Tarde (2000), any creation starts from a memory. The creation of the discursive technique of the meme starts from the memory inherent in the capacity of human social groups to guarantee the continuity of their sets of ideas essentially through physical contact. Given the new socio-technical conditions in the digital world, groups need to guarantee the continuity of their sets of ideas remotely to exist. It is no longer possible to use expressive face-to-face techniques, whose effect is the imitation of beliefs and desires or a certain level of psychic cohesion. Besides physical distance, the existence of groups does not have much time to create and remake itself; its procedural consistency is even more fragile because “external” quality and fleeting bonds have replaced “internal” quality and long-lasting bonds for the benefit of the rapid emergence and expansion of groups.

The continuity of sets of ideas is composed of an immeasurable series of smaller, distinct, and discontinuous ideas. Mediation work is essential to aggregate these smaller ideas, and the meme is part of this work. Overall, this paper states the meme is a type of connector, a way of changing, whose trajectory will be developed on another opportunity.

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