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THE MEME AS AN EXAMPLE OF CARNIVALIZED INTERNET COMMUNICATION

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Man is least himself when he talks in his own person.

Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth...

Oscar Wilde

Introduction

One of the prerequisites for democratic participation in a country is the existence of a public debate characterised by criticism. Nowadays, cyberspace makes it much easier for people to participate in the community life. Civil liberties may flourish due to the Internet, and said liberties may later on turn into a manifestation of support, discontent, social resistance or political satire which comprises both unfavourable comments about the authority.

In contrast to the new kind of politics practiced by new means of political communication in this place the reality of politics is understood in the traditional way. In other words, the politics is no longer reserved for educated individuals; all members of society may contribute. Thanks to the use of the Internet, citizens have become participants in a political debate regardless of their education, experiences or financial situation.

It is due to the exchange of opinions online that participants can express and explain their views, learn about other people's views, and become aware of the fact that they belong to a particular group. The use of the Internet enables citizens to participate in political socialization. Moreover, it influences the selected leaders' decisions and behaviour, as well as ensuring that the country is governed democratically. Especially present on the Internet the public intensifies its influence and importance to the functioning of democracy and the choice of its representatives. Regardless of the fact whether citizens use cyberspace occasionally or on a daily basis, it may influence the way they think and the manner in which their opinion is formed.

The advantages of the Internet communication

The Internet is characterised by a number of unique features which increase its meaning in political life and allow citizens to extend the public sphere. There is a myriad of qualities that are significant in relation to this communication channel; qualities that allow political debates to be conducted in an unrestrained manner.

One of the most distinctive features of communication is its interactivity. It allows Internet users to have a genuine opinion exchange. The possibility to express one's opinion about the real world in real-time is probably the most important and revolutionary characteristics of the Internet as a communication medium¹.

According to some researchers, interactivity is one of the most promising aspects of the Internet with regard to promoting a democratic society. It is partly because the Internet gives the opportunity to communicate not only horizontally, i.e. among citizens, but also vertically, i.e. between citizens and

¹ K. L. Hacker, *Missing links in the evolution of electronic democratization*. "Media, Culture & Society", 1996, Vol. 18, pp. 213–232.

elites. As a result, interaction is created which would be hardly possible in offline communication².

The Internet's interactivity can be defined in a variety of ways due to the fact that this phenomenon relates to the user's influence on technology itself, interaction with other users, and interaction as a phenomenon in the users' perception. This interaction depends on the interlocutors' engagement.

Another significant feature of the Internet communication is the fact that the distance between the interlocutors no longer matters. Therefore, one can find groups of people with similar political values or groups of opposing views. As a result, one can engage in either expressing one's own opinion or discussing a given topic with others³.

Being anonymous is probably one of the most important aspects of the Internet. It allows the expression of views and opinions with no fear of bearing the consequences in the real world. On the one hand, anonymity lowers the sense of social presence, social conventions as well as ethical and moral norms. On the other hand, it may increase eagerness and interest in expressing what one really thinks about politics. However, anonymity may also lead to anti-social behaviour such as online rows or flaming. The Internet allows users to be anonymous, which enables them to discuss a given topic freely. However, anonymity also offers a chance to express one's opinion in a negative or

² S. J. McMillan, J. S. Hwang, *Measures of perceived interactivity: An exploration of the role of direction of communication, user control, and time in shaping perceptions of interactivity*, "Journal of Advertising", 2002, Vol. 31, pp. 29–43; J. Stromer-Galley, *Interactivity-as-product and interactivity-as-process*, "The Information Society", 2004, Vol. 20, pp. 391–394; S. Sundar, S. Kalyanaraman, J. Brown, *Explicating web site interactivity: Impression formation effects in political campaign sites*, "Communication Research", 2003, Vol. 30, pp. 30–59; D. Endres, B. Warnick, *Text-based interactivity in candidate campaign web sites: A case study from the 2002 elections*, "Western Journal of Communication", 2004, Vol. 68, pp.322–343.

³ J. Stromer-Galley, *On-line interaction and why candidates avoid it*, "Journal of Communication", 2000, Vol. 50, pp.111–132; J. Stromer-Galley, K. A. Foot, *Citizens perceptions of online interactivity and implications for political campaign communication*, "Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication", 2002, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2002.tb00161.x/full>, 02.02.2014.

hostile way. This, in turn, may lead to an increased level of discrimination against those who are different. As a result, cooperation only with the Internet users of similar values is strengthened. The illustrative of the thesis above is the form of the mobilization of political organizations where common denominator is defined ideology underpinned hatred to other groups.

Anonymity may not only encourage but also initiate a protest of the social group suffering discrimination. Moreover, due to the opportunity to express one's opinion anonymously and freely, a leader can emerge who will set the goals and determine characteristic features of a group that has been previously passive⁴. The possibility to anonymously express one's opinion is significant for the democratic discourse. It is important because it allows unpleasant consequences to be avoided; anonymous criticism makes it possible to express unpopular opinions or articulate slogans of the less privileged groups or communities.

Anonymous criticism expressed in the Internet is like a coin – it has two sides. On the one hand, it can serve as a „shield”, on the other – as „a sword”. Citizens who are Internet users, who need to be protected may use one of the Internet options to get support or obtain advice and assistance, which leads to catharsis⁵. Therefore, the Internet becomes a place for expressing one's own opinion⁶.

Expressing unpopular slogans may encourage other Internet users to communicate similar views which might be a starting point for change. More-

⁴ K. Y. A. McKenna, J. A. Bargh, *Coming out in the age of the Internet: Identity >>demarginalization<< through virtual group participation*, "Journal of Personality and Social Psychology", 1998, Vol. 75, pp.681–694.

⁵ R. Davis, *Politics Online: Blogs, Chatrooms, and Discussion Groups in American Democracy*, New York: Routledge, 2005, <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/download/35/6>, 02.02.2014.

⁶ K. D. Trammell, A. Keshelashvili, *Examining the new influencers: A selfpresentation study of A-list blogs*, "Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly", 2005, Vol. 82, pp.968–982; E. Wynn, J. E. Katz, *Hyperbole over cyberspace: Self-presentation and social boundaries in Internet home pages and discourse*, "The Information Society", 1997, Vol. 13, 297–327.

over, exchanging ideas anonymously on the Internet may be a substitute of fighting in real life; and it may be equally effective.

Verbal attacks and flaming in the Internet discourse, as well as hostile posts on social networking sites may effectively discredit a political opponent. However, once the attacks are exaggerated, other Internet users may be discouraged to get involved in the discussion. Then, the result might be exactly the opposite than expected. It is worth mentioning that the number of personal attacks in discussions moderated by a neutral party, by a government official or moderators employed for that purpose is much lower than in non-moderated discussions. No wonder that non-moderated websites are visited mostly by a huge number of frustrated Internet users whose opinions are much more hostile and aggressive.

Internet discussions may also serve a good purpose, especially when they are initiated by citizens for other citizens. Government websites do contribute to the political discourse on the Internet; however, since they are not interactive, they are excluded from the informal information flow.

Summing up, one can observe that there are at least three main advantages of Internet discussions: the first relates to the group of Internet users for whom talking about politics is not only pleasant but also beneficial⁷. This group may use a carnivalized form of communication; the term will be explained later on. The second advantage refers to a group of users that treat discussions on social networking sites as a resistance tool⁸. They do not criti-

⁷ J. Stromer-Galley, *Diversity and political conversations on the Internet: Users perspectives*, "Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication", 2002, <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol8/issue3/stromergalley.html>, 02.02.2014.

⁸ A. Fung, *One city, two systems: Democracy in an electronic chat room in Hong Kong*, "E-Networks and Democracy", 2002, Vol. 9, pp. 77–94; D. T. Hill, K. Sen, *The Internet in Indonesia's new democracy* [in:] P. Ferdinand (ed.), *The Internet, Democracy And Democratization*, Frank Cass Publishers, London 2000, pp. 119–136; S. V. Kulikova, D. D. Perlmutter, *Blogging down the dictator? The Kyrgyz revolution and Samizdat websites*, "International Communication Gazette" 2007, Vol. 69, pp.29–50.

cise democracy, but they protect it. Similarl to the first group, the second group can also express its opinion about the regime in a mocking and satirical way.

The third advantage is the fact that the discussions held on websites, especially when they are run by government institutions, “implement” democracy where citizens have a say in creating country policy⁹. It is beneficial not only for the citizens, but also for the government bodies and government policies. Since the message sender is the institution which is hardly ever spontaneous, any form of humour or fun is usually unintentional.

Nowadays, the Internet is the most common communication medium; it is a production tool but also a set of objects, materials, and ideas. Access to the Internet and its content poses a question about what the social communication in cyberspace is, and what forms it can take.

Together with the development of social media, society has more to say when it comes to expressing political views. By the growth of social media the public has more to say and can say more due to the new forms of communication. Therefore, governments and corporations no longer have a monopoly on political news. Social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter, as well as “memes” and demotivators have become tools that put pressure on both non-governmental organisations and individuals. What was impossible ten years ago, has now become commonplace. Therefore, a shift from centralised government policy to a decentralised one can be observed.

⁹ J. W. Stanley, C. Weare, J. Musso, *Participation, deliberative democracy and the Internet: Lessons from a National Forum on Commercial Vehicle Safety*, [in:] P. M. Shane (ed.), *Democracy Online: The Prospects for Political Renewal through the Internet*, New York 2004, pp. 167–79.

Carnivalized communication

Contemporary politics is very demanding in terms of definitions. Today it is difficult for unambiguous the definition of public activity. Politics enters into every aspect of human life and *as a tool of political communication* the Internet rubs out the traditional concepts and boundaries. It also requires from its observers new criteria and tools that allow describing public life. Of course, researchers while searching for new ways of describing phenomena in the public sphere, have made every effort to understand the nature of social processes. One of the ways to describe political events is the application of the carnival category.

Constant antagonisms among political groups have led to a situation where instead of debating about ideas and development projects, issues unimportant for the country are being discussed. Observing the emotions, games, entertainment, tension, as well as aggression and omnipresent paradoxes and humour present in political life, one can assume that politics is becoming growingly infantile. However, there are observable elements of the medieval carnival to it. The whole dynamics of contemporary public life resembles the carnival convention. Even though both spheres might seem distant from each other, politics and carnival do share some analogies and similarities.

Due to its provocative and ambiguous nature, the carnival has already been used in such fields of study as anthropology, ethnography, literary studies, and social sciences. However, it seems the carnival has not been studied sufficiently in the field of social sciences. Social networking sites have become tools that shape our culture. They are also starting to play a significant role in the world of politics. Millions of interconnected computers and servers enable the digital information flow. Each piece of information is immediately copied and transferred to computers all over the world. The Internet users can, there-

fore, be both message senders and recipients. The cyberspace is constantly active; it multiplies already generated messages indefinitely and continually adds new content.

The influence of contemporary social media on the way politics functions indicates their huge potential in the field of social communication. Thanks to the Internet, both supporters and opponents of values presented via social networking sites can meet on the political arena and engage in disputes. Such freedom allows people to express views they would never say in public. Consequently, the freedom has a huge influence on the slogans presented on the Internet and converges with the carnival form in which irony distorts the already existing reality¹⁰.

Therefore, cyberspace has turned out to be a place where criticism flourishes and there is no fear of facing consequences¹¹. Moreover, it has become a fertile ground for an even more attractive nature of laughter. Depicting political mechanisms or public life phenomena in a comic manner mocks the vices of contemporary society and the said mechanisms. One needs to bear in mind that in order for carnivalized messages to become a part of political debate, they need to be visible. Present media coverage needs to raise a lot of controversy in be visible in the background of many other messages. Carnival communication with its irritating colors and topsy-turvy world arouses controversy and provides popularity. Furthermore, since mockery is an insepara-

¹⁰ C. Rhodes, *Coffee and the business of pleasure: The case of Harbucks vs. Mr. Tweek*, "Culture and Organization" 2002, Vol. 8(4), pp. 293–306.

¹¹ I. Grugulis, *Nothing serious? Candidates' use of humour in management training*, "Human Relations", 2002, Vol. 55(4), pp. 387–406; D. P. O'Doherty, *Heidegger's unfunny and the academic text: Organization analysis on the blink*, [in:] R. Westwood, C. Rhodes, (eds.). *Humour, work and organization*, Abingdon, UK 2007, pp. 180–204.

ble part of carnival, carnivalized messages need to mock the reality in an exaggerated way¹².

Technological development and inexpensive access to the Internet led to the creation of new and interesting ways of presenting carnival performance. The term carnival helps to comprehend the role of laughter and satire in contemporary public sphere. Parody makes it possible to stay more reserved towards often unfriendly surroundings. It also allows the audience to think certain situations over.

The key to understanding the link between both caricature and Internet satire, as well as the carnival is the creation of a performance. If the performance is to be successful, it needs to be funny¹³. Therefore, if "memes" are to be funny and effective, they have to contain something new. They need to be surprising, they need to spread new forms of criticism and at the same time avoid repeating the same methods of irony so as not to become a cliché. Parody is essential to political thought in the public sphere. Carnival provides the distance to the reality and it is a convenient satirical tool. Therefore, irony is one of the crucial elements to maintain a public debate.

The Internet provides room for laughter, discussion and parody¹⁴. It reaches a wider range of audience, constantly providing a "vivid" ground for debates for both supporters and opponents of a particular view. Due to technological changes which made both tools and products cheaper and easier to create, everyone can participate in the carnival.

¹² R. Hariman, *Political parody and public culture*, "Quarterly Journal of Speech", 2008, Vol. 94(3), pp. 247–272.

¹³ D. Kavanagh, O'Sullivan D., *Advertising: The organizational production of humour*, [in:] R. Westwood, C. Rhodes (eds.). *Humour, work and organization*, Abingdon, UK 2007, pp. 235–249; M. Parker, *The little book of management bollocks and the culture of organization*, [in:] R. Westwood, C. Rhodes, (eds.). *Humour, work and organization*, Abingdon, UK 2007, pp.77–92.

¹⁴ R. Hariman, *Political parody and public culture*, "Quarterly Journal of Speech" 2008, Vol. 94(3), pp.247–72.

When it comes to the political sphere, parody may provide many points of view: there is a plethora of ways of looking at a particular idea¹⁵. However, in certain situations, parody may become a rationed form of freedom whose task is to keep social anger under control. Caricature may, therefore, be a more cunning and discrete form of power. It may help to maintain social order, serving as a kind of safety valve for protests¹⁶. That is why both critical and tongue-in-cheek parodies may cause an ambivalent approach in relation to authority¹⁷. Public sphere makes use of the carnival convention. Its form – irreverent towards official conventions - allows maintaining the democratic nature of the political discourse.

What is a "meme"?

Human beings, just like other living organisms, are only “breeding machines” that came into existence thanks to genes. People constitute the best environment for the genes to multiply and create new copies. Richard Dawkins, the author of “The Selfish Gene”, presents the thesis that cultural data media called “memes” multiply information the way genes do¹⁸. Therefore, people reinforce information and become machines to multiply it. According to Dawkins, “memes” include, *inter alia*, music, fashion, ideas, common

¹⁵ C. Rhodes, *Coffee and the business of pleasure...*, p.301.

¹⁶ D. Collinson, *Managing humor*, “Journal of Management Studies”, 2002, Vol. 29(3), pp.269–289.

¹⁷ D. Hodgson, *Putting on a professional performance: Performativity, subversion and project management*, “Organization”, 2005, Vol. 12(1), pp. 51–68; R. Westwood, *Comic relief: Subversion and catharsis in organisational comedic theatre*, “Organisation Studies”, 2004, Vol. 25(5).pp. 775–795.

¹⁸ J. Z. Langrish, *Darwinian Design: The Memetic Evolution of Design Ideas*, “Design Issues”, 2004, Vol. 20(4), pp.4-19; A. Grafen, M. Ridley, *Richard Dawkins: How a Scientist Changed the Way We Think*, Oxford University Press 2006, pp. 45-100.

phrases, official and common types of behaviour, rituals, and religious beliefs¹⁹.

Satire and parody are also copied and they constitute a common cultural media. However, they are rather marginalised. There is a clear disproportion between the attention paid to “memes” and the widespread use of “memes” on the Internet. Carnivalisation, the key to interpreting messages present in the cyberspace, constitutes yet another factor encouraging researchers to analyse “memes”.

The idea that human culture develops analogically to the biological processes is not new. Charles Darwin mentioned it back in 1859, in the book entitled “The Origin of Species”²⁰. Richard Dawkins' theory about “memes” as cultural media has inspired a number of researchers, not only biologists but also philosophers, sociologists, political scientists, information technology, media specialists, and interdisciplinary studies enthusiasts²¹. The theory encourages conducting further research and analyses concerning, *inter alia*, carnivalised reality.

Nowadays, the Internet is an information medium which copies culture, mentality, personality, awareness, and behaviour as dynamically and effectively as a viral epidemic²². “Memes”, just like genes, need people to multiply and spread, and cyberspace is where contemporary population communicates²³.

Commonness and the number of pieces of information are becoming even greater psychological problems. People are addicted to the constant flow

¹⁹ G. Keogh, *Reading Richard Dawkins: A Theological Dialogue with New Atheism*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2014, pp. 145-172.

²⁰ D. C. Dennett, The evolution of culture, “Monist”. 2001, Vol. 84(3), p.305.

²¹ B. Doyle, *Memography and the Memetic Web*, “EContent”, 2006, Vol. 29(1), p.25.

²² D. Gatherer, *Meme pools, World 3, and Averroes's vision of immortality*, “Zygon: Journal of Religion&Science”, 1998, Vol. 33(2), pp.203-219.

²³ L. Shifman, *MIT Press Essential Knowledge: Memes in Digital Culture*, Cambridge 2013, pp. 17-36.

of information and continuous exchange of information. They change television channels without end and spend more and more time surfing the Internet.

Culture evolves at an unprecedented pace. In combination with the modern means of communication the culture is growing in a rapid pace. The evolution in question affects all its aspects: be it political, technological or aesthetic ones. Each discovery concerning the mechanisms of how behaviour and views spread on a mass scale makes researchers determine both the importance and the role of carnivalized humour which is being used in advertising and politics on a daily basis.

Everybody who has come up with an idea and wants to depict it in a funny form may do it. A contemporary Internet user might get the impression that the entirety of cyberspace is inundated with humorous pictures. The popularity of satires comprising a picture and a short caption is driven by, as one might assume, the need to laugh. However, such satires also attempt to explain the contemporary reality by means of the carnival language.

Phenomena of that sort are called "memes". They appear on the Internet blogs, social networking sites and emails in the form of pictures, sounds, and films. When the YouTube platform became popular, amateur films with its characters and makers became well-known as well. However, the popularity did not last long. "Memes" can be discovered and watched very frequently, but they can be forgotten equally quickly. Particular varieties refer to cultural memory and reflect current events in an absurd manner.

A "meme" is a picture with a short caption which is a caricature illustration of current political, sports, and cultural events. „Memes" usually depict common, current situations which are retold in the carnival fashion. It places them in a new context. And the recipe for success is rather simple. Using sites such as memegenerator.net, one can create their own "memes" by clicking

a few times and posting them". Nowadays, such absurd-based means of communication is hugely approved by Internet users.

As the carnival convention requires, "memes" are focused on events. Thanks to that they are more visible, ironic, and, above all, they obtain a new meaning. Both the carnival and "memes" are a new way of perceiving the world. Although "meme-makers" intend to present something ironically or critically, there might appear doubts concerning the importance of their effectiveness. Moreover, parody plays a key role in this "awry" performance. This exceptional parody is repeated, and therefore one can see an apparent ideal. Parody makes the power hegemony relative, and, at the same time, it attempts to show an alternative world.

"Memes" have turned into a tool for presenting all kinds of ordinary as well as unfortunate political events. They have become mocking comments which are not only to provoke but also to induce laughter. One can never predict what real-life situation will be mocked on the Internet and how strong a reaction it will evoke in a satire. A political satire is based on a willingness to be either the first one who reacted to a particular situation or the one who creates the best parody. In other words, there is strong competition to be the best.

"Memes" as a tool in the hands of Belarusian opposition

Is carnivalized protest capable of destabilising a particular institution or political order? The question was answered by Wojciech Dudzik, who said that: *many years ago, as well as nowadays, hardly anyone was/is satisfied with the world. Therefore, people want to change it. Sometimes it is possible by means of a revolution. However, when they do not want to or they cannot foment*

*riots, they pretend to change the world, turning it upside down temporarily. They engage in carnival*²⁴.

By promoting a radical change in perceiving something that is necessary or feasible, the carnival *per se* constitutes a political revolution. Along with the carnival, mocking and carnivalized messages created by social media, reinforce social and political changes that have already been happening. They are a massive tool for both governments and citizens. Real-life events become an inspiration for the cyberspace "art". The digital era has contributed to an increased number of social movements. The number of their leaders and members is almost uncountable. Due to technological development not only protest movements but also individuals may spread their ideas in an unrestrained manner.

Criticising authority is a natural phenomenon of a public debate in democratic countries. However, a demanding carnivalized assessment of a regime might apply to both democratic and authoritarian regimes. Such a public discourse aims to mock and undermine the values that have been accepted so far. Criticism based on parody allows the weaker opponent to undermine the authority.

²⁴ W. Dudzik, *Carnivals - holidays, fun, spectacle*, "Polish Folk Art – Contexts", 2002, Vol.56 (3/4), p. 98.

Pic.1. 'Europe's last dictator' meme.



Source: <http://www.polskieradio.pl/75/921/Artykul/617355,-Nowy-hit-Lyapis-Trubetskoy-Pancernik>, 15.01.2014.

Due to some activities undertaken by the Belarusian opposition, one can form a thesis concerning carnivalized forms of a political protest. The carnival is a special and unique time different from reality. It is also a contradiction of official, common, and widely accepted norms and rules. Its form contradicts the style and image of authority. Therefore, one can observe the following caricatures of the Belarusian regime: a combination of a kolkhoz member with a hockey player similar to Banksy's wall paintings, a statue of liberty, with president Lukashenko's face, holding a police baton and a shield, an image of Belarusian president depicted as a fairy tale character, such as Shrek, Dracula or superheroes who possess extraordinary powers. The carnival distorts official norms and habits. Protests have their own rules, the rules of the carnival. Satires and funny images in the carnival convention are a perfect tool for a political satire. They also make Lukashenko's propaganda less significant.

Pic.2. 'Shrek' meme.



Source: <http://nieznabialorus.blogspot.com/2009/07/backa.html>, 15.01.2014.

Communication carnivalization is based mostly on creating parodies of events sanctioned by the Lukashenko regime. Belarusian opposition activists who fight the regime effectively parody the regime on the Internet. For instance, they created a grotesque Gillette razor advertisement which compared Saddam Husain to Alexander Lukashenko.

Pic.3: 'Gillette-presidential selection: Before ... After ...' meme.



Source: <http://nieznabialorus.blogspot.com/2009/07/backa.html>, 15.01.2014.

Everything which is serious, official and accepted by the regime, is mocked and undermined by the opposition. Importantly, at that particular point of time, there are no orders, no bans, no barriers, and no limitations – there is an omnipresent sense of freedom. All kinds of behaviour get out of control.

The carnival weakens the bans connected with authority which is resistant to any kind of change. It turns out that both cynicism and criticism can be forms of social anger expressed by dissatisfied citizens in contemporary societies. Therefore, thanks to protests and its manifestations, also the Internet ones which take place once the reality proves to be against the citizens, the carnival is capable of toppling either a regulation or a norm. If the parody is to be distressing and enable social mobilisation, it requires a special context. The cyberspace carnival demonstrates how the Internet shapes the way society thinks about political reality. It also initiates art that mocks and destabilises regimes. The Internet influences not only what people think, but also how the thoughts spread. Therefore, "memes" spread ideas in a viral way.

"Memes" and the carnival

In order to understand the analysed phenomenon, one should start with the carnivalization theory by Michał Bachtin in relation to a contemporary media democracy²⁵. The carnival laws, which are used to interpret literary works and the works in the field of culture studies, may become a useful tool to interpret political phenomena in a new way. The term *carnival* is very

²⁵ The main basis of that analysis in political science is the theory of *carnavalesque* designed by: M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics and Works of Francis Rabelais and the folk culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Kraków 1975, also developed by contemporary Polish researchers, among others: W. Dudzik, *Carnivals in culture*, Warszawa 2005; A. Bełkot, *Carnivalization as the concept of ludic*, "Homo Communicativus", Vol. 2 2008, pp. 45-57; A. Stoff, A. Skubaczewska-Pniewska (eds.), *Theory carnivalesque. Contexts and interpretations*, Toruń 2011.

broad. However, discussing the carnivalization of politics may present a new perspective on the way the democratic regime functions.

This part of the article aims at determining key features of "memes". The said features will help to understand the relation between a "meme" and the carnival convention. Not only researchers but also carnival participants perceive the carnival as a specific and extraordinary period of time. It contradicts common and officially accepted norms and rules. The Internet "meme" functions analogically: it mocks elements of the current discourse and culture, and questions mainstream hierarchy.

Satirical art is also characteristic of the periods when politics contradicts the previous regime and establishes its own laws. By the same token, the carnival as well as "memes" distort officially accepted norms and habits. One needs to bear in mind that the two phenomena would not exist if it was not for their spectacular form of communication, *i.e.* the use of the absurd, parody, and fun.

The carnival convention creates a dualistic way of perceiving the world; a juxtaposition of opposition views with the officially accepted values. This double existence is visible during the carnival time. Serious issues officially accepted by the hierarchical regime are negated, rejected, and marginalised by the instincts that have so far been restrained by public order rules. This distortion of reality is to temporarily bring social equality.

Such a dualistic distinction can also be observed in politics. It is due to mechanisms that are to shorten the distance between the authority representatives and voters. Therefore, rallies and meetings are organised during which politicians emphasise their plebeian origin as well as the fact that they have experienced a lot of every day hardships. This direct contact with the voters often inspires Internet users to create new funny images.

One of the advantages of the carnival as well as a feature distinguishing it from the contemporary authority is the fact that during celebrations nobody is left alone. Since there are no boundaries between actors and participants during the carnival time, one can deduce that all participants are laughing at themselves. The Internet art also draws its artists to the satirical script. Everyone can become an object of criticism or parody; everyone can become its author, be famous for a while and become a carnival king.

A similar feature characterises the carnival – there are no class, age or financial status divisions. Everyone becomes equal; everyone is important according to the laws of democracy. There is no division for the better and the worse. The Internet gives everyone a chance to share their art, regardless of its artistic quality. There are no authorities in the fields of acting, journalism, music or cabaret. Therefore, everyone has a chance to become visible. A “meme-maker” is an ordinary person; (s)he is not a professional, but it does not matter. What matters is the context and opposition in relation to what happened in real life and what is being watched.

The fact that the distance between politicians and voters is becoming smaller and smaller has led to politicians using simpler and less formal language, as well as gestures. However, be it verbal or non-verbal communication, there is an unofficial message register which does not follow any etiquette. Internet messages are analogically transferred – they omit the official information flow. Some words are created for a particular reason, others come from real life and start to serve as a symbol or a code recognized and understood by a particular social group.

Humour is an inseparable part of the carnival convention. Umberto Eco claims that: *in order to define carnival, it would be enough to provide a clear*

*and unambiguous definition of humour*²⁶. Grotesque, caricature, humour, and mockery are common during the carnival period; they are also omnipresent on the Internet, especially in the unofficial form of communicating with the citizens. Moreover, any extravagance in either behaviour or appearance is nothing unusual in the carnival context.

As Bachtin claims: *almost each church holiday comprised a time-honoured folklore part, a moment of laughter*²⁷. Politics also does not only consist of activities and events which are fully official and sanctioned by the authority. One can observe that whenever people celebrate national holidays or there is a highly important meeting, things such as manifestations, protests, and strikes are organized. Even though they are serious, sometimes full of resistance and aggression, they often contain an element of fun and laughter.

However, the key carnival phenomenon that exists in the public sphere is creating parodies of politicians by the Internet users. Polish politicians like Donald Tusk, Jarosław Kaczyński, Antoni Macierewicz, Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, Krystyna Pawłowicz or Janusz Korwin-Mikke have become objects of the cyber-mockery. All the mentioned politicians have one thing in common – they evoke huge emotions in the society. Therefore, they have zealous or even fanatic, supporters and opponents.

²⁶ U. Eco, *Humor, freedom, carnival*, "Polish Folk Art - Contexts", nr 3/4 2002, p. 132-136.

²⁷ M. Bachtin, *The work of Francis Rabelais and the folk culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Kraków 1975, p. 61.

Pic.4. 'Antek, I have one request..' ²⁸ meme.



Source: <http://gadgetomania.pl/2013/10/23/najwieksze-technologiczne-wpadki-polskich-politykow>, 12.02.2014.

Such a situation often takes place when it comes to unfortunate behaviour or statements. They become an inspiration for "memes", for instance when Elżbieta Bieńkowska said *Sorry, we live in such a climate*. Internet tools not only give a chance to mock a particular event but also, and above all, to distort an already existing hierarchy destroying the present order and authority.

The governments have little influence on bottom-up campaigns. Therefore, the Internet has become a massive tool for showing social discontent. It is politicians that are often mocked, and their photos are usually accompanied by ironic comments which reflect politicians' characteristic features.

²⁸ The picture depicts an embarrassing situation between two opposition politicians during a press conference organised after the Internet users' provocation. The caption reads: *Antek, I have one request. Do not answer with a video.*

Pic. 5. 'Sorry, Madam Minister!' memes²⁹.



Source: <http://www.se.pl/elzbieta-bienkowska-memy,389319>, 10.02.2014.

Still, everyone can become a “meme” hero. It might be a random football match spectator running away from the Police on a wet football pitch or a little girl with a strange grimace during prince William and Kate Middleton's wedding. One can see that “memes” belong also to the entertainment convention. Pop-culture sources inspire Internet artists to mock embarrassing situations in which celebrities found themselves. It cannot be denied that “memes” may relate to the political sphere as well.

Ruthlessness and lack of compromise in relation to the real world are also characteristic of the carnival. Mocking images are a kind of healing reaction to anger and complexes that have accumulated before. Of course, satire is nothing new; it has existed ever since politics has. It can even be stated that both these spheres – officially accepted and the unofficial one, are intertwined.

²⁹ The meme which is a reaction to the statement made by the Deputy Prime Minister *Sorry, we live in such a climate* in relation to frozen stiff trains.

Pic.6. 'Bad referee' meme³⁰.



Source: http://calapolskakibicuje.pl/basen-narodowy-w-warszawie-internauciamiadzazdjecia,artykul.html?material_id=507e74c0142d5c9116000000&4eb1054a9a22dd685a030000-zdjecie=27, 10.02.2014.

The Internet is especially suitable to mock elite pomposity and snobism. Cyberspace is full of mocking, humorous or offensive gestures and words. The lack of hierarchy of values and often infantile behaviour in public do not prove any closeness between politicians and voters, and between understanding their needs. Gestures and statements that are officially unacceptable still become an element of political life. It should also be mentioned that statements and gestures considered to be offensive, but still being a form of carnival expression, are allowed for fun and play; however, they gain new meaning in the official public sphere and can lead to communication pathologies. Various gestures, symbols or rituals indicate that political rows give

³⁰ The meme depicts a referee wearing wellington boots during the 2012 European football Cup. He is wearing the shoes because of a completely wet football pitch. The caption reads: "Bad referee" acquires new meaning [author's note: the combination of the Polish idiomatic expression "sędzia kalosz" and the photo is a verbal and visual pun. The expression comprises the word 'wellington' which denotes a bad referee in Polish].

a chance to cross the boundaries of established cultural patterns, which often ends in inappropriateness.

Pic.7: 'Grace Van Cutsem'³¹ meme.



Source: <http://forum.tz-uk.com/showthread.php?164889-Grace-Van-Cutsem-D>, 10.01.2014.

Other common features of both the carnival and the Internet satire are effectiveness and spectacularity – phenomena based on images rather than words. In both of these spheres one can observe profanation blended with carnality. What matters is irony and accurate criticism. Characteristic features of famous people inspire mocking images. Take for instance Jean Claude van Damme who does the splits between two moving lorries or Chuck Norris whose physical capabilities have also been mocked in many “memes”.

³¹ One of the bridesmaids has become a heroine of many memes. She was not enthusiastic about the royal wedding.

Pic. 8: 'Van Damme did epic splits'³² meme.



Source: <http://www.obrazki.jeja.pl/tag,chuck-norris,1>, 12.01.2014.

Carnival laughter in the "meme" form is not only a kind of Internet sense of humour, but also a mockery. Taunting people or events is its central part. In everyday life, people cannot laugh at others when they want to. Mocking human vices might have unpleasant consequences. Anonymity allows the Internet artist to use a nickname and an avatar to create a completely new personality – a carnival image of a real human being.

What matters in the carnivalized communication is the lack of orders, bans, barriers, and restrictions which results in an omnipresent freedom. Everybody is important and lives according to their own rules. One can observe a comeback to folk anarchism which cures social complexes. Just like during the carnival procession, there is a sense of fun, happiness and joy where adulthood is not so visible among young faces. The Internet communication is mostly the domain of young generations.

³² The meme mocking supernatural skills of the action film actor. The caption reads: Van Damme did the epic splits, but it was Chuck Norris who was driving the two lorries.

Moreover, the carnival is a special period when all kinds of behaviour do not follow rules of communication between the authority representatives or opposition and the society. Thanks to “meme-makers,” politicians get rid of a burdensome kind of official way of conduct. They appear as citizens' representatives, at the same time not losing their seriousness. If one assumes that carnival desacralizes the world, carnivalization depoliticises politics and it becomes an arena for disputes that have no relation to the real problems and social challenges.

The “meme” logic is based on spontaneous and open humour. In the carnival convention, carnality, the opposite of spirituality, plays a huge role. It is also the easiest way to reach the audience. During the carnival time there are no boundaries between actors and spectators; all the involved become actors, participants, and spectators of the performance. Direct contact between Internet users and authority representatives is characteristic of carnivalized communication. As Bachtin pointed out: *Carnival makes people come closer to one another. It unites them in a marital bond. It combines holiness with sacrilege, grandeur with commonness, greatness with nothingness, intelligence with stupidity*³³. The audience is constantly watching the performance, and the number of visits to the site determines whether the “meme” and its maker will be successful or not. No experts are included in the verdict. Moreover, the carnival makes people forget about everyday problems and allows them to enjoy the moment. During the period of political campaigns we are also presented with a better version of life and hope. They improve our mood and create joy similar to the one we experience while creating and watching “memes”.

³³ M. Bachtin, *The work of Francis Rabelais...*, p.189.

Each epoch is marked by tragedy and wars but also by joy and fun. They are a good alternative for a harsh and difficult reality. In other words, humour is a natural way of dealing with serious issues. The need to escape from mundane reality is also present nowadays. Regardless of political views or situation, it is not politicians but comedians who help citizens in the most difficult periods in history. However, the real problem is that the reality is already complex enough and its interpretation can get out of hand.

What matters in the mass media culture is immediately visible to a wide audience and unified messages. As far as the process of information flow, information understanding, and reflection is concerned, the time barrier has been drastically limited, if not completely removed.

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Abstract

A "meme" is a picture with a short caption which is a caricature illustration of current political, sports, and cultural events. "Memes" usually depict common, current situations which are retold in the carnival fashion, giving them a new context. "Memes" have become a tool for presenting all kinds of normal as well as unfortunate political events. They have become mocking comments which not only provoke but also induce laughter. Communication carnivalization relies mainly on creating parodies of events sanctioned by the Lukashenko regime. Cyberspace carnival shows how the Internet shapes the way the society perceives the political reality. It also initiates art that mocks and destabilises the regime.

MEM JAKO PRZYKŁAD SKARNAWALIZOWANEJ KOMUNIKACJI INTERNETOWEJ

Abstrakt

„Mem” to nic innego jak zdjęcie ze słownym komentarzem będącym karykaturalną ilustracją bieżących wydarzeń politycznych, sportowych, kulturalnych. Tematem ironicznych żartów są zazwyczaj znane, powszechnie obecne historie opowiedziane ponownie w konwencji karnawału, w ten sposób zyskujące nowy kontekst. Karnawalizacja komunikacji polega przede wszystkim na parodiowaniu oficjalnych i sankcjonowanych przez reżim wydarzeń. Cybernetyczne wcielenie karnawału pokazuje jak Internet może kształtować sposób myślenia społeczeństwa na temat rzeczywistości politycznej, a tym samym inicjować prześmiewczą i destabilizującą system twórczość.