The past was not as golden, nor is the present as tawdry, as the pessimists suggest, but the only thing really worth arguing about is the future. It is our misfortune, as a historical generation, to live through the largest expansion in expressive capability in human history, a misfortune because abundance breaks more things than scarcity. We are now witnessing the rapid stress of older institutions accompanied by the slow and fitful development of cultural alternatives. Just as required education was a response to print, using the Internet well will require new cultural institutions as well, not just new technologies.

It is tempting to want *PatientsLikeMe* without the dumb videos, just as we might want scientific journals without the erotic novels, but that's not how media works. Increased freedom to create means increased freedom to create throwaway material, as well as freedom to indulge in the experimentation that eventually makes the good new stuff possible. There is no easy way to get through a media revolution of this magnitude; the task before us now is to experiment with new ways of using a medium that is social, ubiquitous and cheap, a medium that changes the landscape by distributing freedom of the press and freedom of assembly as widely as freedom of speech.

Analyze

1. According to Shirky, what was the "essential insight of the scientific revolution"? What were the effects of this insight?
2. Shirky compares Wikipedia with the scientific peer review process initiated with the invention of the printing press. Explain why this comparison is important to his argument.
3. How does Shirky define "cognitive surplus"? Why is this term central to his argument?
4. What are the three beliefs that Shirky cites as being behind the "digitally driven stupidity" case?

Explore

1. Central to Shirky's essay is the analogy he makes between the printing press and the Internet. Make two lists: one of the changes that Shirky mentions in relation to the printing press and one of the changes he mentions in relation to the Internet. Write a short essay assessing the strength of this analogy based on the evidence presented by Shirky.

2. Much of Shirky's argument regarding the potential for the collective cognitive surplus relates to his belief that the Internet is fundamentally different from television. Write a short essay comparing and contrasting how your use of Internet and Web technologies is similar or different to how you watch TV.
3. If, as many critics claim, the Web is a "meta-medium" that incorporates all of the media that came before it, how might this perspective affect Shirky's argument? In a three- to five-page essay, describe the many different media that are brought together by the Web and assess the extent to which Shirky acknowledges this perspective in his essay and the strength of Shirky's argument in the context of this perspective.

Sam Leith
"What Does It All Meme?"

2011

Sam Leith is a British author and journalist. A frequent contributor to *The Spectator, The Wall Street Journal Europe*, and *The Guardian*, he has a regular column in the *Monday Evening Standard*. Leith has published several works of nonfiction: *Dead Pets, Sod's Law, You Talkin' to Me?*, and, most recently, *Words Like Loaded Pistols: Rhetoric From Aristotle to Obama* (2012). *The Coincidence Engine*, his first novel, was published in April 2011. In this essay, Leith reviews the origin and meanings of the term *meme* and considers the possible effects and consequences of instant media events for culture and society.

What is currently your favorite meme? Why?

He lives in Japan. He's a straight-haired Scottish Fold, four years old, slightly rotund (his name means "round" in Japanese). Otherwise? Well, there's this thing he does where he jumps into an empty cardboard box. He jumps into all sorts of cardboard boxes. And out. Sometimes he climbs in a bin. Just for fun!

And Maru is famous. At the time of writing, YouTube videos of Maru have been viewed 100m times. He's the subject of a recent hardback book, *I Am Maru*. It consists of 95 glossy pages of photographs of Maru being a cat. In August, three weeks before its publication date, it was the number one cat book on Amazon UK.

Maru is just a cat. But he's also more than just a cat. Maru is a bellwether of the state of the culture. Maru is a meme.

If you have an email inbox you will, even if the term is unfamiliar, have come across what it denotes: the viral ephemera that washes across the internet, proliferates on Facebook walls and trends on Twitter. The internet is the most potent medium of mass communication in human history but we use it to exchange videos of cats jumping through cardboard boxes, old Rick Astley songs and pictures of a rabbit with a pancake.

The success of these memes prompts certain questions. Not least, what's wrong with us? But also, what do they tell us about our relationships with each other? And what is it that makes certain memes catch fire?

"That's the million-dollar question," says Don Caldwell, a reporter for the website *Know Your Meme*. "There's not an easy answer. I see them as filling ecological niches. There's the funny niche, the weird niche and the cuteness niche: Maru the cat has filled that section of the internet pretty well for himself."

"The success of a meme is like the reproductive success of an organism," he adds. "They have to be really well suited to their environment, and the environment of a meme is the cultural zeitgeist."

The word "meme" was originally minted in the analogue age by the scientist Richard Dawkins. In *The Selfish Gene* (1976), he proposed that natural selection could work on ideas (which would flourish or fail with us as their ecosystem) as well as genetic material, and chose the term as a counterpart to "gene": a meme as a unit of cultural transmission. Essentially, this means a contagious idea. The term is broad. Limericks can be a meme. The late 18th-century epidemic of copycat suicides by men in yellow trousers after the publication of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is a meme. Rioting is a meme. So memes, in this extended sense, existed before the internet and continue to exist outside it.

Latin tags and rhetorical commonplaces were memes; "Kilroy was here" was a meme; chain letters, before the arrival of the internet, were memes that behaved in a recognisably viral way. There were fax memes and email memes, such as the smutty private email sent by one Claire Swire that ended up being viewed by millions in 2000.

But internet culture, and the exceptional speed and ease of transmission online, represents a step-change. Early geneticists were attracted to fruit flies as research subjects because their extreme fecundity and short lifecycles meant many generations could be studied in a space of months. When it comes to memes, the internet is an immense colony of fruit flies living in fast-forward—with all the experimental data widely and instantly available.

Looking at this data, the one distinguishing feature would seem to be downright frivolity. Memes support the idea that the online world has blurred the distinction between work and play—that media has given way to social media. A giant culture of messing about has found its perfect technology. It's no coincidence that the biennial convention on internet meme culture, held at Massachusetts Institute of Technology since 2008, is called ROFLCon, after the common online acronym for "Rolling On the Floor Laughing."

In line with the evolutionary analogy, the memes that live longest tend to be those that are most adaptable. If the defining art form of the first part of the 20th century was collage, from the constellations of fragments in modernist poetry to the collided images of the plastic arts, that of the digital age is surely the remix or the mash-up. Video clips are spliced together; sound is sampled and repurposed; public domain images are overdubbed with catchphrases. *Downfall*, a German film made in 2004 showing the last days of Hitler, is appropriated to have the Führer ranting about Oasis splitting up; a sample of Gregg Wallace from *Masterchef* provides the hook for a techno track ("I like the base, base, biscuit base"). The term "exploitable" is, in this context, often used as a noun by those who make memes and describe their behaviour.

Jonah Peretti, founder of *Buzzfeed*, a website that keeps track of, promotes and reports what goes on in viral media, says: "We used to think of the world in sections like front-page news, the sports section, the business section, the entertainment section. But when you think about memes and a lot of web culture, things are not organised that way. They're organised by a sort of social logic. What kind of things do people like to do together? What kinds of things do people relate to? We organise our site by these emotional responses. So we don't have a sports section and an entertainment section: we

have an LOL [laughing out loud!] section, a WTF [good heavens!] section, a geeky section and so on."

One of the most enduring and easily remixed meme genres is what users on internet forums call the "image macro"—that is, a picture with lettering across it—of which the best known is probably the LOLcat. There are now millions of these in circulation. The archetypal LOLcat—back in the dawn of time, ie 2007, was a fat-looking grey mog asking: "I can has cheezburger?" Subgenres sprang up, multiplied, divided and adapted. The Bible has been translated into LOLspeak and LOLwalruses are already old, old news.

15 Image macros may use a specific image and an associated running joke, or a phrasal template of the sort known as "snowclones": for example, "to X, or not to X"; "X is the new Y." Snowclones are catnip to the internet. A catchphrase from online wargames, "I'm in your base, killing your men" (and numerous misspelled alternatives), has spawned the snowclone, "I'm in ur X, Ying ur Z." You'll find it on LOLcats: "I'm in ur fridge, eating ur noms." Kanye West's famous interruption—"I'ma let you finish"—was another instant snowclone; "Yo Jesus, I'm real happy for you, and I'mma let you finish, but Allah had one of the best ideas of all time. Of all time!" And so forth.

A participatory element undoubtedly helps memes to spread—and to beget other memes. Peretti describes the rise of "Disaster Girl," which began life as an image of a little girl smiling impishly with a burning house in the background. "What we did at Buzzfeed was to cut her face out of the image and let people put it on top of any disaster. So she went in front of Bill and Monica's first meeting, Windows Vista, the Hindenburg . . . People already liked the image and were passing it around. But we made it easier for them to participate and make it their own."

Memes have penetrated the real world too. Whimsical crazes such as "planking"—where users, and increasingly celebrities including Justin Bieber and Katy Perry, photograph themselves lying flat in odd locations—or "extreme ironing" are activities undertaken so that the images of them can be uploaded to the internet. One of the most celebrated instances of a meme that straddles the online and offline worlds is the "flashmob," where a crowd of strangers appears spontaneously in a public space and, for example, breaks into a synchronised dance routine.

The first flashmob was convened in 2003 by Bill Wasik, a writer on technology and culture then working as a senior editor at *Harper's* magazine. "It really started as a prank or a joke," he says. "I'd become very interested in viral email and I thought it would be fun to do a show in New York where the audience would be gathered entirely by viral email. At a certain point, I realised I could be lazier and not come up with an idea for the show: the show would just be everybody coming out to the same place at the same time for no reason.

"I intended this to be a little New York experiment. Just a few weeks into it people were doing them all round the country and then all round the world. I had meant it to be viral in one way, where the emails would spread virally. But then it became viral on a completely other level."

Wasik's experience is a good example of the way in which online memes 20 can be analysed. Memes circulate like jokes and, more often than not, *are* jokes. But while nobody seems to know where jokes come from, thanks to the elephantine memory of the internet it's often possible to trace memes back to the source. We can name Wasik as the inventor of the flashmob in a way we will never be able to name the man who first asked why the chicken crossed the road. That makes even the silliest meme potentially useful as a way of understanding the structures and behaviours of digital social networks.

Indeed, they already have their archivists. The website Know Your Meme started out as a spoofy online video show but is turning into something of a scholarly resource. It documents a whole range of viral phenomena, tracing them to their origins; following the spin-offs and sub-memes, and charting—through Google Insights analysis—the arc of popularity over time. Here is where you go to find out who Star Wars Kid was and what is up with this flying cat with a pop-tart instead of a body.

Don Caldwell of *Know Your Meme* doesn't entirely laugh off the suggestion that what the site is doing resembles Alan Lomax's fieldwork recording folk music in the middle of the past century. "I did my undergraduate degree in anthropology. I see value in documenting culture in this way, trying to understand how it works and how it spreads. What makes some ideas spread more than others?

"With the internet, we can document and witness ideas spreading at rates that we never saw before, for many more people—and you can just watch it happen. We approach a meme as if it has its own life—and we try to explain its life history."

In so fast-moving an environment, the life of even the strongest meme is poignantly short. Maru will still be climbing into cardboard boxes long after his autobiography has been remaindered.

25 When I ask Bill Wasik if any viral object has struck him as especially memorable, he says: "To me both the amazing thing and the disquieting thing about the internet as a medium for culture, entertainment and the transmission of meaning is just how many remarkable things pass through it every day, and how few of them persist in our minds. I feel like the internet resists the very question you're asking. Every day I am rapt by what I see there. The next day I've forgotten everything."

Analyze

1. In your own words, explain what a meme is. Compare this definition to Leith's definition.
2. Who was Richard Dawkins and why is he important to Leith's essay?
3. In what ways are the memes today different from pre-Internet memes?
4. What is ROFLcon?
5. How does BuzzFeed organize its website? Why?

Explore

1. Leith writes, "Memes circulate like jokes and, more often than not, are jokes. But while nobody seems to know where jokes come from, thanks to the elephantine memory of the internet it's often possible to trace memes back to the source." Choose two of the Top 10 Memes from the previous year on the Know Your Meme website (http://knowyourmeme.com/blog/meme-review). Write a short essay in which you compare and contrast the two memes by describing them, where they originated, user interpretations and responses to them, and what cultural phenomenon or phenomena each meme—and the responses to it—may be a comment on. What similarities and differences exist between the two memes?
2. Leith ends his essay by quoting Bill Warik, who, on the subject of memes, noted with some sense of wonder how fascinating they are and yet that by "the next day I've forgotten everything [about them]." Describe a meme that you were once interested in. Why was it so exciting and important at the time? Explain why or why not you consider the meme important now. Reflecting on the time period when the meme was popular, what might that meme have to say about that particular sociocultural moment and what was happening at the time?
3. Leith's article was published in 2011 and, since then, some journalists have commented that Internet memes may no longer hold much interest for Internet users. Write an updated article in which you inform your contemporary audience of the state of Internet memes at the moment, describe their ongoing or declining importance, and discuss Leith's article and its 2011 analysis of Internet memes in relation to their current cultural status.

Toby Litt
"The Reader and Technology"

Toby Litt is a British writer. The author of numerous short stories and novels, Litt has recently been involved with writing a monthly comic book series, *Dead Boy Detectives*, which is based on characters from Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, and has been collaboratively writing an opera. In this essay, originally published in the literary magazine *Granta*, Litt reflects on his childhood and upbringing and how the absence of video games may have had a profound effect on his decision to become a writer.

How has technology changed the ways in which you read and write?

My Futuristic Past

I was born on 20 August 1968—eleven months to the day before the first Apollo Moon Landing. The Space Age was always something to which I aspired rather than belonged.

For several years, between approximately 1976 and 1979, I wasn't interested in anything earthbound. The two most important films of my boyhood were *Star Wars*, which showed me where I wanted to be, and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, which showed me a possible means of getting there.