

**“They Can’t Stop All of Us”: A discussion about the internet’s reaction to the raid
on Area 51**

By

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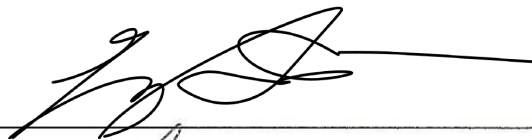
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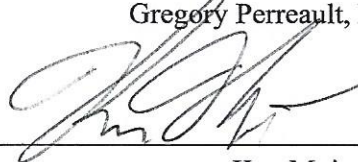
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ABSTRACT:

Through narrative analysis, this paper seeks to study themes seen in a series of Raid Area 51 memes and analyze how visual rhetoric was used to prompt the memes' audiences to participate in a raid on Area 51. The research suggests that the collection of memes illustrated a variety of plotlines that prompted action by tying in both an appeal to emotion and logic while also bringing in pop culture icons to craft a clear narrative that the raid on Area 51 was inherent.

Introduction

On September 20, 2019, Area 51, a top secret U.S. military base in Nevada, was the target for a massive strike of over 1.8 million Facebook users around the world. Why? Because “They can’t stop all of us.” What started as a joke from a college student in California turned into an internet phenomena, causing celebrities, corporations and even the military to put out statements for or against the raid. It is worth considering why this happened and what narratives were being told to invoke such passion and even action from the meme’s audiences. Despite only about 100 people showing up on the day of the planned event, unprecedented attention from across the globe put a sense of importance on this subculture of internet society.

This study views Area 51 memes through the lense of narrative theory informed by visual rhetoric as a case study for a larger story about how meme culture can be used to mobilize masses. It will review literature about memes and how they have been used as a form of visual rhetoric, as well as how narrative theory can help form conclusions about the analysis of these memes. The study then analyzes a set group of Area 51 memes that emerged during the time of the raid, examining common narratives to determine what the story being told by the images and words were, and how these memes prompted even a small subset of the masses that were reached to “raid” Area 51.

Public opinion and action are often swayed by mass media, and with memes continuing to be a key part of a younger generation’s media, it is important to view the underlying narratives being pushed by a form of media rooted and masked in humor. Examining this particular case study will help to elucidate knowledge about the broader potential implications of meme culture.

Background

On June 27, 2019, an event called “Storm Area 51, They Can’t Stop All of Us” was created on Facebook, and was hosted by a 21-year-old student named Matty Roberts (Nevett, 2019). The event was a planned attempt to storm the highly-classified southern Nevada military base that has been rumored to have alien activity. The plan detailed on the page involved meeting at 3 a.m. on September 20 to storm the area using “naruto running,” a style of quick running modeled after the popular anime series Naruto (Bruner, 2019). The hope was that, as the name of the event implied, enough people would show up and overwhelm security, allowing some to get through into the base (Nevett, 2019). From there, tens of thousands of comments on the event erupted with more in-depth plans and even maps to accompany them. Meme culture also played into spreading the message, as thousands of memes began to emerge on various social media platforms about government secrets and extra-terrestrial activity (Frank, 2019).

Finally, the messages went too far, with two counties in Nevada even going into a state of emergency (Frank, 2019). By July 16, 2019, the U.S. Air Force was involved, with a spokesman making the statement that “Any attempt to illegally access military installations or military training areas is dangerous” (Bruner, 2019). What started as a small, seemingly harmless joke took the internet by storm and in just a month, 1.9 million Facebook users had RSVP’d to the event and another 1.4 million users responded that they were interested in the event (Bruner, 2019).

After the RSVP number reached over 2 million people and the FBI showed up at Roberts’ house to investigate, Roberts reached out the community to urge them to instead go to Rachel, Nevada (the town closest to Area 51) and attend an event with live music and meet-and-greets instead called Alienstock (Frank, 2019). The relatively ill-planned festival gained little

traction amongst the facebook pages fans, especially since there were not enough resources in Rachel, a town of only 54 people (Frank, 2019).

Despite the original raid being canceled and Roberts putting in his best efforts to discourage anyone from actually showing up, on September 10, 2019, roughly one hundred people showed up at the gates of Area 51 (McBride, 2019).

Literature Review

Defining the Meme

The term “meme” originally came from scientist Richard Dawkins, who describes memes as the genes of culture that form its characteristics (Blackmore, 1999). The word “meme” comes from the Greek word “mimeme,” which means to imitate. Dawkins (2016) argued that culture and ideas could operate similarly to DNA, replicating itself for survival. While Dawkins obviously wasn’t referring to the Internet, he did refer to other aspects of culture like religion, entertainment, and art that could be replicated (Dawkins, 2016). Blackmore (1999) uses Dawkins definition to further elaborate that humans are merely vessels through which memes replicate themselves.

In social media communities, the term “meme” has come to mean “a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (Shifman, 2014). This new-age term “meme” directly contradicts Blackmore’s concept of humans as more of a passive presence in memes and instead implies that humans are the active creators. The word “meme” also is often used interchangeably with “Internet meme.”

While memes have traditionally been seen predominantly as a source of humor, some research has led to the conclusion that while memes may start from a variety of sources (i.e. funny cat videos, politics, etc.) they all lead to making meaningful connections with others (Miltner, 2012). Mina (2019) argues that memes are a way to break pluralistic ignorance, or the idea that groups mistakenly believe that their opinions are not shared by their peers. This builds a community of like-minded people, sending repetitive, affirmative messages in the form of memes that can then create a synchronization of opinion. Other research suggests that memes can be used as a form of discourse in which meme creators blur pop culture elements with real life political events, making a gateway to a more inclusive and participatory argument about political or cultural issues (Milner, 2012).

Though memes are the specific visual artifact examined in this paper, it also makes sense to acknowledge the internet culture that has developed from the sharing of memes. With the internet's development came the ability for anyone around the world to create or contribute to content that was online, creating "social architecture" (Lovink, 2008). This allowed people to tell the world their thoughts about what was happening around them, whether it was politics, celebrities, or even conspiracy theories, as was the case in the Area 51 memes. As these communities have developed, the members have used file sharing and chat rooms to create common vocabulary of visuals and what they symbolize (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). These authors argue that memes even function as a form of social capital. Even more unique to this Internet culture is that a shift in power dynamics began to appear because the Internet is an accessible source, so some of the most successful memes have been created by an average person against mainstream culture. This has created an almost anti-culture culture movement full of

outsiders (Nooney & Portwood-Stacer, 2014). This type of attitude against the “status quo” could potentially provide insight into the masses that rallied behind the Area 51 raid.

With messages behind these visuals, it is not a far stretch to see how memes could function as a form of visual rhetoric for its audiences.

Visual Rhetoric

This study attempts to discover the underlying narratives of Area 51 memes, which will be represented not only in the text of the memes but also in their visual rhetoric. Analyzing the visual rhetoric will be helpful in distinguishing what each of the various symbols mean using both the images and texts and the underlying argument they may have. Visual rhetoric is an extension of traditional research in spoken rhetoric that analyzes visual artifacts for their communicative and symbolic value (Foss, 2004). Analyzing visual rhetoric will help to better understand memes as discourse.

A lot of research about visual discourse has been done specifically in how it contributes political discourse such as Abrahams (2009) who looked at political editorial cartoons and found that the simplicity of the visuals being used as symbols allowed for a more nuanced understanding of complex ideas, breaking down complicated lines of thought into more palatable concepts. Another study suggests that when people were exposed to political cartoons, their attitude would likely change about the subject toward the direction the cartoon was prompting, especially when audiences were not highly engaged with the subject (Neuberger and Kremer, 2008). In fact, memes were the story behind the Occupy Wall Street movement and as tensions rose during the conflict in New York City, the memes about the movement jumped to the forefront of internet culture and were used as a way to comment on what was happening (Milner, 2012).

Analyzing visual rhetoric requires the breaking down of an image into smaller subsections that can be analyzed. Rowland (2002) establishes that the categories include narrative, appeals to value, common symbols, etc. In general, the symbolic nature of memes gives them the ability to be rhetorical or even persuasive in some cases. This study analyzes the Area 51 memes to better comprehend why these memes were so persuasive to prompt action and foster an anti-culture that led to the raid on Area 51.

Narrative Theory

Analyzing memes through the framework of narrative analysis is an effective way to look at a variety of images to find common symbols and themes, especially in the case of memes as demonstrated in Milner's study (2012) of memes as a form of political discourse. The Area 51 memes are a collection of thousands of images overlaid with text, yet they hold striking commonalities. Narrative theory views narratives as intertextual networks that look at how all of the smaller stories play into the creation of one grand narrative (Boje, 2001). It also looks at the progression of a narrative from start to finish, because it is more effective to assess a narrative's purpose by viewing how it is developed from start to finish (Herman, 2012).

Humankind comprehends the world through storytelling, which inherently requires the good guys, bad guys, and a wide range of plot-lines (Foss, 1996). Even human thought and the way humans process information is directed by narrative (Richardson, 2000). Similar to news organizations, memes like Raid Area 51 create a streamline of meaning to a variety of actors that keep its viewers interested. Creating these stories is a vital-part of the community building process (Schudson, 2003). The collection of memes create a timeline of events, with very specific details about the planning of the raid using figures from other aspects of meme culture as the "pawns" for the battle.

Narrative can be a persuasive vehicle by telling a person or group of people that something happened not just to tell the story but additionally to achieve an underlying purpose (Herman, 2007). This rhetoric has the power to lead consumers to action. For instance, the novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* published in 1774 increased suicide rates in Europe in the final quarter of the century, so much in fact that some European countries banned the book. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was so popular in England that the British government didn't provide aid to the Confederacy (Daiute and Lightfoot, 2004). Narratives aren't always successful in creating action, but when they involve the reader in the plot line by showing characters whose actions make a difference, the audience is morally moved. The message taken away by the reader depends on the worldview from which the reader approaches the work (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004).

Area 51 memes did, inevitably, create action with a music festival planned and even some individuals showing up to attack the facility. Narrative theory is then a useful lens with which to look at this phenomena because it does have such iconic symbols of meme culture woven throughout and did motivate action in response.

RQ 1: How was the Raid Area 51 campaign narrated through online memes?

RQ2: How did plot lines in Raid Area 51 memes function as visual rhetoric to elicit action?

Methodology

To address the research questions, the author of this study utilized grounded theory methods. Grounded theory methods refer to a set of guidelines that allow researchers to gather data and analyze it using successive levels of data analysis (Charmaz, 2005). A grounded theory

study allows structure in a study while still giving the flexibility to uncover information in an area where little is known (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). Grounded theory research emerged as a way to relieve tensions between qualitative and quantitative research, giving qualitative researchers a way to ground their study in methods of analysis (Charmaz, 2014). One of the defining characteristics of grounded theory is to create or develop an existing theory that is grounded in data (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). The key element of grounded theory is that it is “abstracted from, or grounded in, data generated and collected by the researcher” (Birks, 2015).

A grounded theory study first requires data collection (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). To collect data, the author of this study used Google search to find tweets between the times of July 11 and 19, 2019. Twitter was used in this study because it functions as a major source of information dissemination in the modern day and its use of hashtags makes it more accessible to find conversation pertaining to a shared interest in a topic like #Area51 (Burgess & Bruns, 2012). Google search was selected instead of the Twitter search engine, because the searchfeed for Twitter was not allowing for access to particular sets of tweets based on a hashtag between certain dates. Past research also suggests the limits of Twitter research as well, highlighting that changes to Twitter in 2010 limited the ability for researchers to access all tweets at all times, and instead limits tracking to only 5,000 Twitter users at a time (Burgess & Bruns, 2012).

Thirty-two memes of varying types were collected for this research study. Theoretical saturation was achieved because the focus group no longer provided any new information to the study (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006).

The study then requires constant comparative analysis, a method in grounded theory that requires the coding of data into categories (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Narrative rhetoric is used to analyze and sort the Area 51 memes in this study. This method examines characters and plots

to uncover underlying themes about people, social structure, issues or groups. An example of a theme to look at in narrative theory is identity formation. In a study by Roberts and Rosenwald (2001), they specifically looked at upward social mobility as a form of identity formation. They chose specifically to view this by analyzing the subjects' relationships (i.e. parental, sibling, work, etc.) and occupational choice and looked at how these two factors contributed to the internalization of class conflict.

Visual symbols, such as ones seen in memes, are also a method through which rhetoric can take place. Since symbolic interpretation is entirely human made, it is important to have a broader knowledge of the context from which a symbol might come (Foss, 1996). For instance, while humans directly correlate smoke with a nearby fire, they don't automatically associate a cup with an open beverage container (Foss, 1996). With that in mind, meme culture has created its own set of symbols and therefore rhetoric based on the visuals present. This is perhaps why a repeated image might be used for a variety of contexts. For instance, the image "Pepe the Frog" has been used for a variety of different contexts from political elections to history lessons to even just general pop culture references (Pettis, 2018). This study attempts to find recurring symbols and juxtapose those symbols with modern day meme culture to find underlying themes in the Raid Area 51 narratives.

In narrative there are three master analogues: righteous, social, and pragmatic (Cragan & Shields, 1995). In righteous master analogues, the narrative implies an inherent right or wrong and makes judgements about them accordingly. In social master analogues, the narrative emphasizes the importance of social connections, highlighting relations such as family, friendship and the trust and love between them. In pragmatic master analogues, the narrative emphasizes the importance of pragmatism and simplicity (Cragan & Shields, 1995).

Analyzing memes using narrative theory to determine what common narratives throughout a particular meme culture are has been done in several studies and serves as a productive way to study meme culture. For instance, Gill (2011) speaks to how researchers have struggled previously to study memes using empirical research because it requires a vast background knowledge of memetic culture to adequately describe what is happening. Gill (2011) instead suggests that moving toward narrative analysis of memes might progress research in a more productive way. Shifman (2012) analyzes Youtube memes by pulling out general themes and commonalities between memes as well. Kien (2019) discusses how Donald Trump uses elements of meme culture to create and morph narratives into what he deems appropriate.

Findings

Raiding Area 51 being seen as a way to make one's life better

One theme that arose in several of the collected memes is the correlation between raiding Area 51 and having an overall better life. For instance, in Figure 1, there is a clear narrative plotline showing that in the picture on the left, the plain bike in the streets is considered less exciting than flying through the air, as is captured in the right image. By indicating a clear correlation between the dingy brown coloring of the left image to life before Area 51 and the more exciting movie reference to E.T. in the right photo, a theme about the general betterment of one's existence is prevalent. This can also be seen in Figure 2 as well, showing how someone might be showing up in the popular shoe brand Heelys, but will be leaving in a high-tech helicopter with an Alien



Figure 1

on the top. During the original planning of the raid, Heelys were supposed to be used as transportation to Area 51, so having that juxtaposed with a much higher tech level of transportation with support from other members with guns makes a visually appealing argument about raiding Area 51. This even goes even further, making reference to the popular video game *Halo* that the audience could relate to and even find exciting and interesting. The tactic of using video games as a form of visual rhetoric to convince younger individuals to partake in an activity has been used frequently in the last 10 years (Lenoir, 2000).

This theme even extends to life after raiding Area 51 with a series of similar memes all surrounding the idea of having one's own alien. Several of the collected memes make reference to the person who saves the alien as having a friend for life. For instance, in Figure 3, the person to the left of the alien is popular rapper Lil Nas X, complete in a suit, beside an alien who is waving. In the tweet, Lil Nas even refers to the alien as “the bro” indicating both friendship and a particular credibility to the alien’s “coolness.” This is an example of where the meme even goes so far as to specifically naming the U.S. government as the antagonist in this meme, using the words “finally freed”



Figure 2



Figure 3

to imply that the alien was trapped. The relatability of the alien in this meme is also highlighted by the fact that the alien is wearing human clothes and is not naked. Also the alien waving implies a level of friendliness.

Many of these memes even go so far as to make the aliens from Area 51 seem more like a mentee for the audience to mentor. For instance, several memes, like the one seen in Figure 4, use the same image to depict a small alien inside a doorway asking for help with something.

The alien is clearly shown as much smaller so as to potentially show helplessness or even fear. This particular meme is actually a run-off from another unrelated meme about asking your parents for help at night, thus making the correlation even clearer. Figure 4 uses the idea of flushing a toilet, something fairly simple, to show the helplessness of the alien and the need for a mentor. In Figure 5, similar rhetoric is employed, thus making the parent-child relationship even clearer, and trying to create a sense of sympathy towards the alien. With these images, it shows that the audience's life wouldn't just be better, but that the person would even be needed and wanted, thus pulling the audience in even more.

Raiding Area 51 shown as a disaster



Figure 4



Figure 5

Another theme that arose in analyzing Area 51 memes is a clear understanding of the failure of the undertaking. For instance, as seen in Figure 6, a series of memes show people from the future coming back and explaining that storming Area 51 would be a massacre. It is especially important to note the use of the word “massacre” in this meme, which directly translates to “the act or an instance of killing a number of usually helpless or unresisting human beings under circumstances of atrocity or cruelty,” (“massacre,” n.d.). This theme is also noted in Figure 7, which even compares the Area 51 raid to the terrorism attack on September 11, 2001. Again, it is especially noted in this meme that there are implications of a large amount of innocent people dying. Similarly to Figure 6, Figure 7 shows the sheer panic and horror of the person taking in this information. It is also important to note that very rarely did any of these memes specifically designate an antagonist, and it was left to the audience to decide who the antagonist would be in these scenarios. The clear protagonist in this series of memes, however, were the people that went to raid Area 51.

It is also important to note in this theme that unlike many of the memes discussed so far, it speaks about the lack of success from this mission, instead of the good or even exciting end results. As seen in Figure 8, some of the memes

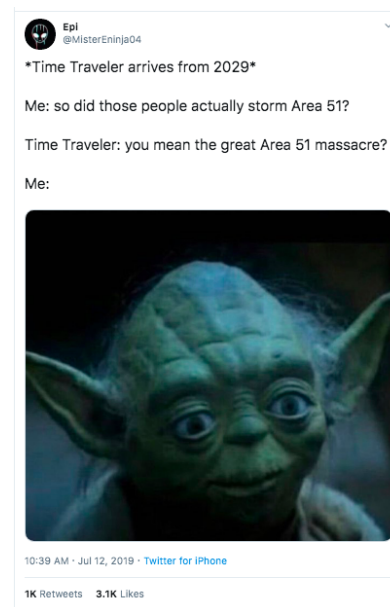


Figure 6



Figure 7

even implied that most people wouldn't show up to the attack and that was why the mission was unsuccessful. This could be taken in one of two ways. It could show several people should come to Area 51 so that the raid can be successful (shown by all of the empty seats around the person on the bus in Figure 8). This could garner sympathy for those who might show up alone or even encourage others to join them.

Conversely, it could also show that very few people actually are going to show up for the raid, thus showing the silliness or stupidity for those that actually do show up (shown by the blank stare and chuckling of the person in Figure 8). Either way, one of the themes of these memes was that the raid would go down in history as being unsuccessful and that no one would show up.

Something else to notice in this subplot as the lack of action or responsibility required of the audience. While the first subplot seemed to encourage responsibility in bettering one's life or providing support and parenting of an alien, this subplot of memes all seem to center around the idea of continuing to let the event take place. For instance, in this study there were no memes that created an action plan for stopping any of the participating members from raiding Area 51. Instead, they all just passively react to the inevitable failing of the event.



Figure 8

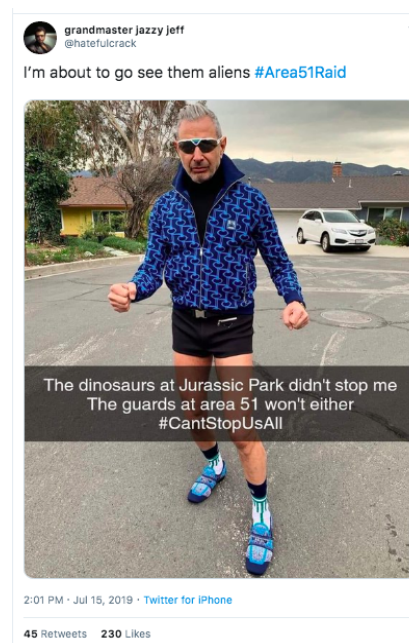


Figure 9

Planning Area 51 raid garners crowd support

As seen in both Figure 9 and in Figure 10, several famous actors and even corporations became involved in the idea of storming Area 51. This in particular created support behind the movement, indicating an additional level of legitimacy to the subculture/movement. As seen in Figure 9, Jeff Goldblum very outwardly names a clear antagonist in the movement: the guards at Area 51. In fact, he even goes so far as to draw the comparison between dinosaurs and the guards, showing that they are both the enemies in this situation. This also implies that, similar to the plotline of Jurassic Park, the heroic figures the audience inherently rooted for were the same people who were showing up to Area 51. Figure 10 highlights the variety of famous actors who have played “good guy” roles in movies, all

indicating their approval of the raid. Again, this plays into creating legitimacy of the movement, using icons of pop-culture to show that having all of these “crime-fighting” actors involved in the raid would create a sure-fire victory. The idea that “we cannot lose” with the support of all of these actors in the raid suggests the obvious sense of legitimacy ascribed to the raid the moment these actors came into the conversation.

Discussion

This study presented two predominant research questions. Research question one, addressed how the Area 51 Raid was narrated through online memes. This study found two

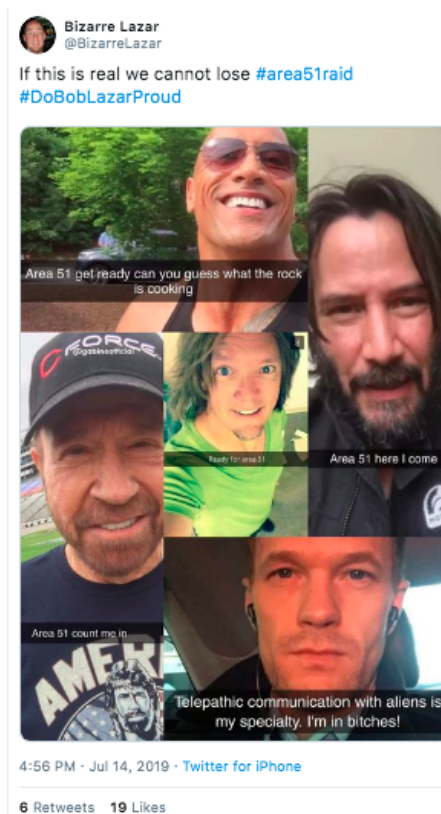


Figure 10

predominant plotlines in Area 51 memes. The first plotline was geared toward a more positive end-goal being that raiding Area 51 would better the participants' life. The second plot line seemed to directly contradict the first, implying that raiding Area 51 would ultimately be a failure and that everyone participating would be killed.

The second research question asked in this study explored how these plotlines served as visual rhetoric to elicit the action response seen in the Area 51 raid. In the first section of memes, there were clear links between a less quality life before raiding Area 51 to a much better life after raiding Area 51. Daiute and Lightfoot (2004) note that a narrative is most compelling when it involves its audience in plotlines that show characters whose actions make a difference. This is what led to examples such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to be so convincing to audiences to pressure the British into not providing financial support to the Confederacy in the U.S. Civil War (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004). When there are clear action items for the audience to take and there is a clear link between those action items creating a better circumstance, narratives can motivate real-world action in response, similar to what occurred when individuals showed up to raid Area 51. This clear narrative plotline of meme culture also makes sense based on the study by Neuberger and Kremer (2008) that found that political cartoons had the power to shift public opinion about something, especially if the audience was not particularly engaged in the first place.

Alternatively, quite a strikingly different narrative plot developed, this time a much more negative plot line that seemed to try and stop individuals from actually going through with the raid. This is particularly interesting when looking at the research about memes being a form of social capital that creates a shift in power dynamics given the accessibility of the Internet across social classes (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). It could be argued that the original Area 51 memes started as an anti-culture movement, especially given the fact that memes are normally

started by outsiders united against one common enemy (Nooney & Portwood-Stacer, 2014). However, once this counter-culture gained traction and over a million facebook users heard about and began to back the raid, it created a need for a second counter-culture, or a counter-counter culture that pushes back against the idea of raiding Area 51. This further develops Lovink's theory (2008) that the ability to create or distribute content online creates "social architecture" in the online world. Not only is meme culture a place for counter-culture, but it creates such mainstream culture that it requires a second layer of counter-culture as well.

One similarity between these two plot lines, however, is present: the inevitability of the raid. Even in Figure 8, which implies that only one or two people would show up, there was still the idea that someone was going to show up. Again this directly points back to Daiute and Lightfoot (2004), implying that, when there are clear action items in a narrative, it is more likely to elicit action. Therefore, when every meme, whether positive or negative indicates that something is going to happen, the social architecture of meme culture makes it so. This implies that the raid on Area 51 was inevitable, despite attempts from the military and even the original creator to discourage people from going.

Another important aspect of the study to note was an extra element of interest that was given to the movement once well-known, public figures like Dwayne Johnson and Keanu Reeves became involved as seen in Figure 10. With several memes concentrating just on the involvement of these individuals, it added an additional element to the narrative. No longer was it just relatively unknown private citizens showing up at Area 51, potentially being harmed, arrested or killed. Instead, these were already established protagonists from pop culture. People would not have to stretch their imagination too much to imagine that, of course, Chuck Norris would be on the "right" side of the issue. He has only ever been associated with protagonists like

Walker Texas Ranger. These faces served as a device to speed up the plot of the narrative. This also, however, meant that if anything bad were to have actually happened at Area 51, these famous figures would be the ones associated with it.

This implies that the more prominent the face of the narrator is, the more effective the narrative might be. This is why in this case, Area 51 memes that reference already-famous figures helped propel the movement forward. As illustrated above, the face of the narrator has a strong impact in meme narration. This also ties into narrative analogues, with the face of the narrator tying back to social master analogues, or the idea that the creator of these memes is emphasizing the previously laid trust between these pop culture icons and their audiences (Cragan & Shields, 1995).

Finally, it's important to recognize the saliency of each story line. By far, the most popular memes were the positive storyline, namely being that raiding Area 51 would be seen as a good thing. These memes would be retweeted thousands of times. Also popular were memes that referenced celebrities getting involved in the raid. These set of memes not only garnered several thousand retweets and likes, but also attracted significantly more media attention as more and more celebrities pledged to join. The least popular plotline was by far the negative memes, implying that storming Area 51 would be a disaster. This could speak to the inherent positivity of meme culture, or perhaps just that it was a less popular movement, because it was the counter-counter culture movement.

Limits and Avenues for Further Research

As a piece of qualitative research it is understood that the research is inherently connected to the researcher, given that the researcher acts as the research tool (Birks & Mills, 2015). However, the author followed the methodology in the ways modelled by prior studies (see

Pettis, 2018, Milner, 2012, Miltner, 2014). That said, further study into this strain of memes may reveal additional narratives. Future research might use a comparative approach to other research in order to draw out meaningful similarities. For instance, a study might compare public reactions to the Area 51 raid compared to GamerGate or the Wall Street movement. This research adds to prior literature by demonstrating the motivational power of memes. It is worth considering that, far from being solely an object of humor, meme's act as a vessel of culture which brings up the question: who can stand against the meme?

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