# A Thousand Words Too Few [1]

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In an age where it is easy to find information—indeed, these days information comes to you unsolicited—and easy to propagate, how carefully do we think about the information that comes to us, and that we share? In this article I explore the pitfalls of "meme" culture.

Scrolling through a social media news feed recently, there appears a cartoon: a person is on TV, standing patriotically behind a podium with a microphone, wearing a suit and tie like one would expect from a politician. The face of this person is a large pair of buttocks. Sitting on the couch in front of the TV is an obese couple, in their underwear or nightwear. Their heads are giant toilet bowls. On the floor of the unclean room, sits a baby playing, with the head of a porcelain sugar bowl, closed with a lid.

Clearly my friends have exquisite scatological taste.

"A picture says a thousand words", the saying goes. During the average day I come across many such cartoons, captioned pictures and "memes"1. The cartoon described above came from a conservative friend, but such pictures are shared by my liberal friends as well.

What gets me about these pictures is that they indeed do speak a thousand words. But what they say are not constructive. Indeed, oftentimes their speech is so subtle, not everyone really "gets" what is being "said". Allow me to explain.

Another time I came across a picture being shared by a liberal friend. The details of the picture escape me, but it was on some polarising topic. I was surprised to see that this friend had shared this particular picture, because it was supporting the conservative side of the debate. In fact, just a few days earlier I had seen the very same picture shared by a conservative friend.

It turns out that this liberal friend of mine had shared it because he interpreted some nuance of it to support the liberal dialogue. Most people, however, interpreted it in the "intended" manner2, including his liberal friends, who derided him for sharing the picture.

This gaffe, which illustrates the pitfalls that such a "thousand words" picture can entail, leads us to the second problem which I have: they rarely foster dialogue, but reinforce already held positions. The American political cartoonist scene is a prime example. Taking the same controversial topic of the day or week, scanning through the political cartoons you see on both sides of the political

spectrum[3] cartoons which are pithy, clever and crass. But because of the perspective from which they are drawn, they merely push the reader further to a polar opposite[4]. These pictures rarely open new horizons for the reader. Instead, they are a tap on the nose, a raise of an eyebrow: "you *know* what is going on, right?"

I consider such pictures, when not accompanied by a reasonable interpretation or analysis, to be underhanded. Of course, I cannot claim the high ground, as I have before shared—and will again as well—such pictures. But I do want to offer one piece of advice for sharing such pictures: put words to them. I don't necessarily mean write an analysis; instead, *vocalise* the picture. Describe it. Explain its meaning. You don't have to do this towards someone else; only yourself. If you still wholeheartedly agree with what you hear being
said, then go ahead and share.

Taking the picture described above, what are people sharing it really saying?

- All politicians only ever say vile things?
- The general populace cannot think for themselves?
- Those who share the picture consider themselves to be more enlightened and above the faecal-receptacle masses?
- That simple-mindedness goes together with laziness and filthiness?

Maybe the person that shares this pictures agrees to all these points. But if they don't they should think carefully about which message they are propagating before reacting to it.

Today, cartoonists and comedians are political, moral and rights commentators; for better or worse. There is nothing wrong with perusing commentators, but my appeal is this: please don't let them do your thinking for you (usually if you scratch the surface, there is not a whole lot of substance underneath).

- 1. It should be noted that the word "meme" does not actually mean "captioned picture". Rather, it is an idea which moves between people and can change over time; a kind of "mental gene". The concept was coined by Richard Dawkins. (It also rhymes with "gene"; it is *not* pronounced "me-me"!]
- 2. Assuming you are not a post-modernist.
- 3. We are, of course, not going to be so naive as to think that any of these publications are not politically biased.
- 4. To the credit of some newspapers, such cartoons are sometimes accompanied by editorials which do not leave the pictures *completely* over to the creative interpretation of the reader.

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