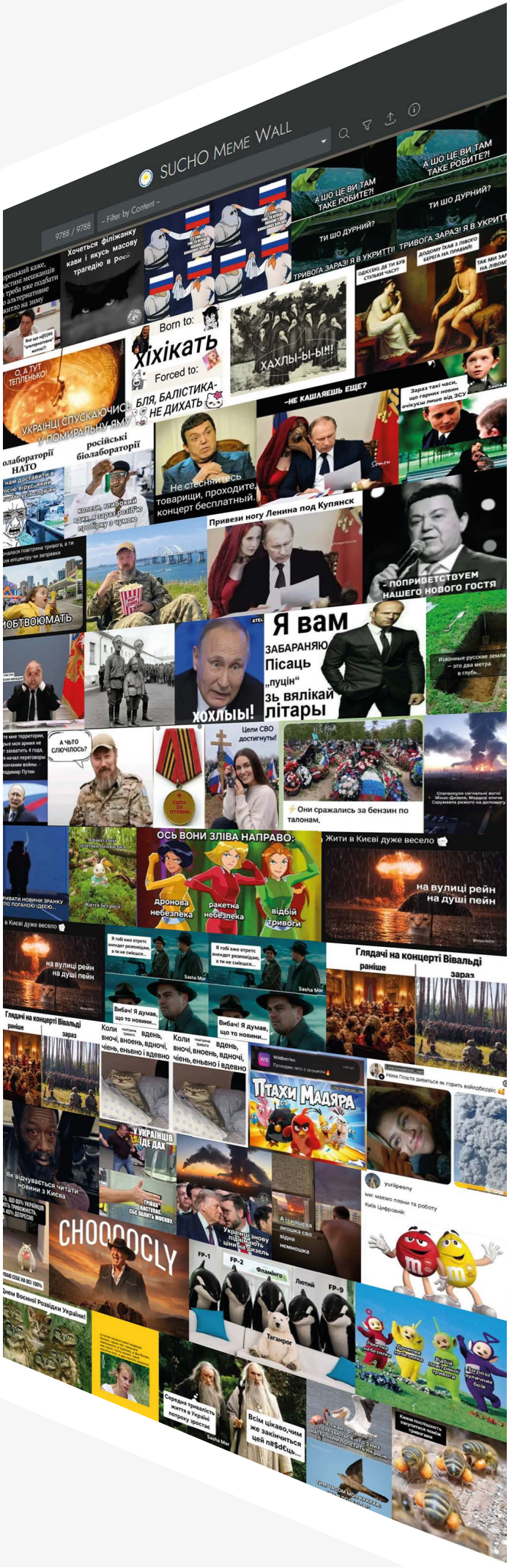
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ANNA RAKITYANSKAYA

ARCHIVING INTERNET MEMES OF THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

ISSUES IN THE PRESERVATION OF BORN-DIGITAL EPHEMERA AND THE CASE OF THE *SUCHO MEME WALL*



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#19

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Issues in the Preservation of Born-digital Ephemera and the Case of the *SUCHO Meme Wall*

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I Memes of the Russo-Ukrainian war: the phenomenon

Modern social media play an extraordinary role in documenting, reporting, and even affecting the events of the Russo-Ukrainian War (2014–). Ample research evidence points to the fact that with the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Ukrainian society en masse turned to social media rather than traditional news media as a preferred source of information.[1] In addition to traditional media broadcasting their content via social media platforms, user-created content, and grassroots reporting ("participatory journalism")[2] have been both abundant and effective in shaping the narrative of this "most documented war ever."[3]

Visual elements have occupied an extraordinary place in this narrative. From the very early weeks of Russia's full-scale invasion, viral images and videos on the subject of the war have been produced in massive quantities and shared widely on social media, both in Ukraine and beyond. These images and videos, casually called "memes" (we will discuss the relevance of this term later in this text), comment on all aspects of the war, from the general progress of the war and specific military operations, to life on the frontline, civilians' experiences, diplomatic efforts, the economic effects of the war, fund-raising, the military draft, and propaganda, as well as meme-making itself.

The role of war-related memes in the media landscape is quite complex. According to Tine Munk, these memes are elements of Ukrainian memetic warfare (a term introduced in 2010 by Brian Hancock),[4] which forms part of the wider Resistance Operating Concept (ROC) model of resistance warfare[5] that functions through "mobilising civil society groups and volunteers to support the Armed Forces, governmental agencies, and actors."[6] This combat role of memes is reflected in self-nomination practices of the social media accounts dedicated to publishing memes. Often, they adopt names that mimic those of state

1 Maryana Prokop: "A Redefinition of the Essence of Social Media in Ukraine in the Era of Russian Aggression of 2022," in: *War in Ukraine. Media and Emotions*, ed. by Agnieszka Turska-Kawa, Agnieszka Kasińska-Metryka & Karolina Pałka-Suchojad, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, 95–110, pp. 100–108; Kateryna Boyko & Roman Horbyk: "Swarm Communication in a Totalising War: Media Infrastructures, Actors and Practices in Ukraine during the 2022 Russian Invasion," in: *Media and the War in Ukraine*, ed. by Mette Mortensen & Mervi Pantti, New York: Peter Lang, 2023, 37–56, pp. 49–50.

2 Shayne Bowman & Chris Willis: *We Media: How Audiences Are Shaping The Future of News and Information*, The Media Center at The American Press Institute, 2003, https://ict4peace.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/05/we_media.pdf [21 July 2026].

3 Greg Myre: "From Drone Videos to Selfies at the Front, Ukraine Is the Most Documented War Ever," *NPR*, 2 August 2023, https://web.archive.org/web/20230813020733/https://www.npr.org/2023/08/02/1191557426/ukraine-war-news-coverage [21 July 2026].

4 Brian J. Hancock: "Memetic Warfare: The Future of War," *Military Intelligence Professional Bulletin* 36/2 (2010), 41–46, p. 43.

5 Tine Munk: *Memetic War: Online Resistance in Ukraine*, Abingdon, Oxon / New York: Routledge, 2024, 26.

6 Munk: *Memetic War,* 76.

institutions: State Bureau of Memes (Державне Бюро Мемів),[7] Armed Memes of Ukraine (Збройні Меми України),[8] Ukraine Meme Forces (Мемні Сили України).[9]

In 2013, shortly before Russia unleashed its war against Ukraine, Valerii Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, declared information warfare to be one of the priorities of Russian military science. [10] This doctrine has since been used actively in Russia's war against Ukraine.[11] Against this backdrop, the Ukrainian memes serve a range of specific purposes depending on which of three audience types they target, separately or in combination: domestic, Western, or Russian:

The Domestic Audience. In Ukraine, war memes appear to play a complex role. Naturally, they provide welcome relief from the harrowing realities of the war and lift people's spirits.[12] This goal is stated clearly in the self-description of one of the most active meme-publishing *Telegram* channels, Military Jokes (Воєнні Смішинки): according to the description, the channel exists "to maintain morale / fighting spirit" (для підтримання бойового духу).[13] In addition to this, engaging with memes has been instrumental in building the sense of unity, resilience, and common values among Ukrainians.[14] Laada Bilaniuk likens memes to "antibodies" and "an immune response" to "invading ideas and destructive cultural logics."[15] In addition to transmitting ideas, memes also provide indirect reporting by referencing and responding to news stories. Because meme production is largely uncontrolled, researchers like Tine Munk, Olena Pavlova, and Mariya Rohozha observe that this sometimes leads to losing[16] or distorting[17] factual information.

7 Derzhavne Biuro Memiv, *Telegram*, https://t.me/dbmua [21 July 2026].
8 Zbroĭni Memy Ukraïny, *Telegram*, https://t.me/ukrainearmedmemes [21 July 2026].
9 Memni Syly Ukraïny, *Telegram*, https://t.me/memeswillkillyou [21 July 2026].
10 Valerii Gerasimov (Valeriĭ Gerasimov): "Osnovnye tendentsii razvitiia form i sposobov primeneniia vooruzhennykh sil, aktual'nye zadachi voennoĭ nauki po ikh sovershenstvovaniiu," *Vestnik Akademii voennykh nauk* 1/42 (2013), 24–29, p. 28.
11 Marina Miron & Rod Thornton: "Russian Cyberspace Operations Against Ukraine in the 2022 War: How Effective Have They Been and What Lessons for NATO Can Be Drawn?" in: *Great Power Cyber Competition: Competing and Winning in the Information Environment*, ed. by David V. Gioe & Margaret W. Smith, London: Routledge, 2024, 57–72, DOI: 10.4324/9781003425304-5, pp. 60–66.
12 Sofiya Maksymiv: "How Humor Helps Ukrainians Withstand War Atrocities," *UkraineWorld*, 21 July 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20220906100538/https://ukraineworld.org/articles/opinions/how-humor-helps-ukrainians [21 July 2026].
13 Voienni Smishynky—dlia pidtrymannia boĭovoho dukhu abo Chornobaïvka style, *Telegram*, https://t.me/smeshinki_net [21 July 2026].
14 Munk: *Memetic War,* 6.
15 Laada Bilaniuk: "Memes as Antibodies: Creativity and Resilience in the Face of Russia's War," in: *Dispossession*, ed. by Catherine Wanner, New York: Routledge, 2024, 143–166, DOI: 10.4324/9781003382607-10, p. 144.
16 Munk: *Memetic War,* 77.
17 Olena Pavlova & Mariya Rohozha: "Decolonizing of Education: Collisions and Prospects for the Study of Internet Memes," 2024 [unpublished manuscript], 4.

Western Audiences. Memes commenting on the war strive to debunk Russian propaganda designed for the West,[18] shape public opinion, and ultimately win the support of politicians[19] who make vital decisions about military assistance to Ukraine.

Russian Audiences. When used in social media comment battles with Russian or pro-Russian account holders, Ukrainian memes not only aim to debunk Russian propaganda and offer Ukrainian versions of events, but also strive to demoralize the aggressor by exposing its moral and intellectual inferiority as well as to shame Russian society at large and the Russian opposition in diaspora for their "silent complicity" in the aggression and attempts at manipulating public opinion in Ukraine.[20]

The exceptional place of war memes in contemporary Ukrainian culture has been solidified by both official recognition and measures taken to honor and memorialize memes and use them outside their native social media environment:

a) Memes have been part of social media activity by Ukrainian government officials,[21] government agencies[22] and Ukraine's official *X* account itself.[23] Moreover, the official website of the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs includes a page "War Memes" (Меми війни)[24] presenting five memetic ideas and phrases illustrated by various visual materials.

b) Ukrainian memes appear to have become an element of Ukraine's national branding. A website for a Ukrainian public organization for international tourism, *Visit Ukraine Today* includes a page: "Ukrainian Jokes: War Memes That Became Hits" filed under "News and useful information" on its blog.[25]

18 Miron: "Russian Cyberspace Operations," 57–72.

19 "Ukraine's meme war with Russia is no laughing matter. Viral posts shape public opinion and shake Western governments into action," *The Economist*, 1 March 2022, https://www.economist.com/europe/2022/03/01/ukraines-meme-war-with-russia-is-no-laughing-matter [21 July 2026].

20 "Ukrainian survey dismisses 'good russians' cliché," *BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union*, 14 November 2022, https://hollis.harvard.edu/permalink/01HVD_INST/726dgh/cdi_proquest_wirefeeds_2735729108 [21 July 2026].

21 Oleksii Reznikov: "Dear #fellas, I'm changing my profile pic, but not switching allegiance. Thanks for inviting me to NAFO! Our joint work continues" [internet meme] (4 September 2022) *X*, https://x.com/oleksiireznikov/status/1566347144654618624 [21 July 2026].

22 Defense of Ukraine: "20+ Ukrainian HIMARS & M270 & MARS. All remain in service. 50+ russian depots with weapons and ammunition. Exited the game" [internet meme] (26 August 2022) *X,* https://twitter.com/DefenceU/status/1563093628716601344 [21 July 2026].

23 Ukraine / Ukraïna: "They should have never gotten there, but our human duty is to get them out" [internet meme] (26 December 2022) *X*, https://x.com/Ukraine/status/1607436112448094214 [21 July 2026].

24 "Memy viiny," *Ministerstvo vnutrishnikh sprav Ukraïny*, 30 May 2022, https://mvs.gov.ua/news/memi-viini [21 July 2026].

25 "Ukrainian Jokes: War Memes That Became Hits," *VisitUkraine.Today*, 16 May 2023, https://web.archive.org/web/20230616115812/https://visitukraine.today/blog/1855/ukrainian-jokes-war-memes-that-became-hits [21 July 2026].

c) Perhaps the most remarkable development in the cultural journey of memes in Ukraine is their crossing over from the virtual world of social media to other cultural practices and objects of physical culture. For example, memes are used as linguistic exercise material by a Ukrainian language teacher in Kyiv, Anastasiia Onatii, both in her online instruction[26] and in a language textbook she co-authored.[27] A number of board games built around war memes are available on the Ukrainian retail market, among them *Iakyĭ ty MEM? Patriotychna kolektsiia* [Which MEME are you? Patriotic collection],[28] *Iakyĭ ty MEM? Kolektsiia hruz 200* [Which MEME are you? Cargo 200 collection],[29] *Bavovna*,[30] and others.

One of the most important issues in the discussion of the internet memes of the Russo-Ukrainian War (or any memes for that matter) is DEFINING THE PHENOMENON. The word "meme" has been used frequently in the context of the war and its social media coverage. However, its meaning is somewhat blurred, often understood too broadly or too narrowly. Specifically, we observe the word "meme" being used to describe the following three different phenomena:

1. *Any popular ("viral") inspirational image or video*

Very often the term "meme" is used as a catchall term to describe any instance of a visual file (photo or video) shared repeatedly via social media. This tendency to use the word "meme" to describe any "'infectious' phenomena" was observed by Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear.[31] There are many types of viral war-related images that are shared widely on social media: for example, artists' works, endearing photos of soldiers interacting with animals, screenshots of verbal jokes, photos of corpses of enemy soldiers, etc. This expanded idea of a meme is reinforced by meme-dedicated social media accounts (discussed earlier) because they occasionally publish all these different types of inspirational images as presumed memes.

2. *Meme template or its part*

On the other hand, we observe a narrow use of the term "meme" when it is applied to a visual meme template (macro) or its element that is used to build different visual narratives. For ex-

26 Lesia PINIAK: "'Chas nazyvaty vse svoïmy imenamy.' Vchytel'ka ukraïns'koï movy poiasniuie movni pravyla na prykladi memiv, shcho porodyla viĭna," *Hromadske*, 13 March 2022, https://hromadske.ua/posts/chas-nazivati-vse-svoyimi-imenami-vchitelka-ukrayinskoyi-movi-poyasnyuye-movni-pravila-na-prikladi-memiv-sho-porodila-vijna [21 July 2026].

27 Anastasiia ONATII (Anastasiia ONATIĬ) & Taras TKACHUK, *Ukraïns'ka mova: 6 klas, Ternopil': Navchal'na knyha*, 2023, https://pidruchnyk.com.ua/2593-ukrmova-6-klas-onatii.html [21 July 2026], 264.

28 See, e. g., https://prom.ua/ua/p1847978329-igra-nastolnaya-kakoj.html [21 July 2026].

29 See, e. g., https://prom.ua/ua/m-3928971552853305389-nastolnaya-igra-kakoj.html?p=1771692380 [21 July 2026].

30 See, e. g., https://igrodol.com.ua/search?search=%D0%91%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BD%D0%B0 [21 July 2026].

31 Michele KNOBEL & Colin LANKSHEAR: "Online Memes, Affinities, and Cultural Production," in: *A New Literacies Sampler*, ed. by Michele Knobel & Colin Lankshear, New York: Peter Lang, 2007, 199–227, p. 199.

ample, in popular discourse certain real-life characters in war memes are described as "memes" or people "who became memes": Igor Konashenkov (the famously incongruous spokesperson of Russia's Ministry of Defense) is referred to as "a meme-person" and a "press-secretary who became a meme" in a *Charter'97* (*Хартыя'97*) news report.[32] Another example is Svetlana Loginova, a disappointed "apolitical" Russian fleeing from Crimea after Ukraine's military action on the peninsula, described as a lady "who became a real internet meme" by *UNIAN* (*Ukraïns'ke Nezalezhne Informatsiïne Ahentstvo Novyn / Ukrainian Independent Information Agency*).[33] While both Konashenkov and Loginova are the main characters in some of the most iconic war meme macros, they are not memes in the strict sense of the term.

3. *True meme*

In this study, when we use the term "meme" or "true meme," we apply it to a very specific internet communication genre, characterized by formal attributes, aligned with the nature of the meme phenomenon. We base our understanding of this phenomenon on the ideas of Richard Dawkins, a biologist who coined the word "meme" in 1976 while applying gene theory to the evolution of human culture. According to Dawkins, memes are "units of cultural transmission"[34] that propagate themselves between the minds of humans by imitation. They are subject to continuous mutation, and their survival depends on their "longevity, fecundity and copying-fidelity."[35] In other words, a contrasting combination of repetition and change is the core quality that allows memes to survive. While repetition is obvious to anyone dealing with a highly reproduced visual culture phenomenon like memes, it is change that distinguishes them from other genres of popular images.

The role of change is underscored in Limor Shifman's concept of memes as "dynamic entities," rather than "isolated, discreet [sic] units."[36] Shifman describes internet memes as "a group of digital items" that have been shared and edited by many internet users.[37] This idea of a meme being part of a group, cluster, or chain in constant flux is critical to understanding the nature of internet memes. To clarify this idea, Klaas Chielens and Francis Heylighen use the metaphor of the game of telephone or Chinese whispers, in which any element of the story chain is a meme.[38]

32 "V Rossii vnezapno propal spiker Minoborony general Konashenkov," *Khartyia '97*, 8 September 2023, https://web.archive.org/web/20230908044436/https://charter97.org/ru/news/2023/9/7/562817/ [21 July 2026].

33 Olha Robeiko (Ol'ha Robeĭko): "'Voobshche ne khochu uezzhat' iz Kryma': stavshaia memom rossiianka pokazala svoiu zhizn' v RF— ėto uzhas (video)", *UNIAN*, 21 March 2023, https://web.archive.org/web/20230321074616/https://www.unian.net/russianworld/voobshche-ne-hochu-uezzhat-iz-kryma-stavshaya-memom-rossiyanka-pokazala-svoyu-zhizn-v-rf-eto-uzhas-video-12186795.html [21 July 2026].

34 Richard Dawkins: *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976, 206.

35 Dawkins: *The Selfish Gene*, 208.

36 Limor Shifman: "An anatomy of a YouTube meme," *New Media & Society* 14/2 (2012), 187–203, DOI: 10.1177/1461444811412160, p. 189.

37 Limor Shifman: *Memes in Digital Culture*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2014, 41.

38 Klaas Chielens & Francis Heylighen: "Operationalization of meme selection criteria: Methodologies to empirically test memetic predictions," in: *Proceedings AISB 2005 convention: Social Intelligence and Interaction in Animals, Robots and Agents,* http://memetics.chielens.net/phd/papers/metaspaper.pdf [21 July 2026].

We view each meme as a dynamic unit, an element in an evolutionary chain even though we do not always have access to that chain in its entirety (to the extent that it is possible in a potentially infinite sequence). In some cases, we are dealing with what meme researchers Bradley E. Wiggins and G. Bret Bowers call an *emergent meme*: a stage between a spreadable media (an unaltered image) and a "meme proper" (part of an existing meme group / cluster / chain): "Emergent memes are altered spreadable media yet are not iterated and remixed further as separate contributions."[39] These memes are usually more unique and innovative; they may use images from the latest news reports as their templates ("contingent macros," in terminology suggested by Giulia Giorgi and Ilir Rama to describe "short-lived memetic layouts that are not able to establish themselves in the visual vernacular of digital cultures"[40]).

While theoretical aspects of the internet meme phenomenon have been studied widely by scholars, its practical (formal) aspects remain somewhat elusive. We find the research by Knobel and Lankshear in identifying the formal characteristics of a "successful" internet meme to be a significant step in that direction. According to the researchers, humor, intertextuality, and anomalous juxtapositions are critical to memes' fecundity (the rate at which they spread).[41] One may argue that anomalous juxtaposition is not a feature but rather a formal device that helps generate humor and intertextuality. However, the observation of the "mechanics" of that juxtaposition ("incongruous couplings of images … deliberately provocative … and the simply quirky"), made by these scholars, is important. We would extend this idea and suggest that the "incongruously coupled" objects may include not just images but also an image and a text.

We suggest a working definition of the internet meme based on the idea that repetition, change, and humor are essential to a meme's existence. Regardless of how widely spread a meme is, it will display the following formal characteristics by which it can be recognized among other genres of inspirational imagery:

a) it features an existing ("borrowed") image or a memetic text (a word or a phrase), or a memetic idea;[42]

b) it modifies that image, text, or idea in some way by adding a text and/or visual elements; and

39 Bradley E. Wiggins & G. Bret Bowers: "Memes as Genre: A Structurational Analysis of the Memescape," *New Media & Society* 17/11 (2015), 1886–1906, DOI: 10.1177/1461444814535194, p. 1897.

40 Giulia Giorgi & Ilir Rama: "The Contingent Macro: The Ephemerality of Memes as Discursive Devices," *Journal of Digital Social Research* 6/1 (2024), 31–49, DOI: 10.33621/jdsr.v6i1.202, p. 32.

41 Knobel & Lankshear: "Online Memes," 209.

42 By verbal memes we assume words and phrases with a fixed symbolic meaning like "Russian warship," "Bavovna" or "Kobzon's concert"). Memetic ideas / narratives are complex mental constructions / cliches / myths that don't have a fixed wording attached to them like "Ukrainian dogs and foxes are getting fat from eating corpses of the Russian soldiers on Ukrainian land" or "Russian fighter pilots are terrified of flying their A-50 planes after Ukrainians have shot down several of them." A selected list of verbal and mental memes of the Russo-Ukrainian War can be found in: Iurii Marchenko & Tetiana Kapustynska: *Ukraine: 50 symbols of resistance*, Kyiv: Blank-Press, 2023.

c) it contains humor in a very broad range of comic forms.[43]

All three elements must be present in a meme. A combination of any two of these elements produces a different genre of visual statement: a poster (image + text), a cartoon (unmodified image + humor), a verbal joke (text + humor), etc.

II Archiving memes: issues and concerns

From the archivists' point of view, memes are priceless born-digital ephemera[44] that require timely and thoughtful preservation. The 2009 UNESCO Charter on the Preservation of the Digital Heritage recognized digital heritage as common heritage and stressed that "digital materials … are frequently ephemeral, and require purposeful production, maintenance and management to be retained." The document also suggests that these born-digital ephemeral materials are being given priority in selection for preservation.[45]

We consider the preservation of internet memes addressing the Russo-Ukrainian War an urgent task because, for all their robust omnipresence, these born-digital artefacts are highly fragile. Their fragility has two aspects, formal and substantive:

The Fragility of Format. A meme is a digital file that is not created to last but rather to serve as a rapid response to minute changes in political and social life. Dozens of memes are bombarding our social media at any given time, fighting for our attention and their own lives. Most of them are born quickly, live quickly, and are forgotten quickly, chased out by other memes. Some lucky memes may linger in the culture, but the majority rapidly perish.

In addition, memes are hosted by an extremely fleeting vehicle, social media: memes are part of a news feed and along with it they run down the screen and disappear. If a future researcher decides to obtain a corpus of memes related to the Russo-Ukrainian War, they would need to carry out complex data operations—such as scraping, de-duplication, and manual verification—on the material found in the *Internet Archive*[46] or any of the meme aggregators, either international megasites like *Reddit*,[47] *Know Your Meme*,[48] or national

43 See the overview of verbal humor strategies used in Ukrainian digital folklore in: Lada Kolomiyets: "Deconstruction of Russia's Newspeak In Ukrainian Humorous Translation And Digital Folklore," *Ideology and Politics Journal* 2/24 (2023), 128–166.

44 The Society of American Archivists defines traditional ephemera as "materials, usually printed documents, created for a specific, limited purpose, and generally designed to be discarded after use." See: The Society of American Archivists (SAA): "ephemera," in: *SAA Dictionary Archives Terminology*, https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/ephemera.html [21 July 2026].

45 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: Charter on the Preservation of the Digital Heritage, *Unesdoc Digital Library*, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000179529.page=2 [21 July 2026], 1.

46 "Search subject: 'Memes,'" *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/search?query=subject%3A%22Memes%22 [21 July 2026].

47 "r/ukrainememes," *Reddit*, https://www.reddit.com/r/ukrainememes/ [21 July 2026].

48 https://knowyourmeme.com/ [21 July 2026].



Fig. 1. "Za tykh, khto rehuliarno kuryt' v Krymu! Bilhorodi ta inshykh orko-mistakh" [To those who regularly smoke in Crimea, Belgorod, and other orc cities] [internet meme] (30 December 2023), Telegram, Voienni Smishynky (based on a still from the 1961 Soviet film *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* [Вечера на хуторе близ Диканьки] by Alexandr Rou)

ones like Finnish *Pakolliset meemit* [Obligatory memes].[49] And even if that future researcher succeeds in extracting relevant memes, they will face the ultimate quest of deciphering the memes' meaning.

The Fragility of Meaning. Martin Hand highlights the significance of "the inter-textual dimensions" for establishing the meaning of specific images on social media.[50] This concept is fully applicable to memes and is crucial to understanding the full extent of issues faced by meme archivists. The intertextuality of a meme can be quite complex and includes several layers of meaning:

(1) basic visual elements (the source image or images, and an optional caption);
(2) ideas and cultural practices the meme references (for example, verbal, literary or cinematic connotations);
(3) the event, person, or idea the meme comments on (the meme's subject);
(4) the humor.

49 "Tag Archives: Ukraina," *Pakolliset meemit*, https://pakollisetmeemit.com/tag/ukraina/ [21 July 2026].
50 Martin Hand: "Visuality in Social Media: Researching Images, Circulations and Practices," in: Anabel Quan-Haase & Luke Sloan (eds.): *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*, London et al.: SAGE Publications, 2017, 215–231, DOI: 10.4135/9781473983847.n14, p. 220.

The layers are progressively more difficult to access. Accessing layer 1 does not require special efforts, it can be done through simple visual examination. Layer 2, on the other hand, often cannot be gleaned from visual examination of the meme, it requires pre-acquired knowledge, but without it, neither layer 3 (the subject of the meme) nor 4 (the humor emerging from the juxtaposition of layers 1–3) can be accessed, and a meme becomes simply a "flat" image and often an obscure one. Because memes respond to the news in real time, they might comment on a specific military action or a public statement or a personality that came into media focus only for a brief moment, but memes assume knowledge of this news. In addition to that, the humorous effect in memes might be built on references from films, songs, or other memes known to audiences whose cultural backgrounds differ depending on their age, language or social media preferences. Without access to these references, a meme cannot be truly "read."

To demonstrate the intertextuality of a meme, we will dissect a meme (Fig. 1), and separate the layers of meaning embedded in it.

1. The visual information: two men in traditional costumes raise their glasses, while the caption in Ukrainian reads: "To those who regularly smoke in Crimea, Belgorod and other orc cities" (За тих, хто регулярно курить в Криму! Білгороді та інших орко-містах).
2. The pre-acquired information includes the following elements:
   a) A popular euphemism "smoking" (standing for "explosion") based on a tongue-in-cheek suggestion by the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense on 9 August 2022 that cigarette smoking had caused a fire on the Russian air base in Novofedorivka (Crimea), alluding to the reluctance of the Russian military to acknowledge the fact that the base was attacked by the Ukrainians.[51]
   b) Persistent use of the word "orcs" (monster goblins in J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth book series) as a derogatory synonym for "Russians" in Ukrainian war-time popular discourse.
   c) News reports on explosions in Crimea, Belgorod and other places.
   d) The tradition of clinking glasses before drinking to celebrate someone or something.
   e) The Ukrainian origin of the traditional attire and hairstyles.
3. The subject of the meme is frequent explosions and fires in Crimea, Belgorod, and other places on Russian and Russia-occupied territories, caused by Ukrainian military activity.
4. The humorous effect emerges from an absurd idea of celebrating smokers.

51 "Minoborony Ukraïny pro vybukhy v Krymu: Ne mozhemo vstanovyty prychynu zaĭmannia, odnak vkotre nahaduiemo pro pravyla pozhezhnoï bezpeky ta zaboronu kurinnia u nevstanovlenykh mistsiakh," *Interfax-Ukraïna*, 9 August 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20220811093446/https://interfax.com.ua/news/general/851457.html [21 July 2026].

The importance of preserving memes with context is well substantiated by F. Garcia López and S. Martinez Cardama, who underscore the "gatekeeper role" meme archivists have.[52] In full agreement with that, we strongly believe that archiving memes needs to involve careful curation and supplying accurate metadata. This means that in order to truly preserve a meme (to keep that "gate" open), it is not enough to have the media file alone (layer 1 of the meme's meaning). The file must come with an interpretation (based on layers 2–4). Considering that any interpretation is subjective, meme archivists must strive for the possible minimization of mistakes in this area by collecting and describing memes "in real time," applying high-level subject expertise.

Another aspect of archiving memes is awareness of different contexts in which memes exist on social media. The harvesting methods and the interpretation of a meme are closely linked to whether it was found in a static or a dynamic context:

Static or Presentational Context: meme-focused social media (with memes as their main content). Each post on such social media contains an image or a video, many of which are true memes. Memes in a static environment are easier to harvest by automatic methods.

Dynamic or Discursive Context: comment threads, where memes are used as replies in an online conversation. This usually happens in social media with a focus on reporting the news and giving their readers a platform for discussion of that news. These memes come from various sources, which ensures a greater variety of memes on any given topic. We are not aware of the possibility of collecting memes in the comment threads by automated methods. However, it is important to harvest memes "in action," in discourse as the latter often provides clues to the meaning of otherwise obscure memes. That said, the use of memes in the discursive environment is not always consistent with the thread's topic, but rather it is indicative of the general popular interest in the subject of the meme. Often memes get thrown into news threads to draw attention to something that just happened or is a "hotter" topic.

In addition to capturing memes accurately, archivists must think about capturing them over time. The memes produced around a specific event acquire a diachronic aspect. Giulia Giorgi and Ilir Rama demonstrate why this aspect matters for meme research.[53] In our view, it is especially important when building a balanced archive of memes of the full-scale Russian invasion. Since February 2022, these memes have acquired their own history and evolved in both narrative and form. Events, actors, images, ideas, and concerns that occupied a central place in public discourse in March 2022 differ from those in August 2026. Capturing their evolution reflected in memes is as important as collecting a good synchronic sample.

52 Fatima Garcia Lopez & Sara Martinez Cardama: "Strategies for Preserving Memes as Artefacts of Digital Culture," *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 52/3 (2020), 895–904, DOI: 10.1177/0961000619882070, p. 903.

53 Giorgi & Rama: "The Contingent Macro," 34.

Curating an enduring digital project comes with its own complicated set of META-TASKS: it requires regular revisions of all its aspects, including metadata, storage, technical solutions and staffing support. In addition, any digital preservation project is ephemeral by itself[54] and requires efforts to secure long-term maintenance and preservation solutions.

The need to archive and preserve Ukrainian war memes as a distinct web culture phenomenon was understood well by digital archivists and researchers from the early stages of the full-scale invasion. This led to several diverse curated meme collections produced by national media, international academic and volunteer organizations and private collectors, to name a few:

a) *War Memes Museum*[55] by Media Center Ukraine (a media platform established with the participation of the Ukrainian government). The last batch of memes was published in November 2024.

b) *Memes of Resistance*,[56] a project by Sven Björn Popp and Anna Maria Schulze (Free University in Berlin). The project was completed in February 2023.

c) "A Free Archive of the Very Best Pro-Ukraine Memes,"[57] a private blog entry by Seth Abramson. The entry was completed in October 2022.

d) *SUCHO Meme Wall*[58] by Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online (an international volunteer project). This project is ongoing.

As a curator of the *SUCHO Meme Wall*, I will now examine this case of archiving activism aimed at preserving memes of the Russo-Ukrainian War in greater detail.

III The *SUCHO Meme Wall*

The *SUCHO Meme Wall* was conceived within an international volunteer project, *Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online* (*SUCHO*), created to preserve Ukrainian cultural heritage endangered as a result of Russia's invasion. Since 1 March 2022, *SUCHO* web-archived more than 5,000 websites and 50 TB of data from Ukrainian cultural institutions, and at the time of writing it focuses its activities on assisting Ukrainian cultural institutions with digitization efforts.[59]

54 Kathryn C. Wymer: "Dealing with Digital Ephemerality," in: *Introduction to Digital Humanities*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021, 10–19, DOI: 10.4324/9781003149378-2, pp. 16–17.

55 *War Memes Museum*, Media Center Ukraine, https://warmemes.com.ua/ [21 July 2026].

56 Sven Björn Popp & Anna Maria Schulze: "Memes of Resistance. Ein Projekt von Sven Björn Popp und Anna Maria Schulze, Freie Universität Berlin," 12 February 2023, https://www.oei.fu-berlin.de/institut/mediothek/Medienprojekte/Zeugnisse-des-Krieges/Projekte/Projekt8/index.html [21 July 2026].

57 Seth Abramson: "A Free Archive of the Very Best Pro-Ukraine Memes," *Proof*, 2 October 2022, https://sethabramson.substack.com/p/meme-library-a-free-archive-of-the [21 July 2026].

58 *SUCHO Meme Wall*, https://memes.sucho.org/ [21 July 2026].

59 https://www.sucho.org/ [21 July 2026].

The work on creating the *SUCHO* meme archive began at the end of April 2022 through crowdsourcing: volunteers across the globe were encouraged to submit individual memes via a *Google* form.[60] The form (still used today) asks a few questions about the meme and the answers generate raw metadata. All submitted memes undergo a process of review before they are published to the open-access interactive online gallery the *SUCHO Meme Wall* (launched in June 2022). The *Wall*, hosted on *GitHub Pages*, allows viewers to discover the memes and explore their content. The project is sustained with professional and logistical support from Stanford University, Harvard University Library, and Bavarian State Library.

The scope of the collection has been set quite widely. *SUCHO* collects any true memes (both "proper" and "emergent") that display the formal characteristics of the genre (described earlier) and come from any country in the world and in any language. The *SUCHO* memes come from social media and are harvested both from static and dynamic sources. It is important to note that although wartime memes are being produced on both sides of the frontlines, the *SUCHO* project is devoted to memes that support Ukraine (regardless of where they are produced), because the project's overarching mission is to preserve Ukrainian cultural heritage.

In addition to providing access to the visual elements of the memes, the *Meme Wall* offers various tools for researchers, such as structured metadata, filters for browsing, keyword search, narrative glossaries (providing contextual background information on people, subjects, and templates in the memes), a CSV file comprising the entire published dataset available for downloading and an RSS feed updated daily with new memes.

The metadata includes complete meme caption texts in the original language(s) and their translation into English. There are also structured controlled vocabulary indexes for subjects and templates, as well as simple indexes for personalities, languages and countries. We also preserve the URL of the source from which the meme was harvested and the date it was posted at the source URL (available on request).

As we mentioned earlier, preserving the meaning of a meme is just as important as preserving the visual file containing the meme. To that end, we have built in a system of pop-up glossaries linked to the metadata for the *Wall* memes. The glossaries are narrative texts providing context for understanding memes by describing subjects and people featured in the memes, as well as templates used to build them. They focus not only on providing some factual information, but also on explaining how these facts are reflected in memes.

The *SUCHO Meme Wall* is a work in progress, but it is a workable open-access archive with a few distinguishing characteristics:

a) the material: the collection began early (soon after Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine) and is ongoing;

b) the volume: the archive now contains over 5,000 curated and described memes;

60 *SUCHO: Ukrainian war meme collection* [online form], https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdhinky_fICuBD-HKaGsQi_ezukKtU3oVeMulMg0Ra8TCnvw/viewform [21 July 2026].

c) the metadata: it is quite granular, curated, and accompanies each meme;
d) the glossaries: three glossaries (for content, personalities, and templates) help to establish connections between facts and their reflection in memes;
e) the sources: most of the memes are harvested directly from social media, with source information available upon request;
f) the website: the collection is presented online via a user-friendly interface and updated daily.

IV Conclusion

Archiving internet memes commenting on the Russo-Ukrainian War is a challenging task. Meme archivists must deal with constantly changing, intellectually complex, and fragile born-digital ephemera while attempting to preserve them both as objects of cultural heritage of undisputed value and research material of unparalleled richness. It is our firm belief that the future will bring technological innovations that will make the process easier and more efficient. In the meantime, archiving activists must continue their collecting over time and treat it as an emergency marathon that requires commitment, curiosity, and stamina.

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Illustrations

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ACCESS
POINTS
#19

ARCHIVING INTERNET MEMES OF THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

The paper advocates for preservation of internet memes, a highly active, abundant, popular, and fragile element of contemporary culture. As a case study, it presents the *SUCHO Meme Wall*, a growing open-access digital archive of memes related to the full-scale invasion phase of the Russo-Ukrainian War (2022–). *SUCHO* exemplifies a digital-archiving activism project that seeks to build a comprehensive diachronic collection of memes. It addresses the complexities of this task by selecting true memes (both "proper" and "emergent"), by developing solutions for preserving the memes' inherent intertextuality, and by collecting persistently over time.

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