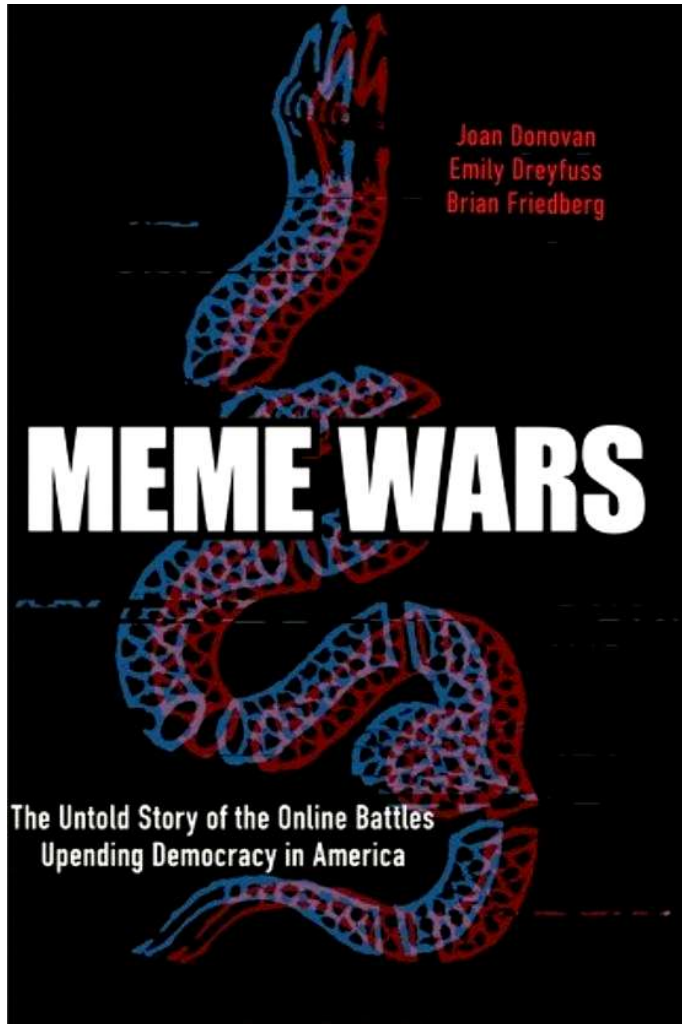


‘Meme Wars’ strong recounting of Jan. 6, extensively researched

Posted: Sunday, December 4, 2022

“Meme Wars: The Untold Story of the Online Battles Upending Democracy in America” by Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfuss and Brian Friedberg. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022, 432 pages, \$30.00 (hardcover).



“‘We’re storming the Capitol! It’s a revolution!’ Elizabeth from Knoxville, Tennessee, told a reporter outside the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021,” Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfuss and Brian Friedberg write at the beginning of “Meme Wars: The Untold Story of the Online Battles Upending Democracy in America,” their exhaustive new treatise on a phenomenon that developed in tandem with the rise of Facebook and other social media outlets. “She had a blue Trump flag slung across her neck like a cape. As soon as she entered the Capitol, she tearfully related, police maced her in the face. As she cried into the camera, her fellow rioters walked into the frame carrying American flags, MAGA flags, Trump flags, and familiar yellow flag with the coiled rattlesnake hissing the warning ‘Don’t Tread on Me.’”

“As soon as the video of Elizabeth’s interview hit Twitter, it went viral,” the authors continue. “From Twitter to TikTok, Elizabeth became fodder for internet jokes. People remixed the video with autotune... Elizabeth from Knoxville had been memed. No longer a person with a real identity, on the internet now Elizabeth from Knoxville

was a character, a memorable piece of media that resonated with people for different reasons. The clip of her was recontextualized, remixed, and redistributed, carrying all sorts of meaning.”

“That’s the definition of a meme, first coined by the biologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 text ‘The Selfish Gene,’ they add. “Supporters of the insurrection shared internet memes that focused on how she had been treated by the police. People who thought the insurrection was a terrifying breach of democracy shared memes celebrating her macing, or mocking her impotent rage.”

So begins a mesmerizing foray into an aspect of our contemporary discourse that most readers are intimately familiar with – and one that many have engaged in. I know I have been known to share (and even develop) a few memes over the last few years. In fact, where civil discourse used to take place around the water cooler, now much of our interactions on the important issues of the day have been reduced to throwing contrived cartoons at each other via our smartphones and computer

screens. No wonder a primary theme of the book relates to the decline of democracy not just in the United States, but across the globe as well.

As might be expected, “Meme Wars” is extensively researched, with 67 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction, 10 chapters and epilogue that form the architecture for the main text. The manuscript, which reads more like a detective novel than an exposé, is also illustrated with images that serve to bring the content to life in a way that would not have been the case otherwise. Honestly, I was captivated by the narrative from the very first page. The picture Donovan, Dreyfuss and Friedberg construct is both fascinating and frightening; we see the subject matter playing out every day on social media which has given a platform to virtually everyone – including those with only a superficial and obviously distorted sense of reality.

For example, consider the following from “These People Are Sick,” the eighth chapter one I found to be particularly instructive:

“For the folks who were skeptical of the mainstream narrative and who craved explanations, these two nearly simultaneous events – {Harvey} Weinstein’s depravity and Trump’s bewitching promise {to pull the United States out of the Iran deal} – were critical to the development of what would soon be known as the QAnon movement. For pro-Trump online communities, already steeped in Pizzagate, Weinstein’s real material connections to Clinton and other Democratic elites was one of the abuse scandals that helped to make the QAnon movement the political force it became. Twenty-three days after Trump said some kind of storm was coming, the conspiracy movement known as QAnon formally came into existence.”

By-the-way, its arrival was announced in the form of a meme.

Donovan is Research Director of the Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center as well as one of the foremost experts on media and disinformation. Dreyfuss is a journalist who covers the intersection of society and technology for publications such as Wired, The Atlantic, and The New York Times. Friedberg is an ethnographer at the Harvard Kennedy School researching fringe political communities online. All three authors are involved with the Harvard Kennedy School's Technology and Social Change Research Project.

Collectively, the authors do a marvelous job of deciphering the conspiracy theories, disinformation, and deepening partisanship that characterize the modern political and societal landscape. Their in-depth, detailed and not-easily-dismissed thesis should be a must-read for anyone who is concerned about our future. It is also a testimonial to the immense power of images to shape and define the conversation in ways that are increasingly divorced from reason and rationality. They somehow make prejudice, bigotry, racism, xenophobia, and antisemitism seem less deplorable than they really are. And, as the authors astutely point out, we need to be careful not to disregard their power to motivate those who are challenged when it comes to distinguishing fiction from truth. Humor can kill.

“January 6 was the rattle of the snake’s tail: a warning of how fragile a multiracial democracy in American truly is,” Donovan, Dreyfuss and Friedberg caution at the conclusion of their tome (and, at 432 pages, I believe that is an apt descriptor). “What comes next is not exactly clear, but we hope we’ve at least revealed what the playbook for the next era of meme wars will be.”

Indeed. Highly recommended.

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