

Memes and the changing of lives

 By [Donovan White](#)

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Let me put it to you: "The dominant media at any given time in a society strongly shapes both the individual and collective life" - Marshal McLuhan.

But what has dominated the social media space especially in these last few weeks, was not the elections and the long awaited release of the Public Protector's Nkandla report. Instead it's been humorous constructs around Advocate Barry Roux in the Oscar Pistorius trial and the trend of NekNominations evolving into RakNominations. Known as memes, these are just two examples of the most recent topics that have taken on a life of its own through continuous replication, sharing and discussion in the media.

But what are memes really? A meme can be defined as an idea, behaviour, or style that spreads from person to person within a culture. Quite literally from the Greek word, 'mimema', the word means "imitated thing" and has in fact been around for centuries in our schools, churches, military and literature. It's also alive and kicking in today's electronic era and playing a huge role in democratisation of the world. In fact never before have memes been more powerful. From the Arab Spring in 2012, to twerking in 2013 and now NekNominations in 2014, memes are challenging beliefs, inciting action (whether good or bad) and allows people's voices to be heard.

Then what is a 'Meme' in today's world?

A meme is therefore a statement or action that someone believes in, or mutates if they disagree - all the while socially sharing their message with other people. Since 2009, [Facebook](#) has been studying the spread and mutation of memes throughout its social network and likened them to the evolution of genes.

According to them, the rate at which a meme is either identically spread or mutated hinges on the following factors:

1. The number of times the meme has been copied
2. The length in time between each copy
3. Variant Fitness (how the meme has been written)
4. Resistance (spelling and grammar)
5. Match to sub-population's beliefs or culture
6. Popularity, measured by using a country's Gini Index Measure (referring to the extent to which the distribution of income deviates from equal distribution in a country. A score of 0% implies absolute equality and 100% implies absolute inequality.)

What does this mean for South Africa as a transmitter or mutator of memes?

To answer this we must look at the macro landscape. Facebook in South Africa is largely used by the millennial population (born between 1980 - 2000). This portion of the population is confident, unafraid, thrives on change and they believe they have the power to make a difference. Additionally they have grown up in a country that is 20 years young this year. They also remember the promises and see the under-delivery, which has led to the rise of entrepreneurial activities that have formed a supra-layer above society to fill in the shortfall (eg. private hospitals, security and medical aid). With this they have been exposed to individualistic role models like Nelson Mandela, who authentically called for change and inspired the nation to be their own unique selves through the notion of Ubuntu (we are people because of people).

Last recorded in 2009, [South Africa's Gini co-efficient](#) was measured at 63.1%, showing a higher likelihood that a meme would evolve due to the diversity of the economy, cultural beliefs, values and ideologies. So it makes sense that the international NekNomination meme would run its course and locally mutate into what has become known as RakNomination (Random Act of Kindness Nomination) - seeing as the act of downing, or necking, a bottle of booze frankly does not fit with at least 63.1% of South Africa's income distribution or values.

Instead it took a confident, individualistic, millennial, entrepreneur to hyper-localise and realise the needs of his fellow South Africans. Brent Lindeque, South African mutator of the NekNomination meme, might not have known of these parameters that would allow him to effectively have RAK Nominations take off, but the conditions he set up in his video speaks to those who understand the original concept, as well as demonstrates the new rules.

The sincerity, emotional text and facts presented that speak of the inequalities, call for change and the fact that he nominated someone of sizeable influence who happens to be a radio presenter, all added to the eventual and rightful success of the mutation of this 'absolute meme'.

Memes as symbols representing society

Marshal McLuhan states that dominant media shapes individual and collective life, but in today's information rich reality, it's rather a case of being exposed, re-exposed and over exposed to the same message in diverse media. This repetition of the same message across various channels has led to the rise of the social television phenomenon and the 'online is offline' trend, bringing the true definition of a meme to life: ideas and behaviours propagated through interpersonal and mass communication affect (online and) offline behaviour.

The NekNomination got coverage online, in the press and on radio. When you read the opening of this article, I bet you read it in Barry Roux's voice. Didn't you? From the Oscar Pistorius Trial Channel, to Twitter - where the social virus has major impact due to its public nature - and then in the press and listening to the morning drive shows on your way to work, you have been re-exposed to 'Barry Rouxisms'. This is what has caused your internal mental processes, as well as the external mental processes by way of social media, to have read and spread that opening line in that specific way.

ABOUT DONOVAN WHITE

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