

On June 23rd 2016, a majority of the citizens of the United Kingdom shocked the global political stage by voting to leave the European Union. Apart from the obvious serious political consequences, an event of the magnitude of Brexit was also sure to generate a swarm of playful satire on the internet. For instance, on the content aggregator Reddit, visitors would quickly stumble upon the following comic:

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[aesop_image  
img="http://networkcultures.org/longform/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2017/11/kwpmfndh  
a5x.png" align="center" lightbox="on" caption="Figure 1: "Brexit: (The North  
Remembers)"" captionposition="center" revealfx="off" overlay_revealfx="off"]
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The above comic could be any random internet comic, but in fact is emblematic for a branch of cartoons containing sphere-shaped characters denoting a specific country, satirizing national stereotypes, geopolitical events and international relations. They are referred to as 'Polandball', or 'countryball'. The comics can be found across multiple internet platforms, most notably on Facebook and Reddit. The latter Polandball powerhouse, [reddit.com/r/polandball](https://www.reddit.com/r/polandball), saw a sudden increase in popularity in 2017. While the reasons for this increase are mysterious, it is a testament to the popularity and relevancy of the Polandball comic on digital platforms.

Despite their recent surge in popularity, Polandball has been steadily satirizing geopolitical drama and national stereotypes since 2009. According to multiple sources such as [Know Your Meme](#), [Wikipedia](#) and [various internet users](#), Polandball originated in September 2009 on the /int/ (international) board on a German forum called Krautchan. On the platform, user FALCO poked fun at the Polish poster Wojak for his broken English. He did so by drawing comics with a sphere-shaped character of Poland as a device to satirize Polish stereotypes.

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[aesop_image  
img="http://networkcultures.org/longform/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2017/11/main-qimg-  
7d81f59fcf28ab1dd4d3f27c89d4aa99-c.jpg" align="center" lightbox="on" caption="Figure  
2: One of the first Polandball comics, according to a Quora user." captionposition="center"  
revealfx="off" overlay_revealfx="off"]
```

The countryball phenomenon quickly began to spread, drawing from and building upon FALCO's initial comics. For instance, the countryballs developed their own twist on English: those that are not natively English speak 'Engrish', where letters are switched ('you' instead of 'yu'), words are abbreviated ('pls' instead of 'please') and mispronunciations are often spelled out ('gib' for 'give'). FALCO's mockery remained, with the national stereotypes

forming the basis of an infinite amount of politically incorrect jokes. 'Classic' jokes persisted and were reused, such as the joke that 'Polandball cannot into space', which [allegedly was first brought up by FALCO](#). While the United Kingdom is already depicted with a top hat in his original comics, other countryballs also started to feature specific attributes, such as the USA's sunglasses, the Netherlands' red eyes or Israel's rectangular shape. The amalgamation of these characteristics created a popular format to satirize geopolitical events - such as the aforementioned comic of the post-Brexit UK-countryball protecting its border from a separated Scotland, standing on a wall inspired by a Hadrian's Wall/Game of Thrones-crossover.

[aesop\_image

img="http://networkcultures.org/longform/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2017/11/main-qimg-1ba0a55dbe6ca99810d2fa201746017d.png" align="center" lightbox="on" caption="Figure 3: According to a Quora user, this comic was posted by FALCO and sparked the catchphrase "poland cannot into space" captionposition="center" revealfx="off" overlay\_revealfx="off"]

Fast-forward to 2017, and the countryball comics have become a global internet phenomenon, with multiple internet platforms being dedicated to the peculiar characters. On Facebook, [the POLANDBALL page](#) has gathered over 400.000 likes, and other Facebook pages such as [USABall](#), [EUBall](#) and [Germanyball](#) also gained a fair share of followers. Apart from these usual suspects, the countryball culture on Facebook is quite a deep rabbit hole of obscure countryballs, with pages dedicated to Ancient Empires ([SPQRball](#)), meta-pages ([The Polandball Report](#)) and religions ([Christianityball](#)). The [Polandball Wiki](#) is another bastion of countryball information, which features 12.779 page-entries, 480.159 page-edits and 30.380 media files. In China, [the Polandball page on Baidu Tieba](#) forms an alternative to the often-blocked Western platforms.

This text focuses on arguably the most prominent Polandball-sphere on the internet: [r/polandball on Reddit](#). This 'subreddit' (a subplatform on Reddit) has gained significant traction, and as mentioned before, has seen a sudden increase in attention in 2017. In the current day, Polandball is especially interesting in light of (1) an alleged increase in geopolitical drama, (2) memes being used for [political meme-ing](#) and [meme warfare](#), which awkwardly positions the countryball comics who have been satirizing politics for a longer time and (3) Polandball in comparison to omnipresent 'regular' internet memes. In this text I deal with each of these topics, but first, I will provide an introductory overview of Reddit and r/polandball

[aesop\_chapter title="Polandball is of Reddit" bgtype="img" full="off" video\_autoplay="on" bgcolor="#888888" minheight="10" maxheight="50" revealfx="off" overlay\_revealfx="off"]

According to one of its moderators, the subplatform [r/polandball](#) on Reddit forms 'one of (if not the) powerhouses of Polandball' on the internet, making it an important sphere when exploring the countryball-phenomenon. For those unaware, Reddit, titling itself with the tagline 'the front page of the internet', is the most popular online content aggregator on the globe. The platform has an incredibly large user base of around [300 million active users](#), with Alexa ranking it as the [7th most popular website worldwide](#). Created in 2005 by two roommates at the University of Virginia, Reddit is still powered by the same basic mechanism: users, referred to as 'redditors', can publish content, comment on posts and 'upvote' or 'downvote' content they like or dislike. Well-received content becomes more visible as it moves up in a list of posts, powered [by a ranking algorithm](#) that takes into account the amount of up- and downvotes and the post's time of submission. The website is made up of thousands of topic-specific subpages called 'subreddits', with topics ranging from obvious to obscure. Subreddits are often referred to with 'r/' prepended to their names, inspired by their URLs (e.g. 'reddit.com/r/worldnews'). Among the most [popular subreddits](#) are [r/funny](#), a collection of a wide variety of humorous content, [r/AskReddit](#), where redditors ask and answer provoking questions, and [r/todayilearned](#), where redditors post intriguing facts. The total variety of subreddits is staggering, varying from [r/musictheory](#) to [r/BabyElephantGifs](#) (a big recommendation) and [r/LegalAdvice](#) to [r/ShittyLifeProTips](#). What differentiates subreddits, apart from their topic interests, is the ruleset subreddit moderators can set up to regulate commenting and posting. These rules can ensure adult content is removed, discussions in the comments remain civilized, or [comments that contest a specific political agenda are not deleted](#). Each redditor can subscribe to subreddits whose popular content are then aggregated on a personalized landing page. On [r/all](#), popular content from all subreddits is displayed, even those a redditor is not subscribed to, forming a 'best of' collection of platform-wide content. Through its combination of intuitive platform mechanisms, a massive user base and strong sense of community, Reddit has become a cultural juggernaut in the contemporary digital media landscape.

As mentioned before, [r/polandball](#), is one of the (if not the) main online spheres for countryball comics. It was created on May 23rd, 2011, and since its inception, it has grown to a large and [well-defined](#) countryball community. The description in the [sidebar](#), where a subreddit's rules are often displayed, reads as follows:

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[aesop_quote type="block" align="center" quote="Polandball is unique and it should remain so. It's clearly distinguished from rage comics and memes. Read the Official Polandball Tutorial. To keep the quality of the content high, all comics have to comply to it." revealfx="off"]
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Indeed, the guidelines on r/polandball are well defined, indicated by its impressive [rules page](#). To remain a place for 'high quality' countryball content, redditors who want to submit their own creation need to let their first comic be approved by the moderators - only after such an approval does the user gain rights to submit new comics. This rite of passage is no mere feat, as the rules page states that 'standards are higher for approval comics' so 'you need to impress the mod handling your request with a funny and original joke'. The subreddit is further supported by [multiple tutorials](#) on how to craft the comics, [rules for commenting](#), an [annual subreddit history](#), a [list of episodic comic chains](#) and even a '[wall of shame](#)' with low-quality and rule-breaking content. Illustratively, the colors of a countryball should correspond perfectly to the respective country's flag:

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[aesop_image  
img="http://networkcultures.org/longform/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2017/11/countryball-correct-colors.png" align="center" lightbox="on" caption="Figure 4: Style Guide Image from r/polandball" captionposition="center" revealfx="off" overlay_revealfx="off"]
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Not surprisingly, the strict rules (of which the prohibition of MS Paint's circle tool should be noted) are considered as overly strict by some. For instance, the [Polandball wiki](#) describes r/polandball as being 'known for its moderation, that is seen as strict and authoritarian by numerous people outside the website. It is sometimes referred to as fascism, both sarcastically and non-sarcastically'. In the eyes of the r/polandball moderators however, the subreddit's rules are intended to keep the space friendly and 'high-quality', or as one moderator unobtrusively puts it: 'there are rules to prevent everything going to shit'. That these rules do not prevent everything is apparent because national and racial stereotyping is not only tolerated, but even forms the basis of the Polandball-humor, for instance as seen in a recent popular entry mocking slave trade and the USA's hypocrisy (the 8-ball represents black people in the countryball world).

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[aesop_image  
img="http://networkcultures.org/longform/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2017/11/eayps7gbbyiz.png" align="center" lightbox="on" caption="Figure 5: "Imports", posted on r/polandball on 31 August 2017 by u/Ludie_Engmann" captionposition="center" revealfx="off" overlay_revealfx="off"]
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Be it despite or due to its strict submission rules, r/polandball currently is the [209<sup>th</sup> most popular subreddit](#) platform-wide. If this seems insignificant, the subreddit's relevance is also demonstrated by the fact that a large amount of countryball comics are first posted there and later copied onto other platforms. As one of r/polandball moderator's claims, '95% of comics on here are original content', which is even an understatement: for all the 3793

comics posted in 2016, 90% is new content, 8% is reposted content and only one post originated on another platform\*. As one moderator summarizes, because 'Reddit is good for creating tight-knit communities and favorizing the creation of OC [Original Content]', the subreddit has become the '*comic-making machine of the Polandball-world*'.

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[aesop_chapter title="Scrutinizing r/polandball's Growth" bctype="img" full="off"
video_autoplay="on" bgcolor="#888888" minheight="10" maxheight="50" revealfx="off"
overlay_revealfx="off"]
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While r/polandball was popular since a few years, over the past months, its subscription count has seen a sudden influx:

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[aesop_image
img="http://networkcultures.org/longform/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2017/11/r-polandball
-subscribers.jpg" align="center" lightbox="on" caption="Figure 6: Subscribers on
r/polandball, derived from redditmetrics.com" captionposition="center" revealfx="off"
overlay_revealfx="off"]
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As of September 4th 2017, the subreddit broke 350.000 subscribers, and this increase does not seem to slow down. Reddit is growing in general, but the spike in traffic on r/polandball remains notable. I asked the subreddit's 23 moderators, of which five replied, about this recent success.

While there can be all sorts of (very entertaining) cultural and political reasons for r/polandball's sudden growth, almost all moderators attributed it to a less dramatic reason: infrastructural changes to the Reddit platform. Specifically, several moderators mentioned the introduction of [r/popular](#): a page [introduced on February 15th 2017](#) intended as a landing page featuring diverse Reddit content for users that are not logged in. Previously, logged-out users would land on a frontpage that was curated by the Reddit administrators, where, as the administrators [described](#), they 'cherry picked a set of subreddits to appear as a default set, which had the effect of editorializing Reddit'. To create a more organic display of Reddit's user-generated content, the site was updated with the inclusion of r/popular, a landing page that algorithmically showed whatever was popular on the *entirety* of Reddit (save for [some filtered subreddits](#)) instead of only displaying a curation. This change could have led to r/polandball's sudden popularity spike, because the subreddit is quite popular, but was previously not amongst the cherry-picked default subreddits. As such, r/popular likely drove more logged-out users to become familiar with the subreddit and subscribing at a later point. Another platform-related reason is the fact that [the moderators dropped their 'no X-posting' policy](#) in February 2017, which means that it was again allowed to post

comics originating on r/polandball on other subreddits, increasing its the platform-wide visibility. However, r/polandball has been steadily growing prior to the introduction of r/popular, and the influx does not exactly align with the platform's changes timewise, so maybe more cultural and political (*and* more interesting) reasons are not far-fetched after all.

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[aesop_chapter title="More Political Drama, More Polandball?" bctype="img" full="off" video_autoplay="on" bgcolor="#888888" minheight="10" maxheight="50" revealfx="off" overlay_revealfx="off"]
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One of such reasons is for the growth is that a recent increase in international political controversies has created a larger inspiration pool for poignant countryball comics, as well as generating an increased interest in geopolitical satire overall. As first-hand witnesses, most r/polandball moderators concur with this hypothesis. One moderator states that 'every major real life event causes a wave of comics on the topic'. Another moderator undergirds this claim by stating that comics containing 'newsy' commentary attracts visitors:

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[aesop_quote type="block" align="center" quote="When something 'important' happens at global stage people seem to step by in the sense of 'let's see what r/polandball has to say about this'...and when they then stumble across a good comic like it happened with 'Damn it, Russia!' and 'New Leadership' those will go through the roof." revealfx="off"]
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Another moderator attests that event-related comics like 'content satirizing Trump's presidency' are gateways that 'bring in a lot of viewers', while a different moderator states that these events do not even have to be major international topics:

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[aesop_quote type="block" align="center" quote="We saw it the Malaysian airline tragedies. We saw it with Trump's election. We even saw it with something as esoteric for most people as stories about rising sea levels affecting Pacific island nations. Any time some topic becomes popular in the news and social media we see an uptick in comics about it." revealfx="off"]
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While a third moderator is more restrained in stating that 'the real-life drama has to be pretty severe to cause mad wild spikes in traffic', he does agree that political events like Trump's presidency have provided incentives for an increase in traffic (i.e. submissions, visitors and comments), becoming so severe that the team 'had to "raise the bar" on low-effort Trump comics', mainly because 'many of them blew up across Reddit and were a nightmare to comment moderate'. If these real-world events indeed cause an uptick in traffic, it would be fair to argue that an increased interest in countryball comics (or at the

very least in r/polandball) is a corollary of increased international drama.

This claim can be tested by analyzing r/polandball's data. When taking Brexit as an example, traffic (in this case the amount of comments) indeed spikes after June 23rd 2016, the day the British citizens voted to leave the European Union:

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[aesop_image  
img="http://networkcultures.org/longform/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2017/11/Comments.png" align="center" lightbox="on" caption="Figure 7: Total amount of comments on r/polandball from June 10th to July 10th 2016" captionposition="center" revealfx="off" overlay_revealfx="off"]
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Another visualization supports the hypothesis by pointing to the actual words used in these comments:

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[aesop_image  
img="http://networkcultures.org/longform/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2017/11/most-significant-words.jpg" align="center" lightbox="on" caption="Figure 8: 11 most-used words on r/polandball for each month in 2016, using u/fhoffa's SQL code and Bernhard Rieder's RankFlow.  
" captionposition="center" revealfx="off" overlay_revealfx="off"]
```

Here, it is apparent that in the month of Brexit, EU and UK are popular, being the second and third most used words in the comments on the subreddit, respectively. Also, the month during, before and after the 2016 US Presidential Elections, 'america' is used more often than in the other months. While these are very broad lines, the visualization suggests that the conversation surrounding the countryball comics is fueled by real-world politics, being energized by and 'reacting' to geopolitical events.

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[aesop_chapter title="Jumping on the Political Drama-Bandwagon" bgtype="img" full="off" video_autoplay="on" bgcolor="#888888" minheight="10" maxheight="50" revealfx="off" overlay_revealfx="off"]
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However, the relation between the severity of international drama and the increase in countryball traffic seems not fully causal because Polandball comics are rarely directly commenting on specific geopolitical events. In [an article on Polandball](#), Ondřej Procházka explains this by stating that the comics are 'often deriving their humor from the absence of decorum'. Indeed, the [r/polandball rules page](#) lists that 'Individuals / political parties / companies / etc. are not to be depicted' and the comics that 'merely retell history or news

items' and do not feature an 'original comedic or imaginative slant' are 'simply boring and therefore bad comics.' A result of these rules can be seen in the two massively upvoted comics mentioned by the moderator above, 'Damn, it, Russia!' and 'New Leadership': both are inspired by political events, but only represent them on an abstract level. '[Damn it, Russia!](#)' (figure 10) depicts the USA pouring gas over itself, lighting it, and blaming Russia for the deed. '[New Leadership](#)' (figure 9) also shows the USA, this time packing the icons of American liberty and leaving a nervous Germany as the new 'leader of the free world'. Both comics draw from real-world geopolitical drama (i.e. the USA's hostility towards Russia and the ideological shifts after Trumps' presidency), but in the case of these two comics, the depersonalization and abstraction leads to an indirect depiction of real-world events at most.

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[aesop_image  
img="http://networkcultures.org/longform/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2017/11/sk4oay72789y.png" align="center" lightbox="on" caption="Figure 9: "Damn it, Russia", posted on r/polandball on 12 January 2017 by u/Sr_Marques" captionposition="center" revealfx="off" overlay_revealfx="off"] [aesop_image  
img="http://networkcultures.org/longform/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2017/11/4ZykfzY.png" align="center" lightbox="on" caption="Figure 10: "New Leadership", posted on r/polandball on 20 January 2017 by u/disneyvillain" captionposition="center" revealfx="off" overlay_revealfx="off"]
```

When further exploring r/polandball's data, after the 2016 US Presidential Elections on November 8<sup>th</sup>, one might expect a similar traffic spike to the post-Brexit activity, but the following chart shows more dispersed traffic:

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[aesop_image  
img="http://networkcultures.org/longform/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2017/11/PostAndComments.png" align="center" lightbox="on" caption="Figure 11: Total amount of comments and posts during November 2016" captionposition="center" revealfx="off" overlay_revealfx="off"]
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This implies another reason for countryball interest: activity is tied to the quantity and quality of the comics, rather than on the severity of the geopolitical happenings. One moderator implies this is due to the countryball 'artists' needing time to create quality comics, stating: 'our artists do know that we won't tolerate bandwagoning and karma-grabs by posting weak comics. Because of this some might wait and work on good content' ('karma' refers to points you gain when receiving upvotes on Reddit). As such, there exist a delay between the occurrence of major political events and these topics finding their way



into a comic.

Another reason for the absence of consequent traffic spikes after major political events are policies enforced by the r/polandball moderators that normalize the appearance of various political events and countries. As one moderator states, ‘a lot of times “repeating whatever is currently in the news” is a low effort way to get material for a comic’, which resulted in measurements to ensure the comics on r/polandball represent a wide variety of geopolitical topics and countries. Most significantly, the subreddit features a [Joke Life Preserve](#): a list of often-used topics that are either only allowed submission if the comic is exceptionally original (e.g. Brexit and Trump’s presidency) or permanently banned because of their over-usage (e.g. jokes about Switzerland’s neutrality). Also, the moderators organize ‘[Lesser Known September](#)’, an annual event during which comics containing the most-used countryballs are denied publication. Figure 8 shows that Lesser Known September in 2016 did indeed shift the conversation towards ‘lesser known’ countries such as Japan and China, as those countries got mentioned more often during that month. Such measurements are implemented to prevent popular topics or countries becoming repetitive and with it, have the side-effect of diminishing the appearance of dominant political events. Therefore, because comics on r/polandball are not merely hopping on the bandwagon of popular political events, the relation between real-world drama and Polandball comic-creation is not one-to-one. Since internet memes are often thriving because they remix and refer to popular events, the restraint of r/polandball is fairly unique - but more on this later.

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[aesop_chapter title="Polandball and Reddit Meme-Politicking" bgtype="img" full="off" video_autoplay="on" bgcolor="#888888" minheight="10" maxheight="50" revealfx="off" overlay_revealfx="off"]
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On an even broader level, it can be argued that r/polandball’s increased popularity is in part due to the subreddit profiting from a broader trend of ‘meme politics’. Media theorist Limor Shifman argues that creating, consuming or rating visual internet artefacts, such as memes, videos or gifs, are modern-day forms of political participation. In her 2013 book *Memes in Digital Culture*, she illustrates how new media have created new, and more importantly, *easier* ways to participate in a political debate:

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[aesop_quote type="block" align="center" quote="In recent years the perception of what constitutes political participation has been broadened to include mundane practices, such as commenting on political blogs and posting jokes about politicians. To a large extent, this transformed perception of what counts as political participation is tied to the rise of the Internet and other digital media. New media offer appealing and convenient ways to stimulate participatory activity, especially among younger citizens who have been the least
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likely to participate in formal politics.” revealfx=”off”]

As such, digital media have – perhaps rather obviously – generated new entry points for political participation. Less straight-forward however, is Shifman’s claim that internet memes are now used as vectors for political agency, stating that ‘meme creation is an accessible, cheap, and enjoyable route for voicing one’s political opinions’. According to Shifman, political events fuel the creation of memes, arguing that ‘any major event of the past few years has generated a flux of commentary memes’. While memes might often be considered apolitical and ‘just for fun; such ‘meme politicking’ – creating or spreading memes for various political ends – is used to humorously push a specific political agenda. This is supported in Whitney Philips’ *This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things*, in which she argues that internet memes and trolling used to be just ‘for the lulz’, but were increasingly used for more serious, and indeed, political ends. Such ‘fluxes of commentary memes’ are indeed visible on multiple internet platforms. One of the most famous examples is [Bernie Sanders’ Dank Meme Stash](#), a public Facebook group of around 430.000 members filled with memes that either positively portray the Vermont senator, or provide humorous commentary on his opponents. Reddit’s [r/all page](#) overtly displays the intertwining of memes and politics, as one is likely to stumble upon on subreddits filled with political memes like [r/PoliticalHumor](#) or [r/FULLCOMMUNISM](#). But meme politicking can also take on more iconic forms. Perhaps the most well-known example of this is [Pepe the Frog](#): once an innocent caricature of an amphibian, Pepe was appropriated by Trump supporters and alt-righters, mostly on 4chan, resulting in the meme becoming an unofficial mascot of the alt-right.

While I will contest labelling countryball comics as memes below, the crudely drawn comics fit comfortably within a wave of both politically motivated and meme-focused internet users. With a format that is poking fun at national stereotypes and international political drama, the countryball comics arguably form an appealing attraction to internet users with a political interest, let alone agenda. This claim is largely supported by the by the [r/polandball](#) moderators. One moderator suspects the increased popularity of the subreddit is because ‘so many more people have been getting involved in politics and geopolitics recently’, while another notes that this general politicization in the online sphere has been visible through the content of countryball comics for a longer time:

[aesop\_quote type=”block” align=”center” quote=”We certainly noted the swift towards a more hateful and uncivilized ‘culture’ when it comes to online communication. Polandball of course is prone to be ‘misused’ for political soapboxing thanks to its format. There always have been pb-comics transporting an offensive or even racist agenda and there probably always will be.” revealfx=”off”]

Therewith, the moderator highlights the vulnerability of the countryball format being hijacked for (extreme) politicking. Another moderator describes that because 'the comics have always had a political bent', innocent jokes and actual politicking are sometimes hard to separate:

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[aesop_quote type="block" align="center" quote="We have tried to eschew actual politicking and focus mostly on jokes but obviously you can't separate the two. The main goal is that comics should be funny. If they are funny and carry a political message then so be it. If they are just unfunny politicking then we don't want it." revealfx="off"]
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In this way, it is implied that the comics may carry political messages, as long as there is something to laugh about. But a different moderator states this politicking is unlikely to happen anyway, as the effort required to draw a cartoon forms a barrier for politically-oriented 'meme hijacking':

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[aesop_quote type="block" align="center" quote="Making pb-comics takes time and effort compared to re-arranging and implementing images from the webz like what happened to Pepe for example, so I doubt we will see Polandball getting 'adopted' this way from one (radical) side or another. It's not what Polandball stands for anyway." revealfx="off"]
```

An easier practice however, is politicking through commenting. A few moderators attest that 'comment politicization' is increasing, stating that while the countryball comics are first and foremost intended for a laugh:

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[aesop_quote type="block" align="center" quote="Many, many commenters do take the comics too seriously, and they oftentimes flame each other and start political arguments in the comment sections. I've seen this phenomenon grow over the years, and it's something unfortunate we have to deal with while moderating." revealfx="off"]
```

Other moderators also attested to this comment politicization, stating that 'political arguments are not allowed as per our comment policy, yet personally I've seen a massive increase in unflaired [i.e. unregistered] users doing just that'. An attempt to regulate these political arguments has caused the moderators to become criticized by redditors; for 'not tolerating any extreme', one moderators states, 'us mods are in a somewhat unique position of often being called both "SJWs" and "alt-right racists"'. As such, the moderators imply that because the comics are about politics, they are inevitably attracting political discussion and politicking.

What can the Reddit data indicate of r/polandball's subjectification to (extreme) politicking?

When analyzing what *other* subreddits r/polandball commenters are also active on, the r/polandball commenters do not seem to be particularly extreme:

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[aesop_image  
img="http://networkcultures.org/longform/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2017/11/Subreddits.png" align="center" lightbox="on" caption="Figure 12: Subreddits where r/polandball commenters also comment on. Edge weight denotes the amount of shared commenters" captionposition="left" revealfx="off" overlay_revealfx="off"]
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Most of the shared subreddits are either non-political and ‘mainstream’, such as r/AskReddit, r/todayilearned or r/pics, or non-partisan politics-related subreddits such as r/worldnews, r/europe and r/politics (although the latter [has been criticised](#) for being overly left-wing). In any case, overtly-partisan political subreddits do not appear, such as [r/The\\_Donald](#), [r/neoliberalism](#), or [r/LateStageCapitalism](#). These political ties do exist on other subreddits. For instance, [r/Anarcho\\_Capitalism](#) shares its Reddit ‘commenter neighborhood’ with r/The\_Donald and r/Libertarian, while r/LateStageCapitalism shares visitors with [r/lostgeneration](#) (lamenting ‘the [economic] problems of an educated young workforce’), and r/COMPLETEANARCHY (of which the name speaks for itself). Additionally, the most-used words on the subreddit visualized in figure 8 do not display any partisan, highly political or offensive terms, which do pop up on other political subreddits (e.g. r/The\_Donald is known for terms like ‘cuckservative’, ‘SJW’ and ‘libtard’). Indeed, the r/polandball moderators seem right in claiming that ‘no [political] side is really more dominant than the other’ and the commenters in general ‘behave accordingly’ to the dismissal of ‘politicization of the content aimed to despise other countries or cultures’. Be it due to its moderators running a tight ship or its frequenters being so well-mannered, r/polandball thus forms a relatively politically neutral space, despite its necessary dealings with political subjects.

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[aesop_chapter title="Regular Meme or Artistic Medium?" bctype="img" full="off" video_autoplay="on" bgcolor="#888888" minheight="10" maxheight="50" revealfx="off" overlay_revealfx="off"]
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Even if the Polandball comics are used for ‘politicking’, would it still be *meme politicking*? Are countryball comics even memes? And while we are at it, what are memes, anyway? Analyzing some prominent definitions of the concept of an ‘internet meme’ reveals some crucial differences between ‘regular’ memes and countryball comics on r/polandball. Additionally, the continuous popularity of Polandball is a characteristic that differentiates it from most internet memes. As I will now explain, this further sets the Polandball comics apart as a unique internet phenomenon.

While being a well-known term, the exact definition of a meme remains relatively fuzzy. Originally coined by the biologist in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), Richard Dawkins denotes a 'meme' as a replicator for biological data that mutates over time. A few decades later, the term has been revived by becoming synonymous with 'viral' internet artefacts. As captured in the word 'viral', the aspect of replication has remained a defining characteristic when referring to the digital sort of meme. For instance, in [Carlos Díaz's attempt](#) to combine multiple frameworks to create a definition for an 'internet meme', the fact that the artefacts are 'passed on' is deemed crucial:

[aesop\_quote type="block" align="center" quote="An internet meme is a unit of information (idea, concept or belief), which replicates by passing on via Internet (e-mail, chat, forum, social networks, etc.) in the shape of a hyperlink, video, image, or phrase. It can be passed on as an exact copy or can change and evolve. The mutation on the replication can be by meaning, keeping the structure of the meme or vice versa. The mutation occurs by chance, addition or parody, and its form is not relevant. An IM depends both on a carrier and a social context where the transporter acts as a filter and decides what can be passed on. It spreads horizontally as a virus at a fast and accelerating speed." revealfx="off"]

In formulating this definition, Díaz draws from Dawkins' three aspects of successful memetic mutation: *fecundity*, *longevity* and *fidelity*. The three concepts are used to argue that 'a successful meme needs to be rapidly replicated (fecundity) with a sustainable replication pattern (longevity) while maintaining its original form (fidelity)' (Dawkins 149). Everyone and their mother are now aware of the stock photo of two girls and a distracted guy, known as the '[distracted boyfriend meme](#)'. This is indeed a (successful) meme because: it was rapidly replicated (fecundity), the meme replication lasted (and still lasts) several months until it died down (longevity), and the original stock photo was maintained (fidelity).

[aesop\_image  
img="http://networkcultures.org/longform/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2017/11/distracted-boyfriend.png" align="center" lightbox="on" caption="Figure 13: The Distracted Boyfriend Meme" captionposition="left" revealfx="off" overlay\_revealfx="off"]

In comparison, Polandball comics are also relatively rapidly replicated, have been replicated for a long period of time and have maintained a certain format. As such, it would be fair to state that they are indeed internet memes. Polandball would be a highly successful meme at that, since it trumps even the infinitely popular distracted boyfriend meme in terms of longevity. Some countryball-platforms such as the [Polandball wiki](#) and the [Polandball Tumblr page](#) embrace this meme-label, respectively describing Polandball as an 'internet

meme that consists of user-generated cartoon comics, artworks, and communities' and 'a user-generated internet meme'. However, there seems to be some contestation on considering countryball comics as memes, as r/polandball outright denounces this categorization: its sidebar states that 'Polandball is unique and it should remain so. It's clearly distinguished from rage comics and memes.'

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After being asked for the reason behind distinguishing countryball comics from 'regular' internet memes, one r/polandball moderator brings up longevity as a differentiation:

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[aesop_quote type="block" align="center" quote="Memes are often short-lived, basic, limited ideas. Polandball is different simply because it's clearly set itself apart as an artistic medium, with a lot of freedom to go about format, content matter, and style. Polandball is a global phenomenon that's out-lived the usual few month lifespan of a typical meme. Our subreddit has been going on about 6 years now, and Polandball itself is about 8 years old, and it's still very much alive, kicking, and actually growing in diversity of content (i.e. animation)." revealfx="off"]
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Another moderator concurs with the above by stating:

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[aesop_quote type="block" align="center" quote="Polandball has been going on for a long, long time, and as you can see it's still hugely popular. You can't say the same about other memes like rage comics. Polandball can constantly adapt to a changing geopolitical climate." revealfx="off"]
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As such, the moderators list the long lifespan of the countryball comics as a differentiating attribute. Interestingly, they knowingly or unknowingly touch upon the Dawkins' meme-attributes, as they attest that the comics are actively replicated (fecundity), the 'replication pattern' has been sustainable for over six years (longevity), and the format has remained its original form but is also able to 'mutate' by 'adapting to a changing geopolitical climate' and transforming into other forms such as animated gifs (fidelity). As such, the refusal to consider countryball comics as internet memes might serve the exact opposite argument, when considering Dawkins' original definition.

However, the moderators make a stronger case when considering one part of Díaz definition, namely that a meme should spread 'as a virus at a fast and accelerating speed'.

Many of the characteristics in Díaz' definition seem to be pointed to this 'memetic spread and distribution'. The memetic spread is indeed what must have occurred after FALCO first drew the comics on Krautchan, since soon after the comics [started to appear on various other digital platforms](#). However, the fact that the countryball comics have maintained a considerable audience for more than seven years raises the following question: is an internet meme still an internet meme if the memetic spread has plateaued and the digital artefacts in question have transformed into a consistently popular format? This question can be answered with 'no' when claiming that a format like Polandball does not depend on, or at least cannot be defined by, its temporality and virality. Indeed, determining the 'success' of a meme with the temporal aspects of fecundity, longevity and fidelity might have been applicable during the insurgence of the countryball comics, but arguably does not seem to be defining characteristic of Polandball comics anymore. After all, the comics have reached a consistent audience and format. This claim is supported further when considering r/polandball's strict submission process, which complicates a viral spread of the countryball comics, impeding the memetic distribution that Díaz sees as defining an internet meme. In this sense, it might be said that countryball comics transcended from being a viral internet meme and transformed into its own unique format, or as one r/polandball moderator summarizes: 'Polandball is (no longer) a meme, it's a *genre*'. If you follow this line of argument, then an internet meme must sustain longevity, but only up to a certain point - indeed, defining a meme now becomes rather vague.

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[aesop_chapter title="Low-Effort Memes, High-Effort Countryball Comics?" bctype="img" full="off" video_autoplay="on" bgcolor="#888888" minheight="10" maxheight="50" revealfx="off" overlay_revealfx="off"]
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Apart from longevity, a second differentiating characteristic is brought up by the moderators: crafting a countryball comic requires a high amount of effort, whereas creating regular internet memes only asks for simple adjustments (or 'mutations'). As one moderator states:

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[aesop_quote type="block" align="center" quote="You have to actually make real original content rather than copy and pasting an image and putting text on it or the 'rage comics' crap where you just copy and paste a bunch of stuff together and sort of cobble together lots of old jokes. Our posters actually draw original artwork that makes a joke. It is much more like a comic strip rather than a meme." revealfx="off"]
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As such, the moderator claims the amount of dedication required to produce the comics is another factor that sets the comics apart from internet memes. This effort-aspect is repeated by the other moderators, who, even though the countryball comics are

intentionally crude, claim the 'high quality' content expected of the submitters sets the format apart from 'quick and dirty' internet memes. Another moderator states that the countryball format allows for a 'lot of freedom to go about format, content matter, and style', arguing that:

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[aesop_quote type="block" align="center" quote="One attribute of a meme is that there's a rigid format that's easily replicated. Whilst we're pretty strict in prescribing the structure of comics on our subreddit, we don't tend to explicitly write into canon what a country's character ought to be." revealfx="off"]
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The fact that a countryball comic has to feature original content can be seen as a difference to the small mutations typical for internet memes. Indeed, 'regular' memes are often slight adjustments or blatant repetitions of the exact same artefacts. The r/polandball rules page explicitly prohibits these slight adjustments: 'DO NOT copy+paste images from the internet or elements within your comic (outlines, eyes, props etc.) It's lazy and we can easily spot it. Draw everything by hand.'

If quality and originality are setting Polandball apart from 'lazy' memes like [rage comics](#), should quality and originality then be parameters for defining internet memes? Indeed, if the content of each image changes significantly per instance, can the change still be seen as memetic mutation? When considering Dawkins' definition, the countryball comics' originality (at least on r/polandball) might indeed set them apart from internet memes, as the latter is defined by virally spreading through both slight and big mutations, whereas the former explicitly has to feature a substantial change in terms of content. A striking piece of evidence for this claim is the fact that the most repeated and 'meme-y' Polandball joke is officially forbidden on the subreddit: the rules page states that the moderators 'will not review [the] comic if the joke is some version of "Poland cannot into space"'. As such, this prohibition of repetition, slight mutations, and copy-pasting significantly differentiates the countryball comics from internet memes. This does not automatically speak for the spread and mutation of the countryball comics on other platforms, but since we have concluded that r/polandball is the *countryball-making machine* of the internet, its characteristics are sure to spread further than its own hub.

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It remains a question how long r/polandball's recent explosive growth will continue - perhaps the surge will dwindle when North Korea stops its nuclear threats, the EU reaches



a stable equilibrium and Donald Trump suddenly becomes the most diplomatic president yet, so countryball-creators have less to joke about – but indeed, this is quite unlikely. Regardless, the system should outlive its participants: the affordances of Reddit, such as featuring tools to ban the submissions, comments and redditors that do not conform to subreddit-rules, should allow the moderators to maintain the coherence of both the community and the content that has come to define r/polandball. Therefore, even with an influx of new users, Reddit's platform specifics should ensure the countryball format will not radically change, get 'hijacked' for political ends or become 'meme-ified' through low-effort copy-paste-mutations. As Polandball explores [different formats](#) on other platforms and the r/polandball moderators claim they will 'allow [Polandball] to explore new aspects and art styles within certain boundaries', it remains to be seen whether the countryball comics will conservatively stay true to FALCO's roots or move to more uncharted territory.

I have only explored the countryball content and culture on r/polandball, which in terms of platform mechanisms as well as content significantly differ from e.g. those on Facebook. Indeed, the fact that r/polandball is a mostly self-contained sphere was highlighted by the moderators, with one describing they 'are not the arbiters of the medium' nor 'gatekeeper[s] of what constitutes polandball as a genre'. As such, the cultural differences between various countryball platforms will most likely differ significantly. Especially the political usage of countryball comics becomes more likely since there are no gatekeepers to restrict the partisan appropriation of the images, and as such, the question of the tools an internet platform offers becomes a highly political matter. But even if a cartoon from r/polandball pops up in your infinitely-scrollable Facebook Timeline, at least it might give some comfort that the meme you are looking at was not just a quick and dirty copy-paste image, but rather a product from a well-defined digital culture that was created through a coming-together of artistic effort, originality, style guides, joke rules and submission processes. In fact, it was not even a meme.

*Sal Hagen is a Research MA student in New Media at the University of Amsterdam. His research focuses on both juxtaposing and bringing together theory and technology of digital media, mainly through using [digital methods](#) to research political movements on online platforms. Sal is part of the research group [Open Intelligence Lab](#).*

### **\*Methods**

*The visualisations in this article were generated with Reddit data published by Felix Baumgartner from [Pushshift.io](#) and hosted on Google BigQuery by Felipe Hoffa.*

*Read more about the methods and visualisation techniques used in this text on [this page](#).*

[aesop\_chapter subtitle="References" bgtype="img" full="on" video\_autoplay="on" bgcolor="#888888" minheight="10" maxheight="50" revealfx="off" overlay\_revealfx="off"]

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