

# Making Sense of Facebook's Content Moderation: A Posthumanist Perspective on Communicative Competence and Internet Memes

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Ondřej Procházka, *University of Ostrava*

## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on how Facebook users understand and adapt to or resist recently increasing intensity in Facebook content-curating practices in pages organized around geopolitical satire memes generally known as "Countryball comics." Participants attach a ludic, nonserious discursive and communal ethos to potentially offensive memes, by which they create a type of sociality that faces punitive actions from Facebook (content deletion and publishing suspensions). Following meta-level discussions about correctness, appropriateness, and acceptability, participants feel compelled to adjust their communicative behavior in ways ranging from self-censorship to altering communicative practices native to such meme pages. Moreover, participants construe Facebook as a composite human (Facebook users and content moderators) and algorithm-driven nonhuman (automated content recognition tools and filters) entity actively involved and embedded in everyday communication. Drawing on posthumanist sociolinguistics and applied linguistics (Pennycook 2016, 2018), the article revisits the traditional notion of "communicative competence" to account for the dynamic interplay between dispersed, disembodied, and (non-)human interactants, environment, and artifacts.

Contact Ondřej Procházka at Department of English and American Studies, Reální 5, 701 03 Ostrava, Czech Republic (on.prochazka@gmail.com).

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In late September 2016, an alliance of Facebook pages organized around Internet memes—groups of multimodal cultural artifacts that usually share features of content, form, or stance and that are created, modified, and spread across the web with awareness of each other (Shifman 2013)—announced a three-day coordinated blackout (ceasing all publishing activity) to protest and raise awareness of Facebook's “automated censorship”—an algorithm-based practice whereby a sufficient number of reports result in the flagged content being removed and the publishing page or profile suspended without having been reviewed and justified by Facebook staff and, more importantly, without a dialogue with the censored party. The protest allegedly involved over 175 content producers and meme pages grouping together over “20 million likes/followers” with a reach of “over 10% of Facebook's daily user base”<sup>1</sup> at the time, although the exact numbers cannot be ascertained due to a significant number of fake and inactive accounts. Two years later, the organizers of the blackout contend on the same page that the protest has had virtually no effect on Facebook policies and left the company's image seemingly “unscathed” in view of high-profile scandals including Cambridge Analytica data scandal or Facebook's controversial censorship of the iconic “napalm girl” photo (Ibrahim 2017).

Similar to other social media, Facebook provides a technological infrastructure that is co-constructed by its users, who regiment it through interaction along the lines of their social interests, for example, by creating and joining (or “liking”) profiles, pages, groups, and other collectivities dedicated to various interests, such as Internet memes. However, the organization of social life in such social niches is not merely subject to the human users who subscribe to and/or participate in them. The emerging body of literature on Facebook's automated content filtering and curating—the algorithms that validate, evaluate, and order the reach and presentation of content (e.g., posts and comments) to relevant users—shows also that these computational, artifactual, and other non-human entities play a significant part in digital communication reaching beyond the role of a mere intermediary (van Dijck 2013, 29; Tufekci 2015; Maly 2018).

Following this line of inquiry, the present work concentrates on the temporary suspension of a Facebook meme page that was thought to have been permanently deleted by Facebook on similar grounds (i.e., violation of its Community Standards) by its fans. The article follows its fan base's attempts to rebuild the page and pays particular attention to the communicative and social ramifications for its subsequent publishing conduct. Drawing on digital ethnography (Varis

1. See <http://memealliance.org/actions/>.

2016; Varis and Hou 2018), the article focuses on participants' metapragmatic reflections on and negotiation of what is *appropriate*, *correct*, and *acceptable* in terms of communicative conduct in light of their local, situated uptake of the content-curating mechanisms. It will demonstrate that the yardsticks for value attribution and judgments cannot be approached as emanating solely from one's command of particular communicative resources and proficiency in their histories of contextualization, nor are they entirely derived from communal communicative spaces dedicated to memes. The efforts to rebuild the meme page and subsequent adjustments to the communicative conduct point to an interconnected and mobile world in which the underlying algorithms become "participants that are complexly intertwined in the production of action, social meaning, and subjectivity" (Bucholtz and Hall 2016, 187). In this view, the traditional notion of communicative competence needs to account for the algorithmic agency implicated in sociohistorical trajectories of communicative resources in a large-scale, mediated, and multisited interactional work involving both human and nonhuman participants dispersed across memetic mediascape (i.e., other meme pages and digital niches organized around Internet memes).

To substantiate this conceptually, the article draws on the recent posthumanist inroads made in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics to emphasize the intensifying interrelationships among humans, environments, communication, and technology (Bucholtz and Hall 2016; Pennycook 2016, 2018; cf. Hayles 2010; Barad 2003). In this vein, posthumanism provides an incentive to broaden the understanding of communicative competence from the terms of internalized individual capacity (Wardhaugh 1986) and/or communal repertoire (Bernstein 2000) to modes of thinking that decentralize human agency and reorient the term to "the multimodal and multisensory semiotic practices of the everyday [that] include dynamic relations between semiotic resources, activities, artefacts and space" (Pennycook 2016, 2; Appadurai 2015). This can be viewed as an addendum to the other recent attempts to de-center the traditional notion of communicative competence (CC) in order to explore the ways "in which it is never solely about agent's ability to function smoothly and seamlessly in the social contexts in which they live, nor it is solely about communication," and at the same time to re-center the term by "reassembling the complex dynamics of different scale that constitute it and exploring the relationships between them" (Kataoka et al. 2013, 349–50).

The following section offers a brief overview of these attempts in connection with the burgeoning scholarship on Internet memes. This provides a segue into the posthumanist approach to Internet memes and their uptake in view of its

embeddedness in the technosocial infrastructure of Facebook. After a brief outline of the data, the article continues with analysis and discussion of specific excerpts, which is then used to revisit the notion of communicative competence in light of posthumanist thought.

### **Memes, Infrastructure, and Competence**

Ever since Hymes (1972) posited the term *communicative competence* against the Chomskyan formal understanding of *linguistic competence*, the term *competence* has become in sociolinguistic and linguistic-anthropological literature virtually inseparable from linguistic resources and a community that uses them. Originally, the line of inquiry in linguistic anthropology focused on largely one-to-one or face-to-face participant frameworks in institutionally enclosed (Canale 1983) or small-scale, geographically anchored communities (Ochs, 1988), and generally with little interest outside the fields of language acquisition and pedagogy (see Kataoka et al. 2013 for an overview). But the globalization characterized by complexifying connectivity and superdiversity (Vertovec 2007; Arnaut et al. 2017) has subsequently prompted sociolinguistics to expand the triad of communicative competence, community, and communicative resources, namely, (i) from stable and sedentary linguistic resources of abstracted and idealized languages to mobile linguistic as well as semiotic resources of different values and form-function relationships ratified locally (Blommaert 2010; cf. Gumperz 1982); (ii) from rather fixed and isolated (speech) communities to more dynamic and socially constructed communities of practice and affinity spaces (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1999; Gee 2005; cf. Rampton 2009); and (iii) from a rigid notion of competence framed and delimited by standardized frameworks such as CEFR (the Common European Framework of Reference) to more integrative notions of competence reflecting pragmatic and metapragmatic but, more importantly, situated aspects of communication (Blommaert and Backus 2013; see Goebel 2007 for an overview).

Importantly, following the ethnographically grounded research programs of Gumperz and Hymes, the locus of competence has shifted from abstract idealized language systems to the individual sociolinguistic actors and their “indexical biographies” (Blommaert and Backus 2013), whereby communicative competence has been generally approached “as both knowledge and practice where meaning is simultaneously negotiated and co-constructed by participants, the process thereof contributes to the reproduction of structures and text histories, while also being informed or mediated by local constraints” (Goebel 2007, 165; see also Ochs 1988, 21). This interactional account of competence has been

subsequently problematized with the increasing role of new media, as they generate more complex forms of competencies in order to account for increasing mobility of people and the communicative resources they draw on, as well as their largely unpredictable, indeterminable, and dynamically changing communicative potential (Appadurai 1996; Agha 2007). Simultaneously it has become gradually more difficult to define or delimit the notion of community in view of the dynamic relationships between groups of people and particular constellations of communicative resources and practices given the diversifying means and forms of mediation and mediatization (Androustopoulos 2016) in addition to the continuing fragmentation of the public sphere (van Dijk 2006, 69; van Dijk 2013, 112). It can be argued that memes instantiate this new social reality as they constitute “serialized material-semiotic re-enactments” of the ebbs and flows of everyday life “that move and change within the dynamics of mediation and connectivity” (Pilipets and Winter 2017, 161) within and across disparate social niches embedded in particular technosocial infrastructures that facilitate and shape communicative conduct therein.

The scholarship on Internet memes has witnessed similar developments as those with regard to CC. Early studies (most notably Knobel and Lankshear [2007]) approaching memes in terms of participatory culture rose from the formal discourse on memetics originally conceived by Dawkins (1976; cf. Blackmore 1999). Subsequently, a mounting body of literature has provided accounts on the role of memes in online community making (e.g., Blommaert and Varis 2015; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2015; Wiggins and Bowers 2015), problematizing the notion of literacy (e.g., Burgess and Green 2009; Procházka 2014), and engendering complex multisemiotic practices and forms identity work (Leppänen et al. 2014; Gal et al. 2016; Ask and Abidin 2018). More recently, several lines of research on memes show their potential to become part of larger knowledge constructions in which they exercise different augmenting functions, such as improving visual literacy (Romero and Bobkina, 2017) and developing critical thinking (Wells 2018) in a classroom. Memes have been also documented as an intrinsic part of multimodal and multisemiotic assemblages cocreating a particular identity (du Preez and Lombard 2014) and facilitating social bonding (Varis and Blommaert 2014) on social media or enhancing commodification of spatial objects such as tourist sites (Valdez et al. 2017). Nonetheless, perhaps the fastest-growing line of research shows that memes operate as agents in contemporary globalizing cultural and political participation (e.g., Shifman 2013; Heiskanen 2017; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017; Laineste and Voolaid 2018). Throughout these studies, one can also discern

a shift from tentative descriptions, classifications, and genealogies of memes as a series of genre-based entities to the ways in which they are situationally coparticipating in meaning making, identity work, and managing interpersonal relations.

Following Pennycook (2016, 2018), the present work draws on the insights from new materialisms (Bennet 2010), distributed language (Cowley 2012), and actor-network theory (Latour 2005) under the rubric of posthumanism to expand this research trajectory by zooming in on how the mediating techno-social infrastructure becomes actively involved and implicated in the sociality of memes and memetic discourses, how this involvement is perceived and reflected upon by participants' engagement with memes, and how it can refine the framework of communicative competence outlined above.

### **Posthumanist Perspective on Internet Memes and Algorithms**

By engaging with Internet memes, participants make sense of the transcultural flows mediated and calibrated through the technosocial infrastructures spanning multiple disparate social niches in which and through which they are circulated and resignified in socially and culturally meaningful ways. Each site differs in its sociohistorical milieu and normative orientations that ratify such processes. One meme may thus bring about different social effects (e.g., acceptance, dismissal, etc.) in each site while being relevant and constitutive of the effects generated in other sites to which memes or their audiences in question pertain (Pelletier-Gagnon and Diniz 2018). Seeing that memes inflect the sociality around them in terms of setting preferences and expectations with regard to communicative and behavioral conduct (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2015; Procházka 2018), we need to sensitize the notion of competence to the sociohistorical trajectories of the infrastructural, artifactual, and environmental entities that participants orient themselves to and make sense of in interactions. In doing so, we are faced with a number of analytical and methodological challenges (cf. Blommaert 2018), including the disembodied character of online communication (people interact through technologically mediated avatars or profiles that can be anonymous, incomplete, or simply fake), ad hoc sociality (forms of groupness or togetherness coalescing and pertaining only to a particular meme), and the nonlinear nature of meaning making and identity work taking place at multiple sites where the meme in question is deployed and contextualized with hardly predictable communicative effects.

To address these challenges, the notion of competence can be revisited by entertaining the posthumanist perception of a dispersed subject (i.e., a composite

assemblage of human and computational, algorithmic, as well as other entities traditionally perceived as nonhuman) and of distributed language (Steffensen 2012). In this view, linguistic and semiotic practices are approached as *enacted* (rather than just individual or social), *embodied* (rather than just procedural), and *embedded* (rather than just representational), on one hand, and *distributed across* as well as *situated within* a wide array of spaces, artifacts, and sensory domains rather than just in individual repertoires and communal reservoirs (Pennycook 2016, 7–8). The posthumanist perspective does not compel us to seek competence in the hardly tangible personal/individual or social/communal entities of the contemporary online-offline nexus. Instead, it invites us to consider how memes cocreate dispersed yet interconnected ecologies with both human (Facebook users engaging with them) and nonhuman (algorithmic or imagined content moderating agents) entities intertwined in the production of meaning and organization communicative action in general. This can be seen in the gatekeeping practices of such ecologies. Since Facebook strives to maintain a safe and inclusive environment through its content regulation, memes may become a target of censorship if they carry disparaging or otherwise illicit referential meaning potentially violating the Community Standards. However, Facebook users organized around memes are usually attuned to their phatic, affective meaning that comes with the origin and/or sociohistorical trajectories of their usage (Katz and Shifman 2017), which may not be discernable to the content-regulating mechanisms (whether enacted by human content moderators or automated algorithmic systems) and which may be in fact aligned with the convivial sociality that the Community Standards attempt to promote.

In what follows, the article employs the posthumanist perspective in an analysis of a contested ludic ecology enveloping certain types of satirical memes circulating in a communal network of Facebook pages dedicated to them. Before moving on to specific examples, the article briefly outlines the ludic sociality surrounding memetic interaction vis-à-vis its inseparability from Facebook's algorithm-driven technologies that coorganize and regiment the communicative action therein.

### **Memetic Communities on Facebook Pages**

A number of useful notions have been employed to conceptualize the social life and communicative practices in the collectivities forming against the backdrop of the online-offline nexus. In this regard, “communities of practice” and “affinity spaces” are highly prominent concepts in sociolinguistically inflected studies

inspired by now classic works of Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1999) and Gee (2005). While longer-lived communities of practice and more ephemeral affinity spaces conceptualize the meaningful arenas for social practice, their core ontological and epistemological architectonics inhibit adequate contextualization of social practices in the newly emerging collectivities devoted to Internet memes (for earlier criticism, see e.g., Gee 2005; Zhang and Watts 2008; Barden 2016). The limitations are intertwined to some extent: it is difficult for the concept of affinity space to account for (i) the emic understanding of such collectivities that involves a communal sense of belonging but without strict categories or criteria of membership that is manifested in (ii) the absence of developed hierarchies among members with clearly identifiable statuses such as an expert, initiate, or newcomer, which in turn signals that (iii) dissemination of knowledge and learning are not central to such collectivities. On the other hand, the concept of community of practice is not geared to account (i) for the extremely loose (if any) relations among often different sets of participants that come together around a particular meme, which lends itself to immense and hardly predictable variability in the participants and their engagements with memes and other participants therein; (ii) for the diverse and dynamic changes in social practices involving memes expedited by the rapid advance of underlying technosocial infrastructures (e.g., social networking sites constantly amending their user interface as well as their codes of conduct that allow for publishing and validating memetic recontextualizations); and (iii) for the disparate yet interconnected sites anchoring memetic collectivities and their sociohistorical milieus being intertwined to various degrees by interspacing memetic trajectories. In this sense, memetic collectivities are more reminiscent of a “nexus of practice”—“the intersection of multiple practices (or mediated actions) that are recognizable to a group of social actors,” and thus shifting the focus away from groups and boundaries to “action as the organizing unit of analysis” (Scollon and Scollon 2007, 612).

In a similar vein, the present work proposes to approach such collectivities as ludic “light communities”—focused but diverse occasioned coagulations of people converging around a shared focus (Blommaert and Varis 2015)—in this case a particular meme posted in a particular Facebook page, which triggers such coagulations. These loose, elastic communities, or “gatherings” (Goffman 1963), do not necessarily entail participation in recurring settings, durable social ties, or learning as in communities of practice or affinity spaces, nor are they firmly established social structures in the sense of Parsons and Durkheim. The article argues that the main organizing principle rests on ludic conviviality; more



specifically, much of the social action therein is in fact grounded in “play,” with the following tentative characteristics inspired by Huizinga (1944, 7–14; cf. Blommaert 2017):

- i. it is a mode of activity located outside what is commonly perceived as useful or rational; it is done “just for fun” or—in a more contemporary vocabulary—“for teh lulz”;
- ii. it is a voluntary activity performed as an act of freedom and often functions as a protest or an alternative to established or mainstream ideas, practices, or institutions;
- iii. despite its playful and potentially transgressive character, it is still a focused and nontrivial social activity demanding certain knowledge or skills that can be learned and policed;
- iv. it is thus a contested site of meaning making and identity work enclosed in a particular spatiotemporal organization (e.g., a post and its comment section), which is nevertheless nested within larger bodies (e.g., a Facebook page lodged in Facebook as a platform) with multiple intertwined sets of complementary as well as contesting normative orders (e.g., communicative expectations and preferences germane to a particular memetic genre as opposed to Facebook’s Community Standards);
- v. its regulation is conducted both internally in terms of organic, grassroots (bottom-up) peer sanctioning in a given coagulation and externally through institutional (top-down) matching of the published content against illicit semiotic constellations by human content moderators as well as algorithm-driven content-curating technologies

This, of course, creates tensions between ludic and serious readings of memes, which may result in their peer acceptance and popularity but also in their being taken down by Facebook’s content-curating mechanisms. The ludic recognition requires to take into consideration that both social actors and the communicative resources they mobilize travel across different digital niches pushed and are pulled by various normativities at different scale levels (Blommaert 2010). For example, what might be considered a ludic, playful memetic satire in a particular meme page could be also considered transgressive, deplorable, or offensive outside the ludic spatiotemporal setting. Likewise it could be considered a ludic excess (i.e., going too far) in another meme page, even though both pages subscribe to and circulate the same memetic genres or formats. It is therefore necessary to pay close attention to the multiple and often layered histories of use (and abuse)

within such systems, as they result from local and situated processes of becoming, which (re)produce patterns of recognizability and, therefore, normativity. The increasing number of takedowns in observed meme pages indicates that the ludic underpinning of this normativity does not seem to be acknowledged or recognized by Facebook's content-moderation policies and its enforcing capacities intended to foster an inclusive and safe environment.

### **The Struggle for Ludic Recognition**

The technological architectures of social media sites in which meme-publishing platforms are embedded play a significant role in communication, as the philosophies behind their codes of conduct provide a basis for the underlying algorithms they implement. The algorithms then organize and regiment the publication and reach as well as visibility of meme-related inputs. For example, on Facebook, one has to select the *All Comments* option in each comment section to see "all comments, including comments in foreign languages and potential spam," some of which are not visible by default, which favors comments and reactions from friends. This poses specific problems when groups, communities, and other collectivities organized around Internet memes develop patterns of expectations and preferences in communicative conduct that deviate from "standard" usage and/or incorporate semiotic resources associated with various different languages, dialects, accents, registers, and so on. Employing such resources is often imbued with elements of satire, banter, levity, and other forms of comicality and humor that are not recognizable for the underlying algorithms and thus may require further action on the part of a user to gain access to them.

Moreover, Facebook and other social media platforms have been deploying and improving large-scale, machine-learning recognition and detection technologies to facilitate automated filtering of illicit content (e.g., nudity, gore, graphic violence) and hate speech against "protected characteristics" (e.g., ethnicity, nationality, gender, religious affiliation). However, the technologies remain prone to criticism for questionable reliability that does not always account for their intersectional complexity (Burnap and Williams 2016) or the fine-grained contextual intricacies in which they appear (Ross et al. 2016; Fortuna and Nunes 2018). Although Facebook's Community Standards governing the algorithmic behavior of such technologies are geared toward distinguishing between serious and humorous speech (as well as a work of art or artifacts), which may contain problematic linguistic and semiotic resources or their constellations, the present work will show that, for example, memetic satire eludes such

a clear-cut distinction with significant social effects. Even with ever-increasing number of human content-review moderators, there are limits to their body of knowledge and access to the transcontextual aspects of meaning making and identity work (Kell 2015) upon which memes become a recognizable and meaningful form of communication within and across multiple different social niches at the same time. The network of Facebook pages dedicated to Countryball memes represents a good example.

### Approach and Data

Methodologically, the present approach is situated in an interactionist discourse-analytical tradition drawing on interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz 1982; Scollon and Scollon 2007; Blommaert and Rampton 2011>; Blommaert 2018) informed by digital ethnography (Varis 2016; Varis and Hou 2018) and the ethnography of algorithmic systems (Dourish 2016; Seaver 2017). The approach is thus oriented toward social and communicative (inter-)action involving memes rather than toward presumed *actors* or *social systems* that distribute them. Given its roots in anthropology, ethnography is here viewed as a *perspective* or an *approach* rather than as a specific set of methods or techniques (Varis 2016). While it remains based on systematic long-term observation, ethnography in this sense offers a flexible methodology adaptable to a particular communicative environment into which ethnographic study enters as a pinpoint in a certain time and space. With adequate contextualization, it is possible to “see, in microscopic events, effects of macroscopic structures, phenomena and processes” (Blommaert and Dong 2010, 18–19).

In the same vein, rather than taking algorithms as abstract, formalized descriptions of computational procedures (Dourish 2016, 3), the present approach focuses specifically on emic understandings of Facebook’s curating algorithms affecting memetic discourses, that is, how participants navigate and make sense of the affordances or architectural design of a given platform with its “semiotic regimes” (Djonov and van Leeuwen 2018) that invite and delimit certain communicative and behavioral actions. This is to study how algorithms enter into the cultural dynamics and logic of memetic discourses in view of the social, political, technological, and communicative ecologies of the collectivities organized around them. Seaver argues that “algorithms are not singular technical objects that enter into many different cultural interactions but are rather unstable objects, culturally enacted by the practices people use to engage with them” (2017, 5). It should be also kept in mind that the enacted nature of algorithms also expands the original question over how participants resist or improvise with

such algorithmic capacities, while engendering novel and unexpected uses of communicative resources that are so characteristic for memetic discourses (Phillips and Milner 2017). From a sociolinguistic perspective, algorithms become part of the habitual processes by which online collectivities produce and construe semiotic signs and their indexical connotations in patterned tendencies, expectations, and preferences that Blommaert (2005) calls “orders of indexicality.” Interestingly, the affordances of Web 2.0 facilitate the emergence of a multitude of influential and nonrandom indexicalities, which are not always recognized or ratified, and thereby visible. Inspired by Foucault, Blommaert (2005, 2010) argues that the hierarchy of or discrepancy between communicative sensibilities (the constellation of different intersecting orders of indexicality) is sociohistorically shaped and extends beyond the immediate encounter, or as Rampton (2014, 11) puts it, “to grasp their influence on what unfolds in any given interaction, researchers need know about communicative practice in different participants’ social networks beyond the event itself.” Therefore, tracking the emic understanding of the algorithmic agency behind the distribution of memetic resources requires an eclectic, multisited ethnographic engagement with their trajectories within and across dispersed sites and from multiple sources.

Accordingly, the present work focuses on a network of Facebook meme pages devoted to Countryball memes. Self-described as “geopolitical satire meme,” Countryball is a memetic format consisting of simple, easy-to-draw comics featuring ball-shaped entities colored in flags of individual countries, nations, or states with a narrative that reinvents and reinterprets historical as well as contemporary international relations and geopolitical events in a satirical manner based on national and sociocultural stereotypes (Procházka 2016). Attention will be paid to two Countryball Facebook pages: Polandball and Czechball. The Polandball page was established in 2009 soon after comics first emerged from an international section of a German image-based forum Krautchan. The original comics (Polandball character in particular) were not dedicated to politics or geopolitical events. Rather, they served to impersonate a Polish member of the forum, whose intriguing use of Poglish (a way of speaking characterized by borrowing and blending of linguistic features generally associated with Polish and English) became an intrinsic part of the Polandball comics figure that also came to be portrayed upside down to further underscore its whimsical nature. This has subsequently inspired linguistic performance of other Countryball characters in the course of gaining more popularity as a geopolitical satire and slowly taking hold in more mainstream media, such as Facebook or Twitter. Since then the Polandball page has functioned as a major international

hub for Countryball fans all over the world and continues to uphold the ludic ethos in covering geopolitical issues not necessarily limited to Poland. In the following years, it gave way to countless other, more locally oriented and grounded offshoots, including Czechball, Brazilball, Germanyball, and other Countryball pages. These second-generation Countryball platforms can be distinguished by publishing and highlighting more nationally and/or ideologically specific interests through the Countryball prism while maintaining an interconnected network through sharing content, forming alliances, and competing with other pages. Even though such pages largely follow the indexical orders of the Countryball genre to attain recognizability, the ludic degree of their uptake differs and might be not necessarily part of the preferences and expectations in communicative conduct among the audiences they attract.

The following analysis draws on data collected between 2017 and 2018, with a particular focus on participants' reflexive apprehension of Facebook's restrictive enactment of their policies subsumed under Facebook's Community Standards. This includes an incident from early 2017 when the Polandball page had been suspended on the grounds that it has been violating the Community Standards. The suspension was thought to be permanent, and its followers (more than 350,000 at the time) were galvanized into supporting and contributing to the new page Polandball 2.0 in an effort to rebuild the original page and renew the community around it. However, these efforts were rather short-lived, as the original page was reinstated by Facebook just two weeks later; Polandball 2.0 was made a backup page. This event nevertheless presents a unique opportunity to examine a very energetic communal endeavor to maintain the substance and normative dynamics of the original page. The discussion then continues with short excerpts from 2018 that testify to the measures taken by both the Polandball and the Czechball pages to avoid similar content takedowns. Further, this article will also analyze how such measures are received by their respective audiences through their metapragmatically reflexive engagement with them, that is, through meta-level reflections on acceptability, appropriateness, and correctness in the comments section of a specific Countryball meme post. The interpretation of the data is based on my systematic observation of both Facebook pages since 2015, whereby screen shots of relevant interactions were taken, anonymized, and transcribed. No data-elicitation techniques were used.

### **Countryballs versus Facebook**

Countryball memes take the form of simple comics capitalizing mostly on the principles of disparaging humor and incorporating elements of denigration,

belittlement, and maligning of various entities represented by Countryballs, which are not always accepted by Facebook. Countryballs reify national and cultural stereotypes by framing them in current as well as historical diplomatic relations and events transcending local importance, and thus the comics reinvent and reinterpret various realities in a ludic-satirical manner. Put differently, bits and pieces of particular realities, both real and fictional, are transposed and transcribed (or “enregistered”) into the heteroglossic register native to Countryball satire (Bakhtin 1981; Agha 2007). It entails constellations of signs—both linguistic and semiotic—that index specific stances, identities, and places that came into being as they have been continually reiterated in an alternative portrayal of geopolitical realities by capitalizing on the heteroglossic “co-existence of socioideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socioideological groups in the present” (Bakhtin 1981, 291; cf. Blommaert and Rampton 2011, 13). The heteroglossic elements allow participants to index and engage with larger social, historical, and ideological processes; yet, as previously noted, such engagements are not always devoid of complications. Specific examples follow.

### Polandball Takedown

The first excerpt focuses on the official announcement published on the Polandball 2.0 page that confirmed suspicions about the original page Polandball having been permanently removed and reception of this announcement in the accompanying comment section. Note that the heteroglossic register incorporates resources from different languages, such as the Polish greeting “Dzień dobry” (Good day) and the indexically rich German term *Anschluss*. This also includes pronunciation features associated with Poghish such as devoicing or deletion of final consonants (strong versus “#STRONK” or Poland versus “polan”/“Polan”) and recurrent deviations from standard orthography (e.g., missing sentence case, vowel switching such as in “yuo” or “shuold,” inconsistent capitalization such as “facebook” or “Facebook,” etc.) as well as grammar (e.g., *-ing(s)* suffix in nonsanctioned positions often preceded by the preposition *of*—“of worryings” or “of understandings,” missing plural marker—“comic” or “laugh,” subject omission—“was only Facebook” or “is the bye bye now,” significant reductions in verbal categories such as absence of the perfective aspect, while the past is signaled only by *was*—“they was decidings” or “was of make around it,” etc.). Moreover, seeing the Polandball character in the background with inverted colors (red on the top, white on the bottom) suggests that the deviations also

reach beyond linguistic practices—to the semiotic and discursive levels or to how the comics are drawn, represented, and interpreted.

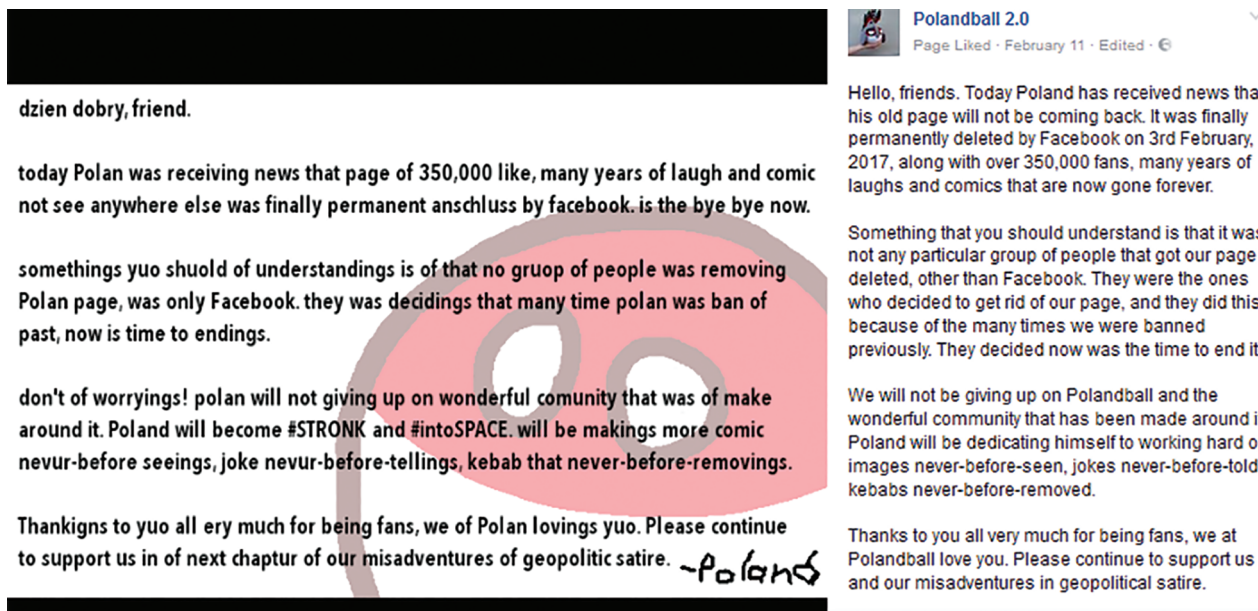
Two terms, *Anschluss* and *kebab*, deserve a closer inspection, as they are crucial indexical tropes pointing to sociocultural meaning reservoirs encapsulated in the stereotypes mobilized by the Countryball satire. The former refers to the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany shortly before the outbreak of WWII; however, in the Countryball universe the indexicality of the term has been appropriated as a satirical expression of the imperialist or expansive tendencies of certain Countryball characters. More recently, it has been transposed onto Facebook to draw parallels between the seizure of control by force and Facebook's censorship. The latter is a part of a running gag meme "remove kebab," which originated from memetic parodies of a Serbian propaganda music video from the early 1990s uploaded to YouTube in 2006. Drawing on the nationalistic tone of the original video, the meme "remove kebab" was conceived as a euphemism for "ethnic cleansing directed against Bosnian Turks specifically (kebab is a regional food)," but later it has become a more general trope conveying an incentive to "stop islam from taking over Europe."<sup>2</sup> In the Countryball network, Turkeyball page was one among the first offshoots to the original Polandball page, but the disputes over the proper format of the comics and its ludic roots alienated Turkeyball from the majority of other offshoot pages, including Polandball, and continue to this day.<sup>3</sup> Consider the following comments below the announcement in figure 1 that inquire about the reason for the removal of the Polandball page.

Both comments and participants are marked numerically in their succession in order to preserve anonymity but also to transcribe the comments embedded within Facebook's interface as closely as possible. Names of other Countryball-related pages participating in the comment section are kept. Parentheses indicate my translation if the comment is not in English, square brackets contain my explanatory notes, and curly braces signal tagging other participants. Second-tier comments (i.e., comments on comments) are indented.

*Participant 1:* Yuo were over-using swearing.

2. Urban Dictionary, entry for "remove kebab" (<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=REMOVE%20KEBAB>); Know your meme, entry for "Serbia Strong / Remove Kebab" (<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/serbia-strong-remove-kebab>).

3. Polandball Wiki, entry for "Polandball on Facebook" (<https://polandball.fandom.com/wiki/Polandball>).



**Figure 1.** Facebook status announcing the permanent removal of the original page (the equivalent in Standard English can be found in the description, presumably by the same author). Facebook Polandball 2.0 page. Excerpted on March 11, 2017.



*Polandball 2.0:* kurwa [fuck]

*Participant 2:* Where? Kurwa is like punctuation mark for poles. Real Polish swearing is much more complicated, [. . .]

*Participant 3:* It's a stereotype. Some poles actually use "kurwa" as if it was comma, but it's heavy swearing anyway

*Participant 4:* Kurwa am [is] always in our hearts <3 [heart shape; indicating love and sympathy]

*Participant 5:* #DefendKurwa

Participant 1 (P1) points to the nonrecognition of the phatic-poetic function (Jakobson 1960) behind the use of profanity in Countryball discourses. More specifically, the Polish expletive *kurwa* (a vulgar term for a prostitute, i.e., a whore/slut, or an interjection akin to *damn/shit/fuck* that may also stand as an intensifier or a filler) has become part and parcel of the ludic ethos of the indexical order of Countryball (especially with regard to the Polandball character). To some extent, it reflects P2's account of its diminishing taboo status through excessive usage to express a variety of emotions, which has been documented in its increasing semantic productivity (Mormol 2016) and in general "colloquialisation" of the contemporary Polish language (Garcarz 2004). And indeed, here it serves as a metapragmatic phatic marker signaling communion, togetherness or general attunement with the Countryball community (P4); but, at the same time, it has acquired poetic properties in Countryball discourses (note that both P2 and P3 describe the use of *kurwa* as a punctuation device that, by extension, indicates rhythmic and rhyming properties). Furthermore, P5 utilizes the hashtag affordance<sup>4</sup> to demonstrate support and "spread the message" by attaching it to the rallying cry "DefendKurwa."

However, as P3 notes, the expletive (and illicit) force of *kurwa* is still acknowledged outside Countryball discourses, which is precisely what distinguishes the ludic communicative space devoted to Countryball, and it is this ludic encirclement of Countryball discourses that fosters positive functions being

4. Marked by the pound sign (#), a hashtag enables users to find all the posts or contents that have been tagged with the same hashtag on a given platform.

mapped to *kurwa* in the course of its memetic iterations. As a result, *kurwa* has become an important part of identity work and meaning making in Countryball discourse that is purposefully separated and distinguished from a higher-scale, institutional, or formal discourses (which generally discourage profanity and/or impose sanctions on its use). On the other hand, Countryball meme pages are embedded within the larger technosocial infrastructure of Facebook, which is in part algorithmically maintained and in part enacted by human actors. The yardstick for measuring transgression, Facebook's Community Standards, apparently do not account for the local ludic order of indexicality native to Countryball, whereby the forms of semiosis involving *kurwa* and the like are believed to be consequently identified as hate speech and are thereby removed. The following comments from other Countryball pages express solidarity and relate similar experiences of nonrecognition.

*Northern IrelandBall:* I know your feels mate, I have recently been Zucked for the stupidest shite like always, for 30 days ~Mario

Get in loser we're deleting meme pages for "hate speech" but leaving up kiddie porn and videos of people dying



*Video Game Ball:* Hello, PolandBall

We recognize and understand the problems you are experiencing lately.

The problem is that the politically correct is increasingly corrupting this social network thanks to a plague called SJW [social justice warriors]

We almost got knocked over by them there 2 years ago

We wanted to demonstrate that we support you, even more than once you commented on one of our posts, and that we have [been] inspired [by] you, because if it were not for you, Video Game Ball would never exist

#RebuildPolandball

-TheCosplayer and the entire VGB Staff

While the Northern IrelandBall page is a more traditional Countryball offshoot dedicated to the geopolitical issues pertinent to Northern Ireland, the Video Game Ball page has adopted the Countryball format to satirically reinterpret problems related to the game industry and the wider gamer community. Both pages express support and sympathy with Polandball's predicament while narrating similar experiences. Interestingly, Northern IrelandBall (here represented by one of its administrators, nicknamed Mario) uses the term *Zucked* (i.e., suspended and/or removed), which invokes the name of Facebook's founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg and has become a pejorative metonymic moniker standing for Facebook's censorship practices.<sup>5</sup> In addition, a photo of Zuckerberg in a car is enclosed to echo a memorable quote, "get in loser, we're going shopping," from the 2004 comedy movie *Mean Girls* that later became a memetic template and here serves to resemiotize Zuckerberg into the role of the movie's mean antagonist.

Video Game Ball (VGB) presents a much more composed message of support, while drawing attention to imagined people or groups, namely, proponents of political correctness. While political correctness generally refers to discursive strategies or principles of avoiding utterances and actions that could offend or marginalize particular groups of people (largely corresponding with protected characteristics against hate speech in Facebook's Community Standards), it has recently become a "spurious construct" (Fairclough 2003, 25) or a metapragmatic label for an ideological other often associated with imposing censorship and limiting freedom of speech, especially in the right-wing conservative

5. Know Your Meme, "zucked" (<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/zucked>).

circles. The term thus functions as a naming or categorizing device—a “frame,” or a schema of interpretation in Goffman’s vocabulary (1974)—allowing participants to organize experience in the sense of locating, perceiving, identifying, and labeling events and entities involved in taking down the page. More specifically, recollecting previous experience with content-curating mechanisms, VGB attributes agency behind their enactment to “politically correct” individuals or groups, namely, social justice warriors,<sup>6</sup> which renders them also responsible for the removal of the Polandball page. Inquiring about the identity of such people or groups is indeed a prevalent concern in the comment section. More examples follow.

*Participant 6:* Wait wait guys, Facebook banned Poland because many people reported it, who are these fuckers?

*Polandball 2.0:* is opposite is what was sayings ^^ [indicating laughter].

*Participant 6:* thanks for the reply. But i think the previous bans must have come from people who report our polandball.

*Participant 7:* Don't post offensive memes then.

*Participant 8:* Offensive memes? These days everyone is offended by everything. You can post a blank and somewhere some cunt will get offended at that.

*Participant 9:* Old Polandball may be gone and resting in Cyberspace Grave but the Joy and Good times the we fans relish, shared, laughed and remember the topics that the Fans used to laugh there asses off and tipping off [infuriating] some Lefist [Leftists], Kebabs and other[s] [about] Geopolitical topics. Therefore Polandall will live on to the memory of every loving hearts of fans. New Polandball is a new beginning.

6. In certain memetic discourses, the term has recently become a pejorative umbrella designation for stereotypically sanctimonious left-wing commentators and activists who radically enforce socially progressive views and political correctness by virtue of hostile rhetoric appealing to emotions rather than rational arguments, thus seeking personal validation rather than pursuing genuine convictions (Know your meme, “Social Justice Warrior”).

Similarly to P6, a considerable part of the participants of the comment sections in fact dispute Facebook's sole role in removing the page as it is presented in the announcement status and later reinforced by the administrator of the page in the response above. Given Polandball's previous bans, P6 seeks to outline an out-group of people who had been allegedly reporting the page under the assumption it was in a concerted effort to trigger an algorithmic reaction resulting in the bans. Although P7 suggests that this could be prevented by posting inoffensive memetic content, P8 answers that this is virtually impossible due to contemporary heightened sensitivity tied up with the previous remark about political correctness made by Video Game Ball (cf. Granath and Ullén 2017), whereby its proponents are perceived as having gone overboard with regard to identification and protection of alleged victims or those who are vulnerable along certain identity-based categories.

This can be read against Howard Beckers's *Outsiders* (1963), which presents a "conflict-interactionist" perspective on the processes by which certain individuals come to be recognized or thought of as outsiders to a particular social group, and their reactions to that judgments. In this sense the term *outsider* is to be approached as double-barreled: an individual who becomes labeled an outsider (i.e., deviant) may not regard those who visit such judgments upon him or her as legitimate; on the contrary, such an individual may likewise perceive the judges as outsiders. The reciprocal dynamic surfaces in P9's recount of collective experience of the social life in Polandball. The page has cultivated a ludic sociality that produced and fostered convivial effects from iterating the seemingly disparaging stereotypes in Countryball comics and discourses, which, according to the administrator of the page, has not been recognized and sanctioned by Facebook—its code of conduct renders them rule-breaking outsiders to be banned, and their content removed.

However, the removal is thought to be enacted in part by other groups or individuals who are reciprocally perceived as outsiders because of their radical views. This includes leftists, on one hand, particularly SJWs, who allegedly enact their politically correct policies (in alignment with Community Standards) through exploiting Facebook's report function and, on the other hand, Kebabs (antagonistic Turkish Countryball fans), for fomenting a rogue Countryball community appropriating the format to promote nonludic nationalism and, likewise, abusing the report function in the course of attacking other Countryball pages that satirize it. Thus, Leftists and Kebabs represent emically constructed identity categories attached to the agency involved in the suspensions and temporary removal of the Polandball and affiliated Countryball pages.

The posthumanist perspective on the conflict over the agency behind the takedown alerts us to the ways in which participants feel reflexively enmeshed in the environment (the communicative space provided or possibly denied by Facebook) and the technology that not only mediates but also seemingly supervises their communicative action. The resulting takedown appears to be attributed to both human (other Facebook users categorized along hostile ideological lines) and nonhuman, algorithmically operating entities moderating content (personified here as Zuckerberg). Although it is obvious that Facebook employs human content moderators, the results of their decisions about the appropriateness of the content are communicated on behalf of Facebook, thereby reducing or eliminating any human individuality. The following two excerpts from 2018 focus on the emic understanding of the other part of such enactments (by what is perceived to be the nonhuman, algorithm-driven agency) and how such understanding contributes to the changes in the Countryball format as well as in participants' communicative practices and behavior.

### Complying with Facebook

Countryball comics often reiterate or reminisce about the glory days and historical feats of particular countries through the prism of today. On that note, figure 2 features a glimpse into the celebrated past of Russia when it successfully resisted Napoleon's Russia campaign and the Axis invasion of the Soviet Union, stressing the invaders' underestimation of and inability to adapt to the frigid conditions of Russian winters (signified by frozen Frenchball and Naziball, respectively). The message—namely, that “no one can survive russian winter”—is challenged by the nonchalant presence of Canadaball and Quebecball; furthermore, commenters also point to other historical events, such as Russia's military blunder with Finland during the Winter War (1939–40) and the successful Mongol invasion of Kievan Rus' in the thirteenth century. Although many semiotic stereotype-invoking emblems could be discussed in light of their significance in the Countryball universe (Russiaball's *ushanka*-hat with a red star and vodka bottle as well as a beaver tail hat worn by Canadaball and Quebecball), attention needs to be paid to the letter *f* appearing in place of a swastika on Naziball, which, of course, does not go unnoticed by participants in the following comment section.

*Participant 10:* Stop censoring swastika. It's hypocritic. Like Future generations have to forget stuff so history is violently repeated

## QUÉBECBALLE



**Figure 2.** A strip published on Polandball page on November 6, 2018. Excerpted January 9, 2019.

*Participant 11:* swastika=instant ban on facebook :p [smiley with tongue sticking out; whimsically acknowledging P10's lack of knowledge]

P10 objects to the self-imposed censorship by the author of the comics (first on the Quebecball page and then shared by the Polandball page), echoing a well-known aphorism by the Spanish philosopher and poet George Santayana: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (1905, 284). Moreover, self-censoring the swastika is perceived as an act of hypocrisy in view of the continuous criticism leveled at Facebook's censoring practices. However, P11 retorts that posting a swastika or incorporating it into the comics immediately leads to a punitive action taken by Facebook. The purported immediacy deserves a closer inspection.

In June 2017, Facebook officially addressed the question, "Who should decide what is hate speech in an online global community" on its website and laid down the definition of hate speech, including Facebook's position toward it in light of mounting criticism about (mis)handling objectionable content. In the answer, it is admitted that Facebook has been experimenting with artificial intelligence technology "to filter the most obviously toxic language in comments" and will continue "to invest in these promising advances" although it had not yet been possible to "rely on machine learning and AI to handle the complexity involved in assessing hate speech" due to immense contextual intricacies (Allan 2017, n.p.). Later, in September 2018, Facebook announced the deployment of a large-scale machine-learning recognition tool code-named Rosetta to facilitate automated "understanding text in images along with the context in which it appears [to] help proactively identify inappropriate or harmful content and keep [Facebook's] community safe" (Sivakumar et al. 2018, n.p.). This immediately prompted an inquiry regarding to what extent such technology can recognize and understand memes and the contexts in which they are mobilized (e.g., Matsakis 2018), largely contending that "meme-style" artifacts remain a challenge and require enlisting human moderators to determine their appropriateness.

It is beyond the scope of the present article to discuss or investigate the variability of access of human moderators to the trajectories of recontextualization of memes and their discourses in dispersed social niches, let alone the degree of fine-tuning of such technologies to account for their socio-ideological histories therein. Although it is virtually impossible to attribute the swastika takedown decision to user(s) report(s), the automated recognition tool or a human content reviewer (or their combination), the sheer speed of the action indicates that



there is little room for negotiation. But it turns out that if the Countryball genre is to continue existing on Facebook, the attenuating modifications in its semiotic register are necessary to fit Facebook's semiotic-ideological landscape curated by the assemblage of human and algorithm-driven nonhuman entities that enact and thus embody the Community Standards. This of course does not mean that all participants willingly submit to such communicative constraints or semiotic regimes. The final excerpt discussed here will zoom in on the Czechball page with regard to creative practices in accommodating to the content-curating mechanisms.

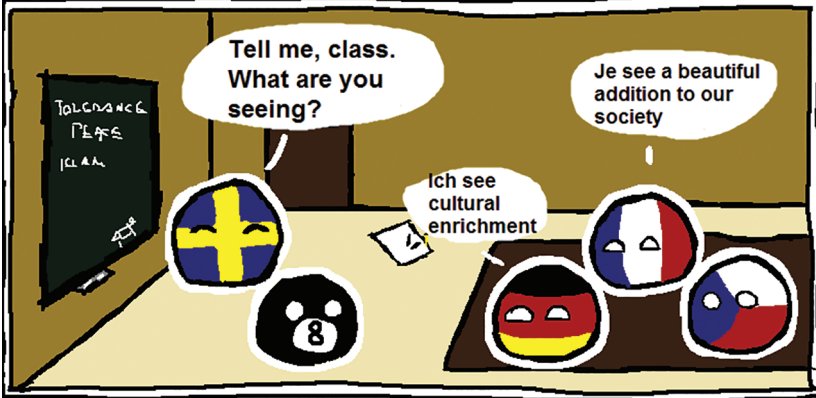
### Resisting Facebook

What needs to be noted is that Czechball, like many other locally oriented offshoots of Polandball, adopts the Countryball genre to accentuate nationally grounded topics and proliferate political perspectives inflected by right-wing proclivities with regard to events of geopolitical significance. In this vein, figure 3 resonates with the staunch dismissive Czech approach to the migrant-relocation mechanism (i.e., sharing a proportionate amount of eligible asylum seekers in the wake of the European migrant crisis), whereby the migrants are depicted as a black eight ball.<sup>7</sup> The mechanism was approved by the majority of the EU states, but refused by Visegrad (V4) countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and, to a lesser degree, Slovakia) in the course of a conflict over how to deal with the migrant crisis. The comic strip was first published in 2017 during the height of the conflict that eventually crystallized into a formal complaint by the European commission against the V4 countries (except Slovakia). However, the original strip was quickly taken down because it contained the ethnic slur *nigger*, which typically refers to black people. Later the comic strip was re-uploaded in a modified state—the Czechball character does not finish the sentence, and the last pane is blackened and overlaid with the caption “FaceBan—Have a nice fucking day”). Later still, in 2018, the strip reappeared, as shown in figure 3, with a blatant indication of self-censorship signified by the square brackets surrounding the “algorithm-safe” term *African American*. Again, this did not go unnoticed by the commenters (paraphrased translations are mine):

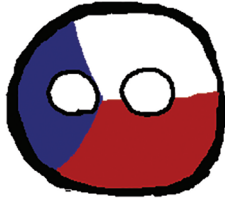
7. According to Polandball Wiki, 8ball (Africaball) is a metonymic representation of historical Africans or African tribes without a flag (hence the black color), including their descendants that have later migrated to Europe. By extension, 8balls have recently been employed to depict all migrants to Europe.

Nicholas

# Insensitive Czechs



Tell us, Czechia. What do you see?



Já see...  
[AFRICAN AMERICAN]



Figure 3. A strip published on Czechball page on October 4, 2018. Excerpted January 10, 2019.

*Participant 12:* Raději postni originál . . . (You better post the original . . .)

*Czechball:* -Nicholas

**You is of getting the zucc**



**No reason?**

**No problem**

*Participant 13:* N

*Participant 14:* Igger :D [indicating laughter]

*Participant 15:* Nigglet

*Participant 16:* GINGER!!! But change the position of letters.

P12 attempts to tauntingly tease out the original comic strip containing the ethnic slur, while Nicholas (one of Czechball's administrators) retorts with a depiction of Facebook as an unofficial Countryball character<sup>8</sup> with a threatening caption informing about an impending suspension/ban (i.e., "the zucc"),

8. Some Countryball characters are endowed with specific gimmicks. The Facebook (or Faceblock, in Countryball register) character is modeled after infamous Reichtangle (an antagonistic rectangular character based on former imperial Germany) endowed with menacing presence and hostile attitude toward other Countryballs, especially Polandball. In addition, Faceblock carries the same letter *f* as the censorship-proof Naziball to transpose the negative indexical qualities of repression and control.

should that be the case. Nevertheless, P13 answers with a letter *N* alluding to its common euphemism (i.e., the n-word), which is then completed by P14 in a jovial manner. Subsequently, P15 presents a diminutive form of the slur (usually referring to black babies or children), and P16 puts forth the anagram of the slur with interpretative guidelines. The playful co-construction of the slur is taken up as a creative ludic sport-like enterprise to avoid the censorship and alarming the imagined content-curating filters. At the same time, it testifies to a ludic excess frequently present in the second generation of Countryball pages.

Finally, one is here reminded of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of rhizome, which, like an Internet meme, "operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots" (1987, 21). Memes constitute recognizable patterns that are appropriated by multiple memetic collectivities with various degrees of ludic apprehension in view of their embeddedness in the technosocial infrastructures that mediate them under their governing policies and ideologies subsumed in their code of conducts. Such codes might be consequently materialized and embodied in specific actions (e.g., takedowns) enacted by an interplay between human and nonhuman agency, but hardly ever resulting in removing the meme in its variations dispersed over multiple sites, platforms, and publics. Some of the implications for the traditional notion of communicative competence in sociolinguistic enterprise will be discussed below.

### **Revisiting Communicative Competence**

By focusing on situated metapragmatic discourses in dispersed Facebook meme pages, this article has demonstrated participants' reflections on some of the significant changes in linguistic and semiotic practices vis-à-vis collectively constructed emic understanding of content-curating mechanisms and the policies behind them. Participants' metapragmatic accounts of such changes open up a largely unexplored avenue in research on communicative competence that takes into account the involvement of the mediating technologies in communicative action.

The article has briefly discussed previous works seeking to update the Hymesian concept of communicative competence in order to address some of its undertheorized or criticized aspects stemming from its ethnographic roots. This included its static conception unable to fully capture creative aspects of social interaction and "indeterminacy of context" (Silverstein 1992; see also Gumperz 1982) and its orientation to one-to-one or one-to-few participant frameworks inhibiting theorization of one-to-many multimodal frameworks employed by the media (Goffman 1974; Agha 2007). Building on such works,

the present article argues that the posthumanist framework can accommodate the concept to the technosocial infrastructure taking part in communication while approaching “semiosis as a process that emerges in the mutually constitutive action taking place between human and other entities with which they interact” (Bucholtz and Hall 2016, 187).

In his defense of the “theoretical” nature of outlining the notion of communicative competence, Hymes writes that practical work “must have an eye on the current state of theory, for it can be guided or misguided, encouraged or discouraged, by what it takes that state to be” (1972, 269). Returning to his original questions defining communicative competence—whether (and to what degree) something is *possible* (formally), *feasible* (implementation-wise), *appropriate* (context-wise), and actually *performed* (done)—the posthumanist theory carves out a perspective in which the mediating technologies and their social infrastructures cannot be simply taken for granted as “static” objects, formally defining the corridors of *possibility* or *feasibility* of a certain communicative action, or background “context” with clear-cut *appropriateness* criteria for that action, or passive “tools” enlisted by a (rational) human “user” to *perform* it (Gourlay 2015). On the contrary, far from the deterministic point of view, the technosocial infrastructures are enacted by interplay between human and nonhuman, algorithm-based agency through the course of which it assumes meaning and plays an important semiotic role while becoming part of communicative routine, which may interpellate participants through their everyday interactions. It has been shown that the technosocial infrastructure of Facebook is seen as asserting itself in the collaborative (albeit in this case unwanted) production and reception of Countryball memes distributed across a heterogeneous network of Countryball pages.

More concretely, Facebook has become a materialized antithesis to Bakhtin’s notion of *superaddressee*—a dialogically positioned “‘third party’ standing above all the participants in the dialogue” who would actively and sympathetically respond to each utterance and understand it “just the right way” (1977, 30). Bakhtin noted that this invisible ideal listener has been historically personified in a number of ideological expressions, such as God, the absolute truth, or science. Facebook is here emically construed, and in fact operates, as an *anti-superaddressee* in view of the impact of content-curating mechanisms on the interaction involving memes and in the way it has been received by participants. It is taken as an Orwellian omnipresent yet invisible ideological entity overseeing and sorting the published content as well as the access to it by co-navigating user interface. At the same time, it has become a metalinguistic fact—a transcendent

presence or a component constitutive of communicative conduct presupposing or anticipating the immanent misunderstanding or nonrecognition of the playful, ludic nature of Countryball memes and their normative orders and likely resulting in a takedown response.

As an anti-superaddressee, Facebook becomes complexly intertwined in the production of action, meaning, and subjectivity not as a neutral object or a piece of mediating technology providing the “playground” (Huizinga 1944) for engaging with Countryball comics but rather as an enacted entity invested with agency that puts the notion of competence into a new light. Participants’ metapragmatic construal of Facebook as an anti-superaddressee shows a reciprocal, interlocking relation in which participants make sense of Facebook’s semiotic-ideological environment also through the way it supposedly makes sense of them in view of their communicative conduct (e.g., through its incurring suspensions). From this perspective, communicative competence marks an intersubjective interactional achievement in which the involved subjectivities pertain to dispersed assemblages of human and nonhuman entities and in which communication involves diverse semiotic resources and ecological affordances spatiotemporally distributed.

Looking at the ludic ecologies of Countryball pages, the posthumanist perspective on competence additionally opens up a path to a neglected aspect of Huizinga’s concept of “play.” As pointed out by Eco (1973), Huizinga was interested in play only as an (aesthetic) performance and ignored the regulating systems that give substance to competence in play, that is, play as a particular moment in a larger, rule-based game or games. In the posthumanist view, it is no longer only the participants who set and police the rules and who ratify others as valid or competent participants in view of such rules—it is also the playground itself. More precisely, it is the evolving imagery of Facebook that pertains to multiple discursive layers that render communicative behavior competent—competent in the sense of successfully navigating linguistic-semiotic practices in the local ludic ecologies of Countryball pages and large-scale, global ecology shaped by the enacting and enforcing Facebook’s Community Standards via content curation. This includes the hetero- or transglossic (deploying resources from various languages, styles, genres, registers, etc., against the backdrop of their verbal-ideological histories, for example, incorporating the phatic/poetic use of *kurwa*), multi- or transmodal (traversing and evoking textual, pictorial, and other modes of communication, for example, substituting the letter *f* for a swastika), and transcultural or translocal layers of linguistic-semiotic practices (employing recognizable sociocultural resources both in territorial and

deterritorial relations, for example, capitalizing on recognizability of the Countryball genre to portray an illicit view on local milieus). Furthermore, since the digital playground of Countryball pages is constructed by transitory light communities (or coagulations) populated with transient participants—it is not entirely sealed off, as Huizinga argued, in spatiotemporal boundaries maintaining and protecting a “sacred” ludic edifice against the outside “real” world. Rather, it is an interdiscursively connected chronotopic network with porous boundaries through which different ecologies intertwine and collide in an engagement between human and nonhuman entities (e.g., when a page is suspended), giving way to emergent and interactant affordances that make up communicative competence (e.g., to avoid suspensions).

Finally, this speaks of new modes of interaction and integration in the online-offline nexus. These may require engaging with the terminological sediment and presuppositions accrued on our analytical vocabulary if they are to be approached with analytical precision, as the article attempted to show.

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