

# Richard Dawkins on the internet's hijacking of the word 'meme'

Olivia Solon

15-18 minutes

---

"Professor Dawkins' speech transmutes into an auto-tuned song about internet memes..." is not a sentence you expect to read in a press release from the evolutionary biologist. However, it's precisely what he signed up for at Saatchi & Saatchi's New Directors' Showcase at the Cannes Advertising Festival this week.

Richard Dawkins coined the word "meme" in his 1976 bestseller *The Selfish Gene*. The word -- which is ascribed to an idea, behaviour or style that spreads from person to person within a culture -- has since been reappropriated by the internet, with [Grumpy Cat](#), [Socially-Awkward Penguin](#) and [Overly-Attached Girlfriend](#) spreading virally, leaping from IP address to IP address (and brain to brain) via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.

In recognition of this, advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi has recruited Dawkins to participate in the theatrical piece alongside installation artists Marshmallow Laser Feast. The aim is, presumably, to create a piece of copy that will itself become a meme, as happened with last year's performance involving 16 flying robots. Within the piece, Dawkins explains how an "internet meme" is a hijacking of the original idea and that instead of mutating by random change and spreading by a form of Darwinian selection they are altered deliberately by human creativity. Unlike with genes (and Dawkins' original meaning of "meme"), there is no attempt at accuracy of copying; internet memes are deliberately altered.

Just for Hits - Richard Dawkins



In advance of this extraordinary performance, [Wired.co.uk](http://Wired.co.uk) caught up with Dawkins to talk about his own favourite internet memes, Twitter, molecular genetics, false memories and, er..., *Celebrity Big Brother*.

**Wired.co.uk: How did you get involved in the New Directors Showcase?**

**Richard Dawkins:** I was approached by Saatchi & Saatchi, who had the idea of centring the event around the theme of memes, so they asked if I would get involved and I was rather pleased with the idea.

**I hear you are going to be playing a musical instrument on stage**  
I might be playing the EWI (pronounced e-wee), which is an electronic clarinet. I used to play the clarinet and saxophone and I find the new electronic version rather appealing.

It not only plays the sound of the clarinet and saxophone; it also does the trumpet, cello, violin, tuba, sousaphone and the oboe etcetera.



Dawkins playing the EWI in rehearsals for the New Directors' Showcase

Sandra Ciampone

**How do you feel about your word meme being reappropriated on the internet?**

The meaning is not that far away from the original. It's anything that goes viral. In the original introduction to the word meme in the last chapter of *Selfish Gene*, I did actually use the metaphor of a virus. So when anybody talks about something going viral on the internet, that is exactly what a meme is and it looks as though the word has been appropriated for a subset of that.

**Do you see many internet memes?**

I suppose I do. It's viral. I get infected by viruses as much as anybody else and yes I pick them up from time to time.

**Have you seen ones in which you feature?**

There are quite a lot of YouTube clips of me that have gone viral. One that I think of is of a young woman at a lecture I was giving -- she came from Liberty University, which is a ludicrous religious institution. She said "what if you're wrong?" and I answered that rather briefly and that's gone viral.



Another one is when Neil DeGrasse Tyson, the astronomer, taxed me for being too militant and I replied to that with a joke that seems to have gone viral. Those two you could probably call internet memes.

Richard Dawkins brilliant quote.



**Are you aware that your appearance has been compared to Emma Watson, who plays Hermione Granger in *Harry Potter*?**

Yes I have seen that. That puzzled me a little bit because I suspect that's been doctored to make us seem a bit more alike than we actually are. You know about [morphing software](#)? Somewhere somebody has done a morph between my face and hers.

**You made a fantastic video in response to questions [posted to Reddit](#) where you read out your worst hate mail? Do you still get a lot? Have any stood out for you?**

That's certainly been a very popular video. It's one I get more requests to watch again than any other I think. I have indeed done it again but it hasn't been

edited. So we have a new version of the hate mail, which I won't say any n about. It's going to be released fairly soon. The hate mail mostly goes to n website and gets filtered for me so I don't see it all, but if you want to look there's a place on [RichardDawkins.net](http://RichardDawkins.net) called The Good, The Bad and The Ugly. If you look at The Bad and The Ugly you can get a good sampling.

Hate E-mails with Richard Dawkins



### **Have any stood out for you recently?**

They go straight out of my mind I'm afraid. There are things like "hope yc cancer" and "we'll enjoy laughing at you frying in hell" and that kind of th

**I read an interview with you in 2010 in which you said you [want tighter moderation of your website](#) to reduce the number of vitriolic comments. Have you managed to do this?**

Yes I think so. Our website is actually pretty good as they go.

I'm afraid the internet is filled with people using really very intemperate language. I'm in favour of ridicule, but not abuse and I think we do a pret good job on RichardDawkins.net of controlling the abuse.

Part of the problem all over the internet is anonymity. Because people are anonymous they would say things to other people that they would never dream of saying to their face and would never dream of saying if they had sign their own name to it. But if you call yourself Tinky Winky or somethi no one knows who you are or where you are. It's a little bit like when you driving your car and because you are separated from other people driving by the wall of your two cars you give them v-signs and things, which you would never do if you actually met them in the street.

**You are quite active on Twitter and seem to get involved in some healthy debates there. And sometimes you seem to stir up Twitstorms -- recently you were accused of Islamophobia following comments about Medhi Hasan. You also made some comments about abortion. Do you think Twitter is an effective communication channel for these sorts of conversations?**

There are risks in the sheer brevity of Twitter and it's actually quite an elegant art reducing what you have to say to 140 characters and it's something that I quite enjoy attempting to do.

As for Islamophobia, I get accused of avoiding talking about Islam and on talking about Christianity just as often as I get attacked for Islamophobia. People attack one tweet and don't take into account everything else one has written. I am actually an equal opportunity anti-theist. I do attack Islam but Islamophobia is, of course, a ridiculous word. Islam deserves no more protection from being ridiculed than Christianity does and nobody talks about Christianophobia. It's a public relations coup that somebody has achieved inventing this word. It is a ridiculous word; it should never be used.

**What do you think about the fact that many modern atheists see atheism as part of their identity?**

I didn't know that was the case. It's undoubtedly true that many religious people see their religion as part of their identity, but I thought atheists were largely free of that.

**Do you still stand by the "Dear Muslima" comments you made about Rebecca Watson?**

I'm not saying anything about her.

**When was the last time you changed your mind about something?**

I've changed my mind in science. One theory that I pretty much ridiculed *The Selfish Gene* was the [Handicap Theory](#), which was put forward by an Israeli biologist called Amotz Zahavi, which said that the reason why peacocks are so brightly, gaudily-coloured is because it is a handicap. Nobody denied that it was a handicap, but Zahavi was suggesting that it was favoured because it was a handicap. So a peacock is advertising "look how strong, fit, clever I must be because I've managed to survive in spite of carrying around this

ridiculous ornament on my back". The theory was pretty much universally ridiculed in the 70s and I have since admitted that I was wrong. That was because of an extremely clever colleague of mine called Alan Grafen who produced a brilliant mathematical model which, contrary to all intuitive expectation, showed that the handicap principle could work. So I had to c down over that and was very glad to do so. It's one of the virtues of science that we do change our minds when the evidence warrants it.

### **What are the most important unanswered questions in biology**

A perennial one in evolutionary biology is what's the good of sex. That's the subject of active theoretical research. The origin of life is a major unsolved problem -- it's a hard one because it happened a long time ago under very different conditions. So the research has to consist of making theoretical models of what might have happened. And the evolution of subjective consciousness is probably the biggest of all outstanding problems in evolutionary biology.

In biology more generally, the relationship between genes and embryological development is a very flourishing, active important field.

### **What would you say is the most interesting piece of research that you've seen recently?**

I think the most interesting general field of research in terms of the sheer volume of results coming in is molecular genetics. There's a sort of breakthrough improvement in the speed and cheapness of sequencing DNA, which has extraordinary advances in all sorts of different fields of biology. In my own field, evolutionary biology, it helps to work out what animals are related to what. It's an extension of the method that was available to Darwin but with huge amounts more data because DNA sequencing is so fantastically data

### **What are you working on at the moment?**

I am literally half way through my autobiography. I have completed Volume 1 titled *An Appetite for Wonder*, and it's coming out in September 2013. That takes me up to the end of writing *The Selfish Gene* at the age of 35. Volume 2 will take me up to the present and will be published in 2015. After that I have no particular books in mind though another children's book (like *The Magic Reality*) might well be on the cards.

### **Can you tell me about your writing process?**

I am very inefficient I'm afraid. I have bursts interspersed with non-burst

don't have a routine of getting up and doing two hours before breakfast I'm afraid.

### **What's been the most challenging part?**

The first half has been reasonably easy and I've had the advantage of being able to speak to my mother about early memories and she's been extremely helpful. She's 96 and has a good memory for the distant past. For my school days I've got a pretty good memory myself although I never kept a diary. When then I went into my scientific career, working for my doctorate at Oxford, Berkeley California, then back to Oxford and writing *The Selfish Gene*. The second volume will be harder.

### **Why will the second half be harder?**

Maybe I'm wrong to think it will be harder. Volume I I did pretty much chronologically, Volume II I think I'll divide into topics like books, television activism, that kind of thing. I really haven't made a start on it at all so perhaps I shouldn't even be talking about it.

### **Since you give so many interviews, do you find yourself referring to your recollections of retelling your memories, as opposed to the memories themselves?**

Psychologists like [Elizabeth Loftus](#) have done research on what they call false memory, which does seem almost unbelievably powerful. Elizabeth Loftus herself claims to be able to plant a false memory in anyone. One of these days I must take up her challenge.

I think one of the problems is that you tend to remember not the event itself but subsequent retellings of it. When you've been interviewed a lot as I have you tend to have to repeat the same thing quite often. It's very easy to repeat the repeating rather than retell the original story.

### **It's like when you come back from holiday and people ask you how it was and you end up picking three things that you end up saying every time, even though they aren't really representative of the holiday as a whole...**

That's right and it's possible that I along with everybody else have some false memories. There was one incident in my childhood where my memory is different from my mother's. I was in Africa and I was stung by a scorpion.



both agree about that, but my memory is a little bit different. Mine was that I was walking across the floor and I saw what I thought was a lizard -- god knows how I mistook a scorpion for a lizard -- and I thought it would be funny to have the lizard walking across my foot, so I put my foot in the path of the lizard and the next thing I knew was a blinding pain. Well, my mother's memory is that I got down from the table at a meal and stepped on the scorpion, which was under the table. A different memory.

### **Which do you think is right?**

Well obviously I think mine is because I have a very clear memory of it, but I am mindful of the fact that psychologists do tell us we have false memories. I suppose it's possible that the extreme pain -- I think I passed out -- could have done funny things to my memory. So it's possible that my mother's is more reliable in this respect. But mine is extremely clear.

### **What's the most unusual appearance request you've had?**

I was filmed by a Japanese television company and the conceit of the programme was that they'd dress an actor, an Englishman, up as Charles Darwin and he would come and knock at my door and we would have a conversation about the changes that had happened in the subject [of evolutionary biology] since his death. So I told him all about modern genetics and things like that in a way that would have interested Darwin because it would have answered one of the major questions that he himself was worried about. The actor was quite good at playing the part of Darwin, doing good "man" acting and repeatedly saying things like "yes, that's it!", although he was heavily made up and bits of slap kept on dropping off him the whole time. Then we went out into the street around Oxford and he was pictured being bewildered by traffic and dodging his way through cars.

### **What was running through your mind?**

I was quite enjoying it. It was quite an unusual experience to be confronted with this Darwin look-a-like and have the privilege of talking to him.

**I was looking at your Twitter feed from last night and you were retweeting some of [Ricky Gervais's negative comments](#) about *Big Brother*. Have you ever been asked to appear?**

Oh yes, I think I have. Of course I said no. It was *Celebrity Big Brother* or something like that and I said absolutely no. I wouldn't touch it with a bapole.

You can read about Dawkins' meme-tastic appearance on stage at Saatchi Saatchi's New Directors' Showcase [here](#).