



The Torch



Edition 18

This delightful new podcast describes memes for people who are blind or visually impaired

The hosts of 'Say My Meme' want to increase the practice of 'alt-tagging,' which helps make images on the internet more accessible for people who are blind.



“A mixed breed. Mostly white and dark brown fur. Short-haired cat with light blue eyes. She has a naturally furrowed brow and frown, making her appear grumpy. She’s laying in someone’s lap, belly up,

and her head is cradled in the person's hand. And it looks like she's looking up at her owner, totally pissed."

Most of us have probably never had to so vividly describe the appearance of [Grumpy Cat](#), the celebrity feline (née Tardar Sauce), who became an internet sensation and the subject of some of the most iconic memes in history. But for blind and visually impaired people, many of whom won't instinctively know the visual details of Grumpy Cat, descriptions are essential to allow them to enjoy memes. These viral images have become such important cultural touchpoints—but they are a highly visual medium, leaving some members of society excluded.

"I really, deeply believe that memes are important, and that blind people should be able to enjoy them and use them to enhance their social and cultural credibility," says Will Butler, VP of community at [Be My Eyes](#), a company that connects blind people with sighted volunteers when they need visual assistance. "This is how people communicate."

Butler has started a new podcast, [Say My Meme](#), which literally describes some of the internet's most famous memes for a blind audience. On the show, his cohost, Caroline Desrosiers, describes them to Butler, who is legally blind, meaning he gets the same experience as the audience in hearing about many of them for the first time. "Millions and millions of blind people and people with low vision [are] just not participating in this whole cultural expression," Butler says. "So, when she describes it to me, I feel like I'm being let in on a whole new slice of culture." He says that, just a few weeks into the show, he's been able to have more dynamic conversations with friends because can now reference memes.

The podcast episodes, which air every week, are themed: So far, the hosts have delved into cat memes, sassy memes, and '90s memes. The issue for blind people is generally not in being unaware of cultural references; those who grew up in the '90s know the [T. rex](#) from *Jurassic Park*, [Nick Carter](#) from the Backstreet Boys, and [Samuel L. Jackson's character](#) in *Pulp Fiction*. "Blind people still understand that salmon is pink, and sky is blue," Butler says, "and that the *Toy Story* dinosaur is goofy, and school photos are awkward." They have the same cultural reference points but need a more textual way to access the images.

Butler has avoided memes in the past simply because they're a hassle to access—and that's because of the often-missing [“alt tag.”](#) That's text that website makers can add to describe the images they place on their sites. During their online access, many blind people use [screen readers](#), which read text aloud to them; as the screen reader comes across an alt-tagged image, it reads the description. But the majority of memes lack alt tags, so screen readers just utter “image” when they get to them. Creating memes without tags, Butler says, is like creating “internet dark matter.”

Memes are chiefly user-generated, and there's little awareness among users of the benefits of alt-tagging. (Another huge benefit for site owners is SEO: Because “Google is blind,” alt tags make images more searchable.) Butler hopes that, as well as describing memes for the blind, his show will also raise awareness among the sighted about the importance of alt-tagging, to eventually make it as mainstream as putting a caption on an Instagram photo or a YouTube video.

So, how should alt-taggers describe memes? It's a careful balance between being overly descriptive, and thus losing the “punch” of the meme, and being so sparing of details that it's not informative enough. On the show, Butler and Desrosiers (who is the CEO and founder of [Scribely](#), which writes optimized alt text for businesses) offer a “quick and casual description,” as well as a more technical description that's closer to traditional alt text. Take the condescending Willy Wonka meme, which is used to portray someone who has no interest in what another person is doing or saying. For some people, “sarcastic Gene Wilder” may be enough. Others may prefer to know the minute details of Wilder's facial expression.

It's not an exact science. To get a better feel for users' preferences, the hosts have launched a crowdsourced element of the show, in which listeners submit their favorite memes along with their own descriptions of them. For Butler, memes are “like folk art” in that they're open to interpretation—so the descriptions should be just as subjective. “It should be just as diverse a pool of people describing them as it is making them,” he says. He suggests they could even start a leaderboard for the best user descriptions, an incentive to help the descriptions keep evolving for the better.

Say My Meme is effectively exposing the fact that memes, like literary texts, are open to interpretation and constantly being refashioned as they're applied in different contexts. In that way, the podcast is enjoyable for all audiences, including sighted folks who dissect memes themselves. Ultimately, memes—and the podcast—reflect the shared experience of humor, which Butler calls a civil right. “I hope we can bring together those who care deeply about accessibility with those who have never heard of it,” Butler says, “over laughter and fun.”

Butler has another fun idea, for another, meta layer of humor: to try to get celebrities on the show to participate in the tagging. “What if Chuck Norris wants to come on and describe his own memes for the blind community?”

Source photo: [David Livingston/Getty Images]

Source Website: [Fast Company](#)

4 Tips to Effectively Ask for Help—and Get a Yes

Social psychology shows people are eager to help—if you know how to ask.



Source: Photo by kieferpix. Adobe Stock.

If you've ever glanced at the acknowledgments section of a good book, or listened to an Academy Awards acceptance speech, you know that no one achieves great things in a vacuum. Even with

these seemingly individual accomplishments, there are countless people behind the scenes offering their skills, insights, and expertise to propel someone else into the limelight.

As highly social animals, we humans depend on one another to learn and grow. What's more, research shows that helping others actually makes us feel good and that generosity is likely an important evolutionary adaptation for our species. If we are hardwired for altruism, why then is it so uncomfortable for us to ask for help?

In a society that praises self-help and self-reliance, it is becoming increasingly difficult for us to ask our colleagues, friends, and even our family for the assistance we need. The mere thought of asking for help can eat away at our ego, undermine our confidence, make us question our abilities, and even paralyze us with anxiety. Yet in modern life—at a time when we are more digitally connected and emotionally detached than ever—the stark reality is that no one can go it alone.

Learning how to ask for (and accept) help is perhaps one of the greatest skills you can develop. Luckily, new research shows that asking for and actually getting help is a lot easier and less daunting than it seems

But first, let's examine our contradictory reluctance to take advantage of this evolutionary altruism.

Why Is Asking for Help So Hard?

The primary reason is fear. We fear that we'll be turned down, laughed at, or revealed to be a fraud. Though these fears are usually unfounded, we are loathe to ask for help because this seemingly simple act carries a number of high social risks: rejection, vulnerability, diminished status, and the inherent relinquishing of control. In the face of these threats, fear overrides reason and, as studies in neuroscience show, this risk of emotional pain activates the same regions of the brain as physical pain.

Another reason why asking for help seems so hard is that we are pretty terrible at articulating our needs in a way that someone can

offer constructive aid. This is partially due to a cognitive bias that social psychologists call the illusion of transparency, or the mistaken belief that our feelings, thoughts, and needs are obvious to other people. Too often, we wait for someone to notice our telepathic plea for help and inevitably get frustrated when no one does.

It should go without saying that in order to receive help, you often have to ask for it. The high stakes and awkwardness of asking in our highly individualistic culture pose obstacles for many of us. But the best way to get more comfortable asking for help is to get better at it.

4 Tips to Ask for (and Get) Help

Here are some simple tips to empower you to effectively ask for the help you need, and ensure that you get a yes in response to your thoughtful request.

1. Be concise and specific. Asking for and offering help can only be productive under one crucial condition: clear communication. Try to communicate your request as clearly and concisely as possible. There is no need to over-explain: simply describe what the task is, why it matters, and how the person you're asking can contribute. Try to be as specific as possible so they know exactly what it is they will need to do and can accurately judge how much time and energy the task will take.

Furthermore, be willing to negotiate. Let them decide how much support they can offer and try to find a mutually beneficial solution.

2. Don't apologize. Don't apologize for asking for help. No one gets excited about a task that the asker feels the need to apologize for. We all need help sometimes and it's nothing to be ashamed of—but apologizing makes it seem like you're doing something wrong by asking and casts the task at hand in a negative light.

On that note, don't minimize your need with phrases like "I hate to ask..." or "It's just a small thing." This suggests that their assistance is trivial and takes the joyous sense of accomplishment out of helping. After all, how am I supposed to feel if you "hate to ask" for my assistance? Similarly, don't ask them to do you a favor. This can make people feel obliged to say yes.

3. Make it personal, not transactional. Don't ask for help over email or text. Though it's easier to send a written request, it's also a lot easier to say no to one. Try to speak face to face or call. Studies show that face-to-face requests are 34 times more successful!

Make your request more personal by explaining why the person's skills or expertise make them uniquely suited to this task. This casts them as a helpful person and not just another person you can resort to for help. Studies show that when people are asked to "be a generous donor"—rather than simply asked to donate—they are more likely to say yes and donate larger sums.

Finally, don't emphasize reciprocity. While we tend to think that sweetening the deal with the promise of a returned favor is a good strategy, this kind of language makes your request feel transactional. People don't like feeling indebted to others, and others are more likely to help you if you show genuine appreciation for their aid rather than assign their efforts a monetary value.

4. Follow up with results. Beyond expressing your gratitude, you should follow up with the helper to share the tangible results of their aid. As much as we'd like to think that acts of generosity are their own reward, the reality is that people long to feel effective. We want to feel that the work we do and the help we give matters. Take the time to show the people who help you why their support not only matters to you, but how it makes a larger impact on your life, work, or community.

Next time you think you need some help, remember that there are more people than you think who are eager to lend a hand. More importantly, use these suggestions to ask in a way that empowers you and the person you're asking to reap the rewards of generosity and collaboration.

Source: [Psychology Today](#)

Ian Fraser Memorial Bursary Fund: Graduates 2021



Michelle Botha obtained her PHD in Disability Studies at the University of Cape Town.



Zaahid Zhaveer obtained his Diploma in Tax at the Durban University of Technology.

SA Mobility For The Blind



Ian Hutton



Parishna Ramluckan, Ian Hutton's successor

There I was, approaching seventy. Or was seventy approaching me? I'll never know. Either way, I knew that the time was right for me to ...? Yes! Retire.

"But why?" someone asks me. And she is older than I am.

"Because," I say, "it would be irresponsible of me to drop dead on the job."

But let's go back. Who am I anyway?

Well, I'm Ian Hutton, for what that's worth, and back in 1998, at the age of forty something, I was sitting there and wondering what I'd like to be when I grow up. And then it came to me, when I was talking about what I should do next.

"You know what?" I said. "We must take white cane training to people who wouldn't get it otherwise. People in rural areas. People in townships. Anywhere and everywhere in the country. We must be like Doctors Without Borders. We must be Mobility Without Borders."

And so it was that SAMBT was born. SAMBT stands for South African Mobility for the Blind Trust. And if I had my life over again, I would have given it a simpler and easier to remember name. But there you go. You can't have it all.

From then on, we have gone out looking for blind people rather than expecting them to find us. And there they were in Kuruman and Priska in the Northern Cape; in the sprawling townships of Katlehong and Tembisa in Gauteng; in Tshidilamolomo village next to the Botswana border and the deeply potholed township beside the little dorp of Ottosdal. And there they were in Manguzi Northern KZN, where a mamba can stand up in front of you, taller than you are, and keep you riveted to the spot for twenty minutes, eyes shut and praying. And then there are those children at schools for the blind. Many of them, too many, leave their school gates for the last time with not a day of O&M training to their name.

And so it was and so it is that our Practitioners go to those places and to those schools, bringing with them the gift of O&M Training. To do this they live and work away from home for much of the year. They are my heroes.

But now the time is ripe for me to hang up my white cane and to wake up every morning thinking it's Sunday. But for a long time, I will hear the voices of those people we have trained saying things like,, "I feel human again," or say to one of our Practitioners, "When I went blind, I prayed every day for help. And then you came, like an angel from God."

What can I say? Well, maybe just this. It's all been a damn sight more fulfilling than running a pencil factory.

But now the question that's on all your lips. Who is taking over from me?

Her name is Parishna Ramluckan. She will do a fantastic job. I know it. When she told me that she was very nervous about filling my shoes, I said, 'Don't worry, I'm only size nine. That seemed to help. You will all meet her in due course.

But wait! Just in case you think that I am about to go up in a puff of smoke, you might like to know that the SAMBT Board has asked me to stay on as an ordinary member. Of course I will. It's better than collecting stamps, don't you think?

Finally, and I mean finally, I want to give huge praise to St Dunstan's. You administer the John and Esther Ellerman Memorial Trust. That Trust subsidises the salaries of O&M Practitioners. This includes the salaries of all SAMBT Practitioners. You have done this for SAMBT from around day one, some twenty years ago. Bless you for that and ...

Amen.

When disaster strikes, why do we only pay attention to the Death-toll?

Faced with so many accounts of death, in our societies, are we prone to overlooking a significant segment of the most vulnerable in our communities?

General knowledge quiz time!

Question 1: How many people were killed in the recent attack on the Capital in Washington DC?

Question 2: How many people were killed in the Christchurch shooting in 2019?

Question 3: Who was Breonna Taylor?

Question 4: Who was George Floyd?

Well done! I am sure most people reading this were correct in their answers.

Now try this.

Question 5: How many people were seriously injured in those attacks?

And for the bonus prize.

Question 6: Who is Jacob Blake?

I am willing to bet that less people got this one without looking it up.

The difference between the first four questions and the last two, of course, is that the first four involved death while the last two were about serious injury and very possibly permanent disability.

The point I am making is that for some reason we tend to direct our attention, horror and outrage toward death, while almost never showing lasting interest in those that get seriously or permanently injured or disabled in these kinds of horrific incidents.

Interestingly, media, not just our own, but globally, perpetuate the foolish fascination by repeating, over and over again, the death toll of a tragic event. Soon, after about a day, the numbers of those who have died are still high on the agenda, while for some reason, details of injured fall away from view and are almost immediately forgotten.

To me, the greatest illustration of this, is the comparison between George Floyd and Jacob Blake.

They were both involved in high profile incidents, involving police in the US, one was killed, Floyd, while Blake was terribly injured, (no surprise there with 7 bullets in his back), leaving him paralysed. Yet who is the more famous?

So what, you might ask?

Is there an Economist in the house?

Ask yourself, what is costlier to a family, community or economy?

Death or Disability?

With the greatest respect to those who have lost someone or those who have passed away, Death is pretty finite. Tragic certainly for those left behind, but they, have no choice but to move on and deal with the aftermath, emotionally and perhaps financially should the person have been a breadwinner.

However, if you have just been “lucky” enough to have “survived” a gang shooting, taxi or bus accident or some other trauma and have been left with a serious and lasting injury, like Jacob Blake was,

What does your future look like?

Who will pay for hospital care?

Rehabilitation?

Assistive devices such as wheelchairs, prosthetics or other technology?

Who will convince your boss that you actually can work again, but will need a little time or some reasonable accommodation, to be able to do so?

Who will care or even know that you exist, if we and media do not shift the attention towards the more significant issue?

I wonder in the light of our universal tendency to overlook and therefore underestimate the sheer scale of later onset disabilities, whether we are not missing whole swathes of communities left vulnerable by our ignorance and inattention.



For those who might struggle to see the cartoon, it depicts a person in a Haz-mat suit, staring in fear at a classic person with a disability in a wheelchair.

The caption reads, "Disability is not contagious."

Due to our atavistic and almost pathological avoidance of Disability, in our everyday society, is it a surprise that we understand so little and see even less?

In a country like ours, with so much crime, so many accidents and other phenomena that disable so many, can we afford not to open our eyes and pay a little more attention?

Jeremy Opperman

Newlands Rotary

February 2021

(sneak preview of the next Wobblies Ink edition.

Tackling the greatest barrier of all; the attitudinal barrier.)

Announcements



Renier Heyns

Renier celebrated his 60th birthday in March 2021. Him and his beautiful wife, Marie, had a small get together with a few friends. All of the best to you Renier, may there be many happy days ahead