



The imitation game: The memefication of political discourse

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Memes (discrete units of knowledge, gossip, jokes and so on) are to culture what genes are to life. Just as biological evolution is driven by the survival of the fittest genes in the gene pool, cultural evolution may be driven by the most successful memes.

— Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 1976

When you think of participatory democracy, do you visualise a town hall meeting or an Internet discussion thread full of political memes? Generations of political scientists have tried to innovate democracy by coming up with different participatory tools to motivate citizens to take a more active role. Oddly enough, memes, propelled by the ever-growing usage of social media and the Internet, have achieved a far more visible change in the political landscape than the aforementioned tools.

Humour and satire in politics have always existed, but with the emergence of the Internet the editorial aspect has become more democratic, meaning that everybody can express their views in a satirical way, not just political cartoonists and satirists. In a way memes have become an alternative to the political humour of the traditional media. Their appeal lies in their participatory character: everybody can be a creator, and there is an intrinsic sense of belonging to a group—a sense that is enhanced through the feeling of being part of an ‘inside joke’. Participation can take on a more passive form than creation, but sharing or liking a meme enhances its ultimate reach and inspires others to play with the same idea and alter the existing meme.

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Perhaps the main allure lies precisely in the playful aspect. Seiffert-Brockmann et al. (2018, 2862–79) argue that the outcome of the ‘meme game’ is less important than the experience of creating and sharing digital content. Even though the player may not necessarily have a political intention beyond just having fun, the consequences of the game might be very political in nature.

A distinction should be made between the formation of a genuine meme thread and a centralised online communication campaign that uses memes as its tools of expression. Political humour often flourishes in oppressive political regimes as a form of morale boost. Memes become outlets for expressing frustration with the political situation. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that one of the first to realise and capitalise on the changes that memes were bringing to political discourse came from precisely this group.

The seamless nature of memes leaves space for abuse. While memes can be used to achieve positive objectives, organisations sometimes use them in disinformation campaigns aimed at smearing opponents. The creation of troll and bot ‘factories’, with the sole goal of disseminating propaganda with content which is meant to appear genuine, has put a nail in the coffin of the idealistic view that the advent of the Internet would democratise societies and enhance participation. The weaponisation of memes through mass replication has created a powerful tool for waging political war against opponents. The biggest shock for the international community came in the wake of the 2016 American presidential elections when the outcome was at least partly attributed to widely shared fake campaign advertisements.

In an article written for *The Guardian* a few days before the elections took place, Haddow (2016) wrote about how memes are slowly ruining democracy. However, there is no need for such a gloomy view as, while political commentary and its reach have advanced with the rise of the meme, we are still in the period when political actors and institutions are becoming accustomed to this new reality. Without needing to spend much money or to find investors or sponsors, a political party or individual candidate can organise a meme campaign with just a simple idea entrenched in humour. Not every effort of this kind has to be part of a well-organised strategy. Large volumes of quality content can be produced quite apart from such schemes since, due to their diverse nature, memes also attract those who are normally less interested in politics. Obviously not all memes have a clear political message that people grasp at first glance. The inherent attraction of this indirect connection with politics leads many to believe that due to their ‘funny nature’ these memes are not changing the political discourse per se, an argument that is supported by research into the impact of Internet memes on digital natives and migrants in India (Kulkarni 2017, 16).

However, memes should not be discredited as a phenomenon which does not affect voting behaviour. They do cause paradigm shifts and affect the ways in which even politicians communicate. More and more politicians are posting and producing memes, or following or liking satirical accounts on social media which offer political memes. Two great examples are DG MEME’s Facebook profile (DG Meme 2019) and Berlaymonster’s

Twitter account (Berlaymonster 2019), both of which are setting trends in the EU political bubble and determining the tone for current topics when it comes to EU policy. In these specific cases even if the followership which these accounts have is not huge, the type of followers they have is key.

Amongst the followers of these accounts, you can often find commissioners, MEPs, directors and political advisers. Due to the influence these accounts have in shaping opinions and trends on social media, they indirectly influence the wider public and change the way policies are communicated. Sometimes the narrative that these memes create can be so destructive that a party leader is forced to publicly apologise for their use. This happened recently to the leader of the Brexit group Leave.EU, Arron Banks, whose group shared a meme on Facebook and Twitter that labelled Angela Merkel a 'Kraut' (Smith 2019).

As implied by the Greek word 'mimesis', from which the word 'meme' originates, the key element is imitation. In a fast-evolving interaction there is no incentive to fact-check, especially as a meme is a political commentary that combines the verbal with the visual, is ultimately meant to be humorous and entertain, and does not purport to state real facts. As more and more people use social media as their primary source of information, the space for nuanced debate is shrinking. Instead of complaining about how democracy will be ruined due to phenomena such as memes, the traditional political sector should embrace the new reality and find a *modus operandi* which it is comfortable using for communication, whilst enjoying the advantages that memification has to offer. Thinking outside the box and creating campaigns which appeal to digital natives and motivate them to like and share the content is the only way for traditional politicians and civil society to reach a wider audience and escape their own echo chambers.

When the General Data Protection Regulation was introduced, the Internet 'exploded' because people thought that the new copyright rules would affect memes. Sensationalist titles in the traditional media that labelled the copyright directive 'the EU's meme ban' illustrated the relevance of memes in the contemporary public sphere. The European Parliament even had to tweet from its official account to assure citizens that 'memes are safe' (European Parliament 2019). The Commission's official Twitter account took it a step further and on several occasions used memes and gifs as replies (European Commission 2018). Taking this into account, it comes as a bit of a surprise that the traditional parties, especially those in power, remain reluctant to use memes.

To survive and form narratives which nurture democracy and pluralism, creative policy leadership will be needed more than ever. To preserve freedom of speech as we know it, hate speech disseminated via memes and the mass production of fake accounts to amplify its effects will have to be combated. Deciphering not only how to use memes as a new communication tool, but all the advancements which the Internet has to offer democracies is one of the biggest challenges that lies ahead for traditional political actors.

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