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Discourse, Context and Media

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/dcm

Digital cultures of political participation: Internet memes and the discursive delegitimization of the 2016 U.S Presidential candidates

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 October 2016

Received in revised form

5 January 2017

Accepted 10 January 2017

Available online 14 January 2017

Keywords:

Delegitimization

Internet memes

Political participation

Discourse

ABSTRACT

Internet memes are a contemporary phenomenon situated at the nexus of language, society, and digital communication, and represent a relatively new form of participatory culture that can offer certain demographics an opportunity for political expression, engagement and participation which otherwise might not have been accessible. This article adopts a discourse analytical perspective to examine the visual-discursive features of Internet memes in relation to the candidates for the 2016 U.S presidential election – Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Specifically, memes are analyzed in line with Van Leeuwen's (2007) framework for the analysis of legitimizing discourse in relation to how they *de*-legitimize. That is, the focus is on how memes attempt to create a negative view of the candidates and reduce their legitimacy as presidential candidates. The analysis reveals that the (de)legitimization strategies of authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization and mythopoesis are all evident within Internet memes.

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1. Introduction

The use of various forms of digital communication and in particular social media has grown rapidly to the point that social media has “become one of the most popular Internet services in the world” (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012, p. 319), thereby providing an avenue for social and political participation to many who previously may not have found such an avenue either apparent or available. One form of digital communication that falls into this category is Internet memes. Situated at the nexus of language, society, popular culture, communication science and digital technologies, Internet memes have been succinctly described as an example of “artifacts of participatory digital culture” (Wiggins and Bowers, 2015, p. 1886).

Foregrounded by the above, this article examines a selection of Internet memes in relation to the 2016 U.S presidential election, subjected to a Multimodal Discourse Analysis as an example of Wiggins and Bowers' (2015) participatory digital culture. We position Internet memes as a creative device which facilitates the potentially viral communication of one's own political beliefs, attitudes and orientations, generally always among groups sharing

the same, similar or opposing ideological beliefs. Moreover, we show the multitude of ways in which Internet memes are able to “provide insight into how ‘everyday’ media texts intertwine with public discourses” (Milner, 2012, p. 9). Particular attention is given to the ways in which Internet memes are frequently utilized as a device for delegitimization. We adopt Van Leeuwen's (2007) framework for analyzing discourses of legitimization (hereafter referred to as *legitimization*), but consider the framework from an inversed ‘negative’ position – as delegitimization. This is not to say that delegitimization cannot be achieved through the application of legitimization strategies in the regular, non-inverted sense, as it certainly can. However, with our explicit focus on delegitimization and the manner in which Internet memes often exhibit a tendency to negatively characterize the target, we therefore consider them from this negated position.

Specifically, we are interested in the manner in which Internet memes are employed to criticize, deride, and mock the selected election candidates – Donald Trump of the Republican Party and Hillary Clinton of the Democratic Party (hereafter referred to by surname) – in relation to some of the more controversial aspects

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of their respective campaigns. Perhaps the two most dominant points of contention circulating through mainstream media discussions during the election campaign were Trump's proposed plan to build a wall along the US-Mexico border,¹ while for Clinton the primary gaze of the media has been cast upon her use of a personal email server for official and classified communications during her tenure as Secretary of State.² The scope and range of Internet memes targeting these two particular issues demonstrates a form of digital political participation that delegitimized the candidates in the lead-up to the election.

The article adds to the existing literature on (de)legitimization by discussing it in relation to this contemporary form of digital political participation. Similarly, although a body of literature on Internet memes both within and outside the realm of politics is emerging, to our knowledge there has been no study to date focusing explicitly on memes in relation to how they delegitimize ideas or individuals.

2. Literature review

2.1. Internet memes – a conceptual overview

Internet memes have been described as the “propagation of content such as jokes, rumors, videos, or websites from one person to others via the Internet” (Shifman, 2013, p. 362) and are first shared in an initial form, but then subjected to derivation and adaptation by other individual members of the community (meme creators). This has led to Internet memes being more generally defined as “groups of items sharing common characteristics of content, form and/or stance, which were created, transformed, and circulated by many participants through digital participatory platforms” (Gal et al., 2016, p. 1700), and it is this definition we the authors adopt in the current article.

Shifman (2012) further highlights how Internet memes require - indeed depend upon - human agency, as memes are only able to spread as a direct result of actions taken and choices made by individual actors. Although the exchange and spread of memes may appear chaotic across intersecting virtual networks, Nissenbaum and Shifman (2015, p. 3) point out that “the exchange of Internet memes is to a large extent a product of societal and communal coordination” whereby meme creators depend upon the content and stance of the meme fitting with the worldview of their digital community in order for the meme to survive and then spread as new iterations and manipulations. Thus, we suggest that memes can extend their appeal beyond digital cultures and into broader popular culture through making connections with emotions and feelings related to a particular belief or position held.

Internet memes occur in a variety of forms but most typically include GIF files, YouTube clips and image macros (an image with text superimposed over the top). Image macro memes spread the most voraciously due to the ease of adaptation and understanding. However, it should be noted that not all memes circulate across the Internet with “extraordinary speed and scale” (Blommaert and Varis, 2015, p. 7), and that multitudes of memes are created in relation to issues that might never be shared. Therefore, the viral success of a meme depends on an assortment of various social

factors aligning in the right place and at the right time in relation to the right issue.

For the current study, image macro memes form the data set due to their proliferation in relation to the 2016 U.S. Presidential election and their ability to convey a message through a visual-discursive combination of image and text. Examples of image macro memes that have undergone the process of adaptation and reiteration are shown in Fig. 1. These particular memes began with imagery from an advertisement for Dos Equis beer featuring the American actor Jonathan Goldsmith. In both instances the text follows the syntactic phrasal pattern of ‘I don’t always X, but when I do I Y’, a common format whereby some part of the text ‘sets up’ the joke for the punchline or key message to then be presented in the lower portion of the image. From here, creators are able to either alter the specific meaning to be expressed through the text to create a new iteration of the meme or to change the image and the text to create a new derivative meme entirely, as shown in the third meme in the series in Fig. 1 featuring the American film actor Leonardo DiCaprio.

We are interested in image macro memes because of the simplicity of their creation and the humor so often involved. Shifman (2014, p. 95) refers to their “simple packaging” meaning that they are generally understood quickly and thus encourage sharing by being forwarded on to other members of the creator/consumers’ digital community or network. In addition, image macro memes are highly convenient in terms of data collection which added to the suitability for the present study. Moreover, image macro memes offer “a humorous take on the subject” (Silva and Garcia, 2012, p. 94) regardless of whether the underlying tone is serious, thereby encouraging creator/consumers to share the meme with community members, colleagues and friends. Finally, community participation and creation has been made easier through online tools that facilitate the production of new meme iterations (e.g. <https://memegenerator.net/>).

2.2. Internet memes, participatory culture(s) and the realm of politics

The notion of participatory culture(s) was proposed by Jenkins (2009, p. 3) and defined as “a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement” and “strong support for creating and sharing one’s own creations”. This can easily be extrapolated to incorporate the idea of a ‘digital’ culture (Wiggins and Bowers, 2015), exemplified by the domain within which Internet memes are created and spread, but is certainly not limited to memes as other forms of social media that are also easy to use and facilitate authentic user creations have led to an “explosion of grassroots participation, allowing individuals to express their opinions more openly and freely” (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014, p. 613). In relation to politics, participation has traditionally been restricted to activities such as voting, campaigning, communicating with officials, and other collective activities (Verba and Nie, 1972). These traditional forms of participation, however, largely overlooked the ways that participation can be enhanced and made more inclusive and accessible through a range of media typologies, especially in the current digital environment. Now, social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook facilitate a higher degree of political participation with greater ease (Loader et al., 2014), and Internet memes can be added to the list of new tools for political participation.

Image macro memes are of specific relevance as although they can relate to any topic, they are frequently devised as a means of political expression, participation and commentary. This is largely due to their simplicity, which lends themselves to being quickly “employed for political or social debate” (Milner, 2013a, p. 65). Milner (2013b) highlighted this in a study of populist image memes

¹ One of the most quoted aspects of Trump’s campaign was his promise to build a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border to prevent illegal Mexican immigrants from entering the U.S. He also stated that he would ensure the Mexican government would pay for the construction of the wall.

² It became known in 2015 that Hilary Clinton had used her personal email server to transmit classified emails during her tenure as U.S. Secretary of State, and it has been claimed that this was a major violation of official operating procedures.

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