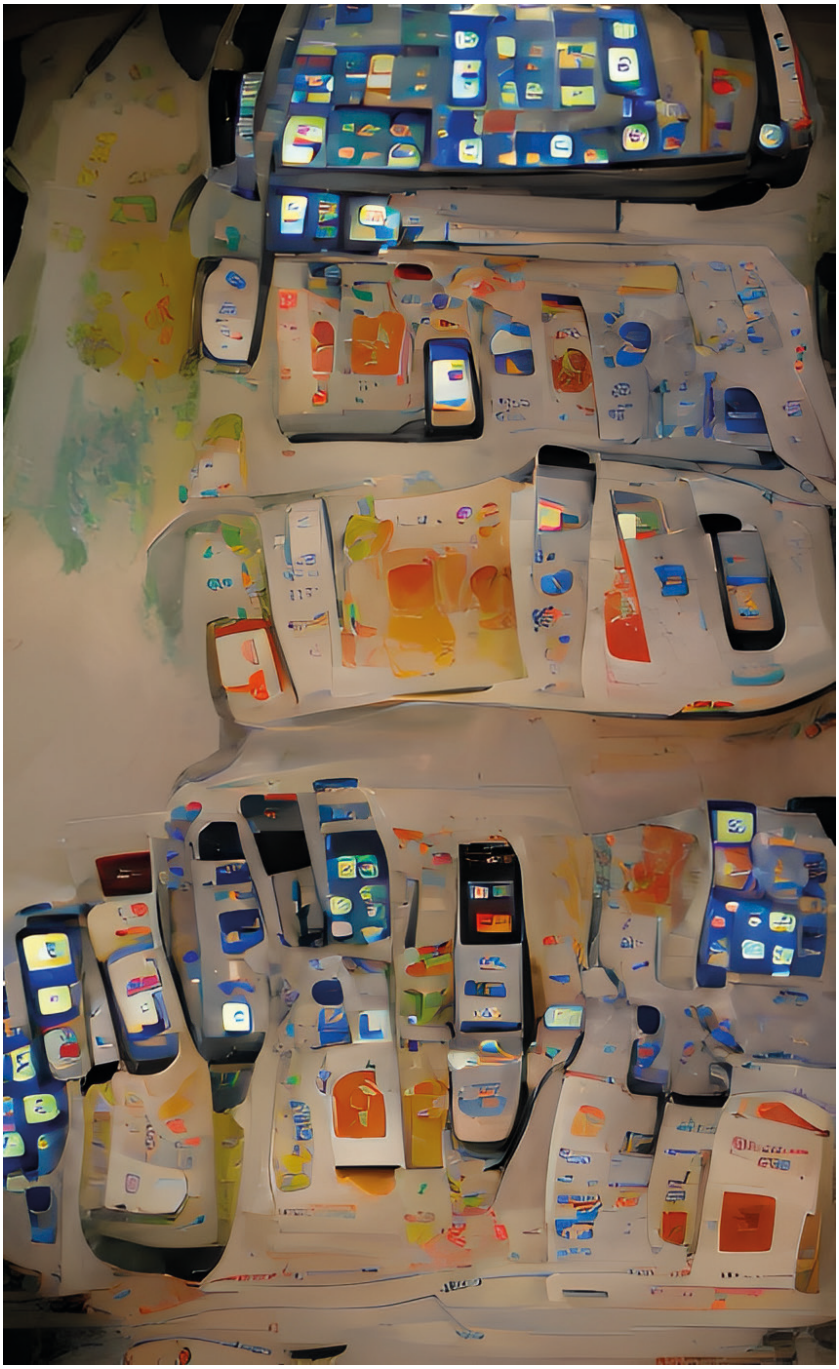

Game of Phones

Note: Image generated using StableDiffusion Image Generator by Stable Diffusion AI from the prompt ‘Craft an image featuring multiple cell phones arranged on a table, exploring the interplay of modern technology and connectivity within the visual composition’.

Abstract

Chapter 4
In Memes We Trust? Co-option or Democratisation of Graphic Political Satire

The decline of political cartoonists, exacerbated by economic and technological challenges, has brought to light a broader societal issue—the erosion of trust in American news sources. Drawing parallels with the waning influence of religious leaders in the Global West as traditional moral guides, this decline stems from various factors. Using a recent case study that continues to captivate news and moral discourse, the focus thus shifts here to the Trump administration's role in discrediting news outlets and attacking journalists. Examining the trajectory of trust in news media since the 1970s, where over 70% of Americans expressed confidence, the issue with memes is that their spread underscores a significant drop to just 32% before the 2016 Presidential election. Scholars and commentators attribute this decline directly to the Trump administration's consistent discrediting of news outlets and personal attacks on journalists. In the first six months of his presidency, Trump dedicated more tweets to questioning the authenticity of news than addressing critical issues such as the economy, healthcare, immigration, or terrorism. As civic rebellion and allegiance to the fake news narrative took shape, this requires an exploration of the rise of memes as a powerful tool for expressing dissent and support. Fuelled by humour, memes have become conduits for spreading hyper-partisan narratives in an era dominated by fake news and the perpetuation of the "Big Lie". Their comprehensive examination unveils the intricate interplay between economic challenges, technological shifts, political influence, and the transformative role of humour in shaping contemporary discourse.

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In Memes We Trust?

Co-option of Democratisation of Graphic Political Satire

Lucien Leon

Memetic Media

Political cartoonists have often been rambunctious individuals not always fitting neatly within newspaper organizations, or, as some scholars put it, they have been "marching to a different drummer" as autonomous "artists" with political views.[1] Despite such a rebellious reputation, however, their works have long enjoyed prominence in the editorial and opinion pages of newspapers which lent an authoritative weight to their critiques and positioned them as arbiters of fairness, morality, and ethics. In viewing the provision of news as a public good and an essential component of a healthy democracy[2] we might better understand political cartoonists as god-like vanguards of morality that illuminate our understanding of the political world around us and guide our passage through political and civic participation.

However, such roles are under challenge from the meme-makers who are often partisans that aim to reinforce a political identity rather than stand aloof from party attachment. As the 21st-century news audience shifts inexorably away from traditional media and towards online and social media platforms, the satiric internet meme has

[1] Riffe, "Deciding the Limits of Taste".

[2] Kovach and Rosenstiel, *Elements of Journalism*.

Leon, L. 2024. In Memes We Trust? Co-option of Democratisation of Graphic Political Satire. In B. Nickl & M. Rolfe. (Eds.) *Moral Dimensions of Humour: Essays on Humans, Heroes and Monsters*. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 105–136. https://doi.org/10.61201/tup.896

emerged as a putative successor to the political cartoon.[3] While the political cartoon is stamped with the graphic identity of its author and sanctioned by the newspaper in which it is published, memes are anonymous images whose authority is sought through their replication and repetition in a largely unregulated environment. The potential to weaponise memes as vehicles for misinformation and malice[4] has proved irresistible for various political, media and activist groups, raising issues of morality in the use of such humour. The co-option of memes by hyper-partisan publishers in particular has blurred the line between propaganda and journalism–creating monsters that would undermine and threaten our trust in civic discourse and institutions.

At their best, memes can be an effective satirical and democratic tool whose participatory modes of production and dissemination promote broad public discourse and scrutiny of political players.[5] Nonetheless, as the political cartoon tradition transmogrifies from an illustrative, sole author pursuit into a collective-based, appropriated image culture, so the role of the political cartoonist as the independent public intellectual and moral bellwether is in terminal decline while the star of the satiric and committed meme-activist is in the ascendant. In addressing the question of whether the democratisation of satire that memes have promoted has come at the expense of illuminating, insightful political critique, this chapter surveys the political memes published and disseminated in the lead-up to the 2020 US Presidential election via the two most heavily subscribed and prolific meme aggregators on Facebook – Occupy Democrats and Breitbart. This chapter examines the manner both in which hyper-partisan publishers engage humorous images to promulgate their message and the way their readers respond to these images. Analysing the form and content of these images through the lens of established political cartoon and meme taxonomies reveals the teleological intersection between political humour and activism in these influential and ideologically opposed groups.

Historical context

Cartoonists are said to represent the citizen's perspective of public life.[6] Roe expands on this definition, positioning cartoonists "on the borderline between the tradition of the artist as social critic and the journalist as social commentator/reporter, between the 'high' culture of the intellectual and the mass culture of their newspapers' readership".[7] Citing Posner's survey of literary satire as public intellectual genre, Roe concludes that political cartooning provides a "new space for public intellectuals to

[3] Grygiel, "Political Cartoonists".

[4] Smith, "Weaponized Iconoclasm".

[5] Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture.*

[6] Manning and Phiddian, "The Editor and the Cartoonist", 48.

[7] Roe, "Graphic Satire", 59.

perform".[8] Similarly, she presents cartoonists as traditional intellectuals who usually consider themselves autonomous and independent of the hegemonic social group as they confront the hegemonic group, its values and its worldview. In her study of the ethical contribution cartoonists make to the maintenance of a just society, Mackay observes that, by publicising issues of justice and focusing attention on issues of inequality, cartoonists "serve important roles in investigating the government and analysing complex problems throughout society".[9] Her study reveals that cartoonists consider their core roles to be investigating government, providing analysis of complex problems, discussing national policy and providing interpretation of international developments. At the same time, cartoonists "were less likely to assign a high level of importance to setting the political agenda or, surprisingly, entertainment".[10]

Cartoonists do not operate with impunity but under the auspices of their editor. Lamb's survey of editors and cartoonists reveals that the two camps "agree to a large extent on the function of cartoons and the constraints that affect them".[11] Editors value their cartoonists' independent contributions to the newspaper and understand that a good cartoonist is attuned to their readership in terms of what is understood politically and appreciated satirically. Subsequently, editors afford cartoonists a great deal of license in the topics and stance of their cartoons, with concerns about 'inaccuracy' and 'style and taste' providing the main factors in their rejection of a given cartoon.[12] This symbiotic tension–between objectivity and satire, fact and exaggeration, tastefulness, and impropriety–is at the heart of the special contract that exists between a cartoonist and the reader. Editorial imprimatur confers a guarantee of trust in these subversive images; the reader understands the telos of the political cartoon is to lampoon, mock and satirise those in positions of power in the name of both public catharsis and healthy, democratic debate.

A confluence of economic, cultural, and technological threats has all but extinguished the cartooning tradition in the US. Where there were 2000 editorial cartoonists employed by newspapers in the United States at the start of the 20th century, in the second decade of the 21st century that number has shrunk to around 20. A steady fall in print newspaper circulation and advertising revenue–down by nearly 50% and 30% respectively since the turn of the century–a trend towards syndication at the expense of staff cartoonists, self-censorship by timid cartoonists and controversy-averse editors, and the rise of partisan comedians and talk show hosts as political satirists have all conspired to weaken the integrity of the political cartoon as satirical critique.[13]

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8 Ibid, 57.

9 Mackay, "What Does Society Owe", 37.

10 Ibid, 33.

11 Lamb, "Perceptions of Cartoonists", 105.

12 Lamb, "Perceptions of Cartoonists", 114.

13 Lichter, Baumgartner and Morris, *Politics is a Joke*.

The digital revolution that saw newspapers shift to online media presented some new opportunities for political cartoonists[14] but disrupted the op-ed status of cartoons, which were now typically framed in galleries and separated from their immediate news context. Once the most high-impact graphic image in a newspaper in terms of illustrative style and op-ed page real-estate, the newspaper cartoon in the digital era competes with audio-visual content and advertising and is challenged by click-through behaviour that diminishes audience attention spans. The US has also entered a new phase of media publication and reporting where audiences are fragmented, polarised–insulated from a diversity of opinion and editorialising–and distrustful of the very news publication platforms upon which they rely for information.

Trust in news media

Compounding the economic and technological factors that have depleted the ranks of political cartoonists in recent decades is the diminishing trust that Americans place in their news sources. While trust in news media has been on a downward trend since the 1970s–when over 70% of Americans expressed confidence in the integrity of the news reporting–this level dropped to just 32% in the lead-up to the 2016 Presidential election. Many scholars and commentators attribute this decline in trust directly to the Trump administration's frequent discrediting of news outlets and personal attacks on journalists.[15] For example, in the first 6 months of his presidency, Trump tweeted more about the relative fakeness of news than either the economy, healthcare, immigration or terrorism.

Americans believe made-up news "is causing significant harm to the nation and needs to be stopped" with 68% saying that made-up news and information "greatly impacts Americans' confidence in government institutions", while 54% say it is having "a major impact on our confidence in each other".[16] The blame for this deterioration in news integrity is attributed to political leaders and activists rather than journalists, with a sizeable majority of Americans (73%) concerned that tensions between Trump and the media impeded their access to important political news. Trust in media is also heavily divided along partisan lines, with Republican supporters six times more likely than Democrat supporters to view journalists as having "very low" ethical standards. Unsurprisingly, Democrat supporters are more likely to trust legacy news media outlets than Republicans, with levels of trust remaining stable for Democrats but sharply declining for Republicans between 2014 and 2020.[17]

[14] Leon, "The Evolution of Political Cartooning".

[15] Koliska et al, "Talking Back".

[16] Mitchell et al., "Most Say Tensions".

[17] Gramlich, "Q&A".

A further blow to political cartoonists is the extent to which Americans have in recent years eschewed newspapers in favour of social media as a source of news. Since the 2016 election, social media sites have overtaken printed newspapers as a source of news, with Facebook dominating as the most common social media site for news.[18] Despite 43% of Americans getting their news from this site, 57% say they expect the news they see on Facebook to be largely inaccurate. In their research into the weakening of democratic systems and discourse in the digital age, Cooper and Thomas argue that social media are "playing a major role in exacerbating problems... by decreasing trust in elites, reducing access to unbiased information and facilitating the dissemination of disinformation".[19] Boczkowski and Papacharissi point out that with journalism no longer the principal arbiter of news, "facts are semantically renegotiated to a greater extent than before, and fake news and alternative facts have become part of our everyday vernacular".[20]

Social media sites such as Facebook have not only drawn audiences away from the political cartoonist's traditional publishing domain, but their unregulated approach to news publication and dissemination provides an ideal platform for hyper-political news publishers. Of further concern for democratic discourse is that distrust of media promotes in audiences a retreat to partisan assessments of news consumption.[21] Social media engagement tracking firm *NewsWhip* notes that "the 2016 election left behind an influx of partisan publishers"[22], identifying *Occupy Democrats* and *Breitbart* as the two leading online publishers of liberal and conservative content respectively. Occupy Democrats is an organisation that is politically aligned with the Democratic Party. Their Facebook page has just over ten million subscribers. Breitbart is an organisation that is politically aligned with the Republican Party and has just over five million subscribers. In the context of the total news audience in the US, these numbers represent a small minority. Some scholars challenge the extent to which such sites promote polarization of political views and fragmentation of the online public, asserting that the diversity of news sources mitigates their impact on the wider public.[23] The capacity of these sites to compete with traditional news publishers and drive the mainstream news agenda is nonetheless alarming[24] – for example, the appropriation of the 'Pepe the Frog' character as a symbol of white supremacy was birthed in the 4chan web community and crossed over into mainstream prominence when Donald Trump retweeted a Pepe caricature of himself, prompting Richard Spencer to claim that the alt-right was "memed into existence".[25]

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18 Geiger, "Key Findings".

19 Cooper and Thomas, *Nature or Nurture*, 8.

20 Boczkowski and Papacharissi, *Trump and the Media*, 5.

21 Newton, "Political Trust and the Mass Media", 360.

22 Oflaherty, "Real-Time Media Monitoring".

23 Dubois and Blank, "The Echo Chamber".

24 Oflaherty, "Real-Time Media Monitoring".

25 Reeve, "We Memed".

Benkler et al. reveal in their study of the 2016 election race that *Breitbart* was at the heart of "a network of mutually-reinforcing hyper-partisan sites…combining decontextualized truths, repeated falsehoods, and leaps of logic to create a fundamentally misleading view of the world".[26] Cooper and Thomas caution that:

> When we get to the deliberate creation and sharing of active falsehoods, we have moved from the realm of honest politics, where at least the intent is to spread real information in an attempt to persuade others, to the realm of propaganda, where the intent is to spread fake information to create a particular, useful belief.[27]

By repeating claims ad nauseam with minor variation and disseminating this content throughout a network of associated sites, hyper-partisan publishers familiarise their readers with their core narrative.[28] In doing so they expand the 'Overton Window', or limits of acceptable public discourse.[29] The observation made by Cooper that "increasingly, those on the left and right disagree fundamentally on what the important issues in politics are" has implications for the range and framing of news topics on these sites.[30] The privileging of partisan messaging over divergent perspectives and opinions narrows the diversity of content offered to their audience. Hyper-partisan publishers thus promulgate ideology through repetition and reductive scope.

While on the one hand acknowledging that propaganda in partisan media is not a recent phenomenon, nor is it confined to one side of politics, Benkler et al. conclude that:

> …the insulation of the partisan right-wing media from traditional journalistic media sources, and the vehemence of its attacks on journalism in common cause with a similarly outspoken president, is new and distinctive.[31]

While the Internet has presented cartoonists with a diversity of alternative publication venues, the notion that "we are running out of places to trust for information"[32] is symptomatic of the increasing fragmentation of these venues into self-selecting partisan audiences that diminish the self-professed core values of the craft. Social media provide new venues for publication and dissemination, but these platforms are compromised by an audience that is largely sceptical about the integrity of the information presented to them–and with very good reason.

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[26] Benkler et al, "Breitbart-Led Right-Wing Media".

[27] Cooper and Thomas, *Nature or Nurture*, 132.

[28] Benkler et al, "Breitbart-Led Right-Wing Media".

[29] Mina, *Memes to Movements*, 122.

[30] Cooper and Thomas, *Nature or Nurture*, 131.

[31] Benkler et al, "Breitbart-Led Right-Wing Media".

[32] Cooper and Thomas, *Nature or Nurture,* 152

The emergence of political memes

The hybridisation of media platforms and intermediation between media types facilitated by Web 2.0 technologies made audio-visual content broadly accessible. As a result, memes – the definition for which we'll come to shortly – became popular as a new form of humorous image. Memes as satirical interventions in popular political discourse emerged in the 2008 US Federal election. Most prominent among these was the Obama 'Hope' image–which immediately became a graphic icon for transformative and generational change – and memes that mocked McCain's awkward moment at a debate and amplified a narrative that McCain was too old and out of touch to be considered presidential material. The impact of these images in political discourse was further amplified in the 2012 US presidential campaign, when 'Big Bird' and 'binders of women' memes proved so damaging to Republican candidate Mitt Romney.[33] Though early interventions favoured the progressive side of politics, the 2016 election race was notable for the emergence of alt-right memes originating in Web communities 4chan and Reddit, Russian interference that was exacted almost exclusively on Facebook via the circulation of pro-Trump memes[34], and the social-media savvy Republican candidate Donald Trump's retweeting of memes that solidified his base.[35] Memes had now been weaponised to an unprecedented extent.

Defining exactly what a meme is – or is not – is problematic in that definitions tend to vary across communities and even within scholarly disciplines. Predating the internet, the term "meme" was coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* to describe a cultural gene or "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation".[36] This quasi-biological metaphor applied to a wider range of cultural phenomena than what appears on the internet, where the meme is understood to be any digitally mediated image that is purposely designed for rapid consumption and wider distribution. It is what Jenkins refers to as 'spreadable media'.[37] Limor Shifman is more specific with this definition in the context of digital culture, offering a taxonomy of meme genres that encompasses audio-visual and image objects that do not behave as single units but as "a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form and/or stance which [are] created with an awareness of each other and [are] circulated, imitated and/or transformed via the Internet by many users".[38] According to Shifman, the extent to which a specific text is imitated and transmitted defines its memetic potential.

Wiggins elaborates this definition to emphasise the enthymematic character of memes, describing them as "a remixed, iterated message that can be rapidly diffused

33 Tay, "Binders Full of LOLitics".

34 Bjola, "Propaganda in the Digital Age".

35 Taveira and Balfour, "How Donald Trump Won".

36 Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 206.

37 Jenkins, "If It Doesn't Spread".

38 Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 41.

by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, critique, or other discursive activity".[39] He argues that the essential characteristic of an Internet meme lies not so much in its imitative potential but in its discursive value as a visual argument where meaning is negotiated between the artist and audience. By presenting some parts of an argument but withholding an explicit conclusion, enthymemes invite a participatory engagement that is informed by the reader's cultural memory and experience. They call for judgment and thus appeal emotionally and ethically as well as logically.

In their taxonomy of political cartoons as graphic discourse, Medhurst and Desousa reveal that a key rhetorical strategy of cartoons is "the construction of first order enthymemes which invite the reader to respond in accordance with certain values, beliefs and predispositions".[40] In aligning political memes with political cartoons in terms of telos and structure, Chen and Tay apply Medhurst and Desousa's framework in demonstrating that photo-manipulated texts and image macros – a subset of memes consisting of images overlayed with witty captions – share many of the rhetorical characteristics found in political cartoons.[41]

Shifman states that internet memes "expand the range of participatory options in democracies by providing new, playful and accessible ways to express political opinion and engage in debate". Writing in his 'Confessions of an ACA Fan' blog, Henry Jenkins reflects that in this way memes achieve "real political work in terms of creating a moment and a networked public with power greater than the sum of its parts".[42] Dean observes that the production and dissemination of these images within a participatory media paradigm has become "part of the constitutive fabric of everyday political engagement" and "increasingly central to how large numbers of predominantly young citizens experience politics".[43] Memes have demonstrated genuine corrective reform in a diversity of social and political settings[44] – but their impact has not escaped the attention of those who would exploit the form for commercial gain or to advance a political agenda.

What's wrong with memes

A key distinction beyond illustrative style is that cartoons are authored by a professional artist, with their authority or claim to truth engendered by the mainstream media context in which they are published. Memes are produced largely by anonymous

[39] Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 11.

[40] Medhurst and Desousa, "Political Cartoons", 204.

[41] Chen, "The Internet Political Meme".

[42] Jenkins, "If It Doesn't Spread".

[43] Dean, "Sorted for Memes and Gifs", 2.

[44] Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*.

amateurs, their legitimacy implied by repeated online transmission and replication. The images that disseminate most successfully serve not to interrogate and reform the status quo but to reinforce it. Gideon Mazambani et al. conclude that memes spread more frequently within online forums when they are consistent with that network's group identity.[45] Cooper explains that:

> Memes are a central engine to modern political discourse online, inherent in digital culture. Their role is to form and signify communal belonging. Highly decentralised and seemingly chaotic, internet memes coalesce around a socially cohesive grassroots network and speak to a specific, resonant group, capturing its commonly familiar worldview and attitude.[46]

Equally as problematic is that partisan content in the form of a meme is less likely to be corrected by others than when presented in a news article, and consequently, memes may present "a highly effective vehicle for misinformation".[47] Memes have come to dominate the social media space as participatory expressions of dissent, yet they are produced and disseminated in ways that have more in common with propaganda images and strategies than they do with cartoons. In the Internet era of news and opinion consumption, trust has been transferred from familiar authors practising in the regulated mainstream print media to truth-claiming images of unknown pedigree shared by friends on Facebook.

Newspapers have long provided a venue for editorial cartoons that, for the most part, maintains a distal and semiotic distinction from propaganda images. Conversely, hyper-partisan publishers circulate satirical and propaganda images in their feeds as a seamless cascade or gallery mosaic, with these images sharing the same platform and similar material characteristics. For example, many of the images appearing on these sites are not memes by typological definition – that is, they are not remixed or transformed by several participants – but nonetheless incorporate the graphic vocabulary of established meme image genres as a kind of "meme-pastiche". Meme images are designed for rapid consumption and as 'spreadable media'. They are characterised by readily discerned photographic or cartoon imagery, and often overlayed with pithy captions or labels in a condensed sans serif typeface – typically Impact – whose formal regularity makes it ideally suited to small amounts of text.[48] They are easily produced and easily disseminated. Consequently, these images make attractive propaganda vehicles.

The extent to which satiric parrhesia and political manipulation might be discriminated by news consumers is complicated by what Baym describes as 'discursive integration' – the blurring of discursive genres driven by the convergence

[45] Mazambani et al, "Impact of Status and Meme".

[46] Cooper and Thomas, *Nature or Nurture*, 138.

[47] Lyons, "Insidiously Trivial".

[48] Brideau and Berret, "A Brief Introduction".

and hybridisation of new media.[49] Cooper argues that when information presented online is designed to attract attention rather than sustained engagement, it is "readily falsified" and that social media's "seductive sharing capabilities…ensure that the internet public is highly culpable in the advancement of disinformation".[50] Renner notes that images made up 5% of *Breitbart* Facebook posts but accounted for 49% of most-shared posts. Engagement with memes on social media increasingly positions citizens as agents for propaganda dissemination rather than participants in critical, civic discourse.[51]

The capacity for social media to manipulate public emotions is reminiscent of 'the hypodermic effect', a model of communication describing the susceptibility of an audience to media manipulation observed most prominently in 1930s Nazi propaganda. Phiddian describes satire as a mode that activates the 'CAD' triad of emotions: contempt, anger, and disgust. He notes that while these emotions can be mobilised by satire towards norm compliance, they can also be evoked to "police reprehensible norms" (contempt), "further victimise victim groups" (anger) and "serve appalling as well as apt goals" (disgust).[52] So, if satirical images and propaganda images arouse similar emotions what are the implications for democratic discourse? Dissemination of memes typically occurs within a media ecology of like-minded communities. Their circulation within these groups reinforces political allegiances among members whilst excluding others, diminishing polyvocal public participation. Phiddian observes:

> The lines between insiders and outsiders used to be clearer in the age when politics' natural medium was print and institutionalised mass media. That seems to be changing in the digital world that has arrived with the new century and allows a proliferation of micro-publics much less defined by place or any need to broker a common (in)civility.[53]

Hyper-partisan publishers are perfect examples of the ideological mono-cultures that he fears may envelop the "general public", at which point "satires will only aid an epidemic of emotional confirmation bias that narrow emotional publics incite".[54] The extent to which the swathe of images published on these sites support this bleak outlook is interrogated in the content analysis to follow.

[49] Baym, "The Daily Show", 262.

[50] Cooper and Thomas, *Nature or Nurture*, 107 and 157.

[51] Renner, "Memes Trump Articles".

[52] Phiddian, *Satire and Public Emotions*, 23, 25, 30.

[53] Ibid, 17.

[54] Ibid, 62.

Occupy Democrats and Breitbart – a case study

So far in this chapter the following observations have been made: the political cartooning tradition, in correlation with the newsprint industry, is in terminal decline; trust in news media generally is at historic lows; Facebook has emerged as a primary news source; hyper-partisan publishers on Facebook challenge traditional news media as a news source; the use of memes and "meme-pastiche" images is a key component of partisan messaging; and these images are published on hyper-partisan sites in tandem with other image types as a cascading feed or gallery mosaic. In interrogating the extent to which hyper-partisan sites have appropriated and leveraged satire as propaganda, questions that emerge from these observations are: what types of images are presented on these sites with respect to their teleological and graphic characteristics? How is humour applied and received in these images? Finally, what are the implications for the political cartooning tradition when graphic satire is perceived as a vehicle for propaganda rather than democratic discourse?

I interrogate these questions through a thematic and structural content analysis of a sample of images (*n*=521*)* published in the Facebook news feeds belonging to hyper-partisan publishers *Occupy Democrats and Breitbart*. These sites are considered here as aggregators of political images and represent the most heavily subscribed image production and dissemination platforms from each side of the political divide. The sampled images were published in a one-month period leading up to the 2020 Presidential election. The election campaign was chosen as a sphere of heightened, sustained political discourse where the polarisation of the two major political parties' respective policy platforms was amplified, and where political messaging was intensely focused on key issues of importance to the electorate.

The sample was categorised in a graphic, formal sense to identify and discriminate the variety of image types published on these sites, as well as any notable features incorporated in these images that promote audience engagement and action. In noting the tendency toward "meme-pastiche" – the leveraging of particular meme-genre features in images that do not otherwise classify as memes as defined by Shifman or Wiggins – I will establish clear distinctions between the diversity of image types published on these sites. The ease of this task will indicate the extent to which categorical discernment might be inferred by an audience as they consume a miscellany of humour, commentary, and propaganda.

Given the hyper-partisan character of the two publishers selected in the sample, it is presumed that the content has persuasive intent. Chen and Tay have demonstrated that memes and political cartoons share key commonalities with respect to their rhetorical function and construction of tendentious humour. Meanwhile, Phiddian asserts that satire mobilises emotions that can police norm enforcement in socially responsible as well as reprehensible ways. I have therefore embraced these positions as a basis to determine the extent to which the sample demonstrates the humorous

intent that characterises the cartooning tradition, as well as the deployment of humour in prosecuting propaganda.

The sample of memes was manually coded according to the political cartoon tonal categories developed by Press and applied by Manning and Phiddian: descriptive satirical, laughing satirical, destructive satirical, and savage indignation. These tonal categories have been applied as indicators both of humorous intent and the satirical potency for moral critique. The descriptive satirical cartoon tends to lack a strong social or political conviction that smacks of an evaluative judgment. Its main purpose is to lightly entertain its reader – the humour tends more toward the comic and neutral than the satirical and judgemental. This is contrasted to the laughing satirical cartoon that is reformist in nature accepting the legitimacy of those in power while seeking to correct or highlight their behaviour. Destructive satirical cartoons, on the other hand, do not accept the legitimacy of the power structures of the day; they appear in times of revolutionary fervour or social despair, emerge from extremist groups, and consequently tend not to appear in mainstream media. Observing a gap in the taxonomy prescribed by Press, Manning and Phiddian append their own category: savage indignation. They describe such cartoons as reformist in nature but neither fundamentally loyal to the system nor bent on its destruction.[55]

Audience response is considered in terms of the reactions garnered by the audience. Laugh and Angry reactions provide the most extreme demonstrations of emotional response and are presented here as 'arousal emotions' that are deployed to affect maximum engagement from the audience. The extent of this engagement is measured here in terms of a subsequent action: commenting and sharing. Inviting comments from the readership creates a discussion thread that reinforces group ideology while encouraging sharing transmits an image into a broader media ecology.

In determining the rhetorical framing of political images, I have also coded the sample in terms of the organising principles identified by Medhurst and Desousa: contrast, commentary, and contradiction. These forms of disposition indicate the discursive value of the images in terms of the manner of enthymematic engagement demanded of the audience in the construction of meaning.[56] Contrast denotes tensions between competing ideas and ideologies; through presentation of opposing ideas, contrast invites the reader to make a judgement of their own volition based on consideration of two or more options. Commentary conveys an implied 'truth' without providing means by which the veracity of the claim can be determined; it is a safe form of disposition that merely implies or reflects a popularly held position. Contradiction exposes dichotomies and polarities in political affairs and seeks condemnation of the target's hypocrisy. Commentary and contradiction are most likely to reinforce, rather than challenge, a particular stance or viewpoint.

Finally, images are considered also in terms of the range of topics addressed. I identify and compare the range and framing of topics presented in the sample to

[55] Manning and Phiddian, "In defence of the political cartoonists' licence to mock", 31–32.

[56] Medhurst and Desousa, "Political Cartoons".

determine how each of the opposing groups packages their respective ideological narratives. The main political events that occurred over the August period of the campaign include: the political response to the COVID-19 pandemic; funding of the United States Postal Service and its capacity to handle mail-in ballots; Black Lives Matter protests and associated civil unrest; the selection of Kamala Harris as Joe Biden's running mate; and the staging of the Democratic and Republican National Conventions (otherwise known as the DNC and RNC).

Form and function

The images published on both the *Occupy Democrats* and *Breitbart* Facebook pages are designed to attract attention, achieve rapid cognition, and incite action. The arrangement of formal graphic elements, tone of messaging and framing of an argument are mobilised towards this aim. A quick glance at the respective image galleries of each site (Figure 1) reveals an immediate distinction in the diversity of image types and graphic treatments. I identify six distinct image types in the sample. Three are found on both sites, specifically captioned images, text-only images, and photographs. However, three of them (cartoons, infographics, and Twitter post images) are found only on *Occupy Democrats*. The breakdown of image types is shown below (Figure 2 and Figure 3). The wider range of images published by *Occupy Democrats* offers broader appeal and more possibilities for persuasion, while *Breitbart*'s narrower range of images presents greater visual coherence and stronger corporate branding.

Occupy Democrats' strategy is one of high-frequency, high-volume posting. In the 31 days covered by the sample, a total of 384 images were published. By contrast, *Breitbart* posted 137 images. *Occupy Democrats* can achieve a high output with minimal costs by reposting much of its image content from elsewhere, while *Breitbart* images are manufactured "in-house". The captioned images posted on both sites demonstrate high visual impact through the use of colour, formal regularity of typeface, iconic imagery, and relation of text to visual imagery. These formal graphic techniques are familiar to images designed for propaganda, advertising, news media– and Internet memes. The images that each site produces natively adhere to a distinct graphic, corporate identity. The *Occupy Democrats* logo features vibrant yellow-and-white text overlayed on a black background, and this palette is applied in its captioned images. *Breitbart* employs two distinct formats in its captioned images, with each serving a distinct purpose. The first variant resembles an illustrated news headline, with black sans-serif text situated above a press image on a white background; while the second features a photographic portrait of a prominent person, overlayed with a text bubble that houses an implied, attributed quote. *Breitbart'*s distinct orange logo subtly inspires the treatment of these text backgrounds through the application of yellow and green hues drawn from the same Pantone colour library. The application

of a distinct, high-contrast colour profile serves to maximise visual impact and act as a brand mnemonic.

Figure 1: Facebook image gallery collage, Occupy Democrats Webpage and Breitbart News Webpage, 2 September 2019.

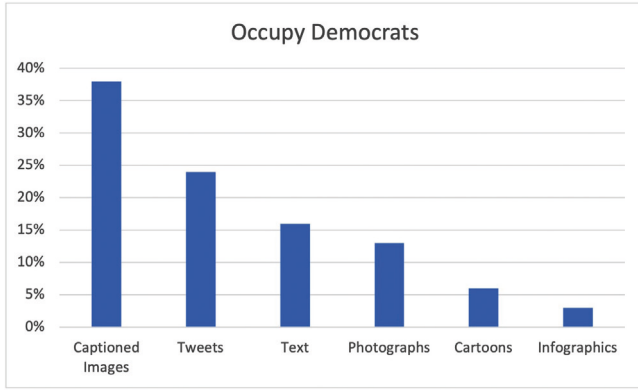

Figure 2: Breakdown Showing Distribution of Image Types, Occupy Democrats on 4 September 2019.

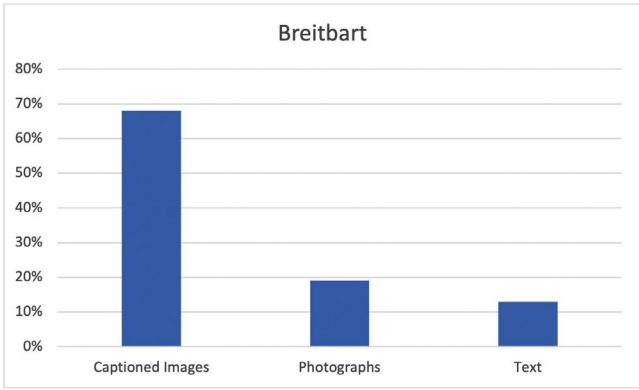

Figure 3: Breakdown Showing Distribution of Image Types, Breitbart on 4 September 2019.

The *Occupy Democrats* images serve a multitude of rhetorical functions. They are mobilised to condemn and mock the actions or ideas of ideological opponents, and to inform and rally their supporters. Similarly, the *Breitbart* pool of images condemn Democrats ("Democrats won't let you go to work, but they'll let you riot"); mock opponents ("There's never been anything we've been able to accomplish when we've done it together – Joe Biden"); inform ("S&P 500 rises to record high, passes prepandemic [sic] top for first time"); rally supporters ("We only need 17 seats to retake the majority and retire Nancy Pelosi. All we need is a little help"); and invite comments ("Did you enjoy Mike Pence's RNC speech?"). The content is framed as reportage – reinforced in most instances by an accompanying link to a longer article – but it is persistent in prosecuting a distinctly conservative ideological agenda.

The externally sourced captioned images published on the *Occupy Democrats* news feed are visually distinct from their natively produced images in some respects–but they nonetheless share the same graphic strategies that optimise legibility and comprehension. Absent from these images is the corporate colour palette and seamless compositing of photographic elements with a black background, but the images do employ the typographic regularity and culturally familiar imagery characteristic of meme images. Indeed, fifteen of the sampled images (4%) are genuine memes–that is, they are remixes of established meme texts. For example, the two-panel, object labelling meme "Elmo chooses cocaine" – showing the Sesame Street character weighing up the choice between a selection of fruit and a pile of white powder before burying his head in the latter – is remixed to depict a Make America Great Again (Trump supporter) choosing between "Sound Medical Advice" and "Demon Sperm Lady". A further thirteen images do not fit the definition of a meme, in the sense that they are not remixes of established meme texts. However, they apply the familiar graphic conventions of meme texts. An example of this is an image showing a large crowd attending the annual Sturgis Motorcycle Rally. The event, where social distancing and the wearing of masks were not mandated, was described in some media as a 'superspreader event'. The overlayed caption, in the default Impact font, reads, "Sturgis 2020. Gonna be some great deals out there on used motorcycles in about six weeks".

While the application of high-impact graphics is by no means unique to memes, both *Occupy Democrats* and *Breitbart* images exploit an online participatory visual culture that is traditionally aligned with meme production and dissemination. Memes are units of participatory culture and an expression of humour within a digital-native demographic. The captioned image format appropriates an established form not merely for its pellucidity but for its cultural cachet. The leveraging of both the graphic formality and transmission vectors that memes have cemented in the digital media ecology leads me to label the images produced by hyper-partisan publishers as meme-pastiche. These "memes-but-not-memes" are likely easily discerned by the informed reader, but their proliferation in hyper-partisan venues presents audiences with an agglomerate of graphically similar images that complicates the reliable parsing of information.

Text-only images on the *Occupy Democrats* news feed perform a similar array of functions to captioned images. Within a rhetorical frame, they variously condemn ("After watching people defend Trump over the last few years, I will never again question how Hitler came to power in Germany"); rally or call to action ("The UPS delivers over 300,000 prescriptions to veterans daily. Republicans are allowing a five-time draft dodger to endanger the health of our veterans. Remember this on November 3rd and vote accordingly"); inform ("For the record, the movement isn't anti-police. It is anti-police brutality. Seems some of you are confused"); mock ("That Michelle Obama speech was so amazing, I can't wait to hear it again from Melania next week!"); and invite participation in the comments section ("When Trumpism is done, will you forgive those who enabled it?"). The text-only images are presented in a diversity of typographical styles and colours, whereas *Breitbart* text-only images are presented almost exclusively as blue type on a white background. *Breitbart* uses these images to simultaneously rally supporters and invite participation in the comments section ("Will you be watching the RNC this week?"; "Does Joe Biden owe Americans an apology for not condemning leftist violence in his DNC speech?" addressing the Democratic National Convention).

The photographs that appear in the *Occupy Democrats* news feed are comprised of a diversity of historical press images as well as candid images that inspire supporters and condemn opponents. The historical images recall Democrat Party ideals through the depiction of prominent individuals–for example, former Presidents Obama and Carter–while the candid images feature humorous anti-Trump protest signs that mock both Trump and his supporters. The photographs that appear in the *Breitbart* news feed are comprised entirely of press images showing President Trump and First Lady Melania Trump engaging in a variety of ceremonial and public appearances. Images of the first couple at the Republican National Convention, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment and unveiling an art exhibition on Pennsylvania Avenue, served to inspire supporters through amplifying Trump's presidential demeanour and authority as well as Melania's wifely and public devotion.

In addition to captioned images, text-only images and photographs, the *Occupy Democrats* news feed also features tweets, cartoons, and infographics. Tweets are versatile rhetorical texts. Like captioned images and text-only images, they are employed by *Occupy Democrats* as vehicles for condemnation ("Donald Trump does not own 162,000 American deaths from COVID-19. He co-owns them with his supporters and the Republican Party"); rallying group members ("...I miss a president who can show emotion and lift our spirits, call to our better angels and remind us what unites us as Americans..".); conveying information ("...The USPS is not meant to be profitable. It's designed to ensure every American has access to mail services regardless of location"); and mockery ("Joe Biden now has Colin Powell and Cindy McCain speaking for him at the Democratic Convention. But Donald Trump has the gun totin' couple from St. Louis. So, I call that even").

Like text-only images in form, their Twitter source origin imbues them with distinct features. Tweets are credited texts that include the author's profile image and handle, and they will occasionally present as a dialogue exchange between two (or more) parties in a reply-quote format, as in Claudia Conway's reply to her mother and ex-Trump advisor Kellyanne Conway's tribute to Herman Cain ("yes it is sad but wasn't your administration complicit in his death?? Yikes"). These texts make a claim to trust or authority by virtue of their attributed author, who in almost all instances is a public figure (such as a politician, journalist, or celebrity) or subject expert (such as a doctor or economist). They can also include a graphic image, for example, actor Mark Hamill's retweet of a meme caricaturing Donald Trump Jr. and Eric Trump as the 1990s dim-witted teenage delinquents, Beavis and Butthead.

Infographics represent the smallest percentage of the total image pool, making up just under 3% of all images. They are designed to convey statistical or procedural information in graphic symbol form, and as such are not conventional vehicles for humour. Infographic images accounted for the least expression of humour in terms of both coding and audience engagement. Only one infographic in the sample was coded as satirical and elicited a Laugh response. It was comprised of a pie chart that was divided into three sections: 'Voted Democrat', 'Voted Republican' and 'Better Start to Give a Shit'.

The 23 cartoons on the *Occupy Democrats* site are illustrated in a diversity of graphic styles and processes, including hand-drawn illustration, digital photo manipulation and juxtaposition of appropriated images. They are created by amateur artists – both anonymous and recognised – as well as professional editorial cartoonists. Unsurprisingly, given the satirical tradition from which they stem, all but three of the cartoons were coded as satirical. These images were categorised as cartoons for their graphic character but did not satisfy the criteria for satire as they merely illustrated a statement (for example, a character declaring, "I miss Obama"). The remaining images mostly condemn or mock their targets, with one cartoon depicting two police officers shooting African-American Jacob Blake in the back as they ignore the assault-rifle-wielding Kyle Rittenhouse passing in the opposite direction. Another shows a fatherly

Trump pouring a glass of Kool-Aid for Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell in the style of a vintage advertisement.[57]

12% of *Occupy Democrats* images and 9% of *Breitbart* images feature a 'call to action' as either embedded text or in the accompanying image description. Both groups provide links to voting rules and invite comment on a given issue, though *Occupy Democrats* also provides links to specific senators, links to like-minded advocacy groups and appeals to engage further with the website (following *Occupy Democrats*, clicking on hashtags, and sharing the image). These calls to action promote participatory engagement within the group specifically and wider democratic engagement generally. Both groups' images employ techniques to demonstrate trust or authority. These include direct attribution of quotes and quotes from known public figures such as politicians and celebrities.

The sample reveals similarities and distinctions in the graphic formality and rhetorical function of the images published to the two groups' respective news feeds. Both groups use images to condemn and mock ideological opponents and to inform, rally and invite participation from supporters. The *Occupy Democrats* Facebook page is more explicitly activist in character. The miscellany of externally sourced images, anchored by recurrent corporately branded native images, implies an organised grassroots group that is tethered to a broader network of like-minded communities. The images reinforce group identity through notions of interactivity, ideological congruity, and persistent messaging. *Breitbart,* on the other hand, presents itself as a conventional news publisher, its images fashioned as reportage rather than commentary. This graphic treatment implies an institutional authority concerning the analysis of political issues, with a further claim to authority evident in the prevalence of attributable quotes. The images reinforce group identity via engagement with a persistent Republican ideology framed as news stories, direct quotes and rallying calls.

[57] The image is a response to McConnell's admission that he didn't cooperate with Democrats months earlier because he wanted to be sure that the coronavirus wouldn't "mysteriously disappear". This admission reflects President Trump's own inaccurate and overly optimistic statements about the duration and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic; hence it is suggested that McConnell is drinking the president's 'Kool Aid'.

Tonal categories, reactions, and disposition

Humour is evidenced in the sample through hand-coded application of the satirical tone categories of Press and Manning and Phiddian[58]; and the elicitation of Laugh reactions to each post. 46% of *Occupy Democrats* images were coded as satirical, while none of the *Breitbart* images exhibited humorous intent (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). Satirical tone was evident across all image types in the *Occupy Democrats* pool, though more clearly apparent in 'cartoon' images and least apparent in 'infographics' images. Of the images coded as satirical, all were deemed 'laughing satirical' (37%) or 'savagely indignant' (63%). The absence of 'descriptive satirical' or 'destructively satirical' images indicates that the images are moderately to aggressively persuasive but without revolutionary intent.

52% of *Occupy Democrats* images elicited a Laugh reaction, indicating a broad alignment with both humorous intent and humorous reception. Just 1% of images coded as satire did not elicit a Laugh reaction, while 18% of images *not* coded as satirical elicited a Laugh reaction. Interestingly, despite *Breitbart* images exhibiting no clear humorous intent–that is, none of the images were coded as satirical – 41% elicited a laughter reaction from readers. This reflects the problematic nature of presuming humorous intent, or lack thereof. Clearly a significant number of *Breitbart* readers, and to lesser degree, nearly one in five *Occupy Democrats* responses, found humour where I did not. To explain this apparent incongruity, Phiddian's conviction that "satire is a cultural practice derived primarily from indignation rather than amusement"[59] may apply here. The Laugh reactions garnered by these images likely represent an expression of contempt derived from irony, superiority, or incongruity. I will return to this idea shortly in the context of rhetorical disposition.

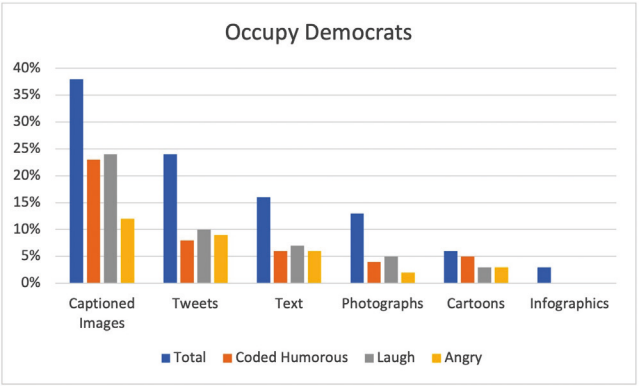

Figure 4: Breakdown Showing Distribution of Coding and Reactions in Occupy Democrats Facebook News on 5 September 2019.

[58] Press, *The Political Cartoon*; Manning and Phiddian, "The Editor and the Cartoonist".

[59] Phiddian, *Satire and the Public Emotions*, 16.

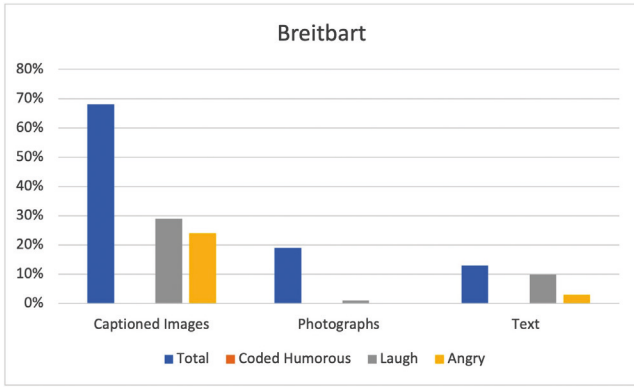

Figure 5: Breakdown Showing Distribution of Coding and Reactions in Breitbart Facebook News on 5 September 2019.

As shown above, satire assumes a substantial rhetorical function in *Occupy Democrats* images, with this side of the sample revealing a close correlation between humorous intent and reception. In explaining the lack of similar correlation in the *Breitbart* images, it is useful to consider the sample in terms of enthymematic engagement and rhetorical disposition. That *Breitbart* readers inferred humour where none was apparent indicates enthymematic engagement – that is, the readers constructed meaning from premises that were implied rather than explicitly stated. Medhurst and Desousa assert that "enthymematic form is not only an inventional resource for the [satirist] but also an interpretative resource or the reader".[60] In this way, the reporting of information presents to some readers not as a conclusion but as a premise that invites the completion of an enthymematic chain. The coding of the sample according to the rhetorical disposition forms of contrast, commentary and contradiction reveals the persuasive character of the images and provides additional clues as to how readers might construct humorous meaning in the absence of humorous intent. The political persuasion of the audience is significant in considering the rhetorical impact of the images, as a reader's ideological and cultural memory influences the meaning they derive from enthymematic engagement with political content. For example, an image of Kamala Harris captioned with a quote from her Democratic National Convention speech ("There is no vaccine for racism") is unremarkable until viewed through the narrative lens of the former Attorney General of California's past advocacy of policies that disproportionately disadvantaged African-Americans. The image thus presents a contradiction to the reader, with the perceived hypocrisy mobilising feelings of contempt or disgust that might then be given visible expression in a Laugh or Angry reaction.

Similarly, the ideological or cultural memory of the reader can lead them to infer a contrast of ideals where none is explicitly stated. To a non-partisan reader, a photograph of a slovenly, obese white man holding a Nazi flag presents as mere documentary. To the reader convinced of Trump's enthusiastic cultivation of the white supremacist

[60] Medhurst and Desousa, "Political Cartoons", 205.

vote, the image presents a contrast of Democrat and Republican ideals embodied in a caricature of a Trump supporter. Contrast is typically employed by the political cartoonist to present two competing ideas within a single frame. The images in this sample typically present a single idea, with the hyper-partisan context in which they are presented implying the oppositional stance. The images can be seen as not simply persuasive texts, but partisan rhetoric. The captioned image declaring "NBA playoffs crash by 23%, lowest watched in 5 years" shifts from reportage to propaganda when *Breitbart* readers intuit the missing premise: that basketball fans are switching off due to the NBA's support of the Black Lives Matter movement.

An initial coding of rhetorical disposition presumed a non-partisan publication context. The *Occupy Democrats* pool showed a distribution of 24% commentary, 4% contrast and 24% contradiction – with the remaining images deemed as reportage or comment (for example, a photograph of a protest sign reading "privilege is when you think something is not a problem because it is not a problem to you personally"). A second coding presumed a persuasive intent aligned with the publisher's ideological stance. The distribution subsequently shifted to 28% commentary, 39% contrast and 28% contradiction. The above example initially coded as reportage shifted into the "contrast" category. As seen through a partisan lens, the messaging evokes the Republican response to the Black Lives Matter movement and COVID-19. The shift in distribution was more pronounced in the *Breitbart* pool – to be expected considering the prevalent framing of content as reportage. The initial coding returned 13% commentary and 11% contradiction, with no images deemed to employ contrast and the remaining images deemed reportage. When coded accounting for a partisan framing, the distribution shifted to 13% commentary, 26% contrast and 26% contradiction. The remaining images were deemed reportage or comment (for example, press images of Donald and Melania Trump and rallying calls to watch the DNC).

Participation

The images that prompted the most participation in the form of commenting and sharing by *Occupy Democrats* readers present a diversity of image types and reactions (see Figure 6 and Figure 7). The 'top ten' most commented-on images on this side of the sample include three captioned images, two text-only images, four photographs and one cartoon. Anger was the most common reaction to these images, with five images eliciting a Laugh reaction and four images attracting both Anger and Laugh reactions. Three of the images were coded as satirical. The 'top ten' most shared images include three captioned images, three text-only images, two photographs and two cartoons. Anger was again the most common reaction, with four images prompting a Laugh reaction and two images receiving both Anger and Laugh reactions. Three of the images were coded as satirical.

The 'top ten' images that achieved the most participation on the *Breitbart* side of the sample (see Figure 8 and Figure 9) comprised captioned images and text-only images – no photographs feature in the list, which attracted the least number of comments and shares overall. The most commented-on images featured eight captioned images and two text-only images and attracted nine Laugh reactions and five Anger reactions – with four images attracting both Laugh and Anger reactions. The most shared images also featured eight captioned images and two text-only images, attracting five Laugh reactions and four anger reactions – with two attracting both Laugh and Anger reactions.

These data suggest that *Occupy Democrats* readers are moved to participation more by negative arousal emotions than positive ones, with laughter providing the dominant response in just three of the most commented images and two in the most shared images. The most commented image asks readers, "When Trumpism is done, will you forgive those who enabled it?" Meanwhile, the most shared image is a captioned image of the teenage Kenosha shooter declaring him a "homegrown terrorist with an assault rifle". Interestingly, *Breitbart* readers commented most on images that made them laugh. The 'funniest' image – showing a captioned image of Jill Biden attesting that "I know my son's character. Hunter did nothing wrong" – indicates a contradiction between the assurance given and the perceived 'truth' that Joe Biden and his son engaged in corrupt activities. Humour was not as evident in the most shared *Breitbart* images, but neither was Anger a strong motivator. *Breitbart* readers were most inclined to share images that rallied supporters, with the most shared image a text-only image declaring, "Dear Leftists, Every city you torch, every store you loot, every innocent you beat makes our November 3rd decision all the clearer. Signed, The Silent Majority".

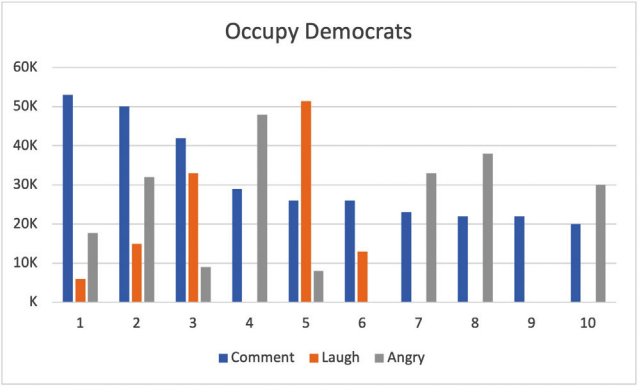

Figure 6: Breakdown of Laugh and Angry Reactions in Occupy Democrats Facebook News Feed on 5 September 2019.

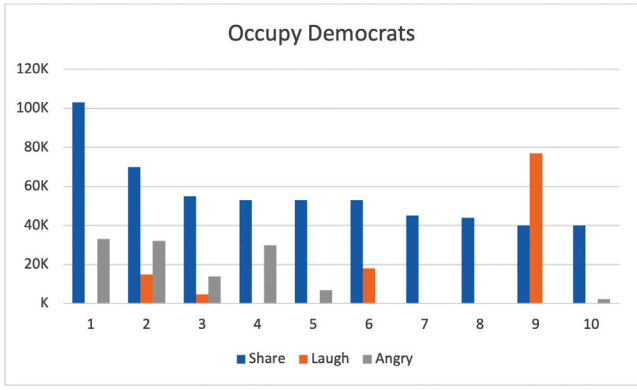

Figure 7: Breakdown of Laugh and Angry Reactions and Share Rates in Occupy Democrats Facebook News Feed on 5 September 2019.

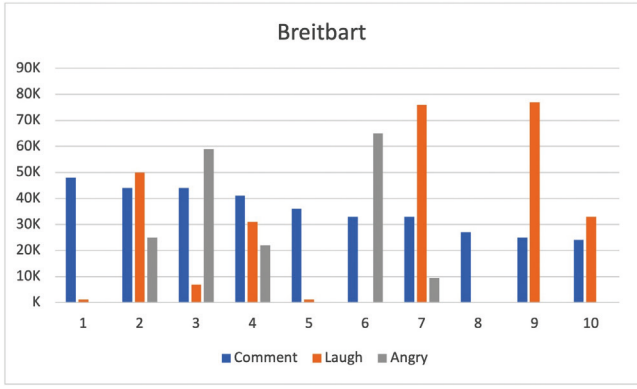

Figure 8: Breakdown of Laugh and Angry Reactions in Breitbart Facebook News Feed on 5 September 2019.

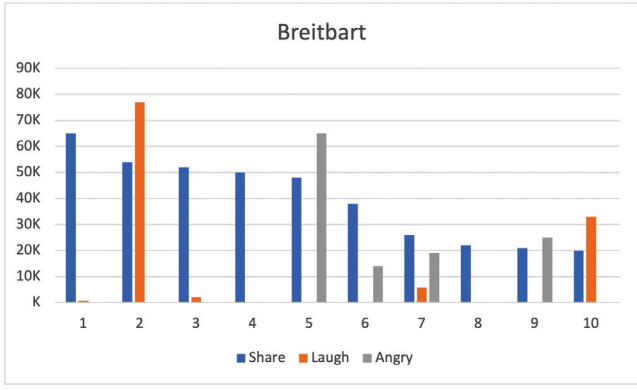

Figure 9: Breakdown of Laugh and Angry Reactions and Share Rates in Breitbart Facebook News Feed on 5 September 2019.

Topics

The topics covered by the respective groups' images vary dramatically in terms of intensity of focus and framing, reflecting the partisan divide in their supporters' response to the issues confronting the United States.[61] 40% of *Occupy Democrats* images responded to current news events playing out during the sample period: the COVID-19 pandemic (18%); the Black Lives Matter movement (12%); the USPS funding crisis (6%); the DNC (1.5%); and RNC (2.5%). 35% of the pool was devoted to Trump, with these images condemning his policy platform, character, integrity, intelligence, and competence. An additional 3% of images mocked his wife and offspring in his employ. 12% of the pool focused on Democrat ideals, including issues of social justice, racial equality, reproductive rights, and immigration; while 8% disparaged Republic politicians and their supporters. The remaining handful of images – less than 2% of the pool – refer to non-political news events (such as the forest fires impacting the East Coast).

39% of *Breitbart* images were devoted to the same news events, but with a different distribution: the COVID-19 pandemic (2%); the Black Lives Matter movement (25%); the USPS funding crisis (2%); the DNC (4%); and RNC (6%). 10% of the pool condemned Joe Biden's incoherence and Kamala Harris's hypocrisy, using direct quotes of Biden's gaffes and Harris' past support for Biden's sexual assault accusers as implicit critique. 12% of the pool focused on Republic ideals, though these were largely framed as opposition to perceived Democrat values (for example, "Democrats showcase illegal immigrant: I need health insurance. I deserve it right?"). 37% of *Breitbart* images were photographs of the president and first lady attending various official engagements. These images were not considered as topical news coverage as they were published without any contextual reference to these events. As such, the couple is deemed the primary subject of the image, with the respective events considered as incidental.

The polarity in political ideologies to which each group subscribes is rendered most stark in the framing of the Black Lives Matter movement. *Occupy Democrats* images present the movement as a legitimate response to systemic racism in general and police brutality towards African Americans in particular. The narrative is an expansive one that references "bend the knee" sporting protests, the dismantling of statues of historical figures associated with the slave trade, overzealous police responses to civil rights protests, the police shooting of Jacob Blake, the subsequent protests in Kenosha, Wisconsin at which a white teenager shot and killed two protesters, and Trump's claim that the killings were "self-defence", and the NRA's complicity in the killings. Reference to the civil unrest associated with the protests is presented as either the actions of a minority ("why does the Black Lives Matter have to answer for Looters, but the NRA doesn't have to answer for School Shooters?") or as a proportionate response to violence ("why is murder an appropriate response to property damage but property damage isn't an appropriate response to murder?"). Ideological opponents

[61] Dunn, "As the U.S. Copes with Multiple Crises".

are portrayed as white supremacist sympathisers. Unsurprisingly, *Breitbart* describes the movement very differently. The unrest in Portland and Kenosha as well as Biden's failure to condemn "leftist violence" in his speech at the DNC provide the dominant narrative. Civil unrest is described throughout as "rioting" and "looting" and several images reference Donald Trump Jr.'s slogan that conflates the unrest with COVID-19 and voter fraud ("if you can loot in person, you can vote in person"). The "rioters" are depicted as unpatriotic and not representative of the Black community, who (apparently) support the police and, increasingly, Donald Trump.

The topics covered on *Occupy Democrats* and *Breitbart* are presented exclusively through a reductive, partisan lens. The readership is not presented with alternative, oppositional stances on matters of broad public import. The discourse surrounding political players, policy decisions, major events and social attitudes is consequently diminished. If the role of the political cartoonist is one of "speaking truth to power", we might also consider the images in terms of power relations and reform. *Breitbart*'s strident advocacy for Republican ideals even after Trump took office in 2016, and the persistent anti-Republican messaging of *Occupy Democrats* in the wake of Biden's 2020 victory, lay bare any notion that the mockery and condemnation implicit in their images afford any corrective intent. When satire picks a side, notions of "holding the powerful to account" accede to confirmation bias and groupthink.

Vanquishing the monsters

Traditions tend to end with a whimper rather than a bang. Political cartooning in the US (and in the developed world more broadly) has been on the wane since the turn of the 21st Century when internet platforms challenged print newspapers as a primary source of news and opinion. Two decades later, journalistic traditions of objectivity and impartiality are overshadowed by subjective advocacy news and the political cartoon is something of an anachronism – a throwback to an era characterised by artisanal authorship. In its place, a form of participatory graphic humour was first conceived in online micro-publics and subsequently co-opted by vested interests. It is something of an irony that a humorous image form that a short time ago was celebrated as a vehicle for amplifying and mobilising minority voices to challenge hegemonic structures was instrumental in coalescing the alt-right from an obscure online sub-culture into a legitimate political force. Hyper-partisan publisher *Breitbart* was at the centre of the unregulated online networks that gave oxygen to ideas once marginalised as hate speech and birthed them as memes into mainstream consciousness through intermediation with traditional media. Almost inevitably, *Occupy Democrats* emerged as a progressive riposte to *Breitbart*'s success.

It is a truism to say that the new media landscape is rapidly evolving, but it is an important one to observe when concluding the role of memes in political discourse.

At the time of writing, the meme does not appear to have assumed the mantle as a teleological successor to the political cartoon with anything like the rhetorical integrity optimistically predicted by scholars and commentators only a few years ago. *Breitbart* and *Occupy Democrats* are just two of many partisan groups that have hijacked the form for its spreadable potential, enervated it of its discourse value and commodified it as propaganda. Memes are not supported by equivalent ethical and regulatory gatekeepers that maintain political cartoons in a broadly trusted and ethical public sphere. Trust is engendered not by editors or regulators but by group solidarity, and the question of whether a meme image is news, satire or propaganda is predicated on the reader's cultural literacy.

Feris et al. caution that "rebuilding a basis on which Americans can form a shared belief about what is going on is a precondition of democracy and the most important task confronting the press going forward".[62] This is problematic when hyper-partisan publishers are likely permanent fixtures of the political landscape and exploit the meagre regulation of 'Big Tech' and their social media[63], and the hellscape that X (formerly known as Twitter) has become under the ownership of Elon Musk. There is more to this disturbing point of what hyper-partisan publishers like *Breitbart* and *Occupy Democrats* have in common when preaching to their respective choirs. While it is true and scary that the far-right has 'weaponized' humour by drawing on the affordances of the newspaper cartoon, their opponents have resorted to the same form, which muddies arguments we might expect from Democrats about the importance of preserving mass media spaces for critical discourse and debate.

Somewhat reassuring is the way citizens have responded to trust concerns by modifying their news and technology habits. An increasing number of Americans are fact-checking the news content they consume, disengaging from factually suspect outlets and voicing more support for regulation.[64] Social media platforms are also becoming more responsive to public expectations of truth in political messaging. In the wake of the January 6 attack on the Capitol, which many deem to have been incited by Trump, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube banned him from their platforms (either permanently or indefinitely). According to research firm Zignal Labs[65], the removal of thousands of additional accounts dedicated to sharing Trump's statements led to an immediate and dramatic fall in election misinformation circulating on those platforms. Horta Ribeiro et al. caution that banning online communities may simply prompt the migration of a community to alternative, fringe venues.[66] Nonetheless, with relatively few accounts responsible for a disproportionate share of misleading content (Center for an Informed Public released in 2021), de-platforming these sources

[62] Feris et al, "Partisanship".

[63] Kafka, "Washington's First Attempt at Regulating Big Tech".

[64] Mitchell et al, "Most Say Tensions".

[65] Dwoskin and Timberg, "Misinformation Dropped Dramatically".

[66] Ribeiro et al, "Platform Migrations", 21.

presents an effective strategy for curbing the momentum and audience reach of this content.

These developments offer some hope for clawing back the trust deficit afflicting contemporary news media. I contend – somewhat reluctantly – that this will not restore memes as bastions of the political cartooning tradition. I do not disagree that cartooning and meme-making will continue as an activity and succeed in finding an audience.[67] But apart from the occasional "cartoon controversy," the razor-sharp, intelligent social and political critique that characterises the best of the illustrative tradition has long since ebbed in the public's imagination. And, despite their initial promise, political memes can no longer claim to uphold a similar critical function. Depending on spontaneity and authenticity for their cultural cachet, the commodification and appropriation of meme images for hyper-partisan messaging has seen them become victims of their own success. The monster, as it were, has eaten itself. And yet the political cartooning tradition has a proclivity for reinvention. In many ways, it is the audio-visual image rather than the graphic meme that best accommodates the moral and ethical ideals of the political cartoon tradition. The abundance of short-form satirical content produced by comedians like Sarah Cooper, the stable supply of late-night talk show hosts and incidental amateur video makers – such as Isabella Sosa's on-point polemic concerning mask ordinance in San Antonio – collectively suggest that the future of political satire may not be so bleak.

[67] Scully, "The New York Times Ends Political Cartoons".

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