

The use of memes to influence youth in an Australian political context

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Of contemporary media trends, there are perhaps none rising faster in prominence than that of memes. The term *meme*, first coined by Dawkins (1976), originally referred to the cultural equivalent of a gene. This definition was further refined as “a unit of information in a mind whose existence influences events such that more copies of itself get created in other minds” (Brodie, 1996, p. 32). In modern common language, however, memes are generally known as an easily shareable, typically digital form of media. Memes are often designed for their comedic value, as quick, disposable jokes. However, a new-wave of memes use these preconceptions as a form of “trojan horse” (Rushkoff, 1994) in order to subtly carry deeper messages. With the loss of effectiveness of traditional forms of media at reaching younger demographics, this strategy of ‘propaganda by memes’ is one that has been heavily employed by all sides of politics in the lead up to the July 2016 Australian federal election, with varying levels of success.

Despite the recency of the development of online memes, this year’s election will not be the first case in which they are used for a political purpose. Indeed, “Barack Obama has been labelled the *memeocrat* par excellence due to his appropriation of such content for institutional and political communication.” (Martínez-Rolán & Piñeiro-Otero, 2016) Indeed, Australian politics is not unfamiliar with the concept of memes, for example, the *Kevin 07* campaign. Youth have long been the most difficult demographic to target political material at due to a lack of interest in politics and an overall resentment for the political system. (Pilkington & Pollock, 2015) Martínez-Rolán and Piñeiro-Otero therefore examine in detail the impact that memes had on the political discourse surrounding the 2015 Spanish State of the Nation address, specifically the Twitter hashtag used by users to communicate about it. They found that of the 329,792 tweets including the hashtag, over 45% of them included graphical content. The most ‘successful’ tweets, that is, the tweets with the most ‘impressions’, ‘favourites’ and ‘retweets’ were those that were of a memetic quality - those images that were able to go beyond an image and transform into an idea. (Martínez-Rolán & Piñeiro-Otero, 2016, p. 148-152) A pivotal finding from this study, however, was that the authors of the most ‘viral’ of the memes were not anonymous citizens but rather the politicians involved in the debate themselves, suggesting that

the memes were not accidental in their success but rather were the calculated product of a public relations machine, firm evidence of the so-called 'hidden agenda' which lay beneath the easily digestible and shareable surface.

Memes (and by extension viral media) have several unique and key features when compared to traditional media - specifically those of fidelity, fecundity and longevity. (Rushkoff, 1994) It is these three features more than any other aspect of memes that allows them to so effectively target a younger, online audience. For a meme to be successful, it must succeed in all of these aspects, and the same is ultimately true for political memes. Fidelity refers to the way in which the concepts and informational concept forming the memes manage to stick longer in the minds of viewers than, for example, a short television advertisement might. The fecundity of a meme is its ability to replicate. A meme may be retweeted, shared on Facebook, sent via text message or reproduced in dozens of different ways, thus forming the 'viral' component of the medium in which memes live. On the other hand, in order to share the previous example of a television advertisement, viewers would be required to either record their television or wait for it to be shown again, both ways requiring far more effort and reducing the likelihood that such an advertisement might be shared. The longevity of a meme is how long it may survive in the cultural mainstream, which will allow it to reach an even greater audience as "memes that survive longer have a better chance of being copied." (Jenkins, 2009) A final component of the success of memes comes down to their personal aspect. When one sees a meme, be it on Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, it is likely due to a friend or mutual connection that they know in real life 'sharing' or 'liking' it in some form. Jenkins, despite disagreeing with Rushkoff on the ability of memes to self-replicate, supports this: "these materials travel through the web because they are meaningful to the people who spread them." This immediately informs a viewer that the content may be more relevant to them, that is to say that a viewer is more likely to enjoy content that connections with similar tastes have already publicly stated they've enjoyed. For younger, digital age audiences with shorter attention spans, such attention grabbing techniques are vital. Since the Australian Electoral Commission estimates that "there might be as many as 400,000 young Australians, 18-25 years of age who do not vote in elections because they have not registered on the electoral roll" (Saha & Print, 2009, p. 2) winning over

the young vote and encouraging greater youth involvement in politics could be a crucial ingredient for election victory.

Although the use of memes has the potential to win the youth vote, contrived usage of memes could conversely prove to further alienate the demographic. Memes are an effective transport for ideology because of the aforementioned 'trojan horse' element, in that they subtly transmit information rather than forcing it upon their audience. Youth issues reporter for the Sydney Morning Herald Josephine Tovey writes that the majority of meme usage "never looks authentic... [it is] soft PR for politicians and cheap fodder for content-hungry news organisations... which lap up "fun" ways to report politics for young people." (Tovey, 2016) This lack of authenticity shows the intended audience of the meme its true purpose as a tool for propaganda, which can conjure hostility in the viewer and even inspire them to immediately reject the party that is attempting to influence them. Tovey suggests that although meme usage by itself is not necessarily a poor political tactic, it can "rankle youthful voters because too often it is the only attention they get." (Tovey, 2016) This suggests that political memes will not be effective if they do not reinforce an ideology with which voters are already in agreement with. Memes can't serve as a tool for misleading voters on policy or concealing aspects of a political party. Employing memes can not be the only attempt at youth engagement that a party makes, indeed such a strategy can only work if used to emphasise a party's solid focus on issues that youth find important. The argument can also be made that memes are more effective at mobilising protests and encouraging dissent and anarchist ideals rather than unifying the widely diverse (in terms of ethnicity, religious and political beliefs and almost all features) online audience behind a single political banner. D.C. Elliott in his 2008 article *Anonymous Rising* writes of the so-called Project Chanology, a digital war waged by a group named Anonymous, members of the website *4Chan* against The Church of Scientology. Elliott states "Anonymous is itself a meme, born from the meme culture embraced by 4chan, and weaponised by the meme's transmitters... it may look like a highly organised, paramilitary pressure-group but in reality, it is none of these things." (Elliott, 2008, p.106) Memes are, by nature unstable and easily reshaped by the users viewing and sharing the memes. Further, the globalised rather than regional nature of the internet (specifically the community of 4Chan) ensures that any features describing you as an individual are hidden and nearly meaningless. These two key

features worked in tandem to ensure that memes work best to mobilise a group behind a cause which the vast majority of the users involved in Project Chanology already supported. Rather than change the ideology of the participants, the meme of Anonymous simply emphasised a preexisting belief that their cause was just. These studies suggest the risk that surrounds mainstream political usage of memes, as they could prove ineffective or even detrimental to a political campaign.

The importance of understanding the usage of memes in politics is clear when viewed from two key perspectives. Firstly, from the perspective of a citizen of Australia it is important to know whether content viewed is rigidly manufactured with the purpose of influencing us or is naturally produced. Being able to identify when such targeted content is being directed at a viewer allows said viewer to be able to make more informed decisions on the informational content beneath the distractions of the memetic layer. Understanding the successes and failings of political memes is also of vital importance from the perspective of a content producer, either working in politics or not. The potential is evidently there to efficiently target content or advertising material and make it feel far more natural than traditional form media. For many years, the majority of research suggested that the chief defining factors behind a citizen's political persuasions were the political beliefs of their parents. (Pacheco, 2008) Contemporary research however has revealed that “patterns of influence... [exist from] teens’ use of online political media” (Allen, Wicks, & Schulte, 2013) What these findings demonstrate is that an uncontrollable factor (the political standing of parents) that was the primary factor in an individual’s political determinations has, in the digital age, become secondary to a far more malleable platform, that of online media. This suggests that as this becomes better understood, major political swings can occur. It will be far more difficult for incumbent politicians to remain in so-called ‘safe seats,’ as these seats are generally created by generations of voters sticking with certain parties. With the rapid growth in the influence of online media, voters’ beliefs will likely become far less regionalised. If a voter from a country town outside of Perth can now be influenced and shaped just as heavily as a voter from inner-city Sydney, the entire political platform will be redefined. The prominence and very nature of memes suggests that they will be the key factor for political parties to take advantage of this new age of political influence. The significance does not, however, end at Internet users’ political beliefs. That intrinsic beliefs passed on through family can

now be effectively reshaped through memes and viral media indicates that in the future, a user's online experience could define not only political beliefs and identity, but many other aspects of identity. It can be stipulated that as more people begin viewing online media and memes more people will be shaped by them - be it in less significant identifiers such as music taste and favourite sports teams to hugely important facets such as religion. The importance of the influential ability of memes and viral media cannot be understated, and likewise is the importance of detailed study and analysis of their use and effectiveness in the upcoming Federal Election.

Using memes politically is clearly not without risk. If a large portion of a meme's audience feels that the meme is 'forced' or 'unnatural' they can be alienated or unified *against* the message that the meme is attempting to transmit. However, the potential reward from a proper and delicate usage of online media far outweighs this risk, as it opens up a very significant base of voters that have in previous elections been nearly unreachable. If a political party were to craft policy with a strong focus on issues that youth find important, and advertised this focus through subtle and effective memetic content, they could potentially win over hundreds of thousands of young voters in electorates across the country. There is no doubt that all the major parties in the upcoming Federal election have been attempting to make use of memes and will continue to do so, and there is also no doubt that this is a practise that will continue for many elections to come. What is currently unknown is how effective this strategy's major debut will prove.

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