

Digital Humour and Protest against the Trump Presidency: A View from Indonesia

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Abstract

Internet memes and hashtags have become integral to contemporary politics, having grown from relatively peripheral amusements to often playing significant roles in the success or failure of a political movement, or at least in particular “moments” of those movements. When a hashtag or meme goes viral, as has been the case, for example, with #MeToo; #BlackLivesMatter; #EqualMarriage, and #OccupyWallStreet, it marks significant in-roads for a campaign and sends out a challenge to opponents. However, to what extent do they actually significantly impact on ruling power relations? This paper will discuss the role of satirical memes and hashtags in anti-racist campaigns opposing Trump’s policies in four areas: his policies on Muslim and Latin American immigration, and the controversy around the removal of statues and monuments celebrating leaders of the pro-Slavery confederate states from the US Civil War. It does this from an Indonesian point of view within a progressive social movements perspective, asking questions about the broader significance of the Trump presidency and forms of grass-roots progressive opposition to his presidency. In this context the paper argues that the international significance of Trump and his grass-roots opponents are not just that they are influencing the direction and policies of the (still) most powerful nation (economically and militarily) on earth, but also that they are expressions of social and political phenomena that are much more widespread—that of, amongst other things, the crisis of neo-liberal politics and the rise of a new “populist” far right politics.

Keywords: meme, social movement, anti-Trump

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Introduction

Internet memes and hashtags have become integral to contemporary politics, having grown from relatively peripheral entertainment to often playing significant roles in the success or failure of political movements. This was certainly the case, for example, in the 2014 Indonesian presidential campaign, when some memes were even good enough to be sold commercially on a wide range of merchandise and even published in books.

The concept of a meme has been around since the end of the 1980s, when it was coined by biologist Richard Dawkins (1989) to describe cultural "replicators", which could be melodies, images, behaviours, slogans, etc. Later the term was borrowed to describe cultural entities copied over the internet, especially combinations of images and text (Shifman, 2014).

Memes can certainly be trivial, as evidenced, for example, by the avalanche of cat memes on the internet. But there is a genre of political memes, some of which can be quite whimsical, others of which can even become emblematic of a campaign. The fact that memes are, in the first place, entertainment, means that they can contrast strongly with the sometimes colourless world of everyday politics and political campaigns, they work if they can somehow "tickle our fancy".

Political memes on the internet are also associated with the wider intersection of emergent technologies and social movements, an intersection that some see as having contributed to the creation of new subcultures, social relations, and political forms. (Kamel, 2014) This has included the development of purely computer/internet based political activity ("hactivism"), as well as the use of technologies to facilitate and build social movements, such as the "Arab spring" democratic movements in the Middle East, and the anti-capitalist Occupy! Movement



Figure 2 A famous Occupy! Meme in an AdBuster 2011 edition



Figure 1 A meme from the "Arab Spring", which inspired the Occupy! movement in North America, Europe and elsewhere

Jenkins (2009) and others have argued that the internet and its technologies have created greater space for participatory politics, spaces fulfilling key requirements of such politics—low barriers to participation, the facilitation of sharing, reward for participation, participants feeling their contributions matter, and participants valuing the involvement of others. Anyone can make a meme, a good meme is easily shared and/or adapted, and the circulation of memes definitely represents something of a "social currency".

Donald Trump's campaign was outstanding for the role social media, especially Twitter played. Trump's often unscripted tweets attracted considerable attention (and controversy) to his campaign. Not only this but his outrageous media personality style immediately attracted parody, including through internet memes. In this paper, we will look at some of these memes

from his campaign, as well as others from the early period of his presidency, especially as the relate to anti-racist social movements that have sprung up since his campaign and electoral victory.

Trump's key campaign slogan was "Make America great again", which contained a significant tinge of nostalgia, which for many had at least an aspect of hidden racism when seen in conjunction with more overtly racist policies, such as his proposal that Muslims should have ID badges, or that Mexico should pay for our wall along the US-Mexico border to keep out criminals and illegal immigrants.

In response to such outrageous policies, there was significant response from meme-makers involved with opposing these policies. So, for example, memes such as the one below



Figure 3 An anti-Trump meme satirising his idea of making Muslims wear ID badge

(Figure 3) were created to oppose and satirise the ID badge idea:

This idea was associated with a general Islamophobic undercurrent in Trump's campaign that played with the prejudices of a certain element of Trump's voter base. This theme of drawing parallels between Trump's politics and those of the Nazis in pre-World War II Germany became even more relevant after the Charlottesville controversies, which will be discussed below.

The key policy to come out of this element of Trump's politics was the ban on immigration from Iran and five other Muslim majority countries that have been effected by brutal civil wars (Somalia, Syria, Sudan, Libya, and Yemen) (BBC News, 2017; Whitehouse, 2017). This policy faced massive opposition in the US, was effectively stopped by a Supreme Court restraining order only a few weeks after its initial implementation, and its future remains unclear (Supreme Court, 2017; Laughland, 2017). During the period of its implementation, there was substantial confusion at US airports, and numerous stories emerged of long-time residents being stopped or turned back, as well as grandmothers etc. being caught in this extremely broad net (Dehghan, 2017; ABC News, 2017). One meme that emerged at this time that was relatively popular and also acted to undermine Trump's Christian credentials. Trump has been backed by a number of right-wing Christian groups) is shown below:

This meme was criticised by some for being clearly factually incorrect: Jesus was a Jew born on the West Bank (now Palestine) and would have been eligible for Israeli citizenship. This misses the central point of the meme: the rules had no clear justification, and caught an

extremely broad array of people in their net. Palestine could just as easily have been included in the group of six countries, and what if Jesus chose to travel on Palestinian documents? Of course, the other message the meme is trying to articulate is a contrast between Jesus' message of peace, tolerance, and compassion, and Trump's policies that attacked groups of people on mass based on religion and nationality. This tactic of trying to undermine Trump from a Christian point of view is the one below:



Figure 4 A meme attacking Trump's travel ban



Figure 5 A conservative meme attacking Trump's Christian credentials

One of the interesting things about this meme is that we found it on a conservative meme-sharing website, conservativememes.com, which also shared the figure 6. This meme seeks to draw a link between Trump's politics of prejudice and division at a national level, and aggressive unilateralism at an international level and the extremist Islamist politics of groups like ISIS—effectively arguing that Trump's politics effectively recruit for such groups (Seipel, 2016; Berenson, 2015).

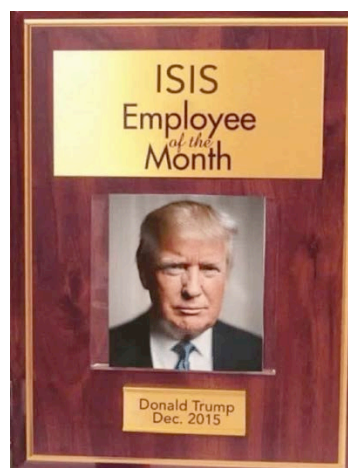


Figure 6 Trump as "ISIS Employee of the Month"

A meme which sought to connect two different strands of Trump's racist policies was the "Mexican Muslim" meme. This meme seeks to combine two issues that have both defined the Trump campaign and presidency, and which have attracted significant opposition: his anti-Muslim and anti-Mexican immigration policies. This meme, of course, is problematic, since it uses the image of extremist preacher Anjem Choundary, hardly a representative of mainstream Islam, and makes fun of something that is actually an issue for some people: there are some Mexican Muslims! This was very quickly pointed out by people on both sides of the Mexico-USA border as soon as the meme starting circulating.



Figure 7 A popular meme combining two issues that have both defined the Trump campaign and presidency, and which have attracted significant opposition

Finally, we come to Charlottesville. Last month a "Unite the Right" rally was held to protest the dismantling of a statue of Confederate general, Robert E. Lee (AlJazeera, 2017; ABC News, 2017). White supremacist and neo-Nazi groups and symbols were prominent at the event. Anti-racists held counter-rallies, and a group of anti-racist demonstrators were attacked by a man linked to white supremacist groups, who rammed them with his car, killing one, and injuring nineteen others. Subsequently, Trump failed to condemn the white supremacist groups, condemning "hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides". This statement and subsequent statements were seen as implying equivalence between the white supremacists and counter-protesters, drawing widespread criticism, anger, and protest. Many memes such as the one below drew attention to the overtones of his "Make America great again" slogan, which drew parallels with similar ideas used by the Nazis in the 1920s and 1930s, and to a nostalgia for an America before civil rights:

Figure 8 "Make America Hate Again"



Figure 9 "Make America White Again"



Conclusion

The early period of the Trump presidency has been a rich period for the creation and dissemination of political memes. This has reflected the highly politically charged and controversial nature of his campaign and policies, as well as the fact that these policies have been the target of significant grass roots opposition from social movements, especially anti-racist movements. Beyond this it reflects the relative maturity and ubiquity of emergent information technologies, which now saturate social life in the US and elsewhere.

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