

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

Andrew S. Ross<sup>a,\*</sup>, Damian J. Rivers<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Centre for Teaching and Learning, Southern Cross University, Bilinga, 4225 Gold Coast, Australia

<sup>b</sup> Faculty of Systems Information Science, Center for Meta-Learning, Future University Hakodate, Hokkaido 041-0803, Japan

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 27 October 2016

Received in revised form

5 January 2017

Accepted 10 January 2017

Available online 14 January 2017

### Keywords:

Delegitimization

Internet memes

Political participation

Discourse

## ABSTRACT

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

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## 1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [andrew.ross@scu.edu.au](mailto:andrew.ross@scu.edu.au) (A.S. Ross), [rivers@fun.ac.jp](mailto:rivers@fun.ac.jp) (D.J. Rivers).

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

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

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Internet memes – a conceptual overview

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

during the Occupy Wall Street movement and posited that memes acted as a form of common language that enabled participation from a diverse range of people. Moreover, [Huntington \(2016\)](#) contends that memes can be seen as a form of political rhetoric in their own right as a result of the text produced within and by the meme. Importantly, beyond the process of creation, the meme and meme iterations correspond to the actual events and situations that trigger the meme, and it is from this that the rhetorical power of memes as a form of political expression and participation emerges. Memes are an organic means through which citizens can respond in almost real time to contemporary political events with no fear of delay or censorship by mainstream media.

There are numerous specific examples of the diffusion of Internet memes in relation to contemporary political events. The meme known as ‘Pepper Spray Cop’ can be counted amongst these. [Huntington \(2016\)](#) explains that this meme originated from a still image emergent from an Occupy protest at University of California Davis in which a police officer was spraying protestors with pepper spray in a nonchalant manner that appeared “no more concerning for him than spraying a garden for weeds” (p. 83). The original image and two examples of the large volume of new iterations it triggered can be seen in [Fig. 2](#).

Another example emerged following a presidential debate in the lead-up to the 2012 U.S. general election in which Republican candidate Mitt Romney was queried about gender equality in the workplace. [Cardona \(2012\)](#) reported that when endeavoring to elucidate his attempt to recruit more women to his cabinet as Governor of Massachusetts, Romney commented “I had the chance to pull together a cabinet, and all the applicants seemed to be men. I went to a number of women’s groups and said, ‘Can you help us find folks?’ and they brought us whole binders full of women”. Almost instantly this resulted in Romney being attacked for a perceived negative stance on women’s issues, and was represented in a barrage of memes, including those in [Fig. 3](#).

Finally, the anonymity involved with meme creation and dispersion is an aspect that should not be overlooked in terms of encouraging engagement in participatory digital cultures. [Davison \(2012\)](#) points out that memes actually encourage non-attribution and anonymous participation and unlock new and potentially

transgressive or empowering modes of communication and participation, thus making the form more dynamic. [Vickery \(2014, p. 302\)](#) further supports this and states “memes are not typically beholden to authorship, but rather facilitate and encourage anonymous participation”. In other words, by not tying any creator to authorship, creators are freer to express their political and other views and to share perspectives through this participatory digital culture. Meanwhile, they are offered protection for the dissemination of controversial, unpopular, and even offensive messages, with no concern for negative consequences or fear of being held accountable, even if the ideas, claims or statements are not supported by any factual evidence. When extrapolated to the political sphere, it can be said that memes allow creators to express their views and stance whilst being shielded from accountability experienced on other platforms and in other contexts (e.g. through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter).

### 2.3. The discourse of (de)legitimization

A notion frequently referenced in relation to political discourse is that of legitimization (see [Van Dijk, 1997](#); [Van Leeuwen, 2007](#)). [Francesconi \(1982\)](#) highlights that in political rhetoric, legitimacy is achieved through communication that successfully aligns actions with the prevalent social values of the time. [Vaara \(2014, p. 503\)](#) reinforces this and defines legitimization as “the creation of a sense of positive, beneficial, ethical, understandable, necessary or otherwise acceptable action in a specific setting”. This is evident in the manner that institutions including corporations and governments have sought to establish legitimacy in many contentious areas such as immigration policy, defence strategy, and environmental issues, among others. Of course, where there exist discourses of legitimization, there also exist discourses of *de*-legitimization. Where legitimization can be seen as “discursively creating and transmitting a positive image of the Self”, delegitimization, in contrast, can be seen as “discursively creating and transmitting a negative image of the Other” ([Screti, 2013, p. 212](#)). In other words, delegitimization demonstrates the *absence* of rhetorical alignment with the prevalent social values of the time in addition to the *absence* of positive, beneficial, ethical, understandable action. In terms of politics, [Steffek \(2003\)](#) contends that delegitimization of a



Fig. 1. Image macro meme examples.



Fig. 2. Pepper-spray cop meme examples.



political institution occurs when policies are challenged and opposed and this also holds true in relation to individual representatives of an institution such as political figures.

Traditionally, research into the discourse of legitimization has tended to focus on institutions and governments rather than individuals and particularly in the area of public relations (Boyd, 2000). An example of the use of delegitimizing discourse directed towards an institution was recently outlined by Davis et al. (2016), who demonstrated how Greenpeace's 'Let's Go!' Arctic campaign used Internet memes designed to mimic the original advertising of oil company Shell in a way that "challenged Shell's goals and identity" (p. 62) through mockery centered on humor and irony (see Fig. 4).

In the current article we affirm how strategies of (de)legitimization can apply to individuals as much as to institutions, especially in the case of presidential candidates or for others in positions of power and authority. Further, although the legitimacy of the Democratic and Republican parties as a whole is not the focus here, both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump are the figureheads of these respective political institutions and as such need to be seen as representatives of significantly more than just themselves. In addition, with regard to connecting authorship of Internet memes and the creators' engagement with the act of delegitimization, Abulof (2015) contends that the study of political legitimization should not be limited to politicians themselves but must include any and all contributions "whether official or unofficial, written by academics, voiced in the media, or spoken publicly by elites or *ordinary citizens*" (p. 82) (*italics added*). Therefore, in the current study we focus exclusively on those Internet memes created as part of a participatory digital culture where there is an assumption that they are intended to function as a discursive form of delegitimization.

### 3. The study

#### 3.1. Procedure

The authors identified the main themes and topics specifically focused upon within the 2016 U.S Presidential election. The

identification of the themes and topics on which to focus our analysis was made primarily in relation to the issues dominating Trump's and Clinton's campaigns as reported in the mainstream media between January and July 2016. The vast majority of meme encounters were focused upon acts of delegitimization of the candidates' credentials or suitability for the office of President of the United States and on their personal affairs, physical appearance and persona. For Trump, the controversy surrounding his campaign's anti-immigration promise of erecting a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border attracted the most media attention within both the U.S based and international online media such as Johnson's (2016) article in *The Washington Post* which ranked this issue as the most significant of 76 other promises made by Trump. Trump's promise that Mexico would be required to pay for the construction of this wall was ranked as the second most significant promise. For Clinton, around the same time she was confirmed as the Democratic Party nominee it was revealed that the Justice Department would not be pursuing criminal charges against her for using a private email server to transfer confidential materials (Ford, 2016). This decision triggered hundreds of Internet memes and the controversy continued to receive significant general media coverage. Given that the issue of Clinton's emails are comparable to Trump's wall idea in that they have been and remain the topics and themes most commonly associated with each candidate, the current study focuses on Internet memes specifically related to these two topics.

#### 3.2. Data selection

Two meme specific websites were chosen as the sources of our data. These were (<http://politicalmemes.com>) and (<http://knowyourmeme.com>). While we are not aware of the first site having been used in any previous studies, the name attracted us and we soon realized the high volume of election-related memes that appeared on the site. The second of these websites has been used previously in other media-related studies concerning memes (for example, Bratich, 2014; Huntington, 2016; Milner, 2013a; Vickery, 2014).

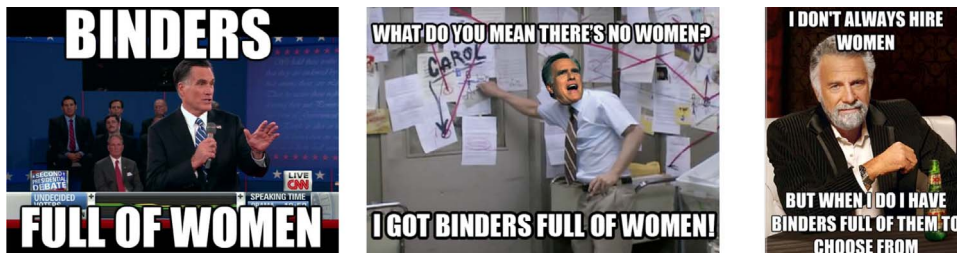


Fig. 3. 'Binders full of women' meme examples.



Fig. 4. Examples of Greenpeace's viral memetic campaign against Shell Oil mimicking the visual-discursive style of the original Shell advertisements.

During the data collection period (March–August 2016), we first independently gathered a number of memes from these websites. While this process was somewhat subjective, our self-imposed remit was to collect memes that were; (1) directly related to Trump's wall and/or Clinton's emails and, (2) representative of the strategies of (de)legitimization outlined in Van Leeuwen's (2007) framework (see next section). Once the data collection period ended we combined our respective samples which gave us a cumulative total of 38 memes (including a number of repeated memes that both researchers had collected). After collaboratively reviewing this collection we were able to remove 12 memes which we believed were repetitive. Our final sample therefore comprised of 26 individual memes, 16 related to Trump's wall and 10 related to Clinton's emails. As we are unable to showcase all 26 memes within this article, we have since narrowed down the sample further to 8 memes for Trump's wall and 8 memes for Clinton's emails. The reduced sample presented in this article comprises those memes we believed most clearly served to represent Van Leeuwen's (2007) strategies of (de)legitimization as well as those which effectively demonstrate the characteristics inherent in Internet image macro memes.

### 3.3. Analytical framework

The data were analyzed in relation to Van Leeuwen's (2007) framework (see Table 1) in which four strategies involved in (de)legitimizing discourse(s) are proposed.

Mackay (2013) points out that Van Leeuwen's framework and other discourse analytical work on legitimization has primarily been applied to the analysis of spoken and written texts of greater length, formality and detail than the limited textual content available within Internet image macro memes (see Martín-Rojo and van Dijk, 1997). Further, the added visual component of the memes moves the analysis beyond language to include the visual aspects of the message, thus making a Multimodal Discourse Analysis approach appropriate.

Using Van Leeuwen's framework as a foundation, we developed a series of prompt questions through which to approach each meme encountered as an act of delegitimization (see Table 2).

More generally, we advanced two specific research questions which underpinned the project. These questions were: RQ1) What stance does the meme appear to take and how does the meme exemplify delegitimizing discourse? RQ2) What specific (de)legitimization strategies are used by the meme? In the following section it will be shown that in different ways, meme creators employ the (de)legitimization strategies of authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization and mythopoesis. Each of these four

strategies of (de)legitimization were present at different points in the memes presented. Although it can be argued that there are instances where individual memes employed more than one strategy, it is our aim in this article to provide examples of how each strategy can be seen in different meme examples.

## 4. Analysis and discussion

The final selected memes are presented and analyzed in the following sections in relation to the (de)legitimization strategies of authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization and mythopoesis. In other words, the memes establish "negative characterization" of the Other (i.e. Trump or Clinton respectively) (Martín-Rojo and van Dijk, 1997, p. 539) where the assumption exists that the memes are created by those in opposition to the memes' subject.

### 4.1. Delegitimization through authorization

The legitimization strategy of authorization refers to authority related to a person, custom, tradition or law. That is, the authority a particular person holds is what they are judged in relation to, often in specific relation to the appropriate use of such authority. Thus, legitimacy is established when an individual (or government or organization) is judged to have used their authority appropriately (i.e. in accordance with dominant social values of a particular population). On the other hand, if authority is judged to have been used inappropriately, the result is likely to be a loss of legitimacy, communicated through attempts at delegitimization (e.g. criticism, ridicule, protest etc.). The memes shown in Fig. 5 represent the strategy of authorization in delegitimizing form. The first meme shows Trump with what could be described as a determined look on his face, and he appears to be mid-utterance. This image displays what Vaara (2014) termed 'position-based' authorization in that Trump is connecting the position of president only with an opportunity for self-aggrandizing narcissism (i.e. an inappropriate use of authority). In the text of the meme he is depicted as naming his wall after himself as well as re-branding the country and the White House with his own name. This is suggestive of a belief that if Trump were to win the presidency, his focus would not be on the accepted issues that a president should exercise an authoritative role, but instead only on furthering his own personal agenda.

The second meme in Fig. 5 takes a similar approach in that it suggests a misuse, or even unethical use, of the authority he would be vested with as president. Van Leeuwen (2007) states that one form of authority is 'role-model' authority, whereby one should

**Table 1**  
Van Leeuwen's (2007, p. 92) framework for analyzing the discourse(s) of legitimization.

Legitimization strategy	How legitimacy is established
Authorization	Legitimization by reference to the authority of tradition, custom and law, and of persons in whom institutional authority of some kind is vested
Moral Evaluation	Legitimization by reference to value systems and includes the techniques of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Abstraction (using discourse linking practices in abstract ways to moral values such as 'the child goes to school for the first time' as opposed to 'the child takes up independence')</li> <li>Analogies - comparisons "almost always have a legitimacy or de-legitimacy function" (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 99)</li> </ul>
Rationalization	Legitimization by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action, and to the knowledge society has constructed to endow them with cognitive ability. These include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Instrumental rationalization - "purpose constructions must contain an element of moralization" (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 101)</li> <li>Theoretical rationalization - "legitimation is grounded in whether it [the action] is founded on some kind of truth, on 'the way things are'" (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 101)</li> </ul>
Mythopoesis	Legitimization conveyed through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate action and punish non-legitimate ones, and includes moral tales and <i>cautionary tales</i> in the form of "alternative future projections" (Vaara, 2014, p. 512)

behave in a way that legitimizes one's actions to others. We argue that in boasting of his wealth at the same time as emphasizing that Mexico will pay for the wall, the meme delegitimizes Trump on the basis that he is not behaving in accordance with the authority of his position as a Presidential candidate.

Hillary Clinton was also the target of memes that demonstrated delegitimization through the strategy of authorization. In both the memes in Fig. 6 this is carried out in a parallel fashion. That is, she is shown to not only be abusing the authority she commands as Secretary of State and as a presidential candidate, but she is doing so in what appears to be an extremely nonchalant, matter-of-fact manner. In the first instance, the image shows Clinton leaning over and speaking – perhaps whispering – in the ear of another woman, who it can be assumed is one of her aides. Her gaze is directed over the woman's head as though Clinton is making sure no-one is close enough to hear her. What she instructs is both illegal and unethical and not in keeping with the behavior that a person in her position should be demonstrating. The delegitimizing power in relation to authorization that emerges from the meme is that, firstly, she knowingly does the wrong

thing to protect self-interest and, second, she does it so easily that her ethical conscience is seen as almost non-existent.

The second meme in Fig. 6 adheres to the meme template demonstrated in Fig. 1 earlier in this paper with the textual pattern of 'I don't always ... but when I do ...'. Her picture here is likely an official institutional picture (noted by the U.S flag in the background) and she is looking directly at the camera, smiling. With the addition of the text, the tone of the image changes dramatically. The text implies that Clinton has no problem breaking the law, which of course is an abuse of authority for someone in a position to serve their nation. Moreover, her rationale that she does so when it suits her amplifies the delegitimization that is occurring on the basis of authorization (i.e. she believes that she is an authority to herself).

4.2. Delegitimization through moral evaluation

The (de)legitimization strategy of moral evaluation relates to value systems, although Van Leeuwen (2007, p. 92) points out that this is generally done in an “often very oblique” or indirect

**Table 2**  
Prompt questions for the analysis of image macro Internet memes in relation to the 2016 U.S. Presidential election based on Van Leeuwen's (2007, p. 92) framework for analyzing the discourse(s) of legitimization.

Legitimization strategy	Prompt questions for analysis
Authorization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How is authority represented in the meme?</li><li>• How is the authority portrayed in the meme utilized as a form of delegitimization?</li></ul>
Moral Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What moral values are invoked by the meme?</li><li>• What moral evaluative techniques are used to delegitimize?</li></ul>
Rationalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Does the content of the meme represent some kind of (un)truth? Is it representative of the way things are <i>not</i>?</li><li>• Does the meme utilize specific (ir)rationalization techniques to delegitimize the candidate?</li></ul>
Mythopoesis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Does the meme offer any alternative future projections?</li><li>• Does the meme reflect a moral or cautionary narrative?</li><li>• Is the strategy of mythopoesis adopted by the meme?</li></ul>

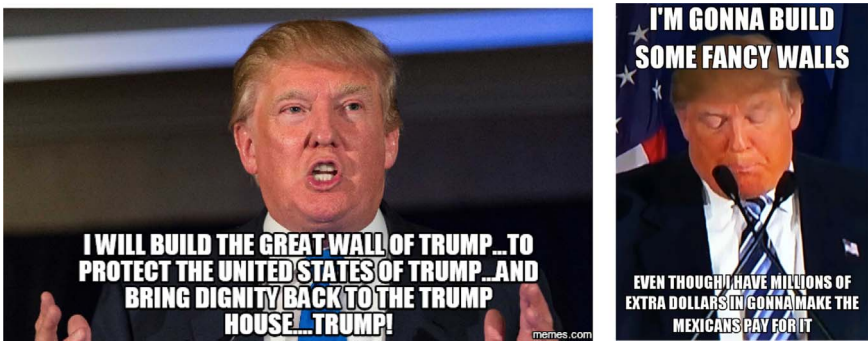


Fig. 5. Authorization – Donald Trump examples.



Fig. 6. Authorization – Hillary Clinton examples.



manner, thus rendering interpretation as essential to unpacking the strategy and its meaning. Numerous memes emerged in response to Trump's proposed wall and Clinton's email scandal that utilized this strategy in an attempt to delegitimize the candidates. The memes depicted in Fig. 7 are related to Trump and can be aligned with this strategy:

These memes convey a negative view of the proposed wall. This is achieved through the combination of both image and text that liken Trump's wall to the former Berlin Wall that separated East and West Berlin during the years 1961 and 1989 (as noted on the first example). With regard to the first meme, the image depicts the wall with attached barbed wire, much like a prison wall. Trump's image in the center of the meme adorns a military-style cap, presumably to represent the Stasi police of the period. Without consideration given to the text, and with no 'action' occurring in the image, we should attempt to interpret the image in line with the 'conceptual processes' Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) suggest; that is, that the image should be analyzed for its symbolic meaning, here interpreted as Trump being allocated this persona, and as such being representative of a similar divisive agenda to that which led to the construction of the Berlin Wall.

The textual component of the meme builds on the image in two ways and is important as individuals, whether deliberately or otherwise, tend to use language as a conduit to reveal ideological positions (Fairclough, 2003). Firstly, it confirms that the meme is in fact depicting the Berlin Wall and that the creator is drawing a comparison between it and Trump's proposed wall. Secondly, the language used in the top part of the meme suggests that the wall will have an extra effect in that in addition to keeping 'them' (Mexican immigrants) out, it will also keep 'us' (presumably U.S. citizens) in. Generally, the use of 'us' and 'them' in legitimization discourses is employed to polarize and to separate in-groups from out-groups (Oddo, 2011). However, the creator's stance on immigration and in relation to 'us' and 'them' positioning remains unclear, but what appears to be suggested is the negative aspect of the proposed wall, which would be that U.S. citizens could be symbolically or ideologically imprisoned in their own country – something reinforced by

the image of the Berlin Wall. In the second image, the Berlin Wall is again depicted, with a large segment of the wall being torn down revealing men dressed in military-style attire. The image presents a transactional process in which the symbolic act of taking down the wall is still in process, and the actors in the image are experiencing this 'freedom' from the divisive wall for the first time. The textual component bluntly confirms the creator's opposition to Trump's proposed wall by addressing him by name and indicates a belief that if erected, it would be unsuccessful.

The (de)legitimization strategy of moral evaluation, and specifically through analogy or comparison, is evident in both memes. The combination of image and text draws the comparison with the Berlin Wall and through the related negative connotations serves to delegitimize Trump's proposed wall. In further support of this, Van Leeuwen (2007) contends that legitimacy is achieved through analogy by comparing an activity or situation to show that it is similar to another activity with positive values, or unlike another activity or scenario with negative values (we would also like to point out transcendence of time in such analogies). However, as an act of delegitimization, comparison is used here to show that the situation is *like* another activity or scenario with *negative* values attached.

Memes employing moral evaluation also emerged surrounding Clinton's email controversy (see Fig. 8). The first meme depicts an image of former President Richard Nixon, and it is his image that carries the symbolism (again transcending time). That is, in combination with the use of the first person 'I', the main purpose of the image is to attribute the textual component to Nixon along with establishing a comparison with Clinton. Nixon's image appears in black and white to reflect the time it emerged from, and his gaze is fixed straight ahead, almost making eye contact with the viewer. This is significant as Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012, p. 436) contend that the "dynamics of eye-contact communication greatly affects emotions such as trust, security, confidence, embarrassment, confusion, honesty, admonition, and pleading". History now shows that Nixon was guilty of what he was accused of, so in this case the image and his gaze might be interpreted as a pleading to the viewer not to view his actions quite so negatively.

The textual element adopts Nixon's voice to compare the severity of the 'deletions' and appears to suggest that Clinton's actions are much worse. The delegitimizing function of this meme rests in the comparison between the actions Nixon and Clinton (allegedly) took, and the subsequent effect on both individuals. The irony here is that for Nixon, the result of his involvement in the Watergate scandal and the erased tape mentioned in the meme was ultimately his resignation, whereas Clinton remained a candidate for appointment. Another significant connection that can be made here is with the notion of intertextuality whereby "each word tastes of a context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life" (Bahktin, 1981, p. 293). Internet memes, as



Fig. 7. Moral evaluation – Donald Trump examples.



Fig. 8. Moral evaluation – Hillary Clinton examples.

with all texts, are influenced by the content of previous texts, in this case Nixon's denial speech.

In a similar manner, the second meme in Fig. 8 delegitimizes Clinton through the strategy of moral evaluation by comparison. In this instance, however, she is compared to whistle-blower Edward Snowden, the former CIA employee who leaked classified information pertaining to U.S. government surveillance programs. Like the Clinton/Nixon meme, comparison is used to delegitimize Clinton by juxtaposing her image with Snowden's and by slightly altering the text. Here, neither person looks directly at the viewer. Clinton's gaze is cast downwards towards her phone as though disinterested in anything else, and coupled with her dark glasses, so that eye contact is rendered impossible. This establishes a sense of dishonesty and untrustworthiness or a desire to show Clinton as disconnected from the viewer.

The text alteration suggests that Clinton is alleged to have carried out the same action as Snowden, but with significantly different results. In terms of how these memes delegitimize Clinton, Zelditch (2001, p. 9) identifies legitimization as a process that "brings the unaccepted into accord with accepted norms, values, beliefs, practices and procedures". As we are interested with the process of delegitimization, we argue that both these memes achieve the opposite effect and act to increase the distance between acceptable and unacceptable behavior for a presidential candidate.

#### 4.3. Delegitimization through rationalization

Within Van Leeuwen's (2007) framework for the analysis of discourses of (de)legitimization, the strategy of rationalization is divided into instrumental and theoretical rationalization. Instrumental rationalization refers to legitimacy being established through a morally justifiable action. On the other hand, theoretical rationalization finds its foundations "not in whether the action is morally justified or not, nor in whether it is purposeful or effective, but in whether it is founded on some kind of truth, on 'the way things are'" (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 103). We interpret this to mean that an absence of legitimacy results from a lack of 'truth' or

reality which in turn makes it difficult to rationalize support of the candidates. Therefore, with the emphasis on a grounding in truth, we focus on the aspect of theoretical rationalization.

The memes shown in Fig. 9 provide examples of theoretical rationalization in relation to Trump's proposed wall. The first meme is one of many created centering on the same textual component. The text is actually an almost verbatim copy of a tweet posted on Trump's Twitter account on September 24, 2015, which ironically could be interpreted as Trump's own attempt at rationalization. The first meme draws attention to his comment and appears to be questioning its relevance and logic. The image of the Great Wall of China is used in a symbolic manner to further establish meaning. Of importance is the contrast between the image of the Great Wall and the textual focus on Mexican immigrants. The viewer is forced to consider the relevance of the Great Wall of China to preventing Mexican immigrants from entering the U.S. Thus, although the message of the meme does not explicitly delegitimize Trump, it is suggestive of a sense of irrationality in Trump's remark.

Through imitation, the textual component of the second meme mocks Trump's dual promise to erect the wall and to ensure that Mexico would incur the cost. However, the proposed border wall has been replaced by "a wall around the entire world" and it is no longer Mexico who is to foot the bill, but "aliens". The meme plays on the creator's view that the proposed wall is about as impossible as a wall being constructed around the entire world. The scenario is humorous given this sense of impossibility, but the actual delegitimization occurs as the sarcastic adaptation of Trump's promise encourages the viewer to see the original promise in the same light. Thus, it is necessary to question whether his promise is grounded in any kind of truth. If no truth can be found and the individual is depicted as engaged in fantasy then delegitimization of both the individual and the idea is effective. Both memes have utilized mockery through imitation, and this is especially so in the second instance reflecting the fact that "humor, ridicule, and mockery are part of an overall architecture of delegitimization" (Hodson and MacInnis, 2016, p. 69). In both memes in Fig. 9 intertextuality is evident in the remnants of a prior text being present as a means of establishing the context of the present memes. As for the visual component, Trump's gaze is slightly off-center with his eyes partly closed contemplatively. Hands are seen in the foreground as though he is cultishly preaching some great master plan. This adds to the effect of the meme as a whole, although the hands almost certainly do not belong to him and are actually part of a different commonly adapted meme that uses 'aliens' as a focus.

Memos utilizing theoretical rationalization as a delegitimization strategy also emerged for Clinton (see Fig. 10). In both memes the images complement the text symbolically rather than carrying a narrative. The first meme depicts a stunned or surprised Clinton, perhaps with the same kind of reaction members of the public had in relation to her denial of the allegations. The image of Clinton is



Fig. 9. Rationalization – Donald Trump examples.

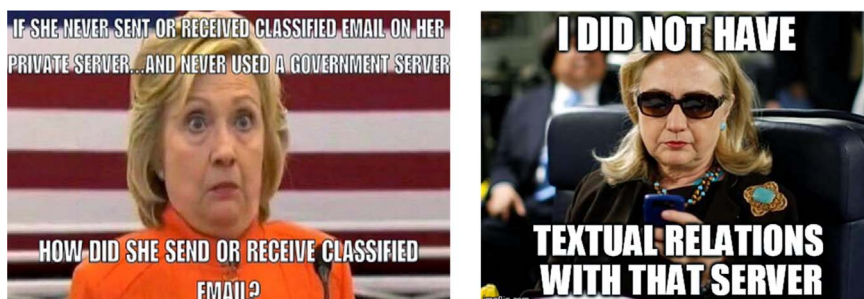


Fig. 10. Rationalization – Hillary Clinton examples.





Fig. 11. Mythopoeisis – Donald Trump examples.

an unflattering one, adding to the negative characterization of the individual. The top component of the meme informs the viewer of what she actually denied. The concluding text at the bottom seems to completely ignore her denials and persists with the same line of allegation. Within this meme, theoretical rationalization can be seen as the delegitimizing strategy with the meme creator highlighting the lack of ‘truth’ in the situation, and that what Clinton claims may not actually be the ‘way things are’. This in turn serves to delegitimize her as a presidential candidate as truth and honesty are highly desired qualities of a leader.

In a similar fashion, the second meme presents Clinton’s denial, but this time through the use of humor. The text bears similarity to the comment her husband and former U.S. President Bill Clinton made in response to the Monica Lewinsky allegations when he stated “I did not have sexual relations with that woman”. The humorous mimicry of her husband in the form of denial of her own guilt could be seen to portray the Clintons as a couple who find it difficult to escape scandal. This meme provides another instance of the indirect stance of the meme, where the interpretation is left open to the viewer. However, it must be said that it aligns with Mackay’s (2013, p. 349) notion of the multimodal discursive feature of ideological import in terms of “Self-legitimation” or “Other de-legitimation”. The image is actually identical to that in the Snowden/Clinton meme and it could be argued that this was chosen for the same reasons to emphasize dishonesty and untrustworthiness.

It should also be noted that legitimization usually must be established by the respective individual or group. For example, Breeze (2012) asks us to consider a situation where a group known for xenophobia is trying to legitimize policies considered to be racist by those positioned outside the group by arguing that those born abroad do not have the same rights as those born locally or that it is only natural that those immigrants who came later to a country should go to the back of the queue. Breeze goes on to say that if these “representations resonate with some widely held views, such political groups may be able to achieve legitimization” (p. 5). Now, consider this from the opposite perspective of delegitimization. Although the memes presented in this section do not explicitly delegitimize through direct negative remarks or images, they create the conditions for the resulting interpretation to be in the form of a negative representation of the subject. If the viewer does in fact take this negative view, a political influence, no matter how minute, has been achieved. It is challenging to measure the impact and spread of such influence through Internet memes, but it is essential that we are aware of their potential for ideological influence in the current climate of almost unrestricted information sharing. This is especially true when we contextualize and hypothesize the influence memes may have. For example, consideration of who influences whom in the sharing of memes (creator or sharer?), what the reach of memes actually is, and how the inter-media spread of memes occurs could enhance our understanding of Internet memes in the realm of politics.

#### 4.4. Delegitimization through mythopoeisis

The final of Van Leeuwen’s (2007) (de)legitimization strategies seen in several of the memes collected for the study was mythopoeisis, which relates to legitimization “conveyed through narrative” (Rojo and van Dijk, 1997, p. 533) and in particular either moral or cautionary tales. On one hand, moral tales establish legitimacy through acknowledging or rewarding what are perceived to be legitimate social practices. On the other hand, cautionary tales outline or suggest what may happen if norms of social practice are not adhered to (Van Leeuwen, 2007). As the discursive practice of delegitimization is more closely aligned with the consequences of non-legitimate actions, beliefs and policies, the following discussion focuses on mythopoeisis in the form of cautionary tales. This relates to Fairclough and Thomas’ notion of ‘imaginaries’ where a “contrast between future and present” (Vaara, 2014, p. 512) is established by it in a suggestive or overt manner. In other words, a possible imagined future scenario is presented and that may be either desirable or undesirable. In line with this notion of imaginaries is the idea of a ‘nightmare scenario’ which plays a role in the memes in the following analysis.

The first meme presented in Fig. 11 depicts Trump gesturing towards a gloomy scene of a large wall flying Canadian flags and patrolling military tanks in the foreground. The image is constructed in accordance with Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (1996) process of symbolic attribution whereby the superimposition of Trump’s image stands out in the foreground, and his gesture acts as a means of “pointing out the symbolic attribute to the viewer” (p. 108). The symbolism here lies in the dark mood of the image behind Trump, and his gesture towards it can be seen as a gesture toward what kind of future he offers as a U.S. President. The textual component reinforces the image and creates an overall negative future projection in the meme, and it is this that confirms mythopoeisis as the delegitimization strategy used in the meme. A deeper understanding of the meme can be achieved by adapting Martinec and Salway’s (2005) framework of the relationship between text and image and applying it to the three observable components – the text, the image of Trump, and the background image. This framework is in turn an adaptation of Halliday’s (1994) descriptions of the relationships that exists between clauses in a sentence. The textual component can be seen as a general warning, and the two components of the image then work together as a cautionary tale and project the idea of a conditional sentence as in ‘If Trump is elected, this is what America will look like’, thus completing the mythopoetic effect.

The second meme in Fig. 11 relies more on the textual component than the image, although the finger-pointing gesture and facial expression add emphasis to the text. The first person ‘I’ effectively attributes the textual component to Trump. The other pronominal reference – ‘you all’ – refers to the American public. In doing so, it portrays Trump in a dictatorial state which in turn reveals the presence of the strategy of mythopoeisis through the projection of caution. The use of terms such as ‘escape’ and ‘hell’



Fig. 12. Mythopoeisis – Hillary Clinton examples.

solidifies the message of delegitimization and although Trump did not actually utter this remark himself, the nature of Internet memes means that the moment the anonymous creator developed the meme and shared it, they participated in an act of delegitimization towards Trump regardless of its basis in truth or reality.

The final two memes to be discussed target Clinton, and further demonstrate the delegitimization strategy of mythopoeisis through the issuance of an indirect caution. The textual component of the first meme in Fig. 12 takes a similar approach to the earlier Snowden/Clinton meme in utilizing the strategy of moral evaluation; however, the primary message here can also be interpreted as one of warning. In the meme, 'Liberals' are portrayed as having double-standards in relation to Clinton. The other name mentioned is Omar Mateen, the perpetrator of the Orlando massacre in June 2016. The comparison alone projects a negative image of Clinton, but the mythopoetic warning is most evident in the perceived threat inherent in Clinton having 'the codes for the nuclear arsenal'. The intentionality here is taken to be that Clinton can be no more trusted than Mateen, which in turn acts to delegitimize her.

The second meme in Fig. 12 takes an almost identical approach to the first in its emphasis on Clinton being under investigation by the FBI, but utilizes an image not of Clinton herself, but of a young boy with a quizzical, disbelieving facial expression. In fact, this image has proven a very popular one for use and adaptation as an Internet meme, generally beginning with the phrase 'So you're telling me ...' and then concluding with more text that states an irrational, illogical or hard-to-believe scenario. This template is adhered to here with the juxtaposition of the statement about Clinton being under investigation against her status as a presidential candidate, which aligns the meme with the delegitimization strategy of mythopoetic caution. Templates such as this (and that in Fig. 1) can play an important role in making the path to participation even easier; in other words, meme creators have only to concern themselves with the punchline for the joke or message while the image and the initial text is provided for them. As yet, research has not focused specifically on meme templates such as this. The claim made that '147' FBI agents are investigating Clinton is almost impossible to verify, and further supports the aspect of this participatory culture where views and ideas can be shared easily and quickly, even in the absence of supporting factual evidence. The power in this situation resides in the fact that once the meme is shared, it is read by an indeterminable number of others whose own views can potentially be influenced. Thus, although memes can appear to be quite simplistic, they are potentially extremely powerful as a means of sharing ideas and perspectives, with creators having no cause to fear the content of the views they share as they will never be held to account.

## 5. Concluding remarks

Overall, the selection of memes presented in this article represent a minute portion of those generated in response to Donald Trump's proposed border wall policy and Hillary Clinton's email controversy. The creators of these memes have engaged in acts of political participation that convey their ideological stance. This has been achieved through the (de)legitimization strategies of authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization and mythopoeisis. Within this participatory digital culture, these strategies are woven into the meme iteration not only to help the creator share their view and spread their message, in the hope of influencing others, but to delegitimize the target of the meme in order to bring about their own desired political result (i.e. the election of one candidate at the direct expense of another). In an increasingly virtual interconnected society, it is important to understand the differing ways that technology, the Internet and social media provide citizens, and non-citizens, greater means with which to engage in political participation. If desired, and armed with a very basic knowledge of the participation tools required, almost any individual with a view or a stance on any issue can participate and have a say where previously they might not have been able to.

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