WhatsAppening Donald: The Social Uses of Trump Memes

The 2020 United States presidential election has come and gone, mostly, and on January 20, 2021, Joe Biden was inaugurated as the 46th president. The election and its aftermath have played out against the backdrop of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and associated periods of 'lockdown' – a word used so often in global public discourse that it was recently named 'word of the year' by Collins Dictionary. Lockdown was chosen by Collins because it has been 'a unifying experience' for billions of people across the world (Falvey, 2020). Two related terms made the dictionary's top ten list: 'social distancing' and 'self-isolate'. Together these terms capture the social consequences of the pandemic and the restructuring of human interaction it has imposed. Most obviously, it has accelerated our reliance on digital technologies and platforms. Many of us have become reluctant, semi-permanent residents of the head and shoulders world of Zoom. Many of us are watching more television. Many of us are spending more time on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok than we did a year ago, and through these various forms of media we are entertained and (mis)informed, hailed and assailed, and confronted with a ceaseless flow of content that intermingles the personal and impersonal, the serious and trivial, the global and local.

Take, for example, the freeware messaging platform WhatsApp. Like many people, I am a member of several WhatsApp groups, but until recently I never stopped to reflect on my participation in them. One group that strikes me as particularly illustrative, in light of our present discussion, is a neighbourhood drinking group. Members of the group live in close proximity – on the same Dublin street, in fact. There are eleven of us in total, ranging in age from late thirties to early sixties. We are all male, all white, mostly married and fond of beer – though one of us also knows a good deal about wine (not me). The WhatsApp group, christened the "man shed", was set up by one of the members in the summer of 2020, though several of them had already been friends for years. In the autumn and winter of 2020, as the global pandemic raged on and the Republic of Ireland grudgingly endured yet another period of lockdown, WhatsApp became the primary means of interaction for the group – bar a fleeting and very occasional 'socially-distanced' encounter on the street.

Messages shared on the group predominantly take the form of memes and emoji responses to them. Memes can be about any number of things but during the period in question they were almost exclusively about Donald Trump. Some referenced the orange hue of his skin,

which one meme likened to the colour of a pumpkin – or a 'Trumpkin'. Some referred to his hair, his penchant for 'tasteful' things, his relationship with Boris Johnson, his testing positive for Covid-19. Some showed him connected to an intravenous drip containing Clorox, or sucking on a bottle of Dettol. Some showed him captaining the Titanic, or building a wall around the White House to keep Biden out, or on a witness protection programme in Russia. One claimed he got the "full 2020 experience: He caught Covid, lost his job, and will be evicted from his house". Just before Christmas I received one showing a drag queen Trump insisting that he would soon ascend the British throne: "OK, so I can't be President any more. No problem, I gonna be Queen. I will be a great Queen, best Queen ever!"

From a research point of view, WhatsApp groups can be studied from a number of vantage points. We might categorise messages according to style, genre or lexicon, and try to identify discursive strands. We might examine how 'groupness' is enacted and performed on them. [1] We might reflect on the insider-outsider dialectic – in this case, my being simultaneously a group member and academic researcher. Here, however, I approach the group – or more specifically the shared, ritualistic process of posting and responding to Trump memes – much like Hermes and Hill (2020) approach television: as a resource for solace, social ritual and ontological security. This approach has much in common with Carey's (1989) 'ritual' view of communication, which suggests that in addition to conveying information, media play a number of important cultural functions, such as helping to create and sustain communities, regulate relationships, and engender a sense of belonging.

Milner (2012) describes memes as amateur, pop cultural artefacts, and analyses them as public discourse and as a genre of participatory media. He suggests that they offer a means of commenting on political events and figures in an oblique way and that they 'provide insight into how 'everyday' media texts intertwine with public discourses' (2012: 14). Similarly, Lukianova, Shteynman and Fell (2019) suggest that political memes reflect broad ideological positions and 'demonstrate that serious political issues can be discussed in a fun way' (2019: 73). These scholars convincingly argue that memes reflect world views and presumed truths. In Milner's (2012: 55) terms, they are 'vocalisations of members of the public sphere'. However, in the case of the WhatsApp group I am reflecting on here, the anti-Trump stance is so presumed, so taken for granted, that memes about the (now former) president do not provoke any kind of debate or discussion; on the contrary, they are purely opinion-confirming, evidenced by the stream of laughing and/or thumbs-up emojis they receive. (These are the most-used emojis on the group by far, followed perhaps by the beer glass). This in itself is

deserving of further analysis. For example, one might suggest that these memes are so focussed on Trump himself – the man, the celebrity, the billionaire businessman, the reality television host – that they are in some respects *apolitical*, which in turn raises the question about what their circulation might imply for political engagement. On a related note, Will Davies (2020) has raised concerns about WhatsApp's capacity to breed suspicion and sow distrust and the kinds of 'negative solidarity' it sometimes engenders – and consequently its potential role in intensifying disengagement from politics and public institutions.

However, what primarily interests me here is the social function and expressive orientation that memes give to groups. Socially speaking, they are bonding devices – artefacts that play an important though inconspicuous role in relationship maintenance during extended periods of social separation. Trump memes are intended to amuse, of course, but humour and satire – and the presumption that group members will 'get' it – have a number of important social functions, including strengthening interpersonal bonds, nurturing community, building trust, creating a sociable atmosphere, and easing uncertainty and tension (Marone, 2015). More fundamentally, posting and responding on the WhatsApp group in question and the loose turn-taking involved is 'phatic' insofar as its primary function is not to convey information but simply to *maintain contact*; it communicates mutual attentiveness and is an acknowledgement of the 'connected presence' of group members (Kulkarni, 2013). Miller (2008: 395) similarly argues that such practices 'imply the recognition, intimacy and sociability in which a strong sense of community is founded. Phatic messages potentially carry a lot more weight to them than the content itself suggests'.

Some of our members post more than others, some respond more, but everyone chips in. In a sense, membership of the group comes with behavioural and communicative expectations, rather like Gluckman (1963) found in his classic study of gossip. Gluckman saw the positive virtues of gossip – how it functions as a social glue and contributes to group cohesion. He argued that it also comes with customary rules, that it is culturally controlled, and that in some respects it is a social duty: 'if a man [sic] does not join in the gossip and scandal, he shows that he does not accept that he is a party to the relationship; hence we see that gossiping is a duty of membership of the group' (1963: 313). Following Gluckman, we might suggest that posting memes and responding to them on friendship groups of this sort is socially obligatory communicative behaviour: in the case of this particular group, it has largely replaced our everyday 'talk' (temporarily we hope). Each meme, each playful exchange, each fleeting

expression of networked sociality is a micro engagement – a virtual wave standing in for a face-to-face speech act.

In some respects, my reflections here might be construed as highly optimistic about the social potentialities of WhatsApp. However, it is vital to temper such a reading by remembering that social media platforms, much like the commercial brands that Francesca Sobande (2020) has analysed, are in the business of making a profit and operate chiefly by commodifying our communicative and connective behaviour. Moreover, as Sobande observes, framings of the global pandemic as a great 'leveller' ignore the intense isolation felt by many groups and obscure forms of inequality that if anything, have worsened during the crisis. To this, we might add that the flip side of WhatsApp's phatic role in sustaining social connections might be a hardening of social boundaries and decreasing opportunities for meaningful encounters with difference. Indeed, in its simultaneous invocation of connection and detachment, community and private retreat – not to mention heteronormative masculinity – one might suggest that the epithet 'man shed' captures rather well the ambivalent implications of WhatsApp sociality.

While various human populations around the globe remain in some form of lockdown, memes are multiplying and roving about freely. As Dennett (1995: 347) aptly put it nearly three decades ago, memes are leaping 'promiscuously from vehicle to vehicle, and from medium to medium, and are proving to be virtually *unquarantinable*' (my emphasis). Most scholars who research these multimodal migrants emphasise their 'virus-like' qualities and their tendency to disseminate amongst large virtual collectives. But memes also spread in closed groups where there is little danger of 'context collapse' (Marwick and boyd, 2011) – and they are sometimes exchanged by persons living mere metres apart. Sometimes said persons drink, but we really shouldn't hold that against them. They say drink is a social lubricant, but I would venture to suggest that 'the Donald' is too.

Notes

[1] In their ground-breaking paper, 'Beyond Identity', Brubaker and Cooper (2000) pick apart the concept of identity and present social scientists with a range of other (and in their view preferable) concepts, one of which is groupness. They suggest that groupness can be a consequence of relational ties or categorical commonalities (race, gender, and so on) and that it can be activated and deepened by certain 'events'. Brubaker and Cooper do not elaborate on what sorts of events might engender groupness; however, I would suggest that a pandemic surely qualifies.

Acknowledgements

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