Posting the presidency: Cartoon politics in a social media landscape

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Successfully turning his Twitter presence into political power in a range of ways, Donald Trump is among the first major political leaders to benefit from fundamental changes in the media ecosystem. This article discerns two dynamics at play in reshaping the media landscape: first, the fact that social media can quickly mobilise effective political constituencies. Second, the rhetorical mode Trump employs in effecting this shift from communities to constituencies reconfigures politics to assume the logic of cartoons. Trump presents and is represented as a character to whom the laws of cartoon physics apply, not in a traditional manner, as an object of political cartoons, but as a powerful agent, driving a logic of politics that engages meme-makers in novel ways.

Introduction

Social media has fundamentally changed the public sphere in a paradigm shift that neither scholars nor politicians have fully grasped. President Donald Trump seems to be one of the first major political leaders to benefit from the change in the basic texture of the media landscape. He seems, despite what at first sight might appear as erratic social media use, to be very successful at turning his Twitter presence into political power in a range of ways.

Trump is of course not unequivocally the first political leader to use or benefit from social media. The obvious precedent is Barack Obama's social media campaign in 2008 which brought in unprecedented numbers of small campaign contributions, as well as new voter registrations.[1] Obama's campaign personalised campaign messages through very specific targeting and shrewd use of social media platforms' algorithms.[2] In doing so, the Obama campaign made use of both the new possibilities of targeted advertising through social media, and of a new understanding of communities as partly digital, online communities. While it did politically activate members of those communities, it did not fundamentally change either their structure or the structure of political communication. New technologies and media were effectively employed with measurable political implications, but much remained essentially the same. Politicians sent their messages through a range of media and advertising, journalists across the political spectrum critically investigated them

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[1] Derrick L Cogburn and Fatima K Espinoza-Vasquez, 'From Networked Nominee to Networked Nation: Examining the Impact of Web 2.0 and Social Media on Political Participation and Civic Engagement in the 2008 Obama Campaign' (2011) 10 *Journal of Political Marketing* 189.
[2] Ibid 201.

and their messages, and made selections regarding what and whom to attend to in what way, and citizens would vote and possibly be involved in the campaign through a specific structure and hierarchy organised by the political parties. Key institutions, such as the political parties and the mainstream media, even in a politically polarised media landscape, continued to work to centralise the public debate. Intuitively, the advent of a more interactive web seemed to offer a healthy counterbalance to the dominance of traditionally powerful institutions. The Web 2.0 constituted a move towards 'user generated content' and thus online sociality.[3] Social scientists understood this development as stimulating a participatory ecosystem which would democratise, break down boundaries, and give a voice to a wider public.[4]

However, recently, since political systems and the media across the globe have been hijacked by organised, often foreign-government-driven cybercrime, an epidemic of fake news and other forms of misinformation and disinformation which are hard to distinguish from 'real' news, the problems of the openness of the Web 2.0 have also become abundantly clear.[5] As Barack Obama said in a *New Yorker* interview on 28 November 2016 right after the 2016 US General Elections, with David Remnick, the new media ecosystem,

> means everything is true and nothing is true. An explanation of climate change from a Nobel Prize-winning physicist looks exactly the same on your Facebook page as the denial of climate change by somebody on the Koch brothers' payroll.[6]

Obama reflects that he mistakenly assumed the old media paradigm still to be in place. In the months leading up to 8 November 2016, the Democratic campaign was often praised for its superior 'ground game' (offline campaign, focused for instance on convincing eligible but unregistered voters to register, or on canvassing in neighborhoods). In Obama's analysis, he had misunderstood the magnitude of the change in the fabric of the media landscape.[7]

This article discerns two dynamics which are at play in reshaping the media landscape: first, the fact that social media can quickly mobilise effective political constituencies. In a context in which

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[3] José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford University Press, 2013) 4.
[4] Ibid 4–5.
[5] Cass R Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton University Press, 2017) 60–1.
[6] David Remnick, *Obama Reckons with a Trump Presidency*, *The New Yorker* (online), 28 November 2016 <www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/28/obama-reckons-with-a-trump-presidency>
[7] Many other economic, social, political and cultural factors can be distinguished to account for Hillary Clinton's election loss, and Donald Trump's victory. This article will not enter the debate on how justified Obama's assessment of the causes of the Democratic election loss is. The point here is that while Obama did effectively communicate within the newly evolving social media paradigm, he did not, in his own assessment, grasp the implications of the eventual shift in the structure of the public sphere which social media have caused.

social media sociality for many people forms the first circle of social contact, as well as the main source of news, online communities are easily transformed into groups that rally around a political cause. Second, this article will focus on the rhetorical mode employed by Trump in effecting this shift from communities to constituencies. This article argues that in the case of Trump's media communication and work to engage political supporters, a specific rhetorical logic, which this article will call *cartoon logic*, is a central catalyst. This article analyses some individual examples of these dynamics. Then the author will consider ways to combine digital methods and traditional modes of analysis from literary studies in order to move from the level of individual examples to a more conclusive body of evidence, to show how social media changes the global media ecosystem and how Trump's Twitter use is successful in this new ecosystem.

Approaching Twitter with digital humanities methods

Twitter data is often used to perform quantitative sentiment analysis and other quantitative or mixed methods,[8] for instance using applications like DiscoverText (developed by Texifter) or TCAT (developed by the Digital Methods Initiative at the University of Amsterdam).[9] These methods are very helpful for visualising, for instance, political bubbles. They can, for example, show which political themes or keywords users who in the summer of 2016 had Trump's campaign hashtag #MAGA in their Twitter biography, what they were tweeting about, or analyse which online news media they were inclined to tweet links to. Or they can show that users with #MAGA in their Twitter biography had relatively more followers who used the same hashtag, compared to users with Hillary Clinton's campaign hashtag #ImwithHer.[10]

The great advantage of this kind of digital method of research is that it is empirical. But the disadvantage is that it can be descriptive of large trends in social media communication without being able to explain what is happening on a qualitative level. Distant readings of large sets of tweets, without support from qualitative methods, can offer answers to 'what' questions, but less to 'how' or 'why' questions. Close reading, even of such ephemeral texts as tweets, however, can reveal

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[8] C Ross et al, 'Enabled Backchannel: Conference Twitter Use by Digital Humanists' (2011) 67 *Journal of Documentation* 214; Danah Boyd et al, 'Tweet, Tweet, Retweet: Conversational Aspects of Retweeting on Twitter' (Speech delivered at the 43rd Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, Kauai, 6 January 2010).

[9] Erik Borra and Bernhard Rieder, 'Programmed method: developing a toolset for capturing and analyzing tweets' (2014) 66 *Aslib Journal of Information Management* 262.

[10] Mark Lievisse Adriaanse, Jos de Groot and Mathijs de Groot, *The 2016 US Elections: A Tale of Two Twitter Bubbles* (20 January 2017) NAP Nieuws <www.napnieuws.nl/2017/01/20/a-tale-of-two-twitter-bubbles/>.

ironies, ambiguities, and implications that distant reading cannot. This is why the mixed-methods approaches developed by, for instance Ross et al. and Boyd et al. are so valuable.[11]

There are risks here on both sides: on the one hand digital media scholars can become extremely agile users of digital tools, who grasp the object of study primarily on the level of being able to prove with data that it exists, and what its scope and geographical location are, rather than understanding its internal logic and sensibility. On the other hand, scholars who may be perfectly situated to make sense of the politics and aesthetics of digital media expressions, often have limited or no training in, or access to digital methods. This article sets out to consider ways in which classical qualitative methods from literary studies can be combined with digital methods to analyse a new body of literature in urgent need of scrutiny: Donald Trump's tweets.

Donald Trump's Twitter use

Donald Trump's Twitter handle @realDonaldTrump assertively claims authenticity. Created perhaps to distinguish this account from the many spoof accounts, there is something funny about a metaphorical voice in the virtual universe of social media that claims to be the real Donald Trump. This effect is caused in part by the hyperreality of Trump's voice: it is arguably more real on Twitter than when it is emanating from his chest. Trump, even more so than other presidents, is constantly mediated and his performance of authenticity is consistently bound up in that intense mediation. In a context in which everyone can be, and to some extent has no choice but to be, a celebrity — monitored, tracked, and archived every day through devices connected to the internet, Trump derives his authenticity from his performance of carelessness about his self-presentation. Trump's Twitter practice embodies this 'realness' — it contains obvious untruths, questionable grammar, phrases entirely in capital letters, retweets of inappropriate material, and other clear marks of real or fabricated spontaneity and off the cuff improvisation.

There has been some speculation about the question whether Trump writes the tweets disseminated through the @realDonaldTrump and @POTUS accounts himself, or whether they are written by staff, and whether this has changed since taking office or as a result of the infamous 'unpresidented' and 'covfefe' tweets in late 2016 and early 2017.[12] These questions have largely

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[11] Above n 8.

[12] On 17 December 2016 Trump tweeted: 'China steals United States Navy research drone in international waters — rips it out of water and takes it to China in unpresidented act' and has since deleted the tweet. Martin Pengelly, 'Donald Trump accuses China of 'unpresidented' act over US navy drone', *The Guardian* (online), 18 December 2016 <www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/17/donald-trump-china-unpresidented-act-us-navy-drone>. On 31 May 2017, Trump tweeted: 'Despite the constant negative press covfefe' and since removed the tweet. Elle Hunt, 'What if covfefe? The tweet by Donald Trump that baffled the internet', *The Guardian* (online), 31 May 2017 <www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/may/31/what-is-covfefe-donald-trump-baffles-twitter-post>.

been answered through digital textual analysis.[13] However, this article is less interested in Donald Trump's day-to-day tweet-composing process than in the political, cultural and medial intricacies of his use of the medium. Therefore, the author will for now work from the position that the tweets posted through the @realDonaldTrump and @POTUS accounts are produced by Trump and his team to suggest he (the 'real Donald Trump') has written them personally, in a configuration which is not known to a broad public now, but will presumably be revealed in coming years. Instead of discovering the details and dynamics of that configuration, this article focuses on the question: What do Trump's tweets *do*? How do they work within the larger media ecosystem? How do they invite particular responses, and how are they politically and culturally effective? This analysis cannot hope to do more than scratch the surface. It is not conclusive, but rather an attempt to indicate how traditional terms and methods from literary studies can help to analyse how a president's social media communication can overhaul the basic structure of the public sphere, and moreover, how digital methods may be helpful in generating evidence of how this shift works.

Many US presidents have been associated with a specific medium which they loved and which loved them. Radio was for Franklin D Roosevelt what television was for John F Kennedy, and what Twitter is to Donald Trump. None of these presidents were the first president to use 'their' medium, but in all three cases they were the first to master it in one way or another. Indeed, in all three cases the medium itself became more successful when the president started to use it; the vector clearly points in both ways. For instance, in Donald Trump's case: not only was his election victory, and his visibility in a broader sense, helped by his visibility on Twitter, his campaign and election victory in turn may have played a role in the upturn in Twitter's profits since 2017. Roosevelt's Fireside Chats, broadcast from coast to coast at the same time, similarly did not only contribute greatly to his popularity as president, they also increased radio sales, and firmly established radio broadcasts as national media events. With at times around 80 per cent of the population tuned in, they contributed to a national perception of the United States as an imagined community.[14]

Because of the very different nature of Twitter communication compared to radio, and because of the content of his messages, Trump's tweets instead seem to fragment the landscape and disrupt a nationally shared sense of community, despite claims to the contrary. This fragmentation is largely due to a general attribute of social media communication: rather than to emphasise a

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[13] David Robinson, *Text analysis of Trump's tweets confirms he writes only the (angrier) Android half* (9 August 2016) Variance Explained <http://varianceexplained.org/r/trump-tweets/>.
[14] Lawrence W Levine and Cornelia R Levine, *The People and the President: America's Conversation with FDR* (Beacon Press, 2002) 17.

collective common ground, social media platforms often are spaces in which radical or polarising content is expressed and finds fertile ground.

The politics of social media

Much of this fragmentation is not driven by the agency of individual users. While there are highly divisive users on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit, who for a host of reasons (presumably for entertainment or political gain, although the motivations can be hard to establish) relish the fragmentation they can affect, the media platforms themselves have a form of agency. The precise nature of this agency differs per platform: Facebook's algorithm famously keeps content away from users if it does not fit their political profile.[15] This is done to ensure users have a 'positive' experience that does not annoy or unsettle, which presumably offers a more profitable context in which to read Facebook's commercial posts. However, this algorithmic choice also contributes to the creation of politically polarised 'bubbles' in which users are confronted only with news messages that are aligned with their pre-existing political preferences, without being able to control or even know this. Twitter in that respect works differently, because as a user you choose whom to follow, often based on the content of tweets, rather than acquaintance in the offline world. However, this does not mean that Twitter has less agency as a medium. The shortness of tweets, the possibility to attach images, hyperlinks or other tweets, the option to include hashtags (reference keywords to make a tweet findable by its tag), and the possibility to 'like' (bookmark) or 'retweet' tweets, invites and facilitates certain messages while impeding others. Thus, it is relatively easy to send out short, snappy messages, or to spread someone else's message to one's own followers.

Twitter is at heart a socially unsafe environment, with a medially constituted dynamic that is conducive to bullying.[16] Bullying or acting as a bystander to bullying is often the safest option, in a context where being victimised can come at a staggering cost. Twitter as a company of course has power to address this issue in principle. It can delete tweets, suspend users, or regulate the levels of anonymity allowed, but despite recently increased efforts to police the platform, it tends to be highly reticent in using those possibilities.

Twitter, unlike Facebook, is highly public: anyone can read, respond to, or retweet all messages (except those sent by 'locked' profiles). As a result, Twitter functions, not as a town commons where people who know each other and belong to the same community discuss life (news,

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[15] Alexis C Madrigal, 'What Facebook Did to American Democracy: And why it was so hard to see it coming', *The Atlantic* (online), 12 October 2017 <www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/10/what-facebook-did/542502/>

[16] Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (Yale University Press, 2017) 178.

politics, children), but rather as a massive and largely anonymous schoolyard, where social capital is expressed in numbers of followers, likes and retweets. Because everyone interested can see a response to one's tweets, a public Twitter conversation tends to differ starkly from private ones held through the platform's Direct Message function. Even a conversation ostensibly between two users with no one else involved is public, and thus to some extent a performance for an unknown number of unknown potential readers and interlocutors. The awareness of this strongly disciplines such conversations: in particular it can be socially safe and acceptable on the public platform to mock, shame, or claim moral superiority over a conversation partner in a way that would be inappropriate in a conversation that only involved just the two people without potential audience, as would be the case in an exchange of Direct Messages.

An important Twitter dynamic, that to some extent becomes a result of the structure of the medium as described here is that it easily forms political constituencies: groups of users who rally around a specific political cause — often through a particular hashtag. Because it is easy to search for hashtags, and 'trending' hashtags (selected by the company's elusive and secret algorithm) appear in the left-hand column in all users' home screen, hashtags can quickly reach a massive audience. Successful hashtags, such as #metoo have enormous impact, far beyond Twitter and other platforms in the offline world. Users who take up such hashtags become part of a political movement, and activist constituency, which often sets out to expose or shame opponents.

The author defines a constituency as a collective mobilised by a specific medium around a political cause. The dictionary definition does not include the manner of mobilisation: '[a] body of constituents, the body of voters who elect a representative member of a legislative or other public body' or '[a] body of supporters, customers, subscribers'.[17] However, the author follows Korsten who argues that 17th century novel print technology allowed the quick dissemination of political pamphlets that gave rise to new constituencies. Korsten's analysis adds to the loose notion of 'a body of supporters' the idea that they are mobilised medially.[18] The nature of the medium then influences how constituencies are brought into existence. The stricter dictionary definition points to the geographical shaping of traditional constituencies: these are made up of people who inhabit one district and share one political representative. They form a community, a group brought together over time by a shared location (neighborhood, church, school), and commitments. However, that notion of constituency is not geared to a world in which voters' communities and political interests

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[17] *Oxford English Dictionary* () 'constituency': Online edition, 2018.
[18] Frans Willem Korsten, 'Online Vitriol's Historical Antecedents: From Resisting Divine Order, via Communities, Constituencies, Platforms and Forums to Symptoms of Neo-Liberal Insurgencies' in Sara Polak and Daniel Trottier, eds. *Online Vitriol: Violence and Advocacy in Transformation* (Amsterdam University Press, forthcoming).

are often unrelated to their locality or the place in which they are registered. The looser definition draws attention to the fact that a constituency is united around a particular interest.

In his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Jürgen Habermas argued that in a democratic society the bourgeoisie in communities (and society more broadly) can and should engage in reasonable political debate and dialogue in the public sphere, so as to arrive at a consensus that is acceptable for all members of the community or society.[19] As defined for Habermas, the public sphere is the realm of social life in which public opinion can be formed. The idea of a public sphere entails citizens behaving as a public body as they confer unrestrictedly on matters of general interest. Public opinion, according to Habermas, can be forged when a reasoning public is presupposed. An urgent question that as yet remains unanswered is what happens with public opinion now that the "reasoning public", and the setting in which the reasoning happens, has radically changed, as an effect of the media through which citizens reason in public. Habermas himself has briefly considered this issue in a recent interview with the Spanish newspaper *El País*. He argues that the Internet and social media have transformed all of us, from readers, into potential authors:

> From the time the printed page was invented, turning everyone into a potential reader, it took centuries until the entire population could read. Internet is turning us all into potential authors and it's only a couple of decades old. Perhaps with time we will learn to manage the social networks in a civilized manner. [20]

Although Habermas notes in the same breath that 'Trump is permanently destroying [the political and cultural] level [of his country]', he remains hopeful about the democratic potential of collective 'potential authorship' in the long term. There are indeed spaces on the Internet where classical forms of sharing or 'commons' are enacted, often in cooperative form. But particularly the realm of social networks — arguably misleadingly dubbed 'social' by their very commercial owners — seems hardly geared to take on a reinforcing role in facilitating a structure for the reasoning public in which to arrive at public opinion through citizens' potential authorship.

So far, 'social' media rather seem to have a fragmenting and divisive role in this process, even perhaps eclipsing a functioning public sphere. Trump's Twitter politics are a case in point, not of a hopeful possibility in the future, but of the current 'state of the art' in tapping into citizens' and

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[19] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence trans, MIT Press, 1991) [trans of: *Strukturwandel der Offentlichkeit* (first published in 1962)].

[20] Borja Hermoso, 'Jürgen Habermas: "For God's sake, spare us governing philosophers!"', *El País* (online), 25 May 2018 <https://elpais.com/elpais/2018/05/07/inenglish/1525683618_145760.html>.

supporters' potential for authorship, and employing them to political advantage. Obama, on the other hand, in his interview with Remnick noted that at present 'everything is true and nothing is true', and thereby implicitly deplored the loss of Habermas' ideal of a collective consensus achieved through reasonable public debate supported by large trustworthy media. Habermas' ideal was always already in a sense nostalgic for a perhaps romanticised past (or future) in which well-educated and reasonable people openly discuss politics in a public setting, but in the present context something else seems to be going on.

In 21st century democratic societies, communities are no longer necessarily tied to location, and little public space remains part of everyday sociality. Town squares or commons where reasonable discussion leads to political consensus in between extreme standpoints has become an unattainable ideal. Communities exist online as well as offline, and are increasingly loosely bound together — increasingly independent of geographical location. It is a cliché to say that this is a result of increased mobility, and the virtual mobility that the Web 2.0 and the ubiquity of smartphones has brought. However, one important effect is that many communities, particularly online can more easily than before be mobilised around political issues, at unprecedented speed. Perhaps the clearest example of this effect in general is the tool developed by the Dutch right-wing news website and discussion platform GeenStijl.[21] The site developed a tool through which users could upload their signature, in order to sign online a petition to request a national referendum about a trade agreement between the Netherlands and Ukraine. The signature tool was very easy to use, and there was a great deal of resistance to the deal among GeenStijl's readers and community members, who collectively managed to force the Dutch government to hold a national referendum which did indeed reject the trade deal (and which barely made the minimum bar for political legitimacy, because there was relatively little interest in the issue outside of the GeenStijl community).[22]

As noted, on Twitter a hashtag can draw up a constituency in a matter of days, but the same effect can be achieved through addressing preexisting online communities regarding a movement for a political cause. Large clusters of members now considered part of the American 'Alt-Right', a clear constituency which supported Trump's election, initially were online communities of gamers or comics fans, who would socialise on platforms such as 4Chan. Thus, a constituency (including for example, #blacklivesmatter, #alllivesmatter, #oscarssowhite, #metoo, #MAGA) can be built on online communities which can be flipped into constituencies, or on pre-existing discontent about an issue, but in any case, the hashtag, or more broadly, the social media hype, almost instantly creates it.

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[21] GeenStijl <www.geenstijl.nl> (literally 'No Style', in Dutch with a pun on 'Bad Form').
[22] Frank Hendriks, Koen van der Krieken and Charlotte Wagenaar, *Democratische zegen of vloek?: aantekeningen bij het referendum* (Amsterdam University Press, 2017).

As the range of examples of hashtags that have generated constituencies suggest, this mechanism is by no means specific to Donald Trump or Twitter. Rather, if the agency of newly developed media technology (be it the printing press in the seventeenth century or Web 2.0 social media now) is included in the understanding of constituencies, it is no surprise that social media allow for new processes and speed of their formation. This acceleration also influences the quality and sway of constituencies, and it is clear that many agents and platforms continue to develop their tactics in this respect. Some examples of algorithmic possibilities that can help to shape constituencies are Facebook's 'likes', often used to decry gruesome examples of social injustice of animal abuse. While such practices are commonly dubbed 'clicktivism' or 'slacktivism' — more helpful to Facebook's business model than to abused animals — at the other end of the spectrum are movements like Trolls for Trump — a spontaneous, but well-organised online Troll army, which evolved during Trump's presidential campaign. Members would, as one of its leaders, Mike Cernovich explained in an interview with *The New Yorker*, decide on a specific hashtag, each day of the campaign (for example, #hillarysucks, #hillarysterrorists) and then collectively use it during a limited time period, so as to make it trending.[23] Trending hashtags appear on all users' sidebar and are thus picked up by a much larger group of Twitter users, and then, often, by other media.

This adoption of Twitter hypes by other media happens in part because Twitter tends to be regarded by other media as a kind of 'vox populi' in the age of social media — an easily accessible way of gauging public opinion.[24] In the field of digital media studies it is now well known that the romantic vision of social media as able to give a voice to a broader range of people implicit in such assumptions is in need of further nuancing. While it no doubt has that effects, assuming or suggesting that one or two often liked or retweeted tweets on an issue represent public opinion on that issue — a practice many news outlets engage in — is naïve and plays into the hands of online constituencies such as 'Trolls for Trump', which operate with a high awareness of the algorithmic dynamics of specific platforms, and consciousness of the marketing dimensions of political organising.[25]

Cartoon politics in a social media paradigm

As Jacob Clifton signals, the sudden rise of a candidate that political analysts had not taken seriously, requires attention to the specific aesthetics that have evolved in the context of the new media ecosystem: 'We're conditioned to distance ourselves from Reddit dorks, anime-avatar trolls, and

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[23] Andrew Marantz, 'Trolls for Trump: Meet Mike Cernovich, the meme mastermind of the alt-right', *The New Yorker* (online), 31 October 2016 <www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/31/trolls-for-trump>.

[24] Roger Kimball (ed), *Vox Populi: The Perils & Promises of Populism* (Encounter Books, 2017).

[25] Marantz, above n 23.

suddenly Nazi-identifying furries, and so they stay invisible — until they aren't.'[26] Clifton suggests that the Alt-Right is made up at least in part of communities of politically detached people. While there are ideologically committed neo-Nazis in the Alt-Right, there is also a strong community of political newbies, who are in it for the comical entertainment ('for lulz' in social media parlance). This conclusion is supported by research in digital media studies and sociology. [27] These researchers do attend to the platforms, communities and networks that Clifton argues have not been properly seen and understood before Trump's election. Nonetheless, it is true that the culture, aesthetics, and media logic of the Alt-Right so far lacks exposure and remains difficult to read, even when networks have to some extent been mapped.

This is where the author sees a task for cultural and literary analysis. Clifton argues that the most influential part of Trump's electorate consists of people who relish Trump's slapstick resistance to the dominant order. This would indicate that the previously invisible communities of 'Reddit dorks' have grown abruptly, or seemingly abruptly, into a constituency of 'suddenly Nazi-identifying furries', through a specific sensibility which is cartoonesque.

Politicians have traditionally solely been *objects* of political cartoons. Such cartoons follow a generic logic: characters appear as caricatures and a brief text interacts with an image, in which those invested with political power are usually ridiculed. A form of humour that would usually 'punch up' to authority, being mocked or criticised through political cartoons could be seen as the price political leaders had to pay for their influence, and conversely, making political cartoons could be seen as a form of speaking truth to power. With the rise of social media some politicians have managed to transform their objecthood into subject status, or something akin to that. Trump, for instance, successfully employs cartoon logic through, and inspired by, his own and supporters' use of social media.

As noted, the change in the media ecosystem has overhauled the classical triad of politicians who send messages, the press who critically investigates and disseminates them through mass media, and the general public who receives them. The changed shape and role of the political cartoon is, at least in Trump's case, a driving element of that transformation. The new ecosystem consists of a range of online platforms with specific relationships: news forums (Breitbart, Infowars) and message boards (4Chan, Instagram) feed circulation platforms (Twitter, Facebook). While classical political cartoons also of course continue to exist, and find new audiences through social media, there is a huge new amateur culture of producing 'memes', 'digital images […] created with

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[26] Jacob Clifton, *The Downfall Of YouTube's Biggest Star Is A Symptom Of A Bigger Illness* (16 February 2017) Buzzfeed <www.buzzfeed.com/jacobclifton/pewdiepie-isnt-a-monster-hes-someone-you-know?utm_term=.ggmgZJYM5D#.fcQBgM89Vm>.

[27] David Neiwert, *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump* (Verso Books, 2017) 256.

awareness of each other, and circulated, imitated, and transformed via the Internet by many users'.[28]

Most memes, like cartoons, are image-text hybrids and are intended to achieve a similar response.

Users of image boards like 4Chan — originally an online community of comics fans — create and post

memes, which then find their way to circulation platforms such as Reddit and Twitter.[29]

Trump's tweets are often worthy of cartoon treatment — that is, they almost seem to invite

the creation of specific political cartoons or memes. For example, on 3 January 2018, Trump tweeted:

> North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the 'Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times.' Will
> someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear
> Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works![30]

This immediately gave rise to cartoons such as this one by cartoon artist Benjamin Kikkert:[31]

As one can see, the cartoonist visualised the latter part of the tweet 'I too have a Nuclear Button, but

it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his'. The strength of the cartoon lies, in fact, in that it

adds so little to Trump's actual words. It is a 'clean' translation of the words into an image. While this

says something about the artist's minimalist style, it also reveals a crucial attribute of a large

proportion of Trump's tweets: they all but dictate specific political cartoons or memes, and these are

duly produced, not just by professional cartoonists like Kikkert, but at a much higher rate (and lower

quality) by amateur meme makers. For instance, when Trump tweeted to qualify himself as 'a very

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[28] Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (MIT Press, 2013).

[29] Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Zero Books, 2017) 68.

[30] Donald J Trump (@realDonaldTrump), (2 January 2018, 4.49 pm) Twitter <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/948355557022420992>.

[31] © Benjamin Kikkert, may be reproduced by courtesy of the maker.

stable genius',[32] this set off a wave of creativity in the production of cartoonish memes, particularly around the iconic image of cartoon character Wile E Coyote, for instance:[33]
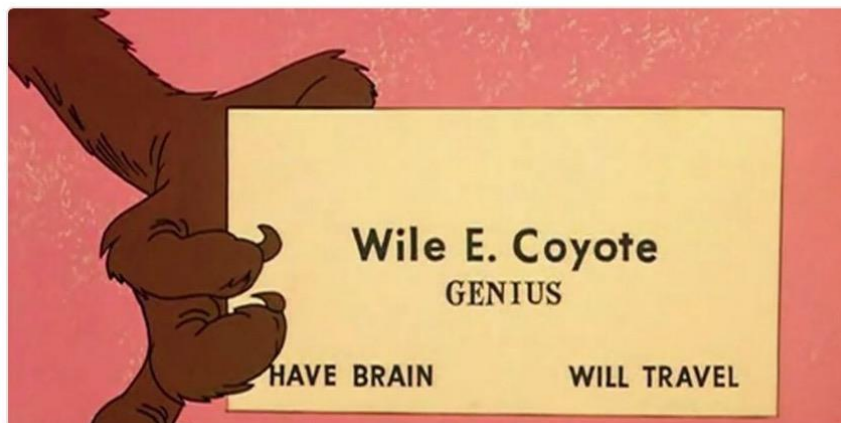
Although these were to some extent critical of the president, they were so in jest, and they fitted perfectly the image of a president who is in the first place a champion at originating 'lulz'. Opponents as well as supporters created and spread memes like this one, which quickly went viral, while mostly representing Trump both as object of admiration and ridicule. While this is not perhaps the most hagiographic example, it shows the ironic style of many meme makers who do support Trump, potentially even more as his tweets and actions become more absurd and outrageous. In this way, many of Trump's Twitter expressions feed the image boards and other meme making and circulation platforms, making his continual 'campaign' interactive, decentralized, and 'Do-It-Yourself'.

At the same time, the cycle goes the other way as well. For example on 2 July 2017 Trump tweeted a video clip of a boxing game in which he beat an opponent whose head was substituted by the CNN logo to the ground, making the amateur animated GIF world famous.[34] Trump said he did not know where the clip came from, but it must have been from Reddit, where its original maker quickly removed it — too late for the deletion to have any real impact.[35] So, Trump successfully instigates the production of memes through his tweets and other media performances, but he also lends enormous momentum to some of these artefacts by retweeting them, which in turn makes them worthy of treatment as news by media outlets around the world.

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[32] Donald J Trump (@realDonaldTrump), (6 June 2018, 4.30 am) Twitter <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/949619270631256064>.
[33] *Very Stable Genius — Wile E Coyote* (8 January 2018) Know Your Meme <http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1330503-very-stable-genius>.
[34] Donald J Trump (@realDonaldTrump), (2 July 2017, 6:21 am) Twitter <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/881503147168071680>.
[35] Andrew Kaczynski, 'How CNN found the Reddit user behind the Trump wrestling GIF', *CNN* (online), 5 July 2017 <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/04/politics/kfile-reddit-user-trump-tweet/index.html>

The same dynamic characterises the official and semi-official campaign and public relations machine that surrounds Trump. On 11 September 2016, for instance, Donald Jr shared this image on Instagram, depicting the presumable heroes in an imaginary action movie, with Trump as leader.[36] Trump's backers on feeder platforms like 4Chan produced such memes; his entourage made them go viral through circulation platforms such as Instagram.

Thus 'President Trump' was conjured up during the campaign as a collectively produced persona, which became attractive to online communities. The 'Deplorables' image, with a pun on the film title *The Expendables* (2010), re-appropriates Clinton's dismissive epithet 'deplorables' into a badge of honor.[37] The insertion of the cartoon frog, and the amateurish photoshopping of the faces show a crude yet ironic sensibility characteristic of Trump's image production in a sense that goes far beyond his individual performance. Trump of course does not personally make such images, they are produced by amateur meme makers and picked up and disseminated by the campaign — in this case by one of its informal exponents, in the person of Donald Trump Jr. Nevertheless, the image is a campaign product that does give a sense of how the image production and dissemination machine operates.

One striking element of this campaign meme is the appearance of a cartoon character, Pepe the Frog. Pepe is originally the main character in a web comic by Matt Furie, but has been 'stolen' and re-appropriated to become a white supremacist meme.[38] Pepe, a perpetually stoned, overweight

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[36] Donald Trump Jr (@donaldjtrumpjr), (11 September 2016) Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/p/BKMtdN5Bam5/?hl=nl&taken-by=donaldjtrumpjr>.

[37] Marina Fang, *Hillary Clinton: Calling Trump Supporters 'Deplorables' Handed Him 'A Political Gift'* (12 September 2017) Huffington Post <www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/clinton-trump-deplorables-2016-election_us_59b53bc2e4b0354e44126979>.

[38] Adam Serwer, 'It's Not Easy Being Meme: How artist Matt Furie feels about his creation, Pepe the Frog, becoming a favored symbol of white nationalists and Trump supporters', *The Atlantic* (online), 13 September 2016 <www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/09/its-not-easy-being-green/499892/>.

anthropomorphic male frog, originally portrayed with his pants down, urinating and saying 'feels good man' is often associated or directly identified with Trump.[39] This is done in an ironic, yet loving, fashion. The process of re-appropriating an existing cartoon character against the will of its maker, to represent an alter ego of a politician campaigning for president, mimics and symbolises the way in which online communities of users have turned into constituencies. While there is a great deal of debate about the term 'Alt-Right', and various critics have argued that it is a whitewashed and politically more acceptable term for neo-Nazi,[40] the reference to the Alt key on computer keyboards does capture the sense that this is a loose collective of originally online communities. Moreover the implication that 'Alt' is shorthand for 'alternative', and thus refers to a new, and politically neophyte group on the right of the political spectrum, does reflect the relatively recent change from community to constituency, as well as the self-conscious presentation of the Alt-Right.

Cartoon physics and cartoon logic in politics

As noted, digital media studies has, from the beginning, been engaged in developing and adapting the necessary vocabulary to describe the avalanche of novel cultural and aesthetic possibilities and logics that have evolved as part of the new media ecology.[41] One crucial concept to understand how Trump generates political support, and manages to turn communities into constituencies, is the somewhat forgotten notion of 'cartoon physics'.[42] Cartoon physics was first coined as a literary term in the 1980s, and refers to the jocular system of laws of physics that supersede real world physics. For instance, the effect that a cartoon character can run off a cliff and only starts falling after noticing what he has done, is caused by cartoon physics. Other examples include the effect that when someone falls from a great height or crashes into a wall, they will usually crash right through the surface, leaving a hole in the shape of their silhouette. The fact that cartoon characters do not usually die of such incidents is similarly part and parcel of the different logic and law system they inhabit.

The concept was developed primarily to describe animated cartoons, or to address the laws guiding the suggested movements in sequential images that represent temporality spatially.[43] Although cartoon physics can as a concept also be applied to single-frame political cartoons that

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[39] Tom Pollard, 'Alt-Right Transgressions in the Age of Trump' (2018) 17 *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 76.

[40] Neiwert, above n 27, 15–17.

[41] Eg, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (MIT Press, 1999); Stephen Ramsay, *Reading Machines: Towards an Algorithmic Criticism* (University of Illinois Press, 2011).

[42] Scott Bukatman, 'Some Observations Pertaining to Cartoon Physics; or, The Cartoon Cat in the Machine' in Karen Beckman (ed), *Animating Film Theory* (Duke University Press, 2014): 301.

[43] This is a reference to Scott McCloud's famous definition of comics in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (William Morrow, 1994): 9.

suggest movement which does not observe the laws of physics in the real world, the animation discourse it opens up is also relevant to the discussion of memes on social media. After all, many memes are not just a single political cartoon-like image-text hybrid; many are themselves animated gifs or other brief clips of video, such as the Trump vs CNN animated gif discussed previously. The visual rhetoric of a clip like that, in which CNN is unsubtly personified by pasting its logo over the face of Trump's victim, suggests a cartoon-physical world in which Trump can beat down one of the country's largest media networks. Although this is of course a metaphor, the literal nature of the beating down is what makes this representation cartoonesque.

Cartoons represent narrative visually, and their ways of representing the passage of time in space have long carried a specific aesthetic. This aesthetic is not just continued in webcomics or online political cartoons, memes or animation, but acquires a new political potential in a context in which all are potential authors. One important aspect of the shocking nature of the CNN gif is that it pairs extreme amateurishness with extreme exposure. The very crudeness both heightens the clip's impact and makes it more shocking that something so silly would have such enormous reach. The maker's attempt to quickly withdraw the clip suggests that he too was shocked. At the same time, both the clip and the ensuing fallout across other media are funny precisely because the clip is supremely silly and crude, and yet achieves such massive effect. This dynamic — something small but stupid has grotesque reverberations — is suspiciously similar to the way in which things usually spin out of control in cartoons.

For Trump, cartoon physics offer a vehicle to transform the political logic in which he cannot be taken seriously into a cartoon logic in which his cartoonish behavior and expressions only help him, as long as he holds the attention. Cartoon physics thus allow for a new political logic. Whereas the cartoonesque formerly aimed at making politicians ridiculous, now the ridiculous acquires serious political impact. A fictional universe which revolves around experimenting with this new paradigm in which the ridiculous, mediated by innovative technology, acquires tangible political sway, is the 2013 episode 'The Waldo Moment'. Taken from the series *Black Mirror* (Netflix), 'The Waldo Moment' proved to be eerily close to current reality: the episode portrays a cartoon character 'Waldo', who participates in, and nearly wins an election.[44] Waldo is animated from behind the scenes by an actor, but he is a persona in and of himself, which survives as such even when played by another actor. Waldo's constant recourse is to attack and mock the 'real' politicians in the election, aiming purely at their presentation as politicians, and their positioning as authentic. He has no aims, ideals, or concrete policy plans himself, but nonetheless, as an entertainer who is perceived as unmasking the

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[44] *Black Mirror* (Directed by Bryn Higgins, Netflix, 2013) season 2, episode 3: 'The Waldo Moment'.

charade of politicians, he is the second most popular candidate, and at the same time the only real, openly content-free, entertainer (in the sense that he is nothing else and performs professionally).

Trump, of course, is not literally a cartoon character, but he seems to inhabit a universe that is governed by its laws. The recurring suggestion is that nothing he does or says can really harm him, like the cartoon cat who cannot die. This is a cartoonesque hyperreality enabled by social media. Translated to the extradiegetic reality of political communication this becomes a cartoon logic that short-circuits traditional content-driven and consensus-seeking political communication. Instead, the logic enables the enjoyment of cartoon violence, and this response is rhetorically excused by the suggestion that there is no real world impact — that it is all just a game, with the kind of teenage boy innocence that characterises cartoons. While this makes sense as a seemingly apolitical response to the perceived insincerity of conventional politicians, it is in Trump's case effectively appropriated by white supremacist and nativist ideologues (in Waldo's case it never reaches the stage at which he acquires any kind of political content, although the explicit suggestion is that it could). Trump's Twitter use and his supporters' social-media practices thus form an exemplary case study to gauge how the political landscape is overhauled by cartoon physics in a new media ecology.
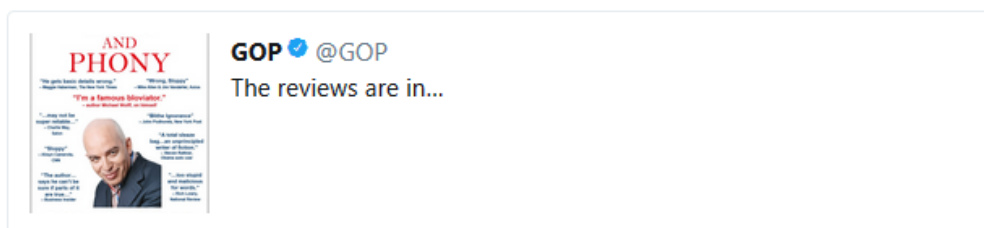
Mr. Wolf got comments from Sloppy Steve Bunnon, gaining attention:
Steve learned the hard way not to leak to wolves who are prone to invention.

The images above represent an example of the social media dynamic, driven by cartoon logic, in which Donald Trump is produced as the Twitter President. On the left hand is Trump's retweet of a Republican Party-produced meme, a mock cover of Michael Wolff's *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House*, dubbing the controversial book *Liar and Phony*.[45] Wolff's book contains a range of embarrassing and incriminating revelations about Trump's White House, the President, and many of his staff, including Trump's son Donald Jr, whom former campaign manager and chief strategist Steve Bannon accuses of 'treasonous' meetings with the Russians in an interview with Wolff. It is worth noting the mere fact that the leadership of the Republican Party would make and disseminate such a mock cover of a journalistic book in the first place. The Party seems to have adopted some of the strategies that also marked Trump's campaign communication, as shown above. Rather than disowning Wolff's narratives in words — for instance through quoting negative reviews — the GOP Twitter communication management has chosen a text-image hybrid parodying the original, much

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[45] Michael Wolff, *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House* (Henry Holt, 2018); GOP (@GOP), (5 January 2018, 1.40 pm) Twitter <https://twitter.com/GOP/status/949395088735723520>.

like the 'Deplorables' 'film poster'.

As noted, in this setting, Trump is no longer an object of the meme: the Grand Old Party produces and digitally disseminates them in interaction with supporters, in order to shield the president. Trump in response added the megaphone of his own Twitter account with nearly 50 million followers. He also added his own cartoonish and cartoon-inspiring voice. His jeer that 'Sloppy Steve' was 'dumped like a dog' prompted the production of numerous cartoonesque viral memes, imagining 'Sloppy Steve', often either combining a caricature of Steve Bannon with a Sloppy Joe burger, or involving a cartoon image of a dog falling or being dumped.[46] The image above by pro-Trump cartoon artist Timothy Lim, shows an obese, food-obsessed, and urine-leaking dog with Steve Bannon's face, who has been taken in by 'Mr Wolf'.[47] It is an example of how cartoon artists and meme makers in a broader sense employ the laws of physics of cartoon universes to visualise Trump's tweet and its implications, and to extend the mockery of Steve Bannon, which relies heavily, both in Trump's original epithet, and in Lim's visualisation on the association between Bannon's disloyalty and leaking urine and excrement.

The publication of *Fire and Fury*, the fall into disgrace of Steve Bannon, and Trump's comments and tweets about these events have of course given rise to millions of other responses, both online and offline. These three images — the GOP spoof cover *Liar and Phony*, Trump's retweet of the same, combined with his own textually suggested cartoon physics, inviting cartoons and memes in response, and Lim's cartoon which offers yet another spoof cover, as well as a parable-like reworking of Trump's tweet — together show a communication dynamic that could be described as digitally native. It could only work in the way it does within a social media ecosystem. Through its incorporation of the creative energy and products of amateur and professional cartoonists and meme artists, it changes online communities of aficionados of comics art in different (digital) forms into a political 'Alt-Right' constituency.

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[46] Donald J Trump (@realDonaldTrump), (5 January 2018, 8.32 pm) Twitter
<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/949498795074736129>.
[47] Donald J Thump (@POTUSThump), (4 January 2018, 11.09 pm) Twitter
<https://twitter.com/POTUSThump/status/949175939723943937> (the author of the Twitter account is Timothy Lin).