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Polak, S.A.; Zwetsloot, A.J.A.

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"And then I see the disinfectant where it knocks it out in a minute": Donald Trump as patient zero and superspreader of Covid-19 cartoon logic

Sara Polak ⓘ and Anne Zwetsloot ⓘ

Centre for the Arts in Society, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

In Donald Trump's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and particularly around his own bout with the disease, the inter-section of "traditional" themes and tropes – i.e. the representation and narration of communicable disease, presidential image-making, and the visual language of play and politics – come together in novel manners. We will argue that Trump's employment of *cartoon logic* relies on his grotesquely exaggerated treatment of pre-existing norms, which generates speculation, innuendo, and in reaction an often cartoonesque meme production. Through an investigation of three case studies – the rumour that Trump would return into public view revealing a Superman shirt, Trump's slapdash suggestion that imbibing disinfectant might cure Covid-19, and his treatment of face masks – we arrive at the conclusion that cartoon logic can generate online political constituencies. The memes' visual rhetoric moves gradually from cartoonesque, narrative, and directly related to Trump's body and person (as in the case of the Superman rumour), to more photographic and more directed at broader consumer behaviour, though still decidedly absurd (as in the case of the disinfectant claim), to acutely and directly politicising constituents' everyday behaviour (as in the case of Trump's masking and unmasking claims).

Introduction

In the first week of October 2020, during the final weeks of the presidential election campaign, the world news was dominated by reports of and speculations about Donald Trump's bout with Covid-19. The media were so swamped with news reports, mostly reporting very little actual new information or development, that many believed Trump did not have Covid, but used it as a pretext to monopolise media attention (Alba 2020). The wild rumours about Trump's Covid-19 story culminated on October 10 in the "leaked" story that he had planned to rip open his dress shirt to reveal a Superman shirt upon leaving Walter Reed hospital (Karni and Haberman 2020). Trump's infection with Covid-

CONTACT Sara Polak ✉ s.a.polak@hum.leidenuniv.nl

19, ensuing illness, and recovery, did indeed dominate a series of news cycles in the US and around the world, and, as importantly, on social media. There, we will contend, the intersection of "traditional" themes and tropes, such as a) the representation and narration of communicable disease, b) presidential image-making, and c) the visual language of play and politics, come together in novel as well as culturally and politically impactful manners.

By the time Trump contracted Covid-19, he had accrued a long track record of framing viral disease as a malign and threatening force, usually in the shape of foreign countries and racial others. In the previous months, while the Covid-19 pandemic hit the United States harder than any other country – arguably because many Americans had relatively little access to healthcare or sick leave – Trump held onto his rhetorical strategy of labelling Covid-19 "the Chinese virus." However, he simultaneously adopted a course of understating its impact, even selling it as a "hoax," rather than overstating the threat to the American population (as he has done in the past, e.g. with regard to the Ebola virus). The White House had rejected any serious observation of Covid-19 measures as a profoundly partisan point of principle, after which a significant percentage of White House staff contracted the virus (Lipton et al. 2020; Buchanan et al. 2020).

During the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, conversely, a great deal of Trump's white supremacist rhetoric, on Twitter and elsewhere, was legitimated and supported by the popular belief that there was indeed an army of viral contaminants lurking outside the borders of the United States. During that epidemic, Trump bought into the most dramatic version of the epidemic's outbreak narrative, described by Priscilla Wald as "an account of an outbreak – in its most archetypal and apocalyptic incarnation" (Becker, de Bruin-Molé, and Polak 2021, xiv). Some of Trump's early rhetoric about "the Chinese virus" followed the same grotesque and racist pattern, alongside his administration's efforts to play down the pandemic's domestic effect.[1] However, once Trump himself had fallen ill, his response shifted into another long-standing habit of communication about presidential health.

There is a long tradition among US American presidents to lie about, obscure, and underemphasise diseases and disabilities they are dealing with, and pass as virile, strong, and non-disabled. Franklin D. Roosevelt famously had a "gentlemen's agreement" with the press that they would not photograph him in his wheelchair – a habit that press photographers kept to and self-policed. Dwight D. Eisenhower's staff initially passed off his heart attack in 1955 as "a digestive upset" (Gilbert 2008). John F. Kennedy remains in cultural memory the epitome of white, blonde, blue-eyed, upright able-bodiedness, the teleological end station of eugenic progress, though, in reality, he suffered from a wide array of painful and impairing health issues (McDermott 2007, 118).

As Brune and Wilson argue in *Disability and Passing* (2013), passing as able-bodied or healthy is hardly ever something the passing subject does entirely autonomously or independently. Instead, it is a social mechanism necessitated

and facilitated by the environment and the culture the person inhabits. Able-bodiedness is a culturally constructed concept enforced through cultural narratives of virile national bodies. As such, this mechanism, naturally, also works for presidents, who are, among other things, objects onto which many of the needs and ideologies of their beholders are projected and who are commonly surrounded by staff specifically employed to manage the president's public relations, image, and appearances in every sense of the word. Indeed, presidential physicians in all of the cases cited here were, to some extent, by necessity spin doctors as well as medical doctors (Sontag, 2002). By 2020, the assumption that practically anything Donald Trump or his White House communicated was as likely to be untrue as anything else was deeply ingrained. Still, it is essential to recognise that on the particular topic of presidential health, dissembling (and audiences simply seeing what they wanted to see) had been the norm long before Donald Trump had begun weaponising "fake news" and "alternative facts." Trump's behaviour in this particular area was hardly new, although he did mediatise his own bout of Covid-19 in a novel way, in synchrony with the changed media ecosystem.

In the 2010s, Donald Trump, armed with ample experience in capturing attention on television, came into his own as a social media user. Twitter became his platform of choice, which made sense because, as a platform, Twitter primarily supported the circulation of short messages (the kind Trump tended to send). Moreover, many journalists and other voices in the media and public debate converged there, so it also became a source of news for other media outlets. Simultaneously, Trump's attachment to Twitter in particular, has ensured that it remained a key platform for anyone following American politics. A key aspect of his style on Twitter was that his tweets were usually textual, and while often crude, they were also suggestive instead of indicating anything specific. As a result, Trump's tweets often marshalled an avalanche of responses, often in the form of memes, made by both sympathisers and detractors, though both can in a sense be equally affective (and affecting) responses. A case in point is the famous "Despite the constant negative press covfefe" tweet of 31 May 2017 (Figure 1): this was clearly an error, which Trump first deleted upon discovery and then reinstated once he saw its positive potential to generate – possibly viral – meme responses.

The metaphor of virality has become a cliché in this context because of its often gratuitous overuse: indeed, the very measure of success for social media posts is whether they manage to "go viral" in their spread across media platforms and the world. Donald Trump has, throughout his career, managed to "go viral" in that metaphorical sense, especially during his tenure from March 2009 to January 2021 as an active Twitter user under the handle @realdonaldtrump. This account eventually accrued 88.7 million followers at the time of the account's suspension, and Trump's average number of tweets per day leapt into the 30s in the final year of his Twitter presence. From this position, we
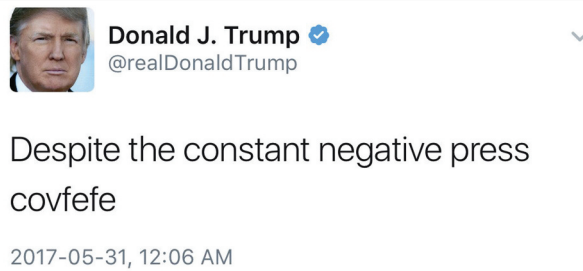
Despite the constant negative press
covfefe

2017-05-31, 12:06 AM

Figure 1. Donald Trump's original Covfefe tweet. Source: https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2018/05/31/covfefe-one-year-anniverary-donald-trumps-confusing-tweet/659414002. (Accessed 15 August 2021).

argue, Trump became both a metaphorical Patient Zero, or index case – a starting point and generator, at least in the US context – of a wide range of Covid-related internet memes (even if he did not personally invent them) and, quite literally, a super-spreader of the disease.

Trump's tweets, but also his statements in speeches and interviews, were going extremely viral, and were, though textual, often obviously fodder for visual meme-treatment by supporters and detractors across the globe and the internet. This type of textual presidential communication, which somehow invites responses that are not purely textual but include visual components, particularly responses that espouse the visual language of cartoons and internet memes, seems to be a key ingredient to Trump's success in holding public attention. Memes are "digital images . . . created with awareness of each other, and circulated, imitated, and transformed via the internet by many users" (Shifman 2013, 8). Memes are usually images that are somehow outrageous, and they act as units for carrying cultural ideas, symbols, or practices. Although it is not always the case that memes rely on the ironic interaction between text and image, many do.

Although many memes are not based on cartoon images, many of the memes that respond to Trump's words can be understood as part of a broader "cartoon logic" that Trump employed on social media from the start, even if they are not cartoonesque in form. Cartoon logic is a concept that Polak has previously developed in an article (Polak 2018): it suggests a metaphorical cartoon universe in which the ridiculous is a driving force; it generates imagery that radically distorts and aesthetically restyles reality to fit this universe; it replaces interest in facts with comic appeal; and it encourages politicians to generate, invite, and disseminate cartoons and memes. A key point here is that Trump often acts as if he inhabits a world in which not the real world's laws of nature, but the laws of a cartoon world apply. A related and relevant concept from animation studies is "cartoon physics," that is, the effect

whereby in a comics or animation world, different natural laws apply, such as the fact that when suspended in the air, a character will only start to fall, once they have looked down, and registered their own mistake (Bukatman 2014, 302). A cat that crashes through a wall, in a world where cartoon physics apply, will leave a cat-shaped hole; no cartoon character dies, despite the most outrageous and outlandish accidents and abuses; and Lucky Luke shoots faster than his shadow. This logic does not work along the same lines as the traditional logic of public communication – consistency, for instance, is of no importance. Instead, Trump, in his use of cartoon logic, employs any means necessary to attract attention and interaction, most often by: 1) posing as a cartoon character to whom the laws of nature do not apply (Polak 2018, 17) and 2) by offering content that invites meme production. The function of cartoon logic is to draw consumers/citizens into an entertaining world (funny, simple, cruelty is admissible because it is not real) and elicit responses that draw the responder in regardless of their political views. Thus, even "anti-Trump" memes, made and circulated in response to his tweets, can generate attention for him that is ultimately positive because it means that his messaging holds the news cycles.

The meme response to Trump's public expressions – often in tweets, but also in interviews, leaked news clips, or press conferences – is typically more "for lulz" (i.e. to excite easy laughter) than particularly ideologically invested. However, what can give the trade in memes significant political impact is that it has in recent years become one of the most readily available and potentially influential modes of interaction, and thus of generating participation (which can easily segue into forms of political participation, less in the traditional sense than in the broader sense of setting patterns of in- and exclusion). In *Make America Meme Again*, Heather Woods and Leslie Hahner make the case that memes should be taken seriously as "rhetorical images that are designed to move audiences and ultimately shape the larger culture" and as "efficient as images that can quickly disseminate a political agenda" (2019, 6–7). While this is undoubtedly the case, the most common quality of memes is that they tend to at least posture as apolitical or nihilist (Philips and Milner 2017, 13). Arguably, the prosumer culture, in which users are simultaneously consumers and producers of social media content, has overhauled political communication. In the traditional triangle of political communication, politicians say and do things; the media critically report about them; and, in response, citizens determine their voting behaviour. This triangle no longer works if citizens become users who themselves create content and are inundated with messages from their political representatives.

In this article, we argue that, while Trump's presentation as having heroically "overcome" Covid-19 fits into a long tradition of the masculine, non-disabled president who stands ready to "fight" the virus, his use of cartoon logic simultaneously enabled him to intensify and opportunistically caricature this tradition as he literalised metaphors into a cartoon world. Simultaneously, his virality on

the internet directly impacts the real world while both ridiculing and breaking through existing societal norms. We do so by close-reading meme responses to three Covid-related statements made by Trump. Firstly, we will analyse memes that respond to the rumour that Trump had wanted to reveal himself as Superman after leaving the hospital. Secondly, we look at memes responding to Trump's statement about "bringing into the body" a type of disinfectant to protect oneself against Covid-19. Lastly, we study a selection of memes regarding Trump's responses to wearing masks, which the CDC has argued is an effective protective measure in the fight against Covid-19. In so doing, we establish two trends that run like threads through the three sets of case studies. First, a thematic shift from individualistic and exceptionalist (as in the Superman memes) to a more general and reflective collective experience (as in the mask memes). Second, a shift in form, from highly cartooned (i.e. drawn or digitally created and/or animated, cartoonesque in style, exaggeration of proportions) to photographic images. These different strands reveal a spectrum from cartoon logic, closely tied to Trump's cartoonesque persona, and couched in the visual language of a cartoon universe, to a concrete, real-world public sphere, visually represented as photographic, and characterised by groups of constituents willing to endanger themselves to follow the leader.

Trump as Superman

While many expected Trump's first public appearance, five days after he was released from the hospital, to be front-page news, American media primarily focused on the superman rumour (Haring 2020). He did not wear a superman shirt, or tweet about it, but as soon as the story was out as a rumour, social media users, as well as traditional media, went wild and triggered a significant memetic response.

As mentioned, keeping up the appearance of being young, virile, and able-bodied is a longstanding tradition in American politics, one that Trump has utilised throughout both his presidential elections, despite being neither young nor adhering to normative perceptions of athleticism. Before his hospitalisation, Trump continually attacked and undermined Joe Biden based on his age, possible age-related ailments, and soundness of mind. In an interview at Fox News Sunday, Trump stated: "Biden can't put two sentences together. They wheel him out. He goes up – he repeats – they ask him questions. He reads a teleprompter and then he goes back into his basement" (Thiessen 2020). Statements like these and Trump's nickname for Biden, "Sleepy Joe," not only call Biden's competence into question but also infrahumanise him, thereby implying that his opinions and feelings can be disregarded and that he is lower in the hierarchy of human worth than Trump himself. Trump seems to imply that Biden is not a leader but instead a dis/abled person, wheeled out whenever the leftist "deep state" deems it practical, or a machine, handled and

programmed to give specific answers. Thus, Biden is portrayed as the opposite of the young, virile, and able-bodied American, an image that Trump aims to use for himself.

When Trump himself became infected with Covid-19, one might have expected him to acknowledge the hypocrisy of his statements, but instead, in line with his own cartoon logic, Trump seemingly aimed to strengthen the difference between Biden as infrahuman, and himself as superhuman, by suggesting he posed as Superman. The image of Superman was an ideal pun to Trump's unwelcome illness, as Superman, an alien being, is not susceptible to human physical weakness and disease, but remains relatable at the same time. If Trump could be compared to Superman, he would not only be better than the average human, but his body would have superhuman abilities. As such, Trump fights the alienation that is a common response to disease by literally alien-ating himself, projecting his desired image into a (superhero) cartoon universe.

While Trump aims to superhumanise himself through a comparison with Superman, he simultaneously seems to compare himself with Clark Kent, Superman's human disguise. More specifically, rumour had it that Trump intended to rip open his button-down and show a Superman shirt in one of his public appearances. However, even if Superman's suit is revealed under an everyday outfit, essentially Superman still embraces the Clark Kent persona. Umberto Eco has argued that Superman's disguise as Clark Kent is what made Superman a relatable character: "Clark Kent personifies fairly typically the average reader who is harassed by complexes and despised by his fellow-men; through an obvious process of self-identification, any accountant in any American city secretly feeds the hope that one day, from the slough of his actual personality, a superman can spring forth who is capable of redeeming years of mediocre existence" (Eco and Chilton 1972, 15). The image of Trump, a public figure that is often (and not only ironically) understood as the epitome of white male mediocrity, springing forth as a Superman, strengthens the idea that Trump is "just like us," and thus reinforces his sense of cultural and political belonging. This message holds increasing importance in a fragmenting world where more and more people feel excluded, whereas the few enhance their long-standing position of privilege and cultural dominance over others.

The reference to Superman arguably supported Trump in two ways: it rendered him relatable, but also elevated his profile to that of a superhuman. While Trump did commend his doctors for the care he received, at the same time he suggested that, unlike the rest of the country, he wasn't affected by the disease because of his personal strength, while Covid-19 is a disease that is especially deadly to elderly, overweight men and of which the death toll surpassed 220,000 the day before the rumour came out. In this public note, Trump seems to disregard that he had access to care and medication unavailable to most Americans, and instead focused on his personal superhumanisation.

The memetic response to Trump's Superman rumour ties into the tradition of the virile and fit president, in which Trump's detractors foreground well-known critiques of his lifestyle. Due to his refusal to wear a face mask and his presence at large political rallies, the US president was more likely to contract Covid-19, and through his demographic characteristics, he was more likely than most to suffer severe symptoms of the disease. Trump's statement regarding Superman led to a new metaphorical discussion among both his opponents and his supporters about his health and his competency to remain president. The fact that Trump survived Covid-19 may have reinforced the idea that, unlike Biden, he was fit enough to become president, an image that was strengthened by Trump comparing himself to Superman.

The Superman memes opposing Trump seem to rely mainly on fat-shaming and weight-related stereotypes, as can be seen in Figure 2. The meme shows an orange-faced Trump as an overweight and sloppy character in an ill-fitting suit. Figure 2's imagery ties into the stereotype that overweight people would be lazy and undisciplined: unwilling or unable to properly care for themselves or look presentable, represented by the ill-fitting clothes and the sagging boot. In the meme, Trump has become a caricature and is, as such, alienised, making it easier to be crude and cruel about his appearance, as this generally allows for a disregard of the feelings of those portrayed. Trump has continuously denied being overweight and seemingly embraces fat-phobic stereotypes in others, both men and women, a prominent example being him calling former Miss Universe Alicia Machado "Miss Piggy" shortly after she was crowned (e.g. Barbaro and Twohey 2016). While Trump is no stranger to using crude stereotypes to undermine others, this is a type of hypocrisy that fits very easily in his cartoon logic (which does not value consistency to begin with). Conversely,

Figure 2. Trump as fat superman. Source: https://twitter.com/sethabramson/status/1315087608427548672. (Accessed 21 March 2021).

Figure 3. "Trump as fat superman: Where he goes, Death Follows." Source: https://twitter.com/sethabramson/status/1315087608427548672. (Accessed 21 March 2021).

many anti-Trump commentators have reflected on the harmful nature of fat-shaming Donald Trump, even as a political strategy (e.g. Bodenheimer 2020).

Other memes, such as Figure 3, utilise similar stereotypes but simultaneously focus on the problematic political stance that Trump has taken towards the Covid-19 pandemic. In this figure, the virus particles are not merely spread by Trump; they specifically seem to originate from his bottom, which can be seen as a visualisation of his utter disrespect for public health: he farts contagion into the nation's face, and indeed, seems to remain airborne only because he propels himself through farting harm. His being able to fly by passing gas is a classic instance of cartoon physics. In classical meme-style reference to other popular cultural texts, the text references the Marvel quote in Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. about the character Skye, originally named in the series as an object of unknown origin, whose father kills all she has been in contact with in order to find her: "Wherever she goes, death follows." The quote suggests that Trump is the opposite of Superman, as he, possibly unknowingly, causes deaths for those with whom he comes in contact. The text ridicules the statement that Trump would be superhuman, instead labelling him as a super-spreader given his disregard for the measures against Covid-19. While Trump's political responsibility for the rapid spread of Covid-19 throughout the US cannot be denied, the visual language that this meme embraces explicitly employs Trump's body shape and embraces the connected social stereotype that the overweight would not be able to control their basic body functions, or use them in socially unacceptable ways, to make the point.

Like memes opposing Trump, the memes supporting him tie into existing political traditions and archetypes. In the memes posted by Trump supporters, Trump's head is placed upon a young, toned, Superman-like body, an epitome

Figure 4. Billboard at Times Square, New York: "Super Trump: Make America Great Again." Source: https://www.adweek.com/creativity/ridiculous-super-trump-billboard-times-square-leaps-infamy-single-bound-173512/ (Accessed 21 March 2021).

of strength and virility. The image of Trump as Superman is not new, nor was it specifically coined in connection to his bout of Covid-19. Instead, the mentally conjured image of Trump as Superman has used this imagery in his initial campaign for President, of which a striking example is the large billboard of "Super Trump" in the middle of Times Square in his hometown New York (see Figure 4). Figure 5, on the other hand, was used for Trump's re-election campaign in 2020 and after his hospitalisation. It intertextually ties into other messages and slogans that Trump has used before, such as "make America great again" and "America first." However, it also clearly alludes to Superman's motto: "truth, justice, and the American way." As Gordon states, "it is probable that when most people hear the phrase 'the American way,' the first association they make is with Superman" (Gordon 2017, 42–43). Regardless of Trump's obvious dissimilarity to Superman, Trump has claimed to fight for the same, or at least very similar, things.

Besides the difference in the representation of Trump's weight, it is notable that the memes opposing Trump are cartoons, while those promoting him are photoshopped pictures. Trump is recognisable in the cartoons, and the cartoons

Figure 5. Trump as superman: "Fighting for Truth, Freedom and the American Way/Trump 2020: Making America Great, Again." Source: https://imgflip.com/i/4ljgfp. (Accessed 21 March 2021).

also employ the same cartoon logic that Trump often uses (for which they are criticised by their own political allies on the left who reject body-shaming in all its occurrences). As such, these memes reference both the cartoon world in which Trump seems to imagine himself and a form of alienisation through caricaturisation and stereotyping. Trump's reference to himself as comparable to Superman in the face of Covid-19 places Trump outside the laws of nature.

Trump and the disinfectant claims

As explained earlier, Trump's behaviour can often be understood as cartoonish, not only in the sense of inspiring and informing the creation of political cartoons, but also as befitting the aesthetic and narrative conventions of a cartoon universe (often characterised by simplicity, starkness, and distorted proportions), on Twitter and other media. Trump often seems to introduce himself and be understood by fans and detractors alike, as operative in the same type of cartoon world. This framing explains to some extent not only the ease in which Trump's messages lend themselves to meme treatment, but also the reason why cartoon-based memes of the US President often seem toothless, even if they ridicule his figure, as we have demonstrated above. If he already behaves like a cartoon character and is undeterred by being perceived as such, his representation as a cartoon reproduces something close to his self-attributed Superman aesthetics and visual language.

A case in point is his famous press conference on 24 April 2020, in which Trump claimed the following:

> So, supposing we hit the body with a tremendous – whether it's ultraviolet or just very powerful light [turning to Dr. Deborah Birx, the White House Covid-19 response coordinator], and I think you said that hasn't been checked but you're going to test it. And then I said, supposing you brought the light inside of the body, which you can do either through the skin or in some other way. And I think you said you're going to test that too. Sounds interesting. And then I see the disinfectant where it knocks it out in a minute. One minute. And is there a way we can do something like that, by injection inside or almost a cleaning? So it'd be interesting to check that. (Clark 2020)

The suggestion that disinfectant might be injected into the bodies of people suffering from Covid-19 is, of course, a terrible and dangerous idea in reality, but it would be entirely feasible in an animated cartoon. There are hundreds of moments in cartoons where air, water, medicine, or other substances are pumped into cartoon characters' bodies in large quantities (see Figure 6). As noted, cartoon physics stipulate that they never die of this treatment. Interestingly, this logic expands beyond the visual language of cartoons into the realm of public discourse. However, Trump's cartoon intervention in which he suggested imbibing disinfectant to give diseased bodies "a cleaning" had real-world effects: Early in May 2020, about ten days after Trump's suggestion, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) queried Americans on
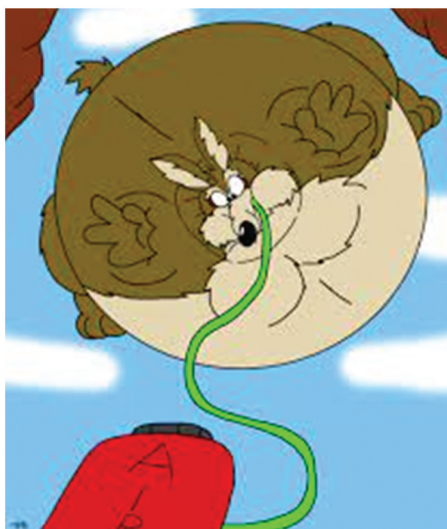
Figure 6. Wile E. Coyote floating like a balloon. Source: https://sfw.furaffinity.net/view/20014885. (Accessed 16 August 2021).

their use of disinfectant and found a sharp increase in dangerous usage, and in calls to poison control centres as a result of overexposure to cleaning products. The episode forced producers of disinfectants such as Lysol to communicate extensively with consumers about the inadvisability of imbibing or otherwise taking in their products in attempts to combat Covid-19 and brought Dr Deborah Birx under severe criticism and scrutiny for not pushing back against the president (McCarthy 2020).

Trump himself, however, primarily attracted attention in the form of laughter. While exasperation about the event was undoubtedly a large part of the response for many people who are not Trump supporters, this found an outlet mostly in humour, in part because there was no serious enough basis for debate or political counterarguments. A great deal of this humour may have been ridiculed, as in the form of comedian Sarah Cooper's (2020), lip-synching skit on TikTok, but instead of confronting Trump with his responsibility to the American public health, and his clear and present danger to it, Cooper's skit, and practically all other treatments of the episode satirised and sensationalised it. This is not to say, of course, that comedians should have responded differently, but rather that, since there was no serious political communication to satirise, the only humorous response that seemed possible was to draw attention to and emphasise the cartoonesque nature of the episode, also, and perhaps especially to those who wanted to hold Trump to account.

One obvious example of cartoon logic as crystallised in a meme is presented in Figure 7 where the aforementioned cartoon physics effect is applied to the case of Trump, with a graphic character inflated or pumped full of a fluid. The irony here is that while Trump did not inject disinfectant into his own body,
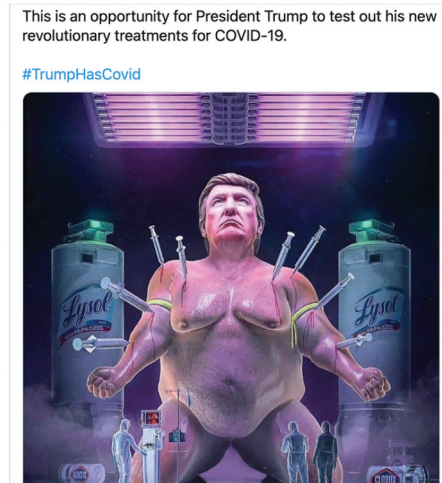
This is an opportunity for President Trump to test out his new revolutionary treatments for COVID-19.

#TrumpHasCovid

Figure 7. Cartoon Trump pumped with Lysol. Source: https://twitter.com/kinngmafi6699/status/1311934044729294849?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1311934044729294849%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fruinmyweek.com%2Fmemes%2Ftrump-covid-memes%2F2%2F. (Accessed 17 April 2021).

a great deal of "new revolutionary treatments" were brought in when he did get Covid-19 to cure him as quickly as possible under optimal circumstances. While the joke in the meme is the suggestion that Trump might actually follow his suggested method of injecting Lysol, the reality is that, unlike other Covid-19 sufferers, he did have superior medicine and hospital facilities at his disposal. Thus, the "magical" treatment that Trump fantasised about in this press conference was indeed implemented *for him* – not in the form of an already known drug, but in the shape of a highly personalised experimental medical treatment, not yet (and to most people never) available to anyone else.

The meme in which Trump is filled with Lysol "to test out his new revolutionary treatments for Covid-19" is clearly cartoonish in the visual language and cartoon physics it invokes, mainly through the "pumping" Trump so full of disinfectant that he blows up to extreme proportions. As such, it contributes to the portrayal of Trump as inhabiting a cartoon universe. There is no feedback loop to contradict that idea – Trump did indeed recover quickly due to a "revolutionary new treatment," and he did indeed claim that feat as his own achievement, even if the experimental treatment did not involve the use of disinfectant. Thus, the cartoonish narrative launched by Trump is essentially confirmed by memes such as this one, and what is more: that narrative attracts attention and laughter from Trump supporters as well as opponents.

However, there is also another type of meme that responds to Trump's disinfectant claim: one that is more photographic in style, more possible to replicate in the real world, and – crucially – less invested in Trump's own narrative and more focused on other citizens and the things they might do in

Figure 8. Disinfectant on ice. Source: https://twitter.com/hibeesfamily/status/1253620688612712449. (Accessed 16 August 2021).

everyday life. This is not to say that memes such as Figure 8 would influence people to drink cleaning products, but rather that the visual language that relates to the lives of actual people is photographic, as opposed to Trump's cartoonish representations – a fact that openly suggests that most people are realistically and severely threatened equally by Covid-19 and the overexposure to disinfectant. In contrast, Trump, like Wile E. Coyote or other cartoon characters, might appear sensationally affected by both, but is ultimately unharmed by either.

Trump, masking and unmasking

Like the memes featuring disinfectants, those about masks are often photographic, and not obviously cartoonesque in style, and proved to have a significant political impact in the real world, presenting a prominent argumentative stance during Trump's campaign for re-election. Face masks have played an important role in externalising the threat of the disease, becoming an outward sign of it; they "serve to 'visually mark and differentiate' people, and impact 'their capacities to relate to one another' in our face-centric, globalised networked culture" (Becker, De Bruin-Molé, and Polak, 242). Trump's personal refusal to wear a mask has led to a dichotomy. As Senator Lamar Alexander,

a Tennessee Republican, stated: "Unfortunately, this simple, lifesaving practice has become part of a political debate that says: If you're for Trump, you don't wear a mask. If you're against Trump, you do" ("Chairman Alexander" 2020). In this process, Trump politicised the wearing of masks, thus revealing the complex stakes of health and science practices.

Trump's stance on the use of face masks has been wilfully divisive and inconsistent, and bypasses any real discussions about the effectiveness of wearing a mask. As such, it fits well within a cartoon universe. While not explicitly opposing masks, he did retweet a post of a conservative columnist with the caption "so many different viewpoints!" The original post claimed: "Masks aren't about public health but social control. Image of Biden in black mask endorses culture of silence, slavery, and social death." This retweet is a dog whistle: Trump's comment may seem non-committal, but his very amplification of the conspiracy theory voiced by the columnist betrays his interest in entertaining the idea.

On the other hand, in July 2020, Trump posted a picture of himself wearing a mask with the caption: "Many people say that it is Patriotic to wear a face mask when you can't socially distance. There is nobody more Patriotic than me, your favorite President!" This tweet seems intended to reassure Republican voters worried about Trump's aversion to science and common-sense Covid-19 measures. However, while this tweet has probably had a real-world effect on people's masking behaviour, it also still embraces some of the basics of cartoon logic, and particularly the wholly untroubled inconsistency involved in Trump's espousing opposite standpoints at the same time, strengthened by the seemingly childish or tongue-in-cheek use of capital Ps in "Patriotic."

Furthermore, Trump and his supporters seem to focus mainly on how masks look rather than on their use as a protective measure – a stance that is cartoonesque in its grotesqueness and oversimplification. For example, pictures of Biden with sunglasses and a mask were meme-ified with the caption: "This might help explain why Trump doesn't like to wear a mask in public" (see

Figure 9. "This might help explain why Trump doesn't like to wear a mask in public. Biden today." Source: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8355149/Joe-Biden-wife-Jill-lay-wreaths-veterans-park-Delaware.html. (Accessed 17 April 2021).

Figure 9). The memes show that Biden is almost wholly covered and nearly unrecognisable. As Becker argues, we do live in a face-centric world, so the use of mask and sunglasses anonymise a person. When one's face is covered, the person becomes less relatable, while both relatability and recognisability are essential in a political campaign that capitalises on an individual figure. Trump's statements probably triggered the following response from his supporters: "I don't wear face masks like him. Every time you see him he's got a mask. He could be speaking 200 feet away . . . and he shows up with the biggest mask I've ever seen." Trump detractors have used this vain stance as a source of ridicule. Common are the memes where Trump's refusal to wear a mask is linked to his orange skin and how the mask would stain, as can be seen in Figure 10. By simplifying the debate to whether or not a mask looks good or whether it is patriotic to wear one, the discussion about the effectiveness of the measure is completely bypassed.

The most significant influx of memes featuring Trump's relation with face masks was noted as a response to a statement he made in an interview at Fox Business on 1 July 2020: "Actually, I had a mask on. I sort of liked the way I looked, OK? I thought it was OK. It was a dark, black mask, and I thought it looked OK. Looked like the Lone Ranger. But, no, I have no problem with that. I think – and if people feel good about it, they should do it" (Best 2020). Like Superman, Lone Ranger has been an iconic figure and an American phenomenon since the 1930s, first introduced through a radio show and later featured on film and television. However, Trump's statement was odd, as Lone Ranger habitually wears a mask covering his eyes in order to stay anonymous. This statement led to a series of memes of Trump wearing an eye mask (as for example, in Figure 11). Furthermore, it resonated with an existing iconographic tradition where face masks are used to cover the eyes of a character, most famously shown on the cover of *The New Yorker* magazine in March 2020 (Figure 12).

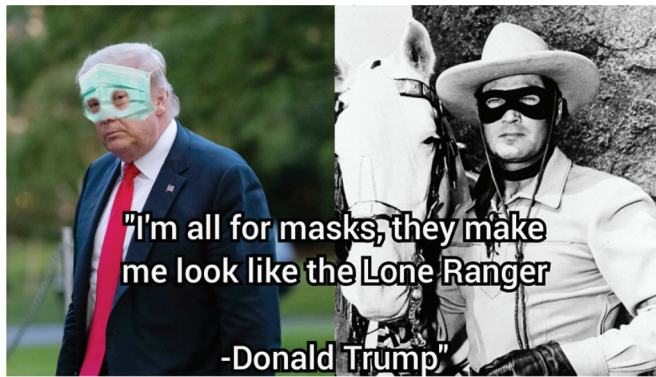**Figure 10.** Trump's skin stains a mask: "This is why he can't wear a mask." Source: https://www.quora.com/Why-doesnt-Donald-Trump-want-to-wear-a-face-mask. (Accessed 17 April 2021).

Figure 11. "I'm all for masks, they make me look like the Lone Ranger." Source: https://imgur. com/gallery/ks7b0Vc. (Accessed 17 April 2021).

Figure 12. *The New Yorker* cover: Trump blinded by face mask. Source: https://www.newyorker. com/culture/cover-story/cover-story-2020-03-09. (Accessed 17 April 2021).

The mask that covers the eyes can be read in two different ways: it ridicules Trump as he compares himself to imaginary characters that hide their identity (both Superman and Lone Ranger), but it also shows a conscious embrace of blindness to the seriousness of the disease. The *New Yorker* cover and many memes circulated by leftist outlets represent Trump with a face mask, not over his mouth and nose, but over his eyes, to criticise the loudmouth blindness of Trump's anti-scientific stance.

However, on the other side of the political spectrum, Trump's literal and metaphorical acts of unmasking that run throughout his career echo percep-tions of political revelation often framed as "red pill moments." Borrowing its key phrasing from the influential blockbuster film *The Matrix*, this response suggests that the red pill is the one chosen by people willing to learn potentially unsettling truths, usually about government- or establishment-related conspiracies. Trump's conjectured "Deep State" is an example of this, and so are his "Birther" allegations – in the early 2010s, he falsely but

incessantly asserted that Barack Obama had not been born in the United States and was thus an illegitimate president. As Nancy Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead argue in *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy* (2019), these are examples of "New Conspiracism," which they define as "conspiracy without the theory." As they further explain, in this context "[t]here is no punctilious demand for proofs, no exhaustive amassing of evidence, no dots revealed to form a pattern, no close examination of the operators plotting in the shadows. The new conspiracism dispenses with the burden of explanation. Instead, we have innuendo and verbal gesture: 'A lot of people are saying … ' Or we have bare assertion: 'Rigged!'" (3). According to the authors, Trump is one of the primary peddlers of the New Conspiracism, and one of the most concrete ways in which this becomes evident, we would add, is through his metaphorical – and literal in times of the pandemic – emphasis on a logic of unmasking; in turn, this is in many ways close to cartoon logic, as both phenomena share a keen interest in visually or rhetorically striking escalations and revelations.

Long before social media, Donald Trump became famous for "unmasking" people: his no doubt best-known and endlessly repeated television moment was his verdict "You're fired!" the culmination of every instalment of *The Apprentice*, a show which he hosted for its first fourteen seasons (2004–2015). These moments of unmasking (and unmaking) candidates already showed the essence of the logic of unmasking: it is a performance that claims authority and authenticity by indicting the other rather than showing anything of oneself. Unmasking is a formula, in the sense that it can be deployed at any moment, as in Trump's weaponisation of "Fake news!" (Happer, Hoskins, and Merrin 2018) or in the examples Rosenblum and Muirhead give ("Rigged!") (2019, 3); at the same time, it is a purely performative gesture, in the sense that there is no actual revelation beyond the claim that something or someone is being unmasked. The innuendo and attention-grabbing nature of the gesture of unmasking is also one of the ways in which it taps into cartoon logic, which revolves around monopolising attention rather than being consistent or reasonable. There are hundreds of press photos (often worked into memes) of Trump who briskly, even exuberantly, removes his face mask (even when he is still contagious): in doing so, he literally unmasks himself, but metaphorically and to his supporters primarily defies and denounces the scientific authorities that mandate the use of protective measures (see Figure 13). Such behaviour signals visually, in a language that is not cartoonesque but retains traces of cartoon logic, even in press photos or video footage, that Trump disavows masking in a style that presumably, though without actual reasoning, reveals supposed impervious designs of "the other side" (or the "Deep State").
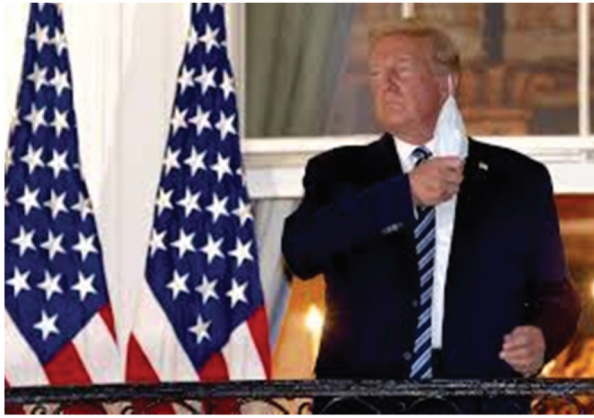
Figure 13. Trump exuberantly removing mask while sick with Covid-19. Source: https://www.vox.com/21506690/trump-white-house-face-mask-weakness-masculinity.   (Accessed 15 August 2021).

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic and Trump's social media responses, first to the virus itself and later to his own infection, have revealed several aspects of his role as a social networks president and highlighted his negotiation of what we call cartoon logic. In this article, we have tried to untangle the intersections of Trump's cartoon logic with larger themes of political value, such as outbreak narratives, presidential health, and social media patterns of "viral" spread.

We have seen that cartoon logic, in its aptitude for generating attention and eliciting meme responses, can create online communities that effectively operate as political constituencies in several ways. Through analysing the visual rhetorics in three different case studies of Trump's widely mediated utterances and memes that were triggered in response, we have observed a gradual transition from cartoonesque, narrative, and embodied representations (directly related to Trump's body and personality, as in the case of the Superman rumour); to photographic renditions pointing at broader consumer attitude, though still decidedly absurd (as in the case of the disinfectant claim); and, lastly, to memes that acutely and directly politicised the everyday behaviour of the constituent body (as in the case of Trump's masking and unmasking claims).

Each of these case studies exemplifies different aspects of cartoon logic, often in tandem with gestures that are common to New Conspiracism (the creation of conspiracy allegations that are not supported by a respective *theory*). This type of insinuation and innuendo is crucial to Trump's ability to hold attention and excite meme production. This logic of achieving authenticity by "unmasking" the other was literalised, especially by his treatment of face masks and his eagerness to theatrically pull them off – not to unmask himself, but to indict the scientists that advised and the politicians that mandated their use. When

a virus is still understood as "outside," Trump's tactics, as we have seen with the Ebola scare and in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, is to blame carriers and bully them as racial others, out to do harm to innocent Americans. When the virus "came home" to the United States and infected him, he denied and diminished it, eventually giving himself credit for "beating" it. This rhetorical strategy with regard to virus outbreaks follows both the classical playbook of chauvinist outbreak narratives (Wald 2008) and the long tradition of US presidents lying about their own ill health. However, Trump's case remains unique through the medium-specific and cartoonesque fashion in which he communicated his response, and the way in which that communication pattern invited memetic and cartoon responses.

Note

1. Earlier instances of this dynamic include Trump's 100+ Twitter responses to the Ebola epidemic in West-Africa, which often suggested that carriers were malignantly trying to enter the US to spread the virus. With Covid-19 he also bought into the notion that the virus had been manufactured in Chinese laboratories, and suggested that this may have been intentional. Immediately after Trump's use of the phrase "Chinese virus," it became a Twitter hashtag that was, in more than 50% of cases, part of a tweet containing other overtly anti-Asian hashtags. For tweets that used #covid19 instead, this percentage was 20%. See Hswen, Yulin, Xiang Xu, Anna Hing, Jared B. Hawkins, John S. Brownstein, and Gilbert C. Gee. 2021 "Association of '#covid19' Versus '#chinesevirus' With Anti-Asian Sentiments on Twitter: March 9–23, 2020," *American Journal of Public Health* 111 (5) (1 May 2021): 956–64.

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Notes on contributors

Sara Polak is a university lecturer in American Studies and programme chair of the MA North American Studies and at Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society (LUCAS), focusing on United States presidents and the politics of media contagion. She wrote *FDR in American Memory: Roosevelt and the Making of an Icon* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), and co-edited *Embodying Contagion: The Viropolitics of Horror and Desire in Contemporary Discourse* (University of Wales Press, 2021) and *Violence and Trolling on Social Media: History, Affect and Effects of Online Vitriol* (Amsterdam University Press, 2020). She is currently working on the Dutch Research Council-funded project "Playing Politics: Media Platforms, Creating Worlds."

Anne Zwetsloot is a study coordinator and external PhD candidate at Leiden University. She graduated from the MA programme in North American Studies at Leiden University in 2020, with a thesis on the political and cultural representation of HIV/AIDS. Her dissertation focuses on political and cultural responses to recent developments in epidemics and pandemics, and Covid-19 in particular

ORCID

Sara Polak 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5003-5031
Anne Zwetsloot 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4526-1373

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