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Motivated Reasoning and Contradictory Internet Memes

Bottomless irony and the affective conditions of assent

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ABSTRACT: There is a saying that “my contradiction is your dilemma.” The argumentative logic of consistency posits that answering a contradiction poses a dilemma because every answer requires replicating the initial tension. However, recent developments in motivated cognition question this assumption. A motivated cognition approach to argument examines the ways that arguments most often work as methods of self-defense rather than engagement. The result is that argumentative contradictions offer argumentative opportunities.

Here, I am interested in common internet memes that center on a fundamental contradiction. Because the contradiction is not all that it claims to be, I will call them ironic in the sense of Wayne Booth’s notion of the “bottomless irony” that characterizes many protest arguments. Booth argued that many protest arguments worked solely by posing endless negation as a form of defense while avoiding overt commitment to any positive affirmation. As such, they represent a type of motivated reasoning designed to defend rather than create the positive conditions to cultivate assent.

KEYWORDS: internet memes, irony, motivated reasoning

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the recent developments in communication, in general, has been the rise of memes. These sharable, short, and often multimodal messages are a function of social media. They gain their life through social networks sustained by familiar people who are often labelled “friends”. As such, information comes to us through a privatized networks that actively resist associating with traditional public information structures (White 2022).

One effect of social media amplified content is that it tends to segregate information. Because people generally receive information from those they perceive as similar, information tends to become self-referencing. Self-segregated information communities reinforce currently held positions. Such information is often called siloed because it is protected or walled-off from competing information that might lead to questioning, cognitive dissonance, and discomfort.

The tendency to silo information, sometimes known as bounded rationality, is also tied to a variety of personal biases. Because most people want to think of themselves as ethical and intelligent, they more easily embrace information that confirms their self-concept. Such an approach to information, segregating and attending to the agreeable and ignoring what is left, is called motivated cognition (Lebo & Cassino 2007; Slothuus & de Vreese 2010; Taber & Lodge 2006). The general notion is that people have a greater interest in defending themselves from potential threats, sometimes called motivated retrenchment, than they do in accurately processing new or challenging information.

Agreeable information requires little elaboration. The lack of overt defense of strongly held beliefs results in “moral dumfounding” (Bullock 2011; Nicholson 2011). Because moral premises are foundationally important to arguments, providing them weight, it appears that meaningful, rational engagement with these premises might be impossible. However, within communities, some will entertain elaborated arguments when they use familiar moral frames, and some well-informed partisans are open to arguments from consonant moral foundations and are occasionally willing to process information systematically and ignore source cues (Bullock, 2011; Nicholson, 2011).

Strong partisanship and more selective social networks reinforce argumentative confidence (Gelman 2008). This, in turn, is accelerated by the ready availability of diverse information that supports asymmetrical skepticism. Additionally, what counts as factual information does not exist independent of an essentially contestable political process which finds fortification with the news convention of presenting information in a dialectical and “balanced” form (Kuklinski, Quirk, Schweider, & Rich 1998). While this convention intends to create the illusion of objectivity, it also encourages the motivated to find legitimacy in the available confirming evidence (Nyhan & Reifler 2010). Consequently, it is easy for partisans to invest more effort in critique than defense of their fundamental principles (Slothuus & de Vreese 2010).

More interesting, motivated retrenchment occurs without much self-awareness as people wish to maintain the belief that they have adequately evaluated new arguments and evidence before coming to reject them (Pyszczynski & Greenberg 1989). Often, initial claims are so familiar and have been repeated so often that they gain the status of objective facts that require no defense or elaboration. To this end, arguers go to great lengths to create objective-seeming attributions for even false information to avoid more detailed elaboration (Higgins, Bargh, & Lombardi 1985; Srull & Wyer 1979; Wyer & Ottati 1993).

The result is that recent work in cognitive effort demonstrates that recalcitrance results from great skill and effort. In fact, those that are the most invested, engaged, knowledgeable and capable are often the most resistant to correcting misperceptions (Nyhan & Reifler 2010; Peffley & Hurwitz 2007). Motivated arguers have several ways of dealing with dissonant information. Most fundamentally, they may selectively find, listen to, or ignore dissonant arguments. Such selective attention allows ideas to find consistent and strong reinforcement in an environment characterized by ready confirmation (Friedman, 2006). In turn, the perception of being surrounded by supporting evidence increases confidence while simultaneously providing exemplar arguments that disparage counter-views (Edwards & Smith 1996; Lord et al. 1979; Taber & Lodge 2006). Thus, selective attention results in a closed-loop of conviction marked by an idiosyncratic consistency (Kruglanski, Shah, Pierro, & Mannetti 2002).

Motivated reasoners are not blind nor dumb. Instead, they are typically skilled at discounting arguments at odds with strongly held beliefs—which is distinct from the skill of explaining their beliefs to others (Nyhan & Reifler 2010). Motivated arguers invest significant effort in evaluating arguments and evidence. In fact, their greater knowledge and engagement position them to generate more numerous counterarguments than an objective participant. Consequently, motivated arguers greet dissonant information with an asymmetrical skepticism where they take reinforcing information without much thought or effort, and invest significant effort in evaluating dissonant information and developing counterarguments (Ditto & Lopez 1992; Edwards & Smith 1996; Taber & Lodge 2006).

2. THE MEME

In a socially connected community, such as a siloed reasoning community, memes are a convenient way of communicating information and constituting community. These easily apprehended political arguments evolve to create the conditions of their own survival and replication (D. Johnson, 2007). As such, memes seek to spread from person to person within a community bounded by a mindful sense of similarity. Often, these communities are defined not by a coherent sense of identity, but rather by a sense of dissimilarity from other groups. As Tuters and Hagen note, “political memes can be extremely effective in the formulation of an organic and classless ‘us’ bound together by existential antagonisms against a nebulous ‘them’” (2020, p. 2223).

However, such spread is not by a simple replication or strategic action. Instead, in each instance, the meme is unowned and free-floating as it creatively engages the audience. The result is that it changes a bit in each deployment. Often, the inherent ambiguity and accessibility of the meme facilitates its creative appropriation. To understand a meme, often requires being part of the community that has fostered and embraced the meme.

An essential element of any meme is its immediate comprehension. Through the framework of its supporting community, a meme gains its place. Hahner writes, “memes can elicit argument by spreading different frames for interpretation and inviting audiences to utilize those frames to evaluate the image” (2013, para.14). As such, they tend to take a visual form and perform in the ways of other varieties of visual argument.

In the framework of established social communities and siloed information designed to facilitate motivated cognition, memes sustain political arguments a bit differently than traditional argument. Within this interpretive framework, political arguments find support in a variety of heuristics that resist externalization or argumentative reconstruction (Van Den Hoven 2015). While this is a controversial position, it is not unreasonable to acknowledge that a reconstruction of an argument is not the same as the argument itself (R. H. Johnson, 2003). While it is possible to make a Ramist split between the logic of an argument as seen in its reconstruction and the rhetorical elements related to its presentation as with the theory of pragma-dialectics and strategic maneuvering (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004). For the meme, the reconstruction is not elaborated in the traditional sense. Instead, it is a shorthand for a community that is familiar with these types of arguments.

Instead, memes represent a variety of enthymeme that extracts meanings from their particular audience where these meanings freely move (Gronbeck 2005). While the meaning may appear fixed and dumbfounded for an intended audience, they also are open to reinterpretation and reappropriation as the heuristics change from community to community.

3. IRONIC ARGUMENT

We live in an ironic age. In many argument communities, reverence for common knowledge has been displaced by suspicion and the desire to generate our own, more authentic, truth and to see with our own unbiased eyes and to “do my own research” to generate a unique understanding. The generation of unique understandings has been

facilitated by the privatization of information amplified by the rise of social media (White 2022). In a sense, most new information appears to be ambivalent, or, at least up for debate and everything takes an ironic caste as almost nothing is as it seems.

There is a long history of the study of ironic argument. Such arguments, start with the presupposition that what is seen is not what is meant. In the right frame, nearly every speech act can be used ironically. These oblique arguments generally gain their meaning by their deployment within a particular context. As such, they rely on a sympathetic audience to bring the context that will reorder the argument in an intended direction. As a result, noted by Kenneth Burke, “true irony” depended on a sense of humility or kinship between the arguer and the audience (1984). In this linkage, irony performs within a comic frame that seeks a gentle correction by a shared community (Parson 2010).

Likewise, Wayne Booth embraced the rhetorical power of irony. However, Booth is even more explicit in emphasizing the ideally sympathetic dimension of stable irony. He writes: “the predominant emotion when reading stable ironies is that of joining, of finding and communing with kindred spirits. The author I infer behind the false words is my kind of man, because he enjoys playing with irony, because he assumes my capacity of dealing with it, and---most important---because he grants me a kind of wisdom, he assumes that he does not have to spell out the shared and secret truths on which my reconstruction is to be built”(1974, p. 26).

Against this stable and sympathetic irony, Booth proposes the notion of an unstable variety. Where stable irony starts with the assumption that there is some shared value or agreement, the unstable variety which embraces a variety of infinite rejection of value or agreement. The unstable variety relies upon a universe that lacks definite meaning. As such, each level of ironic revelation is met by another potential revelation. Booth refers to this variety of ironic apprehension as “bottomless” (268) in that its only endpoint is to deny the affirmations of its competitors. He continues: “the ironies of the abyss not only destroy us but finally bore us as they destroy” (269).

The result is that ironic argument is be both associative and dissociative. That is, while it defines a community who are in on intended reconstruction, it also defines a community that is not in on the joke (Kaufer 1977). As such, the audience divides between those that know and those that do not. The problem is that this effect is achieved through an ambiguity where empathy with the primary audience is antipathy toward other audiences. The reconstruction of the argument moves, therefore, in potentially paradoxical ways. This is especially problematic in a world of memes where it is not entirely clear who the author is or what their intention might be.

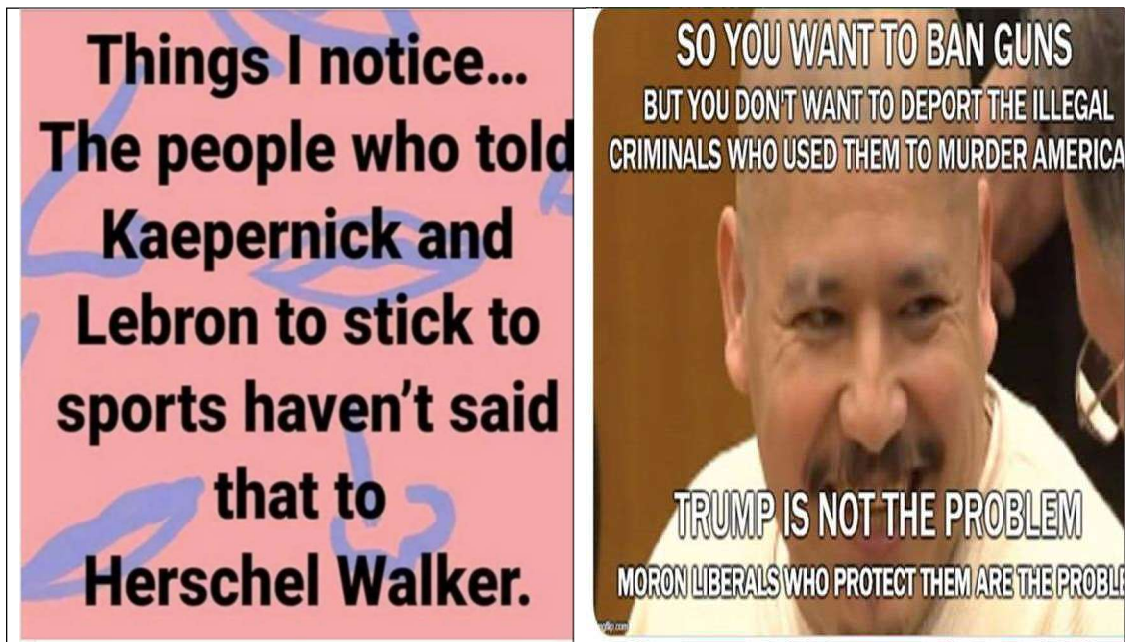
If we assume that the goal of argumentation is engagement or agreement, the rise of ironic memes and prevalence of motivated cognition are problematic. Here, the goal of argument is not to reach out, but rather the justify and to resist change or engagement. Such argument relies on dumbfounding in that it resists elaboration with its claim to obviousness. In this way it mirrors other cultural argumentative moves

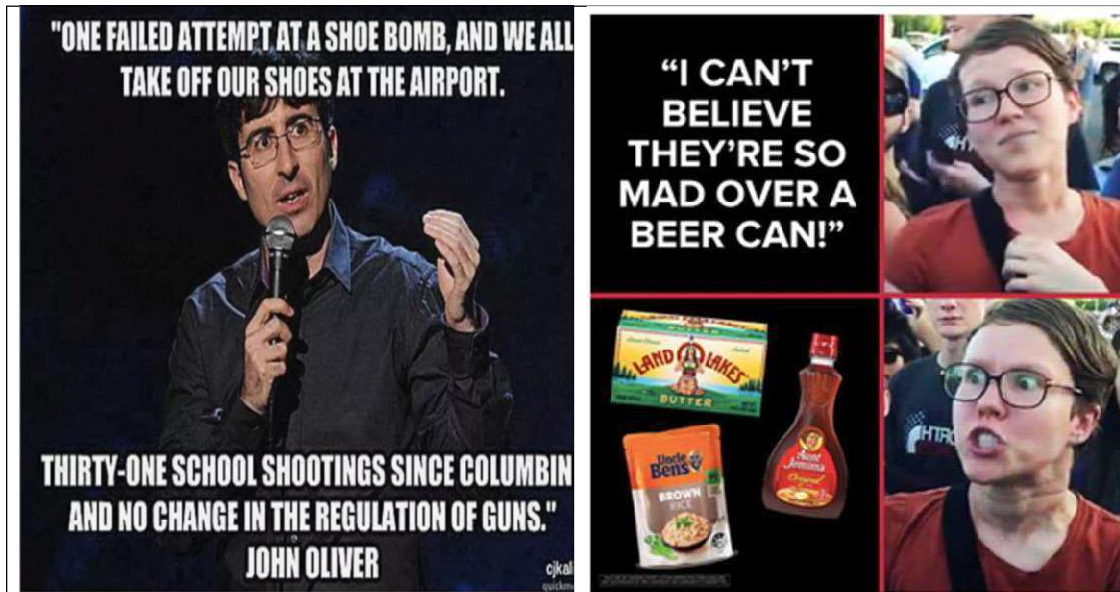
As an example, we turn to “whataboutism” which is a variety of *tu quoque* or *ad hominem* argument. The *tu quoque* argument is also known as the “you too” argument is a classical fallacy goes to the hypocrisy of an argumentative target (Dykstra 2020; van Eemeren et al. 2000). In recent years, whataboutism has become a standard frame for internet discussions (Bowell 2020). Often, they function to highlight the implicit bias in participants to a conversation (Barceló Aspeitia 2020). However, these accounts of the

subtlety of the argument does not explain the manner that most of these arguments get deployed.

Instead of viewing memes as directed at some third party to a conversation who is asked to make a judgement, such as a legal judge, the modern privatized information economy facilitated through social media poses them as a constitutive claim. As Booth noted, to get the joke is to be part of the community. This constitutive claim occurs within a privatized information economy that gives it credibility and a public information economy that prioritizes balance which is a variety of empirical ambiguity (Dykstra 2020). The question form, itself, has greater legitimacy because it takes the form of a legitimate inquiry rather than an attack on the character of a particular or identifiable arguer (van Eemeren et al. 2012).

4. SOME EXAMPLES





(Etan Thomas [@etanthomas36], 2022; GingerDudeTX, 2022; Facebook, 2022;
 California the Sanctuary State of Decay - Imgflip, 2022)

Generally, a reconstruction of the whataboutism claim offers the conclusion that what people say is not really what they mean. While what they might intend is left unstated, the idea that they are generally unprincipled, or that the context determines their principle is the general theme that holds the argument together. Ultimately, such memes posit a cognitive dissonance that should bother one's competitors, or at least disqualify them from speaking to an issue. As such, they pose an end in themselves. They do not speak to an issue, so much as disqualify people from speaking to an issue.

Such constitutive arguments pose a problem to traditional argument studies. Because they presuppose a reconstruction according to the agreement with the audience, they do not attempt to engage those that are not already constituted by it within the realm of such memes. Or, at least, this is what appears to be the case.

5. CRITICISM

Each of the memes represents a style of argument rather than a singular ideology. Some are conservative and others are more liberal. They each make a historical argument regarding consistency. The posit something like: "you did these things then, now you do these things." The intended reconstruction is that some people, "them", are hypocritical or that they are motivated by their circumstance rather than enduring principles. In the end, they imply that the subject of the meme has no firm principles and that their arguments should be disregarded. In this way, they represent a classic *ad hominem*.

From the outset, it is not exactly clear what the preferred position is, that is, it is difficult to discern which half of the dilemma is preferred. That information derives from the audience who understand the author's intention based on how they received it. While

there is a double possible conclusion, the meaning derives from a reconstruction of the author who is unidentified but known to the audience (Booth 1974; Chateau 2020).

While the meme's argument is clear, it is not entirely clear who makes the argument.

In one instance, the argument quotes the well-known comedian John Oliver, but the statement lacks any attribution. They are proposed as simple truth statements. Their credibility, however, does not come from some objective source characteristic of the traditional public information economy. Instead, they derive their credibility from the manner of their sharing. Being shared within a community, they gain the credibility of the community and their meaning through community heuristics. This private information economy accepts its authority from social networks rather than overt claims of epistemology.

Not only the source but the main point is not entirely clear. The meme invites a conclusion from the audience based on their identification with the meme. These ambiguous, bi-directional, but seemingly objective statements create an metonymic "us v. them" framework that distinguishes those that get the point from those that resist (Tuters & Hagen 2020).

The ambiguity works in a few ways that inhibit a clear engagement as an argument. The free reiteration and appropriation of the meme puts it beyond the responsibility of any identifiable person or group. When the meme goes poorly or is poorly received, there is no entity to take responsibility. From the point of view of the poster, the whole thing was just a "joke" without any clear argumentative claim or intended impact associated with it. In fact, if one were to reconstruct a claim, the claim would be a function of the reconstruction and not any intent. From the position of the poster, the meme possesses a kind of magic that arouses a response without implicating the responsibility of a particular advocate. It is the work of an unknown "shit-poster". Burton writes: "Meme magic allows them to see themselves as exercising an intoxicatingly masculine vision of ironic freedom while doing that requires little in the way of courage, physical strength, or personal sacrifice." (Burton 2016, p. 5)

The ambiguity of the author, the power of the private information economy, the ironic frame for internet memes advantages motivated argument. The case does not need to be made for any premise or claim—they are dumbfounded. Instead, a community's premises or claims must only be defended. This moves most debates to negative ground and sets the stage for defensive claims such as "whataboutism." Our contradiction does not need to be explained since they have contradictions as well. Our virtue is assumed while theirs is placed in doubt.

This represents the variety of "bottomless" and unstable irony that Booth warned against. Instead of winning people to one side, the goal is to diminish and degrade the other side. There is no invitation for "them" to join "us". There exists only the disgrace from being one of "them".

These do not overtly embrace *tu quoque* or whataboutism—but elide these with questions left unanswered—where the answer exists in the mind of the audience.

6. CONCLUSIONS

While the memes are designed to establish an antagonistic mentality, their ambiguity offers a means to engagement. In a world where presumption favors the status quo and defense only needs to exhaust the offense, the magic of memes is that they provide an unceasing defensive posture. Like a child that learns the word “why”, the constant “whying” of political arguments resists closure. Consequently, every ironic statement possesses two parts. In the ironic statement, the focus can be turned back to turn the original position. In debate, this is called a linkturn. In general, it is one of the most effective strategies for engaging with others’ arguments because it cedes dumbfounded arguments to focus elsewhere (Janas 2021; Palczewski & Madsen 1993).

Because we have *a priori* commitments to our fundamental premises they are hard, if not impossible, to change. In the motivated cognition scheme, it is not a sound strategy to try to get people to alter the parts of an argument where they are most entrenched. Such value commitments are in a sense transrational—in that they are accepted to a level that most have difficulty explaining why they believe what they believe. When confronted, people become, literally, dumbfounded (Stanley et al. 2019).

Consequently, arguers invest more effort in critique than defense (Slothuus & de Vreese 2010). In affective argument literature, the inability to elaborate consonant moral premises is called “moral dumbfounding” (Schein & Gray 2018). It is the point at which premises transcend argument and where meaningful rational engagement might be impossible. There are circumstances within communities where engagement is possible. People will entertain elaborated arguments when they occupy familiar moral frames or when they are able or motivated to engage less comfortable frames (Bullock 2011; Nicholson 2011).

The levels of community support and engagement in meme culture resist the elaboration of arguments. Instead, it is possible to concede the value and to reconstruct the argument along with an opposite focus. Because meme arguments often work by establishing a contradiction, they also create a dilemma which is open for argumentative exploitation. Arguing both the link and the impact is likely to create a dilemma when answering a contradiction. Instead, the better strategy is to concede the impact.

The ironic meme arguments work their magic through association and dissociation. If you get the joke, the irony is typically stable, and the point is clear. As Booth noted, you realize that this is your kind of person, and you find support in their exposition. Likewise, if you don’t get the joke—you realize that you are the butt of it. However, there are opportunities for re-association in the unstated portions of the argument.

These arguments depend on the reconstruction of the intention of a known arguer whose argument takes the form of a question—turning ambiguity on itself while implying an impact. Here, an advocate has only to alter the frame of interpretation. Rather than taking a defensive point of view and arguing the differences in the case, it is possible to appropriate the impact and take an offensive position.

Regarding the memes presented above, you end up with a series of counter-questions that imply a reconstruction of the argument from the opposite point of view, but united in conceding the dumbfounded impact:

So, we should listen to Hershel Walker?

Wouldn’t it be best to enforce all the laws and ban guns and deport immigrants?

So, you believe that every life is worth saving?

You believe that free markets work?

Because it focuses on a contradiction, the source of its own irrelevance is inherent in each meme. The balanced “whataboutism” framework concedes its ambiguity that only bears fruit through the identification of the audience with the author. If we get it without elaboration, we know that they are our kind of person. It assumes that we understand and accept the implied impact, which should drive our evaluation of the link. The argument, in true “shitposting” fashion, preys upon a schadenfreude at the spectacle of “their” cognitive dissonance, while ignoring the cognitive dissonance inherent in its expression. In this way, the argument performs as *ad hominem*. But the ironic meme itself is a cognitive dissonance invisible to the people that propagate it. This is because we are rational, and they are irrational. We are principled, and they are self-interested.

The linkturn strategy does not defeat the ironic meme so much as disable it. It points out what should be obvious, that the argument is not the sole property of one side or another. In essence, it attempts an us-versus-them antagonism by setting the stage for a potential “us” united by a sense of incomplete justice. While the memes attempt to “own” the opposition, their ironic form creates the conditions for a level of argumentative commensurability centered around core values. Such reconstructions require that advocates be willing to make argumentative concessions—especially at the level of morally dumbfounded arguments.

Where Booth was critical of bottomless and unstable varieties of argument, such arguments have become part of the regular arsenal of social media argumentation. However, they are not entirely bottomless. They do have a sense of terminal value or impact. However, their instability is a resource for counterargument that can re-position unstable arguments in a stable form.

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