DIGITAL MEMES AND US POP POLITICS
Dynamism and pervasiveness of a digital genre
in the mobile Web era

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Abstract – This paper analyses US political memes relating mainly to the Obama and Trump presidencies as an illustration of a subgenre shaped by today's mobile culture, and thus part of the rise of new forms of digital textuality. In particular, the study explores the connection between technology, participatory culture and the entrenchment of memes as a multimodal genre within political discourse. The illustration of the diffusion of this political meme subgenre as a grass roots phenomenon, generated and distributed through social media, is illuminated by the article's focus on the often ironic comments it makes about US politics. By reconstructing the evolution of digital memes in this period and illustrating and exemplifying the textual processes that give this political subgenre its unique forcefulness, the article concludes that digital memes have embraced textual forms – based on mass media and shared authorship – that are certainly informal and often offensive, but which also testify to a vision of politics which is interpretable within the wider framework of US popular culture, the American Dream in particular.

Keywords: digital meme; genre dynamism; recontextualization; social media; political discourse.

1. Introduction

Since the moment it was introduced by Dawkins (1976), the neologism 'meme' has undergone considerable transformation as regards the way in which it is used in contemporary society to refer to meaning-making processes. The concept has expanded from its original and rather general meaning of 'something imitated' – which included any cultural item spreading from person to person balancing and shaping stability and change in society – to the current idea of a digital genre that rapidly circulates thanks to the affordances of new media. The debate around digital discourse has led to interesting insights around new practices, tools and methods that exploit the richness of multimodal resources afforded by the new digital technologies (Bou Franch, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2018). In today's participatory culture (Burgess, Green 2018; Jenkins 2006, 2009a, 2012; Milner 2018), where digital consumers have gradually but inevitably come to be transformed into digital producers, the new challenge is to investigate the texts produced and spread through new digital media. Certainly, the understanding of digital texts needs to be grounded in multimodal studies as memes employ diverse meaning-making resources which go well beyond the exclusive use of language (Baldry, Thibault 2006; Kress 2010; Van Leeuwen, Jewitt 2001). However, 'fluid' texts such as digital memes, that embody change as their very essence, require the edges of multimodal studies to be stretched in order to accommodate the idea of continuous textual recombination that produces textual proliferation and differentiation. In this sense, digital memes function as a 'thermometer' of the degree of openness of societies to novelties and the freedom of expression they afford. The cultural dimension of the textual recombination phenomenon cannot be underestimated (Sonvilla-Weiss 2010) nor can the effects and consequences of this participatory engagement, that

invests creativity, connectedness, participation, multiculturalism and an overall change in communication techniques and academic approaches to literacy. Remix culture studies (Navas, Gallagher, Burrough 2014, 2018; Gallagher 2017) are, in fact, an emerging field of analysis of contemporary trends in genre and textual evolution.

The cultural connection between memes and the digital world has, of course, been explored with interesting results (Castaño Diaz 2013; Shifman 2014). However, fine-grained multimodal investigation of memes is required to unpack the textual features of digital memes, in particular, their combinations of visual and verbal resources, if an appropriate depth of analysis is to be achieved. Given the complexities involved, the history of other types of digital meme which have appeared are discussed elsewhere, including those that materialised before political memes (Arizzi 2017; Davison 2012; Knobel, Lankshear 2006). In pursuance of the article's analytical goals, Section 2 of this article identifies and describes four different types of political meme specifically in relation to two US Presidents, Obama and Trump, with regard to whom the specific meme political subculture in question, which is closely associated with US Presidents and Presidential campaigns (Arizzi 2012; Ross, Rivers 2017), has emerged. Sections 3 and 4 analyse these texts further, and, in particular, from a multimodal perspective. Section 3 suggests that this type of analysis can throw light on how irony has come to be foregrounded in the meme subgenre while Section 4 describes how multimodal analysis helps 'capture' some of this subgenre's special effects. Section 5 attempts to deepen the discussion by relating the specific text type in question to more general aspects of political memes while the final section draws some conclusions about the subgenre's place in current US politics.

2. Four types of remixing

Unpacking the composition of digital memes as a genre is a first essential step towards creating and applying tools for their critical analysis that goes beyond merely recognising their amusing nature. As political statements, digital memes come in a variety of textual formats but rely on their being immediately recognized as such thanks to the associative nature of their textual composition. Two obligatory elements in their generic structure are essential to this end: 1) the obvious repetition and reinterpretation and 2) the addition of new items that add ironic meaning. Other elements contribute to the genre's identification, including striking details that immediately attract attention. As manipulations of an existing picture (matrix), digital memes display typical patterns of reformulation that are exemplified in the memes relating to Presidents Obama and Trump. Genre variants include, but are not limited to, the following textual processes:

a) *Type A*: A change is made to one part of the matrix, usually without adding texts to it;

b) *Type B*: a part of the matrix is copied and pasted into another picture, such as a well-known painting;

c) *Type C*: the matrix is changed and other elements, typically captions, are added;

d) *Type D*: the matrix is not changed, but other elements, once again mostly captions, are added.

Some examples of these different categories are in order. Figure 1 shows a striking photo taken at the G7 summit in Canada in June 2018 that became the matrix that spawned different types of digital memes. It shows Angela Merkel and other leaders looming over a seated Donald Trump and suggests the difficulties the leaders of the most powerful industrialized countries have in getting along with him on important issues such as global

security and the international economy, reportedly because of Trump's awkward announcements as regards domestic market tariffs and foreign affairs policies.

Figure 1
Original photo taken at the 2018 G7 Summit in Canada
(www.vox.com/world/2018/6/11/17449658/trump-g7-summit-photo-canada-navarro).

A clear divide can be seen in the photo, as the desk on which Angela Merkel is leaning physically separates the two visual fields, in this case corresponding to two camps: Trump is seated by himself on the right while all the others are standing on the left. A desk is, of course, usually indicative of power, dividing those in a position of power behind it, from those in front who are not, as typically occurs in police interviews, doctor/patient talk or judge/accused interactions and many other types of asymmetrical encounter. However, in this picture the interpretation is far from obvious. First, the perfect symmetry of the desk makes it impossible to distinguish front from back; second, all but one of the participants are standing, clearly separating the two groups who occupy each side of the desk, but not in a way that tells us who really is in the more powerful position. We might be inclined to think that a group of people standing might overpower the only person sitting on the other side of the desk, *or*, on the contrary, that a truly powerful person might simply not bother to stand up and confront others as the folded arms seem to be implying. In this case, proxemics helps. Merkel is leaning forward restricting the social distance between her and Trump who is sitting on the other side of the desk. She is using *all* of her personal space to tower over him so as to intimidate him into backing down. Moreover, Merkel is the centre of the photo's focus with everyone looking at her and her clothes are of a different, lighter nuance than the others', so she is the visual focus of the photo with all the perspective vectors driving the viewer's gaze towards her. Even though the person sitting down at a lower level than all the others ought to be the less powerful person, Trump's smirk and defiant look run contrary to these expectations. Unperturbed by the fact that the most powerful person among them is looking scornfully down at him and invading his personal space, Trump is far from being considered the 'victim' in this photo. On the contrary, he seems to be enjoying the moment while all the others are witnessing Merkel's efforts not to lose her temper with him.

Note that this photo was taken by Jesco Denzel, a German cabinet official photographer, and released on Angela Merkel's official Instagram account, accompanied by this post: "Zweiter Tag des G7-Gipfels in Kanada: spontane Beratung am Rande der offiziellen Tagesordnung. --- Day two of the G7 summit in Canada: spontaneous meeting between two working sessions. #G7Charlevoix". Sometimes, well-taken photos have a stronger impact than hundreds of newspaper articles or political speeches because they touch emotional strings that belong to instinct rather than to rationality. Releasing this photo on behalf of Merkel's team was a political act designed to manipulate public opinion and to emphasise German leadership. Similarly, the other leaders, including Trump, released

photos of the same crucial moment but from a different perspective.[1] Though beyond the scope of the current paper, a comparison of the textual and political messages behind these photos would certainly help to establish the potential of visual texts to create political consensus. In actual fact, only the photo produced by Merkel's team was successful as demonstrated by the digital memes it has generated, presumably due to the lasting impression that the perfectly balanced and expressive pose created, all of which underscores the need for a matrix to be impressive if it is to proliferate as a meme.

Figure 2
Example of Type A digital meme produced from the matrix in Figure 1.

Figure 2 shows one of the many Type A digital memes created from this matrix, one that visually adds to the idea of Trump behaving like a child that meme sharing has helped to establish. Only one small portion of the matrix has been manipulated but just enough to shift the focus from Merkel to Trump. It is not normal for a political leader like Merkel to take the threatening posture that she does, but even less common for political leaders to go around with spaghetti on their head. Trump has been framed as sitting in a high chair and has a bowl on his head and spaghetti falling all over his shoulders and on the highchair tray. Even though the digital meme is a static image, viewers can imagine the events that took place *before*: i.e. Trump-the-naughty-child responding to a scolding by Merkel-the-strict-mother over a defiant child's prank. Other digital memes have been created following this shared idea which are not included in this paper, such as the one presenting Trump with a huge teddy bear in his arms or the one in which Trump has tomato sauce all over his face and a bib tied around his neck while Angela Merkel is trying to feed him.

Figure 3
Example of Type B digital meme produced from the matrix in Figure 1.

The Type B digital meme shown in Figure 3 is the result of another type of manipulation which recontextualizes the matrix, pasting parts of it into one of the most famous frescoes in the world, Leonardo's *The Last Supper*. The new context is highly symbolic, as Jesus is

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[1] www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jun/11/merkel-macron-g7-photos-social-media-trump.

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celebrating his last supper with his apostles, voicing his legacy of communion and solidarity the night before being crucified. The digital meme instead voices the strategic relevance of this G7 meeting as preceding the dissolution of the known world. In an attempt to respect the geometry of the original fresco, Merkel is separated from the other world leaders who are placed next to Trump, who replace some of the original characters, the apostles. Jesus keeps his dominant position at the centre, physically dividing the two parts with a positive attitude and even seems to offer his mediation to solve the issue. However, nobody apparently seems interested in him, as most of the others are looking at Merkel, who is the focus of the meme, while the apostles seem distressed by the 'intruders' and point towards them while distancing themselves from them.

Leonardo's fresco depicts the moment when Jesus predicts that one of the apostles will betray him, which generates bewilderment and suspicion as well as desire for reassurance. This digital meme mixes Jesus' apostles with today's world leaders conveying the feeling that the traitor must be among them. Merkel's dominant position seems to be distracting all the others who are looking at her, without noticing Trump's strange facial expression, which puts him in pole position for the role of traitor. Even though the dominant feeling of the people in the meme is a mix of surprise and concern for the upcoming uncertainty, the meme suggests rather slickly that the current disagreement between world leaders is so harsh that its solution is beyond divine intervention.

Figure 4
Example of Type C digital meme produced from the matrix in Figure 1.

The third type of digital meme, Type C, (Figure 4) uses a different strategy. The matrix has been resized and decorated with a frame. In addition, it has been graphically changed so as to appear to have the brush strokes that we expect with a painting. Finally, it has been transformed into a painting hanging in an art gallery. In other words, the matrix is only a small portion of the digital meme as it is embedded within an even wider context, one that pretends to be just an ordinary photo of an art gallery, with visitors looking at the paintings, the only jarring element being that the matrix has replaced one of the paintings on the walls. This conveys the idea that the G7 meeting is part of history as it has been hanging in the gallery for many years, an impression underscored by the fact that while five people are looking at the picture, the sixth person is looking in a completely different direction apparently uninterested in this piece of history.

At the textual level, there is an important difference between this type of digital meme and the previous one: its distinctive feature is textual manipulation by embedding the *entire* matrix into other texts. Text embedding seems to be an interesting and productive feature for the development of the genre so much so that *memetization* of texts is based on the principle of textual flexibility and interchangeability, in a productive process whereby texts are jumbled together in such a way as to make it difficult, if not impossible, to

distinguish the matrix from the background, or, in other cases, such as *The Last Supper* meme, where, tantalisingly, one wonders which of the two elements is the real matrix.

All three types of memes described above require considerable artistic or advanced *Photoshop* skills. On the contrary, the fourth and final type presented here (Type D), can be produced without any special graphic skills, and is not surprisingly the most common type. It is created through specific apps for smart phones, such as *Meme Generator* (*Zombodroid*) for Android, which offers a regularly updated gallery of categorized pictures (*All*, *New*, *Popular* and *Favourite*) and an internal search engine from which pictures, to be transformed into digital memes, can be retrieved. Such user-friendly generators drive and, in part, explain the current popularity of digital memes. Figure 5 shows how a digital meme can be created after the selection of a matrix. Written discourse can be included in predetermined spaces and the app even suggests possible ironic content to add, as shown in Figure 5 right.
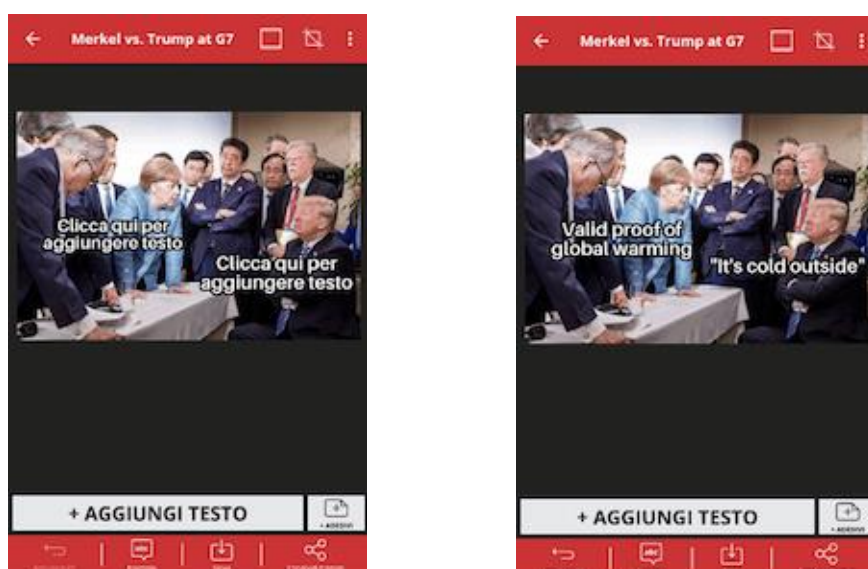

Figure 5
Screenshots of a meme generator.

3. Irony

All memes are ironic but political memes are special, being a contemporary expression of the American Dream and a reinterpretation of the freedom of speech that is at the basis of American democratic visions. Biting irony, often triggered by disappointment with electoral outcomes, is the very essence of digital memes, which are meant to be disturbing and irreverent. The American political scenario offers many opportunities to exercise irony and fosters different types of manipulation and recontextualisation. Being the 'man in charge' and having an extrovert, exuberant and controversial personality, Donald Trump is the favourite, but not sole, target of Internet users either in the US or elsewhere.[2]

Irony has developed over time in Presidential memes. The tie-up between digital memes and politics was cemented with the *Hope* poster portraying Obama (Figure 6a) which

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[2] https://motherboard.vice.com/it/article/pa3848/la-guerra-dei-meme-e-appena-iniziata.

'went viral' in 2008 and which has subsequently spawned countless replicas (Arizzi 2013). The *Hope* poster was created in support of Obama's first presidential campaign by Shepard Farey, a street artist known for his iconic style and idealised images. It showed Obama's face in a stylized pencil portrait in red, blue, grey and beige. Farey's intent was not to create a new genre. He simply wanted to create a poster that would divert attention from the colour of Obama's skin and would elevate him to an iconic status. At first, only about 4,000 posters were printed, some sold but most distributed during rallies. However, once posted on the Internet, the drawing had to be shared out to a very large number of users. To respond to the enormous demand from the public, 350,000 posters and 500,000 stickers were produced with the result that the image became a universal symbol of support for Obama.[3] The poster's strong impact probably came from the striking contrast between its modern look, classic political pose and messianic tone. It became much more than a drawing and was turned into an ad, a placard, a leaflet, a pin and other forms of campaign material in support of Obama. It was the evolution of this image from a paper version to a digital one that proved to be the first, crucial step in the development of this new political subgenre.

| 6a | 6b | 6c | 6d |

Figure 6
The *Hope* Poster (6a); Mitt Romney (6b); Bill Clinton (6c); Donald Trump (6d)

Indeed, such was its success that it prompted the creation of new meme-generating Internet tools that allowed users to make their own images in the *Hope* style, one of them incorporated in the *obamicon.me* website which allowed anyone, including those with no artistic talent, to create an image similar to the *Hope* poster, in the same style and colours, with a personalized caption underneath. Though the site closed in 2013, many of the digital memes that were created can still be found on the Internet. However, the significance of the *Hope* meme lies not so much in the number of replicas it produced but rather in its capacity to inspire new technologies that underpinned the replication process and boosted the potential for transformation. These unimaginable consequences more than justify the reputation of the *Hope* poster as the quintessential political meme of the twenty-first century (Gries 2015).

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[3] https://medium.com/fgd1-the-archive/obama-hope-poster-by-shepard-fairey-1307a8b6c7be.

In fact, as Figure 6a shows, the original *Hope* poster was not originally a meme but was subsequently manipulated and recontextualized to become the *matrix* for other digital memes. Specifically, Figure 6b refers to the 2012 Presidential election campaign and was obviously produced by Obama's supporters. The style and colours were maintained, Obama's smiling face was replaced with Mitt Romney's dissatisfied expression, and the word 'Hope' was replaced by the rhyming word 'Nope'. Thus, while the general look of the meme is the same as the matrix, its ironic meaning is the polar reverse of the original. A further 'irony' is that, as often happens in politics, this meme reinforces the support for a rival candidate (in this case Obama). Figure 6c – which precedes the *meTOO* movement – has an even more overtly political intent, as it refers to the many accusations of sexual harassment against Bill Clinton. The word *Hope* is replaced by *Grope*, an example of a meme's typical use of a 'politically incorrect' statement – often, as is the case here, just one word but with a powerful political punch. Figure 6d makes fun of Trump's long tuft of hair waving in the wind; the word *Nope* below the picture is not new, as it repeats the caption used for Romney, but now takes on the idea of political 'covering-up'. The ruffled hair suggests that Trump is always attempting to cover up not just his head but also the true state of his ethics. Besides stressing the negative feeling against this politician, the use of the colloquialism *Nope* adds a force that matches the strong feelings of many Americans and explains why such memes resonate with the public. Of course, US political memes, like US politics itself, affect the entire world. Not even the quintessentially English newspaper *Private Eye* remained unaffected by the fascination of the *Hope* poster, reviving it on its front cover in October 2016, with the goal of eliciting a reflection on the evolution of US politics. As Figure 7 shows, the original *Hope* poster is compared with a new meme about Trump with a *Grope* caption. Obama has a peaceful and confident expression and his gaze is directed far away, slightly upward, as if he were looking into the future and examining the possibilities to come.

Figure 7
Revival of the Hope meme in *Private Eye*.

This attitude gives a positive impression and conveys hope for the future. On the contrary, Trump looks angry and disappointed, his frowning face looking right into the camera, so that we feel swallowed by his bad mood. Whatever we make of this comparison, we should note the textual journey that the original *Hope* message has taken. From its original incarnation as a printed poster in a specific political campaign it became the matrix for

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digital memes circulating on social media and was subsequently re-invented as the cover
page of a printed political and current affairs magazine – all of which is suggestive of the
need to detail the potential for re-invention associated with the digital meme genre.

Figure 8
Irony in captioned digital memes.

Irony certainly marks the difference between a successful digital meme and a failed one.
The meme presented in Figure 8 left ironically offers a replica of an 'eccentric' matrix in
which Trump's hair is blown by a gust of wind. Nothing strange, apart from the unexpected
length of his hair. Trump is, of course, always perfectly hair-sprayed in official photos, while
this photo leads one to suspect a subtle dig at a President obsessed with whatever he
considers fake. Paparazzi's unofficial photos often have the extra *bite* that is the nourishment
of memes. The rest is left to meme generators which transform the photos, passing from the
mere visual level to a more complex level in which irony is the result of a regenerative
process often including written discourse.

In this case, captions have been added, as usual split into two lines; but while the
bottom caption merely has a contextualizing function, the top one creates ironic meaning. It
is a pun, based on "We shall overcome", the gospel song that became the anthem of the
Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. The verb is impertinently changed into "over comb",
making fun of Trump's dishevelled hair that needs much spray-work to be arranged in such
a way as to cover the presumably bald parts of his head but also recalls the expression 'to
comb over matters' suggesting the political attempt to conceal dysfunctionalities.

Similarly, the digital meme in Figure 8 right plays with the *Black Lives Matter*
activist movement created to intervene in the violence inflicted on black communities by
the state and vigilantes (https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/herstory). The ironic
replacement of 'black' with 'orange' makes fun of the strange colour of Trump's skin due
to excessive artificial tanning or 'wrong' make up. The shared idea of Trump's orange skin
is nothing new, as in 2016 even *Forbes* entitled an ironic article: "Trump could become the
first orange president", even mentioning some of the numerous social media posts about
'TrumpO'Lanterns' joking about his resemblance to a pumpkin.

Figure 9
Examples of the Tiny Trump series of digital memes.

Other memes use no words as the very manipulation of some details in the matrix creates ironic meaning, as for instance in the *Tiny Trump* series, in which Donald Trump is downsized so as to appear very small when compared to the rest of the picture (Figure 9). In these cases, an example of Type A remixing, the meme's recontextualisation expresses a visual metaphor. Figure 9 left has two levels of textual construction: first Trump is downsized so as to look like a mini-him; second the paper he is signing is transformed into a baby's doodle, implying that not only does Trump look like a baby, but also that he acts like one. Figure 9 right instead shows Trump with the other world leaders in Taormina for the 2017 G7. Merkel's disappointment with Trump is ironically conveyed thanks to a downsized Trump in a baby car stroller which he pretends to be driving but is instead pushed along by Merkel. Moreover, baby Trump's big head may refer to his conceitedness and arrogance and his sports clothes and improbable basketball cap point to the idea that he is out of his depth in this political context. The indifference of the other world leaders is manifest and even Merkel is looking in another direction. The digital meme ironically emphasises Trump's isolation in international politics and also suggests a possible reason for this, as he is presented as a self-centred baby who needs to be looked after.

4. Special effects captured through multimodal analysis

Different types of texts can, as we have seen, be the basis for expressing memes and while there is no specific rule about their outward form, various resources are used time and again to produce memes' special effects. For instance, downsizing Trump, which can be done in several ways, e.g. by keeping the original body proportions, or reducing only the body and maintaining the original size of the head, or even by changing details of his features, clothing or adding extra elements and so on. What makes them recognizable as digital memes is the result of the matrix' manipulation, that has to be blatant and visually salient. Baldry and Thibault (2006, p. 199) discuss *visual salience* in reference to multimodal transcription of texts and draw from the Gestalt tradition arguing that salient objects tend to be more substantial and distinct with respect to their background, in terms of solidity and colour. The salient objects in digital memes such as the ones in Figure 8 are those which have been *photoshopped* and which emerge from the background owing to their size, compactness and unexpected relations with other objects.

Some constraints on such manipulations are to be expected for those memes that are created through meme generators for smartphones, which typically produce texts such as the ones in Figure 7. Creativity is limited within the boundaries provided by a meme generator which 'protects' the format but at the same time constrains the evolution of the genre. The predetermined position of the top and bottom captions, markers of the most common type of memes, leaves little space for variation but includes the possibility of opting for a single caption, even though this might make the text look a little odd. Indeed, the positioning of written discourse in digital memes is far from being a secondary feature. On the contrary, it shows how the close relation between the two components of digital memes, matrix and language, is expressed. Even though today the two-line caption is the most frequent, this type of layout is an optional element in the genre (see for instance Figure 10) as written discourse has been included in digital memes in different ways over time.
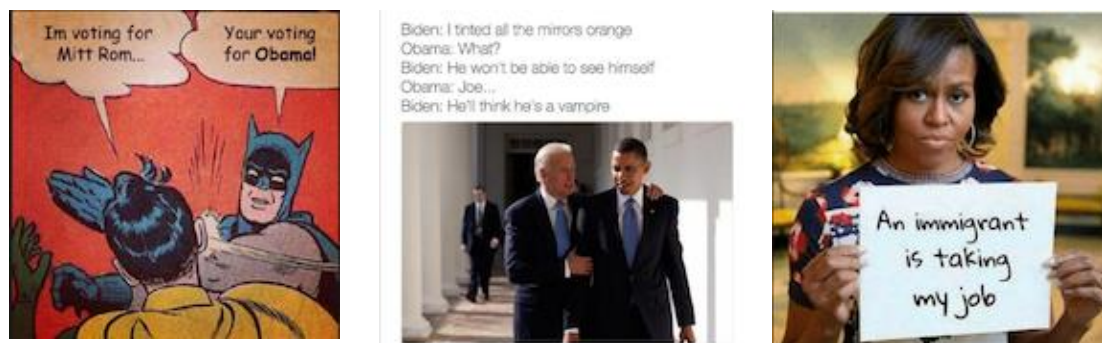
Figure 10
Different outlooks of digital memes.

Figure 10 presents some of the various possible alternatives to the typical two-line captions:

a) written discourse can be placed in speech bubbles (Figure 10 left) pasted into the matrix. As prefabricated multimodal units, or clusters (Baldry, Thibault 2006, p. 9), they are typically customised with contextually appropriate words. However, in Figure 10 left, the words chosen are not appropriate to the matrix's original context as, on the contrary, they are the only components that build the digital meme's new context;

b) written discourse is organized in surreal conversations, usually added to the top or bottom of the picture (Figure 10 centre). The words outside the frame are separated physically but not functionally, as they express how to interpret what is inside (Baldry, Thibault 2006, p. 10). In Figure 10 centre, the dialogue above the matrix presents an innovative metacomment, one that has nothing to do with what was originally being said in the matrix, being one of the endless possible ways of re-interpreting the matrix;

c) written discourse replaces the one previously existing in the matrix (Figure 10 right). Placards are clusters with the same function as thought bubbles. Thus, placards offer a view from inside the picture of the inner thoughts and beliefs of the person represented, in the case of digital memes, often with an ironic and irreverent intent.

Given that they can have different outlooks, what makes digital memes recognizable as a genre? One might easily answer that the combination of a visual element and captions is enough to identify digital memes, at least those created through meme generators. This is partly true, as the combination of the two elements provides the genre with visual cohesion. The notion of cohesion as developed by Halliday and Hasan (2013 [1976]) and expanded by others (Christiansen 2011; Ulrych 2009) is associated with language, but can be easily adapted to complex intersemiotic texts such as digital memes, as the association of written

discourse to a visual element is a continuity-producing factor that identifies texts as belonging to the same genre. However, this visual cohesive connection is not enough, as the visual element and the captions need some overall coherence as well, given that coherence and cohesion jointly contribute towards creating textuality, the property of texts that distinguishes them from a random sequence of unconnected sentences (Ulrych 2009, p. 53).

This is also true for intersemiotic units such as digital memes which pare the verbal to the minimum; if, for instance, we swapped the captions for the memes in Figure 8, adding the 'we shall overcomb' caption to Figure 8 right, the ironic meaning would be lost, as the overcombing would find no corresponding visual item. Similarly, the visual item showing Trump's windswept hair would lose its ironic meaning if matched with the 'orange lives matter' caption. This underscores the fact that digital memes are not random captions added to random pictures, but the result of a creative process that would be impossible to realise without some, however unconscious, awareness of textuality, a matter which invites future possible research into 'failed' digital memes, and the reasons why they failed.

5. The characteristics of an emergent political subgenre

The visibility that the *Hope* poster matrix has gained though viral spreading and its constant remix has made it so successful that the original author, Farey, decided to resort to it to mark the 2017 Inauguration Day. Well aware of the changes in the cultural context, he designed a further *set* of images (Figure 11) in the same style as his 2008 artistic creation thus showing his understanding of the powerful potential of remix and, at the same time, taking back the authorship of the distinctive style he had created.

Figure 11
Farey's revivals of the *Hope* poster for the 2017 Inauguration Day.

Interestingly enough, the images shown in Figure 11 were distributed as placards during the 2017 Inauguration Ceremony but also printed as one-page ads in some newspapers, i.e. stepping back from the digital world and exploring alternative, dissemination media regardless of whether old or new. They were designed to attack racial and gender discrimination by echoing the principles of the U.S. Constitution whose incipit, 'We the people', is reproduced below each image. As such, they are a powerful expression of

identity. The women are portrayed in terms of their Latino and African American ethnicity. Their identity is established by details such as a flower pinned in their hair and dreadlocks, whereas the red, blue, grey and beige shades provide uniform skin colours cancelling out ethnic differences. This feature is 'carried over' from the 2008 *Hope* poster matrix as is the typical pattern of ironic inversion found in memes – in this case, once again part of the political attack on Trump. From this perspective, they have a rather special status as they are images created by a named author but share some characteristics of digital memes. The person portrayed is no longer a powerful and well-known man but an anonymous female, a young social 'underdog' tasked with standing up to powerful male politicians. The slogans underneath the visual items reinforce the commitment to making society more equal and supportive. That they were ultimately designed to generate politically-oriented memes also seems likely, as they were produced by the very same artist whose poster initiated the subgenre. Moreover, in the tradition of political satire they were produced with a provocative, ironic intent in relation to a highly-publicised political/institutional occasion: the inauguration of new President.

However, despite being in the style of the original poster, they add new dimensions which deepen the social protest and intuitively seem more than just a matrix designed to trigger meme generation. This impression is conveyed, in particular, by the last of the three memes, with its profound political statement in which a woman is characterised in relation to her religion thanks to the chador she is wearing. The fact that the chador comes in a star-and-stripes pattern, shows her desire to be protected and accepted by the US, despite its fear of terrorism, usually blindly associated with Muslims. The slogan underneath the visual element quoting the Constitution conveys the idea that America should overcome fear of diversity. Here the irony runs far deeper than any of the other images analysed so far. The image appears to be projecting itself as a timeless icon of US identity, on a par with, but also in many ways very different from, such icons of US identity as Uncle Sam.

5.1. Interpersonal and textual perspectives

Digital memes are premised on participation by reappropriation, on balancing the familiar and the foreign as new iterations intertwine with established ideas (Milner 2018). From an interpersonal perspective, digital memes are products of mobile culture that pinpoint collective identity (Melucci 2003). By creating digital memes, people unconsciously represent their need for immediate inclusion in today's mobile culture with which they strongly identify. This sense of membership is underscored by digital memes' frequently elliptic written discourse that gives hints, but makes no effort to explain, grounded as these hints are in a shared but unstated cultural background. The process starts from a 'common ground', a matrix such as a photo seen over and over again on the Internet, continues with personal additions and finishes by returning the reworked artefact to the community through dissemination on social media. Hence the move is from collective to individual and back to collective, as the individual contributions return to the community enriched with new perspectives. This is a circular form of communication and interaction typical of a culture based on speed and word limits.

Indeed, from a textual perspective, digital memes are based on the manipulation of shared and unshared information. They are successful thanks to the unexpected management of this relationship. This reflection on digital memes' textual composition reminds us of Halliday's concern with relating the units of information in a clause to the previous discourse, both with reference to the sequence of items in clauses and with the information they carry over to subsequent clauses. While the *Theme* is the starting point and the *Rheme* is what follows and includes the rest of the message, in digital memes the *Theme* is the

matrix and the *Rheme* is what concludes the manipulation process. However, Halliday's distinction between *Given* and *New* information also seems to be applicable to digital memes. In Halliday's view, the *Given* information is the information the speaker treats as known, the common ground that is assumed to be shared with the addressor (Halliday 1967; Halliday, Hasan 2013 [1976]), while the *New* information is the information the addressor treats as unknown to the addressee, which is not recoverable from the text, as it may be something not mentioned before or something which is unexpected. In a language such as English which has a rather strict word order that privileges starting the sentence with the common ground, *Given* often corresponds to the *Theme*, unless the latter is marked. Translating the idea of information management into a multimodal text such as a digital meme, immediately leads us to identify the *Given* information with the matrix and the *New* information with its manipulation. However, as part of the meaning remains implicit in digital memes and is understood only by the people who share the same context of culture and the same collective identity, at a higher level of analysis, the *Given* information is the cultural context that the author assumes the user knows, while the *New* information is the reorganization of the matrix by adding captions that create a new text. Seen in this light, the management of *Given* and *New* information merges textual and interpersonal functions in a more complex vision of discourse that affects its subsequent analysis.

Other interpretations of *Given* and *New* further reinforce their applicability to digital memes. For instance when Prince (1981, p. 235) states that a referent is *New* if it is introduced into the discourse for the first time, we can identify this with one of the many digital memes created from a matrix. But Prince also defines the *Brand New* referent as the one created by a speaker and simply unused or not mentioned in the discourse, even if the listener/reader/viewer is assumed to have knowledge of it, which seems applicable to the *first* manipulation of a new photo, that is the first digital meme created after a matrix, which may or may not give rise to a series of subsequent digital memes. Put another way, digital memes are an exercise in 'spontaneous' text management requiring a high degree of understanding of textual processes. Without knowledge of the way in which texts function, people would simply not be able to create digital memes, as their construction is in actual fact a powerful expression of textual processes.

5.2. Genre dynamics

Genre has been the object of analysis for many years and different approaches have emphasised many different aspects (Bhatia 1993, 1996; Martin 1985; Swales 1990). All the approaches, however, are grounded on the recognition of conventionalised, rather than innovative, aspects of genre construction. The identification of genres on the basis of some conventionalised features seems to account for their static nature. Yet this is far from reality.

	GENRE	AUTHOR	SITUATIONAL CONTEXT	MEDIA TOOLS	DISSEMINATION
1	Printed Poster	Shepard Farey	Political rallies	Printing/manufacturing (posters, placards, pins)	Real word handouts and sales
2	Digital Poster	Anyone in Obama's promotional team	E-mail attachment	Computer E-mail server	Internet
3	Digital Meme	Unknown	Internet galleries Social networks	*obamicon.me* Meme generator websites Photo editing software	Internet
			Social networks	Smartphones Apps	Internet

Table 1
Genre evolution of the *Hope* poster: from poster to digital meme.

Diachronic studies confirm that genres are constantly developing. Berkenkotter (2008) dwells on the importance of historical genre analysis and Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) apply their sociocognitive theory of genres to the evolution over time of scientific publications. Genres *must* evolve or are destined to perish (Bakhtin 2010; Lomborg 2011), especially in a changing environment such as the Internet (Garzone 2012; Giltrow, Stein 2009). Genre analysis becomes an even more critical task in mobile communication as textual evolution has to keep pace with technological innovation.

As a genre, digital memes are a combination of dynamic and static features. The peculiarity of their birth as a genre is that initially they were the digital evolution of pre-existing genres (e.g. photos, cartoons, posters). They evolved into a new genre with its own internal conventions. The basic creative process is one that *overtly* recombines pre-existing textual elements adding a personal contribution in the form of captions, resized and pasted elements and so on. Table 1 illustrates the stages of genre evolution from the *Hope* poster into a digital meme. As Step 1 in Table 1 shows, the status of the *Hope* image, that shifted from the original genre, i.e. poster, to others, placard, ad, leaflet, and then digital meme, is that of a *cultural* meme, a unit of repetition, according to the definition given by Richard Dawkins (1976). The move from paper to digitalised form, represented in Table 1 as Step 2, marked the first step in genre evolution that was completed when meme generators made it possible for anyone to create digital memes, replicas in the same iconic style but with different photos. Step 3 is twofold, as it reflects the coexistence of Internet and mobile cultures, which use different media and tools which are responsible for the quality and quantity of digital memes. In fact, the evolution of part of Internet culture into mobile culture (Goggin 2008; Katz, Aakhus 2002) has made a difference as regards the speed of interaction, that is essentially based on quick and short exchanges, e.g. tweets or digital memes, but which has limited affordances as apps for smartphones usually only allow users to create digital memes similar to those presented in Figure 5. The other types of digital memes, those that require a photo editing process and need computer and expertise, are slower to produce, a drawback in fast mobile culture. While they are less numerous, they are often more outstanding and, of course, less ephemeral.

Genre evolution has led to the loss of individual authorship, because in the context of the Internet it is often impossible for it to be determined. When authorship 'changes hands', it is usually an anonymous process, part of a digital meme's identity as an instrument

of collective thinking and populist empowerment. When launched, artefacts such as digital memes are shared so many times that the original author's paternity/maternity is assumed not to exist. In other words, the birth and evolution of digital memes as a genre confirms the power of regeneration and reappropriation of textual elements, in a process in which nothing is created or destroyed, but merely transformed. The emerging issues of intellectual property as well as of infringing copyright law are under analysis (Aufderheide 2014; Gallagher 2017) being the inevitable results of a remix culture that bases creativity on participation and recombination and produces remixed texts, such as mashup videos and digital memes, based on shared authorship and wide dissemination (Jenkins 2009b, 2009c). Lessing (2008) has linked reflection on creative art through digital technologies with copyright law, providing a glimpse of the future of a society that values remix as a form of literacy and creativity.

5.3. Genre Hybridity

Even though we want to identify texts that perfectly realise their generic features, in reality they often come with mixed features, embedded within other texts and in hybrid form (Bhatia 1997a, 1997b; Fairclough 1993). Genre hybridity is such a frequent phenomenon in the digital network context (Howard 2015) that it can be seen as unmarked normality; digital memes, with their *overt* foundations in textual processes of blending, remixing and composing, are the perfect example of this. In genre hybridity, two genres fuse to create texts that share some of the textual features of both of them. However, digital memes *also* have a special inclination for offering prompts to *other* genres such as cartoons. Superficially, comics and cartoons may seem to resemble digital memes, but this closeness is only apparent. While digital memes recontextualize a matrix, cartoons and comics present original material, often with constant components, e.g. the presence of recurrent characters. Precisely because Trump is such a recurrent character in digital memes, some overlap, as Figure 12 suggests, can occur.

Figure 12
An example of genre hybridization.

Here, the context is created by the round table and the plaque on it reading: SUMMIT; a further specification is provided by the flags labelling the backs of the seats around the table, which definitely refer to an international political meeting. The surprising element is the highchair reserved for the United States, as specified by the American flag on the seatback; and even more ironic – or horrifying – is the fact that the highchair is also the headchair, implying that the prominent position in the meeting is to be held by a baby. The well-known

meme of Trump behaving like a baby thus provides the basis for the cartoon's ironic intent and the lack of language makes the ironic meaning more immediate and extremely cogent.

6. Conclusions

Digital memes are an expression of shared authorship and shared feelings, more often than not of a political nature. The process of creation is made easy through user-friendly apps for smartphones, allowing virtually anyone to produce new digital memes. This is, at the same time, their strong and weak point. While in the first stage only an artist or graphic expert can work on the matrix, today the Internet has transformed memes into mass products, part visual, part verbal messages disseminated through social networks with a simple click. Yet many failed memes exist where the desire to produce further manipulation has simply 'fizzled out'. Indeed, in order to be successful, the production of a new meme requires that their multilayered meanings be unpacked, reconstructing them and letting them live and circulate in their natural environment, i.e. Internet/mobile culture, without dampening or extinguishing their vitality. As such they constitute a new form of digital discourse that requires a considerable degree of sophistication on the part of the author in terms of cultural awareness and understanding of digital communication, beyond and above digital skills and a good sense of humour.

Thus, the digital meme 'phenomenon' is far more complex than at first appears to be the case: digital memes are rather more than just visual/verbal items with humoristic intent. They are instantly and instinctively understood but the reaction they provoke has far deeper implications and is surrounded by a complex labyrinth of meanings of which many users are only partly aware and not always able to reconstruct. Such is the complexity of digital memes as multilayered texts that, when coming to terms with the meaning-making processes, the analyst, too, needs to find new tools and adapt existing ones. Hence any critical approach to understanding and analysing digital memes cannot ignore semiotics, politics and history which are their cultural foundations (Lolli 2017).

Some analysts believe that over-replicating a matrix will lead to its weakening and normalization, as the genre will lose its biting power (Lolli 2017). Moreover, the democratization brought in by the Internet is not necessarily matched by an increase in quality, so that even though everyone has the chance to have their say in digital discourse, the risk is that some of them will not have much to say. However, digital memes are an interesting case that testifies to the genre's vitality and transformative power, in a continuous balance between standardization and innovation. Predicting whether their evolution as a genre will move towards standardization or towards subversion of the current features is almost impossible, as many options appear to remain open.

The passage of the *Hope* poster from a paper form to a digital one has been matched by its return to a paper form in the *Private Eye* cover, a fact that may be interpreted as the revenge of the 'good old' traditional genres over new futuristic ones. However, it also points to the fact that popular forms of expression, such as murals, graffiti and other forms of street art, have at the very least the habit of interacting with and influencing mainstream forms of expression and communication, something which analysts of contemporary discourse need to engage with, and reflect on, carefully if digital discourse is to be adequately and successfully described.

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