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Sorted for Memes and Gifs:

Visual Media and Everyday Digital Politics

Jonathan Dean

A few days after the 2017 UK General Election, the Metro newspaper published a feature entitled 'The Memes that Decided the Outcome of the General Election' (White, 2017), reflecting the widely held view that Labour's better than anticipated performance was in part explainable by Labour activists' astute use of social media (Norris, 2017; Goes, 2018). While pulling pack from some of the hyperbole about social media in the Metro piece, the aftermath of the 2017 General Election nonetheless provides a timely opportunity to reflect on the current state of existing political science scholarship on digital politics.

In this paper, I argue that there is a certain unease, or even squeamishness, in the way in which political scientists (particularly in the UK) tackle social media and digital politics. This, in turn, results in a number of key developments in digital politics falling under our discipline's radar. To flesh out these claims, part one of the paper highlights some of the methodological assumptions that underpin this squeamishness. Part two, drawing on a recent research project on the changing shape of the British left, highlights a number of key trends in digitally mediated political participation which the political science community has hitherto downplayed, or overlooked altogether. In particular, I stress the role of the visual: for many politically engaged citizens, politics is enacted in and through visual media cultures such as gifs, memes and other forms of shareable visual content. More broadly, the turn to the visual – what we might call the "memeification" of politics – directs attention both to the affective dynamics of politics, and to the protean, everyday nature of digitally-mediated political engagement. Rather than seeing this turn to the visual as something unusual or exceptional it is, I suggest, part of the constitutive fabric of everyday political engagement.

Against this backdrop, the third section mines recent literature in media and communication studies to articulate a less "squeamish" approach to the analysis of digitally mediated politics. While acknowledging the multiplicity of conceptual and methodological approaches to the study of politicised digital media, I suggest that the recent turn to virtual immersive ethnographies pursued by the likes of Jessica Beyer and Adrienne Masanari could provide useful methodological insights. In the final section, I articulate a possible research agenda. More broadly, I encourage political scientists to see socially mediated cultural production and exchange not as some frivolous activity on the margins of politics, but as increasingly central to how large numbers of predominantly young citizens experience politics.

Political Science and the Problem of Social Media

While few political scientists would doubt the importance of social media, our discipline's capacity to capture the feel and character of socially mediated forms of political participation is hindered, I argue, by three sets of assumptions about the nature, scope and purpose of political science research, as well as an implicit self-representation of the figure of the political scientist.

The first problem concerns the priority afforded to broad-brush diagnostic analyses of aggregate citizen opinions, values, voting preferences and election results. This was evident in political scientists' responses to the 2017 UK General Election (see, for example, Goodwin and Heath, 2017; Jennings and Stoker, 2017; Denver, 2018; Dorey, 2017) and Brexit. Consider, for example, a recent special issue of British Politics on the politics of Brexit. Despite the importance of social media in shaping the wider discursive and affective contours of the Brexit referendum and its aftermath, the articles tend to either totally forego any mention of the role of social media (see, for example, Marsh, 2018) or mention it in passing without subjecting it to sustained analysis (see, for instance, Copus, 2018). My point here is not to churlishly dispute the value of such analyses, as all these pieces are insightful and valuable on their own terms. My point is, rather, that the disproportionate dominance and visibility of aggregate analyses of public opinion, election results etc. – reflecting the tendency to equate political science with what Stuart Hall called 'the psephological equation'

(Hall, [1966] 2016, p.88) – has a number of consequences for how the object of political science is constructed, and the role of social media therein. Such work produces an implicit self-representation of the political scientist as above the fray of political engagement, looking down from a raised vantage point. As a result, the specific texture, feel and character of digitally-mediated participation recedes from view, becoming subsumed into broad aggregations of votes, values, opinions etc.

Second, when social media is taken seriously, it tends to be framed in consequentialist terms. By this, I mean that social media is interrogated not because it is seen as constitutive of politics, but because it is seen to impact upon politics. As Brassett and Sutton (2017) have argued, this is a more general tendency for the political analysis of satire, comedy and popular culture to be 'reduced to an instrumental logic of 'impact'' (2017, p. 246). This tacit framing of the politics/social media relation is present in, for example, Helen Margetts's post-election observation that '2017 may be remembered as the first election where it seems to have been the social media campaigns that really made the difference to the relative fortunes of the parties, rather than traditional media' (Margetts, 2017, p. 386). Similarly, Dommett and Temple's (2018) study of digital campaigning in the 2017 election examines whether and how campaign material disseminated via social media impacted on the results. Again, while such work is of course extremely valuable, it still tends to cast social media as distinct from "proper" politics. Social media is seen as a medium through which political campaigns are directed, or as something that may have consequences for (electoral) politics, but it is tacitly framed as not, in and of itself, constitutive of the texture and practice of politics.

The third problem is to do with a certain squeamishness towards the affective and emotional dynamics of politics. This is mostly manifest as an absence, i.e. a discussion of politics in terms of public opinion, party policy programmes etc. without consideration of the feelings and affects that underpin them (see Hayton, 2018). As Foster et al found in a widely cited analysis of politics and IR undergraduate degree programmes in the UK, 'there is considerable bias towards institutionalised forms of power located within and through institutions, government and governance', which comes at the expense of a consideration of the role of the private sphere and the affective dynamics of political life (Foster et al, 2013, p.568). Occasionally, however, a more explicit defence of politics as (relatively) unemotional is made, such as in Gerry Stoker oft-cited remark that politics 'is not the most edifying human experience. It is rarely an experience of self-actualization and more often an

experience of accepting second-best' (Stoker 2006, p. 72). While Stoker is making a specific point, it reflects a wider sensibility in political scholarship in which, as Laura Jenkins argues in a discussion of the work of Stoker (alongside Colin Hay and Matthew Flinders) there is 'a tendency to prioritise thought over emotion and to imply…. that emotions cloud reasoning capacities' (Jenkins, 2018, p.195). This unease that surrounds political scientists' discussions of social media is, therefore, symptomatic of a more general wariness of digging into the feelings and affective dynamics that underpin everyday forms of political participation and engagement.

To reiterate: none of this is to say that political scientists have not made valuable contributions to the study of digital politics. Consider, for example, Usherwood and Wright (2017) on the role of twitter during the 2016 EU Referndum campaign, Ohme (2018) on the changing relationship between citizenship and digitally-mediated participation, or Leston-Bandeira and Bender (2013) on parliamentary engagement with social media. However, I do want to suggest that deep, sustained analysis of digitally-mediated engagement tends to be viewed with a certain squeamishness from political scientists, and as such there are important features of citizen engagement in a digital age which we tend to overlook. Consequently, if we are serious about capturing the character of contemporary forms of (digital) political participation, we require a diversification of our conceptual and methodological tools.

Visual Culture and the 'Memeification' of Politics

This preliminary analysis of our discipline's nervousness towards digital politics invites a further more empirical question, namely, what are we missing? What kinds of developments in the practice of digital politics are falling under our radar? My answer here is indicative rather then exhaustive. However, one particularly significant development concerns the increasing prevalence of visual digital media in everyday political engagement. This emerged as a key theme during a recent research project on the changing character of British left politics, in which we were struck by the centrality afforded to social media in general, and visual media such as memes and gifs in particular, in left activists' practices and sensibilities in the context of the resurgence of the Labour left following Jeremy Corbyn's securing of the Labour leadership (see author, 2017). Memes, a portmanteau of mimesis and genes,

originally coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976, refer to 'digital objects that riff on a given visual, textual or auditory form and are then appropriated, re-coded, and slotted back into the internet infrastructures they came from' (Nooney and Portwood-Stacer, 2014: 249). More prosaically, memes typically consist of images accompanied by text. They often involve the use of humour, irony and subversion, and are, above all shareable, open to very rapid circulation over a number of different social media platforms. Gifs are simply animated memes, often consisting of short looped video clips shared for the purposes of conveying emotion or a reaction to an event or an utterance.

A striking feature of the 2017 UK General Election was the pervasiveness of memes and gifs as a way of conveying political values, sensibilities or opinions (Segesten and Bossetta, 2017). Among Labour supporters, memes and gifs featuring Jeremy Corbyn and other high profile Labour figures were circulated ad infinitum. Among the more memorable of these included Obi Wan Corbyn memes, in which Corbyn was favourably compared to Star Wars character Obi Wan Kanobi (made possible in part by Corbyn's physical resemblance to Alec Guinness) (see fig. 1). Furthermore, a popular gif showed Steven Gerrard celebrating his goal for Liverpool in the 2005 Champions League final that precipitated his team's unlikely comeback against AC Milan, but with the faces of Corbyn and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell superimposed onto those of the Liverpool players, a humorous comment on Labour's suddenly improved poll ratings. Finally, perhaps the most widely-shared Corbyn tweet of the election season consisted of a short video of Corbyn walking down a flight of steps towards the House of Commons a few days after the election, during which he claps his hands and says "we're back and we're ready for it all over again". One enterprising twitter user, @officialwinemom, tweeted the video with the caption "when you walk back into the sesh after throwing up" ("sesh" being short for "session", British youth slang for an evening of heavy drinking), and received no fewer than 115,000 retweets at the time of writing.

{Insert fig.1 here}
Fig. 1: "Obi Wan Corbyn" (originally posted by @DylanStrain, 04/08/15)

While such practices may seem frivolous, the circulation of digital visual media can play a crucial role in political community formation. To capture these dynamics in detail would of course require a level of detailed empirical analysis that goes beyond the scope of the paper, but a few points are worth making. First, meme-making is extremely common, to such an

extent that the quick-fire mocking –up of a meme or gif is an increasingly normalised mode of response to a political news story, development, comment piece etc. Second, visual media such as memes and gifs serve what, following Althusser (2014), we might call an interpellative function, that is they 'hail' the viewer into identifying with them, either by agreeing with the political sentiments expressed therein, or by finding them funny (or not). This in turn means that the circulation of digital visual media often serves to shore up political identities, affiliations, and the antagonisms associated with them. A good example of this relates to the widespread circulation of a composite image of nine white men who expressed a range of right-wing and/or pro-Brexit views on the BBC's Question Time programme just prior to the 2017 election. Dubbed the "wall of gammon" on account of the somewhat ruddy complexion of the men featured, the meme soon became ubiquitous among young left-wing twitter users, with "gammon" even becoming a widely-used shorthand for older white male Brexit voter (see fig. 2). The "gammon" meme testifies to a number of broader features. These are: first, the capacity of memes to consolidate peoples' political allegiance (by seeing themselves as opposed to everything the "wall of gammon" represents); second, memes' capacity to mock opponents and thus perhaps entrench political antagonisms (indeed several Brexit supporters have argued that "gammon" is a slur akin to racism) and, third, the capacity for memes to shape the broader political discourse (given that "gammon" has now permeated the broader lexicon).

{Insert fig. 2 here}
Fig. 2: the "Wall of Gammon" (originally posted by @bendavis_86, 08/06/17)

More generally, as Tim Highfield puts it, 'irreverent and playful practices, from memes and image macros to parody and satire, are recurring elements of social media activity in general, including political coverage' (2016: 41). Overall, then, there is considerable evidence that digital visual media such as memes and gifs are in many respects an unremarkable part of the everyday vernacular of politics for large numbers of politically engaged citizens, and their playful character renders them profoundly affective insofar as they can be sources of pleasure, fun, connection or anger and irritation, depending on the context. Irrespective of whether one thinks the "memeification" of British politics is a positive development, one should not underestimate its significance.

Re-Orienting the Study of Digital Politics

But if we accepted that the "memeification" of politics is a development that requires scholarly attention, the question arises of what kinds of conceptual and methodological tools we can turn to in order to capture these processes. This section turns to relevant literature in media and communication studies to try draw out a range of methodological approaches which may be of use to political scientists seeking to better understand the memeification of politics, and indeed the texture of everyday digitally-mediated political engagement more broadly. That being said, media and communication studies is of course not a homogenous field. Indeed, there are four bodies of literature germane to our analysis here.

The first is what we might call the "mainstream" political communications literature. While wide ranging, this literature is concerned with mapping the changing character of political and civic information, focussing on interactions between "traditional" and digital media, and the impact of these interactions on political discourses and institutions. While some of this work emphasises the continued hold of political elites (Stromer-Galley, 2014), and some highlights the capacity of new media to weaken traditional media's grip on political agenda-setting (Meraz, 2009; 2011), most of this literature stresses the hybrid, intertwined character of traditional and new media (Chadwick, 2013). The work of Andrew Chadwick looms particularly large here: eschewing overblown claims about the revolutionary character of digital media, Chadwick has, in collaboration with James Dennis (Chadwick and Dennis, 2017), highlighted the delicate interplay between the "horizontal" and hierarchical/professionalised organisational logics within campaign groups such as 38 Degrees. Elsewhere, in collaboration with Jennifer Stromer-Galley (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016), Chadwick has highlighted the capacity of political parties – including, but not limited to, the British Labour Party – to 'renew themselves from the outside in. Citizens are breathing new life into the party form, remaking parties in their own changed participatory image, and doing so via digital means' (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016, p. 285).

A second broad body of literature concerns a range of innovative techniques and methodologies deployed within media studies and internet science aimed at tracing broad patterns of online interaction and engagement. Such approaches can include, for example, the application of the sociological traditional of social network analysis to online networks

(Scott, 2017), semantic analysis of large volumes of social media content (Bontcheva and Rout, 2014; Maynard et. al., 2017); and/or sentiment analysis of online networks, focussing on the online circulation of feelings and opinions (Pozzi et al 2017). Such work is helpful insofar as it stresses the ways in which the more textured, located online practices outlined above reflect, and are situated within, large yet shifting and dynamic networks of interaction and exchange. Indeed, while my interest here is on fine-grained interpretation of visual media, such an enterprise need not be at odds with larger-scale, macro analysis. In a recent contribution to Information, Communication and Society Pearce et al (2018) offer an innovative, very large n, analysis of how visual media circulate across different social media platforms, an approach they christen "visual cross platform analysis" (VCPA). And while most large n social media analyses within internet science tend to be somewhat removed from political concerns (although Maynard et al (2017) is an exception), there is considerable scope for political scientists to ape the methods and approaches found in media studies and internet science to produce broad aggregate mappings of online political behaviour (and to some extent this project is being taken up: see, for example Usherwood and Wright (2017)).

A third body of communication studies literature is more overtly pertinent to political concerns, namely the work on the role of social media platforms amidst more radical and dramatic periods of resistance and revolution. This was particularly the case during the various uprisings of 2010-11 including, but not limited to, Occupy, the Spanish Indignados, the Arab revolutions, and the UK student movement. While some of the more technologically determinist accounts of these movements are overplayed, there is broad agreement that social media facilitated the decentralised, networked modes of organisation characteristic of many of these movements (Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015). As Bennett and Segerberg (2013, p. 2) put it, these movements were characterised by a shift from collective to connective action, the latter characterised by fluid, horizontal, inclusive and 'easily personalised' 'action frames'. And as the title of Zizi Papacharissi's Affective Publics (2015) suggests, these works all, to varying degrees, stress the affective dimensions of digital politics, i.e. the feelings and sensations that sustain digitally mediated participation. Papacharissi's work in particular provides a vivid sense of what it mean to place feelings and sentiments centre stage in the analysis of digital politics (in stark contrast to the political science literature and, to a lesser extent, in the "mainstream" political communications literature). That said, a possible limitation of the work of Papacharissi and others (at least for the purpose of the problem under investigation here), is that, in anchoring their discussions of

digital politics in major events such as the Occupy movement and the 2011 Arab uprisings, they tend to, as David Karpf puts it, 'focus attention on major events as they occur' (Karpf, 2017: 198), at the expense of the protean and the everyday.

Therefore, perhaps more useful for us is a range of recent analyses of contemporary digital politics which are more ethnographic in their focus. Recent years have seen extensive use of sustained qualitative analyses of how citizens in a variety of fora participate in digitally-mediated political spaces. Ariadne Vromen, Michael Xenos and Brian Loader, for example, have conducted a number of studies that aim to capture the nature of what they call 'everyday political talk', via focus groups and other qualitative methods that examine 'how civically active young people understand their own engagement' (Vromen et al, 2015, p. 83).

A number of other recent studies also stress the importance of deep, immersive analyses that seek to capture not so much that impact of digital spaces on politics, but rather the shared cultural norms and practices that constitute different types of politicised online spaces. Jessica Beyer's 2014 book Expect Us, for example, offers a comparative ethnography of four online spaces (Anonymous, Pirate Bay, World of Warcraft and IGN.com). While she concedes these sites 'do not fit easily into conceptions of civil discourse' (Beyer, 2014, p. 2), she nonetheless argues that politics is 'being transformed in these unexpected, darker and more anonymous corners of the internet' (Beyer, 2014, p. 2). Against this backdrop, Beyer traces, first, the specific norms, assumptions and practices that constitute these four online spaces and, second, the conditions under which they mobilise politically. While her specific argument is that, perhaps counter-intuitively, online anonymity facilitates and encourages (rather than hinders) political mobilisation, the broader ethos of her approach, driven by a hermeneutic curiosity towards the cultural norms of these often exclusive and toxic online spaces, is highly instructive. Indeed, this toxicity is even more apparent in the work of Adrienne Massanari, who, like Beyer, conducted an immersive ethnographic study of Reddit (a large, open-sourced news and discussion site) (Massanari, 2015; 2017). Drawing on actor-network theory, Massanri's analysis offers an extremely rich, textured account of the ways in which the Reddit's cultural norms interact with its algorithms to sustained particular kinds of political and affective sensibilities. In particular, she discusses how Reddit plays host to a range of what she calls 'toxic technocultures', in which certain kinds of "geek" masculinity feed into broader cultural and political mobilisations against feminism and anti-racism (Massanari, 2017).

While the politicised online spaces that Beyer and, especially, Massanri analyse are in many respects deeply concerning, their analyses are nonetheless highly instructive. For one, they provide rich, fine-grained depictions of the everyday cultural norms and practices that sustain politicised online communities. As such, they offer an indication of what it might look like to undertake an analysis unencumbered by the squeamishness of digital media that currently besets much political science. A possible rejoinder, of course, is to suggest that these are merely niche online spaces, divorced from mainstream politics and society. However, as Beyer argues, one should not underestimate the capacity for niche online spaces to play a role in shaping the broader ideological contours of politics and society at large. Indeed, Angela Nagle (2017) even goes so far as to argue that the sustained waging of an online culture-war against feminism, anti-racism and progressive politics helped pave the way for Trump's election victory. Thus, even if one retains a purely "electoral" focus, one can ill afford to ignore the role of politicised online communities in shaping the contours of politics more broadly. The broader point, however, is that if one aspires to understand contemporary modes of political engagement, then political scientists would do well to learn methodological lessons from the likes of Beyer and Massanari, and set out producing a more diverse mapping of the practices, norms and discourses that characterise a broad range of different of politicised online spaces.

The Pleasures and Passions of Socially Mediated Politics: Towards a Research Agenda

My argument so far has been that we, as political analysts, would benefit from a thicker, more textured sense of the ways in which politically engaged citizens inhabit a range of online spaces, and engage in, for instance, the everyday production and exchange of forms of visual media such as memes and gifs. In so doing, I want to call attention to concrete, located forms of politicised visual media production, consumption and exchange. This is not because larger scale analyses of the dynamics of online networks are unimportant. It is, rather, because analyses of social media within political science tend to reflect our discipline's emphasis on aggregate analyses of voting preferences and public opinion. Consequently, there is value in redressing the balance such that we pay a little more attention to the personal, the situated and the affective. As Henry Jenkins et al put it in a 2002 'Manifesto for

the New Cultural Studies', 'we are interested in the everyday, the intimate, the immediate… we engage with popular culture as the culture that "sticks to the skin", that becomes so much a part of us that it becomes difficult to examine it from a distance' (Jenkins et al, 2002: 3). The increasing visibility of socially mediated visual culture in contemporary politics requires, I argue, a similar sensibility in political science, that is, an approach perhaps in some ways reminiscent of classical phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002), i.e. one that digs down into the analysis of how politics is experienced in an embodied way by citizens in their day to day lives.

As indicated, to address these issues poses significant methodological challenges, and may require the adoption of a range of concepts, methods and approaches to which many political scientists are unused. This might include, following Beyer and Massnari, deep, immersive digital ethnographies to understand logics of discussion, exchange, debate, dissent and community formation online. It might also entail greater literacy in tools from the study of visual cultures, i.e. the ability to "decode" the polysemic meanings of politically charged visual images that circulate online. But it could also entail research methods perhaps more familiar to political scientists, such as semi-structured interviews about activists' use of social media (as per Vromen et al, 2015), and, as indicated, there is likely to be considerable analytic mileage in seeking to combine fine-grained analysis of localised social media use with the production of large n analyses of politicised online networks.

There are a number of other questions that could fruitfully be pursued as part of an attempt to get to grips more fully with the contours of digitally-mediated politics. One concerns the historicity of the developments described above. While much discourse about social media tends to (over)-emphasise its novelty, a different tack would be to situated the frivolous and satirical political practices described here within a broader history of using visual media for the purposes of political satire. As such, it may well be that (in the UK context at least) the "memeification" of politics represents not a radical break but, rather, a re-working of a tradition of politicised visual humour that includes, but is not limited to, Spitting Image, Yes Minister and the work of the likes of Chris Morris, Armando Iannucci and Charlie Brooker (Brassett and Sutton, 2017; Fielding, 2014). A further avenue of enquiry relates to the relationship between online and offline participation. While I have argued strongly in favour of taking digital politics seriously, one should be wary of a crude technological determinism. Instead, one needs to be sensitive to the ways in which online forms of engagement and

participation are circumscribed by conditions offline (and vice versa). For instance, the ubiquity of digitally-mediated participation on the young British left is partly made possible by the presence of large numbers of young activists linked to Momentum and the wider Labour Party (Young, 2018). Indeed, the much documented failure of Activate – an attempt to launch a grassroots network of digitally savvy young Conservatives – is, arguably, testament to the need for effective online participation to be underpinned by a meaningful groundswell of offline mobilisation.

Finally, I want to respond to a possible objection, namely that in stressing the pleasure and humour of digitally-mediated engagement I am might 'naively advancing a dubious kind of populism', as Leisbet van Zoonen (2005: 147) put it in her description of the sceptical responses that greeted her affirmative account of the politics/pop culture relation. My point, however, is not that we should by definition offer a positive normative evaluation of the practices under discussion. And while admitting that only a relatively small percentage of the electorate engages in the production and circulation of politicised visual media, there can be little doubt that these kinds of practices constitute a significant part of contemporary modes of political engagement, and play a not insignificant role in shaping the contours of wider political discourses and antagonisms. Whether we "like" them or not, political scientists can thus ill afford to bypass these kinds of everyday citizen engagements if we are serious about properly coming to terms with the texture and character of political participation in a digital age.

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