

MEMETIC MOMENTS: THE SPEED OF TWITTER MEMES

Naomi Smith^a and Simon Copland^b

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how speed shapes internet culture. To do so, it analyses ‘memetic moments’ on Twitter, short-lived and rapidly circulated memes that quickly reach saturation. The paper examines two ‘memetic moments’ on Twitter in 2018 and 2019 to assess how they develop over time. Each case study comprises a week’s worth of relevant tweets that were analysed for temporal patterns. We analyse these ‘memetic moments’ through Lefebvre’s (2004) work on rhythmanalysis, arguing that the temporal patterns of memes on Twitter can be understood through his concepts of repetition, presence and dialogue. While seemingly trivial, memetic moments underscore the didactic relationship between social media and news media while also providing a way to approach complex social issues.

Keywords: memes; Twitter; speed; rhythmanalysis.

^a Federation University Australia, Australia

^b Australian National University, Australia

1 INTRODUCTION

While much research has focused on the various affordances of online platforms, researchers are also increasingly focusing on the logic of speed at the core of online life and its effect on social media platforms' emotional tenor and tone. Speed is increasingly revealing itself as central to online life, with digital platforms requiring constant attention from users to survive economically. Speed drives what some have described as the 'attention' economy (Terranova, 2012; Venturini, 2019), in which platforms seek ways to keep users' attention in order to drive profits. Speed is integral to this process, with its logic dominating both technical and social aspects of digital platforms.

Technically, for digital platforms to provide an enticing user experience, they need to load quickly and reliably. Facebook, for example, famously restricted its initial rollout to ensure it had the server capacity to meet user demand (Losse, 2012). Without server capacity to meet each new influx of users, the site could crash, load slowly or unreliably and, as a result, increase user attrition. Site design, focusing on speed and the sensation of smoothness it brings, is key to one of the most successful digital companies to date, specifically Facebook. This logic is also modelled across a range of other online platforms. The reliance of online platforms on speed is facilitated by the implementation of high-speed internet infrastructure, such as broadband, that encouraged more data-heavy use, including photo and video sharing.

Speed is not just about user experience or the temporal rhythm at which things happen, but also the scale and spread of content. As a consequence, issues like moderation on social platforms become increasingly complex. The volume of content is vast and continues to grow daily. While the scale, growth and production of content is the focus of much scholarly discussion of the problem of online moderation (Gillespie, 2019; Roberts, 2019), we argue so too is the factor of speed. Speed is an important part of how information flows and circulates online. The logic of speed even permeates the rapid cycle nature of policy change in companies like Facebook, which often change policy on a fortnightly basis. Working towards a sociology of digital temporality is an important part of analysing the contemporary digital landscape.

Current analysis of the dynamics of speed frequently assumes it to be one of the more destructive elements of digital platforms. Large social media platforms have been associated with or blamed for the rapid spread of 'fake' or 'junk news' (Venturini, 2019), disinformation (O'Neil & Jensen, 2020), conspiracy theories (Tuters, Jokubauskaitė & Bach, 2018) and hateful content (e.g. Massanari, 2017; Salter, 2018). Speed plays an integral role in the spread of this material, with some, in turn, arguing for digital platforms to attempt to 'slow down' discourse online. Suggestions have included the removal or limiting of 'sharing' functions such as the sharing button on Facebook or Retweets on Twitter (Mirani, 2020), as well as the removal of voting functions, such as the like button on Facebook or the voting

function on Reddit (Cook, 2019). These functions play an integral role in boosting and in turn spreading popular content. Recently, in the lead up to the 2020 US Presidential election, Twitter changed the retweet button to default to the “quote tweet” function, turning a one click process into a two click one, and hopefully adding a moment of consideration (or friction) into the retweeting process (Hatmaker, 2020).

It is the intersection of speed, memes and social media that we examine in this paper. Specifically, we examine two memetic moments on Twitter to interrogate the role of speed in the creation and circulation of memes on Twitter. In this paper, we contend that speed can also create a sense of joy, entertainment and even important discussion online. We examine the spread of two memes across 2018 and 2019 on Twitter. These memes focused on political issues in the United States and began after initial tweets, which were then parodied by thousands of users across quick timeframes. These copies and remixes created what we describe as ‘emergent memes’ or ‘memetic moments’, which not only function as entertainment, but also facilitate discussion of important political issues.

In this paper, we do two things. First, we analyse the dynamics of the spread of the two identified memes. We do this by conducting a temporal analysis of the development of these memes, conducting an in-depth reading of how these memes developed over time. In doing so, we explore the role of speed in the spread of this material and the dialectical relationship between Twitter memes and the mass media.

2 MEMES AND/AS DIGITAL CULTURE

Memes are a distinctive hallmark of digital culture. Memes are generally jokes that emerge as a by-product of digital culture. Internet memes, Nissenbaum and Shifman (2015) argue, are digital objects that follow a shared pattern or characteristics that allow them to be identified as a unified group. Scholars have argued for the importance of memes as a “prism for shedding light on aspects of contemporary digital culture” (Shifman, 2012, p. 190). Most scholarship examining memes focuses on template style image-macro memes such as the ‘first world problems’ or ‘lol cat’ memes that rely on a text/image combination, also called image macro memes (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). Specifically, memes are a part of participatory digital culture, which Wiggins and Bowers (2012) argue possess a virtual physicality that renders them observable social artifacts in internet culture.

The memes share unifying aesthetic and linguistic cues; this includes the font choice and the central image. Some scholars have argued that other forms of viral content creation as also memes, such as the ‘It Gets Better’ videos produced in response to homophobic bullying (Gal, Shifman & Kampf, 2015). However, the majority of research that considers memes identifies their humour as a quality that makes them distinct from other forms of viral content. Template or image-based memes are often complex and intertextual artefacts of internet subcultures,

requiring insider knowledge to be correctly read and interpreted. At their core, memes are media-rich jokes that sprawl across form and content (Miltner, 2014). They are commonly conceptualised as a visual, not textual genre, although image-macro memes rely on both visual and text elements for interpretation. Research investigating the social implications of memes is a broad field, covering everything from rhetoric to meme warfare (Bapna & Lokhande 2021). Bapna and Lokhande identify memes as part of what they argue is the ‘aestheticisation’ of politics within India and beyond (2021, p. 201). They also argue that memes are a way of ‘microdosing’ political content amongst more general, humorous content on, for example, Instagram meme accounts. While not directly addressing speed, they highlight how messaging services like WhatsApp can quickly spread fake news using memes to millions of users.

This means that less attention is placed on emergent memes, or memetic moments, that are directly responsive to shared cultural or social events and do not utilise image macros. However, these types of memes are increasingly dominant, including on new applications like TikTok, in which sounds and videos fuel its meme-heavy visual culture. Abidin and Kaye (2021, p. 58) argue that audio memes are the “next frontier of meme cultures on the internet, presenting an ‘aural turn’ in meme ecologies”. Audio use may use songs and original audio produced on the app to tell stories and as a way to organise content within the app. In this context, memes function as a way of cataloguing and finding similar information.

While we focus on Twitter as a case study, our analysis can be applied to memes on other platforms, which do not fit the typical image macro-based structure. In expanding the category of a meme in this way, we follow Phillips and Milner’s (2017) concept of the ambivalent internet. They identify a number of ‘memetic moments’ both on Twitter and on other internet platforms, which they categorise as part of the ‘ambivalent’ internet (Phillips & Milner, 2017). They argue that these moments are often miscategorised as ‘trolling’ or part of the ‘weird’ internet. We agree that these types of behaviour are misunderstood and perhaps overlooked. These types of moments should also be understood as memes - in which an initial tweet provides a meme ‘template’ that is both funny and shareable and allows for a high degree of intertextuality. What distinguishes these memes from the template-based memes, which are the objects of previous research, is their reliance on text. The emergent memes on Twitter are not usually formed around an image, but rely on a readers’ sophisticated knowledge of online communication norms and jokes to be read successfully. Emergent memes are the product of a particular subset of online cultures, one that is ‘always on’ and constantly consuming news and events. It is a culture that prioritises speed. Part of hacking the attention economy of the ‘always on’ internet culture is to be first, first to spot the joke, first to make the joke. In the following sections, we refer to these memes as ‘memetic moments’ due to their ephemeral nature. They are less persistent and recursive than image macro memes but point to a broader understanding of memes as social artifacts in participatory digital culture.

3 SPEED AND THE ATTENTION ECONOMY

Speed is increasingly being addressed as a core component of the function of the digital economy, described by theorists as the “attention economy” (Terranova, 2012; Venturini, 2019). However, speed has long been of attention to social theorists. Speed, discussed through the lens of time-space compression, occurs across the work of geographers (e.g. Harvey 1989; Thrift 1996) and sociologists (Beck 2000; Giddens 1990). These accounts grapple with the effects of a range of technologies, from the industrial to the personal, on the social world. In the work of Giddens (1990) and Beck (2000), this is also accompanied by an attendant focus on what they argue is the increasingly rapid pace of social and cultural change; technology has altered the rhythms of life, speeding them up, alongside the rate of change itself. Specific to social relations, Lash (2002) argues that speed means that previously fixed (in place) social bonds have given way to more transient communication bonds that are immediate yet distanced. Virilio (2000) also identifies similar processes, observing that the ‘speeding up’ characteristic of late modernity means that social relations requiring time are no longer wholly dependent on a body located in space. While Virilio and Lash are writing before the advent of Twitter, the accelerated sociality he described, which is geographically distant yet incredibly fast, is characteristic of the type of engagement that Twitter encourages.

Lash (2002) also identified an emphasis on information over society as part of the transition to late modernity. This is consistent with early political economy analyses identified ‘information’ as the core commodity being sold and traded on the internet. However, more recent analyses have argued that attention has replaced information as the new commodity (Terranova, 2012). Digital platforms base their economic model on collecting and selling user data, primarily to advertisers (Srnicek, 2016). Platforms collect the specified data of their users -- including demographic information, interests, and the ways in which they participate -- and sell that data to advertisers to allow them to target ads to specific audiences on the site. Platforms require the attention of their users to maximise this model (Terranova, 2012; Venturini, 2019). Attention provides platforms with more data to sell and ensures greater usage of platforms, which allows for ads to be sold at a higher level. However, this attention is scarce. Users only have so much time in the day and often engage with different platforms at different times. In this context, the speed and spread of material have become integral to the operations of digital platforms. Speed provides users access to new material, keeping people’s attention on a platform over time. However, speed is also seen as impoverishing social life. DeLuca, when discussing speed in the circulation of images, describes that in “the ceaseless circulation of images, speed annihilates contemplation, surface flattens depth, flow drowns moments, distraction disrupts attention, affect eclipses meaning, the glance replaces the gaze, reiteration erases originals, and the public screen displaces the public sphere” (2006, p. 87).

In the same way that DeLuca identifies speed as having a deleterious effect on the public sphere, similar arguments are made regarding the influence of speed on social media. Speed has been part of the analysis of social media dynamics, particularly as it concerns fake news. For example, Vosoughi, Roy and Aral (2018) found that fake news, being more novel than true news, spreads more quickly, and this is seen as key to social problems born of misinformation. Venturi (2019) argues that fake news is not new, mimicking longstanding propaganda techniques. The present difference is the speed at which this news can spread, facilitated by digital platforms, which provide the architectural scaffolding for its spread (Venturini, 2019). In sum, Venturini argues that social media prioritise attention and speed in both social and technical design, as well as encouraging users to develop affective relationships to news through liking and sharing. This allows news to travel at great speed through online social networks, becoming ‘viral’.

Venturini analyses the operation of speed on digital platforms - with the attention economy being driven by economic, communicative, technological, cultural and political reasons. We see similar driving factors in the speed of memes within our own analysis. The varied literature on memes often references virality and popularity when discussing the spread of memes. These terms, we argue, can also be understood as proxies for speed. However, there is a dearth of research that addresses speed directly as part of the circulation of memes. In Jenkin’s (2014) rhetorical analysis of image-macro memes, he argues that accounting for the speed at which memes circulate online is central to understanding the affects they produce. He argues that it is the circulation of memes across digital media platforms, which produce the structures that enable the ongoing remaking of memes. The cross-platform circulation of memes produces their plasticity. The pattern of circulation described by Jenkins is similar to the modes of circulation described by Lefebvre (2004) in his text *Rhythmanalysis*. Lefebvre (2004, p. 7) argues that “not only does repetition not exclude differences, it also gives birth to them; it produces them.” Repetition creating difference is also what distinguishes memes from viral content. As Miltner explains, “This is the key difference between ‘memetic’ content and ‘viral’ content; if a piece of content is passed along intact and unaltered, it is considered to be viral. If a piece is altered or changed as it is passed along, it is considered to be a meme” (2017, p. 414). Mapping the rate at which memes circulate is difficult because, as Jenkins (2014, p. 446) highlights, “they often emerge in numerous places simultaneously and frequently spread like wildfire.”

In the case studies that follow, we begin to assess how speed factors into emergent memes, or memetic moments on Twitter. In addition to the empirical analysis presented, we also draw on Lefebvre’s theory of rhythmanalysis to understand the temporal structure, or the speed of memes. In addition to drawing on Lefebvre’s work, we also extend Venturini’s focus on ‘junk’. While the mechanism Venturini identifies in the viral spread of information can cause problems, it also brings joy. The internet has always been a home for the weird, absurd and funny, alongside the loftier utopian ideals. This, we argue, is the kind

of attention economy we can see in our data set, driven by speed. In the next section, we examine our two case studies, examining two text-based memes.

4 CASE STUDIES: MEMETIC MOMENTS

This paper is specifically focused on the role that speed plays in the creation and spread of emergent text-based memes on Twitter. To investigate this, we selected two ‘memetic moments’ that took place on Twitter in 2018 and 2019 to judge the ways in which they develop over time. We selected one moment centred on US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) as well as the 30-50 feral hogs meme that was a response to back to back mass shootings in the United States in 2019 in El Paso, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio, which in total killed 31 people. In the case studies that follow, we have identified the authors of each initial tweet by name. These tweets have been widely reported on (Benwell & Paul, 2019; Rosenberg, 2018), and in one instance, the author of the original tweet has openly engaged with reporting on their viral moment (Reply All, 2019). We have chosen these case studies as they were widely reported outside of Twitter both during the initial memetic moment and after it had subsided. We will further detail our methods later in the article, but first, we want to outline the substantive events from which these memes emerged to better situate them in the current social and political context.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, also known as AOC, is the Representative for New York’s 14th congressional district. Ocasio-Cortez is a high-profile politician elected initially in the United States midterm elections of 2018. Ocasio-Cortez first drew interest due to her substantial social media platform, her relative youth (29 years of age at the time of election) and her progressive policies. She was considered to be a ‘surprise’ winner over a more established Democratic candidate in the Primary elections. Ocasio-Cortez is also relatively unique among politicians, having held a number of low-wage service jobs, such as bartending prior to her election. These factors, combined with Ocasio-Cortez’s viral appearances in bill reading hearings, have meant that she has become a rising political star. It is in the context of this additional attention, and her working-class background, that Ocasio-Cortez became the centre of our first ‘memetic moment’. In the lead up to taking up her position in Washington (a two-month delay between being elected and taking up one’s seat), Ocasio-Cortez was public about her financial struggles - having no income to bridge the gap between election and commencement. At her 2018 congressional orientation in Washington, Ocasio-Cortez was covertly photographed by an unnamed Hill staffer. This photograph was sent to conservative political writer Eddie Scarry, who then posted it to Twitter with the caption “Hill Staffer sent me this pic of Ocasio-Cortez they took just now. I’ll tell you something: that jacket and coat don’t look like a girl who struggles.” (see Figure 1)



Figure 1: @eScarry tweet

The response from Twitter users was quick, funny and revelled in the absurdity of the situation. Ocasio-Cortez responded sharply and quickly, and mainstream media outlets were quick to point to the tweet as an example of sexism in politics (Bell, 2018). As will be discussed below, *the hill staffer sent me this pic* is a variation of template memes (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015), and in turn, a valuable example to examine how speed affects memes on Twitter.

The second memetic moment selected for analysis is the 30-50 feral hog meme. The 30-50 feral hogs meme started as a response to a weekend of mass shootings in the United States. On August 3, 2019, in a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, a gunman shot and killed 22 shoppers while injuring 24 others. This was followed by another mass shooting on August 4, 2019, in Dayton, Ohio, where the shooter, using an automatic assault rifle, shot and killed nine victims and wounded 17 others. Two mass shootings so close together renewed debates about gun control in the United States, particularly around automatic, assault-style weapons used in both shootings. Subsequently, musician Jason Isbell tweeted, "If you're on here arguing the definition of "assault weapon" today you are part of the problem. You know what an assault weapon is, and you know you don't need one."

The tweet was popular, being liked and retweeted thousands of times. Amongst the replies, one stood out. William McNabb, who was not a high-profile

user at the time, responded, “Legit question for rural Americans – How do I kill the 30-50 feral hogs that run into my yard within 3-5 mins while my small kids play?” (see Figure 2)



Figure 2: @JasonIsbell and @WillieMcNabb tweets

The next day the jokes began, and the absurdity of the response, along with the format of the original tweet, made it ideal meme material. The meme quickly became intertextual - remixed as song lyrics, as alternative movie titles, and with already existing memes. This meme was also followed by serious political and policy discussion, with stories following about the feral hogs problem that exists in much of rural America (see, for example, Reply All, 2019).

While these memetic moments are focused on humour, they are also political in nature, as well as touching on broader questions of class, gender and violence in contemporary American life. In the latter parts of this paper, we will examine how these memes develop on Twitter, with a particular focus on how quickly they emerge and disappear.

5 METHODOLOGY

We collected data associated with two internet memes across 2018 and 2019. Data was collected from Twitter using the package Twint (2021). For each meme, we collected one week’s worth of data, searching for terms associated with the meme, with data collection beginning on the date of the initial tweet that sparked the memetic moment. Data were initially collected for a period longer than one week, but our analysis has been limited to this time period as very little engagement occurred outside it. Data collected included raw tweets and associated metadata, such as retweet count, favourite count, and mentions of other users. The meme associated with the American Congresswoman Alexandra Occasio Cortez included

two terms, while the 30-50 feral hogs meme only included one term. The terms and dates of the data analysis were as follows:

- 1.) “Hill staffer sent me this pic” and “girl who struggles”: 15th November 2018 – 22nd November 2018
- 2.) “30 - 50 feral hogs”: 4th August 2019 – 11th August 2019

These searches did not include hashtags, although hashtagged material does appear within each data set. We chose these search terms as they represented the core ‘memeable’ aspects of the original tweet, or the parts of the original tweet required for subsequent memes to be recognised and referencing the original. After we collected the data, we then cleaned each data set, removing duplicate tweets, tweets in foreign languages and any tweets not associated with the relevant meme. In total, this created a dataset of 8,585 and 54,086 tweets, respectively.

There are some limitations in these data sets. First, our data set only contains original tweets associated with the terms and does not include retweets. While the data set contains the number of retweets (at time of collection) for each tweet, we cannot see who has retweeted these tweets, and this makes further analysis of these retweets impossible. This limits our understanding of who was engaged in the relevant memes, particularly those who participated by sharing other people’s material. Second, our data set is limited to tweets containing the exact terms searched for each meme. This means that tweets that contain spelling mistakes, or, more importantly, tweets that may include the creative twists on the original tweet, are not included in the data set. This likely represents tweets that are memes of the original meme. The search terms also limit our examination of conversations associated with the memes. If a user replies to a tweet about the meme, for example, but does not include the relevant words, these tweets are not included in the data set. However, as our focus in this research is on the spread of memes connected to these specific terms, this does not necessarily limit our examination of conversations and engagement around the content too heavily.

We have analysed the data using the analysis tool Tableau. Tableau provides quick and clean analysis options for digital data. Using this tool, we have been able to analyse the development of each meme across time, as well as study the key users associated with each meme. We have been able to use this tool to then conduct an in-depth analysis of the development of each meme over time, with a specific focus on the starting points of the meme - i.e. the moments in which memes were sparked. As we detail below, we argue that the moments that spark these memes are essential to understanding both the context and their temporal structure.

6 DATA ANALYSIS

The first clear observation associated with these datasets relates to the size of each. As already noted, the datasets consisted of 8,585 (Hill staffer sent me this pic/girl who struggles) and 54,086 (“30-50 feral hogs”) tweets, respectively. We can see a large discrepancy between the meme associated with the American politician Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) and the 30-50 feral hogs tweet. As we will discuss later, this likely represents that the meme associated with AOC only reached a relatively small and niche audience of more politically minded tweeters, while the 30-50 feral hogs meme was able to go beyond this smaller community. This, we theorise, is in part due to gun violence affecting far more people in the United States, resulting in the meme having greater spread across the country.

Our first key question in our data analysis was to ask how quickly did the relevant memes spread online and what were the key moments associated with this spread? To answer this question, we created temporal graphs of the two datasets, examining the number of tweets per hour following the initial tweet, which started the memetic moments.

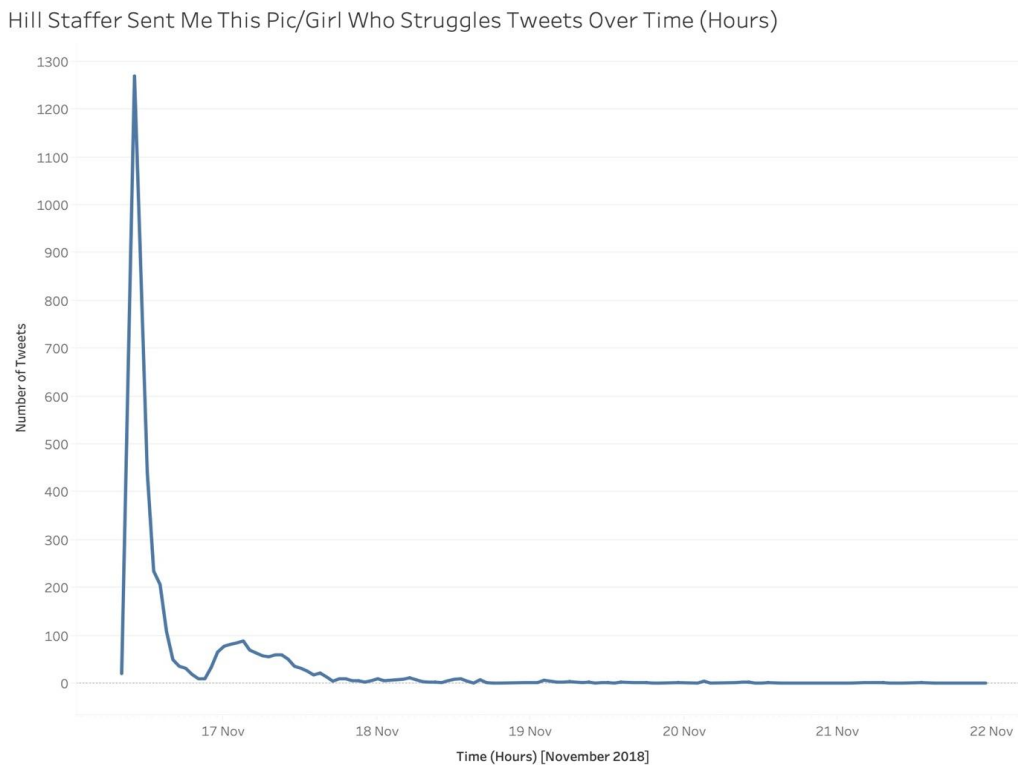
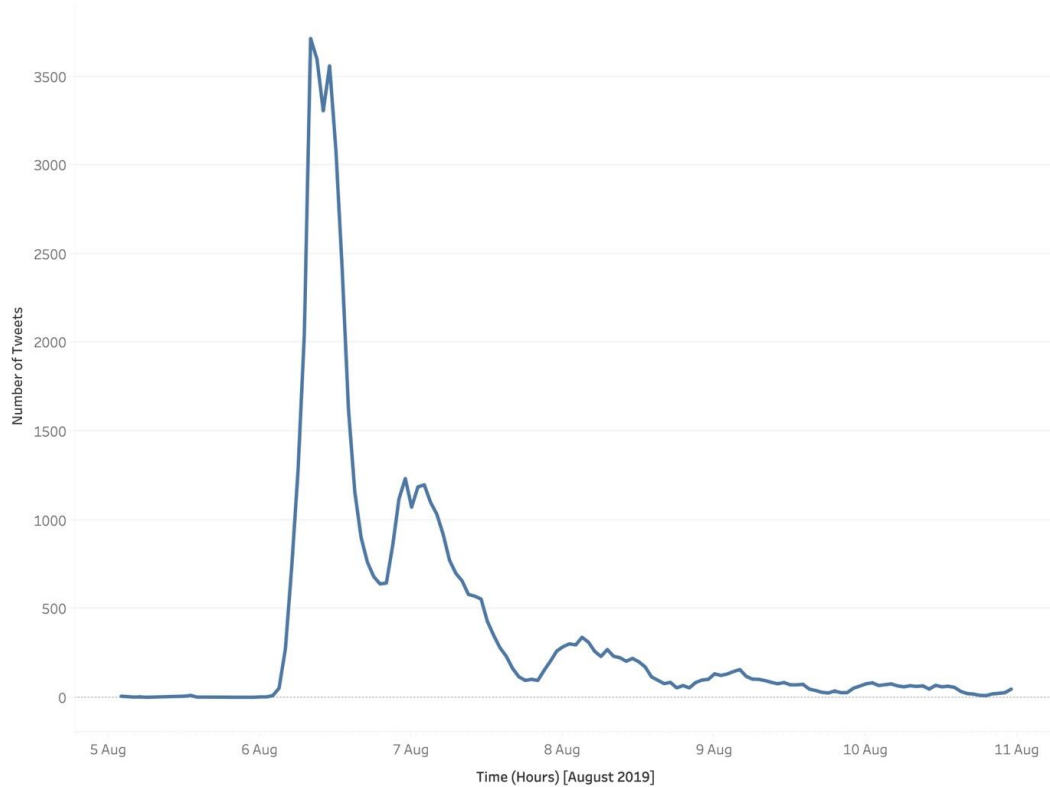


Figure 3: "hill staffer sent me this pic" and "girl who struggles" tweets over time

As is observable in Figures 3 (above) and 4 (below), the two memes developed in a similar fashion. On the left-hand side of each graph is the initial tweet, which is then followed by a very large spike in activity. These spikes consist of 1,270 an hour for the AOC meme, and 3,715 tweets in the case of the 30-50 feral hogs meme.

This spike can last as little as two to three hours, as in the meme associated with AOC, or approximately 12 hours, as in the case of the 30-50 feral hogs memes. Spikes in activity all occur during the daytime hours in the United States, where each meme originated. We then see a sharp drop off of activity as Americans go to sleep, although some other parts of the world pick up on the discussion during their working hours. We then see a small bump of activity on the following day in the United States, although it never reaches peaks anywhere close to the original period of activity. Activity associated with each meme then trails off sharply.

30-50 Feral Hogs Tweets Over Time (Hours)



The trend of sum of Number of Records for time Hour.

Figure 4: 30-50 Feral Hogs tweets over time

What we can see is a very quick spread of these memes, followed by an almost as quick decline. Similar to Venturini’s (2019) notion of ‘junk’, these memetic moments represent bubbles - like sugar highs - that burst quickly and then almost vanish entirely. Extending Lefebvre’s work on cyclical and linear analyses of rhythm, we can understand these memes as part of the cyclical nature of Twitter as they exist in opposition to the linear or to the “monotonous, tiring and even intolerable” (2004, p. 76)

As part of our analysis of the role of speed in these memetic moments, we want to analyse how the memes develop over time. We are particularly interested in the early stages – the moments that result in the immediate spikes of popularity for each of these three memetic moments. As Jenkins (2014) notes, mapping the

rate of circulation of memes is often difficult due to their emergence in numerous spaces simultaneously. We note these challenges through our initial temporal analysis with Tableau, which, while giving us a sense of spread over time, does not analyse links between each tweet, simply positioning each along a timeline as individual nodes. We cannot see, for example, if and how one tweet is inspired by the one before it. Tableau also allows us to examine each tweet in closer depth along the timeline, providing opportunities for a qualitative analysis of tweets at particular moments. Using this capability, we have studied the most popular tweets (in terms of both likes and retweets) for each meme that occur at the base of each of these spikes – i.e. the tweets that are the first spark of the creation and spread of the meme. We have done this to identify themes and structures associated with each meme. This provides us with insight into the temporal patterns of these memes.

Through this analysis, we identify two ways these memes spread at the speed they do. The first is viewable in the “hill staffer sent me this pic” and “girl who struggles” meme. This meme has the fastest incline of the two memes, with an immediate escalation with virtually no lead-in time. This is driven primarily by a small number of high-profile ‘verified’ Twitter users, who provided a template for the meme.



Figure 5: Bob Schooley tweet

The most popular tweet¹ in the early stages of the meme development is from Bob Schooley, an American screenwriter, who, at the time of writing, is a verified Twitter user with over 100,000 followers. Schooley tweeted a direct copy of the initial tweet, with a replaced image (see Figure 5), collecting 3,193 likes and 320 retweets. Here we see the first iteration of the meme, in which Schooley replaces the image of Ocasio-Cortez with a woman on a fashion show runway wearing an oversized hat and large jacket. The extravagance of the runway look implicitly pokes fun at the original tweet.



8:56 AM · Nov 16, 2018 · Twitter for iPhone

Figure 6: Andrew Lawrence tweet

Other popular tweets at this stage follow a similar pattern. The two other most popular tweets in this early stage of the meme are tweeted mere minutes after Schooley's tweet. Andrew Lawrence (the Deputy Director of Rapid Response at Media Matters who has over 50,000 followers) and Asawin Suebsaeng (a senior political reporter at The Daily Beast with over 80,000 followers), tweeted content with 240 and 160 likes, respectively. Lawrence takes a slightly different approach², featuring an image of a woman wearing a barrel (see Figure 6), and replacing the

¹ <https://twitter.com/Rschooley/status/1063188511589752833>

² https://twitter.com/ndrew_lawrence/status/1063189114323910656

word ‘jacket and coat’ with ‘barrel and suspenders’. Meanwhile, Suebsaeng’s tweet³ (see Figure 7), features a scene from the popular TV show *The Simpsons*, in which character Milhouse photographs Lisa Simpson in a future scene in which she is popular, wealthy and cheered on by an adoring crowd.



8:58 AM · Nov 16, 2018 · TweetDeck

Figure 7: Asawin Suebsaeng tweet

This meme acts as a variation of a ‘template meme’ (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). However, in this instance, the text becomes the original template, with the image varied across each version of the meme. This meme acts in a similar way to other image-based memes, such as *distracted boyfriend* meme or the image of Bernie Sanders at the Joe Biden inauguration, in which users shared the same image repeatedly for comedic sake (and at times to make social and political points). What is different in this meme is that it is the text that stays the same, while it is the image that varies with each share. In doing so, it could be read as a version of junk (Venturini, 2019), with the meme presenting a repetitive, simplified, critical response to the initial tweet from @eScarry. However, as Lefebvre (2004) notes, repetition in the meme does not exclude difference, but instead gives birth to it. Each user chooses a unique image to accompany the text of the meme, creating a meme that is both repetitive and similar at the same time, making it easily recognisable and copied from other users.

³ <https://twitter.com/swin24/status/1063189546677035008>

This repetition gives birth to a range of political critiques around the treatment of women in politics. Initially, these users used the meme to make a political point. For example, Schooley follows up his initial tweet with a ‘thread’ criticising conservative media and their obsession with criticising Ocasio-Cortez appearance. The involvement of Lawrence and Suebsaena also indicates the political nature of the meme, as both are closely embedded in the US political scene, from which the first tweet originated. The meme, in turn, becomes a political point in and of itself, with the ridiculousness of the images chosen highlighting the ridiculous standards to which women such as Ocasio-Cortez are expected to live up to.



Figure 8: @iwriteallday tweet

This meme was sparked by a small number of highly politically engaged Twitter users, who saw the original tweet, aimed to make a political point about it, and in doing so, provided a template for other users to follow. The meme can be picked

up quickly because of the ease of this template, with other users able to quickly grab other images from the web to participate. It becomes, in turn, a quick way to both have some fun online, while also making a political point, mixing the absurd with genuine political critique.

Notably, the trend of the early stages of this meme follows throughout its development. The dataset contains three other highly prominent tweets from @iwriteallday, @davidmackau and @matthewacherry. Each three of these tweeters posted a series of tweets parodying the original tweet. @iwriteallday, for example, posted a tweet⁴ copying the original text with an image of a man standing in his bedroom wearing ugg boots, a hoodie and holding a handbag (see Figure 8). @davidmackau, a prominent Australian Twitter user, parodied the tweet⁵ by copying the original text followed by a picture of Anne Hathaway in the movie *Devil Wears Prada* (see Figure 9).



Figure 9: @davidmackau tweet

⁴ https://twitter.com/IWriteAllDay_/status/1063199471520047105

⁵ <https://twitter.com/davidmackau/status/1063200091664732161>

Finally, @matthewacherry posted several parody tweets, the most popular of which included a photo of one of the main characters from the Netflix show *Big Mouth*, Nick, a teenage boy going through puberty; in this image wearing a fancy jacket at school⁶ (see Figure 10).



Figure 10: @MatthewACherry tweet

These users are relatively prominent journalists and political operatives, with high follower numbers and verification on Twitter. The meme is developed and spread primarily by a small number of politically engaged users. These users are “in the know” and each take and spread the template across a short period of time.

The second way in which we see the memes develop is an inverse of the approach from the “hill staffer sent me this pic” and “girl who struggles” meme. Instead of being driven by a small number of high-profile verified users, the 30-50 feral hogs meme is instead driven by a high number of users who are not ‘high profile’, but who have still posted extremely popular tweets. We theorise that the ability of non-verified users to lead this meme development is in part due to the high-profile nature of the original conversation. Specifically, @WillieMcNabb’s initial tweet was a reply to a tweet from the very popular Jason Isbell, providing visibility. Isbell’s initial tweet gained over 50,000 likes and 7,000 retweets, giving it @WillieMcNabb’s reply an immediately large audience.

⁶ <https://twitter.com/MatthewACherry/status/1063207962410434560>

What we see following the initial conversation is a range of users riffing off @WillieMcNabb’s tweet, with some being popular and others falling flat. This meme took some time to build, with users tweeting the term for several hours before we see the main spike of the meme. Similar to the “hill staffer sent me this pic” and “girl who struggles” meme, the 30-50 feral hogs meme then takes off sharply. This is driven by several different riffs on the content, with users coming up with a range of different ways to poke fun at the original tweet. The most popular of these at the early stage of the meme is from @BarbiturateCate⁷ (see Figure 11), which replicates a template from a dating site, in which users can pick between being ‘male’, ‘female’ or ‘30-50 feral hogs’, and seeking ‘male’, ‘female’ or ‘a yard with unsupervised small children to run in to within 3-5 minutes’. @BarbiturateCat notes the immense popularity of her tweet herself, replying to it some hours later “Ok I think this is my best tweet I must now retire from Twitter dot com forever.”



Figure 11: @BarbiturateCat

Other users take this in different directions. For example, @kamilumin tweets “30-50 FERAL HOGS IN YOUR AREA CHAT NOW”, satirising common pop-up advertisements, which advertise sex work services by stating that ‘women are in your area’ and encouraging men to ‘chat now!’. Others just make fun of the scenario that @WillieMcNabb sets up. For example, @tinybaby uses a popular tweet⁸ format to ridicule McNabb (see Figure 12). This format of tweet mocks people for saying things that no one else is thinking – starting with the word “Nobody” followed by silence and then repeating that with “No one” and “Not a single person” until the

⁷ <https://twitter.com/BarbiturateCat/status/1158450759576502273>

⁸ <https://twitter.com/tinybaby/status/1158418843393331200>

initial content is thrown in. This highlights the seemingly ridiculous nature of the initial tweet, poking fun at McNabb for saying something that no one else would even contemplate.



Figure 12: @tinybaby tweet

Notably, unlike the “hill staffer sent me this pic” and “girl who struggles” meme, these tweets are largely non-political in nature. While many replies to @WillieMcNabb’s tweet criticise his position around gun control, the meme itself heads off in a non-political route. Instead, users take the seeming ridiculousness of the initial tweet into further ridiculous directions. One of the most popular tweets is from the user @nomiddlesliders and reads, “take me down to the paradise city where the hogs are feral and there's 30-50”. This tweet replaces the lyrics of the popular song *Paradise City* by Guns N’ Roses, but in doing so, injects a moment of humour around a difficult debate. At the time of writing, @nomiddlesliders has only 439 followers, yet this tweet amassed over 59,000 likes and 10,000 retweets, once again highlighting the capacity of ‘regular users’ to spread this meme.

In comparison, the *hill staffer sent me this pic/girl who struggles* meme followed a template approach, in which the same text was replaced by different images. This meme takes off in a range of different directions. While the term “30-50 feral hogs” remains central, each tweet has a different theme - from jokes about the dating industry, attempts to mock the initial tweeter, and riffs off song titles. The flexible format of this memetic moment allows for a wide variety of creative responses.

While initial tweets do not follow a specific template, the 30-50 feral hogs meme then gets adapted to popular memes on social media platforms such as Twitter. The author @jasonarnopp tweeted a call out for people to tweet in ‘30-50 feral hogs movies’⁹ (see Figure 13). This is part of a recurring meme that occurs on Twitter where users replace movie or other popular culture titles with a suggested

⁹ <https://twitter.com/JasonArnopp/status/1158494270170501120>

word. @jasonarnopp’s tweet received over 1,000 replies with people sending in movie titles ranging from “When Harry Met 30-50 Feral Hogs” to “How to lose 30-50 feral hogs in ten days”. Other prominent users in the data were also associated with similar tweets. @wildheartreads, for example, started a ‘30-50 feral hogs book titles’ thread - i.e. “Interview with 30-50 Feral Hogs”, which received over 100 replies, while @four4thefire also tweeted a separate ‘30-50 feral hogs movie titles’ thread, which also received over 100 tweets.



Figure 13: @JasonArnopp tweet

The 30-50 feral hogs meme operated in an inverse nature to the “hill staffer sent me this pic” and “girl who struggles” meme, with ‘regular’ users driving the content in a non-template form. Unlike the previous example, 30-50 feral hogs develops in a range of different directions, with users using their creativity to riff off the meme. However, we theorise that the very potential of the meme is driven by the initial (unwitting) involvement of Jason Isbell, whose initial tweet provided significant exposure to Willie McNabb’s reply. The speed of this meme is driven by this initial exposure, with users riffing off this and taking it in a range of different directions. After initial slowness, the meme then takes a life of its own, spreading quickly across Twitter, becoming incorporated in other social media memes.

7 DISCUSSION

As part of our data collection process, we manually cleaned the tweets collected, removing irrelevant content, and content in languages other than English. To do this, we read each tweet to determine its relevance and suitability for analysis. However, this task also sensitised us to a surprising aspect of the data. The data contained almost no angry, hateful, sexist, racist or otherwise abusive tweets. This was unexpected. Twitter receives a lot of attention for the abusive behaviour on its platform, which appears to be widespread and part of a systemic failure of design and governance. The topics of the memetic moments we collected data for, Ocasio-Cortez and gun control, are political hot button issues. Ocasio-Cortez is abused for her gender, race and political beliefs. Gun control and gun violence is a particularly

divisive issue. Because of this, we were not expecting to see the data comprising primarily good-natured involvement.

The speed at which the memes grew and ‘burst’ seemed to create a space for low-stakes, non-serious and wholesome engagement. The memetic moments also reinforced the standing of social media spaces like Twitter as networked publics (Ito, 2008), ones that have their own rules and ways of surfacing and responding to content outside of Twitter’s attempts at algorithmic curation.

It can be easier to dismiss memes as artefacts of internet vernacular, but memetic moments are also additionally generative outside of the confines of Twitter itself. Lefebvre’s (2004) work is again useful here, specifically his distinction between the present and presence. He defines the difference between these two states as follows: “The present is a fact and effect of commerce; while presence situates itself in the poetic: value, creation, situation in the world and not only in the relations of exchange” (Lefebvre 2004, p. 47). More simply, in a digital sense, the present belongs to the commercialised attention economy, to algorithms that attempt to hack user engagement. Presence is the ambivalent or weird internet (Philips & Milner 2017), the emergence of memetic moments that are creative, sometimes poetic and fundamentally linked to the social world, not just relations of exchange. The generation of dialogue also categorises Lefebvre’s concept of presence; this is evident in the two memes chosen as case studies for this paper. For example, the 30-50 wild hogs created further discussions about gun control and environmental management. Reply All’s (2019) deep dive into the meme highlighted how wild hog populations are exploding and all but unmanageable for many farmers in the south of America. Wild hogs not only destroy farmed crops but can also have a devastating impact on local ecosystems. Effective management of wild hogs is mired in bureaucracy and politics, leaving landowners to manage the problem on their own, usually with the help of high-powered automatic weapons. While the meme hinges on the ridiculousness of citing rampaging wild hogs as a reason for not advancing restrictions on automatic weapons, the memetic moment also has a ‘long tail’ of discussion and analysis long after the initial meme bubble has burst. The creativity evident in the production of memes on Twitter affords a social presence. Similar is true for the memetic moments centring on Ocasio-Cortez, which generated a number of opinion pieces about gender (Bell, 2018), dress and class (De Valle, 2018). While memetic moments are spontaneously generated sites of engagement, they also serve as a springboard for deeper discussion across other forms of media, underscoring the political and cultural power of memes.

The ‘long tail’ of memetic moments also illustrates how intertwined ‘traditional’ media has become with social media. Traditional media outlets rely heavily on Twitter to both generate and editorialise content. Each memetic moment/bubble detailed in this paper generated a slew of media think pieces (e.g. Bell, 2018; De Valle, 2018). Likewise, comments on Twitter about these events are also used to illustrate journalistic content, like a digital vox pops.

8 CONCLUSION

In this paper, we identified memetic moments as primarily text-based and as an emergent property of activity on social media. Previous research has focused on social network analysis of Twitter and memes. These studies (Dang et al. 2019; Jafari Asbagh 2014; Segev et al. 2015; Xu et al. 2016) have largely focused on political discussion and the spread of hateful material or disinformation on the platform.

Despite their similarity, the memetic moments in this paper demonstrate how humour functions as part of the speed of online platforms. Speed is not just a destructive function of digital platforms, but can also create moments of creative engagement and dialogue in online spaces. The creative, repetitious and quickly-paced circulation of memes on Twitter creates a sense of ‘presence’ (Lefebvre, 2004). Repetition creates enough difference for engagement, while still producing identifiable content to create a clear ‘moment’. This facilitates a quick uptake, with users building off the success of previous tweets in order to turn these moments into memes. As we noted, this occurs in two primary ways - one driven by high profile users, and another by ‘regular’ users, who build off a high-profile conversation to turn it into a meme. While our analysis is limited to only two memes, we argue that this provides insight into the temporal rhythms of memes on Twitter, extending our understanding of how aspects of time, such as speed, function in digital cultures.

As Segev et al. (2015) highlight, memes are often considered trivial and/or mundane parts of the online environment. Memes are playful, silly and sometimes fleeting. Aside from their political resonance, these memetic moments remind us of the positive promise of the internet that often seems like a lost dream, collaborative, fun, intimate. The condition of speed that produces virality can be largely blamed for many of the more toxic elements of social media, including the persistent spread of misinformation. Still, speed can also work to knit publics together. Alongside understanding the harms of social media and the internet more broadly, it also seems important to focus on how social media can produce afford presence, and as an extension, dialogue. Despite the ongoing critique of speed in scholarly literature, speed does not straightforwardly impoverish communication, but can be part of the joyful, creative and poetic rhythms of the social world (Lefebvre, 2004).

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