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**ABSTRACT**
This special issue emphasizes memes as an avenue for researching vernacular expressions of the political. Memes disrupt and reimagine politics in humorous ways. Spreading across platforms, they confirm, contest and challenge political power and hierarchies. In this introduction, we contend that *playfulness* connects the humorous and the political in memes. While memes may be created to disrupt, challenge, and reimagine politics in a humorous way, we argue for a critical examination of how they playfully demarcate and move frontiers between 'us' and 'them' in the political. Memes constitute a playful activity that follows a shared set of rules and gives a (shared) voice, which may create togetherness and political identities but also increase polarization. As their template travels, memes continue to appropriate new political contexts and to (re)negotiate frontiers in the political.

## Introduction

Memes work as rhetorical weapons and discursive arguments in political conflicts. They confirm, contest, or challenge political power and hierarchies. In so doing, they simultaneously create social distortion, hostility, and a sense of community (e.g., Segev et al., 2015). Memes thus not only reflect norms but also work as a 'social tool for negotiating them' (Gal et al., 2016, p. 1700; see also Mortensen & Kristensen, 2020). At the same time, memes meld symbolic and cultural elements with technological functionalities, allowing for replicability and remixing (Shifman, 2013).

Memes are easily generated, disseminated, and consumed – but also easily forgotten. In the techno-commercial infrastructure of social media based on personalization and filtering processes, memes tend to revolve around current spectacular and controversial topics (Bayerl & Stoynov, 2016; Neumayer & Struthers, 2019). Their ephemerality, recognizability, and humorous form can both politicize and depoliticize conflict and divert attention to and from the issues at stake. While there is agreement that memes constitute an everyday shared practice and engagement in politics, research has not yet fully captured the diversity of ways in which memes are political.

From being a phenomenon of 4chan and similar fringe sites, memes have over the past years become an inevitable and intrinsic part of visual communication in relation to

political debate and conflict. They circulate back and forth from niche to mainstream cultures. As they travel across various platforms, political contexts, and corners of the internet, the politics of memes come to the forefront in various ways: Actors from the far-right propagate their ideology through memes (e.g., Greene, 2019). Images from political protests are memefied, such as the Pepper Spray Cop from student protests at UC Davis (Bayerl & Stoynov, 2016; Huntington, 2016) or the Riot Hipster from the G20 protests in Hamburg (Neumayer & Struthers, 2019). Memes have addressed injustice and inequality by deconstructing stereotypes of people living in poverty (Dobson & Knezevic, 2017), and protested the lack of political responsibility for refugees, for example by placing the figure of the deceased refugee child Alan Kurdi on the roundtable of a UN summit (Mortensen, 2017; Olesen, 2018). Other memes continue the tradition of satirizing political figureheads. For instance, the general election in Brazil in 2014 was coined 'The Election of Memes' due to the mass dissemination of memes mocking the candidates (Chagas et al., 2019), and former US president Donald Trump, himself referred to as a 'meme president', has been portrayed in memes as Pepe the Frog and Lord Farquaad from *Shrek* (e.g., Denisova, 2019; Peters & Allan, 2021).

Efforts to understand the political role performed by memes have led to the creation of concepts such as 'memetic protest' (Olesen, 2018), 'the memefication of politics' (Dean, 2019), 'the memefication of political discourse' (Bulatovic, 2019), and 'weaponizing memes' (Peters & Allan, 2021). These concepts foreground the political. In this introduction, we argue for the necessity of considering the *playfulness* that connects the humorous and the political in memes. We begin by addressing the link between humour and politics in memes before conceptually locating the politics of memes at the intersection of play (Sicart, 2014), the political (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 2005), and memes as a humorous form (e.g., Shifman, 2013; Milner, 2018; Miltner, 2018). Within this conceptual framework, we introduce the articles in this special issue and finally discuss how the playful politics of memes may enhance our understanding of shifting frontiers constructing 'us' and 'them' in the political.

## Politics and humour in memes

Memes should be seen as a continuation of the long tradition of political humour. Satire, parody, comedy, and other genres have sustained democratic public culture by exposing the hypocrisy of those in power and testing the limits of free speech (e.g., Chen et al., 2017; Hariman, 2008). What sets memes apart from previous forms of political humour is their fluidity of context and content. Memes differ from earlier types of political humour in that they are created by unspecified groups of media users as part of participatory digital culture. They mostly emerge outside of institutional contexts and are disseminated without a known creator (Ross & Rivers, 2017; Shifman, 2013; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). The constant, collective process of creation and creative expression, which was discussed early on as an element of internet culture (Jenkins, 2006), means that their content is also in flux. Due to this fluidity, the intersection between politics and humour is often more difficult to grasp in memes than in genres such as political cartoons, which are typically anchored by a clear institutional affiliation and an identifiable author. The specific political message in memes is often up for interpretation. At the same time, humour is a driver of both inclusion and exclusion – strengthening a feeling

of belonging and group identity among those appreciating the joke and creating a gap to those who do not.

Research concerning the politics of memes tends to emphasise either the humorous or the political. For example, Denisova (2019, p. 3) contends that the meme 'has no inherent political or cultural connotation except for the promise of entertainment.' By contrast, Shifman (2013, p. 120) argues in her early work on memes in internet culture that humour is more or less pronounced in political memes, but basically they make 'a point – participating in a normative debate about how the world should look and the best way to get there.' Similarly, Wiggins (2019, p. 11) highlights the political in his definition of internet memes 'as a remixed, iterated message that can be rapidly diffused by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, critique, or other discursive activity' and downplays humour as 'merely the surface-level entry point for social salience.' In this special issue, we foreground neither the political nor the humorous, arguing instead that memes perform humour and politics through play.

## Playful humour and politics

We conceptualize the politics of memes as playful appropriations of contexts that occur at the intersection of the political and the humorous. In Miguel Sicart's (2014, pp. 71–72) understanding, play is distinguished by 'its appropriative nature and the creativity that ensues.' Playfulness may facilitate a critical approach to a political context through creative appropriation. As such, play can be used creatively to express political ideas at the nexus of form, appropriation, and context (Sicart, 2014, p. 76). Such creative political expressions are often facilitated by subversive appropriation of mainstream cultural forms, for example through political memes that are heavily shared and appropriated, de-contextualized, and re-contextualized (Mortensen, 2017). Memes are political in their critical engagement with and appropriation of a context – usually, but not always, in a humorous way – and their production of double-edged meanings. They are a play activity in themselves but also express political meaning, which accords with Sicart's (2014, p. 80) definition of playfulness. Being inherently playful, memes allow for creative expression of politics in situations of oppression and crises, collective identification, and togetherness. Memes thus constitute a playful activity that follows a shared set of rules and gives a (shared) voice.

To address the playful in memes as part of politics in contemporary internet culture, we employ Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) radical democracy perspective (see also Dahlberg, 2007; Neumayer & Svensson, 2016; Svensson et al., 2015). Radical democracy provides a conceptual framework for understanding political expression surrounding processes of identification, highlighting difference and dissent in the playful politics of memes. This enables us to widen the sphere of political engagement beyond institutions of democracy. According to radical democracy, the political can never include all political positions since majority decision-making always favours one position over another (Mouffe, 2005). As Mouffe (2005) further contends, ideals of deliberation and communicative rationality (see Habermas, 1990 [1962]) may also conceal differences, conflicts, and power relations beneath a veneer of agreement and consensus.

We conceptualize the politics of memes as a playful expression of different subject positions in the political. This allows us to map out a coalition of excluded opinions,

perspectives, and expressions, which may be overlooked or communicated in different ways within the liberal parliamentary political arena. While memes playfully appropriate political contexts to negotiate identities, express difference and communicate political positions in a digital media environment, it should be taken into account that every identity is relational and consequently exists by affirmation of difference to another identity, which is the essence of how antagonisms arise (Mouffe, 1993, p. 2). Radical democracy thus emphasizes the construction of frontiers to an outside other and the formation of unity across diversity against a common enemy (Mouffe in Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006) which may provide new impulses in a democracy. The 'radical' in radical democracy refers to such expressions of difference and includes conflict and dissent as important elements in a democracy. As constructions of a 'we' and a 'them' (see Mouffe, 1993), memes offer a creative and playful way for groups to express their identity and to raise their voice.

As a playful expression of politics, memes travel particularly well due to 'their textual flexibility,' which allows 'them to be taken up and imbued with new meaning by different groups' (Miltner, 2018, p. 415). The humorous element of memes makes them well suited to political commentary, statement, or critique (Milner, 2018; Miltner, 2018; Shifman, 2013). Although all memes possess politics to some degree, we can observe changes as they travel – often from the political being foregrounded to an almost exclusive focus on humour and creative expression or *vice versa* (Jensen et al., 2020; Bayerl & Stoynov, 2016). At the same time, identity politics are at the core of internet memes defined as 'units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process' (Shifman, 2013, p. 367). From a rhetorical perspective, memes are driven by three factors: political expression on social media, cultural evolution, and games and play (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018).

The origins and motivations for creating memes are not always political. Memes also emerge as an impulse for appropriating visual content that happens to be political or in which the political offers a space for creative expression (Jensen et al., 2020; Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018). This occurred, for instance, when Brussels was in security lockdown after a terror threat in 2015, and memes of LOLcats were disseminated on Twitter to create a feeling of togetherness and solidarity (Jensen et al., 2020). However, memes are also sometimes generated with a direct political intent that deploys humour to promote a certain message. This occurred, for instance, when the international hacktivist collective Anonymous declared 'meme war' on ISIS and circulated memes ridiculing this terror network's propaganda imagery by inserting rubber duck heads onto ISIS combatants, replacing machine guns with toilet brushes, etc. (McCrow-Young & Mortensen, 2021).

Memes may thus foster the formation of shared collective identities or cohesive groups through individuals taking part in the playful activity of producing and sharing them online (Katz & Shifman, 2017). Users who engage in this must, however, first have acquired the shared knowledge of how memes are meant to be appropriated and reappropriated. In other words, the relational rules applied to play (Sicart, 2014) manifest themselves in shared 'subcultural knowledge' and 'unstable equilibriums' that require constant negotiation concerning the correct use of memes and their deployment as 'discursive weapons' directed at the political other (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017, p. 483).

Knowledge of these rules is part of how 'othering' takes place in memes. Tuters and Hagen (2020) find in their analysis of the triple-parentheses meme on 4chan's /pol/ board that the 'us' and 'them' formulated through this meme may not be recognizable to outsiders who are unfamiliar with 4chan's /pol/ and the particular meaning of the triple parentheses. This propensity for in-group lingo constitutes another means by which memes establish frontiers against a political 'other'.

Identifying an outside other is important in this construction of a temporarily coherent 'us'. That is, collectives gather around specific and more or less fleeting political demands. Since radical democracy offers a normative perspective, it also provides a yardstick for evaluating how positions are expressed (Neumayer & Svensson, 2016). Focus on difference and conflict goes to the core of the political. For Laclau and Mouffe (1985), this constitutes a 'democratic pluralism' that brings differences to the fore. However, this entails respecting the other as an adversary and not an enemy to be eliminated. By outlining the notion of agonism, in contrast to antagonism, Mouffe (2005) suggests a conception of the other as an adversary to be acknowledged, which is important for displaying the heterogeneity of conflictual forces constituting the political. Even though expressions and representations of war (e.g., in literary fiction and games) may include ludic elements of play (Huizinga, 1949), this relationship cannot be seen as agonism, given that elimination of the enemy is projected as the ideal outcome. From a normative perspective, this constitutes the tipping point of the playful appropriation and reappropriation that are essential to the politics of memes.

Connecting the political and the humorous as they occur in internet culture with a conceptual understanding of the processes occurring through play, we can map the politics of memes in recurrent elements: the construction of 'us' and 'them' on a continuum from adversary to enemy; the sociocultural, technical, and rhetorical rules underlying playful engagement with memes; the normative yardstick reaching a tipping point when appropriations are taken too far through constructing the 'them' as an enemy that should be eliminated; and the shifting frontiers within which playful appropriations of political contexts take place through memes.

## Mapping the politics of memes: articles in this special issue

In the articles included in this issue, we can observe blurred boundaries in the playful ways in which memes humorously appropriate political contexts. They move not only between online and offline as 'more or less digital' forms (Merrill & Lindgren, this issue) but also between the subversive, the subcultural, and the mainstream (McSwiney et al., this issue) and between challenging and reaffirming the political context they appropriate (Kristensen & Mortensen, this issue). All the contributions play into well-established political contexts and conflicts such as generational gaps (Zeng & Abidin, this issue); commemoration cultures after terror attacks (Merrill & Lindgren, this issue); visual culture surrounding political figureheads (Kristensen & Mortensen, this issue); everyday life in prolonged conflict in Palestinian cities (Zidani, this issue); vernacular politics during the COVID-19 lockdown (Murru & Vicari, this issue); and visual culture of the far-right (Askanius & Keller, this issue; McSwiney et al., this issue; Trillò & Shifman, this issue). In the following, we introduce the seven articles, focusing on how

the humorous memes in question playfully appropriate political contexts and form frontiers between 'us' and 'them'.

In her article, Sulafa Zidani uses memes to map the physical and symbolic borderlines between Israeli and Palestinian youth and their everyday lives in prolonged conflict. The memes on Instagram created by young Palestinians in Israel offer insight into the navigation of life in mixed cities. By proposing a conceptual framework of memes as 'mapping tools of everyday life,' the study shows how memes, as a digital culture vernacular, navigate contested cultural spaces and help carve out spaces for Palestinian youths across cultural diversity.

Samuel Merrill and Simon Lindgren study how the Manchester bee became a symbol of post-terror togetherness following the 2017 bombing at the Ariana Grande concert in Manchester. By analysing Instagram images as 'more or less digital' across and beyond social media platforms, they explore the memetic revival and brand adoption of the civic symbol of 'the worker bee'. They find that although the memefication of the bee produced a form of post-terror togetherness, political tensions were later obfuscated through the integration of the bee into the official city branding strategy.

Maria Francesca Murru and Stefania Vicari explore 'mundane memetic practices' of quarantined Italians during the COVID-19 lockdown. In a study of memes shared on Twitter, they identify a mundane political culture building upon playful rituals through which political identities are established. The memes express sentiments such as anti-elitism and anti-scientism, humorously producing an 'us-versus-them' polarization that feeds into wider populist discourses and allows potentially conflicting political identities to surface.

Nete Nørgaard Kristensen and Mette Mortensen show how memes criticize populist leaders while reinforcing the communicative logics of the populists themselves, thereby both contesting and propagating populism. Using search engines as an entry point, they analyse memes of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and then US President Donald Trump during the COVID-19 crisis. They conclude that the memes conflate affirmative and critical power, as they criticize the populist leaders but also confirm their communicative patterns and worldviews.

Jing Zeng and Crystal Abidin demonstrate in their study that memes form a collective us of 'Gen Z' (or the 'Zoomers') in opposition to 'Boomers' by wittily negotiating generational boundaries in TikTok video memes. They investigate how young people utilize TikTok videos to advocate for their political culture. The memefication of intergenerational politics takes place through short videos produced by the TikTokers, who express a collective generational identity of Gen Z, with Boomers as the collectively imagined other.

Tommaso Trillò and Limor Shifman study 'alternative calendar commemorations' on Twitter and Instagram as a photo-based meme genre memorializing figures and events central to the Italian far-right imaginary. They argue that memes contribute to a mainstreaming of the far-right which is protected from criticism due to the respectability associated with commemorations. Their findings point to a clash between far-right values such as collectivism, patriotism, and tradition on the one hand and values coupled with memes such as individualism, self-direction, and authenticity on the other.

Jordan McSwiney, Michael Vaughan, Annett Heft, and Matthias Hoffmann question common key assumptions concerning the transnationality of far-right memes and their

role in visual culture. In an analysis of far-right memes by alternative media and non-party organizations in Australia, Germany, Italy, and the US, across Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram, they find that, quantitatively, memes play a limited role in visual culture. Far-right memes do not easily circulate transnationally, but they nonetheless express transnationality as 'fascist continuity, western civilization identity, and pop cultural appropriation.'

Tina Askanius and Nadine Keller argue that far-right meme culture transcends symbolic boundaries between mischievous subcultures and violent extremism. They trace the 'memefication of white supremacism' in an analysis of memes published on the neo-Nazi group Nordic Resistance Movement's online hub Nordfront.se. They conclude that the memes contribute to mainstreaming far-right ideas through their interplay between jokes, playfulness, and ambiguity on the one hand and serious, violent threats of white supremacy and murder fantasies embedded into historical events on the other.

## Playful appropriations: moving and demarcating frontiers

The articles in this special issue allow us to chart the politics of humorous memes and how this genre establishes or pushes frontiers in various political, cultural, and platform-specific contexts. Taken together, the template underlying memes can be seen to challenge and regenerate populism (Kristensen & Mortensen, this issue), carve out spaces for new identity formations (Zeng & Abidin, this issue; Zidani, this issue), and create togetherness in situations of crises (Merrill & Lindgren, this issue; Murru & Vicari, this issue). They can also, however, lead to the normalization of racist discourses (Askanius & Keller, this issue; McSwiney et al., this issue; Trillò & Shifman, this issue).

In some instances, memes allow us to look beyond spectacular political events and produce insight into the politics of everyday vernacular culture (Murru & Vicari, this issue; Zidani, this issue). As Zidani (this issue) argues, they enable us to map the politics of inclusion and exclusion and the spaces in between, thereby creating the potential for critical reflection. While a particular meme may stay within subversive subcultures, such as the far-right (McSwiney et al., this issue), it can playfully appropriate a new political context and generate new frontiers between 'us' and 'them'. The constant playful appropriation of contexts and the demarcating of new frontiers allow memes to effortlessly travel between subcultures and the mainstream, between the platform-specific and wider media ecologies.

It can be difficult to pinpoint when precisely a meme works toward politics of inclusion or exclusion, as frontiers are constantly moving, creating new constellations of 'us' and 'them'. Although their potential to travel is dependent on the political context (see McSwiney et al., this issue), memes are produced and diffused by members of participatory internet culture. They cite popular culture, are created with intertextual awareness of other memes, and are distributed online by numerous participants. As memes are rapidly diffused across political contexts and digital platforms, the messages they convey and the memetic visuals themselves become remixed, iterated, and often decontextualized (see also Ibrahim, 2016; Boudana et al., 2017). In some instances, this opens a space for political identity formation (Zeng & Abidin, this issue), while in others it dilutes any political significance (Merrill & Lindgren, this issue) or may contribute to polarization and hostility (Askanius & Keller, this issue; Trillò & Shifman, this issue).

As memes flow between the subcultural and the mainstream, they may normalize or move fringe political perspectives along with them. Askanius and Keller (this issue) remind us of a striking example of how memes can contribute to mainstreaming extremist views. During the siege on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, a mob of supporters sought to overturn the electoral defeat of outgoing president Donald Trump. In their staging of this attack, the insurgents drew heavily upon the iconography of white supremacy, known from memes as well as alt-right visual culture more generally. This includes Pepe the Frog and the green-and-white flag of Kekistan, which references the German Empire's Reichskriegsflagge. These symbols not only travelled from subcultures to the mainstream but also moved as 'more or less digital' (Merrill & Lindgren, this issue) from analogue media to online and were ultimately reproduced in physical protest. As Askanius and Keller (this issue) contend, the violence and turbulence of the attack, during which five people were killed and over a hundred injured, contrasts strikingly with the humour in memes with murder phantasies. Memes can be mobilized to move white supremacist violence into the mainstream and push the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable. In the political, these memes do not create frontiers against the 'other' as recognized adversary (as e.g., in Zeng & Abidin's contribution in this issue) but instead create the 'other' as an enemy that needs to be eliminated. The memes thus reach the normative tipping point of acceptability in playful appropriations of political contexts.

While not necessarily reaching this tipping point, other memes may contribute to mainstreaming political critique or entrenching existing power relations. Kristensen and Mortensen (this issue) identify how memes of populist political leaders seemingly contest their irresponsible handling of the COVID-19 crisis while nevertheless reproducing populist values and communicative styles. This emphasizes how political parody and satire inevitably reference and/or reproduce the target of their criticism, thereby risking amplification of extremist ideologies or indeed populism (Kraidy, 2018; McCrow-Young & Mortensen, 2021). As the contributions in this issue show, however, this ambiguity may be difficult to grasp in memes due to their constant authorless remixing, reproduction, and dissemination in various contexts (Kristensen & Mortensen, this issue; Merrill & Lindgren, this issue; Murru & Vicari, this issue). From a normative perspective, memes can contribute to political discussion in a productive way, but we must differentiate 'between memes that enhance democratic public debate and those which degrade it' (Boudana et al., 2017, p. 1228).

As they travel as artifacts of and in social media, memes are governed by social media logics. They are simultaneously used to destabilize politics and to create new identity formations (Murru & Vicari, this issue; Zeng & Abidin, this issue; Zidani, this issue). Several articles in this special issue demonstrate how memes operate in a grey zone between the market and bottom-up political participation. Memes creating post-terror togetherness (Merrill & Lindgren, this issue) are appropriated by the city council for branding strategies, and the generational politics of the Zoomers have generated spin-off merchandise in the form of keychains, t-shirts, and stickers inspired by meme videos mocking 'Boomers' (Zeng & Abidin, this issue). Such commodification emphasizes the ambivalence of meme's playful politics. That is, memes entangle the political and the humorous through play but this also commodifies the political. By the same token though, the commodified, humorous politics of memes are part of the playful everyday engagement with politics.

The contributions in this special issue show the various ways in which memes reinforce, create, transgress, and challenge political boundaries. They politicize and depoliticize. They personify but also de-personify. They stay within the subversive and create frontiers to political elites and the mainstream, but in their playful appropriation of political contexts, they may challenge and push these very same frontiers. Memes provide means of creating togetherness and political identities while also increasing polarization by constantly drawing and redrawing the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' – in some instances reaching the tipping point of what is acceptable. As their template travels effortlessly, memes continue to playfully appropriate new political contexts and to (re)negotiate frontiers in the political.

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