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Binders and Bayonets: Irony, Comedy, and Social Media in the 2012 Presidential Campaign

1. Obama 2012: The First Meme Election

The presidential election of 2008 has been widely acknowledged as the first U.S. electoral cycle to be crucially affected by the Internet and the specific communication strategies of Web 2.0. Then-Senator Barack Obama's campaign was immediately credited by political pundits and the tech savvy with having skillfully deployed the resources of SNS (Social Network Services) to involve potential voters by fostering the circulation of ideas and political messages, a move that brought its candidate to win the first "YouTube Election" (Cortese et al. 693) and become the first U.S. President of the Facebook era. Since then, several studies have been published in an attempt to ascertain and gauge through the construction of sophisticated statistical models the extent to which participation into online activities contributed to orienting the political views of undecided voters.[1] The results obtained so far seem to be still partial and elusive, and cannot satisfactorily answer the questions raised by the empirically proven impact of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter on the public perception of candidates and policies. By 2012, in fact, it was clear that no one in the U.S. could ever again afford running a presidential campaign without a considerable investment in the IT department to promote the candidate's image and program. The size of the teams the two candidates set up to deal with their respective new-media campaigns, however, was strikingly different: "In 2012 Obama's digital-campaign team outnumbered Romney's by a large amount with 750 on Obama's staff compared to 87 on Romney's staff" (Hendricks 135).

Though the exact measure and statistical evidence of the correlation between voters' online practices and their actual electoral choices still

eludes scholars, there is no doubting their cultural relevance, and empirical evidence abounds as to the influence exerted on public opinion by the quantity and quality of the candidates' presence in the new media. As one commentator noted: "This presidential election takes place in a world where Twitter is more than 100 times bigger than it was four years ago and Tumblr is 77 times bigger" (Jeffries n.p.), a trend that has been constant and predictable over the past decade. In fact, numbers for the 2010 midterm election showed that "half all adult Internet users now have a social networking site on Facebook, Myspace or even LinkedIn," and "Almost a quarter of online adults used Twitter, Facebook or Myspace to connect to campaigns" (Dorsch 30, 28), a situation that clearly marks the importance of social media to connect with the electorate.

These figures become even more significant in light of the fact that the 2012 electoral competition was promptly labeled the "meme election" during the last weeks preceding the vote. The shift in lexis from the 2008 "Facebook/YouTube election" is itself revealing since the latter somehow pointed at the relevance of specific platforms allowing practices such as networking and sharing content, whereas the reference to memes clearly identifies a specific type of online, usually user-generated artifact as the defining characteristic of the 2012 election.

But what is a meme, exactly? And why did it become the most relevant cultural by-product of the campaign trail leading to Obama's reelection? A combination of images and words often marked by a humorous or satirical message, memes have been described as "political cartoons for the web" (Monsour n.p.), a definition that, though surely helpful in explaining the phenomenon to profane readers by comparing it to a well-known form of political communication, misses the crucial point of its web-based practices of production and circulation, which in the case of memes are central to the understanding of their cultural significance.

The word "meme" was coined in 1976 by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, who introduced the term to extend the evolutionary logic determining the survival of any living entity to include ideas. Memes were, in his theory, the replicators that "propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation" (192). After decades from the term's introduction in

the field of biology, memes are considered today "a unit of culture, a parallel to the biological gene in Richard Dawkins's original coinage" and the term is used to describe "how cultural products pass virally from person to person by multiplying themselves throughout the social body" (Jurgenson n.p.). At the time of instant dissemination of content through the Internet, "meme" has come to identify any idea rapidly ("virally") spreading within online-based communities, which forges the language and culture of the group. More recently, with the exponential growth of SNS, the term has been increasingly associated with the viral circulation of user-generated humorous visual artifacts, and with reference to their cultural relevance in U.S. contemporary political narratives we could say that, "At the most abstract level, a meme is an idea that spreads among people in similar cultural circumstances who repeat and modify it. Colloquially, they amount to inside jokes participated in by masses of people" (Jeffries n.p.).

Repetition and modification are key concepts here, because they signal the two strategies through which "masses of people" participate in the meme culture, that is, either by actively engaging in the production of memes (and modification is a form of production, since memes are often generated through Web 2.0 tools allowing the modification of a given template), or simply by contributing to their dissemination, thus letting other people, connected to them through SNS, know that they share the views expressed in the meme. This double emphasis in the definition of meme also accounts, though only indirectly, for the predictable presence on the web of "forced memes" (Phillips n.p.), that is, artifacts created and popularized by paid editorial staff working for the campaigns or people in search of online visibility (e.g., bloggers, web writers, marketing specialists, etc.). Whether, as Phillips notices, this contamination of grass-root practices by subjects with vested interests is likely to turn memes into a commodity (Phillips and Miltner n.p.), or it rather confirms how said interests cannot effectively achieve control of the phenomenon (Jurgenson), is still debatable. Their cultural impact on the election process and its narrative is, however, undisputable: "this is just The Way We Election Now, and that comes with a whole host of implications" (Phillips and Miltner n.p.).

2. From "Occupy Wall Street" to Gender Politics: Memes as Political Speech Acts

When in late October 2012 a number of traditional and new-media outlets hurried to eventually analyze the explosion of the political memes phenomenon and comment on its possible influence on the election,[2] the memeification of the presidential campaign had already been going on for months, with countless instances of viral images circulating and being rapidly discussed, shared, liked, and abandoned by millions of users not just in the U.S. but around the world. Both nominees' campaigns had been trying since at least the summer to quickly seize "memeable moments" in the campaign news cycle and push memes through SNS in an attempt to effectively sell their agendas to undecided voters. Their ability to do so is still highly debated, since several commentators have noticed how the campaigns were usually either slow in capturing the feeling of social media users around a possible meme, or cautiously appropriating it only after it had been successfully circulating for days. Both strategies are marked by a delayed reaction to online trends that is simply incompatible with the extremely fast and short life cycle of memes. Still, as we will see in the following pages, some differences can be noticed between the ways in which the two campaigns tackled the meme election, differences that at times exposed the Romney campaign's use of social media as a struggling effort, whereas the Obama campaign seemed to be right at home when speaking the language of Twitter or Facebook. Furthermore, a careful analysis of the cultural content of some of the most popular memes competing for attention during the last months of the campaign trail shows how, through SNS, the public signaled the topical issues they wanted to place at the center of the political conversation, and how they evaluated the nominees' capacity (or lack thereof) to engage those themes, "competing with a role once reserved to the professional press" (Melber n.p.).

In what follows I will focus my discussion on the memes emerging from three key moments during the campaign trail and the ones that swept across social media during and immediately after the televised debates between the candidates, all of them instancing this appropriation of political commentary and showing how "sharing these memes … represents a political speech act itself" (Graeff n.p.). Measuring the exact popularity

of each meme, or providing evidence for the reasons behind such success, lies beyond the scope of the present analysis, which hinges instead on the cultural work memes perform and the ways in which they are related to the political discourse generated by the campaigns, and actually produce new ways of taking part in it.

Let me start with the first one in chronological order, which goes under the label "You didn't build that." In the course of an election campaign speech delivered in July 2012, in Virginia, President Barack Obama made the following remark on the role played by government-funded infrastructures in building successful business:

> There are a lot of wealthy, successful Americans who agree with me – because they want to give something back. They know they didn't – look, if you've been successful, you didn't get there on your own…. If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you've got a business – you didn't build that. Somebody else made that happen.

As the transcript of the almost impromptu remark in its entirety makes clear, in the sentence "If you've got a business – you didn't build that" the pronoun "that" is meant to refer back to the infrastructures allowing businesses to thrive. Yet, the ambiguous phrasing of the concept gives conservatives an easy ground to claim that not only is the President willing to spend more tax-payers money to fund government-sponsored programs, but he is also eventually giving himself away as someone who does not subscribe to the national narrative of the self-made man, and an enemy to American small business owners. In the days following the speech, almost unnoticed by the traditional media, the web sees a rise of memes satirizing the poorly phrased remark and implying that Obama meant "that" as referring literally to "business." The typical structure of the meme, its visual vocabulary, as we might call it, features some sort of builders (from the famous photo "Lunch atop a Skyscraper," by Charles C. Ebbets, to ancient Egypt slaves building pyramids), with a photoshopped Obama included in the picture and commenting: "You didn't build that." In a matter of days

the Republican Party, seeing that the line had caught the attention of the social media, launched a few GOP-sponsored memes on the same theme and with a similar visual technique. They were based in fact on the superimposition of the President's image and his by-now famous line over pictures of inventors and their inventions. Both types of meme clearly express a highly partisan interpretation of Obama's phrase and aim at exposing his economic agenda as inherently absurd and at odds with reality. However, it is worth noticing that the kind of visual juxtapositions featured in the memes produce a certain degree of ambiguity as to what Obama is to be blamed for exactly. The satirical images, in fact, produce a sort of double decontextualization: first, Obama's line is completely cut off from the flux of words which would have clarified what he was referring to; secondly, the semantic shift from infrastructures to business is further abstracted and "that" comes to refer not even to business, but to material objects and actual buildings. The entrepreneurial idea behind these "objects" is, to begin with, visually erased and somehow conceptually misplaced: are small business owners supposed to identify with the construction workers building the skyscraper? Or maybe with ancient Egyptian slaves raising pyramids? In the case of the GOP-sponsored "inventors" memes, the "abstraction" of the message is subtler, but still a relevant aspect of the communication produced. While it is possible to locate entrepreneurship in the inventor, who will thus invite identification from business owners, the remark "You didn't build that," which visually refers to the material objects resulting from the innovation process, is somehow off the mark, since quite often inventors and innovators had to avail themselves of the labor force to "build" their ideas and turn them into reality. In other words, these memes imitate the process of decontextualization which produced a remark the Democratic leader never actually made in the first place. Moreover they do not reflect the real world of the potential undecided Republican voters who are supposed to identify with their message, but rather repeat the now classic ideological charge of socialism, which has been accompanying Obama since his first presidential campaign.

As is shown by the GOP decision to use "We built it" as the theme for the late-August National Convention that nominated Mitt Romney as their candidate, this position pleases an electorate that is already decidedly

conservative, but is less likely to equally resonate with other constituencies like the moderate center voters. The convention theme, based on a meme that had been popular more than a month before, also says something about the GOP's repeated effort to capture the spirit of new-media communication, while crucially missing one of its constitutive characters, that is immediacy.

The "You didn't build that" episode is probably the most troublesome moment in Obama's campaign in terms of miscommunication and backfiring attempts at promoting his agenda. His opponent, Mitt Romney, had a harder time dealing with the intricacies of online buzz, since he seemed peculiarly prone to make the wrong statement in public. Though he surely was not the first presidential candidate to repeatedly miscalculate the potential impact of a remark, "In election past, the sort of stuff reporters joke about … might have ended up in pool reports, seen and appreciated by other journalists. The Internet gives campaign press ways to publicize the weird details that otherwise might not make it into print" (Pareene 4). In other words, the virtually unlimited space for and zero cost of spreading even petty news online make today's candidates more vulnerable to attacks originating and spreading from often unknown and certainly uncontrollable sources.

Mitt Romney's arguably worst choice of words (not to say concept) came during a private fundraiser in May 2012, when he was recorded on hidden camera while making the following analysis of his campaign in the months to come:

> There are 47 percent of the people who will vote for the president no matter what. All right, there are 47 percent who are with him, who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it. That's an entitlement. The government should give it to them. And they will vote for this president no matter what. And I mean the president starts off with 48, 49 … he starts off with a huge number. These are people who pay no income tax. Forty-seven percent of Americans pay no income tax. So our message of low taxes doesn't connect. So he'll be out there talking about tax cuts for the rich.… My job is not to worry about those people. I'll never convince them they should take

> personal responsibility and care for their lives. What I have to do is convince the 5-10% in the center that are independents, that are thoughtful, that look at voting one way or the other depending upon in some cases emotion, whether they like the guy or not.

The video remained unknown for months, until it was published online in September 2012.[3] The "47 percent" remark, which seemed to exclude from Romney's concerns as a then potential nominee almost half the American voters, predictably prompted enormous buzz on social media. As a speech act it had "the key ingredient of digital-media production," that is spreadability: "Spreadable media invites sharing, which invites more sharing," as explained by Jones (126), a concept more sophisticated than that of virality which, by emphasizing the idea of uncontrollable contagion, deprives much online behavior of agency.

The memes inspired by the video typically feature an American from the 47 percent crowd, with a caption detailing their job and annual income, and a considerable number of them compare the socioeconomic condition of the portrayed person with Romney's well-known status as a millionaire, with several among them featuring the closing line: "Fuck you, Mitt." Visually, they stress their "voter-generated" quality (as opposed to the ones centering on Obama's "You didn't build that") and are firmly rooted in the everyday reality of the people who felt disparaged by Romney's comment. Their political message is then quite unambiguously delivered and, more crucially, vote-oriented in ways that can be perceived by the public as non-partisan and non-ideological.

As I have mentioned above, there have been moments during the campaign trail when the "Obama for America" staff appeared to be speaking the language of social media with considerable proficiency, and promoting the image of the incumbent President online seemed to be achieved with native ease. A revealing moment in this sense was offered by a virtual conversation that took place in the course of the Republican National Convention. It featured as one of its main events a speech delivered by actor and Republican supporter Clint Eastwood addressing an empty chair, which was to symbolize Obama's ineffectiveness in dealing with the problems of the nation. The number seemed to be cleverly staged for social media

to turn it into a meme, something that actually happened, and originated even a new word, *eastwooding*, for the act of aggressively addressing an empty chair. However, the Obama's campaign response was quick and up to par: a picture was posted to the President's Twitter profile showing a White House meeting from the perspective of the back of the presidential chair, the iconic big-eared back of Obama's head emerging from it, and the tweet: "This seat's taken." The episode, although apparently a trivial one, is relevant for more than one reason: first of all, compared to the belatedness of the "We built it" slogan for the Republican National Convention, it shows how Obama's campaign had quickly detected in the empty chair a spreadable moment and had preemptively curbed its potential, undermining it with humorous wit exuding self-confidence and imperturbability on the President's part at the attacks from his opponents. Furthermore, it shows how, in the news cycle generated by the presidential election, the Internet is now capable of acting independently from the other media, producing its own language and giving rise to exchanges, like the virtual one taking place between the two candidates, that are fully informed by the dynamics of online behavior. Finally, it is revealing of the crucial role played by humor (both that proceeding from the nominees themselves and that targeting them) in defining the candidates' images during the long campaign trail.

In the current rapidly evolving scenario of the U.S. political communication, in fact, one of the few elements to have remained virtually unchanged is the abiding relevance of comedy, satire, and humor in general in the Presidential election cycles. A fair degree of humoristic discourse is ritually expected of the candidates themselves, and considerable creative energies and comic talent are invested by the campaign officers of each nominee, in order to effectively manage this strategic area of image-building communication.

The remarkable importance of humor in the U.S. political culture has been read by several scholars as an expression of the democratic spirit of the nation itself. As pointed out by Patrick Stewart in his study of the use of humor during the primary debates leading to the 2008 presidential election: "in more egalitarian societies, such as the United States, … leaders are expected to bridge the divide between them and their followers by

reducing their own prestige" (255), notably through playful self-deprecation. It is no surprise, then, that the ability to elicit laughter in the course of election campaigns has given rise to a significant body of scholarship in several fields, from sociology to statistics, from media studies to political science,[4] and is further, though just empirically, confirmed by the recurrent interest media outlets show in a candidate's ability to entertain. In the ritually staged moments when the candidates are called to demonstrate their mastery of the art of comedy, in fact, their performances are widely reported on by both traditional and new-media news outlets and thus become an integral part of the public's (i.e. voters') perception of their charisma as potential political leaders.

Being able to participate in, rather than being the victim of, the economy of humor that "can humanize candidates" but also "backfire if it is used inappropriately or if it is seen as lacking in a candidate" (Stewart 256), for example, by gracefully receiving jokes or cleverly retorting to them, allows the candidate not to be relegated solely to the role of target in the complex dynamics of humor, and contributes to more firmly establishing their prestige in popular imagination. In other words, as the "tweeted" response to the "Empty chair" speech demonstrates, though an effective deployment of humor clearly has no direct relation to either political agendas or personal capacities, it is nonetheless crucial in defining each candidates' image and role not just in politics, but in popular culture as well.

This national cultural investment in comedy, together with the unprecedented (in scale if not in nature) phenomenon of political memes, conferred new significance in cultural terms to the three televised debates between the nominees, which predictably became a celebration of "participatory culture," in which potential voters "transform the event from something one watches on television into a broader event in which citizens have avenues available for centering the conversation on their own interests and supplying their own voices in making the event meaningful" (Jones 126).

Three memes, one for each debate, captured attention on social media, confirming how the campaigns had less control than ever in the past over the message they were able to cast. Moreover, the ability to produce spreadable speech acts was revealed as the only getaway for candidates to take part in a culture that can only effectively propagate political ideas when it is appropriated and modified by the masses, for example through memes.

Political and television commentators alike agree that Mitt Romney won the first debate against an unusually non-communicative Barack Obama, who seemed distracted, detached, lacking energy, and peculiarly less effective than in other comparable circumstances. However, though the President's disappointing performance did become the subject of quite a few memes, the defining moment of the debate was to be unwittingly offered by Romney. Talking about his proposed cuts to the PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) budget as part of his spending review measures for the public sector, Romney tried to produce a lighthearted humorous remark by pointing out: "I'm going to stop the subsidy to PBS…. I like PBS. I love Big Bird." The Internet went nuts. In a matter of hours, Facebook and Twitter were inundated of posts about Big Bird (the yellow giant puppet starring in one of PBS's most popular and internationally renowned children's program, *Sesame Street*), and meme after meme were produced featuring the endangered puppet. The most imitated visual statement had Big Bird framed as having become recently unemployed or unsuccessfully offering himself for hiring at a very low wage, with captions like "Will work for food." Again, as with the 47 percent one, this meme clearly resonated with the everyday reality of many Americans who saw their jobs in jeopardy due to the financial crisis. Equally emotionally engaged were the citizens who somehow benefited form the government-funded policies that Romney promised to cut. Finally, another extremely piercing piece of commentary was provided by the series of memes punning on the assonance between Sesame Street and Wall Street, and connecting the candidate's attack on Big Bird to his closeness to the financial elite. The "Occupy Sesame Street" meme captured the way in which a significant constituency across the nation was using this grass-root form of satire to translate Romney's agenda (not just his casual remark on Big Bird or even PBS) into a visual and verbal language that highlighted its perceived impact on masses of American citizens. The discourse was produced from an unauthorized point of view, which can be seen as one of the defining characteristics of popular culture (Parker 165). The meme also established which moment/theme in the debate was closer to the interests of this newly defined citizenship coalescing around its social media practices. It can be said that the explosion of the Big Bird memes almost moved away from pure criticism of Romney's figure, and rather focused on a policy point that happened to be voiced by the Republican candidate.

The second debate, as narrated by and through memes, tells a different story. Here, again, the spreadable speech act was unwittingly produced by Romney, when he answered a question on the issue of pay equity for women:

> Thank you. And – important topic. And one which I learned a great deal about, particularly as I was serving as Governor of my state. Because I had the chance to pull together a Cabinet, and all of the applicants seemed to be men. And I went to my staff and I said: 'How come all of the people for these jobs are all men?' They said: 'Well, these are the people that have the qualifications.' And I said: 'Well gosh, can't we find some women that are also qualified?' And we took a concerted effort to go out and find women who had backgrounds that could be qualified to become members of our Cabinet. I went to a number of women's groups and said: 'Can you help us find folks?' And they brought us whole binders full of women. I was proud of the fact that after I staffed my Cabinet, and my senior staff, the University of New York in Albany did a survey of all 50 states, and concluded that mine had more women in senior leadership positions than any other state in America.

As one commentator put it: "Mitt Romney did not just lose the debate on Tuesday night. He handed the Internet ammunition to memorably mock him for several more news cycles. While candidates have always worried about gaffes, this year's nominees must navigate the first Meme Election" (Melber n.p.). Twitter accounts and Facebook pages using the "Binders full of women" quote were instantly registered and gaining followers in the thousands while the debate was still on. And though Romney's campaign tried to deflate the meme bubble that was already taking the social media by storm, suggesting it was merely an infelicitous phrasing of a perfectly commendable position on women's rights, the analysis of the visual character of many of these memes reveals a deeper critique to the Republican nominee's gender policy. From Hugh Hefner smirking among what seem to be shelves upon shelves of "binders full of women," to pop culture icon Patrick Swayze rephrasing his famous line from classic movie *Dirty Dancing* to say "Nobody puts Baby in a binder," the emphasis is on practices of objectification of women who, in Romney's view, are deprived of full

agency. Romney's narrative of his search for female candidates qualified to fill high rank positions in his Governor's cabinet tells a story of women who are not confident enough or embattled enough to push for an opening, and are saved from professional obscurity by an enlightened and benevolent patriarch.[5] These memes, then, are doing more than poking fun at a clumsy statement: they are exposing Romney's attitude towards women as patronizing and calling attention to the objectification of women implicit in the conservatives' gender policies, which are predicated on definitions of reproduction, rape, and birth control focusing on the female body as a site for male control.

By the time the third debate aired, it had become clear that memes had inverted the direction of the news circulating between traditional and new media. Until very recently, the web would select something from the traditional media information cycle on the campaign and would spread it online through social networks and microblogging (Twitter). A perfect example of this is the consumption of TV clips on YouTube, a platform that allows the uploading of original content, but is mainly used, during election campaigns, to "watch TV" independently from the networks' schedules. With the 2012 election, social media played a significantly different role since they did not merely disseminate content produced elsewhere to a relatively restricted audience of users' friends and followers, but fully appropriated cultural content related to the campaigns and, through memes, fed the news cycle of traditional media, rather than being fed by it. In other words, "memes (and meme creation as a cultural practice) have become mainstream" (Phillips and Miltner n.p.).

The third debate was the occasion for Obama to once again take advantage of his capacity to fully and nonchalantly take part in the social media game of eliciting or producing spreadable speech acts. While Romney was trying to explain why he would not cut the budget of the military, supporting his view by saying (as he had done innumerable times at campaign events around the country) that "our Navy is smaller now than any time since 1917," Obama was quick to reply:

> But I think Governor Romney maybe hasn't spent enough time looking at how our military works. You – you mentioned the Navy, for example, and that

> we have fewer ships than we did in 1916. Well, Governor, we also have fewer horses and bayonets – because the nature of our military's changed.

As Alex Pareene noticed, with his punch line on horses and bayonets Obama "was speaking in readymade hashtags" (5). The rebuttal is so effective as to seem scripted in advance as a perfect retort to be used whenever Governor Romney would advance his well-known outraged opinion about the size of the Navy. Whether scripted or spontaneous, it helped positively define the third debate for Obama. The final meeting between the candidates was in fact centered on foreign policy, a sensitive ground for the President, given the controversy around the responsibility of his administration in failing to protect U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens, among others, from a terrorist attack in Benghazi. And given the enormous emotional investment of a huge part of the nation in their troops abroad, Obama could not risk being defined by Romney as a weak or incompetent Commander in Chief who is going to cut the resources for the military compartment. By preemptively pointing at the lack of credibility of this charge, Obama managed to move the conversation on the military away from the pitfall of a discussion of the Benghazi attack, while Romney's inability to effectively retort with equal wit to his opponent's mockery left his online supporters with no ammunition in the memes competition for attention.

As Erhardt Graeff put it in a conference talk discussing how election memes expand political discourse, "The propagation of these politicized cultural artifacts may seem trivial and guilty of the common slur of 'slacktivism' online, but it's sharing that does most of the work in terms of creating a moment and a networked public with power greater than the sum of its parts. Friends or followers are exposed to your otherwise unspoken political opinions and given the opportunity to participate by forwarding the same meme you did." (n.p.) Thanks to the tools provided by Web 2.0, we are all in a certain sense "satirists now, even if by sharing those formulations constructed by others" (Jones 126), a phenomenon of mass participation in political discourse that seemed to leave the campaigns "very little control over the message" (Hendricks 144), while demonstrating "how

presidential elections have become cultural events as much as political ones and that the political and cultural are really inseparable" (Jones 127).

The few representative examples presented above help understand how memes marked a crucial shift in the role played by social media during the 2012 campaign, from being one of the tools used by the candidates to reach potential voters to being the site of production and circulation of users-generated political content that effectively deployed humor to turn political discourse into forms of "unauthorized culture." Among the implications of this shift, a crucial one seems to be the close connection memes establish between the tradition of humor, and more specifically political satire, and present day social media, in a sort of mutual reinforcing dynamics, which fosters the influence of SNS on the pre-election debate through the potential online virality of laughter, while simultaneously spreading the impact of humor on the campaigns through the practices of sharing and liking.

Notes

[1] See, among others, Robertson, Vatrapu, and Medina, Vitak et al., Taewoo, Spiliotes, Hargittai and Shaw, Tsou et al., and DiGrazia et al.

[2] A number of articles were published online between the 22nd of October and the 2nd of November 2012, which analyzed the subject of memes and their impact on the campaign trail. See, for example: Becwith, Garber, Jeffries, Jurgensen, Melber, Monsour, Neuman, Phillips and Miltner.

[3] It first appeared on the website *Mother Jones*, an investigative U.S. magazine. <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/09/secret-video-romney-private-fundraiser>

[4] See, among others, Baumgartner, Pareene, Stewart.

[5] The story of Governor Romney hiring an unprecedented number of women in his cabinet has also a strikingly different version. According to Mass GAP, a bi-partisan women's organization, they had compiled a list of outstanding female professionals and offered it to both candidates in the State election, asking the future Governor, whoever he might be, to hire Cabinet members from that list.

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