

The Role of Political Memes on Social Media in Criticizing Political Policy in the United States 2016-2019

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Abstract

Purpose - This paper seek to determine the role of political-themed memes on social media in criticizing political policies in the United States (US) in 2016–2019. This period was beginning with the 2016 US presidential election and continuing through Donald Trump's presidency. The use of memes has become a popular medium for expressing US public opinion on policies and political issues that occur in the US. Expression of opinion in the form of praise, support, or criticism was channelled through memes that are created and disseminated on social media. **The method** used was qualitative, with data sources from books, journals, and official US media. **Findings** - this study describes memes as an alternative means of representing US public opinion in a light and interesting way. However, the use of memes can only be used as a form of taking a stance on the development of political situations and policies through social media. **Novelty** - Political instruments that have developed in the midst of digital technology have been an important factor in political discourse in a country. This can provide input for the government and policy makers to take into account the development of discourse on digital media as a form of public participation.

Keywords: Political Memes, Public Opinion, Social Media, US.

INTRODUCTION

The delivery of political communication has traditionally shifted with the internet and social media. Technological developments have also brought communication media into the digital era (Johansson, 2019). The existence of technological developments and the emergence of the internet open up new spaces and facilities in the media of political communication (Axelrod, 2016). The development of internet technology gave rise to social media sites such as Friendster, MySpace, LinkedIn, XING, and Facebook. Social media is defined as a form of internet-based electronic communication where users can create online communities or forums to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (Merriam-Webster, 2020).

The presence of social media adds to the space for freedom in the form, language, appearance, and manner of political delivery that appears along with the creativity of its users (Dean, 2018). Dean (2018) also mentions that the current delivery of political messages can be done not only with explanatory and descriptive sentences. However, it can also be in visual form in the form of images or videos. This visual aspect is taken into account when forms of political activities such as campaigns and socialization begin to enter social media. The existence of social media creates a forum that is able to accommodate and form opinions on certain issues. According to Boulianne (2009), with the existence of social media, users can easily express their opinions and show their position in responding to political issues. In addition, a social media user is also able to convey and form public opinion at large (Martnez-Rolán, 2015).

"Social media users actively follow political developments every day" (Dean, 2018). In social media, content that appears, especially in the form of visuals, is becoming more relevant and interesting in the process of delivering

political opinions. There is an urge to express through content in visual form on social media. Not a few also share content by adding an element of humor to it. According to Hunting (2020), the development of the use of visual forms on social media shows a new way of delivering opinions digitally. Previously, the delivery of political opinions was done conventionally using print media such as newspapers and magazines. In addition, the aspiration box in general is still a means of conveying opinions to the public. Political parties have an influence on the delivery of political opinions by forming supporting organizations. For example, in the United States, during the 2009 presidential election, Barack Obama became a presidential candidate. Obama formed an organization called Obama for America (OFA) which aims to find and mobilize Obama supporters during the presidential election (MillerCenter.org, 2020).

Memes are a new way of conveying political opinion. Memes, or memes (plural), are a form of visual media that include elements of humor that are widely spread on social media and the internet. This meme is usually a joke for internet users who understand the concept (Axelrod, 2016). Research by Martnez-Rolán (2015) states that internet memes can be interpreted as a form of content in the form of images, videos, or songs that have humor and joke values and are shared by internet users. However, the most common form or format of memes is in the form of images or videos.

The phenomenon of the emergence of memes on social media has enlivened the dynamics of US politics. Especially in 2016, which was during the presidential campaign (Ross, 2017). Social media shows its role in American politics and also in the 2016 presidential campaign, where people can participate in expressing their opinions through the media. According to (Hunting, 2020), memes are considered a form of content that is quite strong in conveying opinions. Young people in the United States find there is an attractive opportunity to share their political opinions through social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Expressing opinions through memes is considered easier, more interesting and entertaining (Axelrod, 2016).

This tendency to make memes has a value in favor of a certain side. Thus, with the partiality that is raised through this meme, it also acts as a medium for conveying opinions from social media users. In this study, we want to explain the role of social media political memes in criticizing political policies in the United States, especially in 2016–2019. The time limit in this study is based on the administration of President Donald Trump, from the campaign period to 1 year before the end of his term of office.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Politic

Digital politics is defined as a means of shaping the political environment in society based on digital technology that is able to influence political activities and agendas (Coleman, 2015). Digital technology has a role in the world of politics, namely how a political figure can carry out good and appropriate political communication. According to Dahlgren (2015), the existence of technology such as the internet and social media as communication media plays an important role in implementing political agendas. Dahlgren (2015) also added that the wider spread of internet technology in society has become a very important means of communication for the civil sphere in voicing opinions and taking sides in responding to a particular political issue.

The existence of the internet and social media is one form of the implementation of digital politics. According to Wahyudi (2018), social media is used in disseminating political activities, such as disseminating work programs from the government. In addition, politicians and political parties use social media in an effort to increase electability and popularity. People also use social media to access political information that is developing. Social media in the political sphere can be used as an indicator of public participation in following developments and political situations. For example, in elections, people have the freedom to express their opinions. Wahyudi (2018) added that social media can also provide information widely and openly to its users.

Political Communication

According to Denton (1990) in the book (McNair, 2017), political communication is a method of conveying information in order to influence political views and atmosphere. This message is conveyed by political actors or groups that aim to inform and influence the attitudes and behavior of the community (Cangara, 2007). Political communication activities can be carried out by all political actors, such as politicians and political parties; communication activities aimed at political actors by non-political actors; all communication and information about political activities contained in newspapers and all public media (McNair, 2017).

The existence of the internet and social media makes it easier for the delivery of political communication to be faster and wider. Submission of broad political opinions by individuals or groups on political dynamics through social media becomes more easily accepted by the general public. Political communication that is carried out through mass media and social media is able to provide an overview of the behavior and opinions of the public in responding to political issues that occur.

METHOD

In this research, descriptive qualitative research is used because in this research it is intended to convey the process and presentation of the themes, namely the phenomenon of social media and political dynamics that occur on social media. This type of qualitative analysis will be in accordance with the qualitative data collection method used. And it will be easier to describe the process and analysis of the themes through qualitative descriptive. This research uses primary and secondary data sources. The primary data sources used are sources from books, journals, electronic newspapers, and official websites on the internet. Sources of data related to the use of practical theory are obtained from other researchers' journals and books. Meanwhile, information on issues or phenomena related to the theme is also obtained from journals and books, as well as electronic information media on the internet.

This study uses library research data collection techniques (library studies), which is carried out by collecting library documents, which will be the source of research data. This research was analyzed with 3 steps of interactive analysis, namely: (1) Data reduction, by selecting and focusing on all types of data that support research data so that they can be presented with clear and effective narratives; (2) Presentation of data, in the form of a complete description and narrative, which is compiled based on the main findings contained in the data reduction; (3) Data verification, which is intended to draw conclusions based on the data that has been extracted, to obtain the truth or validity of the data taken, and to maintain objectivity from different perspectives. This can be done by triangulating the data.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The term "meme" first appeared in 1976 in the book "The Selfish Gene" by Richard Dawkins. Dawkins defines a meme as a form of dissemination or cultural imitation (cultural replicator). According to Dawkins, memes spread ideas to individuals and groups of people (Miltner, 2018). The definition of a meme has changed with the advent of the internet and social media. Memes are now displayed in the form of images, cultural symbols, videos, and narratives.

Memes in internet studies are described as media objects that appear and spread among internet and social media users. According to Jenkins et al. (2013), memes are a medium that is easy to spread because each individual can create memes with their own intentions or ideas. The form of memes on the internet has various styles or genres with different structures, forms, topics, and purposes. Some examples of streams that are widely used include rage comics and image macros (Miltner, 2018).

A meme has three elements in its delivery, namely content, form, and point of view. The content of internet memes refers to the ideas or ideas expressed in them. The shape of the meme refers to the format (video or image), as well as frequently used patterns such as the size and position of the text in the image. The point of view of the meme refers to the position of the participating parties and how the creator views responding to an issue (Shifman, 2013).

Political Memes

A political meme is a medium created with the aim of expressing opinions or participation in certain political issues. Political memes, like memes in general, contain jokes that can trigger a reaction from readers (Tenove, 2019). Several professions in the fields of politics, public relations, and advertising use memes as their medium of communication in delivering messages and attracting audiences. The public and political sympathizers can also express their opinions freely through self-made memes. The existence of meme-making sites such as knowyourmeme.com, reddit.com, quickmeme.com, imgflip.com, 4chan.org, and electmeme.lol have become a place for users to be creative and express opinions through memes (Heiskanen, 2017).

Political Memes in the 2016 US Presidential Election

The period of the US Presidential Election in 2016 was marked by the popularity of political memes that spread on the internet and social media. People in the United States, who are mostly supporters of the

two presidential candidates, voice their support through social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit. They also exchanged opinion attacks through memes they created aimed at opposing candidates. In February 2016, the Washington Post news media stated that the presidential election that year was "the most-memed election in US history," which is defined as the presidential election with the most memes (Heiskanen, 2017).

The popularity of memes during the presidential election began with the emergence of a Facebook group called Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash (BSDMS), which was created in 2015. This group was created by Will Dowd and Sean Walsh as a form of support for the Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders (Dewey, 2016). This group has 450,000 Facebook followers as of May 2016. One of the most popular memes depicts the Democratic candidate rivalry between Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton, where this meme group is more likely to support Bernie Sanders. An example of a meme is "Bernie or Hillary", shown in Figure 1.



Source : Slate.com

Figure 1. Meme "Bernie or Hillary?"

In Figure 1, memes contain opinions about Bernie Sanders, who is considered more suitable as a presidential candidate than Clinton.

On Reddit and 4chan, Donald Trump supporters form pro-Trump meme communities (Ohlheiser, 2016). Ohlheiser explained that Donald Trump's supporters were enlivening the 4chan page with support for the 2016 campaign. The New York Times media said that the Reddit page also has a sub-Reddit (page group) called "The Donald," which is one of the social media communities supporting Trump with developments the fastest. One example of a meme as a form of support for Donald Trump is shown in Figure 2.



Source : Time.com

Figure 2. Meme "The Simpsons Knew"

Figure 2 is a meme that is widely spread on social media such as Twitter and Facebook and is used by Trump supporters to reinforce the opinion that Trump has a great chance of winning the 2016 US Presidential election.

The use of memes is not only a form of expression of support for political actors, but can also be used as a strategy to delegitimize political actors. In this case, delegitimization activities are specifically aimed at opposing candidates, such as criticism, insults, protests, etc. (Ross & Rivers, 2017). Most of the memes that appeared on social media during the 2016 election had messages aimed at delegitimizing presidential candidates who were deemed worthy of serving as president. Many of the criticisms and insults of this meme have focused on the political establishment, the original party, and the policies being promoted. In addition, not a few memes mention the personal life, appearance, and image of the candidate (Ross & Rivers, 2017). The meme that was widely circulated as a criticism of Donald Trump at the time was related to one of his controversial campaign narratives regarding the issue of anti-immigrants. An example of a meme is shown in figure 3.

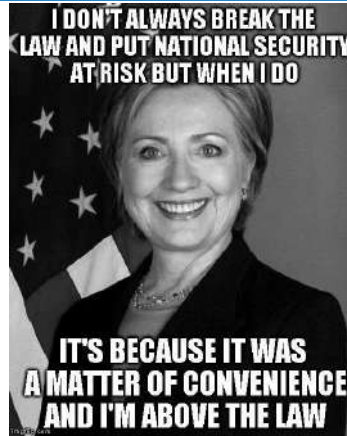


Source : Jurnal Ross & Rivers (2017)

Figure 3. Meme “Donald Trump - Walls\$\$\$”

During the campaign, Trump promised to build a wall along the US-Mexico border, and Mexico also had to pay for the wall's construction (Johnson, 2016). This not only attracted the US and international news media but also attracted the attention of people who were against the statement, creating a critical meme.

Candidate Hillary Clinton cannot be separated from the target of criticism through memes. At almost the same time as Clinton was appointed as the Democratic presidential candidate, she was proven to have used private email when sending confidential government data (Ford, 2016). According to information from the FBI agent who investigated the case, what Clinton did was a very reckless act. However, no charges were filed in this case to be followed up in court. Many social media users and internet meme creators offered criticism and satire in response to this case (Ross & Rivers, 2017). One example of a meme created is shown in Figure 4.



Source : Jurnal Ross & Rivers (2017)

Figure 4. Meme “Hillary Clinton Email Controversy”

The meme in Figure 4 uses the meme format "I don't always...But when I do..." (I rarely do...but when I do...), which contains activities that are rarely done by the subject in the meme. But when the subject does so, there is usually a justification or justification (knowyourmeme.com, 2007). In this case, Clinton was insinuated regarding the email case through the meme that even though Clinton took actions that were considered unlawful, he could be released from the applicable law. Figure 1; Figure 2 shows the support strategy for the candidate, while Figure 3; Figure 4 shows the delegitimization strategy carried out against the opposing party of the meme maker. This is because memes basically contain partisanship, which has a positive value for the party being supported and a negative value for the opposite party (Ross & Rivers, 2017).

2017-Donald Trump Administration Memes

Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential election yesterday elicited mixed reactions from the US public on social media. The majority of Donald Trump supporters come from social media sites such as 4chan. This social media is considered to be the base of Donald Trump's supporters since during this campaign period, he feels the euphoria of victory. As reported by The Washington Post page, 4chan users began to spread Trump's victory and insult Hillary Clinton supporters through memes, which were then disseminated on social media (Ohlheiser, 2016). In addition to the joyous reactions from Donald Trump's supporters, there were also opposing reactions from social media users who were against him. Some of the reactions they showed by giving jokes were uploaded through social media such as Twitter. They feel disappointment and distrust of the election of Donald Trump, which is expressed through memes. The examples of memes created are shown in Figure 5.



Figure 5. (a)

When you went to America to live the
American dream but Donald Trump became a
president



Figure 5. (b)

Source: Know Your Meme.com

Figure 5. (a) Meme “Wonder How it Got There?” b) Meme “Winslow’s seen enough”

Figure 5(a) contains the sentence "Do you ever look at stuff and wonder how it got there?" which demonstrates public distrust of Donald Trump's election as US president (Knowyourmeme, 2017). Figure 5(b) depicts one of the memes created by Twitter user @nouiscrist and inspired by the American children's cartoon series "Cat Dog." The expression of the character in the meme is considered appropriate as an expression of disappointment (Griffiths, 2017).

In the early days of the administration, Donald Trump used his social media for political communication. Even before he ran for president, one of his social media accounts, @realDonaldTrump, became the primary means of communicating politics to the public. This is an opportunity for social media users to express their opinions on political and government situations more easily and with the hope of conveying them directly to the president (Merrin, 2019). The Trump administration, which has caused a lot of controversy with the policies it has implemented, has also attracted the public to comment and convey their criticisms. In his early weeks in office, Trump signed his first executive order, which drew some criticism and sparked demonstrations. In addition, social media users also voiced their protests through memes that were widely used, such as the "Trump's Wall" meme and the "Travel Ban" meme (Hoffman, 2017). But one of the most popular memes responding to the issue of the executive order is the "Trump's First Order of Business" meme. This meme is different from the protest meme against the contents of the executive order but focuses more on insulting Trump's behavior at the time of signing the order (Zhu, 2019).

One of the most controversial policies in President Trump's administration is the anti-immigration policy, which is often referred to as the "Travel Ban" policy. This policy refers to one of the contents of the executive order which aims to suspend the US Refugee Admissions Program and suspend the administration of entry for foreigners who come from seven Muslim-majority countries (Arafa, 2018). Since this policy was implemented on January 27, 2017, there have been criticisms and protests from politicians, advocacy groups, and the public. Demonstrations were held at several international airports in the US. In addition, this policy triggers reactions from the public through Twitter and Facebook social media. They shared their opinions regarding the case by using the hashtags #MuslimBan, #RESIST, and #OccupyAirports as a form of protest and rejection of the policy. Reporting from Bustle media, the US public also spreads "anti-refugee ban" images and memes to affirm their position in an effort to reject Trump's policy (Hollander, 2017).

The US government's policies during the Trump era related to environmental and energy issues also attracted the attention of political observers and environmental activists. In March 2017, President Trump signed an executive order canceling the temporary ban on coal mining and river protection rules from the Obama administration's previous policies (Anderson et al., 2017). The president and Congress are seeking

to remove the law because it is seen as hampering US production and exports of fossil fuels and to make the US domestic energy sector more competitive. In June 2017, President Trump announced that the US would withdraw from the 2015 Paris Climate Accord (Anderson et al., 2017). This raises concerns about environmental pollution, especially in rivers caused by mining waste. Concern has not only come from environmental activists but also from the US public (BBC, 2020). They are busy sharing their criticisms through social media and voicing support for environmental activists who criticize Trump's policies. One of the photos circulating on Twitter and Facebook shows the Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg staring intently at President Trump during the UN Climate Summit in New York in 2019. Social media users turned the photo into a meme, which was then shared on Twitter (Dyer, 2019) . One of the memes is shown in Figure 6.



Source : Dailymail.co.uk

Figure 6. Meme “Greta Thunberg Stares at Donald Trump”

Not only has the Trump administration been criticized by the public, but there are also several groups that supported Trump even before his candidacy for president. On Reddit social media, there is a Trump support community forum called r/The_Donald. The forum was formed in 2015 and more than 700,000 Reddit users have joined (Gaudette et al., 2020). One of the uploads on the r/The_Donald forum that was widely discussed was the case of Trump against the CNN news media, which is shown in Figure 7. This video was made as a form of support for Trump in his conflict with the CNN news media, which was labeled "fake news" (fake news) (Romano, 2017). The video was also uploaded by Donald Trump on his Twitter account with the title "FraudNewsCNN".



Source : Vox.com

Figure 7.
Meme “Trump Smacks CNN”

2018 -Donald Trump Administration Memes

In 2018, the United States started a trade war with China. The Trump administration has slapped 25% tariffs on \$34 billion in Chinese imports. The US then imposed 25 percent tariffs on an additional 200 billion US dollars' worth of Chinese imports. China has also begun to impose tariffs on US-imported goods, with a 25% tariff on goods worth \$60 billion (Liu & Woo, 2018). The US-China trade war has an impact on the limitations on goods imported from each country. One of the highlights is the blocking of Huawei technology products from China by the US government. This triggered a public response against the regulation (Law, 2019). Social media users on Twitter responded to the rule by inserting humor into their posts, as shown in Figure 8.



Source : RadiiChina.com

Figure 8. Meme “Huawei Banned”

Figure 8. shows a meme uploaded by one Twitter user @kdxblunt that relates to the ban on Huawei in the US and the US trade war situation with China (Law, 2019). Trump's policy on immigration again drew criticism and criticism in April 2018. Criticism came from political actors, public figures, and the US community regarding the "Zero Tolerance" policy, which imposes sanctions on every citizen who crosses the US-Mexico border illegally. This sanction punishes violators in the form of imprisonment or deportation for adults, while children will be taken to refugee camps under the supervision of the US Department of Health and Human Services (Horwitz & Sacchetti, 2018). However, this policy was criticized for failing to take steps to reunite separated children with their parents and was deemed inhumane. This policy has also drawn criticism on social media, including from Senator Kamala Harris via her Twitter account @VP (Parks et al., 2018). There are approximately 350,000 tweets with the hashtag # WhereAreTheChildren responding to the case on Twitter. The emergence of this hashtag demonstrates the ability of social media to create a defensive reaction regarding a particular issue (McMurry, 2018). This criticism prompted the Trump administration to finally revoke the child immigrant segregation rule in June 2018 (Parks et al., 2018).

2019 -Donald Trump Administration Memes

At the end of 2019, the Trump administration came into the spotlight with the appearance of the first impeachment case against President Donald Trump. On December 18, the House of Representatives voted to remove the president on suspicion of high-level crimes (Yglesias & Prokop, 2019). President Trump is

accused of soliciting foreign assistance from the Ukrainian state to conduct an investigation into the 2020 presidential election contender Joe Biden (Ewing, 2020). The public responded to this case with mixed reactions. The US community of Trump supporters opposed this impeachment effort by holding demonstrations, one of which was a demonstration in Battle Creek, Michigan (Perkins, 2019). Trump's supporters think that the impeachment attempt against Trump is bogus and lacks solid evidence. In addition, Trump support groups on social media like 4chan and Reddit expressed their disapproval reactions on the forum's page. One of them is from the Reddit forum r/The_Donald. Trump supporters are even trying to find and spread the identity of the whistleblower (rapporteur) in this Trump case (Timberg & Harwell, 2019).

Other reactions also emerged from many people on social media who criticized President Trump's actions. Some social media users also expressed happiness at the news of Trump's impeachment by posting memes (Clarke & Herbert, 2020). One of the memes uploaded by Instagram social media users is shown in Figure 9.



Source : Standard.com

Figure 9. Meme "Trump Impeachment"

Figure 9 is a meme uploaded by a public figure from the United States, The Fat Jewish, on his Instagram account. This upload is intended to criticize and insult Trump's illegal actions as President of the United States.

Referring to the theory of political communication, political communication activities can be carried out by all political actors, including one who can take advantage of political memes. The spread of memes conveyed in digital media is a form of political communication activity aimed at political actors by non-political actors. This is based on the assumption that all communication and information about political activities contained in newspapers and all public media is a form of political communication. In its development, the internet and social media have made it easier for the delivery of political communication to be faster and wider. This occurs in the spread of memes that are widely circulated in digital media quickly and widely and are able to attract the attention of many parties.

CONCLUSION

The use of memes can be used as an alternative expression of opinion and criticism from the public. In responding to an issue or political policy, the community can channel it not only through demonstrations and writing in the aspiration box but also through social media. Apart from the effectiveness and influence of criticism through memes on social media, this method makes it easier for people to show their position (pro or con) in responding to an issue or policy. Political instruments that have developed in the midst of

digital technology have been an important factor in political discourse in a country. This can provide input for the government and policy makers to take into account the development of discourse on digital media as a form of public participation.

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