BRINGING THE PANDEMIC HOME: MEMES AS LOCAL POLITICS AT TIMES OF GLOBAL CRISIS

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On 22 February 2020 part of Northern Italy entered the first Covid-19 lockdown of the West. While stories of people fleeing quarantined areas soon made national headlines, the international news was suddenly reporting of coronavirus patients connected to Italy all around the world. Against this background, Italian social media started thriving with Covid-19 humour (Murru and Vicari, 2020). On 9 March the Northern lockdown turned nationwide and became one of the strictest in Europe.

This article focuses on Covid-19 memes of quarantined Italy during the 'first wave' of the pandemic. Whether reflecting univocal ideological stancing or enabling 'polyvocal discourse' (Milner, 2013), memes emerge at the intersection of 'cultural memory' (Laineste and Vooilad, 2017) and circumstantial events, often resulting in varied forms of political expression. But how does this play out at times of global crisis? How does local cultural fabric (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2018) contribute to the definition of political categories when a crisis is both local and global? We investigate how local culture shaped pandemic memes and explore how these memes constructed political discourse in quarantined Italy. Our work explores the local appropriation of memetic practices, providing insight into how local publics make themselves a(t) home on mainstream social media.

We combined digital methods (Rogers, 2019) and netnographic techniques (Kozinets, 2019) to study a dataset of Covid-19 Twitter memes. The study's sample period spans from 28 February - a week into the country's Northern lockdown - to 3 June - when most of the national restrictions were finally lifted. The Twitter Capture and Analysis Tool (TCAT) was used to 1) implement a keyword query strategy relevant to the pandemic in Italy, 2) launch the live data (and metadata) capture and 3) filter the resulting archive by language (i.e., Italian) and content format (i.e., containing media urls). The final filtering process returned 101,776 Italian tweets containing media content.

Drawing from Nissenbaum and Shifman (2018), we used netnographic analytical techniques based on grounded analysis to investigate pandemic memes as local social, cultural and political objects. This translated into manually scanning the 101,776 Covid-19 media tweets - with their metadata - filtered via TCAT to detect the data that would constitute the corpus for our analysis. We relied on Shifman's (2014) definition of memes to identify tweets that showed characteristics of memetics. We then applied a combination of open and theory-based coding to the resulting dataset. First, we used open coding to mark recurring patterns in meme forms and contents to explore in depth how local cultural fabric contributed to different dimensions of meme production. Then, we focused on content-stance combinations and, using theory-based coding, we categorised the emergence of different forms of political expression.

In all their dimensions, Italian pandemic memes played a key role in generating affecting tuning. This happened via reshuffling past and present pop culture in native form templates, repurposing local or sub-local stereotypes and self-stereotypes in native content templates or adapting popular and/or populistic debates to the pandemic society. Rather than generating 'disruptions or interruptions of dominant political narratives' (Papacharissi, 2015: 131), this affective tuning provided a connective - and temporarily reassuring - dimension. It was 'laughing together' (Kuipers, 2010) when there was no reason to laugh, or 'affective attunement' (Papacharissi, 2015) without much content going with it. In fact, where political expression did emerge in pandemic memes that were 'making a point' (Shifman, 2014), this 'point' was never particularly innovative or new because it was there to mark previously established communal belonging more than to initiate activist 'or social change' (Mina, 2014) practices.

Italian pandemic memes did develop the ridiculing and delegitimizing techniques typical of political memetics (Ross and Rivers, 2017) but they did so primarily relying on populist narratives. This was evidenced by the frequent targeting of well known political leaders via pre-existing schemata adopted to attack them. This is perhaps not surprising as these practices aligned with the growing influence of populist parties (e.g., Five Star Movement and League) in the Italian political landscape and were made possible by what Baldwin-Philippi (2018) has defined as the 'democratic and populist' 'technologies of meme creation', namely by the easy access to memetics literacy and use on mainstream social media.

What pandemic memes expressed is therefore a peculiar form of "mundane political culture" (Merelman, 1998), that is, an active and ordinary exchange of symbols and ideas that stops on a purely performative level, remaining disconnected from any subsequent political action or collective undertaking. As shown by the analysis, pandemic memes drew on a vast repertoire of ideas and symbols and selected those resources that allowed the 'Wittgenstein "Language game" of political discourse to "go on"' (Merelman, 1998, p. 517). The memetic culture here described was full of implicit meanings that remained as such, devoted to an evocative and never explanatory function and aimed at the pure enjoyment of the conversation and at mutual recognition.

Ultimately, our findings suggest that the 'in-group-ness' (Miltner, 2014) allowed by memetic practices can have strong relevance to the geographically and linguistically local, in both its cultural and political dimension, especially when this local is under an

exogenous threat. They then also point to the need for further research using contextual approaches to digital affordances as this research would enhance our understanding of how local publics appropriate global platforms.

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