

## **How to Make Sense of Nonsense: Political Absurdity and Parodic Memes in the #Sharpiegate Affair**

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This article interrogates the memetic reactions triggered by #Sharpiegate. The affair was a moment of political absurdity that provoked critical engagement with the irrationalities of Trump's performance. Analyzing the imbroglio around a doctored map of Hurricane Dorian in 2019, we show how parodic memes offered a response to publicly displayed unreasonableness. Our analysis characterizes the renditions shared on Twitter as clumsy corrections. In the tradition of political jamming and its tactic of *détournement*, this memetic genre works by emulating the distortion of images with bold scribbles. The renditions took the form of prospective or retrospective interventions that hoped to draw a desirable condition into being. This gesture of point-blank meddling stood in opposition to the populist truth-tampering that became evident in the affair. The meme provided a rallying point for spontaneous resonance and collective self-ascertainment while acknowledging its limited ability to correct political pretensions out of touch with reality.

*Keywords: memes; parody; political jamming; détournement; Trump; Twitter; Hurricane Dorian; Sharpiegate*

In some of the more surreal moments of Donald Trump's presidency, the excitement around his claims and actions veered toward the absurd. The unstable lines between political reality and real-life comedy, between the serious and the nonserious, seemed to blur. Think of Sean Spicer's briefing on the number of people attending the inauguration, the assertion that Trump wrote the inauguration speech

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himself (this claim was supported by a staged photo showing him at his Mar-a-Lago desk), or the suggestion that the United States could acquire Greenland. Irritation and annoyance were the usual public reactions to these incidents.

We argue that in situations like these, absurd parodic acts of political jamming, which can be channeled through political satire, caricature, or Internet memes, offer ways to respond to an all-too-obvious political absurdity (Cammaerts, 2007; Korkut, McGarry, Erhart, Eslen-Ziya, & Jenzen, 2020). Such moments make the foibles and incompetence of political actors visible. Being evidentially absurd, they are, as Phelps (2018) posits, a "surface phenomenon" (p. 831) that is immediately obvious, not in hindsight or only upon in-depth reflection. What is more, absurdity resists rectification. Exposing and disputing the inadequacies of politics means adopting an absurd position too that acts "in the conscious realization that there is no final resolution," as Goodwin (1971) notes in reference to thoughts on the absurd offered by Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus (p. 834).

Politics and political protagonists have always exhibited instances of absurdity (Bowker, 2013). Yet during Trump's presidency, absurdity seemed to become commonplace. Thus, his political performance invited two readings: To some, they were signs of dilettantism and helter-skelter impulses; for others, they were indications of an insurgent political agenda (Happer, Hoskins, & Merrin, 2019; Morini, 2020). Whether such mishaps were inadvertent or not, Trump and his advisors exploited them to spin a narrative around his passionate personality and devotion to a political mission. Visuals have been key to this strategy that cultivated Trump's strongman image built on success, power, and authority (Scott Chun, 2018; Strand & Schill, 2019).

Though Trump's presidency has ended, he has not lost his appeal for a considerable portion of the U.S. electorate. Instead, it seems as though even without holding political office, he will be a figurehead for reactionary politics. More importantly, the legacy of the political misuse of false statements coupled with a disregard for facts remains. This has supported "regimes of post-truth," as Harsin (2015) writes, that are marked by a lack of concern for the falsity of truth claims (p. 328). In these regimes, populist actors seek to reinforce skepticism toward authorities in journalism, science, and politics. They do so, Harsin (2015) argues, by multiplying "truth claims (often entertainingly tabloidesque) whose meaning, if not veracity, is not easily or quickly confirmed" (p. 331). In response, parodic political jamming enables comments on incidents deemed outrageous, yet such responses may not halt the proliferation of inaccurate information—false speech resists debunking efforts.

To investigate the use of parodic memes vis-à-vis political absurdity, we interrogate the reactions triggered by #Sharpigate. We ask how memetic imitations and reappropriations were employed to engage with populist truth-tampering. The hashtag #Sharpigate refers to an incident in 2019 where Trump insisted that he had been right in anticipating that Hurricane Dorian would hit the U.S. state of Alabama, although weather forecasts predicted the opposite. In support of his claim, he showed a doctored map, obviously altered with a black marker pen that extended the storm's likely cone into Alabama. Shortly after, social media, especially Twitter, was buzzing with images that played on the visual incongruity of Trump's attempt to redraw reality and the suspect agenda behind it. These memetic renditions can be characterized as a form of political jamming that attempted to publicly delegitimize his obstinate political worldmaking.

By analyzing the #Sharpiegate affair as an emblematic case, we underscore the import of memetic Internet content in performing meaningful political work (Davis, Love, & Killen, 2018; Griffin, 2021). The mockery of the crudely redrawn map demonstrates how parodic reappropriation, channeled through the humorous hyperbole of memetic permutations, came up against publicly displayed unreasonableness. Pointing to the power of absurd parody to confront the absurdity of populist pretensions, our study of a meme genre that we propose to call “clumsy corrections” contributes to an improved understanding of the memefication of public culture and sheds light on the role memes play in political contestation.

### **Political Absurdity, Parody, and Memes**

Arguably, the media avidly covered Trump’s irrationalities because they guaranteed traffic and attention—“crazy Trump” provided constant fodder for comedians and late-night shows (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2019). They produced hilarious impressions of him, only to be rendered obsolete by the next debacle. It is essential to criticize these errors and his misconduct, but what could be achieved by depicting Trump as an idiot when his antics were predicated on the theatrics and comedy of American pop culture? Put differently: What is the significance of parodic distancing in relation to a politician who often seemed distant from reality anyway?

#### ***A Parody of Absurdity***

Humor is a serious instrument of critique that makes it possible to disavow politicians’ assertions and promises, the staged performance of political events, or the hypocrisy and ineffectiveness of policies. Jokes, cartoons, graffiti, and satire about political leaders seek to “foster perspective by incongruity,” as Hill (2013) has put it (p. 329). People default to the comic for different reasons: They may seek entertainment and fun, or they might want to escape censorship and state control. Thus, formats such as sarcastic commentaries, caricature, satirical news shows, and late-night political comedy are popular in democracies and totalitarian or autocratic systems alike. Unsurprisingly, they also constitute formidable venues for uncovering and challenging populist tendencies (Baumgartner & Becker, 2020; Bennett, 2007).

Besides irony, cynicism, and sarcasm, parody is a chief rhetorical device of political humor. As Hutcheon (1985) has argued, it presents a “repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity” (p. 6). Similarly, Rose (1993) has defined parody as “the comic refunctioning of preformed linguistic or artistic material” (p. 52). Such parodic inversion includes malicious and denigrating exaggerations leveled at social elites. In essence, the technique works by reformulating, defamiliarizing, and recontextualizing existing cultural material. Parody does not simply duplicate a specific text or image but self-consciously reproduces some of its formal, semantic, or semiotic features. It places an original beside its own pastiche to maintain a skeptical distance and to unveil the tacit flaws and limits of the original. This comic refunctioning can nurture a public culture that stands against totalizing discourse, enabling it to embrace discord and multiple, even competing, voices. Based on such expectations of parody as a safeguard of rational and critical debate, Hariman (2008) has argued that “genres such as parody play a crucial role in keeping democratic speech a multiplicity of discourse” (p. 260).

The value of parody lies in its ability to uncover the implicit idiocy of politics through comic means, and it is usually the seriousness of its target that renders such commentary necessary and important. Inversion works best with restrained templates whose deficits become apparent on reproduction. This means that the comedic doubling of politics presupposes that something profane or silly can be exposed through parodic slippage (Hariman, 2008). Yet in some moments of Trump's presidency, this arrangement was turned upside down: The oft-decried political absurdity of his performance arose from the twisted relationship between parody and power. In these moments, humor was no longer able to unmask political idiocy and reveal abuses of power, since his deficiencies and inconsistencies were all too obvious and thus defied scrutiny and intellectual critique. Therefore, while parody commonly involves some sort of social leveling, Trump himself embodied this leveling through his ignorance of facts and decorum. In consequence, parodic resistance was under threat because political absurdity was experienced in "an environment continually steeped in contradiction from which there is no possible meaningful resolution" (Goodwin 1971, p. 832). What was absurd about Trump's performance then was the overt lack of concern for rational decision making and discursive deliberation coupled with a palpable ambition to bend reality to his will.

Notwithstanding the lack of a conclusive response to absurdity, humor is still a viable means to "assert humanity and sincerity" (Korkut et al., 2020, p. 2). Absurdity might resist clarification or correction, but that does not mean that critical engagement with it is superfluous. On the contrary, humor offers the opportunity to articulate "the sense of the senselessness" (Esslin, 2001, p. 24) and thus to interrogate the conditions that render some political performances absurd. It is able to expose the inadequacy of any attempt at rectification. Despite its limitations, parody can furthermore add meaning to absurd situations and their underlying contradictions. Parody, therefore, is the "conscious ascertainment" (Goodwin, 1971, p. 832) of absurdity, not its remedy. Its imitations use stylistic effects like alienation and amplification to tease out ideological, intellectual, political, or communicative flaws in their targets. Based on this, the next section will examine how parodic techniques were deployed to challenge moments of absurdity in Trump's political performance through memes.

### ***The Politics of Memes***

Internet memes have widely been discussed as a vehicle for delivering parodic critique. Following Shifman (2013), we conceptualize them as sets of digital items that imitate preexisting verbal or visual texts, are created in reference to similar expressions, and proliferate by means of further adaptation and sharing. A great many memes take parodic form. Yet as Highfield (2016) has maintained, parodic memes are not simply an instance of harmless fun, toxic trolling, or an apolitical oddity; they too facilitate a participatory politics that takes shape through irreverent responses to topical discussions. Taking advantage of easily accessible digital image processing tools, modifiable templates, and meme generators, users can fashion memes as a means to engage in playful and critical commentary (Bayerl & Stoykov, 2016).

Consequently, memes have played a part in grassroots uprisings. However, they do not only serve progressive goals. Memes also circulate in reactionary movements, where they communicate antagonistic sentiments about race, gender, or class. Because they can be ambiguous and offensive, some argue that memes obstruct sincere political activism. For Hristova (2014), they are "neutralizers of political dissent" (p. 265) that reduced the Occupy protests to superficial pop culture jokes and directed attention away from

confrontations on the ground to banal digital play. Others worry that sardonic content might lead to more cynicism, apathy, and distrust in political actors and processes, and that the anonymity and unaccountability of meme creators further fuel this dynamic (Baumgartner & Morris, 2012). Hence, memes can play a productive part in people's political orientation, association, and self-assurance, but this capacity does not eliminate their inherent ambivalence and potential destructiveness. Next to revealing flawed political slogans and double standards, parodic memes may also reinforce subjectivist thinking and political disenchantment (Miltner, 2014; Wagner & Schwarzenegger, 2020). The resonance of memes, Phillips (2020) stresses, is "often entirely unmoored from the objective truth of the claims being made" (p. 58), which prevents them from being instruments of political critique. Furthermore, because populist leaders themselves seek public confrontations and are keen to stress the mischiefs of others, memes' incongruent humor might feed into these very tactics rather than disavowing them (Kristensen & Mortensen, 2021).

However, although memes cannot overturn political power structures and expunge the absurdity that accrues from their inherent contradictions, they are still political acts that represent a genuine form of political jamming. As such, memes work by reusing existing material expressions and employing them as a way "of dealing with the messiness of reality, [of] subverting meanings, and thereby using humour, mocking, satire and parody" (Cammaerts, 2007, p. 72). In the 20th-century tradition of situationist art movements and countercultural tactics, acts of jamming the political represent a sort of *détournement* that deface, poach, hijack, and misappropriate existing artifacts and political expressions (Debord, 1967). With respect to political absurdity, these techniques seem particularly appropriate because they suggest "a different approach to reality and how it can be perceived" (Kiziltunali, 2020, p. 103). *Détournement* aims at transformation and recoding, not destruction; it emphasizes the performative element of realizing and enacting its interceptions.

The significance of whimsical and playful engagement was, for instance, demonstrated by the popularity of humorous tweets during the 2012 and the 2016 U.S. presidential campaigns (Moody-Ramirez & Church, 2019). For instance, Ross and Rivers's (2017) examination of the 2016 election has shown how memes were instrumentalized to challenge "the lack of 'truth' or reality" (p. 8) of both candidates. Memes served to delegitimize their political aspirations and to portray them as untrue and thus unfit for office. Young people in particular appreciated the ease and informality of memes as a vehicle for voicing political views (Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2018). They allowed them to partake in a way that was meaningful to them and to interact with like-minded users to validate their viewpoints and find solidarity. On this note, Penney (2020) has found that memes are a tool for coming to terms with a disturbing reality. Taking a humorous stance was helpful to Penney's (2020) respondents "in making rational sense of a political world that is experienced as irrational, absurd, and chaotic" (p. 799).

Taken together, memes encapsulate a political critique and can represent a rational response to a political system that appears to be going off the rails. This does not just apply to the Trump presidency or to the United States alone, yet it has arguably become particularly salient with Trump's slipups and tantrums. The following section considers what kind of Internet memes were used to engage with absurd moments of Trump's political performance.

### Case Study: The #Sharpiegate Affair

The confusion around the path of Hurricane Dorian, a category 5 hurricane, started on September 1 with a tweet from @realDonaldTrump (10:51 AM, EST) stating, "In addition to Florida—South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama, will most likely be hit (much) harder than anticipated" (Trump, 2019). With his tweet, Trump might have wanted to address public concerns and prompt people to prepare for adverse weather. Yet while this message seemed to impart crucial information from the president's briefings, the latest meteorological forecasts from the National Hurricane Center and the local Southeast bureaus of the National Weather Service (NWS), both of which are divisions of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), did not suggest that Alabama would lie within Dorian's path. Hence, the Birmingham NWS office quickly communicated that the state would not be hit.

To vindicate his outdated prediction, Trump marshaled old (and now inaccurate) hurricane maps that suggested Dorian might turn west. These efforts culminated in an Oval Office press conference on September 4. There, Secretary of Homeland Security Kevin McAleenan held up a NOAA map from August 29. On this map, the predicted path of the storm had been changed with a black Sharpie to extend its projected trajectory. Soon after, the hashtag "#sharpiegate" or "#Sharpiegate" was trending, and users started responding to the incident (Figure 1). What drew public attention to the situation was Trump's repeated insistence on having been correct when the best available models claimed otherwise.

To examine the controversy and the deployment of parodic memes to challenge this moment of political absurdity in Trump's performance, we sampled tweets containing the hashtag for 14 days after Trump's initial post on September 1. We collected these Tweets from Twitter's application programming interface (API) by using the rtweet package (Kearney, 2019). As with other hashtags, "#Sharpiegate" not only referred to a topic but also signaled a normative position (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). It helped us to put together a set of tweets that were intentionally linked via the use of "#Sharpiegate" so to criticize Trump's personality and performance. Existing research shows that a hashtag-driven corpus of this kind allows identification of the defining features of the interconnected reactions indicated by the use of the hashtag, as well as sensitivity for the variability of the associated memes (Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2016).

The chosen timeframe reflected the common issue-attention cycle on Twitter, in which the volume of tweets using the same event-centered hashtag usually drops sharply after one week and peters out after about two weeks (David, Ong, & Legara, 2016). We collected a sample of 87,762 tweets. This was not the total population of tweets because our collection was predicated on the technical settings and limitations of Twitter's API. To mirror the tweets' distribution over time, the sampling was conducted on a daily basis and in proportion to the full population of tweets containing the hashtag ( $N = 209,456$ ). We were able to collect about 40% of the daily volume of tweets. We included tweets, replies, and retweets with comments.



**Figure 1. Trump presenting the manipulated map, September 4, 2019.**  
(Source: AP News, 2020).

From this set, we selected the most popular tweets based on the number of retweets (RT), replies, quotes, and favorites. We considered tweets with an accumulated score above 20 to include posts that generated a certain level of engagement. This means that a tweet with 20 RTs was not included but a tweet with one comment, three RTs, and 17 favorites (= 21) was ( $N = 1,004$ ). In our sample, 561 of these popular tweets contained 634 audiovisual or visual items; there were 578 static images, 20 GIFs, and 36 short video clips. The remaining 443 tweets with no such elements were not considered in our analysis.

To heuristically organize the tableau of sampled visuals and to separate memetic content from nonmemetic content, we sorted the  $N = 634$  images, GIFs, and clips using image type analysis (Brantner, Lobinger, & Stehling, 2020). To this end, we uploaded all items to a shared file repository and then sorted them into mutable categories. We employed a method of constantly comparing visual similarities and differences. On this basis, we were able to sort the material into groups and inductively developed image types as bundles of homogenous motifs. Given that the images often included pictures and combinations of pictures together with scribbles and written or hand-drawn text, our analysis considered and compared these multimodal compounds as meaningful statements without trying to disassemble them into smaller units. We repeatedly revised the emerging packages of visually coherent items and tested them for internal consistency and distinctness. Two coders worked on this together. It was a genuinely interpretative step that sought to account for the visual substrate of the images to put together sets of items of a similar visual nature.

After three rounds of sorting and discussion, we arrived at a final set of 11 image types that allowed us to classify the content shared under the hashtag. The interpretation of the visually coherent sets of images was done in a second step. Thus, we did not set out to only find memetic realizations but started from tracing patterns of imitation and modification so to assess the visuals' shared features. This formed the material basis for identifying the emerging memes, some of which were reformulations of existing genres. We also realized that not all of the material followed some recognizable memetic formula. Most of this nonmemetic content that could not be grouped into a visually coherent image type comprised screenshots of news photographs from the Oval Office scene, while others featured copies of the president's tweets ( $n = 140$ ).

### **Results: Memetic Parody Through Clumsy Corrections**

The lion's share of the memetic images circulated in the context of the #Sharpiegate affair took the form of seemingly hand-drawn alterations, usually of photographic images. In the sample, these images were the most prevalent and visually coherent memetic articulation of Trump's modification of the map. Taken together, they represent a meme genre that we call *clumsy corrections*: Unable to effectively change reality, clumsy corrections resort to awkward doodles to redraw the representation of an unpleasant circumstance. Most of the memetic images in the collection of #Sharpiegate posts fall into this group, which consists of six image types ( $n = 362$ ) plus a few collages ( $n = 8$ ), as well as a small set of residual visuals that gesture toward the meme genre but could not plausibly be sorted into one of the image types ( $n = 15$ ). Collages and residual visuals do not form coherent image types. Moreover, there are other, visually more incoherent items that contain various memes built on different formulas that, because of their disparity, are not the focus of our discussion. They can be grouped into five image types plus a number of miscellaneous items that respond to various meme genres without forming a coherent image type ( $n = 109$ ; for an overview, see Table 1).

As a meme genre that generally reflects "social motivations and cultural activity" (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015, p. 1893), clumsy corrections are based on modification and recontextualization. They seek to emulate the distinct visual characteristics employed by Trump and his aides to redraw the meteorological map. These memetic renditions tweak a malleable image, usually with a black marker, and produce particularly ingenious and striking applications. They thus contrast a reproduction done either photographically or via computer modeling with seemingly hand-drawn additions. The photoshopped or manually performed alterations are not just amendments but an attempt to rectify elements in the original depictions so that the *ex post* drawings take the form of corrections of a visually recorded and materially documented state of affairs.

Playing with the clumsiness of hand-drawing, the memetic expressions are ostentatiously simplistic, unpolished, and allude to the ugly aesthetic of the Internet (Douglas, 2014). This does not imply a lack of concern for aesthetic considerations. Instead, the technique is used deliberately to mock Trump's hasty cartographic edits. As an example of political jamming, clumsy corrections resort to the tactics of *détournement* to discredit the visual interference by way of creative misappropriation and exaggeration. In the parodic corrections we found, the point is not to uncover some clever modification that would otherwise go unnoticed or to rectify the original manipulations, since the alterations were all-too obvious. As cost-







effective add-ons whose execution does not require expertise, they react to the absurdity of an ex post maneuver. Clumsy corrections are the effect of spontaneous and amateurish intervention.



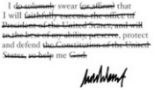


The retouching of images is modeled on the ham-fisted modification that became the focus of criticism during the #Sharpiegate affair, but the genre goes beyond redrawing maps. The map functions as the model from which the meme takes its mode, though not necessarily its represented objects. Given the versatility of clumsy corrections that flexibly apply a consistent mode to various visual representations, we found a host of subjects treated with the same formula.


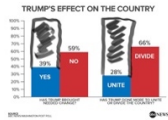



The genre therefore rests on what Bayerl and Stoynov (2016) term the “reference flexibility” (p. 1017) of political memes. Its peculiar mode of remix and mimicry is not bound to one object but has a more abstract utility. Clumsy corrections did not simply imitate the motif from the Oval Office but retrofitted its mode of blatant visual intervention and redefinition. The genre is about replicating and reinforcing the observable marks left by an expressive gesture and creatively transforming it in the name of critique rather than reproducing visual objects. Hence, the memetic permutations integrate various representations that are altered by redrawing. They can thus also interfere with the (sometimes iconic) imagery from pop culture, reuse portraits of media personalities, or play with pictures related to wider social and political issues.


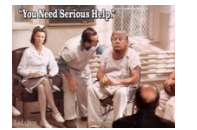



Based on their visible similarities, we subdivided clumsy corrections into the following subpopulations: corrections of people ( $n = 104$ ); Trump ( $n = 99$ ); built environments, landscapes, or other physical objects (i.e., the world [ $n = 54$ ]); documents ( $n = 39$ ); maps ( $n = 39$ ), and figures ( $n = 27$ ). This makes it evident that virtually no circumstance, situation, or issue could escape becoming an object of correction, which was so easy to do given its material visual fixation. Figures 2a–2d feature examples of the six different inflections of the genre.


**Table 1. Image Types.**

Image type	Image Sub-types	Description	Number of Cases	Visual Exemplars
<b><i>Clumsy corrections</i></b>				
<b>Correcting people</b>	Added stick figures	Schematic figures are added to a picture.	30	
	Meddling with people	People are either accessorized (glasses, mustache, etc.), their bodily appearance modified, or they were visually put into jail. This involves Trump's family (Melania Trump, Trump children), adult film actress Stormy Daniels, cabinet members, other politicians, celebrities, or random people.	64	
	Striking people out	People are struck out from a picture. This usually happens to the late Jeffrey Epstein but some of Trump's children were also effaced.	10	
<b>Correcting Trump</b>	Striking Trump out	Trump is erased from a picture.	4	

	Meddling with Trump	Trump is either accessorized (dogs, sunglasses, umbrella, halo), or his appearance modified, usually by enlarging (hands, muscles, head, hair, penis), minimizing (brain), or adding body parts (bone spur, double chin). It also involves masquerading him (Nazi, Mexican bandit, etc.) or disfiguring his face. Some show him jailed.	95	
<b>Correcting world</b>		Physical objects and environments are visually modified, added, or eliminated. Elements of change are golf sport and darts, the Mexican-American border wall, wind turbines, aerial views, Mt. Rushmore, depictions of Hurricane Dorian, or genitals.	54	
<b>Correcting documents</b>	Expunctions	(Parts of) documents are removed from the picture by blackening or overwriting.	30	
	Filling out the blanks	Blank spaces in forms are completed.	9	
<b>Correcting maps</b>	Markers on geographical maps	Places or territories are modified with lines or words placed on maps.	18	

	Markers on meteorological maps	Storm paths are expanded and amended.	21	
<b>Correcting figures</b>	Correcting diagrams and charts	Either bar charts or trajectories are retouched.	18	
	Correcting numbers	Numeric values are altered.	9	
Meme collages		Collection of images from different image types.	(8)	
Memetic residuals		Images use the memetic formula of clumsy corrections without clear visual connection to the image types.	(15)	
		Sum:	362 (+23)	
<b>Additional memes</b>				

<b>Can't stop laughing</b>	Stock character macros: Political leaders, bursting out laughing.	6	
<b>Displacing Trump</b>	Trump's head is placed onto different bodies. This could place him in an asylum, a cubicle, or into a celestial scene.	6	
<b>Oval Office farce</b>	Reaction photoshop: Images from the press conference with the original map or with Trump replaced by a motley crew of visual pointers (U.S. \$20 bill with Trump's portrait, television art instructor Bob Ross, etc.).	10	
<b>Pathetic chair</b>	Stock character macro: anticlimactic image of a toppled white plastic chair on a sunlit green lawn.	4	
<b>Sharpie</b>	Reaction photoshops: pen featured in different scenes and contexts, for instance, in an outsized format as a gun in Trump's hands or as set of pens with different labels reading, for instance, "Dummie"; "Crazie"; or "Felonie."	42	

Miscellaneous	Images responding to various meme genres but not forming visually coherent image types.	(41)	
Sum:		68 (+41)	
<b>Nonmemetic content</b>		140	
<b>Sum total:</b>		<b>634</b>	

*Note.* All images were taken from the sampled tweets containing the hashtags #Sharpiegate or #sharpiegate.

### ***Correcting People***

The largest portion of images falls into this category. Some of them are altered images of people taken from the political sphere or Trump's family and friends. The reworked images contain additional items to spark debate around a person or issue. For example, one image shows the Mexican president, Enrique Peña Nieto, handing over a bag of cash to Trump to pay for the border wall between the United States and Mexico. Others distort the appearance of prominent characters, for instance, by depicting them with glasses.

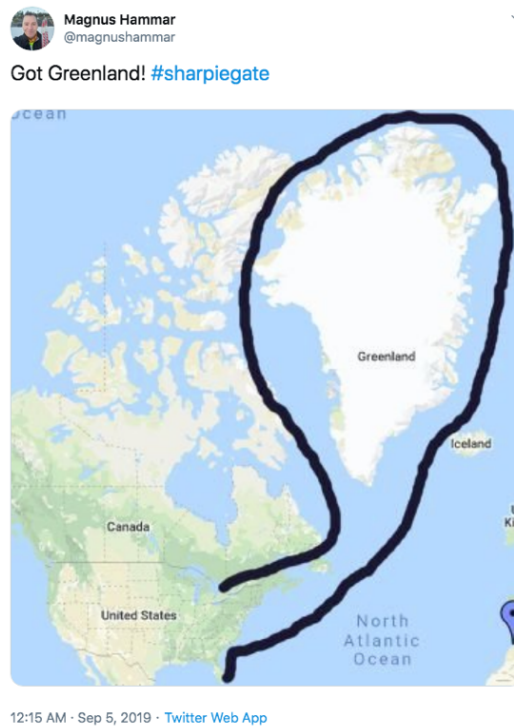
One prime focus was Melania Trump. Some images show her with an extra umbrella when Trump, in an ungentlemanly manner, is not sharing his. Others picture her with a diploma and a square academic cap. A related set of images modify the bodily appearance of individuals, for example by changing the color of their hair or adding extra muscles. Members of Trump's cabinet were the main target of these modifications, as well as his family and Melania Trump (who, once again, is of particular interest). We sampled a set of pictures in which she is forced to take Trump's outstretched arm; others turn the corners of her mouth into a smile. This collection also includes pictures in which people are struck out and visually excluded from the display. The majority of them refer to current affairs or public contestations involving Trump. In another set, stick figures populate Trump's inauguration ceremony or crowd a Republican preelection campaign rally.

### ***Correcting Trump***

The second-largest subgroup is dominated by images that visually ridicule Trump himself. In one set, he receives an accessory (like a dog, for instance), often with the punch line that this is a "sharpie" breed. Others depict him sporting sunglasses, which he did not wear while watching a solar eclipse, or with a halo and a note stating that Trump was "the chosen one" during an audience with Pope Francis, a theme also recurring in other image types. Another connected set of images show modifications of Trump's body parts. Playing off Trump's braggadocio, these modifications usually aim to magnify his physical presence and virility. In the pictures, he is given larger hands, bigger feet, huge genitalia, or a taller head. Just one organ—his brain—is made smaller, thus hinting at an assumed lack of intellectual capacity. Another visual strategy is that of disguising Trump. In some of the retouched photos, he is accessorized with a toothbrush moustache, swastikas, and a color scheme of black, red, and white, which underscore an association with Hitler. Another popular disguise, applying black hair and a horseshoe-style mustache, gives him the stereotypical look of a gunslinger or bandit.



**Figure 2a. Combination of correcting Trump, correcting people, and correcting world. (Source: Maxwell, 2019).**



**Figure 2b. Correcting maps. (Source: Hammar, 2019).**



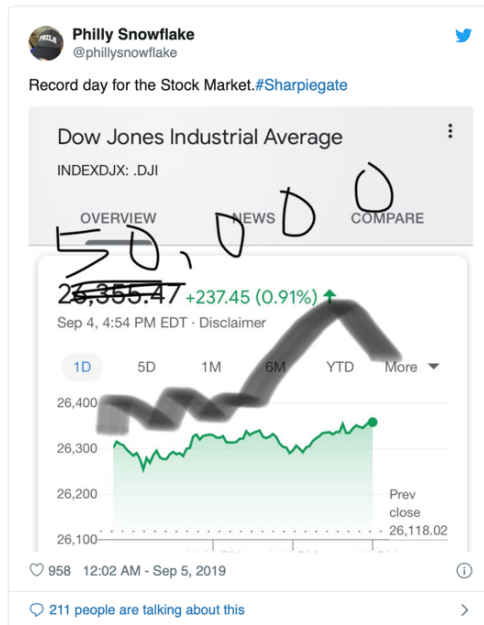


Figure 2c. Correcting figures. (Source: Snowflake, 2019).



Figure 2d. Correcting documents. (Source: Wiersman, 2019).

### ***Correcting Documents***

This subpopulation contains copies of official records and fixed letter. These include print forms, letters, tweets, certificates, checks, or illuminated ads. The documents all share a certain permanent nature—in other words, they could not simply be modified. The changes made to them have left visible marks and do not reveal any intent to disguise the alterations. Corrections take the form of redactions in blacked-out text, with some or all of the written material rendered unreadable. Other modifications proceed by rewriting parts of the text, with passages struck through and replaced by handwritten input. Likewise, corrections involve entries into forms with clumsy handwriting.

### ***Correcting the World***

This category includes modified images of physical objects and environments, usually in relation to one of Trump's assertions or opinions. One set of images envisages the Mexico-U.S. border fence as expanded or completed. A second set comments on another confusing Trump statement by showing wind turbines emitting waves plus a stick figure lying prone with crossed-out eyes. In the accompanying posts, the pictures are offered as visual evidence of wind turbines causing cancer. Other images depict butterflies and unicorns flowing from funnels, or Birmingham, Alabama, under blue skies but with a hand-drawn swirl, thus lampooning Trump's erroneous storm warning. There are pictures where a misdirected golf ball is encircled into the hole; others show a dartboard with all the missed shots looped in. Another set includes views of Mount Rushmore with Trump's face added in to mock his tendency of self-aggrandization and overconfidence.

### ***Correcting Maps***

This image type is visually closest to the doctored map from the Oval Office that served as the blueprint for the meme. It features corrections made to maps, either geographic or meteorological. Some ridicule the effort to shift the path of the storm. Others have a more geo-strategic message, with territories and places relocated or integrated into the United States. Often, the original lines are exaggerated to create ridiculous paths, while in some cases, random scribbles that stand in stark contrast to the rigor and accuracy of their cartographic basis are added. These extreme alterations obscure that maps always involve design choices and decisions on what to include and how to depict a spatial or political situation. Such decisions are inherent in cartographic attempts of all kinds, from the effort to produce the most faithful copy to the most egregious distortion. Yet to work, the alterations ignored the questionable facticity of maps.

### ***Correcting Figures***

We placed all images that show corrections of some sort of numerical information into this category. This includes diagrams and bar charts that were retouched to present a more favorable trajectory or outlook. Some are about Trump's approval rates or job growth, one of his core political goals. Others are about the 2016 election results or the polls for the then upcoming 2020 ballot. We also found images with corrected numbers, again mostly about the popular vote during the 2016 election, which had visually been tweaked in Trump's favor.

### **Discussion: Presidential Hubris and Memetic Retaliation**

Given its ostentatiousness, the alteration on the map presented by Trump in the Oval Office was both hapless and worrisome: It was hapless because it did not conceal the changes made to the original but stressed what was considered a futile and absurd attempt to defend Trump's forecasting skills. Yet even though the modification was the target of mockery, it also points to something more worrisome, namely the lack of attempt to conceal the alteration and simple assumption of the authority and justification to do so.

Located on a temporal scale, the six subgroups of corrections include retrospective interventions that seek to adjust the visual evidence of previous missteps, embarrassments, or otherwise unfortunate events documented in pictures. They comment on the revisionist agenda frequently associated with Trump and his effort to rewrite the past, from his personal biography to U.S. history. As such, they respond to an established line of criticism geared toward Trump's historical revisionism, which is connected to existing concerns about the falsifications of history aired by populist movements (Valencia-García, 2020). Besides retrospective interventions, there are also prospective adjustments that hope to draw a desirable condition into being. In the memetic content in this group, there is a lurking sense of preemption that imagines actions before they eventually might materialize. The corrections hence introduce an anticipatory ambition into the pictures by visually juxtaposing depictions of a more or less recent past with an envisioned future state.

Next to retrospective and prospective interventions, there is a third crosscutting, present-focused temporal theme. It contains images that engage in a sort of wishful political worldmaking that tries to redraw an unpleasant or annoying current reality. Some of the renditions in this group suggest that Trump was largely ignorant of what he was doing when he corrected the original map. They depict Trump correcting things out of ignorance, and thus resonate with the recurring skepticism of Trump's mental capacity, particularly in relation to presidential duties (Procknow, 2017). Relatedly, some other pictorial interventions tweak the depicted reality, usually in Trump's favor. They portray him as vain and anxious, hence referring to an established trope from psychoanalytical diagnoses of his narcissistic personality (Renshon, 2020). Another set of images can be read as a figuratively expressed denial of an existing state of affairs. They picture Trump in disagreement with reality. The Sharpie additions are, therefore, an act of refusal hinting at his assumed unwillingness to accept reality as it is.

In one way or another, the clumsy corrections in our sample either revolve around Trump as the implied originator of the visual corrections or mimic his favorite medium. Clumsy corrections cast Trump as retouching reality rather than facing it. In response, the memetic renditions function as a kind of visual retaliation against the hubris of self-aggrandizement and the inability to admit errors. On the whole, the meme satirizes Trump's personality; its tone and evaluative tendency are deprecative. The negative assessment is particularly pronounced in images that depict Trump as disfigured, jailed, or crossed out. Here, Trump's face is distorted or misshapen, he is placed behind bars, his face is crossed out or painted over to erase him from view. A considerable portion of the memetic content is explicitly abusive or obscene. Some of it pairs Trump with sexually violent imagery. The visual brutality and abusive undertones also extend to close family members, most notably in misogynist alterations of images of Melania Trump. Distorting Trump's likenesses and the representations of his entourage show that such "memetic weaponization" (Peters & Allan, 2021, p. 5) does not necessarily follow noble political ends but can also

involve forms of harassment, sexism, and personal attacks, a dynamic found in the use of other memes, too (Miltner, 2014; Phillips & Milner, 2017).

Arguably, by scrutinizing the shortcomings of blatant truth-tampering, the meme has the capacity to move beyond Trump's moment of absurdity and to challenge the figure of the populist leader whose appearance and rhetorical signature are expressions of "a style (regardless of content that might be false) that is highly aggressive; it often demonstrates outrage, disgust, and humiliation" (Harsin, 2018, p. 45). Clumsy corrections undermine the visual display of such populist performance. In reaction to the combination of machismo, sizeism, and ableism that has come to identify the populist leader, the genre presents a convenient instrument of subversion and counteraction. Its tactic of delegitimization aims to underscore the lack of sincerity and truthfulness that became evident in the #Sharpiegate affair. The genre thereby forms part of a larger repertoire of political memes geared toward deriding the presumed insincerity of political actors and the fallaciousness of the political system (Moody-Ramirez & Church, 2019; Ross & Rivers, 2017). In the material we studied, the symbolic delegitimization was doled out by doodling Twitter users who acted, if only in their practical capacity of painting over an image, on a par with political leaders. In that figurative leveling of positions, participants appropriated the expressive opportunities afforded by ex post retouching.

In a way, clumsy corrections thus resemble other forms of *détournement* found in political communication and political street art, which encompass an iconoclastic repertoire of easy-to-do defacements used to spoil election posters, monuments, or the public effigies of rulers (Chaffee, 1993; Taussig, 1999). These representations become the target of jams, for instance through color stains and expunctions, stickers, handwritten additions, or doodles. Such visual disturbances are geared toward frustrating the representation of political actors and slogans, at times by applying well-known symbols like Hitler's toothbrush mustache or the punk circle-A of anarchism, at times by adding imagery without such straightforward connotations (Phillips, 2015). Yet unlike these iconoclastic aggressions, the coarse gestures of clumsy corrections do not undermine the representational function of the mutilated images. While the meme overemphasizes the absurdity of the interference as such, it does not call into question the genuineness of the underlying image. Quite the opposite: The overt sketches mimic the crude adjustment of a picture to fit a position and reinstate the evidentiary value of visual representations. In other words, clumsy corrections do not refute an image but expose the damage done to it. This insistence on the evidentiary value and objectivity of images can, Hodson (2021) maintains, be an effective way to debunk and document wrongful statements.

Akin to other political memes, the effect of clumsy corrections goes beyond the expression of dissent (Milner, 2016). The opportunity to circulate instantiations of the meme as a signal of affiliation is equally important, thereby reassuring users that they have a similar sense of humor and that their condemnation of the absurdity of the #Sharpiegate incident is shared. As Dynel and Poppi (2021) note, memes help users to take part in polyvocal humorous activities where they can articulate political critique and find affirmation of their views. Through sharing, liking, or redoing variations of the theme during the affair, clumsy corrections become a means of collective self-ascertainment in the face of truth-tampering. They indicated a common irritation and assured users that others were able to connect and shared their feelings of amazement and consternation.

It is impossible to equate the Twitter users who participated in #Sharpiegate with the wider U.S. public or even with those active on Twitter. As Phillips (2020) has remarked, the resonance of memes is predicated on a mix of “belief, standpoint, and play” (p. 60). It hinges on a political standpoint and not on the objectivity of the claims being expressed via the production and circulation of memes. This is why efforts to visually eradicate or flout Trump arguably made little difference to his supporters and only resonated with those opposing him anyway, Hodson (2021) concludes. Hence, while the tweets using the hashtag #Sharpiegate express indignation, it would be misleading to treat them as indicative of the general public sentiment around the incident. In that regard, our sampling strategy was biased from the start. It skewed toward critical positions.

### Conclusion

When we look at the imagery shared via Twitter around the #Sharpiegate affair, we see users playfully lambasting an evident attempt to alter reality—not subtly, but plainly. Employing the memetic genre of clumsy corrections, the contributors produced shareable renditions of ostentatiously bold and inept modifications of photographs and data-based analyses like charts or maps. Beyond being expressions of ridicule, these image-based interventions functioned as a form of political commentary that scrutinized the absurdity of the visual infringement by way of parody.

The genre of clumsy corrections is a congenial form of memetic adaptation that makes use of the repertoire of political jamming and its easy-to-do practices of *détournement*. It underscores the ability of anyone with access to a pen to retroactively intervene in the material representations of reality and at the same time notes the inability of these endeavors to effectively change it. In the #Sharpiegate affair, the coarse scribbles, supplements, and deletions are therefore employed to mark the critical distance between the instrumental power to configure real-life conditions and the doomed effort to redraw what appears as unpleasant in a stubborn reality. The memetic variations are parodic in character and hence exploit the comic effect of incongruity and discrepancy. To do so, they include allusive imitations that function by invoking the original, mostly by amplifying the correction and recontextualizing its amendatory intention. Clumsy corrections employ parodic exaggeration and ridicule so to disfigure Trump and lampoon the people and incidents associated with him. Yet their doodles and scribbles presuppose a photographic original that is taken to document and debunk wrongdoings or false statements in the first place. Since there is no point in uncovering the obvious manipulation of the map, the retrofitted images seek to overdo the juxtaposition between an original image and a substandard new version. After all, what made Trump’s faux pas meme-worthy was that the doctored map itself was an unintended parody of a scientific document.

#Sharpiegate as a moment of political absurdity that triggered memetic responses ties in with a number of similar situations. To the extent that Trump’s populist rhetoric relied on portraits of him as a powerful leader, it provided for parody and vituperative attacks. There seem to have been countless moments, starting with the crowd size during his inauguration, the “girther movement” questioning his health, or his attempt to look at a solar eclipse without protective glasses. More important than those relentless skirmishes are hazardous political actions, authoritarian tendencies, and self-serving functionaries that have become the target of memetic critique too such as politicians’ failed reactions to the COVID-19 crisis (Kristensen & Mortensen, 2021) or the incompetence of communist leaders (Fang, 2018).

Treating clumsy corrections as an effective response to truth-tampering beyond #Sharpiegate does not imply that they engender a direct and corrective political impact. Instead, their effectiveness lies in the capacity to demonstrate to a potentially wide audience the flaws of a populist style of communication and political action (Davis et al., 2018; Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2018). In a highly polarized media environment, however, it remains a mere potential. Virtually all content shared under the hashtag #Sharpiegate was critical of Trump, deprecating and mocking his personality and actions. Following the hashtag deliberately generated such one-sided sample, while other, more affirmative statements possibly avoided the hashtag at all and were thus absent from our study. Consequently, the meme helps to shed light on the creative reactions from a portion of the public that is associated with liberal positions also supported by most of the U.S.-broadsheet newspapers. They form a public sphere that is networked but divided. It is unlikely that the meme circulated widely across ideological silos given Twitter's highly selective algorithmic processes of filtering and dissemination, although it came to the attention of a wider, but again partial, public through the media coverage of the affair.

Given their ambivalent character and antagonistic potential, memes can be retrofitted to serve misogynist, racist, or xenophobic ideologies (Milner, 2016). Nevertheless, because of their modularity and modifiability, memes are versatile communicative instruments that are employed for a broad range of purposes. They defy monopolization and instead represent conduits for what Phillips and Milner (2017) describe as an ambivalent political engagement that oscillates between silly and more serious intentions. Set against populist truth-bending, clumsy corrections constitute precisely this kind of irreverent response to political absurdity. They embody what Hartley (2010) has called "silly citizenship" (p. 233), a form of participation in which humor becomes a rhetorical tactic for voicing political dissent not only vis-à-vis a sober reality but also in a sometimes nonsensical world. Clumsy corrections are about play and silliness, but they arise from serious political subjects. Regardless of the actual motif and besides simply mocking Trump's edits, the images are absurd responses to an absurd scene and to an ambition to meddle with reality.

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