

Who to Blame This Pandemic On:

A Qualitative Study of the Politicization of COVID-19 through Political Memes in Canada

Scott DeJong, Saskia Kowalchuk & Fenwick McKelvey
Concordia University, Canada

Abstract:

Memes are a curious object of study, easy to identify but harder to contextualize. Working with the growing literature on the study of memes and their communities, our paper offers a method to study the shared values or stories worked out and maintained by memes that Whitney Phillip and Ryan Milner describe as a “deep memetic frames.” Our interest is less on the individual memes than how memes accumulate and help communities express their own ways of interpreting events. One of these events has been the COVID-19 pandemic. We developed our method while studying how Canadian partisan groups – or what we call scenes – reacted to the pandemic. Was the pandemic a chance for partisans to make peace or recontextualize politics over a health crisis? Through researcher journals, team meetings, and observational notes, we evaluated the use of memes across 14 Canadian partisan communities on Facebook and Instagram during the 2020 summer of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Our approach extracts three distinct partisan scenes: established partisan, negative partisan, and emergent right-wing populism. We focus on their memetic contexts to evaluate the central themes of understanding, extract the worldviews that maintain these digital spaces, and construct a deeper comprehension of memetic frames. As a term widely used but challenging to study, we recognize this research as a novel approach and conclude by discussing its utility for researchers more broadly and acknowledging its limitations while providing the various research directions this work offers.

Keywords: memes; methods; politics; framing; qualitative social media; partisanship; COVID-19
