A Picture is Worth a Thousand (S)words: Classification and Diffusion of Memes on a Partisan Media Platform

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Memes have become an integral tool of communication in partisan online spaces. Moderation policies and algorithms lack the capacity to filter out meme content with extremist foundations. This report explores an algorithmic approach to identify harmful meme content and analyse their patterns of diffusion. Using state-of-the-art deep learning image and visual rhetorical analysis, the report examines 465,229 memes scraped from Parler between August 2018 to January 2021 and categorises them into thematical clusters of gender, race, partisanship, and violence.
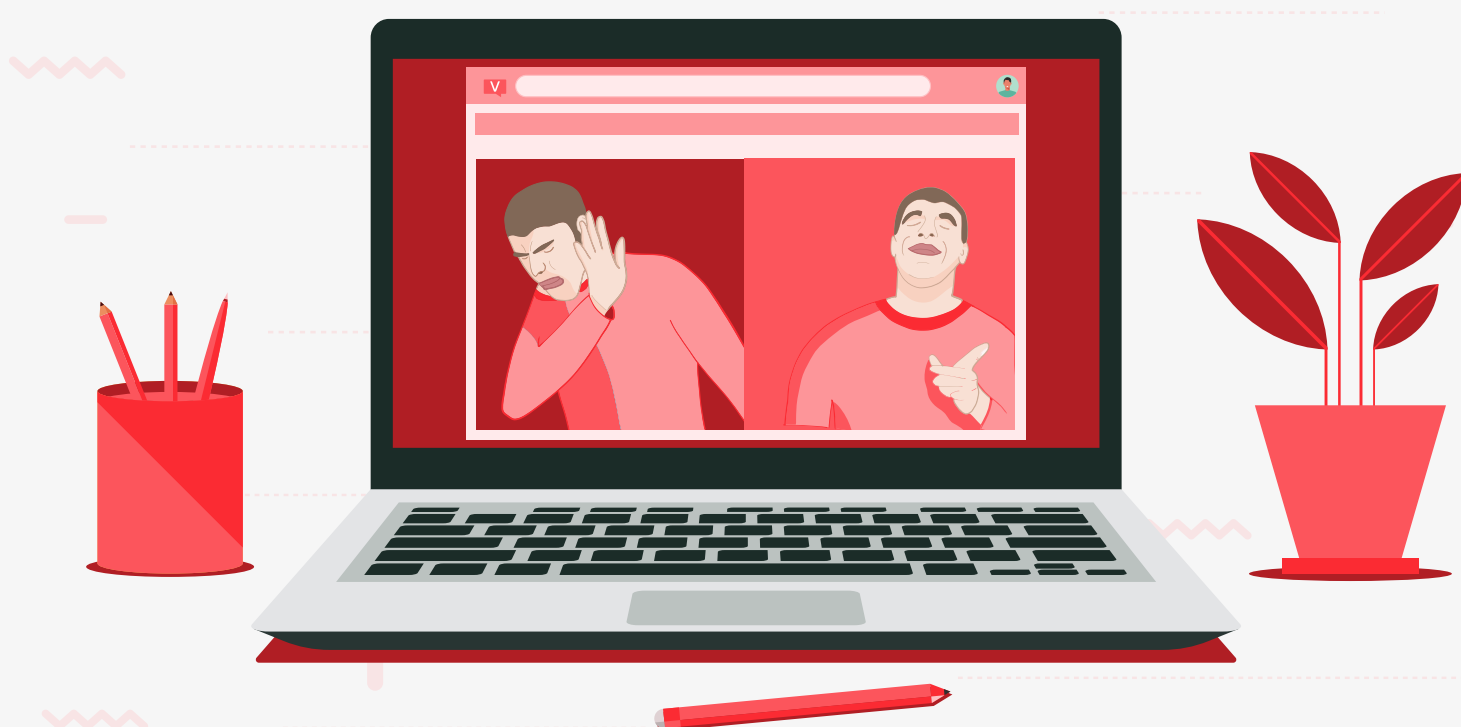
Parler memes contained intersectional themes of partisanship, race, gender, and violence. While partisan memes received the highest engagement overall, partisan themes often intersected with race, gender, and violence. High engagement memes correlated with right-wing media coverage, such as elections, regulations and platform censorship, and with controversial public figures.

The 2020 Presidential Election was associated with a significant increase in the likelihood that a posted meme would be shared by other members. This increase in virality was most notable for violent memes, which went from having the lowest transmission rate prior to the election to having the highest transmission rate following it. This finding underscores the animating role of the election and subsequent right-wing media coverage in inciting online extremism.

The top five meme clusters in 2020 were Climate Change, George Soros, Pro-Trump and Michelle Obama. In comparison, clusters on MAGA and soldiers, against political lobbying, children and gender, leftists and missing votes had the highest impact in January 2021.

Memes branded by group logos, such as Turning Point USA, Trump, QAnon and Prolife, increased their virality within public discourse and often had a higher engagement. These meme brands can be used to identify and track the discourse across platforms and depict thematic trends.