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<title> Memes, digital remix culture and (re)mediating British politics and public life

<author> Dr Francesca Sobande

<standfirst> Digital remix culture is enabling people to express how they feel about politics and society in a way that was not possible before the internet. Politicians, policymakers and others committed to progressive social change should take heed of this culture in terms of what they can learn from it and how they can protect people from its most harmful effects.

The rise of social media platforms, which contribute to many people’s daily routines, has significantly affected contemporary British politics and public life. Although in 2018 Ofcom reported that the television was the most-used platform for accessing news by adults in Britain (79 per cent), the internet was not far behind (64 per cent), unlike the dwindling influence of newspapers (40 per cent).<sup>1</sup>

The internet is the most popular platform for news among those in Britain who are 16–24 years old (82 per cent) and it plays a key role in news access for individuals identified as being part of “ethnic minority groups” (73 per cent).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, increasing evidence points to rising numbers of people who actively avoid mainstream media and news outlets. Over a third of UK audiences turn away from mainstream news<sup>3</sup>, with many people starting their day by accessing social media spaces instead.<sup>4</sup>

Put simply, British politics and public life are distinctly shaped by digital spheres. These include online content creation that enables the expression of political and social issues in dialogic and powerful ways, challenging the dominance of discussions led by traditional news outlets and gatekeepers. Conversely, content created on social media is also at the core of online abuse directed at British political and public figures, particularly Black women,<sup>5</sup> who face the impact of interconnected anti-Black racism and sexism.<sup>6</sup>

<callout> “increasing evidence points to rising numbers of people who actively avoid mainstream media and news outlets in favour of social media spaces”

Digital remix culture encompasses how people (re)use and (re)create digital content and commentary. Such processes can involve editing or adding to existing visual, audio and textual content to (re)produce something new, which is tailored to capturing specific socio-cultural views and events. Associated with a “do it yourself” (DIY) or “do it together” (DIT)

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<sup>1</sup> Ofcom (2018) ‘News Consumption Survey’.

[https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0024/116529/news-consumption-2018.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0024/116529/news-consumption-2018.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ofcom (2018) ‘News Consumption Survey’.

[https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0024/116529/news-consumption-2018.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0024/116529/news-consumption-2018.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2019) ‘Reuters Institute Digital News Report’.

[https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-06/DNR\\_2019\\_FINAL\\_0.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-06/DNR_2019_FINAL_0.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Ofcom (2019) ‘Online Nation’.

[https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0024/149253/online-nation-summary.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0024/149253/online-nation-summary.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Amnesty International (2018) ‘Toxic Twitter – A Toxic Place for Women’ (Chapter 1).

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-1/>

<sup>6</sup> Akiwowo S (2018) ‘Amnesty’s Latest Research Into Online Abuse Finally Confirms What Black Women Have Known For Over A Decade’, *Huffington Post*, 19 December 2018.

[https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/amnesty-online-abuse-women-twitter\\_uk\\_5c1a0a2fe4b02d2cae8ea0c1](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/amnesty-online-abuse-women-twitter_uk_5c1a0a2fe4b02d2cae8ea0c1)

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ethos, digital remix culture involves the (re)production of various forms of media by people on the internet, including individuals without formal media training.

Often by blending pop culture and political references, remixed digital content results in commentary that reflects different public conversations, contestations and concerns about the current state of politics and society. Even though the concept of digital remix culture can be used in abstract ways, there are clear examples of types of online activity that may be labelled as such. Among these is the widespread (re)use of political memes, GIFs (graphics interchange formats) and user-generated content on social media. This can involve the repurposing of photographs and the words of politicians and public figures, yielding acerbic statements that can be as critical and/or offensive as they are humorous.

The surface-level humour infused in much digitally remixed content can initially make it seem harmless, to some. Its potential to be perceived as trivial contributes to the potency of forms of digital remix culture, which may contain hate-filled messages barely masked by allegedly comedic undertones. Partly due to their association with youth and frivolity, memes, GIFs and much digitally remixed content are often regarded as trivial and inconsequential in terms of their capacity to contribute to critically informed political interventions. However, as is illustrated by the work of An Xiao Mina on memes and social movements,<sup>7</sup> digital remix culture is far from being a peripheral element of political life and public discourse across the globe.

<subheading 1>What does this mean for British politics and public life?

Memes influence and represent society in many ways.<sup>8</sup> Britain's impending exit from the European Union (Brexit) remains a source of much meme activity, by both Brexit supporters and Remain campaigners. There is an abundance of remixed digital content accompanying Twitter hashtags such as #BrexitMeme and #StrongAndStable; the latter of which echoes a phrase that has been central to Prime Minister Theresa May's past campaigns and which has since been parodied online.

In March 2019, the launch of the new anti-Brexit party (Change UK) quickly inspired memes generated to express scepticism about their motivations, unity and potential longevity. Such online actions can reveal much about which issues bolster support for or push back against Brexit and people in political power, as well as parties in pursuit of it. Brexit is undoubtedly the topic of myriad memes stemming from Britain, but it is merely one of many topics that fuel content that is the by-product of digital remix culture connected to politics and public life.

Digital remix culture sometimes entails forms of self-disclosure by people, who without using digital platforms and/or online anonymity, may not otherwise publicly express such sentiments. Despite some individuals being less inclined to voice certain socio-political views that they convey online, in person, it may be precisely the type of politics they promote on

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<sup>7</sup> Mina A X (2019) *Memes to Movements* [video], Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University.

<https://cyber.harvard.edu/story/2019-01/xiao-mina-memes-movements>

<sup>8</sup> Denisova A (2019) *Internet Memes and Society: Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts*. New York: Routledge.

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the internet that underpins how they vote and/or which political and public figures they support.

In sum, content produced as part of digital remix culture can shed light on British political and social attitudes, particularly those that previously people may have primarily, or only, shared in private. The potential impact of this includes the public condoning, circulation and celebration of bigoted views that long pre-date the internet, but which can be reinforced and popularised through digital channels.

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Digital remix culture reflects social groups, attitudes and subcultures that exist offline, but involves the formation of cultural codes, rules and in-group cues that are particular to digital settings, including the possibility of censorship and being banned from platforms. It is crucial that digital remix culture and the different views and voices that it amplifies are not simply written off as being far removed from how people think and act offline. After all, despite common distinctions between “the digital world” and being “in the real world”, online and offline environments and identities are inherently entwined. While it does not take the shape of a formal and structured polling of people’s political positions, digital remix culture can communicate, and perhaps forecast, facets of Britain’s changing socio-political landscape.

The most popular type of online news in Britain is social media, which is used by approximately 44 per cent of adults.<sup>9</sup> Of those adults, around three-quarters (76 per cent) report that they use Facebook for news, which is followed in popularity by Twitter.<sup>10</sup> As the internet continues to usurp newspapers’ role in how adults in Britain access news, individuals and institutions committed to progressive social change would be remiss to dismiss dialogue developed through and around digital remix culture.

The complete demise of print newspapers does not seem imminent. Nevertheless, the days of confidently declaring that British election victories are based on newspapers’ support have been disrupted by digital remix culture’s impact. Gradually, political parties and mainstream media are strategically tapping into forms of digital remix culture, especially when trying to appeal to young target audiences. From featuring tweets as part of television news reports, to the inclusion of meme images on newspaper cover pages, the lines between digital remix culture and mainstream media and press are constantly blurred.

In their haste to keep pace with viral and innovative social media content created by relatively unknown online users, mainstream media institutions frequently (mis)use individuals’ digital content. This can involve institutions refusing to ask for permission to use the person’s online contribution in such a public way, failing to credit the person who created the content that the institution incorporates and/or co-opts, or (mis)using online content and identifying the person behind it in ways that make them vulnerable to online harassment and

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<sup>9</sup> Ofcom (2018) ‘News Consumption Survey’.

[https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0024/116529/news-consumption-2018.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0024/116529/news-consumption-2018.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Ofcom (2018) ‘News Consumption Survey’.

[https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0024/116529/news-consumption-2018.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0024/116529/news-consumption-2018.pdf)

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offline abuse. The ethics of how mainstream media and press engage with digital remix culture require robust scrutiny by those at the helms of such activity.

<callout> “In their haste to keep pace with viral and innovative social media content ... mainstream media institutions frequently (mis)use individuals’ digital content”

Due to the immediacy of social media content compared with more traditional news outlets, there is often a time lag between political critiques and pressing issues being debated by young people and structurally marginalised groups via digital remix culture, and the reporting of such issues by high-profile news organisations. For this reason, turning to pockets of the internet where digital discussion and remix culture unfolds, can sometimes present a more recent and complex picture of British political and public life than what is communicated by newspapers and television reports. As people in Britain ponder over who may be the next Prime Minister, user-generated content being (re)produced and (re)mixed in digital settings may be paving parts of the political path that lies ahead.

Digital remix culture is not solely the domain of the politically left or the politically right, nor of centrist conversations. That said, aspects of digital remix culture have arguably accelerated various forms of far-right radicalism that need to be tackled. Digital space is entangled with the racial dynamics of media communications,<sup>11</sup> marketplace interactions,<sup>12</sup> identities and social inequalities.<sup>13</sup> More specifically, digital remix culture has played a central part in the insidious harbouring of racist, xenophobic, misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic, ableist and classist ideologies, including strategic efforts to target and recruit young people online. Thus, there is a need for the influential role of digital remix culture to be taken seriously by all invested in countering the rise of ideologies rooted in hate speech, violence and the structural oppression of different social groups.

In 2019 Ofcom reported that social media sites are the most commonly-cited source of online harm in Britain<sup>14</sup>. Digital remix culture can be the cornerstone of forms of online bigotry and abuse. Yet, it is also engaged with in ways that facilitate essential critiques of politics, including the ineffectiveness of centrist views, which do not dismantle deeply embedded power relations. Memes can serve as digital conduits through which the public are able to highlight issues often woefully overlooked within British party politics, including anti-Black<sup>15</sup> racism, Islamophobia and trans rights.

<callout> “digital remix culture has played a central part in the insidious harbouring of racist, xenophobic, misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic, ableist and classist ideologies”

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<sup>11</sup> Hall S (1992) ‘Race, culture, and communications: looking backward and forward at cultural studies’, *Rethinking Marxism* 5(1): 10–18.

<sup>12</sup> Johnson G D, Thomas K D, Harrison A K and Grier S A (eds) (2019) *Race in the Marketplace: Crossing Critical Boundaries*, Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>13</sup> Sobande F (2017) ‘Watching me watching you: Black women in Britain on YouTube’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20(6): 655–671.

<sup>14</sup> Ofcom (2019) ‘Online Nation’.

[https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0024/149253/online-nation-summary.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0024/149253/online-nation-summary.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Aligned with the position of many Black feminist activists and scholars, the word “Black” (in relation to people of African descent) is capitalised in this work to challenge how Black people’s agency and ability to self-name has been disrespected by white supremacist ideologies throughout history.

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One of the risks involved in participating in digital remix culture by (re)producing content is that, despite the intended message of the content put together by a person, such a message can be diluted, decontextualised and recontextualised. This can involve individuals with oppositional motives skewing and (re)working the content's meaning. Motivations to do so include attempts to incite violence or to spread misinformation and forms of discriminatory malice. But memes have also played a useful part in challenging false narratives spun by politicians and public figures.

Digital remix culture and the social media spaces that sustain it can be a strong source of knowledge-sharing, meaning-making and content-creation, particularly for those who are systemically stereotyped and underserved by mainstream British media institutions.<sup>16</sup> Social media's ability to aid the quick creation of content that contributes to counternarratives that hold politicians and governments to account has helped to sustain public discourse concerning issues related to the Windrush scandal, the Grenfell Tower disaster and the continued dehumanisation of migrants in Britain. The conversion of such public discourse into action on the part of those in power remains a challenge. Regardless, the expanding influence of digital remix culture on public debate and political life should not be underestimated.

#### <subheading 2> Digital remix culture and resisting mainstream media narratives

At present, the Scottish government has postponed the planned updating of its gender recognition legislation – the Gender Recognition Act 2004 (GRA). Media coverage of this often lacks an explicit critique of transphobic attempts to prevent governmental moves towards ensuring the rights of trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals.

By contrast, DIY or DIT digital content raises awareness of recent rhetoric and events intended to malign trans people in Scotland and hinder any political progress that might contribute to further establishing and protecting their rights. Memes and Twitter activity document forms of surveillance, slandering and disruption inflicted on trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals, as well as others who protest to counter the discrimination that they encounter.

Related content highlights abusive responses that such people face, including when raising awareness of transphobia within LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual) and feminist spaces, as well as beyond them. Digital remix culture can be a means to undermine fearmongering disinformation attempts that inflate the recorded amount of public resistance to the planned GRA reforms in Scotland. Unfortunately, digital remix culture can also be weaponised by transphobic individuals and institutions with the intention to misinform.

It is difficult to determine the extent to which digital remix culture currently impacts law in Scotland. Regardless, discussions mobilised by memes and digital remix culture continue to present vital critiques of party politics, policymaking and bigoted social attitudes, in ways

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<sup>16</sup> Sobande F, Fearfull A and Brownlie D (2019) 'Resisting media marginalisation: Black women's digital content and collectivity'. *Consumption, Markets & Culture*. DOI: 10.1080/10253866.2019.1571491

Sobande, F. (2019), "Memes, digital remix culture and (re)mediating British politics and public life", *IPPR Progressive Review* 26(2): 151–160.

that have the potential to put pressure on public figures to work towards progressive social and structural changes.

Digital remix culture can be the bedrock of the DIY and DIT creation of under-reported and erased counternarratives, such as those communicated by individuals (re)mixing and (re)creating content on social media that highlights the perniciousness of transphobia in Scotland and throughout Britain. Digital content production processes can draw attention to issues and experiences that are pertinent to those who are most marginalised and are rarely represented and supported in British politics and public life. Still, it can be these same processes that are used to perpetuate the societal oppression of such individuals, in the form of vitriolic online abuse and which extends to offline threats and violence.

<callout> “discussions mobilised by memes and digital remix culture continue to present vital critiques of party politics, policymaking and bigoted social attitudes”

When politicians and public figures pursue social change in Britain and seek to challenge structural inequalities and hierarchies, it is not enough to simply call for increased representation of under-represented groups in the media, politics and public life. It is not enough to praise the precarious potential for social media and digital remix culture to democratise news reporting processes and provide a window into the lives of those most visibly absent from front-line British politics. Instead, it is imperative that praise of the beneficial use of digital tools in pursuit of a more socially just society is balanced out by efforts to address the dangers that those most oppressed face when visibly (re)creating online content and commentary that challenges dominant and discriminatory ideologies.

There are many challenges ahead for those who are working towards eradicating pervasive forms of online hate, or at the least, campaigning for and developing social media platforms that effectively deal with online abuse when it arises. Memes and digital remix culture are (re)mediating British politics and public life in messy and meaningful ways that show no sign of slowing down. Such online activity is contributing to the development of 21st-century cultural memory in Britain, with individuals using digital tools to document and re(meme)ber political and public events. Therefore, although the future of British politics is uncertain, it may be increasingly anchored in the influence of digital remix culture, which can catalyse much more than just laughter and online in-jokes.

<author bio>Dr Francesca Sobande is a lecturer in digital media studies at Cardiff University. Her research interests include how racism, sexism and structural inequalities manifest in media and the marketplace. Her work has appeared in the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Consumption, Markets & Culture*, *Marketing Theory* and *Celebrity Studies*. Her co-edited collection (with Akwugo Emejulu), *To Exist is to Resist: Black Feminism in Europe*, was published in May 2019 by Pluto Press. Francesca’s forthcoming book, *The Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain*, will be published in 2020 by Palgrave Macmillan.