**Rodney Taveira – US Politics: A meme made in heaven**

>> Welcome to the podcast series of Raising the Bar Sydney. Raising the Bar in 2017 saw 20 University of Sydney academics take their research out of the lecture theatre and into bars across Sydney all on one night. In this podcast you'll hear Rodney Taviera's talk U.S. politics: A Meme Made in Heaven. Enjoy the talk.

[ Applause ]

>> And thanks very much Alan. Thank you all for coming tonight. So the title my talk tonight is U.S. Politics: A Meme Made in Heaven. Now I'm an English professor by trade or lecturer by trade so I was going to try to be cute and say I'm going to find the equivalent a circle of Dante's hell to talk about U.S. politics, but I couldn't work out which one was appropriate. Is it lust, treachery, wrath? But some kind of descent into a terrifying hellscape would seem to be an appropriate image to have in mind when thinking about U.S. politics currently both domestically and how it affects us here in Australia. So we have two men with bad hair. Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump and their crew getting into a Twitter fight lobbing verbal bombs at each other. [Donald Trump voice] "Hey, little rocket man." Then he gets called a mentally deranged dotard by North Korea. But the issue for us is that this could all go nuclear literally. Talk about getting roasted in the group chat. And I could also trace a dissent when I think about teaching my unit in American comedy and humour. As an icebreaker in the first lecture, I'd like to, you know, ask my students the question to make everyone comfortable. And the question I ask is who is the funniest American? Now we all know the answer to that is Will Ferrell. And you can fight me on that later if you buy me a drink. But the first response that came out in 2015 was Donald Trump. He apparently was the funniest American at the time. And that got a chuckle from everybody. Last year when I suggested that Donald Trump might be the funniest American, there was like a nervous giggle. And this year, nobody's laughing. So I want to think about Trump here in U.S. politics tonight in the context of social media, of memes, and of the particular kind of humour that pervades large sections of popular culture. So you got trolling where you're post things just to get a reaction; usually anger, shit posting where you post nonsense to derail a conversation, or you post GIFs of Hillary getting hit by a golf ball -- hit by Trump that knocks her over, or Trump clotheslining a wrestler that has a logo of CNN on it. So these kinds of jokes are created and shared at an extraordinary clip with a ready audience but are in the same field I'd say as online harassment and the cycles of outrage that burn so quickly and hotly but over and over again. So instead of thinking about Trump as a joke as he was thought of by so many during his campaign and which led him getting so much free publicity because he was great for ratings because he's a spectacular train wreck. So instead of thinking about him as a joke -- and here is a key idea for tonight -- I think we should think about him as an anti-joke. And think about an anti-joke as describing what passes for so much of politics in the US at the moment. So while having the structure of a joke -- you have a setup, a punchline, and a reaction -- anti-jokes are only funny to a select group of people. Think of the trolls who chuckle as, you know, butthurt normies react to their triggering posts. Or the levels of irony required to work through one of the biggest memes from last year; Harambe the guerrilla: fallen hero. So Harambe was a guerrilla, as I said, and he was shot dead after a child fell into his enclosure at the Cincinnati zoo. And after that, there was immediate outrage directed at the parents and a petition was started on change.org through Justice for Harambe. And it got hundreds and thousands of signatures. Following that mostly ironic hashtags developed. We all remember RIP Harambe. Song parodies were created, and then millennial comedian Brandon Wardell issued the now legendary rally cry "Dicks out for Harambe." The Twitter handle of zoo's director was hacked and this call to arms was issued by the zoo director; at least it appeared to be. And then of a "Bush did Harambe" sign was held up outside the Democratic National Convention and went live on TV on MSNBC. So memes have gone mainstream. And even that "Bush did Harambe," you needed to have a kind of conversance of memes to understand that that is a reference to the 9/11 Truther movement where you get comedic mileage out of conspiracy. The idea that Bush did 9/11 and the punchline for most of those would be something like "jet fuel doesn't melt steel beams." So was the wild popularity of the Harambe meme proof that people actually want to laugh at murder, but kind of feel bad about it? Maybe. But it also went viral I think because it hit at a time when a particular style of humourless self-righteousness social media sentimentality was at its peak. So it became the perfect parody of a certain brand of Western liberal performative politics. So while it worked really well as parody and relied on buffering levels of irony, it could also be used very directly and in a hateful way. So Harambe the meme was deployed in the campaign -- the harassment campaign against Leslie Jones the African-American star of the all-woman Ghostbusters reboot which itself was kind of immediately subject to a campaign of online harassment the moment that it was announced that it was going to be made. So the abuse was directed to Jones after the infamous Milo Yiannopoulos -- many of you will probably know, but he's sort of British, gay conservative turned celebrity leader of the Alt-Right. The Alt-Right I'll be talking about later. He tweeted that she looked like a black dude. So this thing about an anti-joke is that if it's only taken seriously, it doesn't make sense. And making sense of the political that goes without saying is of the utmost importance. I used to like to think that I could ignore politics and sort of stick to my books and my films. But I've since come to the unhappy realisation that politics are a matter of life and death. The political scientists Harold Lasswell said, "Politics define who gets what, when, and how." And I think that, you know, the terrible situation in Puerto Rico is an example of this. I'm pretty sure Trump only recently realised that Puerto Rico is an island. But now that he knows it's an island, I don't think he thinks that the inhabitants of those islands -- of that island are American citizens; which they are. So this is the second part of the key idea. If the anti-joke is not taken seriously, it may just kill you. I think we see an example of this dynamic at play in the sort of infamous pussy-grabbing video that came out in the lead up to the presidential election from Trump. So really this video is a hot mic and he was sort of talking to Billy Bush, the cousin of George W., and he talked about -- he just grabs women by the pussy. And then the outrage -- the taking -- the only taking seriously of what he said; right. So you have Jake Tapper on CNN talking to Rudy Giuliani and saying, [Jake Tapper voice] "Sir, I have been in many locker rooms over the years and I've never heard talk like this." And Anderson Cooper challenging Trump directly asking him if he had indeed sexually assaulted women as his comments indicate. And even the people saying, "Now, this is the end of the campaign. This! This final this after all of thises that had happened previously." So this is people that are only taking it seriously closing it off from its wider context. Pussy grabbing is a meme for the particular brand of no apologies, "I take what I want when I want it" masculinity that is at the core of Trump's appeal. It stinks and reeks of power. So to be in on the anti-joke is to pay attention to the laughter of the men that Trump was talking to; Bully Bush. Bully Bush? Billy Bush but "bully" is an appropriate slip there. So you notice the way that Billy gets the actress to give Trump a kiss and Trump murmurs, [Trump voice] "Well, Melania said this was fine." But does anyone even remember the name of the actress? It was Arianne Zucker. She was the butt of the joke. So the hot mic tape is an example of an anti-joke of a series that comprise rape culture. And in one of the many things that Harvey Weinstein has revealed is that this is not just about a certain strain of politics; one side of politics. It is about power. And everybody knows especially the butts of the anti-joke. But being in on the anti-joke -- right -- so there's this tension between being in on it and taking it seriously. That you're in on it, it's like a finger trap. So you're in on it until the point that you want to pull out and then it tightens around you. And you're kind of swallowed it up by. So you take it seriously, it dies but the stench remains. Don't take it seriously, it kills. So please keep this dynamic in mind as I'm thinking about memes and online life and how what goes on there can kind of it's crossing over into the mainstream space of our public and political discourse in the U.S. and here. And I'm sure we all know what memes are at this point? They're basically a picture with words on it. Kind of the most basic description describes a joke format. So one of the biggest latest ones, I guess, is kind of "distracted boyfriend." There's a guy standing there and then there's a woman walking past him. Wooh! [phonetic] And then his girlfriend looking him like "what the hell you look at?" So students have shown me one where it's the guy looking, and it says, "Echo" which is the lecture recording software at the University of Sydney. And on the girlfriend is "attending lectures."

[ Laugher ]

That was pretty good. I gave that five stars the moment they showed me. But memes exist in the wider ecology and is in this wider ecology that their impact is felt. So "meme" as a word was coined by that mirthless atheist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book The Selfish Gene where it is asserted that it's a unit of cultural transmission. So kind of any behaviour or idea that can spread by copying and imitation. So while memes now have a very specific meaning, I think it's important to note that they also act like memes as Dawkins originally described them; spreading by copying and mutation. Mutating and recombining across their very short lifecycles. So think about how memes are spread. I mean my students told me they consume 50, 60, 100 means a day. And this doesn't necessarily mean like laughing at each meme that they come across; right. They just sort of come through their timeline which is kind of coextensive with our lives now. And we tag each other in means. On? In. In memes. Underneath means. We tag each other on our Instagram or Facebook. I mean, I sustain a long-distance relationship with a friend of mine purely by doing this. And then there's kind of memes about not getting tagged in memes; right. That it implies a kind of social death. Like, "why wasn't I included in that sort of half a second you took to tag somebody else?" So how does this whole all work and how might it affect our politics happens? How can people claim that we memed a president or elected a meme as a president? Or as liberals lamented after the shock of the election, [Sad voice] "But we had the best memes." So memes are by far the most consumed units of humour. Now this is not difficult -- not a difficult thing to achieve given how quickly you consume them. But they do represent I think a kind of apex point in their relationship of politics to media at least since the second world war. But even before that one might argue, media has been deployed by politicians. Now there's the old adage that Hitler conquered Poland by radio and Franklin D. Roosevelt when he was trying to sell the New Deal to the American people, which was his, you know, response to the Great Depression, he used the radio to speak to Americans directly. They were called Fireside Chats. And he got around the newspapers by doing this because the newspapers were really against him and the new deal. So how is this different to Trump taking to Twitter or setting up his own news channel on his Facebook page? I don't think it's that different. But the media environment has changed a lot. We have the postwar era which is the era of television. And up until cable, they're only, you know, three channels. So there were gatekeepers. And journalism was supposedly, you know, objective affair and got its scream of heroism after Watergate where Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the Washington Post doggedly pursued President Nixon's abuses of power that led to his resignation. A little side anti-joke -- the name of their anonymous source: Deep Throat -- name of a pornographic film. So the watching of television news peaked during this era. So even if TV news is watched less now, the formal changes that have happened are worth noting in the context of memes and politics. So the average shock length -- sorry -- the average soundbite in 1969 was something like 30 seconds. And now, it's down to just 4.3. What can you say in 4.3 seconds or what can be heard? Slogans work well. Build the wall! Make America great again! And insults work pretty well. [Trump voice] "Such a nasty woman." And, "I prefer soldiers that don't get captured." We've also seen the spread of programmes like The Daily Show and The Colbert Report and Full Frontal with Samantha Bee. So these are news parody programmes that skewer politics and the reporting of politics at the same time as they deliver the news. And there's a slew of scholarship that always starts with the claim that [Reporter voice] "More and more young people are getting their news from these sources." And then they try to work out whether it's good, bad, or otherwise. But where do people get most new news from now? It's Facebook; right? And where do memes get shared? Facebook. Now that's not the only place where they get shared and where they circulate. But Facebook has something like 2 billion users worldwide. And it leaves all other forms of social media in the dust in any kind of metric of engagement. And you don't need the resources of a TV station to have an effect on Facebook. So what the great cultural theorist Theodor Adorno shared to a daughter identified as the erasure or the borderlines between culture and empirical reality is rife of social media. Think about your curated online self, versus your actual self. Again, [inaudible] there are memes about this. Me in real life: is someone's looking like hungover and I'm like shit lying in bed. And then really kind of filtered and made up and what they look like on Instagram. And the boring blue-and-white sameness of Facebook means everything just kind of looks the same. So when scrolling, who can tell or even care where the images and stories that you are consuming come from. So the failure of Facebook to kind of hold the proliferation of false stories during the presidential campaign shouldn't surprise anybody. The social media companies are too enamoured of their algorithms and the venue. Venue? Their revenue they generate to intervene. So this erasure between culture and empirical reality is the point to concentrate on because it is here that politics enters the fray. It's where the rhetoric of policy and the material effects of the policies' outcomes are negotiated. So there's not nothing that Andrew Breitbart -- so the founder of Breitbart News which is now helmed again by Steve Bannon erst of all Chief Strategist for Trump. He used to like to say that "politics is downstream from culture." The while of course it would be too far to say that a president was memed into office, an analogy I think might be useful. So not everyone, indeed only a very select few, wear the latest fashions from the high fashion houses like Louis Vuitton or Prada. However, the style of that particular season philtres down through to more affordable shops like Zara or Topshop and we come all the way down to Kmart. So some will buy these cheaper clothes knowing where the style cues and references come from which means both the loopy mind of someone like Karl Lagerfeld -- which is kind of like the rhetoric I think about there -- and in the sweatshops of Bangladesh. Right. So this materiality of the situation. Others might not know and care less about where their style comes from. Further, they can be directly copied and counterfeited and passed off as the real thing. In any event, what we where is defined, coloured, and cut according to the whims and tastes of a very small group of people with whom we have little contact and may only vaguely understand or be aware of. Similarly, people that create memes might be very far away from us; geographically, socially, political. Further, there are lots of people, you might be surprised, who don't consume memes at all. Right. Lots of people -- most people even -- who have no idea who Pepe the Frog is. And don't know that it's kind of passé to use the Willy Wonka macro now. However the themes, images, and messages of memes permeate public discourse shifting terms of what can be said out loud influencing the norms of politics. So memes have entered in some way the public realm which is where citizens hold rulers to account in a democracy. So the question that has arisen lately is: what happens when these norms are under attack by the rulers? One of the clearest examples is fake news. So this term has entered the lexicon of politicians even here in Australia where basically it can be deployed just to pivot away from a question that you don't want to answer. Everyone heard the Spanish president saying it the other day in relation to Catalans: [President of Spain's voice] "And we have much alternative facts happening here and fake news." And this the grab that you hear on Radio National. And there are, of course as for everything, there are memes about this. So it will say at the top, "When your mother calls you down for dinner and it's not ready" and it's over a picture of Trump pointing at the CNN reporter, "You're fake news."

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>> So further -- and we all know this -- that we live in an age of distraction. There are more and more demands on your time. We have more information and images and notifications coming at us than ever before. We even have an acronym that describes this aspect of what people are talking about now as an attention economy. This acronym as tl;dr. Too long; didn't read. And how long is too long? I wager many of you might watch a video that's more than 15 seconds long if you're somehow really motivated to watch it. Advertisers are told they have a 6-second window to grab the attention of the audience. So this is why memes I think have such a life. You consume them immediately, almost automatically. They almost trick us into consuming them. It's like once you've learnt to read, words -- letters start being kind of arbitrary curves and lines. You see a letter. You see a word as soon as you've learnt how to read. And memes build on this automatic function to deliver a lot of information in a short amount of time. A student of mine last year Emma Belfor [assumed spelling] -- not here? Awh [phonic], I could have just ripped her off without naming her. Not that I'd ever do that. She wrote on this thesis last year on memes in the presidential election. She's has this interesting idea in the -- in her thesis that memes make sense because we've seen memes before. So for those of you familiar with memes, when was the first time you saw Pepe the Frog? Trick question. You probably can't remember. And this gives memes an extraordinary flexibility. So Pepe that big headed cartoon frog has undergone a massive transformation from being a reaction image meant to sort of give off an emotion to being classed as a hate symbol by the Anti-Defamation League. And then he finally gets a -- oh, not finally -- he also gets an explainer on Hillary Clinton's presidential website saying that he's associated with white supremacy. This is exactly what the anti-joke has wanted to happen. And we have them kind of rejoicing when Donald Trump Junior re-tweets this image of the "deplorables" -- right, which itself has become a meme of self-identification for a large wave of Trump supporters. So this "deplorables" it's instead of the Expendables -- you know, that kind of geriatric action film with Sylvester Stallone and other older action stars. And they've replaced the faces of those actors with Mike Pence with Milo, and like St. Peter next to Daddy Trump is Pepe the Frog. So what memes have this effect of is distorting and flattening history. Yet the circulation of memes I'd argue is an example not of just nostalgia but hyper-nostalgia. Recognition of something -- anything that we've seen before in the bat of an eyelid, many times a day, something familiar but different enough to garner our attention. We've got reboots, remakes, sequels, cover songs, television shows that in a nostalgic past like Stranger Things. Expanded cinematic universes where we watch the same kind of long-ass movie for 10 years -- you think about the Marvel universe. Memes -- these are stakes in the ground against the ever quicker, ever more demanding, and ever thinner slicing up of our time. And just what is a President meme other than a nostalgia for a 1980s businessman? A man who could be predatory and reckless and not only not get into trouble, but succeed and get incredibly wealthy. And this figure is aspirational in a time where people's jobs are increasingly precarious, where wages have stagnated, and the gap between the mega-wealthy and the rest of America is growing. So I've talked here how memes are consumed and how they might have this kind of dragging effect on political discourse affecting its fashion. But where do they come from? One source, amongst many, is the Alt Right that I mentioned earlier. They're Alt or alternative in a sense that they see themselves as different from traditional establishment conservatives or cock-servatives as they like to call them. This is a kind of loose collection of extremely online people. The Alt Right has captured the attention of the mainstream media both for their abnormal tastes and for this influence that they're having on the culture more broadly. So the Alt Right is a somewhat radical political formation that is closely tied to the rise of Trump. Its political ethos combines the internet irony aesthetics we saw with Harambe, with a vehement opposition to liberal cultural values like multiculturalism and feminism. So this is a group who decry the fall of Western civilisation in one post, debate the virtues of lowering the age of consent in another, all the while deploying images of sort of rape and murder and deploying sexist language with kind of anti-abandon. 2016, said Emily Nussbaum of the New York Times, is when Alt Right inside jokes -- or as I'd call them "anti-jokes" -- entered the world. In 2017, they manifested in polo shirts wearing tiki torches in Charlottesville, North Carolina and the young woman was killed. So along with Reddit and chat platforms like Discord, fortune is one of the -- fortune? -- 4chan is one of particular sources of labour -- of the free labour that goes into producing memes. And it provides much of the energy behind the Alt Right and its cachet of transgression. Now transgression is often celebrated as a kind of politics of the oppressed and the marginalised. But it's, kind of, now been co-opted by the Alt Right and it can lead to seemingly absurd statements such as "conservatism is the new punk." So 4chan is an image board that was set up in 2003 and was made there to share Japanese Anime. But by 2011, it was getting something like 750 million page views a month. It's culture of anonymity and shock humour. So the users go by a nom foster an environment where the users can air their darkest thoughts and fantasies: weird porn, gory images, stories of murder and incest, musing on racial superiority and genocide. So it is in this environment that many memes get made. And this -- think about this in combination with a gradual right turn shift or shift towards the right and the politics board on 4chan and this -- you know, it previously it's kind of the intranet as a new frontier where it's strictly libertarian and it starts moving right and I it had this kind of self-justification for doing that in its opposition to what they call SJWs -- Social Justice Warriors. So the urgency of Trump's appeal for the Alt Right seem to stem from this mounting conviction that the West is rapidly degenerating. A widely shared meme on 4chan has the year 1970 and looking forward to flying cars or a cure for cancer. And then 2017, an absurd representation of contemporary identity politics such as a man who identifies as a dog or an adult baby. So the political message is clear. Either progress itself is a myth, or we have stopped progressing and started regressing as a civilisation. The speed and sheer number of memes and the filtering layers of irony and humour mean that hypocrisy cannot be used as a defence against this garbled politics nor can shame because Trump and the anti-jokes of memes and chan culture would seem to operate without this important emotion. Shame is really important. There is no apology. There's only righteous, self-justification. The is the "it's not me, it's you" deflection. And then there are the outright lies which add up to the propaganda technique of the big lie where you say things so outrageous and crazy that you think: who could be crazy enough to make this up, it must be true. But this kind of global gaslighting. So can democracy survive is, you know, the question many are asking. Well, this is democracy. The politics is personal and collective, emotional and material, a matter of life and death. The German philosopher -- allow me to quote him -- Friedrich von Schelling said, "But where danger lies, there grows salvation also." I'm not sure if that's hopeful or comforting. Brandon Wardell recently tweeted "Dicks out for healthcare." It didn't get the same traction as "Dicks out for Harambe." So memes in the political subcultures that emerge around them, point beyond the narrow ideological spectrum and the narrow notion of what is political that Americans have traditionally taken for granted. For better or worse, next generation of American politics is being radicalised not or not only by evil foreign communist powers or think tanks in the pockets of corporate billionaires; but by today's extremely online youth, the heirs to the culture industry cavorting upstream from politics with cartoon frogs, self-proclaimed "deplorables," and the martyr Harambe. At the same time, it's hard to see things changing at all until the material facts of the GOP's policies, should they ever manage to enact them, are felt by the people who voted for them and for Trump. Until then, there's going to be the gnashing fury of the online cultural wars with memes drop day and night like the bombs we hope remain strictly verbal. Unfortunately, it's a group chat that we can't opt out of. Thank you.

[ Applause ]

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