

“Meme-orialising” civil war: exploring audiences’ mnemonic engagement with memes about “the Troubles” in Northern Ireland

Abstract

This study seeks to shed light on audiences’ mnemonic engagement with memes about “the Troubles” in Northern Ireland. Memetic memorialisation (or “meme-orialisation”) may, on the one hand, help users find closure with traumatic experiences by giving them the agency to voice their own narratives of the past — narratives which are commonly absent from mainstream media. On the other hand, considering that memes frequently “travel” across digital contexts and may linger online for a long period of time it may entail that users unwillingly come across a meme which re-ignites traumatic memories of the past. Hence, it has been theorised that the meme is a double-edged sword in this regard: having the potential of helping people cope with traumatic memories of the past, while also potentially prolonging said mnemonic suffering (Silvestri 2018; Murru & Vicari 2021). While theoretically convincing, these notions have not previously been “tested” on actual meme audiences. To ameliorate this shortcoming, I explore how audiences in Belfast engage with memes about “the Troubles”. In particular, I narrow in on a starter pack meme entitled “Welcome to Belfast” (see Figure 1) which draws its imagery primarily from this violent era in Northern Ireland’s past. How — I ask — do audiences make sense of this meme? Does it help them come to terms with the violence of the past, or does it rather keep them trapped in painful memories of civil war? To answer these questions, I conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with interlocutors in Belfast in early 2023, asking them for their take on this (and other) memes about political violence in the city. Many interlocutors read the meme as an indication that Northern Ireland has somewhat moved on from its troubled past. They saw memetic joking about “the Troubles” as a sign (or even a driver) of societal healing. Here, several interlocutors stressed that black humour about the violent past helps them cope with painful memories of it. Other interlocutors read the meme as narratively bringing back the past into the present: arguing that it is politically divisive and risks fuelling sectarian tensions in present-day Belfast. Interestingly, some of the interlocutors who read the meme this way exercised their agency by suggesting alternative starter pack memes that (in their view) better represent life in contemporary Belfast. Overall, then, this study confirms previous theorisations of how memes function in relation to traumatic memories, but importantly, it does so through an engagement with audiences. This is something that has been mostly missing from the broader meme studies literature (Trilló and Shifman 2021, 2496-2497) where concept such as “imagined audience” and the “directionality” of memes (see Wiggins 2019, 111-112) have been favoured over in-depth audience research. Thus, this study not only answers the empirical question of how audiences engage mnemonically with memes about “the Troubles”, but it also contributes to the broader meme studies literature through its focus on the audience reception of memes.

The "Welcome to Belfast" Starterpack



Figure 1: "Welcome to Belfast Starter Pack". Source: Reddit.

References

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