Tim Highfield, *Social media and everyday politics*, Polity press, 2016.

Political Rituals of Social Media

July 2013 was a momentous month for the United Kingdom. On 22 July, Prince George was born, automatically becoming third - in - line to the throne. On 7 July, professional tennis player Andy Murray won the men's singles championship at Wimbledon, the first British man to win Wimbledon in 77 years. And on 21 July, Chris Froome won the men's Tour de France cycling race, achieving back - to - back British victories following Bradley Wiggins's triumph in 2012. Throughout, Queen Elizabeth II tweeted her thoughts, providing regular updates as the world waited for the birth of her great - grandson and showcasing the monarch's sense of humour and awareness of popular culture.

Well … this was obviously not the real Queen Elizabeth II tweeting. These comments were instead the work of Elizabeth Windsor, @Queen\_UK, one of many social media accounts parodying figures from political, pop culture, sports and fictional contexts. Their tweets mix the topical, whether major news headlines or the daily work of being the Queen, with the mundane and the humorous, including regularly commenting about the ‘monarch's’ love of gin and sharing a dislike of Mondays with many. Topical comments in particular attract widespread attention from Twitter audiences; tweets framed within the world of the parody have also been found to attract greater attention, and possibly have more appeal or salience for a wider audience, than their more mundane, everyday posts (Highfield, 2015a).

Topical commentary by parody accounts, and the creation of new parody accounts in response to breaking news and unexpected developments, are examples of social media practices that demonstrate ritualized behaviours. In this chapter, I examine rituals around the political and around social media. These include political rituals on social media, and social media rituals that may take on political dimensions. In addition to everyday political talk, the activities featured here are instances of everyday social media practices which are adaptable for politically relevant subjects. Irreverent and playful practices, from memes and image macros to parody and satire, are recurring elements of social media activity in general, including political coverage. 13

Practices which are not necessarily political in themselves can be adapted adapted for political commentary, and those practices which start off as political may over time move towards the irreverent, offbeat and generic. In general I am focusing here on what could be considered as ‘nice’ irreverence. Similar approaches are used for antagonistic and bigoted content, as noted in Whitney Phillips's (2015) examination of race, trolling and Photoshop regarding Obama, and these are mentioned in later chapters. This is not to say that focusing on the light - hearted is the right, or only, approach: Nakamura ( 2014) rightly points out that ‘Because memes are often defined by their humor and whimsical nature – indeed, they circulate because of these very traits – they are seldom analyzed from the perspective of racial and gender critique’ (p. 260).

Humour is a key factor in determining the spreadability and salience of online content (Jenkins et al., 2013; Nahon and Hemsley, 2013). Playful practices online exemplify ‘vernacular creativity’ (Burgess, 2008), where users create and share content in response to previous instances and variations, adapting and altering social media logics and cultures in the process. Users are not only aware of the social media context in which they find themselves, though, incorporating this understanding into their online activity; they are also cognizant of the logics and affordances of the platforms they are using. Gibbs et al. ( 2015) identify a ‘platform vernacular’, examining how content is shaped by practices specific to individual platforms (in their study, Instagram) and what can and cannot be done here.

The platform vernacular is also a response to standardized practices. For example, the diversity of discursive functions for which hashtags can be adapted (Page, 2012; Zappavigna, 2015), and varying practices across platforms which support hashtags, encourage irreverent hashtaggery. These jocular responses become ritualized in themselves. Similarly, users make use of devices appropriate to chosen platforms – such as text - based wordplay, including punning, on Twitter, or visual media with intertextual references on Tumblr – to frame politically themed content (and these of course will also cross platforms). […]

Memes as participatory politics

Memes are a central component of internet culture, reflecting elements of participatory and convergence cultures (Jenkins, 2006). In their extensive research into memes, Shifman ( 2012, 2014a, 2014b) highlights key attributes that lead content to become memes, including its replicability and mutability. While popular content shared widely in its original form is described as viral (Nahon and Hemsley, 2013), memes spread as both initial and adulterated content. Users remix content, adding in new elements to images or videos to create new meanings and commentary by using humour and playful practices. While image macros – offering a common template of image, font and writing style with the caption decided by the user – are particularly commonplace and diverse meme forms, they are not the only types apparent (Nooney and Portwood - Stacer, 2014): related practices around visual media include inserting public figures or characters into new settings and contexts (Bayerl and Stoynov, 2014). Memetic practices are also apparent through primarily textual means, as users on Twitter adopt, appropriate and ritualize behaviours variously serving informative purposes, sharing mundane comments and featuring irony and parody (Leavitt, 2013). As will be seen later in this chapter, too, hashtags offer a marker for memes, and can follow memetic logics in themselves (Thrift, 2015).