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Laughter as an antidote to despair

The brutal reality of ICE spurs political resistance in the US — including online. Memes like #iceonice have become a form of empowerment

A man in uniform runs towards a group of people, slips on a patch of ice in the road and falls flat on his back, a cameraman filming all the while. In the background, we hear people cheering. Someone shouts 'My tax money pays for this!' Videos of the incident, featuring various different edits and dramatic or funny soundtracks, have been doing the rounds on social media for weeks, using the trending hashtag #iceonice. They show an ICE agent being brought down, ironically, by ice.

The clips are funny, the reality behind them less so: ICE, the US immigration agency, has for months faced criticism over its increasingly extreme tactics for arresting supposedly illegal immigrants and its often violent operations across various American cities. Just last week, ICE agents seized a five-year-old named Liam and transported him from Minnesota to Texas, having previously attempted to use the child as bait in order to lure other family members out of their home. The government maintains that his parents entered the country illegally — a claim rejected by the family's lawyer. The boy is one of 3 800 children currently being held by ICE — mostly without legal representation or contact with their parents.

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After an ICE agent shot dead 37-year-old mother Renée Good in her car in early January, thousands gathered across America to protest against ICE. In Minnesota alone, around 50 000 people took to the streets in temperatures of -25 °C. Last week, one of these protests saw another fatal shooting — this time, the victim was 37-year-old intensive care nurse Alex Jeffrey Pretti. ICE claimed he was threatening its officers and that they feared for their lives, but videos show that Pretti was thrown to the ground by at least six men and held down before shots were fired.

So numerous are these negative news stories that it's hard to keep up; on social media in particular, it's impossible to stay on top of all the latest updates. More than the entirely understandable anger and outrage, what stands out among users' reactions is the use of memes.

Memes are an online phenomenon consisting mostly of short video clips or images combined with text; they almost always have a humorous or satirical undertone. As cultural in-jokes, especially among Gen Z, they quickly go viral — as was the case with the #iceonice clips. It would be easy to dismiss memes as non-political entertainment, as signs of a dubious disconnection from reality or a cynical detachment from current affairs. In fact, there's more to them than that. Given the information overload on social media, memes are a quick and easy form of political engagement and communication, a way of finding out what's happening in the world and what other people, especially in one's own age group, think about it.

Even more importantly, at a time when Gen Z is being constantly bombarded with bad news from around the world, memes are a means of dealing with this information overload — a survival strategy even.

Memes as self-defence

Gen Z is the first generation to have grown up with a never-ending news cycle. The smartphones in their pockets are constantly firing off new notifications, be they about another war, a new famine or an instance of police violence. Each of these stories in isolation is overwhelming. Taken together, however, they become unbearable. And yet they can't simply be ignored. After all, most people use their smartphone not just as a source of news but also as a means of communication, entertainment and social connection. You can't just opt out. At the same time, you can't feel everyone's pain all the time; eventually, you'll experience what psychologists call compassion fatigue. When there is more distress than it can bear, the brain switches off — not out of indifference but as a self-defence mechanism. And this is where memes come in: they are a way to make the unbearable bearable without simply putting it out of our minds. Being able to laugh about the situation means you briefly feel something other than just powerlessness.

One might go even further and suggest that Gen Z's meme creation can, at least in part, be seen as digital political activism. Via millions of shared images and videos, memes give issues visibility and can speak to even those who don't wish to engage with politics. They can reach beyond the filter bubble of the already well-informed by translating political realities into a language that the internet understands. In an age in which Trump

has reduced politics to a game show that prioritises emotions over facts, Gen Z is thus playing by its own rules. When leaders turn politics into a show, then any resistance needs to entertain — to poke fun at power.

That's not to say a few videos and likes on their own can change the world, but this phenomenon does at least demonstrate an understanding of the digital world as new political terrain. Where the public realm once centred around town squares, today it is primarily virtual — the political weather is now made by those who can control the narrative and win the battle for attention online. It's one of the reasons Trump and his ilk have enjoyed such success online, but also why resistance to him flourishes there too.

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After all, politics has always been about narratives — those who control *what* is talked about, also control *how* it's talked about and thus shape how reality is interpreted. That's why the visibility of a given issue is paramount if you want to win the messaging war. And this is where things get interesting: a viral video can reach millions of people across national borders in the space of a few hours — without having to rely on official communication channels or being constrained by set views. All of a sudden, people are talking about a news story they would otherwise never have engaged with.

As a generation that has grown up in the face of constant crisis – climate change, pandemic, right-wing extremism, wars in Ukraine, Gaza and Sudan, massacres in Iran, all visible all the time on your phone – Gen Z has learned that outrage and frustration alone can wear you down. No one can continually process all the news from all over the world without detriment to themselves, but online, there's no escape from it. People, therefore, need to develop coping strategies. Memes are exactly that — a coping strategy, a way of processing the unprocessable.

When the Trump administration breached international law by invading Venezuela and abducting Maduro, it took less than a day for the Instagram memes to go viral. Those clips of ICE agents falling over, set to a jokey soundtrack, also spread like wildfire. None of this is about diverting attention from the problem. Rather, it's a way of dealing with the problem without getting worn down by it. Laughter as an antidote to despair can be an effective psychological tool; after all, humour plays an important role in dealing with anger, fear and anxiety.

To get back to #iceonice and men falling headlong: the millions of people who share such images and videos know very well what ICE is doing. They know about the frightened children, the violence and the deaths. And yet, online, they find amusement against this backdrop. Perhaps, when faced with desperate political situations, we need moments of ridicule all the more — or, as in the aforementioned video, moments in which the mighty take a tumble.



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