# From Memes to Mobilisation: Understanding Far-Right Propaganda in the Internet Age

"Whilst we may use edgy humour and memes in the vanguard stage and to attract a young audience, eventually we will need to show the reality of our thoughts".[1]

*Brenton Tarrant – Gunman in 2019 New Zealand Mosque Shootings*

Propaganda has long functioned as a key tool of terrorist movements, and the Far-Right's consistently "innovative" use of online space, particularly Web 2.0, has unlocked a new digital sphere for the dissemination of image-based messaging.[2,3] This essay will heed Massimo Leone's "urgent" recommendation for a semiotic consideration of online propaganda which is grounded in an "unconventional reading of contemporaneity", by analysing the emerging use of internet memes as propaganda by the Far-Right.[4] Memes will here be defined as the "highly medium-specific", user-generated vehicles through which "arguments" are created by the "intertextual" relationship between image and text.[5,6] In short, internet memes are "small cultural units of transmission".[7] Rather than attempting to provide a comprehensive overview of terrorists' various uses of propaganda, this essay will instead focus specifically on the strategic deployment of memes by online Far-Right

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[1] Brenton Tarrant "The Great Replacement: Towards a New Society" (2019) pp.1-74 available https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5770516-The-Great-Replacement-New-Zealand-Shooter.html p.45

[2] Manuela Caiani and Linda Parenti "Extreme Right groups and the Internet: Construction of Identity and Source of Mobilization" *European and American Extreme Right Groups and the Internet* (2013) Ashgate, Austria pp.83-112 p.108

[3] Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis "Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online" *Data Society* (2017) pp.1-104 available https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_MediaManipulationAndDisinformationOnline.pdf p.4

[4] Massimo Leone "*Propaganda Mala Fide*: Towards a Comparative Semiotics of Violent Religious Persuasion" *Semeotica No.57* (2015) pp.1-25 p.19

[5] Nicolle Lamerichs *et al* "Elite Male Bodies: The Circulation of Alt-Right Memes and the Framing of Politicians on Social Media" *Participations Vol.15 No.1* (2018) pp.180-206 p.180

[6] Heide Huntington "Pepper Spray Cop and the American Dream: Using Synecdoche and Metaphor to Unlock Internet Memes' Visual Political Rhetoric" *Communication Studies Vol.67 No.1* (2016) pp.77-93

[7] Lamerichs *et al* "Elite" p.180

movements to publicize their political ideology, and the forms of identity which engagement with memes fosters. It will be argued that these key functions may encourage individual action on behalf of a larger collective. It will be concluded that memes function as a vehicle of symbolic messaging for Far-Right movements.  There is currently very little academic study dedicated solely to the effects of memes within terrorist movements. This essay, therefore, does not attempt to link any specific terrorist acts directly to engagement with memes, but will instead adopt a semiotic lens to examine the wider theoretical effects of memes as propaganda.

The question posed by this essay gives rise to an abundance of definitional complexities that must be briefly clarified before embarking upon analysis. Firstly, it must be recognised that the inherently global nature of online space problematises any definition of terrorism grounded in universal absolutes. Instead, here terrorism will be defined through a social-constructionist lens as a contextually relative "politically motivated tactic involving the threat or use of force or violence in which the pursuit of publicity plays a significant role".[8,9] The Far-Right constitutes a specific articulation of terrorism, however Manuela Caiani and Linda Parenti show that The Far-Right is comprised of a loose association of heterogeneous political nodes, and is therefore difficult to describe as a cohesive 'movement'.[10]  Stephanie Hartzell, however, notes that the various factions of Far-Right ideology can be broadly united under an "umbrella of "pro-whiteness".[11] As such, this paper will adhere to Cas

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[8] Mark Sedgwick "The Concept of Radicalisation as a Source of Confusion" *Terrorism and Political Violence Vol.22 No.4* (2010) 479-494 p.481

[9] Leonard Weinberg *et al* "The Challenges of Conceptualising Terrorism" *Terrorism and Political Violence Vol.16 No.4* (2010) 777-794 p.786

[10] Manuela Caiani and Linda Parenti "The Organizational Structure of the (Online) Galaxy of the European and American Extreme Right" *European and American Extreme Right Groups and the Internet* (2013) Ashgate, Austria pp.55-82 p.59, p.80

[11] Stephanie Hartzell "Alt-White: Conceptualizing the "Alt-Right" as a Rhetorical Bridge between White Nationalism and Mainstream Public Discourse" *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric Vol.8 No.2* (2018) pp.6-25 p.8

Mudde's broad characterisation of these groups as linked by their allegiance to idealised authoritarian political systems, ethnic nationalism, and xenophobic attitude.[12] The newly-emerging Alt-Right, will be considered as an anarchic "youthful, intellectual, pro-white" faction of Far-Right ideology which bridges "mainstream public discourse and white nationalism".[13] Therefore, in contrast to a centralised organisation, the Far-Right generally will be considered as a "leaderless resistance" where individuals may be inspired to carry out "lone-actor" attacks on behalf of the wider movement.[14]

Propaganda, is also a contested concept, and will be examined more closely throughout the course of this essay. However, it will be considered generally as "the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist".[15] Semiotics, as conceptualised by Clifford Geertz, is the study of "sacred symbols [which] function to synthesize a people's ethos… and their world view – the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are."[16] As a discipline it theorises that when taken together symbols combine to form "complex systems, named 'codes'", to produce an "authoritative story" definitive of a collective's ontological perspective.[17,18] As such "reality" is neither neutral nor absolute, but is constituted through the communication and engagement with various

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[12] Cas Mudde "The Extreme Right Party Family" *The Ideology of the Extreme Right* (2000) Manchester University Press, United Kingdom pp.2-24 p.18

[13] Hartzell "Alt-White" p.8

[14] Chip Berlet and Stanislav Vysotsky "Overview of US White Supremacist Groups" *Journal of Political and Military Sociology Vol.43 No.1* (2006) pp.11-48 p.15

[15] John Corner "Media Politics, Promotional Culture and the Idea of 'Propaganda'" *Media, Culture and Society Vol.29 No.4* (2007) pp.669-677 p.671

[16] Clifford Geertz "Religion as a Cultural System" *The Interpretation of Cultures* 1973 Basic Books, United States, pp.87-125 p.89

[17] Francesco Buscemi "Edible Lies: How Nazi Propaganda Represented Meat to Demonise the Jews" *Media, War and Conflict Vol.9 No.2* pp.180-197 p.184

[18] Geertz "Religion" p.90

"signs and symbols".[19] Symbols are defined here in the broadest sense as "tangible

formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms".[20] Far-

Right movements exemplify this form of symbolic culture construction in their allegiance to

traditional culturally loaded "symbols of hate" such as the swastika.[21] Francesco Buscemi

suggests that a semiotic lens is particularly well disposed for the analysis of extremist

propaganda, which often relies on sets of symbols, and regards human bodies symbolically,

to produce "formally structured oppositions", in the premediated dissemination of divisive

ideology.[22]


**Memes as a Form of Publicity**


Philip Taylor states that a central function of propaganda is its ability to disseminate a

group's message and publicize its political ideology.[23] Alice Marwick *et al* stress that some

memes function as "image macros" – "images that quickly convey humour or political

thought", which are engineered to 'go viral', and spread key elements of Far-Right ideology

to mainstream circles.[24] One such example of this engineered virality is the "Tickle my

Pickle" meme (Figure One), which was created within Far-Right online "Scambaiting"

communities to visualise white "racial power".[25] The image depicts two black men in bras

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[19] Elizabeth Minei and Jonathan Matusitz "Cyberspace as a new arena for Terroristic Propaganda: an Updated Examination" *Poiesis Prax Vol.9 No.1* (2012) pp.163-176 p.166
[20] Geertz "Religion" 91
[21] AJ Willingham "These are the New Symbols of Hate" *CNN* (2017) available https://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/21/us/hate-symbols-changing-trnd/index.html last accessed [04/03/19]
[22] Buscemi "Edible" p.184
[23] Philip Taylor "Introduction Looking Through a Glass Onion: Propaganda, Psychological Warfare and Persuasion" *Munitions of the Mind* (2003) Manchester University Press pp.1-16 p.3
[24] Marwick and Lewis "Media" p.36
[25] Lisa Nakamura "'I WILL DO EVERYthing That Am Asked': Scambaiting, Digital Show-Space, and the Racial Violence of Social Media" *Journal of Visual Culture Vol.13 No.3* (2014) pp.257-274 p.270

and skirts, holding another black man between them as they balance white blocks on their heads and hold pickles in their mouths. The original post encouraged users to engage with the motif and provide humorous captions for the photo.[26] The image leverages two key goals of the Far-Right. Firstly, from a



**Figure One**: 'Tickle My Pickle' available http://jawdrops.com/tickle-my-pickle/ last accessed [08/03/19]

semiotic perspective, the black bodies are depicted as an essentialised metaphor for primitiveness - the orchestrated bizarreness of the picture is evocative of traditional white supremacist metaphors of black bodies as "animalistic", and inherently 'other' to superior white bodies.[27]  Similarly, the surrealist tone creates intrigue and confusion, which encourages audiences to engage with the image, and share it online, thereby enabling the spread of Far-Right ideology into mainstream circles. As such, memes may elicit the publicization of racialised ideology online by creating an intriguing premise and encouraging interaction.

Moving beyond overtly symbolic racial metaphors, memes may also publicize elements of Far-Right ideology by allowing extreme messages to masquerade as medium-specific parody. For example, the 'Successful Black Man' meme (Figure Two) which originated on Alt-Right Reddit forums provides a template of an African-American man in a suit for users

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[26] Nakamura "'I WILL DO EVERYthing" p.270
[27] Christopher Brown "WWW.HATE.COM: White Supremacist Discourse on the Internet and the Construction of Whiteness Ideology" The Howard Journal of Communications Vol.20 No2 (2009) pp.189-208 p.196

to modify and inject their own sense of humour onto the image. Users create an attention-grabbing headline grounded in a racist stereotype, which is then undermined by the text underneath the image which subverts this premise, in an apparent parody of racial profiling. However, as Ryan Milner argues, "familiarity with racist tropes is necessary to get the joke".[28] Nicole Lamerich *et al* claim that



**Figure Two:** An example of the "Successful Black Man" meme available https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/successful-black-man/photos last accessed [08/03/19]

memes of this sort instead create "a certain awareness of cultural repertoire by imitating it", thereby confirming stereotypes by making racial differences more salient, rather than dispelling them.[29] In this way memes operate under the guise of humour to enable the symbolic categorisation of blackness as 'other' and thereby hierarchically inferior to 'whiteness', thus propagating the Far-Right's semiotic construction of reality.

This strategic deployment of humour may also create a "fertile breeding ground" for radicalisation.[30] Angela Nagle suggests that parody is a tactic employed by Far-Right movements to shift the "Overton Window" – the general conception of what is considered acceptable public discourse - by using humour to disguise the loaded racism of their messaging.[31] This dynamic is heightened when memes are situated within the particularities

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[28] Ryan Milner "Internet Memes, Identity Antagonism, and the Logic of Lulz" *The Fibreculture Journal Issn 1449-1443* (2013) pp.62-92 p.71

[29] Lamerichs *et al* "Elite" p.186

[30] Manuela Caiani and Linda Parenti ""Technological", Political and Cultural Opportunities for the Extreme Right in the United States and the European Countries" *European and American Extreme Right Groups and the Internet* (2013) Ashgate, Austria pp.30-53, p.48

[31] Angela Nagle "Gramscians of the Alt-Light" *Kill all Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (2017) Zero Books, United Kingdom pp.32-41 p.33

of online space. Internet algorithms work in tandem with users' browsing patterns to personalise their digital experiences by exposing them to similar, mutually affirming content, and thus creating a "filter bubble".[32] Therefore, users who interact with memes generated by the Far-Right are increasingly likely to be exposed to similar content. Scot MacDonald shows that propaganda functions most effectively as a recruitment tool when it accords with a viewer's preconceptions; an assertion strengthened by Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens *et al*'s argument that extremist narratives are most successful when they avoid triggering "mental resistance".[33,34] Thus, by shifting the Overton Window, memes create an environment in which "racism, misogyny or Islamophobia is normalised", which may increase an individual's receptiveness to extremist narratives which may once have been dispelled as extreme.[35] Quentin Wiktorowicz identifies this dynamic of increasing receptiveness to extremist narratives as a necessary precursor for radicalisation.[36] As a form of propaganda, memes may therefore create a normalising environment to enable further extremism.

**Memes and Identity Conception**

Propaganda also aims to bind actors together in a cohesive in-group, by producing a sense of shared identity.[37] Emile Durkheim asserts that social cohesion is produced through the

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[32] Engin Bozdag *et al* "Does Offline Political Segregation Affect the Filter Bubble? An Empirical Analysis of Information Diversity for Dutch and Turkish Users" *Computers in Human Behaviour Vol.41 No.1* (2014) pp.405-415 p.405

[33] Scot MacDonald "Psychological Operations: Hearts and Minds and Eyes" *Propaganda and Information Warfare in the Twenty-First Century: Altered Images and Deception Operations* Routledge, London (2007) pp.32-53 p.44

[34] Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens *et al* "The Impact of Digital Communications Technology on Radicalisation and Recruitment" *International Affairs Vol.93 No.5* (2017) pp.1233-1249 p.1237

[35] Jason Wilson "Hiding in Plain Sight: How the 'Alt-Right' is Weaponizing irony to Spread Fascism" *The Guardian* (2017) available https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/23/alt-right-online-humor-as-a-weapon-facism last accessed [10/03/19]

[36] Quentin Wiktorowicz "Introduction" *Radical Islam Rising* (2005) Rowan and Littlefield, London pp.1-44 p.20

[37] MacDonald "Psychological" p.42

"collective representations of a "sacred"

[entity]", which unites subjects in a state of

mutual regard.[38]  This essay suggests that the

notion of 'Kek' may fulfil this symbolic role in

some Far-Right communities. The term "Kek"

emerged as a synonym for 'laugh out loud' from

online gaming circles and was appropriated by



**Figure Three:** An example of the "Kekfugees" meme available  https://017qndpynh-flywheel.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/kek.jpg last accessed [09/03/19]

communities on 4chan and Reddit as a "tribal marker of the Alt-Right".[39] As memes from

these communities spread into mainstream circles and were declared hate symbols,

members of the Alt-Right parodied this rejection from society by branding themselves as

"Kekistanis", or "Kekfugees" (Figure Three), a fictional minority whose right to free-speech is

viewed as being under constant threat.[40] As such 'Kek' simultaneously binds members of

Alt-Right communities together in their mutual awareness of the sacred nature of free-

speech, while also parodying the European refugee crisis.

Furthermore, the very sense of irony with which this identity is created serves to increase

group cohesion. Ryan Milner argues that memes generate a sense of inauthenticity whereby

antagonistic symbols are disseminated with ambiguous intentions, which allow members of

Far-Right communities to consistently mock outsiders, or "normies", who take these

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[38] Birgit Meyer "Introduction: From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms and Styles of Binding" *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses* (2009) Palgrave Macmillan, United Kingdom pp1-31 p.3

[39] Southern Poverty Law Centre "Explaining the Alt-Right 'Deity' of their 'Meme Magic' *Intelligence Report* (2017) available https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2017/explaining-alt-right-%E2%80%98deity%E2%80%99-their-%E2%80%98meme-magic%E2%80%99 last accessed [10/03/19]

[40] Robert Evans "From Memes to Infowars: How 75 Fascist Activists Were "Red-Pilled"" *Bellingcat* (2018) available at https://www.bellingcat.com/news/americas/2018/10/11/memes-infowars-75-fascist-activists-red-pilled/ [last accessed 03/02/19]

symbols seriously.[41,42] Ruth Wodak shows that one's own sense of identity is strengthened when it is juxtaposed against that of an undesirable "out-group".[43] Therefore, not only does this irony masque hateful messages, it also acts as a sub-cultural "marker of the elite", whereby outsiders can be consistently undermined by humour, thus strengthening a sense of in-group cohesion.[44] In short, memes function as propaganda by fostering a collective identity through the co-definition of sacred symbols and the sense of irony with which these symbols are adopted.

Yet it is not merely the content of memes which impacts actors' sense of identity. Diane Austin shows that symbols are made meaningful by the ways in which they are interacted with, and therefore it is necessary to examine the forms of sociality that memes foster.[45] Douglas Walton argues that propaganda must be considered as a form of discourse, where messages are communicated not only externally but also internally.[46] Similarly, Heide Huntington shows that memes such as Successful Black Man, which invite users to modify the source material to create new jokes, create a community bound in a discourse of co-production.[47] Thus, memes may foster a culture of "semiotic productivity", where users are

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[41] Milner "Internet" p.74-77
[42] Marwick and Lewis "Media" p.36
[43] Ruth Wodak "The Semiotics of Racism – A Critical Discourse-Historical Analysis" *Discourse of Course* (2009) pp.1-17 available https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/35437980/The_Semiotics_of_Racismrenkemafinal.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1551648344&Signature=YQHLpX5Ej7kvl5s%2BGN2JNLOHZ8A%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DSemiotics_of_Racism.pdf last accessed [03/03/19] p.8
[44] Naomi Shor "Fetishism and its Ironies" in Emily Apter and William Pietz. [eds] *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse* Cornell University Press, United States (1993) pp.92-110 p.92
[45] Diane Austin "Symbols and Culture: Some Philosophical Assumptions in the Work of Clifford Geertz" *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice No.3* (1979) pp.45-59 p.50
[46] Douglas Walton "What is Propaganda, and What Exactly is Wrong with it?" *Public Affairs Quarterly Vol.11 No.4* (1997) pp.383-413 p.383
[47] Huntington "Pepper" p.79

encouraged to engage discursively with texts and images to produce the shared values of their online environment.[48]

This dynamic of collective production also impacts identity at an individual level. Elizabeth Baeten demonstrates that selfhood is reflexively produced by interactions between actors and their environments, and Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diane suggest that one's identity is constituted through active engagement with a wider collective.[49,50] Thus through participating in the collective production of semiotic systems, one's ontological perspective may converge with that of the collective, producing a "chronic inclination" towards the shared values of a group.[51] It is this convergence of individual and extreme collective narratives that Quentin Wiktorowicz suggests drives one's desire to carry out acts of terrorism as a representative of a terrorist movement, as their own identity becomes synonymous with that of the group.[52] Cristina Archetti, too, suggests that acts of "lone-actor" terrorism are made possible as individuals come to regard the values of a terrorist movement as key markers of their own selfhood.[53] In short, memes may function as effective propaganda for terrorist movements by encouraging ideological convergence. This convergence may ultimately facilitate the reformulation of individual identity to gradually encourage extremist action on behalf of a wider leaderless resistance.

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[48] John Fiske "The Cultural Economy of Fandom" *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* Lisa Lewis*. [ed.]* Routledge, United Kingdom pp.30-49 p.37
[49] Elizabeth Baeten "Rethinking the Socially Constituted Self as the Subject of Ethical Consumption" *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy Vol.13 No.1* (1999) pp.1-18 p.6
[50] Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani "Collective Action and Identity" *Social movements: An Introduction* (1999) Blackwell Publishing, Oxford pp.89-113 pp.93-95
[51] Geertz "Religion" p.97-98
[52] Wiktorowicz "Introduction" p.28
[53] Cristina Archetti "Terrorism, Communication and New Media: Explaining Radicalisation in the Digital Age" *Perspectives on Terrorism Vol.9 No.1* (2015) pp.49-59 p.53

**Conclusion**

This essay has argued that memes function as propaganda for terrorist movements by attracting individuals to Far-Right political ideology, and by fostering specific articulations of identity. Before concluding it must be briefly acknowledged that the internet-specific contemporaneity and ironic nature of memes means they are often discounted from serious academic consideration, and there is currently very little work which directly considers the impact of memes as a tactic of terrorist movements. This paper has aimed to redress this exclusion from academic discourse by adopting a semiotic lens which recognises memes as a vehicle for the transmission of symbols and ideological frameworks. This lens has elucidated the capacity for memes to act as propaganda in two key ways. By masquerading under the guise of humour, memes enable the spread of Far-Right political ideology into mainstream circles, demonstrating a normalising capacity whereby individuals may regard extreme messages as more politically acceptable. Similarly, the forms of interaction fostered by memes through the co-definition of shared values and collective semiotic production can enable a sense of collective identity, encouraging individuals to act on behalf of a broader movement. Therefore, while it is not currently possible to link the dissemination of internet memes directly to specific terrorist acts, this paper has elucidated how engagement with memes, as a form of propaganda, may foster allegiance with terrorist movements, thereby potentially increasingly the likelihood of violent action. In conclusion, this essay has shown that memes cannot be regarded as a neutral form of communication, but must instead be afforded serious academic attention as propaganda for their propensity to spread extremist ideology and their potential to encourage action on behalf of leaderless resistance terrorist movements.

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