It’s not funny anymore. Far-right extremists’ use of humour

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Humour has become a central weapon of extremist movements to subvert open societies and to lower the threshold towards violence. Especially within the context of a recent wave of far-right terrorist attacks, we witness "playful" ways in communicating racist ideologies. As far-right extremists strategically merge with online cultures, their approach changes fundamentally. This trend has been especially facilitated by the so-called alt-right and has spread globally. This predominantly online movement set new standards to rebrand extremist positions in an ironic guise, blurring the lines between mischief and potentially radicalising messaging. The result is a nihilistic form of humour that is directed against ethnic and sexual minorities and deemed to inspire violent fantasies — and eventually action. This paper scrutinises how humour functions as a potential factor in terms of influencing far-right extremist violence. In doing so, we trace the strategic dissemination of far-right narratives and discuss how extremists conceal their misanthropic messages in order to deny ill intention or purposeful harm. These recent developments pose major challenges for practitioners: As a new generation of violent extremists emerges from digital subcultures without a clear organisational centre, prevention strategies need to renew focus and cope with the intangible nature of online cultures.

Introduction

Humour in the context of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) has largely been discussed as a means to combat extremist ideologies ([1]). Various counter-narrative campaigns have deployed humour to question the authority of extremist groups and ridicule their ambitions. Even though it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of such campaigns, research has shown that such endeavours are appropriate to spin democratic alternatives for affected youths ([2]). Thus, the potential of humour as a means of persuasion and disengagement is acknowledged by a variety of actors. Yet, much less attention has been paid to how humour is utilised by extremist groups and subcultures as a means of recruitment. Addressing this gap in P/CVE research and practice has become an urgent issue, especially in light of the digitally mediated wave of far-right terrorism that has struck Christchurch, El Paso and Halle — amongst others.

The perpetrators of these attacks did not have a criminal record and were neither members of extremist organisations nor did they have any links to local scenes. Rather, they emerged from digital subcultures, which share — besides their receptiveness to extremist ideas — a cynical style of humour intended to numb and desensitise its consumers to the use of violence. In their manifestos, the terrorists consequently adopt expressions from meme cultures and online milieus. In particular, image-based forums such as 4chan and 8kun (previously 8chan) developed as places from where extremist messages with humorous and ironic underpinnings spread into the mainstream, thereby making it increasingly difficult to distinguish between organised action and individual acts of provocation. Users of these forums rebrand far-right extremist ideologies and make them attractive for new target groups that are not on the radar of practitioners and law enforcement.

Thinking of far-right extremism, we might associate this with backward-looking, stiff and formal zealots who act on the fringes of the political spectrum. Yet, the skinhead image has long been overcome and, in fact, also more recent phenomena like the Identitarians have lost traction throughout Europe. As far-right extremists strategically merge with online cultures, their approach changes drastically. In fact, they have learned the lesson that if — in our digitalised societies — a movement wants to be successful, it needs to be entertaining and participatory. In fact, a shared sense of humour has become an effective tool in terms of immersing individuals into extremist ideologies and, as a consequence, contributed to some of the worst acts of violence in the 21st century.

Analysing the strategic use of humour might thus provide some clues regarding what makes far-right extremist ideas attractive to a generation of digital natives and how digital cultures have become a potential factor in terms of evoking and influencing racist mass violence. So how can we make sense of the connection between humour-driven subcultures and extremist violence? In this research paper we aim to shed some light on the underlying processes that might help us understand recent developments in far-right extremism — and to reflect on how countermeasures need to adapt to combat extremism in

([1]) ISD and RAN CoE (2015): *Counter narratives and alternative narratives*, p. 6.
([2]) Tuck and Silverman (2016): *The counter-narrative handbook*.

the digital age. We begin with a brief primer on the relationship between humour and (far-right) extremism, followed by a description of the recent conflation of online cultures and far-right extremism. We then outline the far-right online ecosystem, highlighting the spread and varieties of humour across different platforms, as well as the potential for violent radicalisation. We conclude by focusing on the problems in tackling online hate cultures and providing some recommendations to help support practitioners working in this area.

Humour and (far-right) extremism. A primer

While it is a truism that extremist movements are only successful if they speak the language of the masses, researchers and practitioners have been repeatedly overwhelmed by the new guises that extremist communication has adopted in the digital era. The playful and ironic re-articulation of white supremacism and ethnonationalism has largely been understood as an innovative strategy to appeal to broader audiences. This is certainly true as we see that the rigid structures and fanatic appearance that once marked far-right extremist groups have gradually faded away. In contrast, such structures have been substituted by a strange mixture of infantile mischief, communicative ambivalence and a strong dose of nihilism that promote extremist ideas. Yet, looking back into the history of the far-right — and other forms of — extremism we can conceive varieties of humour as a steady companion of hate-based mobilisation ([3]).

Terminology

The terminology used in this paper follows the definitions provided in the 2019 RAN factbook on *Far-Right Extremism: A Practical Introduction*:

- "Far-right extremism" is understood as an umbrella concept, which comprises both the radical and the extreme right.
- Far-right extremism encompasses a range of different ideologies, which may include elements of cultural, ethnic, and/or racial nationalism.
- Individuals, movements and groups within the far-right extremist spectrum also differ in terms of how far they are willing to take their activism — i.e. whether they are prepared to use violence or not.
- There are also inconsistencies regarding the concept of the authoritarian state. Some individuals, movements and groups may be in favour of overturning democracy completely, whilst others may support retaining democracy and championing a more heavy-handed state with harsher punishments for crimes ([4]).

"The most potent weapons known to mankind are satire and ridicule"

civil rights activist Saul Alinsky wrote back in 1971 in his renowned book *Rules for Radicals*. This advice has been key to winning the hearts and minds of people, especially by progressive movements, as "through humour much is accepted that would have been rejected if presented seriously" ([5]). In recent years, Alinsky's book experienced an unexpected renaissance in far-right circles. Their activists learned the lesson that laughter is imminently important to strengthen a collective identity and to better communicate their own positions to outsiders. By reformulating prejudices and disguising them in witty language, the interplay of hatred and amusement regarding the misery of supposedly inferior groups runs like a golden

([3]) Billig (2001): *Humour and Hatred*, pp. 271–274.
([4]) Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) (2019): *Far-right extremism*, pp. 6–9.
([5]) Alinsky (1971): *Rules for radicals*, p. 75; p. xviii.

thread through the history of far-right movements. From the Ku Klux Klan to the Nazis, from Pegida to the Identitarians, the mocking denigration of other groups has been a symbol of self-assurance emphasising the notion of supremacy.

Recent generations of far-right extremists have chosen transgressive humour and (supposed) satire as central weapons in the fight against liberal democracy and its "political correctness", which is depicted as prudish and patronising ([6]). Praising a "politically incorrect" attitude, humour has been weaponised as a form of resistance against a political culture that is supposedly curtailing free speech. Especially culturally sensitive language has been taunted with vulgar expressions that affect widespread resentments with humorous elements. Hence, derogatory statements are given a humorous guise to make them more compatible with the political mainstream. At the same time, it shifted the limit of tolerance further to the right. This dog-whistling paid off, especially in the digital realm, where special literacy is needed to follow certain references. But why does this pay off so well?

In persuasive terms, humour is especially attractive for extremist groups given its effect on the following:

Emotions – Humour activates repressed emotions, releases inhibitions, and enables an immediate and spontaneous exchange of feelings.

Cognition – Humour stimulates and activates decision-making processes and changes in perspective and replaces rigid behaviour patterns with more flexible ones.

Communication – Humour reduces interpersonal barriers and increases both identification with one's own group and demarcation from the outside group ([7]).

In the case of far-right extremism, humour helps to reframe hate-based ideologies, thereby reducing objections towards positions that would otherwise be condemned by the wider public. At the same time, it helps to cover up one's own barbarity and to ignore the consequences of one's own rhetoric and actions.

Far-right extremism and online culture

The relationship between humour and (far-right) extremism has been reinforced in the digital context where missing gestures and intonation leave much more space for interpretation to the individual consumer of online content. The internet has been a game changer in terms of organising, communicating and mainstreaming. In fact, digital culture — that is the idea that technology and the internet significantly shape the way we interact — bears great significance regarding how extremists reinvented themselves. Clear-cut distinctions between the digital and analogue, as well as mischief and bigotry, are increasingly difficult to make. Digital culture is based on the core belief that ways of interaction online differ fundamentally from the offline world. "The Internet is serious business", has become *the* ironic meme, the meaning of which is actually the exact opposite, which is to say that the internet is not serious business at all, and anyone who thinks otherwise should be corrected and ridiculed ([8]). But why should P/CVE practitioners care about these trolls and memes? And what are these memes actually?

([6]) Topinka (2018): *Politically incorrect participatory media*, p. 2054.
([7]) Wicki (2000): *Humor und Entwicklung*, pp. 175–176.
([8]) De Zeeuw and Tuters (2020): *Teh internet is serious business*, p. 214.

Memes are cultural units of meaning ([9]) (image, text or audio fragments) that develop and spread virally by copying or combining with other units. Memes have become a central means of online communication and can influence how we see the world and thereby shape our views. Internet memes consist of images, captions or GIFs. Anyone can create, edit and share a meme. Limor Shifman argues that funny or ironic memes in particular have the power to foster political and social participation ([10]).

([11])

(1) The original iteration of the Wojak meme expressed emotions such as melancholy, regret or loneliness. It has gradually been adapted and advanced by far-right meme culture to portray liberals with blank expressions. The aim here is to show that "normies" do not question the information that comes from mainstream press and politics.

(2) The Doge meme is one of the most famous internet memes, which has been adapted in various ways to tease a kind of outdated humour and style of individuals and politicians. In far-right circles, it has often been combined with Nazi memorabilia to trivialise violence by the SS and Wehrmacht.

(3) The Pepe the Frog meme has been appropriated by far-right online activists. It symbolises "a kind of superior nonchalance toward others, helping to normalize hostile attitudes toward minorities and political opponents" as well as "a kind of anti-elite arrogance and condescension" ([12]). It has become the icon of the alt-right.

Internet memes are graphics of visual and textual remixes shared and widely distributed online. They depict everyday situations and often express slapstick, which is difficult to express in words. With a general turn towards visual elements in communication, it is becoming increasingly impossible to ignore memes — especially in political contexts. As with every new technology, the far right has been quick to adapt to the new requirements of seizing the attention of broader audiences and to tailor white supremacism to the jargon of online communities. At a time in which memes have become a universal means of communication, far-right groups have recognised this popular potential for politicisation. They put a lot of time and energy into meme production, spread their ideology — sometimes more, sometimes less openly — and act according to the motto: if the meme is good, the content cannot be bad. As inane as these pictures may seem, they are important as they offer a low threshold to interact with extremist ideas.

Digital hate culture

The creation and sharing of memes, as a ritual of an imaginary community, can foster a feeling of collective belonging amongst those who participate in rather dispersed online networks. In this way, overtly humorous and harmless everyday images shape political world views and opinion-forming in the cultural, pre-political space — beyond great words and complex political manifestos. With this participatory practice, the role of movements and specific organisations changes fundamentally ([13]).

([9]) Dawkins (1976): *The selfish gene*, p. 192.
([10]) Shifman (2014): *Memes in digital culture*, p. 393.
([11]) Image references, left to right: Know Your Meme: *Wojak*; Know Your Meme: *Doge*; Anti-Defamation League: *Pepe the Frog*.
([12]) Miller-Idriss (2019): *What makes a symbol far right?*, p. 127.
([13]) Bogerts and Fielitz (2020): *The visual culture of far-right terrorism*.

As far-right actors are not in the position to control the various streams of hate online, they rather attempt to post radicalised content that spreads through infamous imageboards, such as 4chan and 8chan/8kun, and social media. Consequently, it is often hard to tell if the actors involved are organised or not — and if certain far-right actions are collective or individual. As an organisational centre seems to be absent, extremist tendencies largely function organically online. Sociologist Bharath Ganesh refers to this phenomenon as "digital hate cultures"; namely, temporal alliances of online users who employ trolling tactics to challenge meaningful conversation online ([14]). Such hate cultures usually act across different platforms, leaving behind a strange mixture of vulgarity, humour and propaganda. They act like a "swarm", seeking out *schadenfreude* and enjoy seeing other people suffer at the hands of trolls.

The fluidity of these hate cultures makes efforts to control them almost futile. Their followers communicate primarily through images and language that normalise violence against minorities, and therefore the mass consumption of these materials contributes to desensitisation. Additionally, the anonymous content creators establish an outbidding culture that gradually reduces the step from mere discourse to terror. The most extreme examples of this have been enacted through the attacks in Christchurch, El Paso and Halle. These are culminating events that have their roots in the very communities that combine extremist ideologies with a cynic dose of humour. The responses to the Christchurch attack within these far-right extremist online communities have been as disturbing as the attack itself. They combine infantile humour, neo-Nazi allusions and blatant contempt for humanity. For instance, users of the infamous imageboards reproduced snapshots from the livestreamed video of the attacker, in which the execution of a Muslim man by a close shot to the head could be seen, and remixed these brutal images with meme avatars.

Far-right actors have adapted to the ways of thinking and expression in social networks: politics must be entertaining; break the boredom; and reference elements of popular culture.

The insults and harsh manners that spread on these boards have become key characteristics of image-based forums, whose users have become a central resource for far-right extremist recruitment ([15]). The close interaction of hatred, devaluation and amusement is therefore no coincidence. Rather, it makes use of a form of abusive humour that has established itself especially through digital subcultures and triggers a community-building dynamic. Following this rule of thumb, the often-hierarchical structures of extremist groups have been increasingly substituted by so-called swarms. In most cases, it is difficult to determine which kind of online behaviour is organised — and which is driven by organic bottom-up processes. And yet, this is not a weakness, as the role and aims of organised actors have changed: it is now their specific aim to get individuals to engage with and conform to extremist ideas in the absence of "real world" contact. This works best through jokes, pranks and parody, thereby adapting to the online environment, which is full of ambiguities, mischief and edginess.

Varieties of humour in the far-right ecosystem

Extremist narratives are designed to travel quickly within the online ecosystem, spreading their influence across different platforms. Research carried out by Julia Ebner and Jacob Davey on the manipulation campaigns carried out by far-right actors in order to influence key national elections across Europe and in the United States has shed valuable light on how far-right campaigns organised on the fringe platforms travel through the online ecosystem ([16]). The same tactics are apparent in the context of how far-right extremists curate their images and messages on the fringes and disseminate them on mainstream platforms in a bid to radicalise the normies. For example, messaging boards, forums and vlogs, such as Reddit, YouTube and 4chan, serve as areas of recruitment, mobilisation and identity formation; imageboards, such as 4chan, are where memes are created and shared, for example. More coordinated campaigns such as shitposting,

([14]) Ganesh (2018): *The ungovernability of digital hate culture*.
([15]) Hawley (2017): *Making sense of the alt-right*, p. 82.
([16]) See, for example, Davey and Ebner (2017): *The fringe insurgency*.

trolling or hashtag campaigns are organised through encrypted messaging apps, such as Telegram and WhatsApp. These would include, for example, hashtag campaigns to bolster support for populist right-wing parties during elections or trolling and abusive campaigns against targeted individuals. Such campaigns — whether meme-/hashtag-based or trolling — then trickle onto mainstream social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, as well as comment sections on news sites ([17]).

***Imageboards**, such as 4chan, are a type of discussion forum divided into different boards, each comprising a discussion thread. Any user can start a thread by posting an image as the opening post. Users can then contribute to this thread by replying with text, images or quoting previous comments/images. There is no requirement to sign up for a username and the majority of users post anonymously.*

The kind of humour and the degree of extremeness depends on the platform culture. As will be shown below, certain platforms demand specific forms of humour and the potential risks towards radicalisation depend on which platforms are being targeted and in which spaces the content is being consumed.

Humour and radicalisation on fringe platforms

Within the far-right online milieu, forums, imageboards and messaging apps are filled with hateful content with an ironic and humorous edge. Specifically, humour and irony function as a tool to normalise and trivialise far-right tropes and violence. If individuals are exposed continuously to seemingly "playful" images with underlying anti-Semitic and racist undertones, for example, these thoughts and beliefs have the potential to be normalised and ingrained within these communities ([18]). Not only repeated exposure but also a lack of resistance within the chan communities reinforces such microaggressions.

Embracing and believing in this new reality is seen within the far-right extremist scene as "red pilling". This process describes a "political awakening" that empowers individuals by helping them realise that racial diversity is the central dividing line on which societies are built — a supposedly secret knowledge that others (who took the "blue pill") are unaware of (see info box below). Looking towards classical theories of radicalisation, a sense of belonging and in-group cohesion is also important. Humour and in-jokes can offer a sense of identification with an in-group as well as an exchange of ideological thought through these images and ironic references. The memes are recognised for what they are and what they mean within the far-right scene but often seem obscure to other audiences. These in-jokes help "nurture solidarity" through a shared sense of "(sub)cultural knowledge" ([19]). Moreover, the jokes and ironic references often target an out-group, sewing more hatred and disdain for minority groups and the "elite" mainstream ([20]). As such, a sense of collective identity is formed where resentment and perceived victimhood coupled with a sense of supremacy and entitlement over an out-group inspire individuals to take action. This particular narrative is aimed at those who feel unable to relate to "mainstream" culture and the reinforced message that white (male) persons are the real "victims" of political correctness, "forced" multiculturalism and radical feminism.

***"Red pill"** is a term used by the alt-right movement to describe that someone is fully politically and racially aware of what is happening around them. The 'red pill' refers to the 1999 film 'The Matrix', to a scene where the main character can choose between a life in ignorant bliss (blue pill) or see the world as it is (red pill)" ([21]).*

([17]) Ebner (2019): *Counter-creativity*, p. 172.
([18]) Marwick and Lewis (2018): *Media manipulation and disinformation online*, p. 37.
([19]) Greene (2019): *"Deplorable" satire*, pp. 41–42.
([20]) ibid.
([21]) Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) (2019): *Far-right extremism*, p. 13.

Humour and radicalisation on mainstream platforms

The fringe platforms and imageboards not only operate as an area of mobilisation and identity formation, they also set the groundwork to coordinate and organise online campaigns on mainstream platforms. Far-right actors are deliberately calling on their followers to post content in ironic formats in order to forge new virtual alliances, and to incorporate far-right themes into the public debate. In this sense, satire and irony can also be used as a strategy to slowly shift the public discourse and widen the "Overton window" of what is considered acceptable or not ([22]).

One key tactic here is to reach out to the wider spectrum of the far-right sub-movements; that is, individuals who do not necessarily fall under the extreme end of the spectrum, but who may hold anti-immigration sentiments, support radical right-wing populist parties and politicians, and/or believe that freedom of expression is threatened by a culture of political correctness. Amongst the extreme right, these sub-movements are referred to as the normies — potential target audiences that can be radicalised through exploiting the above grievances ([23]).

Whilst the fringe platforms remain vital to far-right extremists, the mainstream platforms function as an important route in terms of reaching out to more audiences. The curation of the content and imagery on the chan boards is what is significant here. Users communicate anonymously and primarily through images. The images are playful and overlaid with humorous and ironic text, distracting from and in part concealing their actual racist and hate-filled nature. Some of these supposedly lighter, less overtly extremist memes are then distributed to mainstream platforms. Within this context, meme culture is an important tool used by far-right extremists to imply that what they say should not be taken seriously and that their rhetoric is "harmless" or "just for laughs".

The increased visibility of such content on mainstream platforms poses a problem for both social media companies and P/CVE practitioners in terms of trying to mitigate the far-right threat. Far-right extremists are highly adept at masking their tactics and remaining within the boundaries of legal speech and the rules of different platforms. As such, the content available on the more visible, mainstream platforms tends to be "toned down" or "sanitised" compared to the content on fringe platforms and private groups ([24]).

There are two main reasons for this:

1. Large platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have come under increasing pressure from governments to take down illegal, racist content and hate speech, and therefore the extreme right have become more careful regarding what they post on mainstream platforms;
2. More subtle, humorous content provides a greater opportunity to resonate with and gradually radicalise the normies.

Meme campaigns that find their way onto mainstream platforms from the fringes expose far-right extremist content to those who may be susceptible or "at risk" — i.e. potentially sympathetic to far-right ideas, but not deep into the fringe platforms. As these memes are humorous and ironic, they are more likely to attract a higher level of engagement. This is a more subtle and top-down way of potential radicalisation, which could lead to a greater level of immersion into the extreme right fringes. As Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis note, the "milder" memes are intended as a "gateway drug" to the more extreme elements of far-right ideology ([25]).

Humour and radicalisation via messenger apps

Along with a general shift of communication towards private messenger apps, far-right extremists are increasingly making use of messenger apps to spread hateful content and crude humour. Deplatforming from social media platforms (see info box below), as well as the privacy and security features such messenger apps afford to extremists, are some of the reasons for this shift. While they share a lot of content in internal groups, which is intended to be distributed in other contexts, harmful content strategically spreads in broader, more public chat

([22]) See, for example, Conway (2020): *Routing the extreme right*, pp. 110–111; Greene (2019): *"Deplorable" satire*, p. 36.
([23]) Nagle (2017): *Kill all normies*.
([24]) Ekman (2018): *Anti-refugee mobilization in social media*, p. 6.
([25]) Marwick and Lewis (2018): *Media manipulation and disinformation online*, p. 37.

communities, for example in messenger groups of sports clubs, working groups and school classes. Teachers especially are often stunned when they discover what type of content is being spread and disguised as humour. In fact, it is not necessarily internet-savvy political activists who use those platforms to share edgy images, trying to present themselves as taboo breakers. Instead, it is often regular youngsters trying to attract attention with offensive material that many people might not immediately characterise or recognise as extremist. Without necessarily intending to do so, these young people contribute to the spread and normalisation of extremist ideas. As Cynthia Miller-Idriss rightly points out: "They mean to provoke or offend, and the meaning can come later" ([26]).

Challenges and recommendations for P/CVE

Challenges

As we know from everyday interactions, humour and irony are sometimes difficult to decode. This becomes even more problematic when trying to analyse humour in the online space, where the irony is celebrated as a core countercultural element. Playing with exaggeration and irony and the reactions from the various audiences are an essential part of the provocative playbook. Thus, it is very difficult to regulate and counter digital hate cultures. There are no clear-cut boundaries of what exactly should be countered, as many of the memes circulating on mainstream platforms appear harmless and often lie within the boundaries of the law and/or the platforms' rules. Thus, we are often dealing not with obvious illegal content but rather "potentially radicalising" content, which can be difficult to identify — and even harder to take down. The popular idea of attempting to counter extremist humour with a form of alternative humour has proven very difficult in this context.

Far-right digital subcultures tend to be immune against democratic intervention as they are sceptical of any outsider intervention. Without speaking the harmful language of these insular communities, it is difficult to make counterarguments heard. Moreover, given that many of those within the far-right extremist spectrum claim that they are the victims of an "elitist" conspiracy that aims to "weaken" or "erase" Western culture and/or white people, democratic intervention from the very people who they see as "enemies" is met with resistance. Those who call out the far right are often vilified, trolled further, accused of being "over-sensitive", and confronted with the claim that memes are designed just for laughs. On the other hand, shutting people down and deplatforming can also lead to reinforcing the narrative that free speech is limited to mainstream elites and potentially rally more support for the far right.

Deplatforming on social media *refers to the removal of accounts of individuals or groups on social media sites following violations of platform rules. Deplatforming can also refer to banning users in other contexts, such as cloud services or websites. The central aim is to limit the person or group's ability to share information or ideas to a wide audience. In recent years, a number of far-right "influencers" and movements have been deplatformed from mainstream social media sites ([27]).*

Normalising and trivialising violence through humour and memes or ridiculing marginalised groups through trolling campaigns have the potential to desensitise their consumers and lead to actual violence. Given the decentralised, global and online community within which far-right extremists operate, it is incredibly challenging for local practitioners who need to stay up to date with fast-changing developments within the global and local far-right scenes. Relatedly, credibility is important with regard to counter-narratives, and the generation gap makes it more difficult to understand and tap into the very niche online cultures, images and language used. As most current P/CVE practitioners have not grown up with modern digital technologies, they naturally face difficulties in coping with the accelerated — largely image-based — communication.

As peer pressure is high in school contexts, teachers report copycat effects. Young people especially are often not aware where humour ends and indoctrination begins. This line is further blurred by fluid switches from public to private conversations. Hence, humour can function as an effective means of intrusion into

([26]) MacFarquhar (2019): *O.K. hand sign is a hate symbol.*
([27]) Rogers (2020): *Deplatforming*, p. 214.

private communication, making it easier to directly influence people. As the so-called dark social is difficult to monitor for researchers and practitioners, much of these communication channels remain opaque. As a result, outsiders, such as teachers or parents, often only discover potentially harmful behaviour in those channels once a certain tipping point has been crossed.

Hence, facing a new tech-savvy generation of far-right extremists that has become attuned to the language of digital cultures, P/CVE practitioners lag behind and are — if at all — mostly reacting to new trends instead of proactively setting up trainings and reconsidering and adapting existing practices in the digital context. This divide is largely caused by a generational gap: while far-right influencers address especially millennials who grew up with digital technologies, practitioners often underestimate the role of digital and meme cultures as they are not important in their everyday life. Nevertheless, there are ways to stem the viral power of far-right messaging cloaked in a humorous guise. Below we outline some recommendations to help overcome these challenges.

Recommendations for action

Improving literacy

It is a key element of humour to draw the line between those who understand and those who look foolish, as well as between those who laugh about others and those who are humiliated. In fact, humour is a social practice that bears several excluding mechanisms. As such, it demands specialised knowledge to make sense of it and to react appropriately — to determine if one likes the jokes or not. It is especially difficult to cope with the complex dynamics of humorous memes without a profound knowledge of the language and practices of online cultures. This requires the following:

- Develop and support more resources aimed at understanding vibrant online cultures that far-right actors take advantage of;
- Improve literacy with regard to memes, codes and symbols online to appear authentic when engaging with young people;
- Build effective partnerships with the technology sector and researchers to develop knowledge on new developments.

Monitoring and exchange

Once literacy on the extremist underpinnings of strategic humour is established, the next step is to closely monitor dynamics around far-right meme cultures. Online cultures quickly develop into extremist movements, as seen in the conspiracy cult around QAnon and the anti-government militia in the United States known as the boogaloo movement. It is thus important to:

- Increase knowledge and understanding regarding the cultural practices and structures of radical online milieus;
- React swiftly to new developments and innovation;
- Use this knowledge to help young people identify potentially harmful or hateful content and increase awareness regarding more subtle racist terminology or imagery and dog whistles;
- Learn lessons from previous pitfalls and failures in practice and do not unintentionally amplify the messages of extremists and terrorists.

Dealing with extremist humour: Mind the trap – and do no harm!

Every kind of intervention against racist and far-right forms of humour needs to eliminate unintended consequences as far as possible. Few things play more into far-right activists' hands like a scandalised and outraged reaction that misses the point entirely. Humorous campaigns are tailored to trigger overreactions and to make them a meme instantly. Hence, through sharing provocative humorous content, extremist actors

calculate the reaction and outrage of broader, mainstream audiences — especially media sensationalism. Both P/CVE practitioners and journalists must therefore:

- Strategically ignore exaggerated and misleading statements and visual material — and not take the bait.
- Quarantine extremist humour — and therefore extremist ideas ([28]). The first priority is to not amplify messages that might harm broader communities or even directly benefit far-right campaigning.
- Debunk the harmful content of extremist humour, but only once a certain tipping point has been crossed ([29]).
- Understand the motivations behind why people are sharing certain toxic content, in order to determine points of intervention.
- Point out the sources of harmful ideological content. Knowing the actual sources and meaning of content may prompt individuals to reconsider sharing such supposedly humorous content in the future.

Supporting resilient communities & building alliances

In contrast to the hierarchical structure of far-right organisations, digital (hate) cultures develop organically. This means that it is often not possible to isolate driving forces from larger platform dynamics. To participate in online discussion, authenticity and creativity are the currency that make content spread — and ultimately — relevant. Hence, well-intended posts are just as good at circulating across communities and platforms. In short: form outpaces content and community leverage trumps expertise. Practitioners need to accept that artificial interventions from the outside often do more harm than good. In fact, to reveal oneself as being a P/CVE practitioner and stating one's mission in online forums is likely to end a conversation. Practitioners would risk putting themselves above the community and appear condescending. To conceal one's identity, however, may cause ethical problems as it is not opportune to do P/CVE work anonymously. Despite this structural disadvantage, practitioners can work on the following:

- Build up effective partnerships with social media influencers and progressive communities, which have a strong influence on the views of their followers and supporters. Such alliances serve as much more effective multipliers of their message than trying to inflate content on its own.
- Foster trust and credibility and accept that building digital communities is a long process and can only be successful if there is a high degree of credibility independent from organisational constraints.

Staying up to speed with developments in the online space

The online space is subject to rapid and highly dynamic changes. Identification and knowledge are the first steps towards overcoming this particular challenge. Thus, it is important to:

- Be able to identify different far-right codes and imagery masked in humour.
- Understand the dissemination strategies, as well as the different target audiences.
- Be aware of the different "push" and "pull" factors; specifically, understanding that these messages may be particularly attractive to those who feel marginalised by mainstream culture and aspire to achieve a sense of belonging. Of course, the reality is more nuanced than that, but it needs to be acknowledged that these factors are important to the individual.
- Civic education should also play a key role in terms of dispelling and confronting many of the myths that circulate within these online communities — and beyond.

Far-right extremism has changed its face in the advent of digitalisation. The interactive elements of social media and more fringe forums have significantly changed the way far-right ideologies are communicated, and in turn have had an effect on recruitment and violence. As this paper has shown, this is not just a short-

([28]) Donovan and Boyd (2018): *The case for quarantining extremist ideas*.
([29]) Philipps (2018): *The oxygen of amplification*, p. 10.

lived trend but a serious issue that goes beyond the local level and has far reaching consequences for countering the far-right threat. As extremists disseminate their ideology as transgressive pranks, they offer new incentives to act on behalf of nation and "race", thereby communicating violence against minorities as an act of fun. Yet, these jokes are not funny anymore. The violent fantasies that are woven into these witty narratives may function as serious accelerants of mass violence that need to be countered as such.

Further reading

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Resources

CARR Guide to Online Radical-Right Symbols, Slogans and Slurs: This report by the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right details the principal symbols, slang, coded references and terminology used online by far-right extremists today. The first part of this survey will focus on key images, ranging from the Celtic Cross to ancient Germanic runes, with an emphasis on frequency of use and changes over time — such as the recent way in which 'Pepe the Frog' has operated as shorthand for various far-right themes.

KnowYourMeme: KnowYourMeme is the world's largest online database researching and documenting viral online material. KnowYourMeme includes sections for confirmed, submitted, deadpooled (rejected or incompletely documented), researching and popular memes.

Meme War Weekly: Meme War Weekly is a newsletter addressing political messaging that comes from the wilds of the internet, produced by the Technology and Social Change Project at the Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy. Each week, we will look closely at the use of popular slogans and images and how they are shifting political conversations.

Tech Against Terrorism: Tech Against Terrorism is an initiative launched and supported by the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (UN CTED) working with the global tech industry to tackle terrorist use of the internet whilst respecting human rights. The initiative features amongst others a Terrorist Content Analytics Platform (coming soon) and an up-to-date podcast on recent trends in extremist online scenes.

Urban Dictionary: Urban Dictionary is a crowdsourced online dictionary for slang words and phrases. Originally, Urban Dictionary was intended as a dictionary of slang, or cultural words or phrases, not typically found in standard dictionaries, but it is now used to define any word, event or phrase. Words or phrases on Urban Dictionary may have multiple definitions, usage examples and tags.

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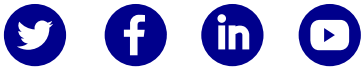
Radicalisation Awareness Network

RAN



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