



Far-right violent extremists and meme culture

Maygane: Did you know...

Jacob: That the Christchurch shooter in a post on messaging board 8chan encouraged readers to continue to make memes shortly before its attack and that his manifesto included multiple references to memes and in jokes appealing to the far-right violent extremists?

Maygane: That some far-right violent extremist online movements have military style teams dedicated to the dissemination of memes online?

Jacob: And that during last week's protest against a Coronavirus lockdown in the US, a protester was spotted with a flyer referring to "Boogaloo", a popular far-right violent extremist slang term calling for a civil war that has turned into a meme culture of its own amongst violent extremists?

Maygane: This is Tech Against Terrorism, I'm Maygane Janin.

Jacob: And I'm Jacob Berntsson and this episode we're exploring how far-right violent extremists online have been weaponizing memes and their popularity to spread their ideology.

Maygane: Memes are everywhere and have become an unavoidable feature of today's digital culture from our daily social media scrolling to chatting with friends on messaging apps. Most of us have already shared, liked, if not created a meme. While most memes are nothing more than online jokes running on pop culture elements. The funny and harmless appearance of memes can also become a central element in information warfare with the aim to inspire long term changes in values and behaviors. Memes have therefore become an unconventional strategy to easily spread any political message with online far-right violent extremists taking advantage of the intrinsic virality of seemingly harmless online jokes to reach out to new audiences and penetrate mainstream culture.

Jacob: There's centrality of memes within the online far-right and violent extremist environment can be linked to chan-like websites such as 8chan that requires users to submit an image with text when posting. An important part of violent extremist memes today still originates on chan sites before finding their way to more mainstream platforms such as Twitter or Instagram. By wrapping their violent extremist views and hate messages into pop culture and humoristic references, violent extremists have thus found a way to hide in plain sight, normalizing their calls to violence and targeting, to propaganda to young people. At the same time, the humor and irony of memes allow them to act within the limits of legality so as to protect themselves if things were to go wrong. After all, they are just online jokes.

Maygane: Yet violent extremist memes are really just fun. On the contrary, they are visual narratives strategically designed to give a new, more youthful appearance to narratives that are often a lot older. Such memes are purposely created with the intent of appealing to those already in the know while attracting new audiences through hidden meanings and ambivalence. The use of memes as an information warfare tool, has become such an essential element of violent extremist. The think tank Institute for Strategic Dialogue funded some online groups have teams dedicated to their creation in the same nation.

Jacob: A particular example of how means can be used as hidden calls to violence and insurgency is the "Boogaloo" meme which draws on military language to call for violent insurgency with networks secretly organizing and recruiting behind what appears to be online jokes.

Maygane: To get a better understanding of the prevalence of memes within the far-right violent extremist online movements and the reason why they have become such a strategy tool for violent extremists. We are joined today by Maik Fielitz and Lisa Bogerts. Maik is a researcher at the Jena Institute for Democracy and Civil Society and a fellow at the Centre of Analysis of the Radical Right. He specializes in far-right extremism in Germany and he's one of the editors and authors of the 2019 book, Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right. Lisa is an expert of visual communication who also contributed to Mike's book on post-digital cultures. Together, they collaborated on the number of articles analyzing the visual culture of far-right violent extremism with a focus on memes. Lisa, Mike, welcome to the show.

Lisa: Thank you.

Maik: Hi, thanks for having us.

Maygane: So first of all, to make sure that we have our terms right, what is a meme and how would you define it?

Lisa: So a meme is basically an idea, a thought or a piece of information that is spread and goes viral by being replicated or being combined with other thoughts or bits of information. Just like a biological gene, the meme as a cultural unit changes and develops, not by random mutation, but by human creation, participation in creativity.

This way these thoughts and trends find their ways to spread across the population like a human made virus, so to say. So when we talk about memes, we commonly refer to internet memes, these are combinations of digital image and text elements widely distributed in online spaces. They hijack the original idea of the image of the texts and develop it into a new direction that seems interesting to the particular person or funny to the person who replicates and remixes it with other texts are digital elements. The most simple form of internet meme is a so-called image macro and image paired with a textual concept or catchphrase. So we all know, for example, the photo of the so called grumpy cat with a funny cat quote above or underneath the photo and more elaborated forms are moving images such as giphys for example, these files are shared in social networks and blocks and image boards or via instant messages and often referred to a certain internet culture such as music videos, shows, video games and so on.

Jacob: Great and to sort of set the scene a bit further, could you explain how and why memes have become so widespread within this visual culture. What purposes do they serve and what benefits, so to say, do they offer to violent extremists?

Lisa: Well memes are easy to create, they can of course also use and replicate political content and make it more fashionable and trendy for very diverse audiences. They spread in everyday culture. For instance in social media and image forms, a seemingly unpolitical cultural spheres, these semi-public semi-private arenas are sometimes called pre-political spaces because you wouldn't necessarily expect overt political propaganda there but they are of course influenced by connected to politics and they do reflect and shape the user's political opinions and worldviews, although often subconsciously but by spreading ideas of how things look like, what is normal, what is not normal and how to interpret things and ultimately how we see the world. So both the creation and everyday online spaces has a very low threshold but only because they are easy to create but also because their creation is anonymous and often the original image file cannot be traced back to it's creator. So there's a felt freedom to express yourself and also meme creation and sharing can be something like a ritual of an imaginary community with common symbols, and these images are shared fast and organically across the internet. Without using great words and complex political manifestos, these apparently humorous and harmless everyday images are able to condense complex political content into simple messages that are easy to understand and catchy for a very broad audience. And yeah, in the end, one reason for the widespread use of memes is simply that creating, consuming and sharing means is entertaining and fun.

Jacob: Another aspect that you have highlighted in your research is the idea of strategic use of humor and irony within the violent extremist far-right's use of memes. Could you expand on this? And what this means and what impact it has?

Lisa: Sure. So on the one hand, in order to make far right ideology and visual culture attractive for wider audiences memes need to be appealing for these audiences and dealing with politics and political problems might be interesting for some. But in the end, what all people find interesting is having fun. So also when surfing on the internet. So if you find a meme on your Facebook timeline funny, it's much more likely that you share it with your friends, maybe even without thinking too much about the meaning of the religion, of the different visual or text elements. So in a media handbook of the

German far-right group, Reconquista Germanica, for example, it's written, 'anniversary, who's laughing? It's already halfway on our side'. So I think that's really true. And another quote by an activist of the not at all, far-right, hacking group, Anonymous really hits the point when they say 'boredom is contrary, revolutionary political resistance needs to be fun or no one will want to participate'. So sharing humorous moments with your friends makes you feel part of a collective, bigger group and gives you a good feeling because you can jointly laugh about it. On the other hand, not only humor, but also irony is used to give actual hate content such as racist, misogynist, antisemitic, Islamophobic or homophobic slurs, a playful or funny or even satirical tastes, which makes it harder for users and other people or tech companies to hold far-right meme creators responsible because they will always say, "come on, it was just a joke, don't take it too serious" Or "can't you even laugh about yourself" and things like this. So this way, humor is a frequently used strategy, by far-right activists.

Maygane: So image boards and Chan websites are often pointed out as the source of most violent extremists memes. Would you agree with this analysis?

Maik: In the case of 4chan and 8chan, absolutely. Even before the Christchurch massacre, we've seen how violence glorifying memes have been published there and hundreds of like minded users respond to it. White supremacist discovered some five years ago to hijack parts of these platforms to spread the toxic narrative, especially through imagery on these boards. So as an online community 4chan has been the kind of cradle of much of the online culture that we consume on various platforms. It is a place where people communicate via images. Oftentimes students transgressing social norms by trolling persons with reputation. So the schadenfreude aspect as a core of the exchange of the users of 4chan for far-right activists, it's also very simple to post a propaganda as part of the flow of these images as everybody can say whatever he or she wants on these image boards, and this is very much exploited by extremist activists to hijack whole communities. In fact, the escalating dynamics are very much inscribed in the concept and the architecture of these anonymous and largely unmoderated platforms. Image follows after image and there's no real interaction between the users. If you want your meme to persist, you would need to use spectacular memes and spectacular content. So racism, misogyny, and antisemitism are considered transgressive content that keeps the tension high for a certain image. So it's sad to see that especially swastika and other far-right symbolism is in a way like more attractive than moderate content on these platforms.

Jacob: So moving on from that, it would be interesting to hear more about the life path that a violent extremist meme might have. So obviously you mentioned that it originates on the chan site and the messaging boards and obviously one of the benefits of using memes as a primary method of messaging is that people might often not be aware that they're sharing a violent extremist far-right meme given that it's imagery and wrapped in humor, is this life path angle, something that you might be able to expand on?

Maik: I think basically, we may say that it is a kind of whole media, transmedia ecosystem that violence prone activists split up. So memes in a way travel from one platform to another and then they adapt to the kind of communication routine these platforms have built.

And this means that meme production is one of the many means, also like to convey far-right ideology as you said, like memes are born mostly on the chan boards and are taken up by different actors on other platforms with very different intentions. If they are directed like to an ingroup audience they are likely to travel via alternative platforms so-called altrec where there's very few moderation and people might take them up and radicalize them further. If memes are made for a broader audience and more tamed from obvious extremism. They might find the way through the mainstream platforms and even be shared by users who don't really understand the origin of the meme or also don't really get the message of the meme even though we also said like memes are quite open and the messages often not very clear, but of course as we also said before, like if memes are in a way like funny or humorous in the way of the beholder, they might spread much further. I also think that we should also leave, like from the perspective, from one specific meme and consider it more on a broader framework in a way that far-right actor's produce massively memes, not just one meme that is specifically popular, but in a way they called their behavior themselves, they produce as much content as possible to in a way like to paralyze platforms, to paralyze discussions on platforms and to direct like emancipatory potential in discussions on platforms. So not every meme has a kind of strategic function in a way that it's affecting people like to balance. But the flat of memes that is produced strategically is also distributed in a way that they should mute other users from commenting on different posts and platforms.

Maygane: So once memes have crossed into the more mainstream platforms, do they lose meaning or are they still as strong, a propaganda tool as they were designed to?

Maik: I think the question of meaning depends very much on the platform they are spread. So there are some platforms that people engage with each other and comment on this, but there are other platforms in a way where it's just one meme among the many memes. The problem I think between the mainstream and the extreme is very much that the political circumstances have changed fundamentally during the last several years. And the question, what is today mainstream and what is extreme in a way has changed tremendously. So I think these memes travel through the barriers, mainstream and extremist platforms. And they are also, I mean, I think this is the special dilemma of memes, any kind of interaction, even if you want to censor or to ban memes from your platforms, every interaction causes new permutations of memes and so point is very much that it is difficult to current time memes like to extremist fringes. Once the meme is in a way in the world, it's very difficult to get it out again.

Maygane: Many might say that memes are just a part of online humor but don't have any impact on real life. However, we have seen examples of expression and violent extremist meme culture manifesting itself in real life situations. Is this something you can expand on?

Maik: I think in academia, but also like in CVE practice that has long been like a content that is kind of virtual world and the real world so that we have a kind of not inter-crossing between these worlds. And I think this has been much misleading during the last years, but it has also been revised of course, recently. Nevertheless, I think that what is real for people is very much individual characteristics. So for some people who spend most of the time online on these platforms to exchange online is much more real than their real world might actually be. So in a way this means also that what's happening in these

online boards is very much guiding the everyday life of people who are consuming various platforms. So we see that on platforms like YouTube that there is a kind of parasocial relation building up with people with influencers and their communities. That influencers have a very large influence on the choices that are being made by their community. I think that we should consider this in a way that it's not only organizations today that really matter in the context of violent extremism and terrorism, but that it's a of assemblage that everyone, every single person is creating for him or herself to make sense of the world, and I think considering that it's mostly about consciousness that the far-right is mobilizing upon, it is difficult to separate the online from the offline worlds. So if we see, for example, in Christchurch the far-right shooter has posted like on the 8chan boards that he's going to make a real life, a forward, is a kind of thinking that this, what he's doing online is kind of a premise as to what's happening like later on.

He's very much animating those people online to continue, like with the online political action and being sure that someone will take this out and transfer it to real life violence. So considering the very central part of memes and these recent terrorist attacks, I think this is crucial to understand modern form or contemporary forms of far-right terrorism to think in a way like from inside of these communities how they perceive the world and how they in a way like justify their political action, which is a very central motive of these recent attacks and Christchurch that these perpetrators are very much in between these online and offline worlds. And yeah, make it very difficult to separate one from another.

Maygane: So continuing on the real life impact of those violent extremist memes the “Boogaloo” meme trend has been especially singled out as a part of a wider propaganda effort to organize an armed insurgency in the US could you tell us a bit more about this or are there any other meme trends that you have noticed that could be covering real calls for insurgency?

Maik: Yes. I think the “Boogaloo” meme in a way is kind of synonymous for a far-right rampage. That is in a way like guiding those recent terrorists and I think it's part of the larger trend of kind of what's called neo-Nazi accelerationism. So like if a colleague from the Peace Research Institute in Hamburg we were collecting 202 of telegram groups, where like-minded neo-Nazis that are dedicated to accelerationism, meaning that to accelerate the collapse of democracy through massive violence that these groups, they follow a certain trend and the “Boogaloo” is one of them to make in a way to reduce the threshold to violence. I think more recently we also see other pop cultural elements, especially taken from movies. The Joker movie has been a very special event recently, but it's in a way, these groups react to every kind of public event that's happening. They try to communicate the ability to see that every event that's happening in the world is in a way like contributing to their narrative of the say of democracies and of the coming age of the kind of fascism that they are promoting. And so the memes of these online seems to very much speak to current events like also the coronavirus pandemic. That is also seen in a way like, as an opportunity to to build up and to use the chaos that is a cost through all the measures that have been taken to bring democracy to fall and to build up a kind of new empire from scratch. And this is a kind of very traditional narrative and everything that is kind of speaking to this narrative is in a way like framed

as also for the community to be on the right path and to continue the way and that it just needs a bit more violence until the system is fallen.

Jacob: And in your opinion, how much of a game changer is the use of memes in violent extremist circles? Is it something entirely new or is it mainly an updated manifestation of an old trick in the violent extremists and terrorists handbook?

Maik: So traditionally a fascist activists made abundant use of visual tools in communicating their worldviews. I mean, think about the early fascist of 1920s. We have been much inspired by futurism and aesthetic glorification of violence and war. Much of the agility of fascism relies on art and culture and in fact, there are various fascist movements that considered themselves as poetic and artistic. So the orchestration of propaganda and marches showed that aesthetics have been at the core of communicating fascist ideology. Of course, visual representations change according to the political context and movements have to adapt to contemporize the public appearance. Hence the access to digital platforms with free community and potential global reach has changed the communication organization habits. Accordingly, far-right activists message much more to the ambivalent modes of communication if they want their message to resonate in broader circles. So memes, as we already said have been one element in the broader strategy. A very effective one, one might say. So honestly, like 20 years ago would have imagined the frog as a mascot of the far right in the 21st century. So yes, memes are a game changer because the functioning contradicts the hierarchical setup of extremists and terrorists and messaging as we knew it like from last millennium, let's say. Organizations are not in control of how messages spread and how it is being adapted by others because they are symbiotically open and they spread uncontrollably yet they are sure that if the visual content is attractive, that people might feel affected. In the case of terrorism, this means the communication is tailored to activate people to conduct political violence hence several networks online that spread these memes, these various hate-driven and strategically hoping that commutes consumers take action. This is kind of inspiration, a form of terrorism that has been called stochastic terrorism, in a way of terrorism that uses mass media to provoke random acts of ideologically motivated violence that are statistically predictable, but individually unpredictable. Memes play a crucial role in the conduct of the recent terrorist attacks.

Maygane: So your research also mentions that memes are used to give a more youthful appearance to extremist views. How does that youthful outlook play out?

Lisa: Far-right extremist ideology commonly tries to legitimize itself by drawing on maintaining traditions and maintaining an idealized past and therefore it calls for defending traditions against changes of the modern world. So indeed in many memes we find the phrase revolt against the modern world. For instance, far-right actors call for honoring nationalism and military tradition and the strong male soldier defending its nation. It calls for maintaining the heteronormative core family with a strong male leader, called for maintaining alleged genetic heritage or ethnic purity of what is imagined to be the Völkisch community of the Aryan race and so on and so forth. But of course it's challenging to make such backward attitudes appealing for people living in the 21st century, particularly for young people and the traditional aesthetics of far-right battles and soldiers or of Nazi symbols seem quite outdated and out of place in social

media platforms, far-right actors must give their hate content and open calls for violence and openly racist, misogynist, homophobic, Islamophobic or antisemitic messages a more contemporary and youthful design, appealing to multiple audiences. Therefore, many memes use visual symbols that are part of mainstream cultures such as art history or most commonly also references to popular culture such as movies like The Matrix or The Joker or cartoons such as Japanese anime or Pepe the frog or TV shows such as Game of Thrones or video games. Additionally, apart from these motives of the memes, they often contemporize the content with the help of certain aesthetic styles. By mixing seemingly unpolitical pop cultural symbols and trendy style with historical references and conservative or reactionary political content, they make it seem less old fashioned and more appealing to a younger audience and also a millennial audience. So this way they can appeal to diverse audiences who will not necessarily identify with the political content itself. And often they use topics that provide entry points for audiences such as protection of the environment or traditional family values by implying a humorous ambiguity and hipsterish aesthetics and references to popular culture. These more subtle, not overtly political imagery, may offer access points for undecided or not yet politicized users to develop affinities with support for far right causes. And I'm gonna give an example, in far-right platforms, there's a lot of hipsterish nature and family photography. Let's imagine a beautiful blonde woman taking care of the household and a strong man with the hipster beard cutting wood and blonde children playing and laughing in the forest on the grass and meme creators mix these family and nature photos with modern graphic design and with Germanic runes representing ethnic purity. For instance, the Othala rune that was also used by Hitler's paramilitary group, the SS in the Nazi times. So if you don't know the meaning of the rune, you might just take the image as an expression of your romantic or nostalgic wish for return to nature and traditional family life and a minimalist lifestyle. And you don't have to be a close to extremist sympathiser to click the bottom and share the image with your Facebook friends. And another very frequent aesthetic style is so-called vaporwave aesthetic, vaporwave is a retro style which draws on the 1980s technology, design, music and TV by using neon colors, grid optics and glitch effects such as blurred or pixelated images. And they combine it with ancient Greeks that uses, for example, that represent traditional antique beauty or of course only whites that used to symbolize white supremacy or some even bluntly put a vaporwave filter onto historical photos of German Wehrmacht soldiers or more contemporary of far-right terrorists such as the Christchurch, mass murderer, Brenton Tarrant, to glorify them in a more contemporary style. And this use of vaporwave style for fascist content even has its own sub genre that so-called flashwave and this way the help of means far-right actors manage to conserve and spread traditional core ideological elements of far right ideology while appealing multiple audiences with the help of a variety of stylistic and aesthetic strategies.

Maygane: In your latest article on the visual culture of far-right terrorists, you mentioned that far-right actors use irony and humor to protect themselves when things get out of hand, could you develop on what this means and how violent extremists exploit the limits of legality in this regard?

Lisa: Images are semiotically more open and ambiguous than texts. There are much more ways to interpret an image according to your own individual association than to interpret the word. So it's much harder to prove what was the intended message and

what was the producer's ambition when creating the meme and much less, it's harder to prove that it was indeed a political strategy and incitement of violence or if it was just a playful, everyday communication and culture. So when far-right groups produce memes they often employ humor and irony to present their hate content as some kind of satirical project. For instance, the homepage of the German far-right group, Reconquista Germanica started with an image of a lego character dressed as soldiers and the sentence, "this is a satirical project without any link to reality". And in this way they use satire and the freedom of the arts to protect themselves against legal consequences. And this way they exploit the limits of legality. And that is extremely important for an extremist group to survive. Because by nature, they often operate on the threshold to crime and risk that their activities are punished by law. For instance, as sedition, as instigation to violence, hate crimes, denial of the Holocaust, the use of forbidden Nazi symbols such as the swastika. And by using irony, they circumvent being censored or even banned as a group.

Jacob: You've touched upon how violent extremists and terrorists often wrap their violent messages in humor when they produce these memes, this means that obviously it can be difficult for tech companies to detect memes with potentially harmful impact. However, what recommendations would you give to tech platforms that want to improve their response to this problem?

Lisa: Yeah, so one very obvious recommendation to tech companies would be to improve media literacy and above all visual literacy because automatically we learn much more about how to interpret words and texts than how to interpret visuals and images because we didn't learn seeing in a conscious way, in the same way we learned speaking or reading. That means that tech companies could use or even provide their own knowledge of where symbols come from, particularly of those who are not obviously from far-right or even neo-Nazi backgrounds such as like neo-Nazi symbols of swastika. So most commonly it's not so obvious. And they could also provide information on where certain narratives come from that might be appealing to unpoliticized audiences who are not aware of the far-right content and why they are in the end going against the more diverse and liberal and open society. In the end, this must also lead to a more stringent censorship policy when racist, misogynist, Islamophobic, or homophobic content is detected as subtle calls for violence.

Maik: So it's very difficult to handle memes or extremist memes on platforms because of the irony that they're carrying and the intention of memes. It's difficult to pinpoint, and this is a part of the strategic game that extremists and terrorists play. So they infiltrate the mainstream platforms and it's difficult to find legal or community standards to ban them from their platforms because the other side of the coin is the way that these ambiguous productions are used and chaired because they want to provoke in a way, and additions by platforms too and they're thinking like through reveal there is no free speech on these platforms. So this free speech argument, they often capitalize on this argument. And this is a kind of dilemma that platforms are facing because if they let the memes persist on their platforms they will get criticized for accepting extremist content. On the other hand, banning these quite ambivalent productions would make them vulnerable to far-right storms that would judge them for censoring their platform. So this, the kind of strategic advantage for extremist actors and from our viewpoint, it's very difficult to

understand like the message that could be understood in an extremist or terrorist way and to reveal the intentions that these actors would have and ban these memes on these platforms because otherwise you would play into the logic of a meme to always reproduce it further and further. And this can be the intention of platform companies.

Maygane: Thank you very much. That was Lisa Bogerts and Maik Fielitz discussing how far-right violent extremists online have been weaponizing memes to spread their views and call for violence. We will be back soon with another episode. In the meantime, find us on Twitter @techvsterrorism.

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