# THE LEFT CAN MEME

## What we can learn from the alt-right's meme war and how we can counteract

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**Content Warning:**

**This thesis includes racist, sexist, antisemitic and other discriminatory content.**

# Introduction

If you asked me what the first meme I saw today was, I couldn't remember. Maybe some cat content? A baby with a funny laughter? A politician wearing a silly hat? What once used to be niche humor is a way of communicating presently. Internet memes have infiltrated the mainstream and have turned into a new digital dialect. While memes can superficially be understood as nonsense or jokes, they hold political power and can be a tool for propaganda (von Gehlen, 2020).

In this thesis, I will describe the concept of memes and how they can be weaponized in political warfare. In 2016, the spread of alt-right memes has had a significant impact on the US presidential election (the Great Meme War). Using the example of the Great Meme War of 2016, I am going to analyze how memes and organized fascist activism on internet forums like 4chan[1] led to the rise of the Alternative Right (alt-right) in the United States and how memes influenced the global political landscape. I am going to discuss why the alt-right remains one step ahead when it comes to the creation and dissemination of weaponized memes and dissect their memetic strategies (King, 2021). Furthermore, I will illustrate possible counteraction strategies. If the alt-right is able to mobilise people to be politically active in real life, to attend white supremacist rallies or to storm the capitol by means of memes, what could the left learn from the alt-right's meme tactics? And how can anti-fascists counteract?

[1] 4chan is an image board website.

## The definition and concept of memes

The term *meme* was first coined by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976). He defined memes as cultural entities that are passed on by imitation from person to person. Dawkins suggests as examples "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases[2], clothing fashions, ways of making pots or building arches" (quoted from Blackmore, 1999). He sees memes as the cultural parallel to genes as they both replicate through copying or imitation and only the strongest ones survive (Dawkins, 1976).

While Dawkins' theory is useful to understand the concept of a meme, little research has been done about internet memes. Memes have long arrived in the digital sphere, we encounter them as cultural reproductions in online spaces, in the shape of digital images, videos, text, websites or audio content. Analysing Dawkins' theory, Limor Shifman brought up a separate definition for internet memes in her book *Memes in Digital Culture* (2014). She defines an internet meme as:

> *"(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users"* (Shifman, 2014, p. 41)

In this thesis, when I talk about memes, I refer to internet memes only.

Shifman argues that digital content only becomes a meme once said content has been used, edited and disseminated by several users. Otherwise a photo is just a photo, a video just a video and a gif – you guessed it – just a gif. I would like to demonstrate this memetic mechanism on the example of the well-known *Change my mind* meme.

*Fig. 1: The original photograph posted on Steven Crowder's twitter account.*

*Fig. 2: A meme variation of the original photograph. Knowyourmeme.com.*

The meme has its origins on the twitter account of conservative comedian and podcaster Steven Crowder. To promote his podcast, he sat on the campus of the Texas Christian University and put up a sign reading "Male Privilege is a myth / Change My Mind". He shared

[2] A catchphrase is a phrase or expression recognized by its repeated utterance.

a picture of this scene on his twitter account in February 2018 and it quickly turned into a meme template. Users from all over the globe started to modify this picture (knowyourmeme.com, n.d.).

*Fig. 3: Change my mind meme. Knowyourmeme.com.*

*Fig. 4: Change my mind meme. Knowyourmeme.com.*

*Fig. 5: Change my mind meme. Knowyourmeme.com.*

While some of the variations still make a connection to the original photograph, either to mock the comedian or to agree with him, other variations are completely detached from its original message and the template functions as a mere placeholder for the message of the meme creator. The main concept of this meme is to exchange the text above the sentence "Change my mind" and this idea is spreaded through online-sharing.

Shifman states that the act of *sharing* is a fundamental aspect of memes. She says that *sharing* can be seen as both, as an act of dissemination as well as sharing in the sense of communicating. When you post a meme, you don't only spread the meme further, you also communicate your feelings or perception towards it (Shifman, 2014).

The more variations a person sees of one meme, the better they recognise the joke in the next variation they'll see. I remember that when I first saw a meme with the catchphrase *The Feminine Urge* appearing, I didn't understand it. Only through repeatedly encountering more variations, I got in on the joke. The phrase eventually morphed into other variatons like *The Masculine Urge* or *The Non-binary Urge* (knowyourmeme.com, n.d.). The reasons differ why people might find this catchphrase funny, either because they recognise themselves within the message, they appreciate the randomness of the depicted gender stereotypes or any other reason. If you struggle to understand a certain meme, the online encyclopedia *Know Your Meme* is the best source to research it.

*Fig. 6: Tweet of the first internet user (@stompanie) to use the phrase*

*Fig. 7: Meme variation of the feminine urge. Knowyourmeme.com.*

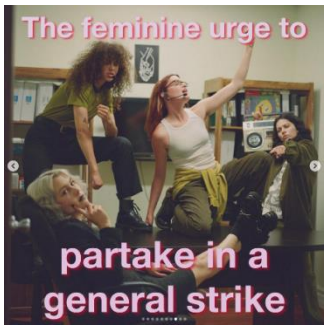


*Fig. 8: Meme variation of the feminine urge. @sufferingsapphomemes.*

*Fig. 9: Meme variation of the feminine urge. @sufferingsapphomemes.*

Most memes are published on online social networks like Instagram, Facebook or Twitter. Though, that does not mean that memes are only fabricated in the digital realm. They are recreated using physical materials such as lego bricks, dough or Simpsons figures (Shifman, 2014), or they get printed out or quoted in real life. Memes are used in advertisments or during protests. Besides their purpose of comic relief, they infiltrated our physical world and have started to become an important factor in how we address or engage with political issues (Mina, 2017). Usually, we don't question the memes we bump into while doomscrolling[3] on the toilet. By talking about the Great Meme War of 2016, I want to demonstrate how memes can be weaponized for targeted political attacks, and to discuss that we should see all memes for what they are: propaganda material.

*Fig. 10: Meme recreated with Legos.*

*Fig. 11: Meme used in advertising.*

*Fig. 12: Meme used in protest. Leanne Young. 2019.*

*Fig. 13: Meme used in protest. Kurrija. 2019.*

[3] Doomscrolling is "the practice of obsessively checking online news for updates, especially on social media feeds, with the expectation that the news will be bad, such that the feeling of dread from this negative expectation fuels a compulsion to continue looking for updates in a self-perpetuating cycle" (Dictionary).

## The Great Meme War of 2016

While people seem to acknowledge the political power of memes only slowly, memes already have a notable impact on today's politics. The best example is without doubt the Great Meme War of 2016. It might seem ironic to see the terms *meme* and *war* appearing together, and in most cases, meme wars are indeed funny and harmless. *Meme war* usually refers to rather playful online rivalries in which opposing factions battle against one another with internet memes (knowyourmeme.com, n.d.). I have seen it myself, on platforms like Reddit[4] where one sub-reddit[5] infiltrates another with users posting memes to mock the other faction, all for fun and games.

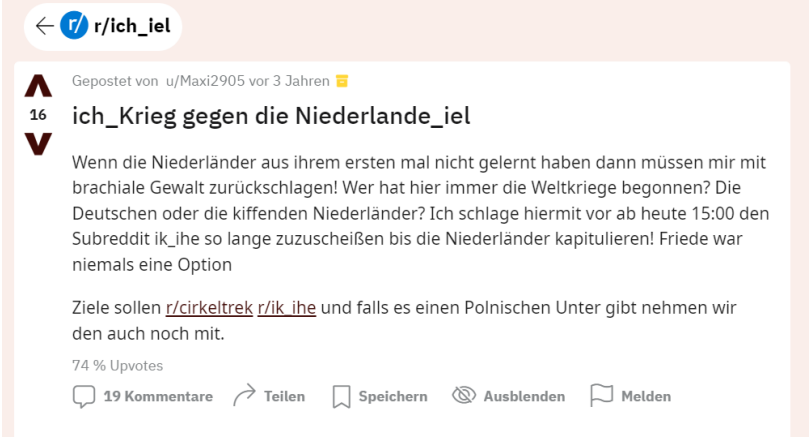


*Fig. 14: An example for a playful online meme war. Screenshot of a reddit post where a German user calls to infiltrate Dutch sub-reddits.*

*Translation: "If the Dutch have not learned anything from their first time, then we must strike back with brute force! Who's always started the world wars here? The Germans or the pot-smoking Dutch? I hereby propose to take over the subreddit ik_ihe from 15:00 until the Dutch capitulate! Peace was never an option. Targets should be r/cirkeltrek and r/ik_ihe and if there is a Polish sub-reddit, we'll take that one too." (Translated by me, Miriam Schöb)*

These meme wars in online forums and on social media platforms are nothing new, still, the Great Meme War of 2016 stands out in many ways. Memes might not hurt in the same way arms in real war situations do, but they can be weaponized for political purposes.

The Great Meme War refers to the widespread spread of political memes on social media platforms by the alt-right and the impact they have had on the political landscape. The alt-right are a relatively new phenomenon although their ideas are equivalent to those of mainstream racism, antisemitism, fascism, and misogyny. They believe that the Western

[4] Reddit is a social platform and discussion website that features user-posted stories. Reddit's main characteristic is the network of communities where people can dive into their interests; the so called sub-reddits.

[5] A sub-reddit is a subsidiary thread or category on the Reddit website. It is like a niche forum or community with a specific focus, rules, and moderators. Examples for sub-reddits are: r/worldnews (for major news from around the world), r/vandwellers (tips for living in a van) or r/gardening (things related to plants and their care).

civilization is under attack by multiculturalism and that the leftist "political correctness[6]", and "social justice[7]" are used to weaken "white identity". Alt-rightists reject common conservatism (as it's not radical enough), embrace white ethnonationalism (SPLC S. P., n.d.) and often adhere to conspiracy theories.

> *"The ideal of a white ethno-state — and it is an ideal — is something that I think we should think about in the sense of what could come after America. […] It's kind of like a grand goal […]. We want a new type of society that would actually be a homeland for all white people."*
>
> - Richard Spencer, alt-right activist, in the public radio program *Reveal* (Letson, 2016)

The movement consists of nationalists, supremacists, monarchists, neo-reactionaries and even self-declared fascists. Most of the alt-right's adherents are young, white, and male Americans or Western Europeans (Vandiver, 2020).

Donald Trump is one of their heroes. During the 2016 US Presidential Election, the alt-right played a significant role in shaping public opinion and political discourse around the presidential campaign by flooding the web with pro-Trump and anti-Hillary Clinton propaganda in a highly organized manner, recruiting young men to join their movement and follow their political agenda (Schreckinger, 2017). To understand the alt-right and its strategies, we first need to understand the landscape the movement is embedded in.

The movement is still taking shape ideologically and operationally but some of the main influential players are known while the majority of its adherents are anonymous. The term *The Alternative Right* was coined by Richard Spencer, head of the white supremacist think tank[8] the National Policy Institute, in 2008 (Lyons, 2017). The National Policy Institute is located in Washington D.C., and its aim is to elevate the consciousness of whites and to ensure the biological and cultural continuity of the "white race" (SPLC, n.d.). Spencer has positioned himself as the leader of the alt-right but there are other well-known proponents pulling strings in the background or shaping the identity of the alt-right. In the following list, I tried to sum up some of them based on my research (Cramer, 2017; SPLC S. P., 2010).

[6] Political correctness describes "carefully avoiding forms of expression or action that are perceived to exclude, marginalize, or insult groups of people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against" (Oxford Learner's Dictionary). Used derogatorily by the alt-right.
[7] Social justice describes "the fair distribution of wealth and opportunities within a society" (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, n.d.). Used derogatorily by the alt-right.
[8] A think tank "is a research institute that performs research and advocacy concerning topics such as social policy, political strategy, economics, military, technology, and culture" (Wikipedia, 2023).

**Richard Spencer** (head of the *National Policy Institute)*

**Jared Taylor** (editor of the white supremacist magazine *American Renaissance*)

**Mike Peinovich** (founder of the white nationalist blog *The Right Stuff)*

**Greg Johnson** (editor-in-chief of the white nationalist publishing house *Counter-Currents*)

**Mike Cernovich** (owner of the website *Danger and Play)*

**Matt Parrott and Matthew Heimbach** (founders of the *Traditionalist Youth Network)*

**Steve Bannon** (former executive chairman *of Breitbart News*)

**Milo Yiannopoulos** (former editor of *Breitbart News*)

**Andrew Anglin** (editor of the neo-nazi message board website *The Daily Stormer*)

**Nick Land and Curtis Yavin** (founders of the anti-democratic philosophical movement *Dark Enlightment*)

**Andrew Alan Escher Auernheimer, known as weev** (white supremacist computer hacker and internet troll)

**Paul Ray Ramsey, known as RamZPaul** (conservative YouTube personality)

**James Allsup** (alt-right YouTube personality)

What connects these people and organizations is that they all represent similar ideologies and possess the resources to spread them continuously. They are often associated with big conservative media outlets with a big reach and therefore have the power to influence a broader audience by disseminating their ideologies. The alt-right have a giant network and they're not hesitant to make use of it. Big names can be found on the list of celebrities that feel drawn to the alt-right, for example Trump sympathiser Kanye West. Also, Alt-rightists are often flirting with conspiracy theorists which is not suprising considering that the core of most conspiracy theories is antisemitic (e.g. jews portrayed as a secret force controlling the economy and media) and rooted in Nazi-propaganda. Furthermore, conspiracy theories can be used as a powerful recruitmet tool for extremist ideologies (Farinelli, 2021).

Nevertheless, the men listed constitue only the tip of the iceberg, the general population of the alt-right are young men are often recent college graduates who see mainstream conservatism as useless. One reason the alt-right is able to assemble large troll[9] armies is its ability to tolerate ideological differences within its own fractions (King, 2021). The heterogeneous composition of the alt-right shows that its adherents can overlook certain ideological differences in order to achieve their bigger goal: the protection of traditional conservative values and the preservation of the "white race". Paradoxically, you see hardcore Christians and atheists, homophobes and gays, BIPoC[10] and white people aligning in the political battle against "the establishment" (Gremmen, 2018; King, 2021). This raises the question of what brings humans to fight against their own rights. The examination of these mechanisms is beyond the scope of this thesis, still, glimpses of an answer can be found in Arun Gupta's article *Why Young Men of Color Are Joining White-Supremacist Groups* (2018). The journalist inquired male BIPoC that march along white supremacists about their motivations. Their reasoning does not differ much from the incentives of their white comrades. The interviewees do not believe in the existence of racism and that in case

[9] "Troll" is internet slang for a person "who intentionally tries to instigate conflict, hostility, or arguments in an online social community" (GFC Global, n.d.).

[10] "BIPoC" is an abbreviation for Black, Indigenous and People of Color.

there's any remaining black inequality, it's caused by social welfare and liberal policies (Gupta, 2018). According to Daniel HoSang, Professor of Ethnicity, Race, & Migration and American Studies at Yale University, some of the BIPoC join far-right movements because they identify with nationalism, patriotism, military values and conservatism (Gupta, 2018). If you believe in the greatness of your country to such a great extent, there is little room for discrimination. When people that have experienced discrimination speak up, they're not only talking about their own experiences but they are also disrupting the nationalist's cherished views of the world (DePaulo, 2013). Saying that racism in the USA exists, is therefore like saying that the USA is not perfect (spoiler: it is not).

That BIPoC take part in white supremacist movements also has other benefits for the alt-right. When the only requirements to become a part of white supremacist movements are to be male and to love the West, then you gain a broader target audience than with identity politics. HoSang further explains that the far-right tries to expand by shifting the image of a whites-only movemet in a multiracial America to a more heterogeneous one, so it is "laying the claim to the ideas of anti-racism, racial uplift, and civil-right progress" (quoted from Gupta, 2018). The alt-right benefits from having BIPoC in their ranks, as it excuses white racism and reinforces the stigmas BIPoC face. Following the principle: We cannot be racist because we have Black friends, but if even the Black people agree with our anti-Black ideology, then our discriminatory beliefs must be true.

Most alt-right adherents were exposed to the alt-right's ideologies online, on message boards like 4chan's and 8chan's /pol/[11], the sub-reddit r/The_Donald[12] and platforms like Twitter (SPLC, n.d. and Cramer, 2017).

4chan might be the most popular and iconic image board website and is the cradle of the whole contemporary image meme culture as we know it today (Cramer, 2017). The website works in a simple way: On the platform, you find boards dedicated to a variety of topics such as Japanese culture, video games, travel and fitness, and in those boards, you can post anonymously. It's a simple web-design; a user can post something and another user can reply. Whereas the format originally mostly discussed Japanese and anime culture, the boards /pol/ and /b/[13] have been taken over by the alt-right and have become the main ground of operation for alt-right discussion and the creation of alt-right memes (Cramer, 2017). 4chan is basically the alt-right meme factory, where new political online strategies are discussed, and from there, the memes get disseminated to the more mainstream platforms Twitter, Reddit and Instagram.

Even though 4chan does not work with complex algorithms such as pattern recognition algorithms, a 2018 study has shown that the 4chan message board /pol/ has a particular influence on racist and political memes while the sub-reddit r/The_Donald is particulary successful in pushing memes to both fringe and mainstream web communities (Zannettou, et al., 2018). The speed at which alt-right ideologies propagate is extraordinary if you

[11] /pol/, short for "politically incorrect", is an imageboard on 4chan.
[12] r/The_Donald is a subreddit for Trump supporters.
[13] /b/ is 4chan's board for random discussion.

compare it to historical far-right ideologies. White supremacist ideas have existed before (e.g. Nazi Germany, Ku-Klux-Klan or the Christian identity movement), but the new dynamics that digital media bring to extremist practices are worrying, seeing how easily and efficiently they can spread (Dafaure, 2020). In the 1930's, Adolf Hitler succesfully disseminated his Nazi propaganda through media like radio broadcasts, art, films, books and the press (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.). Today, social media have become a new platform for propaganda and accelerators of genocidal thought.

Propaganda is a biased form of communication to manipulate other people's beliefs, attitudes, or actions by means of symbols (Smith, 2023). In the alt-right's propaganda machinery, language plays a significant role. Their use of euphemisms, coded language, and fear-mongering is designed to manipulate their audience and create a sense of urgency around their cause. Oversimplified or loaded messages like "fake news", "woke[14] madness" and "social justice warrior[15]" are used to shape perception and evoke emotions. While some of these terms have infiltrated the mainstream, you probably need to google first to understand the full vocabulary used by an alt-rightist on 4chan. The alt-right has developed its own unique lingo, which is often used to signal membership in the movement and reinforce its ideological boundaries. "Libtard" is used to describe "liberal retards", "cuck" (a portmanteau of "conservative" and "cuckold") stands for conservatives that are not loyal to white supremacy, and a "rapefugee" is a racist slur used to describe refugees and migrants (Al Jazeera Staff, 2017; Petrow, 2017).

This language is also used in the memes created by the alt-right's troll army. One of the reasons why their memes spread more efficiently than leftist memes, is because the alt-right have very efficient strategies to troll targeted communities and to spread anger and misinformation. They like to use the strategy of subversion. During the Great Meme War, one of their campaigns was to reclaim the cartoon character and meme subject Pepe the Frog from normies[16] (knowyourmeme.com, n.d.). The alt-right adopted Pepe as a symbol of their movement and used it in their racist, antisemitic, or other bigoted memes (ADL, n.d.). Over time, Pepe became associated with the alt-right's extremist views, and its use in mainstream culture became increasingly taboo. Eventually, in 2016, the Anti-Defamation League designated Pepe as a hate symbol, which was celebrated by the alt-right. They did not only gain a new mascot that became unusable for the rest, but to them, they also proved how arbitrary and exaggerated accusations of racism are. They intentionally turned an innocent illustration into a fascist symbol, to demonstrate that leftist "snowflakes[17]" see racism everywhere – even in a harmless frog. People that continued to post Pepe memes because they were unaware of Pepe's new hate symbol status, were all of a sudden attacked by the left for being closeted fascists (King, 2021). This again, played right into the hands of

[14] Being woke describes the "active awareness of systemic injustices and prejudices, especially those involving the treatment of ethnic, racial, or sexual minorities" (Dictionary, n.d.). Used derogatorily by the alt-right.
[15] Social justice warrior describes "a person who advocates a liberal progressive orthodoxy, often on the internet, especially involving the treatment of ethnic, racial, or sexual minorities" (Dictionary, n.d.) Abbreviation: SJW.
[16] "Normie" is 4chan slang for normal people with normative beliefs. Used derogatorily be the alt-right.
[17] A snowflake is a person "who is easily offended, overly sensitive, or emotionally fragile" (Dictionary, n.d.). Used derogatorily by the alt-right.

the alt-rightists. They incited chaos in the spaces of their political opponents and stimulated feelings of annoyance towards “political correctness”.

*Fig. 15: Alt-right Pepe meme. Knowyourmeme.com.*

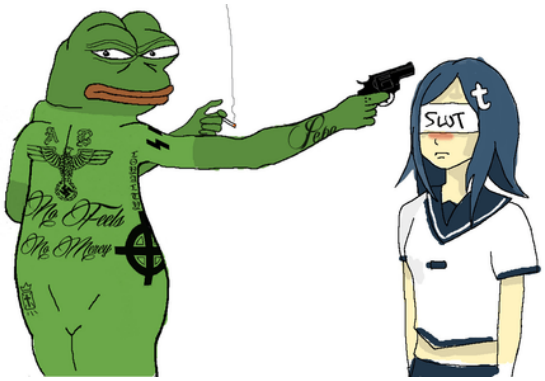


*Fig. 16: Alt-right Pepe meme. De Correspondent.*

*Fig. 17: Alt-right Pepe meme. De Correspondent.*

*Fig. 18: Alt-right Pepe meme. Imgflip.*

In my opion, one of the biggest weaknesses of leftist politics at the moment is the cancel culture[18] narrative created by the far-right. While leftists once wanted people to be accountable for their actions, the far-right suceeded in shifting the meaning of cancel culture to their own advantage. They propagate cancel culture as a danger to free speech and as the concept of being silenced as soon as you set a foot out of line of “woke” politics (Romano, 2021). With operations like the theft of Pepe the Frog, the alt-right could not only enjoy seeing leftist people cancelling each other because of an arbitrary cartoon character, but they also showed that they can controll political narratives and mark their territory by being able to turn everything into a symbol of hate.

Motivated by the success of Pepe the Frog, alt-right activists started to lay more traps in order to infiltrate the spaces of the left and mainstream media. In 2017, Operation O-KKK was launched on 4chan. Following the same principle as for the Pepe mission, the goal of the operation was to spread the false idea that the "OK" hand gesture, had been adopted as a symbol of white supremacy (King, 2021). The 4chan user who came up with this idea, explained how the gesture could spell out “WP”, standing for white power, to back up the invented story (Sung, 2019).

[18] Cancel culture is defined as “the phenomenon or practice of publicly rejecting, boycotting, or ending support for particular people or groups because of their socially or morally unacceptable views or actions” (Dictionary, n.d.)

*Fig. 19: 4chan thread explaining operation O-KKK*

Alt-right activists were given directions to create fake social media accounts that appear to be feminist, leftist or run by PoC, where they should spread the word and express their disgust at this new symbol of white power. Soon, alt-rightists disguised as over-sensitive feminists started to pretend to wage an online war against the use of the OK-gesture. When actual feminist accounts started to defend these fake feminists, the media picked up the story of how the Ok-sign became a new symbol of hate. The media got ridiculed immediately. Again, the alt-right laughed looking at the mischief they caused. They successfully spread fake news and made the press believe in it. With operation O-kkk, they didn't only mock "political correctness" but also spread mistrust in mainstream media (King, 2021).

After having subverted the Ok-sign, Operation Honk was introduced on 4chan. At the time, the Honkler meme, a clown variant of Pepe the Frog, had become more and more popular. For the alt-right, the meme represents the idea that we're living in a clown world, in which the media has been taken over by liberals that are obsessed with political correctness and cancel culture (knowyourmeme.com, n.d.). Since alt-right trolls couldn't post Pepe memes anymore without the risk of being banned, they had to fall back on the more subtle clown face emoji 🤡. Just like Pepe and the Ok-sign, the emoji quickly became a dog-whistle for the alt-right. Again, the media picked up the story of how clowns became the next racist symbol. Another win for the alt-right. They gave the media a (clown) face to portray them as lunatics in a world gone mad, and the media taking the bait eventually, was proof to them that the media is in fact politically paranoid (King, 2021).

*Fig. 20: Honkler meme. Knowyourmeme.com.*

*Fig. 21: Honkler meme. Knowyourmeme.com.*

*Fig. 22: Honkler meme. Knowyourmeme.com.*

*Fig. 23: Honkler meme. Knowyourmeme.com.*

Next, the 4channers wanted to see how far they can go and decided to hijack the rainbow flag from the LGBTQIA+[19] community. Their goal was to associate the flag with hate speech unless it changes its meaning or gets flagged as a fascist symbol, so progressives could not use it anymore. Even though, the operation #takingbacktherainbow was not as successful as channers have hoped, far-right activists started to show up with rainbow flags at white supremacist rallies. The move was strategic: Bringing physical rainbow flags ensured that the alt-right could not be accused of queerphobia at first sight, or the flags would even give the impressions that the far-right and the LGBTQIA+ community have formed an alliance (King, 2021).

*Fig. 24: 4chan thread explaining operation #takingbacktherainbow*

[19] Abbreviation for: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual (+ other queer sexual/gender identities)

*Fig. 25: #takingbacktherainbow meme. Knowyourmeme.com.*

*Fig. 26: #takingbacktherainbow meme. Knowyourmeme.com.*

*Fig. 27: #takingbacktherainbow meme. Knowyourmeme.com.*

*Fig. 28: #takingbacktherainbow meme. Twitter.*

Next to the examples mentioned above, the alt-right tried to reclaim other mundane objects like milk, the peace symbol, the facebook like button, or symbols of progressive resistance (Ellis, 2017).

*Fig. 29: Various 4chan threads discussing reclaiming symbols*

While some operations were more successful than others, the alt-right efficiently sparked irritation and confusion about "what is still allowed" in a time period perceived to be dominated by political correctness (Ellis, 2017). The alt-right played leftists and the media like a puppet on a string and caricatured progressive politics, to the extent that it caused turmoil among leftist people. They sowed paranoia in society by spreading conspiracy theories. With the only difference that in these conspiracy theories, not celebrities are accused in taking part in an evil agenda, but rather every normal invidual that could possibly do the Ok-hand sign or post a Pepe meme (Ellis, 2017). Emma Grey Ellis writes: "The alt-right is attempting to normalize itself and its ideas. If anybody who drinks milk might be a Nazi, the idea of someone being a Nazi starts looking more pedestrian" (2017).

How far-right ideologies are infiltrating the mainstream, is what I find most concerning. Donald Trumps election campaign was strongly supported by his alt-right online army (Thompson & Hawley, 2021). He hired alt-rightist Steve Bannon as chief executive for his election campaign, retweeted several alt-right memes, and used alt-right slang and symbols in speeches (Golshan, 2017). This ensured him having the alt-right on his side, without losing voters that were maybe not aware of the alt-right's lingo. After Hillary Clinton's speech about the disturbing connections between Trump and the alt-right, the alt-right only got more attention (Thompson & Hawley, 2021).

*Fig. 30: Donald Trump tweeting a Pepe meme. 2015.*

In 2017, the first large-scale alt-right rally was held in Charlottesville, where a white supremacist drove his car into a crowd of counter-protesters, killing one person and leaving many more injured (Thompson & Hawley, 2021). In 2019, alt-right supporter Brenton Tarrant, killed 51 people in a terrorist attack (Atkinson, 2020; King, 2021). In 2021, Trump supporters attacked the capitol in Washington D.C. During the riot, five people died and many got injured (Levenson, Vera, & Kallingal, 2021; Wild, 2022).

Not only these examples but also history has taught us that fascism is deadly. The influence the alt-right had on elections, and the acts of anti-immigrant and anti-semitic violence associated with the alt-right, make clear that we shouldn't laugh off internet trolls. They are to be taken seriously. We need to understand that far-right extremist ideologies have long-term goals that can only be realised through violence. Furthermore, the ideas of a white ethno-state and ethnic cleansing are hidden in euphemisms like "the preservation of white culture" and "ethnic replacement" (ContraPoints, 2019). Fascist memes are disguised as jokes, although they contain the true beliefs of the alt-right. It makes it harder to counter-argue when fascism can be excused with irony. Memes in their simplicity are just another tool for political propaganda.

During the Great Meme War, the sentence “the left can’t meme” appeared on 4chan’s /pol/ and quickly became an expression used by the alt-right to describe memes created by left-leaning people (knowyourmeme.com, n.d.). Looking at the success of the alt-right, there is definitively truth to this statement. As mentioned previously, they have a better organised online structure and are better at coordinating their messages through various platforms. Their audience tends to be young and is likely to use social media platforms. They promote conspiracy theories and misinformation to gain attention. Overall, their memes are designed to elicit a strong emotional response, often using shock value or provocative imagery which makes them more likely to be shared. Another reason is that they have the financial resources for professional meme-making and social media management. And last, they co-opt popular memes and trends from mainstream culture and give them a new meaning to promote alt-right beliefs.

The alt-right uses leftists’ angry reactions to bigoted memes to further crank up their propaganda machine. The meme strategies of the alt-right work so well because they have no reputation to lose, while the left is expected to be the “good people” that react to discrimination. The alt-right can be as provokative and discriminatory as they want, because we wouldn’t expect any other behaviour from them. Fascists are no longer afraid to be called Nazis and their voices are still elected in parliaments. Also, the more the media falls into the traps of the alt-right, the more attention they get. The bigger their audience grows, the more violence is spread.

This leads us to the question: How do we counteract?

## Counteraction strategies – From a leftist, for leftists.

Some people argue that the best way to react to the alt-right's violence is to ignore it in order to not provide them with bigger platform (Ellis, 2017). Following the principle: If we stop feeding internet trolls, they might starve. Other people argue that counteraction of the left will lead to political polarisation (Gremmen, 2018). Even though I agree that this should be taken into consideration, I think this reasoning is not strong enough to abstain from counteracting. The alt-right actually benefits from this way of arguing. If this hollow argument only serves to make the left give way to white supremacists in their metaphorical sprint to the political top, the left can already call itself defeated. Accepting the status quo has never led to change. Nevertheless, this does not mean we need to apply the same violent tactics as the far-right.

I believe that possible counteraction strategies need to go hand in hand with the beliefs and values of the left, thus, we can already rule out some strategies the alt-right use. For example, integrating swastikas in leftist memes in order to subvert the symbol's meaning, would not only be a reproduction of violence but also an endless spiral of appropriating and reclaiming. Everything that has been subverted can be resubverted. Cramer writes in his book *Anti-Media* that if subversion only follows the logic of appropriating dominant codes for the purposes of counterculture, the subversion does not have any ontological or epistemological substance and is therefore only tactical (Cramer, 2013). If the left started to appropriate odal runes, this would be just as arbitrary as the alt-right trying to claim the rainbow flag.

Yet, I think for more subtle symbols, subversion can be an effective strategy to counteract. Andy King suggests that anti-fascists can fight the alt-right's culture-jamming tactics through flooding the internet with alt-right's symbols until they become mainstream. When the clown emoji became mainstream, the alt-right couldn't recognise it as coded language anymore and therefore, it became unusable for them. Once their symbols lose their meaning, the alt-right have to revert to explicitly fascist symbols (e.g. swastikas and odal runes) or create new ones in order to distinguish their own shitposts[20] from mainstream sincerity. King further explains that if the alt-right have no other choice than to turn back to old-fashioned nazi symbols, they would lose their center-leaning members (King, 2021).

Another strategy to react to fascist accounts could be mass-reporting. The more people report a social media account in a short period of time, the more likely it is to be banned. In the past, this strategy has been used, both by fascists as well as anti-fascist hackers (Kayser-Bril, 2021; Contreras, 2021). Mass-reporting can be done through either manually reporting a targeted account collectively, or by the means of programming scripts. Last option is used by small-scale criminals all over the world. These scripts exist for various social media platforms and can be found on Github, a platform to share computer code. The programming scripts can run on smartphones and automatically report a targeted user, leaving a single person the power to report another user hundres of times in a few clicks. Depending on what sorts of violence reports they receive, most platforms suspend or shadow-ban a targeted account after receiving so many reports (Kayser-Bril, 2021;

[20]A shitpost is a "'shit'(low)-effort/quality-post with the sole purpose to confuse, provoke, entertain or otherwise evoke an unproductive reaction." (Urban Dictionary)

Contreras, 2021). This method of automated mass-report is a form of hacking and therefore might be justiciable in your country. I am not saying that anti-fascists should commit crimes in order to counteract online trolls, I am just saying that these scripts exist. The choice is up to you.

Sometimes, it is hard to distinguish between real alt-right trolls and people that might be open to change their opinions. Often, a quick look at the account can make this more clear. If the account is obviously violating hate speech guidelines, report it. If the account doesn't have any profile picture nor posts or followers, the chance is high that it might be a troll or a bot. If the user posts a lot, I suggest to review the content posted. Trolls usually don't reveal personal information online. Also, trolls often leave hateful comments or make questionable claims and never let go of a topic (Oppido & Rising, 2022). This information might help to estimate whether someone's an internet troll. Nevertheless, it is hard to determine if someone is a troll because they also disguise themselves as feminists or leftists. If it's not obvious that a user is a troll, direct intervention can be a legitimitate and meaningful way of counteracting. A confused teenager or a conservative open for discussion might be sitting behind the instagram account of someone posting hateful content. Studies have shown, that when you publicly engage with far-right extremists on a Twitter thread, the conversation deradicalises (King, 2021). Education instead of provocation.

During my research, I started to participate more in political discussions with strangers on Instagram. I noticed that conversations were more fruitful the less leftist slang I used, and the more relatable and simple I'd try to break down a political issue. In my experience, the overuse of academic language as well as catchphrases like "smash the patriarchy" acts as a deterrent for people that are not leftist. The same goes for gender-inclusive language, that in my mother-tongue German, is only used by left-wing people. Here, I found myself struggling with weighing up priorities: Is it more important to make a political stance by using gender-inclusive language and risking to agitate my discussion partner, or to not use it but instead creating a more solid common ground with my counterparty? What's more urgent, the visibility of FINTA[21] in language or the possibility to change a conservative's mind?

Unfortunately, I don't have the answer to this question. I suggest trial and error, and experimenting with your moral boundaries.

If you engage in political discussions in comment sections, you'll eventually find yourself attacked by trolls despite all efforts to have a civilised debate or report their accounts. Still, I would like to encourage you to interact with them. This might seem useless, knowing that a troll's goal is engagement and they will not listen to your carefully sorted facts and political arguments. Even though you might not change the view of a troll, you might support or change the view of someone lurking[22] at the comments. It is important to create counter narratives because the more a message is repeated, the more it becomes reality. The more you read that women shouldn't have any rights or that we should kill all immigrants, the more it infiltrates your mind. If you describe reality differently, you change it. Be that one anti-fascist voice out there in a comment section full of hate.

[21] Abbreviation for: female, intersex, non-binary, transgender and agender people.
[22] "To lurk" is internet slang for reading an Internet forum without posting comments or making one's presence apparent (Wiktionary, n.d.).

Also, there is a difference between having an online discussion and participating in memetic warfare. To dismantle toxicity in cyberspace, a single conversation in a twitter thread may not be enough. Collective action is vital to success. Fascism can be counteracted by employing the tactics of trolls for the anti-fascist cause. Clara Balaguer, a cultural worker, gives trolling workshops in which groups explore gender-varied (t)role-playing (Newman, 2018). In these workshops, people are introduced to create fake accounts and to start attacks on targeted posts where fascism accumulates. This form of activism can easily be done at home. Start a group message channel with other activists and inform each other about the newest comment section that could use some anti-fascist voices. Then, fight trolls by trolling back together. It is more important to create a sensation of a multitude than to be one – a single person can also create several troll accounts. Experiment with the accounts you create and the language you use. Are you perceived as more convincing when commenting under a male name, for example? How does the use of certain lingo influence your success in debating? You should think about how far you want to go with your made up personality as a troll without abandoning your political ideologies. Think about what your boundaries are, define a goal for yourself and strategies on how to reach it.

If you're not only an anti-fascist but also the admin of a meme page, and you want your political views to spread, collaboration with other anit-fascist meme accounts can be a good strategy. Sharing or commenting each others posts, will increase your memes' reach. You can also trick the algorithm by purposely tagging right-wing politicians to to trigger their responses which – again – generates more reach (Arkenbout, 2022).

When it comes to actual meme-making, there are enough leftist meme accounts that proof that the left indeed *can* meme. Nevertheless, in the following, I tried to analyse a few key aspects of good political memes.

*Fig. 31: Meme by leftist @brainpain5000. 23 June 2019.*

*Fig. 32: Meme by leftist @angry_radical_feminist. 9 February 2023.*

*Fig. 33: Meme by leftist @coryintheabyss. 11 May 2017.*

*Fig. 34: Meme by leftist @emotionalproletariat. 12 October 2018.*

*Fig. 35: Meme by leftist @gayvapeshark. 4 February 2020.*

*Fig. 36: Meme by @memesagainstpatriarchy. 7 May 2022.*

Researcher Chloë Arkenbout spoke to nine leftist Dutch meme makers[23], all varying in their number of followers and operating on different spectrums of the left, about their strategies and tricks (Arkenbout, 2022). In terms of meme creation, summed up, the interviewees mentioned following advice to turn a good meme into a great political meme:

- The meme should be relevant
- The meme should contain something recognisable
- The meme must not contain too much text
- The meme should comment on current events
- Controversial memes are successful and evoke emotions
- The meme should have different layers of symbolism (the more symbols, the more sophisticated the meme)
- The meme must simplify political and ideological issues
- The social commentary is more important than the punchline

This advice is helpful but not a guarantee for *the perfect meme*. During my research, I talked to the writer and media theorist Florian Cramer, an expert in memes, and asked him how much of an impact the creation of perfect memes would have on the success of infiltrating

[23] The interviewees were @kakelversememes, @linksinhetnieuws, @gratis_saaf_voor_iedereen, @commie____central, @roodememes, @progressieve.plaatjes, @linkslibertaireplaatjes, @delinksestudent, @memesvdmassa and @politieke_jongeren

the mainstream. He said that there's no such thing as a perfect meme and that he believes memes function so well because they aren't perfect and can be made quickly.

Imperfect content is actually memetically more successful according to Limor Shifman (2014). She investigated what attributes make video content more likely to become memes. She could break it down to six key characteristics: Content that shows (1) ordinary people, (2) fragile masculinity, (3) (unintentional) humour, (4) simplicity in terms of how topics are addressed or ideas expressed, (5) repetition of units throughout the video like repetitive lyrics, and (6) whimsical content. The results showed that not all memetic videos have all six attributes but the most successful ones have at least three to four of them. She comes to the conclusion that all of these attributes characterise the videos as imperfect and that therefore "bad" videos make "good" memes (Shifman, 2014).

With this insight, it would be possible to intentionally create and stage content that contains all those imperfect attributes, just for the sake of forcing content to turn into a meme template and hopefully to go viral. Leftist meme activists could try to embed their political message in images or videos they estimate to have high potential in turning into a popular meme. Theoretically, as people start replicating the meme, the political message gets replicated, too. Though, this requires ingraining your message in a way, it will not immediately disappear after being remixed. This could be done most effectively through choice of imagery. The clearer the political stance behind one imagery is, the harder it is to use it for other purposes. For example, the white supremacist *Amerimutt* meme (also known as *Le 56% Face*) that derived from 4chan's /pol/ and depicts a mixed-raced American who identifies as white, is impossible to use in a non-discriminatory way. The meme was made by far-right Europeans to mock Americans because 56% of their population is not of "pure race". While little variations of the *Amerimutt* meme were used to demonstrate the hypocrisy of the alt-right's racism, most just portray mixed-race people as a subhuman who are stupid and overweight (knowyourmeme.com, n.d. and Tokmetzis, 2018). In both cases, the meme stays fascist.

*Fig. 37: Various Amerimutt memes. Knowyourmeme.com.*

On one hand, it could be useful to create leftist meme templates that can only be used in a certain way, on the other hand, the chances are higher these memes stay niche, and the effort might not be worth it.

Another thing to consider during the process of meme-making is the question of the audience. Who do you want to reach with your memes? If you want to create leftist memes that spread beyond your leftist bubble, it is useful to focus on message rather than ideology. Focus on specific social issues that people can relate to, even if their ideologies differ from yours.

The overarching problem of fascism cannot be solved through online activism alone. Leftist politics need rebranding. Andi King writes that the alt-right have moulded their image into the one of an underdog, while the left finds itself being referred to as "the establishment" without having the powers that come with being one (King, 2021). While conservative parliaments are in power and fascism is on the rise, right-leaning people still see themselves as the victims of pseudo-prevailing left politics. For leftist politics to become more popular and relatable, we need to shift this perception.

The left needs to define and work on long-term goals collectively instead of having internal turf wars. The left cannot fight fascism effectively if it focuses on the ideological differences in its own fractions. Leftists must be more forgiving with each other. This does not mean that all leftists need to agree on all topics with each other, but they can try to see the diversity of the left as a strenght rather than an obstacle. The different ideological groupings need to unite.

I also think we need to make it clearer again that being an anti-fascist is something positive and that fascists are not to be tolerated. We find ourselves in a time where the antifa is perceived as more radical than fascists. *Fascist* has lost its meaning because "everyone's declared a fascist nowadays" and most people think we're free of Nazis since WWII. When people think of anti-fascists, they think of left-extremist criminals that get off to violence and destruction, veiled faces that will set your car on fire and spray "ACAB[24]" on your house wall. The truth is, there is nothing radical about being an anti-fascist. There is nothing radical about being against genocides, racism or misogyny. We need to make it popular again to be anti-fascists. Say it loud, say it proud: I am an anti-fascist.

The more proud anti-fascists we have, the less space we leave for fascism.

[24] Abbreviation for: All cops are bastards.

## Conclusion

The Great Meme War of 2016 showed how memes can be used for fascist propaganda and how they can play a significant role in spreading political ideas. Although the alt-right's tactics were mostly based on hate, there are lessons that the left can learn from the alt-right's meme war.

To build counter-narratives, the left needs to understand the importance of online presence and networks, and actively collectivise. Unifying goals instead of having turf wars is more effective in the battle against fascism. Also, the left needs to watch out for trolling traps. Knowing the alt-right's tactics can help to identify traps and avoid them. Further, counteracting strategies can include mass-reporting fascists, mobilising leftist troll armies, subverting alt-right symbols, or direct intervention online. While the perfect political meme does not exist, meme creation can be seen as a further tool to counteract fascism and to build counter-narratives. The left can experiment with different formats to see what works best for their messaging.

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