

How Far-right Groups are Spreading Hate Meme Campaigns Online

“Are you just looking for supplies for your Facebook page? Then you are right here. Memes are designed, shared, discussed and edited here.”: this text is translated from a German Discord server called Reconquista Germania which had its own “meme factory”. The same strategy is now being used by other groups who want to polarize mindsets with far-right messages.

What began as a mere recreational form of interaction has now become a full-fledged activity for some political groups who want to influence public opinion. The year 2017 witnessed a global rise of the “alt-right” online campaign in countries such as Germany, USA and Sweden. The term “alt-right” refers to the offshoot of conservatism mixed with racism, white nationalism and populism. They coordinate their hate campaigns through applications like Discord, which was originally designed for gaming communities to interact, and Telegram, a VoIP application. These applications are now used by political groups of all persuasions but the far-right is more sophisticated in using these apps.

“We see coordinated 'psy-ops' campaigns, essentially digital marketing campaigns, planned on sites like Discord, with 'meme factories' churning out content, instructions about how to mainstream fringe narratives and undermine political opponents, digital metrics measurement,” said Peter Pomerantsev,

Senior Fellow at the Institute of Global Affairs at the London School of Economics. Pomerantsev has co-authored a report called “Make Germany Great Again”, which covers the interference by the Kremlin and the alt-right in the 2017 German Elections.

Recently, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have taken a stand against hate speech and barred several high-profile alt-right groups and users. Some of these profiles include Tim Gionet a.k.a Baked Alaska, online troll (and a former BuzzFeed social media strategist) and Andrew Anglin, founder of the neo-Nazi website The Daily Stormer.

After these social media companies decided to initiate a crackdown on these extreme ideological users, some of the groups found new platforms such as Discord, Telegram and Gab. Discord and Telegram provide anonymity for their users, which makes these platforms a good foundation for political and social campaigns. Some hate Discord groups such as *irlposting* and *sweg* are still pushing their campaigns and promoting hate messages, even after Discord banned many far-right servers. They’re like whac-a-mole, popping up with a new server after getting banned.

An analysis of the three hate campaigns #VerräterDuell, #MadMaxine and #MyBordersMyChoice shows how internet technologies are used to promote

political and social agendas. The #VerräterDuell campaign was spread during the German elections, while #MadMaxine was used in the United States during President Trump's State of the Union speech, and #MyBordersMyChoice is a global campaign that started on the Discord group [irlposting](#).

#VerräterDuell

#VerräterDuell means TraitorDuel in English. The campaign was developed by people in the group Reconquista Germania (RG), and carried out on Twitter during the 2017 German elections. Using memes and illustrations as xenophobic messages, trolls attacked the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) and Social Democratic Party (SPD). The other intention was to promote Alternative for Germany (AfD), a far-right political party in Germany. The extreme-right party AfD ended up entering the German parliament as the third largest party.

RG had actively promoted AfD's views on social media, by asking its users to share memes and related content. The group's creator, Nikolai Alexander, a far-right activist, has been actively promoting far-right views since November 2013. Over these years of spreading views on [Google Plus](#), [YouTube](#), [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#), Alexander has become strategic in conducting his meme campaigns.

During the 2017 German elections Alexander was making meme campaigns on Discord, and teaching other users on RG.



In a video later leaked by @AltRightLeak, Alexander explained how to use sock puppet accounts to manipulate the overall number of likes on a video.

A German news website, [Spiegel.de](https://www.spiegel.de), reported that the group was found conducting troll campaigns during the Bundestag elections. In one of the YouTube videos posted by @AltRightLeak, Alexander said, "The first campaign starts on Sept. 1 and ends on Sept. 24 with the federal election." Campaigns similar to this were conducted consecutively during the 2017 German elections. Though it is not clear whether Alexander has direct connections with AfD member Detlev Frye tagged him on a Facebook post, in a group called [MerkelBusters](#). Frye is member of the group, and office manager of AfD

Bürgerbüro Seelow. He was running for mayor last year, in a small town called Lebus.

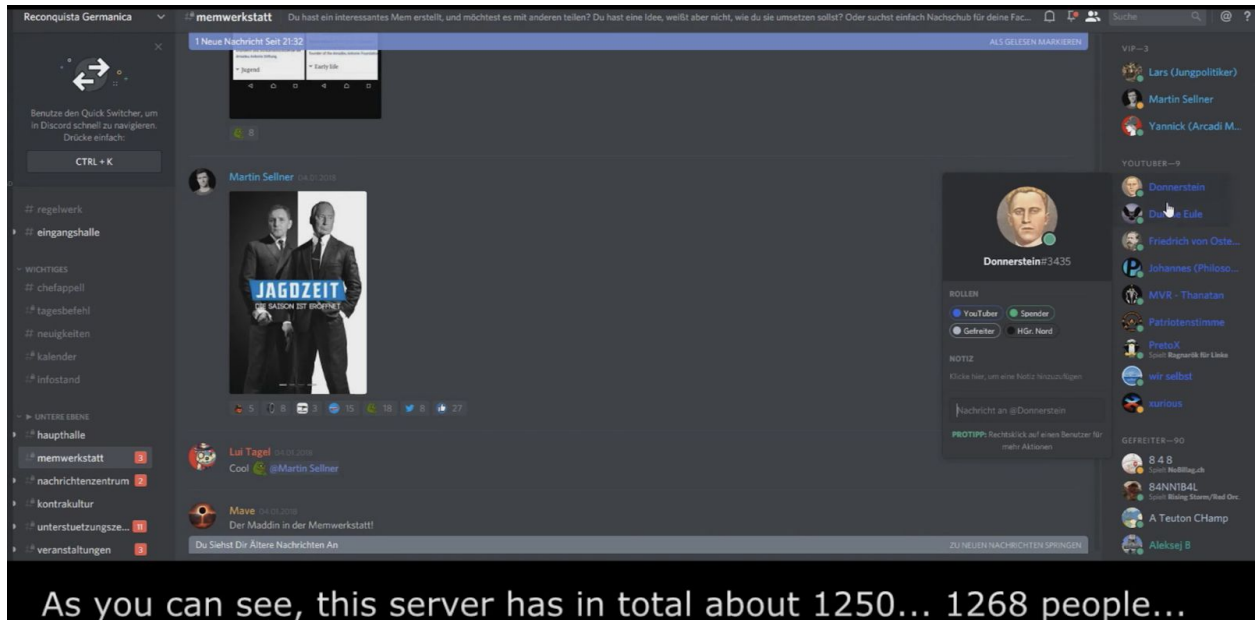
Other than political connections, Alexander has connections to Martin Sellner, an Austrian far-right activist who has frequently taught dirty online techniques to RG Discord users. Before the elections some far-right individuals had set up a Telegram account called [Infokrieg](#) (Infowars), which was used to disperse information on campaigns. The group was guided by Sellner.

[Der fuken](#), one of the far-right users in the group posted a message in German which translates to, “A group in which everyone participates, where we evolve together as swarm intelligence memes and hashtags. This channel is primarily to announce in which period we start actions and what memes and hashtags we use.” One of the first campaigns, #MaasEffect, was carried out with sophistication. In the group, Sellner had posted [an online poll](#) to select the best hashtag and MaasEffect won.

Sellner said in German, in the group, “On Sunday starts our first raid.”

“Good tweets would be the moment and gifs from the film ‘1984’ to show ‘public enemy number 1’ with Maas grimaces,” he posted, referring to a scene from the famous dystopian film. “Everyone gets it with a few Photoshop and Premiere

skills. Those who can not just retweet what our MEMEsmiths produce;),” he added.



In this image from a video posted by @AltRightLeak, Sellner is teaching RG how to conduct dislike campaigns.

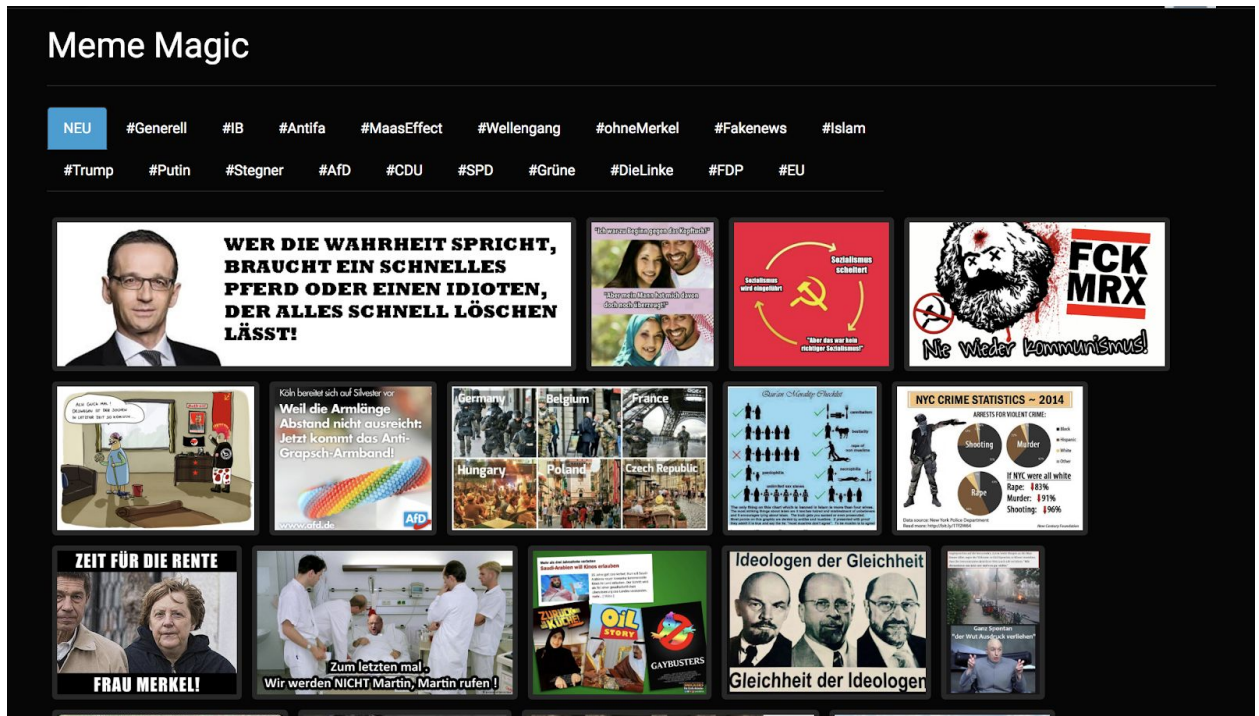
In the video, Martin says “as you can see this server has in total about 1250..1268 people, that sounds very little considering that we have a video with 200k views ... but it can be easily multiplied, by creating brand accounts or fake accounts - call them whatever you want and then you participate with whatever you want and then you participate with 5 or even 50 accounts.”

The account [der fuken](#) had posted a manual called [Trendingraid-Tutorial Version 1.0](#). The manual contained detailed instructions on how to carry out

meme operations on Twitter. The same tutorial was also posted on the discord server RG.

“Create several accounts. At least 2-3. Make it a bit individual and interact a little bit ... You need a few followers and a bit of activity, likes, retweets, so the tweets are indexed ... Also use your true accounts to interact with the second accounts to upgrade them,” a translation of the document says.

Other than the usual training techniques, the Infokrieg group also created [an application](#) to disperse memes which required access through Twitter accounts. The memes shared on the application were similar to those posted on the RG Discord group.



A screenshot from the application created by Infokrieg showing memes for different hashtags

The application has a compilation of memes for particular hashtags, making it easier for users to send their messages across social media platforms. Patrick Reichert, the creator of the application, is another user who has close relations with the RG Discord group.

“We admins will keep an eye on the metapolitical situation and continue to work on Twitter Raids, both independently and cooperatively with the Reconquista Germania Group,” said Reichert.

Another problem with these planned campaigns is that they inspire users from different parts of the globe to carry out their own version of campaigns. The methods used to plan the [Unite the Right](#) rally on Discord are now being used in parts of EU, where the problem now lingers on for the Swedish elections in 2018. Youtubers like [Angryforeigner](#) are following a similar pattern of setting up discussion points. It is not clear whether he intends to plan campaigns, but his far-right views are becoming louder as elections approach.

During the German elections, the meme campaigns by RG were clandestine enough that most of their campaigns weren't even reported until late October, 2017. The groups had a hierarchy which mirrored the Third Reich with ranks such as "Paladin," "Sturmtruppe," "Feldjäger," and "Offizier".

Groups like RG and Infokrieg have emerged over time as many of these campaigns appeal to some gamers and online trolls. "Discord is made for gamers and setup in a way that its users find it easy to make subculture and counterculture," said Jacob Davey, researcher and project coordinator at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a London based think-tank.

Davey's interest lies in the increasing role new communication technologies are playing in conflict between communities globally. Whether or not far-right communities treat these operations like games, Davey says that "These political

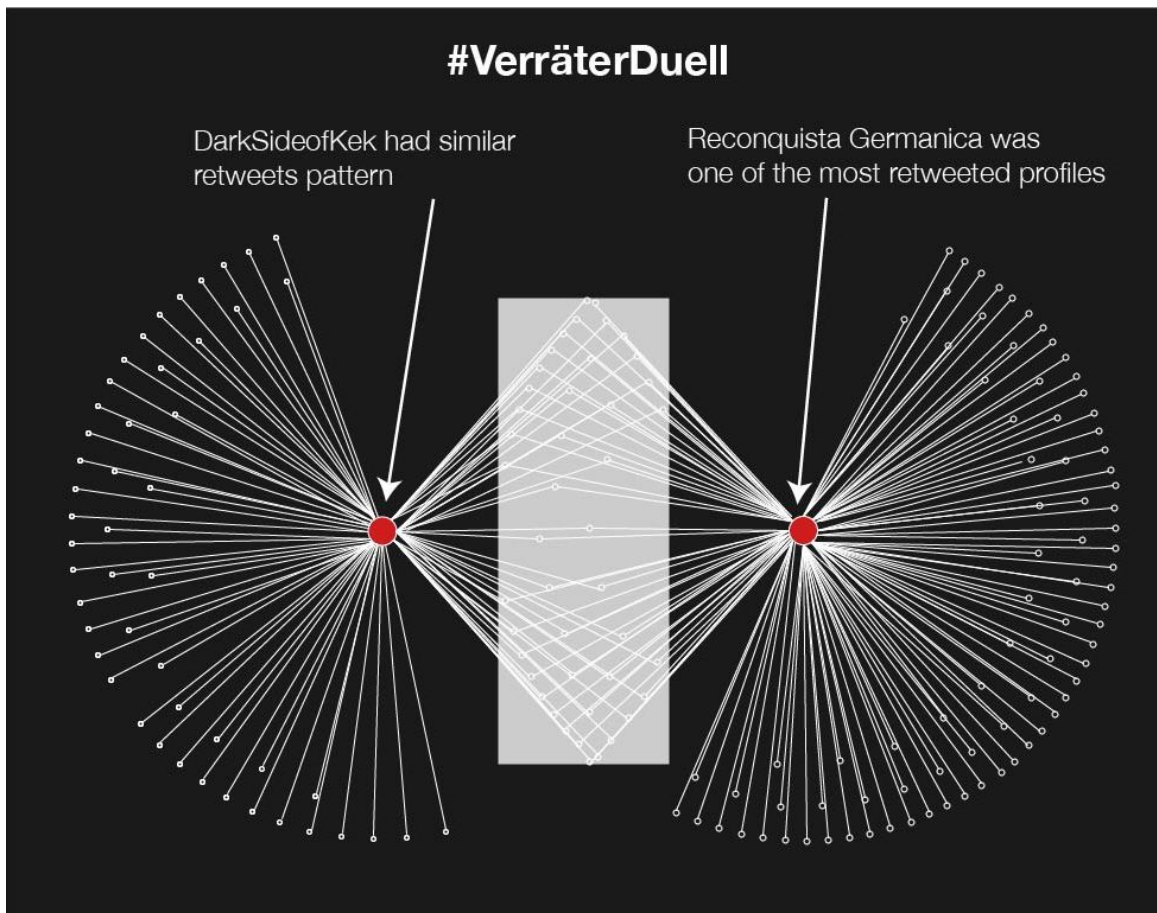
groups crossover with gaming communities. These communities treat campaigns like MMO games.”

Most campaigns are built on Discord groups, but the instructions are posted on the anonymous 4chan and 8chan boards. Usually these instructions are compiled on Pastebin, an anonymous text editor, and then posted as “meme dumps” on platforms where users can download them easily to spread online. [Here](#) is one of the meme collections that they released during the Bundestag elections, 2017.

Other than elections, the group carried out "Störaktionen," which means disruption operations in German. These operations were carried out on Youtube videos where the group created multiple sockpuppet accounts, which were used for disliking videos and posting negative comments.

Online technologies of different kinds were used for campaigns. [Ghostbrowser](#) was used to hide IP addresses, and FireBase, a Google developed application builder which allows secure authentication and cloud storage, was used for compiling memes. Another method was registering a new website address where information was posted along with articles to spread and share on social media. [Here](#) is one that was posted in a private Infokrieg chat.

To control multiple Twitter accounts, the most common application used was TweetDeck. Infokrieg users used a Google Chrome add-on called [SessionBox](#) to remain logged into multiple accounts on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc.



Analysis of #VerräterDuell shows the Twitter profiles [@darksideofkek](#) and [@ReconquistaGermania](#)(since deactivated) share a common set of retweeters, shown in the gray rectangle.

#MadMaxine

The hashtag MadMaxine was used to post hate messages against Maxine Waters, the Democrat Representative from California. It is not known who was behind the attack but it occurred on January 27, 2018, when Rep. Waters boycotted Trump's State of the Union (SOTU) speech and delivered her own televised response while discussing topics affecting African Americans.

On the same day, a vote was held [on strawpoll](#), an online polling website, to decide which hashtag should be used against Waters. The poll received about 700 votes in total and nearly 200 votes for the winning hashtag *#madmaxine*. The attack was carried out on Twitter using sock puppet accounts with over 250 tweets against her on the same day. Examining sockpuppet accounts shows that the profiles had a high retweet ratio, raising the question of whether retweets were purchased.

An account called [@Avonsalez](#) had highest number of retweets. The account exhibited bot-like characteristics with over 1000 retweets in a day. The concern here is that there might be accounts similar to [@Avonsalez](#) which are pushing conspiracy theories and fake news on social media platforms.

An article on the far-right website [Infowars](#), stated “Qanon Exposed Obama/Hillary 16-Year Coup D’etat Plan.” As reported by NY Mag, “Q claimed to be a high-level government insider with Q clearance (hence the name) tasked with posting intel drops — which he, for some reason, called “crumbs” — straight to 4chan in order to covertly inform the public about POTUS’s master plan to stage a countercoup against members of the deep state.” This 4chan-based conspiracy theorist gained attention after posting a series of cryptic messages on 4chan subthread in /pol/ titled “Calm Before the Storm.” A subreddit called [r/TheCalmBeforeTheStorm/](#) was recently banned from Reddit after violating community standards, but posts about Q are still available on other sub-Reddits. Most of these followers have now shifted to [r/Great Awakening](#). #Qanon is popular on Twitter. The Twitter analysis site [keyhole.co](#) shows that the hashtag generated more than 100,000 impressions.

The problem with Qanon’s conspiracy theories is that they develop on image boards such as 8chan, and then spread out on online platforms. The challenge with conspiracy theories and fake news is that users who follow this news do not verify the source. There is a Qanon [website for news and comments](#), where someone reposts text from 4chan. Like Qanon, some far-right groups have their own website for promoting fake news.

#MyBordersMyChoice

On International Women's Day about 2.6 million gathered to protest the lack of proper implementation of women's rights. On the same day, an online campaign was deployed from a Discord server called irlposting, This group has been actively creating global campaigns that are based on far-right ideologies. This group's two most successful campaigns are #MyBordersMyChoice and "women's waddle".

"MyBordersMyChoice" is an ultra-nationalist campaign which had over 700,000 impressions on Twitter. The campaign was supported by top white supremacists [David Duke](#), [Peter Sweden](#), and [cartoonist Ben Garrison](#).

The campaign was aimed at spreading anti-immigration views globally. In a post, a reddit user named u/mybordersmychoice stated, "The long term goal is to shift the overton window and push back political correctness in order to safeguard the existence of nation states. This is in direct opposition to globalism, which wants to erode all of them and form a planetary government (like John Lennon's horrifying song 'Imagine', some kind of ideal similar to an impossible communist utopia)."

In the campaign there were “Bonus points” for putting printed banners outside “feminism & SJW related areas: social science & psychology departments, women's & gender studies departments, office doors of feminist profs, etc,” as mentioned in one of the [Pastebin dumps](#).

According to data from keyhole.co, profiles [@PolNewsupdates](#) and [@MemeAlertNews](#) (since deactivated) had the highest number of retweets of the #MyBordersMyChoice campaign. @PolNewsupdates, also known as the /pol/ news network, is a Twitter channel run by Levi Smith, a white supremacist.

Smith was a participant and supporter of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, which was organized in May last year. He has been banned from Twitter thrice for posting hate tweets. His most recent Twitter account has over 16k followers.

In a podcast interview with Brittany Pettibone, an alt-right commentator, Smith said that 4chan's /pol/ “had a big impact on the elections,” referring to the US Presidential elections in 2016. “During the election I think the biggest influence was that people were able to collaborate with each other and do kind of big pieces, users from UK, Poland, US and Mexico and it became like an international group to save America.”

Regarding what was common ideologically with /pol/ users, Smith added, “It’s nationalism in general, users of pol collectively want what’s best with each other’s country.”

Onion Websites

Other than Discord groups, some campaigns or discussions take place on onion websites. The .onion suffix is a top level domain that provides anonymity to the person who hosts the website. Onion websites are only reachable via Tor, a tool used for anonymous browsing.

The Daily Stormer forum The Goyim Know is an onion website which has private boards including TrollStorm and Meme Machine. The Goyim Know is the 8chan of the deep web; it’s murky and dark, with people sharing photographs of others to make memes out of them.



Hussar
Shitposter

2d

Where's muh memes @?

I get unzucc'ed tomorrow & need some fresh material.

I have a fan club that includes nonhuwhites that I have influence over.

But my prime audience is muh young veterans that I connect with who are near me & right/ correct minded.

I have some shithole stuff lined up, but that is already passed it's max lulz. I'm banking on let us make 'Day of the Pillow' next week's meme to rub it in to the boomers for allowing shit mongrels from shithole countries into our lands!

If we can get that onto CNN, holy fucking shit!!! They already quoted the almighty propagandist, AA!

Let's step this up & make history brothers!

We can only conquer the universe from here!

If you need inspiration, look into the Hitman series vidya for screenshots.

A user on The Goyim Know asking other users for anti-immigration memes.

The screenshot shows the user asking for memes on Trump's description of Haiti and African nations as 'shithole countries'. In this case memes are used as a tool to gain CNN's attention. As to why the alt-right would look for media attention, Matt Goerzen, a researcher covering cultures of anonymity and technology at think tank Data & Society, says "It establishes them as an entity worthy of attention, worth of being taken seriously: a legitimate threat. The more people talk about them, the more their ideas are normalized in discourse, thus 'opening the overton's window' about what is acceptable to talk about in polite discourse."

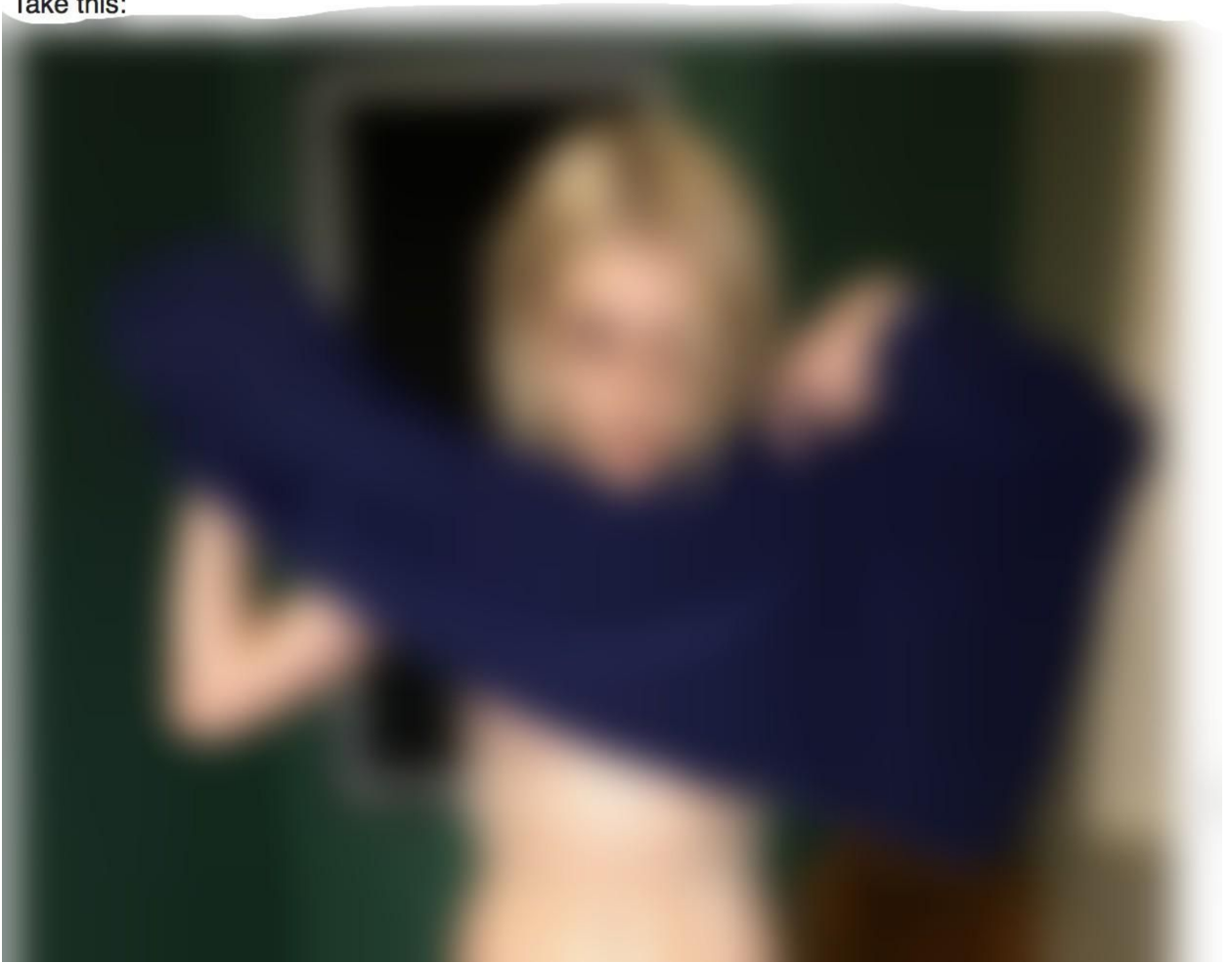
Other than gaining attention, most of them are doing it just for fun.

“It's worth noting some of the people participating in this space are just ironic trolls, doing it for kicks. For them, seeing the media fall for a trolling campaign or a meme is like the punchline to a joke. They revel in the ability to have an entity with a large audience take them seriously and spread their message. So for some it's a cheap power trip, and for others it is a way to spread their ideology,” Goerzen added.

On the Trollstorm page, users post a “target” and their details to conduct a collective attack against someone, while on the Meme Machine page, meme instructors give exercises to make neo-nazi memes. It's a forum where people learn how to make hate memes and share them.

Alright photoshop pros, here is your mission:

Take this:



A user on the Meme Machine page asked other users to photoshop an image of a person, saying “here is your mission:” The image is blurred here to hide the identity of the person.



The image was later photoshopped by another user, with the girl in Crematorium I at Auschwitz.

The image is blurred here to hide the identity of the person

The Goyim Know acts as a separate website which is more or less a forum for The Daily Stormer. Andrew Anglin, the founder of the website, is facing charges for coordinating a troll attack against a Montana woman named Tanya Gersh. For now, [Anglin's attorney has claimed that he's hiding in Cambodia](#), but on both The Daily Stormer and The Goyim Know, Anglin has been actively posting comments.

Memetic warfare is a reality

Anglin and the alt-right proponents are leading in the meme battle against online liberal voices. This raises the question whether memes should be regulated or not. If not, then the left side of the political spectrum needs to gear up. This new revolution of discussing politics using memes has certainly changed the concept of social media communication as it is hard to distinguish when memes are being used as fake news.

“Fake news tries to appeal in the same way as other political memes, utilizing similar topics and grassroots social media networks as distribution channels,” said Bret Bowers, Assistant Professor at University of Arkansas Fort Smith.

In the same way that fake news can manipulate opinions on social media, it is certain that memes are becoming a threat too.

Bowers added, “Memes are a threat to information exchange, and not simply can be a threat: they already are a threat.”

Glossary

Some of the terms used in the research are defined below:

/pol/ - Created in October 2011, /pol/ is a politics discussion board on 4chan. The name was a rebranding of 4chan's already existing news board. It was deleted due to an increase in volume of racist posts.

“Alt-Right” - An offshoot of conservatism mixed with racism, white nationalism and populism. The term “alt-right” is used by white nationalists to promote their extreme right ideologies.

Discord - It is a proprietary freeware Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) application designed for gaming communities. “Alt-right” groups use the application to spread hate messages. “It's pretty unavoidable to be a leader in this [alt-right] movement without participating in Discord,” Analyst Keegan Hanks, Southern Poverty Law Center said a New York Times Article.

Telegram - A not-for-profit, cloud-based instant messaging service popular in Russia. It is one of the most widely used applications by ISIS. Some users are also using it for posting hate messages.

Neo-Nazis - People who believe in Neo-Nazism, which combines racist and white supremacist beliefs with admiration for an authoritarian, totalitarian style of government.

White nationalism - A subset of racist beliefs that calls for a separate territory and/or enhanced legal rights and protections for white people. Critics accuse white nationalists of being white supremacists in disguise.

Gab - Created as an alternative to social networks like Facebook, Twitter and Reddit. Gab puts the notion of "people and free speech first". Many users from the extreme right political ideology who are barred from Twitter and other social media platforms end up on Gab.

Shitposting - It is an internet slang word used to describe a range of user misbehaviors and illogical rhetorics on online forums. Many "alt-right" groups keep this as a subchat in their discord groups. It usually consists of memes and unrelated conversations.

Meme Campaigns - Campaigns that use memes as their crux for spreading satirical/hate messages.

Reddit - A social platform where users discuss all types of news. Reddit has categories and sub-categories for topics.

4chan - English-language image posting forum, which allows users to post anonymously, without registration.

8chan - Similar to 4chan, it is also an imageboard website.

SJWs - It stands for Social Justice Warriors. Used as slander for individuals who promote socially progressive views including feminism, civil rights, and multiculturalism.

Soyboy - A slang word used to describe someone who lacks masculinity.

Shilling - In the “alt-right” community, shilling refers to aggressive promotion of ideas.

Conspiracy Theories - An alternate explanation of a situation generally involving illegal operations carried out by government or other powerful actors.

Sources

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Research Methodology

I was actively following the news coverage on the U.S. Presidential elections, 2016. The news on the meddling of elections by Russians led me to think that there's something more to it. I started researching on social media and found out that far-right communities were conducting meme campaigns online for quite some time. I looked at different internet communities such as Reddit, 4chan and 8chan. To my surprise, I found out that there are many micro-communities that were using memes as a tool to sway the mindsets of Internet users.

I started talking to some of these users and asked them about the techniques they were using to spread hate messages across social media platforms. During my discussion, I found out some users are trolls, who started attacking me online on my Twitter and website. Therefore, I decided to go undercover in these communities to understand how they operate.

I went undercover in private groups that were created on applications such as Discord and Telegram. These private groups are places where users create and spread memes. My focus on memes became secondary, as during my research I noticed that these communities use sophisticated online technologies to disperse hate messages. I talked to experts who told me how these communities work. Overall, I had a good reporting experience, I learned a lot about how these communities function and conduct their operations.