



## **MEMEOLOGY: NORMALIZING HATE THROUGH HUMOUR?**

**Date:** June 17, 2021

*Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.*

### **KEY EVENTS**

On June 17, 2021, the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies (CASIS) Vancouver hosted a digital roundtable titled *Memeology: Normalizing Hate Through Humour?* The presentation was conducted by Dr. Viveca S. Greene, Associate Professor of Media Studies at Hampshire College, along with Makena Rasmussen, Writer for Meme Insider, and Dutch Clark, Intern at Trademark Event Productions. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives.

### **NATURE OF DISCUSSION**

#### **Presentation**

In the day and age of technology, memes have become the digital language of the Internet. While memes may be presented as harmless jokes to the majority of the online populations, they matter significantly in the political, economic, and social spheres that are outside of the virtual world. Makena Rasmussen began the presentation by reviewing the cultural evolution of memes, which included delving into the concepts of “post-irony” and the funnel effect of meme radicalization. To build off the latter points, Dr. Viveca S. Greene introduced the concept of discursive communities, which memes can be constitutive of as they allow insiders—and invite outsiders—to share jokes, references, and attitudes without necessarily having an initial full-scale commitment to a particular cause. Additionally, Dr. Greene provided an overview of right-wing extremism (RWE) and its influence on memes, with RWE memes successfully disseminating ideology through “meme magic”. Lastly, Dutch Clark touched upon the reality of “lone wolves” actually being violent actors connected by online communities,

as well as the RWE tendency to espouse these violent actions as martyrdom (an example being Anders Behring Breivik). The presentation concluded by emphasizing the way in which RWE memes provide discursive communities with means of communication that may outwardly appear harmless, but promote and celebrate violent identities.

### **Question and Answer Period**

The question-and-answer period involved a discussion of the appropriation and usage of memes by both sides of the political spectrum, including the “Left” and the “Right”. Additionally, all three of the speakers touched upon the satirical and rhetorical nature of memes and the popularity of humour and irony being used to sugar-coat violence. Makena Rasmussen briefly addressed censorship as being a double-edged sword when it comes to memes, and the need for online monitoring to be manually done by human beings, as Artificial Intelligence (AI) is not yet equipped to do so. Lastly, both Dr. Greene and Makena Rasmussen addressed the need to put pressure on governments to devote funds towards fighting white nationalism.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Presentation**

Memes matter greatly with regards to their ability to affect politics, the economy, and social interactions. Examples of meme influence include the Donald Trump election and its aftermath, and the rising popularity of some stocks, such as GameStop (GME). In the era of the Internet, people learn about the world through the memes they consume, as they use symbols and rhetoric to communicate information in what is called “participatory culture”.

Throughout the early 2000s, memes evolved from simple and innocent jokes to present-day memes, which have become about expressing differences rather than similarities. These “us vs. them” memes originated in niche communities like 4Chan and have been used to radicalize “normies,” which is a term for individuals who are “not a member of a given subculture [and those] who use popular social media and hold mainstream opinions” (Anglin, 2016, as cited in Greene, 2019, p. 36). Present-day memes are often post-ironic, whereby post irony refers to a style of humour where something is so extreme or absurd that it is unclear whether or not it is ironic. More specifically, post-irony is what allows memes to become vehicles of disinformation, which thus creates a funnel effect. In this context, the funnel effect occurs when “normies” want to understand the

jokes behind the memes and join said meme communities, which exposes them to RWE views and can lead to radicalization.

Memes serve a significant function as they are culturally constitutive of discursive communities. Discursive communities—a term coined by Linda Hutcheon (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 85)—are different worlds in which people use particular language or discourse, emerging from collective meaning and communal identity. Memes draw lines between insiders and outsiders, which contributes to political polarization. Many of the most popular memes and meme formats originated on image boards such as 4chan, though those origins are widely unknown to those who manipulate, share, or receive the memes.

In general, the political gravitational pull is far right, with most memes originating in fringe communities alongside many deeply racist, sexist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, and other radical attitudes. A core concept of the Alt-Right movement is “replacement theory” or “white genocide,” the idea that white people are undergoing an extermination via mass immigration (Anglin, 2016), and this shows up in memes as they are a large part of Alt-Right culture. Most notably, RWE leaders were among the first to recognize “meme magic,” the belief that online trolling can affect real world events, and right-wing extremists have harnessed memetic power to spread their ideology to mainstream culture.

As newer RWE groups are making a room for themselves in digital spaces, groups such as the Boogaloo Bois and the III% are competing for members with their memes—basically, they are engaging in meme wars when it comes to recruitment. As these memes often celebrate and encourage violence, the idea of “lone wolf” actors no longer applies since online communities link violent actors together with similar beliefs in RWE spaces. By the same token, RWE groups engage in the martyrdom of violent actors who are worshipped in memes and are woven into a larger patchwork of RWE “folk mythology”—a significant example is Steven Carrillo, who was idolized by the Boogaloo Bois for his involvement in the 2020 Boogaloo killings.

The aforementioned “replacement theory” pushes RWE groups to promote overthrowing the government and (in the US) to call for a second civil war; such interest in violent action is often expressed by memes that utilize light-hearted pop culture references. This juxtaposition between the deadly serious and playfully non-serious creates incongruity and thus can evoke amusement. As such, sharing “dank” or “edgy” memes becomes a form of gaining subcultural

capital, whereby those who share or create them blur the boundaries between thinking violence is funny and believing extremist views.

### **Question and Answer Period**

The question-and-answer period began with a question regarding the appropriation of memes on different sides of the spectrum, and whether there are different uses of memes for the Left and the Right. Dr. Greene stated that while a lot of memes come from places like 4Chan, where many conspiracy theories originate, there are progressive Leftist creators that try to promote their ideologies in a similar manner, which was echoed by Makena Rasmussen. Dutch Clark explained that many memes have RWE origins, but they are also used satirically by the Left and are recycled to create oppositional viewpoints.

There was a follow-up question about whether or not Leftist memes are less influential than the Alt-Right memes. Makena Rasmussen explained that what is most significant is not influence, but rather the ability to manipulate the life cycle of online content as a way to promote one's ideology. Dr. Greene agreed by stating that memes connect users with many different political perspectives, which is completely acceptable until people act in ways that make life dangerous for others.

The discussion moved further to satire and the idea of censorship being a potential solution. Makena Rasmussen explained that censorship is a double-edged sword and that manual online monitoring is important to mark violent content, and that censorship is more of a management tool than a solution. As the question-and-answer period concluded, Dr. Greene and Makena Rasmussen emphasized the need to devote funds to fighting white nationalism and the threat to security that RWE groups pose with their memetic dissemination/recruitment techniques.

## **KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION**

### **Presentation**

- Memes possess the power and influence to affect a country's politics, economy, and social interactions.
- "Post-irony" memes let the audience decide whether offensive content is justified or solely humorous, making it much easier to spread disinformation.

- Memes not only encourage violence by celebrating extremism, but also allow individuals to create martyrs out of violent actors that become worshipped figures within discursive communities.
- Memes draw distinct lines between insiders and outsiders, promoting an “us vs. them” ideology, which contributes to political polarization.
- “Meme Magic,” which is the idea that online trolling can influence real world events, is used by RWE to promote their ideologies as they understand the power that memes have over people’s minds and beliefs.

### **Question and Answer Period**

- Historically, a lot of memes have come from websites such as 4Chan which are platforms that the Right frequent often, giving them a potential advantage when it comes down to harnessing “meme magic”.
- There are self-proclaimed Leftist creators that promote ideologies through memes, though seemingly many fewer than the extreme Right.
- Censorship is a double-edged sword when it comes to meme culture. That culture evolves so quickly that it is hard to keep up with new trends, so censorship is not a solution but a management tool.
- Like satire, memes blur the line between humor and seriousness. The Alt-Right has figured out how to capitalize on the interplay of the two.
- Memes create competition around which communities can best manipulate the life cycle of online meme content.

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