FROM TAINTED MEMES TO TRENDING STREAMS: HOW LIVE STREAMING SERVES AS A VECTOR IN FAR-RIGHT MEME NORMALIZATION

by

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The far-right, a group which includes all forms of right-wing belief that fall outside of social norms,[1] has always used comedy and mockery to bolster their beliefs, and this has become even more true in the digital era. Their use of memes and other inside jokes is heavily documented and longstanding. Historically, however, these jokes existed on the edge or just beyond the edge of acceptability in polite society. With the introduction of the internet those on the edge were able to convene and insulate themselves on dedicated message boards and niche websites like 4chan or early reddit. Meme culture originated here, with a focus on "trolling" and edgy jokes. Later, meme culture became much more widespread, but lost much of what made it socially intolerable before. Jokes were less edgy, content was less focused on bigotry, the format and irreverence remained but these new memes were for everyone. This is the world we have been living in for the past decade, with memes successfully breaking through to the mainstream and becoming a major facet of life both digitally and in reality. This breakthrough happened because the ecosystem of the internet was such that, as memes moved further and further through

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[1] "The Overton Window." Mackinac Center, www.mackinac.org/OvertonWindow. Accessed 3 June 2024.

the internet, they were softened and made palatable, with the original more offensive versions rarely escaping their site of conception. People did not widely repost offensive things, but they did repost non-offensive jokes told in the same format. This led to an ecosystem where, even though the right was creating the original memes, everyone else was using memes much more successfully and widely. The case I will make in my thesis is that, recently, this movement from the edges of the internet to mainstream social media has become much shorter, and thus the bigoted ideas aren't nearly as detached from the formats and jokes. Bigoted phrases and ideas from these insulated far-right communities are picked up directly rather than being slowly smoothed out and passed down. Because of this, audiences (often consisting of children and teens) are being exposed to, essentially, propaganda from the right, implanting ideas of homophobia, sexism, and racism in their still forming psyche. I believe the reason this content migration has quickened so much is due to the popularization of live streaming in recent years, especially among younger audiences. In this paper, I will examine a few specific examples of memes that have made their way from far-right communities into the wider internet and analyze how they made that move through live streaming. I will conclude by analyzing how this development fits into the history of internet content and political comedy in general.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

Growing up in the internet age, I have always been very interested in what is happening online, especially in places not very popular in the mainstream. Being on the inside of everyone's inside jokes was important to me, so I sought out more and more obscure and niche corners of the internet. Eventually this brought me to some unsavory places, seeing bigoted ideas played up for laughs and reactions. Being young and lacking the analytical tools to recognize these dog whistles and exaggerations, I did not see the problem and assumed these were just more jokes I was not quite getting. I quickly learned that, outside of these internet outskirts, these are sensitive topics and often not things an individual should be joking about. This sparked an ongoing interest in how some on the right make themselves both disarming and immune to criticism by operating in the realm of comedy, disregarding any accusations of bigotry with a simple "it's just a joke". Humor has always been an effective method of normalizing an individual's ideas, especially with unassuming audiences. Having watched this development for the past decade or so, I have noticed the impacts of far-right internet use become more and more consequential in the real world, as well as seeing that beliefs that were once obscure and exclusively online have become talking points for politicians and news organizations. For a long time, this normalization of bigotry online remained a niche interest of mine, with barely any tangible consequence in the real world beyond a few annoying people and the occasional attack encouraged and carried out by far-right extremists. As time has gone on, though, many of these ideas that were once relegated to the dark corners of the internet have made their way closer and closer to mainstream recognition. I believe we have now finally crossed the threshold into this being a problem that can no longer be ignored.

This paper's goal is to explain and analyze how far-right memes integrate into mainstream meme culture and how that process has evolved in recent years. In order to do this, I will be examining three examples of memes with similar but distinct journeys from far-right use to mainstream consciousness. I will discuss the messaging of these memes, as well as when and how that messaging may have changed over the course of their migrations. I will then compare my findings to methods and processes of meme transmission across the last 20 or so years and consider the circulation of offensive memes within the history of political comedy as a whole.

Literature Review & Methodological Background

This section will establish the research already done on and around my subject to identify what is relevant, and what holes there are in the field. I will focus especially on published papers on far-right meme use, comedy as a political tool, and the motivations behind both creating and consuming live streaming content. My aim in this thesis will then be to bring together the research between these disparate factors to form my own conclusions.

Memes

Meme research, in general, is a fairly new but very active field. Researchers from many diverse fields have begun to analyze all aspects of memes. Linguists,[2] economists,[3] art historians,[4] --nearly every discipline has reason to examine memes because memes have become a major part of the content we consume. The majority of meme research, however, seems to be in political science and anthropology. There is a growing body of research on what memes say about a person's politics[5], what memes say about the wider culture,[6] and what the implications of those memes are.[7] While useful and insightful, most of this research looks only at memes once they have become popular, and not the process through which that popularity is achieved. That is not to say that no one is researching the popularization, but the work tends to focus only on the

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[2] Davison, Patrick. "The language of internet memes." *The social media reader* (2012): 120-134.
[3] Harbo, Tenna Foustad. "Internet memes as knowledge practice in social movements: Rethinking Economics' delegitimization of economists." *Discourse, context & media* 50 (2022): 100650.
[4] Piata, Anna. "Stylistic humor across modalities: The case of Classical Art Memes." *Internet Pragmatics* 3.2 (2020): 174-201.
[5] Burton, Julian. "Look at us, we have anxiety: Youth, memes, and the power of online cultural politics." *Journal of Childhood Studies* (2019): 3-17.
[6] Handayani, Fitrie, Siti Dewi Sri Ratna Sari, and Wira Respati. "The use of meme as a representation of public opinion in social media: A case study of meme about Bekasi in Path and Twitter." *Humaniora* 7.3 (2016): 333-339.
[7] Wiggins, Bradley E. *The discursive power of memes in digital culture: Ideology, semiotics, and intertextuality*. Routledge, 2019.

hard data of how and where memes are moving.[8] There is little to no mention of the social and political implications that come with popularity, or the possible messages conveyed by the memes. As far as I can tell, research bridging growth analysis with political or cultural analysis is rare, leaving room for new and exciting research that considers both factors.

In order to establish a framework through which I can properly analyze memes, I will draw on methods from Injeong Yoon's article "Why is it not Just a Joke? Analysis of Internet Memes Associated with Racism and Hidden Ideology of Colorblindness."[9] This paper utilizes comedy analysis tools to analyze racism in memes and makes the case that we cannot ignore these things simply because they are "jokes." The author begins by explaining the methods she uses to analyze these memes through the lens of art criticism and the study of humor and race. Specifically, she discusses the idea of "color-blindness," i.e., not acknowledging race, and how it negatively affects people of color. She then collects memes from a meme sharing website by searching the phrase "that's racist", which was a popular meme in the mid 2010's. After settling on 87 of these memes (identified based on popularity and relevance to her research), she analyzes each to see what is being blatantly said and what is being implied. She finds that African Americans are overwhelmingly the most mocked group within these memes. This set of memes is subdivided into categories according to the form of racism the meme exploits: Making fun of African Americans directly through stereotyping, denying the existence of racism, and mocking the notion that racism exists. She concludes that, despite being separate forms of racism, all of the race-based memes analyzed end up having the same effect of encouraging racism as well as making racism harder to discuss genuinely online.

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[8] Wang, Le-Zhi, et al. "A model for meme popularity growth in social networking systems based on biological principle and human interest dynamics." *Chaos: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Nonlinear Science* 29.2 (2019).
[9] Yoon, InJeong. "Why is it not just a joke? Analysis of Internet memes associated with racism and hidden ideology of colorblindness." *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education* 33.1 (2016).

Yoon cites many different analyses of comedy and its effects, ruling out some she disagrees with and some that were simply not fit for analyzing internet humor, eventually settling on "critical humor theory" (CHT) in tandem with critical race theory (CRT) to analyze racism and color-blindness in memes. Put simply, CHT says that bigotry in humor, specifically racism in this case, does not go away just because you are not aware of its being there. Instead, any veiled bigotry contained within is normalized, emphasizing the importance of calling out bigotry in humor when we see it. CHT is the most relevant form of comedic analysis for my thesis and will be a major part of any conclusions I draw.

The author emphasizes that most previous research on the subject either does not cover the internet or underestimates the impact of internet humor. As she shows, research on internet humor pre-2016 either paints it wholly positively or downplays some of the worse content on the grounds that some individuals in the marginalized group find it funny as well. Research focusing on the reactions of individuals fails to account for online communities and systemic issues of racism and bigotry.

Yoon's research is heavily reliant on ideas from CRT. She specifically cites the idea of "color-blindness", a denial of racism's existence because a person "does not see color". The issue with "color-blindness" is that ignoring racism does not make it go away, it just normalizes it. Building off this, she asserts that many internet users carry this belief, with users claiming that their racism is void because they were "just making a joke". Yoon uses the concept of "color-blindness" from CRT and maps it onto CHT to discredit this belief and prove that, no matter the intent, memes engaging in racist humor always have larger systemic consequences.

This research is perhaps the most relevant to my own out of all the works I cite throughout the thesis. Yoon's article not only provides a relevant form of comedic analysis while

arguing for its use in online spaces, but it also highlights a major issue with meme study in general: The fact that it is rarely taken seriously. Memes are jokes; it is in their nature to be laughed off and moved past. Yoon is still able to explain the dangers inherent in interacting with memes that way. Although the internet has shifted significantly since her paper was published, and many of the examples used for analysis likely would not go uncriticized, that does not mean the problem is gone, just harder to detect. Yoon's research provides the tools to get beyond a surface level assessment, which may not initially suggest any problems with popular memes with far-right origins, while deeper analysis utilizing CHT will.

Comedy

Comedy, similar to memes, has been studied by people across many disciplines. Only recently has meme research begun to overlap with comedy research, however-- mostly in the fields of anthropology[10] and literature.[11] The overall scholarship around comedy is vast and covers many subjects relevant to this paper, including the political use of comedy,[12] the social implications of comedy,[13] and the way comedy is presented and perceived.[14] All these are areas that will inform my analysis of memes.

The connection between online comedy (memes especially) and real-world politics can sometimes be difficult to detect, so I will be using methods established in "Elite male bodies: The circulation of alt-Right memes and the framing of politicians on Social Media" by Nicolle

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[10] Oring, Elliott. "Humor in anthropology and folklore." *The primer of humor research* 8 (2008): 183-210.
[11] Heller, Agnes. *The immortal comedy: The comic phenomenon in art, literature, and life*. Lexington Books, 2005.
[12] Cao, Xiaoxia, and Paul R. Brewer. "Political comedy shows and public participation in politics." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 20.1 (2008): 90-99.
[13] Henkle, Roger B. "The Social Dynamics of Comedy." *The Sewanee Review* 90.2 (1982): 200-216.
[14] Sypher, Wylie. "The meanings of comedy." *Comedy: Meaning and form* (1956): 20-51.

Lamerichs, et al.[15] The authors study far-right meme usage during the 2016 election and the underlying beliefs contained within the memes. They consider 100's of memes from various far-right meme pages, Trump and Putin fan pages in particular, and then analyze the levels of engagement for each meme. Their findings show that each of the Facebook pages had 100's of thousands of likes, while Instagram pages on the same subject had similar numbers of followers ("liking" a page on Facebook is essentially the same as "following" a page on Instagram). In conjunction with this research, they analyze literature on how memes can be an important component of public discourse, as memes come directly from the people making them rather than someone else reporting on their beliefs. They then analyze literature on how politicians and governmental bodies are characterized online and in memes, becoming less of an actual person or group and more a representation of the ideas people associate with them. Finally, they use literary analysis tools to explore the intertextual implications of these memes and if these memes can be accurately characterized as parody. They conclude that these memes do act as parody and were an important factor in the 2016 election and served not only to ridicule Trump's opponents, but also to paint Trump as the ideal leader due to his far-right views.

The authors of this paper expand on the works of past authors by directly citing older political concepts like "the kings two bodies" and mapping them onto far-right behavior today, consolidating two previously unmatched concepts. This melding of online research with political theory is crucial to my thesis, as the memes I research will need to be analyzed through a theoretical lens rather than taken at face value, and most theory that would be applicable was written without memes in mind. Being able to bridge that divide is incredibly important for the soundness of my arguments, and this text establishes a way to do that.

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[15] Lamerichs, Nicolle, et al. "Elite male bodies: The circulation of alt-Right memes and the framing of politicians on Social Media." *Participations* 15.1 (2018): 180-206.

Live Streaming

Live streaming, as we understand it today, developed in the 90's but did not see wide popularity until 2011,[16] when Twitch was founded.[17] Over the course of live streaming's existence, the work of streamers has evolved from little more than gaming to include a broad range of subjects with varying levels of public interaction. As the internet has changed and content sourcing algorithms evolved, what makes a streamer successful has changed with it. This section will analyze research on motivations for live streaming, both for creators and consumers, to find what kind of content generates the widest and most consistent audience.

Research on live stream viewers is comparatively sparse and tends to focus on user-engagement and hard data, looking only at statistics.[18] Such data is incredibly useful, and relevant to this paper, but unfortunately barely touches on the human element and social implications of patterns in live streaming. Live stream research is also largely focused on e-sports, the most immediately profitable and mainstream form of live streaming for the past two decades. While e-sports do include some level of streamer-audience interaction, the genre is inherently less personal because viewers are generally not watching a single personality, but a whole team or tournament. E-sports viewers have their favorites and create parasocial relationships, but not at the same level they may with an individual who is explicitly interacting with the audience.[19]

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[16] Sripanidkulchai, Kunwadee, Bruce Maggs, and Hui Zhang. "An analysis of live streaming workloads on the internet." *Proceedings of the 4th ACM SIGCOMM conference on Internet measurement.* 2004.

[17] Kaytoue, Mehdi, et al. "Watch me playing, i am a professional: a first study on video game live streaming." *Proceedings of the 21st international conference on world wide web.* 2012.

[18] Zhang, Cong, and Jiangchuan Liu. "On crowdsourced interactive live streaming: a twitch. tv-based measurement study." *Proceedings of the 25th ACM workshop on network and operating systems support for digital audio and video.* 2015.

[19] Kowert, Rachel, and Emory Daniel Jr. "The one-and-a-half sided parasocial relationship: The curious case of live streaming." *Computers in human behavior reports* 4 (2021): 100150.

The importance of a personal connection with a streamer is explained in "Social motivations of live streaming viewer engagement on Twitch." by Zorah Hilver-Bruce, et al.[20] Hilver-Bruce and her colleagues seek to determine what motivates live stream viewers to consume this specific form of media. The paper uses an established framework for analyzing motivations of social media which breaks down these motivations into eight categories: Entertainment, information seeking, meeting new people, social interactions, social support, sense of community, social anxiety, and external support. They then identify four measures of success specific to live streaming: Emotional connectedness, time spent, time subscribed, and donations. The idea is that some or all of the eight motivators could explain the data found for the four measures. In their research, they found that six of the eight motivators—i.e., all but social anxiety and social support—significantly explained at least one indicator of engagement, if not more.

Hilvert-Bruce uses past established tools for determining social-media motivations to look specifically at livestreaming on Twitch. There has been a great deal of research on social motivations for most major social media websites, but none had previously centered on live streaming as a form of social media. By analyzing Twitch as a social media (rather than just media) Hilvert-Bruce and her coauthors capture the aspects of live-streaming often not offered by traditional media, such as live viewer interaction and real-time community discussion.

Their findings are relevant to this paper as they not only explain why live streaming has had so much success in recent years, but also how and why viewers become invested in certain streamers. The information provided allows me to make research-based claims about the cultures of live stream fandoms and how susceptible they may be to political or social influence coming

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[20] Hilvert-Bruce, Zorah, et al. "Social motivations of live-streaming viewer engagement on Twitch." *Computers in Human Behavior* 84 (2018): 58-67.

from a streamer or the community around them. The work of Hilvert-Bruce et al. clearly demonstrates the importance of the social aspects of livestream consumption, in contrast to most traditional forms of media. Therefore, the communities built by streamers must be more important to fans than communities less socially oriented, because the uniting factor is not just a shared love of the content, but a shared love of the community as well.

According to research done on understanding characteristics of popular streamers on live streaming platforms, certain personality traits result in viewer growth, while others result in viewer decay.[21] Initial hypotheses suggested traits like extroversion, openness, and conscientiousness would be advantageous, but results showed that they negatively affected viewer numbers. Instead, the most advantageous personality trait by a wide margin was neuroticism. Their findings paint the audience's ideal streamer as someone who is perhaps unstable and prone to meanness, rather than a conscientious creator who takes the time to vet content they are producing or spreading. Research shows a positive correlation with novelty, meaning new and unknown content does better than a consistent focus on one subject. Research also found a regular release schedule was advantageous, allowing audiences to more consistently tune in. There is also a notable positive correlation with streamers who speak more during their streams, leaving less time to consider possible implications of what the streamer is saying. The research also found that the major motivators for increased output for streamers themselves are, perhaps obviously, social capital and monetary gain, both of which depend on how well the streamer can maintain their audience.

Considering all these factors, it seems that live streaming is a field that encourages, and perhaps requires, a creator to produce content quickly, callously, and without checks and

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[21] Zhao, Keran, et al. "Understanding characteristics of popular streamers on live streaming platforms: Evidence from Twitch. tv." *Journal of the Association for Information Systems, Forthcoming* (2019).

balances that may alert live streamers to the problematic aspects of content they are spreading. A streamer that is not on the cutting edge is not profitable, and a streamer who is not profitable is less inclined to produce more content. This, in turn, makes them less popular as their consistency drops. On the other hand, a streamer who is willing to discuss more novel, often sensitive subjects will find greater success, which will result in greater output, requiring even more novel content. In the pursuit of content that is both novel and entertaining, there will inevitably come a point where one has depleted the main-stream sources and must pull from less socially acceptable sources, like 4chan or other far-right spaces, to find content worth discussing. While it is not inherently harmful to discuss these things, the fast-paced nature of live stream creation means that audiences are often not provided the relevant context and are left to take whatever is being spread at face-value, unaware of the possible offensive origins.

Similar research has been done on what motivators explain consistent viewership among audiences.[22] This research, detailed above, found that entertainment, information seeking, meeting new people, social interactions, external support, and sense of community were statistically significant motivators for engagement. Each motivator has its own implications when considering the kind of content and streamers that consistently see the most engagement. Entertainment and information seeking are perhaps the most obvious motivators for content engagement, as we have seen that content which is entertaining and novel produces greater viewer numbers for streamers.

Combining those motivations with the earlier findings on what makes a streamer successful, we can conclude that viewers find the more successful, edgier content entertaining, which may serve to normalize subjects or ideas that would not have been normalized without

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[22] Hilvert-Bruce, Zorah, et al. "Social motivations of live-streaming viewer engagement on Twitch." *Computers in Human Behavior* 84 (2018): 58-67.

their being featured in these streams. Information gathering is perhaps a more worrying

motivator here, as viewers will come to these streams seeking new information, only to be shown

decontextualized bigoted content, unaware of the biased sources it comes from.

The other social motivations: Meeting new people, social interactions, external support,

and sense of community, have their own implications that are more complicated than the two

already discussed. The majority of the motivators being based in social interactions means that

not only are these viewers loyal, but they are inclined to maintain that community and the social

engagement that comes with it. This makes viewers prioritize fitting into these communities,

which may lead to the creation of echo chambers among these audiences. When a streamer

platforms content based in bigotry, and is not critical of said content, ideas at the center of the

content can be adopted by community members due to the need to be in agreement with the

streamer and, by extension, the community. Even if the streamer does not hold these beliefs

themselves, something very likely considering the rate at which content must be released, they

are, in a sense, endorsing them by letting them go unchecked. Considering that openness was

also found to be a negative trait for streamer success, it is likely many of these streamers are not

sharing their actual beliefs for the sake of maximizing engagement, which leaves the socially

motivated audience to piece together their own image of the streamer. This image, detached from

the streamer's actual personhood, will be influenced by the content they share, meaning

audiences are left with the conclusion that the streamer does hold these beliefs, and they may

adopt them as well for the sake of the community. Once a community has established an identity

rooted in bigoted ideas, it becomes advantageous for the streamer to feature more content

associated with those ideas, reinforcing the audience's image of them and sense of community as

a whole. While this could, hypothetically, also apply to a left-leaning escalation, the fact that

conscientiousness was also a negative trait means that a more tolerant streamer likely will not see the same success as someone capitalizing on hate. It is also worth noting that controversial opinions are by definition less common than non-controversial ones, meaning there is some exclusivity in holding controversial beliefs, strengthening the sense of community among those who hold them.

Overall, the nature of live streaming and what makes a streamer successful encourages a spiral of edgier and edgier content until a group identity is established, at which point the most advantageous move for the streamer is to lean into that identity. The content that is regularly successful means these groups often end up sharing controversial opinions, with more tolerant beliefs being less engaging while more controversial beliefs generate greater engagement, thus producing more group identities rooted in controversy.

Now that we understand the motivations of both sides of live streaming in the abstract, the question is how does this manifest in reality? In order to answer that question, I will examine past examples of far-right content featured in live streams and how their features affected their overall popularity.

Research

This section consists of three examples of memes that were popular with far-right communities before they gained mainstream popularity: "Wojak", "caught in 4k", and "fatherless behavior". In order to show how migration can occur, I will document their origins, initial popularity, and spread in order to show how this migration can occur. By the end of this section, the reader should have an idea of how the content ecosystem functions and the possible consequences that can result from that process.

Wojaks
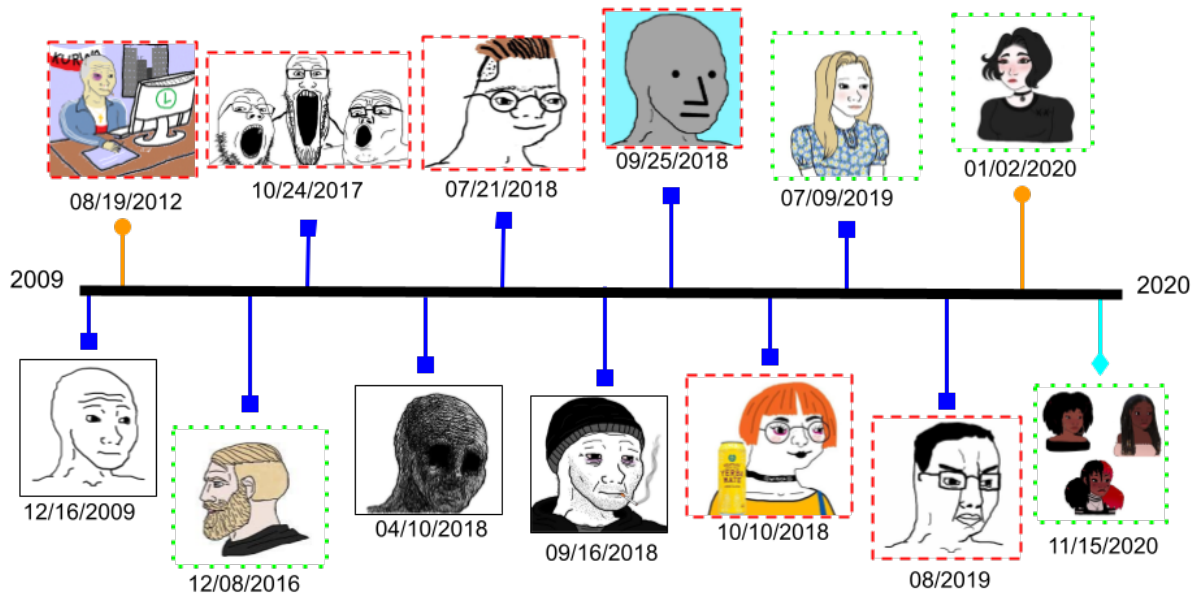
Figure 1: A Timeline of Wojaks

The lineage of the Wojak meme is complicated enough for its own project,[23] but for the purposes of this paper I have chosen some of the most notable and recognizable Wojaks (an umbrella term for the images seen above) for analysis. The graphic above is a basic timeline of when and where these variants came from. Wojaks with a dark blue square line come from 4Chan (or another Chan-related imageboard, including 8chan, Krautchan, Vichan, and Bunkerchan), Wojaks with an orange circle line are from Reddit, and Wojaks with a light blue

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[23] Z. "Wojak." Know Your Meme, Literally Media, 9 July 2015, knowyourmeme.com/memes/wojak.

diamond line come from X (previously known as Twitter). Each Wojak also has a border representing their purpose in the Wojak Comic format. Solid Black outlines are neutral self-inserts, meant to be a non-judgmental representation of a regular person (often the poster themself). Wojaks with a red dashed outline are pejorative, created to insult a person or group of people. Wojaks with green dotted outlines are positive representations, not meant to insult but instead often placed in opposition to one of the insulting Wojaks.

The original Wojak, also known as "Feels Guy" (the first image in the timeline above), was likely drawn some time in the late 2000's, though its exact origin is currently unknown.[24] The first known appearance was posted on December 6th, 2009, but the poster later claimed in a Reddit AMA (ask me anything) that they found the image on Vichan, a Polish imageboard software, before popularizing it on Krautchan, a German language imageboard. In 2012, the first major variants were posted as a set to the r/4chan subreddit under the title "guess the country",[25] featuring many versions of the "Feels Guy" sitting at a desk with various national identifiers. These variants ranged from oversimplified to outright offensive and were used primarily as a tool to mock posters from certain countries.

For a few years, these remained as the only major recurring Wojaks, with people occasionally altering the original image to more aptly fit a situation (Giving him hair or an indicator of a certain job, etc.). In 2016, a meme known as "Nordic/Mediterranean" became popular on 4chan, in which people compared the two groups using drawings to paint their preferred side as desirable and the other side as ugly.[26] The positive Nordic drawing, later known

[24] MScratch. "I Wish I Was at Home / They Don't Know." Know Your Meme, Literally Media, 7 Aug. 2014, knowyourmeme.com/memes/i-wish-i-was-at-home-they-dont-know.

[25] MazicFranco. "Country Feels." Know Your Meme, Literally Media, 8 Oct. 2014, knowyourmeme.com/memes/country-feels.

[26] Philipp. "Nordic / Mediterranean." Know Your Meme, Literally Media, 4 Sept. 2019, knowyourmeme.com/memes/nordic-mediterranean.

as "Yes Chad", came from this, and has seen much greater longevity than other aspects of the "Nordic/Mediterranean" meme. It would be a few more years before the "Yes Chad" became a regular part of the Wojak Comic canon, but once introduced it would quickly come to be one of the most popular elements used in these memes.[27] This is the first Wojak in the Wojak Comic canon that is explicitly positive, almost never being the butt of the joke. It is worth noting that the term "Chad" as it is used in this meme is a phrase and idea sourced directly from incel boards and their ideas of the ideal man.[28]

The next major Wojak, the Soyjak, came about in 2017 on the /pol/ board of 4chan (short for "politically incorrect").[29] With a wide open mouth, patchy hair, and a great deal of enthusiasm for whatever the poster wants to criticize, the Soyjak is a strawman anyone can use to make the other side of an argument seem unintelligent or childish. The use of "soy" here is in reference to the problematic and disproven belief that the comparatively high amounts of estrogen in soy may "feminize" men who consume it.[30]

After this, popular Wojaks began appearing more often, with five more recurring characters appearing in 2018 alone. First was the "Withered Wojak", a neutral Wojak meant to represent the poster feeling a deep sadness or dread.[31] Next was the "Zoomer", a Wojak meant to mock Gen Z culture.[32] After this came the "Doomer" which was used similarly to the Withered Wojak but with a focus on functional depression rather than debilitating sadness.[33]

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[27] Philipp. "Yes Chad." Know Your Meme, Literally Media, 4 Sept. 2019, knowyourmeme.com/memes/yes-chad.
[28] Fatninjaskillz. "Chad." Know Your Meme, Literally Media, 16 Mar. 2012, knowyourmeme.com/memes/chad.
[29] Swaggins, Bilbo. "Soy Boy Face / Soyjak." Know Your Meme, Literally Media, 9 Jan. 2018, knowyourmeme.com/memes/soy-boy-face-soyjak.
[30] Messina, Mark. "Soybean isoflavone exposure does not have feminizing effects on men: a critical examination of the clinical evidence." *Fertility and sterility* 93.7 (2010): 2095-2104.
[31] Philipp. "Withered Wojak." Know Your Meme, Literally Media, 31 Oct. 2019, knowyourmeme.com/memes/withered-wojak.
[32] Philipp. "Zoomer Wojak." Know Your Meme, Literally Media, 20 Mar. 2019, knowyourmeme.com/memes/zoomer-wojak.
[33] Adam. "Doomer." Know Your Meme, Literally Media, 19 Sept. 2018, knowyourmeme.com/memes/doomer.

The next Wojak from 2018, the "NPC", became significantly more popular than other Wojaks for a time, with the NPC meme becoming so huge in far-right spaces that its existence became a problem across the internet.[34] The NPC stands for "Non-Player Character", a term from gaming which refers to characters controlled by the computer rather than a player. The NPC Wojak was employed to mock people who held more popular political beliefs, in this case anyone who was not as right leaning as the original posters. This Wojak will be explored further later in this paper.

The last major Wojak of 2018, while less popular than the NPC, is notable in the history of Wojaks. Known as the "Art Hoe" (a term from Tumblr describing a certain aesthetic movement popular among left-leaning college aged women),[35] the Wojak features orange hair, a choker, and a Yerba Mate.[36] This Wojak was used largely in political compass memes, a Wojak comic format that placed different ideas or individuals on a four-section political compass. Her primary purpose was to mock liberal left-leaning beliefs.[37] This Wojak is most notable not for its popularity, per se but because it was the first original and recurring female Wojak character. Prior to this, women were generally represented by drawing some long hair on an existing Wojak, so it is worth analyzing why this particular character needed to be its own illustration. Making a typically male Wojak into a woman, especially when representing left-leaning beliefs, often took on a transphobic subtext as well, so perhaps this change was meant to avoid that connotation as transgender identities became more common and accepted on 4chan.

[34] Don. "NPC WOJAK." Know Your Meme, Literally Media, 17 Sept. 2018, knowyourmeme.com/memes/npc-wojak.

[35] Frizzell, Nell. "#Arthoe: The Teens Who Kickstarted a Feminist Art Movement." The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 19 Aug. 2015, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/aug/19/arthoe-teens-kickstart-feminist-art-movement-instagram-tumblr.

[36] Sakshi. "Art Hoe Wojak." Know Your Meme, Literally Media, 18 July 2023, knowyourmeme.com/memes/art-hoe-wojak.

[37] GigaChad, Old Man. "Political Compass." Know Your Meme, Literally Media, 18 Sept. 2016, knowyourmeme.com/memes/political-compass.

In 2019, the "Trad Wife" was created.[38] Named for the Trad Wife movement, the Wojak represents the traditional western image of a perfect wife who is conservative, caring, and quiet. Often paired with the "Yes Chad" discussed earlier, it is the first female Wojak to be deployed positively by its users. Together the Trad Wife and Yes Chad Wojaks very clearly represent a conservative paradigm of gender norms that far-right communities idealize.

Later in 2019, a left leaning imageboard known as "bunkerchan" created the "Chudjak,"[39] a pejorative representation of the far-right 4chan users who created most of the Wojaks I have discussed so far. This is the first popular Wojak to overtly mock right-leaning beliefs. The Chudjak's likeness is based on the perpetrator of the 2019 El Paso shooting, who frequented far-right image boards and posted his manifesto to 8chan, a largely bigoted board that was later used to help plan the insurrection on January 6th, 2021. The popularization of this Wojak resulted in a digital "raid" on Bunkerchan by 4chan users on October 1st, 2020.

2020 saw the last major shifts in the Wojak comic canon before it spiraled into hyper specificity. The first Wojak from 2020 was the "Doomer Girl".[40] Filling a similar niche as the Doomer mentioned earlier, the Doomer Girl is more as an object of affection than anything else, giving the self-insert Doomer an idealized female counterpart who sees the world the same as him. The connection between the Doomer and Doomer girl is similar to the connection between the Yes Chad and the Trad Wife discussed above. This was the first major Wojak to come from outside of 4chan since 2012, being posted to reddit in early 2020. While still clearly beholden to the male gaze, this is the first female Wojak that is both positive representation and not explicitly

[38] Philipp. "Trad Girl / Tradwife." Know Your Meme, Literally Media, 23 Dec. 2019, knowyourmeme.com/memes/trad-girl-tradwife.
[39] Papatoastie. "Chudjak." Know Your Meme, Literally Media, 6 Oct. 2020, knowyourmeme.com/memes/chudjak.
[40] Philipp. "Doomer Girl." Know Your Meme, Literally Media, 7 Jan. 2020, knowyourmeme.com/memes/doomer-girl.

tied to conservative beliefs. Later in the year, a set of various black female Wojaks were posted on X.[41] These featured diverse representation without an implied political message, clearly marking the new, non-conservative audience that the Wojaks had found.

Famously, 2020 was defined by a global pandemic that saw much of society quarantining at home, which meant internet spaces became much more popular and important for social needs.[42] People who were not previously invested in internet culture and the development of memes were suddenly much more likely to be exposed to them, and I contend that the current popularity of the Wojak comic format is likely due in large part to that shift. Another form of online media that saw a large boost in consumers during the pandemic was live streaming, with people filling their new-found free time with live stream viewing at a level previously unseen.[43] One popular genre of live stream is reaction content, in which streamers react to all kinds of online media, including memes. Wojaks ended up being featured in many of these live streams, exposing an even wider audience to their existence and furthering their popularity.

From this point onwards, hundreds of new and specific Wojaks have come about, but almost all of them are based on the characters featured above in one way or another. Wojak comics have come to fill the niche left by rage comics, a similar format popular in the early 2010's,[44] and are now popular and recognizable wherever memes are found.

Wojaks, as a whole, spent most of their existence on 4Chan. 4Chan is infamous for the content and culture the site fosters, being one of the last popular websites that adheres strictly to

[41] Philipp. "Black Wojaks." Know Your Meme, Literally Media, 22 Dec. 2020, knowyourmeme.com/memes/black-wojaks.

[42] Alheneidi, Hasah, et al. "Loneliness and problematic internet use during COVID-19 lock-down." *Behavioral Sciences* 11.1 (2021): 5.

[43] Leith, Alex P., and Erin Gheen. "Twitch in the time of quarantine: The role of engagement in needs fulfillment." *Psychology of Popular Media* 11.3 (2022): 275.

[44] Sav. "Rage Comics." Know Your Meme, Literally Media, 20 May 2011, knowyourmeme.com/memes/subcultures/rage-comics.

freedom of speech rules. They allow essentially any content (short of clearly illegal content) to be posted and remain on the various boards that make up the site. This has led to many fringe groups whose opinions are rejected or disallowed on other social media to conglomerate on 4Chan, creating a culture founded on those beliefs. This includes groups like the alt-right, incels, and neo-Nazis, with a great deal of overlap between them. 4Chan consists of various boards with their own topics ranging from benign, like literature or music, to outright malicious, like the politically incorrect board, better known as /pol/, which is perhaps the most well-known board outside of the website. /Pol/ has consistently been home to the groups mentioned above, and is the origin point not only for some Wojaks, but for many memes and ideas popular among these far-right groups. While /pol/ is the worst offender here, the mentioned groups have a presence across the site and are at least heavily normalized if not actively posting on other boards.
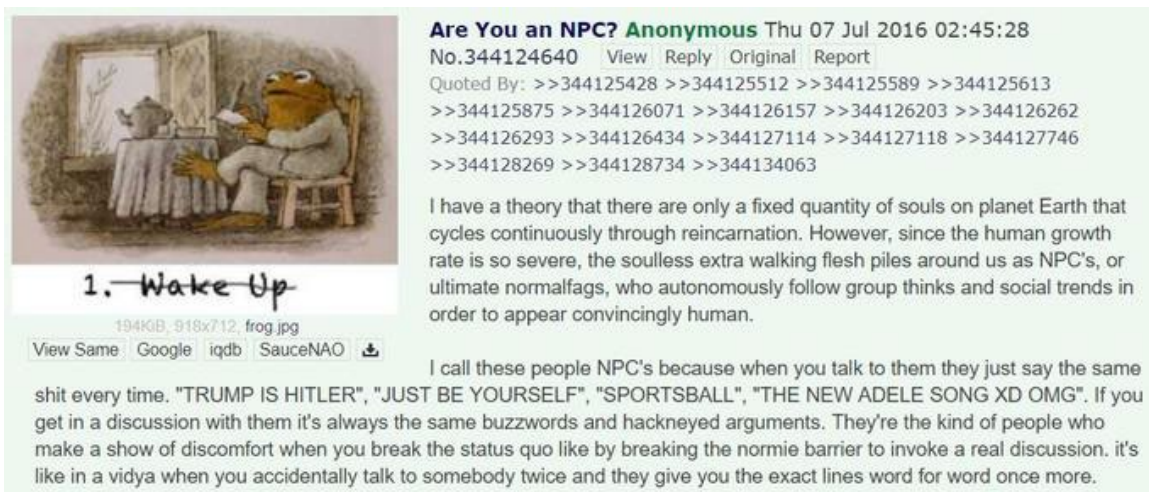

Figure 2: Original NPC Post

The "NPC" concept, for example, actually came from the video games board in 2016, but the original post was full of rhetoric popular among the far-right. The NPC Wojak featured in the timeline began appearing in various threads across 4Chan on September 7th, 2018, specifically about a study that showed many people did not have an internal monologue. On September 10th,

2018, the NPC Wojak as well as the general NPC concept, were posted to X to more directly

insult those the Wojak was meant to mock. By September 14th left leaning X users had

identified the phrase "NPC" as a dog whistle. This, in turn led to thousands of bot accounts

featuring the NPC Wojak as the profile picture to be created on X, but their growing presence

was not widely acknowledged until October 14th, one month later. These bot accounts would

post regurgitated, surface level democratic messaging to flood users' feeds and mock left-leaning

beliefs. Within days of their acknowledgement, the bot accounts were banned en masse, which

sparked a new, albeit less popular, meme among the right which consisted of using the hashtag

#greylivesmatter to lament their banning, mocking the Black Lives Matter movement and

doubling down on the NPC "joke" in one fell swoop. All of this attention led to the meme being

featured on the live streamed far-right show "Infowars" hosted by Alex Jones, in which he held a

competition for people to submit the best Infowars-themed NPC meme.

"Caught in 4k"

Not every far-right meme has such a complicated history, however. Consider the "caught

in 4k" meme. The phrase originated in a 2019 YouTube comedy sketch about a rapper getting

away with murder, in which he is caught on camera committing his crime.[45] The phrase did not

become popular until 2020, when an X user posted a clip from the sketch in response to people

discovering the identity of a famous gay youtuber's secret boyfriend from his arm tattoo.[46] Not

only was this an outing, but it also implied that being gay is somehow wrong and deserving of

being "caught". While not initially offensive, the phrase took on a homophobic connotation after

[45] RDCworld1. "How Lawyers Always Get Rappers Off." YouTube, Google, 7 Aug. 2019,
www.youtube.com/watch?v=3RcZsdgcEHk.
[46] Philipp. "Caught in 4K." Know Your Meme, Literally Media, 23 Jan. 2021, knowyourmeme.com/memes/caught-in-4k#fn3.

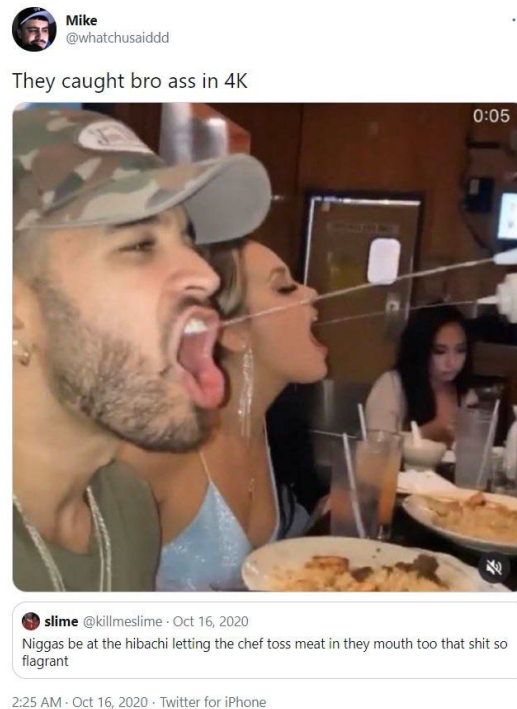this incident. For much of 2020, this phrase was used to call out and mock anything perceived as gay.

Figure 3: An Example of the "Caught In 4k" Meme

As the meme grew in popularity and spread to other websites, this initial homophobic intent, while certainly still present, began to be diluted by more general uses of the phrase. From this point, the phrase became a part of a common internet vocabulary, used in many non-homophobic contexts with no acknowledgement of why the meme was initially popular. Similar to the Wojaks, this meme's journey to public appeal began during the pandemic and owes much of its popularity to its use in live streams. Specifically in the game Among Us, in which players must find one murderous impostor among all the crewmates on a spaceship. The game saw massive popularity during 2020 and was the most popular game being streamed for a few months. The phrase's initial popularity coincided with the rise of this game, resulting in the

phrase being used frequently when catching the impostor, and being spread even further to various streamers' large audiences.

Unlike the Wojaks, "Caught in 4k" proliferated primarily on X before spreading to the rest of the internet. X is not an overwhelmingly right leaning platform, but there is certainly a far-right presence on the site. In addition, a strong culture of insults and internet conflict thrives there, often being the battleground where people online argue and escalate situations, both for their own satisfaction and for the engagement that comes with conflict and strong opinions. While homophobia is often acknowledged or critiqued in these interactions, that does not mean everyone is on the same page and, often, callouts are ignored or downplayed for the sake of comedy and entertainment.

Figure 4: An Example of Criticism of the "Caught In 4K" Meme

For example, this post that features two men napping together being "caught in 4k" was criticized by X user yomiverse, receiving just over 200 likes. By contrast, the original tweet has well over 40k likes and most of the top replies are doubling down on the "joke."[47] Interactions like this allow phrases like "caught in 4K" to become new manifestations of homophobia or other bigoted beliefs because comedy reigns supreme. Often, the time it takes for the joke to die leaves room for the meme's bigoted connotations to change before enough people can recognize their origins. This meme falls into that category, with the initial comedy of the phrase

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[47] Shannonnn sharpes Burner (PARODY Account). "Bro Got Mad Because They Got Caught in 4K

outweighing political concerns until it became popular and unspecified enough for people to move on to more pressing, overtly bigoted memes that have popped up in the meantime.

"Fatherless Behavior"

The last example that will be discussed in this paper is the phrase "fatherless behavior". The earliest archived appearance of this phrase in its current context was an Urban Dictionary entry from January 4th, 2021, that defined the phrase as "When you weird as hell for no reason".[48] A later, more fleshed out definition essentially defines the phrase as an evolution of the "daddy issues" concept, an idea with its own misogynistic history.[49] For decades now, many women and some others were accused of having "daddy issues" in response to rejections of conservative femininity or sexual purity. "Fatherless behavior", like "daddy issues", almost immediately began being used to mock members of the LGBTQ community, as well as any woman who does not fit traditional notions of femininity (Liberals, sex workers, etc.), claiming their identities are due to a lack of a strong male figure in their lives. Early spread of this phrase happened through normal processes, until the phrase was picked up by a selection of popular streamers who admired and often platformed the infamous and self-proclaimed misogynist Andrew Tate. This group included some of the most popular streamers of all time across all platforms, like Adin Ross and N3ON. Accusing internet users of "fatherless behavior" became much more popular after being adopted by these streamers, becoming a frequent sight in comment sections on TikTok, Instagram, and many other social media platforms to this day.

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[48] Keller, Adrian. "Fatherless Behavior." Urban Dictionary, Urban Dictionary, 5 Jan. 2021, www.urbandictionary.com/author.php?author=Adrian+keller.

[49] The exquisite wondernator. "Fatherless Behavior." Urban Dictionary, Urban Dictionary, 3 Sept. 2021, www.urbandictionary.com/author.php?author=The+exquisite+wordernator.

Figure 5: An example of the "Fatherless Behavior" Meme

Unlike the other two memes discussed, "Fatherless Behavior" was never really tied to one specific website, instead having a presence across various social media for as long as it was a popular meme. The site hosting the earliest archived use of the phrase, Urban Dictionary, is a crowdsourced website where anyone can post definitions for words or phrases not recognized or defined by larger institutions. While it does feature many bigoted or offensive entries, these exist more as reference than as actual content, and are not explicitly endorsed by the website or the poster of the entry. Urban Dictionary likely was not the actual origin point of this phrase, but wherever it was circulating before is currently unknown as this is the earliest version currently accessible. Its being posted there, however, does tell us that the phrase already had some popularity, but was likely still niche at the time. We know this because Urban Dictionary is a popular website and it does not take much popularity for someone to add a new phrase to the database, but posts with no basis whatsoever are easily buried, so "fatherless behavior" was likely somewhere between the two. While we cannot know all that much about the poster, the

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original definition gives a usage example that reads "You gay asf on that fatherless behavior and shit". Clearly here we can see that, even in the beginning of its popularity, homophobia was a major aspect of its use.

This meme's lack of a home website makes its spread somewhat difficult to track, but it can be connected with a specific group of streamers and their figurehead, Andrew Tate. Tate's beliefs include the ideas that men and women are inherently different, it is a man's job to be a strong leader, and it is a woman's job to be virtuous and chaste.[50] While not inherently bad things to be, his gendering of these traits is clearly misogynistic. His claimed beliefs here are also challenged by the ongoing sex trafficking charges he is currently being tried for in Romania.[51] Despite all of this, or perhaps because of it, many streamers chose to platform and uplift his tenets, with some even having him on their streams prior to his arrest.

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[50] Tate, Andrew. "41 Tenets." Cobratate, TopG, www.cobratate.com/41-tenets#tenet1.
[51] Franks, Josephine. "Who Is Andrew Tate, the Self-Styled 'King of Toxic Masculinity', Awaiting Trial in Romania?" Sky News, Sky, 4 Apr. 2024, news.sky.com/story/who-is-andrew-tate-the-self-styled-king-of-toxic-masculinity-arrested-in-romania-12776832.
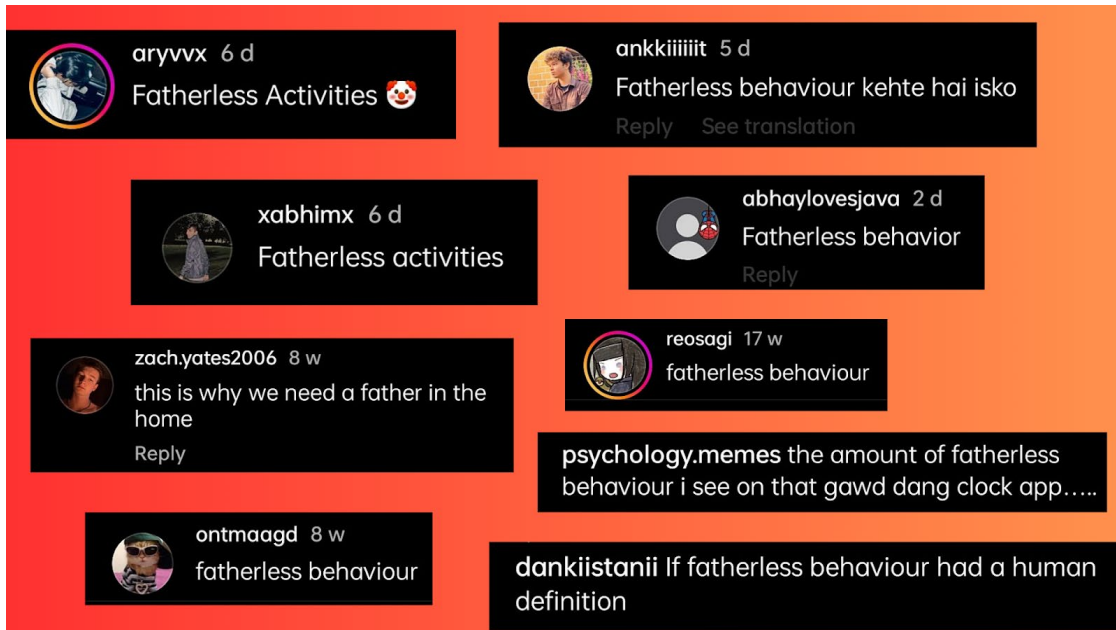
Figure 6: Examples of Commenters Using "Fatherless Behavior"

This is the subculture in which "fatherless behavior" rose to popularity, and that can tell us quite a bit about the phrase's intended usage. Currently, the phrase still pops up in comment sections across the internet, mainly on TikTok and Instagram. Unlike the other two examples discussed, the meaning never really changed. It is still meant to say, "you are deviant from the conservative norm, and that is due to your lack of a father." People are not regularly using the phrase thinking it means something else, it just has become so prevalent that commenters who say it are not being questioned or criticized the same way they likely would be if they were just bluntly sexist or homophobic. Rather than standing out in comment sections like most bigotry, the ubiquity of the phrase allows it to blend in as just another funny internet phrase. The normalization of this phrase has, by extension, somewhat normalized the beliefs expressed within it, and this can be seen by the sustained use of the phrase years after its initial popularity.

The examples discussed above illustrate three unique but similar journeys of memes that originated or were first popular with far-right users before becoming common, popular, and

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thereby normalized on the wider internet. The Wojak meme spent a decade on 4Chan, the most popular meeting site for far-right internet users, before becoming a successful non-political meme. "Caught in 4k" was co-opted from an unrelated video to mock queerness before losing some of its initial edge and then, again, becoming a popular non-political meme. The ideas behind "Fatherless Behavior" existed as a concept for decades (i.e. daddy issues) before appearing online as "fatherless behavior". It was then bolstered by a group of streamers dedicated to misogynistic ideas who were so successful that the phrase bypassed regular checks and balances meant to halt offensive memes and became prevalent across the internet. What, then, do all of these memes have in common? Tacit endorsement of bigoted ideas contained within them. Many Wojaks remain offensive caricatures or borderline conservative propaganda (Yes Chad and Trad Wife) but are still being used regularly by people of varying political beliefs seemingly unaware or inconsiderate of their origin. "Caught in 4k," despite having lost some of its specificity, is still regularly used in a homophobic way. Because it is considered a familiar and funny meme, however, genuine criticisms often go unheard or are outright mocked. "Fatherless behavior" is simply misogyny or homophobia packaged in an easily digestible, easily repeatable phrase, allowing it to generally avoid criticism because the number of people using it or ignoring it outweighs the number of people who are aware of what it means and want to criticize it. All three of these memes have managed to take far-right ideas about race, gender, and sexuality, and introduce them to the generally left-leaning social media most people frequent.

We know what these memes are, and we have seen how they can spread, but why does it matter? These are irreverent jokes on the internet, so what is the harm? This line of thinking is all too common and a major part of why these memes are able to spread unquestioned. Currently,

meme culture is rooted heavily in irreverence,[52] so attempts to take them seriously are often met with that same irreverence. There are, in fact, many reasons why this kind of humor and online activity are harmful as well as representative of changing attitudes in online communities. The internet is no longer isolated, and online happenings regularly have real-world consequences. In order to determine how far-right normalization may progress, I will go over the history of comedy as a political tool, and what we can learn by analyzing a community's humor.

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[52] Górka, Marek. "The meme as an example of carnivalized internet communication." *Kwartalnik Naukowy OAP UW "e-Politikon"* 9 (2014): 215-242.

Irreverence and Indoctrination: How Comedy affects our Politics

Comedy and Politics have a long history, existing for just about as long as society itself. In this time, both have changed and evolved in countless ways but have always remained somewhat connected. From jesters to stand-ups to memes, comedy has been a powerful tool in expressing a political opinion in a more digestible way.[53] In this section, I will establish that history and discuss how it has changed in modern times, as well as how it has stayed the same. I will then apply my findings to the examples discussed above to understand the implications of their popularity and what consequences may follow if they are left unchecked.

According to a 1985 essay by L.E. Mintz, every society has had a fool.[54] While in modern times these "fools" are generally intentional in their comedy, historically fools have been those who are easily mocked: Developmentally disabled people, outsiders, anyone left vulnerable by whatever systems of privilege were in place at the time. If we consider modern culture, and especially internet culture, there are few groups more readily mocked than the far-right. Their beliefs are generally unpopular and tend to crumble against any mildly researched argument. Despite this, they generally have a passionate insistence that their views are right. The thing about fools, however, is that their being vulnerable to mockery also offers some protection. If people see these those on the far-right as so absurd that they're not worth taking seriously, it becomes very easy to miss when they are successful in spreading their message. Because of this "protection", it is all too easy to see some of the more blatantly problematic creations of this group and brush them off as niche ramblings of a dying political identity rather than take the time to consider the implications of something so problematic achieving such popularity.

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[53] Olson, S. Douglas. "Comedy, politics, and society." *Brill's Companion to the Study of Greek Comedy*. Brill, 2010. 35-69.
[54] Mintz, Lawrence E. "Standup comedy as social and cultural mediation." *American Quarterly* 37.1 (1985): 71-80.

These people are not quite fools in the historical sense because they are generally aware of and are responsible for their place in the overall culture, rather than having the role thrust upon them due to things they cannot change about themselves. Later in Mintz's essay, he discusses various stand-up comedians and how they maintain some power while playing the "fool" role. Joan Rivers, he explains, created a self-deprecating comedic persona largely based around her not fitting into societal expectations for women. Many audience members, primarily men, laughed because they shared these ideas of an ideal woman, and found her comedy acknowledging those ideas to be funny. Many others though, primarily women, were laughing because Joan was mocking the very societal expectations she was discussing. While some found the routine funny because of what was literally being said, many others were able to look deeper into her jokes and find a message that was counter to what was being literally said. In this example, we can see that people on opposite sides of a subject can enjoy the same joke simply due to varying interpretations, and this is due in large part to Joan's "fool" status. Opposing interpretations resulting in the same reaction can be observed in usage of the memes discussed earlier in this thesis, and perhaps more so. Online culture, and specifically meme culture, is marked by both absurdity and self-reference.[55] When people use any of the examples previously discussed, there is an inherent comedy to the repeated use of the meme. When someone comments "caught in 4k" the first thought is rarely analysis of its use, rather it is an acknowledgment of a person's familiarity with it and past uses they have seen. This results in people unaware of the meme's origins laughing due to their knowledge of its existence, while others who are aware may be laughing because they have all the necessary context. Some people are in on the joke, others are not, but they laugh just the same.

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[55] Owens, Jay. "Post-authenticity and the ironic truths of meme culture." *Post memes: Seizing the memes of production* (2019): 77-113.

Similarly, Mintz describes the comedy of Redd Foxx, in which he regularly discussed taboo topics regarding sex and relationships. In his routine, the audience was observed having two distinct reactions to a routine about the benefits of oral sex. Older audience members recoiled in laughter, looking at those around them to assure each other that the comedy here was based on the absurdity of the statement, while younger audiences laughed and cheered in clear agreement with the sentiment. Again, we can confirm that two very different interpretations of a joke can yield the same result. When exposed to the more blatantly offensive memes of the far-right, some are laughing because of the absurdity, while others laugh because they agree, but again they laugh just the same. I have established that the same comedy can appeal to diametrically opposed groups, simply because most people assume they are in on the joke and that their interpretation is the correct one. Is an overly bigoted Wojak an absurd criticism of its original users, or is it an earnest mocking of a marginalized group? In the fast-paced culture of the internet, it can often be difficult to tell, and we need to rely on our own interpretation to determine what is what.

Our understanding of comedy's ability to be enjoyed by people on either side of a joke is incomplete without establishing who these sides may consist of and what divides them. In a paper discussing class and comedy, Sam Friedman analyzes individuals with Low Cultural Capital (LCC) and those with High Cultural Capital (HCC).[56] Despite some research claiming that most people are now comedic "omnivores" open to all kinds of comedy,[57] Friedman finds that there are clear distinguishers between the two groups. Firstly, HCC respondents had moral

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[56] Friedman, Sam, and Giselinde Kuipers. "The divisive power of humour: Comedy, taste and symbolic boundaries." *Cultural Sociology*, vol. 7, no. 2, 27 Mar. 2013, pp. 179–195, https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975513477405.
[57] Warde, Alan, Lydia Martens, and Wendy Olsen. "Consumption and the problem of variety: cultural omnivorousness, social distinction and dining out." *Sociology* 33.1 (1999): 105-127.

issues with "low class" comedy, disliking how brash and often offensive it is. LCC respondents, on the other hand, were more likely to acknowledge a perceived higher quality in high class comedy, but also defend their own tastes based on relatability. While this research was done on more traditional modes of comedy like television and stand-up, the ideas absolutely apply to online comedy as well. The cost of entry for the internet is generally low, with free internet being available in many places, so it has become a major meeting place for members of the working class. Upper class people use the internet as well but are able to do more in the real world because they do not need to worry about issues of cost as much as the working class does. This means those in power, generally upper class, are not as deeply ingrained in internet culture and are generally less interested in keeping up with it, meaning they may be unaware of how influential certain memes and online personalities can be.[58] The working class, on the other hand, is responsible for the majority of meme culture, and are generally much more in tune with what exactly is occurring online. This means that those who have the knowledge to identify grassroots bigotry appearing in memes do not have the power to stop it, while those with the power lack the knowledge necessary to do something about it. We must also consider the culture of resistance among LCC internet users, which means any criticism coming from HCC users, even if in agreement with the politics of an LCC user, may be ignored due to prevailing attitudes on class divides often superseding beliefs on political divides. Left-leaning internet users may not want to hear from "liberal elites" even if they are in agreement, because class divides often take priority.[59]

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[58] Lee, Lisa. "The impact of young people's internet use on class boundaries and life trajectories." *Sociology* 42.1 (2008): 137-153.
[59] Fuchs, Christian. "Class and Exploitation on the Internet." *Digital labor*. Routledge, 2012. 211-224.

Returning to the idea of absurdity, it may also be difficult for a user unfamiliar with the culture of the internet to understand the layers behind a meme's usage. Just seeing one of these pictures or phrases without context may not immediately reveal their bigoted nature, resulting in the meme being interpreted as having no deeper meaning and instead being funny simply because everyone has agreed it is, which is the case for many memes. Nothing about the original Wojak will tell a viewer it came from 4Chan, that fact requires some knowledge of internet history and the migration of memes, and that information is not always readily available. This means there are at least three different possible interpretations of the same meme. Right wing LCC users may laugh because of the blatant or latent bigotry in one of these memes. Left wing LCC users may laugh because they read the meme as satire, finding comedy in the perceived mocking of opposing beliefs. Finally, HCC users on either side who lack the context to fully understand the meme may laugh because it is absurd, which may be punchline enough to them.

Having established the different interpretations that can be drawn from the same meme, we must now consider what could come of that. There are reasons why anyone, regardless of class or politics, can find these things funny, but what are the consequences of that? This section will analyze literature on how media we consume affects our politics and what that means for meme culture. In an article discussing online political parody and its effects on an audience, Amy Becker analyzes what forms of media result in higher internal political efficacy, which is an individual's own confidence in their ability to engage in politics.[60] The study found that exposure to traditional forms of network news and cable news resulted in greater internal political efficacy, while exposure to network comedy yields less internal political efficacy. Online humor, on the other hand, also had a positive effect on an individual's internal political

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[60] Becker, Amy B. "Playing with politics: Online political parody, affinity for political humor, anxiety reduction, and implications for political efficacy." *Mass Communication and Society* 17.3 (2014): 424-445.

efficacy. We can see that, despite comedy making people less certain about politics offline, online comedy actually strengthens a person's belief in their abilities to contend with real world politics. The article also found that republican internal political efficacy is increased when seeing democrat-directed material criticizing republican beliefs, while this effect is not mirrored with democrats. This finding makes clear the issues with reclaiming meme formats designed or popularized by the right. According to the data, co-opting right-wing memes will likely only serve to strengthen right-leaning beliefs rather than hurt them. On the other hand, someone on the right co-opting a left leaning meme will likely see greater success in getting their point across and weakening the beliefs of whoever they are criticizing. Either way, participating in the same memes as those on the right only results in greater internal political efficacy for the right no matter who posts it, while it may have a negative effect for those on the left.

We also must consider how likely it is that any of this online talk yields real world results. Obviously, an individual's political opinions matter because they have a vote and can influence those around them, but one person's beliefs among the millions in the US generally will not have a noticeable impact. What may, however, is further political action beyond just a vote or a conversation. According to another article by Becker, viewers of network television are much more likely to engage in "easy" political action (signing a petition, commenting on a politician's website or social media) if given a call to action by whoever they are viewing.[61] While the research did not study how a call to action would affect internet users, we can make some educated guesses based on research covered in the live streaming section in combination with the research detailed above. Firstly, Becker finds that much of the motivation for these network viewers comes from a sense of mutual benefit and agreement with the entertainer.

[61] Bode, Leticia, and Amy B. Becker. "Go fix it: Comedy as an agent of political activation." *Social Science Quarterly* 99.5 (2018): 1572-1584.

People heed this call to action not just because they agree politically, but because they are fans of the one calling them to action and have a level of respect for them resulting in their increased likeliness to act. The greater the feeling of connection with the entertainer, the more likely a viewer is to listen. This effect, I believe, is likely even stronger in the online communities fostered by live streamers. As established in the previous section on live streaming motivations, community and audience participation is a major factor in retaining an audience, even more so than with traditional media, so the effect of a call to action would likely be heightened. We have seen examples of this kind of communal political action before. For example, in 2020 Donald Trump boasted over a million tickets had been requested for his Tulsa rally, only for actual attendance to be below ten thousand. This was due to a TikTok campaign to reserve tickets and inflate expectations with no intention of actually attending.[62] The ticket reserving was done in protest of Trump's politics and happened organically as the idea spread around TikTok, being spread further by popular TikTok users. We can see that a concerted effort from united internet users can have real world effects, and few communities online display stronger loyalty than those of live streamers and their fans.

While direct calls to action are not most streamers' usual fare, it is not unheard of. Around elections, more overtly politically motivated streamers tend to voice their opinion and encourage their generally young audiences to go out and vote. Sometimes, people like Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and other internet savvy politicians make guest appearances on live streams, further amplifying these calls to action. On the opposite side, we have the streamers discussed earlier who regularly platformed Andrew Tate and his ideology. These streams featuring Tate were often full of actionable advice and calls to action from Tate on

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[62] Lorenz, Taylor, et al. "Tiktok Teens and K-Pop Stans Say They Sank Trump Rally." The New York Times, The New York Times, 21 June 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/06/21/style/tiktok-trump-rally-tulsa.html.

how young men in the audience could improve themself, improve their finances, and identify "high-value women" to pursue. While less involved in traditional political action like voting or protesting, the behaviors encouraged by Tate often erred on problematic, encouraging young men to belittle those who did not fit within conservative heteronormative ideals and essentially harass women they desired. Not to mention that holding those misogynistic beliefs will likely influence an individual's political leanings to better fit those beliefs.

Another factor discussed in the Becker article and worth considering here is how entry-level political action may affect an individual's internal political efficacy. Calls to action were not shown to impact raising or lowering internal political efficacy; people are either interested in politics or not, but Becker posits that what may change that measurement is regular political action of any kind. She concludes that while a call to action may not make a person call their representative if that is beyond their usual scope of political action, regularly signing petitions and seeing change as a result likely will. Despite not having an initial effect on that person's internal political efficacy, a call to action may result in someone doing something "easy", making them more likely to do something "harder" than if they had not been called to action at all. In this way, these "easy" activities serve as a gateway into greater political action, and thus greater internal political efficacy. Internet users who simply see a right leaning meme likely will not immediately take on those beliefs and act on them, but seeing said beliefs echoed, encouraged, and normalized may, over time, strengthen those right leaning beliefs while weakening opposing views, steadily shifting online opinions towards the right. Minor as it may be, creating or even just interacting with politically charged memes is a form of political action, and the sustained usage of them can yield stronger action over time.

I have established how a person may be influenced politically by the content they engage with as well as what exactly is being said and who is saying it, but does this apply to memes presented on their own? Is being featured in a live stream enough for these memes to have a tangible effect on the viewer? Earlier in the thesis, we discussed an analysis of memes that utilized ideas from critical race theory (and by extension, critical humor theory) that found memes with offensive elements, whether they be blatant or subtle, still have an effect in normalizing those offensive elements regardless of how much context the viewer has.[63] If a person does not understand the meme to be offensive, the offensive things about it do not disappear, they just become normalized. We can see this with the progression of "fatherless behavior", which may seem like a harmless phrase if someone is unaware of the misogyny inherent to it, but still normalizes the idea that not having a father is in some way bad. Based on CHT, I can draw the conclusion that any of the memes featured throughout this paper have risks associated with their sharing even if they are not directly supported by the streamer sharing them, because anything short of overt criticism may result in a normalization of the problematic ideas contained within the memes. There are, of course, streamers and content creators out there who make a career of calling out bigotry online, with a so called "cancel culture" being pervasive in many online spaces, but they are generally less focused on memes that are subtly offensive, like the "Wojak" or "Caught in 4k", and instead focus on more egregious breaches of online etiquette, morals, or even legality. This is where we find the other issue. I've established that memes, in general, are not taken very seriously. This is in their nature, they are meant to be irreverent and casual, but it has consequences when bigotry is part of that casual irreverence. For most people online who seek to call out bigotry, there are seemingly bigger fish to fry. Everyday

[63] Yoon, InJeong. "Why is it not just a joke? Analysis of Internet memes associated with racism and hidden ideology of colorblindness." *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education* 33.1 (2016).

there are real neo-Nazis or fascists online spewing all kinds of hate, so something like
the "Wojak" falls to the wayside as more pressing matters are handled. The trouble is the stream
of new bigots is essentially never ending, and online culture never gets around to reckoning with
how popular memes from the far-right are getting. This allows mildly bigoted ideas to approach
normalization while attention is focused on more overtly bigoted content, slowly but surely
having an effect on overall attitudes towards what is okay to meme about and what warrants
criticism. Analyzing these memes through the lens of CHT, however, we can prove categorically
that these memes are manifestations of bigotry, even if subtle, and generally progressive
politically minded internet users should be avoiding their usage altogether, rather than engaging
with them in a reclaimatory way as they currently are.

Figure 7: An Example of a "Reclaimed" Use of the "Fatherless Behavior" Meme

In the example seen above, we can see an X user calling Andrew Tate "fatherless" in
response to a post from Tate detailing his tenuous relationship with his father. While

reclaimatory in nature, the implication here is still that Tate behaves the way he does because he lacks a father, which is the same point made in its original use. Even if turning out as a misogynist is very different from turning out queer, the central notion here is that the lack of a father makes someone into something negative in the poster's eyes, which is the same misogyny in more obviously bigoted uses of the meme.

Overall, these memes have political influence in a number of ways, ranging from slow changing of ideas to immediate calls to action. Downplaying the effects of this kind of comedy only heightens the results, and notions of memes being casual and unimportant are precisely what make them so powerful. The comedy here shields these memes from most of the criticism they would face if we stripped away everything except for the bigotry at their centers.

What's The Punchline? An Analysis of My Findings

Considering my findings so far, I can create a comprehensive analysis of how and why far-right memes travel, as well as the effects they may have on the wider internet ecosystem. Memes come about in a number of ways, but the one general constant is an organic beginning. A meme cannot be forced to happen, it must find an audience and spread through regular content circulation, meaning very few memes ever gain any kind of popularity. The existence of customized algorithms for individual users across all major social media platforms means users generally only see things curated to their tastes unless they go out of their way to see something else. This means each person's experience of the internet is individual, which generally makes a meme's popularity reliant on an organic spread across different internet subgroups. This process, however, can be influenced by creators with large platforms sharing and spreading a meme. While an organically popularized meme needs to be popular and non-controversial to be seen by millions of people, a streamer can take a meme of any size or political leaning and immediately broadcast it to their entire fanbase, massively boosting the meme's popularity. While this may seem initially harmless as most memes do not carry much political weight or outright bigotry, maintaining popularity as a streamer requires a great deal of content, and specifically less well-known content. By law of large numbers alone, the occasional bigoted meme is bound to be included in the huge amount of content needed to maintain an entertaining stream, but that is not the only reason one might be featured. Most memes that become popular completely on their own need to be somewhat neutral, appealing to users on any side of the political aisle, so the most popular memes are the politically neutral ones, thus making them less beneficial to the streamer's success. At the same time, far-right online spaces contain a great deal of content that, almost by definition, is unknown to the mainstream. 4chan and other popular sites among the

right are rife with memes untapped by the wider internet culture, making them excellent sources for novel, interesting content. Content that was once niche is pulled from these spaces and presented to much larger numbers of viewers, generally without the context of where the meme originated or what the original joke was. When streamers reproduce far-right memes out of context the bigoted ideas present in the memes circulate unchecked. Then, as more and more people are exposed to the content without criticism or even the basic information needed to understand the concept of the joke, they become normalized and spread still further.

The content we consume informs and influences our opinions and beliefs; this is true of everyone. Ideally, people consume with a critical eye, looking past the surface level to see what is really being said in any given piece of content, but this simply is not always the case. Nowadays, content is fast-paced, and this is even more true for online content. Everyday internet users see hundreds and hundreds of creations online, and there simply is not time to unpack everything, so things that seem less important tend to go unanalyzed. Of all the kinds of content users can consume online, memes are often seen as the form with the lowest stakes, due to meme culture being heavily based on absurdism and irreverence. Not taking it too seriously is part of the experience, which unfortunately makes it very easy to avoid criticism when posting memes with more bigoted intentions. This failure to think critically about the seemingly less important content we consume results in all kinds of ideas being normalized, bigoted or otherwise. The issue is that right leaning beliefs and the people who hold them are proven to be less affected by being exposed to opposing ideas, while those on the left are more easily swayed when seeing ideas counter to their own. These bigoted memes go unchecked for a variety of reasons detailed above and are allowed to proliferate as if they do not tacitly endorse bigoted beliefs. This still does not pose an immediate issue as simply seeing one or two memes that endorse bigoted ideas

will not singlehandedly radicalize someone, but sustained exposure over time combined with support from an online community can, bit by bit, shift an individual's political beliefs and ideas of what political actions they are interested in. One of the most worrying aspects of this whole process is precisely that it is a slow boil rather than something immediate. Obvious and pressing examples of bigotry online are often quickly criticized and handled, but there is always something new to fill the gap left behind, meaning the problems that are more innocuous or slower are simply never addressed. Not only does this allow bigoted memes to spread unchecked, it heightens the effect as we have seen slow but sustained influence has a greater impact on how people engage in politics than brash and obvious political statements and memes.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed far-right memes, the live streams that feature them, and theory about comedy and its effects on political influence. Based on past research as well as specific case studies, I have found that memes popular with the far-right have been able to become normalized through their featuring on live streams and the decontextualization that comes with the increasingly fast-paced spread of content online. Using comedic analysis tools as well as political research we can see that, while this is a clear and present issue, it is also increasingly hard to detect, making it all the more important that consumers are aware of the methods through which these memes can become normalized. I have also found that the subtlety of this spread can have marked effects on an individual's political beliefs over time, slowly but surely shifting online norms towards those of the far-right.

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