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Research Roundup Newsletter: April 2023

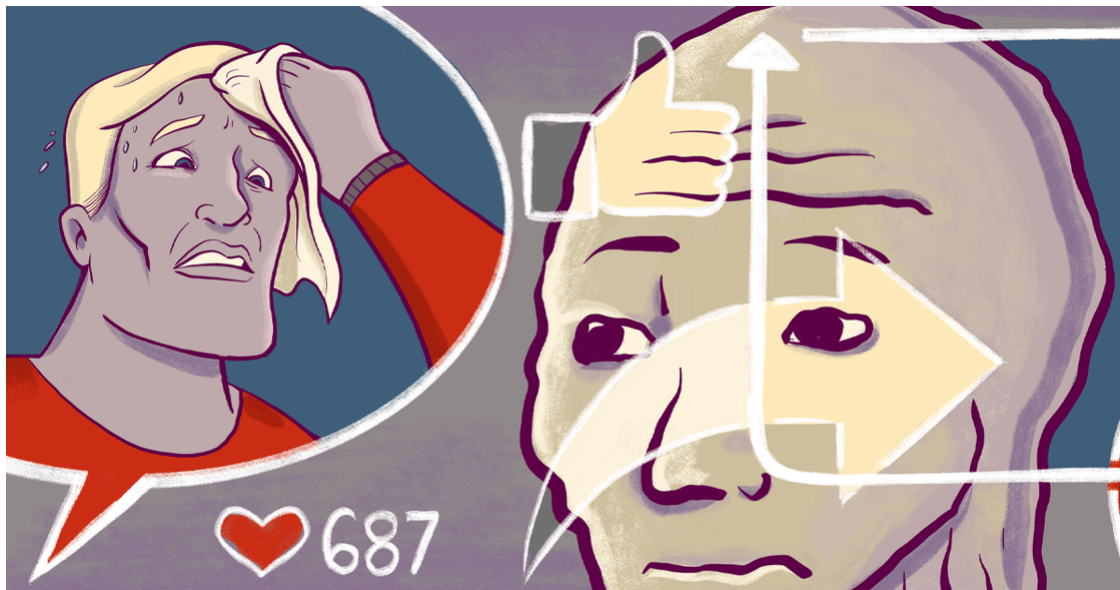National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center

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NCITE RESEARCH ROUNDUP
Use of memes by violent extremists

Dear NCITE Community,

Welcome to NCITE's second *Research Roundup*, in which we share plain language summaries of recent research on timely topics. In this issue, we focus on the use of memes by violent extremists to spread their ideologies and radicalize others to violence.

In an era in which we increasingly live and communicate online, it is critical that we understand how online tools can be used to spread extremism. Memes are one such set of tools. We have all seen them online – some iteration of Success Kid celebrating an accomplishment or Boromir telling us, "One does not simply …" They have become a ubiquitous part of internet life. However, in the same way users can create memes to express funny ideas, they can also create memes to share extremist sentiments or advocate for violence.

In this mailing, you will learn about how memes are used to spread extremist rhetoric, why they are so effective, and how practitioners can intervene. You'll see that many of the articles highlighted focus on a specific ideology – however, the underlying psychological mechanisms likely apply regardless of ideology. Although memes may be more widely used by racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists (REMVE) or anti-government, anti-authority violent extremists (AGAAVE) at the moment, they could easily be adapted by any set of extremist actors. With that, I'd encourage readers to think about how the key takeaways from the highlighted articles apply broadly, rather than focusing on any one ideology or set of actors.

In this *Research Roundup*, you will find:

- Plain-language summaries and links to new academic articles (and one practitioner tool)
- Updates on relevant work by members of the NCITE consortium
- A list of resources for further exploration

Please let us know if you have ideas for future topics, or if you'd like more information on any of the resources provided.

Sincerely,

What does the research say?

First Responder's Toolbox: Use of memes by violent extremists
By National Counterterrorism Center, Department of Homeland Security, and Federal Bureau of Investigation (2022)

The National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) completed a report on the use of memes by violent extremists as part of their First Responder's Toolbox reference aids. Memes are simpler for consumption by wider audiences and can spread extremist narratives in a way that is indirect and ambiguous, potentially leading to recruitment. The report provides considerations for law enforcement in differentiating between memes that are innocuous and those that are harmful and likely to incite further action. This may include working with private-sector partners and community members, using computer-based methods and human analysis, understanding how

cyber platforms handle possibly harmful messaging, and evaluating the meme, the messenger, and the potential effects of the post.

Key Takeaways

- Use of memes can normalize extremist narratives and create collective identities between groups.
- Indicators for radicalization and possible violence can be contained in memes and the sharing of these messages online.
- It can be difficult to distinguish which memes are malicious, and considerations should be taken to properly evaluate posts.

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Memetic irony and the promotion of violence within chan cultures

By F. Keen, B. Crawford, G. Suarez-Tangil (2020)

These authors conducted data scraping, ethnography, and visual analysis of 12 chan sites (fast-paced, anonymous message boards) in the summer of 2020. They found that these chan sites foster in-group status through the sharing of digital media that requires some cultural knowledge to feel included. While they found a vast number of ideologies present within these sites, they conclude that the complex visual content and shared sense of out-groups builds these online communities. The authors provide recommendations for analyzing these message boards, including enhancing digital literacy and building crowd-sourced hateful meme databases.

Key Takeaways

- Memes may be explicitly extremist or may take this meaning only in the context of other extremist narratives. It is important to promote digital literacy and understanding of chan culture to better interpret these memes.
- Users may post memes to reinforce their own narratives following major moments of political unrest such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the summer 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in the United States.

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Islamogram: Salafism and alt-right online subcultures

By M. Ayad (2021)

This report looks at shifts and emerging trends in Salafi subculture, particularly in the online ecosystem known as "Islamogram." The authors analyzed the use of visual posts on different internet platforms to better understand the use of humor and the targets of the self-declared "meme war" for Gen-Z Salafis. The research focuses on young followers and their use of memes to engage with and recruit a younger audience. The analyses help researchers better understand the cultural beliefs that Gen-Z Salafis fight against, further establishing in-group and out-group narratives. Further, they find that the use of memes and videos by individuals on the internet makes it more difficult to classify individuals along the traditional spectrum of involvement in Salafi Jihadism, due to varying degrees of participation online.

Key Takeaways

- Internet subcultures of online groups such as video gaming, alt-right or far-right, and chan groups are being used by Gen-Z Salafi members to spread their views through memes and visual culture.
- These communities build younger audiences and are primarily active in the West, although there are ties to the Middle East.
- Many of these memes, videos, and posts are found on mainstream platforms such as Instagram, Discord, Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and Telegram.

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From cyberfascism to terrorism: On 4chan/pol/culture and the transnational production of memetic violence
By C. Thorleifsson (2022)

This report analyzes the anonymous political discussion imageboard /pol/ on the website 4chan. This imageboard has been associated with racism and white supremacy, and extremist narratives are often espoused through posts, including memes. The author analyzed the imageboard for six months following the Christchurch shooting in New Zealand, finding an influx of posts praising the perpetrator's actions and creating memes out of the attack. This influx came, in part, from the perpetrator's manifesto and livestream of the shooting, where he made references to chan culture and asked viewers to make memes to continue spreading his message. These findings show how some digital spaces create a subculture where malicious memes and jokes can be widely spread to exploit major global events and recruit followers.

Key Takeaways

- Play frames, which use nonserious visualization (i.e., memes) for very serious content (i.e., terrorist acts), make extremist content more accessible to the public on /pol/ and other chan websites.
- While rare, online participation in chan subcultures can lead to and inspire real-world violence. Such is the case with the Christchurch shooting.

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Sharing the hate? Memes and transnationality in the far right's digital visual culture
By J. McSwiney, M. Vaughan, A. Heft, and M. Hoffmann (2021)

This research uses a cross-country design to analyze the transnationality of meme usage across far-right groups in four different countries: Australia, the United States, Germany, and Italy. By analyzing public postings of visual media in organizations throughout these countries, the authors found that there were surprisingly few memes used, and these were primarily concentrated among Australia and the United States – the English-speaking countries. Further, they found that the majority of memes were unique to each organization, with relatively few transnational references or sharing of common memes. However, common symbols, themes, and references were present throughout visual media used by these organizations, including memes. These themes were grouped into three categories by the authors: fascist continuity, western civilizational identity, and pop cultural appropriation.

Key Takeaways

- Most memes that are used by the non-party far-right organizations analyzed globally were related to specific organizations and themes, instead of being applicable transnationally.
- Memes make up only one important aspect of the visual media in the internet subculture of far-right organizations.
- The understanding of individual subcultures and organizations is a key part of analyzing meme usage, due to a lack of transnationality in memes.

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What makes a symbol far right? Co-opted and missed meanings in far-right iconography

By C. Miller-Idriss (2019)

This chapter considers the use and distribution of symbols by far-right groups internationally, including memes. The author conceives three categories of far-right symbols in online and offline spaces: intentionally coded, co-opted, and deliberately or coincidentally offensive. Intentionally coded symbols and iconography are created by individuals or brands with deliberate references to a far-right idea, although this reference may be only understood by a select group of people that are in on the idea. Co-opted symbols, such as the Pepe the Frog meme, are taken from non-far-right contexts, and may provide an opportunity to reference political beliefs in a more subtle way. Finally, recognizable brands – such as Wendy's and Urban Outfitters – have used offensive symbols either deliberately through attempts to draw media attention or coincidentally through ignorance.

Key Takeaways

- Extremist groups may create, appropriate, or use symbols in a way that only those in the "in-group" will understand.
- Symbols may be co-opted by extremist groups, and meanings of symbols may shift in quickly evolving online platforms.
- The spread and usage of memes and symbols in the digital age have changed the way we can attribute meanings to these symbols; it is necessary to understand the evolution of these meanings and monitor their usage.

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Strategic framing and social media engagement: Analyzing memes posted by the German Identitarian Movement on Facebook

By L. Guenther, G. Ruhrmann, J. Bischoff, T. Penzel, and A. Weber (2020)

This study considers a way to analyze memes posted by extremist groups to identify patterns, communication strategies, and characteristics of these groups. Their focus was on the German Identitarian Movement (GIM), a group which operates on many social media platforms and frequently shares ideas through internet memes. The authors chose to use a framing approach to cluster posts into distinct groups that could represent the most important and salient viewpoints of GIM. Through a content analysis of the memes shared on a Facebook group, the authors were able to cluster

the memes into six different patterns of posts in which the group focused on identifying their most important political agendas, recruiting for GIM, and portraying the different aspects of the group in a positive light. Overall, this paper identified strategies that the group used through their intentional postings to gain attention online and further engage the public in their ideas.

Key Takeaways

- It can be important to analyze groupings of meme posts instead of individual ones to better understand patterns in extremist group behavior and communication.
- Groups may strategically use frames (i.e., patterns across social media posts) to raise attention, persuade the public to their views, or recruit more followers.
- Engagement on posts (e.g., likes, comments, shares) may be an important metric to understand how widely these messages spread and the impact of their content.

READ MORE

The shadowy lives of emojis: An analysis of a hacktivist collective's use of emojis on Twitter
By K. Jones, J. Nurse, and S. Li (2021)

These authors conducted an evaluation of emoji usage by an online hacktivist collective known as Anonymous. They collected datasets of tweets from Anonymous and non-Anonymous Twitter accounts, and used Word2Vec, an approach that is used to model language (including emoji) usage. Finally, they conducted a sentiment analysis of emoji usage by both groups. Importantly, the researchers found that many similarities exist between emoji usage by Anonymous and non-Anonymous Twitter users; however, Anonymous users seemed to give emojis group-specific associations, specifically tied to an infatuation with prominent Anonymous accounts. These results indicate that emojis, like memes, may have some associations and elements that are unique to extremist organizations, emphasizing the importance of better understanding the visual messaging of different groups.

Key Takeaways

- The meaning of emojis used by different groups may differ slightly with group-specific associations.
- Practitioners must understand the nuances of individual groups when considering their use of visual messaging of all types (e.g., memes, emojis,

videos).

What is NCITE doing?

NCITE recently hosted [a panel discussion](#) exploring how terrorists and extremists weaponize memes to spread violent ideology and build group identity.

The panel was moderated by Erin Grace, NCITE's director of strategic communications and external relations. Panelists were:

- **Kat Parsons** – research associate, [NCITE](#)
- **Oliver Goodman** – project manager, [Moonshot](#)
- **Arthur Bradley** – open-source intelligence manager, [Tech Against Terrorism](#)

The panelists also discussed strategies for countering extremist messaging and the efficacy of moderating violent content.

- [Read a summary of the panel.](#)
- [See clips from the panel on YouTube.](#)
- [Read a full transcript.](#)

LEARN MORE

Resources

- [**Request**](#) a Community Awareness Briefing from DHS.
- [**Browse**](#) the Prevention Resource Finder website.

Get involved with NCITE

- Attend [**events.**](#)
- Stay up to date on [**research.**](#)
- Follow on [**social media.**](#)
- Meet our [**partners.**](#)

Apply for grants

- **Apply** for a terrorism and targeted violence prevention grant.
- **Apply** for a FEMA preparedness grant.

What if someone is mobilizing to violence?

- Your local police and/or security team are first point of contact.
- Get your team educated about **suspicious activity.**
- **Report** suspicious activity by state.

Thank you for reading!

Send future Research Roundup ideas to ncite@unomaha.edu.

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