

The Synthesis of Social Media Dialectics & the Rise of Alt-Right Memes

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Abstract

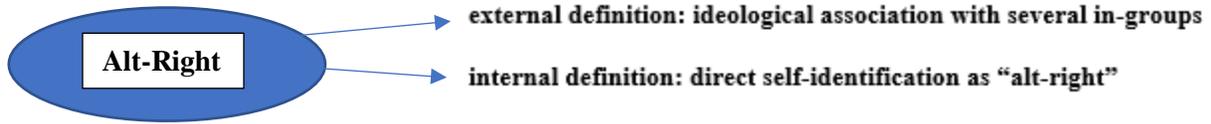
The conference paper follows Lacanian and Freudian discussions concerning (obsessional) neurosis to locate the development of alt-right meme culture expression in a dialectic of political affect. The internet meme response to the MAGA hat kid scandal of January 2019 is analyzed under the scope of recent transformations in media culture and illuminates the psychoanalytical foundation of political reactionism as a counterproductive mechanism of identity politics, namely, the desire for identity legitimization.

INTRODUCTION

I would like to start with the main assertion of my paper: Alt-right memes can, essentially, be framed as a social translation of an individual struggle for identity legitimization which takes place within a space synthesized by a dialectic of social media interaction. This is not to say they do not hold the potential for a vast level of ideological implications. But this paper is not concerned with those implications. It is concerned with the dialectic of power mechanisms involved in social media political polarization and the cultural and political transformations that are produced by this dialectic.

What I am going to show is that there is a two-sided struggle inherent in social media political interaction in America which sustains the rise of ideological developments such as the alt-right and that its political internet memes function, first, as an individual process of coping with a perceived threat to identity. I am going to point to this dialectical relationship by illuminating a recent scandal and the memes which were produced during the development of the scandal and link the binary of political reactions to what I perceive as their psychoanalytical foundation to show a very basic correlation which I see as the fundament of the mechanism that gives rise to ideological frameworks and, ultimately, groups such as the alt-right.

To illuminate this framework, some definitions need to be clarified. First of all, we need to differentiate between the alt-right as an internal and an external label (see diagram below).



Differentiation of definitions of the term "Alt-Right"

There are people who directly identify as alt-right and there are other groups which are tied to the alt-right by external definition through their ideological implications. There is no externally agreed upon framework of what the alt-right is, by definition.

Perhaps it also helps to clarify what internet memes are. As defined by Limor Shifman, "[i]n the vernacular of discourse of netizens, the tag 'Internet meme' is commonly applied to describe the propagation of items such as jokes, rumors, videos, and websites from person to person via the Internet" (Shifman 2014: 2). For the purpose of this paper, I define internet memes as literary units of internet propagation, which function by means of intertextuality within different visual and audiovisual formats. They do not necessarily hold ideological implications (see Image I), but the ones I will exemplify certainly do.



Image I: Example of Non-Ideological Meme (Pinterest)

Again, I propose in this paper that the rise of alt-right memes is connected to a social media dialectic which synthesizes what I will refer to in Lacanian terms as a mythologization of circumstances to yield an absolute truth. This absolute truth serves the purpose of avoiding the psychological anxiety connected to the ambiguity of identity and group identification and is deeply embedded in the recent cultural preoccupation with fake news.

I will briefly outline the development of fake news and the emergence of alt-right memes to show an underlying rationale. Then I will use a recent scandal to exemplify the dialectics of social media interaction, before detailing the way in which the synthesis adheres to and perpetuates the same social inequalities which both sides seek to counteract.

THE DIALECTICS OF POLITICAL REACTIONISM & FAKE NEWS MEMES



A message from Donald J. Trump.

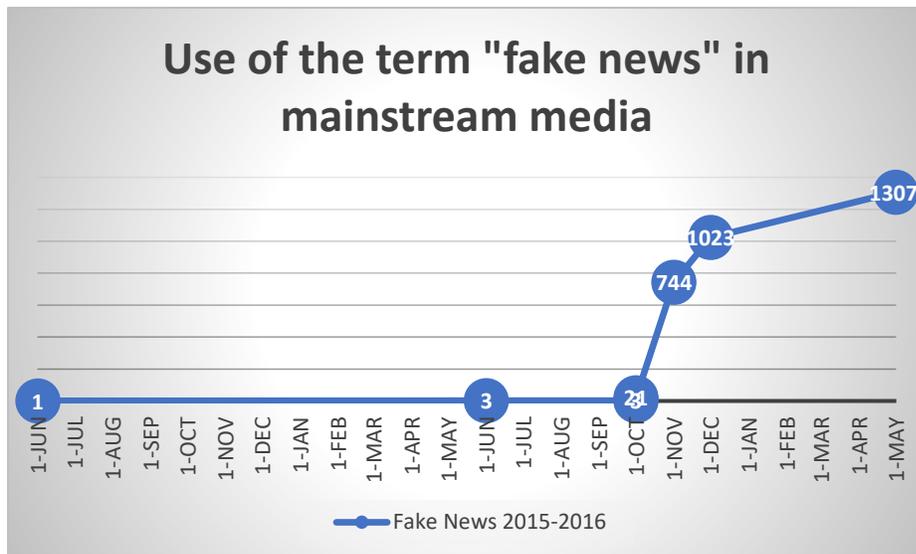
Image II: Fake News Memes

Fake news is a simplified term for insincere journalism. Opposing sides of the political spectrum seem to be throwing the fake news accusation at each other on a consistent basis (see image II, above) but the phenomenon has been discussed in academia for a long time. Esteemed scholars such as Jürgen Habermas and Noam Chomsky have created models to understand the mechanisms of communicative reason and, both, the left and right of the political spectrum have frequently called into question the integrity of mainstream and non-mainstream media in general. However, contemporary political discourse shows evidence of a recent ideology-based re-alliance

with mainstream media, mostly on the left of the spectrum and a rise in alternative right wing media sources as well:

“The political and academic left, it is fair to say, has in many countries seen the mainstream media as servants of the ruling class to be countered at every opportunity. It is ironic that so many of those same voices are now vigorously defending the likes of the New York Times and the BBC against Trump’s ongoing campaign to define them as sick, dishonest, pro-elite, anti-working people purveyors of ‘fake news’ [...]” (McNair 2018: 5)

The focus was not always as extensive or politically polarized as it is today: References to the term ‘fake news’ were, quite literally, minuscule, before October 2016 but skyrocketed in November, after the election of Donald Trump and are growing steadily (see graph below):



“Fake News” Mentions in Mainstream Media: see McNair 2018 (pg. 3)

In terms of emergence, the politicization of internet memes can be linked to a specific time period as well: As explained by Angela Nagle in her 2017 book *Kill All Normies*, the campaign and election of President Obama in 2008 and the use of the hope-meme was soon accompanied by mock-versions of it, showing an ideological opposition (Image IV, 1&2 below).



Image IV: The Obama-Hope and Nope Memes 1&2

Thomas Allmer shows in his 2015 book *Critical Theory and Social Media*, that, throughout Obama's two terms in office, social media became a wider space, growing from 360 million users in December 2009 to 1.1 billion in December 2012 (Allmer 2015: 3), and by the time Donald Trump became president, online information sharing had become a massive system. Nagle explains that when we compare the use of memes during the first election won by Obama to the last race, which yielded full-on political meme forums such as "The Donald subreddit" (Nagle 2017: 3), we also see a rise in mainstream media trying to catch up with non-mainstream developments, which came to include news based on social media claims and ideological alliances:

"Compare the first election won by Obama, in which social media devotees reproduces the ironic but official blue-and-red stylized stencil portrait of the new president with HOPE printed across the bottom, [...], to the bursting forth of irreverent mainstream-baffling meme culture during the last race, in which the Bernie Sanders Dank Meme Stash Facebook page and The Donald subreddit defined the tone of the race for a young and newly politicized generation, with the mainstream media desperately trying to catch up with a subcultural in-joke style to suit two emergent anti-establishment waves of the right and left." (Nagle 2017: 3)

Furthermore, a radicalization in political internet memes can be observed during this expansion period as well. This radicalization, commonly taking the form of social media mocking, can be seen in the following two memes with one side labelling its opposers, named here as 'the alt-right' as MAGA hat wearing, gamer trolls and the other side generalizing all liberals as 'crybabies' (see Image VI, below).



Image V: The Alt-Right Starter Pack Meme

Image VI: Liberals Cry Meme

Conclusively, this period of time includes, both, a binary of mainstream media distrust and alliance, and, as an outcome, a large-scale online political polarization fueled by two sides which consistently provide radicalized online content for the other to react to.

As shown by various studies on tribalism and naïve realism in social psychology, there is a reason for the increase in ideological alliance with mainstream media sources: Hart, Eagly, Lindberg, Albarracin, Brechan and Merrill, for example, showed in their 2009 meta-analysis of selective exposure to information that people in a democratic environment are likely to resort to selective exposure motivated by a defense mechanism, rather than an accurate assessment of information:

“People are almost two times (odds ratio 1.92, based on d 0.36) more likely to select information congenial rather than uncongenial to their pre-existing attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. The moderate size of the bias is perhaps not surprising given that selective exposure is responsive to motivations that can occasionally exert opposing influences on selection preferences. As our analyses have shown, variables associated with defense motivation (e.g., commitment, value relevance, confidence, and challenge or support) uniformly increased the selection of congenial information.” (Hart et al. 2009: 579).

This phenomenon is related to a desire to be validated in one’s beliefs.

THE MAGA HAT KID SCANDAL, SOCIAL MEDIA DIALECTICS & NEUROSIS

What I have just explained will now be exemplified by focusing on reactions connected to the *MAGA hat kid scandal* which occurred in early 2019.

Judging from the videos which made their rounds after and during the scandal became viral, the timeline of the events which took place on January 18th, 2019, started without the Covington High School boys, who had just attended the 47th Annual March for Life, a pro-life activist event. Before the boys arrived, a group named the Black Hebrew Israelites stood near the Lincoln Memorial, preaching their beliefs. Several Native-American individuals were at the same location as they were participating in the First Indigenous People's March. Some members of the Black Hebrew Israelites decided to confront the Native-Americans, of which some asked them to stop preaching what they had perceived as offensive. When the Covington High Schoolers walked up and stood where they were allegedly supposed to stand to wait for their bus home, some members of the Black Hebrew Israelites shifted their attention to them, insulting them with homophobic rhetoric and other statements. There is no evidence as of now that the boys reacted in the same manner. After the Covington kids moved away and while on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, a Native-American man named Nathan Phillips walked up, banging his drum. He decided to stand in front of one of the boys, Nick Sandmann, who looked him in the eyes and smirked. The picture and video of this smirk became viral on social media during and after this event (see image VII below).



Video shows a crowd of teenagers wearing 'Make America Great Again' hats taunting a Native American elder after Friday's Indigenous Peoples March at the Lincoln Memorial
[cnn.it/2FM8De6](https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/20/politics/maga-hat-kid-scandal/index.html)

1,821 likes · 2:32 AM - Jan 20, 2019

3,268 people are talking about this

Image VII: CNN - Maga Hat Kid Scandal

When covering the event, *CNN* initially claimed that a “[v]ideo shows a crowd of teenagers wearing ‘Make America Great Again’ hats taunting a Native American elder after Friday’s Indigenous Peoples March at the Lincoln Memorial” (see image VII above), after the *Washington Post* reported on the developments of the story. Articles were later deleted, and positions were clarified.

I will now attempt to exemplify the similarity in reaction and the mutual relationship between both sides according to immediate and later social media responses to the scandal while connecting it to Freud and Lacan’s concepts on neurosis, to show an inherent, individual struggle.

As an immediate response, figures associated with the political Left took to social media to express their discontentment of the situation with tweets such as film producer Jack Morrissey’s “#MAGAKids go screaming, hats first, into the woodchipper” (Image VIII).



Image VIII: Jack Morrissey Tweet Meme

The immediate response of the political Right included, mostly, claims of fake news and a quick alliance with Nick Sandmann (Image IX).



I Stand With Nick.

Image IX: Nick Sandmann Allegiance

What can be seen here is an allegiance to a news source that confirms an ideological stance on one side or a quick rejection of mainstream media’s credibility but also an alliance with an ideological agenda on the other

On the following day, memes shaming of the opposing side could be found all over social media. For example, Congresswoman Deb Haaland’s tweet, stating: “The students’ display of blatant hate and disrespect, and intolerance is a signal of how common decency has decayed under this administration. (Image X)”



Image X: Deb Haaland Tweet Meme

Supporters of the Covington High School boys engaged in similar behavior: YouTube videos were created, supposedly assessing the situation critically, before ending in moralizations and shaming of the opposing side’s behavior. A video on the YouTube channel BlazeTV, for example, shows host Glenn Beck give an impassionate speech about Nathan Phillips’ behavior, calling him a “despicable liar” (Image XI).



HERE Is The Definitive Timeline For The Covington Catholic Run In At The Lincoln Memorial

Image XI: Glenn Beck Video Screen Shot

Several news articles including either rationalizations (Image XII) or mocking of rationalizations (Image XIII) could be found as well.



Image XII: ABC News Headline Meme



Image XIII: PJ Media Headline Meme

The response is to be framed here as a symptom of a neurotic attempt to reconcile bias with an absolute truth. According to a mix of theories on *hysteria* and *obsessional neurosis* by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, the latter focusing on Freud's 1909 case study of what he referred to as the *Rat Man*, obsessive and neurotic defense responses involve three actions: a suppression, and allegiance (see Freud 1895: 202), according to Freud which is also discussed in social psychology under the name *naïve realism*, and mythologization (see Lacan 1979: 407-15) according to Lacan.

Freud developed his concept of hysteria in 1895, explaining that, "in neurosis, the ego suppresses part of the id out of allegiance to reality" (Freud 1895: 202). He later conducted a case study on obsessional neurosis which Lacan referred to. The *Rat Man* case study involves several sessions with a man whom Freud had been seeing at regular intervals to analyze his obsessive

thoughts. He is referred to as the *Rat Man* because he kept speaking about a memory which he had been having pertaining to a man he considered cruel, talking about the torture of rats. The patient told Freud that he pictured the torture happening to one of his loved-ones. The real events surrounding the manifestation of this thought pattern was not closely discussed by Freud. Lacan later took the real events to establish a correlation. The events included a perceived debt to be paid to a Lieutenant during his military service and the complicated scenario surrounding his ability to pay back the debt. Lacan explains that the labyrinth the *Rat Man* builds to avoid the perceived punishment for not yet having repaid his debt can be attributed to an obsessional preoccupation with it, which ends up perpetuating his inability to pay and widening the scope of the labyrinth in which the neurotic patient finds himself lost: “This phantasmatic scenario resembles a little play, a chronicle, which is precisely the manifestation of what I call the neurotic’s individual myth.” (Lacan 1979: 414) Lacan mentions that Freud finds in this case study the patient’s preoccupation with honorable behavior and its connection to betrayal, social debt and compromise. Lacan then points out the objectification of the cruel captain as a mythologized absolute enemy and how it relates to the idea of opposing the enemy’s behavior as part of an engrained self-identification: “Myth is what provides a discursive form for something that cannot be transmitted through the definition of truth” (Lacan 1979: 407).

To relate Freud and Lacan’s theories to the case of social media dialectics it can be said that what we see here is 1) a selective suppression of information, because, for example, the MAGA hat does hold certain ideological implications, 2) an allegiance to the ego’s subjectively established framework for reality, including seeing in-group identifications as objective behavioral markers, 3) which yield the mythologization of an absolute truth, namely the opposing side’s

behavior being absolutely intolerable in terms of ideological self-ascription and thereby serving as an absolute enemy.

What can also be ascribed to the consistent focus on the opposing side is an attempt to provide the ego with a form of truth which is understood to be able to somehow silence the drive itself. Freud explains the futility of this obsession in his 1929 essay *Civilization and its Discontents*, where he states that there is an essential tension between the drive for contentment and reality, or what he calls the pleasure and reality principle (29-30), which cannot be brought together:

“The programme of becoming happy, which the pleasure principle imposes on us, cannot be fulfilled; yet we must not — indeed, we cannot — give up our efforts to bring it nearer to fulfilment by some means or other.” (Freud 1929: 29)

Lacan individualizes this inherent impossibility to reconcile the myth with absolute truth (415), which causes a neurotic cycle of repetition in his analysis of Freud’s *Rat Man*, titled *The Neurotic’s Individual Myth*, by explaining that “[t]he element of the debt is placed on two levels at once, and it is precisely in the light of the impossibility of bringing these two levels together that the drama of the neurotic is played out.” (Lacan 1979: 415).

So, essentially, I claim that what happens in fake news meme propagation and political polarization online starts with an individual seeking to combat an anxiety, a fear of uncertainty over the impossibility of ideological absolutes. And that the id is partially suppressed in that any chance of ideological ambiguity is squashed by legitimization of the group’s mythical enemy.

Furthermore, I propose that this mythical enemy is the synthesis of social media meme dialectics. The externalized mythical enemy serves as a legitimization of self, or in other words, identity. And, as described by Elizabeth Anker in her 2014 book *Orgies of Feeling* this legitimization translates as a need to align one’s desire for self-ascription with authoritative power

structures that are capable of establishing a rule of definition (114), which explains a return to ideology-based information exposure:

“In political theory, legitimacy is conventionally defined as the acceptance of power as authoritative, as the polity’s consent to the rules that emanate from governing structures and as the justified use of force and violence” (Anker 2014: 114)

SYNTHESIS & CRITICAL THEORY

As I have explained, the rise of political participation in the form of ideological internet memes can be tied to a general distrust of mainstream media and the rise of fake news, not as an occurrence but as a topic, instilling a new loyalty to the mainstream or non-mainstream media source which supports bias. Furthermore, fake news meme propagation starts with an individual seeking to combat fear of uncertainty over the impossibility of ideological absolutes, with an establishment of a myth including an absolute enemy. This myth takes the form of an opposer of the individual’s own needs for political self-ascription and ends in the accumulative production of an ideological in-group which sustains an established political identity.

So, essentially the alt-right is a symptom of an embedded desire for individual legitimization, and its propagation instruments are used to cope with the impossibility of absolute legitimization by repeatedly reproducing the content and seeking approval from others. In essence, as explained by Anker, “[l]egitimacy is, [...] in part one that circulates among political subject affective experience, a sociopolitical emotional experience as a common feeling of rightness.” (Anker 2014: 118). This need is to be fulfilled.

To conclude, I would like to show that this mechanism is not serving either side’s proposed interest in terms of counteracting the state’s totalization mechanisms over the individual. By focusing on legitimization needs in social media, a new political space is synthesized, which not only distracts from the problems which both conservative capitalists or egalitarian liberals are seeking to combat, but also enhances the perceived need for further state power:

“The fragility of melodramatic discourse then, might do more than diminish felt legitimacy; this fragility might also and at the same time provide conditions for further extension of state power. The failure to destroy evil, achieve freedom or eradicate fear, [...], are actually the conditions by which governing power expands most rapidly – the failure demonstrates the need to increase state action in order to reverse the failure.” (Anker 2014: 141)

Of course, this mechanism serves as a legitimization of power mechanisms of state power, such as actions like the building of a wall (see Image XIV below) in the case of Donald Trump and his followers.

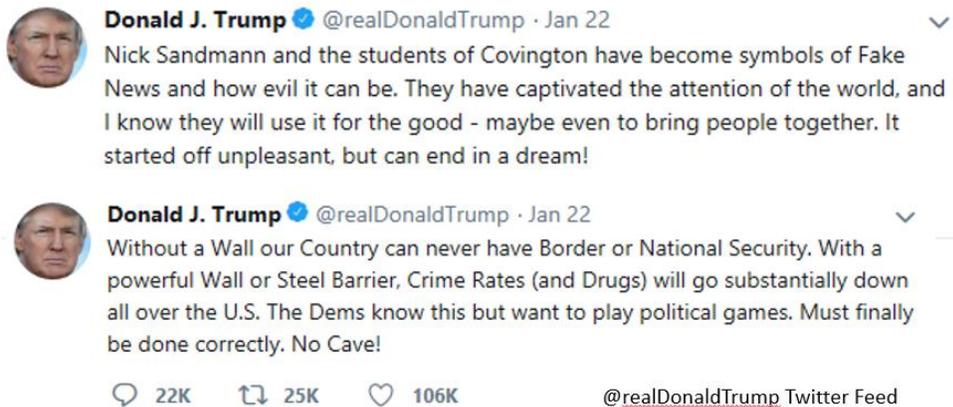


Image XIV: Donald Trump Tweets

How social inequalities are further negatively affected by social media political polarization and even general engagement becomes apparent when looking at Thomas Allmer’s statistics provided in his 2015 book. He shows that since 1960 productivity has grown drastically but wage share has fallen by 6 % and annual corporate profits have almost doubled in the United States. To show a connection with social media, he shows that Facebook’s revenue has increased by a factor of 18,7 between 2008 and 2012. And a direct link to social inequalities can be illuminated by the fact that the minerals used to manufacture a variety of electronic devices, are “extracted in mines in the Eastern Province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo amidst slavish working conditions” (Allmer 2015:1-4). Clearly, simultaneous productivity increases and decreasing wage shares, as well as corporate growth is not in the interest of either side. Yet social media and technology use is growing as a network for the expression of ideological discontentment. So, the

liberal Left's desire to combat social injustices is clearly counteracted by the rise in social inequalities tied to the use of social media and technology. And the conservative Right's desire for self-determination and a decrease in state power cannot be met by supporting the opposite in the name of their own version of identity politics, such as movements like the alt-right.

Conclusively, a return to a focus on critical theory in the humanities can provide an access point to analyze social and mainstream media as a space for power struggles which perpetuate social inequalities and raise state power by following fluctuations in communicative reason. Perhaps, this way, attention can be shifted from a mythical enemy to a real one.

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