LARPing & Liberal Tears

Irony, Belief and Idiocy in the Deep Vernacular Web

Marc Tuters

In the summer of 2017, the American Alt-Right gained international recognition following the violence at their Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, North Carolina, which left one counter-protester dead and dozens of others injured. Unwilling to condemn this act of far-right violence, the American president Donald Trump instead spoke of violence having occurred "on many sides" (Peters 2017). As exemplified by this response, over the course of his election campaign and early days in office Trump's reluctance to distance himself from the far right had the effect of normalizing the public expression of their ideas to an extent that seemed unprecedented to many (Mulhall et al. 2018; Marwick/Lewis 2017). Beyond the sixty million Americans that voted for him, Trump's inflammatory political style also appealed to heretofore little known elements of internet subculture for whom he also appeared as an avatar of their indignation at feeling somehow demographically displaced. This source of indignation, however imaginary, is what accounts for the resonance between bizarre internet subcultures and the global insurgency of far-right populism, and is the subject of this chapter.

Although Trump's initial rebellious appeal was somewhat diminished in the eyes of radicals by the time of Charlottesville, a significant number of those at the rally still saw themselves as the loyal foot soldiers of the world's first meme president, who they imagined themselves as having helped elect through their skillful deployment of "meme magic". While self described "internet trolls" were pleased to publicly pronounce such ridiculous sounding claims in the media (Shreckinger 2017), one may reasonably ask if they actually believed it to be true? While there are those who have attempted to seriously grapple with such claims (Lachman 2018), the standard fallback response from most of these figures when

pushed to explain their actions is that they are 'trolling', which is to say they are just playing around. To put it in the jargon of computer game culture, they are 'live action role playing' or *LARPing*. This explanation offers those involved with a convenient excuse if and when things get out of hand. It is based on the core belief that "teh Internet is serious business", an ironic slogan whose meaning is its opposite, which is to say that the internet is *not* serious business, and anyone who thinks otherwise should be corrected and is, essentially, undeserving of pity.



The Identitarian Movement (in Germany), LARPing at Pepe.[1]

For many this dualistic outlook was, however, no longer sustainable in the face of the bloody violence in Charlottesville. Indeed, in the aftermath of that event the apparently inexorable rise of the Alt-Right was, for the first time since Trump's rise, brought into question. A year later, on the anniversary of the rally, the movement's momentum appears rather diminished. It seems that there has been a softening of the Alt-Right as many who had been flirting with its explicit white-racial supremacist elements have fallen back to the more 'mainstream' position of contemporary far-right populism, with its reactionary suspicion of 'migrants' and celebration of 'Western culture'. But while the disturbing spectacle of violence in

1 | Source: https://blog.identitaere-bewegung.de/pepe-und-identitaere-aktivisten-waren-heute-in-mecklenburg-vorpommern-unterwegs/.

Charlottesville may have tested the commitment of many to 'real-world' political organizing, from an online audience perspective the rally nevertheless seemed like the culmination of a trend which had been consistently developing for some time and which continues unabated.

If the Alt-Right can be said to have accomplished anything, besides briefly normalizing 'ironic' expressions of intolerance and hate, it would be in their innovative infusion and deployment of elements of high concept fan culture in the form of political tactics. It would seem that many continue to see themselves as engaged in an online culture war whose primary battlefield is social media (in particular Youtube), and in which they appear to have the upper hand, in spite of an apparent disenchantment with the Alt-Right's more ideologically extreme propositions. While the European far right, unlike its American counterpart, has a long and established tradition of organized street protest, it would seem that they, too, are learning from the Alt-Right playbook.

The Deep Vernacular Web

While much has been made of the Alt-Right's supposedly ironical stance (Neiwert 2017), their ideological core lies in an essentialist vision of identity politics developed by the European New Right, which has been referred to as "differentialist racism" (Taguieff 2001). Many radical right populist parties in Europe have embraced these same ideas, seeing themselves as engaged in a civilizational struggle. This worldview implores supposedly autochthonous Europeans to prevent the "great replacement": waves of immigrants overtaking Europe, all orchestrated according to the nefarious multicultural agenda of the "globalist" class. Like some of the radical right populists, there is an expressed feeling amongst these long-established denizens of the web that *their web* is being encroached upon and gentrified. The rise of social media platforms that have corporatized the experience of the web has led these otherwise disparate and marginal niches of what I call *the deep vernacular web* to see themselves as an oppositional subculture tasked with keeping alive what they perceive to be the original spirit of the web. Due in part to the cleverly strategic amplification of these antagonisms via platforms such as Twitter and Youtube, in practice this has manifested as an online culture war, the opening battle of which was the notorious Gamergate that I unpack below.

The concept of the deep vernacular web can be understood as a heuristic intended to historicize these online antagonistic communities as antecedent to social media and even to the web itself. The deep vernacular web is characterized by anonymous or pseudonymous subcultures that largely see themselves as standing in opposition to the dominant culture of the surface web. Identified to an extent with the anonymous 4chan image board – which hosts one million posts per day, three quarters of which are made by visitors from English-speaking countries[2] – these subcultures tend to imagine themselves as a faceless mass. In direct contrast to the individualized culture of the selfies associated with social media, we might thus characterize the deep vernacular web as a *mask culture* in which individual identity is effaced by the totemic deployment of memes. Insofar as this mask culture constructs an image of itself as an autochthonous culture whose integrity is under threat, we can perhaps begin to understand how grievances of the deep vernacular web have been capitalized upon by those espousing a far-right ideology. Conversely we can also see how the *vernacular innovations* of these often bizarre subcultures, such as Pepe the Frog, have themselves been absorbed in the service of far-right populism.

The reasons why 4chan is productive of vernacular innovation have to do, in part, with the affordances of the platform. 4chan 'moves' very quickly – threads are quickly purged from the website, meaning the website does not offer a way to 'catch up' with the latest developments (notwithstanding external archival websites or wikis like *Encyclopedia Dramatica*). Furthermore, 4chan is anonymous, which means that if one wants to participate in the conversation one has to demonstrate a degree of subcultural literacy. Although there are other 4chan boards which operate differently, on its most popular board, /pol/ – which has, since about 2015, increasingly been viewed as a point of convergence been online subculture and Alt-Right ideas (Heikkilä 2017) – if you speak out of turn you are likely to be either brutally insulted or else, even worse, simply ignored. As a result of this blend of affordances and practices, /pol/ drives many away while exhibiting a strong socialization effect on those remain – one byproduct of which is that sensationalist behavior helps one to be noticed on /pol/. Combined with an ironic relationship with the idea of belief, discussed below, these factors help to account for why 4chan is so productive of ver-

2 | Anon (2018): "Advertise", (http://www.4chan.org/advertise).

nacular innovation and arguably why /pol/, a board devoted to 'politically incorrect' discussion, appears so productive of far-right hate speech.

The adepts of the deep vernacular web engage in gatekeeping processes to mark-off and maintain its boundaries from the surface web. In spite of the familiar purist tendencies of the hard core that wish to remain resolutely underground, the broader influence of their subcultural imaginary can be seen as extending rather deeply into aspects of corporate social media. As an example of such an incursion we might consider the Kekistan meme that had its origins in 4chan but which came to prominence on Youtube as a kind of imaginary homeland for trolls (de Keulenaar 2018). In a series of videos posted on Youtube over the course of 2017, the Kekistan meme developed the mythology of an imaginary country with its own flag and history, a kind of 'ethnostate' in the language of the European New Right, whose people imagined themselves to be engaged in a civilizational conflict against the forces of 'political correctness.'

Initially functioning as a kind of in-group slang expression for gamers, in 4chan the term 'kek' (at the root of Kekistan) became a conceptual marker for the concept of 'meme magic'. As such 'kek', often symbolized by Pepe, signifies the peculiarly postmodern idea that an empty symbol can itself be used as a tool to create belief in which its 'adepts' bear witness to effects of that idea without necessarily believing in any sort of truth, as one would normally expect from 'believers'. Since expressions of sincerely political belief would be dismissed as 'causefagging' on 4chan, any political memes that it generated were thus veiled in layer upon layer of irony. As a keyword, 'kek' spread from 4chan to other parts of the deep vernacular web, such as /r/The_Donald, a popular discussion board on the aggregator site Reddit devoted to Donald Trump's insurgent candidacy. On the Facebook page *God Emperor Trump*, the candidate was envisioned as a figure of divine chaos, the embodiment of the 'cult of kek'. On Youtube the Kekistan meme was developed in a number of directions by a variety of channels including some associated with Youtube's so-called "intellectual dark web" (Weiss 2018). Common to most of these channels were videos which staged confrontational encounters with liberal protesters, so-called social justice warriors or SJWs. Following a well established technique of internet trolls, the objective of these Youtube videos was to 'trigger' an emotional reaction from the SJWs, who are considered to exhibit an embarrassing and predictable lack of composure – connected to this, for example, was a whole new genre of 'liberal tears' videos.

The Idiotic Adjacent

The Kekistani flag became emblematic of Alt-Right trolling tactics. It was 'iconically' modeled on the Nazi *Reichskriegsflagge*, an echo that was intended to 'trigger' SJWs into accusing their opponents of being Nazis. While the ironic use of Nazi iconography may appear baffling, the logic deployed is that, as memes, even the most taboo symbols can be disconnected from their fixed historical meaning and made to function as *floating signifiers* for those who understand the rules of memes. As with Trump's own populism, we can think of the essential formlessness of the Kekistan meme as having created a kind of "equivalential chain" across an otherwise disaffected group of people, thereby uniting them (Laclau 2005). As opposed to SJWs, trolls thus perceived the flag of Kekistan as being governed by the first and second laws of the internet: that all discussions find their end in a fallacious comparison with the Nazis (Godwin's Law) and that, in any case, it is impossible to distinguish between sincerity and parody online (Poe's Law). These videos thus staged a conflict not only between Alt-Right Kekistanis and liberal SJWs but also between the imagined depths of authentic web subculture and its superficial surface. We could call this LARPing deployment of 4chan 'meme magic' in the sphere of protest politics a kind of idiocy, in the sense that Isabelle Stengers discusses "the idiot" as someone who takes a kind of stand against objective reality (Stengers 2005). To this end, self-described Kekistani's imagined themselves as staging a kind of counter-protest against what 60s counter-culturalists sometimes referred to as "consensus reality", represented in this case by all the "'normies' and 'basic bitches' who 'don't get' the countercultural styles of the amoral subculture" (Nagle 2017: 107).

But while this ethnographic perspective may offer some insights, and in spite of how adamantly or articulately some self-described Kekistanis may protest their ideological innocence, as the Kekistan flag should make clear, the meme also draws its transgressive appeal from its *subjunctive adjacency* to actual violence – violence made possible thanks to the deep vernacular web's digital dualism. Although the digital dualist notion that the online world is somehow distinct from 'real life' is an relic of an earlier era of 1990s 'cyber-theory', there is residue of its effects in the deep vernacular web. Given its roots in the pre-web era internet, the deep vernacular web's subcultural imaginary may be understood as predating the current *social media dispensation* of the surface web, pre-dating Facebook's

global imposition of a "real name policy". As articulated by 90s libertarian media theorists with roots in the 60s counter-cultural movements, the earlier *cyberspace dispensation* promised to be a "new home of Mind", of disembodied avatars exempt from the laws and constraints of the physical world (Barlow 1996). For all of Facebook's hegemony, the frontier ideology of this earlier cyberspace dispensation has continued in the pseudonymous and anonymous cultures of the deep vernacular web, in particular in the thriving parallel reality of online multiplayer gaming.



Trump supporter in New York 2017 with a Kekistan flag. Photo by Alec Perkins from Hoboken, USA.[3]

As has been well explored elsewhere (Massanari 2016), the current reactionary populist moment in online culture can be traced back to the convo-

3 | Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Trump_supporters_May_Day_2017_in_New_York_City(34430306665).jpg, CC BY 2.0.

luted narrative of "Gamergate", which was essentially an anti-feminist protest movement bewilderingly disguised as a moral outrage against "ethics in game journalism". Gamergate may be understood as having pioneered a new model of right-wing activism centred around a fundamentalist defence of free speech, neo-reactionary and traditionalist notions of identity politics and a series of online harassment tactic referred to as 'brigading'. What is of particular significant for our purposes is how Gamergate served to politicize a cross-section of previously relatively politically unengaged internet users in the service of a cause. (In a rare instance of such censure on an otherwise uncensored platform, discussions of Gamergate were in fact banned from 4chan since they violated its 'causefagging' prohibition.) In apparent violation of *4chan's irony imperative*, Gamergate created true believers. Through a process they referred to as 'red pilling', coverts came to see themselves as part of a collective quasi-religious community. While this awakening had none of the individual piety of prior American religious revivals, it did draw its strength from the Thomist idea of the just war against the infidel, who were in this case the dreaded SJWs. Alongside the globalist and the so-called Cultural Marxist, the figure of the SJW served to unite these online antagonistic communities. While originally derived from the famous psychedelic scene in the 1999 film *The Matrix*, the 'red pill' became a metaphor for revealing and overcoming false ideology through The Dark Enlightenment – a quasi-philosophical movement that may be considered as a precursor to the Alt-Right – which posits the existence of a hegemonic, unconscious consensus between powerful figures within academia and the media who use the concept of "political correctness" as a tool of oppression (see Sandifer 2017). Dark Enlightenment thinkers thus advocated embracing the most extreme elements of trolling as an antidote to, and violent rejection of, insidious attempts at mind-control by these unholy forces. Thus, it is by way of fan culture and conspiracy ideology that we may we come to understand the newfound appeal of reactionary post-digital activism.

Dark Fandom

It would be a mistake to claim that the Alt-Right pioneered this relationship to fan culture. American media studies scholarship has for some years sought to study how online fan culture might inform new forms of

liberal protest politics. Building on the celebration the 'agency' of active audiences in 90s cultural studies scholarship, Henry Jenkins argued that fandom represented not only a source of cultural innovation but a new model for citizenship and even activist politics (Jenkins 2006). In contrast to the anti-consumerist culture jamming practices of earlier activists, with their fatalistic and purist vision of commercial culture, Jenkins champions the notion of the empowered consumer: co-creation versus co-optation. In this new model, which has been referred to as "transmedia organizing" (Costanza-Chock 2014), activists thus come to resemble the active audience of fan culture by engaging in the co-creation of world-building leading to narratives or story elements dispersing across multiple delivery channels. We can find striking examples of Jenkins' model on the American progressive left, notably the #MyHungerGames protests in 2014 in which the Twitter hashtag allowed young adult sci-fi fans to show solidarity with low paid service employees (Ashoka 2014). While such progressive examples continue, it would however appear that in the aftermath of Gamergate, and especially since the rise of Trump, the new vanguard has become "toxic fandom" (Parham 2018). Indeed, at a structural level reactionary memes like Kekistan seem more innovative and original than their politically-progressive counterparts: As instances of world-building they can be understood as the autopoetic creations of the deep vernacular web.

The argument developed above is that the deep vernacular web, long the source of memetic innovation, has recently become a staging ground and recruitment center for the new-right. In contrast, however, to the post-critical argument (so forcefully articled by Henry Jenkins), it would appear that what makes the new-right so appealing to so many in these subcultures is how this ideology seems to offer a critique of the dominant hegemonic system which they perceive as threatening their enjoyment (Lovink/Tuters 2018). Whatever we call them, these online antagonistic communities appear to be here to stay. Part of the reason for this is indeed their capacity to world-build by drawing from the abundant 'lore' of gamer culture. Although equally significant is the *schadenfreude* of triggering SJW. These innovations come together in the deployment of 'meme magic' in the sphere of protest politics. However idiotic such protest-LARPing may appear to 'normies', those who consider themselves to be 'in on the joke' may perceive their actions to be a kind of avant-garde activism, which aims to disrupt 'consensus reality'. We may even consider the former in

terms of an anarchistic protest against what Jacques Rancière (2004) refers to as the dominant "partition of the sensible," according to which aesthetic conventions are used to disguise the essentially arbitrary nature of political domination. Insofar as protest-LARPing does not exhibit an accompanying "desire to engage in reasoned discourse", by this same measure one may say that it fails to meet the normative standard of a genuinely activist "disruption effect" (Rancière cited in Bennett 2009: 109).

In spite of all the ironic posturing, what we should not overlook is the extent to which these communities also represent the concerns of those who perceive their identities as under threat. Given the demographic make-up of the culture of 4chan and of 'hard core' computer gamers, this political movement has appeared as a backlash spurred by an aggrieved 'silent majority'. While one may not necessarily sympathize with the substance of these grievances, in terms of political strategy it would be an oversight to dismiss them out of hand. Given the degree of their entrenchment in the broader political discourse, it is not obvious how to respond to this situation. In a simplification of Gramscian meta-politics, the New-Right in both Europe and America would have us believe that "politics is downstream from culture" (Griffin 2000; Meyers 2011). While these online antagonistic communities appear to have occupied the high ground in the current online culture war – figuratively speaking of course – it has also been argued that "this supposed new and revolutionary countercultural influence hasn't produced any original cultural artefacts of note beyond a few frog memes" (Wendling 2018). If, as the red pill metaphor would seem to suggest, there is a deep desire on the part of many to see beneath the ideological superstructure, then the left can gain advantage by shifting the theatre of conflict from half-baked pop culture to the conventional political sphere and issues like economics and social justice. On that terrain, we might say *the left still has all the best memes.*

References

Ashoka (2014): "Hunger Games Salute Used by Black Friday Protesters Fighting for Higher Wages", 5 December 2014 (https://www.forbes.com/sites/ashoka/2014/12/05/hunger-games-salute-used-by-black-friday-protesters-fighting-for-higher-wages/#6b953b1a712e).

Barlow, John P. (1996): "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace", 8 February 1996 (https://projects.eff.org/~barlow/Declaration-Final.html).

Bennett, Jane (2009): Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things, Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Costanza-Chock, Sasha (2014): Out of the Shadows, Into the Streets! Transmedia Organizing and the Immigrant Rights Movement, Cambridge: MIT Press.

de Keulenaar, Emillie V. (2018): "The Rise and Fall of Kekistan: a Story of Idiomatic Animus as Told Through Youtube's Related Videos", 6 April 2018 (https://oilab.eu/the-rise-and-fall-of-kekistan-a-story-of-idiomatic-animus-as-told-through-the-youtube-recommender-system/).

Griffin, Roger (2000): "Interregnum or Endgame? the Radical Right in the 'Post-Fascist' Era." In: Journal of Political Ideologies 5/2, pp. 163–178.

Heikkilä, Niko (2017): "Online Antagonism of the Alt-Right in the 2016 Election." In: European Journal of American Studies 12/2, pp. 1–23.

Jenkins, Henry (2006): Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide, New York: NYU Press.

Lachman, Gary (2018): Dark Star Rising: Magick and Power in the Age of Trump, New York: Tarcher Perigee.

Laclau, Ernesto (2005): On Populist Reason, London: Verso.

Lovink, Geert/Tuters, Marc (2018): "Memes and the Reactionary Totemism of the Theft of Joy", 12 August 2018 (https://non.copyriot.com/memes-and-the-reactionary-totemism-of-the-theft-of-joy/).

Marwick, Alice/Lewis, Rebecca (2017): "Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online," 15 May 2017 (https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_MediaManipulationAndDisinformationOnline.pdf).

Massanari, Adrienne (2016): "#Gamergate and the Fappening: How Reddit's Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures." In: New Media & Society 19/3, pp. 329–346.

Meyers, Lawrence (2011): "Politics Really Is Downstream From Culture – Breitbart", 22 August 2011 (http://www.breitbart.com/big-hollywood/2011/08/22/politics-really-is-downstream-from-culture/).

Mulhall, Joe/Lawrence, David/Murdoch, Simon/Simmonds, Abigail (2018): The International Alternative Right, London: Hope Not Hate.

Nagle, Angela (2017): Kill All Normies. The Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the Alt-Right and Trump, Winchester and Washington: Zero Books.

Neiwert, David (2017): Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump, New York: Verso.

Parham, Jason (2018): "The Ultimate Toxic Fandom Lives in Trumpworld", 23 July 2018 (https://www.wired.com/story/trump-fandom/).

Peters, Jeremy W. (2017): "One Theory Over Meaning of Trump's 'Many Sides' Remark", 15 August 2017 (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/us/politics/theories-meaning-trump-many-sides-remark.html).

Rancière, Jacques (2004): The Politics of Aesthetics, London and New York: Continuum.

Sandifer, Elizabeth (2017): Neoreaction a Basilisk: Essays on and Around the Alt-Right, London: Eruditorum Press.

Shreckinger, Ben (2016): "At Trump's Victory Party, Hints of Vengeance to Come", 11 September 2016 (https://www.politico.com/story/2016/11/trump-vengeance-victory-speech-2016-231084).

Stengers, Isabelle (2005): "The Cosmopolitical Proposal." In: Latour, Bruno/Weibel, Peter (eds.), Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy, Cambridge, and Karlsruhe: MIT Press & Center for Art and Media, pp. 994–1003.

Taguieff, Pierre-André (2001): The Force of Prejudice: on Racism and Its Doubles, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.

Weiss, Ben (2018): "Meet the Renegades of the Intellectual Dark Web", 8 May 2018 (https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/opinion/intellectual-dark-web.html).

Wendling, Mike (2018): Alt-Right: From 4chan to the White House, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.