Terrorist Use of Memes

Feb. 23, 2023

The following is a transcript of the NCITE Presents panel discussion, "Terrorist Use of Memes," that took place virtually and in-person on the University of Nebraska at Omaha campus on February 23, 2023. The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Erin Grace

Welcome to NCITE Presents. This is an occasional panel discussion series that we are hosting on topics of interest to our counterterrorism and national security stakeholders. My name is Erin Grace. I will serve as today's moderator. I run communications and external relations for NCITE, which stands for the National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center.

NCITE is a federally funded research consortium focused on counterterrorism and targeted violence prevention. Our network includes more than 60 researchers at universities across the U.S. and U.K. working to solve some of the world's most pressing problems.

We've got a terrific panel lined up, and I can't wait to introduce you to them, but first I want to give you a welcome and a warning. We want to welcome all who have joined us online as well as our in-person guests at UNO.

We hope that newcomers to NCITE check out our work at www.unomaha.edu/ncite. We'll have more events coming this spring, and we'll post those on our events page. You can follow us on social – on Twitter and LinkedIn – and you can join our listserv to stay on top of news about our research, researchers, and events. There is an easy sign-up on our homepage.

It also probably goes without saying that when you're going to hold an event called "Terrorist Use of Memes," that you're going to see some disturbing material. You're going to see examples of memes that have been shared among extremists, and frankly, the imagery is disturbing. There's no other way to say it. We are sharing these materials and showing them today to illustrate the damaging impact of this kind of messaging. NCITE and its partner organizations are researching this topic as part of efforts to counter extremist messaging and build safer communities, on and offline. Journalists attending are strongly encouraged to be thoughtful about what examples you do show as part of this event.

This is how the hour is going to go. Each panelist will have about 10 to 12 minutes to address the work they and their organizations do in this space, and then we'll open it up to questions. We'll try to get to as many questions as possible, and if we don't get to yours, you can please e-mail us: ncite@unomaha.edu and we'll get back to you as soon as we can. We will be sending a follow-up report of this event today to all of those who attend.

This particular subject has broad appeal, and a number of you wanted to sign up today to find out all about how terrorists use memes, which all of us use in our daily lives. In the 2022 book Meme Wars, sociologist Joan Donovan and coauthors define a meme as, quote, "A resonant, authorless idea that spreads through culture, evolving with every hand that touches it." And that meme wars, as culture wars, according to these authors, seek to bring the energy of an online community into the real world.

We're doing this panel because after the Buffalo shooting last year, some of our government stakeholders reached out and wanted to find out more about the role of memes, which seem pretty harmless, in a violent event. And although

NCITE isn't currently funding research on this topic, we do have at our disposal access to some of the best people to speak to it, and that's who is here with us today.

We'll have Arthur Bradley, the open source intelligence manager at Tech Against Terrorism. This is an organization that works on behalf of the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate. After he goes, we'll hear from Oliver Goodman of Moonshot. Oliver is a project manager who oversees the Moonshot Threat Bulletin, which comes out monthly and analyzes U.S.-based domestic violent extremism. Both Oliver and Arthur are joining us from the U.K., so thank you for coming.

And then rounding us out on the panel is NCITE's own Kat Parsons. She is a research specialist who handles a range of research and project management duties, and her focus in her research is on the variation between support for political extremism, violence, and engagement in violence. Her previous research, before she came to NCITE, has included examining support for political violence and the impact of violent rhetoric, both in the U.S. and elsewhere. So that is enough of me talking. Let's turn it over to Arthur, who's going to kick us off, telling us about himself and his organization. Arthur?

Arthur Bradley

Brilliant. Thanks, Erin. Hi everyone. As Erin said, I manage the open source intelligence team at Tech Against Terrorism. I'm going to briefly introduce Tech Against Terrorism and the work we do and then, from a fairly high level, talk about some of the key utilities of memes by terrorists and their supporting networks, talk about some practical challenges in countering terrorist memes, and then also some key examples of the practical work that Tech Against Terrorism is doing to counter this.

So, as Erin said, we are a new entity that launched in 2017, and we're a not-for-profit public-private partnership. We work with all sorts of stakeholders across the online counterterrorism industry, including governments, academia, civil society, and industry-led initiatives. But really our main priority is on working closely with smaller tech companies. These are generally the platforms that are facing the highest threat and also lack the capability to really understand and counter terrorist exploitation.

Diving straight into it, these are really the themes that I'm going to be talking about before I talk about some of the challenges and our work to counter it. [There are] five of these. So first, making extremist narratives more accessible – and clearly the kind of humorous dynamic of memes and the ubiquity can kind of make those narratives more accessible. They also offer plausible deniability. The ambiguity of memes can basically mean that the creators can kind of hide behind a "It's just a joke" kind of position. They're a great way of dog whistling extremist narratives and directing a message at the target audience where the wide audience doesn't really pick up on it. Also, other examples, disinformation and, crucially, reinforcing in- and out-group dynamics.

So, diving into each one of these individually. As Erin said, memes have become an inevitable part of modern communication. Corporations, governments, and even some militaries are using them in their online communications. So, I think, although there's definitely a case that terrorists are kind of knowingly exploiting this form of communication, their prevalence in terrorist propaganda is also in some respects an inevitable reflection of the ubiquity of memes in modern communication. And, you know, terrorists like memes just as the rest of us do. That being said, they really can be an entry point for vulnerable individuals who might be susceptible to extremist ideology and messaging. The first thing that people might notice when they're looking at a meme might be a joke. And obviously, many people spend hours every day looking at funny content online. So, the message often comes second.

And I've put here also similarities with state-backed disinformation. Just as state-backed disinformation outlets can insert false information among a number of accurate reports, meme accounts, particularly those associated with extremism, often post lots of innocuous memes or other kind of humorous content, but occasionally drop in terrorist or violent extremist content here and there.

Some examples here. [indicates slides] You know this first one kind of spins the idea of conspiracy theories and radicalization on its head; kind of suggesting that the tech sector and liberal values are an example of brainwashing rather than the other way around. Second one is a kind of reimagination of what used to be called Uncle Ben's Rice and recently changed branding because of elements of racial stereotyping. But this is a version that contains multiple references to white supremacy and neo-anarchism. The 88 calories, for example, is a reference to "Heil Hitler." And then third is a far-right meme that invokes the pseudoscience behind some forms of racism, particularly by the so-called alt-right.

So, onto plausible deniability, this is really crucial to the use of humor generally by terrorists and memes specifically, particularly by extreme far right. The fact that memes are often a joke means that their creators can kind of normalize violence and also trivialize extreme violence. So really the Christchurch attack and the perpetrator of the Christchurch attack embodies this. It's probably the clearest and most pervasive example of a far-right terrorist who was really ingrained in internet subcultures. There were multiple meme references, both in his actions and in the live stream and in the manifesto that he produced. And content relating to the perpetrator and his actions are continually turned into memes since the day of the attack. Same is true for Buffalo.

Reinforcing in- and out-group dynamics: they're really a crucial way to reinforce the sense of in-group belonging, but also out-group hatred. So, some of the examples here [are] tapping into shared experiences and shared values of extremist communities. You know, "we're all in this together," joking about anxieties about government monitoring and squaring their ideology with their everyday lives. Also, they're being used to kind of mock enemies. So, there's two Islamist examples on here from pro-Islamic State online spaces, in which they're essentially ridiculing the former al Qaeda leader. They're making fun of his age and of the kind of, frankly, boring nature of some of his video lectures.

I haven't included on here that, really critically as well, is this kind of dehumanization of marginalized groups or perceived enemies of violent extremists. I think Oliver is going to speak more about this in his presentation, but, you know, a kind of key example of this is the classic antisemitic depictions of Jewish people that you get often in far-right memes.

Memes are also used as dis- and mis-information tools. This is a kind of case study. Sam Hyde is the person that you can see in these images. He's an internet comedian and kind of an alt-right figure who's become the subject of recurring memes spread by the alt-right following incidents of mass violence like shootings and other attacks. He is often frequently misattributed to being the perpetrator of these attacks, and it's become almost an inevitability that the rumors will spread, including images of him claiming that he was the perpetrator of the attack. This is in the hours following the attack. This is in some respects kind of a 4chan smearing campaign type thing. Actually, in some instances, his name has even reached the mainstream media. Recent examples on here includes the spy balloons flying over the US and the war in Ukraine, and also the assassination of Shinzo Abe.

So, moving on a bit to practical challenges in countering terrorist memes online. First really crucial issue – from a tech company point of view, from a moderator point of view – is the difficulty of differentiating between legitimate expression and violent extremist intent. You know, clearly, we're trying to balance freedom of speech here with countering terrorism online. And also, kind of by their very nature, the fact that memes are continually edited and changed means that automated detection and removal can be extremely challenging.

And also finally, I mentioned dog whistling. Effective moderation really requires a specialist understanding of terrorist narratives and the kind of references that they make. So that can also make it particularly challenging. Again, here I've used a lot of Christchurch examples, but, you know, for example, down on the bottom left that's an NFT of Brenton Tarrant's face. Clearly the blockchain element of that makes it very difficult. And then other forms that they might come in as stickers in channels and things like that.

So finally, what's Tech Against Terrorism doing about it? First of all, there's our mentorship work. This is our one-to-one bespoke work with mostly smaller tech companies, essentially aiming to raise tech industry standards. So, we do give

policy and enforcement guidance, particularly for those smaller tech companies – some of them have five or less employees. Our approach is to prioritize the platforms that are most in need of support. This is through our open-source intelligence work identifying the platforms that have a high volume of terrorist content and are struggling to tackle it effectively. And as part of that, we do bespoke open-source intelligence investigations for those platforms and give them bespoke advice based on that.

Secondly, our knowledge sharing platform. This is a kind of secure online resource. It contains a kind of one stop shop for tech company moderators. We've got a database of terrorist phrases, logos, and symbols. Exactly the kind of things that you might see in these memes. Again, advice and guidance on policy, best practice, and also helping companies with understanding and operationalizing their requirements in terms of online regulation. And then finally, at the sharp end all of this, we are alerting hundreds of links to terrorist content on the internet every day via our Terrorist Content Analytics Platform, or TCAP. This proactive disruption also includes engaging with infrastructure providers. So, the kind of platforms that are very likely to be operated by terrorist or violent extremist actors. This is a particular issue, raising a whole new kind of question around how to go about disrupting things at the infrastructure layer. And then on the topic of live streams and manifestos, we're actively involved in crisis response as well. So, I'll stop there and really looking forward to the Q&A. Thanks very much.

Erin Grace
Thank you. Oliver, let's kick it over to you.

Oliver Goodman
Absolutely. First of all, thanks to NCITE for organizing this panel and then to the other panelists as well. I share with you, Arthur, the interest in the Q&A, especially, at the end.

So, I'm Oliver. I'm a project manager working for Moonshot. I’m sure many of you have heard of us, but we're a social enterprise who focus on really understanding and trying to prevent different kinds of online harm. We have offices in Washington, D.C., and London. In my personal three years at the organization, I have managed a number of projects, delivering insights on a number of different online harms, including violent extremism and conspiracy theories.

I’ll build upon the great insights Arthur has already shared, but I'll be taking a slightly more microscopic approach, I suppose you could say, as you'll see in a minute. But to be clear up front as well, I will be looking more specifically at how online extremist communities are using memes more broadly rather than terrorist groups specifically.

The first thing to say really is just that the insights from my presentation are drawn from the Moonshot Threat Bulletin. As some of you may be aware, the Threat Bulletin is a subscription-based product which is designed to inform professional threat assessments. The bulletin analyzes online domestic violent extremist trends, themes, and narratives within public spaces to provide readers with the critical understanding of online to offline risk and threats to public safety.

So really, part of the privilege of the Threat Bulletin is that we're able to observe online DVE trends longitudinally. So, analyzing how threats against marginalized communities and the tactics used by DVE groups change over time. Each month, for example, we process an average of six million posts from public high-risk DVE spaces across a number of high-risk DVE platforms.

So, in late 2022, the Bulletin observed a significant, measurable increase in antisemitic discourse – I'm sure many of you are aware of this as well – and threats against the Jewish community online, which is what I want to turn our attention to today.

Before going onto the memes, in particular, just by way of kind of introducing what I'm going to be speaking about ... you can see here data drawn from the Threat Bulletin showing a sharp increase in threats against the Jewish community towards the end of last year. These reached a peak of around 7,500 threats in October 2022. And worth saying as well,

this is drawn from DVE spaces on five platforms, in particular. That's Telegram, Gab, Twitter, 4chan, and Reddit. So really key platforms in the dissemination both of DVE narratives and of memes, as well.

Antisemitism and threats against the Jewish community are unfortunately both things that are really endemic in online DVE spaces – domestic violent extremist spaces. However, what we can see is a really unprecedented month-on-month increase. These increases were largely driven by the actions and remarks of Kanye West. All of you remember last year that Kanye West made a series of antisemitic and highly controversial remarks. So, for example, he appeared on Alex Jones' Infowars show in December of last year, claiming that he quote, "Loves Hitler." And then he was also banned from Twitter for posting a swastika inside the Star of David, amongst many other acts. These remarks and actions were widely celebrated, supported, then ultimately amplified by DVE communities online, prompting much of the increase that you can see here.

Which moves [us] on to the topic for today. Memes really accompanied this increase in a quite significant way and were used to symbolize, represent, and develop this sharp rise in antisemitism. I thought this would provide a useful backdrop for explaining how memes accompany and are really used to promote certain reactions to current events, and exploring these are my focus today.

To start with a very general example [indicates slides]: What you can see here is one of the most enduring and common antisemitic memes online, sometimes referred to as "the happy merchant." It depicts a man with exaggerated and stereotypically quite Jewish features. And with memes, as we all know, it's often these similar images and tropes which are kind of reimagined, placed in different contexts to communicate different extremist ideas.

And this is certainly true of the happy merchant, and I will go through some ways in which it's been repurposed, reimagined now, just to serve some different ideas. So, you can see two of these [images] here ... each case used to convey a slightly different idea. And I think the image on the left of the screen right now is particularly instructive. A common antisemitic conspiracy theory, and what we witness peaking at the end of last year, is this idea that the Jewish community are kind of pulling the strings and employing a nefarious influence to control public affairs, social issues, global events, and so forth.

Now, if you're not well versed in the language of memes, you probably look at this meme on the left of the screen, and you probably don't necessarily infer that from this image. However, if you are well versed, this conspiracy theory is in fact, I would argue, communicated through this meme. So, i.e., the Jewish community, which here is depicted by the happy merchant, is kind of secretly responsible for global events referred to as "the current thing" in this particular meme. And this idea of memes requiring a kind of higher level of knowledge and understanding is something I'll come back to in a second.

On the right, we can see the happy merchant again depicted in a way to encourage and normalize violence towards the Jewish community. And some of you will have noticed the additional symbolism of the SS image in the spray paint can on the screen now.

So again, just to reinforce this point and present an example of some of the memes Moonshot were observing last year, here you can see the happy merchant image transposed onto an elephant. Again, it represents that same conspiracy theory that I was referring to a moment ago: that the Jewish community employs nefarious influence over global affairs. So again, a good example of what is quite a complex idea communicated in the context of a relatively similar image.

The same meme – and content warning goes up here as well – the same meme is really used to support and encourage violence as you can see here in these next two images.

So, one thing I really want to emphasize is just how endemic, just how widespread these violent memes are across DVE spaces. And again, we can understand, I think, in these images that the happy merchant is representing the Jewish

community more broadly. Again, these memes really peaked towards the end of last year and show how online hate and threats manifest through the use of visual imagery.

On the right here, you can see Pepe the Frog. Pepe the Frog, as many of you will be aware, is probably the single most recognizable extremist meme. The image was originally coopted by extremist communities on 4chan who used it to kind of mockingly reference a wide range of extremist jokes. The history is very long with that particular image.

So, becoming even more specific still, here we see how the antisemitic remarks of Kanye West were glorified within the meme culture of online extremist communities. Coming back to the Pepe the Frog meme, here we see Pepe's face transposed onto an image of Kanye West, and this is an image of when he appeared on the Alex Jones show in December 2022. Kanye, as I mentioned, made many deeply antisemitic remarks while on the show, and then was immediately glorified within the meme culture of these online extremist communities. Pepe the Frog, generally speaking, I think is depicted as a kind of heroic figure in these spaces. And the transposition of the Pepe face onto Kanye here kind of acts as a show of support for what Kanye was saying, kind of a valorization of Kanye West's remarks.

I should say as well, just to follow the point Arthur was making, these memes follow the events almost immediately. There is literally no time lag at all. As soon as an event happens, the memes follow. That's the kind of pace we're dealing with here.

And then finally, just my final slide before I pass it over, I wanted to show you two more memes glorifying Kanye West. And I want to make the point here about the deep symbolism contained within some of these memes. There's a lot to go on in these two images. In the left, there's the obvious Adolf Hitler shirt, plus he is standing in front of a black sun, which is a Nazi symbol that's been employed recently by both Neo-Nazis online and offline. And that image of the black sun actually appeared on the first page of the manifesto of the Buffalo mass shooter last year.

In the right-hand image, Kanye is standing in front of a "Kekistan" flag, which has been changed. Normally, the Kekistan flag is a green color. It's been changed to a red coloring here and given the Ye symbol in the top left as well. Kekistan, for those that don't know, is kind of a fictional country created by users on 4chan within their meme discourse, whose leader is often imagined to be that Pepe the Frog figure. So, there's an idea here communicated that Kanye is becoming a kind of spiritual leader of users on 4chan following the antisemitic remarks he made.

And the point I wanted to finish on really is that I think the symbolism here reveals something deeper. To those in these communities and researchers alike, we recognize the wider symbols in these images quite immediately. However, to the uninitiated, perhaps the person on the street, it's quite difficult to get to grips with this imagery, immediately anyway.

What does this mean? Well, I think it means it's quite a high barrier to entry in understanding these memes, and memes generally, because they require quite a lot of prior knowledge, especially in the case of extremist memes and terrorist memes. So, there's a sense in which memes help build a shared and exclusive language for online extremist communities. We're all social animals, of course. We all enjoy being a part of a community, and so I think memes really help online extremist communities build that very sense of community, and then can therefore act as radicalization tools – powerful radicalization tools – for that very reason. They can also, of course, be used to reinforce extremist ideas, as I hope I've shown today.

And that, I think, is one of the reasons why we need to understand memes as practitioners in this field, and why studying them and talking about them is just so important. At that point, I'll stop. Thank you.

Erin Grace
Oliver, thank you so much for that. Next up, we'll have Kat Parsons offer her presentation, and so be thinking of questions that you would like these panelists to try to answer. Thank you. Kat?

Kat Parsons

Hi there. So, first of all, again, thank you so much for joining here. I just want to reiterate the first two panelists that I'm looking forward to the discussion, so I'll try to get through this quickly because I think that's an important component of this particular topic especially.

I'm trying to take a little more of an academic perspective after these two far more applied sorts of presenters. So, hopefully we can all complement each other. I am a Ph.D. candidate at American University, and I've also been a research specialist here at NCITE since 2021. My background is in criminology. My focus, as Erin mentioned, is on domestic extremism, political violence. This topic is near and dear to me because I've been very extremely online since probably about the mid-90s. I remember being a kid using dial-up and my mom's Gateway computer, getting yelled at to get off so someone can use the phone. And back then, even, running into things like Nazi imagery online at a very early time. So, I've always been very interested in those fringes of online community, which has played into my own research. My own research focuses right now on online content of these domestic extremists especially, but violent extremists more generally. So, I'm going to draw a lot on my own research here, and even a little on my experience just dealing with this content.

The reason we're really talking about this is because we're concerned about online versus offline behavior. We're not just concerned about violent memes. We're concerned about how violent memes might impact violence in real life. And this has come to attention, as the other two presenters have mentioned, because there have been some noteworthy, large scale, very, very severe attacks that have been associated with manifestos that utilize memes and references to this sort of internet culture throughout them.

So, you know, we're also interested in spread, right? What is their spread, how do they spread, and do memes radicalize? Do memes help people to embrace more extreme views, for instance? Hopefully we can shine a little light on some of those things.

It's worth noting that terrorists in general are often very early adopters of technology, so it's no surprise that internet, social media would be no exception to this rule. For example, we're well aware, I'm sure many in this discussion are aware, that ISIS, ISIL was very prominent on Twitter, very successful on Twitter for not only producing very polished content, but also for recruitment. We also know that REMVE, so racially and ethnically motivated violent extremist, actors have been using the internet for recruitment and radicalization since the 90s.

And again, we've seen these memes and these sort of references to internet culture depicted in many or multiple, especially more recently, lone actor manifestos. So, [looking at these images], on the left is the symbol for Stormfront. Stormfront is an online community for white nationalists that was developed by Donald Black in the mid-90s. He essentially taught himself how to code to develop this website, to help connect people who were disparate in the sort of white nationalist movement and give them a central meeting place online. And it still stands today. It's probably one of the longest standing sources within that group. In the middle is the gun that was utilized in the Christchurch shooting attack. In that attack, the shooter had multiple internet references written onto his rifle as he livestreamed. And then our last image is just a Twitter user-created image in support of ISIS and their Twitter usage. My point here is simply that we are often seeing [that] they're generally very early adopters. Right now, there's a lot of conversation, for instance, over crypto and its use to help fund terrorist organizations and so on.

With that said, where we've sort of seen things progress is this concept of online extremism, that's sort of where we are right now. So, just trying to bring it back to this concept of online versus offline behavior, when we're looking at terrorism as a topic, it's often conceptualized as international versus domestic. And these kinds of current movements that we're seeing and that we're talking about, they exist in a physical space, but they proliferate in an online space, and we sometimes see those borders sort of blend. So, this [image] is again a participant at a rally who is actually wearing the flag of Kekistan. And again, as I believe Oliver just mentioned, Kekistan is this sort of user created concept, an imaginary online-only place that is then being represented physically in these physical spaces, in these protest spaces, in these rally spaces. So, it is clearly for us very important to understand, first of all, what the importance of this imagery is and sort of how it plays into these offline actions.

Another interesting component we'll see in the meme culture is the coopting of symbols. I'll talk about it a little more later, but for example, many probably heard about the OK hand gesture being used as a white supremacy symbol. This was born out of kind of a joke, right? Users were trying to promote this to prove they were being monitored online, for one, but also to try to kind of pull one over on people who were monitoring them. Basically, this joke persisted so extensively, it has actually grown to be adopted by some white nationalists, white supremacists as a symbol of their movement.

The meme is born out of this idea of the inside joke. It's inside jokes that are often born out of these forums, these boards, these chans. They're these anonymous sources where people are able to meet. They'll find like-minded [people], and these inside jokes are born. And most of these memes, if you don't have a little inside knowledge or at least knowledge of the context or the setup, you don't get it. So, there's a premise here of the memes on this inside joke.

This plays into political aesthetics, especially those that we see amongst REMVE, the racially and ethnically motivated and AGAAVE, which would be your anti-authority-type violent extremists. This sort of aesthetic of humor is often adopted for multiple reasons. It is, for one, a way to promote group memberships. So those who get the joke, who get the meme, they're in, they're part of the group. Those who don't are on the outside. It kind of helps create that border.

Because it relies on the inside joke, it's also going to be very effective tool for othering, for dehumanization. It presents information in a very black-and-white format. It's very easy for logical fallacies to slip in, for instance. And what do I mean by a logical fallacy? Here we have for instance, after many of the George Floyd protests, there was a surge in very, we'll say, far-left extreme kind of memes shared on social media spaces. The "all cops are bad." There's been many iterations of this. This is just one example – this is a play on the phrase "all cops are bad."

So, again, what do I mean by a logical fallacy? Here's a meme that presents what's supposed to be just data, facts. And it's pretty clear that this is supposed to tell us and play into this trope of black-on-black crime. This is a very commonly utilized trope amongst REMVE actors. In the wake of protests surrounding the police killing of George Floyd, this is like a response tactic, that there is far more black-on-black crime. So, this is sort of playing on that and presenting it in a way that seems very cut and dry, black-and-white, right? But this just says, "USA Crime Statistics". It was a percent ... it's not actually telling us much. We don't know the percent of what. We don't know who the data pool is. This is what I mean by logical fallacy. It's presenting information in a way that is supposed to be very clear, but really has very little meaning. And we see a lot of this shared on these meme content, these kinds of memes, and these groups will share information this way.

And again, going back to that political aesthetics, a big component of that is also trolling. We see a lot of that in these memes. A lot of that will be, for instance, coopting symbols. For instance, Pepe the Frog, a very well-known coopted symbol. This was just somebody's cartoon that had absolutely nothing to do with any kind of political violence or even a political message. It has been coopted heavily by various groups. And again, an example of a Proud Boy in a protest space utilizing the OK hand symbol to show solidarity, even though again, this is something that was born originally as a joke.

And that also brings us back to one of the strategies or uses of memes. It's set up in a way that you can just say "I was joking," right? Like you can fall back on this as a joke. And this is not necessarily unintentional. I'm just going back to this slide for the quote. At the top of the slide, we see a quote from the Daily Stormer, which is a prominent white nationalist website. There's a style guide that they released suggesting how to spread the message in a kind of mainstreaming sense. And their advice: "Generally when using racist slurs, it should come across as half-joking – like a racist joke that everyone laughs at because it's true." When you're using humor in this way and memes in this way, you're able to fall back and say, "Listen, it was just a joke. That violent imagery, I don't really mean that. I'm just joking." But it's also a way to just sow confusion and create increased scrutiny. When you see controversies over things like the OK hand gesture, that just brings increased attention to their movement.

And again, this has come to a point where we're often seeing this imagery adopted in protest spaces and in rally spaces. There is again this sort of merging of this online versus offline behavior. For example, this is someone wearing a Pepe the Frog mask at a political rally as a form of sort of in-person trolling.

What's interesting is when we look at the research… And I will say there's not a very long established, body of research here. A lot of the research is coming out now, this is new. This isn't something that is an established issue. This is something that's coming up more recently. So, I expect a lot more research to be coming out, and our understanding of this to expand greatly in the coming years. But what we're seeing now is that the sharing of these memes is generally within clusters. They're not necessarily shared outside of their particular networks widely. Those clusters are predominantly looking or shared in sort of what we consider Western spaces. So, they're shared in often English speaking, but very generally European, Australian, Canadian and U.S. spaces. Not as a rule, but again just sort of, more often than not, this is what the research is showing us right now.

This can tell us a couple of things. I think what it tells us is that memes are very useful with these groups for reinforcing boundaries, for sharing their values, and determining who the outgroup is. But they're not necessarily used widely as a primary radicalization tool, and I'll talk about that a little bit more. But just to sort of think about the process … memes are very iterative. And what I mean by that is that, it's a back-and-forth process. Someone manipulates the Pepe the Frog image, and then someone adds to it, and there's this sort of common, you know, back-and-forth. It's like an intentional game of telephone. So, it's something that constantly evolves and the meaning and symbols that go along with it evolve with it.

But memes are more than just the images that we're talking about. There are hashtags that go along with it, social networks, and it's something we can relate to. You're online, scrolling Instagram. Someone shares a funny meme, you follow an account, and then suddenly they start sharing amongst those funny memes, things that are kind of racist. And what we can see then is that memes are very much a way to get people in the door but are predominantly used also within groups. It's very contextual, it changes often, and as we've seen quickly, right – like looking at the Moonshot data, how immediately these things come out. For instance, immediately following a lot of the controversy and the George Floyd protests, September of that year, there was a major surge in violent memes shared on far-left social media sources. And it was, again, that same sort of, 'something happened in real life' and we see this very quick response online with these memes associated.

So, the really big question is – do memes radicalize? Do memes radicalize people to terrorism?

[Here is] a screen grab [from 2015] from a Stormfront commentor who is saying "Guys, I think memes are the best way to share our white nationalist message. I've created some memes here that are palatable enough for mainstream social media, and I'm sharing them with you for that purpose." So that's what this poster is saying.

So, what does that tell us? Clearly memes are being used intentionally by some as a propaganda tool, as a way to share their message, as a way to try to get people in the door. Meme don't act alone though, right? So again, maybe that gets you to follow an account. Maybe that gets you interested in something. Maybe you laugh at something that's a little inappropriate and start thinking … I don't know, but I think it's a good way to help get people in the door, right. It opens the door to that type of exposure. It makes it more approachable. It makes it easier to draw people in.

And again, there's a lot of important purposes that the sharing of these memes serve for people who are existing in largely online spaces. It helps develop identity. It helps create borders to an otherwise borderless space. It can help sow confusion more generally, which is often a goal of many of these extremist movements. It can be a cover for true violence, like for actually instigating violence, for actually supporting or condoning violence, saying "It was just a joke. It's just a meme" as a cover. And it can also be a way to help question authority. If you see one meme that's got a logical fallacy on it, that's very black and white, suddenly it can be a direct question to authority, and that can be part of the appeal as well.

With that said, I will wrap up here. If anybody is interested in the research that I'm referencing here, feel free to email me (ncite@unomaha.edu). That said, I will turn it back over to Erin.

Erin Grace

Thank you so much, Kat. There's so much good information here. What you, Arthur, and Oliver have clearly shown us is that Pandora's box is wide open. And before the Supreme Court makes any decisions affecting how internet content is regulated here in the U.S., if they in fact decide to act on that, I guess a question I'd like to kick to our U.K. guests is how on Earth do you start to close Pandora's box? What are some current processes for detecting online extremist content? What challenges are you facing when trying to remove such content? And Arthur, why don't you go first and then Oliver?

Arthur Bradley

Sure. Yeah, it's a big question. Maybe I could talk in a bit more detail about what we're doing to challenge it and the kind of rationale behind our approach. And then I could talk to a couple of other approaches. And in fact, I'll talk about three things.

So, our Terrorist Content Analytics Platform, basically the methodology of that is to focus on the core of these terrorist networks and how they're spreading the content online. So as Kat said, a lot of this content is actually happening within the communities and less so outside of them. So, our approach is to focus on those communities. As I said at the start of my presentation, they're often on platforms that are either struggling to moderate this or potentially are unwilling to talk about those two things separately as well. But for the TCAP, what we're doing is using open-source intelligence to track this content and alert it to the platforms every day and to help them to identify it. And usually when they receive an alert, it will have an explanation of what the content is, which is crucial as well.

Limitation to that is that we, essentially, our inclusion policy is based on designation lists. We look at the major democracies and the designation, which is quite clear for Islamist terrorism. But you know, famously for the for the far right, it's much less comprehensive. So that's a real challenge. And obviously, [some of the] limitations are that we can't catch everything. We're a small organization.

Other solutions that I mentioned, kind of automated solutions, hash sharing is one, and that is very effective for things like Islamic State videos shared across social media. And a limitation with that, as I said in my presentation, is that that has to capture like exact copies. The hash is like a unique code that identifies the material. With memes, by their definition they're constantly edited and changed, and they're always different when they're uploaded. That makes detecting it much more difficult from an automatic point of view.

Third thing I'll say then I'll pass it over is, you know, we're focusing a lot on infrastructure providers. I talked about platforms that are struggling to moderate content, but there are also platforms that are either terrorist themselves or kind of supportive of or completely ambivalent to it. That really poses a challenge for us. We're focusing on what we call terrorist operated websites – i.e., websites that are operated by terrorist actors – and at that point, you need to start talking about infrastructure level action. But that kind of raises the legal challenges. Anyway, I'll stop there, pass it over to someone else.

Erin Grace

Go ahead, Oliver.

Oliver Goodman

Thank you. Thank you, Arthur. So, from Moonshot's perspective, [there are] two key ways really where we try and address some of the threat, not just of memes but of domestic violent extremism more broadly. The first of those is our insights work and our insights portfolio. So really helping our stakeholders, like the Threat Bulletin I mentioned a moment ago, really understand the nature of the threat. I think in order to decide how to intervene, in order to understand how to direct resources to counter the nature of the threat, we first need to understand what that threat is. That's what the

Threat Bulletin is all about. We have customers, fusion centers and their customers on the federal level as well in the U.S., helping them understand these threats and how these threats manifest, so that they can direct their resources more effectively.

On the other side, Moonshot also undertakes lots of intervention work. Everything we've spoken about today is online. Memes are inherently an online thing, online object. And because those memes are online, it means or implies there's a massive opportunity for online targeted interventions as well. Whereas previously in the sector, obviously, 10 [or] 20 years ago, it was all offline interventions. Now I think it's really important to bring those interventions online to try and target people in the same kinds of spaces that they're finding these memes online. To try to offer them credible counter messaging. To try to take them away from these memes and towards some positive forms of content.

Erin Grace
Thank you, Oliver. As a follow up, since we have so many law enforcement folks on this call here, how do you get your Threat Bulletin?

Oliver Goodman
Probably the best way is to email our email address. I'll leave it up to you to decide the best way to disseminate that.

Erin Grace
OK, sounds good. So, if you want to get a copy of that, reach out to NCITE and we will be sure to steer you to Oliver.

You know, I want to ask … this is a question for all three of you, but I guess something I'm curious about is the stickiness of these memes. It's not like, you know, the artwork is Don Draper – if you're casting these as ads. What makes a meme really successful? What are some elements? Or is it more about the who's sharing? Is it less about the image and more about the platform or the path?

Kat Parsons
I think there's both involved, to be honest. They're very context driven, and so you can have a meme that's only applicable to a very, very insular small community, like a very particular branch of a Reddit thread. Or you can have a meme that has wide reach that's going to make sense to most people. I think that honestly it very much depends. But the concept sticks. The concept of this sort of this back and forth, this evolving of shared messages in this format, and this kind of quick snapshot, I think is here to stay … As much as that probably will evolve and adapt per who's using them.

Erin Grace
So, the idea of stickiness is so portrayed in the photo that you shared, Kat, of the woman who's actually wearing Pepe's head. And I'm curious about something Oliver said, which is this idea of counter messaging. So, take the fight to the online space. Can you think of an effective example of counter messaging? And it's OK if you can't, I'm putting you on the spot here. But I'm just interested in that idea of, "OK, how do you defuse Pepe? How do you defuse the inside joke?"

Oliver Goodman
I think there are a couple of things we can do. I think it's important to see memes not as a cause, but more as a symptom of some deeper underlying trend. And so, in many cases, the emphasis of the counter messaging should be to address that deep underlying trend rather than the individual message contained in the meme. That might sometimes be relevant indeed. But there are these deeper underlying factors that all of us operating in the space know of – social deprivation, isolation, mental health issues, or a combination of all of these things. And in Moonshot's work, we've found that addressing these particular vulnerabilities has been the most effective counter messaging strategy.

Kat Parsons
I'd like to add also, that from a research perspective, we found that community-driven messaging is far more effective. So, having something kind of top-down, generally, can almost have a backfire effect at times. But when messaging is born

out of the community it's within, it's much more effective. Working directly with people who are leaders in online spaces, for instance, can be effective. And I know that's tricky, but again, just sort of going off what research has told us.

Erin Grace
What have you seen with AI? There's been a lot of talk right now about, you know, the robot apocalypse is here. So, how does the AI technology take memes to a new level? Or we have we seen that yet?

Arthur Bradley
I can go first. I mean, that's a tricky one. In short, I don't really know. I haven't really seen any kind of distinct examples, apart from today; Andrew Torba of Gab actually has announced, I don't know how sincere he was being, about making a rival version of ChatGPT, and I guess it remains to see if that will happen or not and I think.

Kat Parsons
They did release an AI tool for image creation.

Arthur Bradley
Yeah, I mean, the point I was trying to make was slightly tangential in that, in terms of algorithmic amplification of this kind of stuff, that's an issue on larger platforms. But I think when we're talking about these small online spaces where the real extreme violent extremist terrorist actors are operating, it doesn't really seem to be like a prevalent issue. I wouldn't say it's top of the list. And yeah, in terms of AI, I'm not sure, to be honest.

Erin Grace
Arthur, hang with me here. I have another question. I'm thinking of the meme that you showed us of, you know, the old man and the young man, right. And they're poking fun, the joke is at the generational idea, and I'm wondering who the audience across ideology typically is for these memes. Is it young people, like, am I too old as a Gen Xer to get it?

Arthur Bradley
I guess it's kind of … you're talking about the IS meme about Ayman al-Zawahiri? I think, generally speaking, with memes, as Kat was saying, the earlier question about what makes a meme successful … it's totally dependent on the context, on the intended audience and how relatable it is. I think also really important is the timing of a meme. So, as Oliver was saying in his presentation, it's completely inevitable that, particularly on the extreme far right, they're going to be commentating whatever global events are happening, however relevant they are for them. And they're going to be talking about it, making content about them. So, I think certainly the timing and yeah, relatability and kind of the context of it, I think is what it is.

Erin Grace
Thank you. I want to read you a quote from the book I'm reading Meme Wars, just to get your reaction to it. This is a person who's very active on 4chan and is talking about the crossover from, they call it "from the wires to the weeds," right? So, something that just exists online that now gets repeated in real life, like the woman wearing the Pepe head. "I think memes are a very important political tool that not a lot of people understand yet. You can create an image, and if you share that image enough, it takes on a life of its own, and it shapes the reality that you live in. There is a saying, 'make your memes come true.'"

So, closing question, how do you stop the memes from coming true? Is it counter messaging? Is it pulling them off the platforms? Or is it fixing all those intractable social ills that you referenced before that sound real easy?

Kat Parsons
Yeah. Again, I think it's a symptom largely and, standing out as a symptom, you have to look at actual root causes, right? So, the memes themselves can be regulated, but again, there are alternatives. There are these spaces and, ultimately, we do have to find a way to strike at the actual core of the problem, which is obviously a very easy, simple task.

Erin Grace
Oliver, would you like any closing word on that subject?

Oliver Goodman
Yeah, I think the simple – the very, very simple – answer is that we can't stop memes. I mean, there are examples of recorded memes as early as the 1920s in newspapers, right? The idea of a theme or a motif being reproduced in either an image or in text or in some other format, this is kind of an almost base form of human communication. I don't think we can stop that. I think, at best, we have to start to address some of those underlying concepts, and that might not be on the level of public health or the level of public economics, right? It might be very targeted, individually trying to address someone who is at risk of radicalization, their particular vulnerabilities. And trying to get them to see memes in a different way. I don't think we can stop the sharing of memes on an aggregate level, unfortunately.

Erin Grace
Arthur, last thought?

Arthur Bradley
Yeah, I agree with what's been said. I clearly mean our focus, Tech Against Terrorism’s focus, is on the online element of this. And so, it's the sharp end, we're focusing on the worst material, direct incitement, and illegal content. In that case, stopping this material from being seen by as wide of an audience as possible is really important. But at the same time, this has to be in tandem with all the other approaches. It's got to be a cross-industry thing and I think it's really important also to remember that we can bash the big tech companies all we want, and often they deserve it, but the content on the internet is being produced by people in society and removing the content doesn't remove the people from posting it. They'll probably just go somewhere else. And so, it goes way beyond the Internet. And yeah, as Kat said, there's no easy answer to it, but it's definitely across industry.

Erin Grace
I see that we're about at time and honestly, we could talk about this a lot longer, so maybe we'll have to do a Part 2. But I want to just thank you all for joining us. Thank our panelists, Oliver and Arthur and Kat, for devoting their time. This takes a lot of prep just to talk for 10 minutes, so thank you all for being available. And thank you to our audience. Please reach out to us at ncite@unomaha.edu for anything we couldn't answer. We will be sure to follow up with a recap of today's program. Thank you again.