



## NCITE Presents: Terrorist Use of Memes

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*A look at how terrorists and extremists use memes to spread their ideologies and radicalize followers, how memes translate to offline violence, and what can be done.*

As memes become an increasingly common form of online communication, it is important to consider how they can be weaponized to spread extremist ideologies and mobilize people to violence. In a recent NCITE panel discussion, three panelists – Arthur Bradley of Tech Against Terrorism, Oliver Goodman of Moonshot, and NCITE’s own Kat Parsons – spoke about the work they are doing as researchers and practitioners to understand and combat the threat. This snapshot summarizes the key takeaways from the discussion. A full transcript can be found [online](#).

### **Arthur Bradley** *Tech Against Terrorism*

Arthur Bradley is the open-source intelligence manager at Tech Against Terrorism and oversees content collection for the Terrorist Content Analytics Platform (TCAP), an automated tool that flags content to platforms in near-real time. Tech Against Terrorism works with the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate to counter terrorist use of the internet while respecting human rights.



**Why is it important that we study memes?** When an extremist group uses memes, it can increase disinformation online and make it difficult to differentiate between legitimate expression and violent extremist intent.

**How are memes used by extremist groups?** These groups may use memes to make their extremist narratives more accessible to the public and hide their ideas behind a veneer of humor. Memes can be an entry point for vulnerable individuals who might be susceptible to extremist ideology and messaging.

**What can we do about it?** One important aspect of solving this problem is removing content and stopping material from being seen. This requires knowledge of context, best practices, and these extremist groups.

*“[The] prevalence [of memes] in terrorist propaganda is also in some respects an inevitable reflection of the ubiquity of memes in modern communication...terrorists like memes just as the rest of us do.”*



## Oliver Goodman *Moonshot*

Oliver Goodman is a project manager at Moonshot and oversees the *Moonshot Threat Bulletin*, a monthly report with qualitative and quantitative analysis of U.S.-based domestic violent extremism online. Moonshot develops technologies and methods to expose threats, disrupt malicious actors, and protect vulnerable audiences online.



**Why is it important that we study memes?** Memes typically emerge as soon as an event happens, with no distinct timeline. They can combine many different ideas and images from current events and other narratives.

**How are memes used by extremist groups?** Memes can be used to combine complex ideas into simple, digestible images that help build a sense of community and shared language among extremist groups. They can also be used to normalize violence, as seen in the recent uptick in antisemitic memes and associated threats against the Jewish community online.

**What can we do about it?** We can help stakeholders understand the nature of the threat, so they know how to effectively designate resources. Counter-messaging should address the underlying factors and trends instead of only the content of the memes.

*“It is important to see memes not as a cause, but more as a symptom of some deeper underlying trend ... addressing these particular vulnerabilities has been the most effective counter-messaging strategy.”*

## Kat Parsons *NCITE*

Kat Parsons is a research specialist at the National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center and a Ph.D. candidate at American University. Her previous work has included examining support for political violence and the impact of violent rhetoric. As a Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence, NCITE is a federally funded research consortium focused on counterterrorism and targeted violence prevention.

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**Why is it important that we study memes?** We have to be concerned about online versus offline behavior, or how violent memes may impact violence in real life. We have seen, in some recent noteworthy attacks, where perpetrators have incorporated memes into manifestos.

**How are memes used by extremist groups?** Memes can be used as a tool for language, creating in-group and out-group identity, mainstreaming extremist content, recruitment, and propaganda. Memes often rely on the “inside joke” and present information in ways that allow for logical fallacies. When extremists use memes, the use of humor makes room for plausible deniability – “I was just joking!”

**What can we do about it?** Community-driven messaging, such as working directly with individuals that are leaders in these online spaces, may be more effective than top-down efforts.

*“We’re not just concerned about violent memes. We’re concerned about how violent memes might impact violence in real life.”*

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