

Elite male bodies: The circulation of alt-Right memes and the framing of politicians on Social Media

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Abstract:

In 2016, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. The right-wing support online was particularly of influence in this event. Indeed, some argued that the biggest winner of the 2016 US presidential election was the “alt-right”, an extreme right-wing community that communicates through online image boards like 4chan and social news sites like Reddit. By close-reading images and memes from the Facebook pages and Instagram, we traced the circulation and impact of these memes, as well as their visual connections and themes. We argue that the communities that share these memes adhere to a masculine iconography. By drawing inspiration from different texts, such as games and historical portraits, Trump is glorified by his supporters as the ultimate saviour, aided by other politicians such as Putin. In its framing of patriarchy, sexism, racism, and even racial purity as a heroic and cartoonish narrative, the alt-right renders its memes as part of a powerful male story. We argue that the use of parody to discredit an opponent is what allows memes to be read as an incredibly powerful, persuasive medium, which has led to them being adopted by the alt-right to justify a racist and sexist discourse.

Keywords: Political communication, memes, framing, participatory culture, masculinity, persuasive communication, intertextuality, parody

Introduction: Political Memes as Public Discourse

Public participation and the enacting of citizenship increasingly take place in an online 'participatory culture' (Jenkins, 2006). Internet memes have become an important medium to respond to political and social issues online, especially during elections in the USA (Ross & Rivers, 2017). Political participation is integral to Jenkins' discussion of media and cultural participation. For instance, he refers to the 'Bert is evil' controversy, in which a meme of the *Sesame Street* character Bert interacting with various terrorists went viral and was even adopted by pro-Bin Laden protesters in Bangladesh in 2001 (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 1-2). The fact that even anti-American protesters picked up the meme is a clear illustration of how parodies can also be assigned serious and literal meanings.

Memes can have political impact and are one way in which we learn about important global issues. In other words, participatory media such as memes are key to engaging with democracy and citizenship today. As highly medium-specific expressions, memes can provide a timely and even reactionary response to political debates. By linking to popular culture and well-known signs, memes have become a 'spreadable' part of our remix culture. While it is not our aim to trace how the circulation of these memes influenced the election, we acknowledge that these memes are widespread on different social media.

Memes are an example of 'spreadable' media, media which are part of an online participatory culture and spread beyond different platforms (Jenkins, Ford, Green, 2013). The term 'meme' was originally coined by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976). In line with his evolutionary theory, Dawkins defined memes as small cultural units of transmission, similar to genes, which are spread from person to person by copying or imitation. Melodies, catch phrases, and clothing fashions are examples of Dawkins' conceptualization of memes.

Today, internet memes are a genre in their own right – with recognizable visuals, fonts, video tropes, and other genre qualities. While memes can be defined broadly to include any type of spreadable online content, they often have the connotation of being user-generated and viral. As Shifman (2013) notes in her study on internet memes as exemplary of digital discourses: 'Whereas in memetics the unit of analysis itself is abstract and controversial, Internet users tend to ascribe the meme tag to concrete phenomena such as particular YouTube videos that lure many derivatives. "Leave Britney Alone," the "Star Wars Kid," Hitler's "Downfall" parodies, and the "Numa Numa guy" are particularly famous drops in a memetic ocean' (p. 363).

Our research focuses on the emergence and influence of alt-right memes during the American elections of 2016. The alt-right is associated with a long history that is tied to the American extreme right, which has been growing steadily in number and influence since the 1990s with the rise of 'patriot' extremism. David Neiwert writes in his book *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump* (2017) that the alt-right of the past years is a movement which consists of seemingly disconnected groups – nativists, patriots, white supremacists, and self-declared neo-Nazis to name a few. While these groups are often represented as a homogenous cohort, in reality they have conflicting agendas. Neiwert

describes how these different radical right-wing ideas led to a massive alternative universe, which is now called the alt-right, derived from white nationalist ideas, far-right 'traditionalist' ideologues, organized and recruited almost entirely online. The alt-right's influence became so extensive that it managed to include Trump himself. However, the alt-right is full of contradictions, since it consists of these different political parties and agendas.

In their extensive study on the alt-right, Marwick and Lewis (2017) analyse how the alt-right purposely uses online communication and its ironic vocabulary to further its political agenda: 'Taking advantage of the opportunity the internet presents for collaboration, communication, and peer production, these groups target vulnerabilities in the news media ecosystem to increase the visibility of and audience for their messages' (p. 3). The alt-right is not the only movement that has manipulated media in such a way. Trolls, hate groups, and Gamergate followers also rely on these tactics, and often share online spaces, such as 4Chan, with the alt-right. Their endeavours have a real effect, as Marwick and Lewis write (pp. 44-45). Citizens are misinformed by the messages and false news that originate from these groups. Alt-right communication creates a culture of growing distrust of mass media and the official social media channels of parties and individuals. The most important problem, however, is radicalization – the messages of groups such as the alt-right may persuade individuals to invest in extreme right-wing beliefs.

Memes were essential to the success of the alt-right and to the election of Trump. While these memes often seem innocent, comical, and even cute on YouTube, Tumblr, and other platforms, they are used by the alt-right to promote radical political ideas. These alt-right memes adopt a typical aesthetic of irony and referencing that makes them stand out (Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Cramer, 2017). By adopting the imagery of games, such as *Warhammer* and *Assassin's Creed*, and novels such as *Dune*, and various internet comics, alt-right movements have engaged both their supporters and opponents online during the American presidential election of 2016 and its aftermath. The memes use their own iconic language and images (e.g. Pepe the Frog), thereby creating a complex subculture (Garofalo, 2016; Rose, 2016). As we shall show in our empirical research, these memes mediate existing controversies, issues, and political personae in an intertextual way.

Our study shows that humour and parody are important devices here that mediate a potentially toxic internet culture, which is carried over into offline political campaigns. We define a toxic discourse in this study as a speech act and aesthetic that is racist, sexist or extremist in nature. In the alt-right discourse, such critical and conservative elements are marginalized through jokes, thereby rendering extreme right views as harmless. Users may get the idea that these are only jokes although the political content and the persuasion are real. In the American election of 2016, we saw that memes were weaponized to influence campaigns and their outcomes. Interventions by professional trolls influenced the outcome of the election, and this makes it all the more relevant to research the content of these memes and the comments they receive.

These memes that we investigated can be seen as a form of political trolling. We define political trolling not only as an act of posting hateful messages and memes, but as a

wider phenomenon through which users engage in influential, toxic behaviour. Tagging posts in a specific way, creating false accounts, and befriending certain people helps create toxic cultures and makes sure that certain messages are circulated. For instance, by creating fake 'sock puppet' accounts, which circulate their own messages, trolls can be more influential and create an echo chamber online.

In this study, we investigate the iconography of online alt-right memes. The main research question that we answer is: 'What are the ideological stances and themes inferred in popular memes about Trump?' Similar to the close-reading of memes by Shifman (2013), we analyse the content and form of these memes and the ideological stance that they convey. We unpack how memes connect to different texts from popular culture and gaming culture, but also to Western history of male leadership. An important case-study that we analyse within this corpus is the alt-right portrayal of Trump as 'God Emperor Trump', which repositions Trump as a glorious, heroic leader. Overall, we argue that the semantics and iconography of internet memes during the elections represented and co-constructed the political landscape in the United States.

To fully understand our digital culture, memes are essential. They are a pivotal example of mass communication online with a complexity that several internet scholars have already unpacked. Johnson (2007), for instance, asserts that memes can be particularly relevant for cultural studies to decipher the meaning of 'seemingly superficial and trivial elements of popular culture' (p. 27). Theoretically, memes can be read as incredibly powerful, persuasive media which are adopted by the alt-right to justify their toxic discourse. Parody masks problematic content as a joke, but as we can tell by the widespread circulation of and responses to these memes, they are part of a right-wing communication strategy. Their purpose is to create a certain emotional and social engagement with the elections. In other words, through their persuasive language, these memes have real social influences.

We argue that these alt-right memes rely on a specific discourse, one which is grounded in imperialist themes and genres, such as the imperial portrait. The Trump memes that we studied imply a specific kind of regressive, heterosexual masculinity. In the reception of Trump by the alt-right, this masculinity connects closely to religion as well. Trump is glorified by his fans and supporters as the ultimate saviour, aided by other politicians such as Putin. In other words, we examine how can parody and intertextuality ('referencing'/'mediation') can be used to frame political issues on the web. Furthermore, we chart how political memes are circulated and engaged with over time.

Framing of Politicians and Online Media

Framing is central to political communication (Castells, 2009; Lakoff, 2008). Official bodies, such as governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), think tanks, and social media agencies adopt framing strategies. All of these actors construct and share their viewpoints on current issues and developments. Similar events are evaluated differently depending on their political angle and agendas. These political groups share their agendas,

programs, and worldviews through the construction of ideologically loaded representations and interpretations of problems, challenges, issues, and developments. They share these representations with relevant social groups such as stakeholders and opponents that are involved in areas of their operations (Entman, 1993). Examples of this political communication include party programs and the content of political campaigns or social movements. Various forms of politically loaded online content, such as memes, became important tools for dispersing framings.

Frame- and framing-analyses are hence common methods in empirical research on political communication for several reasons (Matthes, 2013). Framing analyses reveal what issues, developments, and events currently dominate public agendas. They may also point to hierarchies, fault lines, and conflict constellations in public discourses. A framing analysis may even reveal the ideological backgrounds that influence processes of identity formation (such as ingroups and outgroups). Finally, a framing analysis can show how public speakers apply strategic communication for specific political goals and how these activities are being perceived, processed, and evaluated within the media (Nguyen, 2016). In our research, framing analysis is used to examine the strategy and ideology of the alt-right in their communication.

Media technologies, especially online media, have two functions. First, they function as platforms, or stages, for sharing framings with general and/or specified audiences. Second, they are tools for creating content and networking (Nguyen, 2016; Karatzogianni, 2006). Social media networks expand the spectrum of public spaces for political communication and enable framing via content creation; however, this does not automatically translate into wider integration of society but may actually catalyse a fragmentation of public discourse culture (Sunstein, 2017). From this perspective, frame- and framing analyses facilitate research on controversies, crises, and conflicts. Social media networks leave a tangible impact on the rules of engagement in political discourse by providing fast-lanes to audiences and the incorporation of digital communication in political campaigning (Jensen, 2016).

Political groups associated with the alt-right in the United States exemplify how these potentials are implemented to initiate counter-discourses on the web (Hine et al., 2016), which can spill over into mainstream media debates. Framing is achieved with the help of memes (Ross & Rivers, 2017), as well as postings, short videos (including GIFs and vines), and other multimedia texts. At the center of these digital artifacts are supported individuals and groups that include, in the present case, Donald Trump and his political allies and opponents. Visual framing, conveyed in torrents of digital images, is central to these online discourses, which mostly adopt a satirical-provocative tone that is somewhat typical for various forms of online communication.

Through referencing and remixing, memes and other digital formats are employed to convey meaning, which inevitably includes the ascription of attributes and characteristics to at least two social groups involved in a political discourse: those who are the (often like-minded) audience of the communicator and those who are the perceived political

opponents. Memes that glorify Trump in an exaggerated, almost comical way, address a mainly male group of politically interested internet users who identify themselves with the alt-right. This political movement can be traced back to the controversial 4Chan platform, a source for many popular memes (Hine et al., 2016). At the same time, the opponents and thus targets of negative framing, including ridicule and insult, are usually democratic politicians (e.g. Hillary Clinton) and representatives of the political left; a favourite target are so-called 'SJWs', which stands for 'social justice warriors' and has become a derogatory label for feminist, prosocial, and anti-racist positions (Luke, 2016; Duncan, 2017).

In memes, framing materializes through the main narrative and punchline of the whole artifact, including both the visual and textual elements. Political memes created and shared in alt-right networks usually attack political opponents and/or support preferred politicians and their organizations. At the very least, they satirically comment on current issues. They thereby circumvent the confinements of mass media agendas and build their own narratives about political developments and conflicts.

However, these processes are not exclusive to isolated fringe groups. Politicians themselves actively influence this. For example, Trump himself engages in practices of framing by rewriting news narratives through Twitter messages and actively contesting – and condemning – journalistic outlets (Ott, 2016). His 'tough stance' towards the press is celebrated by his supporters and also feeds into the narrative about his masculinity, which is an important theme surrounding his public persona. In his self-fashioning, Trump adheres to notions of hegemonic masculinity that aim to legitimize the dominant position of men in society. Speech acts are one important way in which Trump also positions himself against women such as Hillary Clinton. For instance, when in 2016 a recording of him was found by the *Washington Post*, in which Trump used sexist slurs, Trump responded: 'This was locker room banter, a private conversation that took place many years ago'. By dismissing his slurs as 'locker room' talk, as crude but innocent banter just among men, he also tries to normalize these hypermasculine speech acts.

What the previous example shows us is that today's politicians can easily construct and share their own framings of current issues on social media. This framing tends to be paired with practices of self-fashioning, which include how they look, talk, and act. Trump himself is a perfect example of this behaviour. His use of Twitter is functional, aimed at creating a specific, timely image of him and specific political events.

Furthermore, social media are powerful framing tools for supporters, who can now create and distribute their own framings in alternative online spaces. The alt-right engages in framing to persuade, and even misinform, citizens of the United States and other countries to further their cause.

Intertextuality and Parody as Dramatic Devices

In meme culture, intertextuality is an important narrative technique. Intertextuality defines the relations between texts and, as a dramatic device, shows how textual meaning is always shaped by other, older texts (Kristeva, 1981). Scholars such as Genette (1997) understand

the concept of intertextuality narrowly as literal citations or identifiable references to other texts. Other critics, such as Julia Kristeva, understand intertextuality more freely as cultural discourses that thrive around a text.

Thus, the definitions of 'text' in intertextuality studies are diverse. Moreover, they are often not limited to written texts but also cover spoken texts, generic conventions, images, ideologies, and even cultural clichés such as stereotypes (Meijer, 2006). This open definition of text strongly fits the memes that we have studied, which combine written text and images but are also highly medium-specific digital images. Memes can be spread, shared, responded to, and commented upon. Within the alt-right, memes are often appropriated again and again in responses, creating different *visual* discourses around one topic (e.g. Clinton's campaign). Intertextuality in a narrow sense - the phenomenon that literary texts can refer to, or use, other literary texts of the same medium - is similar to concepts such as intermediality, which emphasize how different media texts can be related in one product (Rajewsky, 2002).

Parody is one genre in which intertextuality is highly prominent. In *Theory of Parody*, Linda Hutcheon (1985) describes parody as 'repetition with critical distance' (p. 8). Unlike pastiche, which imitates by similarity, parody bases itself on difference and self-reflexivity. Parody creates a strong sense of community. As a dramatic device, parody presupposes certain knowledge and also excludes those who do not get the in-jokes (pp. 94-95). If a viewer or reader *does* get the parody, it results in a kind of satisfaction and even creates a favourable audience that appreciates the parody exactly for the acquired taste it requires (pp. 93-94). Similarly, Gray (2006) explains that viewers of *The Simpsons* praised the cleverness of the series (pp. 132-133). We can presume this cleverness extends to the viewers themselves to a certain extent because they can decode the text and respond amicably. Gray also suspects that parodies are likely to draw a more intellectual audience who can place the references in context (pp. 137-141).

Though a parody requires a competent recipient, thereby excluding certain viewers, it can have a didactic effect as well. A parody can encourage the audience to get acquainted with the source text. Even if the viewer will not go directly to the source, they at least become familiar with it to some degree. Many internet users will, for instance, recognize Pepe the Frog as an alt-right symbol but only know him through this political appropriation and not from the source text itself, Matt Furie's comic series *Boy's Club* (2005). The parody thus creates a certain awareness of a cultural repertoire by imitating it. By referring to specific texts the parody warrants 'cultural continuity', as Hutcheon describes it, and adopts a didactic function (1985, pp. 96-99). A parody can also encourage an individual to learn about certain texts.

Parody not only creates a sense of community through its common languages and images but also through its construction of authority. By mentioning certain conventions or discourses - whiteness, sexism, anti-Islamic thought - the parody also confirms them. In other words, by making these notions transparent and poking fun at them, they are also reified. This is related to a parody's most important political and ideological function, which

Hutcheon also links to late twentieth century postmodernism. Parodies *dedoxify*, as Hutcheon argues; they unsettle all *doxa*, all accepted beliefs and ideologies (id., p. 95). As a dramatic device, parody subverts dominant ideologies through humour. The idea that parodies *dedoxify*, that they unsettle our beliefs, maps onto the alt-right movement very well. The alt-right adopts the speech of parody to unsettle accepted beliefs but also to manipulate. Memes, for instance, render problematic content (e.g. racism, sexism) innocent by using familiar images and jokes.

Parodies then, Hutcheon also remarks, are 'double-voiced': they confirm the authorities that they simultaneously criticize or even downright reject (id., p. 73). As appropriations, memes can establish the same values and authorities that they try to reject and, as a result, might give renewed vigour to a dominant discourse. The alt-right both criticizes and makes fun of Trump in their memes, but also celebrates his masculinity, economic power, and right-wing thought. In this sense, framing and parody also go hand in hand.

In this research, we examine a different corpus of memes from alt-right platforms, such as the Facebook page God Emperor Trump. We analyse the engagement with memes by users (e.g. likes, shares) within different data sets of memes around Trump and Putin. The memes about Trump, as we will show, cannot be read outside the political spectrum in which Trump is framed against his opponent, Hillary Clinton. Similarly, a story is told about Trump and Putin as allies of sorts, which we also unravel. We argue that memes are powerful tools of communication. As parodies, memes may seem trivial, but they are highly powerful dramatic devices that are used to shape the public sphere.

Methodology

The sheer wealth and diversity of online data poses a challenge for research in the humanities and social sciences. Online data is highly varied in its media, formatting, and coding. A pitfall of online research for any scholar may be focusing on the data that is most engaged with, most popular, or most typical, rather than a data set that reflects the diversity of online data. In this mixed-method research, we provide a semantic and visual analysis of memes that moves beyond the most popular data to explore online data from smaller socio-political sections, namely the online memes spread from the so-called 'alt-right' groups. Within this data set, we have also searched for the key words 'Putin' and 'Russia'. The comparative approach of this study sheds light on certain aspects of the media discussion about the alleged Russian interference in the 2016 American elections through social media.

Our methodology offers both 'distant reading', in line with Franco Moretti's approach (2013), of a corpus of memes collected on different platforms, as well as a close reading of specific memes. Distant reading means that we examine the data networks and their larger patterns. We supplemented this with a qualitative close-reading of internet data that examines individual memes, their construction, aesthetics, and comments (Manovich, 2012). Our methodology resembles what Manovich describes as necessary, which is the

combination of 'larger patterns with the analysis of individual artifacts and their details' (p. 55).

Within online research, it is key to examine larger trends as well as to interpret singular, representative examples. It is not enough to examine this data quantitatively. It also needs to be examined qualitatively. Our research visualizes the engagement with Trump memes and close-reads various examples of Trump and Putin memes to see how these leaders are positioned. Our distant reading focuses on creating visualizations based on engagements (e.g. likes, reactions, comments) to provide insights into the alt-right. After collecting the data, we identify themes through open coding and frequency analysis in Atlas.ti. We follow this with a narrower, medium-specific analysis and a close reading of internet memes that focuses primarily on data from the Facebook page of God Emperor Trump (215,189 users on 2017-01-12), which was collected from December 2015 to December 2016 (<https://www.facebook.com/GodEmperorTrump>).

This data, consisting of a total of 8,783 posts and their associated images, was cross-compared with different data sets:

- a) The most popular Facebook posts containing memes (top 100 based on number of likes) including comments, likes, and engagement scores from the God Emperor Trump Facebook page, gathered with Netvizz (DMI). The most popular Facebook posts dated from June to 2016 to December 2016. Within the Facebook data set, we also specifically applied search results (initial GET data set) for the query term 'Putin': 88 posts; search results (initial GET data set) for the query term 'Russia': 84 posts.
- b) The Instagram hashtag #godemperortrump from October 2016 to January 2017, gathered with Netlytic (8,783 posts).
- c) The Facebook page 'Putin memes' (6,973 users on 2017-05-02), the most popular Facebook page of Putin supporters with Putin Memes; gathered with Netvizz (from 2014-03-23 to 2017-01-01): 238 posts; for the further analysis, the top 100 posts (the most popular posts based on like count).

Our study is a cross-comparison between different platforms, particularly Facebook and Instagram. On both platforms, similar discourses emerged, as we detail in our findings. For visualization purposes, Facebook and Instagram are suitable platforms that work with our software well (e.g. Netvizz). Furthermore, this paper was the outcome of a winter school held by the Digital Methods Initiative in Amsterdam, where other groups focused on the memes that were uploaded on Reddit. While 4Chan was also considered during our project, this platform proved difficult to investigate and was left out of the scope of the overarching Digital Methods winter school project.

We analysed this data set with Tableau and designed a clearer visualization of it with Illustrator to see how the memes developed over time and how the conversations increased in light of the elections, which will be summarized in tables in the next section. For the

cross-comparison with Instagram, we visualized the connections to see which images occurred on both platforms in the sample. Finally, we added to this set by searching for more results that represented Putin and Russia.

This image data, along with the annotations of the images, were coded in Atlas.ti to identify common themes in open coding. This first open coding and initial theme identification was done by one of our researchers. A second round of collaborative coding with another researcher allowed us to redefine the coding framework and identify themes, sub themes, and concepts in our data set.

Distant Reading of Memes on Facebook and Instagram

Our study traced the circulation of memes over time and on two different social media, Facebook and Instagram. Our visualizations of Facebook focused on the God Emperor Trump page as one of the key pages. It is a page dedicated to support Donald Trump, as its creator describes:

Some believe him to be the reincarnation of General George Patton while others go as far as to claim the rumors of Godhood are true. It cannot be argued Donald J. Trump was raised the son of an upper middle class real estate developer in New York, New York. Trump went on to become the most recognizable real estate mogul in the world, and with the mandate of the people of the United States and the world, will attain his rightful title, God Emperor of Mankind. (<https://www.facebook.com/pg/GodEmperorTrump>).

The God Emperor Trump Facebook page collected over 100,000 likes from its inception in January until the election. The admin (or admins) of the page has been quite prolific and edits Trump's fan pages elsewhere on the web. When Facebook temporarily discontinued the God Emperor Trump page, the admin posted on the subreddit r/The_Donald, dismissing Facebook censorship and asking for support. Additionally, there is a God Emperor Trump II: The Emperor Strikes Back Facebook page created in February 2017 and a website called the Department of Memes created on June 16, 2017, which describes itself as 'a news website owned and operated by artists who run meme pages, and this alone makes it more trustworthy than CNN'. (<https://www.facebook.com/GodEmperorTrumpii/>)

While these pages are outside the scope of this research project, we want to briefly emphasize that the way these sites are represented by their admins is characteristic of the alt-right. The front page of the God Emperor Trump page features descriptions of the page admins as Pepe the Frog characters, the central meme of the alt-right subculture. The website also sells merchandise under the domain name American AF Nation (American as f*ck), and a shopping button has been added to God Emperor Trump page. American AF Nationalready has a very vibrant Instagram community (american_asf) with 310,000 followers on July 7, 2017. It features similar kinds of iconography as other pages, but with

more focus on military themes and a kind of eroticized patriotism (such as sexy women posing with guns and wearing American flags).

Strikingly, most of the comments on the page are linked to personal Facebook accounts. However, these personal accounts sometimes clearly contain nicknames and have profile pictures that contain art instead of the user's photograph. In other words, they still have a degree of anonymity that is characteristic of platforms where the alt-right operates, such as 4chan. The Facebook page admin for God Emperor Trump, likewise, is set on anonymous. It is important to note that the memes the admin posts are often addressed to 'patriots', but the admin does not tag any specific users, meaning they stay anonymous as well. The gender listed under the profile of the group is also defined as 'male'.

First, we examined the timeline and engagement of the memes on the God Emperor Trump Facebook page. The graph in **Figure 1**, 'Top 100 Memes Timeline', primarily illustrates a relationship between two variables, total engagement and time created for the top 100 memes (100 memes with most likes on the page). The timeline shows when the top 100 memes were uploaded (x axis) and how engaging they were (y axis), which was determined by using the total engagement formula (likes + reactions + comments). Two other variables are plotted in the graph – namely, the total number of comments and the total number of likes. The latter (top to bottom) is based on the total number of likes the meme received and is represented by the ID number next to the meme. In other words, the meme with ID '1' had the most likes, the meme with ID '2' had second most, and so on.

In the figure, the category 'comment' indicates an active participation of the user in page debates, while a 'like' marks a more passive endorsement of the online content. The yellow bubble surrounding the meme reflects, by size, the total number of comments that meme generated (the number in the bubble shows the exact number of comments). Only memes with more than 250 comments were highlighted, mostly for clarity reasons and to avoid messy overlapping, but also because other memes had significantly smaller number of comments.

The pattern of posting time and engagement in the 'Top 100 Memes Timeline' (**Figure 1**) is representative of the entire data set. The timeline of engagement (**Figure 2**) and the entire data set timeline (**Figure 3**) demonstrate similar trends.¹

Most of the memes from the top 100 were uploaded, liked, and commented on in November 2016, especially on and around Election Day (November 8, 2016 – marked with the vertical orange line on the graph). With a few exceptions, the memes that generated the most comments and likes were created just after the Election Day, and this trend continued in the following weeks, conveying the page members' excitement over Donald Trump's victory.

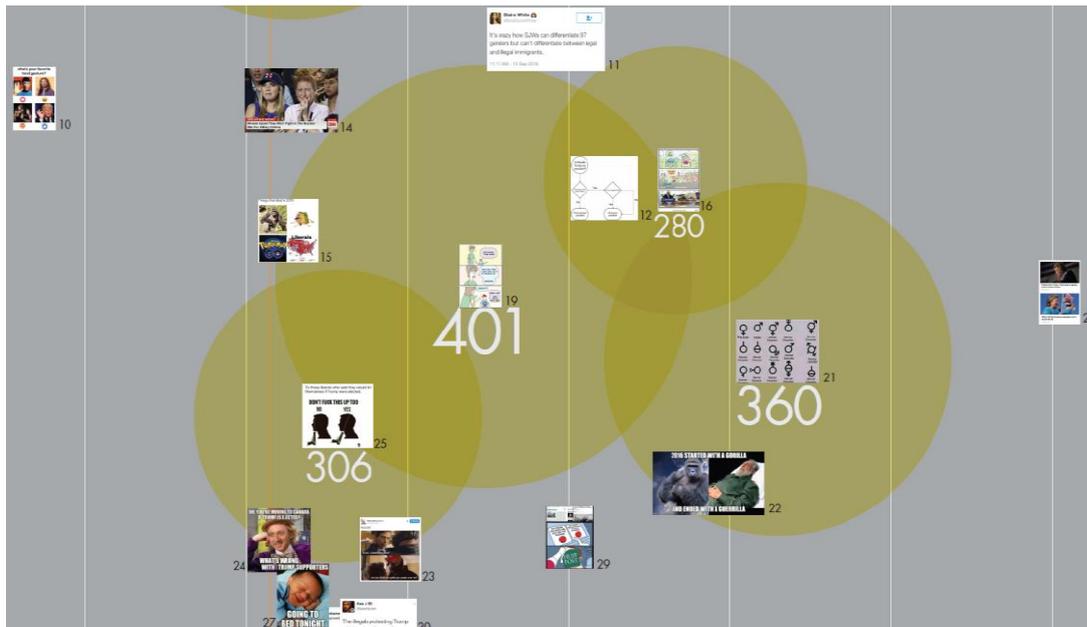


Figure 1: Detail of the timeline of engagement for the top 100 images from the Facebook page ‘God Emperor Trump’ (data obtained in December 2016).²

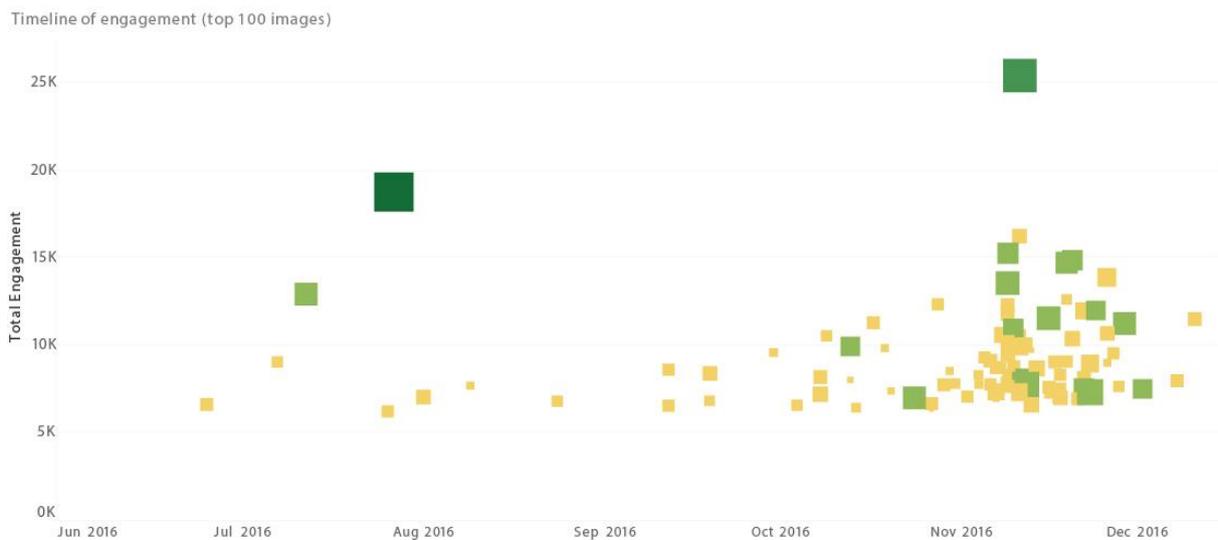


Figure 2: Timeline of engagement (top 100 images), analysed and visualized with Tableau. Size (and colour) of images indicate the number of comments.³

An interesting insight gained from the data set is that there is a consistent and strategic uploading activity. If we consider the monthly uploads rate of the complete data set (**Figure 4**), we can see that, although the number of uploads is growing towards Election Day, the growth is not so dramatic. There is almost no difference in the number of uploads from June to October (around 1,000 uploaded memes per month, a sign of consistent upload activity). The numbers drop slightly in November, and then they plummet in December. However,

data from December is not complete because this data set was collected in the second week of the month.

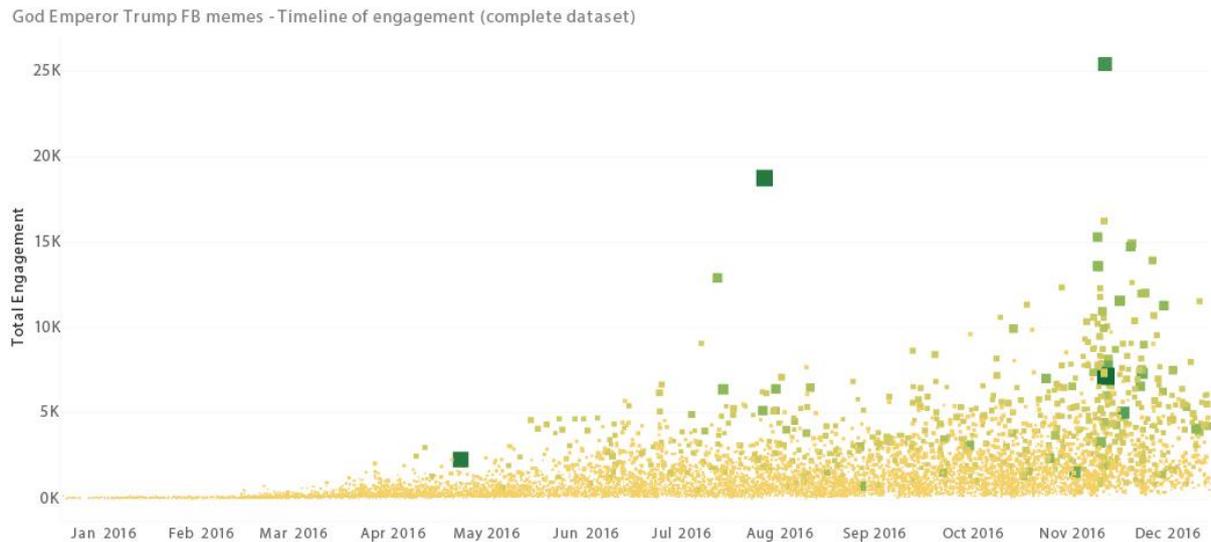


Figure 3: Timeline of Engagement (complete data set), analysed and visualized with Tableau.⁴

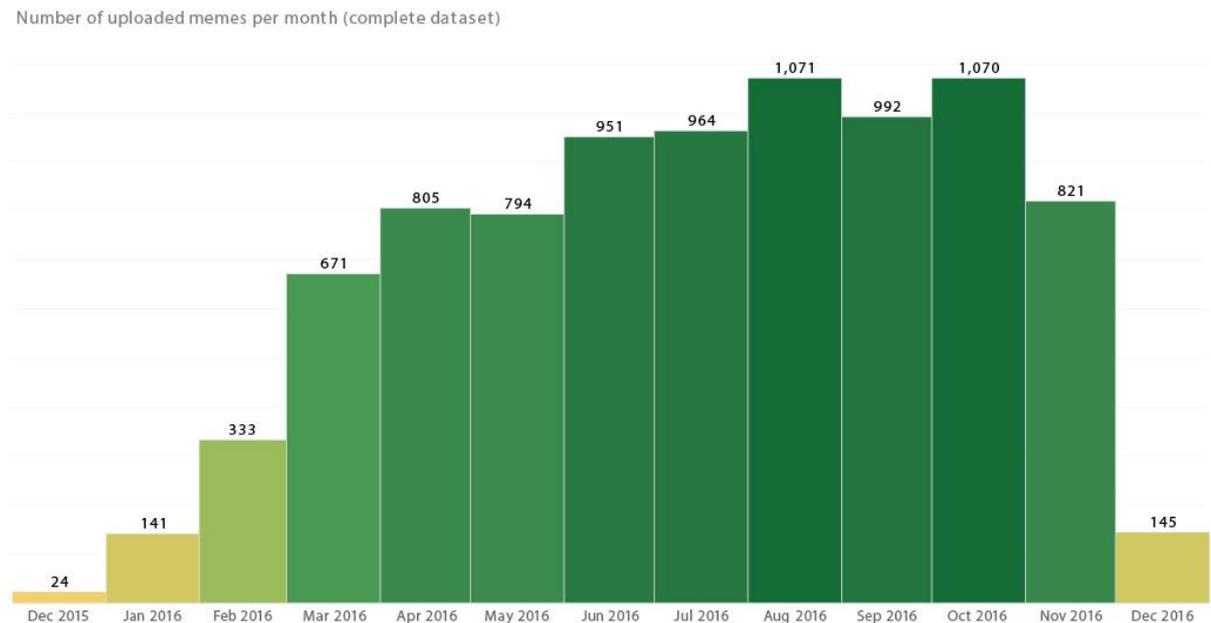


Figure 4: The number of memes uploaded per month (complete data set).

The steady number of posts in the period between June and November, in the midst of the campaign, and the drop just after the elections indicates a planned activity in the service of Trump campaign to spread the ‘God Emperor’ memes and energize the alt-right sphere. Page membership grew quickly and in a short time period, with numbers from the imminent pre-election period resembling monthly quotas of around 1,000 created memes. After the election, it seems that administrators’ interests waned for a while, and the number of

uploaded memes in November dropped by 250, in contrast to a lot of activity at the beginning of the month leading to Election Day.

Second, we traced the circulation of memes on various platforms by comparing the Facebook data set and Instagram hashtag #godemperortump. As stated in the methodology section, we visualized this hashtag in top 100 posts, based on likes (data abstracted on October 19, 2017, via Netlytic).

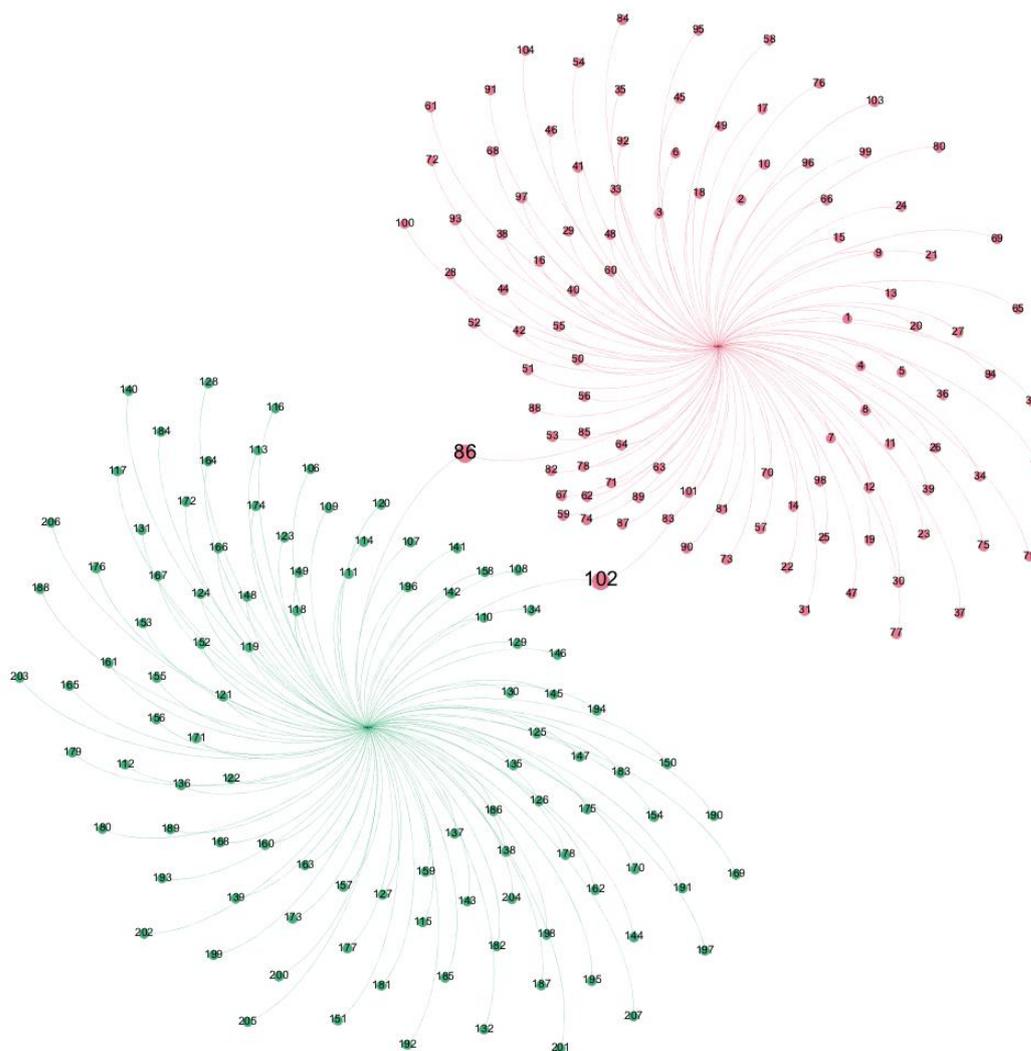


Figure 5: Visualization of shared images in Instagram and Facebook sets.

The visualization (**Figure 5**) shows how many of the top 100 memes for #godemperortump occur on both Instagram and Facebook. The goal was to explore whether there are recurring memes that are popular beyond the Facebook group. The overlap between the two platforms – visualized as red (Facebook) and green (Instagram) – is extremely limited. Only a limited number of memes occurred in both sets, suggesting that the alt-right may consist of different, isolated communities or that they do not cross-post their messages frequently.

However, a closer analysis of the memes revealed that individual visual elements and themes occurred on both Facebook and Instagram, revealing a consistent discourse.

These include references to Pepe the Frog, Trump, Clinton, and Fidel Castro. It is not complete memes but a set of individual visual elements and references that frequently occur on both. This discourse is described below in the content analysis, which identified different themes within the memes, such as imperialism and political/military ideologies.

Qualitative Analysis of the Memes

As indicated, we started by analysing the top 110 memes from the Facebook page of God Emperor Trump. Since the data collected in this platform amounted a total of 8,783 posts, we selected the top 100 most popular posts based on the number of likes for further analysis. We considered the amounts of likes as an indicator of engagement and outreach within the community. Within this set, we also paid attention to other variables such as comments.

Using the inductive approach, we coded the memes without predetermined conceptions or theories. An initial set of 193 open codes were defined by one of the researchers. This first analysis showed that even though several memes were coded as against Democrats (especially critiques of and jokes about Hillary Clinton) and against other ideologies (for example, communists or Muslims), most of the memes and themes were directly pro-Trump (129), showing Trump or his political ideas in a positive light. In a second stage, and in collaboration with a second researcher, a final coding framework was created (Figure 6). A total of fourteen relevant themes clustered into two main categories were identified. These categories included directly pro-Trump codes versus codes that criticized other ideologies or political parties in some way.⁵

PRO TRUMP	About the elections	31
	Trump Hero	26
	About Trump	19
	Racism	15
	Alt-Right	12
	Sexist	12
	Positive consequences of supporting Trump	10
	Funny	7
	Patriotism	4
	Make America Great Again	3
	Putin	1
	TOTAL	129
AGAINST OTHER IDEOLOGIES	Direct critics to Hillary	31
	Jokes and critics to other political ideologies	21
	Not voting for Trump or voting for Hillary: Negative consequences	10
TOTAL	62	
OTHERS	Not related	2

Figure 6: Final coding framework of the top 100 memes of the Facebook page God Emperor Trump.

In the content analysis of the memes, we identified two main categories: ‘pro-Trump’ memes and memes ‘against other ideologies’. These categories, with their subthemes, are visualized in **Figure 6**. The memes/figures that we refer to are included in the appendix at the end of this essay.

This first category captures memes with positive opinions about Trump (labelled ‘pro Trump’). Within the memes that support Trump, memes directly related to the elections are the most frequent with a total of thirty-one codes (**Figure 7**). These memes are mainly about supporting Trump as the winner and/or attacking his rivals.

About the elections	31	News image	13
		Trump wins	11
		campaign	4
		Election map	2
		Flow chart	1

Figure 7: Codes directly related to the elections.

Within the ‘pro Trump’ category, the second most relevant theme is labelled as ‘Trump Hero’ (**Figure 8**). Several memes represent Trump as a fictional hero (e.g. Thor, Clint Eastwood, and even cartoon characters such as SpongeBob Squarepants). Other memes portray him as a historical person, a fictional emperor, or some type of religious saviour. In the close-reading in the next section, we will describe and discuss representative examples from a sample of the top 100 posts that portray Trump as a masculine hero or leader (e.g. a gladiator or famous emperor).

Trump Hero	26	Trump hero other fictional/cartoon character	17
		God Emperor	4
		Social Justice Warriors	3
		Martyrdom/savior	2

Figure 8: Codes used for memes depicting Trump as a hero.

The second main category, ‘memes against other ideologies’, included memes and codes that criticized in some way opponents of Trump and his political ideology (**Figure 9**).

Direct critics to Hillary	31	joke about Hillary	16
		Hillary "weak"	6
		Hillary to jail	2
		tweet answer to Hillary	2
		tweet from Hillary	2
		Hillary's health	1
		evil Hillary	1
Jokes and critics to other political ideologies	21	joke about liberals	7
		joke about communists	3
		joke about Obama	3
		useless shit in 2016	2
		Liberals' misconceptions about Trump	2
		mental disorder	1
		anti gun liberals	1
		Slavery	1
		Fake Trump victim	1
Not voting for Trump or voting for Hillary: Negative consequences	10	consequence of supporting Hillary	3
		consequence of not voting for Trump	3
		picture of sad democrat voter	2
		in favor of Hillary	1
		"bad" political actions	1

Figure 9: Main themes and codes about Hillary and other ideologies non pro-Trump.

In this second category, most codes are directed at critics of the right-wing agenda. They contain jokes about Hillary Clinton or anti-Republican ideologies. These memes are, for instance, openly racist against Mexicans, Muslims, and other ethnic or religious groups. They often contain sexist imagery. There are also several memes supporting or representing the alt-right ideology directly, such as memes depicting Pepe the Frog, which was frequently used by alt-right supporters during Donald Trump's campaign (**Figure 10**). Only one of the 100 posts includes a reference to Putin (**Figure 11**).



Figure 10: Pepe the Frog. Facebook. God Emperor Trump (November 9, 2016).
[https://www.facebook.com/GodEmperorTrump/photos/a.792821487511350.1073741828.791373644322801/1014669468659883/?type=3.](https://www.facebook.com/GodEmperorTrump/photos/a.792821487511350.1073741828.791373644322801/1014669468659883/?type=3)



Figure 11: Meme including Putin. Facebook. God Emperor Trump (June 25, 2016).

<https://www.facebook.com/GodEmperorTrump/photos/a.792821487511350.1073741828.791373644322801/904239176369580/?type=3>

Discourse and Humour in Memes during the Campaign Season

We found a wide range of toxic public discourse that emphasized hate around Hillary Clinton in light of the elections. Considering that we analysed the alt-right, we do not find this surprising, but it is interesting to see how far the sexist and racist discourses in the memes go. We also identified strong anti-left language that ridiculed ‘commies’ and went to the point of communicating about executing them.

Heroism is another strong theme in the God Emperor Trump media and related Putin memes. When they are not depicted as imperialists, they are often characterized as other strong male characters, such as Superman or Bane from *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (Nolan, 2014). During the campaign, memes focused on framing Trump as a hero or gladiator, while Clinton was depicted as a frail woman. One meme compares Hillary with a reptile, exaggerating her age and framing her as old (**Figure 12**). While Clinton and Trump are not far apart in terms of age, Trump is depicted as healthy in his portrayals whereas Clinton is seen as old. In line with the media discourses and news events, she was mocked for her health, gender, and age.

Throwback Photos Of Celebrities When They Were Babies

1. Donald Trump
2. Hillary Clinton



Figure 12: Hillary evil. Facebook. Good Emperor Trump (October 18, 2016).

<https://www.facebook.com/GodEmperorTrump/photos/a.792821487511350.1073741828.791373644322801/989192997874197/?type=3>

The discourses of sexism and ageism are prominent in memes that have Clinton as a subject. However, it is not only Clinton who is discredited in memes. Her voters are often framed as ‘retarded’ (mentally disabled) or ‘libtards’ (liberal and retarded) in alt-right lingo. One of the top 100 memes (**Figure 13**), for instance, takes a spin on the popular Oh No, It’s Retarded meme, also known as Aww Ain’t You the Cutest Lil Thing (Know Your Meme, 2017), which originated on Tumblr (aaaaa42c, 2014). In this web comic meme, a girl praises a cute dog, but then the dog tells the human that he is voting for Clinton, after which the girl says: ‘Oh, no it’s retarded!’



Figure 13: Oh no, it’s retarded. Facebook. God Emperor Trump (November 14, 2016).

<https://www.facebook.com/GodEmperorTrump/photos/a.792821487511350.1073741828.791373644322801/1022634437863386/?type=3>

Many of the memes of the alt-right that we analysed have a similar language as this one. They adopt popular memes and rework their jokes subtly to discredit liberal or left-wing views. These memes, in which Clinton is symbolically defeated through wit and irony, can be contrasted to the more imperialist memes in which Trump himself is shown as a vindicator. These imperialist memes are characterized by the celebration of militarism and force to expand territory. In other words, there is a colonial sentiment that the alt-right refers to. These memes allude to the expansion and influence of the United States, which is positioned not as a country but as an empire.

The iconography of games is used in the imperialist memes based on Trump. This suggests connections to the Gamergate controversy that originated on Wordpress and was amplified by 4chan, where there is considerable support for the alt-right. By using imperialist game portraits of George Washington (e.g. using imagery from *Bioshock Infinite*) and the God Emperor from *Magic the Gathering*, the alt-right adopts a heroic imagery. While this language can be partly read as ironic – an extreme glorification of Trump – it can also be understood as persuasive. This is humour which dramatizes and parodies, rather

than discredits, as is the case with the Clinton memes. Both are extreme and ironic, but the imperialist imagery is glorified, masculine, and almost religious in its tone.

Not all meme portraits of Trump, however, contain both a portrait as well as a reference to popular culture. Many memes, also outside our corpus, rely on historical portraits of emperors. Reworking portrayals of Napoleon, for instance, is a common practice in this online subculture. Trump is likened to fictional emperors and characters (e.g. God Emperor) but to famous historical characters and symbols of our patriarchy. Trump is thereby depicted as someone who will truly lead the USA to a new future. These historical references should not be seen as neutral. The alt-right creates a nostalgic version of the past, and its imagery suggests that they go back to times in which strong masculine leaders ruled the Western world.

Imperial and Religious Framing of Trump and Putin

In our analysis of the different data sets of memes, we observed similar discourses on the God Emperor Trump page in January 2017. This page contained memes where Trump was positioned against Putin as a male leader (in the data set 'Putin memes' as described in our methodology). In these data sets we saw many masculine images that evoke ideas of militarism and imperialism as well.

Both Trump and Putin are depicted as elite male bodies and glorified within internet images. The motif of imperialism takes a prominent position in the memes that depict both Putin and Trump. They clearly demonstrate that the imperialism is understood by supporters of the Russian and American leaders as a conquest and division of the world, with analogies to the Cold War period. Other recurring themes in the data sets were Democrats' theories about the Russian influence on the election and Russian hackers, with depictions of Julian Assange in his changing role from leftist hero to Russian spy (figure 14).

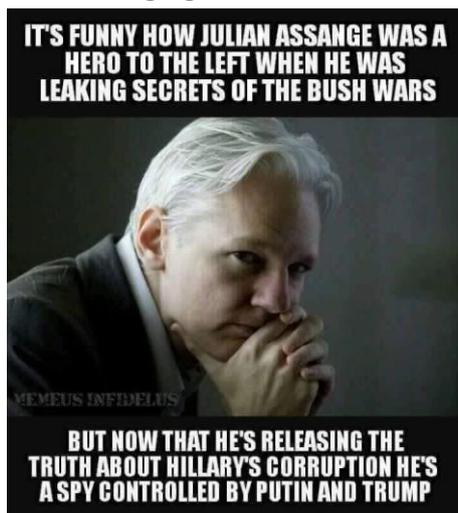


Figure 14: Facebook. God Emperor Trump (October 18, 2016).

<https://www.facebook.com/GodEmperorTrump/photos/a.792821487511350.1073741828.791373644322801/991957900931040/?type=3&theater>

Within our reading of Putin memes, we did not find clear proof of the Russian interference in the 2016 elections through social media. In fact, we cannot directly assess whether the internet memes that we investigated were, for instance, part of a strategic media campaign organized by Russian officials. However, the analysis does show an enthusiastic rhetoric about Trump and potential collaboration with America. Russian officials, for instance, are depicted in the memes as positive regarding Trump’s election. The Putin and Trump supporters who circulate and comment on these memes seem to share ultraconservative values of patriarchy and imperialistic geopolitical division of the world.

In this corpus of memes, we primarily see imperial and geopolitical themes. The most popular memes in the God Emperor Trump data set with the keyword ‘Putin’ are styled as TV news (mostly CNN) photo collages that depict Trump in a military uniform, proclaiming the victory in World War III. Putin seals the victory by handshake as Trump’s partner of the holy alliance. This ‘Western alliance’ of the two world leaders is presented as a crusade, obviously a final fight against Muslims, which is called a ‘battle for Eurabia’.

The far-right ideology manifests itself in such lexemes as ‘crusade’, ‘Eurabia’, ‘retaking Constantinople’ and ‘patriot’. The ideology is reflected in explicit glorification of ethno-national states. There are several memes that show leaders of far-right parties from all over the world (e.g. depicting Nigel Farage, Frauke Petry, Geert Wilders). Nevertheless, Trump and Putin are not just first among equals but a holy duo that saves mankind. It should be noted that Trump fans still depict him as greater than Putin. For instance, one meme (**Figure 15**) compares Putin, Clinton, and Trump, in which Hillary Clinton’s actual date of birth and achievements are depicted. Putin’s life starts in the Middle Ages, which is supported by a particular picture: a medieval portrait of Putin’s look alike. However, Trump is depicted even more almighty and immortal; his life starts on day one with the creation of the world.



Figure 15: Facebook. God Emperor Trump (October 16, 2016).

<https://www.facebook.com/GodEmperorTrump/photos/a.792821487511350.1073741828.791373644322801/99017804775692/?type=3&theater>

The imperialistic character of the slogan ‘Make America Great Again’ is underlined by images of Putin wearing the typical red Trump supporter trucker hat with a similar invocation: ‘Make Ukraine Russia Again’. This clearly shows that this public discourse is not about the return to the nation states that Putin and Trump officially propagate; it is much more about the division of the world into spheres of influence. The direct approval of this argument can be seen in the meme that shows Putin, Trump, and Farage as Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill, establishing the new world order at the Yalta Conference (**Figure 16**).

Remarkably, the data set from the Facebook page ‘Putin Memes’ contains no images of Trump. In fact, Trump was even cut out of the recurring memes from the first data set (such as **Figure 15**). The Putin memes stress the superiority of Putin over the leaders of states that are involved in current foreign-policy conflicts with Russia. For instance, Merkel and Obama are photoshopped in the famous movie scene of the sinking *Titanic*. Most memes are built around a tension between the United States and Russia, respectively depicted as the West against the East. The excitement on Russian state TV about Trump’s victory does not correspond entirely with the analysed internet memes.

Putin’s image is militaristic above all. There are fewer photoshopped collages, but there are official press photos with ironic texts in which the comical effect is created by words. It is striking that caricatures of Putin are completely absent except in isolated images of Putin as a medieval warrior or a gladiator (‘Vladiator’). The combination of ironic text with press photos enhances Putin’s official image as a successful secret agent like James Bond. It could be explained through unspoken taboos regarding caricatures of Putin: the satirical TV show *Kukly (Puppets)* (NTV, 1994-2002) was allegedly shut down in 2002 after



Figure 16: Facebook. God Emperor Trump (October 16, 2016).

<https://www.facebook.com/GodEmperorTrump/photos/a.792821487511350.1073741828.791373644322801/846794145447417/?type=3&theater>

Putin was portrayed in a parody of E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Little Zaches, Great Zinnober* (Burrett, 2011). In the memes, Putin is presented as a celebrity (Mikhailova, 2013), who corresponds to current Russian 'bio-politics', as described by Makarychev (2015). Putin's body transcends his physical body and represents the political body of the nation in the sense of Kantorowitz's (1957) 'king's two bodies'.

We see a particular narrative unfolding in alt-right memes when they are read through the lens of intertextuality. Trump and Putin are imperialist heroes, even gladiators, aligned with historical images (or semi-historical images borrowed from game culture). Thereby, these memes position the world leaders in a long tradition of masculinity, continuing a history of male body politics that glorifies the bodies of the elite. In a study on Roman portraits, Hengel (2014) writes that this tradition of art, including sculptures, constructs hegemonic masculinity: 'The imperial *imago* is interpreted as a specifically phallic display of power, a regulatory fiction of a phallic masculinity, in which the gendered materiality of the body is disavowed' (p. 495).

His analysis shows that these portraits rely particularly on the spectator's position and allows them to observe God-like emperors. Hengel argues that ancient portraits create a masculine perspective as the privileged way of looking:

the imperial *imago* needs to be considered as a normative body-image, constructed for male viewing. This does not mean that such portraiture was observed exclusively by men, but rather that the subject positions generated by the portrait image are *a priori* gendered masculine, regardless of the gender of the actual viewer (p. 498).

The Roman imperial portrait should also be read partly in light of the gladiator, the heroic fighter, another iconic resemblance that we see in the Trump and Putin memes. Indeed, the God emperors in contemporary alt-right memes are positioned similarly to the God emperors of old.

As the term 'God emperor' already implies, God emperor discourse cannot be read without attention to religion or the deification of Trump. There are many parallels to the alt-right that also create a mock religion around the web comic character Pepe, who has intertextual connections, according to the alt-right lore, to the ancient Egyptian frog god Kek. Since Trump is often symbolized as Pepe, there is also a strong connection between him and Kek. This form of ironic religion is often related by the alt-right to the term 'meme magic', the idea that memes have powerful resonance. Alt-right meme creators often adopt the term 'meme magicians' for themselves. The idea of magic resurfaced frequently, even in our limited data set and close reading of top posts.

In terms of storytelling, we see that in these visuals Putin and Trump are cast in the role of saviours or martyrs who are in a holy war against terrorists. In alt-right communities, these men are symbols of Western culture and modernity, specifically of history as written by white Western men. The discourse in these memes, then, is quite overt. The world

leaders will continue a historical legacy and return to old ideologies, 'saving' the West from feminist discourses and power influences.

Conclusions

In this study, we identified different themes in relation to the 2016 American presidential elections and the surrounding discourse before Donald Trump officially became president on 20 January 2017. By close reading different data sets on Facebook and Instagram, we provided insights into the toxic discourse of the alt-right. During the election campaign, which is a political contest situation par excellence, different users engaged in the relatively new ideological spectrum of the alt-right. We showed that they made use of creative, humour-oriented communication to disperse partly extreme sexist, anti-leftist, nationalist, and masculine-chauvinist themes. They had at least two aims: the defamation and ridiculing of political opponents and the glorification of the preferred politician, Donald Trump. The satirical-comical tone of most memes did not defuse the toxicity and aggressiveness of their framing, which is shared in allegedly non-serious memes.

This study is an example of how political groups can operate, persuade, and manipulate through the visual language of memes. Parody and irony proved to be powerful tools used to discredit opponents, be they liberals, feminists, or Clinton supporters. Analogies to war, imperialism, and heroism in particular stood out and were all connected through intertextual references. Historical images, comic books, web comics, and games were particularly remediated by the alt-right to make jokes about imperialism.

Through parody, problematic issues can be framed and masked as jokes, but we must remember that these representations are not just jokes. Their content relies on a long history of imperialism and glorification of strong male leaders. The alt-right draws upon this iconographic history to persuade and recruit. While memes have not been studied often in academia, we see them as a powerful tool in politics and news framing. The influence of this online medium must not be downplayed, since they circulate widely and certainly help create a certain image of politicians such as Trump and Putin. They are heroes on display, to be admired by their male supporters. Their alliance is depicted as a strong and sometimes even erotic one, not just for fun and giggles but to persuade citizens to vote for them.

To truly analyse and understand online political communication, future research in media and political studies should dive deeper into memes and the comments and engagement they receive. Our current study focused on content and engagement, but we are also interested in viewing the circulation and origin of top memes on the web in more detail. This could provide more insights into Trump's meme sphere, the origins of these memes, and ways in which they spread. While our current study could not provide evidence of, for instance, influence by professional Russian trolls, a study on circulation could reveal this infrastructure.

To summarize, in media and reception studies, memes must not be overlooked. They connect to a strong visual history. By depicting patriarchy, sexism, racism, and even ideas of racial purity as a heroic and religious narrative, the alt-right attempts to render its memes as

innocent. Parody and jokes are powerful tools used here to discredit political opponents and to manipulate and persuade internet users. In this sense, memes are powerful, persuasive media, adopted by the alt-right to justify their toxic discourse. For members of the alt-right, a meme may only be a joke, but as we can tell by the widespread circulation of these memes, these jokes have real social influences.

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Notes:

¹ An interactive version of **Figure 1** can be found at: <http://digilantes.net/TrumpMemes/top100>. The full data set (**Figure 3**) has been visualized interactively as well:

<http://digilantes.net/TrumpMemes/complete>.

² The full timeline is available at: https://digilantes.net/trump_memes/timeline-of-engagement-top-100-images-pdf/ Download the file for full resolution, password:2Z78GO3f9s1.

³ Interactive version of **Figure 2** is available: https://digilantes.net/trump_memes/timeline-of-engagement-top-100-images (password: 2Z78GO3f9s1).

⁴ Interactive version is available: https://digilantes.net/trump_memes/timeline-of-engagement-complete-dataset/ (password: 2Z78GO3f9s1)

⁵ Two memes were categorized as 'other', as they did not seem related in any direct way with the researched topic.