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# Can the Right Meme? (And How?): A Comparative Analysis of Three Online Reactionary Meme Subcultures

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# Executive Summary

**M**emes have become a mainstay of online discourse, from which images and videos have often become ingrained in popular culture. Memes are as varied as the communities that use them. Unsurprisingly, memes have made an impact on political discourse, in which they are now increasingly deployed by social media users as commentary on their issue of choice and are even shared by politicians. They have been used by hardline political organisations to spread their narratives around the world. This has included the spread of narratives that target marginalised groups or political opponents and occasionally encourage violence.

This report examines memes from three reactionary subcultures that maintain a significant Internet presence. Using a mixed-methods approach to meme collection, the authors sorted and analysed a sample of 100 memes from three different online reactionary communities gathered from accessible and well-used public content on Facebook, Twitter, Telegram and meme aggregation image-hosting sites. These memes included those generated and shared by the Hindutva movement in India, neo-Nazis oriented towards a primarily US-based audience and memes centred around the Kyle Rittenhouse shooting in Wisconsin in the United States. The authors thereby examine the differences between the meme content created by a well-defined and cohesive reactionary nationalist movement (Hindutva), a chaotically disparate and hateful propaganda and radicalisation network (neo-Nazis) and a general reactionary meme environment surrounding a violent incident in the USA (Rittenhouse).

The first case examines memes shared by supporters of the Hindutva movement. The use of social media by the Hindutva movement, particularly its “IT Cell” or electronic army, is well documented. The memes shared by supporters of the Hindutva movement and its political party accentuate the narrative of the movement, with memes suggesting that Hindus are in danger. Indeed, Hindus and India are often portrayed as besieged by a wide variety of forces, from international activists “conspiring” with “anti-India” forces, Christians, political opponents of India’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and, particularly, Muslims. In the 100 sampled memes, 52 of them specifically focused on Muslims.

Since 2016, memes shared by heterogeneous US-based fascist communities (referred to here as “neo-Nazis” given their general affinity for the political specifics of National Socialism) have received some scholarly attention. In particular, the use of irony has been examined as a cover to justify their calls for violence as “unserious”. Unlike the Hindutva case, in which the targeted out-group was Muslims, neo-Nazi memes are often more diverse in their targets, including black people, LGBTQ groups, Jews, the US state and, particularly, women. Neo-Nazi memes also tend to focus more on cultural figures connected to the far right, as well as historical figures traditionally associated with reactionary or ultranationalist governments.

The Rittenhouse case is unique in that it represents a coalition of meme communities around a significant event. With the various movements coalescing over a common issue, this has allowed meme creators to inject their own politics and connect the subject matter with their own issues. The memes surrounding the Kyle Rittenhouse case were often the most supportive of violence, with a wide variety of targets, including Communists and the Black Lives Matter movement. At the same time, the Rittenhouse meme community is also one of competition among meme creators, as they seek to elevate their own voices and condemn those they view as inauthentic or in opposition to their own values.

This report therefore analyses 300 memes collected from online public forums (100 for each case, each randomly sampled from broader data collections). The authors assess and classify memes according to three primary categories: figures contained (the orientation of subject of the memes: for example, political or cultural), out-groups identified (what group the discourse is targeting) and relationship to violence (whether the meme supports or decries violence against or by the named out-group). Coding for these categories, the authors then analyse some of the more specific characteristics of meme propagation among these distinct political communities. The limited sample size does show some interesting findings, such as a focus on victimhood, narratives in Hindutva memes centred around how Muslims pose a danger to Hindus, and the glorification of violence among different reactionary groups in the USA. Despite the limited sample size, the memes examined demonstrate the incorporation of the narratives of the groups in question into an easy-to-digest image form, one that can easily reach a wider audience.

# Overview

This report analyses memes propagated among three online socio-political groups drawn from sample datasets pulled from social media sites often used by adherents of each group. These groups include those connected to the India-based Hindutva,<sup>1</sup> US-based neo-Nazis and those engaging in pro-Rittenhouse communications in late 2020. The authors chose the groups based on similarities in their ideological goals, race-based nationalism and their close association with political violence in their respective countries.

The first set of memes the authors analysed came from the Indian political group Hindutva. Hindutva, also known as Hindu Nationalism, is a ethno-religious ideology that maintains that India should be a homeland for Hindus above all other religions. Despite the emphasis on Hinduism and Hindus, Hindutvadis, the followers of Hindutva, view Hindus not simply as a religious group, but rather a race in which Hinduism encompasses the faith, symbols and culture of the Hindu people and their homeland in the Indian nation. Through this conception of race, Christianity and Islam are viewed as foreign faiths and cultures that were forcibly imposed on the Hindu people; the loyalties of adherents to these other faiths lie in other countries rather than to the Hindu symbols that represent the Hindu nation.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, one of the original intellectuals of the Hindutva movement, Vinayak Damodar Sarvarkar, was an atheist. The movement originated during India's late colonial period when many of its ideologues called for the establishment of a Hindu state. In particular, they viewed Islam and Christianity as alien to the country; Christian and Muslim loyalties and dedication to the state were considered questionable at best.<sup>3</sup> In the early years of Indian independence, the movement was marginalised, largely due to the fact that a Hindutva adherent assassinated Gandhi in 1948. Due to their initial marginalisation, the left-liberal hegemony over mainstream media in India and other factors, the various groups of the Hindutva movement sought alternative platforms and learned to use new technologies to spread their messages.<sup>4</sup> The Hindutva presence on the Internet and on social media platforms is particularly intense, especially compared with other political parties and movements in India. During the 1990s Hindutva achieved mainstream success in the political arena and now its political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is the hegemonic political party in India.<sup>5</sup> This puts Hindutva at a unique vantage point. The movement currently controls much of the discourse in traditional media, social media and political mobilisation on the ground. Hindutva is important in this investigation due to its identitarian focus and access to state power.

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1 Eviane Leidig, "Hindutva As a Variant of Right-Wing Extremism", *Patterns of Prejudice* vol. 54, no. 3 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2020.1759861>.

2 For more on this, see Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 11–75; Chetan Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism: Origins, Ideologies, and Modern Myths* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 77–111.

3 Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*, 11–75.

4 Rohit Chopra, *The Virtual Hindu Rashtra: Saffron Nationalism and New Media* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019).

5 Milan Vaishnav and Jamie Hinton, "The Dawn of India's Fourth Party System", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 5 September 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/09/05/dawn-of-india-s-fourth-party-system-pub-79759>.

Neo-Nazis, the second group in our analysis, are a heterogeneous set of online fascist communities with a long list of enemies and social grievances.<sup>6</sup> The study conducted here is primarily focused on the neo-Nazi gatherings that have emerged from the 2016-era Alt-Right and their subsequent evolutions, which has created several sects of neo-Nazi online and offline activism.<sup>7</sup> Those covered here include absurdist 'shock' neo-Nazi content, accelerationist ultra-violent neo-Nazis, Hispanic neo-Nazi Catholic posting and white-power specific groups, all of which are directly addressing a US audience. These groups sometimes overlap but just as often are sectarian, competing with one another and especially with conservatives and libertarians who do not explicitly share their politics. The neo-Nazis are key in this investigation due to their highly violent rhetoric and clandestine organising.<sup>8</sup> In offline settings they often act in private or otherwise seek anonymity, yet are unafraid to engage in violent actions, causing direct bodily harm to their enemies or whomever they perceive as their opposition.<sup>9</sup> Some actors from within this milieu gain access to power or resources, but usually do this by publicly concealing their privately held beliefs.<sup>10</sup>

Kyle Rittenhouse is a teenager involved in the lethal shooting of two demonstrators and the maiming of a third in Kenosha, Wisconsin, following a Black Lives Matter-themed uprising in the city. After the shooting, a community formed around Rittenhouse with significant overlap with US conservative activism. Chief among these groups are those connected with movements attempting to counter Black Lives Matter political messaging, supporting unfettered access to firearms via the Second Amendment and promoting nationalist (or self-described patriot) movements in the USA. The contemporary Republican Party acts as a conduit for the ideologies and political goals of these groups. Political activism around Rittenhouse is not so much an ideology as it is a unifying aesthetic between many different movements with which the nationalist socio-political groups find great affinity. Rittenhouse memes represent a convergence of meme creator communities rather than a specific meme creator community.

These communities seemingly engage with their audiences and among themselves in different ways. Appeals are made to an audience using various channels of identity and worldview, be that political, cultural or otherwise. Reactionary movements are often exclusionary in nature; therefore, actors tend to identify and target out-groups. Finally, these actors often promote violence, expressing support for violence against their political enemies or alternatively decrying and highlighting violence against their group by the groups they oppose.

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- 6 Magdalena Wojcieszak, "False Consensus Goes Online: Impact of Ideologically Homogeneous Groups on False Consensus", *The Public Opinion Quarterly* vol. 72, no. 4 (2008): 781–91; J. David Gillespie, "Doctrinal Parties 2: The Neo-Nazis", in *Challengers to Duopoly: Why Third Parties Matter in American Two-Party Politics* (University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 188–99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1.ctv6wgjrr.16>.
- 7 George Hawley, "The Alt-Right Returns", in *Making Sense of the Alt-Right* (Columbia University Press, 2017), 67–90, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/haw18512.7>; Thomas J. Main, "The Emergence of the Alt-Right from The Rise of the Alt-Right", in *The Rise of the Alt-Right* (Brookings Institute Press, 2018), 3–10.
- 8 Maggy McDonel and Joanna Bouras, "White Supremacist Graffiti Found on NKU's Campus for Second Time This Year", <https://www.fox19.com>, accessed 2 November 2021, <https://www.fox19.com/2021/04/03/white-supremacist-graffiti-found-nkus-campus-second-time-this-year/>.
- 9 Greg Myre, "Deadly Connection: Neo-Nazi Group Linked To 3 Accused Killers", NPR, 6 March 2018, sec. National Security, <https://www.npr.org/2018/03/06/590292705/5-killings-3-states-and-1-common-neo-nazi-link>; David Neiwert, "Neo-Nazi 'Active Clubs' Spring up around Country as Handiwork of Notorious Fascist Living Abroad", Daily Kos, accessed 2 November 2021, <https://www.dailykos.com/story/2021/9/28/2054946/-Notorious-neo-Nazi-organizes-fascist-fight-clubs-in-U-S-while-evading-the-law-traveling-abroad>.
- 10 Amanda Holpuch, "Stephen Miller: The White Nationalist at the Heart of Trump's White House", *The Guardian*, 24 November 2019, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/nov/24/stephen-miller-white-nationalist-trump-immigration-guru>; Jean Guerrero, "The Man Who Made Stephen Miller", POLITICO, accessed 2 November 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/08/01/stephen-miller-david-horowitz-mentor-389933>; Jonathan Blitzer, "How Stephen Miller Manipulates Donald Trump to Further His Immigration Obsession", *The New Yorker*, 21 February 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/03/02/how-stephen-miller-manipulates-donald-trump-to-further-his-immigration-obsession>.

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# 1 Introduction

Online communication and “in real life” (IRL) or offline actions are increasingly less distinct political arenas. Online meme wars increasingly manifest in offline spaces, which create new IRL happenings. This forms a symbiotic relationship between political action and propaganda creation that bridges offline and online spaces. Many meme-creating communities online often now map to IRL communities, especially ones connected to political and/or social and cultural movements. The convergence of online and offline activities highlights the importance of studying online communities and their relationship to IRL movements and actions. In this report, the authors focus on several key online–offline communities that demonstrate this relationship between the two domains across different contexts and political modalities.



## 2 Literature Review

The Internet has been a crucial forum for the sharing, consuming and resharing of information in profound ways. This “flood” of information, as Gleick terms it, has defined the so-called contemporary era of information. Lovink describes the “cybernetic metaphor” of memes, specifically how they operate as the “addictive and viral” interface following a circuit of “human-machine interaction” to become a “cultural artifact” via Internet resharing.<sup>11</sup> This process is, Lovink describes,<sup>12</sup> a contemporary example of the “servo-mechanism” entity formed out of a relationship between human and machine as expressed by Rid,<sup>13</sup> forming something that is neither fully abstract nor fully biological, but instead something “in between ... PNGs and JPGs, but also addictive and viral.”<sup>14</sup> Lovink continues, describing the pleasure of being in the know about a popular meme, specifically how it helps to situate the consumer in the “cultural matrix in which the memes circulate”.<sup>15</sup>

Online communications are reorganising and restructuring the way language develops.<sup>16</sup> This process has been accelerated by the advent of new media and social media.<sup>17</sup> By the same token, memes – themselves a cultural artifact of online communication – are plausibly having a similar if not more particular effect. Memes are a form of image, which structurally is important to explore. As online communications reorganise and restructure the way language develops, so too do the technical aspects of image-sharing particularly impact consumption and eventually worldview formation. Flusser et al. explore the specifics of this as it structurally relates to reactionary politics, writing, “Media form bundles that radiate from the centers, the senders. Bundles in Latin is *fascis*. The structure of a society governed by technical images is therefore fascist, not for any ideological reason but for technical reasons.”<sup>18</sup> Media reduces choice, is passively consumed and pre-formatted to produce a specific reaction or experience from the person consuming it. These dominant relations, namely of that between creator and follower, thereby prefers a system of content curation based upon a creator situated at the top of a hierarchy who then doles out enjoyment or political reification via rapidly resharable content.

Memes serve as the ironic, take-nothing-seriously counterpoint to post-modernity’s fetish with authenticity and realness.<sup>19</sup> There’s always a hint of the real within these mostly virtual foils, but the

11 Geert Lovink, “Memes as Strategy: European Origins and Debates”, in *Sad by Design: On Platform Nihilism* (Pluto Press, 2019), 119, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvg8p6dv.14>.

12 Lovink, “Memes as Strategy”, 119.

13 Thomas Rid, *Rise of the Machines: A Cybernetic History* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2016).

14 Lovink, “Memes as Strategy”, 119.

15 *ibid.*, 120.

16 Gretchen McCulloch, *Because Internet: Understanding How Language Is Changing* (Random House, 2019).

17 Vivian Roese, “You Won’t Believe How Co-Dependent They Are: Or: Media Hype and the Interaction of News Media, Social Media, and the User”, in *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm*, ed. Peter Vasterman (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 313–32, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt21215m0.19>.

18 Vilém Flusser, Mark Poster and Nancy Ann Roth, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

19 Jay Owens, “Post-Authenticity and the Ironic Truths of Meme Culture”, in *Post Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production*, ed. Alfie Bown and Dan Bristow (Punctum Books, 2019), 77–114, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11hptdx.7>.

tongue-in-cheek approach to comedy and community-building is crucial to the creation and promulgation of memes. For this reason, memes can be critical cultural and social vehicles for political projects, such as those explored in this report.

These memetic effects are, in some contexts, directly related to politics and mainstreaming youth extremism.<sup>20</sup> However, this is not particular to the right, as liberals, leftists and queer activists alike all also engage in memetics for spreading their messages or imagining collectively.<sup>21</sup> Outside the US-focused notion of politics, memes serve as discourse related to: expressing political dissent in Oman;<sup>22</sup> mediating gender identity over WhatsApp in coronavirus-struck India;<sup>23</sup> discussing national identity and beauty in Colombia;<sup>24</sup> offering a political inoculant in Nigeria;<sup>25</sup> accompanying the otherwise well-saturated discussions of Brexit in the UK.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, this report will examine how different reactionary groups use memes to spread their messages and reinforce their movements' own collective identities.

## Case 1: Hindutva

Although much attention has been afforded to the use of Twitter and other social media platforms by the Hindutva movement, this is just the tip of their adaptation of technology.<sup>27</sup> As Peter Manuel examined in his book, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the largest and leading Hindutva organisation in India today, effectively utilised cassette tapes to spread the Hindutva message as well as staged or doctored audio to present Muslim men attacking Hindu women.<sup>28</sup> The use of media, both old and new, has fallen in line with the overall Hindutva messaging. That is, it wants to emphasise a particular vision of India's past and present as well as to push a specific interpretation of Hinduism among its practitioners. Hinduism as a faith holds hundreds of differing interpretations, myths and so on. Hindutva often exercises a specific vision of the faith associated with upper-caste northern Indians, one that also emphasises the masculine and powerful.<sup>29</sup> Its view of Indian history views the age of the various Hindu rulers as a golden age and the era of Muslim rulers as one when a violent, barbaric faith persecuted Hindus.<sup>30</sup>

20 Heather Suzanne Woods and Leslie Ann Hahner, *Make America Meme Again: The Rhetoric of the Alt-Right* (Peter Lang, 2019).

21 Thomas Hobson and Kaajal Modi, "Socialist Imaginaries and Queer Futures: Memes as Sites of Collective Imagining", in *Post Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production*, ed. Alfie Bown and Dan Bristow (Punctum Books, 2019), 327–52, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11hptdx.17>.

22 Najma Al Zidjaly, "Memes as Reasonably Hostile Laments: A Discourse Analysis of Political Dissent in Oman", *Discourse & Society* vol. 28, no. 6 (2017): 573–94.

23 Haripriya Narasimhan, Mahati Chittem and Pooja Purang, "Pandemic Times in a WhatsApp-Ed Nation: Gender Ideologies in India during COVID-19", in *Viral Loads: Anthropologies of Urgency in the Time of COVID-19*, ed. Lenore Manderson, Nancy J. Burke and Ayo Wahlberg (UCL Press, 2021), 362–83, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1j13zb3.25>.

24 María Elena Cepeda, "Putting a 'Good Face on the Nation': Beauty, Memes, and the Gendered Rebranding of Global Colombianidad", *Women's Studies Quarterly* vol. 46, no. 1/2 (2018): 121–38.

25 Deborah N. Dike, "Countering Political Narratives through Nairaland Meme Pictures", *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* vol. 58, no. 230 (2) (2018): 493–512.

26 James Brassett, "Brexit, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Single Market", in *The Ironic State: British Comedy and the Everyday Politics of Globalization*, 1st ed. (Bristol University Press, 2021), 119–38, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1c9hmqr.10>.

27 For a detailed exploration into the Hindutva movement's adaptation of technology and its online environment, see Rohit Chopra, *The Virtual Hindu Rashtra*.

28 Peter Manuel, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), 250–256.

29 Sujatha Subramanian, "Is Hindutva Masculinity On Social Media Producing a Culture of Violence Against Women and Muslims", *Economic and Political Weekly* vol. 54, no. 15, 13 April 2019, <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/hindutva-masculinity-social-media-producing-violence-against-women-muslims>.

30 Arvind Sharma, "On The Difference Between Hinduism and Hindutva", *Asian Philosophies and Religions*, vol. 25, no. 1 (Spring 2020), <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/on-the-difference-between-hinduism-and-hindutva>.

In its messaging, Hindutva often tries to portray Muslims and Christians as outsiders who pose a danger to Hindus and India, and align with opposing political forces to undermine Hindus. Weaving both historical and present-day grievances, Hindu nationalists portray “real Hindus” as a people persecuted and unfairly treated by Muslims, Christians, liberals, leftists and others, and declare that a strong Hindu state or identity will defeat these forces. Of course, Hindutva itself remains a spectrum, which some users in pro-Hindutva spaces must grapple with as they encounter even more extreme members of the movement.<sup>31</sup>

For this study, the authors utilised 100 selected memes shared by pro-Hindutva users. The majority of the memes were scraped on Twitter through the use of popular keywords and hashtags used by the BJP and its supporters. Some 19 memes were manually scraped through pro-Hindutva pages on Facebook and Instagram. This is just a small subset of the total database and it does not use all of the platforms popular with online Hindutva activists. Platforms popular with Hindutva organisers, such as private chat groups on Telegram and WhatsApp, were not used for the Hindutva dataset in this study. Public Telegram broadcast channels, however, were collected for the second case study on neo-Nazi content creation.

## Case 2: Neo-Nazis

Much has been written about neo-Nazi memes, especially since 2016. For example, Bianchino describes these memes operating at the limits of the irony from which all memes are in some way proximate.<sup>32</sup> This irony provides a cover of “unseriousness”, thereby allowing plausible deniability for violent adherents in tandem with the easy retort to detractors that outsiders are absurd for taking such content seriously. That neo-Nazi content creators took advantage of a wave of Trump-bolstered memetics, namely those connected with attempts to mainstream youth extremism via irony, is well explored in the United States.<sup>33</sup> Others explore the “micro-fascism” of the Trump era,<sup>34</sup> deploying Felix Guattari’s notion of fascist ideological proliferation as conceptually similar to molecular vibration: echoes and resonance lead to manipulation of larger bodies.<sup>35</sup> The meme, acting as a politically laden technical object, serves as the vibration that manipulates the larger body of political discourse, redefining the pure, the perverse and the thinkable themselves.

Many scholars have described the specifics of reactionary discourse affectation, examining the narratives and online presence of actors, including with an explicit focus on neo-Nazi content creators.<sup>36</sup>

31 See, for example, fieldwork among some pro-BJP users who might admit that they are troubled by some of the more extreme anti-Muslim sentiments but also feel compelled on social media to take a position on key Hindutva battles. See Sahana Udupa, “Enterprise Hindutva and Social Media in Urban India”, *Contemporary South Asia* vol. 26, no. 4 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2018.1545007>.

32 Giacomo Bianchino, “Simulation and Dissimulation: Esoteric Memes Pages at the Limits of Irony”, in *Post Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production*, edd. Alfie Bown and Dan Bristow (Punctum Books, 2019), 367–88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11hptdx.19>.

33 Woods and Hahner, *Make America Meme Again*.

34 Gary Genosko, “Micro-Fascism in the Age of Trump”, in *Spectres of Fascism: Historical, Theoretical and International Perspectives*, ed. Samir Gandesha (Pluto Press, 2020), 164–76, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvrxp2qv.14>.

35 Félix Guattari, *Chaosophy*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, Semiotext(e) / Foreign Agents (Cambridge, MA, USA: Semiotext(e), 1995).

36 Samantha Walther and Andrew McCoy, “US Extremism on Telegram: Fueling Disinformation, Conspiracy Theories, and Accelerationism”, *Perspectives on Terrorism* vol. 15, no. 2 (2021): 100–124; Maura Conway, Ryan Scrivens and Logan Macnair, “Right-Wing Extremists’ Persistent Online Presence: History and Contemporary Trends”, n.d., 24.

In these cases, analysts point to the messaging app Telegram as a site of activity and content creation. Other locations have also been analysed as crucial sites for neo-Nazi-generated propaganda, such as Chan Boards,<sup>37</sup> Facebook,<sup>38</sup> YouTube,<sup>39</sup> or sites created explicitly for neo-Nazi online content.<sup>40</sup> These platforms are then used to affect politics nationally and internationally,<sup>41</sup> seeking to disturb the rhetorical and imagined status quo to make their own politics “familiar”.<sup>42</sup>

The authors exported 35,434 images from Telegram to assess the content of memes from these types of content-creation communities. A random sample of 100 memes from these images was then gathered to be included as part of this study.

It should also be noted that neo-Nazis are occasionally known for pulling from a mystic tradition that is in many ways directly connected to the same threads as those levied by Hindutva explored above.<sup>43</sup>

### Case 3: Rittenhouse

Distinct from neo-Nazi memes, other conservative actors create and curate memes online to spread their ideology and foster communities. The meme environment around the August 2020 shootings in Kenosha, Wisconsin, featuring teenaged shooter Kyle Rittenhouse represents a case of several meme communities converging.

An initial outline of the dataset, based on 105 images, displays a high level of violent content among these memes.<sup>44</sup> Diving into the memes surrounding the shootings is currently under review with a journal, featuring an expanded dataset of 355 unique memes gathered from scraping Twitter and manual collection from militia forums, public Facebook meme pages and reactionary meme aggregation sites.

Not much academic writing has yet covered the context surrounding Kyle Rittenhouse’s actions; when the incident in Kenosha is included in these studies, it is usually only in passing. Some may mention the Rittenhouse incident in an article on the Trump presidency, including Rittenhouse within the larger MAGA spectacle.<sup>45</sup> Discussion is more deeply developed, however, in white papers

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- 37 Elise Thomas, “Manifestos, Memetic Mobilisation and the Chan Boards in the Christchurch Shooting”, *Counterterrorism Yearbook 2020* (Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2020), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25133.7>; Stephane J. Baele, Lewys Brace and Travis G. Coan, “Variations on a Theme? Comparing 4chan, 8kun, and Other Chans’ Far-Right ‘Pol’ Boards”, *Perspectives on Terrorism* vol. 15, no. 1 (2021): 65–80.
- 38 Elise Thomas, “Boogaloo Bois: The Birth of a ‘Movement’, from Memes to Real-World Violence”, *Counterterrorism Yearbook 2021* (Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2021), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep31258.10>.
- 39 Andrew B. R. Elliott, “‘God Bless the EDL, the New Templar Knights’: The EDL, the Far Right and the Crusaders”, in *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century* (Boydell & Brewer, 2017), 155–82, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvc16jn7.12>.
- 40 Steven Windisch et al., “On the Permissibility of Homicidal Violence: Perspectives from Former U.S. White Supremacists”, *Perspectives on Terrorism* vol. 14, no. 6 (2020): 65–76.
- 41 John Feffer, “Transnational Organizing of the New Right”, in *Right Across the World: The Global Networking of the Far-Right and the Left Response* (Pluto Press, 2021), 44–65, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1z7kgms.6>.
- 42 Damon T. Berry, “Conclusion: Making White Nationalism Familiar”, in *Blood and Faith: Christianity in American White Nationalism* (Syracuse University Press, 2017), 191–98, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1pk86c2.11>.
- 43 Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology* (NYU Press, 1993), <https://nyupress.org/9780814730607/occult-roots-of-nazism/>; “The Supernatural Pseudoscience of Nazi Germany | Religion & Politics,” 24 October 2017, <https://religionandpolitics.org/2017/10/24/the-supernatural-pseudoscience-of-nazi-germany/>; Eric Kurlander, “The Nazi Magicians’ Controversy: Enlightenment, ‘Border Science,’ and Occultism in the Third Reich”, *Central European History* vol. 48, no. 4 (December 2015): 498–522, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938915000898>.
- 44 Hampton Stall, Hari Prasad and David Foran, “What’s in a Meme? The Rise of ‘Saint Kyle’”, GNET (blog), accessed 29 October 2021, <https://gnet-research.org/2020/10/29/whats-in-a-meme-the-rise-of-saint-kyle/>.
- 45 Blythe Worthy et al., “Intermedial #MAGA: The Trump Presidency on Screen”, *Australasian Journal of American Studies* vol. 40, no. 1 (2021): 65–100.

and policy briefs on US political violence, in which the Rittenhouse incident is included as either an indicator or an example of political violence, future or past.<sup>46</sup>

There is potential here for great overlap in the literature between what might be considered the literature around the Rittenhouse social space and that covering the neo-Nazi-tinged Alt-Right mentioned above. For example, the lessons of Bianchino,<sup>47</sup> Berry,<sup>48</sup> and Genosko<sup>49</sup> are applicable to the Rittenhouse case study, though specifics differ: neo-Nazi posters are often relegated to clandestine organising whereas those captured in the Rittenhouse reaction are more connected to formal conservative organising and state power.

MAGA memetics are often quite closely linked with Alt-Right and neo-Nazi memetics, though specificity about the US Constitution and especially the Second Amendment encourages students of the Rittenhouse meme social space to draw from other research.<sup>50</sup> The networks of information generation and consumption that come into contact with Rittenhouse content are those that specifically have access to mainstream institutional power, either through Trump and the GOP contemporaneously or through the Tea Party and local organising previously.<sup>51</sup> Others have explored the relationship between messaging and action within the US-based Tea Party,<sup>52</sup> findings that are directly relatable to the study of the Rittenhouse media environment, given Rittenhouse fans' Constitutional focus, delight at violence against political adversaries and general scepticism of racial progress. Others have described the specifics of how Trump himself utilised Twitter to generate another new iteration of an authoritarian-capitalist ideology.<sup>53</sup> Following these authors' lead, the authors of this report drew their sample memes for the Rittenhouse dataset primarily from Twitter.

46 Seth G. Jones et al., "The War Comes Home: The Evolution of Domestic Terrorism in the United States", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26423>; Roudabeh Kishi et al., "A National Emergency: How COVID-19 Is Fueling Unrest in the US | ACLED", 4 March 2021, <https://acleddata.com/2021/03/04/a-national-emergency-how-covid-19-is-fueling-unrest-in-the-us/>; Hampton Stall, Roudabeh Kishi and Clonadh Raleigh, "Standing By: Right-Wing Militia Groups & the US Election | ACLED", 22 October 2020, <https://acleddata.com/2020/10/21/standing-by-militias-election/>; David Sterman, Peter Bergen and Melissa Salyk-Virk, "Terrorism in America 19 Years After 9/11" (New America, 2020), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26364.4>; International Crisis Group, "'Why This Year Is Different', The U.S. Presidential Election" (International Crisis Group, 2020), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep31345.5>.

47 Bianchino, "Simulation and Dissimulation".

48 Berry, "Making White Nationalism Familiar".

49 Genosko, "Micro-Fascism in the Age of Trump".

50 Woods and Hahner, *Make America Meme Again*.

51 Douglas Kellner, "Donald Trump as Authoritarian Populist: A Frommian Analysis", in *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism*, ed. Jeremiah Morelock, vol. 9 (University of Westminster Press, 2018), 71–82, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv9hvtcf.8>; Matthew W. Hughey and Gregory S. Parks, "Unsweet Tea and Labor Pains: The Tea Party, Birthers, and Obama from The Wrongs of the Right: Language, Race, and the Republican Party in the Age of Obama on JSTOR", in *The Wrongs of the Right: Language, Race, and the Republican Party in the Age of Obama* (2014), 27–52; Patrick Fisher, "The Tea Party and the Demographic and Ideological Gaps within the Republican Party", *Geopolitics, History, and International Relations* vol. 7, no. 2 (2015): 13–31; William H. Westermeyer, "Trickle-Up Politics: Local Tea Party Groups as Movement Actors in Local Politics", in *Back to America: Identity, Political Culture, and the Tea Party Movement* (University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 143–68, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvr33c80.9>; Brigitte L. Nacos, Robert Y. Shapiro and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, "Donald Trump: Aggressive Rhetoric and Political Violence", *Perspectives on Terrorism* vol. 14, no. 5 (2020): 2–25.

52 Francis B. Prior, "Quality Controlled: An Ethnographic Account of Tea Party Messaging and Action", *Sociological Forum* vol. 29, no. 2 (2014): 301–17.

53 Christian Fuchs, "Trump and Twitter: Authoritarian-Capitalist Ideology on Social Media", in *Digital Demagogue: Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter* (Pluto Press, 2018), 197–257, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt21215dw.10>.

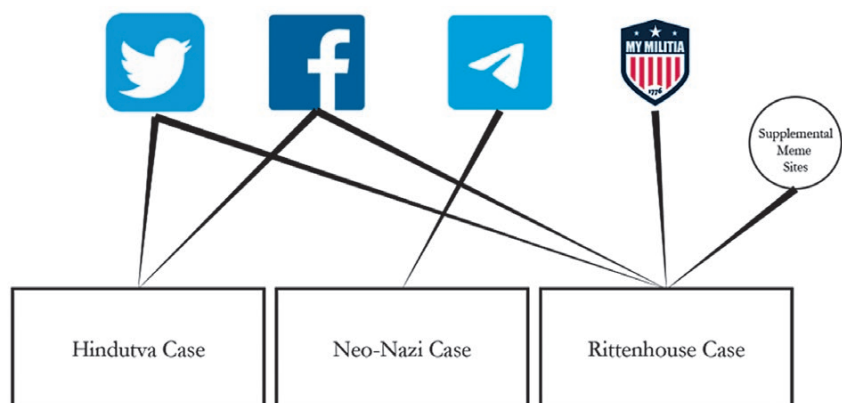




### 3 Methods

Our project employed a mixed-methods approach to meme collection, classification and analysis. The basic meme analysis workflow we conducted consisted of: first, collecting memes from various public forums via manual and API-based scraping; second, sorting images based on whether the image included a meme format or not; third, selecting a random sampling of the sorted images; fourth, adding the sampling into image-tagging software; fifth, tagging the image samples based on their constituent visual elements – those that make up a specific meme template – and thematic elements.

Collection tools included full-archive scraping of Twitter’s API using researcher-identified hashtags associated with Rittenhouse and Hindutva, downloading entire Telegram broadcast channels associated with neo-Nazi content-creation communities and manual collection of Rittenhouse and Hindutva memes on public forums, Facebook and various meme aggregation sites. For the Hindutva case, the authors scraped Twitter by targeting associated keywords used in Hindutva media activism campaigns. These scrapes were then supplemented by manually documented meme pages on Facebook identified by experts on the movement. For the neo-Nazi case, 30 propaganda channels on Telegram were identified through conversations with experts and researchers infiltrating the US-based fascist movement. These channels were then exported through Telegram’s built-in download function. For the Rittenhouse case, the authors scraped public Tweets containing key phrases related to pro-Rittenhouse sentiment. These images were then supplemented by researcher-identified meme pages and aggregators, namely public militia forums, pro-Second Amendment meme pages on Facebook and image-aggregation boards frequented by conservative posters. The sourcing of the memes for each case is illustrated below (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Sourcing of memes for each case. Twitter memes were gathered using an API-connected scraper, Facebook memes via manual selection, Telegram memes through the app’s export function, MyMilitia memes by manual selection and supplemental meme sites through manual selection.

After collection, a random sample of 100 memes from each dataset (Hindutva, neo-Nazi, Rittenhouse) was identified using random number generation. These 300 memes were then imported into a workflow in Dedoose, an image-tagging program, for qualitative data analysis.

The analysis for this project hinged on tagging and determining the significance of the various image elements and iconography that made up the memes themselves. One may refer to these technical artifacts as “meme elements”. Several “meme elements” combined constitute a “meme individual”, which is the entire image itself. Groups or collections of these meme individuals constitute a larger “meme ensemble” or system. This distinction is important, as meme individuals can contain a variety of characters seen throughout these meme ensembles, in which meme individuals reference each other through their constituent elements, tags and metadata.<sup>54</sup> The meme networks form as a result of pre-existing aesthetic (constituent visual elements, characters, formats and styles), technical (algorithmic classifications, platform and hashtags) and social (sub-groups, likes, retweets, and friending) relations. Figure 2, below, shows the process of formation from elements to individuals to ensembles (or networks). The root elements serve as a tool for group consolidation and signalling. By applying the appropriate aesthetic elements/touches to posted media, individuals can more effectively indicate the presence of their socio-political groups within a specific channel. Tagging and other types of metadata allow users to establish a relation between the media they post and specific channels (topics, threads, groups, etc) mentioned above. Social actions (likes, retweets, shares, etc) are another mechanism that groups use to elevate the importance of and propagate specific memes in the channel. Together, these actions allow for groups to capture or occupy space within the larger ensemble of memes related to the specific channel that is being targeted. Specifically on social media platforms, hashtags, user shares and other forms of metadata bind various memes together by topic, user relations, and algorithmic sorting. These relations add a spatial element to otherwise seemingly disparate, non-spatial pieces of media, forming a sort of online terrain in which groups can compete. The set of relationships, aesthetic–technical–social, position the memes within the terrain, so that meme creators can begin to build on and occupy their own spatial territory within each media channel, if only as a knowledge base within the logical space of the platform/application itself. This results in a process of reticulation and convergence, where seemingly separate or unrelated social groups and media objects become part of the same system or ensemble.<sup>55</sup> The relations between memes that arise out of their constituent elements allow different groups to signal the underlying meanings and associated narratives that they are trying to connect to current social and political events. The groups, in turn, are able to affect larger media networks through various vectors such as tagging, account association and other types of metadata. This process of reticulation (network formation through the creation of aesthetic, social and technical relations) causes a convergence between knowledge bases created by the various political groups and mainstream media knowledge bases.

54 Our three-tiered analysis of memes is derived from philosopher Gilbert Simondon’s analysis of technical objects in *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* (1958) and philosopher Yuk Hui’s analysis of digital objects in *On the Existence of Digital Objects* (2016).

55 Yuk Hui, *On the Existence of Digital Objects: Electronic Mediations* (Minnesota University Press, 2016), <https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/on-the-existence-of-digital-objects>.

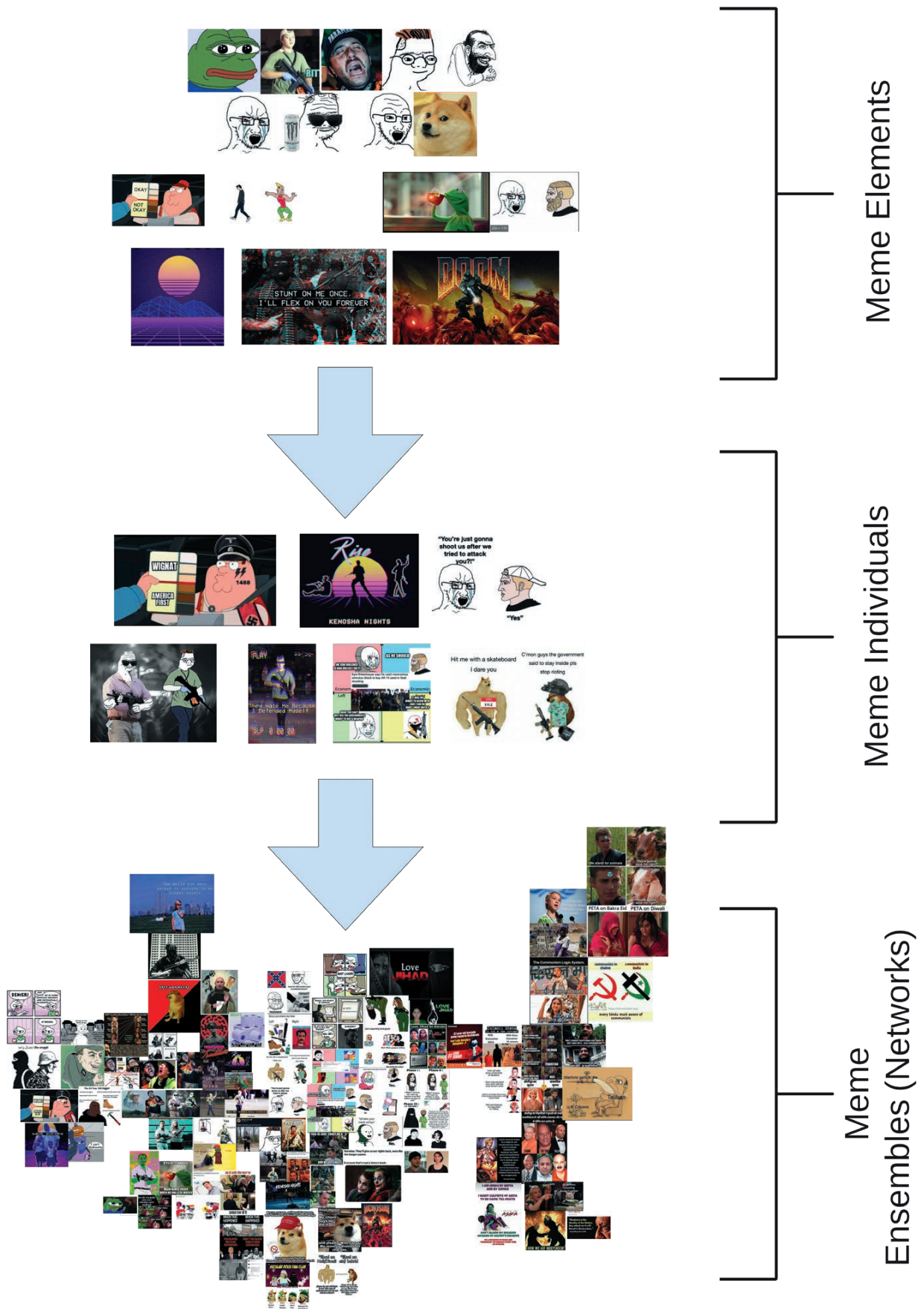


Figure 2: Process of meme formation and ensemble propagation – memes are grouped according to their meme elements.

Through our analysis of meme elements, the memes were categorised according to three different aspects of analysis. The first category, "Figure Type", analyses the type of figures included in the meme (for example, the likeness of individuals re-created within the meme, either directly or through referential mention). The second category, "Out-Group", analyses the representation of the meme community's out-group (for example, how the meme defines the meme community's enemy or enemies). Finally, the third category, "Violence Ratio", analyses the meme's relationship to violence (for example, decrying it or supporting it, dependent upon identified out-group). Using these tags, analysis is possible of the individual meme data streams themselves and in comparison with one another.

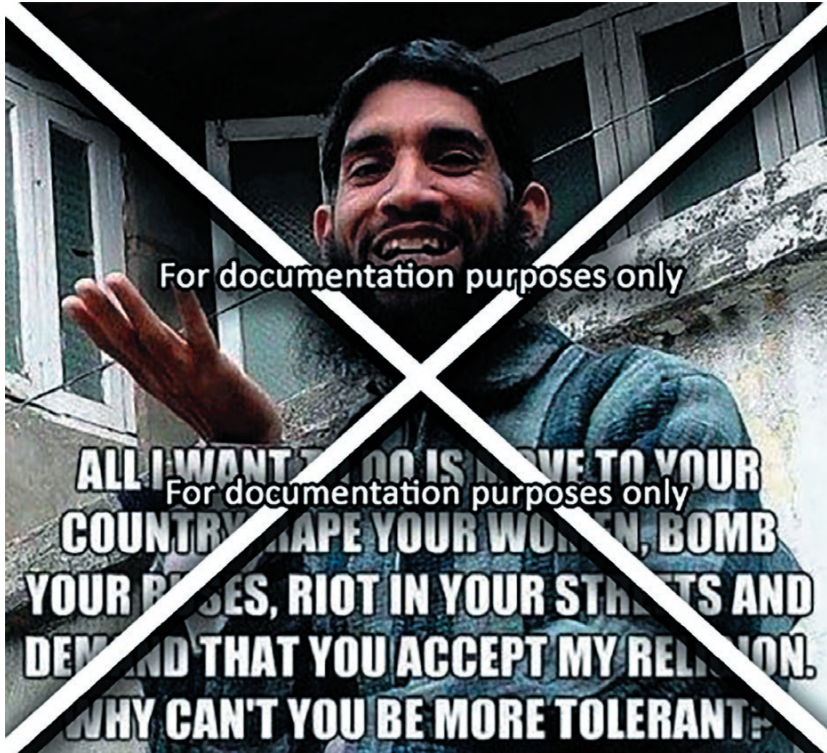
## 4 Analysing the Data

### Case 1: Hindutva

Unsurprisingly, memes shared among pro-Hindutva social media users closely follow the offline rhetoric and issues in India. The social media networks are used to create a friendly online environment that serves three general purposes: the amplification of pro-Hindutva messages, demeaning the “other” and distortion in the public sphere.<sup>56</sup> Hindutva memes often promote an idea of victimhood, portraying Hindus as facing danger from out-groups, such as Muslims, journalists, Christians, leftists and alleged “anti-India” activists. Such an image appears alongside other reported problems on social media networks, where Hindu nationalists have often used misinformation to push a narrative of Muslims and others attacking Hindus to instigate communal tensions.<sup>57</sup>

Out of all the out-groups contained or referenced within the memes, Muslims occurred most frequently (52%). At times, memes indirectly referred to Muslims by referencing IS, the Taliban or “Jihadis”. However, these terms are often used as dog whistles to attack Muslims in India. Other memes focusing on Muslims drop this pretense, often pointing out the danger that Muslims pose to Indians and Hindus. Of the 20 memes that focused on violence by the out-group (Muslims), 14 centred on violence or images of violence carried out by Muslims. The emphasis on threats posed by Muslims is hardly surprising considering that they have been a frequent target of Hindutva rhetoric since its inception in pre-independence India. The particular emphasis on Muslims has increased post-independence due to the violent religious politics surrounding the partition of the Subcontinent and the fact that Muslims are the largest minority religious group in India today. Generally, Hindutva memes do not appear to celebrate violence against Muslims, choosing instead to focus on the perceived threats Muslims pose to Hindus, such as violence against Hindus and threatening Hindu women (see Figure 3, an example meme, below). Despite this, figures such as Yati Narsinghanand<sup>58</sup> and Yogi Adityanath,<sup>59</sup> religious leaders and politicians who encouraged violence and ran organisations that carried out violence against Muslims, are often celebrated.

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- 56 Jordan Newton, Yasmira Moner, Kyaw Nyi Nyi and Hari Prasad, “Polarising Narratives and Deepening Fault Lines: Social Media, Intolerance, and Extremism in Four Asian Nations”, *GNET*, 2 March 2021, <https://gnet-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/GNET-Report-Polarising-Narratives-And-Deepening-Fault-Lines.pdf>.
- 57 Newley Purnell and Jeff Horwitz, “Facebook Services Are Used to Spread Religious Hatred in India, Internal Documents Show”, *Wall Street Journal*, 23 October 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-services-are-used-to-spread-religious-hatred-in-india-internal-documents-show-11635016354?s=09>; Jasper Jackson, Rahul Meesaraganda and Sarah Haque, “So Much Hot Hair: Twitter and Facebook Let Quack COVID Cures Spread Unchecked in India”, *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, 10 June 2021, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2021-06-10/so-much-hot-air-twitter-and-facebook-let-quack-covid-cures-spread-unchecked-in-india>; Sheera Frenkel and Davey Alba, “Facebook Papers: In India, Facebook Grapples With an Amplified Version of Its Problems”, *New York Times*, 23 October 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/23/technology/facebook-india-misinformation.html>.
- 58 Ananya Bhardwaj, “How Narsinghanand, a Russian-educated, London-Returned Engineer, Became ‘Hate-Spewing’ Sadhu”, *The Print*, 23 October 2019, <https://theprint.in/india/how-narsinghanand-a-russian-educated-london-returned-engineer-became-hate-spewing-sadhu/310092/>; Alishan Jafri, “Beyond Blasphemy: Inside Yati Narsinghanand’s Militant Hindutva Machinery”, *The Wire*, 17 April 2021, <https://thewire.in/communalism/beyond-blasphemy-inside-yati-narsinghanands-militant-hindutva-machinery>.
- 59 Véronique Bouillier, “Yogi Adityanath’s Background and Rise to Power”, *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* vol. 24/25 (Winter 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.6778>.



**Figure 3:** Example of a Hindutva meme that integrates both the idea that Muslims pose a danger to Hindus and the “injustice” that Hindus are not allowed to respond.

One Hindutva meme narrative worth highlighting is the “love jihad” conspiracy. Love jihad is the theory that Muslim men are engaged in a conspiracy to woo Hindu women to convert them to Islam. Some recent narratives try to situate love jihad as part of a larger IS conspiracy,<sup>60</sup> despite its origins prior to the rise of IS.<sup>61</sup> Even after multiple investigations and the use of national security agencies to pursue love jihad cases,<sup>62</sup> there is still no evidence that such a conspiracy exists. Instead, it is used as a pretense by some states and Hindutva organisations to harass Muslim men.<sup>63</sup> The spread of love jihad conspiracies has had a deadly effect. In an infamous example, a Muslim man was hacked to death by a man accusing him of trying to conduct love jihad.<sup>64</sup> The video of the killing was shared widely on social media. The killer was later venerated by local Hindutva groups for protecting the Hindu community.<sup>65</sup>

60 “‘Love Jihad’: ISIS Targeting Hindu, Christian Girls in Kerala, Says BJP State Chief”, *ANI News*, 31 March 2021, <https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/love-jihad-isis-targeting-hindu-christian-girls-in-kerala-says-bjp-state-chief20210331151850/>.

61 Chandrima Banerjee, “Ram Sene Coined ‘Love Jihad’, But First ‘Case’ Goes Back a Century”, *Times of India*, 19 October 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/ram-sene-coined-love-jihad-but-first-case-goes-back-a-century/articleshow/78744013.cms>.

62 Scroll Staff, “Kerala CM Cites Data to Refute Claims Linking Religion to ‘Narcotics, Love Jihad’”, *Scroll.in*, 23 September 2021, <https://scroll.in/latest/1006023/kerala-cm-cites-data-to-refute-claims-linking-religion-to-narcotics-love-jihad>; Johnson T. A., “8 Years Before NIA, Karnataka CID Probed ‘Love Jihad’, Found No Specific Instance”, *The Indian Express*, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/8-years-before-nia-karnataka-cid-probed-love-jihad-found-no-specific-instance-4807667/>.

63 Shweta Desai, “The ‘Love Jihad’ Conspiracy”, *Newlines Magazine*, 21 December 2020, <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/the-love-jihad-conspiracy-theory/>. See also Betwa Sharma and Ahmer Khan, “Hindu Vigilantes Work with Police to Enforce ‘Love Jihad’ Law in North India”, *The Intercept*, <https://theintercept.com/2021/07/03/love-jihad-law-india/>.

64 “The Rage and Hatred Behind a Public Murder”, *BBC News*, 13 December 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-42320616>.

65 Press Trust of India, “Rajasthan: Shambu Lal Raigar, Who Hacked Muslim Labourer Over ‘Love Jihad’ Gets Tableau on Ram Navami”, *Firstpost*, 27 March 2018, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/rajasthan-shambu-lal-raigar-who-hacked-muslim-labourer-over-love-jihad-gets-tableau-on-ram-navami-4408301.html>.

## Case 2: Neo-Nazis

In contrast to Hindutva, the neo-Nazi dataset is an extremely chaotic and disconnected sample dataset. This is in part due to the fact that the sole unifying principles of the neo-Nazi channels are online fascism and a preference for a US-based audience. Some 28 different out-group targets are identified within this dataset. Those with an identified out-group target have on average about 1.5 defined out-groups within the meme. The most out-groups contained in a single meme from this dataset comes from a meme sporting six different groups that the meme is attacking.

However, out-group targets often coalesce around a few themes. For example, women are often a target for neo-Nazi posters within this dataset, standing in as the out-group community for 13% of the meme sample set and 14% of all out-group tags identified. Within those memes identifying women as the out-group, 23% expressed support for violence against women. There have been many studies focusing on neo-Nazi disdain for women,<sup>66</sup> as well as the anti-woman stances at the root of fascism.<sup>67</sup> However, this does not mean that women themselves are inactive or otherwise absent in racist spaces, as other work on the dynamics of gender within Ku Klux Klan activism shows.<sup>68</sup>

Other out-group targets within the neo-Nazi meme dataset garnering five or more mentions in the sample include black people (six), Israel (six), Jews (five), LGBTQ groups (nine), modernity (six) and the US government (six). This is indicative of the many antagonisms that neo-Nazi groups hold close to their activism and worldview. While there is ample reason to believe that hate for Israel and hate for Jews are directly correlated with one another, this relationship does not appear in this sample of neo-Nazi memes. Only 10% of the memes include both Israel and Jews in the meme references at once. The absence of correlation between Israel and Jews as out-groups is not plausibly due to principled criticism of Israel separate from ethnic hatred; it is more to do with neo-Nazi use of Israel as a codeword for Jews. Using coded or veiled language is a well-documented aspect of neo-Nazi online communication.<sup>69</sup> The meme that constitutes the 10% overlap is a meme citing Bible verses decrying “Satanic” Jews and Israel together, with an image of Jesus below it (see Figure 4).

66 Megan Condis, “From #GamerGate to Donald Trump: Toxic Masculinity and the Politics of the Alt-Right”, in *Gaming Masculinity: Trolls, Fake Geeks, and the Gendered Battle for Online Culture* (University of Iowa Press, 2018), 95–106, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv3dnq9f.12>; Ben Whitham, “A Postmodern Neo-Marxist’s Guide to Free Speech: Jordan Peterson, the Alt-Right and Neo-Fascism”, in *The Free Speech Wars: How Did We Get Here and Why Does It Matter?*, ed. Charlotte Lydia Riley (Manchester University Press, 2021), 227–38, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv199td7w.23>.

67 Laura U. Marks, “Which Came First, Fascism or Misogyny?: Reading Klaus Theweleit’s Male Fantasies”, in *Spectres of Fascism: Historical, Theoretical and International Perspectives*, ed. Samir Gandesha, (Pluto Press, 2020), 109–19, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvxrpxzqv.11>.

68 Kathleen M. Blee, *Understanding Racist Activism: Theory, Methods, and Research*, 2017, <https://www.routledge.com/Understanding-Racist-Activism-Theory-Methods-and-Research/Blee/p/book/9781138699793>.

69 Gabriel Weimann and Ari Ben Am, “Digital Dog Whistles: The New Online Language of Extremism”, *International Journal of Security Studies* vol. 2, no. 1 (2020), <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1030&context=ijoss>; Mathilda Akerlund, “Dog Whistling Far-Right Code Words: The Case of ‘Culture Enricher’ on the Swedish Web”, *Information, Communication & Society*, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1889639>.



Figure 4: Example of a neo-Nazi meme evoking a religious figure and designating Jews and Israel as enemies of the audience group.

Surprisingly, the neo-Nazi sample dataset features no indications of philosophical figures among the memes. Cultural figures (often low-level online celebrities connected to the far right), historical figures (often military or world leaders of politically aligned governments) and figures connected to terror or violence (often school shooters or neo-Nazis) all appeared at a greater than 15% incidence rate.

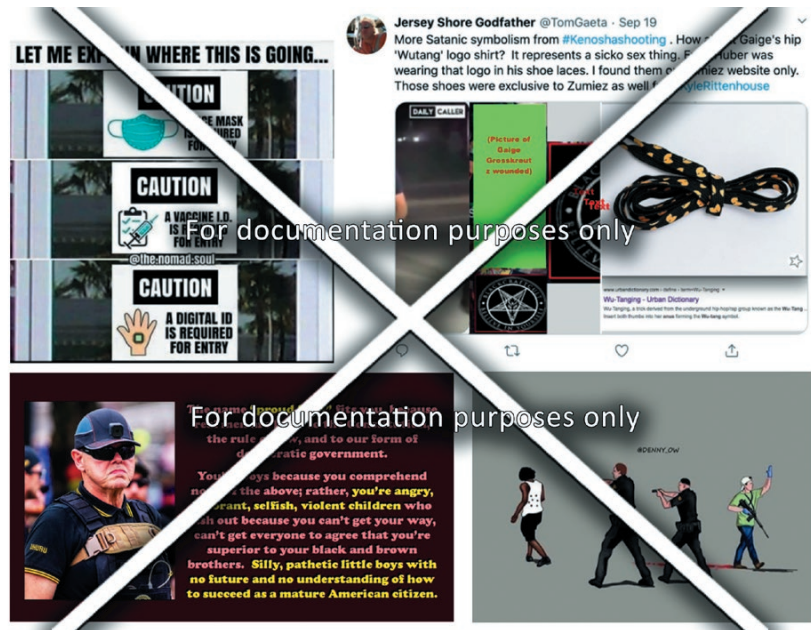
### Case 3: Rittenhouse

Rittenhouse memes targeted a more specific range of out-groups than the neo-Nazi dataset, with only twelve different out-groups identified among memes sampled from the Rittenhouse dataset. Communists (9%) and Black Lives Matter (8%) were the most common out-groups targeted, along with several others that netted a lower than 5% occurrence: “Antifa”, “anarchists” and “pedophiles”. All of the memes identifying Communists as the out-group also contained implicit or explicit support for violence against the out-group. This is unsurprising given the theories about politics and the Second Amendment proffered by those of the armed, US-based reactionary movement.<sup>70</sup> The same can be said for Black Lives Matter as the out-group; the memes in question suggest that the racial justice movement deserves the same level of lethal violence and is a looming threat for armed American conservatives.<sup>71</sup>

70 David C. Williams, “The Militia Movement’s Theory of the Second Amendment”, in *The Mythic Meanings of the Second Amendment: Taming Political Violence in a Constitutional Republic* (Yale University Press, 2003), 191–219, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1npjzf.12>; William H. Westermeyer, “Plantation Politics: Race in the Figured World of the Tea Party”, in *Back to America: Identity, Political Culture, and the Tea Party Movement* (University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 89–114, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvr33c80.7>.

71 Daniel Martinez HoSang and Joseph E. Lowndes, “State Abandonment and Militia Revolt: White Occupation, Native Land, and Black Lives”, in *Producers, Parasites, Patriots: Race and the New Right-Wing Politics of Precarity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 129–52, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctvdjrrcq.8>; Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, “The American Uprising of 2020: Black Lives Matter Gains Traction”, in *Africa and the Disruptions of the Twenty-First Century* (CODESRIA, 2021), 31–62, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1j55h48.11>.





**Figure 5:** Injections of ideology into the Rittenhouse dataset. From left to right and top to bottom, these include vaccine-sceptic conspiracy theories, wild Satanic Panic-style religious conspiracy, a renunciation of the Proud Boys and a depiction of police violence against black people in contrast to Rittenhouse being let past cops unharmed.

Given that the Rittenhouse dataset is drawn from a violent event, it is unsurprising that violence against out-groups is a constantly present thematic element. Less than 10% of the Rittenhouse memes collected contained no signifiers of violence and about twice as many simultaneously expressed disdain for out-group violence and support for violence against out-groups in the same meme. This is perhaps why the dataset has an 84% rate in favour of violence and a 25% rate against violence, since many memes do both at the same time. This 25% rate of disdain for violence is almost always alongside narrative elements that seem to insinuate the primary mode of discussion of violence is that regarding armed self-defense rather than that which is considered by meme creators to be offensive action. Insurrectionary violence and the need to suppress opposing views violently is something well covered in the literature surrounding the same milieu from which the Rittenhouse meme dataset is drawn.<sup>72</sup>

The Rittenhouse dataset also elucidates how meme communities intersect and interact with other movements or events. Rittenhouse, for example, represents a crucial figure for often-disparate movements to coalesce around and find common ground among the US right, partly through the intersection of memes and other news events. Posts comparing Rittenhouse's shooting spree with Pinkerton employee Matthew Dotloff's Denver shooting of a pro-Trump demonstrator replaced comparisons between Rittenhouse and police victim George Floyd.<sup>73</sup> Other crossovers include

<sup>72</sup> Jared A. Goldstein, "To Kill and Die for the Constitution: Nullification and Insurrectionary Violence", in *Nullification and Secession in Modern Constitutional Thought*, ed. Sanford Levinson (University Press of Kansas, 2016), 179–222, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1dr36x4.9>; David C. Williams, "The Militia Movement's Theory of the Second Amendment", in *The Mythic Meanings of the Second Amendment: Taming Political Violence in a Constitutional Republic* (Yale University Press, 2003), 191–219, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1npzf.12>.

<sup>73</sup> Kevin Vaughan, "Concealed Carry Permit for Suspect in Denver Shooting Suspended Monday, Authorities Confirm", KUSA.com, 9 October 2020, <https://www.9news.com/article/news/crime/security-guard-held-denver-shooting-wasnt-licensed-officials-say/73-648ca0f2-cc71-4fa7-b145-cbd710b87f5f>.

complaints about Colin Kaepernick kneeling for the flag and even the Michigan kidnapping plot from October 2020. Meme creators inject their political opinions into the discourse as they seek to re-establish political views in a semi-familiar space; in this case, a shared affinity for the teen shooter is one born of support for violence – a violence that is clearly and deeply political. Figure 5 shows four examples of meme creators bringing their own ideology into the Rittenhouse meme environment.

The political, aesthetic and organisational narratives injected into the media environment surrounding events like the Rittenhouse shootings are multitiered and networked. Stonetoss, a comic creator, pulls from neo-Nazi views and makes them more palatable for a broader audience.<sup>74</sup> In turn, the creator has made a format indicative of a particular political leaning that can then be injected and normalised in the media network in response to a key event or dynamic. These meme networks, even those of a similar political landscape, are still places of competition, where actors vie for influence over the conversation through the crucial online cultural production of memecraft. Engagement in a contested meme environment may be just as much about defining what or who a movement or ideology stands for as it is for what it is not. Examples indicate an underlying push by meme creators from different political tendencies to vie for space and time within the Rittenhouse media environment, setting themselves both in relation to other inhabitants of the reactionary meme system but also in opposition to those they view as inauthentic or unwelcome.

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74 "StoneToss", Know Your Meme, accessed 2 November 2020, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/subcultures/stonetoss>.

## 5 Comparing and Contrasting Cases

The three cases contained in this report represent three very different online communities as far as content creation and discourse injection are concerned. A table below (see Figure 6) shows data about each of the three samples, as related to the three main categories of analysis in this study: figure types used, out-groups identified and ratio of support for violence. The overall percentage is the incidence of the meme element across the sample set. The comparative percentage is incidence of the element compared against the total number of elements of that type (for example, three mentions of “activists” and two mentions of “liberals” in a sample set would net a 3% overall rate for “activists” and a 60% comparative, given that the “activists” tag accounts for three out of five total tags).

	<b>Mode Figure Type</b> (% overall, % comparatively)	<b>Mode Out-Group</b> (% overall, % comparatively)	<b>Violence Ratio</b> (Support:Against)
Case 1: Hindutva	Political (31%, 29%)	Muslims (52%, 43%)	4:20 (.20)
Case 2: Neo-Nazis	Cultural (21%, 26%)	Women (13%, 14%)	24:7 (3.43)
Case 3: Rittenhouse	Political (13%, 35%)	Communists (9%, 26%)	84:25 (3.36)

**Figure 6:** Summary chart to compare the sample datasets

The three cases are distinct in the sense that they each represent quite different content environments. Each case has a different primary out-group mentioned in the memes. The Hindutva sample set was aimed decidedly against a clear enemy, “Muslims”, which was in turn often equated with violent activity. Thus, the Hindutva case is the only case with a violence ratio score of less than one, meaning higher prevalence of critiques against out-group violence than support for violence against said out-group. Like the Rittenhouse case, however, referencing the violence committed by the out-group (which were relatively comparable between the Hindutva and Rittenhouse datasets) is not itself disconnected from a desire to justify or to commit violence against out-groups. Instead, this discussion of out-group violence against in-group symbols seems to be intended to create an exclusionary and justifying media environment. By comparison, neo-Nazi politics are inherently violent and neo-Nazi meme creators perhaps feel less of an inclination to justify the assumptions already central to the ideology itself.

Overall, across the three sample communities, several patterns arise about reactionary memes in general. The memes are sourced from different platforms using different sourcing methods (see Figure 1 for platforms and Methodology section for sourcing methods). While this is not yet a comprehensive sampling of international reactionary information environments, it perhaps elucidates some cross-cutting patterns outside the sample cases alone. For example, the most used types of figures evoked in the memes are those that are explicitly political (18.3%), followed by cultural ones (16.3%). The out-group target information is highly skewed by the Hindutva case's heavy Muslim representation and the next most-evoked out-groups include women and Communists, as represented by the neo-Nazi and Rittenhouse samples respectively. At the same rate and more evenly distributed across the datasets are mentions of "Activists" (5.3%), "BLM" and "Media" (each 4%). The mentions of these groups is not altogether unsurprising, but shows that disdain for activists, including those associated with the Black Lives Matter movement, cuts across reactionary subcultures. Scepticism or wishes of violence against media is also unsurprising as well, given the cross-cultural legacy of "Lügenpresse" and "Fake News" alike.<sup>75</sup> Finally, the overall ratio of violence is 112:52, or 28:13 (2.15).

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75 Roese, "You Won't Believe How Co-Dependent They Are"; Nacos, Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon, "Donald Trump"; Katherine Cross, "The Art of the Real: Disinformation vs. Democracy", *The Baffler*, no. 35 (2017): 16–27.

## 6 Conclusion

Each of the meme community samples analysed here provides useful case studies for assessing how different reactionary online communities create community and exclude out-groups, often directly justifying violence against their enemies. The Hindutva case shows how widespread victimhood narratives can be, and how political figures can evoke notions that one's people need to be defended through aggressive politics, a view likely pushed ahead by Hindutva proximity to state power. The neo-Nazi case shows how a broad selection of targets and an emphasis on culture can still lead to the overwhelming conclusion that the right's enemies deserve violence. Finally, the Rittenhouse case shows how overlap between political allies who do not always agree may be especially poignant in times of political electricity or violent spectacle. Captured in this coding methodology is an emphasis in violence across datasets: over half of the 300 memes collected have some form of violence depicted or otherwise described. It is also worth noting how violence, both its action and its justification, differs among some of these sets: there appears a fetishism around guns and armed violence within the US-oriented meme communities, whereas Hindutva meme communities often prefer to put forward narratives about Hindu Indians being victimised. It is difficult to make claims based upon this alone, but further study of other cases might elucidate some of these factors.

This study is limited in a few ways, most specifically in the limited sample size. Just 100 memes for each community is sufficient for a narrow examination of the variables discussed in this report, but a larger dataset for each community would net more conclusive and specific results for deeper research questions, especially those around community-building and ideological construction.

Further research is needed regarding support and disdain for violence, especially since the Hindutva case's victimhood narrative is an outlier and because there is also potentially an overlap between the neo-Nazi and Rittenhouse samples, given their US focus. Other variables can also be explored within these datasets. While the authors have dates and sources for the memes, these did not figure into this comparative analysis. Comparing how each group relates inwards and outwards over time might provide aesthetic insights into how reactionary meme communities vie for cyberspace. For now, however, it does look as though reactionary movements, both in the United States and in India, do place some significance on the creation of memes. How and why these memes are created remains deeply contested.



# Policy Section

*This policy section has been written by Inga Kristina Trauthig, Research Fellow, and Amarnath Amarasingam, Senior Research Fellow, at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) at King's College London. It provides policy recommendations and is produced independently by ICSR. Recommendations do not necessarily represent the views of the report authors.*

The key findings of this report carry corresponding policy implications for governments around the world. At the same time, technology companies are well aware that they face challenges to stop the spread of discriminatory memes as well as memes that call for violence via their platforms in different country contexts. The following section seeks to achieve a threefold aim: first, to deliver concrete policy recommendations for governmental stakeholders; second, to outline policy options and strategic foresight for technology companies; and, finally, and in hand with [1] and [2], to serve as a reference point for future evaluation of tech policies in order to assess dos and don'ts of technology legislation around the globe.

With this, the policy section ensures that the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), the academic research arm of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), academically advises and supports technology companies and policymakers on how better to understand the ways in which extremists and terrorists are using information technology. This is designed not only to fulfil GIFCT's pillar of learning, but ultimately to improve prevention and responses to terrorist and violent extremist attacks.

## 1. Focus: Policymakers

The analysed content and spread of memes in India and the USA on public social media carry relevant implications for national and international (EU, UN and so on) policymakers, especially homeland security officials ranging from law enforcement to social workers engaged in prevention programming.

- To start with and given the continuous development of memes by groups and movements while relying on the same underlying narratives, an **impactful addressing of this potentially harmful dynamic requires that law enforcement stays attuned to the changing extremist landscape and enforces existing laws against hate speech and violence**. For instance, with regard to the Hindutva movement, this report has outlined the potent narrative of "love jihad", which has resulted in violence on multiple occasions (largely Hindu men killing Muslim men after accusing them of seducing Hindu women). While memes engaging with the narrative of love jihad may engage with the idea in a humorous fashion, they are capable of producing real-world violence.

- Secondly, there needs to be a continued commitment to a human-rights-based approach to prevention and homeland security. As this report outlined, the targeted out-group and hence potential victims of violence are minority groups, such as Muslims in the case of the Hindutva, or black people and the Black Lives Matter movement, such as in the case of neo-Nazis and the supporters of Kyle Rittenhouse (even as “communists” appeared often as an out-group for Rittenhouse and his supporters). **Governments are therefore well advised to develop an emphasis on protecting minority groups**, developing a trusted relationship with these communities before attacks occur and ensuring that gathering points for these communities are secure. In this case of India under the BJP and the United States under the Trump administration, the proximity of the social movements pushing extremist rhetoric to the political parties in power creates unique challenges.
- Since this GNET report has outlined the difficulty of differentiating between a tongue-in-cheek meme and playful memes that are potentially feeding conspiracies, governments as well as international sponsors should aim to direct resources towards **community-based activities that include discussions about memes** as part of their countering violent extremism and/or digital literacy programmes. Ideally these workshops would bring together both recipients and spreaders as well as the targeted out-group; this approach, however, might need to be adapted depending on security provisions.

## 2. Focus: Technology Companies

Given the crucial position that technology companies occupy in allowing discriminatory or potentially violence-triggering memes to reach a wide audience and even be picked up by mainstream actors, such as the Tea Party in the USA or national politicians of India’s ruling party, the BJP, certain steps should be considered by technology companies without relying on lawmakers’ backing.

- This GNET report outlined three main aims of the analysed memes: first, amplification of in-group praise; second, demeaning of identified out-groups; and, finally, distortion of the public sphere. As such, tech companies could **develop community standards specifically related to image-based content, such as memes, in addition to verbal incitement to violence** in their removal decisions.
- Also clear in the findings of this report is that cultural gaps remain with respect to content moderation. Therefore, human content moderation should be employed alongside automated attempts. As previous incidents of communal violence in Sri Lanka, India and Myanmar have made clear, cultural nuances and language particularities often go unnoticed by content-moderation initiatives. Tech companies have made great strides in filling these gaps over the years, but **more work is needed to reduce the cultural gap, as certain symbols, slogans and slurs aren’t always known to the average moderator**. The memesphere in particular, with its infusion of irony and humour, serves only to make this more difficult yet it remains a pressing need.



- Finally, tech companies should continue to strive to **open up data to researchers and work closely with extremism experts.** The contemporary extremism landscape is fast evolving and ideologically fluid. In this changing dynamic, content moderators are more likely to make mistakes, computational tooling is likely to be out of date and extremist content could potentially have real world consequences.

### 3. Focus: Strategic Foresight and Broader Implications

Next to the policy recommendation related directly to the quoted GNET report, broader implications and strategic deliberations can be developed from this study of online memes in the USA and India and their potential real-life impacts.

- While this report looked individually at multiple platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Telegram), there is still much that needs to be learned about content diffusion across multiple platforms. For future insights, it could be enlightening to bring together research that examines **which platforms lend themselves to meme creation** (the first occurrence of a meme) with research that focuses on which platforms are most successful in spreading memes and reaching a wider audience.
- The report also makes clear that **the large grey area that exists between illegal content and “lawful but awful” content is only going to become more complicated in the coming years.** More knowledge-sharing and workshops, where tech companies, governments and researchers are at the table, could help stakeholders iron out some of the messiness that resides in this space.





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