On Frogs, Monkeys, and Execution Memes: Exploring the Humor-Hate Nexus at the Intersection of Neo-Nazi and Alt-Right Movements in Sweden

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Abstract

This article is based on a case study of the online media practices of the militant neo-Nazi organization the *Nordic Resistance Movement*, currently the biggest and most active extreme-right actor in Scandinavia. I trace a recent turn to humor, irony, and ambiguity in their online communication and the increasing adaptation of stylistic strategies and visual aesthetics of the Alt-Right inspired by online communities such as 4chan, 8chan, Reddit, and Imgur. Drawing on a visual content analysis of memes (*N* = 634) created and circulated by the organization, the analysis explores the place of humor, irony, and ambiguity across these cultural expressions of neo-Nazism and how ideas, symbols, and layers of meaning travel back and forth between neo-Nazi and Alt-right groups within Sweden today.

Introduction

"Humor is essential for us to be able to address a younger audience but also to de-dramatize (not to be confused with shrugging at) the repressions activists in the *Nordic Resistance*

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Movement face. Our battle is taxing and tough, but it should also be about camaraderie, pleasure, and fun" (2018-02-04, author's translation).

These are the words of the host of *Mer än Ord* [More than Words], one the latest additions to the long list of podcasts distributed by the militant neo-Nazi organization, the *Nordic Resistance Movement* (NRM) as he reflects on his aspirations for the new show. As a "down to earth, yet frivolous" talk show, the podcast is part of the organization's broader ambitions to appeal to an audience beyond their own core members and a long-term strategy to normalize national socialism in Sweden and eventually the rest of the Nordic countries. In this article, I show how part of this strategy involves a shift in the tone and tenor of the content distributed online from relatively "old school" National Socialist rhetoric and imagery to a more fresh-faced propaganda packaged and presented in the form of light-hearted entertainment, humor, and satire. In 2017, the organization, which is currently the biggest and most active extreme-right actor with an explicitly violent and revolutionary agenda in Scandinavia, launched a new "satire project" in the framework of which a wide repertoire of new online content was produced and circulated. This includes a weekly feature called "Meme of the week." As "bite-sized nuggets of political ideology and culture that are easily digestible" (DeCook 2018, 485), memes employ humor and rich intertextuality and are "meant to be shared in social media" (Marwick and Lewis 2017, 36). NRM's memes serve as a pertinent example of one such new "packaging" of neo-Nazi ideology, which in many ways epitomize a broader shift to humor, irony, and ambiguity in the organization's online communication.

Essentially there is little new or unique about NRM's shift in communication strategy. Rather the meme campaign dovetails with a larger trend among extreme right movements in Europe and globally in which the symbols and icons that once anchored such communities have shifted from the tropes of National Socialism to re-coded hipster emblems (Miller-Idriss 2019) and humorous memes (Bogerts and Fielitz 2019; Schwarzenegger and Wagner 2018). Yet, the complexities and specificities of each national context and their different historical trajectories of racist ideas and formations of organized racism require detailed and context-specific analysis. In order to fully be able to unpack and debunk racist narratives, we need to understand their patterns of translation and recontextualization within different national and local contexts.

The organization's adaptation of memes and ambivalent internet culture I will argue, is intrinsically linked to an upsurge in cultural expressions of national socialism today and to how neo-Nazis in Sweden are increasingly adopting some of the stylistic strategies and aesthetics of the Alt-Right movement[1] in Germany and the US in particular, and looking to fringe online platforms such as 4chan, 8chan, Voat, Reddit, and Imgur[2] for inspiration and networking. In the Swedish context, this overlap in discourse and concrete exchanges of ideas and images between the Alt-Right in Sweden (represented primarily by the group *Nordisk Alternativhöger*) and the violent extremists (represented by NRM) became particularly pronounced in the case of the so-called Finspång execution memes. The Finspång memes is a series of explicitly violent "jokes" about the public executions of traitors and "Sweden-enemies"

involving primarily politicians, journalists, and researchers. Circulating around the time of the 2018 general election in the country, the Finspång memes are particularly interesting because of their partial success in infiltrating the mainstream and hence their potential as a model for efficient neo-Nazi propaganda. I therefore focus the analysis on this cluster of memes to document how these cultural forms, that are spread through the various fringe platforms and chat services that make up the rapidly expanding alternative far-right media ecosystem (see, e.g., Benkler et al. 2018; Lewis 2018) allows the neo-Nazis to transgress boundaries (national, ideological, affinities, etc.) in ways that make rigid distinctions between violent and non-violent forms of extremism and organized racism increasingly analytically unproductive.

Further, the introduction and integration of memes into the online universe of NRM highlights a new mode of ambivalence and ambiguity in their online media practices. Satirical memes and other online ephemera have created a contradicting mash-up of different aesthetic and cultural expressions of neo-Nazi propaganda in Sweden today, which bleeds into mainstream youth culture in new ways. Some memes draw on "conventional" representations of a militant, hierarchical organization seeking to project an aura of seriousness and earnestness with images of men in uniform marching the streets in step and in straight lines, while others are made up from, at first sight, silly and harmless images of frogs, monkeys, and well-known cartoon or children's books characters. The mixing of biological racism and anti-Semitic creeds of historical national socialism with the more "fresh-faced" fascism and ethnopluralist ideas of the Alt-Right give rise to an ambiguous and at times conflicting ideological jumble. The memes also point to fraught tensions and ambiguities in the organization's narrative about the state of affairs in the country: on the one hand Sweden is a society facing collapse, a self-deprecated nation in the midst of an ongoing white genocide orchestrated from within its own ranks by "traitors of the people." On the other hand, it is a tale of a burgeoning reawakening of a proud and superior populace facing an imminent future of racial purity in a new pan-Nordic state. Finally, the memes showcase ambiguity and ambivalence around the violence with which such a white sanctuary will be brought about, modes which are used strategically in ways that seem to allow them to push the boundaries of how far they dare to go, to blur the boundaries between the extreme, meta-political, and populist right and to circumvent the lines of legality regulating hate speech. It is towards these ambivalences and "humorous ambiguities" (Bogerts and Fielitz 2019) that this article directs attention.

Methods and Empirical Data

The study is part of an ongoing case study of the media practices of the neo-Nazi organization the *Nordic Resistance Movement* in Sweden situated at the most extreme end of the spectrum of groups and organizations, which constitute the far-right in Sweden today. Three interrelated research questions inform this larger case study: (1) How is neo-Nazism forged and sustained online through contemporary cultural forms? (2) How can the case of NRM help us understand the mainstreaming of "extremist narratives" and its increasing integration into mainstream political discourse and media

culture? (3) What is the role of humor, irony, and ambiguity in this process? In this article, I focus on the final dimensions of the case study asking: how do NRM's memes add new layers of meaning and renewed relevance to the neo-Nazi movement by fusing long standing ideas of racial hierarchy and national socialism with contemporary aesthetics of digital remixing and ambivalent internet culture, and what is the role of irony, satiric play, and ambiguity in this "renewal"? The empirical material for this article was collected as part of this larger case study, which involved a 6-months period of conducting field work in the online universe of the organization along the principles and techniques of digital ethnography (for a discussion of the methodological and ethical challenges this involves (see Askanius 2019). Digital ethnography as proposed by Postil and Pink (2012) involves the daily routinized online practices of updating, exploring, tagging, and archiving and of keeping a field diary of the observations made. Studying NRM using this method involved weekly and in some periods daily engagement with the organization's "news" articles, literature, and manifestos; listening to weekly podcasts and watching webcasts; following members and supporters on Twitter; listening to their "songs of the week" and following their memes as they were picked up from the "meme-factory" on *Nordfront*, the online hub of the organization, and spread across social media and Sweden's rapidly evolving far-right digital ecosystem. From the extensive digital archive of online content collected in this period, for this particular article, I focus on the memes published under the banner "memes of the week" as part of a wider move towards producing and distributing more "satire," "humor," and "entertainment"[3] by the organization in 2017. The data set of 634 memes thus constitute the total population of memes featured on *Nordfront* from May 2017— when "Memes of the week" was launched—to December 2018 when the fieldwork ended. In addition, some of the data from the larger digital archive of empirical data is brought in as background material to help me contextualize and broaden the analysis of aesthetic and visual strategies of the organization. This includes transcripts from podcast episodes and articles on *Nordfront* in which NRM members reflect openly on the recruitment strategies behind the meme campaign and the humor/satire initiative more broadly.

The analysis proceeded in two parts. In a first analytical step, the memes were subjected to a visual content analysis (Rose 2016), which produced five broad thematic subcategories. These are (i) anti-establishment (214) (ii) "racial strangers" (145) (iii) anti-Semitic (129) (iv) NMR self-promo (61) and finally (v) anti-feminist/LGBTQ (42).[4] VCA allows me to systematically code for the notoriously slippery notion of våldsbejakande [adjective signaling someone or something *inciting* violence], mining the data for explicit references to violence, genocide, ethnic cleansing,[5] and probe for the ways in which ambiguity, irony, and mainstream popular culture is being weaponized across the thematic clusters of memes.

I then focus on a cluster of memes that represent a particularly potent position in the sample in terms of spreadability and successful propaganda in so far as managing to circulate beyond NRMs own media circuits. I use the case of the Finspång execution-memes to explore what elements might be needed for neo-Nazi messages to potentially travel with some degree of success from the fringes into the mainstream but also

to demonstrate how any rigid distinction between anti-democratic (violent extremists) and democratic extreme-right (meta-political and populist) actors—which often informs Government Official Reports and counter-extremism schemes—is increasingly misguided and unproductive and fails to capture the intricate relations between and exchange of ideas, symbols, and messages across the various sites of organized racism in Sweden today.[6] In this sense, I consider it a primary analytical task of research on digital racism to draw the background practices and convictions of racist communities into the foreground so that we can think critically about what actually unifies their memberships and sense of belonging. Analytically, this involves close-reading as a method and "sensitive forms of disentangling and disambiguation" (Whitney and Milner 2017) to trace and understand the layers of meaning and intertextuality of these texts and their circulation.

Research Ethics—The Issue of Amplification

By searching and collecting (boosting traffic, clicks, and downloads) and analysing "texts" such as those produced by NRM to then later reproduce them in academic conferences and publications (re-circulation), researchers also call attention to and potentially amplify neo-Nazi discourse. Milner (2016, 123) argues that "even when done in the service of critical assessment, reproducing these discourses continues their circulation and therefore may continue to normalize their antagonisms and marginalizations." On the other hand, there is a chance, if we as academics position our voices wisely, that we can contribute to critically confronting and potentially help stymie these actors. To be sure, there are no universal or easy solutions to the issue of amplification and a case-by-case assessment that is context-sensitive is called for (Philips 2018). In this case, considerations around the risk of amplifications mean that I have chosen to illustrate the analytical arguments by reproducing *certain* images while leaving out others (the vast majority). If NRM members figure, their faces are blurred so as not to provide them with the publicity or "fame" to which they aspire. Further, memes depicting ordinary people who have unwillingly and perhaps unknowingly ended up in a meme and whose identity might be recognized have been omitted for their protection and to avoid revictimization, whereas images of well-known politicians, journalists, and other public actors have been included (in the shape of both digitally manipulated photographs or caricatures). This means that the images reproduced here are by no means representative of the general level of overt racism, obscenity, and bigotry in NRM's memes or online media repertoire in general. Finally, I have omitted all references to the N-word due to the particularly violent legacy of oppression and hatred it inevitably speaks to and the harm it continues to cause today (Holt 2018).

The Hate-Humor Nexus and Ironic Ambiguity in Contemporary Forms of Digital Racism

In order to understand contemporary forms of digital racism, we need to look closer at the fusing of the nonserious (comic) with the serious (political) and the increasingly

complicated relation between extremism, intent, and satire. In his work on humor and hatred, Billig (2001, 269) calls for serious scholarly attention to the unserious cultural expressions of extremism and urge scholars to probe that which is presented to us as "just a joke." With the recent upsurge in media manipulation and disinformation under-girded heavily by the strategic use of irony and humorous ambiguity to spread Islamophobia, misogyny, and anti-Semitism online (Marwick and Lewis 2017), his call seems even more pertinent today. I draw on Billig's (2001) work on the relationship between jokes and racist bigotry to understand the role of humor in how NRM construct narratives with which to legitimize violence and hatred. Such an analysis provides me with insights on the dynamics between humor and hatred and the meta-narrative used to present and justify racist jokes (Billig 2001). Research on the relationship between hate and humor shows that those sharing a laugh at the expense of an "out group" foster greater social affiliation and decreased social distance with their "in-group" while simultaneously increasing social distance from their targets of ridicule and insult in a process of dehumanization (Billig 2005; Pérez 2017; Weaver 2013). Laughing together is one of the swiftest and most effective routes to a feeling of belonging together and "charged humor" is generally seen as a shortcut to community (Medhurst 2007). As a distinct subcategory of humor, "satire's calling card is the ability to produce social scorn or damning indictments through playful means, and in the process, transform the aggressive act of ridicule into the more socially acceptable act of rendering something ridiculous" (Gray et al., 2009). Satire has proved a potent strategy in recent years for building counterpublics to move racist humor and white supremacy ideas from the backstage to the frontstage of online spaces and public discourse in general with some degree of success (Greene 2019). Nikunen (2015), for example, in her work on the anti-immigration movement in Finland demonstrates how irony is used as an affective practice to push political views and to solidify community. The various features of humor are increasingly recognized by the extreme right who are tapping into the possibilities offered by irony and satire to widen the discursive space of acceptable political discourse, not least through the excessive production of memes sent into circulation online.

By memes, I am referring to what Bogerts and Fielitz (2018, 137) define as "graphics of visual and textual remixes shared and widely distributed online." The label covers a broad category of humors images, videos, texts that are copied, and spread online from person to person or community to community. As a form of propaganda, DeCook (2018) describes them as "bite-sized nuggets of political ideology and culture that are easily digestible and considers them participatory political practices representing important facets of identity and community building. At first glance, memes—as embodiments of silliness and "whimsicality" (Shifman 2014)—might seem insignificant when compared to other more straightforward forms of overt or violent racist propaganda. Yet, memes have become one of the most common ways that racist content gets shared online, often playing with a cynical or ironic stance relative to current affairs to recruit new sympathizers and make its messages attractive (Miller-Idriss 2018). They allow people to disclaim a real commitment to extremist ideas while still espousing them and offers a way of avoiding censorship and hiding in plain sight (Marwick and Lewis 2017; Wilson 2017).

Frogs, Monkeys, and Execution Memes in and Beyond the Online Media of the *Nordic Resistance Movement*

In May 2017, NRM launched their memes-of-the week campaign, thus dovetailing with a more general trend among extreme right movements internationally. In a Swedish context, the addition to their repertoire of online communication seem particularly inspired by actors on the metapolitical end of the movement, such as Nordisk Alternativhöger for whom "humorous opinion-building" have been a stable feature since its inception in early 2017. In a multi-platform effort, NRM encourage members and supporters to start making their own memes and provide a pool of images ready for captioning as well as detailed instructions on how to do so. Instruction are then provided on how to submit them in an email created as part of the project of expanding the satire and humor in and beyond their online spaces. On several occasions, on Nordfront and in podcasts, NRM members reflect openly on the underlying strategies and rationales behind the choice to move into this, for NRM at least, new area of online communications, and pre-emptively address the critique from within the organization, that memes represent unserious "folly" and other "online nonsense."

> Some might be wondering why NRM should dedicate time to such folly. The answer is that humor and satire, or silliness if you will, is a very powerful weapon. Not least because humor breaks the first mental barrier in "ordinary people" when it comes to "forbidden topics" If a person laughs at "the Holocaust," the first barrier is gone. At the same time, it is in our interest to help promote politically incorrect popular culture as a counterweight to hegemonic culture. We can't complain about people destroying contemporary culture if we can't provide an alternative.
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> It is important to mention that memes do not have to be done at the expense of other forms of combat actions. Rather, this should be considered entertainment which helps us push and promote our positions. On top of that it is fun work, which makes it easier for us to engage in. An important aim with creating memes is to stir interest around our cause and catch people's attention. A long-form investigative piece on a subject matter will, no matter how good, only reach the already converted. It is a shame, but it is a fact. Memes therefore work as a gateway into other, more demanding genres. No one outside the movement will ever find our articles, if they do not know we exist. No one will read them if we are considered uninteresting. That is why it is important to catch people and slowly but steadily lead them on to the right path (Nordfront 27-05-2017, author's translation).

The manuals on how to create and combine materials ensure that the memes, while leaving room for playfulness and diversity, are created in ways that are consistent with the organization's goals. Further, the satire team offers guidance on the choice of font (*Impact Regular* for a classic meme sensation), size and lines for contrasts along with directions for how to access the archive of template and ready-made memes to ensure that messages are conveyed in accordance with the party line and that the look and feel of an NRM meme is relatively harmonized.

Figure 1. Sweden Democrat Pepe on the left, NRM Pepe on the right.
Source: Nordfront, 2018.

In a nutshell, NRM memes craft white supremacy, homophobia, anti-feminism and anti-Semitic ideas onto popular culture iconography. Thematically, they range from (1) anti-establishment/"national traitors" (214), (2) "racial strangers" (145) (3) anti-Semitic (129), (4) self-promo-memes; a cluster of memes best understood as a form of self-understanding/presentation with no clear thematic through-line other than building and boosting their image/"brand" (61), and finally (5) anti-feminist /LGBTQ-memes (42). The memes all draw on well-known tropes and well-trodden paths in the history of Nazi ideology. As representations of "hate jokes" (Billig 2001) and at the level of content, NRM's memes represent nothing new. They rely on the reproduction of century old racist imagery, slurs and epithets, stereotypes, and mockery. Yet at the level of (cultural) form, something new seems to be at play. We may ask therefore, how do they add new layers of meaning and renewed relevance to these century-old ideas by fusing racism and national socialism with the "fresher" aesthetics of digital remixes and ambivalent internet culture currently circulating among youth cultures across the world? And what is the role of irony, satiric play, and ambiguity in this "renewal"? I dedicate the following analytical sections to these questions by probing three of the five most common themes in the material, which are of most immediate relevance to contextualizing and analytically unpacking the ambiguous play with violent intent in fantasies of revenge and violent white supremacist takeover projected onto their online universe of memes in general and the Finspång memes in particular.

"National Traitors" Memes

The first and largest thematic cluster covers a broad category of memes targeting so-called "national traitors": representatives of the establishment including politicians, journalists, and researchers. Even the populist far-right party, *The Sweden Democrats*, with historical roots in neo-Nazism, is considered part of the political establishment

Figure 2. "Information for you who belong to an inferior race" (author's translation).
Source: Nordfront 2018.

having sold out/gone soft on their route to power in parliament, and thus repeatedly figures as the comic butt of NRM's memes:

Other subcategories of "national traitors" memes include those coded in the content analysis as "Lügenmedia" in which journalists, editors, and media institutions are targeted specifically. The newspaper Dagens Nyheter whose editor in chief, Woldarski (see Figure 3), is Jewish and Fredrik Virtanen, former journalist at Aftonbladet and Sweden's first "#metoo victim" figure with particular frequency. Finally, this category includes the "Finspång execution memes"; a series of explicitly violent "jokes" and murder fantasies about the public executions of the country's elite, the detailed nature of which is unpacked in the final sections of this analysis. The satiric elements range from mere ridicule and mockery of individuals and groups to ambiguously menacing threats of revenge and collective punishment for having betrayed the country and "white Swedes." Central to the narrative of national traitors is the nation's own complicity in an ongoing "white genocide" and "Muslim take over" orchestrated from within by a globalist elite in cahoots with a putative self-destructive welfare state. While the symbolic production of white genocide has been a stable feature of extreme

Figure 3. "Pettson and Findus writing hate mail to Wolodarski" (author's translation).
Source: Nordfront 2018.

right lingo for decades, the memes produced in the wake of the European border crisis of 2015 to 2016 have amplified, satirized and popularized these ideas in Sweden noticeably. The national traitors memes are thus in line with and underpin broader ideas around the complicity of the white elite in the country's putative collapse into "Eurabia" circulating among the extreme right in Sweden and beyond (see Titley 2019 for a discussion on the racial revenge fantasies projected onto Sweden-as-nation internationally and the centrality of Sweden as a news commodity in far-right news coverage of Europe's "migration crisis").

"Racial Strangers" Memes

I use the organization's own term "racial strangers" to describe the cluster of memes targeting both people of color and Muslims. Subcategories include what we may dub "Rapefugees" and "Refugees not welcome" memes focusing specifically on opposition to the influx of migrant and refugees in 2015 to 2016 that draws on a common trope I digital hate culture of Muslim men as rapists and pedophiles (Ganesh 2018) along with a range of more generically Islamophobic memes, and finally "Monkey" memes that are constructed around distinct forms of Afrophobia and dense with references to slavery and Western colonialism. The racism in this category of memes is openly proclaimed. There is no discourse of mitigated or denied racism as often the case in other thematic strands. The professed biologically determined racial inferiority of "racial strangers" is proclaimed rather than implied. In the example below, the meme mimics in great detail the information leaflets provided by the Swedish Migration Agency and The National Board of Health and Welfare.

The monkey memes come with a particular historical and ideological baggage of "conventional" racist hate jokes, which "make use of stereotypes, narratives, and imagery to reinforce notions of racial or ethnic inferiority and superiority" (Pérez 2017, 959). In the memes, the monkey trope often appears in conjunction with "the

Figure 4. Examples of Finspång memes.
Source: Nordfront 2017-2018.

n-word," an epithet described by Billig (2001, 272) as "the ultimate word of racist hate." The juxtaposition of monkeys/gorillas and people of color is imbricated with historical narratives of blackness and whiteness and works as a particularly dehumanizing hate joke with strong residues of unreformed racism. These memes are thus reminiscent of historical categories of N-word jokes and KKK discourse, which is most often subtly implied, but sometimes made explicit with visual references to "the Klan" and Klan symbolism adapted to a Swedish context.

Anti-Semitic Memes

Conspiracy theories, Holocaust denial and ridicule are key themes in memes where anti-Semitism takes center stage. The memes draw on century old stereotyped portrayals of Jews as parasitic, devious, miserly, and greedy (cf. Weaver 2013). Almost all of the anti-Semitic memes use the same caricature of a big-nosed, hunched, and bearded male. This template-image works as a coded visual shortcut to signify Jew and the threat posed by ZOG; (the Zionist Occupation Government who secretly controls Swedish media, the government, etc.).

Such conspiracy theories of Jews being behind influxes of "Muslim migrants" and white genocide (Great Replacement) thus work as a way of bridging contemporary expressions of Islamophobia with centuries-old anti-Semitism, making the extremist narrative add up in a present-day context. They feature a mix of "the usual suspects" (e.g., Soros) and Swedish "Globalists" including well-known Swedish public intellectuals and journalists such as the editor in chief of the Swedish daily Dagens

Nyheter, Wolodarski who is also a recurring figure in the Finspång execution memes. The anti-Semitic memes, often using children's cartoon characters and other mainstream imagery that may add to the plausible deniability of their serious intent, work as a visual form of what NMR elsewhere, both in podcasts and articles, calls "Holocaust LOLs." These are jokes about or ridicule of Holocaust and Holocaust survivors, presented as a form of ironic Nazism. It adds layers of confusion and ambiguity around the group and its intent when an explicitly national socialist organization, which openly profess Non-ironic Nazism, celebrating Hitler and Third Reich symbolism, masquerades as ironic Nazism. Yet, depictions of concentration camps, ashes, starved or dead bodies, might be considered a form of "ambivalence removal" (Bauman 1989) eliminating all symbolic or figurative reference to violence, death, and genocide instead removing all uncertainties about the literal and real nature of their violent fantasies.

Together, the various thematic strands of memes pay testimony to the transposability of racism under conditions of an increasingly transnational, interactive, and convergent digital media environment. They are heavily intertextual and made up from a hodge-podge of shredded material from the sea of memetic content available online. They are distinctively "Swedish" yet with clear inspiration from the so-called meme wars on fringe online communities such as 4chan and 8chan /8kun and white supremacy movements in the US and Germany; they are both mainstream and extremist; they are explicitly violent and implicitly/jokingly violent; they propagate old school Nazism and fresh-faced fascism. Below, I try to make sense of these ambivalences.

The Cross-Over Between Neo-Nazi and Alt-Right Discourse: The Case of the Finspång Memes

The Finspång memes make for a particularly interesting case of humor, ambiguity, and professed irony at play in the material. In endless variations around the theme of tribunals and public execution, the Finspång memes tell the story of an imminent future in which all "national traitors" (politicians, journalists, public intellectuals, etc.) will be killed in large sways in the small industrial town Finspång in Northern Sweden. In this distinctly Nordic iterations of what is essentially a variant of the Day-of-the-Rope trope with origins in US-based white supremacy,[7] these mass executions will take place in the year 2022 (others state 2030) once NRM and their allies rise to power in a fascist Pan-Nordic regime. In this future fantastical world, the town has been sealed off from the rest of the multicultural country, collapsing into chaos and darkness, and turned into a "white reservation" to protect the biological exceptionalism of white Swedes. Some of the memes explicitly depict hangings or allude to this by displaying, for example, a hangman's noose while others offer more of an indirect threat against specific groups and individuals with the phrase "See you in Finspång" (see example below depicting the members of the political party *Feminist Initiative* with the text "We are going to Finspång!"). Such phrases are carefully crafted to signpost and add to layers of intertextuality condensed within extreme right meme culture, in this case for example echoing German far-right extremists who use the phrase "See you in

Walhalla" in their efforts to intimidate and direct threats against assumed enemies (Miller-Idriss 2019, 128).

The Finspång memes, which first started circulating in the summer of 2017, were not originally created by NRM, but by leading figure in the group Nordic Alt-Right (Nordisk Alternativhöger) and former member of the Sweden Democrats, Christoffer Dulny. According to him and his partner Daniel Friberg, who have publicly defended the circulation of the memes, Finspång was meant as a satire on the Nurnberg trials. It intends to depict a "symbolic place of revenge" in which those responsible "will be held accountable retrospectively" for all the harm they have caused the Swedish people (Önnerfors 2018). One of the recurring motives in the Nordic Alt-Right's first Finspång memes were the bodies of those sentenced to death, hanging from trees, cranes, and lamp posts. NRM have for years been putting up stickers on lamp posts saying, "reserved for traitors of the nation." With these violent fantasies now being embedded into the Finspång revenge narrative, we see a very real exchange of ideas and intertextuality going on between these two, up until recently, disparate political camps. During the run-up to the national election of 2018, the memes were picked up again and widely shared and liked on Facebook not only by people unaware of their origin but also by mainstream far-right populists on the mainstream so-called "immigration critical" end of the political spectrum (Poohl 2018)—actors who historically have wanted to be associated neither with neo-Nazism, nor with identitarianism. This includes contributors to one of the most popular far-right alternative news sites Ledorsiderna. Along with other key actors, such as Nya Tider, Samhällsnytt, Fria Tider, Nyheter Idag, Motgift, Ledorsiderna form a "distinct and insulated" far-right media ecosystem in Sweden that is nevertheless "integrated into and acts upon the wider media field" (Titley 2019). This mesh of Swedish-language blogs, hyper partisan news sites and discussion forums are both highly critical of and heavily dependent on traditional news media in the country (Holt 2019) but also seem to pick up content from (negative) international press coverage of Sweden (see also Titley 2019 for a discussion of "taboo news" about Sweden in the far-right cross media milieu internationally). Once having caught the attention of central nodes in this right-wing "knowledge community" and network of alternative "news" sites, this particular cluster of memes thus managed to leave the more obscure corners of the internet and circulate in more mainstream online spaces as well as gain the attention (albeit critical) of mainstream news media (Önnerfors 2018) where discussions (once again) broke out on the limits of freedom of expression, humor, and hate speech. This trajectory pays testimony to how NRM and similar actors take advantage of the current media ecosystem to manipulate news frames, set agendas, and freely propagate ideas of violent extremism (cf. Yonkler et al. 2018).

Another reason this particularly powerful set of intertextual memes managed to travel is that they encapsulate growing and relatively mainstream anti-establishment sentiments among the general Swedish public (Ravndal 2018) and prey on the general climate of political despondency that is percolating through liberal democracies across the world. The idea at the core of the Finspång memes, that political elites are lying to the people, is increasingly widespread in discussion forums and the web of far-right

"news" sites described above. With these mainstream sentiments of mistrust and weariness with the political system and its representatives as a negative core, the memes cement an imagined affinity and political community, that connects actors across the political spectrum of the extreme right in Sweden. In this manner, the memes create rhetorical bridges between neo-Nazis and mainstream far-right populist discourse in ways so far unexplored in the country.

The way in which Finspång memes mix images of murder, executions, and "serious" political rhetoric with irony and "unserious" political comment and comical imaginary make them particularly unsettling. They situate imagined violence and essentially very real and long-standing violent fantasies of "bringing the proponents of multiculturalism to justice" in a framework of irony. The form the messages comes in adds "humorous ambiguity" (Bogerts and Fielitz 2019) to the earnestness of their intent to resort to violence in order to reach their professed political goals. It is a case in which the humor label under which the text travels offers a means of being explicit and open about radical messages and violent intent while at the same time being able to write it off as "just a joke" (Billig 2001) or "just trolling" (Philips 2018). This increasing blur between humor, irony, and earnestness opens up otherwise impermissible discourse and an unprecedented tolerance for violent imagery and explicit incitements to violence. In this sense, the Finspång memes are undergirded by the ambiguity and irony, which permeate the fringe online communities and chan-driven cultures of the Alt-Right in which NRM find fodder for these memes. The logic of ambivalence permeating these online spaces "complicates any easy assessment of authorial intent, social consequences or effect" (Whitney and Milner 2017). ("Is it a joke or are these people serious?" is the ever-present question of the ambivalent online spaces, Whitney and Milner 2017, 6). As argued by Nikunen (2015, 22), irony "creates a sense of insecurity for interpretation—and a sense of absence. Not everything is said, there is more behind the words." Yet knowing the sender and the context in which the memes are created, there is little need to spend too much time trying to unravel the true intentions or hidden meaning of the text and whether or not it is a joke. Rather than evaluating them in terms of their intentions, satirical or otherwise, we should consider them in the light of the broader context in which they are created and circulated. Meaning is not anchored to intent; instead it is produced by the discourse that surrounds the text in the arenas in which it circulates (Greene 2019). At the current political juncture in Sweden, Finspång is not a joke, it is merely packaged or cloaked to resemble one. The joke, if we insist there is one, is that scholars and journalists alike spend time discussing whether or not it is in fact a joke.

Concluding Reflections

The memes provide a window onto considering the range of racist ideas and discourse openly on display in and beyond the online universe of the neo-Nazi movement in Sweden today. They provide insights into the inner workings of irony, humorous ambivalence, and satiric play in the public parading of racist ideas and the damaging histories of slavery, genocide, and oppression they draw on. Using the example of the

Finspång execution memes, the analysis offers an indication of what might be the right "ingredients"—in terms of content and form—to "catch people and slowly but steadily lead them on to the right path" as professed by an NMR member in the quote above. They give us an indication of when and under what circumstances neo-Nazi messages may travel from the fringes of the internet to more mainstream spaces and actors and of the intricate ways in which racist ideas are co-produced by neo-Nazi and Alt-right actors in new informal constellations.

However, esoteric, fringe, and harmless silly images of frogs and caricatures of politicians might seem, these memes are circulating in a time where norm violations, that were unthinkable not so long ago, are becoming increasingly routine and normalized in the country. And in some cases, like the one accounted for in the present paper, they actually gain some traffic and traction. Although memes might be the most topical examples of how the neo-Nazi movement in Sweden is dovetailing with international trends by adopting humor and irony in their communications, this certainly is not meant to indicate that the integration of entertainment, humor, satire or other cultural forms are new to the communication of national-socialist ideology—it has always been an element (Merziger 2015). It is however, currently being brought to center stage and weaponized in yet unseen ways, in a context where new forms of re-mixing and hybridization of content are made possible by digital media technologies and distributed through an ever-growing mesh of globally networked far-right media.

Further, the willingness to openly display Swastikas, Holocaust ridicule and denial and racist ideas seems to have grown exponentially with this, to NRM, new mode of spreading their messages. As has seemingly the tolerance towards this in the public domain as NRMs content seems to go under the radar when frogs and monkeys are used to veil violent extremism. These tropes are used strategically and systematically to spread murder fantasies and the organization's very real ambitions of a shift to authoritarian rule through violent revolution. To be sure, these memes offer a site in which to openly parade extremist views in a kind of naked projection of murder fantasies—while presenting and justifying them with reference to it being "just a joke" and anti-political correctness. The memes dwell in a murky area between satire, irony, mockery, and serious ideology with violent agendas. They are enshrouded in an ambiguity around the seriousness of the ideology (and its exuberance into violence) and the media form (childish, whimsical, and silly). This fusing of the non-serious with the serious point to the increasingly complicated relation between extremism, intent and satire, which will need further scholarly attention. The analysis leaves us with several questions for future research. These include: To what extent are such "hate jokes" part of a slow but steady normalization and proliferation of violent extremism and hatred in mainstream media circuits? With what consequences do they move beyond NRM's own media circuits? How are they received and experienced among the general public when they do?

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Notes

1. As a label for describing a number of loosely affiliated far-right social movement actors, Alt-Right is best understood as a "vessel of white nationalist entryism" (Hawley 2018) and an informal alliance of political allies who since 2015 have been operating effectively online to rebrand fascism by projecting a view of their activities "no longer as radical evil, but as daring, transgressive, comic, ironic and futuristic" (Gilroy 2019, 3).
2. For a discussion of the so-called "Alt-Tech platforms"—a term used to describe the wide range of blogs, forums, podcasts, image boards, chatrooms, and social media platforms that attract exponents of digital hate culture with lax community policies and strong advocacy of free speech see, for example, Donovan et al. (2018) and Ebner (2019).
3. When I use "humor," "satire" "jokes" or "humoros" I consider these descriptive and analytic rather than normative labels. Rather that implying aesthetic judgement of what is or is not funny, I use the language with which these categories of content are presented and self-labeled by the organization.
4. About 19 of the 634 memes, with no direct reference to any of the above themes, were coded as un-categorized/unclear.
5. Markers of violence and violent extremism include dead bodies, bodies being beaten/violated, concentration camps, explosives, knives, hangman's ropes, and weapons in general.
6. Research often draws on conventional distinctions between the *extreme* right and the *radical* right in which the former is seen as posing a threat to the democratic system with their fascist links and overt racism and the latter respecting the democratic system while offering a "sanitized" version of racism by adopting a new master frame that emphasizes culture rather than race. Recent analyses of the far right, however, have indicated both social and discursive overlaps between the extreme and radical right-wing parties and groups (Ahmed and Pisoiu 2019). Insights from this case study further challenge this traditional separation within the far-right spectrum.
7. The "Day of the Rope" is a white supremacist concept taken from *The Turner Diaries*, a fictionalized blueprint for a white supremacist revolution written in 1978 by neo-Nazi leader in the US, William Pierce (see, e.g., https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/day-of-the-rope)

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