



MEMES, VIOLENCE, AND VIRUSES: A NATION'S GUIDE TO GLOBAL CONTAGIOUS THREATS

Date: November 24, 2021

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KEY EVENTS

On November 24, 2021, Dr. Joel Finkelstein, Director of the Network Contagion Research Institute, presented on *Mememes, Violence, and Viruses: A Nation's Guide to Global Contagious Threats* at the 2021 CASIS West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question and answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points of Dr. Finkelstein's presentation included the relationship between memes and violence exploited by populists and exacerbated by viral outbreaks of online hate and the emergence of machine learning tools that enable responses by policymakers.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

The overarching theme of Dr. Finkelstein's presentation was the spread of memes and violence, which is accelerated by viral outbreaks of online hate. Dr. Finkelstein also discussed how populist mobs exploit these memes, the big data approaches that enable researchers to identify memetic violence, and how big data enables researchers to identify big data attacks on both sides of the political spectrum.

Question Period

During the question and answer period, Dr. Finkelstein discussed the relationship between populism and groups that experience oppression, as well as the importance of policy makers building trust between the state and groups that feel oppressed and are vulnerable to succumbing to populist rhetoric.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Dr. Finkelstein began his presentation by stating that the general problem regarding violent memes is about how vulnerable communities to memetic violence can manage to keep themselves safe from emerging threats in an era where these threats are contagious and amplify themselves in ways that are networked and mutually reinforcing. These threats arise unexpectedly in the form of viral outbreaks of online hate, which demonstrate that there are hidden implications for online communications networks that policymakers are not accustomed to thinking about. This can include the social nature of the internet, which enables hateful groups to easily promote their rhetoric with anonymity and greater speed compared to previous forms of media. Furthermore, Dr. Finkelstein expressed that these implications reveal the need for new tools, paradigms, and methods of thinking to understand, respond to, and prevent viral outbreaks of online hate.

Dr. Finkelstein expressed that antisemitism provides a strong and consistent case of how memes generate and perpetuate antisemitism which is accelerated by viral outbreaks of hate. This case can be analyzed from the medieval period until today. Advancements in communication throughout history have enabled near simultaneous rises in antisemitism which erupt and spread faster. This occurs because new communication channels break apart the boundaries of institutions that evolved with slow forms of communication with limited bandwidth. The new bandwidth creates instability as these former institutions of communication are jeopardized in the wake of new forms of communication that people are not used to, and the instability is accelerated by viral outbreaks of hate.

Dr. Finkelstein then discussed the transition to memes as a medium of communication which present their meaning through codewords as a ciphered sort of messaging. These meanings are unclear because they are inferred through codewords and thus they are difficult to associate with universal clear meanings. In the process of sharing memes and their cryptic meanings, common meanings are shared between members in segregated online communities. Dr. Finkelstein argued that this notion further obscures the search for a universal meaning to memes. However, these meanings and memes spread quickly by virtue of the speed and connectivity of the internet. Thus, the prevalence of memes and their meanings among certain segregated online communities reveals and perpetuates tribalistic thinking.

Dr. Finkelstein stated that segregated online communities accumulate hostilities, which are expressed through memes to generate a demand for conspiracy. This demand for conspiracy is brought about by the ambiguity of language posed by codewords in memes. These ambiguous codewords generally allude to hostile meanings, reinforcing the notion that the members of online segregated communities are oppressed by a corrupt mass of powerful people. This allusion to hostility through codewords acts as a double-edged blade; it encourages political violence while enabling segregated online communities to claim plausible deniability. Consequently, according to Dr. Finkelstein, being able to claim plausible deniability enables hateful online communities, as well as populists who leverage memetic violence, to escape blame or punishment for inciting violence, which encourages further episodes of memetic violence to become more brazen.

Crucially, Dr. Finkelstein argued that a rise in hostile codewords in memes can predict potential antisemitic violence, such as the attack on the Pittsburgh Synagogue. By virtue of the interrelatedness of conspiracy theories, a rise in the spread of hostile memes pertaining to one conspiracy theory can predict the proliferation of another. Big data can be used to predict when and where memetic violence is proliferating to respond to and prevent viral outbreaks of online hate. Dr. Finkelstein pointed out that the Network Contagion Research Institute has developed PushShift, a machine-learning big data platform that surveys segregated online communities for hostile memes and changes in hateful online rhetoric associated with these memes. PushShift enables trend forecasting and transparency in social media.

Question Period

During the question and answer period, Dr. Finkelstein noted that the relationship between populism and groups, which rally around experiencing oppression, was explored through the notion that populism is psychologically underscored by identities that feel neglected. Further, he argued that this promotes a tribalistic instinct, which arguably has often led populist mobs to persecute a minority perceive as being powerful and thriving at their expense, explaining why successful populist efforts seem have consistently used antisemitism. In response, the Jewish diaspora has historically grown and built upon a notion of anti-fragility in opposition to antisemitism exploited by populists, and the category of race was born as a tool of othering against Jews.

Dr. Finkelstein argued that a network of trust between the state and groups that are vulnerable to succumbing to populist rhetoric is required to overcome the

virulence of populism. Achieving this is a tough balancing act by those who are elected, and mobs are good at creating their own truths. However, dr. Finkelstein suggested that policymakers must critically listen to the grievances of a mob who cries ‘fake news’ to facts since those who are skeptical of the ‘truth’ may have valid reasons for skepticism. Thus, critical listening and trust building must occur to reduce polarization and tribalism, rather than responding with ridicule and marginalization to groups that argue alternative realities.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- Memes and political violence share a positive correlation, and viral outbreaks of online hate accelerate the proliferation of hostile memes and acts of violence.
- Memes are used by segregated online communities that share an identity of feeling oppressed by groups that they perceive as being powerful.
- Memes provide a medium for generating a demand for conspiracy as their meanings are expressed through codewords that lack a clear, universal meaning.
- Memetic violence is leveraged by populists who can appeal to segregated online communities by using the language of hostile memes. Thereby enabling and encouraging memetic violence whilst enabling plausible deniability.
- Big data tools such as PushShift can map the spread of memetic violence to prevent viral outbreaks of online hate and focus policymaker efforts on building transparency and trust with groups that feel segregated, oppressed, and othered.

Question Period

- Populist identities involve individuals organizing around the idea of being oppressed and having unmet needs which creates a tribalistic mentality.
- Policymaker responses to memetic violence require efforts in trust building and transparency to encourage segregated online communities to shed their sentiments of feeling oppressed, marginalized, and neglected.



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