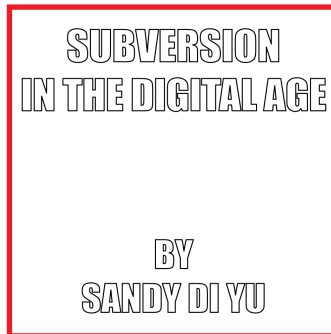


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subversion in the digital age

Kill All Normies and other light summer reads

By Sandy Di Yu

“ This is the first article in a series of investigations by writers and thinkers into their respective discourse which they relate to protest. This article is written by Sandy Di Yu who is a London-based writer, cultural theorist and artist. Her research focuses on the effects of networked societies on digital subjectivities, our changing temporalities in the face of leaky semantics, and attempts to imagine a post-capitalist world. Follow her on Instagram and Twitter, or visit her website.

At the age of 16, I discovered 4chan, and the already volatile self-esteem of my teenaged-female-ethnic-minority identity got a few bouts of whiplash as I floated through the endless sea of misogyny, racism, and male attention. This was in 2006, when the website (and indeed the internet as a whole) was relatively underground and our entire social experience hadn't yet moved online. If there were online culture wars at that time, I was not yet privy to it, too concerned as I was about my own insecurities of identity.

10 years later, having grown up on and grown out of this side of the internet and the many insecurities that it nurtured, it was with incredulity that I read about the Clinton administration featuring on their web platform an “explainer” which admonished 4chan and its memetic spawns. Following the 2016 USA presidential election results, there has been no shortage of literature attempting to make sense of the strange new political playground of our times. Everything from well-researched books to personal blogs to the astoundingly ill-informed quips on Facebook and Youtube comment sections were giving their two cents. The topic has been bled dry, and yet here we are still bringing it up, a testament to the importance of this networked space of politics and its pervasiveness that will certainly not yield in the foreseeable future.

Politics in the age of digital technology moves at the speed of electrons. To speak about the last presidential election is to speak of fossils, without decay and without novelty. Yet fossils have their uses, whether to be reconstituted into energy and atmospheric pollution or to be studied so that we may understand the history of the Earth that came before us. It is this understanding, like the understanding of all history, that is necessary in order to sculpt a future worth experiencing. In keeping with this, *Kill All Normies* acts as a sufficient introduction to the strange ways that politics have been twisted in preceding years. It starts with an account of the aforementioned election, and builds up a rich (if stomach-turning) account of the recent history and technological culture that enabled these outcomes. As a primer for those who (luckily) did not grow up on the dark side of the internet, author Angela Nagle's account is a readable and diplomatic explication of the culture wars that enabled a reality television personality to become the leader of the (sort of) free world.

Walking the reader through the developments of meme culture and how it was appropriated by the new right, Nagle sews a thread through the beginnings of mainstream internet culture from the days before Web 2.0 was in full swing, to the inception of 4chan, through to the sometimes horrifying and often absurd events that mark its chronology. Phenomena that she draws on includes Harambe, Gamergate, internet atheism, “an hero”, and Kony 2012, just to name a few. Misogyny is a common theme throughout these developments, the beginnings of which she argues is a response to feminized spaces of the internet such as Tumblr set against a gatekeeping mentality of nerdisms.



Trump as Pepe the Frog. Image found on: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-pepe-the-frog-became-a-nazi-trump-supporter-and-alt-right-symbol?r...>

Significantly, one of Nagle’s most interesting insights is the parallels between alt-right internet culture and 80’s left anarchist movements. The new right, as she says, takes on the aesthetics of counterculture, and perhaps buds from the same anger and the want to subvert. The difference, of course, is that what the leftist movements were subverting against were the hegemonic structures of old, the same ones that have been in place for centuries, whilst the new right subverts against what is merely a moderation of this power, an attempt to reel it in. In both accounts, we see a rise in censorship, and transgression as a way to challenge newly sanctified morality. In the decades passed, it was censorship implemented by the State or the Church that was subverted. Today, the PC culture that the new right take issue with may be traced to the sanctimonious way in which leftist internet spaces consistently try to one-up one another in their bid to be the most righteous. Nick Srnicek says in *Inventing the Future* of this phenomenon:

“Given the individualism of current social media platforms – premised on the maintenance of an online identity – it is perhaps no surprise to see online ‘politics’ tend towards the self-presentation of moral purity. We are more concerned to appear right than to think about the conditions of political change.” (pg. 8)

Moral transgression of this new age consists in memes circulated throughout cyberspace rather than picket signs and bodies taking up real space. The term “troll” to describe a disruptive character in online spaces has been floating around since the late 80’s, but its use as a political tool first required that a great majority first used the internet. That visual culture proliferated by a populist right might make waves in politics is something that political analysts clearly overlooked. And yet memes alone couldn’t have created such outcomes. While the way in which alt-right sentiments joined forces with the transgressive, near-nihilistic ways in which internet spaces operate, there is something to be said about the way in which new media matures. As Nagle poignantly puts it:

“What we now call the alt-right is really this collection of lots of separate tendencies that grew semi-independently but which were joined under the banner of a bursting forth of anti-PC cultural politics through the culture wars of recent years.” (pg. 19)

All ideologies need a common enemy; thus, the alt-right was born.

Of course, purveyors of the alt-right have another genealogy lined up, one that paints its ideology in a much more flattering light than the foray of hyper-aggressive virginal men with misplaced blame for their unfulfilling lives. One such article in the *Breitbart*, the far-right American news website, was titled “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide To The Alt-Right”, written by Milo Yiannopoulos and Alium Bokhari. Nagle does an admirable job in profiling key figures of the movement in a way that isn’t talking down about it. Along with the aforementioned figures, she also introduces people such as Ben Shapiro, Steve Bannon, Lauren Southern, Pat Buchanan, and many more.

Admittedly, I myself veer so far more towards the left that at times it felt Nagle was being an apologist for the right. But in so doing, her insight into the dark parts of the internet can be read by right, left, and centre without too many feathers being ruffled. It leaves space for discussion, which is something that several internet platforms preclude. For the leftists of the world, the phrase “know thy enemy” comes to mind. More importantly, to know and to not underestimate thy enemy is an important takeaway.

For those of us who lived through the consistent rise of 4chan, reading the pages feels like you're flipping through your old year books, where the popular kids no longer look intimidating. While they might leave a bad feeling in your stomach, more than anything they become cringe-inducing as you think to yourself, "I know exactly what they're on about, and it's really lame." For the rest of us, it's an easily readable introduction to the genesis of memetic culture and the precursor to the phenomena that has spilled from the internet into real life.

While the introduction to internet subcultures come real culture is extensive, I wouldn't suggest that it's comprehensive. There have been more developments since its publication, and there are also parts of the internet that it did not account for (i.e. non-Anglospheric internet spaces). In order to gain a better insight into the causes and the trajectory of internet culture and the polemics that it proliferates, I would recommend that it not be read in isolation, but rather across (or against, in some aspects) a few other texts. These include Geert Lovink's *Overcoming Internet Disillusionment: On the Principles of Meme Design*, Nick Srnicek's *Inventing the Future* and his more recent *Platform Capitalism*, and Wendy Hui Keong Chun's *Habitual New Media*.

Digital culture and protest:

In thinking about digital culture in light of protest, it is necessary to have a deeper understanding of what role transgression is playing and how technology affects this. If platforms didn't exist, if Cambridge Analytica never did anything scandalous, we may be seeing a very different political landscape right now. But protest is difficult to do on the internet. When protest is done in person, there is a physical aspect of taking up space that speaks volumes as an act in itself. On the internet, algorithms create filter bubbles that disallow penetration from unwanted opinions. As Johannes Grenzfurthner says to Lovink in the e-flux article *Overcoming Internet Disillusionment*, "You can't penetrate conservative bubbles with liberal content. Your content has to be so obscure and mysterious that it's not working as a propaganda tool anymore. Or will just be used for ridicule."

On the other hand, technology acts as an excellent way to augment protest. It allows like-minded thinkers to organize and divert against potential threats. One well-known example is the Occupy movement. Another is the Arab Springs (something that Nagle exemplifies as a point of hope for change). Of course, neither of these has a particularly happy ending for the left side, but it promises a potential that, while unreachd, may be revisited.

Protest read across digital spaces may look different from protest in physical spaces, but as we move more of our lives online, or as more of the internet spill into real life, the significance of this way to subvert control and power structures becomes increasingly important. A foundational understanding of this phenomenon is the key to appropriating memetic strategies of past elections for the sake of worthier causes.

Further reading:

[Overcoming Internet Disillusionment: On the Principles of Meme Design](#)

[Inventing the Future](#)

[Platform Capitalism](#)

[Habitual New Media](#)

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