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TITLE: Free speech platforms & the impact of the U.S. insurrection: Misinformation in memes

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ABSTRACT

The circulation of false information online, whether intentional or unintentional, has become one of the most pressing threats to social cohesion and security for governments around the world. The U.S. insurrection on January 6th, 2021 was a striking example of how polarising and inflammatory rhetoric posted on social media platforms can influence offline movements and connect to real-world violence. It also highlighted the negative effects of meme culture, post-truth and free speech ideology within right-wing groups in the U.S. and beyond. Looking at this event as a main case study and considering the ramifications more than two years on, this paper broadly aims to unpack the forces, influences and affordances of so-called free speech platforms that contributed to the insurrection through a thorough literature review. More specifically, I identify how and why the rise of meme sharing on the platform Gab has helped generate right-wing identity, shape attitudes towards the mainstream media and increase the proliferation of false narratives and culture wars. Through a social semiotic multimodal analysis, this thesis contributes to existing scholarship by assessing the ideological role of memes posted on Gab in the two years since the Capitol attack. The findings indicate that blatant falsehoods are reinforced and masked by appeals to humour, emotion, values and beliefs within right-wing communities. It also reveals that the concept of free speech is being instrumentalised to attack public institutions.

KEYWORDS: memes, post-truth, media, misinformation, Gab, free speech, platforms, news, journalism, participatory culture

SAMMENDRAG

Sirkulasjonen av falsk informasjon på nettet, enten det er tilsiktet eller utilsiktet, har blitt en av de mest presserende truslene mot sosial samhørighet og sikkerhet for regjeringer over hele verden. Det amerikanske opprøret 6. januar 2021 var et slående eksempel på hvordan polariserende og inflammatorisk retorikk lagt ut på sosiale medieplattformer kan påvirke offline bevegelser og koble til vold i den virkelige verden. Den fremhevet også de negative effektene av memekultur, post-sannhet og ytringsfrihetsideologi innenfor høyreorienterte grupper i USA og utover. Når vi ser på denne hendelsen som en hovedsaksstudie og vurderer konsekvensene mer enn to år senere, har denne artikkelen som hovedmål å pakke ut kreftene, påvirkningene og fordelene til såkalte ytringsfrihetsplattformer som bidro til opprøret gjennom en grundig litteraturgjennomgang. Mer spesifikt identifiserer jeg hvordan og hvorfor fremveksten av memedeling på plattformen Gab har bidratt til å generere høyreorientert identitet, forme holdninger til mainstream media og øke spredningen av falske narrativer og kulturkriger. Denne oppgaven bidrar til eksisterende vitenskap ved å vurdere den ideologiske rollen til memer postet på Gab i de to årene siden Capitol-angrepet, gjennom en sosial semiotisk multimodal analyse. Funnene indikerer at åpenbare usannheter blir forsterket og maskert av appeller til humor, følelser, verdier og tro i høyreorienterte samfunn. Den avslører også at begrepet ytringsfrihet blir instrumentalisert for å angripe offentlige institusjoner.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

"The technology involved with each new disaster changes just enough to defamiliarise the situation and to allow people to ignore striking similarities with the past." (Hicks, 2021)

Social media platforms are an integral part of our sense of identity, community and participation in both the public and private domain. We use platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and others for casual entertainment, social connection and political engagement. Over the last 20 years, platforms have become ever present in our daily lives and evolved from being basic digitised networking applications to providing a new infrastructure of culture, connection and publishing. Scholars have discussed the rise of social media as tools; performing technical, social, economic and cultural functions that may be constructive, destructive or a combination of both. The shift from what's known as 'Web 2.0' that heralded greater user participation on the internet in the late 1990s, to modern-day platforms has affected our very experience of sociality (van Dijk, 2013). Furthermore, the use of artificial intelligence agents and algorithms in controlling information on social media platforms has changed not only what it means to participate and interact online, but also how individual users perceive reality based on their digital experience.

Platforms are a public sphere; they have been corporatised and there is less and less of a separation between commerce and community. According to philosopher Jürgen Habermas, a public sphere is created where "citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions – about matters of general interest" (Habermas, 1964). In this way, platforms have digitised the assembly and expression of users and created a new sense of being social including open and critical discussion. As users become increasingly aware of the impact of corporatisation and algorithms on social media, I argue that we should view the platformisation of our social lives as an exchange. Our use is always some form of transaction that involves our personal data, ideas, attention and time. How we engage

with platforms is an intrusive process, even if our access is fleeting and superficial. Platforms have infiltrated our communication habits to such an extent that they've become the gatekeepers of information and mediators of public discussion. For the most part, we've willingly allowed and embraced networked technologies to facilitate, foment and amplify our conversations. Many of these functions are intentional and have positively contributed to online communities and the diverse fabric of social debate. However, the scale of social media platforms in the current period is such that their flaws or oversights can contribute to the undermining of democracy and public safety.

Social media has been championed as an agent of great political and cultural reform. The Arab Spring revolution that saw widespread anti-government protests across the Middle East and North Africa from 2010 has often been referred to as the "Facebook revolution" because of the way activists used the platform to spread messages and galvanise support (Guesmi, 2021). However, as platforms have become more advanced and developers created ways to collect and exploit more personal data, the balance of power visibly shifted from users to those who control or own platforms. As Tunisian academic Haythem Guesmi argues:

> "although the January 6 riots took almost everyone by surprise, we, in the Arab world, have known for a while that these social media platforms are a threat to democracy. For far too long, Big Tech companies have been allowed to be the ultimate arbiters on free speech online and a haven for hate speech and disinformation. They have piggybacked on the idea that they helped trigger the Arab Spring and therefore are a force for freedom and democracy". (Guesmi, 2021).

Since the advent of major social networking sites Facebook and Twitter in the early 2000s, we have witnessed several cases of violence and/or political breakdowns blamed in part on the use of platforms and influence of viral media shared on such platforms. Facebook has been condemned for allowing hate speech that encouraged violence against the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar, despite the tech firm promising to tackle the issue (Asher, 2021). Similarly in Ethiopia, poor content moderation efforts and a lack of action by executives at Facebook contributed to an overwhelming amount of material inciting ethnic violence in the northern Tigray region in late 2020 (Mackintosh, 2021). Facebook and Twitter have also been

shut down or restricted in African nations Ghana, Sudan, Chad and others to stop hate speech and the circulation of false information close to elections (Matfess, 2016).

There is no denying that the ease of access to social media and option of anonymity has led to increased social and political activism, but it's also given all sorts of extremists a public microphone. Conflict narratives and conspiracy theories can proliferate on social media, where every voice competes for attention and moderate views necessary for peacebuilding are drowned out (Verbakel, 2019). It has become clear that political parties and extremists can weaponise platforms to spread misinformation and manipulate public opinion. In this way, control or access to social media metadata has the potential to influence democratic processes (Hall, Tinati & Jennings, 2018).

The emergence of newer, more niche platforms that champion a lack of content regulation and free speech has amplified the problem of misinformation and increased the threat of real-world violence. As a journalist and a millennial, watching the U.S. insurrection play out live on TV news and social media was an extraordinary moment. It reaffirmed the enormous political and social power of major tech platforms and the growing threat of fake news, even in a nation that is widely regarded as one of the world's leading democracies. After four years as President, Donald Trump's overt mistrust of the mainstream media had a significant impact on his supporters and conservative voters, affecting the social media dynamics that contributed to the insurrection. January 6th, 2021, also put free speech apps on the world stage and perhaps spurred governments to pay greater attention to these online communities.

In the United States, platforms that are marketed as alternative sites for free speech gained popularity from 2016, as Facebook and Twitter began to take stronger action against radical far-right factions using their services. I define free speech apps as any platform that has been established since 2016, with explicit reference to upholding free speech and intent to severely limit or abolish content moderation. The shift from established platforms to free speech apps, where there is little to no regulation of false and/or offensive content, influenced those users to enter self-reinforcing feedback loops, creating a susceptibility to unfounded narratives and further conspiracy theories. This movement in 2016 has been referred to as 'the purge' from mainstream social media sites, with many users migrating to alternative platforms like Gab,

Parler and BitChute (Andrews, 2016). There are very few regulatory controls on what is posted and circulated on these platforms, which empowered alt-right communities to expand their networks and strengthen anti-establishment ideologies, particularly against the mainstream media. This includes supporters of the QAnon movement which centres on a conspiracy theory that a high-profile, Satan-worshipping paedophile ring had been working to undermine Donald Trump. The movement lured thousands of believers, many of whom took part in the January 6th insurrection and the community is still active on some forums today. QAnon, 'the purge' and the rise of free speech platforms will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 4. Considering these introductory points, this thesis explores the implications of free speech apps, predominately Gab, in the context of the January 6th Capitol Hill riots. Specifically, I identify how and why the sharing of content on Gab has played a role in altering individual perceptions of truth, the credibility of established news outlets, and civic participation. My particular focus was how alt-right discourse and conspiracy theories have continued to proliferate well beyond the events of January 2021, and to this day still influence online and offline communities.

1.1 <u>January 6, 2021 – The day the U.S. alt-right and free-speech apps took the world stage</u>

> "On the insurrection's anniversary, Facebook, Twitter and other social networks still
> face scrutiny for how they police political misinformation." (Wong, 2022)

The deadly riots at the U.S. Capitol on January 6th, 2021, brought sharp focus to the increasingly dominant role of platforms in shaping public opinion, and lack of policy in regulating the flow of information and misinformation in the digital public sphere. Two years on, the mob assault on America's parliament remains a glaring stain on a polarised country with flawed digital infrastructure. Adding to this, Republican figures including Donald Trump continue to claim that the 2020 election was rigged and stolen. An analysis by the BBC news organisation found that 35 percent of candidates running for Congress or Governor in the November 2022 midterm elections, had fully and publicly denied the outcome of the 2020 election (BBC News, 2022).

It has been argued that the insurrection was the violent culmination of former President Donald Trump and his allies' war on the legitimacy of American elections (Beauchamp, 2022). U.S. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell has said the mob attacked the Capitol after being "fed with wild falsehoods by the most powerful man on Earth – because he was angry he'd lost an election." (Holpuch, 2021). The events of January 6, 2021, played out live on international news networks and through the perspective of participants uploading to various social media channels. Thousands of pro-Trump activists galvanised by the alt-right movement battled police, broke into the U.S. Capitol, and sent members of Congress fleeing as lawmakers were confirming the 2020 presidential victory of Democrat Joe Biden (Petras et al., 2021). Many demonstrators came directly from Donald Trump's "Save America Rally" that began hours earlier in a park near the White House. Trump spoke to them for more than an hour, insisting that the election had been stolen and they needed to "fight like hell" to save the country (Petras et al., 2021). Rioters breached police barricades around the Capitol, eventually overcoming officers to occupy large parts of the complex for hours. In what was a frantic and confronting scene, politicians and staff were evacuated as protesters vandalised and looted offices, and even erected gallows outside (see Figure 1). Federal prosecutors later stated that rioters intended to "capture and assassinate elected officials in the United States government" (Petras et al., 2021). Five people died as a result of the attack.

Figure 1

(Source: CNN Illustrations/Andrew Caballero-Reynolds/AFP/Getty Images)

The investigation into the storming of the Capitol is the biggest criminal inquiry in the history of the U.S. Justice Department and it continues to grow (Feuer, 2023). It is estimated more than 2,500 people were involved, and as of January 2023 hundreds have been charged with assaulting or resisting law enforcement officers and obstructing official proceedings. Overall, the investigation has been a highly publicised effort to bring justice to organised extremist groups that planned the event and uncover any links between former President Donald Trump and his aides (Feuer, 2023). Trump was eventually impeached for inciting the insurrection but he was then acquitted after only seven Republican Senators broke ranks to vote to convict him. As federal inquiries continue, there is also a need to scrutinise the role of technology in enabling, encouraging and recruiting rioters on January 6. While violence linked to online communities and fake news had already been witnessed at scale in places such as Myanmar and Ethiopia, until January 2021, it had seemed incredibly unlikely that such unrest would take place in an advanced democracy like the United States, that had long set the global standard for liberal ideals and democratic freedoms. There is no doubt this extraordinary event reaffirmed the enormous political and social power of major tech corporations and the growing threat of false information intended to confuse, distract or persuade users. The exploitation of social media platforms to spread misinformation and foster anti-establishment ideologies in the lead-up to January 6 was a major contributor, as well as a failure to adequately regulate the posting of harmful and inflammatory content.

The use of several platforms marketed as avenues for free speech has exposed and, in many ways, amplified some grey areas and complexities of our online habits that deserve attention in the present moment. Has new media spurred a new form of democracy? Who or what is responsible for maintaining truth and credibility within digital communities? And how should governments and tech companies navigate the increasingly conflicted issues of free speech and censorship? The broad intention of this thesis was to address some of these complexities and understand what influence free speech platforms have played in prompting a civic breakdown on such a major scale in the United States. Furthermore, I have analysed the ongoing threat posed by unregulated content on free speech apps.

The overwhelming power of platforms in the current period is perhaps most aptly illustrated by the suspension of former U.S. President Donald Trump's Twitter and Facebook accounts shortly after the insurrection, given the danger that his false claims of election fraud had wrought. What became evident in the days that followed this event, was the amount of planning and preparation that had taken place on those digital platforms, where alt-right discourse had become normalised and hardened. A key sign of this preparation was the fact that some protesters arrived at Trump's rally and proceeded to the Capitol wearing t-shirts that read 'MAGA Civil War January 6, 2021' (see Figure 2). M.A.G.A. stands for Make America Great Again, which was Donald Trump's election slogan in 2016. This indicates that there was a planned resistance movement with a number of people showing up to Trump's rally with the preconceived intention to incite violence and disrupt civil processes. The fact 'Civil War' was printed on the shirts gives an insight to the malicious rhetoric that would have circulated in this resistance movement. There are many more images throughout this thesis that detail the signs and symbols connected to the attack, and how these can be linked to extremist groups online.

Figure 2

(Source: CNN Illustrations/Tess Owens/Vice News)

While there's been justified focus on condemning and sanctioning those involved in the Capitol riot in the two years that have since past, it remains questionable whether there's been similar condemnation and change in the operation of platforms. In fact, we've seen more free speech platforms emerge, including Truth Social which was founded by former U.S. President Donald Trump in February 2022. Trump used this platform to announce in December of the same year that if he were to become President again, he would ban federal money from being used to

label speech as misinformation or disinformation (Holmes, 2022). Trump added that Congress should pass a "digital Bill of Rights" that would require government officials to get a court order before removing content and informing users if their posts are being restricted or taken down (Holmes, 2022). These recent comments from Donald Trump, just two years after the insurrection, epitomise the enormity and urgency of the issue of protecting digital communities and encouraging open, transparent dialogue between users and platforms about content regulation and the influence of algorithms. As Trump and right-wing communities continue to weaponise the concept of free speech, this only contributes to political polarisation and distrust in public institutions.

Free speech platforms have created new challenges and opportunities for journalists and governments in an era of participatory news, meme culture and political polarisation. This is particularly so in the United States. I believe the Washington insurrection and shutdown of former President Donald Trump's social accounts presented a new frontier in dealing with the broader themes of participatory culture, misinformation, post-truth, censorship, democracy and the role of journalism. These concepts are defined and discussed in detail in the theoretical framework.

1.2 <u>What is Gab?</u>

> "The term social media as a gestalt concept fails to account for the nuanced nature of social media platforms and the types of expression they enable or constrain. Understanding how these platforms function as distinctive brands within communication spaces becomes increasingly important." (Kor-Sins, 2021)

Gab is a largely unmoderated social media site that was established in 2016 and gained popularity in the United States during Donald Trump's presidency. The platform's founder, Andrew Torba, says Gab is a direct answer to the censorship of conservative voices on social media (Goodwin, 2021). The web interface mimics the layout of Twitter, with the addition of various sub-groups that users can subscribe to. The platform is fully funded by users and

donations are encouraged to 'help keep Gab online' with a monthly target published on the home page. There is also a Gab shop, which features a range of merchandise including t-shirts, caps and socks bearing Gab slogans. According to Gab's description on the web interface, the company maintains:

> "...that the future of online publishing is decentralized and open. We believe that users of social networks should be able to control their social media experience on their own terms, rather than the terms set down by Big Tech." (Gab, 2021)

Gab's logo is a green frog, which many interpret as a reference to Pepe the Frog, a meme that became the symbol of the alternative right or 'Alt-right' political movement (see Figure 3 – protester holding Pepe the Frog poster, Gab logo screenshot). The Alt-right identity gained momentum in the United States with the election of Donald Trump in 2016. It can be understood as distinct from traditional right-wing politics in that supporters have a greater focus on anti-establishment and anti-globalist sentiment (Forscher & Kteily, 2020). A thorough definition of the movement is difficult to articulate due to its largely decentralised and informal structure (Forscher & Kteily, 2020). What characterises the alt-right movement is considered in detail in chapter 4.

Figure 3

(Source: JOSH EDELSON/AFP/Getty Images)   (Source: VICE news)

Gab's founder insists that the logo was inspired by a Biblical passage and that the frog serves as a metaphor. Andrew Torba says, "it's releasing the frogs on Silicon Valley to expose their corruption, their censorship and the information monopoly that they have on the web."

(Wendling, 2016). At the time of this research, the frog logo was less visible on the web interface and had been replaced simply by the word Gab in bold green text. However, the frog logo is a prominent feature on merchandise available for purchase on the site. It was also observed that some Gabbers add a small frog icon to their posts.

Gab is identified as a free speech platform and indeed the issue of policing speech online is a great challenge for major tech corporations. The value of free speech in America is unique. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution protects freedom of speech, the press, assembly, and the right to petition the Government for a redress of grievances (Illing, 2021). In the American legal system, it is difficult to suppress or punish speech, or hold social media platforms to account for harmful content that's posted by its users. New media technologies such as Gab that encourage free speech have only exacerbated this issue even further.

Previous research has revealed Gab fosters extremist attitudes and conspiracy theories, and the platform has been described as a right-leaning echo chamber where a diversity of viewpoints is not welcomed (Lima et al. 2018, Zhou et al. 2018). The platform has also been linked to alt-right political discourse and its users seem to react strongly to real-world events focused on white nationalism and support of Donald Trump (Zanettou et al. 2018, Zhou et al. 2018). The first offline example of violence linked to Gab occurred in October 2018, when a Gab user carried out a mass shooting at a U.S. synagogue after announcing his intentions to do so on the platform, where he'd participated in anti-Semitic discourse (Buntain et al., 2020). The event brought some media attention to the platform, but significant and lasting changes to the operation of the site and the type of content it supports have not materialised.

As the platform has grown and developed, some observers and scholars have noted that Gab is at the forefront of a new digital support infrastructure for the far right (Donovan et al., 2019). This certainly becomes clear when spending some time navigating the web platform. Gab has expanded its affordances to offer users a paid 'PRO' version of the service featuring verification and scheduled posts. There is also a marketplace, TV streaming, news and Gay pay which is touted as an alternative to PayPal and a parallel economy. According to the site:

"Gab has been banned from any online payment processing, limited only to checks, money orders and bitcoin to operate the business. God had a plan and getting banned only led us to build GabPay." (Gab, 2022)

My research has complemented most of the current literature on Gab and draws further connections between the spread of memes and negative attitudes toward the mainstream media and public institutions. It was my hypothesis that Gab and several other free speech platforms have been operating to create an alternative society for alt-right followers. I believe this has been done by establishing social markers online, using memes and language, and offline, through clothing and merchandise. This also involves a new news ecosystem for the alt-right community, encouraging users to disregard credible journalism sources in favour of content shared on free speech sites.

1.3 What are memes?

"Memes may be best understood as pieces of cultural information that pass along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon." (Shifman, 2013)

Memes are multi-functional digital tools that can reaffirm, challenge or confront social, cultural and political norms and ideologies. Dynamic in form and context, memes can attract attention to issues or create a pointed distraction, generating a sense of community through shareability, shared ideology and humour. Memes circulate back and forth between alternative and mainstream cultures, platforms and contexts. What sets internet memes apart from a long tradition of political humour and parody in both old and new media is the fact that memes are created and altered by unspecified groups of participants outside of institutional contexts (Mortensen & Neumayer 2021). Coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976, the term meme has been defined as 'a unit of cultural transmission' (Dafaure, 2020). In this context, memes were historically considered a cultural parallel to biological genes that could reproduce and evolve. Today, what is better understood as an internet meme involves the

spread of cultural information in an amusing or interesting assemblage, shared on social media (Dafaure, 2020). This thesis will harness Bradley Wiggins' definition of memes as "a remixed, iterated message that can be rapidly diffused by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, critique, or other discursive activity." (Wiggins, 2019).

Whilst memes are primarily generated and shared with humorous intent, the messages conveyed through memes are vast and very much open to individual interpretation. Memes have become an entrenched and inherent element of communication on free speech platforms. In fact, memes operate as a form of cultural capital for users of alternative social networks. Cultural capital can be understood as "recognising and understanding cultural items, references and codes, along with the ability to implement them independently, generate respect and status from those in one's social surroundings" (Shifman & Nissembaum 2015). In this way, memes have the power to normalise certain perspectives within cultural groups. One of the most prominent ways in which Gabbers communicate is through memes. Articles are posted, shared, liked and commented on, in a similar fashion to many other social media sites. When memes are shared on Gab, it is not only a trivial means of expression but also a symbolic way to establish common ground and kinship in terms of ideology or beliefs (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). Certain images and language become associated with a particular viewpoint, and this is reinforced within digital communities as memes spread and evolve. Furthermore, "memes may enhance our understanding of shifting frontiers constructing 'us' and 'them' in the political" (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021).

According to Limor Shifman in her book *'Memes in Digital Culture'*, there are three dimensions that compose the structure of internet memes which are content, form and stance (Shifman, 2013). Content relates to the ideas and/or ideologies that inspired the creation of the meme. The physical structure of the meme defines its form, which can include text, image, audio and video. Stance relates to who established the content and how they "position themselves in relation to the text, its linguistic codes, the addressees, and other potential speakers" (Shifman, 2013). In this way, any time digital items are shared, imitated and transformed by multiple users according to the dimensions described here, an internet meme is born. A key consideration related to the spread of memes is the actions of automated agents or non-human

actors, which results in the coordinated proliferation of content on social media platforms at speed. The impact of automated agents, particularly in relation to the spread of misinformation, is discussed in a dedicated sub-chapter later in this thesis.

Memes have become a simple, effective and efficient way to package a message for a target audience. Due to the power and popularity of memes in appealing to a wide range of mainstream and niche cultures, political actors increasingly use them to communicate and influence the "beliefs and actions of the fabric of a society" (Beskow, Kumar & Carley, 2020). Author and U.S. campaign strategist Doyle Canning has argued that memes are slowly replacing nuanced political debate in contemporary society (Canning, 2017). Indeed, memes are democratic in nature due to the fact their production and replicability do not require great technical skill. Memes are an easy entry point into politics for those who have chosen not to engage with state affairs through more traditional channels. In recent years, memes have evolved from being viewed merely as humourous cultural items. Memes have truly integrated as the media of choice for this generation, they are tied to modern political discourse and therefore should be studied as such.

1.4 <u>What is post-truth?</u>

''In the mental universe of social media, truth is a popularity contest.'' (Hannan, 2018)

Exactly what is considered post-truth both as an epoch and a digital trend is disputed. As a periodising concept, post-truth can be understood as a time marked by the breakdown of common objective standards of validity, both in terms of honesty and factuality. There are a vast number of influences that have driven this trend and for all its positive liberations, the proliferation of digital technologies cannot be ignored as a factor. The post-truth era has emerged because of societal trends such as a decline in social capital, growing economic inequality, greater polarisation, declining trust in science, and an increasingly fractured media landscape (Lewandowsky, Ecker & Cook, 2017). I adopt the view that post-truth is a period where objective facts have less value and influence in shaping public opinion than appeals to

emotion and personal belief (McIntyre, 2018). In other words, in a time of post-truth, factual accounts are commonly subverted and manipulated to ensure consistency with an individual's worldview and values. In a way, truth is being personalised and the relevancy and merit of objectivity is diminishing. The concept of personal truth has become significant in the current media landscape. It is increasingly common to see reports of people giving 'their truth' on a particular issue, both on social platforms and in the mainstream media. Despite the intention of using the phrase 'my truth' or 'their truth' this perpetuates the belief that there are in fact multiple versions of truth rather than one objective standard.

The idea of personal truth is further complicated by the dynamics on free speech platforms, where far-right and extremist ideologies can become normalised and repeated without challenging viewpoints. Free speech apps create a near perfect environment where the mere repetition of statements and opinions can result in an illusion of truth (Stafford, 2016). The notion of post-truth is multi-faceted, particularly when considering digital communities and the flow of information online. It is not just about lies or false beliefs, but also confusion amid a surplus of information and influential appeals, the difficulty in discerning sources, and the constant selective presentation of facts (Harsin, 2018). Free speech platforms have set a precedent for the almost unabated circulation of misinformation or disinformation on a large scale. I argue that post-truth is a consequence of fractured communication networks, influenced by social, cultural and political assemblages, that will remain a problematic feature of digital engagement for the foreseeable future. New communication technologies have increased the public's willingness and ability to question truth claims from authoritative sources. Social media has also fostered the emergence of what can be described as participatory sense-making (Zeng & Schäfer, 2021). In this way, people turn to social media to discuss current affairs in a more relaxed, personal environment compared to the detached perspective traditionally adopted by news outlets. In addition, the option of anonymity online adds to the appeal for users to express their views in a more open and direct manner than they would in a face-to-face setting.

1.5 Research question

Considering the introductory points made in Chapter 1, this thesis is based on the following research question:

After the 2021 Capitol Hill riots: How has the use of memes on Gab affected the expansion of fringe right-wing communities, proliferation of post-truth and negative framing of mainstream journalism?

The motivation for this project stemmed from my career history as a journalist and television producer. As a user and a publisher, I've witnessed different perspectives on how the dynamics and affordances of social media as a tool for democratic participation has helped generate the conditions for post-truth. To some extent, I have first-hand experience in trying to combat misinformation and false narratives in the public sphere and I have wanted to take a forensic look at the various influences changing the way people consume news. I've also grappled with understanding that my position as a professional media producer inevitably results in idealistic bias towards mainstream, established and traditional news outlets. Consequently, this project has allowed me to assess these issues through a case study that is significant both in terms of news and digital transformation.

In the next chapter, I detail the methodologies for my research and address the relevance and contributions of this work in the wider context of meme studies, post-truth and social media. In the proceeding chapters, I establish a theoretical framework, further define the terms of my research question and introduce my dataset and analysis of memes shared on Gab.

CHAPTER TWO – METHODOLOGY

2.1 <u>Research methods</u>

The overarching goal of this thesis was to assess how the use of memes on free speech apps has expanded alt-right communities and contributed to the rise of post-truth, anti-establishment narratives and resistance against mainstream news media organisations. The catalyst for this analysis and main point of reference was the U.S. Capitol riot of 2021. I also focused on the platform Gab to explore how free speech social media services operate, how its users communicate and what sort of communities are fostered there. I adopted a qualitative and quantitative approach to the research question outlined in Chapter 1, beginning with a literature review to establish the theoretical concepts and definitions used for analysis. This theoretical framework formed the basis for the quantitative element of the project which involved a data set of 30 memes collected from the platform Gab. I then conducted a social semiotic reading and multimodal analysis of the memes gathered. Multimodal analysis involves a critical assessment of the various modes and resources that are used to create meaning within an artefact, including text, imagery, colour, size, moving image and audio. According to Carey Jewitt, multimodality can be understood as a response to the demands to look beyond language in a rapidly changing social and technological landscape (Jewitt, 2013). By undertaking this approach, researchers can attempt to understand how the use of digital technologies extends the range of resources for communication (Jewitt, 2013).

The 30 memes I gathered were taken from Gab sub-groups G/Election Integrity (formerly known as Stop the Steal) and G/News. Each artefact was related to the January 6th attack, claims of election fraud, and/or coverage of both issues on mainstream media channels. The data was collected between January and July of 2022, which coincided with heightened news coverage one year on from the insurrection and the progress of several criminal inquiries. To find this data, I browsed posts on the platform sub-groups within the given time frame and conducted keyword searches. To some extent, the memes were selected at random in the sense that searching was conducted on an ad hoc basis as opposed to the same time each

week. I did this on purpose in order to gather what I hoped would be a diverse data set, giving a better sense of the persistence of particular issues and narratives on the platform, as well as the active construction and negotiation of group identity.

Taking a social semiotic multimodal approach in analysing this data set, I drew several ideological and political aims, and noted various communication techniques inherent in the memes. Where required, dubious information presented either through text or image in the memes was fact checked. In conducting this analysis, I focused on the following questions:

- How and in what ways do the memes reference or draw on language, ideology and imagery to construct identity?
- How and in what ways do the memes rely on users' individual and group identities as knowledgeable participants in this community?
- Overall, what sort of ideological work/role are these memes performing?

In this process, I have assessed how some of the concepts and phenomena outlined in my theoretical review are portrayed in memes. This assessment allowed me to discuss the key concerns in my research question; that is how fringe right-wing communities are expanding and changing on Gab, as well as the prevalence of post-truth narratives and negative framing of mainstream journalism.

2.2 Social semiotic theory & Multimodal analysis

To analyse the memes collected in this study as well as several icons and artefacts displayed at the Capitol Hill riots, I utilised social semiotic theory and multimodal analysis. Semiotics is the study of how meaning is socially constructed from a system of signs that can include textual, visual, audible and physical elements. According to theorist Roland Barthes, semiotics or semiology "aims to take in any system of signs whatever their substances and limits like; images, gestures, musical sounds, and objects" (Barthes, 1968). Extending on the work of prior theorists, Barthes suggests the sign is a combination of a signifier and a signified (Bouzida,

2014). A signifier is a material item that may be an object or text, whereas signified elements relate to meaning, incorporating what can be interpreted from the signifier within a given context. For example, the colour red is a signifier that can be interpreted as danger, blood, love or a code to stop; all of which are signified. The context in which the colour red is seen also shapes the meaning that is derived. Further to this, there are multiple levels of signification which include denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to universal meaning that is generated without any association to the viewers culture, ideology or society (Bouzida, 2014). This is the most obvious, basic and superficial level of meaning. Connotation is meaning that is more complex and nuanced, describing what happens when the sign interacts with feelings or emotions of the viewer and the values of their culture (Bouzida, 2014: Fiske, 1990). Connotation is a process that unites signifiers and signified elements and that can be influenced by subjective and ideological factors. This methodological approach allowed me to investigate the symbolic interaction of verbal and non-verbal signs, as well as the ways in which meaning is manifested. Semiology underpins the notion that reality is a constructed and, in many ways, naturalised system which relies heavily on human interpretation. Moreover, the theory purports that information and meaning does not simply exist in the world but "we actively create it according to a complex interplay of codes or conventions of which we are normally unaware" (Chandler, 1999).

Extending on the basis of social semiotic theory and as I have alluded to earlier in this chapter, multimodality is an approach to analysing communication. It emphasises that meaning is generated through different modes, which may be selected intentionally by authors to best suit a given context. According to one of leading theorists in the field, Gunther Kress, multimodality is an inter-disciplinary approach that helps researchers address critical questions about changes in society, particularly in relation to new media and technologies (Kress, 2009). Multimodality asserts that signs, modes and meaning making are relatively fluid and open systems intimately connected to social contexts (Jewitt, 2013). The first stage of a social semiotic multimodal analysis is usually to examine the use of modes in the texts being analysed (Kress, 2009). The second stage requires attention to the modal organisation, layout or design of texts. The third

stage takes into account what motivated the text and its author, which involves comparison across texts and contextualisation of these in the social moment (Kress, 2009).

Considering these points, I believe a social semiotic multimodal approach was best suited to this study, to understand the intention of meme production and sharing on Gab, as well as how memes as items of cultural content are interpreted by right-wing audiences and the general public. Social semioticians highlight the importance of the way readers attach significance to signs within a text, rather than the extraction of a single, fixed meaning (Chandler, 1999). Furthermore, there is a significant benefit in using multimodal analysis for digital data and environments where modes, affordances and inter-semiotic relations are dynamic and can be constantly renegotiated (Bezemer & Mavers, 2011). This is because communication within digital communities draws on an increasing number of modes and in the case of online extremist groups, signs have been co-opted to take on new associations.

2.3 Research ethics

In undertaking this project, I have used photographs and images from the January 6th riots, as well as content posted online that can be identified alongside usernames. It was important to ensure that this was done ethically. According to the Norwegian Research Ethics committee for social science and humanities "...researchers should be able to freely use the information on issues reported in edited media," so much of the background information I have used about the Capitol attack including images of participants, flags and symbols was taken from public and credible news sources (De Nasjonale Forskningsetiske Komiteene, 2019). The use of material (memes) posted on Gab also presented a concern. However, as the platform is openly available to browse without a registered account, it is fair to say that there is a reasonable expectation of publicity. This refers to "research that does not violate the informant's understanding or expectation that the information and communication are public" (De Nasjonale Forskningsetiske Komiteene, 2019). In consultation with my supervisor and in registering my thesis with UiB's RETTE program, which stands for Risk and Risk Experience in research projects, I decided not to publish the usernames and display pictures associated with the Gab accounts I

have taken data from. Accordingly, to protect the privacy of the Gabbers I have sampled from, names and profile pictures were removed from the posts or blurred, both in the analysis chapter of this paper and the appendix. It is worth noting that the vast majority of Gabbers sampled did not include real names or portrait display pictures with their accounts. This presented a further point for discussion regarding anonymity and how that is often a key value within right-wing digital communities. All 30 memes were captured directly from Gab's web interface.

2.4 Relevance of research

> "When far-right rioters stormed Brazil's key government buildings on January 8, social
> media companies were again caught flat-footed" (Scott, 2023)

This study is important in the present moment to investigate links between meme culture, post-truth and the portrayal of mainstream news organisations on free speech platforms. In the two years since the U.S. insurrection, we have also witnessed a strikingly similar event in Brazil where supporters of the former far-right President Jair Bolsonaro broke into government buildings and damaged property, alleging their most recent election was rigged. This was the worst political violence Brazil had seen in decades, and many parallels can be drawn from both incidents. The Soufan Center, which is an organisation focused on foreign policy issues and global security, noted in September of 2022 that a political riot was likely in Brazil. According to their report, Bolsonaro "appeared to be taking a page" from Trump's playbook "by laying the groundwork for claims of a stolen election and a contestation of the results, should he lose" (Deliso, 2023). Both Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump indicated some months before polls opened that if they were to lose the election in each of their countries, it would be due to malpractice and there would need to be some kind of fight to ensure electoral justice. In fact, Bolsonaro vowed to 'go to war' if he failed to triumph at the polls (Soufan Center, 2022). In addition, there had been a wealth of content rejecting the vote and supporting the rioters in Brazil circulating on social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp (Scott,

2023). This event showed what little change had been implemented by platforms to control misinformation in the wake of the January 6 U.S. attack. According to the Soufan Center, the unrest in Brazil has also signified that:

> "Ironically, the United States, historically known for exporting democracy, is now associated with developing the playbook for dictators and strongmen to use to sow doubt about democratic elections, while simultaneously offering a blueprint for authoritarian leaders to seize power by force" (Soufan Center, 2022).

With these points in mind, my initial hypothesis was that both memes and the concept of free speech have been instrumentalised to attack public institutions such as the mainstream media and the U.S. Democratic government. I also suspected that threatening, nationalistic and anti-liberal rhetoric was freely circulating on Gab with little to no acknowledgement of opposing or challenging viewpoints. In turn, this research sheds further light on the ways Gab allows alt-right extremists to indoctrinate their views and groom new followers by exploiting the unregulated nature of the site and appealing to the emotions and values that are inherent to free speech platforms. From this study, granted it is limited in size and scope, I have considered how memes are being used as propagators of post-truth narratives on Gab, specifically in relation to the Capitol Hill attack and claims of election fraud, and to what extent. More broadly, I've also attempted to offer some insight into the ways right-wing communication techniques have transformed on Gab in the wake of the 2021 riot, and what new ideological aims have emerged.

This thesis outlines the social and political context that gave rise to the normalisation of misinformation and alt-right discourse on the free speech platform Gab. While other scholars have broadly labelled Gab as an alt-right echo chamber and a site for the exchange of politically focused memes (Zannettou et al., 2018), I have distinctly addressed the role of memes in perpetuating an alternate reality for alt-right followers, by reinforcing right-wing discourse, spreading conspiracy theories and false narratives about democratic processes and the presentation of news.

CHAPTER THREE – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Networked Individualism, Participatory culture & Actor-Network Theory

While the introductory points raised so far may have scripted a rather dystopian view, my position in this thesis originated from techno-neutrality. This is to assert that communication technologies, including the platform Gab, fundamentally have little influence upon society nor the flow of information until subjected to user intervention and interpretation. Rather than viewing the generation and uses of platforms as being solely dictated by tech companies, I believe it is in large part the result of consumer demand, and greater attention should be paid to the way platforms are employed by users, regardless of the initial design goals of the service. However, this is certainly not to exonerate tech companies of their many responsibilities in managing platforms. In fact, as raised in Chapter 1, platforms have justifiably come under extensive criticism over the last decade for failing to identify and quell behaviours that have contributed to violence and political crises. There is no question that major tech companies have garnered unimaginable power, and many design and policy decisions they make directly influence our engagement with public issues, news and current affairs. Yet, it is important to view this power as a construct or an outcome of complex and fluid social assemblages. According to assemblage theory, social and cultural settings are constructed by elements such as users, institutional structures, language and machines among others, which vary in their degree of influence (DeLanda, 2019). In this way, the position of platforms within communities is constantly negotiated and the power wielded by digital technologies varies according to context and the influence of other elements. For example, there is a significant difference in analysing the use of platforms to spread political messages compared to social communication. Whilst the fundamental action of posting and sharing content on platforms is almost identical in both cases, the motivation and intent for spreading political information can have wide-reaching consequences and elevate the perceived power of platforms in the process. It is

important to make this distinction not only to highlight how platforms exist as one part of social assemblages, but also to understand that platforms gain power according to the way they are employed by users and communities.

Social media has enabled a world of networked individualism. This describes the unprecedented system of connections and communications offered to users with the advent of the internet, digital communities and platforms (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). The 'networked operating system' has empowered people to expand their social circles, to access information and to create and share content. In the context of post-truth, it's clear that this shift has been both liberating and burdensome, as Rainie & Wellman assert:

> "In the less hierarchical and less bounded networked environment – where expertise is more in dispute than in the past and where relationships are more tenuous – there is more uncertainty about whom and what information sources to trust" (Rainie & Wellman, 2012)

If we understand networked individualism as a phenomenon where users interact with resources and information on their own terms, perhaps it is possible to imagine contemporary exchanges on platforms like Gab as a networked collective. As Gab was established as a right-wing platform, it is fair to argue that there is a degree of cohesion among users seeking information that appeals to issues deemed important in right-leaning politics. There is perhaps less individualism in communities on Gab in that the resources available to users are limited. Furthermore, much of the content on Gab is intentionally provocative to outsiders and designed to promote alt-right ideologies.

The act of being online and engaging with information is a form of participatory culture. This term was coined by scholar Henry Jenkins to describe contemporary communities where users not only consume media content but also create and distribute it (Jenkins et al., 2009). Jenkins argues there are relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement in participatory cultures and strong support for creating and sharing. Members also believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with other users (Jenkins et al., 2009). Participatory cultures have permeated almost all aspects of the public and private spheres. They have broken down the traditional barriers that existed between media producers

and media consumers, and this has extended to an organisational level whereby news outlets and public institutions now involve some level of citizen feedback or contribution. Further to this, the architecture of participation across media landscapes has led to the mass amateaurisation of journalism (Shirky, 2008), and transition from passive audiences to 'produsers' which combines the traditionally distinct roles of media producer and media user (Bird, 2011). This cultural shift has indeed created an unprecedented opportunity for democracy, yet it also paved the way for the manipulation of digital tools to create and spread misinformation. Citizen journalism and misinformation is addressed in greater detail in the next chapter.

The communities established by users and audiences on social media platforms are dynamic and influenced by a variety of factors. It can be easy to assume a direct causation between technology and changing social processes. For example, some may claim that the development of Facebook as the first widely adopted social media platform has changed human relationships. Certainly, platforms have become integrated in our social lives, but the changes one may argue have resulted from new technologies cannot be attributed to this alone. A technological deterministic view asserts that new technologies dictate a society's social structure and cultural values. However, I adopt the perspective of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to understand how these networks and their effects are generated. According to ANT, the notion of 'the social' is developed through connections between entities or assemblages which include human and non-human actors (Latour, 2005). In this way, all actors within a given network are associations of heterogenous elements. ANT positions society as the outcome of interactions performed within complex systems called actor-networks (Wiard, 2019). These networks cannot be reduced to an actor or network alone and they are constantly refined and transformed by the actions or influences of each element. People, ideas, symbols, language and machines have equal importance in actor-networks and thus deserve equal analysis (Wiard, 2019). This is not to suggest that objects have intentionality, but "ANT researchers recognise that all entities involved in a course of action can influence it" (Wiard, 2019).

Considering this, there are many factors to analyse when looking at the role of free speech platforms in right-wing communities. Gab as a platform is one entity in an assemblage of actors

that includes political conditions, the media, social and cultural attitudes, individuals and other technologies including alternative platforms and television. To thoroughly understand what motivates people to use Gab and the effect its use has one must consider all of these entities. However, as I will detail in the next sub-chapter and throughout this theoretical framework, there are some deceptive features of platforms that can perhaps shift the balance of power in actor-networks. This includes the introduction of algorithmic practices, which have led to the formation of filter bubbles and echo chambers in our online experience, meaning platforms have been afforded some element of intentionality.

### 3.2 Meme culture, Humour styles & The impact of algorithms

"Algorithms create numerous possibilities for self-radicalization, whether by functioning as echo-chambers or pushing users to go further 'down the rabbit hole,' video after video, meme after meme." (Dafaure, 2020)

Drawing on the definition from Chapter one, memes are digital pieces of cultural information that can be shared at scale within online communities. As Shifman argues, sharing content or spreading memes has become a fundamental part of what users now experience as the digital sphere (Shifman, 2014). Memes have an overwhelming ability to create community through shared intertextual references, humour and in some circumstances ridicule and othering. According to Shifman, there are two main repackaging mechanisms of memes that dominate internet sharing culture. One is mimicry which involves the imitation or re-creation of an existing text, image or piece of content. The other is remixing which includes technology-based manipulation of an existing item (Shifman, 2014). As memes are primarily comprised of images and text, they are a form of non-verbal communication and form part of a larger discourse which can be referred to as 'memetic discourse' (Wurst, 2021).

The extent of popularity of memes as communication tools is such that politicians, governments and institutions have sometimes embraced their use in formal messaging (see Figure 4). Figure 4 shows a dog meme used by the U.S. Department of Health & Human

services on social media in 2014, to promote healthcare. Crucially, memes are increasingly blurring the "split between formal and informal ways of producing knowledge" (Heiskanen, 2017). It is the existence of this grey area where misinformation, false narratives and conspiracy theories can flourish and become more embedded and accepted within certain online communities.

Figure 4
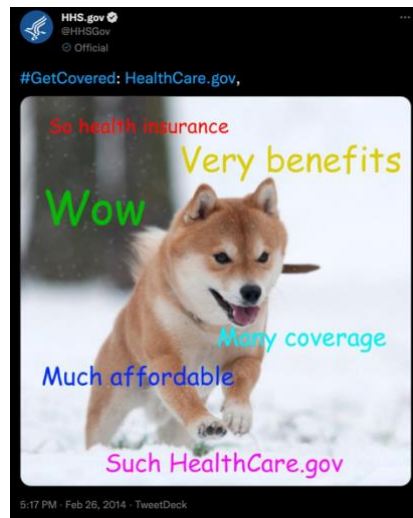
(Source: Twitter – U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2014)

As memes infiltrate traditionally formal communication channels, this shift demonstrates the growing relevance of popular and fan culture to political discourse. Memes are used as tools to bridge divides on social media platforms where communities are increasingly more connected yet fragmented at the same time. As Shifman asserts, "in an era marked by 'network individualism,' people use memes to simultaneously express their uniqueness and their connectivity." (Shifman, 2014). Meme culture has also highlighted one of the dangers of participatory culture, in trivializing complex situations, spreading misinformation and blurring the line between playful and offensive. In some instances, memes can be deliberately designed to support radical political movements and bring fringe perspectives into the mainstream (Wurst, 2021). In this context, scholars Marwick & Lewis argue memes can be viewed as "gateway drugs" to more extreme elements of alt-right ideology (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). This is a crucial point that I would like to investigate with the data set I have collected from Gab. As a

precursor to that analysis in Chapter 5 and to exemplify how memes may be designed to further misinformation under the guise of playfulness, I have shared here one meme taken from Gab in February 2022 (see Figure 5). The image depicts an unknown woman, labelled 'Democrats', drinking from an oversized cocktail glass that is labelled 'Government Propaganda'. The meme insinuates that the U.S. Democratic party as a collective organisation operates according to a predetermined agenda and is working to spread propaganda. The representation of the woman seemingly enjoying the drink portrays that she is being intoxicated by it and the large size of the glass suggests there is a lot of propaganda material. On the surface, this meme is not subtle in its political messaging though it certainly passes as playful. Yet, it can also be argued that this meme is a 'gateway drug' to those that include more extreme and offensive content on the same or similar subject matter.

Figure 5

(Source: Gab, February 2022)

Humour, or at least an attempt at humour, is a core element of meme culture. Specifically looking at memes shared within communities on platforms like Gab, the content that drives humour is usually political or socially contentious in some way. For example, memes are often created and shared to reinforce a particular ideological position or to make light of a current political issue such as migration, economic management or gender identity. In an era of post-truth and misinformation, humour can be implemented as a defence against falsehoods (Yeo & McKasy, 2020). In other words, humour has far more value than truth in meme culture and

blatantly false information that's presented as a joke or under the guise of playfulness is often shared and spread without further consideration.

To understand the role of humour in memes and the wider implications in generating a sense of community and identity, I utilised the four dimensions of humour detailed by researchers Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir in 2003. According to their findings, there are several distinct functions that humour plays in everyday life. These functions are centred around interpersonal relationships, in enhancing the individual or enhancing the connection with others. The four humour styles are self-enhancing, affiliative, self-defeating, and aggressive (Martin et al., 2003). When humour is used to enhance the self in a way that is tolerant and non-detrimental, this is described as self-enhancing. Non-hostile humour that amuses others and facilitates relationships is considered affiliative. Self-defeating humour can be considered as defensive denial and a ploy to hide negative thoughts, while aggressive humour is used to detriment one's relationships with others and is undeniably hostile in nature (Martin et al., 2003). Aggressive humour is the predominant style noted in memes shared on Gab. However, because of the unique group dynamics on Gab whereby ultra-conservative, right-wing and anti-establishment ideologies are heavily ingrained in the operations of the platform, the humour style could also be interpreted as affiliative or self-enhancing. For example, a meme depicting U.S. President Joe Biden as the devil would be aggressive in many contexts, yet on Gab it's likely to be perceived as affiliative because the vast majority of users identify as Republican voters and therefore any negative representation of a Democrat can serve to amuse viewers and facilitate group relationships.

Our exposure to certain types of memes and the perceived dominance of popular items online can be attributed to the effects of algorithms. Fundamentally, algorithms are defined computational procedures that transform input, which can be a value or set of values, into output (Figueiredo & Bolano, 2017). The introduction of algorithmic practices around 2010 was a turning point for social media platforms, particularly concerning the rise of misinformation and fake news. Based on users' preferences and attitudes, algorithms mediate and facilitate the promotion of content and spread of information (Cinelli et al., 2020). Essentially, algorithms work to develop personalised profiles of users in order to offer targeted content and

advertising that will keep a user engaged with a platform for as long as possible. As Eli Pariser argues in his book 'T*he Filter Bubble: What The Internet Is Hiding From You*':

"The race to know as much about you as possible has become the central battle of the era for Internet giants... As a business strategy, the Internet giants' formula is simple: The more personally relevant their information offerings are, the more ads they can sell, and the more likely you are to buy the products they're offering. And the formula works" (Pariser, 2011).

Algorithms involve a symbiotic relationship between users, advertisers, platforms and machines in that they "command interactivity between humans and software, and software and computers mediate human interactions in social media" (Figueiredo & Bolano, 2017). Due to these processes, at any given time when we log into our social media platforms, there is a host of content and information that will not ordinarily be presented to us, even though it may be the most recently posted material, or the most accurate on a certain issue. What we are shown is what the algorithm expects us to be interested in and engage with. This phenomenon has been explored by U.S. artist and professor Ben Grosser in his artwork 'Not For You' which is a browser extension that subverts the algorithm on the social media site, TikTok. TikTok is a Chinese-owned platform where users can upload, share and comment on short videos. The work highlights the "nooks and crannies" that TikTok's algorithm doesn't show and aims to make viewers aware of filtered online experiences. According to Grosser:

"the work stands in opposition to letting corporations opaquely decide what we see and when we see it, to their intentional crafting of addictive user interfaces, and to the extraction of profit from the residual data left behind by users" (Grosser, 2020).
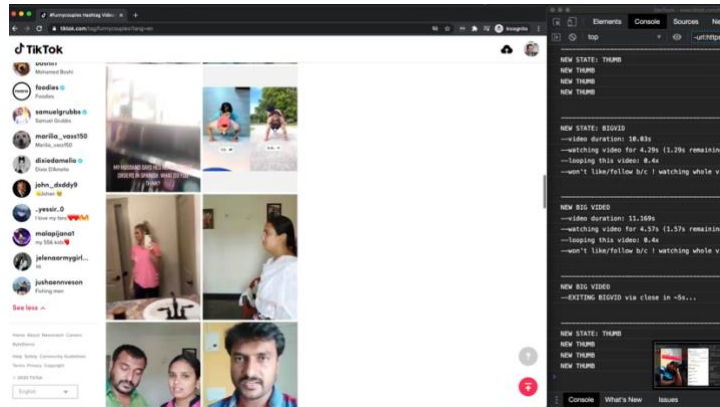
Grosser's work brings focus to the tactics employed by social media platforms to extend the time we spend browsing and engaging with content, which in turn increases the amount of personal data gathered from us. 'Not For You' also illustrates how platforms can alter a user's perception of reality, by stripping away curation features that normally control what type of content is presented.

3.3 Misinformation, Disinformation, Fake News and Post-truth

''The post-authenticity of fake news isn't solely a technological or media problem, but a social one, symptomatic of declining trust in a shared civic project. Nonetheless, new media technologies really aren't helping.'' (Owens, 2019)

Social media has redefined the structure, dimensions, and complexity of information flows and the dissemination of news. It has knocked television from its status as the most dominant media form of our time and this has had positive and negative consequences for public discourse. The sheer immediacy with which content can be uploaded to social media and spread to millions of users has been revolutionary. Considering this significant change in the way information is generated, shared and consumed there may be several approaches to understanding why false or distorted information has become so prolific. Are we perhaps more aware of misinformation simply due to the saturation of content that is now available to us? Or is this a problem connected to the medium (social media)? Theorist Marshall McLuhan argued

in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, that the development of each new medium disrupts tradition and reshapes social life (McLuhan, 1964). His famous phrase "the medium is the message" conveys that the form of communication may have more value than the content itself, because the form shapes the audience's experience and how information is processed (McLuhan, 1964). If we adopt this view to consider the development of Gab and evolution of communication technologies over the last half century, one may argue that there's now an overwhelming focus on visual entertainment as opposed to critical and challenging information. As Jason Hannan argues, "If television turned politics into show business, then social media might be said to have turned it into a giant high school, replete with cool kids, losers and bullies" (Hannan, 2018). The assertion that new media technologies have eroded democracy is not a position I subscribe to. However, the effects of algorithms and filtering practices employed by major tech companies have been a detrimental force. It is clear that some reform is needed either in terms of media literacy or content management, to bring greater awareness of misinformation and eliminate harmful online material.

The issue of misinformation in the digital sphere was articulated by scholars in 2000 and can be understood as occurring when misleading, incomplete or incorrect information leads people to hold erroneous beliefs and do so confidently (Kuklinski et al., 2000). Misinformation has "distorted people's views about some of the most consequential issues in politics, science and medicine" (Flynn et al., 2017). The problem continues to plague democratic processes, public health messaging and journalism around the world, and despite an increasing understanding of the mechanisms contributing to misinformation, there is still no established standard for an effective correction (Jerit & Zhou, 2020). Focusing on political misinformation, scholars Jerit & Zhou noted that preexisting attachments to a political party or ideological worldview can impart strong directional goals in the way people process information (Jerit & Zhou, 2020). Moreover, "directional motives contribute to the problem of misinformation insofar as they lead to biases in how people obtain and evaluate information about the political world" (Jerit & Zhou, 2020). In this way, Gab's association as a right-ring platform heavily influences the type of information that is shared and the type of audiences that are likely to engage with it. This is not to suggest

that Gab is filled with misinformation, but rather that popular content on the platform is directed towards right-wing beliefs and ideologies.

Disinformation has been defined in UNESCO's handbook for journalism education and training as deliberate and often orchestrated attempts to confuse or manipulate people through the delivery of dishonest information (Ireton & Posetti, 2018). The key distinction between misinformation and disinformation is the intent to manipulate and knowingly spread false content. Misinformation can be shared without an awareness that the information is fabricated or false. For this reason, misinformation is perhaps the most pressing concern for users, social media platforms and public institutions today. Media literacy also affects our ability to evaluate information. Media literacy is a complex concept that refers to the ability to analyse and evaluate information that is available in a variety of media formats. According to scholars Sara Yeo and Meaghan McStay in their article '*Emotion and humor as misinformation antidotes*':

> "Evaluating online information includes considering strategies used to create content; identifying a media producer's purpose and perspective; recognizing the social, political, and historical contexts in which information is created and consumed; and determining credibility." (Yeo & Mckasy, 2021)

There is difficulty or perhaps confusion in understanding what fake news is in the current period. Fake news isn't just one type of made-up content presented as a factual account that stems from one source, but different types of manipulated media with varying degrees of forgery. It is also a label and catchphrase that has been used by former U.S. President Donald Trump and his supporters to express disagreement or dissatisfaction with reporting. As Owens asserts, for Donald Trump: "The term means something more like 'troublesome news,' or 'news I vehemently disagree with, and wish to discredit'" (Owens, 2019). While it has existed online for decades, the term fake news almost exploded in interest from 2016, when two key events made history in the western world. Defying predictions, the United Kingdom voted to exit the European Union and the infamous business tycoon Donald Trump was elected as U.S. President. Both events sparked accusations of false reporting by news organisations and

misleading campaigns on behalf of politicians. In some circumstances, those accusations have proved true, and this has perhaps triggered a dilemma whereby there's greater awareness of fake news, but it is also now more commonly assumed by some communities that many if not all mainstream news outlets cannot be trusted.

As Figure 6 shows, Google search data for 'fake news' increased significantly from November 2016. Social media platforms have played a large role in fake news amounting to the issue that is it today. The digital media ecology has proliferated, democratised and intensified the scale of fake news (Bakir & McStay, 2017). In their article, 'Fake News and The Economy of Emotions: Problems, causes, solutions', Bakir & McStay argue that the contemporary fake news phenomenon is a logical outcome of five features: "the financial decline of legacy news; the news cycle's increasing immediacy; the rapid circulation of misinformation and disinformation via user-generated content and propagandists; the increasingly emotionalised nature of online discourse; and the growing number of people financially capitalising on algorithms used by social media platforms and internet search engines'' (Bakir & McStay, 2017).

Figure 6
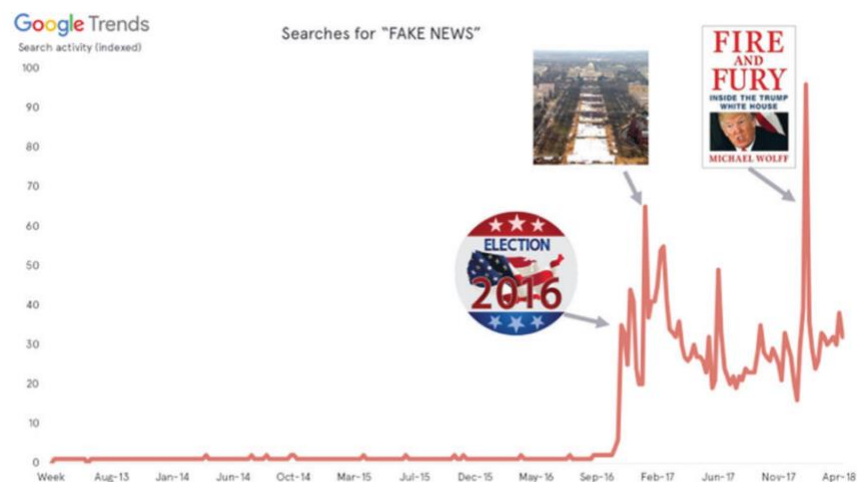
(Source: Post-Authenticity and the Ironic Truths of Meme Culture - Owens, 2019)

Drawing upon the definition outlined in the first chapter, post-truth is a period marked by the declining relevance of objective facts in favour of opinion or misinformation that appeals to particular ideologies, interests and emotions. This shift has emerged because of societal trends such as a decline in social capital, growing inequality, increased polarisation, waning trust in

science, and a fractured media landscape (Lewandowsky, Ecker & Cook, 2017). In other words, the abundance of information now readily available to mass audiences has perhaps planted seeds of doubt over the authority and credibility afforded to longstanding public institutions. Moreover, the shift to more participatory journalism as well as advancements in self-publishing and technologies used to forge or manipulate content means opposing or false viewpoints can be presented in a logical and convincing manner. This has rendered some publics susceptible to false narratives. The phenomenon was well illustrated by former Trump advisor Kellyanne Conway in 2017, when she told U.S. media the government was offering 'alternative facts' about the size of the crowd at Donald Trump's inauguration, that obviously was not a record as claimed by the White House Press Secretary at the time, Sean Spicer (Swaine, 2017). Post-truth has created an environment where people and organisations can escape from admitting that they may have been wrong and instead double down on their claims because they believe it is right and that belief aligns with the values and ideologies they subscribe to.

Aptly summarising some of the concepts raised so far, scholar Maxime Dafaure points out that contemporary meme culture combined with algorithmic practices provides an opportunity to reflect on public discourse and the 'irreconcilable paradox' of growing distrust in mainstream journalism outlets, coupled to the growing popularity of alterative news sources (Dafaure, 2020). In other words, it can be argued that modern social media platforms have created an environment where popularity outweighs accuracy. Moreover, this is a problem that has been structured into platforms in the way users are encouraged to share information and content, regardless of how truthful it is, in order to generate interactivity.

3.4 Filter bubbles, Echo-chambers & Social identity theory

As I have argued to this point, our experiences on social media sites and the internet more broadly are increasingly individualised and curated through the effects of several forces. Using algorithms, platforms and search engines track the way we engage with content, what interests us and how long we spend looking at certain material. As a result, what we are presented with

online can be characterised as a personalised 'filter bubble' which fundamentally alters our encounters with ideas, information and news (Pariser, 2011). The term was coined by Eli Pariser in his 2011 book that I have previously referenced. Filter bubbles impact both platforms and web search engines by displaying narrowed and managed newsfeeds, placing users in a prism where they are more likely to be exposed to content that reinforces their current ideological views (Sphor, 2017). This results in users becoming separated from exposure to wider information that could present opposing viewpoints or challenge the user to take a different perspective (Pariser, 2011). It is fair to say that this phenomenon was largely driven by internet advertising, as web companies sought to capitalise on increased user engagement.

Pariser claims there are three key elements that make this phenomenon distinct from users simply seeking out content that appeals to them online. This includes the fact that every single user is alone in their own algorithmically generated filter bubble, they are unaware of and have no control over the exact parameters that set the filter, and finally there is no choice on behalf of the user to enter or exit the bubble, it is imposed on them automatically (Pariser, 2011). Filter bubbles erode the possibility of what users might assume is common ground when searching for information online. Rather than standardised outcomes based on search terms, users will in fact receive individualised results where algorithms have made a calculated guess about our interests coupled with advertising opportunities.

A similar term for this concept is echo chamber, which exists where information is amplified, reinforced and repeated inside a defined system where competing views are underrepresented (Bakir & McStay, 2017). Echo chambers are arguably a form of filter bubble, but it is possible for users to actively choose to exist in an echo chamber, whereas filter bubbles are imposed without consent. Echo chambers can also exist outside of the digital sphere, for example one's choice to focus on content from a specific television network or radio station can constitute an echo chamber. An online echo chamber can be defined as the exposure to ideologically homogeneous information, which is highly influenced by algorithms and based on user behaviour (Wollebæk et al. 2019). Echo chambers often feature content that prioritises political similarity, like-mindedness and lack of diversity. This is in relation to a user's engagement with

ideas, facts, values and how they engage with others in an online forum (Boulianne et al., 2020).

Filter bubbles and echo chambers can contribute to polarisation, diminish mutual understanding and in a way result in the perception of different realities. This leads me to consider the 'illusion of truth effect', whereby psychologists have suggested that the mere repetition of false statements in certain contexts can result in the perception of fact (Stafford, 2016). One could argue this was a tactic well employed by former U.S. President Donald Trump during his four years in office. However, focusing on the phenomena of filter bubbles and echo chambers, it is clear this could be escalating and compounding the illusion. The ultimate risk of filter bubbles and the echo chamber effect is that those users often exposed to misinformation have greater potential to stay ill-informed, and their views may become more ingrained, making it a difficult process to challenge or reverse. While social media creates an environment that allows access to vast collective intelligence, many online mechanisms including algorithmic manipulation, filter bubbles and echo chambers can also cause false information to gain acceptance (Del Vicario, 2015). This is very much evident within online communities on free speech platforms, where extreme views are shared and promoted with minimal regulation. The premeditation of the U.S. insurrection was in some ways enabled by the ideological polarisation and filter bubble phenomenon on social media platforms. Extremist groups were able to recruit users through a saturation of right-wing discourse. Of course, this is not to suggest users are passive and uncritical of content they see on platforms, but there is surely a measurable impact of the repetition and reinforcement of particular ideologies within filter bubbles and echo chambers. Furthermore, it is fair to suggest that many users are not fully aware of the ways in which their activities online can be controlled by algorithms, for better or worse.

The complex assemblage of feeds, groups, memes and messages on digital media both contribute to a sense of belonging and community for some and can lead to the isolation of what is considered the 'other'. In the context of free-speech platforms such as Gab, that identify so heavily as being anti-regulation and anti-establishment, it is fair to say that the overall group identity of 'Gabbers' can be viewed as more important than one's identity as an individual. According to social identity theory (SIT), which was formulated by Henri Tajfel and

John Turner in the 1970s, the mere process of making salient 'us and them' distinctions in social settings changes the way people see each other (Hornsey, 2008). There are three distinct processes in social identity theory: categorisation, identification and comparison (Hornsey, 2008). This involves recognising that there are a variety of groups, individuals subscribing to the groups they belong to and assessing their standing in comparison to other groups. In considering free speech platforms, perhaps the most important element of SIT is the fact that people evaluate their group with reference to relevant 'outgroups'. Groups become psychologically real only when defined in comparison to others, and their perceived identity can influence intergroup behaviour (Hornsey, 2008). The 'us versus them' dichotomy is represented in an openly sinister manner on Gab, creating the perception of enemies. This is evident in the language used on Gab's website, encouraging users to "take back control of the Web for the People." This statement is significant in several ways, demonstrating a populist ideology that 'the people' are being disregarded by powerful internet companies, and further positioning Gab as an element of the alternative infrastructure envisaged by extremist groups.

3.5 Preparatory media, Dark platforms & Dark participation

The emergence of free speech platforms and niche social media sites in the last decade has brought new and more nuanced functions and meanings to online participation. Our contributions to social media are perhaps more targeted and curated, and what we seek from being online may be more specific or focused as opposed to the early days of social media. This shift in how social media is used or misused, and the events of January 6th 2021 in particular, have led scholar Luke Munn to propose the concept of preparatory media (Munn, 2021). It allows us to look at how certain media or platforms use "logistical, organizational, and ideological levels to render publics into a more stabilized and cohesive force." (Munn, 2021). In other words, the design of certain platforms or ideological intention thereof, can direct or influence users to form groups, and affect their actions as a group. Moreover, digital media can anticipate an event and structure the expectations and activities of its participants (Munn, 2021). As I have previously argued, the storming of the U.S. Capitol in 2021 was to some extent

premediated through social media. Extending on the prior points about social identity theory and othering, Munn goes further to suggest that some platforms, comprising of complex and often overwhelming feeds, groups and memes, have already singled out enemies and posited ideal scenarios (Munn, 2021). As the term would suggest, preparatory media works to prepare its users for a specified end goal that may be tangible or ideological. Preparatory media legitimises viewpoints and mobilises its users against 'the other'. This "activism of hate" (Zelenkauskaite, *et al.*, 2021) has leveraged the affordances of social media to articulate and extend a political vision. In my analysis of memes on Gab, I have considered what role they play in positioning the platform as preparatory media.

It is also important to consider here what can be characterised as 'dark platforms'. Scholars Jing Zeng and Mike Schäfer claim dark platforms are spaces where users can freely engage in sharing content that may be shunned on mainstream platforms. Dark platforms share the basic functionalities of their popular counterparts and have become more prominent in recent years by promoting an image of defending the free flow of information (Zeng & Schäfer, 2021). According to Zeng and Schäfer, there are several key features in observing what constitutes a dark platform, including content liberation, exile congregation and infrastructure ostracisation (Zeng & Schäfer, 2021). In other words, dark platforms welcome users who may have been banned from other sites and champion a censorship-free environment away from the perceived control of major tech organisations like Google, Microsoft and Apple. Inevitably, this has resulted in dark platforms harbouring conspiracy theorists and extremists.

New media technologies and networked individualism prompted hopes for a democratic transformation and rejuvenation of journalism, giving access to all levels of the production chain. However, Thorsten Quandt points out that there is an "evil flipside of citizen engagement" (Quandt, 2018). Online tools have allowed for greater interactivity with news and there are indeed significant benefits of user-generated content. However, there has also been an increased level of hateful messaging, opinion mongering and incivility in comment sections of news articles and in discussions of current affairs on social media platforms. This can be viewed as 'dark participation' which involves several different motivations, methods and targets, as detailed by Thorsten Quandt in the chart below:
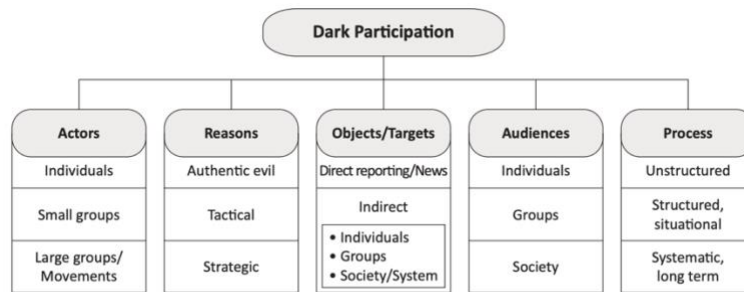
Dark Participation

Actors	Reasons	Objects/Targets	Audiences	Process
Individuals	Authentic evil	Direct reporting/News	Individuals	Unstructured
Small groups	Tactical	Indirect • Individuals • Groups • Society/System	Groups	Structured, situational
Large groups/ Movements	Strategic		Society	Systematic, long term

Figure 1. Variants of dark participation.

As witnessed on Gab, an increasing number of users are bypassing traditional journalism to disseminate their interpretation of news (Quandt, 2018). People can publish news articles without the involvement of professional journalists or release fake or manipulated news pieces under the name of professional journalists and established media.

It is important to clarify that the use of the term 'dark' to describe both platforms and participation should not necessarily be considered a condemnation. Rather, it represents the less desirable outcomes of digital participation, in contrast to what could be described as the 'social media utopia' that was envisaged in the early days of platforms. As Quandt rightly asserts, we must also consider the various shades of grey between the black and white models of user engagement, and foster participation from various perspectives in order to counter polarisation (Quandt, 2018).

CHAPTER FOUR – THE ALT-RIGHT & FREE-SPEECH PLATFORMS

4.1 Populism & the rise of the alt-right

In this Chapter, I define and explore the rise of what is considered populism and the alt-right, how free speech platforms have gained popularity and consider some of the groups involved in the January 6 Capitol Hill attack. This is important to establish more of a contextual basis, in addition to the theoretical framework that has been used in my analysis of memes on Gab in

Chapter 5. It is fair to say that the content of this thesis is related to a time when populist politics was a significant force in the United States and indeed in many developed nations around the world. Donald Trump was a populist president, and his campaign slogan "Make America great again" is illustrative of that. The term populism encompasses a political movement, attitude or individual who engages in confrontational, anti-establishment rhetoric aimed at displacing the governing elites and their entrenched systems (Mueller, 2019). It is a stance that is positioned against liberal constitutional democracies and the forces that have enabled them. It assumes dysfunctions within the current order of government, society and institutional powers, yet the solutions or goals offered by populists are often obscure and too simplistic for the real world. According to Scholar Axel Mueller:

> "Populists promise to 'take back control' or to 'take our country back' from power-wielding elites and to do away with the politics-as-usual that empowers them. I take this to be the deliberately vague and multiply ambiguous core promise and appeal of populist platforms." (Mueller, 2019)

A key characteristic of populism involves the dichotomy between what is considered the elite and powerful ruling minority, and the working-class people that form the majority. It is also important to acknowledge that populism is not a fundamentally right-leaning phenomenon. Populist movements exist on both the left and right divide of politics, and the most successful populists may even draw support simultaneously from both sides of the spectrum (Ostiguy & Roberts, 2016). Populism can be considered as an instrument of 'creative destruction' in that it often does not align with conventional measures of political competition, and it can seem to simplify the political space (Ostiguy & Roberts, 2016). In this way, Donald Trump's outsider bid for the U.S. Republican presidential nomination in 2016 was highly disruptive for the traditional U.S. party system.

Considering the role of Donald Trump as a populist leader, his celebrity status in the U.S., reputation for breaking the mold and 'telling it like it is' was only bolstered through flagrant violations of what is traditionally considered political etiquette. Several elements of Donald

Trump's character and political motivations served to galvanise different members of society. His history as a real estate tycoon and business acumen gave legitimacy to his claims of 'winning' and getting deals done. Trump's focus on protectionism and nationalism, challenging the benefits of globalisation appealed to blue-collar workers, and those who feared that uncontrolled immigration would threaten the economy and jobs (Ostiguy & Roberts, 2016). Whilst Trump didn't necessarily conform to the religious and cultural ideals of the political right in the early days of his leadership, he managed to spin this image to attack the political correctness and perceived 'sterileness' of the current order. He threw out the rule book on presidential language, instead opting to speak freely, and perhaps at times with the intention of being controversial, in order to prove he was the 'voice of the people' and separate from the ruling elite.

Donald Trump's election as U.S. President in 2016 also coincided with the rise of a political movement separate but related to populism; the 'alternative right' or 'alt-right' as I have previously referenced in this thesis. The movement was active in cheerleading Trump's candidacy and many of his controversial policies including building a wall along the Mexico border and restricting the entry of Muslims to the U.S. The formal establishment of the alternative right in the United States is widely attributed to Texas born Richard B. Spencer, who coined the term in an article in a right-wing publication in 2008 (Bulent, 2021). Spencer has previously called for 'peaceful ethnic cleansing' to stop what he claims is the deconstruction of white culture. Alt-right has been used by Spencer to refer to people who oppose egalitarianism, multiculturalism, and open immigration among other things. In 2010, he founded a website focused on white supremacy called AlternativeRight.com (Bulent, 2021). The alt-right ideological movement has existed online since then, as a vague opposition force without an organisational structure, but was thrust into the spotlight during the 2016 U.S. Presidential campaign (Hodge & Hallgrimsdottir, 2020). The movement is decentralised, predominantly online, largely anonymous and known to foster racism, homophobia, xenophobia and misogyny, with a 'dizzying array' of positions on wide range of topics (Hodge & Hallgrimsdottir, 2020; Hawley, 2017). Because the movement was essentially born online, trolling, internet pranks and memes are considered key forms of political action (Wendling, 2018). In fact, it has

been argued that the alt-right entered the national conversation in the U.S. when it mastered the art of trolling, which involves any action that can be considered deliberately inflammatory in online discussions (Hawley, 2017).

The first platform that has been linked to the development of the alt-right is 4Chan, which is a message board website where users can share images and create threaded discussions (Wendling, 2018). The fact that the movement was essentially based in the digital sphere and utilised humour as a primary tactic gave the alt-right a sense of youthfulness, despite its disgraceful undertones and motives (Hawley, 2017). Over the last decade, alt-right content and discussion has appeared on almost all social media platforms, at least until content moderation measures were introduced by some outlets. Alt-right ideology has recently become concentrated on platforms such as Gab, that are marketed as sites for free speech and alternative digital infrastructure.

The willingness of some of the alt-right's adherents to use extreme tactics to achieve their objectives, the January 6 insurrection being a prime example, highlights the need to better understand the roots of alt-right support (Forscher & Kteily, 2020). In his book, '*The Rise of the Alt-right'*, Thomas J. Main argues that the movement went from obscurity to infamy after Donald Trump appointed Steve Bannon as a campaign executive (Main, 2018). Bannon is a former editor of the Brietbart News website which is marketed as 'the platform for the Alt-Right'. This brought the movement into the spotlight and prompted Trump's opponent, Hilary Clinton, to label the political stance as 'emerging racist ideology' (Main, 2018). The alt-right embodies most of the well-known far-right issues including gun rights, free speech, nationalism, anti-feminism and anti-migration. Yet, it is widely considered to be more radical and dangerous than the right-wing extremism of past decades. Thomas J. Main asserts that there are four distinctive features of the movement: a rejection of liberal democracy, white racialism, anti-Americanism and vitriolic rhetoric (Main, 2018). I argue the latter two elements are what set the alt-right apart from other right-wing groups and contribute to the heightened perception of danger. Anti-Americanism can be understood as an aversion to racial equality, in that alt-right adherents believe the white race is superior and therefore should be politically dominant. As I

have witnessed in my research on Gab, the language used by alt-right supporters indulges in offensive stereotyping and coarse humour, and this has become normalised.

4.2 After 'The Purge' - Enter Gab & other free speech apps

"Platforms, as sociotechnical infrastructure, will adapt to new forms and norms of conduct, but the values that support design must also support a diversity of tactics and users" (Donovan, Lewis & Friedberg, 2018).

As I have pointed out in Chapter 1, I consider free speech platforms to include any social media service that explicitly references an intent to allow open, unregulated speech, limited content moderation and a somewhat liberation from the constraints of mainstream social sites and the order of 'big tech'. In a way, free speech platforms have embodied the populist ideals set by Donald Trump in that they reject the established etiquette of online communication and convey a purpose of giving power back to 'the people'. These alternative platforms began to emerge in 2016, when Trump was elected as U.S. President, and when mainstream platforms such as Facebook and Twitter began to take a more critical look at their users and what sort of content they were sharing, resulting in thousands of accounts being blocked, temporarily suspended or banned altogether. This included the accounts of alt-right leader Richard Spencer, who responded on his YouTube channel saying, ''It's corporate Stalinism, in the sense that there is a great purge going on, and they're purging people on the basis of their views'' (Andrews, 2016). Spencer tried to frame this crackdown by social media platforms as a victory for the alt-right movement, suggesting it was a 'clear sign' the alt-right had power and was changing the world (Andrews, 2016). Many alt-right supporters and other extremist followers referred to this period as 'the great purge', leading them to new apps that became a kind of lifeboat for the radical right, welcoming them to express their views freely and promising never to censor their posts (Munn, 2021). Newer platforms have lured conservatives and alt-right figures with promises of a safe haven free from perceived censorship. Yet, while these platforms are leading some form of ideological competition against their dominant counterparts (Twitter, Facebook,

Youtube) it appears they are becoming a sanctum for misinformation and hate speech. For example, instead of moderating content, Gab says in the help section of its website that it leaves it up to the user to mute or block accounts they find offensive.

Other platforms that have emerged since 'the purge' in 2016 include Gettr, BitChute and Parler. Gettr is a new player in the alternative social media scene, it was founded in July 2021 and according to its web interface, it's "a brand new social media platform founded on the principles of free speech, independent thought and rejecting political censorship and 'cancel culture'" (Gettr, 2022). Like Gab, Gettr explicitly references a stance against censorship, and standing up against what it calls 'Silicon Valley's tyrannical overreach'. The platform was founded by former Trump staffer, Jason Miller, and the interface appears similar to that of Twitter. The recent establishment of Gettr, and Donald Trump's Truth Social referenced in the first chapter of this thesis clearly indicates that fringe communities have continued to find a place to express their views online and connect with new users, despite the events of January 6 which led to a U.S. government audit of social platforms.

BitChute was launched in 2017 and is best described as a free speech alternative to YouTube. It is a video hosting platform that previous research has shown to be primarily used for news and political commentary, attracting 'news-like' channels that deliver mostly conspiracy-driven content (Buntain, 2020). It is notable that whilst BitChute does reference freedom of expression and 'putting creators first', the language and terms of use in the site's description is perhaps more cautionary, with a list of community guidelines and 'flagging and reporting tools' for content that violates the guidelines. However, it's difficult to ascertain if and how those guidelines are enforced. As illustrated in the below screenshot from January 2023, BitChute is hosting video supporting Covid-19 conspiracy theories, disinformation about news organisations, anti-transgender rhetoric and political commentary (featuring an image of alt-right symbol Pepe the frog).
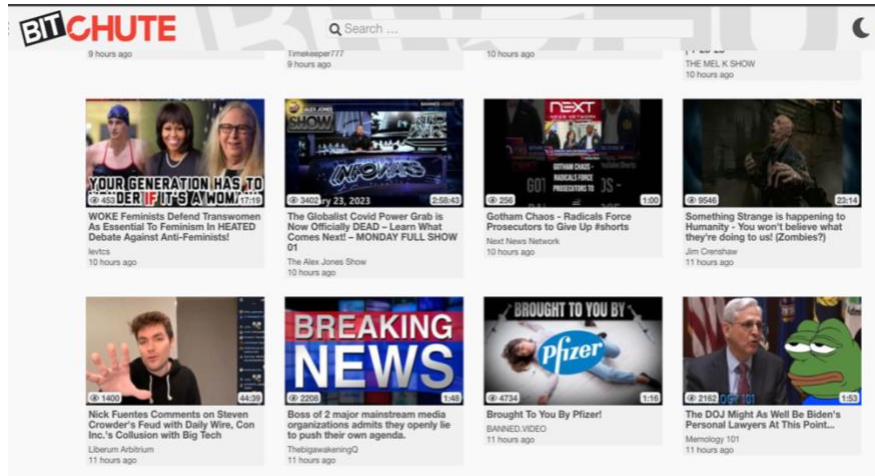
Parler emerged in 2018 as a social media site for free speech and gained notoriety after the Capitol Hill attack. According to the Pew Research Center, Parler is now the best known alternative social media site in the United States, with 38 percent of adults saying they have heard of it (PRC, 2022). Parler's app was removed from the Google and Apple app stores after the January 6 riot, as investigators discovered people had used the platform to help plan and broadcast the event. However, Parler has since returned to each store after adding new moderation features in response to criticism over the platform's role in the insurrection. Parler has been described as a 'hyper-conservative' platform attracting a large user base including politicians, media figures and influencers (Munn, 2021). Crucially, regarding the January 6 attack, GPS metadata associated with Parler posts showed how its users breached the U.S. Capitol, posting videos from the hallways, offices, and stairwells of the government building (Munn, 2021). As with Gab, a lot of the material that circulated prior to and during the Capitol Hill attack that encouraged violence has been taken down from Parler, either by users or when the app was temporarily shut down.

In reviewing the common elements of free speech platforms, it is clear that there is some form of resistance against what is deemed 'big tech' and corporate control over speech. Alternative platforms have also capitalised on the increasing criticism mainstream platforms have been facing over the use of users' personal data and algorithmic practices. Whether they make explicit reference to hosting right-wing discourse or not, the very existence of free speech apps

plays into the anti-establishment narrative championed by the alt-right movement. In a way, not only did 2016 herald a populist government in the U.S. led by Donald Trump, but it also marked the emergence of populist digital infrastructure, comprised of alternative platforms. Minimal content regulation is a recurrent theme in the practice of free speech platforms. This empowers users to upload, share and discuss material that would typically be restricted on mainstream sites including content deemed hateful, violent, false or unethical. Whilst major platforms like Facebook and Twitter claim to be enhancing moderation techniques, the process is fraught with difficulties and nuances, particularly as extremist groups constantly adapt their communication methods with new terms and codes. Vetting can be carried out through algorithms designed to detect problematic imagery and language, or in most cases it is performed by human agents.

Content moderation and the challenges it presents has been explored in Mark Sample's digital artwork, 'Content Moderator Sim'. The work "puts you in the role of a subcontractor whose job is to keep your social media platform safe and respectable" (Sample, 2020). It highlights the time pressures of the position, the disturbing nature of some content and often conflicting priorities as companies seek to increase user engagement yet eliminate controversial content at the same time. The screenshots from the work displayed below reveal features such as case tallies, the time designated for the reviewing of each item and what we can assume are the thought processes of the reviewer. In each instance, the moderator is given a choice to approve or block the post. Of course, this work is just one critical representation of content moderation, yet it exemplifies the complex assemblage of actors involved and raises issues about social media regulation that may be misunderstood by observers. This includes the sheer amount of material that can pass through content moderation units, as well as the subjective standards set by platforms for publishing decisions to be made in short time frames. It underscores the nuances of the process and how competing interests can result in rules and guidelines being overlooked. The themes inherent in Mark Sample's digital artwork including mental health strain, time pressure and graphic descriptions or images have also been raised by content moderation employees. Giving evidence to a parliamentary committee in Ireland in 2021, a Facebook worker described processing up to 100 posts each shift with insufficient mental

health care or support (Criddle, 2021). Facebook currently uses a combination of algorithms and human moderators to review content and the platform says it plans to reduce the number of human agents in future. But some employees claim this is a "fantasy" and systems are "not even near that stage" (Criddle, 2021). Furthermore, many content moderators are required to sign non-disclosure agreements so they are unable to discuss specific details of the challenges they face with friends or family (Criddle, 2021).

Content Moderator Sim

A Workplace Horror Game

by Mark Sample

It's close to the end of an **8 hour shift** at ViralTitans, Inc., the third largest online content moderation subcontractor in the Valley.

You have screened 927 cases today.
Time Remaining to Review this Case:

The next case is an animated GIF. A Karen meme.

Slightly misogynistic. But also anti-racist? Maybe? Somebody probably finds it funny. The Impact font softens the blow and the GIF blends in with all the other memes.

Approve or Block this post?
Approve
Block

You have screened 1245 cases today.
Time Remaining to Review this Case:

Somebody flagged an event. Hosted by a militia. Something something Storm Guard wants armed intervention at a protest in a mid-sized Midwestern city.

One comment asks what kind of guns to bring. An event organizer says, Bring Everything. (You've lost track of how many times this post has been flagged today. It's still here. Nothing ever seems to go away.)

Approve or Block this post?
Approve
Block

(Source: Mark Sample)

4.3 Donald Trump's 'Fake News Media'

There are many factors that made Donald Trump an unprecedented U.S. President. One element that is of particular interest for the purpose of this thesis is Trump's blatant disregard for most established news organisations and combative behaviour towards certain networks and journalists that he considered to be 'fake'. Trump once declared that much of the media was "the enemy of the American people" and in 2018 he banned the press access pass of a CNN White House Correspondent because he didn't like their line of questioning (Stelter, 2018). Whilst alt-right groups and other fringe conspiracy theorists already believed the mainstream media was corrupt and untrustworthy, Donald Trump pushed this to a new level and arguably galvanised more members of his support network to adhere to this belief. Moreover, because this made Trump's remarks even more newsworthy, the way outlets responded to his criticism in rebroadcasting it only served to amplify coverage and increase visibility (Wells et al., 2020). Regardless of the accuracy of Trump's claims in branding many media organisations as fake, there is no denying that his repeated comments have an impact in shaping public opinion. Whilst Trump's 'fake news' phrase may have seemed trivial and almost humourous to some audiences in the beginning, over four years in office his continued aggressive rhetoric against liberal media sources worked to reinforce rebellious sentiment among his supporters. Essentially, Trump is a proponent of post-truth. His constant denial of news he didn't like reinforces the notion that it's acceptable to have your own version of truth, and to uphold certain ideals and beliefs despite facts proving otherwise.

In addition to the increased distrust promoted by Donald Trump's rhetoric, the news industry was already grappling with challenges brought by the digital advancements of the past couple of decades. Today, audiences actively participate in the generation of and flow of news content from uploading images to social media to commenting on and/or sharing published material. Organisations have responded to this by prioritising digital strategies that include the use of automated social media posts over traditional broadcast outlets including television and print. As is the case with most industries adapting to new technologies, platforms bring a wealth of benefits in how we receive news, yet they have also presented serious obstacles for credibility.

Platforms have somewhat hijacked the link between news consumers and news producers. Digital audiences will now mostly access news content through a platform rather than by directly visiting a news website. Furthermore, platforms have provided a space for non-journalists and amateur publishers to reach a mass audience. The rise of what's known as citizen journalism involves the work of non-journalists engaging in journalistic activities to produce journalistic outputs, including news (Edson et al., 2017). Axel Bruns coined the term 'produser' to best describe the role as that of a hybrid user-producer (Bruns, 2008). Produsers represent a newly powerful audience, to whom industry had to respond and accommodate (Bird, 2011). Furthermore, with increased abilities to self-publish, it has been argued that users are moving towards owning the digital mediascape and are now able to share in, if not completely dictate the terms (Bird, 2011). I believe produsers certainly have an increased stake in shaping platforms, but the 'produsage revolution' has not resulted in citizen control.

The implications of this paradigm shift in news profoundly impacts how public opinion is formed as well as "the construction of social perceptions, framing of narratives; it influences policymaking, political communication, and the evolution of public debate, especially when issues are controversial" (Cinelli et al., 2020). Participatory online news has almost come full circle, from the initial resistance of professional journalists fearing a breakdown in standards, to celebration of mass participation and global reach, and in the present time concerns of strategic manipulation. Considering the proliferation of hateful messages in news comment sections and on social media platforms, some may argue that user participation has almost become more of a polarising force as opposed to a democratic one. As Thomas Quandt asserts, "the idea of free, high-quality user generated content in the context of professional online new media is seemingly half dead" (Quandt, 2018). Paradoxically, increased user participation seems to be both the problem and solution in ensuring a diverse and vigorous media landscape.

4.4 The spread of right-wing discourse and iconography around January 6th, 2021

> "Whether paraded on flagpoles or tattooed on the skin of seditionists, these symbols shared a common call, harkening back to an idealized history with white Christian men at the front and center" (Romey, 2021)

In this sub-chapter, I have considered the history and motives of some of the distinct groups and identities involved in the January 6th insurrection. In doing so, I also introduced some right-wing symbols and codes associated with these groups that were on display during the riot and considered why they are important. In the following sub-chapter, I've analysed a handful of posts taken from Gab on or before January 6th, 2021, that can be seen as evidence of planning and incitement. This background was crucial to draw connections in rhetoric, imagery, symbols and themes with the memes I have gathered from Gab.

- **QAnon**

QAnon is an ideologically motivated and violent extremist movement founded upon a conspiracy theory that a global 'Deep State' network of satanic pedophile elites is responsible for all the evil in the world (Jensen & Kane, 2021). QAnon followers also believe that this network is seeking to bring down Donald Trump, whom they see as the world's only hope in defeating it. The conspiracy started when an anonymous person known as 'Q' began posting a series of far-fetched claims about the 'Deep State'. The movement became well-known in 2016 in what's known as the 'Pizzagate' scandal, whereby a man who was radicalised by the QAnon theory began shooting in a Washington DC pizza shop that he believed was linked to former Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and the pedophile criminal network (Jenson & Kane, 2021). The man was misled, and no one was injured. Despite the outlandish claims central to QAnon, the theory spread rapidly during Donald Trump's years as president and in 2020 an opinion poll found at least half of Trump's supporters believed Democrats were involved in an elite child sex-trafficking ring (Jenson & Kane, 2021). Many QAnon followers equate their dedication to the movement as a religion. Believers claim they are awaiting two major events which are the Storm, when there would be a mass arrest of corrupt people in high-profile

positions, and the Great Awakening, when everyone will realise the QAnon theory was accurate the whole time (Forrest, 2021).

Many rioters who stormed the U.S. Capitol did so with clothing or flags that were marked with Q symbols, as seen in the images below. The picture on the left shows Jason Chansley (middle), who is perhaps one of the most recognised figures from January 6. Images of him wearing a shaman outfit leading rioters through Congress went viral. He has since been sentenced to 41 months in prison for his role in the attack. Many rioters wore military attire and items that carried historical imagery, but Chansley's 'Viking warrior image' was unique. Bearing his chest, "...he is tattooed with Norse and Viking symbols that, in a far-right context, evoke the whiteness of ancient Scandinavians" (Romey, 2021). Historical iconography is significant to followers of the QAnon movement because it emphasises connection to a time prior to the evil forces of the so-called 'Deep State'. In the picture on the right, a protester is seen wearing a shirt with a large Q, printed with the backdrop of the U.S. flag and an eagle appearing in the centre. Above the Q, there is an emblem reading 'Trust the plan' which could be interpreted as foreshadowing 'the Storm' and 'the Great Awakening' events which I have just referred to. The symbolism of the American flag and the eagle reveals QAnon believers connect their activism heavily with patriotism, nationalism and freedom.

Jason Chansley dressed as 'QAnon Shaman' (Source: AP News)

Protester wearing Q t-shirt (Source: Manuel Balce Ceneta/AP)

- **Proud Boys**

The Proud Boys is a far-right, all-male organisation that has a history of using violence against left-wing opponents at protest rallies (Greig, 2021). The group was founded by noted racist, anti-Semite and Islamophobe Gavin McInnes, who was once a media commentator and co-founder of the online news company, Vice Media (Kenes, 2021). The group describes themselves as 'Western chauvinists' by which they mean "men who refuse to apologise for creating the modern world" (McBain, 2020). The Proud Boys rose to national prominence in 2020, when Donald Trump was asked about his failure to condemn white supremacists and right-wing militia, telling members to "stand back and stand by" during a presidential debate. That message was interpreted by some members of the Proud Boys as marching orders (Kenes, 2021). Like many right-wing extremist groups in the U.S., The Proud Boys' loose organisational structure makes it hard to estimate its overall size, though most experts suggest there are several thousand members in America and a handful of international chapters (McBain, 2020). As noted in the below image on the right, the use of the cartoon character Pepe the frog, which has been co-opted by the larger alt-right movement as a symbol, has been used to build group identity (Kenes, 2021). The Proud Boys depict Pepe wearing the Proud Boys' uniform and flashing what's known as the 'OK' hand symbol. This gesture has been listed as a symbol of hate by The Anti-Defamation League, which is a Jewish civil rights group based in the U.S. (Allyn, 2019). The gesture was initially used in memes and as an emoji comment on internet message boards such as 4chan, and it evolved to be so widespread that in 2019 observers said it could no longer be considered a prank (Allyn, 2019). In the picture below on the left, members of the Proud Boys at the Capitol on January 6 were photographed giving the 'OK' gesture. Clearly, the Proud Boys use clothing and branding to cement membership and to make their political and ideological affiliation visible (Kenes, 2021). The Proud Boys announced in the days before the insurrection that members would forgo their traditional black and gold attire for black clothing and bright orange hats. Some members still wore the Proud Boys logo.

As of February 2023, Proud Boys National Chairman Enrique Tarrio and several other members are facing trial for their involvement in the Capitol attack. Tarrio was not present in Washington

DC on January 6 and was in fact briefly arrested a few days prior for separate offences. However, messages obtained by prosecutors show how he incited and planned violence, instructing the group's members to storm the government building (AP News, 2023). Case documents show that on January 6th 2021, Enrique Tarrio posted messages to Proud Boys members on social media reading, "Do what must be done #WeThePeople", "Don't fucking leave", "Proud of My Boys and my country" (DOJ, 2023).

Proud Boys (Source: CNN Illustrations/Jim Urquhart/Reuters)

(Source: Kenes, 2021)

(Source: National Geographic, 2021)

- **Three Percent Militia**

The Three Percent Militia, also known as the Three Percenters, is an anti-government paramilitary group that formed in 2008. The name itself is a reference to the fraudulent claim that only three percent of the population fought against the British during the American Revolution in the 1700s (Washington Post, 2023). The group is traced back to a blog post by the late activist Mike Vanderboegh, who promoted 'Three Percenters' as gun owners who would

not support the next gun control act. Vanderboegh also headed a militia-style group called 'Sons of Liberty' in the 1990s (SPLC, 2023). According to the Southern Poverty Law Centre, Three Percenterism is a sub-ideology or common belief that falls within a larger anti-government militia movement (SPLC, 2023). There are several factions of the group headquartered in different parts of the United States, for example III% Security Force, III% United Patriots and III% Georgia Martyrs (SPLC, 2023). They are pro-gun, fiercely patriotic and self-described as on a quest to rid America of 'tyranny' (Somos, 2021). In fact, the group's slogan is 'when tyranny becomes law, rebellion becomes our duty'. The group is often illustrated in flags and patches on clothing by the roman numeral for three. Three Percent Militia have adopted what's known as the Betsy Ross flag. It's an early version of the American flag from the 1700s that features a 13-star circle. These days, the flag is often used as a symbol within white supremacist and nationalist groups. As Journalist Janice Williams asserts:

> "its origin is steeped in a time period where America was a slavery-driven and openly racist country. The values of that era persist within American culture, with white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan using the Betsy Ross Flag in its propaganda in more recent times" (Williams, 2019).

The militia group also utilises a gesture that appears similar to the 'OK' hand symbol used by the Proud Boys as discussed above. Three Percenters members use outstretched middle, ring and pinkie fingers to represent the roman numeral for three. However, the group is not explicitly affiliated with white supremacy. The Three Percenters have mobilised in support of Donald Trump, and in opposition to gun regulation, pandemic-related shutdowns and racial justice protests (Washington Post, 2023). Several rioters associated with the Three Percent Militia were arrested and charged for their involvement in the Capitol attack. One associate, Guy Reffitt, has been sentenced to seven years in prison. Prosecutors say he told fellow members that he wanted to drag the House speaker at the time, Nancy Pelosi, out of the building by her ankles "with her head hitting every step on the way down" (The Guardian, 2022).

Three Percenters flag (Source: Shannon Stapleton/Reuters)   Letter to Three Percenters (Source: U.S. DOJ/District of Columbia)
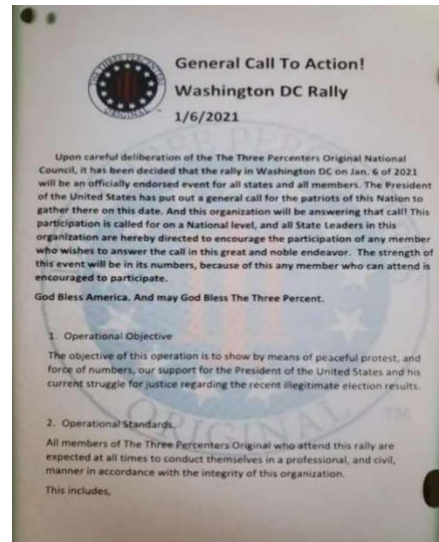
- **Oath Keepers**

The Oath Keepers is another anti-government, right-wing fringe organisation that is a part of the broader patriot movement. It was founded in 2009 by Army veteran Stewart Rhodes and many members are affiliated with the belief of a 'New World Order' threatening Americans. According to the Anti-Defamation League, the conspiracy theory of an impending one-world government underpins the motivation behind The Oath Keepers (ADL, 2023). The Oath Keepers have notably focused their recruiting efforts on members of the police or law enforcement, firefighters and active or former military (Somos, 2021). It is also considered one of the larger extremist organisations operating in the U.S., with at least a few thousand adherents, though there is some overlap with the Three Percent Militia. The group's leaders believe their members will follow the notion of what it means to take an oath to protect the Constitution against "all enemies both foreign and domestic" (ADL, 2023). They have several promotional and recruitment strategies to remain at the forefront of activist movements in America, with the group posting billboards near military bases and sending promotional material to serving military members and their families (Somos, 2021).

The Oath Keepers' yellow logo takes inspiration from the U.S. Army Ranger tab, revealing further aspirational links the group has to being an established armed force. Founder Stuart Rhodes and several other Oath Keepers members have been convicted of seditious conspiracy

for their roles in the January 6th attack. They are the first people in decades to be found guilty of the rarely used Civil War-era charge, which involves intent to overthrow or destroy a government or established authority by force (Associated Press, 2023). Although, it is worth noting at the time of writing that several members of The Proud Boys are also facing the same charge. During the trials, prosecutors told jurors that Rhodes and others began preparing an armed rebellion to keep Trump in power shortly after the 2020 election. Messages revealed Rhodes and the Oath Keepers discussing a potential 'bloody' civil war and the need to keep Democrat Joe Biden out of the White House (Associated Press, 2023). Prosecutors also alleged that members of The Oath Keepers kept a stash of weapons at a hotel that could be brought in to support so-called 'quick reaction force' teams at the Capitol on January 6th, 2021.

Men in Oath Keepers attire (Source: AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta)   Man on right in Oath Keepers cap (Source: Getty images)

Oath Keepers outside Capitol (Source: U.S. DOJ/District of Columbia)

This is not an exhaustive list of all the groups, affiliations and individuals involved in the January 6th attack, but in looking at some of these organisations and drawing parallels in their aims and

motivations, we're able to get a clearer picture of several things. First, the overall scale of organised right-wing activity in the United States at the time of the insurrection. Second, how these groups galvanised against the perceived yet fraudulent threat of electoral injustice and the ousting of a President they idolised. Third, the level of fragmentation in what can be seen as the larger right-wing resistance movement, given the distinctions and nuances of each individual group. This also points to the difficulty that exists in monitoring each faction and understanding the specific iconography they associate with and how they communicate. Moreover, the nature of belonging to many of these groups or identifying as a member can be informal and is largely manifested online.

Indeed, whilst there had been some notable incidents prior to the U.S. insurrection, it can be argued that the scale of the offline threat posed by right-wing extremist groups only became apparent on January 6th, 2021. I believe this is because public opinion surrounding the communication methods and spaces employed by extremist groups is oftentimes somewhat dismissive. For example, the sharing of memes that appeal to niche communities on an alternative platform like Gab may be considered as simply playful, misguided or inconsequential. In her book '*Culture Warlords: My Journey Into the Dark Web of White Supremacy'* American journalist and author, Talia Lavin, discusses the dangerous and toxic mix between perceived goofiness and fascism that is inherent in many extremist organisations (Lavin, 2020). Lavin argues that the playful façade often presented online can be used as a cover for political allies to dismiss right-wing extremist groups as unserious (Lavin, 2020). There are several tropes evident in this discussion about right-wing extremist groups involved in the Capitol riots. Many identities feature similar symbols, gestures and icons. There is an overwhelming connection to military style clothing and logos. As noted in the images above, members of extremist groups wore army camouflage attire, combat helmets, vests and even gas masks during the Capitol Hill attack. Utilising semiotic theory to read these images, the choice of clothing in this context can signify the intent or expectation of conflict. Many rioters have been photographed shouting, raising their arms or making hand gestures as I have just described. Not only does this body language suggest they were protesting, but coupled with the military style clothing, they appear to be poised to attack. There is also a convergence of

symbols and codes that bear meaning within a group identity, including the 3 Percenters flag, Betsy Ross flag and 'ok' hand gesture. Separate to the distinct uniforms of groups such as The Proud Boys and The Oath Keepers, hundreds of rioters also wore red caps or beanies and carried 'Trump 2020' red flags. Here, the colour red can be interpreted in several ways but the most prominent meaning in this context is the political connection that the colour represents the U.S. Republican party. Also, red is also associated with aggression, passion and initiative. All of these connotations can be applied to Donald Trump and his supporters in that they had hope and inspiration for what they asserted to be a restoration of the nation.

- **Evidence of planning and incitement on Gab**

Fearing criminal prosecution, it is clear that many Gab users have taken down much of the content related to the January 6th U.S. insurrection. It also proved difficult to find this material republished by news outlets, in academic sources or on public research forums. Therefore, in order to illustrate how Gab was involved in the premeditation and planning of the Capitol Hill attack, I conducted my own background search of the platform to uncover some posts that remain. I performed this search by looking up various hashtags, including #CivilWar2021 and #StopTheSteal and scrolling through the results to see what was posted on or before January 6, 2021, that clearly indicated an impending event or call to action. To ensure the ethical use of this material usernames and display pictures were removed.

In the six posts that I present below, there are several references to consider. Each post invokes an overwhelming sense of an upcoming battle, not only to correct alleged election fraud but also to enact 'The Plan' and save the country. Interestingly, the first post features a news headline that at first glance may seem fake - 'Arizona Republican Party calls on supporters to fight to the death for Trump'. As shocking as this sounds, it did happen in a series of now deleted tweets in December 2020. The Arizona Republican Party's official Twitter account shared a tweet a from Trump supporter, who posted: "I am willing to give my life for this fight", referring to alleged election fraud. The party responded by asking: "He is. Are you?". In another tweet, the party shared a clip from the 2008 film 'Rambo' with the title character saying, "This is what we do, who we are. Live for nothing or die for something." (CBS News, 2020). The Gab

post from December 9, 2020 asks viewers 'So when is political violence justified? It's a legitimate question. If your answer is Never then you haven't really thought about it.' Other posts make reference to QAnon's 'Deep State' theory which purports that members of the ruling elite are part of an underground child sex trafficking ring. Gabbers also address each other as Patriots in some of the posts, symbolising a sense of duty to the country. The rhetoric is almost war-like, including comments such as "Strong words and God can't help us now. Only our weapons and the burning desire to Keep America ours". Others say, "Nothing can stop what is coming", "The Plan is about to unfold". One post includes an image of a partial skull that is draped in the U.S. flag with fire burning in the eye sockets. The Capitol building is in the background amid a black and white stormy scene with the text 'I'm with you, I will fight for you, and I will win for you – President D Trump'. This image could be interpreted as a foreshadowing of the so-called storm event that is perpetuated by the QAnon movement. The conspiracy theory suggests there will one day be a mass ousting of corrupt leaders and officials.

(Source: Gab)

CHAPTER FIVE – AFTER THE U.S. INSURRECTION: MEMES ON GAB

5.1 Data collection - Memes on Gab post January 6th, 2021

In this chapter, I present 30 memes gathered from Gab subgroups G/News and
G/ElectionIntegrity (formerly G/StopTheSteal) as outlined in the methodology. Each artefact is
numbered (Meme 1-30) but they have been presented in no specific order. Following this, in
section 5.2, I present my analysis of the key themes drawn from this social semiotic multimodal
reading and apply the outcomes to the theoretical framework that underpinned my project.

Meme 1   *Meme 2*

Meme 1 utilises several modes including text, colour, stance/body language, image and spatial
representation. The text is presented in capital letters along the top and bottom border of the
item, reading 'America's going to hell and we all know why'. In the centre of the artefact, there
are images of U.S. President Joe Biden and his wife Jill as well as former Democratic President
Barack Obama and his wife Michelle. They are calmly standing and smiling amongst a fiery and
mountainous landscape. In this instance, the meaning derived from the meme is literal and
overstated in that the inter-semiotic relations between the text, use of red, orange and black
colours and image of a hellish landscape illustrate a clear linking of U.S. Democratic leaders and
hell. Also, the reference in the text 'we all know why' appeals to the anti-liberal group identity
on Gab. The composed and friendly appearance of the people in the meme juxtaposed with the

apocalyptic background suggests that they may consider this to be a favourable environment, or that they are pleased with the current state of affairs.

Meme 2 depicts a U.S. flag on a black background with bold white text which reads 'Stop with the Trump 2024 Bullshit. He was elected by us in 2020! This must be resolved!'. The U.S. flag in the image is presented in a downward portrait position and it appears slightly tattered which could signify that the country is not at its best in the current moment, or in combination with the text it could be interpreted that the flag represents a diminished and corrupt country. This notion is reinforced by the black background. The semiotic resources employed in this meme could draw patriotic meaning and a call to action, as signified by the text, flag and use of exclamation marks. There is also a group reference here, with the use of 'us' in the text and collective call to action to 'resolve' electoral wrongdoing.

Meme 3	Meme 4

In Meme 3 we see a remixed version of a popular meme that was inspired by the film series 'The Lord of the Rings'. According to the website, KnowYourMeme.com, the item typically includes the text 'One does not simply' and an image of the film character Boromir, who originally says the line 'One does not simply walk into Mordor' in the 2001 film. In this instance, the text has been altered to read 'One does not simply 'get over' election fraud'. The image of Boromir has also been manipulated to show him raising his middle finger as he gazes off to the left of the image. The body language of raising a middle finger commonly signifies anger and rebellion. This, coupled with the quotation marks around the phrase 'get over' indicates a

rejection of calls to move on from claims of election fraud. In this context, it can be assumed those calls are coming from the mainstream media, liberal supporters and U.S. Democratic leaders. The meme creator is trying to convey a defiant stance, doubling down on allegations of vote rigging and displaying a universal symbol of anger to those suggesting one should 'get over' election fraud claims.

Meme 4 shows a picture of Donald Trump against a green landscape with bold white text over black bordering. Trump is gazing at the audience with an engaged and serious facial expression. The white text reads 'America needs this man now more than ever'. The illumination of Donald Trump in the centre of the image with darker borders conveys that the meme creator wants to present him as somewhat of a national saviour. Trump appears calm, self-assured and makes direct eye contact with the viewer symbolising sincerity. He is wearing a red tie that could signify his Republican politics. The colour red also denotes passion and urgency which could be interpreted as his desire to return as U.S. President.

Meme 5   *Meme 6*

In Meme 5 the artefact has been visually divided into three sections, with the top half showing a large shadow of a roaring lion with a smaller image of Donald Trump walking alongside, as though he is casting the shadow. The bottom half is split in half with one section showing a shadow of a curled snake that is raised in a motion indicating it is ready to bite. U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris is shown confidently striding alongside the shadow wearing high heels and carrying a handbag. This image has been altered from an artwork that went viral when

Kamala Harris was declared vice president-elect. The original image was made by Artist Bria Goeller, showing Ms Harris casting the shadow of iconic U.S. civil rights activist Ruby Bridges. Both Goeller's artwork and the 1964 painting of Ruby Bridges that inspired the modern work are shown below.

(Source: Norman Rockwell Museum)

The third section of this artefact in the bottom right corner shows Joe Biden casting the shadow of an old, hunched back man using a walking aid. To those that are familiar with the animated comedy series 'Family Guy', this shadow is recognised as the character Herbert. In the series, Herbert is presented as decrepit and often behaves inappropriately with boys.

(Source: Fandom)

Considering these references, there are several meanings that can be drawn from this meme. Donald Trump is perceived as dominant and powerful, whilst Joe Biden is presented as infirm. To viewers who notice the Family Guy link, there's an insinuation Biden could be linked to the so-called 'Deep State' pedophilia ring purported by the QAnon theory. Kamala Harris may be perceived as unscrupulous, sneaky and manipulative given the portrayal of a snake as her shadow. This also makes fun of the earlier meme where Ms Harris casts the shadow of Ruby Bridges.

Meme 6 utilises image, text, colour and gaze. The artefact features 18 headshots of U.S. media personalities and journalists. There is a lot of bold text fit above and below the images, reading 'We all lied to you! Over and over again! We lied about the election, Russian collusion, the special counsel, obstruction, impeachment, Covid-19 and the riots. We lie every single day!' Many of the journalists featured are from the CNN network, including Jim Acosta who as previously mentioned was banned from White House press conferences by Donald Trump in 2017. The layout of this artefact makes it very clear that the meme creator means to indicate all the journalists pictured are liars and have been responsible for spreading fake news. The listing of several issues also conveys that the creator believes these affairs were wrongly reported. There is also emphasis on certain lines of text that have been printed in yellow 'We lied to you!', 'We lie every single day!' which reinforces the message that those pictured in this artefact are untrustworthy.

Meme 7	Meme 8

A remixed version of a 'Kermit the Frog' meme features in Meme 7. According to KnowYourMeme.com, this format became popular from 2014 and has been used to make fun of questionable behaviours and certain social situations. In this context, it seems the format has been employed to show insight or realisation about the behaviour of tech companies. The text reads 'Facebook and Twitter aren't banning hate speech they are banning speech they hate.' It could be interpreted that Kermit represents Gabbers, who have come to the platform after either being banned on Facebook and/or Twitter or realising that those platforms do not allow

free speech in the way that they value it. Given the context of where this meme has been posted (Gab) it also reinforces group identity in that Facebook and Twitter are positioned as oppositional powers that control speech and reject extreme right viewpoints.

Meme 8 includes the modes text, colour, image and font. The combination of red, yellow and black used in the artefact symbolises a need to pause and reflect on the information that is being presented. The top third of the meme includes the text 'Evidence of election fraud'. The middle section presents three images against a red background; the department of justice logo, the U.S. House of Representatives filled with lawmakers and a gavel/court hammer being used. Under these images there's text 'We didn't investigate. We voted not to investigate. We won't look' coinciding with each image respectively. Under this on a yellow background is the text 'We the people investigated! We have the evidence and we are not going away'. Each mode used in this meme works to convey that the U.S. government and institutional bodies have denied evidence of election fraud and it is up to 'the people' to continue their campaign against alleged electoral corruption. 'We the people' is a rally slogan that has been associated with The Proud Boys and Three Percent Militia in the past. This referential code draws on the cultural and group identity of the alt-right and it can be interpreted as an appeal to followers to step up their actions in sharing their alleged evidence.

Meme 9	*Meme 10*

There are a lot of elements presented in Meme 9 reinforcing the view that the 2020 election was rigged and the dismissal of efforts to investigate it has prompted outrage amongst the alt-

right. The modes employed include text, colour, image, facial expression and icons. The alt-right symbol 'Pepe the Frog' features in a series of images that have been presented in a comic style storyline with speech bubbles. From the change in expression across the four images, it is clear that Pepe is becoming increasingly furious as each icon representing U.S. Congress, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Department of Justice and Supreme Court reply 'No!' to Pepe's question 'Did you investigate election fraud?' The meme also includes an excerpt from a Supreme Court document related to the Brunson v. Adams lawsuit, which sought to remove President Biden and reinstate Donald Trump on the basis that lawmakers violated their oaths of office by refusing to investigate claims of election fraud (Pierides, 2023).

Former U.S. House Speaker, Democrat Nancy Pelosi, features in Meme 10, which refers to the Capitol Hill attack as 'J6', presumably standing for January 6. Pelosi is pictured in similar attire to Jason Chansley, or the 'QAnon Shaman', as referenced in Chapter 4 of this paper. Her face has been painted in red, blue and white to symbolise the U.S. flag, she is donned in fur and horns and appears to be holding a spear. The text reads 'The real architect of J6!'. This image suggests that Nancy Pelosi or the Democratic party more broadly was responsible for planning and carrying out the U.S. insurrection in January 2021, either due to election fraud or other means.
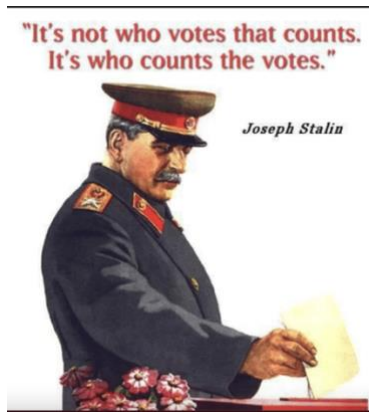
Meme 11	Meme 12
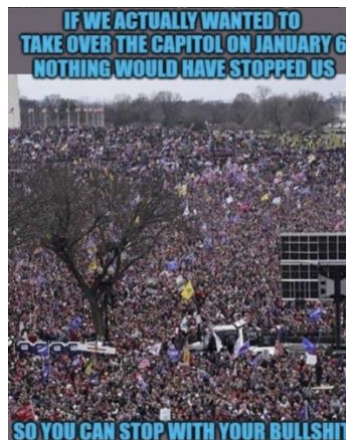
Meme 11 presents a historical image of the former Soviet Union leader Joseph Stalin placing a piece of paper in what we can assume is a ballot box. He appears to be wearing a Soviet army

uniform that features red elements, which in this context is a colour widely associated with communism. The text is also written in red, reading 'It's not who votes that counts. It's who counts the votes'. 'Joseph Stalin' is printed in black text beneath this, in a style to indicate this was a direct quote. This meme or very similar versions were posted on several social media platforms shortly after the 2020 U.S. election. Yet, according to PolitiFact which is an American fact-checking website, there is no credible evidence that Stalin ever made such comments (O'Rourke, 2019). It can be assumed this meme was shared on Gab to criticise the results of the 2020 U.S. election and draw comparisons between Stalin and the incoming U.S. President Joe Biden.

A powerful aerial image dominates Meme 12 along with blue text 'If we actually wanted to take over the Capitol on January 6 nothing would have stopped us so you can stop with your bullshit'. Upon conducting a reverse image search, I confirmed that this image was legitimate and had been taken from Donald Trump's 'Save America' rally that took place shortly before the insurrection on January 6, 2021. The photo was captured from an elevated position, showing the size of the crowd that had gathered. A few Trump flags, U.S. flags and Gadsen flags can be spotted in the crowd. The Gadsen flag features a yellow background with a coiled snake and the words 'Don't tread on me'. It is a historical flag that was used during the American revolution in the 1700s. The flag and phrase 'Don't tread on me' has since been co-opted by right-wing groups. This image combined with the text signifies defiance, suggesting that rioters could have done more on January 6. It is also perhaps a caution that Trump supporters and right-wing groups remain strong and are capable of bringing change through force. The artefact works to reinforce group identity and the us versus them dichotomy that has been drawn between Trump supporters/right-wing rioters and the rest of society.

Meme 13   **Meme 14**

Meme 13 draws on less modes compared to most others in this dataset, yet its meaning is clear and powerful. It utilises colour and text with a small, semi-translucent image of the U.S. flag in the top centre. Three words in the item are printed in red, highlighting they are the standout terms and deserve greater attention. The text reads 'Daily Reminder: The Presidential Election on November 3, 2020 was Stolen'. 'Daily Reminder' and 'Stolen' appear in red whilst the rest of the text is black on a white background. The capitalisation of 'Stolen' also illustrates the importance the meme creator was trying to convey. The item has a yellow border with a black stripe diagonally crossing through. This could be interpreted as imitating a warning sign or symbol. The fact this is presented as a daily reminder indicates this is an ongoing issue that requires regular attention and review.

Image, gaze, facial expression, colour and text has been used to create meaning in Meme 14. The bottom half of the image shows the words 'Election Fraud' in red with a border around it. This appears to be imitating the look of text that has been stamped. In the top half there are black and white images of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, former Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, U.S. President Joe Biden, Former President of Cuba Fidel Castro and former Soviet Union leader Joseph Stalin from left to right. Biden is pictured in the centre with a grimaced facial expression. The other leaders are positioned to be gazing toward Biden and these images are set behind silver bars which signify a prison cell. The inter-semiotic relations here point to the suggestion that all of the pictured leaders should be jailed because they have been responsible for election fraud. The fact Biden is in the centre and other subjects are glancing in

his direction suggests Biden is perhaps the worst culprit, or he has been encouraged by the other subjects. Given the other leaders have links to communism, socialism and have been considered authoritarians, it is also clear that the meme creator wants to present Joe Biden as somewhat of a dictator.

Meme 15   *Meme 16*

Meme 15 draws of the modes of colour, text and symbols to convey meaning. This artefact also invokes group identity by speaking directly to the viewer. The meme has been modeled from existing Trump campaign stickers. It has a deep blue background with red bordering as well as 5 white stars featuring at the top and bottom. The white text reads 'Trump won. I know it. You know it'. There is a black banner along the bottom of the artefact with white text reading 'And the FBI knows it.' Here, the bold and large typeface used for the words 'Trump won' highlights the importance of this message. The fact the FBI line has been printed along a black background, separate from the blue, red and stars, could suggest there is something sinister about this allegation. It also serves to create a distinction between what 'you and I' know versus what the FBI does.

Patriotic themes and colours also feature in Meme 16, which appears to take inspiration from historical 'Uncle Sam' American war posters, as illustrated below. Uncle Sam is a long-standing symbol of patriotism in the U.S. and several variations of his image have been used in military recruitment posters.

(Source: DNT Digital Library)

Uncle Sam is typically presented as an older man with grey hair and a grey beard, often wearing a top hat, white shirt and vest. Comparing Meme 16 to the war poster, it is clear the figure of the man is almost identical, wearing the same clothes and in the same pose, rolling up his sleeve. The meme also mimics the background which is an illustration of the U.S. flag. The white text in the meme reads, 'Get Involved! It's time to TAKE BACK AMERICA'. The capitalisation of the last phrase gives emphasis. This meme is multifaceted in the meanings it conveys, it can be seen as an appropriation of the historical war posters, encouraging Gabbers to join forces to 'take back America'. It could also be interpreted that there is some direct connection with Donald Trump's campaign slogan "Make America great again'. This meme is yet another example of how alt-right communities draw historical connections to conflicts and symbols.

Meme 17
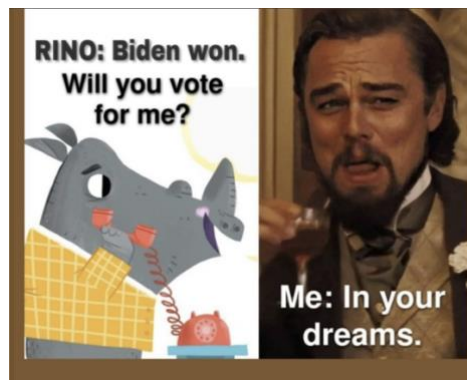
Meme 18

In Meme 17, two distinct images have been combined to represent a phone call setting. On the left-hand side there is a cartoon depiction of a Rhino wearing a yellow checked shirt holding a red phone to its ear. The black text reads 'RINO: Biden Won. Will you vote for me?' Here, RINO is an acronym that is known in U.S. political circles to mean Republican in name only, suggesting those who are labelled RINO deviate from the ideological values of the party. Interestingly, former President Trump used this insult against Republican leaders who failed to dispute the results of the 2020 election (Tomco, 2022). Prior knowledge of this is important to understand the meaning of this meme. On the right-hand side a popular meme featuring actor Leonardo DiCaprio in an image from the film 'Django Unchained' has been used. The character is shown with a surprised facial expression holding a glass of wine. The text accompanying this image reads 'Me: In your dreams.' This symbolises a dismissive reaction.

Meme 18 features an augmented image of voting rights campaigner and U.S. Democratic Politician Stacey Abrams. She is widely credited with increasing the turnout of Black voters in the 2020 Presidential election in the U.S. state of Georgia. In this artefact, it appears Abrams' face has been superimposed on a morbidly obese body wearing a blue shirt. She is holding a burger close to her face in one hand and there is a plate of burgers on a nearby table next to a mouse and keyboard. Her facial expression could indicate the superimposed image has been taken at a time when she was shouting and has been made to appear in this instance that she is aggressively eating. In the background of the artefact we can see mail-in voting papers. There is text along the top and bottom of the image reading 'Can we talk about the elephant in the room? ELECTION FRAUD…' Here, text, image and gesture has been used to suggest that Stacey Abrams instigated mail-in election fraud.

Text and colour are the only modes employed in Meme 19 yet there are multiple layers of meaning that could be derived from the artefact. It is set on a plain white background with black text reading 'My pronouns are Trump/Won. If you don't use them, you're a bigot.' The meme creator is capitalising on the cultural conflict between liberal groups and right-wing conservatives, as the use of pronouns in personal branding is widely perceived as a liberal action. The meme also attempts to draw a humourous link between the listing of one's preferred pronouns and identifying as a Trump supporter. This is pushed further in the second line of text, suggesting any denial of Donald Trump's alleged victory is hateful and intolerant. The antagonistic message reinforces implied cultural boundaries that define the alt-right and Trump supporters. Overall, this artefact is a prime example of how alt-right communities use memes to make affiliations between election denialism and political and cultural identities. Meme 20 has co-opted the design of a sticker that is commonly handed out to people after they have voted in the U.S. It features an American flag on the left side with the text 'I voted Joe Stole it' and beneath there is a hashtag '#Fix2020'. The text is printed in blue which is the same as the original version that simply reads 'I Voted', as pictured below. This artefact conveys that Joe Biden wrongfully claimed election victory in 2020 and there is a need to rectify it. Like Meme 19, this artefact serves as a cultural marker for those following the conspiracy that the 2020 Presidential election was mishandled.
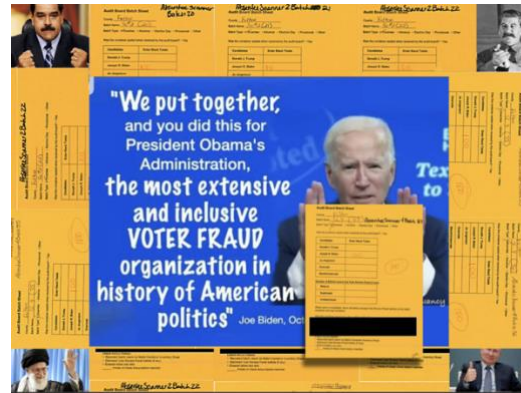
(Source: GPA Photo Archive)

Meme 21   *Meme 22*

Meme 21 uses a popular meme template that lists or displays items considered a 'starter pack'
for a particular identity. Text, image, body language and colour has been used to convey
meaning with the artefact featuring four distinct pictures. The text at the top of the meme
reads 'The "I'm too busy to research your stupid ELECTION FRAUD conspiracy theories" starter
pack'. Election fraud has been entered in red which signifies importance and is written with an
arrow above the rest of the text, which could indicate this meme has existed without the
reference to election fraud. The image in the top left shows three people each holding a beer
glass in a gesture that is commonly known as giving cheers. The image at the top right shows
two people with their hands on game controllers. One person is shown with headphones worn
around their neck. The bottom left picture features a man and a woman wearing numbered
sporting jerseys and gesturing as though they are cheering. Their gaze is off centre to the right
which suggests they are watching television. The man is also shown holding up a football. The
final image at the bottom right features several logos of news networks and television and
entertainment stations including ABC, Sony, CBS, Bloomberg, Walt Disney, CNBC, FOX and
Warner Brothers. Each of these four pictures work to convey that the actions pictured are a

distraction from the important task of researching election fraud. It also serves as a further marker of group identity with the implied suggestion that those who have researched election fraud would not participate in the pictured activities.

In Meme 22, links are again drawn between Joe Biden and Joseph Stalin. The artefact also features images of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The artefact employs image, colour, gesture and text to create meaning. The pictures of Stalin, Maduro, Putin and Khamenei are placed in the corners of the meme. Each of them appear to be gesturing in ways to signal victory or power. For example, Putin is giving a thumbs up whilst Maduro is holding up two fists. The background of the artefact is made up of orange audit papers. In the centre, we see an image of Joe Biden with the text 'We put together, and you did this for President Obama's administration, the most extensive and inclusive VOTER FRAUD organization in history of American Politics'. This is framed in blue to offset from the audit papers. This quote has been taken from a podcast in which Joe Biden did use the phrase 'voter fraud' which was a slip of the tongue when he was in fact discussing voter protection programs. The mistake was seized upon by Donald Trump and his allies immediately after it was broadcast in October 2020. The claim fed into baseless assertions repeated by Trump and others that a surge in mail voting could lead to fraud in November's election.

Meme 23   *Meme 24*
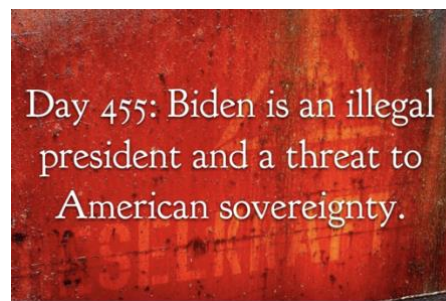
Meme 23 includes a photograph taken from a ballot counting centre in the U.S. city of Detroit shortly after the 2020 election. In this instance, the image has been misrepresented to suggest electoral workers were trying to hide or cover up alleged malpractice. The picture shows a man holding up a large white sheet over a window, with people gathered outside a door peering into a room. There are small black borders at the top and the bottom of the artefact featuring white text which reads 'Here's a photo from election night. Why do you think we don't trust the results?' Text is also printed near the man holding the white sheet which says 'People with nothing to hide' and near the crowd outside the door 'People sent to verify the vote'. In posting a direct question to the audience, viewers are invited to reflect on the image and make an assessment about what is happening in this scenario that is not captured in the image. This particular photo was in fact used in reporting by right-wing media outlets including FOX News and Brietbart News to allege there could be criminal activity at the voting centre (Darcy, 2020). In reality, the windows were only partially blocked in sections where poll workers were seated close-by and voter information could be compromised. So, the central image in this meme has been taken out of context and combined with the language used to label various elements, there is a misconstrued meaning.

The two modes of text and colour are employed in Meme 24. The white text printed over a red background reads 'Day 455: Biden is an illegal president and a threat to American sovereignty.' The message here can be interpreted in a similar fashion as Meme 13, which was presented as a daily reminder that the 2020 election was stolen. Here, the colour red signifies cause to stop and reflect upon the text. The language used to describe Biden as illegal and a threat reinforces the false narrative of election fraud. The specific reference to 'Day 455' indicates that this artefact marks 455 days since Biden took office.
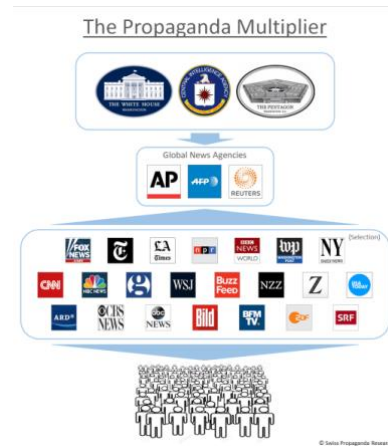
In Meme 25 we again notice the use of the alt-right symbol Pepe the Frog as a cultural marker. The modes of text, colour, image and facial expression have been engaged to develop meaning. The artefact is set on a green background with white text framing the image of Pepe looking downcast with a flat facial expression. There is a watchtower positioned behind the image of Pepe, indicating they are inside a prison. This is further reinforced by the text which reads 'January 6 Political Prisoners You Are Not Forgotten'. The reference to political prisoners suggests those who have been jailed over the January 6 attack were targeted for their political views rather than offences related to violence and obstruction of official proceedings. There is also a sense that these prisoners are somewhat idolised or held in high regard by the group, with the use of the phrase 'You are not forgotten'.

The U.S. government, institutions and the news media feature as targets in Meme 26. Text, icons and layout has been designed to portray 'The Propaganda Multiplier'. In a box at the top of the artefact we see icons of The White House, U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and The Pentagon. There is a wide blue arrow that points down to icons of the Associated Press news agency (AP), Agence France-Presse (AFP) and Reuters. This feeds down into a large box with icons of global news sources and then black drawn figures which symbolise a crowd or mass audience. Considering the modal affordances in this instance, it appears the meme creator is trying to illustrate the flow of 'propaganda' that originates from national authorities and is

disseminated by news organisations. The representation of the mass audience as identical, idle figures insinuates that members of the audience have little agency in this system.

Meme 27   **Meme 28**
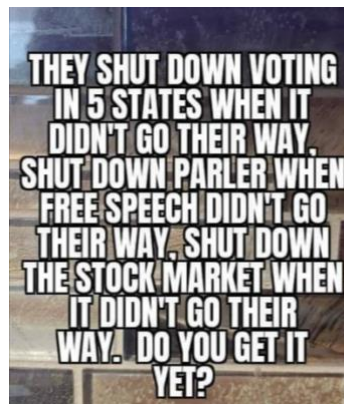
Meme 27 uses gesture, colour and text to convey meaning. A raised middle finger features prominently in the centre of the artefact. This was also seen in Meme 3. Here, focus has been drawn to the subject's hand by blurring their face in the background and presenting the image in black and white. As mentioned in the analysis of Meme 3, a raised middle finger is commonly understood to represent anger and defiance. The bold white text printed above and below the image reads 'To all the elites, politicians, health experts and so called journalists, we won't forget what you did to our world..' This implies that the listed groups have in some way damaged society. These modes work to establish group identities and distinguish between those creating and supporting the meme, from the first-person point of view, versus the identities named in the text. Similar to Meme 19, this artefact works to reinforce cultural opposition between liberal groups and Trump supporters. The two dots at the end of the text could indicate there is more to be said or action that could ensue. Usually, this is represented by three dots indicating an ellipsis and it's impossible to determine whether this was an error or done intentionally by the creator, yet it still lends meaning to the artefact overall.

Text and image convey meaning in Meme 28 with direct reference to the reader/viewer. The background image is difficult to determine but in context with the script it can be assumed the obscured figures may be ballot boxes or boxes containing election documents. The bold white text reads 'They shut down voting in 5 states when it didn't go their way. Shut down Parler

when free speech didn't go their way. Shut down the stock market when it didn't go their way. Do you get it yet?' This question to the viewer draws one in to reflect on the artefact and again capitalises on culture wars between what is regarded as the establishment and the people. In this instance 'they' have been positioned as the other and the enemy of 'you'. The meme creator provides no evidence to substantiate the claims listed in the artefact yet it is clear 'they' might refer to the U.S. Democrats and/or other governing bodies.

Meme 29   *Meme 30*

In Meme 29, two images are juxtaposed with red text. The top half of the artefact shows a person wearing a grey hat and shirt with a long dark beard. They are pointing a gun and gazing in the direction of the viewer with a determined facial expression and gritted teeth. It is also possible to make out a black and white image hanging on the wall in the background that appears similar to Islamic jihadist flags. The image at the bottom is a manipulated photo from Donald Trump's rally shortly before the January 6 insurrection. Crowds and U.S. flags are seen as well as large reflections of Trump on three projector screens. The red text running over these images states 'We went from "Not all Muslims are terrorists" to "All Trump supporters are terrorists"'. The meaning drawn from this artefact is criticism of the treatment of those involved in the Capitol riots, implying that all participants have unjustly been deemed domestic terrorists. The person pointing a gun in the top image is assumed to be a Muslim, conveying that the collective attitude 'not all Muslims are terrorists' is flawed.

The final meme includes image, text and layout to illustrate a portrayal of Joe Biden as a puppet, specifically Elmo from Sesame Street, which is a popular U.S. children's television

program. We know that Elmo has been positioned to represent Biden due to the placement of the text 'Joe Biden' in white over the torso of the puppet. The second figure in the artefact is recognised as Chinese President Xi Jinping and he is seen to be controlling the puppet due to the placement of his hand and gaze. President Xi reveals a content facial expression, indicating he is satisfied with the work of the puppet. The interaction of these elements signify that U.S. President Biden is controlled by China. It also conveys that Biden himself is ineffective and unable to carry out tasks without assistance.

5.2 Analysis of key themes in data collection

A number of themes emerged as a result of conducting a social semiotic multimodal analysis of the 30 memes collected in this study. In addition, this analysis illustrated how some of the concepts and phenomena reviewed in the theoretical framework are manifested through the sharing of memes on Gab. In assessing the ideological role of memes, I classified the above semiological readings into four groups in order to discuss the most prominent characteristics and phenomena. These are:

- Post-truth & Electoral fraud trope
- Alt-right identity & Culture wars
- Use of humour
- Preparatory media & Historical references

Post-truth & Electoral fraud trope

As expected, the most exaggerated and repeated trope was the false narrative of election fraud in the 2020 U.S. Presidential vote. This was explicitly evident in 25 of the 30 artefacts. In each instance text, image, gesture and/or icons have been used to promote and spread the belief that former U.S. President Donald Trump was robbed of election victory through alleged voting malpractice and corrupt dealings by the Democrats. The current U.S. President and Democratic leader Joe Biden was repeatedly represented as incompetent, fraudulent and in some cases infirm. This connotation was achieved through negative illustrations of President Biden such as

his positioning amongst a hellish landscape in meme 1, casting the shadow of a decrepit elderly man linked to the U.S. comedy cartoon 'Family Guy' in meme 5 and Biden's presentation as a puppet controlled by Chinese leader Xi Jinping in meme 30. Biden was also pictured behind bars to convey a prison scene in meme 24, and elsewhere he is referenced alongside the words stolen, fraud and illegal. A misquote was repeated in meme 22 where Joe Biden accidentally stated the words voter fraud instead of voter protection during the 2020 campaign period. All of these elements illustrate the way in which memes are used as shareable items of cultural content that can so easily perpetuate false information with a lack of context. In turn, the proliferation of these types of memes further ingrains and naturalises the phenomenon of post-truth on Gab.

The representation of former U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi as the 'QAnon Shaman' in artefact 10 with the label 'The real architect of J6!' is another example of how memes are used to further disinformation. In this instance, the meme creator intended to shift the blame for the U.S. insurrection onto the Democrats and left-wing groups. This example illustrates that in the current period of post-truth, the value of objectivity has diminished and one's choice of narrative is based on political and cultural identity. Furthermore, whilst memes can be passed off as unserious and inconsequential in some contexts, it is evident that they indeed have a real impact in advancing ideologies and repeating false messages to a point where this information is accepted.

From my analysis, it is evident that meme culture is a fundamental and symbiotic element of post-truth. In other words, the shareability and entertaining appeal of memes is central to the wider reinforcement of conspiracy theories and alt-right narratives about election corruption. Memes allow users to easily and efficiently connect and participate in alt-right discourse on Gab. Additionally, the sheer repetition of this viewpoint through meme iterations, coupled with the lack of any challenging or opposing information, works to generate an illusion of truth. Furthermore, the saturation of biased content witnessed in this analysis exemplifies how memes act like 'gateway drugs' to new and/or more extreme elements of fringe political identities, as discussed earlier in the theoretical framework. An example of this is meme 6, where several themes are listed in addition to the 2020 election including COVID-19 and alleged

Russian collusion. This can lead viewers down a rabbit hole of alt-right content, exposing them to further radical causes and issues.

Alt-right identity & Culture wars

Memes appear to be the primary media format for Gab users to create, spread and promote radical right-wing ideologies. In many cases, this is done so through appeals to kinship, group identity and culture wars against left-wing or liberals ideals. At least half of the memes gathered in this analysis exhibited some element of collective reference or alt-right cultural marker and in most instances, outsiders were represented as enemies. The use of plural first-person pronouns in several memes can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it may be assumed that those viewing the meme are undoubtedly of the same mindset. Second, it could be seen as an invitation for viewers to become part of this group affiliation. In either case, there was a distinct us versus them dichotomy derived from a number of the memes gathered. This was markedly observed in meme 19, 25, 27 and 28. In the latter two artefacts, oppositional forces are identified as 'elites, politicians, health experts and so-called journalists'. The language and rhetorical questions used in meme 27 and 28 suggest the world has been disrupted and impaired by governing and corporate forces. It is also implied that it is up to the alt-right as a collective group to bring change to the current world order.

Meme 7 highlighted the free speech culture war the alt-right movement has with major tech corporations, specifically social media giants Facebook and Twitter. As discussed in the theoretical framework, this dispute has been a long-running feature of the alt-right since Facebook and Twitter started to crackdown on hate speech in 2016. This meme alleges that both companies are banning 'speech they hate', which perpetuates the trope that governments and powerful elites are working to censor right-wing groups.

The alt-right symbol 'Pepe the Frog' featured in some of the artefacts and it had notable significance in meme 9 and 25. In both cases, it is clear that there was an assumed knowledge on behalf of the viewer to interpret what Pepe as an icon means to the alt-right. Meme 9 depicts Pepe as a metaphor for the alt-right identity as a whole, growing increasingly angry at what the movement claimed to be a lack of investigation over election fraud. Meme 25 shows

Pepe looking downcast in a prison yard scene, with the label 'January 6 political prisoners – You are not forgotten'. This glorifies those who have been jailed or charged in relation to the events on January 6, 2021 and suggests that they are true members of the alt-right identity, likened to Pepe himself. It also creates the perception that Capitol Hill rioters were patriots and saviours for the Trump administration and the alt-right. This culture clash is furthered by the label 'political prisoners' indicating that rioters have been targeted for their political beliefs rather than the fact they broke the law in charging into the Capitol building, attacking police officers and disrupting official proceedings.

Cultural divisions between the alt-right and liberal groups are highlighted in meme 19, 21, 26 and 29. Donald Trump's alleged election victory was intertwined with the use of preferred pronouns in artefact 19, with the suggestion that it was bigoted not to acknowledge that Trump won the 2020 presidential vote. The presentation can be perceived as an attack on one's choice of pronouns and gender identity, suggesting the most important and justified identity is being a Trump supporter. This sense of importance and enlightenment over Liberal groups was perpetuated in artefact 21 which illustrates scenarios whereby people are seen to be somewhat distracted from 'election fraud conspiracy theories' because of popular, mainstream culture. A similar message was conveyed in meme 26, with news outlets criticised, labelled as liars and likened to propaganda multipliers taking orders from U.S. government authorities. Anti-Muslim sentiment was a feature of Trump's presidency and this has been maintained by his supporters and alt-right members, which is evident in artefact 29. It suggests that all Trump supporters have been deemed as terrorists in the wake of the Capitol Hill riots, yet not all Muslims were considered terrorists because of Islamic-inspired attacks. This draws cultural and political boundaries between liberal and right-wing groups and implies that Trump supporters have been wrongly targeted by U.S. authorities, whilst reinforcing the Islamophobic narrative that Muslims are violent.

Overall, the process of assessing memes focused on alt-right identity and cultural conflicts has revealed the critical function that meme culture plays in creating group affiliation and a sense of kinship. This is achieved by appealing to a range of alt-right issues beyond January 6th, including gender identity, free speech, anti-media and anti-Muslim sentiment. The way such

issues are interlaced through both overt and subtle methods highlights how memes work to reinforce ideologies, define cultural parameters and ultimately establish the alt-right identity online.

Use of humour

As discussed earlier in this thesis, humour is one of the central pillars of meme culture and it is widely regarded as a basic intention of memes as a media format. However, the recognition and appreciation of humour is subjective and it's often used as a decoy for offensive or false content within alt-right communities. This is evident in artefacts 3, 5, 17, 18 and 30. A popular meme format referencing a character from the film series 'The Lord of the rings' has been exploited in meme 3, doubling down on claims of election fraud. In this case, humour was generated from the association with the film character and the rebellious hand gesture. In comparison to other memes analysed in this category, meme 3 was considered a fairly innocent attempt at satire. This is similarly the case with artefact 17 where a popular meme format was used featuring an image of actor Leonardo DiCaprio. It was used to make light of a scenario where a RINO (Republican in name only) was denied voter support.

In memes 5 and 18, the use of humour is more malicious and offensive, exemplifying how alt-right memes can pass off defamatory and abhorrent messages under the veil of playfulness and satire. The comparison of U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris to a snake in artefact 5 was particularly derogatory because the image was reappropriated from a civil rights artwork that celebrated progression from racial and gender-based inequalities. Similarly, the depiction of Joe Biden alongside the silhouette of an elderly character from the cartoon 'The Family Guy' who is regarded as infirm and a pedophile is grossly oppugnant. Not only does this image attack Biden based on his age, but the indirect reference to pedophilia could be linked to the QAnon belief about a 'deep state' global pedophile ring run by global elites that has been mentioned earlier in this paper. Humour was also used as a defence to mask offensive messaging in artefact 18, where a U.S. voting rights campaigner was depicted as morbidly obese with reference to election fraud and being 'the elephant in the room'. Artefact 30 likened Joe Biden to the puppet widely recognised as Elmo from the U.S. children's show 'Sesame Street'. The puppet is being

held by Chinese President Xi Jinping. Here, the meme creator attempted to make a comedic representation of Biden to convey the message that he is powerless as a single entity and has been used as an instrument to achieve the goals set by other world leaders.

In considering the various humour styles outlined earlier in this paper, it was clear the two dominant styles from this analysis were affiliative and aggressive. Yet, this largely depends on the audience and how humour has been interpreted by individual viewers in a specific context. Affiliative humour facilitates and enhances group relationships by amusing like-minded people in a non-hostile manner. Aggressive humour on the other hand is hostile in nature and can negatively impact interpersonal relations. It can be assumed that the majority of users on Gab already subscribe to some alt-right values and beliefs, and therefore are unlikely to be offended by the intended jokes conveyed in the memes here. Furthermore, it can be argued that the issues that have been made light of, including election fraud, civil rights, gender rights and ageism appeal to the alt-right and Trump supporters. In turn, this has solidified those concerns as targets of the alt-right movement and worked to motivate more followers through appealing to a variety of issues. On the flip side, viewers who identify as liberal supporters would likely interpret these memes as aggressive. This reveals how meme culture can operate both as a galvanising and polarising cultural and political force.

Preparatory media & Historical references

Perhaps the most dangerous feature of several memes in this analysis was their propagandist nature. These artefacts can be viewed as examples of preparatory media, in mobilising publics into a cohesive force both ideologically and tangibly. This was clearly identified in 8 of the memes gathered. In many cases, propagandist messaging was intertwined with historical or biblical references. This either signified a desire to maintain the predominately conservative and patriotic values of decades past, or it conjured connections between Joe Biden and corrupt or authoritarian world leaders of the past and present. Focusing on meme 1, the biblical representation of hell associated with U.S. President Joe Biden, his wife Jill and U.S. former President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle can be interpreted as the need for 'the day of

reckoning' or 'the storm' according to the QAnon conspiracy theory. As previously mentioned, followers of QAnon purport that on the day of reckoning there will be a purge of corrupt elites, including U.S. Democrats, and a new and just world order will be established thereafter. For many believers, January 6th was envisaged as the day this event would take place. Meme 1 highlights the notion that QAnon supporters now believe the U.S. is 'going to hell' because the day of reckoning has not yet taken place. Again, this can be interpreted as inspiration and a call to action for Trump voters and QAnon activists to bring about this disruptive event, thereby acting as preparatory media.

Artefacts 2 and 8 also invoked a call to action to investigate and resolve alleged election fraud in the 2020 U.S. presidential poll. Both memes reinforced the sense that tangible measures were required to force a change in leadership and implement the will of the people who voted to re-elect Donald Trump as their president. In artefact 8, it was conveyed that official U.S. institutions such as the Department of Justice and Congress failed to adequately probe claims of electoral malpractice and those who had access to evidence would continue to lobby for change. It's possible that this repeated message generated a sense of urgency and anger amongst Trump supporters to do more and take drastic measures to see the results they believed to be justified. The patriotic theme was exploited in meme 2, which showed an artistic representation of a torn U.S. flag, suggesting the nation had been damaged by the presidency of Joe Biden. Propaganda and historical U.S. patriotic connections were most blatant in artefact 16 which took inspiration from well-known 'Uncle Sam' war posters. This was significant in that it suggested the U.S. was in a time of war and patriots needed to be recruited to 'take back America' as the meme quoted. Not only was this a current example of preparatory media, but it also perpetuated conflict narratives and worked to draw divisions between those willing to 'get involved' for the sake of restoring the country and those who may adopt a more passive approach.

Historical references and negative comparisons between Joe Biden and other world leaders are featured in memes 11, 14 and 22. The representations in these artefacts worked to illustrate the belief that Biden was involved in or aware of alleged electoral fraud and engaged in authoritarian political tactics. Meme 11 showed an image of former Soviet Union leader Joseph

Stalin with an unverified quote reading 'It's not who votes that counts. It's who counts the votes.' Whilst Joe Biden is not seen in this instance, the context of where the meme was published generates parallels between the U.S. election outcome and communism. This was reinforced in artefact 14 where Biden was pictured alongside images of socialist or communist leaders including Maduro, Chavez, Castro and Stalin. The label 'ELECTION FRAUD' in this artefact conveyed that Biden and the other leaders had committed electoral crimes and should be imprisoned. Russian President Vladimir Putin and the supreme leader of Iran Ali Khamenei were also shown in meme 22, which conveyed a very similar message to meme 14. Overall, the repetition of these parallels elicited the perception that U.S. President Joe Biden is corrupt and can be considered a dictator.

Overall, each of these factors revealed the different ways in which memes shared on Gab reinforced right-wing ideologies and perpetuated false information. My findings have reaffirmed that memes play a crucial role in establishing a sense of kinship through humour, othering and intertextual references on Gab. It was evident that whilst meme culture is largely informal and playful, it is one of the primary ways users generate and share information on the platform. The allusion to a wide variety of topics such as communism, gender rights, free speech, religion and the news media illustrated how memes can act as 'gateway drugs' to a spectrum of conspiracy theories and fringe right-wing beliefs. In this process, more viewers may be lured into subscribing to the alt-right identity.

5.3 <u>The influence of Bots & A.I. agents in viral media</u>

> "While scholars strive to unpack the architectures of contemporary media manipulation, and legislators seek to understand the impact of social media on elections and political processes, the corporate actors involved will naturally weigh disclosures against their bottom line and reputations" (Gorwa & Guilbeault, 2020)

Another crucial factor to discuss in looking at the spread of memes and other content online is the operation of bots or non-human actors and artificial intelligence agents. When employed

for malicious purposes, these can work to manipulate social media feeds and enhance false perspectives and narratives. Social Media Bots (SMBs) can be defined as algorithmically controlled accounts that emulate the activity of human users but operate at a much higher automated pace, while successfully keeping their artificial identity unknown (Bessi & Ferrara, 2016). Bot accounts can be used for a variety of useful objectives, including the issuing of emergency alerts and posting of news items. Yet, when developed to enhance falsehoods, bots have harmfully interfered with the operation of social media platforms. Automated accounts have the power to influence opinions and researchers have suggested that bots were responsible for up to one fifth of conversations about the U.S. Presidential election in 2016 on Twitter (Bessi & Ferrara, 2016). Bots have also been singled out as disruptive forces in elections in Africa, South America, across Europe and the 2016 UK Brexit vote (Gorwa & Guilbeault, 2020). As a result, there has been a flurry of activity by platforms, the media, academics and institutions to better understand, identify and control the operation of automated accounts. However, it can be difficult to ascertain who is responsible for establishing and running SMBs. In fact, even social media companies themselves have acknowledged the dynamic challenge of detecting automated accounts (Gorwa & Guilbeault, 2020). Furthermore, despite the constant refinement of models and tools to uncover SMBs, 'botmasters' are rapidly developing and advancing to evade detection (Orambi et al., 2020). Automated accounts can be established by individuals, private companies, governments, political parties or foreign actors.

In their article 'Social Bots distort the 2016 U.S. Presidential election online discussion', scholars Alessandro Bessi and Emilo Ferrara claim that the presence of bots can create several tangible issues. This includes increasing polarisation in political conversations, enhancing misinformation and/or unverified content and spreading influence across several suspicious accounts to make detection more difficult (Bessi & Ferrara, 2016). They outline three indicators that may separate automated accounts from regular human-controlled ones. The first indicator involves whether the social media profile appears with default account features, or it has been customised in some way. Customisations can include a display picture, background picture, changed font or profile layout. According to researchers, making changes to a social media profile typically requires human effort and therefore default or basic settings can raise suspicion (Bessi &

Ferrara, 2016). The second indicator is the absence of geographical metadata which usually reveals when and where a post has been made by a human user through their smartphone or app. The third and perhaps most reliable indicator is social media activity statistics that can reveal the number of posts and frequency, as well as followers. Automated accounts exhibit incessant posting activity and are likely to have significantly less followers than human accounts (Bessi & Ferrara, 2016). It is also worth noting that SMBs will typically show more recent creation dates, meaning the account has not been around long, and have randomly generated usernames.

There are two key issues related to the work of SMBs that require focus here. One is the need for increased efforts to improve public media literacy skills; that is to raise awareness of how bots operate, how they can be detected and at a more general level, to adopt a critical perspective of viral content on social media. The second issue is the impact of the sheer bombardment of information that comes from SMBs. As I have discussed with the repeated false comments from former President Donald Trump, being exposed to falsehoods consistently has a persuasive effect. Moreover, the lack of transparency from social media platforms in identifying and neutralising malicious bots raises further concerns. This is a dynamic issue that will continue to plague our online experience for the foreseeable future. It requires a multi-faceted response from governments, platforms and individuals.

The actions of non-human actors in spreading memes on Gab is not the primary focus of my research. This is largely due to my preoccupation with post-truth and how ideologies are manifested through memes at the point of interaction, rather than production and dissemination. Also, as evident from this discussion, confidently detecting SMBs is a difficult task that would require a more complex methodology. This is particularly the case with focusing on alt-right memes as the anonymity of members and content producers is often a key value of the community. In fact, in considering the above indicators that may reveal the work of bots, I do not believe that the memes I have gathered were produced or shared by automated accounts, at least in the instance where I have captured the posts on Gab. However, an awareness and understanding of SMBs is vital in considering the prevalence of post-truth, filter

bubble phenomenon and negative framing of mainstream media sources on platforms. It is clear that these issues can be compounded by the work of automated agents.

This is especially relevant in the current period with the rapid development of algorithms and artificial intelligence tools including chat bots. The introduction of Open AI's ChatGPT prototype in late 2022 has attracted the interest of social media users, authors, business owners and more with the potential to revolutionise current workflows (Haleem, Javaid & Singh, 2022). This technology assists users in creating content including essays, computer coding, news articles, videos and images. Considering the circulation of alt-right memes, in most cases synthetic media has been easy to detect because of visual irregularities or the context of parody and comic effect. However, as generative AI tools become more prevalent, distinguishing features of fake images are likely to become more difficult to expose. This issue was highlighted by the recent posting of doctored images showing Donald Trump being arrested in the wake of his indictment over the alleged falsifying of business records.

CHAPTER SIX – DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

6.1 Discussion of overall findings

Broadly, this project sought to understand some of the political, social and cultural impacts of memes shared on free speech platforms in the two years since the U.S. Capitol attack. The event demonstrated the heavy blurring of boundaries between the online and offline in terms of violent and hateful rhetoric, if not their total collapse (Munn, 2021). In focusing on the free speech platform Gab, my research has highlighted the various ways meme culture has bolstered users' exposure to fringe right-wing communities and beliefs, perpetuated a period of post-truth and thereby furthered negative sentiment towards mainstream news outlets. This has been achieved through the use of humour in memes, a facade of free speech ideals and the generation of an alternate perception of truth and reality. It appears memes have become inextricably linked with alt-right identity and post-truth politics on Gab. Whilst memes as

individual artefacts present complex options for meaning, interpretation and value, this study has revealed how alt-right meme culture has evolved to operate as a targeted system on free speech platforms, reinforcing conspiracy theories and luring new followers. In undertaking a semiotic multimodal analytical approach, it was revealed that memes have a persuasive and pervasive effect on Gab, motivating users to engage with content and enter a self-convincing feedback loop. Crucially, the appeal to and role of emotions in memes as communication tools had a significant impact. Many memes conjured anger and discontent on political and cultural issues. This process of othering positioned those who did not subscribe to alt-right beliefs as enemies and in some instances, there was a distinct call to action against such enemies. Placing this outcome into the wider context of how social media has fundamentally changed the way we engage with politics and current affairs, it is clear that platforms have transformed from being digital tools that once merely supplemented our daily lives. There is now an element of addiction, control and manipulation, though as users we are not passive to these forces. Social media has become an integrated extension of the self and corporate system that arguably demands more from the user than the user receives. Potentially manipulative phenomena such as filter bubbles and characteristics of preparatory media reveal that platforms serve their own business and/or ideological goals and have been designed to be addictive and compelling for wide audiences. In turn, those who own and run platforms wield incredible power over public debate and access to information. Of course, this is not a new assertion and similar assessments have been made in recent years. However, I argue this has been exacerbated by the rise of free speech apps and the increasingly dangerous influences of alt-right meme culture. Furthermore, events that have brought scrutiny to the operation of platforms and right-wing communities online such as the U.S. insurrection have seemingly failed to generate decisive action by governments and tech companies in mitigating harmful effects.

It was also evident through this analysis and in general observation of free speech platforms over the past two years, that whilst Donald Trump may have brought post-truth and misinformation into the U.S. Presidential realm, it has not ended with his exit. In some ways, the alt-right movement has become hardened and more pervasive online since the 2020

election and memes have been central to this expansion. Moreover, Trump's style of polarising political rhetoric and staunch attachment to his own definitions of fake news and truth has been replicated by other world leaders. This was most evident in Brazil where a similar insurrection took place after right-wing leader Jair Bolsonaro lost an election in January 2023. Ultimately, this project has further highlighted the need for increased transparency from platforms, including those deemed sites for free speech, over the way content is managed and verified, and the work of algorithms. In addition, there is a need for improved and universal media literacy skills so that users have the ability to evaluate information in new and evolving digital ecosystems. This education should be both a personal and societal goal. In my view, it is difficult to attribute responsibility to one entity for the current state of post-truth and lack of trust in established news sources. However, should free speech platforms and alt-right communities persist as they are without some level of intervention, we will undoubtedly see further examples of conspiracy-driven violence and the alt-right movement could gain wider influence in promoting their worldview.

6.2 Limitations & Future research

This study was launched to investigate specifically how memes shared on Gab further conspiracy theories and alt-right beliefs tied to electoral fraud and the mainstream media in the U.S. It also focused on a relatively small data set that could be expanded to include more platforms and themes. Future scholarship might incorporate Donald Trump's new Truth Social platform and compare semiotic readings of memes across multiple free speech sites. As mentioned, an analysis of the origins of the memes gathered was not conducted in this instance, nor was the potential work of social media bots or AI agents in spreading content. Additional focus on these issues in further studies could generate a more precise picture of what or who is driving alt-right meme culture and how vulnerable audiences may be protected from overexposure to such content on free speech platforms. On the subject of social media bots, it may also be a future consideration to analyse the prevalence and value of anonymity

among alt-right followers on free speech sites. Perhaps this may be compared to anonymous accounts run by foreign actors or AI agents.

It should also be acknowledged that there can be some reservations about the conclusions drawn from semiotic multimodal analyses. This approach is based largely on social context and dynamic meaning. Yet, it has the potential to be largely impressionistic and the principles for establishing the security of a meaning or a category can be challenged by alternative readings. However, given the tendency for alt-right memes to harness humour as a defence for hateful and offensive messaging, it is fair to suggest that the critical reading of memes gathered in this instance is valid and offers a perspective that should be considered in the wider context of fringe right-wing movements, meme culture and social media.

Overall, this research has highlighted how a lack of content moderation measures on free speech platforms can be exploited to spread conspiracy theories, false information and ultimately promote a period of post-truth. In addition, the relentless pursuit of upholding the concept of free speech, as defined by extremist communities, appears to be a construct to allow an unabated attack on public institutions, politicians and liberal ideals. Communicating with users of free speech platforms to assess their perception of truth and how they verify content they're exposed to online may be another avenue for future studies. It may also be relevant to seek an assessment of the impact of fact-checking and anti-fake news initiatives both on social media sites and mainstream news outlets.

6.3 Conclusion summary

Beginning this project two years ago my goal, in essence, was to discover what online forces or practices had been driving what seemed to be an alternate reality for alt-right and Trump supporters, and how. As a journalist, I continue to be equally intrigued and concerned at the circulation of false narratives on social media platforms, the scale of polarisation and the absence of what I consider to be formidable required reform to digital practices, particularly with regard to free speech sites. The deep interweaving of social media into our daily lives has resulted in both phenomenal and dangerous outcomes. My research has contributed to this

field by identifying the ideological work of memes in normalising and spreading false information in the wake of the U.S. insurrection in 2021. Whilst they may be branded as playful and humourous, internet memes operate as a drip feed to the alt-right, reinforcing conservative viewpoints and narratives, and further muddying the dilemma of fake news and post-truth. In this period, it seems that no matter how facts are presented, their validity relies upon our political leanings and appetite for specific social media outlets. Further narrowing the dynamic construct of our digital presence is the work of algorithms, filter bubbles and non-human agents. Continuing in this way, democracy and balanced and informed social debate will remain fragile.

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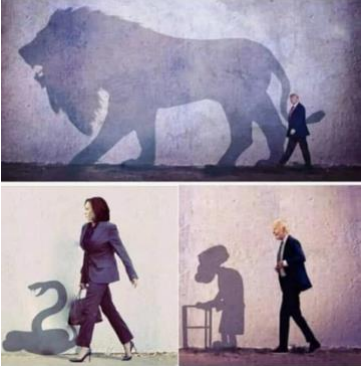
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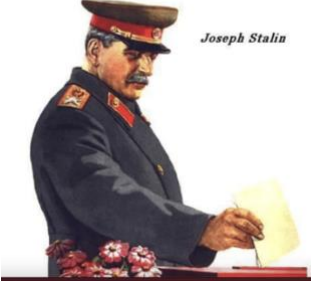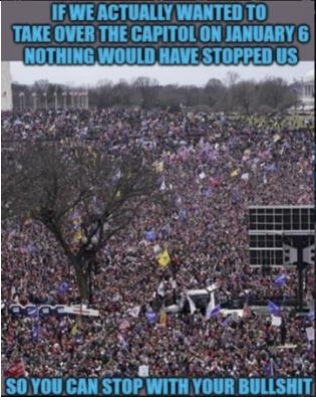
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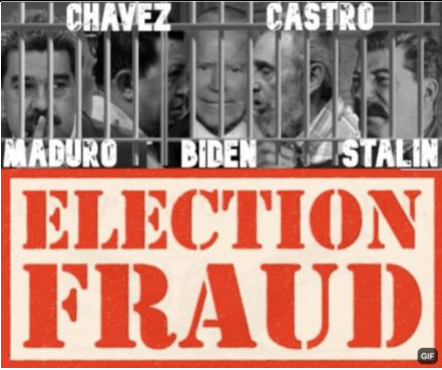
APPENDIX I – GAB MEMES

	MEME SCREEN CAPTURE	GAB SUB-GROUP	DATE
1		G/News	January 24, 2022
2		G/Election Integrity	January 26, 2022
3		G/Election Integrity	January 26, 2022
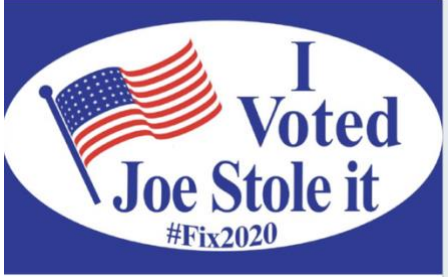
4		G/Election Integrity	January 30, 2022
5		G/News	February 1, 2022
6		G/News	February 12, 2022

7		G/News	February 20, 2022
8		G/Election Integrity	March 3, 2022
9		G/News	March 3, 2022
10		G/Election Integrity	March 15, 2022

11		G/Election Integrity	March 17, 2022
12		G/Election Integrity	April 16, 2022
13		G/Election Integrity	April 18, 2022

14		G/Election Integrity	May 3, 2022
15		G/Election Integrity	May 3, 2022
16		G/News	May 7, 2022

17		G/News	May 7, 2022
18		G/Election Integrity	January 15, 2022
19		G/News	May 20, 2022

20		G/Election Integrity	May 20, 2022
21		G/Election Integrity	June 7, 2022
22		G/News	June 7, 2022

23		G/Election Integrity	June 20, 2022
24		G/News	April 20, 2022
25		G/News	January 8, 2022

26		G/News	February 9, 2022
27		G/News	June 14, 2022
28		G/Election Integrity	March 6, 2022

29		G/Election Integrity	January 7, 2022
30		G/News	June 23, 2022