

## **Laidlaw Scholars Program 2023: Research Proposal**

### **Title of Research Project:**

The Far-Right Extremist Memes on Instagram and the Recurring and Dominant Messages Being Conveyed Through Them: A Qualitative Analysis

**Tentative Start Date:** June 5<sup>th</sup>

**Place of Conducting Research:** Canada

### **Introduction:**

While people are aware of the ever-growing online public discussions on political topics, there is less focus and understanding on the memes which are being used as a medium to express radical far-right views. (Lamerichs et al., 2018). This phenomenon is important to study due to its significant impact. For example, the explosion of alt-right memes and other forms of online support during Trump's first candidacy was an important component that led to his election as president (Lamerichs et al., 2018). This topic interests me as Neo-Nazis and Alt-right groups take advantage of the features of a meme (such as its humour, irony, and visual appeal) and use it as an effective tool for expanding their influence (Askanius, 2021). Moreover, they are also easily and rapidly shared across websites, which allows them to prevail, despite being regularly taken down due to their infringement of community guidelines (Munn, 2019). For example, I have personally come across memes espousing racist and antisemitic beliefs when scrolling through Instagram.

The impact of this research is that it would begin to help us develop a comprehensive understanding of the dominant far-right ideas being promoted on Instagram. These harmful ideas are normalized to people through the incessant re-posting of memes (Munn, 2019). That is, seeing the same content repeatedly desensitizes individuals to its offensive content. After normalization, people can begin to adopt such views themselves, which in turn leads them to extremism (Munn, 2019). Moreover, a qualitative analysis of memes would provide an understanding of the strategies that the far-right meme creators use to recruit people, such as the use of the meme's design/features, (e.g., humour and irony) to subtly manipulate one's way of thinking. For example, some alt-right messages exist under the guise of a

funny edgy joke (Burnham et al., 2022). Furthermore, the findings of this research has strong future implications as it can serve as a basis for further research that explores possible counter-tactics against far-right groups' online efforts and the development of preventative measures that impedes individuals from adopting such damaging views and becoming radicalized.

**Research Question:**

The research question contains two components: (1) What are the types of recurring/dominant far-right messages being conveyed through the memes on Instagram and (2) how is the content and/or features of the meme being utilized to help convey the message?

**Methodology:**

Prior to the start of this research project, preliminary studying and learning on proper ways to conduct qualitative analysis of data will be done. During this, the literature related to my topic as well as insight from the research advisor will be utilized to assist me in properly preparing me to carry out my research. No specific trainings or certifications need to be completed. Moreover, to gain a better understanding of the current data and findings that exist on similar previous research conducted, I will review recently published research papers. The goal here is to see how experienced researchers have approached this topic which I can then use as guidance as well as something to refer back to when conducting my own research. The only research advisor involved in this research is Christopher Cochrane. Summer 1 will consist of two main components: Data gathering and data analysis.

Week 1-2: Gathering of far-right related memes. Using the far-right based Instagram accounts that I have already discovered, I will use the comments and likes on their posts, as well as their followers, and who they are following as an avenue to find more memes. The memes will be collected and saved through Instagram's bookmark function and by taking screenshots in case the posts are removed. There is no set goal for the number of memes that need to be collected. The memes will be qualified as far-right extremist memes if they are posted on accounts that depict themselves as supporting far-right extremist ideologies.

Week 3-5: Analyzing. In these weeks, the memes will first be categorized based on the dominant message they portray (racist beliefs, anti-multiculturalism, etc.). In other words, categories will be created based on the memes that are found and the number of memes in each category will be recorded. Then, an analysis will be done that looks at how far-right groups/individuals take advantage of the meme format and its content to effectively spread their message. This will be done by looking at the features present within the meme, such as its symbols, references, and the affective value it embodies. The comments underneath the posts (if any) will also be used to aid the meme analysis process.

Week 6: Analyzing + Discussion of findings. As I expect some overspill work from the previous weeks, this week would serve as a much-needed buffer period for the qualitative analysis of the memes. Furthermore, I will also begin to use the findings to compile report based on the completed analysis. In this, I will elaborate on the categories that emerged and discuss their features. Any patterns and common structure among memes that emerged will also be explained, such as usage of certain images or icons. Furthermore, I will draw on existing literature on this topic when interpreting the findings.

#### **International Focus of research:**

Given the global connected nature of Instagram, the findings of this study are relevant to many communities around the world, giving this research a high international focus. To elaborate, the far-right propaganda memes that will be gathered and analyzed have a global audience, since they can be viewed by anyone who has access to Instagram. For example, the Nordic Resistance Movement is an alt-right based organization in Sweden who use the circulation of memes as a form of communication and influence (Munn, 2019). Their work will not only engage individuals living in Sweden, but anyone who understands Swedish and English. Additionally, the translation of their memes into other languages broadens their reach.

Given the nature of this research, there is no specific focus on far-right propaganda memes created from individuals/group of a particular community, ethnicity, or religion. As a result, the global implication is that the analysis of the prevalent messages and strategies used within the memes to

indoctrinate vulnerable individuals will provide a general understanding of the phenomenon, as well as highlight possible shared similarities among far-right memes as a general global trend.

**Ethics Review:**

This research does not require an ethics board approval.

**Research Advisor:**

Associate Professor Christopher Cochrane from the Department of Political Science will be my supervisor. His knowledge related to far-right politics and general expertise in this topic will be a significant resource during the analysis portion of the research, particularly in establishing and labeling categories. Moreover, Professor Cochrane will provide me with general feedback at each step of the research. In terms of the resources being provided, prior to conducting the research, I will be asking Professor Cochrane to refer me to any noteworthy research or literature papers that he believes will be valuable to my research question. Professor Cochrane is also willing to provide computing resources and software for conducting the qualitative analysis, as well as lab space.

**Outcome:**

The key achievement of this research is that its findings will provide a foundational understanding of the type of far-right extremist content people, especially youths, are being exposed to and being manipulated by on Instagram. Specifically, through the qualitative analysis, categories and descriptions of the types of far-right memes will be created. The goal of these categories is to provide a basic understanding on the common types of ideas, misinformation, and general persuasive tactics alt-right groups and individuals focus on when creating propaganda memes to influence and recruit others. As I would ultimately like to protect and prevent those who are vulnerable to these types of influences from adopting them, this research can act as a groundwork for efforts (e.g., awareness education) that help minimize the effects and influence of far-right extremist memes.

In terms of my goal for this entire program overall (aside from summer 1), I hope to gain experience in terms of understanding what I can do as a leader that is effective and beneficial for the people around me as well as the things I do as a leader that are not as effective. Since this is the first time

I will be in a leadership position regarding something that genuinely interests me, I believe that developing my skills and attitude as a leader is what I can best obtain from the Laidlaw Scholars experience.

## References

- Askanius, T. (2021). On frogs, monkeys, and execution memes: Exploring the humor-hate nexus at the intersection of neo-Nazi and alt-right movements in Sweden. *Television & new media*, 22(2), 147-165. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15274764209822>
- Burnham, S. L., Arbeit, M. R., & Hilliard, L. J. (2022). The Subtle Spread of Hateful Memes: Examining Engagement Intentions Among Parents of Adolescents. *Social Media+ Society*, 8(Burnham et al., 2022). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221095100>
- Lamerichs, N., Nguyen, D., Melguizo, M. C. P., Radojevic, R., & Lange-Böhmer, A. (2018). Elite male bodies: The circulation of alt-Right memes and the framing of politicians on Social Media. *Participations*, 15(1), 180-206.
- Munn, L. (2019). Alt-right pipeline: Individual journeys to extremism online. *First Monday*. <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v24i6.10108>