gender<ed> thoughts

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and Viral Images.**
Questioning Immunological
Metaphors in Digital
Communications.

With a Commentary by Simon Strick

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Infectious Ideas and Viral Images

Questioning Immunological Metaphors in Digital Communications

Iz Paehr[1]

[1] hello@izpaehr.xyz

Abstract

Why are images and imaginations of 'infections' and virality so appealing for digital communications? This article problematizes immunological metaphors by discussing a research report submitted to the United States (U.S.) Department of Defense entitled *Exploring the Utility of Memes for U.S. Government Influence Campaigns* (Zakem / McBride / Hammerberg 2018), in which the authors develop an epidemiological model to analyze and engage memes to 'inoculate', 'infect', and 'treat' the effects of adversarial messaging for influence campaigns. As work pursued in feminist/gender and critical disability studies shows, these framings of communications as 'infectious' resonate with immunology's historical framing of the body as a bounded object at war with the outside world, the immune system as a normative cognitive system, and the ableist idea that sickness, disability, and queerness result from and lead to moral failures. Images of viruses and infections are present in the recent memetic alt-right trope of the Social Justice Warrior (SJW), and they echo with National Socialist (NS) propaganda posters that equated social groups with infectious diseases. Following 'infectiousness' as part of the basic aesthetic vocabulary of racist, anti-Semitic, and ableist ideologies, this article offers an analysis of selected alt-right memes and NS visual propaganda materials by incorporating the crip method of image descriptions into a method for analyzing contemporary memes offered by Nowotny and Reidy (2022). By critically following immunological metaphors through both textual and visual depictions I hope to show some of the concerns that arise when understanding images as 'infectious'.

Keywords

Infectious Images; Virality; Digital Communications; Memes; Ableism and Anti-Queerness

Author's note

In this article, I am working with and extending the work pursued by Johanna Schaffer and me for two lectures[1] we prepared in 2019 that thematized the research report submitted to the U.S. Department of Defense entitled *Exploring the Utility of Memes for U.S. Government Influence Campaigns* (2018) by

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[1] Was tun mit „Sichtbarkeit" in kritischen digitalen Realitäten? [What to do with "visibility" in critical digital realities?], Ringvorlesung „Digitale Sichtbarkeit" [lecture series "Digital Visibility"], Alfried Krupp Wissenschaftskolleg Greifswald, IZG University of Greifswald, 30.10.2019; Ambivalences of Visibility (Revised), GCSC/GGK Keynote Lecture, Justus Liebig University Giessen, 12.11.2019, in the context of the interdisciplinary conference "Renegotiating Minoritarian IN_VISIBILITIES" (Nov 12-14, 2019).

Vera Zakem, Megan McBride, and Kate Hammerberg with a focus on its bioinformational understanding of people's behavior as programmable. With Johanna's consent, this text contains excerpts from our lecture in section one and three. This article contains discussions of racist, ableist, anti-queer, and anti-Semitic memes and NS propaganda posters.

Introduction

Immunological imaginations are ever present in discourses around digital images and platforms: Memes go 'viral', fake news are 'spread' and computer malware is commonly called a 'virus'. The quotidian ease with which immunological metaphors are taken up in the field of digital communications is taken to an extreme in a 2018 research report developed for the U.S. Department of Defense entitled *Exploring the Utility of Memes for U.S. Government Influence Campaigns*. In their publication, Zakem, McBride, and Hammerberg develop an epidemiological model to analyze and engage memes to 'inoculate', 'infect', and 'treat' the effects of adversarial messaging for influence campaigns. After introducing core concepts of the report, I will question the apparent readiness of epidemiological and immunological metaphors for the field of digital communication by taking up the work of feminist/gender and critical disability studies scholars that discusses paradigms of war and cognitive ableism in the field of immunology. What are the implications of understanding memes as infectious, and which understandings of immunology are at play when rendering images as carriers of (unnamed) disease? While the first part of this paper critiques immunological metaphors used to describe the distribution of memes online, the second part attempts to close a gap the report leaves: In right-wing online circles, memes are produced and circulated that equate marginalized social groups with viruses and infections – an image practice that also belonged to the basic aesthetic vocabulary of National Socialist propaganda. Instead of attending to these two lines of analysis – immunological metaphors when discussing the sharing of images online, and widely shared images of eugenicist hate speech – as separate issues, this paper reads them as intertwined phenomena that ren-

der sick and disabled life as less valuable. By critically following immunological metaphors through both textual and visual depictions I hope to show some of the concerns that arise when understanding images and the ways in which they are shared online as 'infectious'.

The analysis of memes in this article follows a multifaceted methodological approach as suggested by Joanna Nowotny and Julian Reidy in their book *Memes. Formen und Folgen eines Internetphänomens* (2022). According to Nowotny and Reidy, a formal-aesthetic analysis of a given meme calls for a description of the multimodal dimensions of the meme such as text and image (ibid.: 67). I will, when formally analyzing a given meme, offer an image description in the form of an alt text, which is a textual description of visual material for the purpose of accessibility for low-vision and blind readers (Coklyat / Finnegan 2020). In the continued text, I will analyze additional visual information and provide translations into English. I introduce this two-step method into Nowotny and Reidy's approach because of my commitment to access for other disabled people, and to disconcert seeing/visibility as presumably natural or normal ways of knowing, as they are often built on the assumption that "everyone sees, speaks, hears, feels, and moves in the same (nondisabled) ways" (Schalk 2013). This use of alt text makes a discussion of eugenicist visual materials possible without sharing images that embed photos of people without their consent and disrupts what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has called "the politics of staring" (2002). For academic traceability, links to the original images can be found in the footnotes. Nowotny and Reidy suggest two contextual analyses to place the meme within a possible cluster of memes that may follow a certain template, and to understand the meme within social, historical, and po-

litical contexts. This approach allows for an analysis of how memes "participate in the construction and maintenance of categories of difference such as gender, race, class etc." (ibid.) and thus opens the analysis to strands of representational critique (Hall 2013), giving particular attention to histories of visual stereotyping (Schaffer 2008), which, as I will argue, prevail in contemporary memes.

1. 'Inoculating', 'Infecting' and 'Treating' the Effects of Images through Memetic Engagement

The research report *Exploring the Utility of Memes for U.S. Government Influence Campaigns* was submitted to the U.S. Department of Defense under the sponsorship of the Center for Naval Analyses. The 84 pages long report attributes great significance to images in digital media realities, as they facilitate rapid comprehension of complex relationships and arouse emotional reactions much more than other media (Zakem / McBride / Hammerberg 2018: 12). The authors claim that images in the form of memes can effectively be used in U.S. government influence campaigns. To facilitate this usage, they develop an epidemiological model in which memes are supposed to help "spread" (ibid.: 5) ideas. Their abstract reads:

"The term meme was coined in 1976 by Richard Dawkins to explore the ways in which ideas spread between people. With the introduction of the internet, the term has evolved to refer to culturally resonant material […] spread online, primarily via social media. This CNA self-initiated exploratory study examines memes and the role that memetic engagement can play in U.S. government (USG) influence campaigns. We define meme as 'a culturally resonant item easily shared or spread online,' and develop an epidemiological model of inoculate/infect/treat to classify and analyze ways in which memes have been effectively used in the online information environment. [...]" (Zakem / McBride / Hammerberg 2018: i)

One goal of the report is to develop an epidemiological framework through which "me-metic engagement" (ibid.), the activity of using memes for a purpose such as an influence campaign, can be understood as well as practiced (ibid.: iii). Epidemiology, a term that is only briefly covered in the report,[2] comes from the Greek *epidēmía nósos* and means 'disease spread across the entire people' (Brockhaus). The epidemiological model that the authors propose consists of three categories: *inoculate, infect,* and *treat.*

The report constructs several adversarial actors in the field of online information such as the Islamic State, North Korea, and Russia, which are then used as examples to be countered through memetic engagement. As an example, Zakem, McBride, and Hammerberg explain how a "Russian attempt to infect" (ibid.: 34) is 'treated' via memetic engagement (ibid.: 34-38). The authors show two tweets that I will briefly describe and contextualize in written form by using the crip practice of alt texts (Coklyat / Finnegan 2020) without providing the original visuals.

[Image Description: The first tweet features text written in Russian by the user @rentvchannel. An embedded photo shows an elderly white man from the waist up. He has short white hair and is wearing glasses and a beige coat. Multiple microphones and a large camera lens point towards him, while his mouth

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[2] The report is an interesting but challenging artefact to work with for multiple reasons: In the authors' recounting of a history of memes, and in their argumentation on why they develop an "epidemiological model" (ibid.: 15) for influence campaigns, core claims are often not supported by academic references. Further, the authors describe part of the research on memes that they recount as "contested" (ibid.: 10) and the literature as "messy" (ibid.: 11), while not mentioning less contested academic work on memes (see Jenkins / Ford / Green 2013; Nahon / Hemsley 2013; Nakamura 2014; Shifman 2013) or actively distancing themselves from said work. Central terms for the development for an epidemiological model such as the term 'epidemiology' are not mentioned outside of footnotes, while the term 'ISIS' appears 182 times throughout. Lastly, and as I will revisit later, the term 'right' never points to the infamous memes of the U.S. American alt-right but is only used to describe the positioning of an image on a page, meaning that the alt-right and their usage of memes are plainly not discussed.

is slightly open as though he is about to give an interview. Behind him there are many people walking down a street; one of them is wearing a sign that is cut off from the view. Below the photo, the time and date of the tweet are displayed as "11:00 AM - 20. Sept 2015".]

This Twitter post displays an 'infection' in the form of a post by *rentv*, a pro-Russian TV channel. Translated from Russian, the text reads: "U.S. Ambassador in Russia John F. Tefft at a rally by the opposition in Maryino [Moscow neighborhood]". The 'infection' occurs because the U.S. Ambassador John F. Tefft is visually connected to a protest held by the opposition in a way that is both compromising for the ambassador and the opposition.

[Image Description: A Twitter post by the user @USEmbRu shows text in Russian along with four embedded pictures of the same elderly white man as in the previous image. While the man looks the same across the pictures – same hair, coat, posture, opened mouth – and while the same microphones point towards him, the background is different on each photo. Behind him there are: a different street, another demonstration, the surface of the moon, and an ice hockey match. The time and date of the tweet are displayed as "4:22 AM - 21. Sept 2015".]

In this second Twitter post, the ambassador is photoshopped into a variety of places and events. The tweet reads: "The ambassador John F. Tefft spent last weekend at home. But thanks to Photoshop he can be everywhere." This counter-memetic engagement was published by the U.S. embassy in Moscow. As a 'treatment', the images are supposed to "contain the effect of adversary messaging" (ibid.: 6) by revealing that the ambassador was photoshopped into the protest.

The application of the epidemiological model that the report suggests thus frames the images published by *rentv* as a memetic 'infection' which was met with a counter-meme by the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, finally resulting in a successful 'treatment'.

2. 'Infectious' Ideas: Problematizing Immunological Metaphors in Digital Communications

As a primary reason for their analytical usage of biological-medical terminology, Zakem, McBride, and Hammerberg name the writings of the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, who developed a concept termed *meme* in 1976 "to explore the ways in which ideas spread between people" (ibid.: i). Dawkins asserted that ideas were transmitted through memes in a similar way to how physical attributes were passed on through genes (Dawkins 1989: 192). The meme, as an idea, is self-replicating and bound to spread, following the principles of evolutionary biology, "from brain to brain" (ibid.). For Dawkins, the authors explicate, the idea of information being passed on between individual people by means of "human imitation" (Zakem / McBride / Hammerberg 2018: 4) is central, but later research would describe the focus on the "transmission of ideas" (ibid.) in terms of contagion or infection, leading to what the authors call the "imitation/contagion debate" (ibid.: 5). The contagion debate posits that individuals can be infected with ideas in similar ways as they would be infected by a virus and thus would become a "host" (ibid.) for information. For the fitness, that is, the success of a meme, it is fundamental for the meme to be compatible with the "hardwiring" of the brain, for instance (ibid.). In this recounting of the history of memes, cognitive processes and processes of infection are linked, and the brain is named a site where information in the form of messages resides.

Zakem, McBride, and Hammerberg's reliance on metaphors of infection is contested in the field of digital communications: Scholars Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green have stressed in their book *Spreadable Media* that culture does not self-replicate but is driven by human agency, arguing that the way in which audiences actively share materials "is distorted by the metaphor of infection that "viral" invokes" (2013: 20). However, they critique virality mostly for its imprecision, a position that also

Joanna Nowotny and Julian Reidy take by explaining that virality cannot account for the copies, transformations and variations memes go through (2022: 37). Others such as Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley (2013) as well as Jussi Parikka (2007) have embraced 'virality' as an analytical category. A critique of immunological metaphors that is devoted to questioning their ableist implications is still underrepresented in the field.

Questioning the proximity between medical and communications terminologies that the report constructs, I wondered how bodies are conceptualized in relation to infectious diseases in medical discourses. As I will show, these discourses position the immune system as a site of encounter between the outside world and the body, and they tend to employ terms borrowed from the field of communication to explain the workings of this system (consider Biss 2014; Haraway 1992 & 1999; Martin 1990). Tending to the work of gender/feminist and critical disability studies scholars, I will in the next step trace paradigms of war and cognition in the field of immunology to explain why they might spark metaphors around supposedly 'infectious' ideas in digital communications.

Bodies at War: Connections between Military and Immunological Language

The scholarship of the anthropologist Emily Martin is dedicated to the cultural and political dimensions that shape definitions of immunity. In her 1990 article "Toward an Anthropology of Immunology: The Body as Nation State", she analyzes the textual images that dominate the popular and scientific literature on immunology employed at the time in the U.S. The body, equipped with an immune system, is often understood and described in terms of a nation state at war (1990: 410). According to her research, imaginaries of the immune system rely on an understanding of a "clear boundary between self and non self", in which "the non self world" is "foreign and hostile" (ibid.: 411). This

supposed hostility is met with metaphors of warfare such as the description of T-lymphocyte cells as "special combat units" (ibid.: 412) that fight cancer. In scientific literature of the time, Martin argues, the body is often described as a police state in which cells that have false "identity papers" (ibid.) must be found and destroyed. In this imaginary, all bodies are "imperiled nations continuously at war to quell alien invaders" (ibid.: 421), always on the lookout to assess which elements in their interior are impure and always ready to try and eliminate them. Roberto Esposito describes the differentiation between an individual's identity and "the threatening magma that presses on its outer boundaries" (2011: 155) as "the fundamental distinction around which the most widely accepted immunological theory has constructed its story, and thus its meaning" (ibid.). Conversely, as Donna Haraway writes, discourses within the U.S. military borrow metaphors from immunology, which positions immunology and military cultures in a symbiotic relation (Haraway 1992: 321). This relation becomes evident in visual material too, as Esposito recalls when contemplating illustrations of the workings of the immune system in *The Body Victorious* (Nilsson / Lindberg / Lindqvist / Nordfeldt 1987), "if these are medical accounts explained using military images, or military strategy books illustrated by medical metaphors" (2011: 156).

The ease with which the authors of the report *Exploring the Utility of Memes for U.S. Government Influence Campaigns* engage the terms 'inoculate', 'infect', and 'treat' follows a longstanding tradition of a shared vocabulary between military language and immunology. While Martin analyzes the nation state as an underlying concept that has shaped metaphors in immunology (1990), the report has been sponsored by and written for two military departments of the United States, which means that actors of a state are not (only) a metaphor but actual agents in the making and the reception of the report. Government actors are prompted by the report to recognize the use of memes for influence campaigns in the face of the already ongoing memetic 'infections' of the other state and non-

state actors that it constructs. The report thus relies on immunology's rendering of the body as a nation state at war to convince government actors of an actual state to deal with images shared online as though they were infectious diseases released as forms of warfare. The actual immunological terms that the authors engage leave one question remarkably open: If an 'infection' occurred when people of a "target population" (Zakem / McBride / Hammerberg 2018: 17) looked at a meme, what then is the disease that is contracted or treated (ibid.: 6)?

Countering Paradigms of Cognitive Ableism in Immunology

According to the report, some memes are 'infectious' *per se*, which makes it the task of the U.S. government agencies to decide which infections are welcome and which must be 'treated'. Implied throughout is the belief that a person can be 'infected' with a message and that such an 'infection' can have consequences for their behavior – even though the authors warn that "changes in attitude do not necessarily correlate to changes in behavior" (ibid.: 60).

The workings of the immune system are often imbued "with essentially human characteristics" (Biss 2020: 60) such as "interpretation and communication" (ibid.). While immunology as a field and practice does not suggest that minds can be 'infected', it does employ metaphors that render the immune system itself as a normatively functioning cognitive system. If the immune system is positioned as having the ability to differentiate between a strict binary of self and other, as Martin argues (1990: 411), then it must decide what belongs inside the bounded realm of the body and what needs to be kept out, which means that it somehow must *know* itself. In his article "Cripping immunity. Disability and the immune self" (2019), Travis Chi Wing Lau details this idea of supposed decision-making as immunology's cognitive paradigm. Under the cognitive paradigm, the functional or healthy immune system is understood as "capable of perception, recognition and learning in response

to microbes and other environmental stimuli" (ibid.: 165), while the disabled or non-healthy immune system is framed as unable to differentiate, memorize, and learn. As Lau reminds, cognitive ability and rationality, as ascribed to the healthy immune system, were defined as foundational for humanness by philosophers of the Enlightenment (ibid.: 168). The conflation of cognitive ability as a precondition for humanness led to disabled people, particularly people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, at the time labeled with terms such as "the 'mad' or the 'idiot'" (ibid.), being pictured as "incompletely human and consequently unworthy of fundamental human rights" (ibid.). According to the author, immunology in its naming and defining of the default immune system as a healthy and normatively functioning cognitive system follows an "ideology of ability" (ibid.) that equates disabled immune systems, because they are not cognitively able to tell themselves apart from outside stimuli, with failures of the self.

Research on the effects of discourses that position sickness and impaired immune systems as failures of the self has been conducted, among others (see Day 2021; Waldby 1996), by Susan Sontag in relation to her personal experience with cancer, as well as the socially prevalent stigmatization of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), and the resulting acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). Both diseases, Sontag explains, were understood as consequences of "unsafe habits" (1989: 25), but AIDS was linked specifically to drug addiction and queer sex. Drug addicts were framed as "committing (or completing) a kind of inadvertent suicide" (ibid.: 26), which positioned their lives as 'close to death anyways', and queer people, homosexual men in particular, were framed as getting infected through sex deemed "unnatural" (ibid.) and constructed as "more willful, therefore deserv[ing] more blame" (ibid.). Acquiring a disabled immune system was framed as a direct consequence of "perversity" (ibid.), and accordingly, disability and queerness were forced into a stigmatizing and deeply ableist logic in which a disabling disease was misunder-

stood as a punishment, and queerness was warped into a failure deserving the punishment of disease. The consequences of this logic were, as Catherine Waldby reminds, that gay men were "effectively treated by much public health discourse *as if they themselves were the virus*" (1996: 11). Almost 30 years after Sontag's writing, the field of immunology is still just starting to grapple with the implications of its construction of the non-disabled immune self as a supposedly superior default, and Lau's wish for the field to "shift its conceptual models away from both an ableist ideal of bodily self-management and a curative telos that seeks to correct or eliminate" disabled immune systems (2019: 169) has yet to come to fruition. For this to happen, the immune system needs to be understood in different terms than as a normative cognitive system that positions disabled cognition as less than.

In the report, the terms 'inoculate', 'infect', and 'treat' are shifted into the realm of communications, while other related terms such as 'disease' or even 'immune system' remain absent. According to Zakem, McBride, and Hammerberg, who mention the term 'disease' only twice in a footnote and the term 'ISIS' 182 times, memes can 'infect' populations with messages such as understandings of Islam that "prevent the spread of extremism" (2018: 27). The report echoes immunology's usually more subtle cognitive paradigm and applies it to actual cognitive processes: Instead of a cell potentially learning about and rejecting a disease, a message 'infects' information that reaches a target population through a meme (ibid.: 24). For these messages to work, the authors rely on ableist tropes: The appendix of the report is dedicated to the term "memetic warfare" (ibid.: 50) and one of the ideas presented is to describe terrorists as, among other attributes, "weak" and "mentally unstable" (ibid.) – a logic that only works when people who present outside of the norms of compulsory able-mindedness are already pictured as less valuable.

To summarize, the report builds on immunological metaphors around infectiousness without dealing with the ableist implications of turning images into carriers of unnamed diseas-

es, and further links the realm of online images with the biopolitics of war. In the following second half of this paper, I will turn my attention towards the ways in which diseases and disabilities themselves are used as visual devices to devalue social groups. The next section discusses selected right-wing memes and NS propaganda materials that equate social groups with viruses and cancer or that perpetuate hostile ideas about disability and disabled people.

3. 'Infectious' Images: Viruses and Sicknesses as Right-Wing Aesthetic Vocabulary

In the formulations of their epidemiological model and in their analysis of adversarial actors in the report *Exploring the Utility of Memes for U.S. Government Influence Campaigns*, Zakem, McBride and Hammerberg do not discuss the enormously successful discursive and memetic tactics of the U.S. alt-right at all. To close this gap, I will recall one of the central memetic figures of the *#GamerGate* movement and discuss along historical depictions that ideas and images of viruses and infections belong to the basic aesthetic vocabulary of National Socialist, anti-Semitic, ableist, and racist ideologies.

In journalistic texts like "How an Online Mob Created a Playbook for a Culture War" (2019) by Charlie Warzel in the *New York Times*, *#GamerGate* is described as a central moment in the formation and radicalization of U.S. fascists and their online tactics. In 2014, the group *#GamerGate* emerged on the platforms *4chan* and *Twitter* in reaction to persons active in the field of games as players or developers who were advocating for more diversity. The latter were being attacked by the *#GamerGate* members with death threats and other threats of violence. *#GamerGate* first formed in a moment of outrage when the ex-boyfriend of independent game maker Zoë Quinn released a manifesto that contained the information that Quinn had slept with a video games journalist, thus supposedly influencing reporting on games. For many users of the hashtag *#GamerGate* violence

seemed necessary to defend gaming as 'their' *per se* unpolitical medium, which they saw as being threatened by political correctness and various persons (see Cross 2017: 179 and Strick 2021: 219ff).

Social Justice Warriors and Depictions of Social Groups as Diseases

One of the caricatures and memes that *#GamerGate* produced are the so-called Social Justice Warriors (SJWs). *#GamerGate* uses the feminist-activist concept of social justice in their terminology, but they caricature it and then transport that caricature into the mainstream. In their article "Attack of the 50-Foot Social Justice Warrior: The Discursive Construction of SJW Memes as the Monstrous Feminine"*,* Adrienne L. Massanari and Shira Chess write that SJWs are characterized as individuals who are overly invested in identity politics and political correctness, and therefore, in the eyes of *#GamerGate* proponents, would be a threat to freedom of expression (2018: 2). In their analysis of SJWs as derogatory caricatures, they point to three main traits of the SJW: The SJW has a body that deviates from the binary norms of cisgender male or female (ibid.: 531-32), a fundamentally different, namely "emotional rather than rational brain" (ibid.: 533) and is ultimately sick and monstrous. The latter can be seen in memes that show the SJW as afflicted with tumors or viruses, or that even show them as a tumor or virus (ibid.: 537). Ultimately, as Massanari and Chess argue, SJW memes are trying to deny the humanity of the groups caricatured there and reproduce the rhetoric of elimination and genocide (ibid.: 538). They show that SJW memes equate femininity and nonconforming gender presentation with monstrosity by using cancer and other diseases as visual devices.

Building on Massanari and Chess' work, I will analyze two alt-right SJW memes and pay attention to how divergences from heteronormativity and compulsory abled-bodied and -minded-ness are co-constructed (see McRuer

2006) visually, and what role ideas of infections play in the selected memes. For reasons of space, I am focusing on memes that equate feminism with cancer and refer to Massanari and Chess for a close reading of memes that work with visual depictions of viruses. The first meme features faces of existing persons and is therefore not embedded.

Fig. 1: Shave Your Head for Social Justice. Source: Internet Search³.

[Image description: Two photos show two white people presumably in their 20ies with shaved-off hair. The left person has a greyish-looking pale face and their gaze turned slightly downwards; a locker behind them suggests a location such as a hospital. The person on the right is looking slightly upwards and is wearing a colorful blouse and earrings. Their lips are glossy and they are wearing mascara. Behind them is a decorated room. A text across both photos reads in the top: "Shave your head for social justice", and in the bottom of the image "so you can look like a cancer patient while being a cancer to society."]

In this meme, the left person is framed as a patient likely situated in a hospital and having had their hair shaved off in response to cancer treatment, while the person on the right is depicted as wearing short hair as a choice. This short hair and the wording "social justice" marks the femme presenting person on the right as a feminist, while the person on the left mostly serves as a reference image for a sick person, manifest in the naming of the meme "a cancer patient". The written message of the meme addresses feminists who do not have cancer, asking them to voluntary shave off their hair to look like what the meme suggests they already are: "a cancer to society". This phrasing mocks the person on the right, suggesting that they look sick, while further claiming that they themselves and people who share their beliefs regarding social justice are a disease that affects not bodies, but society as a whole. As discussed in the previous section by drawing on Sontag's

³ https://funnyjunk.com/Cancerous+sjws/funny-pictures/6349564/ (last accessed 27.11.2021).

work, the idea that someone is a "cancer to society" is a metaphorical usage of cancer that depicts them as destructive and unwanted.
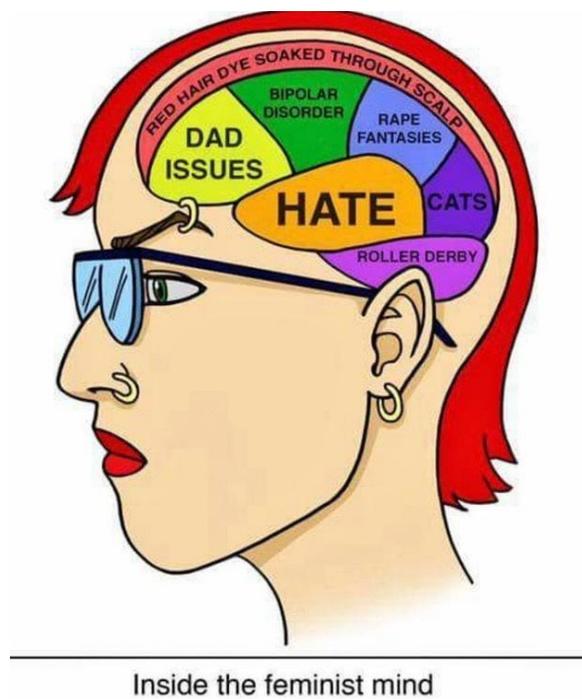

Inside the feminist mind

Fig. 2: Inside the feminist mind. Source: Internet Search[4].

[Image description: An illustration with defined black outlines and flat coloring depicts a person's head from hair to neck in a sideview cross-section that allows insight into their brain. Below is a line separating the image and from short description that reads: "Inside the feminist mind". The depicted person has light beige skin and is wearing glasses, red lipstick, and three piercings: one in their eyebrow, on in their ear, and one in their nose. The hair of the person is red. The brain is visually split into seven sections, each labeled. Underneath the red hair is a red section that reads "Red Hair Dye Soaked Through Scalp". Of the other areas, "Hate" is labeled in the largest font. The rest of the sections read in a capitalized font: "Dad Issues", "Rape Fantasies", "Cats", and "Roller Derby".]

This meme, posted on *reddit* under the title "Feminism is cancer" in 2017, equates a femi-

nist's mind with their brain and provides labels for what is supposedly going on in various brain regions. Stereotypically, the feminist has some space in their brain reserved for roller derby and cats. One layer of their brain consists of hair dye only, which suggests that the habit of using hair color has caused brain damage. Further, the feminist is depicted as having bipolar disorder, as having problems in relationships to men because of past experiences with their father, and as holding rape fantasies. The space reserved for "bipolar disorder" is visually directly wedged between "dad issues" and "rape fantasies", which positions bipolar disorder in a highly stigmatizing way. Only one area of the feminist's brain is reserved for emotion, and the chosen emotion is hatred. The meme follows the trope of the angry, men-hating, and mentally ill feminist with unresolved personal issues and a hidden desire to be subsumed by patriarchal violence. The habits and political beliefs of feminists are linked to their different brains, and the context in which the meme appeared – which links feminism with cancer – suggests that the kind of brain shown in the meme is disordered, all while presented in a cultural setting that understands neurodivergence, such as bipolar disorder, and sickness, such as cancer, as wrong.[5]

The idea of 'infections' is core to these depictions: The displayed memes do not just show an individual SJW with a supposedly different brain and body. Visually encoded is also the idea that feminist beliefs which are linked to the mental state of the SJW will 'spread' like cancer if not eliminated. Feminism and other hallmarks of social justice are framed as able to modify mental and bodily configurations with the result

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[4] https://www.reddit.com/r/dankmemes/comments/5qkhjk/feminism_is_cancer/ (last accessed 30.05.2022).

[5] I am writing this text from a position that refuses stances that wish to rid queerness of the stigma of mental illness and neurological difference/disability and, instead, work towards dismantling how heteronormativity and compulsory abled-bodied and minded-ness are co-constructed (see McRuer 2006), to figure how anti-queer and ableist sentiment can be challenged together. For suggestions of coalescing trans* and autistic theorizing read MELT (Britton & Paehr). Con(fuse)ing and Re(fusing) Barriers, A Peer Reviewed Journal, 2021,
https://aprja.net/article/view/128188
(last accessed 27.11.2021).

that those 'afflicted' with them end up with different brains. And of course, the equation of social difference with being diseased or being a disease only makes sense when understanding life with a disease as less livable.

Echoes of SJW Memes with National-Socialist Propaganda

By drawing the SJW as cancer or a virus, *#GamerGate* and other right-wing groups stand in a long tradition of anti-Semitic, ableist and racist propaganda. A flyer from the collection of the *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* names a variety of diseases that are also referenced in the two epidemiological sources of the meme report, for instance syphilis and cancer.

Fig. 4: NS Propaganda depicts Jewish people as cancer. Source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, Gift of Rudy Appel[6].

[Image description: A flyer painted with watercolors shows various font and picture elements on a dark gray background. Next to the words "Tuberculose", "Syphilis", and "Cancer", a white person wearing white medical attire including a face mask is looking through a microscope. Below on the left side is a round cutout that shows what is visible through the microscope: A crab-like entity in orange with six legs and two claws has a human face featuring a large and hooked nose, big teeth, brown hair, and eyes without pupils. The claws are holding a

piece of something that resembles tissue or skin, and the teeth are biting into it. Next to this depiction, a font reads in capital letters: "sont guérissables… Il faut en finir avec le plus grand des fléaux: le Juif." Like the names of the above diseases, "le Juif" is written in white lettering with red outlines, while the rest of the text appears in white without outlines.]

Translated from French, the text reads: "Tuberculosis, syphilis, cancer are curable… It is necessary to finish the biggest curse: the Jew!" The human face of the creature that is chewing on cellular tissue is marked by means of the anti-Semitic visual code *par excellence* for marking a face as Jewish, the large, hooked nose (Gilman 1994). Visually, the red outlines of the lettering link the names of the diseases with what the flyer calls "the Jew". As the website of the *U.S. Holocaust Museum* explains, the flyer builds "upon centuries-old anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jews as dirty and vectors of disease".[7] The flyer depicts Jewish people as a disease and a curse, while suggesting that this 'disease' is affecting healthy tissue. Found by Rudy Appel between 1942 and 1945 in wartime France, this flyer remains a horrible reminder of stereotypical anti-Semitic visuality and the violence of depicting social groups as diseases. Other archived artifacts confirm that NS propaganda routinely relied on this logic, as for example another poster refers to their enemies as the plague.[8] Many of the archived flyers and posters were shared widely and publicly, calling to attention that "abject images of racialized others were 'viral media' long before the internet" (Nakamura 2014).

Diseases and divergences from abled-bodied and -mindedness in NS visual propaganda come to signify needs for elimination, which becomes most clear in the National Socialist representations of disabled and sick people: On one propaganda poster, composite photographs of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities are accompanied by the sentence that

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6 https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/artifact/antisemitic-poster (last accessed 30.05.2022).

7 https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn4822 (last accessed 30.05.2022).

8 https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1123134 (last accessed 30.05.2022).

"The National Socialist State in the future will prevent people whose lives are not worth living from being born."[9] Another poster features photographs of disabled adults with the statement "Hereditary loaded, inferior and terminally ill."[10] Seeing these photos of disabled people was supposed to convince the viewer that the lives of the depicted were worthless. These eugenicist sentiments were mirrored in NS discourse, for example in the demands for a "healthy Volkskörper" (see Graf / Schiefeneder 2020), and they were violently actualized.

Social justice warrior memes re-articulate an equation that was also made by National-Socialist propaganda: the equation of social groups with viruses and cancer and the framing of disabled and sick life as less worthy – with thoughts of elimination not far away. It is conspicuous that the authors of the report examine memes without thematizing the intertwining of the histories of the meme and of the alt-right movement. Epidemiological ideas of 'infections' are not only used in research *on*, but above all *within* right-wing and radicalized online contexts.

Towards Other Metaphors

An analysis of the suitability of immunological metaphors for digital communications needs to consider that images that equate social groups with infections, diseases, and viruses were constructed and distributed long before the internet, and with the intent of dehumanizing and eliminating the depicted groups. In the memetic continuation of image practices that engage infections, depictions of sickness and disability are employed in ableist ways to degrade social groups such as feminists by either depicting them as disabled, particularly neuroatypical, or by suggesting that the depicted groups look like sick people, most prominently like people with cancer. Disabilities that are not based on infections and that factually cannot spread between people are rendered as though they could: In the discussed memes, feminism is equated with cancer and is shown to alter a person's brain structure, and because feminism is rendered as being able to 'spread', cancer is depicted as able to 'spread' between people too.

What then does it communicate to disabled and sick people that all the language available for the sharing of images online draws on 'virality', or as suggested in the report, even 'infections' and 'treatment'? Cyrée Jarelle Johnson warns in hir essay *Disease is Not A Metaphor* (2014) about "re-entrenching able-bodied supremacy in language", and through powerful rhetoric repetitions of what the sick and disabled body will not do in language for nondisabled people, Johnson asserts that "the body will not untwist itself, anti-virus itself, or cover itself up […]". Listening to Johnson means to think with Sami Schalk about how to "adopt a reflective political commitment in which we more diligently interrogate the assumptions that underlie our theoretical practices and more closely consider the implications of the words we use—especially our metaphors—in order to prevent further marginalization of disempowered social groups […]" (2013).

As I conclude this paper, I would like to leave you with some suggestions of writing and speaking otherwise about the sharing of images online. None of these are 'solutions' to the dominance of immunological metaphors online and in scholarship, but I hope they offer some of the playfulness that may be needed to subvert dominant metaphorical frameworks letter by letter:

Sharing/Distributing: "This meme on autistic joy has been shared/distributed 500 times." / Alt-texting: "This image is so good that it has been alt-texted across multiple platforms." / Commoning: "No one knows where this image came from, but people keep commoning it." / Cultivating: "People keep cultivating this image, and it is starting to flower." / Permeating/Fermenting: "Do you know the meme that permeated the internet yesterday? – Yes, but it's been fermented so heavily that I don't understand it anymore." / Circling: "The meme cir-

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[9] https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1146880 (last accessed 30.05.2022).
[10] https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1146881 (last accessed 30.05.2022).

cled around for a few weeks." / Attracting: "I'm studying the attraction of memes on rest." / …

Conclusion

As I have shown, the report *Exploring the Utility of Memes for U.S. Government Influence Campaigns* proposes that opinions present in a "target population" (Zakem / McBride / Hammerberg 2018: 24) can be adjusted by 'infectious' messages communicated via memes. With their research, Zakem, McBride, and Hammerberg tap into a larger pattern in which immunological metaphors are employed to describe how ideas and images circulate online and how their effects on viewers can be understood. While immunology does not suggest an application of its metaphors for the field of digital communication, its reliance on metaphors of war as well as its cognitive paradigm are increasingly and easily picked up in discourses around 'infectious' images and ideas. 'Infections' are a traditional part of the aesthetic vocabulary of anti-Semitism, racism, and ableism, and these ideologies rely heavily on the field of the visual to translate socially produced differences into the viewability of physically visible evidence (Schaffer 2008). This assumed self-evidence of visibility can be questioned through the crip practice of writing alt texts (Coklyat / Finnegan 2020), which as a method provides ways of discussing harmful images beyond the often practiced binary of either erasing or replicating them. As shown in the last section, images that equate social groups with viruses and diseases suggest their elimination. In response to this article's brief insight into NS visual history, I call for a careful evaluation of immunological metaphors in digital communications, particularly in times of a global pandemic that meets social conditions in which predominantly disabled people are left to die from the COVID-19 virus (Office for National Statistics 2021). 'Infections' and diseases are not neutral metaphors, but above all lived realities for sick and disabled people of whom many, particularly trans*, queer, and BIPOC disabled people, experience ableist discrimination. Instead of re-performing equations with diseases, be it of social groups or of communication paradigms, I suggest we find other terms, methods, and imaginations to describe how we share materials online. Instead of viral and visual, let's invent towards other crip-queer sharing terms and practices ☺.

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Insert Anti-Dawkins Meme

A Commentary on the Article by Iz Paehr

Simon Strick[1]

[1] s.strick@zem-brandenburg.de

0000-0002-6455-549X

Memes are not alive, and they do not infect anyone. They do not die, reproduce, or spread. There is no immunization against them or the (mis)information they supposedly carry. Cultural ideas and/or political propaganda do not spread like viruses. They do not pour over or pierce through borders. They do not attack, invade, or corrupt host bodies. There is, to bring this enumeration to one possible conclusion, no vaccine against fascism.

These are plain truisms from where I'm sitting, and they render the author's careful intervention into the muddling of immunology and information all the more alarming and acutely important. I don't have much to add to Iz Paehr's insightful tackling of the arguably immense problem that languages about digital information are steeped in metaphors of biology, immunology, warfare, and eugenic tropes of fitness and resilience, of sickness and corruption. T-cells are not combat troops and memes are not viruses.

Besides its forceful argument, the author's intervention points to genealogical questions to further investigate the coupling of biology and information, of medical language and communication. They name Richard Dawkins, who in the 1970s so successfully rhymed "Gene" and "Meme" to cook up the populist notion that culture is made up of "units of meaning" (aka memes) – supposedly subject to mutation, spread, and the law of "survival of the fittest"

ideas.[1] Dawkins' fateful invention of the "meme" subjects knowledge and culture to seemingly biological aka "natural" laws, and its popularity arguably disproves the theory itself: that Dawkins is still cited by anyone from the U.S. Department of Defense to the *Critical Meme Reader* (Arkenbout/Wilson/de Zeeuw 2021) demonstrates that truly bad and misleading ideas – such as conceiving of "info" in terms of "bio" – can and do have the most longevity.

Why did Dawkins' malevolent concept endure? If anything, because it was stylistically opportune: It provided military agencies, such as the Department of Defense, with opportunities to update myths of the "national body" assailed by "foreign invaders" for the age of information warfare. Just as the invisible threat of "computer viruses" threatening "home computers" became popular at the height of the domestic AIDS hysteria,[2] the military apparatus keenly adopts Dawkins' language of genes=memes to cloak itself as the immune system of the information-nation: Surveillance of communication becomes resilience of national health, preventing information sickness and corruption of American data. As the author shows, such metaphorology allows to adopt antisemitic and

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[1] Richard Dawkins, The Selfish Gene, Oxford University Press 1976.

[2] Casilli, Antonio A. (2010): "A History of Virulence: The Body and Computer Culture in the 1980s." In: *Body & Society* 16(1): 1–31.

xenophobic tropes that national socialism and the eugenics movement had established long before. It further renders the fuzzy concept of "memetic warfare" as some form of "ethical bioweapon" in the information war. The author's examples of alt-right memes – two drops in a virtual ocean of memetic hate-splicings – merely explicate the Department of Defense's point: phrenology and ableist cancer jokes pair seamlessly with antifeminism and add bodily-political insult to military injury.

The last paragraph's intuitive wordplay in the semantic field of *bio-info-war* should demonstrate that metaphors of biology (immunity, virus, spread, infection, cancer) indeed work *too seamlessly* when employed within information systems and defense budgets. This should give pause to any person with a concern for how to do things with words. The author enacts such a pause by deftly turning to Disability Studies, which among many insights tell us that a) the immunocompromised body is everybody's body, and b) that the phantasmatic states of inoculation, immunization, and ultimate resistance against alien agents (or cancer, or fascism, or feminism) serve only to bolster very material regimes of discriminatory policing: between those designated as healthy and those abjected as sick, between native and alien, between worthy and unworthy lives. Such metaphors keep up defense budgets and regulate access to medical insurance.

In this regard, one cannot simply pivot to conclude that *ableism is a virus*, infecting metaphors and material repercussions of everything from far-right antifeminism to Homeland Security to insurance premiums. This commentator, therefore, agrees with the author that other metaphors are highly needed to leave behind languages of eugenic (information) warfare and its material effects. But to do this is no easy task, and the article carefully hints towards alternative metaphors in its last paragraph, suggesting themes and practices of commonality, sharing, distributing: Memes and their circulation are what people do, not what is done to them. It is not this commentary's task to wholly invent other vocabs. But the opportunity to ad-

vance the article's forays should be taken, albeit speculatively, by thinking briefly about memes.

In many regards, Dawkins was a nightmare starting point to do that, to think about memes, to think about how ideas or meaning are distributed in digital vernaculars. Because instead of functional "units of cultural meaning" (such as genes are thought to be units of biomeaning), memes point to a different way of conceptualizing information – namely that of unlikely navigational acts in digital archives. Take only one of the alt-right meme examples the article mentions: It navigates past scientificking (racist phrenology) and present antifeminist/misogynist stereotypes (red hair dye,[3] Roller Derby, daddy issues), jamming them together in one complex image to articulate a point that is more affective than informative: all feminists are women*, and all women* are pathologically – not politically – minded. Where Dawkins would find a "unit of cultural meaning" in this assembled invective is a polemical question and beside the point: the meme stages a meeting of disparate visual archives (phrenological typification of brain areas, catalogue of misogynist tropes) to reshape its misogyny into an affective point. But such illicit assemblage or pairing of information repositories (image, text, genre, clusters of meaning) is what every meme enacts, its function being precisely not "meaning," but staging an *information overload* to trigger an affective response. The function of the meme is not the meaning, but the overload: the joke, the insult, the outrage, the affective surcharge.

Iz Paehr inventively deals with such overload by employing the practice of alt-texting, innovated by disability activists online: Instead of showing images and memes (offensive or otherwise) and thus replicating potentially toxic ef-

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[3] "Red hair dye" is itself a distillation of another antifeminist meme, a heavily shared image and video of a Canadian woman* arguing at a demonstration in 2013: Sporting red hair, Chanty Binx was filmed engaging a group of so-called "men's rights activists," and has since become a popular stand-in for the online trope of the "obnoxious feminist," archived under the monicker "Big Red." Cf. https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/people/big-red (last access: 12.12.2025)

fects, the article chooses to describe what is seen. Alt-texting circumvents the alt-right logistics of affective overload and transmutes pictorial insult into textual sequence: The surcharge is dispersed in a series of semantic approximations, the visual shock cut down to grammatical size. This technique registers less in the tradition of *Ut pictura poesis* than it spells out a slowing-down strategy that refuses the shock tactics of memetic warfare and undercuts the indeed *reactionary* triggers that an imagery of "Feminism is Cancer" enacts: When memes try to force instant reactions (humor, revulsion, confusion, offense), alt-texting deciphers what is (or is not) reacted to. Alt-texting inserts a literal pause, breaking down the instantaneous (Dawkinsian) jumps from information to image to disabled body to biological pathology to political injury (from Gene to Meme, from Feminism to Cancer).

The author ties their alt-text intervention explicitly to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's critique of "the politics of staring" (2009), and thereby stresses the political undercurrent of both memes that expose disabled bodies (such as cancer patients) for shock value, and the larger logistics of "enfreakment" that govern visibility regimes around such bodies.[4] By cutting into the overload – where medicine, pathologization, dehumanization, freakishness, and political insult are heaped together to constitute a deeply eugenic and warlike meme (Feminism is Cancer) – one particular effect is achieved: The various partaking archives (cancer, feminism, haircutting, protesting, medical treatment) become discernible and the memetic acts of assemblage and circulation are opened to critique. Navigational agency is regained in an environment designed to overwhelm. Critique becomes possible because movement is possible.

The author is cognizant of disability activists' thoughts on accessibility vis-a-vis exclusionary information systems, and what Gracen Brilmyer and Crystal Lee dubbed "crip legibility" – referring both the demand for more legible digital environments (e.g. for blind or neuroatypical users) and to the enforced legibility that information systems often impose on crip bodies.[5] Their article presents a valid and important counterstrategy to memetic overload, its exclusionary and pathologizing mechanics, and also its military-eugenic use value, which defense departments and neofascists so excel at exploiting in order to jam critical movements. "Infectious Ideas" provides a brilliant starting point for further necessary critiques of how information systems operate, are operated by eugenic, military, and fascist agents, and how critical strategies of slowing-down, de-jamming, and making legible should put disability studies at their center.

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[4] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How we look*, Oxford University Press 2009.

[5] Brilmyer, Gracen, & Lee, Crystal (2023). "Terms of use: Crip legibility in information systems." *First Monday*, 28 (1) (Original work published January 16, 2023).

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