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Conspiracy theorising online:
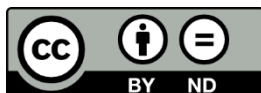# Memes as a conspiracy theory genre

by

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Conspiracy theorising online: Memes as a conspiracy theory genre[1]

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Abstract

There is no shortage of conspiratorial thinking at the moment, and also "research on conspiracy theories is currently thriving" (Butter & Knight 2016: 1). However, very little has been said about conspiracy theorising online and the digital infrastructures for conspiracy theorising, and even less about the exact shape of conspiracy theory discourse online, or how conspiracy theories are constructed and circulated making use of digital affordances. This paper is an attempt to fill some of that gap, by examining memes as a genre for conspiracy theorising online.

1. Introduction

As Jovan Byford (2015: 3) amongst others has pointed out, conspiracy theories "have migrated from the margins of society to the centre ground of politics and public life and have become a ubiquitous feature of contemporary political and popular culture". Examples do indeed abound. In the US, for instance, "It seems that hardly a day goes by without a new charge of conspiracy, from 'fake news' to 'rigged elections,' from 'enemy of the people' to a 'coup' perpetrated by the Department of Justice." (Muirhead & Rosenblum 2019: 1). One international large-scale study by researchers from the University of Cambridge and YouGov on the other hand led the scholars involved to be "startled by the proportion of Trump and Brexit supporters who said they believed the grand replacement theory"[2], referring to the conspiracy to make 'non-Europeans' the majority in western countries. Also known as the

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[2] https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/nov/23/study-shows-60-of-britons-believe-in-conspiracy-theories

'great replacement', or 'replacement theory', this theory became more widely known among the general public in early 2019 with the New Zealand terrorist attack, as the manifesto of the murderer who livestreamed his killing spree on Facebook was not only inspired by the theory, but was also titled 'The Great Replacement' (see Maly 2019a). A further current example is climate science deniers, who "(…) feel entitled to a double standard where they simultaneously believe (with no evidence) that the world's climate scientists are part of a global conspiracy to hype the evidence on climate change, but then cherry pick the most favorable scientific statistics" (McIntyre 2018: 232) to suit their own purposes.

While conspiracy theories are not exactly a novel way of making sense of the world, it has been suggested that "Conspiracy theories tend to flourish especially at times of rapid social change" (Merlan 2019: 13) and that "Conspiracy theories are born during times of turmoil and uncertainty." (Kline 2017: 186). In any case they certainly are part of political culture in many places in the world and, largely thanks to digital affordances such as those provided by social media platforms, are now increasingly a translocal phenomenon, too. One of the reasons for this is the ways in which the internet has contributed to the reshuffling of 'orders of visibility' (Hanell & Salö 2017). As Hanell and Salö (ibid.: 154, emphasis original) point out, "some types of knowledge, as well as the practices that produce them, [become] more credible, more legitimate – and hence more *visible* – than others." That is, "practices and artefacts arising on the internet reconfigure old-established orders of visibility, as they potentially change people's access to knowledge, technologically as well as socially." (ibid.) Indeed, numerous media reports have attributed blame for the increasing visibility and circulation of conspiracy theories to tech and social media companies. YouTube, for instance, has been under considerable fire for its role in giving visibility to conspiracy theories, and it has reportedly taken steps to change for example its algorithmic recommendation system to prevent their promotion on the platform[3].

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[3] See for instance https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/02/reason-conspiracy-videos-work-so-well-youtube/583282/; https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/19/technology/youtube-conspiracy-stars.html; https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/01/25/youtube-is-changing-its-algorithms-stop-recommending-conspiracies/?utm_term=.51e557a447c4; https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/25/technology/youtube-conspiracy-theory-videos.html

The possible cause-effect relationship between the two – that is, whether the availability of new online infrastructures for conspiracy theorising has contributed to more people believing in conspiracy theories – is of no particular interest for the purposes of this paper. What is undeniable is that, even with all the inequalities in its usage, the internet is the most extensive and pervasive knowledge infrastructure to have ever existed. This also allows for new forms of conspiracy theorising and like-minded conspiracy theorists to convene to debate and contribute to the collective construction of conspiracy theories. In this sense the internet can be seen as having played a role in "mainstreaming the fringe" (Barkun 2016: 1). Or, to put it in somewhat more disparaging terms, it functions as "the Petri dish for paranoids" (Fenster 2008: 1).

There is no shortage of conspiratorial thinking at the moment, and also "research on conspiracy theories is currently thriving" (Butter & Knight 2016: 1). However, very little has been said about conspiracy theorising online (see e.g. James 2001; Wilson 2018; Varis 2018; Procházka & Blommaert 2019) and the digital infrastructures for conspiracy theorising, and even less about the exact shape of conspiracy theory discourse online, or how conspiracy theories are constructed and circulated making use of digital affordances. This paper is an attempt to fill some of that gap, by examining memes as a genre for conspiracy theorising online.

2. Memes as a conspiracy theory genre

In Barkun's (2016: 1) words, conspiracy theories are "intellectual constructs. They are modes of thinking, templates imposed upon the world to give the appearance of order to events." They "assert that some small[4] and hidden group has through special means, powers, or manipulations brought about visible and evil effects of whose true cause most people are

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[4] It appears that the group allegedly involved is not always necessarily exactly 'small'; think of e.g. 'climate scientists' supposedly being involved in a hoax to further a certain agenda with their 'manufactured' research results.

unaware." (Barkun 2016: 1-2) This is why conspiracy theorists, the only ones to know 'the truth', become people with a "claim to special knowledge", and this "privileged knowledge converts them into a self-identified elite, differentiated from what they often view as the ignorant, herd-like public." (Barkun 2016: 2)

It is clear, thus, that conspiracy theorising is not only about claims to *knowledge*, but also about claims to particular *identities*, as those propagating and circulating them occupy a specific knowledgeable position for themselves. Such positions are familiar from many online communities making claims to 'truth', such as the anti-vaccination one, where the ignorant 'sheep' or 'sheeple' are presented as stupid enough to believe that vaccines are useful. The often hashtagged #sheeple are the ones who have fallen for government or pharmaceutical industry propaganda about vaccines, while the ones propagating the theories are the ones who have accepted the hard, inconvenient truth about how the world works, and do not only have superior knowledge that others (the sheep[le]) refuse to look for, see or accept, but also simultaneously make themselves come across as superior beings, thanks to their privileged knowledge and unparalleled intellectual faculties. In this sense, it is not difficult to see the attraction of such knowledge communities; they are as much about consolidating perceived pieces of evidence to form – for those involved – a coherent theory of the social world, but also about claims to privileged identities, and elite positions as those 'in the know'. A further identity dimension of conspiracy theory discourse of course has to do with political affiliations and forms of belonging that are established through engagement in conspiracy theorising.

As Davies (2018: 423) has pointed out, "The fact that the Internet is as much a visual medium as a textual one is crucial to the power it offers to mobilise and influence crowds." For instance, he (ibid.) mentions that "The white supremacist 'alt-right' movement began in online forums as a community of libertarians and ethno-nationalists, whose messages and sentiments were spread via pictorial memes, in contrast to the pamphlets, books and articles that have provided the soil for political movements to grow in the past." Memes have indeed become an important vehicle for political discourse, and are one very popular genre also for the circulation of conspiracy theories nowadays. There are, of course, many different kinds of conspiracy theory memes. Some of them are perhaps more on the 'innocent' side (as the ones in Images 1 and 2 featuring 'Conspiracy Keanu', a meme employing an image of the actor

Keanu Reeves from the 1989 movie Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure), while others – such as the ones discussed below in more detail – come with clear political motives and can also have political effects.
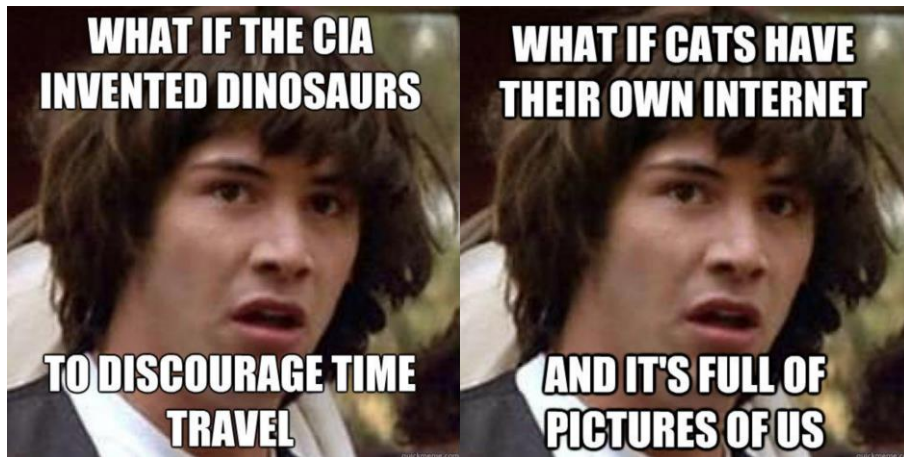

Image 1 and 2. Conspiracy Keanu memes.[5]

Memes in general are an interesting digital cultural object of study; they can tell us about people's cultural affiliations and identifications, and the creation of collectives of like-minded people online (Varis & Blommaert 2015). There is also additional justification for studying the kinds of conspiracy theory memes that promote certain political agendas. Conspiracy theory memes construct and circulate claims to knowledge, and contribute to the creation of communities of knowledge where particular versions of reality become authoritative. Given the current concerns regarding the spread of misinformation online, studying such forms of communication seems like a not only interesting but also necessary task.

While conspiracy theories are of course not by definition false, many of them are. However, as with other types of misinformation circulating online, it is not the most interesting choice to start and end one's analysis of conspiracy theory memes at their debunking and dismissal. This is not to undermine the importance of debunking misinformation; rather, it seems that being able to understand how people come to construct and circulate specific types of knowledge, and the attendant claims to identity, and for what purposes, is highly useful. The

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[5] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/conspiracy-keanu

approach I choose here is one informed by sociology of knowledge. In this line of thinking, "the processes by which *any* body of 'knowledge' comes to be socially established as 'reality'" (Berger & Luckmann 1966: 15, emphasis original) are of interest. This means taking seriously "whatever passes for 'knowledge' in a society, regardless of the ultimate validity or invalidity (by whatever criteria) of such 'knowledge'" (ibid.). Conspiracy theories are often easily dismissed, based on the idea that those harbouring them suffer from one or the other mental disorder, or are mostly people wearing tinfoil hats. While many conspiracy theories may of course involve tinfoil hat people, I am rather joining researchers such as Dentith (2018: xii) who advocates "Taking conspiracy theories seriously [which] requires we engage in a systemic investigation of them". This means, as Butter and Knight (2016: 10, emphasis original) suggest, that in researching conspiracy theories "The starting point would need to be the recognition that no matter what psychological traits are involved, conspiracy theories are essentially *social* constructs." In that sense, what we are dealing with when studying conspiracy theorising (online) is specific ways of 'seeing' the world – that is, "socially organized ways of seeing and understanding events that are answerable to the distinctive interests of a particular social group" (Goodwin 1994: 606).

This is the sense in which I'm interested in the analysis of memes as a genre for conspiracy theorising; as a specific logic for seeing and representing things, and making claims to knowledge. Here, I will specifically focus on one type of conspiracy theory meme: the crisis actor meme.

3. Challenging victims' authenticity: The figure of the crisis actor

In the context of a more long-term effort to understand conspiracy theorising online (Varis 2018) and with an interest in memes as a form of communication (Varis & Blommaert 2015), I started following conspiracy theory memes more intensely in the spring of 2018. This was partly instigated by the tragic events at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in February, 2018, and what happened in their aftermath.

On February 14, 2018, Nikolas Cruz, 19 years old and a former student at the high school, murdered 17 people (14 students and 3 staff members) and injured many others in the premises of the high school. As yet another horrific case of school mass shootings, the incident spawned another round of uproar and public debate regarding gun control in the US. Some of the young survivors of the shooting spree quickly became very prominent media figures and known as vocal advocates of more stringent gun control. Their activities included starting an action committee (Never Again MSD), numerous media interviews, and protest marches. The biggest of all was March for Our Lives[6], a demonstration in March 2018 in Washington DC, joined by hundreds of thousands of people to make a statement against gun violence. Social media was an important part of the debate that was sparked on gun control through e.g. hashtags such as #NeverAgain. Perhaps the most prominent of the young survivors were Emma González and David Hogg, who also early on started to have an impressive Twitter presence (González with more than 1.5 million followers, Hogg with close to a million). They continue to be active and vocal about gun control, as well as other political issues, on Twitter and elsewhere. Many applauded the spirit and courage of these young people in coming forward and taking a stance after having experienced such horrors in what was supposed to have been a safe environment for them – their own school. This was, however, not the whole story.

The shooting survivors were also bullied, threatened and ridiculed, by trolls and conspiracy theorists. A number of different conspiracy theories appeared, challenging the authenticity of the victims[7]. The entire event of the shooting was dismissed as an elaborate piece of theatre, constructed to further one or the other political agenda. All kinds of purported evidence were brought forward to question the authenticity of the event and the survivors, and the claims were extensively discussed in the media. An important part of the conspiracy theorising was what could be called the 'biographising' of what were viewed as not 'real', but only alleged victims and survivors: that is, efforts were made amongst the conspiratorially minded online to prove that the victims and/or survivors were not who they were presented as, either by themselves, or by the media. The fact-checking website Snopes for instance did a fact check on one of such claims about David Hogg, with recontextualised images of a high school year

[6] https://marchforourlives.com/
[7] See e.g. https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/2/22/17036018/parkland-conspiracy-theories

book given as evidence to prove that Hogg was not a student at the Parkland school at all[8]. The professional conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, already well known for his challenging of the authenticity of 2012 Sandy Hook shooting where 27 people were murdered, also ranted on about the Parkland events with his familiar take on school shootings as 'staged'[9]. Later in 2018 Jones and his Infowars was banned by Facebook, Apple, YouTube and Spotify[10] after several temporary bans and warnings, cycles of wrought discussions about 'freedom of speech', and reoccurring public outrage regarding the tech and social media companies' handling (or lack thereof) of Jones. In early 2019, the families of some of the Sandy Hook victims won a lawsuit against Jones who has been trying to discredit the legitimacy of the entire event for years[11]. Jones attributed his behaviour to having suffered from "almost like a form of psychosis" and spoke of "the trauma of the media and the corporations lying so much"[12].

Alex Jones has, however, been only one of the loudest voices in promoting conspiracy theories about school shooting victims such as the one at Parkland. The event was labelled by many enthusiastic conspiracy theorists as a 'false flag' operation. As Merlan (2019: 83) explains,

> "There are examples throughout history of real or suspected false flag attacks; the name supposedly comes from a mode of pirate warfare, in which a pirate ship would feign distress to draw another vessel closer. When the other boat came within attacking distance, the pirates would raise their – surprise – black flag."

An internationally known example of a suspected false flag operation mentioned by Merlan (2019: 83) is "The bombing of four Russian apartment buildings in 1999, which were blamed on Chechen militants" while "many believe the attacks were carried out by the FSB, the Russian security agency, to help Putin in his rise to the presidency." As Merlan (ibid.: 86) points out, most false flag theories "stay firmly relegated to the fringe, confined among people who,

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[8] https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/david-hogg-attend-california-high-school/
[9] https://techcrunch.com/2018/07/25/youtube-punishes-alex-jones-channel-for-breaking-policies-against-hate-speech-and-child-endangerment/
[10] https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/aug/06/apple-removes-podcasts-infowars-alex-jones
[11] https://abcnews.go.com/beta-story-container/US/families-sandy-hook-shooting-victims-win-legal-victory/story?id=60314174
[12] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/mar/30/alex-jones-sandy-hook-claims-psychosis

for ideological reasons, very much want to find an alternative explanation for a violent event."
And yet,

> "Globally, false flag theories can have extremely sinister political uses. One particularly chilling international conspiracy theory claimed that the chemical attacks by the Syrian government against civilians were either staged or perpetrated by the White Helmets, a civilian aid and rescue group." (Merlan 2019: 90)

Circulated by, amongst others, both Russian media as well as American far-right bloggers (Merlan 2019: 90-91), this conspiracy theory is a good example of a false flag theory on a more global scale. In the US context, Merlan (2019) amongst others covers several false flag theories, from 9/11 and the 1995 Oklahoma bombing by Timothy McVeigh, to school shooting incidents such as the Sandy Hook one.

With the Parkland shooting, as with many other supposed false flags, the idea thus is that it was a staged event, and is often attributed to 'the deep state' – a hidden yet powerful network of political actors constituting a 'hidden government' pursuing its own agenda (see e.g. Goldberg's 2001 book *Enemies within* for an account of the development of such and other forms of conspiratorial thinking in American culture; also Procházka & Blommaert 2019). The supposed aim was to purposely deceive the public, to direct public debate to a specific direction, and ultimately benefit certain political actors. Some of the supposed benefactors of this false flag operation were the Democratic party, and the 'gun control lobby'. In all this conspiracy theorising, David Hogg became one of the most visible targets, also of what is an established strategy in attempts to delegitimise certain crisis narratives and political viewpoints. That is, he was labelled as a 'crisis actor'.

The term 'crisis actor' refers to a person (e.g. a volunteer or a trained actor) emulating the behaviour of a real victim during emergency drills simulating actual disasters, to ensure and improve preparedness in case of an actual disaster such as a fire or an earthquake. The crisis actor is a term popular among conspiracy theorists in the context of e.g. school shootings[13],

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[13] See the April 2018 *Vice* video discussing 'The rise of the crisis actor conspiracy movement':
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=To91BJGKr5I

and calling victims crisis actors has the function of calling into question and delegitimising the reported version of events as staged. The claims regarding David Hogg became a media spectacle also because in February 2018, YouTube's number one trending video was about a conspiracy theory presenting him as a crisis actor[14]. Similarly on Facebook, the 'trending topics' directed users to crisis actor conspiracies[15]. While my discussion below focuses on a specific type of conspiracy theory meme only, it is worth pointing out here that the algorithmic sorting of information on social media platforms thus brought Parkland conspiracy theories in general to the attention of large numbers of people. This algorithmic sorting of information is an integral part of the online infrastructure that in many cases can facilitate the spread of conspiracy theories (Varis 2018). With conspiracy theorising online, we are in essence then looking at a sociotechnical phenomenon (van Dijck 2013), where the digital affordances play an important role. At the same time, however, as Seargeant & Tagg (2019: 41) have pointed out, "While algorithms are certainly an important element in the spread of false or fabricated reports about events in the world, (…) they are only one side of the story.", as "Of equal importance is what people themselves do (…)." In this paper, my focus will be precisely on the latter – the ways in which conspiracy theory memes are crafted for circulation on social media.

4. Locating Parkland conspiracy theory memes

I will now turn to the specific focus of this paper: memes that have been circulated about the Parkland school shooting, and in particular of one of the most prominent survivors, David Hogg. As part of all the theorising going on online, Hogg's face started to appear in crisis actor memes.

A methodological issue related to online research that one very quickly encounters when studying conspiracy theories online has to do with searching for and finding such discourse, and it is also one related to the battles waged between platforms and users over what kind of content stays online. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter manage the delicate balance between attracting people to their site as well as keeping them there,

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[14] https://www.theverge.com/2018/2/21/17035872/youtube-trending-conspiracy-parkland-david-hogg
[15] https://www.wired.com/story/youtube-facebook-trending-tools-parkland-conspiracy/

and on the other hand reacting to user dismay regarding 'inappropriate' content on their services. While this is an issue that comes with a social media business model that relies on monetising social life (discourse and the attention and engagement it receives), social media platforms have been the target of considerable critique due to their content moderation practices – it has been pointed out that these platforms are very quick to censor for instance 'inappropriate' appearances of female nipples (the qualification 'female' being important here, as male nipples do not seem to be a problem[16]) but allow for instance conspiracy theorists to harass school shooting survivors and the families of victims. Most recently this discussion was fuelled by the white supremacist terrorist attack in New Zealand in March, 2019, as the attacker livestreamed his shooting spree on Facebook. In terms of misinformation, social media companies have for instance taken steps to tackle anti-vaccine content through different means such as by reducing its visibility in news feeds and search (see e.g. Goodman 2019).

While a discussion of the responsibilities of the platforms is beyond the scope of this paper (see however e.g. Gillespie 2018), the methodological issue worth highlighting here is that often one cannot rely for instance on the strategy of searching with the most self-evident terms or hashtags to yield anything, or at least not much, of interest – if one knows what the relevant terms or hashtags are to begin with (see e.g. Haider & Sundin 2019 on the politics and practices of online search). It would of course be naïve to assume that certain types of content do not exist on a specific platform simply because they don't appear to be there (see Du 2016). Users have all kinds of elaborate strategies not only to (not) be found by specific audiences, but also to evade bans and censorship, and they do this with reflexivity regarding platform policies. For instance for the David Hogg meme below (Image 3), the issue of 'shadowbanning' was mentioned by the poster in the caption ("Here are some hashies [hashtags] that will assuredly prevent any shadowbanning: #marchforourlives #davidhogg #911wasanoutsidejob #alqaedaactedalone #throwbacktuesday").

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[16] https://www.bustle.com/articles/95552-women-are-pasting-male-nipples-over-photographs-of-breasts-to-protest-censorship-on-social-media

Image 3. David Hogg was in the World Trade Center on 9/11.

Shadow banning refers to the practice of blocking a user and/or their content from being visible to others, without the user being aware of the blocking having taken place. Whether in the case of the post above it was really the use of the specific hashtags (anti-conspiracy ones about 9/11; generic, widely used one for posting nostalgic content ['throwback']; neutral, descriptive ones about David Hogg and the March for our Lives action) that prevented it from being censored or not is not really the interesting issue here; what is interesting is the user's orienting towards the hosting platform, including the expected banning, and the consequent engagement in the practice of hashtagging (see also Procházka 2019). This says something about the way in which the user imagines the platform and its policies, and the kinds of discursive practices involved in attempts to create and maintain visibility for content such as

conspiracy theory memes (see also LaViolette 2017 on 'cyber-metapragmatics', i.e. "forms of discourse participation more or less unique to online discourse", p. 22).

While there is a lot more to say about the meme above (I'll discuss similar examples below), to return to the methodological point: this issue of 'findability' is one of the reasons why in many cases ultimately the best strategy to get to specific types of content is not necessarily to mine for hashtags (at least not always as the first step), but digital ethnographic research (Varis 2016, Varis & Hou 2020[17]). That is, it is often necessary to have knowledge about where to find a certain phenomenon in the first place, and how that phenomenon might materialise in these spaces – in particular also considering some of the efforts by social media companies to make specific kinds of content less visible, thus also influencing the work of researchers studying e.g. certain types of misinformation. Knowing where to look for and what is perhaps particularly relevant when it comes to the production and spreading of such stigmatised forms of knowledge as conspiracy theories (Barkun 2016) that are also often the target of platform censoring, as they might, at least in some cases, be more likely to be under the radar than easily pulled up by searching with hashtags. While certainly a lot of conspiracy theorising online is easily accessible and visible, in order to know where to look for, and what exactly one is even looking for, ethnographic knowledge of e.g. contexts, topics, and discursive practices and strategies is necessary.

There are many strategies people can make use of online, ranging e.g. from hashtag hijacking[18] and steganography[19] to trying to 'game' algorithms (see Maly 2019b on algorithmic activism).

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[17] I take as the object of digital ethnography "the ways in which people use language, interact with each other, employ discourses, and construct communities, collectives, knowledge and identities, through and influenced by digital technologies" (Varis & Hou 2020: 230).

[18] Hashtag hijacking, or hashjacking, refers to the appropriation of trending hashtags to subvert the original message and/or enhance the visibility of one's own message that may be entirely unrelated to the original context in which the hashtag was used. Hashtag hijacking is common on e.g. Twitter. For instance, McDonalds ended up discontinuing the use of the hashtag #MCDstories, as people started to use it to post about their negative experiences with the company's products. This could be seen as a form of culture jamming. Another type of hashtag hijacking has been identified as an online strategy of e.g. ISIS, which hijacks unrelated trending hashtags to enhance the visibility of their own messaging. For an example of ISIS using a Justin Bieber hashtag see: https://www.news.com.au/technology/online/hacking/islamic-state-hack-justin-bieber-hashtag-to-try-and-spread-graphic-video-about-the-terror-group/news-story/fdccc50b8a87f09aa14f77c0fc7d4816

[19] Steganography refers to the practice of hiding a message within another message. The hidden information can be in plain sight for everybody to see, but only those 'in the know' would be able to decipher it. For instance danah boyd has discussed the practice of 'social steganography' as an online privacy strategy by teenagers, where a post can remain indecipherable to those not part of the intended audience, as "Unlocking the meaning of that

These are to ensure visibility (Hanell & Salö 2017; Varis 2018) – either to just guarantee that one's content remains visible online in the first place (through steganography for instance), or for increased visibility (as with gaming the algorithms). Hashtags themselves of course have other important 'infrastructural' functions here, in grouping specific types of content together and often also giving users the opportunity to make the identity statement of identifying with, or vouching for, a particular cause.

In the case of the memes discussed in this paper, my first encounter with them was in fact entirely accidental in the sense that I came across the first 'David Hogg is a crisis actor' meme while browsing on Instagram for something else. I had by that time already read extensively about the Parkland conspiracy theories, and the meme obviously caught my attention. Some of the memes below were the result of simple Instagram searches with the hashtag #DavidHogg, conducted in May-October 2018 after the first encounter with a 'David Hogg is a crisis actor' meme in May 2018. Many of the later ones too, however, are the somewhat accidental product of unrelated searching and browsing on Instagram (and for some examples, on other social media, specifically Facebook) for entirely other types of material. Not all of the data discussed here are thus a product of a systematic effort to delineate a field, or to collect data on a specific topic. As will become clear below, though, this does not mean that the pieces of data are not linked: while they do not illustrate a clear chronological trajectory in memeing David Hogg, or a clearly definable group of Parkland conspiracists, they tell us something about a 'pathway' of a linked series of discourse events (cf. Wortham & Reyes 2015).

The Instagram memes discussed below were each posted by a different account, with numbers of followers ranging from about 40 to roughly 7600. None of the accounts, thus, is a grand Instagram hit. And for all we know, of course, all these accounts could be operated by one and the same person, or the memes be posted by an auto-posting bot. While these scenarios seem unlikely, the fact that any of this is possible of course says something about the way in which social media data has to be conceived of and contextualised nowadays. The memes also vary in terms of numbers of 'likes', and none of the memes has, in terms of

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post requires recognizing multiple referents." (boyd 2011: 22) That is, steganography relies on shared presuppositions and intertextual references. See also Du 2016.

numbers, been a massive success. The number of likes each meme had at the moment of collection will be indicated in their captions below; the numbers varied between two and 245. I will return to this point about numbers below. In this paper I will be focusing on the memes themselves. Focusing solely on the memes themselves is not to imply that their framing or comments on them aren't important. For the purposes of this paper, however, my focus will be on placing the analysis of memes as a genre on the agenda in the effort to understand how conspiracy theories are constructed and circulated online. I also have not deemed it necessary to identify the accounts concerned; this is not necessary for the task here, nor do I see it useful to give them more attention by identifying them. Some of the accounts concerned have also been made private since the data collection took place.

As multiple general accounts of memes exist (see e.g. Shifman 2014; Milner 2016; Nie 2018), I'll move straight to the specific case of the 'David Hogg is a crisis actor' meme. The kind of meme we're looking at here is the well-known combination of (an) image(s) overlaid with text, and the examples are chosen to present the diversity in the Hogg-as-crisis-actor meme, as well as to illustrate a development that took place during autumn 2018.

5. The 'David Hogg is a crisis actor' meme

I'll begin with what are some of the most straightforward conspiracy theory memes suggesting that David Hogg is, in fact, a crisis actor and not a real school shooting survivor. Image 4 below features a picture of David Hogg, with the widely used 'When you…' meme template for presenting a specific scenario taking place in certain circumstances: the text gives the frame and context for the image, the function of which is to present the action arising from the context described. While not explicitly stated, the implication here, suggested by the visible effort of running, is that David Hogg is hungry for media attention. It's also no coincidence that CNN should be mentioned as the news outlet here; it is now widely talked about as a (liberal) 'fake news' enterprise, not least thanks to Donald Trump having spent considerable energy during his presidency to frame it as such.

When you hear about a nearby mass shooting and CNN is filming...

Image 4. David Hogg is a crisis actor. September 9, 2018. 77 likes.

Image 5 gives exactly the same message, but through different means.

Image 5. David Hogg and Emma González as crisis actors. May 24, 2018. 14 likes.

Here David Hogg is not alone in being presented as a crisis actor, as the picture features another prominent survivor mentioned above: Emma González. The implication thus is that both of them – in fact an entire gang of them – are fake victims, working at the beck and call of CNN which needs them for their broadcasts on manufactured events. Again, it is no coincidence that CNN appears here, as part of the 'liberal fake news' establishment. The text is different from the one above in that it appears to be the voice of one of the people in the picture gathering the pack (presumably Hogg's, given his position and role in the picture). What is also different is the kind of material recontextualised here (see Leppänen et al. 2014 for resemiotisation and recontextualisation on social media), as the meme makes use of popular cultural material, specifically a still from the movie E.T. (in the original scene, E.T. was the one in the basket where González is now placed).

This meme manages to achieve several different things: it constructs David Hogg and his schoolmates as crisis actors; with the word 'again' it puts forward the idea that this is not a 'one-off' event, but rather one in a chain of events, where both Hogg and his schoolmates are

implicated as crisis actors and also them having at least a degree of professionalism to it, as acting for CNN is a reoccurring event; and, related to the previous point: the meme also implicates the media as being heavily involved. It's CNN that needs the kids for their manufactured crisis broadcasting, and that orchestrates the mediated manufacturing of the crisis. This is therefore not only about smearing David Hogg and his schoolmates; it is also making a statement about the media, with Hogg and others guilty of taking part in the CNN conspiracy – or at least a conspiracy that CNN is part of. Finally, given how González is positioned and presented can be interpreted as a dehumanising or infantalising move. This is also relevant to mention as she has been the target of massive amounts of dirt online, with efforts to minimise and attack her as a 'little girl' who doesn't know anything and should 'shut up'.

As 2018 dragged on and conspiracy theorising intensified and diversified, David Hogg's face and persona became more and more productive semiotic material. One productive line of memeing had to do with questioning whether he 'was there', i.e. presenting him as an unreliable witness to an event that might also not have taken place at all in the way it had been presented in the media. This is also something on which the website Snopes did a fact check, as a quote from Hogg – recontextualised to support the theory that he is a crisis actor – seemed to suggest that he was not on campus at all during the shooting [20]. The recontextualised quote was just another piece of 'evidence' that was taken by social media conspiracy theorists to prove that he 'wasn't there' (see Blommaert 2018 for a different case of a 'was/wasn't there' meme). Image 6 below is a straightforward variation on the meme, with the text 'Claims to be a school shooting survivor – Wasn't even there when it happened!'.

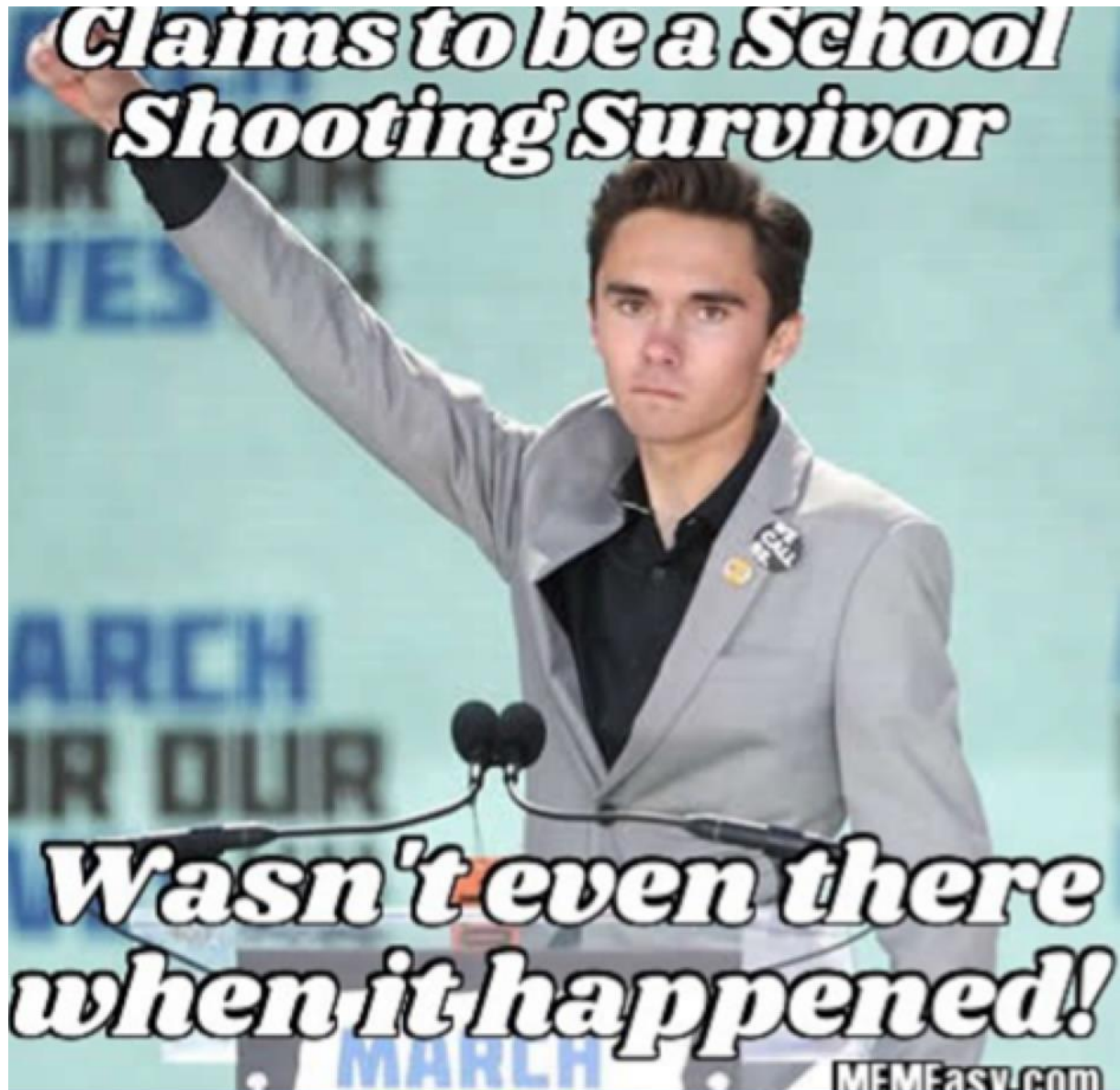[20] https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/david-hogg-on-campus-rumor-hoax/

Image 6. David Hogg 'wasn't there'. September 29, 2018. 2 likes.

This is a fairly straightforward message, readable and understandable also to those not deep in the school shooting conspiracy theory scene: it simply features a picture of Hogg, probably taken from a media report on what appears to be from his speech at the March For Our Lives protest, combined with a statement questioning in no uncertain terms his authenticity as a school shooting survivor – and given the text at the right bottom corner, apparently made with a little help from a meme generator website. No evidence for the claim is presented either in the meme itself, or in its framing; the statement, to make sense, has to be taken as a fact by the audience. The meme thus relies on the audience making intertextual links to other texts disputing the veracity of Hogg's story, or the authenticity of the school shooting.

Thus, the poster and the viewers of the meme need to share certain presuppositions – certain taken-for-granted assumptions and knowledge resources – for this conspiracy theory meme to work, as certain ideas need to be assumed as 'facts'.

The 'David Hogg wasn't there' theme got an interesting twist later in 2018, as the process of nominating Brett Kavanaugh as a US Supreme Court justice became an international media event. While Kavanaugh was eventually appointed to serve in the Supreme Court, in the months leading up to that decision there was heated discussion about his appointment due to accusations of sexual harassment against him. There is no need here to go through all the details of the nomination process, but certain things are important to know as they are relevant for the interpretation of the David Hogg conspiracy theory memes below.

In the summer of 2018, Brett Kavanaugh was reported to be on president Trump's shortlist to become nominated to the US Supreme Court. This led a woman thus far entirely unknown to the media and the general public, Christine Blasey Ford, to come forward – first anonymously and later, in September 2018, publicly – with the claim that Brett Kavanaugh had sexually assaulted her at a party in 1982. What followed was months of discussion on whether it was possible for Blasey Ford to have false memories, whether it was possible that she could remember anything accurately, and whether the party took place at all in the first place. Kavanaugh categorically denied the allegations. A culmination of sorts in the process was a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing in September 2018 where both Blasey Ford and Kavanaugh made a statement. In his statement[21], Kavanaugh dismissed Blasey Ford's account by referring to "a frenzy on the left", characterised the accusations as "a calculated and orchestrated political hit", and, placing them in the context of the 2016 presidential elections, as a "revenge on behalf of the Clintons" with "millions of dollars in money from outside left-wing opposition groups" to block his confirmation. Kavanaugh himself therefore appeared to be relying on conspiracy theory discourse to dismiss the accusations. There were several aspects to the nomination process that made the discussion around Kavanaugh perhaps even more heated than it would've been otherwise, namely for instance the #metoo movement that had gained traction in previous months, as well as a discussion on issues such as abortion,

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[21] Kavanaugh's statement: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVJdy3FmlCo&t=453s

on which Kavanaugh was expected to tip the balance in the Supreme Court and consequent widespread concerns regarding the possible overturning of Wade v. Roe, the 1973 landmark Supreme Court decision on abortion. In the end, Kavanaugh was nominated and he now sits in the Supreme Court. Blasey Ford, who held positions as psychology professor at Stanford and Palo Alto University, left her teaching position, and has moved with her family several times due to death threats.

This is a very short summary of what was in fact a complicated media spectacle with multiple twists and turns; what we need to know here is that Kavanaugh allegedly assaulted Blasey Ford at a house party in 1982, and the veracity of her account of the house, the party, and the assault itself were all called into question not only in the official nomination process, but, as is to be expected, on different online forums as well.

In the memes below, we see how two important events in US politics in 2018 – the Parkland school shooting and its aftermath, and the nomination process of Brett Kavanaugh – become intertwined. More importantly, the memes show how David Hogg has become a figure who indexes unreliability; he has become productive beyond the Parkland shooting conspiracy theory, as his figure has become shorthand for a liberal conspiracy.

Image 7. David Hogg saw Kavanaugh drunk. September 29, 2018. 17 likes.

There is recontextualisation involved in Image 7 on two levels, one more explicit than the other. First, the use of an image of David Hogg. For the meme to make sense, his face has to be understood as standing for lying and presenting a false account. Secondly, his account of the Parkland school shooting, and his claim of having been there, is recontextualised more implicitly. What takes place here is a condensed version of that ('there I was', where the word order is also of significance as opposed to the unmarked 'I was there') being implicitly made use of in this intertextual reference. The figure of David Hogg is thus indirectly used to discredit, in fact, the account by Christine Blasey Ford. David Hogg thus has a double function as a conspiracy theory figure: his effective use in the meme relies on the shared

presupposition that his account of his own experiences was false, and as he has come to stand in these intertextual chains of reference for an 'unreliable witness', he also works in disqualifying an account of an entirely unrelated event. Politically speaking, the events are of course not entirely unrelated, as both involve political struggles with dividing lines in both largely drawn along partisan lines, and a 'liberal conspiracy' can be seen as the foundation for both the Parkland 'false flag' as well as the appearance of Blasey Ford as an assault victim in an 'orchestrated political hit'. David Hogg has become, in this context, a highly mobile recontextualisable figure for making claims about 'liberal conspiracies'.

The fact that David Hogg even hadn't been born at the time of the party at the centre of the Kavanaugh accusations obviously means that the scenario presented in these memes is factually nonsensical. This can be taken as either just simply about a blatant disregard for and irrelevance of facts, or, more plausibly, as a more carnivalesque type of discrediting of the factuality of Blasey Ford's account; that is, her accusations are ridiculous to the extent that in undermining them, even an entirely implausible – perhaps by implication equally unbelievable – scenario will do. This issue of timing is in fact highlighted in Image 8 below ('thirty some years ago…'). Here the position given to Hogg also changes, from a mere witness to a target of Kavanaugh's sexual advances (with 'sexual assault' also presented as 'groping', another potentially discrediting move).

Image 8. David Hogg being groped by Kavanaugh. September 25, 2019. 245 likes.

The memes also vary in terms of their degree of easy recognisability, and the kinds of shared presuppositions necessary for their interpretation. While the meme in Image 9 below still provides the contextual clue of the year 1982, it does not explicitly refer to Kavanaugh, unlike the examples above. Even without explicit reference to the Kavanaugh case, the meme still make senses – at least to certain audiences – thanks to the indirect reference through the year; this meme though can perhaps be predicted to have a shorter shelf-life than the ones explicitly describing David Hogg as a crisis actor, as they can more easily be circulated as 'evidence' in networks of school shooter deniers and theorists of liberal conspiracies. The details of the Kavanaugh case, on the other hand, can fall into oblivion as time goes by, and the type of meme in Image 9 will perhaps prove to be more of an example of a 'real time' commentary kind of meme, the interpretability of which relies more on knowledge about on-going political and media debates and which thus has more communicative conspiracy theorising purchase at and around the time of the event it references.

In general though, it seems that at least up until now, more than a year after the Parkland school shooting, new kinds of 'there I was' memes with David Hogg are appearing; in that sense it seems to have at least to an extent stood the test of time, unlike many other memes that will more quickly go out of fashion. Hogg as an unreliable witness has probably to such an extent become a recognisable and thus mobile and recontextualisable figure, at least within certain circles, that it can have a reasonable shelf life, perhaps at least as long as Hogg himself remains a public figure.

Image 9. David Hogg at a house party. September 28, 2018. 97 likes.

Image 10 is a further variation on the degree to which shared presuppositions are required to link the meme to the Kavanaugh nomination process. This meme only refers to 'the party' and witnessing 'everything'; this makes the meme more open for interpretation as contextual clues are vague, making the meme also potentially more mobile and recontextualisable, as it can be used to make a generic claim about having been a witness to 'everything'.
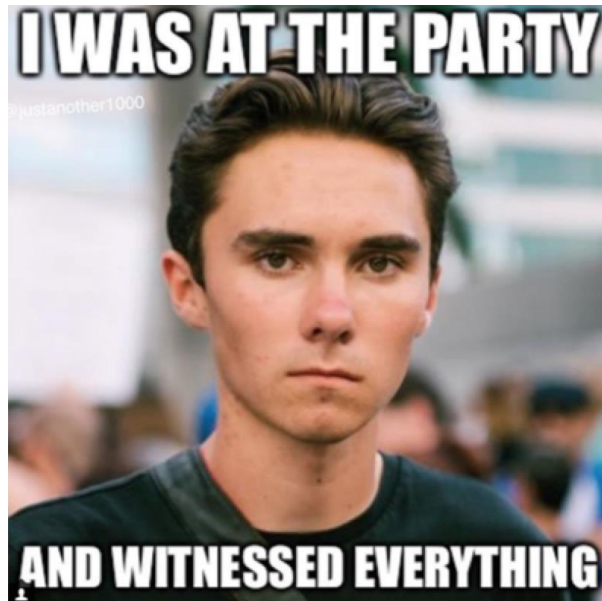
Image 10. David Hogg witnessed everything. September 30, 2018. 25 likes.

There are many other examples of the 'there I was' meme placing David Hogg in a number of different contexts and circumstances; just to briefly mention two further examples of the productivity of the meme, Images 11 and 12 connect David Hogg to an international news item from the summer of 2018, and a specifically American political issue, respectively. In Image 11, Hogg is placed in a cave in Thailand; this is a reference to the unhappy events of June-July 2018, when 12 youth soccer team members and their coach were trapped in a cave for two weeks. The story was followed intensely also outside Thailand and became an international rescue effort which did have a happy ending with all those trapped being saved.
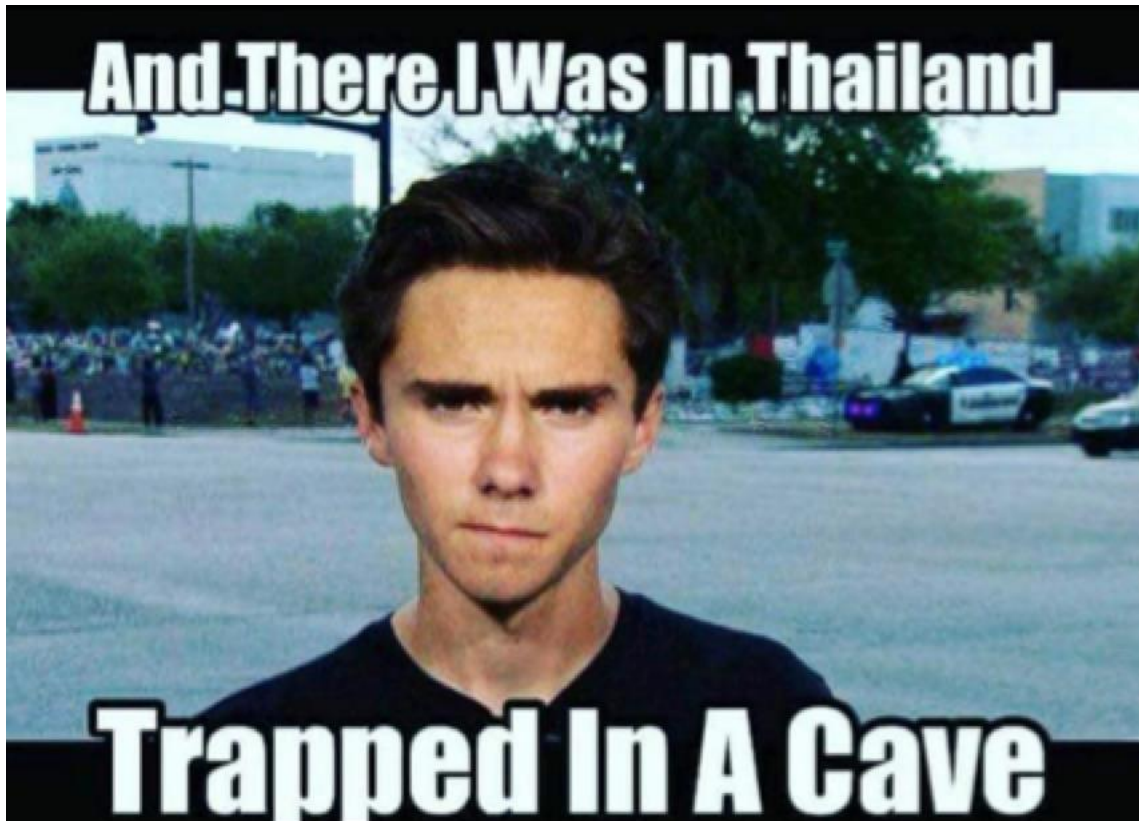
Image 11. David Hogg in a cave in Thailand. July 17, 2018. 26 likes.

While Image 11 can thus be imagined to speak also to an international audience, with the condition that they recognise David Hogg and share the presupposition that he is the face of a liberal/media hoax and an unreliable witness, Image 12 on the other hand probably has less purchase outside the US, except among those following American politics. The meme in Image 12 makes a reference to the Democratic senator and now presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren, whose claims to Native American heritage have been extensively discussed and also ridiculed in the media and by people on online platforms. The point here is about having found a witness – David Hogg – to her claims to heritage, and thus disqualifying them.
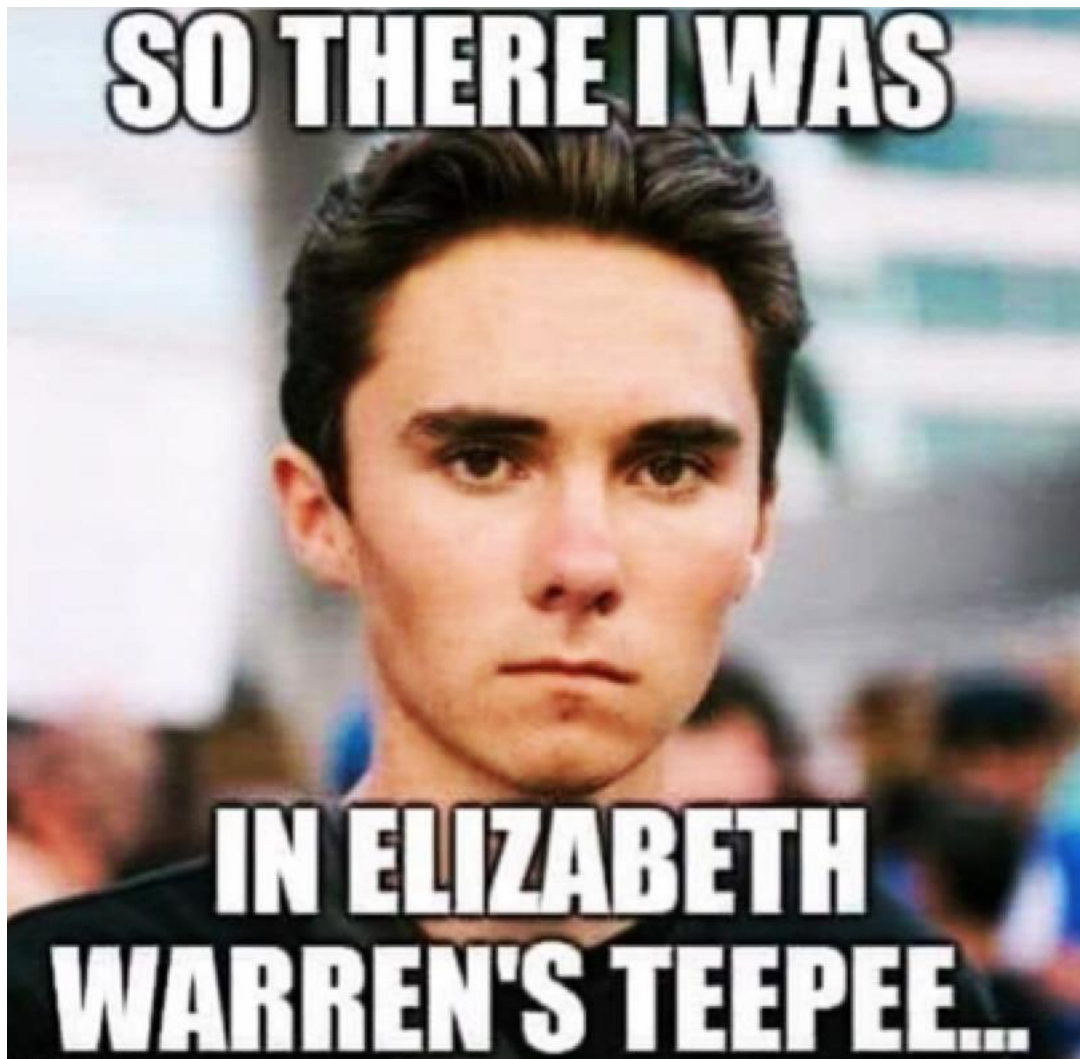
Image 12. David Hogg in Elizabeth Warren's tepee. October 18, 2018. 155 likes.

The above examples are all related to actual (political) events and figures, and have the double function of not only discrediting David Hogg as a reliable witness, but also calling into question other evidence for, and versions presented about, the events e.g. in the media. The two final David Hogg memes (Image 13 and 14) connect him to yet another conspiracy theory, namely the Flat Earth conspiracy. This theory, which has gained considerable prominence recently, states that the earth is in fact flat, and that knowledge of this actual state of affairs has been hidden from the general public thanks to an elaborate cover-up by the education system, NASA, Hollywood movies, governments, and, depending on which Flat Earther one asks, also

by for instance Jews, Jesuits, etc. Again, social media, and specifically YouTube, has been blamed for the apparent rise in the number of people believing in the Flat Earth conspiracy[22].

The one in Image 13 differs from the ones above. Here, the ridiculousness of the activity presented – Hogg taking a photo of the earth while clinging to orbital debris – works to accentuate the level of distrust towards Hogg, and discredits him wholesale as a reliable source of information, disqualifying him as a 'witness'.

Image 13. David Hogg clinging to orbital debris. June 4, 2018. 32 likes.

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[22] https://www.theguardian.com/science/2019/feb/17/study-blames-youtube-for-rise-in-number-of-flat-earthers

The meme above connects intertextually to other Flat Earth texts and discourses: Flat Earthers put forward the claim that real photos of the earth do not exist, and the ones we are accustomed to seeing are composite images, or simply fake. One needs to share in this presupposition as fact for the meme to make sense. However, also conspiracists with no Flat Earth affiliations can find a point of identification in the meme – given that David Hogg is a crisis actor, claims to have been in places where he hasn't been, and is an unreliable witness, for him to claim that he has been clinging to orbital debris is not far-fetched, or in comparison his claims about the Parkland shooting are equally ridiculous to such a space claim. Image 13 is thus yet another example of the semiotic productivity of the figure of David Hogg in conspiracy theory discourses, as is Image 14:

Image 14. David Hogg flushing the toilet. May 29, 2018. Facebook. 51 'like'/'haha' reactions.

Referencing the idea that toilet water always flushes differently depending on whether one is in the northern or southern hemisphere, this meme again makes use of David Hogg as a witness – here to toilet flushing – and its power for the Flat Earthers of course relies on the intertextually established idea that he is an unreliable one. The discrediting is further emphasised by word choice ("Earth is a ball"), placing Hogg in a child-like/ignorant position. Further evidence of the semiotic productivity of the figure of David Hogg is that, while the focus in this paper was on Instagram memes, the one in Image 14 is one example of David Hogg conspiracy memes that I have encountered as part of my research on Facebook.

6. Memeing David Hogg

Before drawing broader conclusions, some words are in order about the kinds of discursive strategies the memes above make use of. In general, in most of the above memes David Hogg becomes what in Goffmanian terms could be described as a 'cited figure'. A cited figure – which can be a 'natural', staged, or a printed one (Goffman 1974: 530) – has "the capacity to tell of the doings – past, current, possible, or future – of other figures, including, necessarily, 'themselves.'" (ibid.: 529). With cited figures, "A transformation of activity is clearly involved, often a replaying or preplaying of a strip of experience – a playing of a tape. And the figures acclaimedly responsible for the reported action or words are cited ones, the referent of 'I' being by far the most common" (ibid.). Further, "a cited figure can himself [sic] cite another's words or actions, giving us multiple embeddings [of statements]" (ibid.: 530).

In the contextualisation universe (Blommaert 2005: 44) of the conspiracy theorists, the figure whose doings David Hogg is reporting is himself; he is placed in a number of different scenarios on which he gives an account in the memes ("There I was…"). The underlying presupposition that the latter memes rely on is that the Parkland school shooting did not take place, and David Hogg is a crisis actor. That is: David Hogg's account of his experiences as a school shooting survivor is fictional. This 'original' fiction then becomes recontextualised as presupposition for the other memes to work: the figure of David Hogg stands for an unreliable narrator and thus works to consequently discredit other events, figures, and versions of reality. The figure of David Hogg is, in other words, made use of here in ventriloquizing

(Leppänen 2015) the conspiracy theorists' stances very productively, in a number of different scenarios.

In Goffman's (1981: 226) terms, we can also think of these memes in terms of their 'production format', involving an animator ("the sounding box" that produces the talk), a principal ("the party to whose position the words attest") and an author ("the author who scripts the lines"). This in general might be a useful avenue to explore the circulation of conspiracy theories and misinformation through memes: based on my exploration of such memetic activity, it is not entirely exceptional to for instance invoke children as 'animators' of anti-vaccination content (a text along the lines of "I am such a happy child because my mother didn't poison me with vaccines" accompanied with a picture of a happy child) for emotional effect.

As for the exact shape of what the cited figure is made to cite, or the lines scripted for the animator, we can make use of the idea of 'emplotment'. Georgakopoulou & Giaxoglou (2018: np) define emplotment as

> "(…) sets of more or less meaningful connections that are made through social media commentary and often viral reworkings of public life that circulate in stages or phases across multiple media" (see Silverstein, 2011). These connections bring together key individuals, notably public figures (e.g., politicians), events, and outcomes in specific spatiotemporal scenarios."

Georgakopoulou and Giaxoglou (2018: np, emphasis original) conclude that emplotment "(…) is shaped by the affordances of *portability, replicability,* and *remixing* and is characterized by *cumulativeness, multiple authoring* (…), and *trans-mediality*." In the case of the memes discussed here, these rely on intertextual 'biographising' of David Hogg as an unreliable witness, a process to which a number of actors, across different platforms, have contributed (e.g. by, as mentioned above, recontextualising quotes from him, or circulating visual 'evidence' in the form of a high school yearbook picture of him to create a history of Hogg as a liar). The memes analysed here make use of the portability of what I would call an elliptical story ("There I was…") that is picked out for circulation, replication, and remixing into a

number of different memetic scenarios, trans-medially and over time cumulatively. The 'There I was…' frame becomes iterated into a number of different contexts, amounting to an 'elliptical' story where the audience has to complete the story, or fill in the gaps to be able to create a coherent account around it – with the preferred account along the lines of 'and this story is of course fabricated'.

On the surface, many of above memes have nothing to do with the original Parkland school shooting conspiracy theory. They bear no explicit reference to the discursive material they rely on for sense-making; they rather rely on shared intertextual knowledge of David Hogg as a crisis actor, a fake, who only claims to have been 'there'. Yet, through the circulation and recontextualisation of the figure of Hogg as an unreliable witness, they implicitly work to consolidate the original conspiracy theory, too, while at the same time undermining specific accounts of other events, or discrediting other people as credible tellers of their own story (as with Christine Blasey Ford and Elizabeth Warren above).

This is also what the virality of the figure of David Hogg as a conspiracy theory device relies upon; virality is achieved at moments at which indexical orders – perceived shareability of meaningful signs – are taking shape (Varis & Blommaert 2015). At the same time, we could say that these memes exploit 'pretextual gaps' in the repertoires of their viewers, as they work to 'smuggle' conspiracy theories into visibility by not necessarily explicitly making a case for them – as is the case here with the elliptical story David Hogg is iteratively made to voice. Blommaert (2005; also Blommaert & Maryns 2002) discusses the issue of pretextuality in an entirely different context, but the idea is applicable in understanding the spreading of conspiracy theories, too. Pretextuality refers to "The features that people bring along when they communicate: complexes of resources, degrees of control over genres, styles, language varieties, codes, and so on that influence what people can actually do when they communicate." (Blommaert 2005: 254). In the case of conspiracy theorising on social media, the issue of pretextual gaps does not only involve the kinds of communities of knowledge that are built through shared indexicalities and presuppositions – that is, the users. There is also an interesting (pre-)textual relationship between the users and the platforms – the infrastructures of conspiracy theorising. As I already mentioned in relation to 'shadow banning' above, users reflexively orient towards platform policies through all kinds discursive

strategies. We know that platforms try to, apart from using human editors, make use of technological solutions in attempting to censor or at least make less visible 'inappropriate' content. In the context of the Parkland school shooting conspiracy for instance, social media platforms such as Facebook made statements about their efforts to eradicate 'crisis actor' theories. However, for both human and machine censoring alike, the issue of pretextual gaps can be a problem. For conspiracy theorists this is great news: conspiracy theories can be circulated and consolidated through discursive strategies exploiting these pretextual gaps: implicit and less direct intertextual conspiracy theorising can easily escape the censors (unless of course the theory is made explicit in the framing of the posts e.g. in the form of give-away hashtags). The memes discussed above rely more on the citability of shared meaningful signs (see also Moore 2018) than making explicit statements such as 'David Hogg is a crisis actor' or 'Parkland was a hoax'. Nor do they for instance mention the name of Christine Blasey Ford, and yet they clearly aim at undermining her account and her as a reliable witness.

7. Conclusion: Conspiracy theory memes and online infrastructures for conspiracy theorising

In their recent book *A lot of people are saying. The new conspiracism and the assault on democracy*, Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019) suggest that we have entered an era of a new type of conspiracy theory discourse. They make a distinction between 'classic conspiracism' and the 'new conspiracism' as follows:

> "Warranted or not, classic conspiracism is conspiracy with a theory. The new conspiracism is something different. There is no punctilious demand for proofs, no exhaustive amassing of evidence, no dots revealed to form a pattern, no close examination of the operators plotting in the shadows. (…) Instead, we have innuendo and verbal gesture: 'A lot of people are saying…' Or we have bare assertion: 'Rigged!'" (Muirhead & Rosenblum 2019: 3)

"What validates the new conspiracism", they suggest, "is not evidence but repetition." (Muirhead & Rosenblum 2019: 3) In this repetition, they (ibid., emphasis original) posit, the new online infrastructures, and specifically social media, play a crucial role:

"Forwarding, reposting, retweeting, and 'liking': these are how doubts are instilled and accusations are validated in the new media. The new conspiracism – all accusation, no evidence – substitutes social validation for scientific validation: if *a lot of people are saying* it, to use Trump's signature phrase, then it is true enough."

In this kind of repetitive exercise, memes of course can play an important role. Thanks to their features, they can be seen as an ideal tool for the kind of 'new conspiracism' described above: as a genre they are not conducive for the presentation of elaborate theories or sophisticated analyses of evidence; they are rather 'bite-size' conspiracy theory, and as I have shown above, for them to make sense and appear credible to their viewers, thus rather often rely on shared presuppositions, or existing 'stocks of knowledge' to borrow from Berger and Luckmann (1966). In the case of the memes analysed above, this took e.g. the shape of David Hogg as a citable figure narrating 'elliptical stories' of his doings and whereabouts. While memes are also easily shared – in fact made for circulation and repetition – it is not only the act of repetition that makes conspiracy theory discourse circulate effectively; I would add to Muirhead and Rosenblum's account about the 'new conspiracism' that what a discourse analytical approach can do is explain the kinds of presuppositions and intertextual links as well as other discursive devices through which the innuendo or bare assertion they refer to actually becomes functional in circulating and strengthening specific conspiracy theories. As Stokes (2018: 34-35) puts it, in reference to e.g. the Sandy Hook shooting conspiracy theorists,

"It takes a fairly remarkable degree of self-confidence, to put it politely, to accuse someone of only pretending to be a grieving parent. That confidence is considerably easier to muster, however, from within a community of inquiry that is predisposed to explaining events in terms of organized malfeasance, and that posits conspiracy as frequently being a reasonable best explanation to infer to. It is also much easier when grieving parents have become a piece of disconfirmatory data to a theory which you're antecedently committed."

For instance the repetition of the figure of David Hogg works wonders within a 'community of inquiry' which already shares certain views, stances and positions; it is one that 'knows' that there is a liberal conspiracy, or a plot to cover the fact that the earth is flat.

While memes can thus be seen as ideal vehicles for the circulation of conspiracy theories, this is accurate only on one level. With all the on-going discussion and worry about the amounts of misinformation spreading online, there's of course also the question of what exactly do these memes *do* – what do they achieve, and how much do they contribute to the spreading of misinformation, about David Hogg and the events at the Parkland high school, but also potentially other events and types of knowledge as we've seen above. Given the extent to which they rely on intertextual links and presuppositions, they may not be very effective in *spreading* a conspiracy theory, or *contributing to it* with further pieces of perceived *evidence*. The spreading function can be limited by the fact that they often rely on their viewers sharing certain ideas as 'facts', and as mentioned, thanks to their shape, are not ideal for the presentation and discussion of 'evidence'. They can certainly, however, have social functions as instruments of conviviality (Varis & Blommaert 2015), function in *confirming* people's views, and in *solidifying* communities of knowledge through intertextual repetition. And this is where humour can be very effective; presenting David Hogg in entirely ridiculous scenarios in outer space, for instance, can obviously be intensely funny from the perspective of those who believe that he is a crisis actor. For the memes presented in this paper, it was also not the case that the accounts posting them were explicitly giving substantial evidence to support the conspiracy theories supported by them; they rely more on implicit intertextual links for their content to make sense. If one does not know who David Hogg is, or that he is a figure indexing a conspiracy, instead of humourous, the memes can be interpreted as slanderous (as in defaming and misrepresenting Hogg) and misleading, or simply appear nonsensical. This is an important qualification also in general, in terms of an analytical reflex to view memes as a genre 'simply for fun'. While memes certainly are well-established as a humorous genre, it would be simplistic to view them exclusively as such – the medium is 'not the message' in that sense. As "genres are about 'getting things done'" (Jones 2012: 9), we obviously need to also go beyond genre ideologies regarding memes as vehicles for fun, and investigate, as I have attempted to do above, what (other) kinds of things 'get done' with them. The genre ideologies regarding memes should be interrogated too, though: in fact, they can e.g. be

strategically invoked in the context of political discourse to dismiss critiques ('but it's just a meme').

While it is not in the nature of memes as a genre of communication to allow for elaborate argumentative strategies and long explanations, at the same time this does not necessarily decrease the value of memes as a genre of conspiracy theorising, nor does it mean that we should overlook them. Quite the contrary: they can have important functions. The combination of 'fun' and 'fact' also helps here, contributing to their shareability and social functions. The memes are polycentric artefacts, in the sense that they work for different audiences – they can be appreciated as both humorous mocking and disqualifying of David Hogg as a reliable witness, as well as in the context of memic activity to combat and advance specific stances on American politics and e.g. the gun control debate. There are, of course, also those for whom neither the humorous nor the political stances are understandable and/or appealing in the first place – but for those 'in the know', they are easily digestible. While the framing of the memes (through captions, hashtags) was not a focus in this paper, in terms of the features of the genre, they are also part of the discursive strategies for (conspiracy theory) meme making (e.g. by contributing to their visibility, potential virality as well as their community-making through the grouping of messages; and also of course in sometimes creating an interpretative frame for the meme, as well as connecting the memic content to potentially many other issues, too), together with the strategies involved in the composition of the meme itself. Conspiracy theory memes, like other forms of online conspiracy theorising, do indeed rely on the digital cultural infrastructures available to us on e.g. social media. Infrastructures in this sense are not only about wires and cables, but also about the infrastructures that enable information to become ratified as knowledge (through for instance sharing, 'liking' and upvoting and other such ratification practices) and for specific types of knowledge to become visible (Hanell & Salö 2017). However, a final note here has to do with researching phenomena such as conspiracy theory memes and the ways in which researchers may go wrong if they follow the 'platform logic' in identifying and choosing materials as data – and in particular if judgements of relevance are based on quantifications by the platforms themselves. Numbers can be easily manufactured – what is known as 'astroturfing' is a very widespread practice, including both what can be labelled as more amateurish modes of astroturfing (e.g. organised 'liking' of content by a group to make it

appear popular to other users viewing the content, and/or to make it gain algorithmic visibility within the medium in question) and reactions more professionally produced for instance at what are known as click farms (where people generate views, likes and shares for financial compensation, again to the same ends as the more amateurish forms). And there is of course also the issue of bots; these are now also widely used for manufacturing visibility[23]. Apart from the algorithmic recommendation systems of the platforms themselves that I mentioned above, all kinds of practices have thus developed for the generation of 'algorithmic visibility' through actions by ordinary users (Maly 2019b). So-called trending phenomena are, thus, sociotechnical phenomena (van Dijck 2013).

However, a low number of visible reactions (likes, shares) for a piece of content also doesn't necessarily mean low engagement – there is a difference between *encountering* and *reacting to* something on social media (see also Tagg, Seargeant & Brown 2017; Moore 2019). That is: lack of visible engagement in the form of likes or shares does not necessarily mean that many more people have not seen the content, and neither does spread (or amount of visible reaction) equal importance. This is, first of all, because even content with few reactions can have significant social functions within a small group of people. Also, perhaps especially in the context of such 'stigmatised' forms of knowledge as conspiracy theories (Barkun 2016), and especially on platforms where one is present with one's 'real name' and one's reactions to content can become visible to one's network consisting potentially of both conspiracy believers and non-believers alike, it is not entirely inconceivable that at least some users might think twice before hitting 'like' or 'share' on certain conspiracy theory discourse content. This will of course be remarkably different on platforms and forums where one knows one is not surrounded by 'sheeple', but rather among believers. Thus, it seems that we should at least entertain the idea that platform logic (or the social media 'popularity principle' – the more (reactions, connections), the better – as a cultural logic; see van Dijck 2013) is not the only logic for determining interest, significance, or analytical importance for that matter.

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[23] For an example, see https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/as-a-conservative-twitter-user-sleeps-his-account-is-hard-at-work/2017/02/05/18d5a532-df31-11e6-918c-99ede3c8cafa_story.html?utm_term=.dcf94ef99869

As I've suggested earlier, discourse analysts can have a lot to offer in understanding the construction and circulation of conspiracy theories online (Varis 2018). Altogether the aspects I've discussed above, along with the idea that shared knowledge, presuppositions, pre-textuality and intertextual links in conspiracy theory memes are important in making sense of them, I'd propose that instead of relying too much – or at least exclusively – on the 'platform logic', i.e. numbers and algorithmic relevance, in explaining them, discourse analysts can show how intertextual links and intertextual relevance matter in making sense of these present-day digital cultural phenomena.

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