

## ***The Life Cycle of an Alt-Right Meme:***

A Radio Documentary about online subcultures, the election of Donald Trump, and Pepe.

By  
Martin Cusack

A Dissertation by Practice submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for MA in  
Journalism & Media

Faculty of Journalism and Media Communications  
Griffith College, Dublin

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### Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of the MA in Journalism and Media is my own; based on my personal study and/or research, and that I have acknowledged all material and sources used in its preparation. I also certify that I have not copied in part or whole or otherwise plagiarised the work of anyone else, including other students.

Signed: *Martin Cusack*

Martin Cusack

Dated: August 2017

## **Abstract**

The subject of this documentary is the emergence of the alt-right political philosophy over the years 2016 and 2017, and how it has achieved global infamy through its use of memes, irreverent shock tactics and provocative stunts. The so-called “movement” is a phenomenon which has manifested itself amid a rising tide of right-wing populism across the West, and suddenly came to international attention in the run-up to the 2016 American presidential, allying itself with the successful campaign of Donald Trump.

The alt-right movement has successfully attracted a demographic primarily composed of alienated, mainly male internet users into its sphere of influence by adopting and popularising an idiosyncratic jargon and iconography (including the use of memes) to add an irreverent flavour to their often virulently xenophobic, anti-Semitic and racist rhetoric. The most prominent of these memes is that of Pepe, a frog with a humanoid body co-opted by the alt-right as the bizarre mascot of their movement. By telling the story of Pepe's journey from harmless cartoon figure to hate symbol I hope to also tell the story of the alt-right movement and its parallel journey from obscurity to international attention.

This documentary has a number of different facets pertaining to the phenomenon of memes and the sudden rise in popularity of the alt-right. I will investigate the roots of this “movement” in the chaotic and profane world of message-boards such as 4chan, how it attached itself to the campaign of Donald Trump, and how its irreverent streak conceals a much darker reality. I will conclude by asking what strategies the left has to counter this disturbing trend.

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I would especially like to thank Ian O'Doherty who gave of his time so generously and gave a wide-ranging and informative interview which helped to form the basis of my documentary.

And finally, I'd like to thank to my family and friends for all their feedback, help and support over the past year and throughout the completion of the dissertation.

Martin Cusack

August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The aim of this documentary is to investigate the widespread proliferation of the alt-right subculture and its associated iconography, both online and in the mass media, during the politically tumultuous years of 2016 and 2017. My thesis will focus primarily on the parallel ascent of alt-right ideology and transgressive online meme culture, in particular the notorious Pepe meme. I will trace the alt-right's evolution, from a loose coalition of trolls and pranksters making questionable posts on image boards such as 4chan, to an influential movement credited in some circles with making a decisive contribution to the election of Donald Trump as US president in 2016. In January of that year, few outside their own immediate online circle were even aware of the term "alt-right", let alone had an inkling of the dangers it represented: so how did it accumulate such staggering momentum, and how did it harness the subversive potential of memes such as Pepe to appeal to a whole swathe of disillusioned keyboard warriors?

I will investigate the roots of this movement and its ideological origins in prankster message-boards like the Anonymous-spawning 4chan, its use of inflammatory terminology, frat-boy humour and recurring memes, and ask whether the alt-right really succeeded in having an influence on the minds of the American electorate during the 2016 election. I will also investigate what the success and growing influence of the alt-right and their followers says about the current state of political discourse.

One aspect of the alt-right which I found particularly fascinating was their use of argot and jokey terminology as a propaganda tool, as well as their undeniably clever deployment of the strange power of memes. The alt-right have a profound understanding of the internet meme as a uniquely 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon, and 4chan and the alt-right have mastered the art of using irreverent humour to carry insidious propaganda-style messages which have a disruptive effect on the mainstream media and are hugely appealing to rebellious teenagers. As an article in Vox recently stated: "it makes sense that 4chan's nihilistic attitude toward memes and their creation ultimately helped fuel a political and ideological movement that has as its core goal the upheaval of social norms. 4chan virtually invented the concept of the internet meme as we know it, and a meme itself is a disruptive entity — an image that takes on a life of its own outside of its originally intended purpose, and then evolves according to the whims of the

people who view it.”

I will also examine the ways in which the echo chamber effect of online engagement and social media portals causes users of certain political persuasions to become blinkered and entrenched in their beliefs; leading to a reluctance to debate or engage constructively with people who disagree with them. I will contend that in the case of the alt-right this has led to a normalising of unacceptable behaviour, such as offensive and bigoted characterisations of minorities and immigrants and other forms of racial stereotyping. I will also look at how the inflammatory rhetoric of the alt-right movement has emboldened those who have used it as a platform to air their own white supremacist, nativist beliefs and prejudices; in some cases this has resulted merely in relatively harmless online trolling, but in some extreme cases has had tragic consequences (such as the murder of Jo Cox MP in June 2016, and the mass shootings committed by Chris Harper-Mercer in Umpqua, Oregon in 2015).

With the election of Donald Trump, the alt-right have seen their “God-Emperor” transcend conventional political boundaries, viewing his success as a vindication of all their beliefs and the ultimate middle-finger to the PC establishment. Trump steamrolled his way to the presidency while breaking all established rules; every obstacle thrown in his path was flattened by the unstoppable force of “Trump-mentum”. Not being a politician he didn't have to play the traditional games, and every time he gleefully tore up the conventions of fair play and conventional etiquette his fans were all the more convinced that they had chosen the tough guy they needed; the man who would drain the swamp, tackle the hegemony of the elites, and ultimately Make America Great Again. My documentary and supporting document will investigate how this occurred, and why traditional conservatives and liberals have utterly failed to appeal to young people and blue-collar Americans, instead encouraging these potential voters to seek easy answers in the hip, ironic sloganeering, anti-immigrant rhetoric and angry untruths of the alt-right.

Finally, I will focus on how the emergence of the alt-right has mirrored similar trends in countries throughout Europe, how these trends have originated, and how in the context of a globalised world where borders and boundaries are disappearing, the parties of the far-right have exploited the worst instincts of voters in order to scapegoat immigrants and foreigners as the root of all of society's problems.

I hope to present the documentary in a fast-paced irreverent style, which I think is in keeping with the more bizarre elements of alt-right ideology and iconography. The construction of the documentary will essentially consist of four parts; an initial introduction to the Pepe meme and the phenomenon of the alt-right, a central section tracing the Alt-Rights journey to worldwide renown (paralleling the unlikely rise to prominence of Pepe), a third section containing an insightful documentary with journalist Ian O'Doherty, and finally a conclusion in which I ask what the future may hold for the alt-right, as well as summing up the bizarre journey of Pepe from cuteness to obscenity.

In the main narrative line of the documentary I will attempt to recount the story of the “Life-Cycle of an Alt-Right Meme” - tracing the rise of Pepe as a meme while simultaneously telling the story of the alt-right's journey from obscurity to global attention. I hope that by using music, sound effects, and an innovative narrative framing device that I will be able to hold the listener's attention as well as inform the audience on the subject of the documentary.



**Above: Pepe, (2005-2017)**

## **Chapter Two: Evidence of Research**

This chapter will outline the research undertaken over the course of the production of my documentary.

Since the alt-right is still a comparatively new phenomenon, written sources on the subject are still comparatively scarce and quite difficult to source; as a result my research consisted in large part of various online sources including newspaper articles, essays as well as interviews which will form the basis of the radio documentary element of the thesis. However, there were a few key titles published this year which formed the core of my research and which are quoted from during the course of my documentary. Some of the following titles, primarily those written by individuals who constitute part of the Breitbart faction of Donald Trump's inner clique such as Sebastian Gorka, give sharp insights into the political and philosophical mind-set of the alt-right and so are also listed below.

Podcasts and radio shows were also a good source of relevant material. Debates and discussions such as the Irish Times "Women's Podcast" hosted by Kathy Sheridan; and episodes of Matt Cooper Show and The Culture Show with Fionn Davenport on RTE Radio 1 were also a rich source of material for research. A BBC Radio 5 Live radio programme presented by Calum McDonald and broadcast on 11 October 2016 also gave me some useful guidelines in terms of how to discuss the alt-right in such a way as to inform the viewer about the origins of the alt-right and the political circumstances (economic, racial etc.) that created the environment in which both the alt-right and Donald Trump could thrive.

### **Literature Review:**

The text which proved to be the central plank of my argument in this thesis is Angela Nagle's *Kill All Normies* (Zero Books, 2017). An extremely timely addition to the canon of books on the subject of the rise of the alt-right ideology, *Kill all Normies* is a slim volume which was released in May 2017 and proved to be an invaluable resource in terms of gaining insights into the online culture wars of the 90s and 2000s.

Nagle provides many sharp insights into the origins of leftist PC campus culture in the

revolutionary fervour of the 1960s and how its pervasive influence in media and culture led to a determination among a well-connected cohort of keyboard warriors, anti-feminist pranksters and meme-loving trolls to gather around a common set of anti-PC values. As Nagle writes: “we see online the emergence of a new kind of anti-establishment sensibility expressing itself in the kind of DIY culture of memes and user-generated content that cyber-utopian true believers have evangelised about for many years but had not imagined taking on this particular political form.”

Of primary relevance for me was Nagle's investigation into the world of internet memes, particularly the subject of my documentary, Pepe the frog. Since meme-making is such a recent phenomenon, there are few books which have tackled the subject. As a result, *Kill All Normies* was a priceless resource.

There were a host of online articles which gave me valuable perspectives on populist political movements and how propaganda can be used to gain traction for far-right ideologies. One of these was Professor George Michael's academic article on website [theconversation.com](http://theconversation.com) - “*The seeds of the alt-right, America’s emergent right-wing populist movement.*” An in-depth look at the origins of the alt-right movement, Michael's article covers everything from the anti-government nativism of Willaim Pierce and terrorist Timothy McVeigh to Breitbart writers and provocateurs such as Milo Yiannopoulos.

In a similar vein was George Monbiot's article headlined, “*Our greatest peril? Screening ourselves off from reality. Immersed in life online like the followers of 4chan and PewDiePie, we start to imagine that nothing matters – even racism, misogyny and resurgent fascism*” - (Guardian article, 01/03/17). Monbiot's article raises some interesting points about the dislocation which online engagement can foster, leading some to air opinions which they would never dream of broadcasting in public.

Charles Mackay “*Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*”. 19<sup>th</sup> century work which explores the phenomena of mass delusion and how lies and delusion can take root among a mass of individuals motivated by a common anger/desperation. Mackay's prescient work has foreshadowed many populist movements since it's publication, and has been more relevant than ever over the last few years as disaffected voters across the western world have

abandoned previously centrist ideas to rally around isolationist movements such as the Brexit campaign in the UK, and right-wing ideologues such as Marine Le Pen in France, Viktor Orban in Hungary, and of course Donald Trump in the US.

Also of considerable interest in this regard were the writings of Mark Potok, a Senior Fellow of the Southern Poverty Law Centre. Potok wrote a comprehensive overview of the explosion in popularity of right-wing groups in USA in 2016 with a focus on the alt-right which was posted on Southern Poverty Law Centre website. An example of some of Potok's incisive observations include: "white supremacists are increasingly opting to operate mainly online, where the danger of public exposure and embarrassment is far lower, where younger people tend to gather, and where it requires virtually no effort or cost to join in the conversation. The major hate forum Stormfront now has more than 300,000 members, and the site has been adding about 25,000 registered users annually for several years — the size of a small city."

As a comprehensive overview of the Anonymous hacking movement, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy* by Gabriella Coleman was an indispensable part of my research. The book traces the infamous hacking group's history from the primordial soup of profane, taboo-busting message-boards such as 4chan to a group dedicated to fighting corporate misdeeds and the abuse of power by repressive governments and any legislation which threatened the freedom of online speech. This book was hugely beneficial to me in the compiling of information for this documentary as it focuses on the ways in which faceless masses of internet users can bond around a common cause. In the case of Anonymous, their irreverent antic often veered toward morally questionable behaviour, but more often than not served to highlight abuses of corporate and governmental power. However, many of the old 4chan crowd have gravitated towards the alt-right movement attracted by the edgy memes and "lulzy" aesthetic that have made the "movement" such a force to be reckoned with in the online world.

*Shattered: Inside Hillary Clinton's Doomed Campaign* by Jonathan Allen and Amy Parnes. The timely publication (in summer 2017) of this devastating exposé of the chaos which swirled around Hilary Clinton's doomed White House offered several revealing insights into the distrust American voters felt towards the Democratic candidate, and in a wider sense, the public's

dissatisfaction with mainstream politicians. This disaffection has been identified by many commentators as partly responsible for fuelling support of the alt-right and its establishment-baiting views on race, nationalism and other inflammatory issues.

Also of interest in terms of gaining an insight into the mechanics of the Washington power game was *The Devil's Bargain* by Joshua Green. This study of the close connection between Breitbart firebrand Steve Bannon and Donald Trump paints a worrying picture of the extent of far-right influence on the new President. In a wider sense the book gives the reader a detailed view of the disposable nature of Trump's cabinet, where members who dare show the slightest sign of disloyalty are considered expendable (see the fates of Jeff Sessions, Reince Priebus, Sean Spicer etc.).

Several radio shows and podcasts were of huge benefit to me while conducting research and gathering material. On RTE Radio 1's *The Culture Show* (dated 29 May 2017), Fionn Davenport conducted an interview with *Kill All Normies* author Angela Nagle. The result was an absorbing discussion which centred on the rise of the alt-right and their origins in the meme-heavy, shadowy netherworlds of 4chan and other message-boards. The author also gave her thoughts on what the future could hold for this amorphous movements and what those on the left of the political spectrum can do to halt their rise and offer a viable alternative for disaffected young people. The show was of particular relevance for my study of the strangely subversive power of memes, particularly Pepe, which is discussed in depth here.

The Irish Times *Women's Podcast* hosted by Kathy Sheridan, (originally broadcast 10 July 2017) – this episode was a fascinating insight into the current state of the culture wars in contemporary Ireland. One of Kathy Sheridan's guests on this episode was Frankie Gaffney, a young Dublin writer who was one of the first people I considered when it came to finalising a list of potential interviewees. Frankie's recent experiences, where he became a target of online ire for being a “bad ally” to the feminist movement, felt to me like a textbook example of the left tearing itself apart in a petty internecine struggle, when it could be addressing more important issues, such as the rise of the right.

While Frankie has consistently affirmed his support of social reforms which would benefit the poorest and most vulnerable in communities such as the one in which he himself grew up, he

somehow fell foul of the left by getting entangled in a tortuous row with an online group of feminist campaigners who accused him of “punching down” and causing dissent among the ranks when he wrote an article in the Irish Times which was critical of some of the more extreme and hyperbolic language used by a subset of those involved in the Irish feminist movement. The main target of his criticism was the oft-repeated refrain of the “straight white male” being continually invoked in a negative context, to the point that the description has in itself become a pejorative term.

This spawned the hashtag #coponcomrades, and inspired an open letter signed by Irish feminists which accused Gaffney of writing a “damaging and reductive” article which unfairly criticised aspects of the women's rights movement. Remarkably, the “Cop on Comrades” open letter only served to throw into sharp relief some of the myriad difficulties faced by the left in reaching out to those who occupy the centre ground. By employing US campus terms such as “toxic masculinity” and “tone-policing” they alienate the average listener and only truly appeal to those already well-versed in politically-correct discourse. By preaching to the choir in this manner, and by basking in the unquestioning echo chamber of social media, some individuals on the left continually fail to reach out beyond the margins of their own safe space – where criticism is simply not tolerated.

Audio: Matt Cooper interview with Nicholas Pell on Today FM. (Jan 6, 2016) The Irish Times' publication of a glossary of terms related to the actions of the alt-right caused a mild controversy as it emerged it was written by an American blogger and online troll named Nicholas Pell, currently resident in Ireland. The Irish Times, responding to criticism both online and elsewhere, printed an editorial explaining why they considered the article to be newsworthy. The result was that the previously obscure Pell had suddenly become a public figure and was invited on to Matt Cooper's show, where the subsequent said much about the lack of knowledge among Irish mainstream media about this increasingly influential group and their beliefs.

Pell is a textbook example of “performative transgression”, a huckster who generates predictable, self-consciously “edgy” content as clickbait and even admits as much in the Matt Cooper interview. This type of cynical bandwagon-jumping is a wearily familiar sight online but when it carries overtones of racism and xenophobia it becomes just another ugly aspect of

modern social media posturing. Pell is an example of what Gabriella Coleman refers to when she says “the chaos of feuding and flaming can be catalysed by inhabiting identities, beliefs and values solely for their mischievous potential”.

## CHAPTER THREE: DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

**Design of technical application:** My radio documentary consisted of a central narrative line bringing the listener on a journey - from the origins of Pepe and the alt-right through to the end of Pepe's meme life-cycle. It also includes an interview with a media professional (Ian O'Doherty) who could shed some light on why the alt-right have managed to attract such broad support from a particular demographic. These sections are interspersed by narration explaining the thrust of my central argument regarding the alt-right and their followers

**Voice of documentary:** I wanted to incorporate a free-wheeling Michael Moore-style approach which would include music and sound effects heavily. While radio is a very different medium to film, Moore's approach is still valid for radio as his approach usually involves a central argument which is forcefully advanced through the use of multiple perspectives. This approach is often bolstered by interviews (in the case of my documentary, with journalist Ian O'Doherty). Since I personally find the alt-right so objectionable as a movement, I decided not to disguise my distaste for them and to adopt an engaged tone which sought to dig under the facade of the movement and expose their bigotry.

Unlike the films of Moore (which are highly partisan in their viewpoint) however, I wanted to include a measure of balance by allowing the audience to understand why frustrated and disillusioned young internet users may be drawn to the message of the alt-right. I sought to achieve this through an interview with journalist Ian O'Doherty, a political skeptic and libertarian who often enjoys taking a contrarian approach. While I don't always agree with what Ian says, his wide-ranging opinions gave me an excellent insight into the many reasons why the prevailing tone of media discourse has alienated so many individuals who eventually gravitated to the alt-right and their poisonous message

Since the alt-right and the whole subject of memes is an inherently wacky one I thought that a slightly irreverent approach was warranted, since it is difficult to talk about memes depicting cartoon frogs in an entirely po-faced, serious manner.

In terms of the technical aspects of the radio documentary, my biggest challenge was in marshalling all the different strands and elements of the documentary and synthesising all of these into a cohesive and coherent whole. Sound effects, music clips, interview segments and narration all had to be edited and arranged in such a manner as to maintain a steady flow and a brisk pace. This was essential in order to keep the listener's attention.

### **Featured Music:**

Edvard Grieg – *Morgenstemning* (Morning Mood) from “Peer Gynt”. Performed by Orquestra Sinfonica de RTVE.

Black Sabbath – Into the Void.

Creedence Clearwater Revival – Fortunate Son.

Marconi Union – Weightless

Edvard Grieg – *In the Hall of the Mountain King* from “Peer Gynt”. Performed by Orquestra Sinfonica de RTVE.

### **Sound effects:**

I used a small number of sound effects files, mainly for comic/interstitial purposes. Each of these were sourced via free online sound files and samples. Sound effects were an important part of the documentary as they helped to break up blocks of narration and added a humorous touch when needed.

**Challenges:** One of the main challenges that I face in tackling this particular subject is that the alt-right are primarily an online phenomena. Since the beliefs of the alt-right are a loose agglomeration of elements drawn from white nationalism, nativism, anti-EU sentiment and outright white supremacist racism, one of the major difficulties I faced was in defining exactly what the alt-right believe in, if anything.

**Editing:** It was quite difficult to arrange elements of the piece in such a way as to maintain consistency of pacing, particularly since I had so many long stretches of interview material. It was therefore very important to ensure that the potential audience would not find the end result an overly monotonous experience. I tried to tackle this problem by introducing outside elements such as music (Grieg, Black Sabbath, Creedence Clearwater Revival) to act as a humorous and sometimes ironic counterpoint to the central narrative. I also sought to break up recorded interviews so that all important sections were still part of the finished product, but not all stitched together in one long passage - this would risk boring the potential listener.

**Interviewees:** The most difficult part of the dissertation process was in securing interviews. I approached several potential interviewees including authors Angela Nagle and Gabriella Coleman, and *Irish Times* journalists Mark Paul and Patrick Freyne, without any luck. After listening to the *Irish Times* Women's Podcast originally broadcast on 10 July 2017 (outlined on page 13) I got in contact with Frankie Gaffney, a young novelist and freelance journalist and managed to agree on a time for an interview. Unfortunately, Frankie had to cancel at the last minute and despite repeated efforts I wasn't able to reschedule. Correspondence with Frankie is pasted below:



I also got in contact with Irish Independent journalist and often controversial commentator Ian O'Doherty via email. Ian is an atheist and libertarian with strong opinions about the Catholic Church, personal liberty and PC culture and over the course of his career has attracted a fair amount of opprobrium from both the liberal left and the religious conservative right for his strongly-held views on these subjects. Since the election of Donald Trump, he has written a number of articles decrying liberal hand-wringing over Trump's many offences against campus-approved politically-correct terminology as well as other aspects of what he sees as a victimisation culture of millennials including campus “safe spaces” and trigger warnings. As such, I reasoned that Ian would be an excellent choice for an interviewee as not only has he been an experienced journalists with a front row view of the culture wars, he also could possibly provide a valuable perspective on why disaffected young people might be repelled by

liberal PC politics and as a result attracted to the message of the alt-right.

My email exchange with Ian is pasted below:

Interview request Inbox x

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 **Martin Cusack** <cusackmartin@gmail.com> 2:18 PM (5 hours ago) ☆ 

to iodoherty 

Hi Ian,

My name's Martin, I'm a journalism student at Griffith College currently doing a thesis and radio doc on the subject of the alt-right, rise of Trump etc. It would be great to get your thoughts on this subject, particularly on whether you think PC culture is partly responsible for the attraction of alt-right politics to younger people, especially in US.

I appreciate that you must be very busy but let me know if you have a spare 10-15 minutes this week to do a very quick interview whenever is convenient for you. I live in Ringsend so I can meet you anywhere/anytime in Dublin.

Any help would be massively appreciated!

Regards,



---

 **Ian O'Doherty** 5:13 PM (3 hours ago) ☆ 

to me 

Hi Martin,  
Yeah, I'd be happy to be of any assistance, fair play to you for going into journalism at the toughest time in its history.  
I'm pretty much stuck around Terenure this week, but give me a shout tomorrow on [0863157724](tel:0863157724) and we can work something out.  
Cheers,  
Ian

---

**From:** Martin Cusack <cusackmartin@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** 24 July 2017 14:18:57  
**To:** Ian O'Doherty  
**Subject:** Interview request

## **CHAPTER 4: EVALUATION**

My dissertation proposal was submitted on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2017 outlining the central premise of the documentary which I hoped to produce. The proposal contained a detailed reading list and an analysis of sources which I planned to consult during the course of my research.

Meetings were held with my supervisors Ronan Brady and Conor Kostick over the course of May 2017. Previous to my discussion with Ronan it had been my intention to do a straight-forward factual documentary on the alt-right using a conventional structure, but after discussing the subject of memes with Ronan, he suggested structuring a narrative around the “life and death” of the Pepe. This struck me as a good way to frame the documentary; I could tell the story of the emergence of this political movement while also explaining the unusual phenomenon of memes at the same time using a parallel narrative. Having decided on this course of action, I began to research memes and started to re-frame the narrative.

I met Conor in the same week and this meeting was very beneficial in terms of how to present my supporting document. Conor guided me in terms of how to build a literary review and how to structure the document in a way which illustrated the evolution and development of my idea from inception to execution.

Advice from both of my advisors proved vital over the course of the dissertation. The greatest difficulty I faced was in securing interviews, and this is the biggest regret I have in terms of the whole experience. I ended up with just one viable interview; having originally envisaged including two or three voices in the documentary. However, Ian O' Doherty was sufficiently generous with his time and so wide-ranging in his interview answers that for me it partially compensated for the lack of a polyphony of voices.

### **Audience Interest**

There certainly exists a great fascination amongst the public (that is, among those aware of them) when it comes to the alt-right movement. Their eye-catching use of memes and use of

provocative language makes them stand out among the politically-correct landscape of the media; which is of course their intention. However, I was struck by how many people were not aware of the alt-right as a phenomenon, and also how many people were baffled by their use of internet memes. This demonstrated to me that individuals who spend a lot of time online were much more likely to be aware of this subject; compared to people who rarely engage with social media, confirming that the alt-right are mainly an online subculture.

Podcasts and radio programmes which have dealt with the alt-right have generated a huge amount of discussion over the last year, further underlining the existence of a public appetite for information on this subject.

## CONCLUSION

The subject of the alt-right is still a relatively new phenomenon. This is reflected in the dearth of published sources available at the time of writing. Maybe of the books which were relevant to my research were published very recently; one can only expect that this number will grow exponentially in the coming year as the Trump presidency continues to throw up drama after drama.

Because the subject of internet memes is also such a 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon; it's also understandable that few texts have been published exploring this very current issue. Angela Nagle's *Kill All Normies* was hugely beneficial to me in this regard; despite being a slim volume, it contains a wealth of information on the origin and evolution of several memes, including that of Pepe.

Creating a documentary which was entertaining and informative was always my final objective, and by securing a wide-ranging and comprehensive interview and by finding a wealth of online material to support my central thesis, I hope that I managed to achieve this.

## APPENDIX: NARRATOR'S SCRIPT

### Voiceover Narration

#### THE LIFE CYCLE OF A NEO-FASCIST FROG

Introductory Music– Edvard Grieg “MORNING”, from Peer Gynt.

**NARRATION:** Once upon a time in the land of the internet, there was a friendly little cartoon frog who went by the name of Pepe. Our smiling green-skinned friend was born into the carefree world of comic strip website *Boy's Club*, and before long he found unlikely fame as a hugely-popular meme on social media networks, his unmistakable visage shared by users around the world.



Above: Pepe in his original, carefree *Boy's Club* incarnation

**NARRATION:** But Pepe's carefree life changed forever when he was embraced by an online subculture who call themselves the alt-right. A loose coalition of online pranksters, disaffected shut-ins and outright racists who with far too much time on their hands, the alt-right adopted Pepe as a bizarre kind of mascot, and from there our harmless friend took a sharp right turn into sinister territory.



**Above:** Smug Pepe

### **MUSIC: BLACK SABBATH - INTO THE VOID**

**NARRATION:** From humble origins, Pepe grew into a big, bad meme monster – embraced by reactionary and xenophobic trolls and synonymous with the worst excesses of online bigotry. It eventually came to the point that our dear Pepe was denounced by the Anti-Defamation League in 2016 and added to their list of hate symbols. His creator Matt Furie was horrified at what became of his once-innocent character, and so he did the decent thing buried Pepe in a solemn online ceremony in May 2017. This is the story of one meme-frog's strange and troubling life cycle. But what can Pepe's journey from cutesiness to obscenity tell us about the nature of the alt-right? What does the story of the Pepe meme say about the febrile and increasingly surreal nature of online political discourse? And can any of this shed any light on how America ended up with Donald Trump as it's Commander-in-Chief?

SOUND EFFECT: record scratch

**NARRATION:** Well....let's start at the beginning... back when Pepe was a mere tadpole, yet to enter the shark-infested waters of online xenophobia and racism.

Rendered by cartoonist Matt Furie in 2005, Pepe was originally a laid-back and eccentric frog-like cartoon character with an oddly humanoid body- just one in a series of creations for the online series Boy's Club. Pepe's unique demeanour immediately touched a chord with the

social media using masses – and his visage arranged in various poses was appropriated by millions of users on popular messageboards, becoming a perfect exemplar of that 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon – the meme. Gabriella Coleman defines memes as “modifications of humorous images, videos, or catchphrases, some of which attain legendary status”. Pepe had joined this exclusive club.

In its infancy, Pepe's meme life was all very innocent and his image was most popular with teenage girls and even pop idols such as Katy Perry – but the shadowy denizens of notorious messageboard 4chan soon embraced him as an unofficial emblem of chaos. 4Chan - which has been colourfully dubbed by its users as “the asshole of the internet” - is the fetid birthplace of hacking group Anonymous and dozens of other breakaway strands who specialise in spreading malware to disable sites of which they disapprove, and whose twisted humour is characterised by an obsession with the most grotesque scatological and pornographic images imaginable – in internet parlance, images which “can't be unseen”. 4Chan is an example of what writer Oisín Fagan refers to when he states that “anonymous message boards are the dark place where unspeakable discourse goes to breed with itself.”

These online misfits' joy in transgressing the boundaries of taste is partly the reason why they embraced Pepe: something about this ostensibly innocent frog-like character has an indefinable perversity which endears him to these internet ruffians. As Angela Nagle, author of alt-right study *Kill All Normies* writes “in his original cartoon form, Pepe was a sad sack, prone to bouts of humiliation, but as his froggy visage got meme-fied on 4chan, he took on a distinctly more menacing aspect... he became a favorite icon of last-straw ranters spewing extreme misogyny, racism, and vengefulness.”

Social networks generally associated with liberal politics such as Twitter were soon crowded with anonymous users eager to share Pepe memes and irritate as many lefty types as possible. In June 2017, RTE Radios The Culture Show – presented by Fionn Davenport – discussed this very topic with the aforementioned Angela Nagle:

**CLIP:** (RTE RADIO 1 - CULTURE SHOW CLIP - FIONN DAVENPORT & ANGELA NAGLE)

**NARRATION:** From the moment he was adopted by the alt-right, Pepe was set to embark on a

wild ride through the murky highways of online transgression, his image attached to everything from badly-photoshopped meme atrocities to racially-charged nativist rhetoric. Now of course, your average 4chan troll has no specific political beliefs or convictions and instead are what cultural theorist Whitney Phillips classifies as “agents of cultural digestion who scavenge the landscape, re-purpose the most offensive material, then shove the resulting monstrosities into the faces of an unsuspecting populace”. These desecrators are always looking for a cause to attach themselves to, and in 2016 they found it in the form of the unprecedented, jaw-dropping, scorched-earth presidential campaign of one Donald Trump.

**CLIP: (Creedence Clearwater Revival - Fortunate Son – Trump collage)**

**NARRATION:** But before we deal with Trump, let's first define exactly what the alt-right is. The term was coined by self-confessed white nationalist Richard Spencer back in 2010, and he has since become the most recognisable name to be associated with the movement. He does not however claim to be a leader, as the alt-right has always presented itself as a movement without leaders. In an article about Spencer, Rolling Stone magazine said “the Alt-Right prides itself on its leaderless ethos, using social media to spread its ideology through viral memes and anonymous attacks on its enemies, real and imagined.”

But very quickly, it became apparent that the term “alt-right” itself was a deliberate misnomer, a kind of tongue-in-cheek attempt to paint the movement as a hip, counter-cultural alternative to the mainstream – a form of fascism for hipsters. But under all the sneering and ironising was a morass of outright xenophobia, anti-semitism, racism, and misogyny – a set of hateful beliefs that justified itself purely through its deviation from established politically-correct norms. This meant that no form of bigotry was out of bounds – as long as it upsets liberals and lefties, then all is permitted.

The most immediately striking thing about the alt-right was the way it used language. Previously, extreme-right-wing youth groups such as skinheads and neo-nazis were not exactly known for their linguistic facility and so remained marginal groups. The alt-right on the other hand had a much broader appeal thanks to its adoption of meaty catchphrases and meme magic which were the ideal hook for young keyboard warriors disillusioned with the

mainstream. All groups who like to think of themselves as subversive enjoy developing their own distinctive argot and iconography, which acts not only as a barrier to the unwanted and uninitiated but is also a way for insiders to feel as if they are part of something “underground” and clandestine.

And so, here's a quick glossary of some of these alt-right terms:

**CULTURAL MARXISM:** A catch-all term used by the alt-right to describe the damaging effects of PC culture on the American way of life. In their eyes, since the 1960s a rot has developed within the core of American society as a result of the influence of a matrix of forces including a left-leaning mainstream media, a Hollywood dominated by Jewish liberals, and a campus culture dedicated to attacking the bulwarks of conservatism such as family, heterosexual relationships, racial segregation and gun ownership. Tellingly, very few of the people who employ this term seem to have any idea what the term “Marxism” actually means.

**CUCKSERVATIVE:** A cuckservative is a traditional Republican (e.g George W. Bush, Mitt Romney) deemed not sufficiently conservative by the alt-right legions. The word itself is an unwieldy hybrid of “cuckold” and “conservative” – the implication being that mild conservatives have allowed their own country to be figuratively cuckolded.

**HATEFACTS:** Obviously concocted falsehoods and skewed statistics used to back up any argument advanced by the alt-right, usually with the aim of causing maximum offence to their opponents in the conservative centre or on the liberal left of the political spectrum.

**NORMIE:** Any individual one who is not conversant with the idioms and memes of alt-right online activity. Often ridiculed by 4chan users for their cluelessness when it comes to the “lulz”, or online hacker humour.

**NARRATION:** These are just a few of the terms that have entered the trolling lexicon, and in fact it was with a list of this nature published on the *Irish Times* website that the Alt-Right suddenly announced itself to the Irish public in January 2017. Nicholas Pell - a chancer who had a few

online articles published and had attached himself to the growing alt-right movement - wrote a glossary of alt-right terms which generated a mini-controversy when some accused the *Irish Times* of providing a platform for bigotry.

The following clip from *The Matt Cooper Show* illustrates Pell's cynicism in co-opting this language and forces the listener to question to just how committed some members of the alt-right are to their stated beliefs. When Pell is confronted on air, he disingenuously claims that the alt-right is a harmless “irreverent youth movement” - while in the next breath admitting that it's also an ideology heavy with xenophobic and white supremacist elements.

(CLIP: PELL CLIP)

**NARRATION:** Pell is a textbook example of “performative transgression”, a huckster who generates predictable, self-consciously “edgy” content as clickbait and even admits as much in the Matt Cooper interview. But of course the king of all hucksters is Trump. When Donald Trump's campaign bulldozed its way beyond a hapless Hilary Clinton to claim the unlikely presidential election victory in modern history, the alt-right must have believed that all its Christmases had come at once. Trump had become their idol thanks to his rampant and unabashed misogyny, his anti-immigrant rhetoric and his perceived refusal to kowtow to established politically-correct norms. The alt-right ironically labelled him their “God-Emperor” and soon attached poor Pepe to the new president's image in a constant barrage of memes pouring from such forums as God Emperor Trump’s Dank Meme Stash on Facebook.



Above: Trump-Pepe

By early 2017, Pepe had matured into a meme monster, the centre of a convoluted mythos created by his fans involving obscure ancient Egyptian deities, secret messages transmitted through obscure Italian disco-pop tracks and the self-consciously madcap theory that his and Donald Trump's identities had become fused and intertwined.

The reality is that Trump and the alt-right do not have a relationship. Trump is and has always been a cynical opportunist who is willing to befriend anyone if they advance his relentless drive for self-promotion. Once the brand of the alt-right becomes toxic, Trump will distance himself from the movement very quickly.

The following clip from BBC Radio 5 live discussion explains how the alt-right and Trump have both appealed to the baser instincts of voters by demonising minorities, a grubby tactic which has paid off in bucket-loads for both parties.

**CLIP:** (BBC Radio 5 clip – Calum McDonald )

Putting all the madcap silliness to one side, the Pepe meme and the alt-right has acquired some genuinely dark associations. The reality is that whenever hateful language is used to degrade any social group there are always going to be ugly consequences.

Many disenchanted young males who gravitated towards the alt-right – drawn in initially by its anarchic humour - identify as “beta-males” and wear this as an ironic badge of honour, as well as a way of identifying with similar geeky types. Betas use the internet as a primary source of social interaction and it is through the internet that they can find others of their ilk and genuinely feel like part of a community. However, by living a cloistered existence in order to find this sense of kinship they paradoxically only deepen their dissociation from mainstream society. The ethos of the alt-right is one which is cut out for these alienated keyboard warriors.

When twenty-six-year-old Chris Harper-Mercer shot and killed nine classmates and injured nine others before shooting himself at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon, it didn't take long for the full details of his background to emerge. He was an alienated young white male, obsessed with guns and ammunition who was easily drawn into the alt-right

conversation on line. He had also written a manifesto full of extreme-right references in which he bemoaned his social isolation and sexual inadequacy, and just before this deadly spree he had posted a warning message on 4chan emblazoned with an image of Pepe holding a gun. Of course, rather than question the killer's easy access to deadly weapons, the US media was quick to ascribe blame to the malevolent influence of social media.

CLIP: (MERCER CLIP – YouTube Clip)

**NARRATION :** And so Pepe had come to the end of his life-cycle : a very 21<sup>st</sup> century journey from the innocence of an online comic strip to a symbol of violence and inchoate rage– co-opted by Trump supporters, InfoWars fanatics, “men's-rights” misogynists and build-the-wall bigots. His creator Matt Furie never intended any of this for his goofy little frog character. Here he is expressing his dismay at the tragic fate which befell his goofy little frog.

(Play Pepe funeral)

And so Pepe was laid to rest on May 6<sup>th</sup> 2017 – a victim of the internet’s swirling and dangerous undercurrents, but no doubt doomed to be kept alive in a shadowy digital half-life by thousands of frat-boy pranksters and angry keyboard warriors.



Above: Pepe (2007-2017) RIP.

For a professional perspective on the alt-right phenomenon, the Pepe phenomenon, the rise of Donald Trump and other relevant issues I spoke to Ian O'Doherty a journalist for the Irish Independent, The Irish Daily Star and others. Ian is a libertarian with strong opinions about the Catholic church, personal liberty and PC culture and over the course of his career has attracted a fair amount of opprobrium from both the liberal left and the religious conservative right for his strongly-held views on these subjects. Since the election of Donald Trump, he has written a number of articles decrying liberal hand-wringing over Trump's many offences against campus-approved politically-correct terminology as well as other aspects of what he sees as a victimisation culture of millennials including campus "safe spaces" and trigger warnings. As such, I reasoned that Ian would be an excellent choice for an interviewee as not only has he been an experienced journalists with a front row view of the culture wars, he also could possibly provide a valuable perspective on why disaffected young people might be repelled by liberal PC politics and as a result attracted to the message of the alt-right.

## **CONCLUSION**

"United mostly by what they hate, their internal contradictions are too great to allow them to form any kind of sustainable, cohesive political organisation, or do anything offline more politically significant than beating up a few teenagers." (Oisín Fagan)

The online environment which created the alt-right can also be harnessed to provide a healthier alternative for the disaffected. A lot can be learned from the way the alt-right have used irreverent humour to popularise their message; maybe the left can learn not to be quite so easily offended when it comes to the arena of online "shitposting". Reasoned debate will show up the alt-right for what they are; however, due to the anonymity it affords, the fevered and hyperbole-strewn arena of the internet is not particularly conducive to the kind of reasoned debate which will show up the alt-right movement for the emperor with no clothes which it is.

Instead as Oisín Fagan writes, " Rather they will have to be superseded and made irrelevant by a wide-reaching, inclusive and unapologetically mainstream political movement towards economic justice that uses social media primarily as an organising tool."

This is essential to arriving at an understanding of the threat that the alt-right pose in our society, and the damage that they have caused in coarsening and cheapening political discourse. The alt-right and Trump are symptoms not the cause of Trump, Brexit and the alt-right

So what can we learn from the journey of poor Ol' Pepe from harmless stoner frog to hate symbol. One thing is that performative transgression has real-world consequences hwtether it be in the form of the mass shooting or the election of an unstable demagogue such as Trump. Because when we end up with dangerous idiots like this (TRUMP QUOTE) the consequences are no laughing matter.

CLIP: GRIEG – In the Hall of the Mountain King

#### **Sample Interview Questions:**

Q: What are the some of the factors that can explain the emergence of the alt-right? Are they a reaction to PC culture?

Q: The alt-right revel in the use of transgressive language. Does this make them attractive to those individuals who are frustrated by the restrictions imposed by politically-correct campus-approved language?

Q: Was the emergence of the alt-right part of the reason behind the rise of Donald Trump?

Q: Does the “echo chamber” effect of social media create the conditions where political discourse is pushed further and further to the margins, and does this encourage extremism on both the right and the left of the political spectrum?

Q: What can the left do to combat the rise of the alt-right and provide a viable alternative for people who may be disillusioned with the prevailing political environment?

Q: Did the alt-right play a significant role in the rise of Donald Trump?

## Consent Form

### Consent Form

Researcher: Martin Cusack

- The aim of this study is to investigate the origins of the alt-right movement: why they exist, how has their message evolved, do they have a future are they an example of a political fad?
- You will be asked a number of questions about your work as a journalist writing on subjects such as political-correctness, the rise of Donald Trump etc. The interview should last around 20 minutes.
- This research will be of benefit as it draws on the experience of a journalist working at a time of change in the media industry This research provides an opportunity to hear a working journalists' perspective.
- Personal participant information will not be used for any reason and participants will not be identifiable in any published material.
- Taking part in this research is voluntary and there will be no consequences for withdrawing.
- If you have any questions about this research, please contact:
  - STUDENT NAME: Martin Cusack (cusackmartin@gmail.com)
  - SUPERVISOR NAME: Conor Kostick (conorkostick@gmail.com)
- This project has been approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

Participant Signature 

Researcher Signature Martin Cusack

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