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THE USE OF MEMES AMONG FAR-RIGHT ACTIVISTS: INDIVIDUATION, HEROIZATION, AND SELF-DERISION

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how far-right activists use memes on their personal social media profiles as meaningful, situated social practices. Moving beyond the view of memes as purely ideological propaganda tools, our qualitative approach highlights three interrelated dynamics. First, heroization and the mythologizing of the past: many memes reference idealized historical figures or periods, such as Crusaders or Roman legionaries. Activists symbolically align themselves with these glorified identities, using aesthetics and cultural codes to position themselves within the far-right landscape. These figures are typically drawn from an ahistorical, essentialized vision of race, masculinity, or cultural heritage.

Second, self-derision as a legitimizing strategy: the use of humor and irony often softens the dramatic or theatrical aspects of political identification. By mocking themselves or exaggerating their references, activists make their ideological stances more socially acceptable and engage in a form of subversive play.

Third, political individuation: memes allow activists to assert themselves as individuals within or at the margins of their movements. Through specific references, they express subjective positions or reinterpret traditional ideological frameworks.

This interplay of individuation, heroization, and ironic distance reveals how memes function as both aesthetic tools and modes of political self-expression in far-right digital cultures.

Far right, Memes, Political individuation, Heroization, Mythologizing, Self-derision, Digital Activism

Keywords:

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1. INTRODUCTION

The mischievous Frogs are dressed as a Roman legionary, a pop-culture Viking, and a Nazi officer. They smile slyly through the screen as they lock eyes with the viewer. This is the kind of image – both martial and humorous – that has been shared by French far-right activists since Trump’s first election.

This article examines the way French far-right activists engage with online visual presentation. While the meme has been studied as a visual tool for disseminating a transnational and violent alt-right ideology (Dafaure, 2020; Bogerts, 2020; McSwiney et al., 2021; Romano, 2019), our approach is more individualized and interpretive.

Since the late 2000s, we have been studying the far-right online visual culture, particularly the visual production of the identitarian movement and the content produced by so-called “Zentropa blogs”. Back then, we turned our attention to the appropriation of the so-called “cultural struggle” or “metapolitical” strategy of the *Nouvelle Droite* (New Right) by a younger movement rooted in skinhead countercultures (Casajus, 2025). Within this framework, we monitored online activity across this ideological network and conducted interviews with activists (Casajus, 2015). From September 2015 to October 2016, we infiltrated Action française, a historical monarchist movement. This insider perspective provided a much clearer understanding of the identitarian practices of far-right movements. Our observations notably confirmed that far-right activist identities are constructed in opposition to one another (Casajus 2023).

Contemporary French far-right movements have given rise to a recent body of work. One may mention, for instance, the research of Marion Jacquet-Vaillant and Samuel Bouron (Jacquet-Vaillant 2020; Bouron 2014; Bouron 2017). Stéphane François has also contributed to the study of the cultural, musical, and pagan dimensions of the far-right culture (François 2017). Cynthia Idris-Miller’s work also helps to shed light on the performative and consumerist practices of young members of the far-right (Miller-Idriss, 2017a, 2017b). Regarding the construction of social identities, we draw on Erving Goffman (2007). Regarding the relationship between social identities and consumption practices, we rely on classical French semioticians of consumer society (Barthes, 2015; Baudrillard, 1986) and on researchers associated with Mike Featherstone and Andy Bennett (Bennett, 2005; Chaney, 1996; Featherstone, 1982). We analyse the tensions between gender models and forms of masculinity drawing on the work of R. Connell (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Our understanding of the distinction processes through socially situated consumption practices is informed by Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1979; Bourdieu 1992).

Building on the previously described observations and analytical framework, we analyze the sharing of memes or visual content by these activists as a meaningful and socially situated practice. Online practices of these activists have often been analyzed through the lens of their exclusionary and racist dimensions, as well as their political consequences. Our approach, however, aims to look at these practices differently — we ask what they mean for the activists themselves. Three key dimensions emerge from this analysis:

- Heroization of the self and mythologization of the past
- Self-derision as a legitimizing strategy

- Political individuation

Our approach will move from the collective to the individual, addressing these three aspects in chronological order. The heroization of the militant self is an older strategy within the far right (on fascism, see for example Griffin, 1993; Mosse, 2003). The thematic of the self-transformation into a hero is omnipresent in the fascist text of Julius Evola, Jünger, or more recently, Dominique Venner (Jünger, 1991; Evola, 1980; Venner, 2013). In contrast, self-derision strategies are more recent developments².

2. THE IDENTITARIAN MOVEMENT AND THE ZENTROPA COMMUNITY: AESTHETICS AND HEROIZATION

After the independence of the Algerian colony, the French so-called *Nouvelle Droite* (New Right) developed a new political strategy, which they called *metapolitics*. The aim was to influence political outcomes by reshaping the value systems of society. This strategy involved founding magazines and promoting a folkloric, pagan-rooted vision of European history and culture.

In the 1990s, revolutionary nationalist groups such as *Jeune Résistance* and *Unité Radicale* reinterpreted the metapolitical strategy in a more youthful and popular form. They attempted to distance themselves from skinhead aesthetics by creating a musical genre derived from RAC (Rock Against Communism), which they renamed *Rock Identitaire Français* (RIF). In 2002, *Unité Radicale* was dissolved after one of its sympathizers, Maxime Brunerie, attempted to assassinate President Jacques Chirac.

Immediately after the dissolution of *Unité Radicale*, a new movement appeared: *Bloc Identitaire*. This group continued the youthful, popular metapolitical approach pioneered by *Jeune Résistance*, but brought significant visual innovations. Whereas *Unité Radicale*'s graphic style was inspired by GUD comics and skinzines (skinhead fanzines), the Identitarian movement began to explore broader visual references. Formally, these visual productions were often created with vector graphics, and shared online. Their productions celebrated European, pagan, and Hellenic heritage, local and regional cultures, left-wing visual codes (appropriated tactically) or pop culture references.

On the fringes of the French far right (notably the Identitarian movement and MAS) and the Italian *CasaPound* movement, a small group of activists develop a galaxy of blogs, the *Zentropa blogs*. The *Zentropa community* was hosted on Splinder (a now-defunct Italian web platform). Many of their blog posts combined nationalist texts (e.g., by Brasillach, Bardèche, Nimier) with images overlaid with striking slogans in stylized typography.

The visual style developed by the Identitarian and Zentropa deeply influenced the broader radical far right. The logos of numerous current radical groups echo the style created by the Identitarians or *CasaPound*. Groups such as *Club Roger Nimier* and the graphic collective *Allure Rupture* (affiliated with *Action française*) clearly echo Zentropa's visual codes.

² A precursor is the “rat noir” (black rat), the emblem of *Groupe Union Défense*. This “self-representation myth” (Lebourg 2010), depicted through comics featuring violent and sometimes foolish black rats, echoes the current self-representation of the Kekist movement.

This aesthetic influence also remains strong in the visual productions of the *Nouvelle Droite*, such as those from *Institut Iliade*.

There are tangible links between the New Right and these newer cultural strategies. Both *Unité Radicale* and the Identitarian movement explicitly reference the metapolitical framework in their theoretical writings, and borrows several core elements from the *Nouvelle Droite*'s strategy of seduction:

- The construction of behavioral models through the aestheticization and mythologization of historical figures (whether social roles or famous personalities)
- The romanticized reconstruction of historical eras, drawing on folklorist traditions and the narrative codes of historical fiction
- The belief that aesthetic self-fashioning is a driving force for political action

The Identitarians add a deliberate effort to adapt the seductive strategy of the *Nouvelle Droite* and their kindred spirit to a younger, more popular audience, by incorporating already established codes from pop culture. Thus, the Hellenistic ideal of the Spartan warrior, theorized by Dominique Venner, is reinterpreted through the lens of the film *300*. To illustrate their revolt against the modern world, the Identitarians reference *Fight Club*. *Zentropa*, for its part, illustrates fascist authors through visuals inspired by American comic books, tattoo aesthetics, and more.

However, the *Nouvelle Droite* can be critical of this aestheticized and youth-oriented approach. This criticism is evident in a review written by the current *Éléments pour la civilisation européenne* editor-in-chief of the identitarian manifesto “*Éléments pour une contre-culture identitaire*” (Vardon-Raybaud, 2011; Bousquet 2011):

[...] There is, between you and us, a gulf of a thousand years. You are from Nice, but I find little in you of the spirit of a city that was once home to Giuseppe Garibaldi and Louis Nucéra. On the contrary, I see the omnipresence of American mass culture — a culture that has not only delegitimized the great classical culture (which once made us free men), but also, and more irreparably still, has destroyed rooted popular cultures (those very cultures that made us men with proper names).³

Yet the objective remains the same as Dominique Venner's: to propose aesthetic models of action, capable of shaping the militant self (Venner, 2013). This tendency toward uniformization and collective aestheticization in radical groups has been noted by Samuel Bouron during his infiltration of *Bloc Identitaire*, and by myself during my fieldwork within *Action Française* (Bouron, 2014; Casajus, 2023). The prominent figures—both textual and visual—circulating on digital platforms become reference points for militants. The militants associate with these figures by sharing them on social media (at the time, via Facebook profile

³ “[...] Il y a entre vous et nous, comme un fossé de 1000 ans. Vous êtes niçois, mais je ne retrouve guère en vous l'esprit d'une ville qui fut celle de Giuseppe Garibaldi et de Louis Nucéra. J'y trouve au contraire l'omniprésence de la culture de masse américaine, cette culture qui n'a pas seulement délégitimé la grande culture classique (qui faisait de nous des hommes libres), mais encore, mais plus irréparablement, qui a ruiné les cultures populaires et enracinées (celles-là mêmes qui faisaient de nous des hommes avec un nom propre).”

pictures, wall posts, etc.) or by embodying them (Miller-Idriss 2017a, 2017b; Nadeau, Boursier & Gnocchini, 2025) through clothing, tattoos, and other forms of performative expression.

The figures promoted by the radical right can be stratified as follows: mythologized martial figures from a primordial mythologized past (Spartans for the Identitarians, *Camelots du Roi* for *Action Française*, etc.), and a current ideal-type activist for everyday life. The second figure is supposed to embody the “eternal values” of the first in the present, through a specific lifestyle and clothing. For instance, activists from *Action française* seek to adopt a Camelot style, in reference to the *Camelots du Roi*⁴. They embody the *camelot* figure in the present through a Peaky Blinders-inspired style. However, those models (past reference and actual clothing style) are opposed to the Identitarian or revolutionary nationalist models, which favor a “casual” style, originated in British hooligan subcultures. This opposition is marked by mockery. For example, *Action française* activists are mocked for taking themselves for knights and looking like conservative Catholics – a style considered less “street credible” than the casual style. Rivalries between far-right micro-groups thus play out as stylistic struggles over the “proper” definition of stylized militant virility (Casajus, 2023).

The tendency toward uniformity and the heroization of the group according to pre-established models is counterbalanced by other practices. The meme, this play of signs and images popular within the far right, reuses right-wing heroic codes while treating them ironically.

3. MEMES AND MILITANT SELF-DERISION: IRONY, SATIRE, AND IDENTITY PLAY IN FAR-RIGHT VISUAL CULTURE

Richard Dawkins coined the notion of the meme. Placing imitation at the core of cultural transmission, Dawkins emphasized parallels between genetic transmission and cultural transmission. He introduced the concept of the meme as a cultural equivalent of the “selfish gene,” a central idea in biological evolution: cultural traits—acquired behaviors—are transmitted across generations much like genes. This idea gained particular traction with the rise of the Internet, which accelerated the spread of memes. Memetics helps explain phenomena such as the propagation of rumors and adherence to cultural, political, or religious movements.

On the Internet, the term “meme” refers to meaningful content that spreads online through imitation. Most often, this takes the form of a combination of images and text. It is important to note that memes are almost always a reworking or *détournement* of an original image. A meme functions as a kind of “sign made available” to which users can respond, modify, or repurpose, using social media accounts and editing software. Sometimes the images derive from popular culture, or are simply striking (for example, private or personal photos may become memes and enter Internet culture).

There is a large body of sociolinguistic literature (Johnstone, 1994; Norrick, 1989; Tannen, 1999) addressing how social bonds and actors’ identities are reaffirmed through interactions based on the repetition of shared, intertextual cultural elements. Sylvia Sierra (Sierra 2016), who has studied the use of memes and cultural references in playful and

⁴ The *Camelots du Roi* was the squadrist organization of *Action française* until 1936

humorous peer-group interactions, highlights the identity-building and group-binding function of this repetition. In such exchanges, she notes the omnipresence of shared cultural elements, repeated like verbal gimmicks, which create a sense of unity and group cohesion.

The widespread use of memes online began in the early 2000s on the 4chan network before being popularized by the platform 9gag. On these and similar platforms, memes act as linguistic tools that humorously express adolescent lived experiences: awkwardness around parents, the pleasure of cocooning, academic failure, social or sexual frustration (as in the “forever alone” meme), etc. While memes shared by the 4chan community were initially apolitical, they sometimes took on provocative forms. The forum is known for hosting the core of Anonymous and is associated with masculinist communities. In France, the jeuxvideo.com forum gathered a community of young users who developed their own humor and references. Grouped around the 15-18 and 18-25 forums (the supposed age groups of the users), they express a scathing critique of French society. The French Dream, a French version of the American Dream, is summarized as follows: the worker’s ideal is to live in a suburban house with his wife, the “big Magali”. Alongside this classist vision of society, racist and masculinist humor is common among jeuxvideo.com users, much like on 4chan. During my observation in *Action française*, one activist was a former member of this community.

The meme humor system spread in France after the Trump first election through humor-focused Facebook. Many of them, such as “Neurchis de Zemmour” or “Neurchis de Trébuchet” were right winged. By sharing situated content (for example, from Facebook pages like “*Triste Sire*” or “*Mèmes Royalistes*”, run by monarchist militants, while the page “*Femmes d’Europe*” is associated with Europeanist and pagan themes), users position themselves and make their identities visible and legible.

During the 2016 U.S. presidential election, many young Alt-Right supporters of Donald Trump expressed their backing through memes. Pepe the Frog (sometimes named the “kek – kek,” as an interjection on social media, means “lol” or “haha.”), created by artist Matt Furie, embodies this perfectly. From the mid-2010s, Pepe—the mischievous cartoon frog wearing a knowing smile – was appropriated as a far-right symbol online during Trump’s first campaign in the U.S. and became a rallying emblem. With his ironic grin and knowing expression, Pepe primarily conveys the silent satisfaction felt by young conservatives witnessing liberal decline. Transformed into countless variations, Pepe appears as Trump, a Roman legionary, a Ku Klux Klan militant, and represents the anonymous Alt-Right sympathizer. Each incarnation ironically reflects different social roles and mythical, virile identities emphasized by the far right. A parody cult of personality mimicking that of Adolf Hitler emerged: the esoteric kekism. The “flag of Kekistan” (a play on “kek” and the suffix “-stan” from certain Central Asian countries) parodies the Third Reich war flag, replacing the swastika with “Kek” and the Iron Cross with the 4chan logo. During January 2025, just before Trump’s inauguration—during which he appeared to give a Nazi salute – Elon Musk multiplied on his X profile AI-generated self-representations of himself as a Roman imperator Kek, and renamed himself Kekius Maximus.

Like the Identitarians and Zentropa, Alt-Right culture heroizes and sanctifies figures and eras from the past, directly associating sympathizers with these revered symbols. But it does so with a critical and humorous detachment absent from French visual culture of the 2000s

(except for jeuxvideo.com). Instead, this meme culture constantly plays on the gap between heroic pretension and the prosaic reality of everyday life. Where Identitarians promoted refined, clean vector graphics, “memelords” use basic graphic software like Paint, giving their productions an intentionally rough, amateurish look.

The far-right activist and influencer Ugo Gil Jimenez, aka Papacito, employs this strategy in a quite personal way. On his blog from the late 2000s – written almost phonetically – and in a series of interviews, he promotes models and figures serving as ideals. This strategy of offering exalted social models to youth, in the form of heroic historical figures, was already articulated by Dominique Venner, but unlike Venner, Gil Jimenez does so with humor and provocation. His blog offers “a top list of the most street-credible dictators,” while his interviews highlight athletes and virile pop culture figures (wrestlers, rugby players), as well as culturally virile references such as the mustache worn by Saddam Hussein or Slobodan Praljak. Although humorous in tone, his discourse is openly normative and prescriptive: the modern man, supposedly “de-virilized,” must recover the virile energy embodied by such figures.

Thus, the self-representations of the far right combine paradoxically irony and heroization. Yet in both cases, we have treated self-representation as a process of reification, in which the group seeks to shape its members according to pre-established models. However, observation shows that activists try to play with these codes in order to assert their individuality.

4. PROCESSES OF INDIVIDUATION IN THE FAR RIGHT

By repeatedly publishing and sharing, militants perform the daily visual construction of the identity they wish to present to their social media networks – at least to those able to understand their references. This identity thus appears as an original combination of images. The main goal of this image-making is social: each image is addressed to a specific segment of their contacts, whom they seek either to distinguish themselves from or to align with. The images accumulated by militants form a panoply—a system of signs and commodities with ephemeral value – which, through associations and combinations, expresses various ways of inhabiting the world.

Right-wing political doctrines distinguish themselves notably by their choice of “great figures” and behavioral models, as well as the historical eras they mythify. The debate between a fascist sympathizer or a Napoleonic one, or between a paganophile inspired by Hellenistic or Germanic traditions, can be summed up as: which era was the most glorious? Which deserves to be represented? With which figure is it more prestigious to identify?

From this perspective, online sympathizers associate themselves with certain doctrinal reference systems and dissociate from rival ones. For example, a monarchist militant might reject a Nazi-inspired aesthetic in favor of one specific to *Action française*—supposedly Latin, orderly, and measured—opposed to Germanic hubris. He may also distance himself from the classical standards of *Action française* by promoting “median” figures, such as Valois, a former AF member and founder of the *Faisceau*, who adopted a pseudonym inspired by the eponymous dynasty.

Like memes, right-wing ideologies can mix and recombine references to create new ones. The process is so easy that it is tempting for an average militant to dissociate from the uniform ideology of their reference group and to “bricole,” through recomposition and synthesis, an original ideological identity. A strange example of this kind is the satirical National-Liberal Party of Henri de Lesquen. This former president of *Radio Courtoisie* (the largest far-right radio station) began, surprisingly, a troll career in 2016 (at the age of 72). The recomposition can be recomposed again and again: thus, a militant of *Action française* in 2016, influenced by Henri de Lesquen’s national-liberalism, attempted a Maurrassian-liberal synthesis.

Militants can try other mixes, seeking highly specific and little-known references from the contemporary right-wing imagination. Between Christianity and paganism, one obtains a solar paganism sprinkled with references to Mithra and Sol Invictus. Between National Socialism and ufology (François, 2006), a visual and graphic culture referring to the Vril Society (a supposed occult sect of the already secretive *Thule Society*, is said to have been in contact with... extraterrestrial beings) and Nazi bases on the moon. Between Orientalist occultism and Hitlerism, thus a whole memetic production refers to Savitri Devi’s National Socialist Buddhism (Asprem, 2020), easy mixable with Hyperborean myths or other elements (Forth, 2025; François & Olivier, 2014). These niche references, understood by very limited but supposedly erudite circles, confer cultural capital (Bourdieu 1992). Without necessarily constructing highly elaborate ideological mixes, almost all *Action française* militants, alongside their general interest in integral nationalism, develop a specific focus: one for Casapound, another for revolutionary nationalism, another for Nazi occultism, Zoroastrianism, solar cults, etc.

This ideological individuation takes on a large part of an aesthetic dimension. Like national ideologies constructed on “*Images d'Épinal*,” all these ideologies rely on reservoirs of images and symbols, such as the Black Sun, an SS symbol reclaimed by Nazi occult enthusiasts, or the symbols of the Vril Society. It is worth noting that this deeply visual character of Nazism had already fascinated several French intellectuals (notably Brasillach, Bardèche, Drieu La Rochelle, and Chateaubriant) in the interwar period, which led for some time to the idea that French fascism was merely a matter of aesthetics. This aesthetic attraction to past models is deeply felt by young far-right activists. Numerous memes echo the physical sensations these associated imageries provoke: goosebumps, tears of emotion.

This aesthetics of thought is also an aesthetics of the self. We have seen that right-wing ideologies promote an aesthetic model that varies from one ideology to another. These individual recompositions allow militants to align themselves with a “personalized” model. The internet then allows, through the invocation of significant images that the militant associates with by creating and sharing them, for this model to become explicit. Clothing and tattoos enable reformatting it on a daily basis.

Thus, militants referring to Casapound wear black sweatshirts. Those referring to the Camelots adopt a “Peaky Blinders à la française” style (sometimes called sartorialism). Solar Christian militants sport a “chic metalhead” look – distinct from that of a pagan militant converted to Christianity, who wears a rough metalhead style adorned with Christian symbols,

as if recently converted barbarian. Both listen to neofolk music (François, 2006) and doom metal.

This cultural individuation is therefore a strategy of distinction through good taste, where specific and erudite references are more valued and legitimate in the right-wing militant field than popular and more common references. For instance, classic national references—blue-white-red color code, baguette, red wine – are contemptuously regarded as “natiobeuf.”⁵. The skinhead uniform, sometime adopt by newcome, is often seen as “wannabe”, “has been” and ugly (Casajus, 2015). During my first evening at the AF premises, Orick, the movement’s graphic artist, a national-socialist paganophile fascinated by the social and occult aspects of Nazism (all very specific interests that make him a recognized and respected personality, especially since he expresses this erudition artistically with talent), hurried to show me a “franchouillard” and “natiobeuf” group, whose aesthetic he found particularly ugly. Aesthetic tastes distinguish and classify.

The activist seeks to associate themselves with martial figures, positioning themselves as part of an elite caste. However, this elitism is marked by a preference for obscure or highly intellectualized martial models. At both the group and individual levels, situational references allow one to distinguish within a capitalistic field that could comprise two axes: warrior capital (Sauvadet, 2006; Casajus, 2023) and cultural capital. The slogan of *Action Française*, inherited from Charles Maurras, *we must be intellectual and violent*, as well as the Identitarians’ attachment to the motto *a healthy mind in a healthy body* reflect this tension.

5. CONCLUSION

References to mythologized themes from the past are nothing new. In his classic work on nationalism, Raoul Girardet (Girardet, 1990) describes the repertoire of images that constitute nationalist mythology: conspiracy, the savior myth, the golden age, and unity. Anne-Marie Thiesse (Thiesse, 2001), writing about the construction of national identities, highlights the role artists played in shaping these identities. They crafted epics and heroes, painting the typical landscapes of emerging nations.

Today, the internet enables renewed engagement with this pre-existing imagery. The online self-representation of far-right activists is thus structured by internal tensions. These tensions can be summarized along several polarizing axes:

- Loyalty to a collective aesthetic vs. the desire for individuation
- Heroization vs. self-derision
- Intellectual vs violent
- Popular appeal vs sophistication

All of these axes are socially distinguishing: the choice of a collective aesthetic — and the way one distances oneself from it – functions as a social marker.

⁵ “Beauf” can be roughly translate by redneck.

Attempting to embody these social models without any distance borders on the ridiculous, yet even humorous references to them still imply a form of identification.

The guiding figures commonly highlighted are often fighters — men of action (Pierre Sergent, Hélie de Saint Marc, Jean Bastien-Thiry) — but sometimes also men of letters. Often, they are both: a former soldier, Dominique Venner described himself in later life as a contemplative historian. He regularly identifies with Ernst von Salomon and Ernst Jünger, both of whom were writers and men of war.

The selection of such figures of identification also serves to assert cultural and social distinction: the Viking or the Templar belong to the most easily accessible militant iconography, while references to the Freikorps suggest a deeper familiarity with activist mythology.

The polarities described above counterbalance each other and, through their synthesis, make their opposites acceptable. However, heroic or ironic self-construction must be understood at the societal level. The martial models with which militants and sympathizers identify were developed upstream by theorists, according to a clearly defined and theorized objective of cultural conquest of society, by spreading their values through role models. Since to Dominique Venner, “*the warriors’ attire*,” “*the form and the roar of the weapons*,” and “*the choreography of close-order drill are among the powerful joys to which a healthy young male cannot help but yield*.” (Venner, 1975:27). This attraction to a warrior society is very clearly revealed beneath the self-mockery and irreverent humor of the younger far-right generation. Memes are one of the channels through which this order of things is imposed. The rewriting of history, the redefinition of the meaning of words, disinformation, the harassment of opponents, and violent actions are the other channels of this cultural war.

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