



Episode 3: Reactionary Digital Politics Part 2

Games, memes, and parodies are increasingly used by extremist groups to spread misinformation and to lower the barriers to entry into extreme ideologies. But is there a deeper strategy at work? And if so, what's the end game? In Part 2 of this special two-part interview, Dr. Sara Grimes chats with three researchers from the Reactionary Digital

Politics Research Group, a multi-disciplinary collaboration based in the UK that has spent the past five years tracking the rise and spread of extremist and alt-right political ideologies, rhetorics, and aesthetics online. Dr. Alan Finlayson is a Professor of Political and Social Theory at the University of East Anglia, in Norwich England, and the author of *Making Sense of New Labour* (Lawrence and Wishart, 2003). Dr. Robert Topinka is a Senior Lecturer in Transnational Media and Cultural Studies at Birkbeck, University of London, and the author of *Racing the Street: Race, Rhetoric and Technology in Metropolitan London, 1840-1900* (University of California Press, 2020). And Dr. Rob Gallagher is a Lecturer in Film and Media in the Department of English at Manchester Metropolitan University and author of *Videogames, Identity and Digital Subjectivity* (Routledge, 2017).

In this episode, the Reactionary Digital Politics team discusses findings and arguments advanced in Dr. Topinka's recent article, entitled "Back to a Past that was Futuristic: The Alt-Right and the Uncanny Form of Racism," published in *B2O: an online journal* in 2019.

Dr. Sara Grimes (00:00):

In 2021, as the pandemic raged and Fortnite officially became the most popular game in the world, a noteworthy new global initiative was launched, The Extremism and Gaming Research Network. Its members include counter-extremism researchers, government officials, international policymakers, think tanks and game companies. They've come together to address the deeply troubling phenomenon of terrorists and other violent extremists using online games to recruit new members and spread harmful content and misinformation. Research conducted over the past several years reveals that as games have become more social and more mainstream, they've also become more amenable to problematic unanticipated uses, including political and ideological radicalization. As we approach the 10th anniversary of Gamergate, a misogynistic mass harassment campaign targeted at women in the games industry, it's important to remember that even technologies made for play can have serious real-world implications. Like any technology, digital games shape and are shaped by politics, personal agendas, and

systemic bias.

Dr. Sara Grimes (01:21):

Games aren't the only cultural forms used by extremist groups. The alt-right often rips ideas and references from blockbuster sci-fi movies. Cartoon characters are transformed into symbols of hate. Memes, jokes, and parodies that draw heavily on pop culture are used to spread misinformation, foster insider/outsider divides, and mock progressive movements. As a report by Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis, published by Data and Society in 2017 describes, "using memes and games lowers the barrier for participation in extreme ideologies." But is there a deeper strategy to all this? And if so, what's the end game? The Reactionary Digital Politics Research Group has spent the past five years trying to answer these questions. They've tracked the complex, and at times contradictory, ways that political ideologies, rhetorics, and aesthetics are reshaping politics in our increasingly digitized world. Through this work, they've examined the impact of cultural influencers turned political opportunists, the reach of far-right extremists, and their links to cultists and conspiracy fanatics. Using a groundbreaking, deeply interdisciplinary approach, this project delves into a profoundly troubling area of digital culture, and of contemporary society.

Dr. Sara Grimes (02:52):

The group is led by three amazing scholars, Dr. Allen Finlayson, Dr. Robert Topinka, and Dr. Rob Gallagher. Dr. Finlayson is a professor of political and social theory at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England. He is a notable political theorist and the author of numerous publications, including the book, *Making Sense of New Labor*, published by Lawrence and Wishart in 2003. Dr. Robert Topinka is a senior lecturer in transnational media and cultural studies at Birkbeck University of London. His areas of expertise are in technology, the city post-colonialism, and race. His recent, book *Racing the Street: Race, Rhetoric, and Technology in Metropolitan London, 1840 to 1900*, was published in 2020 by the University of California Press. Dr. Rob Gallagher is a lecturer in film and media in the Department of English at Manchester Metropolitan University. His research focuses on digital cultures, online communities, and interactive media. His book, *Video Games, Identity, and Digital Subjectivity* was published by Routledge in 2017.

Dr. Sara Grim (04:09):

The research collaboration between these three scholars focused on bringing together experts and knowledge from multiple fields to map the current toxic state of digital politics in the UK and across the western world. As part of their project, they created an eight-episode podcast about their findings called Reactionary Digital Politics.

Dr. Robert Topinka (04:34):

Maybe facts don't care about your feelings, but for QAnoners, it's your feelings that send you out looking for facts.

Dr. Sara Grimes (04:40):

So today we're going to do something a little different. Instead of inviting just one of the members of this research team to speak with me about their work, we've invited all three. And to make sure everyone gets a chance to share their incredibly important insights on this massive topic, we're doing this interview in two parts, over two separate episodes. Each episode will focus on a different article written by a member of the research team, but all three will respond to my questions and to each other. Here's what they each sound like.

Dr. Rob Gallagher (05:14):

Me, Rob Gallagher.

Dr. Robert Topinka (05:15):

Me, Rob Topinka.

Dr. Alan Finlayson (05:16):

And me, Al Finlayson.

Dr. Sara Grimes (05:19):

The focus of today's episode is an article entitled, "Back to a Past That Was Futuristic: The Alt-right and the Uncanny Form of Racism," written by Dr. Robert Topinka and published in B2O, an online journal in 2019.

One more thing. This episode has a content warning. The research project we're discussing focused on uncovering and tracking an affiliation of ideas, political groups, and individuals that espouse extremely discriminatory beliefs, including racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and antisemitism. The point of the project was to better understand how these ideologies are circulating online and influencing real world politics. Neither I nor anyone from the Reactionary Digital Politics Research Group share these beliefs. In fact, we completely reject and condemn them.

I'm Sara Grimes, director of the Knowledge Media Design Institute at the University of Toronto, and host of the Critical Technology Podcast. Today I'll be speaking with Dr. Alan Finlayson, Dr. Robert Topinka, and Dr. Rob Gallagher about their investigation into

the alt-right and affiliated extremist political ideologies online.

Dr. Sara Grim (06:47):

So let's just jump right. In the boundary two article in entitled, "Back to a Past that was Futuristic," Dr. Topinka focuses on memes as a key example of how reactionary ideologies circulate online. In that article, you describe memes as a "perfect reactionary tool that reacts against the present by repurposing it." The emphasis here is on re-appropriation and disruption. What's the relationship between this facet of memes and the flow of ideas and isms that feed into reactionary politics?

Dr. Robert Topinka (07:25):

So this idea in a way is drawing on Corey Robbins work on reactionary ideology. One point he makes is that reactionaries are often on the cutting edge culturally. They often are very interested in sort of vanguard cultural issues, and that's because they're very concerned with where things are going and how the natural hierarchies and natural orders have been corrupted. So they're very concerned with responding to the present, and that's in service of restoring this lost past, which is not necessarily a tradition, as Alan said, but a kind of natural order, a natural hierarchy. One reason they're so useful is because a lot of these groups, and this is why the alt-right in particular was so famous, is they're very interested in what is in vanguard online. So they're very concerned with trends and responding to them and repurposing them.

And that's what memes do. They identify references and then they make use of them to respond to different situations, different moments. They piece together bits of culture and then rearrange them in an interesting way. So that's a useful thing for a reactionary to be able to do because they want to respond to the present. But in terms of whether they facilitate reactionary ideas, I think that the tricky thing about memes is they actually don't really communicate anything beyond one's location in a culture or one's location in a subculture. Memes are complicated, but to use the example of the sort of classic image macro, which is one example of a meme, which is an image with text laid over it, they're not usually very dense texts. They don't require a lot of unpacking. They float in front of your screen on your social media feed and you either get it or you don't. You recognize the reference in how it's being repurposed or you don't. So they don't really communicate ideas, but they do signal your location in the culture.

Dr. Robert Topinka (09:09):

So what happens is a lot of these groups rely on being insiders and outsiders. They have an us versus them mentality. So a meme allows you to say, "Hey, I'm aware of the discourse. I know what we're talking about. I know how to use the references and how to piece them together, and the normies or the mainstream won't get it." So memes are

very useful for consolidating group identity more so than for communicating ideas. So they consolidate identity, and then the next step is to start sharing ideas and memes might be an outcome of that. But what they're really good at doing is saying, "Here's my location in the culture and here's who gets my ideas and gets my references, and here's who doesn't."

And then what sometimes happens is when a particular meme becomes very popular, which famously happened with the Pepe the Frog meme, and the mainstream alights upon it and starts to explain it, then sometimes that allows these groups to amplify their message because then people start searching for it. They want to know more about it, they start reading what the people who use it are talking about. So that can be a way of spreading ideas. But really what memes help people do is form the insider group and exclude the outsiders who don't get the references.

Dr. Alan Finlayson (10:18):

And part of the point is that they don't get them, isn't it? That's what you're saying, because as we said about reaction politics, it's not trying as it were to refute the positions as opposed to so much just kind of mock them, make fun of them, disrupt them, make them look stupid. So as long as you're continuing to make them look stupid to the inside, the political work as it were, is being done, isn't it?

Dr. Sara Grimes (10:39):

What's an example of a meme that's used cultural references to communicate the type of insider/outsider political identity that you're describing?

Dr. Rob Gallagher (10:49):

One example we've been thinking and writing about is the so-called NPC meme. This is a bit of gaming jargon, so it's already excluding people who aren't gamers there. And the conceit is that certain people are like non-player characters in a video game. They're just these robotic drones who kind of follow their codes. They can't deviate from this fixer programming that they have. And the brilliance of this meme is that it creates those in-groups and out-group by you either get the reference or you don't, but if you don't get the reference or if you don't take kindly to being accused of being an NPC, you're proving that you are an NPC. You are this inflexible, humorless, clueless drone. And it brings home in quite a cute way these dynamics.

Which in some ways I think, as Rob's article shows early studies of internet culture can't equip us to understand, but those studies often assume that any kind of re-appropriation or borrowing is going to be resistive or reparative, and it's going to be people challenging the boring normative hegemonic pop culture by doing more radical things. And that is

kind of a description of what's happening on the right, but not in the way that figures writing in the 2000s necessarily anticipates it I think.

And a meme that can carry, I don't want to say a lot of content, but it does have an ideological resonance as well, and it could be part of a larger narrative or presentation that, "Oh, the liberals are just spouting a whole bunch of phrases. They don't really understand. Oh, they learned it in college from their cultural Marxist professors, but don't really get it. They're just trying to impress each other and all they can say is blah, blah, blah." And so that then spurs on a search to find more people that you can get to look like that and call them NPCs or you get a clip of them and insert them in your YouTube video and so forth and present this caricature of what liberalism or left wing or critical, any other kind of politics is like, freeing yourself of the burden of having to justify what your own political program is while also winning people over to your side as being part of the cool alert side that knows what's going and that has been awoken to consciousness by the insights afforded of the red pill.

Dr. Rob Gallagher (13:04):

And there's a certain flexibility to it, I guess, for the more kind of race realists so-called wings, this programming can be understood as its genetics for, as Alan was saying, if you're more worried about lefty professors indoctrinating students, that programming is how the new class is kind of shaping discourse. So that relationship between something that's dynamic enough to take on different meanings and remain polyvalent, but also coherent enough to register as that kind of signal of cultural location Rob's talking about, that's a sort of balance I guess all memes have to maintain to remain viable.

Dr. Sara Grimes (13:42):

A core contribution of this article is your argument that the critique of identity politics is just the first move that these groups are trying to make, a setup for a much more terrifying and destructive second move, which you describe as "the restoration of the lost past." What does this mean exactly?

Dr. Robert Topinka (14:05):

Yeah, so it's a really interesting question because I think we often get caught up with the first move. And then there's this sense that the response is to say, "Oh, maybe identity politics has gone too far, or maybe political correctness has run amuck." And then there's this sense sometimes in mainstream political discourse that the reason Democrats in the US or the Labor Party in the UK are not doing as well as they might is because of some mythical white working class in the UK, middle class in the US, some mythical white working class figure who is fed up with this sort of identity politics run amuck. But I think what that misses is, as you're asking about the second move, which really is a move

they would make even if identity politics was rolled back a little bit.

They're not really worried about identity politics. They're worried about tweaking their enemies. And the lost past is what we've been talking about, is this natural order that people figure in different ways. It's usually about race or gender, but not always. The natural differences among races as they would see it, or the natural differences between men and women and men and women only. And that's part of the reason the current trans-panic I think is so dangerous as well, because it also feeds into these reactionary narratives that there's men and there's women and they have their roles.

So examples of this, Curtis Yarvin thinks the Civil War is when the United States went wrong because that was when the Union committed itself to equality, and that is what has corrupted the natural order of things and the market system that should rule everything. And not just the economy, but people's relationships. Christopher Rufo, who's from the Manhattan Institute, he's almost single-handedly responsible for the critical race theory panic that has continued to resonate, especially on a local level in the US. He's now turning his attention to gender ideology in schools. But he's very open about ending public education and returning schooling to families. That's what he wants to do.

Dr. Robert Topinka (15:59):

Roe v. Wade, although it was only just overturned, this was the result of years, decades, of organizing by the right, especially Federalist Society. So, these groups think in long term, they think over the long duree. They have big goals and they're often goals that would horrify many, hopefully most people, like that the Civil War was a mistake or that public education should be ended. But I think it's a pretty dangerous moment that Roe v Wade should be overturned. I mean, that's hugely unpopular, but it's the result of decades of organizing.

And then you see things like sitting members of Congress going to Groyper rallies, the Groyper Zara for the born digital, neo-Nazi, white nationalist group, and that's Marjorie Taylor Green. She goes to their rallies. She recently called herself a Christian nationalist. We already talked about the great replacement theory appearing on television. So I think it's a pretty dangerous political moment, but that is in some ways the result of us missing the second move, right? This desire to overturn the entire progressive era, and sometimes even before that.

Dr. Rob Gallagher (17:06):

That's such an important thing to emphasize. I think that this is sometimes when I talk about this to people, they think of it as not really being real politics. It's just stuff online, and don't see how it directly comes out of and feeds into the kind of politics and political

changes that Rob's talking about, and also creates a larger climate in which people are perhaps more willing to count against the rollback of social programs or unwilling to push for their maintenance and extension, where there's a suspicion put on all kinds of activities that might be seen as promoting or enabling some kind of idea of equality. "Well, should we really be doing that?" That's happening right now in debates about what to do with cost of living increases in the UK. The discourse is often framed in a way in which one has to make the case for doing something rather than make the case for not doing something. Because really we should just let everything unfold as it naturally would.

Dr. Robert Topinka (17:57):

The other difficult thing I think when thinking about these things is that the natural order that the reactionary groups want to restore is all encompassing, and it sort of runs the gamut of policy decisions like overturning Roe v. Wade. There's lots of stories already of people's lives being put at risk by that decision. So from things like that, but also to everyday life, how we dress and how we talk. The manosphere was a concern for a while, this idea of pickup artists and looks maxing that I talked about. But that discourse still exists on TikTok with people interested in things like The Hustle. There's this guy Andrew Tate, he's a former kickboxer/reality TV star, has a pretty big following on TikTok, and he has Hustle University, which is his way of teaching, how to make money, how to be fit, how to attract women, how to be dominant.

There's a lot of that sort of thing on TikTok. There's also women interested in being trad wives, traditional wives occupying traditional gender roles. There's these aesthetics like the Coquette aesthetic, which is one that's trending on TikTok right now, which is conceived of as a way to reclaim an idea of femininity. It's a lot of pastels and lace and pearl necklaces. So there's a way it can be subversive, but there's also a way it resonates with this idea that women are submissive and men are dominant. So this is another difficult thing about it, is it runs from TikTok trends and aesthetics to how people dress and talk and act, to major policy decisions. It's hard to keep all those in one frame at one time, but they're all at play.

Dr. Rob Gallagher (19:28):

Hopefully, needless to say, it's still profoundly a historical image of history. It assumes that there are certain immutable conditions that were set way back in deep time or a product of evolution, and we can only sort of ignore them at our peril. So any shifts or discontinuities in how people have understood and practice gender and sexuality, that's not because those things are malleable. It's because we've perversely denied our nature. So it's both very concerned with history, which becomes a battleground, but it denies history as processional and as dynamic and as contingent.

Dr. Alan Finlayson (20:02):

We haven't even talked about COVID. Which again, you see this, and people sometimes hold these contradictory views at the same time. On the one hand, COVID isn't real. It's part of the conspiracy of the technocratic elites to do whatever it is. Or it is real, but we don't need to take any medication for it. Our natural immune system should be able to fight it. I'm not going to take part in all these false impositions on my natural condition. I'll just go around without wearing a mask and I won't take any vaccinations or anything. That then allows this discourse to also begin to intersect with certain kinds of natural health communities, movements that might be seen as counter-cultural in different kinds of ways. That made up quite a large contingent for the people drawn into their anti-COVID conspiracy type thinking. And then they find themselves adjacent to all these other kinds of politics.

Dr. Sara Grimes (20:48):

Throughout the project, you've made sure to remind us that reactionary racism, while fringe, has been around for a long time. But it's now being revived or maybe rebranded, and it's reaching a larger audience through social media platforms and online forums. Why is this happening?

Dr. Alan Finlayson (21:09):

I think it's really important for people to understand that the kinds of politics we find online, while very new are not entirely new. The internet hasn't restarted politics from scratch, and that movements that have been around for a long time have simply found a new platform in a way to re-express and re-articulate their arguments and to find new kinds of followers. And one unassumingly small but significant thing is simply that people who were scattered across a large geographical area holding extreme views and having to wait for books to come in the post, can now meet each other very easily and talk about what they believe and consolidate their politics and to act in concert. So at one level, one might imagine the internet hasn't increased the number of people who have this kind of politics. It's just enabled them to function more effectively together. But that has then had effects on how politics plays out. So I think that's part of what's going on and part of why it's important to understand the politics as well as the digital side of it.

Dr. Robert Topinka (22:01):

The other thing online forums do is give people a space to articulate ideas they may have already held and then they might consolidate and grow their ideas and make transnational connections. But I'm not sure the number of people holding racist views has increased recently, but maybe the spaces for those views to be expressed have increased. I mean, it's obviously a very difficult question to verify empirically, but a lot of these spaces give people an opportunity to say things they couldn't say in other

locations. And that's one reason that the far right, the extremists right, Neo-Nazis, white nationalists, have long made use of the internet.

This is a point Kathleen Belew makes in her book, *Bringing the War Home*, and she talks about the white power movement and how they were early adopters of the internet, very active on internet forums before many people were even aware of the Internet's power in the eighties and nineties. And partly because this resonated with their idea of leaderless resistance, which was the idea that you get the message out, you get the ideas out, but you don't connect it to any one person. Partly this is a response to law enforcement trying to disrupt these groups, but also a way of saying, you don't need to have it connected to any one person. You need to have it spread out through the network for people to find.

And that's still what is happening now, and it's happening more quickly. There are more opportunities for people to do that. But in a way, white power groups, white nationalists, neo-Nazis have a 20-year head start on a lot of us. They've been on these groups for a long time, on message forums like the Daily Stormer, and engaged in online communication far longer than many of us have been. So they have a head start.

Dr. Rob Gallagher (23:39):

That's a really important point. I think it took, Sandra, as strange as it might seem, it took lots of people a long time to realize the internet was going to be as important as it was. There are these famous news headlines from the 1990s saying the internet's going to be a fad, or it's just the new ham radio. And by that point, some groups had already been active on computer systems for five years, 10 years even already. So I think that's a big part of what's helped a lot this grow actually, is that people very embedded in and committed to what is now traditional politics, newspapers and broadcast television and political parties, couldn't really see what was happening or couldn't see the importance of what was happening outside of it. And still don't, in some cases, I would add. While those who were already used to it had a head start. And now of course there was more than one generation that has grown up entirely in a digital world and understands that this is where political discussion, political exchange happens.

Dr. Sara Grimes (24:31):

Your project argues that in order to understand the changes unfolding in the contemporary political landscape, we need more cross-disciplinary dialogue. This was a key focus of the Reactionary Digital Politics podcast and a big reason why we're doing today's episode as a group interview. I'd love it if you could tell us about your approach and how has your research benefited from it?

Dr. Alan Finlayson (24:54):

Well, maybe I could just talk a little bit about how it came about. I mean, at least from my point of view probably might have a different story. But I was initially interested in online politics as someone who's primarily seen politics in political ideas and political ideologies, how they work, how they get formed, how they adapt to the circumstances they find themselves in. So from my point of view, I could see things happening online, and old forms of ideas coming back and old political theorists being discussed on forums and all sorts of things happening around particularly what became the alt-right and what would turn into the Trump supporting parts of the internet. And I felt that I had something to bring to understanding that which was understanding something about the histories and development of political ideas and how they work. But it was very clear to me that I needed to supplement that with an understanding of the specific things about what organizes digital media and digital communication and how that works.

And sometimes I found, and I mean this in the best way possible, that sometimes writing from within digital media studies would talk about the politics, but not really understanding or think it was quite new. They didn't really have a sense of the traditions in history. So from my point of view, it's to be understood and requires, yes, a political theorist like me, but absolutely people understand digital media and people who can read and interpret texts and images in perhaps the more literary ways that Rob Gallagher brought to the project or our previous collaborator, Cass Osborne Kerry, who brought her sociological approach to people's engagement with social media. In a sense here the issue is what object is this thing that we're studying? And it's easy to think of it. Oh, it's digital technology, it's communication, it's internet discourse, and actually it's so extensive and expansive. It's everything now. It is where social-political life takes place. So it needs all those kinds of approaches to begin to understand something like reactionary digital politics.

Dr. Rob Gallagher (26:36):

That interdisciplinary ethos, if you want to call it that, that was very much the thinking in terms of who we invited onto the podcasts. Trying to get perspectives from political theory, from digital culture studies, from a lot of different domains. A lot of my work has been under the umbrella of game studies, which is itself quite a vaguely defined beast. So I was quite struck by the consensus among a lot of people for whom that's not really their beat, the extent to which they agreed that Gamergates, this kind of 2014 online campaign of harassment and abuse targeted to feminist minorities in video game culture, how much that's seen as both a recruiting opportunity for right-wing groups, but also this petri dish in which all of these new tactics, all of these new ways of doing, well, harassment, but also politics, the line's quite blurry there, were kind of trialed and perfected. So I think even that range of perspectives has been interesting to see where things converge and where there are differences.

Dr. Robert Topinka (27:36):

Yeah. I suppose another difficulty with studying these groups is they're so diffuse and they make use of so many different platforms that there's a need to understand historical context, but also have the capacity to find what they're saying, where they're saying it and how they're saying it. So that requires digital methods, which is something we've been trying to learn more of, I think, but also find ways to connect them with a critical approach. Particularly with something like computational methods, big data methods, web scraping, something we've made use of. The trouble with that is you end up with so much data that you want to describe it and arrange it, which is important, but we wanted to be able to also critique it. So learning ourselves how to do it, but also finding really smart people who know how to do that work and also know how to link it with critical theory has been a big part of the project. is someone who comes to mind, someone who can do this work. Claire Birdshaw also is someone who's able to combine this really in-depth understanding of how media works with critical approach.

And the critical approach has been really important too. I mean, when Alan and I came together on this originally was, for me it was because I was spending a lot of time lurking online, which I still do. But I was seeing a lot of racism. And as an academic, I'm interested in critical race theory, critiques of white supremacy. I was seeing a lot of that. And at the same time, I was seeing a lot of stuff being published, celebrating social media and participatory culture, and I was thinking, "Oh, something's being missed."

But I think one possible weakness of our project, and something I'm still thinking about, is maybe one thing we haven't addressed as well as others is the role of gender and sexuality in this, which I think is really important. And with the current trans-panic becoming even more important, because there's sort of a war up on all fronts with these groups, I don't think there's any one person who can respond to all of it at once. You really do need an interdisciplinary approach for understanding the different media components, but also understanding the different discourses that are invoked, the different people who are being attacked, and how those attacks have historical precedent and how they're being shaped and reshaped in the present. So it is not a task that any one person or even a group of three can really take on; which is what we wanted to partly do and work towards with the podcast was, find all these people who could bring a picture together for us and teach us about it.

Dr. Sara Grimes (29:58):

My last question is the one I'm asking all of my guests this season. What should we all be thinking about when considering the political dimensions of digital technology? Alan, let's start with you.

Dr. Alan Finlayson (30:12):

So the first would be, I think the significance and scale of what is happening. Not to get carried away or be in permanent fear about it, but to recognize that politics now happens primarily online. That is where people are finding out about how to think about politics, and forming an understanding of it, relating themselves to, and acting in relation to it. And that that's true across the spectrum. And recognizing therefore, that in fact, forms of politics that some people might think are marginal or extreme or troubling, but happening over there somewhere, are right back at the center of what's going on in contemporary political discourse. I don't think it's fully recognized and understood by quite a lot of people, primarily on the political liberal left side of things. They're a little bit stuck in the print broadcast area.

But the second thing I would say is to then think about how to act in response to that. And I think the certain reflex on the part of some political people is to say, "Well, how do we regulate it or manage it or control it?" And those are really good questions. I don't object those questions, but I think you also have to be above all thinking about how to use it. How does one engage on and act on digital platforms in ways that can challenge the kinds of politics we've been talking about, develop other kinds of politics.

In a way, the big question then is, what sorts of genres and forms and styles of politics can come out of digital technologies? And I say it that way, both to emphasize that something new, new ways of expressing are taking shape on the right. I think there are some very interesting forms of political expression developing. People always talk about ContraPoints on YouTube, and they're right to talk about ContraPoints on YouTube. She's very interesting. But there are other people too, trying out and developing different ways of interacting and communicating, particularly in shaping political movements. And I think that there's an awful lot of practical work to be done testing out and developing ways of being political online.

Dr. Sara Grimes (32:06):

Rob Topinka.

Dr. Robert Topinka (32:06):

From an academic perspective in particular, there is a temptation to want to identify and describe all the different manifestations of reactionary politics. And that's in part what we've been doing in this project. But the difficult thing with that is we'll always be behind. And in a way it's sort of, you'll always find it as well. So if I reference TikTok, there's reactionary digital politics on TikTok. It will appear on every platform. So there's a difficult question around how do we move from tracking it to critiquing it? And it's not an easy move to make. And I do think it's linked to what Alan was saying, which is how do we find ways, and this is maybe departing from what traditional academics would do, but

how do we find ways of moving from describing and always responding to these groups to doing a better job of doing politics ourselves in these spaces?

And I think one thing to say is that although the kind of constituency of the alt-right is certainly white men in English-speaking countries and Europe, Western Europe, these ideas appeal outside of those groups. Annie Kelly has talked about this a lot, the appeal of QAnon to women. I mentioned the coquette aesthetic, trad wives. So these ideas are not appealing only to white men. And part of the reason for that is reactionary groups offer an answer in troubled times, right? Things are very difficult for everyone in different ways right now, but it's a very insecure moment, I think, for a lot of people. And reactionary politics offers a relatively simple answer. So it will appeal not just to young white men, it will appeal to other people as well. So we have to be alert to that and find ways to offer something else.

Dr. Sara Grimes (33:48):

And last but not least, Rob Gallagher.

Dr. Rob Gallagher (33:48):

I would say, and I'll try to keep my answer from getting too rangy, but also, I've been thinking about this in relation to games, which again are a medium that I work on a fair bit. And that vented the conversation around reactionary politics because of Gamergate. And I think in seeking to understand why there was this seeming overlap, there was a lot of attention paid to the representational content of games. And I think somewhat as with memes, that's not irrelevant, and it's not like there's nothing going on there.

But I think besides or beyond that, there are also things about the way that digital media asks us to think about ourselves, about time, about the way they organize and classify things that resonate in some quite deep ways with some of these kinds of reactionary epistemologies. So I think thinking about the systems and the ideas or assumptions that they encode as well as the kinds of content that they present or that move through them is important. Acknowledging that not wanting to be technologically determinists nor to assume that these are totally neutral systems. I think being alert to that and those dimensions beyond what we might see on the surface remains really important.

Dr. Sara Grimes (34:59):

A big thanks to Professors Finlayson, Gallagher, and Topinka for joining us today.

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