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# KILL ALL NORMIES

## ONLINE CULTURE WARS FROM 4CHAN AND TUMBLR TO TRUMP AND THE ALT-RIGHT

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# Introduction

# From Hope to Harambe

In the lead-up to the election of Barack Obama in 2008, his message of hope was publicly and with great earnestness shared by vast numbers of liberals online, eager to show their love for the first black president, ecstatic to be part of what felt like a positive mass-cultural moment. After George W. Bush, who had waged wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and embarrassed educated people with his Southern style, and his regular gaffs and grammatical mistakes or 'Bushisms', the feeling of shame among US liberals was captured at the time by books like Michael Moore's *Stupid White Men*.

In stark contrast Obama was articulate, sophisticated, erudite and cosmopolitan. In the media spectacle of his election Oprah cried, Beyoncé sang and crowds of young, adoring fans rejoiced. Even some of the icy hearts of those significantly to the left of the Democratic Party were temporarily melted in what felt like a mass outpouring of positivity and hope, an egalitarian dream realized.

Hillary Clinton tried to repeat this formula in 2016 by dancing on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, drafting in Beyoncé once again, assuring listeners of her penchant for hot sauce and attracting feminist celebrities like Lena Dunham with the 'I'm With Her' slogan. However, instead, she became a source of comedy and ridicule among large online audiences from right across the political spectrum. When she solemnly condemned a new Internet age right-wing movement as part of Trump's 'basket of deplorables', the massed online ranks of the target of her comments collectively erupted in memes, mockery and celebration.

How did we get from those earnest hopeful days broadcast across the media mainstream to where we are now? This book covers this period from the perspective of Internet-culture and subcultures, tracing the online culture wars that have raged on below the line and below the radar of mainstream media throughout the period over feminism, sexuality, gender identity, racism, free speech and political correctness. This was unlike the culture wars of the 60s or the 90s, in which a typically older age cohort of moral and cultural conservatives fought against a tide of cultural secularization and liberalism among the young. This online backlash was able to mobilize a strange vanguard of teenage gamers, pseudonymous swastika-posting anime lovers, ironic *South Park* conservatives, anti-feminist pranksters, nerdish harassers and meme-making trolls whose dark humor and love of transgression for its own sake made it hard to know what political views were genuinely held and what were merely, as they used to say, for the lulz. What seemed to hold them all together in their obscurity was a love of mocking the earnestness and moral self-flattery of what felt like a tired liberal intellectual conformity running right through from establishment liberal politics to the more militant enforcers of new sensitivities from the wackiest corners of Tumblr to campus politics.

Through this period we can also see the death of what remained of a mass culture sensibility, in which there was still a mainstream media arena and a mainstream sense of culture and the public. The triumph of the Trumpians was also a win in the war against this mainstream media, which is now held in contempt by many average voters and the weird irony-laden Internet subcultures from right and left, who equally set themselves apart from this hated mainstream. It is a career disaster now to signal your left-behind cluelessness as a basic bitch, a normie or a member of the corrupt media mainstream in any way. Instead, 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 cyberutopian true believers have evangelized about for many years but had not imagined taking on this particular political form.

Compare the first election won by Obama, in which social media devotees reproduced the iconic but official blue-and-red stylized stencil portrait of the new president with HOPE printed across the bottom, a portrait created by artist Shepard Fairey and approved by the official Obama campaign, to the bursting forth of irreverent mainstream-baffling meme culture during the last race, in which the Bernie Sanders Dank Meme Stash Facebook page and The Donald subreddit defined the tone of the race for a young and newly politicized generation, with the mainstream media desperately trying to catch up with a subcultural in-joke style to suit two emergent anti-establishment waves of the right and left. Writers like Manuel Castells and numerous commentators in the *Wired* magazine milieu told us of the coming of a networked society, in which old hierarchical models of business and culture would be replaced by the wisdom of crowds, the swarm, the hive mind, citizen journalism and user-generated content. They got their wish, but it's not quite the utopian vision they were hoping for.

As old media dies, gatekeepers of cultural sensibilities and etiquette have been overthrown, notions of popular taste maintained by a small creative class are now perpetually outpaced by viral online content from obscure sources, and culture industry consumers have been replaced by constantly online, instant content producers. The year 2016 may be remembered as the year the media mainstream's hold over formal politics died. A thousand Trump Pepe memes bloomed and a strongman larger-than-life Twitter troll who showed open hostility to the mainstream media and to both party establishments took The White House without them.

One of the early significant moments of rupture in mainstream Internet-culture sensibilities was the viral Kony 2012 video. You

can map a trajectory through the dominant styles from virtue to cynical inscrutable irony, roughly from *Kony 2012* to the Harambe meme explosion in 2016. The *Kony 2012* film's purpose was to promote the charity campaign Stop Kony, which itself aimed to have the Ugandan militia leader Joseph Kony arrested by the end of 2012. The film received over 100 million views and went so viral that one poll suggested half of young adult Americans heard about it in the days following the video's release, causing its website to crash. *TIME* magazine called it the most viral video ever made. On Facebook and Twitter, a vast audience of Western young people normally pretty indifferent to the activities of Ugandan war criminals shared the video, with urgent emotional exclamations attached, which we might now cynically call 'virtue signaling'.

But then the video and the campaign started to come under criticism from Ugandans, experts on the region, and even their Head of State. Denunciations of the video began to pour in for its crass oversimplification, inaccuracy, emotional manipulation and 'slacktivism' – a now common pejorative also called 'clicktivism'. A mass screening of the film in Uganda was met with jeering and hostility, as viewers were angered that the film was focused on the US filmmaker, while neglecting Kony's victims. Western critics eager for shares of righteous approval rushed to expose the insufficient virtue of *Kony 2012* and its mainstream supporters.

Then, still at the height of the video's viral fame, Jason Russell, the filmmaker, was arrested and detained for psychiatric evaluation after his public breakdown was filmed and released online. This became yet another viral video in which he could be seen outdoors naked and shouting, hitting the ground, masturbating and vandalizing cars.

At a dizzying pace, the Kony story had run a now familiar course from mainstream virtue to competitive virtue hot takes to disgrace to *Schadenfreude*, which would become a standard

plot of dark online spectacles in the years that followed. Many of those who had shared the video in the spirit of global goodwill were sheepishly taking it down. Earnest, feel-good, easily shared concern had been replaced in a matter of days with the darkest side of the return of a more native, pre-monetized, anonymous Internet-culture – *Schadenfreude*, deep cynicism and the now unstoppable force of public humiliation as viral entertainment.

By 2016, after countless repeats of the *Kony 2012* cycle from virtue to disgrace, a spirit of deep nihilistic cynicism and reactive irony bubbled up to the surface of mainstream Internet-culture and an absurd in-jokey forum humor became dominant. When a gorilla named Harambe was shot dead at the Cincinnati Zoo that year after a child fell into his enclosure, the usual cycles of public displays of outrage online began as expected with inevitable competitive virtue signaling. At first, emotional and outraged people online blamed the child's parents for the gorilla's death, with some even petitioning to have the parents prosecuted for their neglect. But then a kind of giddy ironic mocking of the social media spectacle started to take over. The Harambe meme soon became the perfect parody of the sentimentality and absurd priorities of Western liberal performative politics and the online mass hysteria that often characterized it.

On the same day that a post about the incident reached the front page of Reddit news, a petition titled 'Justice for Harambe' was created on Change.org, which called for authorities to hold the child's parents responsible for Harambe's death, gaining hundreds of thousands of signatures. Soon, the mostly ironically used hashtags #JusticeForHarambe and #RIPHarambe began circulating. Song parodies with Harambe inserted into the lyrics were created, and the call to arms 'Dicks Out For Harambe' was quickly turned into a popular expression by comedian Brandon Wardell.

Harambe began appearing in tongue-in-cheek sentimental portraits of beloved celebrities who had died in 2016, like David

Bowie and Prince. One US high school student in a gorilla costume was filmed running along the sidelines at his school's first football game of the season, dragging another student behind him like the little boy in the enclosure before Harambe was shot. The Zoo pleaded with the meme-makers to stop using Harambe hashtags, and bombarding them with tweets and messages. The memes spread to mainstream media, when a young man holding a 'Bush Did Harambe' sign, a reference also to the 9/11 'truther' conspiracy, appeared on MSNBC live outside the Democratic National Convention.

Matt Christman from the podcast Chapo Trap House, itself a knowing product of contemporary irony-saturated online culture, unsentimentally but accurately summed it up saying: 'the popularity of Harambe jokes proves that people want to laugh about murder but feel bad about it.' Christman also noted on one podcast that Harambe mania really took off after the Orlando nightclub massacre in a gay club, carried out by a shooter pledging allegiance to ISIS.

Responding to highly mediated tragedies with insensitive pranking and irony had been a staple of online trolling cultures for many years before, but Harambe was the first case attracting such large numbers of people online wanting to get in on the in-joke. It went viral too, because it hit at a time when a particular style of humorless, self-righteous, right-on social media sentimentality had already reached such an absurd peak that the once obscure style of ironic cynical mockery also emerged into more mainstream Internet-culture as a counterforce.

Although it worked as a brilliantly absurd parody, and was embraced by ironists from left to right, what came to complicate the detached humor is that, as in so many other similar cases, it also allowed cover for genuinely sinister things to hide amid the maze of irony. For example, Harambe was referenced by harassers in the hate campaign led against *Ghostbusters* star Leslie Jones, with largely anonymous threats and comparisons

of her to the gorilla. This barrage of abuse came her way after Milo Yiannopoulos, the English gay conservative turned alt-light celebrity, tweeted a series of insults at her and said, among other things, that she looked like 'a black dude'. The harassment campaign against her for finding herself in Milo's firing line led to, among other things, her website being hacked and nude photos of her being circulated online.

Given the Harambe meme became a favorite of alt-right abusers, was it then just old-fashioned racism dressed up as Internet-savvy satire, as it appealed most to those seeking to mock liberal sensitivities? Or was it a clever parody of the inane hysteria and faux-politics of liberal Internet-culture? Do those involved in such memes any longer know what motivated them and if they themselves are being ironic or not? Is it possible that they are both ironic parodists and earnest actors in a media phenomenon at the same time?

A hacker who goes by the Twitter handle @prom hacked into the account of Cincinnati Zoo director Thane Maynard tweeting #DicksOutForHarambe from his account. When asked about his motivations, though, he told the *New York Daily News* he was 'not sure' why he hacked Maynard's account, saying: 'At the time when it actually happened I was kinda angry at the dude who shot him.'

It was amid this ironical in-jokey maze of meaning that the online culture wars played out, that Trump got elected and that what we now call the alt-right came to prominence. Every bizarre event, new identity and strange subcultural behavior that baffles general audiences when they eventually make the mainstream media, from otherkin to far right Pepe memes, can be understood as a response to a response to a response, each one responding angrily to the existence of the other. Trumpian meme-makers ramped up their taboo-breaking anti-PC style in response to gender-bending Tumblr users, who themselves then became more sensitive, more convinced of the racism, misogyny

and hetero-normative oppression of the world outside of their online subcultures. At the same time, the 'deplorables', from the Trumpian trolls to the alt-right, view the Hillary loyalists – the entrenched identity politics of Tumblr and the intersectional anti-free speech campus left – as evidence of their equally bleak view of a rapidly declining Western civilization, as both sides have become increasingly unmoored to any cultural mainstream, which scarcely resembles either bleak vision.

The once obscure call-out culture of the left emanating from Tumblr-style campus-based identity politics reached its peak during this period, in which everything from eating noodles to reading Shakespeare was declared 'problematic', and even the most mundane acts 'misogynist' and 'white supremacist'. While taboo and anti-moral ideologies festered in the dark corners of the anonymous Internet, the de-anonymized social media platforms, where most young people now develop their political ideas for the first time, became a panopticon, in which the many lived in fear of observation from the eagle eye of an offended organizer of public shaming. At the height of its power, the dreaded call-out, no matter how minor the transgression or how well intentioned the transgressor, could ruin your reputation, your job or your life. The particular incarnations of the online left and right that exist today are undoubtedly a product of this strange period of ultra puritanism. These obscure online political beginnings became formative for a whole generation, and impacted mainstream sensibilities and even language.

The hysterical liberal call-out produced a breeding ground for an online backlash of irreverent mockery and anti-PC, typified by charismatic figures like Milo. But after crying wolf throughout these years, calling everyone from saccharine pop stars to Justin Trudeau a 'white supremacist' and everyone who wasn't With Her a sexist, the real wolf eventually arrived, in the form of the openly white nationalist alt-right who hid among an online army of ironic in-jokey trolls. When this happened,

nobody knew who to take literally any more, including many of those in the middle of this new online far right themselves. The alt-light figures that became celebrities during this period made their careers exposing the absurdities of online identity politics and the culture of lightly thrown claims of misogyny, racism, ableism, fatphobia, transphobia and so on. However, offline, only one side saw their guy take the office of US president and only one side has in their midst faux-ironic *Sieg Heil* saluting, open white segregationists and genuinely hate-filled, occasionally murderous, misogynists and racists.

Before the overtly racist alt-right were widely known, the more mainstream alt-light largely flattered it, gave it glowing write-ups in *Breitbart* and elsewhere, had its spokespeople on their YouTube shows and promoted it on social media. Nevertheless, when Milo's sudden career implosion happened later they didn't return the favor, which I think may be setting a precedent for a future in which the playfully transgressive alt-light unwittingly play the useful idiots for those with much more serious political aims. If this dark, anti-Semitic, race segregationist ideology grows in the coming years, with their vision of the future that would necessitate violence, those who made the right attractive will have to take responsibility for having played their role.

This book is an attempt to map the online culture wars that formed the political sensibilities of a generation, to understand and to keep an account of the online battles that may otherwise be forgotten but have nevertheless shaped culture and ideas in a profound way from tiny obscure subcultural beginnings to mainstream public and political life in recent years. It will place contemporary culture wars in some historical context and attempt to untangle the real from the performance, the material from the abstract and the ironic from the faux-ironic, if such a thing is any longer possible.