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Welcome to the Dark Side: Use of Humour in Indoctrinating to Extremist Ideologies

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ABSTRACT

The paper argues that humour can be very effective in disseminating extremist ideologies, in part because of humour's inherent capacity to hinder critical reflection and in part because humour requires bringing together two conflicting frames of interpretation. With extremist humour, the other frame needed to make sense of what is funny is the extremist ideology itself. Thus, merely grasping what is funny in an extremist joke entails the ability to see and interpret other things through the lenses of that extremist ideology. Although this ability does not amount to accepting the ideology, the ability is the crucial first step in the process of converting audiences to the ideology. I argue that ideology should be understood as an interpretational framework, following the political theorist Michael Freeden, so that it is something that can be parsed from the joke by the audience making sense of the joke. This view of ideology opens a way for understanding how indoctrination to an ideology with humour occurs, explaining how ideology is transmitted, how it bypasses critical reflection and how it might cause dogmatism. The paper argues that this power stems not only from the cognitive mechanisms of humour processing but also from the deeper human needs that humour serves, the desire for communality and belonging and the creation of in-group/out-group distinctions (schismogenesis). The neo-Nazi website, the Daily Stormer, which is notorious for using humour to garner new adherents for the white supremacist ideology and antisemitism, is used as a case study.

1 | Introduction

Humour is an essential mode of human interaction. Although some authors have emphasised humour's capacity to communicate emotional 'tenderer sentiments' (Oring 2003, 79), the open expression of which is sometimes negatively sanctioned in modern societies, humour has a dark side as well. Already, Plato and Aristotle considered humour as a way of expressing one's own superiority over those laughed at and the view is not without its defenders even today (Gruner 1997). Racist humour serves as a rhetorical device for the dissemination of racist ideas and stereotypes (Adams 2023;

Saul 2024; Weaver 2011). Recently, neo-Nazi actors and other extremists online have engaged in a systematic effort to spread their hatemongering by using humour as a 'method of delivery' and a smokescreen for their deeply dehumanising agenda.

In 2017, the style guide for the aspiring authors to the Daily Stormer Neo-Nazi website ('The *Daily Stormer Style Guide*', 2017, referred to as *DSSG* below) was leaked to the public. The 17-page document, which offers a rare inside view of the manipulative strategies used by right-wing extremists, has been called the *playbook for the alt-right* (Feinberg 2017).

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The style guide is disturbingly explicit:

There should be a conscious agenda to dehumanise the enemy [i.e., Jews, gays, trans people, feminists, etc.], to the point where people are ready to laugh at their deaths. So it isn't clear that we are doing this—as that would be a turnoff to most normal people—we rely on lulz [i.e., fun, laughter, or amusement, especially that derived at another's expense]. ... Dehumanisation is extremely important, but it must be done within the confines of lulz.

(DSSG, 14.)

This manipulative method of covering the true intentions behind communication with a humorous appearance is called *sugar-coating* (Adams 2023). Sugar-coating is a mode of subtle linguistic manipulation, that is, intended to make the targeted audience more receptive to otherwise disagreeable views and ideas by attaching a reward to the uptake of the message. As the style guide explains: 'Packing our message inside of existing cultural memes and humour can be viewed as a delivery method. Something like adding cherry flavour to children's medicine'. (DSSG, 13.)

The style guide directs prospective writers to use many other kinds of linguistic manipulation tactics and strategies as well. For example, it instructs authors to focus on the attitudes of the general audience so as not to generate negative responses: 'The tone of the site should be light. Most people are not comfortable with material that comes across as vitriolic, raging nonironic hatred'. (DSSG, 11.) The document instructs the authors to use ambiguous language to leave room for doubt about the seriousness of the message: 'The unindoctrinated should not be able to tell if we are joking or not' (DSSG, 11). This ambiguous language, which is designed to leave room for the denial of serious racist intentions, has been dubbed *figleaves* (Saul 2017, 2024). The guide also lists several racist and misogynistic slurs that are allowed and advisable but notably only in humorous contexts: 'Generally, when using racial slurs, it should come across as half-joking—like a racist joke that everyone laughs at because it's true. This follows the generally light tone of the site'. (DSSG, 9.) However, potty humour and references to faeces and excreta are effectively forbidden. This likely reflects the accurate insight that people who bring up disgusting things are often themselves implicated in the disgust aroused in the audience (Heinämaa 2020).

The style guide is also explicit about the purpose of the site: 'It should be understood first and foremost that the Daily Stormer is not a "movement site". It is an outreach site, designed to spread the message of nationalism and anti-Semitism to the masses'. (DSSG, 10). Although the site aims to provide news and entertainment for those already 'in the know', the main purpose of the site is to recruit new people to support the ideology: 'it should always be considered that the target audience is people who are just becoming aware of this type of thinking'. (DSSG, 10). Elsewhere, Anglin acknowledged that the content of the site, which relies on memes and humour, is 'mainly designed to target children' (SPLC/Southern Poverty Law Centre 2018). The

primary aim of the website is clearly to lure new people to neo-Nazism, that is, to indoctrinate people to Nazi ideology. The question is as follows: why do Nazis view humour as an effective means to achieve this goal? More importantly, could humour truly work towards achieving these goals? And if it works, why does it work?

I suggest that there are several reasons to believe that humour is as if ready-made for dissemination and indoctrination to extreme ideologies. Although the Daily Stormer site and its style guide have received much attention from scholars (Barnett 2017; Bessant 2018; Christmas 2022; Condis 2019; Leeb 2024; Mok 2022), the connection between humour and indoctrination has not been scrutinised. Many authors have analysed the use of humour and other linguistic devices for transmitting racism and extreme ideas, but the focus has been on the pragmatics or politics of language use rather than the dissemination of the ideology itself (Ahmed 2004; Blee and Simi 2020; Haney-Lopez 2013; Nussbaum 2019; e.g., Saul 2017, Saul 2017, 2024; however, see Weaver 2011). I argue that once we appreciate how humour is related to our fundamental social needs and cognitive processing of humour and understand ideologies as ways of interpreting the social world—in a way to be explicated below—we can see how the use of humour can be frighteningly effective in the purposes of indoctrination to extremist ideologies.

2 | Funny Nazis and Sense of Community

(Content warning: This section contains derogatory language.)

2.1 | The Daily Stormer Modus Operandi

The Daily Stormer was one of the most popular right-wing extremist sites online from 2013 to 2017 (SPLC/Southern Poverty Law Centre 2022). It picks its name and style from the Nazi-German sensationalist tabloid *Der Stürmer*, which is specialised in disseminating hate propaganda, antisemitic stereotypes and pornography. The audiences of both propaganda outlets are similar: young and lower-class white males. During Donald Trump's first presidential campaign, the site encouraged white men to 'vote for the first time in our lives for the one man who actually represents our interests' (Wright 2015). After Trump's election, the site became considered 'the top hate site in America' (Hankes 2017). Soon after, in 2017, the site was denied service from domain registrars because several lawsuits were ruled against its founder, Andrew Anglin, and there was a significant amount of public pressure (e.g., Prince 2017). Today, the site remains active only on the dark web, which reduces its visibility and accessibility greatly.

The initial popularity of the site has been partly attributed to its intentionally mimicking appearance and style of other sites popular among young people in the 2010s (Hankes 2017). Most of the 'official' content on the site appears to be written by Anglin himself, although there are some other dedicated authors as well. Active commenting and a discussion forum add a communal aspect and a sense of togetherness to the site, which

has delivered a dedicated fanbase for Anglin, calling themselves ‘the Stormer Troll Army’ or ‘Stormers’ (SPLC/Southern Poverty Law Centre 2022). Indeed, the Daily Stormer has orchestrated countless smear and harassment campaigns, targeting and doxing (i.e., publicly providing personal information without consent), to which many of the lawsuits against Anglin are connected.

The Daily Stormer website’s main form of content is racist antisemitic commentaries on current news, which are further discussed on an active discussion forum. The commentaries give an ideological, often sarcastic gloss on topical issues, often quoting in length from and linking to the reports on mainstream media platforms. (For this reason, the site is also considered a fake news website.)

As an example, consider news that made some headlines about an American passenger who was removed from a flight after going on a racist tirade. In a viral video, the passenger can be heard using offensive language, including Islamophobic and racist slurs, and calling the female flight attendants ‘fat a**es’ and their male colleagues ‘fa**ots’ (censure added). The Daily Stormer, true to its style, published a story of the incident under the heading ‘Moslems and Fat Skank Send Reasonable Man into Rage on an Aeroplane, Fatties Divert Flight’. The headline itself is a textbook example of ambiguities of humour: it uses hyperbolic and hostile language, hinting simultaneously at the possibility of being irony (cf. ‘reasonable man’). Such ambiguities create room for denial of ill intentions (e.g., Saul 2024), and humour essentially thrives on those ambiguities (Weaver 2011; Young 2019, 69 ff.).

The ‘news piece’ quotes extensively from mainstream media before praising the racist passenger’s behaviour and rationalising it under racist misogynist ideology. It essentially blames liberal society for the passenger’s outburst: ‘This is what we are dealing with in the world now: a coalition between carbohydrate-addict sl*ts, anal-obsessed fa**ots and stinking Moslem apes’ (censure added). Although the text does not at all hide its misogynist, body shaming, homophobic and Islamophobic content, it involves paradigm elements of humour: hyperbole and exaggeration.

The text continues: ‘wew [sic] lads. It seems to me the only thing this man is guilty of is speaking truth to power. Something that we used to praise men for doing’. Immediately following this text is an image depicting Adolf Hitler delivering a speech. Such over-the-top allusions to Hitler are a common theme on the site and also serve to make references to antisemitism seem ironic.

The strategy of using hyperbole, ridicule and irony seems clear. The style guide instructs the use of humorous elements explaining

...the more hyperbole, the better. Even when it is totally ridiculous. Firstly, it is fun. People like reading it (and writers enjoy writing it). Secondly, even when a person can say to themselves “this is ridiculous,” they are still affected by it on an emotional level. Whether they like it or not.

(DSSG, 14.)

The strategy of the site is to present Nazism in an ironic light and exaggerate the statements to a point of seeming ridiculous. As Anglin states about such instrumentalization of humour: ‘This is obviously a ploy and I actually do want to gas k*kes. But that’s neither here nor there’. (DSSG, 11; censure added.)

2.2 | Community

The Daily Stormer is premised on the idea of communality. The site effectively uses click-bait headlines to maximise visitor engagement and encourage further comments and discussion. The users are encouraged to compile personal information about ‘the enemies’, which could be useful in smear campaigns. As noted above, there is a large group of active followers of Anglin, who call themselves Stormers. At one point, Anglin also encouraged his followers to start local ‘book clubs’ that would convene face to face to discuss Nazi ideology and practice martial arts and combat skills. The Southern Poverty Law Centre documented over 30 active ‘book clubs’ in 2016–2017 (Hankes 2017).

Community seems to be something Anglin has seen as key in his extremist ideology. He explained his personal path into Nazism by writing: ‘I got into Hitler, and realised that through this type of nationalist system, alienation could be replaced by community in a real sense’ (Hankes 2017). The ‘message of heroism, presented as standing up against an insidious evil, serves as a sugar-coating for the racist content of the speech’ (Adams 2023, 464). The Daily Stormer has indeed been very effective in exploiting other social grievances, especially male grievances, to benefit their cause. Anglin has gained notoriety for his extreme male supremacist views, openly supporting beating, raping and murdering women. As has been noted, this is part of the reason behind his influence online, for he ‘strategically uses misogyny to mobilise disaffected young men, particularly those involved in the manosphere, into the white supremacist movement’. (SPLC/Southern Poverty Law Centre 2022.)

In addition to utilising gendered grievances, the Daily Stormer also offers rewards for its readers. As noted above, one kind of sugar coating used by the site, in addition to humour, is heroism, a narrative about the purportedly victimised but heroic white heterosexual cis-males (Adams 2023, 463–464). According to studies, such utilisation of grievances plays a significant role in other rightwing populist rhetoric as well, enabling the aggrieved ones to portray themselves as ‘noble martyrs’ who are fighting a true evil (e.g., Salmela and von Scheve 2018). Such resentment-driven heroism also serves to foster a sense of belonging to a community united by shared victimhood (Capelos et al. 2023). The significance of such rewards for targeted audiences—lower class white males and boys—should not be underestimated. The tactic of utilising grievances and offering a narrative of heroism is also frequently referred to in the style guide: ‘Hardcore nationalist parties and activists should always be presented as virtuous and heroic, while all opposed should be presented as disgusting and evil’ (DSSG, 11). The narrative of the site is very much about ‘us’, the champions of a noble cause (white suprematism), who fight the evil, corrupted ‘Others’.

3 | Humour as Social Action

3.1 | Proximal and Distal Purposes of Humour

To understand the proper function of humour in the dissemination of extremist ideologies, we need to distinguish some aspects of humour. Importantly, what is the purpose of humour? This question can be understood in two ways, both of which are relevant for understanding the social function of humour. On the one hand, we can attempt to identify the function in ordinary social contexts. To this question, plausible answers include rewarding things such as amusement, enjoyment, relief, mirth and laughter. These rewards, among other things, are the *proximal purpose* of humour. Such purposes are mostly agent-based and describe the *immediate* rewards for which we often engage in humour.

It seems safe to say that much humour research focuses on the nature of humour in this agent-based sense. From Plato and Aristotle onward, some have connected humour with a sense of superiority (e.g., Gruner 1997). However, according to Freud, humour is a matter of releasing tension or ‘psychic energy’, which explains why we laugh (Mulder and Nijholt 2002, 4). There are many computational models of humour (see Mulder and Nijholt 2002), and research has placed much emphasis on understanding humour as a linguistic process (Krikmann 2006; Raskin 1979). More popularly, many scholars have followed Kant (Kant 2000, I.I.54) in seeing humour as a matter of resolving incongruence (Hietalahti 2020; Oring 2003). As Schopenhauer puts it:

The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and the laugh itself is just an expression of this incongruity

(Schopenhauer 1883, 76, §13)

Below, I assume that something, such as incongruity theory, adequately describes humour and explains its proximal purpose. The strengths of the view include, but are not restricted to, that the incongruity view focuses solely on the mechanism producing laughter and allows for different psychological explanations for different kinds of humour and in different contexts (some of these are discussed in connection with indoctrination below). Because of this, the view also has value in explaining the darker shades of humour without making too wide-ranging assumptions about the general nature of humour, as, for example, the superiority view seems to make. For example, the incongruity view has been used to analyse insulting humour (Hietalahti et al. 2016) as well as the relationship between humour and violence (Hietalahti 2020). However, a caveat should be made.

Most humour on the Daily Stormer is hateful ridicule and hyperbolic exaggeration, called ‘scalar humour’ (see Bergen and Binsted 2003). Owing to the intention to be funny by disparaging others, this humour clearly fits neatly into the superiority view of humour. Plato and Aristotle focused on humour precisely in the sense of ridicule and thus condemned it. Importantly, contemporary superiority theories explain the nature of humour as a game-like endeavour, in which laughter is the

prize for winning the game and does not limit its attention to ridicule as the ancients did (see esp. Gruner 1997). However, for this paper, the differences between these theories might not be too important, but there are numerous things speaking in favour of the superiority view as well.

An issue that is deeper than the proximal rewards and purposes of humour is what I wish to focus on. We might look at the purpose of humour as a part of the human social fabric in terms of its function as a social lubricant or in creating and cementing social relations and group distinctions. These are the *distal purposes* of humour. For example, various suggestions about the evolutionary purpose of humour are related to the social function of humour. Some suggest, for example, that although humour has no survival-related value on its own (at least for early humans), it can serve as a proxy in sexual selection for traits that have such value (Miller 2003). Others have suggested that the evolutionary function of humour is to detect mistaken reasoning (Hurley et al. 2013). Moreover, Bergson (1911) famously suggested that laughter is a collective activity, the purpose of which is to bring about moral and social cohesion. Freud also suggested that humour serves the purpose of converting socially tabooed aggressive impulses into socially acceptable ones (Krikmann 2006, 28). In what follows, I add yet another suggestion about such distal purposes of humour.

The purpose of humour, in the deeper sense I wish to flesh out here, is to achieve certain social results. As Ted Cohen argues, humour and jokes function as devices for *inducing intimacy* between the communicator and the audience:

And just what is this *intimacy*? It is the shared sense of those in a *community*. The members know that they are in this community, and they know that they are joined there by one another

(Cohen 1999, 28.)

The purpose of humour, as Cohen sees it, is to create social cohesion. This precise point makes Cohen's discussion of humour very interesting. As noted above, most research on humour tends to emphasise its proximal purpose. Of course, as those leaning towards the superiority theory of humour would be quick to acknowledge, humour often also involves others, the butts-of-the-jokes and the ridiculed. The power of humour in *othering* is well-attested to, for example, when racist humour is used to disseminate racist ideas and stereotypes (Weaver 2011). Humour can be symbolic or structural violence and psychological abuse, when it is used to imply that fat people or stammers are ridiculous, for example (Hietalahti 2020, sect. 4). According to studies, humour appreciation is also shaped by one's own reference group and by one's antipathies and sympathies towards outgroups (Young 2019, 91–92; Zillmann and Cantor 2017).

To be sure, the function of humour in creating intimacy and social cohesion has been studied. Humour is closely related to intimacy (Chapman 1983; Hampes 1992), is an important factor in identity and intimacy development (Kuiper et al. 2016), can facilitate friendship between adults (Carson 2020) and is closely related to trust (Hampes 1999). Therefore, it seems worthwhile to consider the more fundamental role of humour in human social relations, which is related to the evolutionary origins of humour.

To appreciate the role of humour in creating social bonds, I would like to suggest an analogy between humour and gossip. According to the *social gossip theory of language* (Dunbar 1998, 2004, Dunbar et al. 1997; Mesoudi et al. 2006), the evolutionary forces driving the development of human languages are related to the adaptive benefits stemming from complex social relations and cooperation. From an evolutionary perspective, human linguistic capacities are developed for sharing social information, in other words, to enable gossip. The amount of research backing up the theory is significant, and it makes much sense: as human evolution and survival are closely related to our sociability and cooperation, hearsay about our social environments, about our comrades and their quirks and trustworthiness, is crucial information for our well-being (Foster 2004). The same considerations that ground the social gossip theory of language suggest that humour is likely to serve similar evolutionary purposes. Just as gossip serves to form social bonds (it is an extension of the functions of grooming behaviours witness among apes; Dunbar 1998), so does laughter (Meyer 2000). It is against these speculations that Cohen's views seem especially interesting.

According to Cohen, the creation of social cohesion with humour requires two different components. First, there needs to be 'a shared set of beliefs, dispositions, prejudices, preferences, et cetera—a shared outlook on the world, or at least part of an outlook' (Cohen 1999, 28). The second component, according to Cohen, is 'a shared feeling—a shared response to something' (Cohen 1999, 28). How does humour function to create the second component, the shared feeling?

For our purposes, we can consider the *incongruity view* of humour mentioned above, according to which 'humour depends upon the perception of an incongruity that is resolved or made sense of' (Oring 2003, 2). In the case of humour, the shared feeling is amusement or mirth, which arises as a response to a perceived incongruity (say, between our prior expectations and a punchline). A more theoretical exposition of this incongruity can be found in a classic work by Arthur Koestler (1964). According to his view, humour requires the activation of two different and incompatible *frames of reference* in a person's mind. The act of bringing those frames together by some piece of information (e.g., a punchline offering an ambiguous concept that connects the frames) reconciles the incongruity. Thus, humour involves perceiving 'a situation or idea, L, in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference, M1 and M2. ... The event L, in which the two intersect, is made to vibrate simultaneously, on two different wavelengths, as it were. While this unusual situation lasts, L is not merely linked to one associative context, but bisociated with two' (Koestler 1964, 35). Notice that this 'bisociation' of concept or an idea that is necessary for humour, according to the view, is what also makes humour an inherently ambiguous mode of communication.

3.2 | Us and Them

As is the case with jokes employing stereotypes, humour often creates a sense of community by making some salient

distinctions between groups of people (Meyer 2000). Here, the analogy to gossip is useful again. Although gossip (in the sense of sharing information about the personal lives of absent third parties) often involves sharing socially important information, it arguably is a significant force for creating social bonds and intimacy between the gossipers but also for creating distinctions between the in-group and out-group. The poor reputation of gossip is likely related to this latter negative aspect; however, according to studies, most gossip is not actually that negative (Hartung et al. 2019). Similarly, most humour is likely on the amiable side (Meyer 2000). Nevertheless, people sometimes also thrash others, and sharing negative information about others is an important factor in producing and upholding allegiances and socially excluding others. According to some studies, it is mainly group boundaries and social status that determine who the objects of positive and negative gossip will be (e.g., Ellwardt et al. 2012). The same is likely true of the butts of the jokes as well.

In Cohen's view, jokes and humour require 'a shared outlook on the world, or at least part of an outlook' (Cohen 1999, 28). This can be interpreted as a shared ability to bring the two required frames of reference into one's mind to grasp what is funny. For example, various jokes require the ability to use culturally relative stereotypes, and if such stereotypes are not available, the joke does not make much sense. For example, in Finland, there is an endless repository of Swedish jokes, which rely on (mostly negative and/or ridiculous) stereotypes about Swedes. They make little sense for foreigners not having cognitive access to the relevant stereotypes (see also Young 2019, 93). Humour is a social force to be reckoned with because, when successful, it connects people with a shared vision of reality, making them an 'us'. (I will discuss this further in Section 4.2. below.)

The creation of social distinctions at the level of societies has been called *schismogenesis*, creation of division (Bateson 1935). Anthropologists Graeber and Wengrow (2021) have recently used the concept specifically to explain the creation of social in-group/out-group differences among communities that are regionally or otherwise in close contact and seem to share many cultural and regional things. The creation of division serves to distinguish 'us' from 'them' in cases where observable differences are small or absent. This is the case between Finland and Sweden, as mentioned above, as well as in many similar cases where the neighbouring nation is the object of ridiculing stereotypes (Young 2019, 93–95). I believe that humour and jokes depending on stereotypes and other social distinctions can function to produce schismogenesis.

As Graeber and Wengrow, in discussing social schismogenesis, state:

People come to define themselves against their neighbours. Urbanites thus become more urbane, as barbarians become more barbarous. If "national character" can really be said to exist, it can only be as a result of such schismogenetic processes: English people trying to become as little as possible French, French people as little like Germans, and so on. If

nothing else, they will all definitely exaggerate their differences in arguing with one another.

(Graeber and Wengrow 2021, 53.)

In a rather obvious way, the Daily Stormer's attempt to create a sense of white pride and demonise the out-group (i.e., all the nonwhite, nonmale, nonheterosexual and nonnationalists) is an instance of the intentional creation of schismogenesis. The style guide makes this explicit:

The basic idea is that everyone on our side is 100% good and everyone who isn't on our side is 100% evil. Of course in real life you can't exactly do anything 100%, but it should be as close to that as possible while still being coherent. Hardcore nationalist parties and activists should always be presented as virtuous and heroic, while all opposed should be presented as disgusting and evil.

(DSSG, 11)

This creation of schismogenesis is not considered unrelated to humour, as the document adds: 'The melodramatic nature of it also increases entertainment value' (DSSG, 11). Although authors, such as Adams, mostly appear to connect this cultivation of us-versus-them mentality by the Daily Stormer to an attempt to arouse a negative emotional response (such as disgust towards 'them'), we need to acknowledge that the other side of such hatemongering is creating something that is of positive value to those hearing the message: it also speaks to their deeper human need for belonging. Aggrieved white males find the Daily Stormer appealing because it offers them an 'us' to which to belong, a group of like-minded individuals who share the sense that the liberal modern society is somehow rigged against them. In this context, white supremacists seem to offer similar rewards of communality and belonging as other online hate communities do such as incel forums (Cottee 2020; Labbaf 2019; Sugiura 2021). Jihadists have also been observed to use similar tactics in their recruitment of aggrieved young males (Hoffman et al. 2020, 574–576).

Cohen's view also explains human needs that help to see why jokes can be so effective in schismogenetic processes through creating togetherness:

I am confident that it is an intimacy that should not be underestimated. When we laugh at the same thing, that is a very special occasion. It is already noteworthy that we laugh at all, at anything, and that we laugh all alone. That we do it *together* is the satisfaction of a deep human longing, the realization of a desperate hope. It is the hope that we are enough like one another to sense one another, to be able to live together.

(Cohen 1999, 29.)

The same 'deep human longing' seems to play a role in the case of extremist humour. When humour is used to distinguish between us and them, we often laugh at the expense of those others. This

means that in the case of the extremist, hateful humour Cohen's statement must be adjusted: the ridicule and laughing at others promises that *we* can live together happily but not *with* those others. As the in-group is formed in contrast to the out-group, our shared derision and contempt towards 'them' is what defines 'us' and is part of the feelings we, the in-group, share.

Grievances can fuel the need to distinguish oneself from others, especially those who are perceived as responsible for those unfortunes (in the case of white male supremacy: immigrants, Jews, blacks, feminists, liberals and sexual minorities). Here, the function of humour in creating schismogenesis becomes visible. Humour has the power to significantly lower our defences even in the face of ideas and views that we are otherwise reluctant to accept because its functioning on the human needs to connect with others and receive affirmation for one's identity as a member of a social group (see Haslam et al. 1999). In the dissemination of their extremist worldview, the Daily Stormer seems to have succeeded precisely because it speaks to the need for recognition and community, achieved through the intentional creation of schismogenesis, in which humour is used to distinguish 'us' from 'them' and hatred towards the members of the outgroup is fomented (see also Meyer 2000).

4 | Ideologies and Indoctrination

In light of the above, we can appreciate why humour might be extremely effective as a tool for disseminating ideologies, especially extreme ideologies. Humour easily lends itself to schismogenesis, which itself is the other side of our basic human need to find companionship. In this section, I wish to take up the precise mechanism of how humour functions in indoctrinating to an ideology. I suggest that we need to understand both the nature of indoctrination and ideology in a new way, which needs to be elaborated.

4.1 | Indoctrination and Humour

Indoctrination, in the sense relevant here, is roughly the morally reprehensible way of influencing others to form biased, partisan or sectarian views. There are three different views about what makes the transmission of ideas *indoctrination* in this sense. On an autonomy-based (Kantian) view, indoctrination occurs when the transmission of ideas *prevents rational evaluation* (Merry 2005) of the beliefs transmitted. On another, content-based account the transmission of ideas is indoctrination when what is transmitted is an ideology (see White 1967). In the third view, indoctrination occurs when the transmission of ideas results in *dogmatism* (DiPaolo and Simpson 2016; Ranalli 2022). In some respects, all these views capture what the Daily Stormer is doing and all have some insight into the role of humour in indoctrination. In this section, I discuss only the first and its relation to humour. The others will be examined in the following section.

The Kantian view sees indoctrination as resulting from bypassing the rational evaluation of the audience. In general, such a view faces certain challenges, for some cases that appear

to be indoctrination seem to involve rational processes essentially and thus not to prevent rational evaluation at all (Callan and Arena 2009). However, I will ignore these complications.

Indoctrination has been connected especially to belief manipulation (Yaffe 2003), so it is not surprising that manipulation has also been viewed as influencing that bypasses reason (e.g., Cave 2007; Bělohrad 2019; Whitfield 2022). One way that this could take place is through *covert influence* (see Ware 1981). In discussions on manipulation, cases of subliminal advertising and hypnosis are often mentioned as clear examples (Nogge 2022). However, the Daily Stormer is interesting precisely because it does very little to hide its commitment to Nazi ideology, except by making references to it seem somewhat ironic because of hyperbole. The website itself is garnished with swastikas and frequent images of Hitler, so Nazism is very much in plain sight. Arguably, the only thing that does anything to veil the ideology, and the site's aims to spread it, is the humorous mode of presentation. However, this makes sense in the light of views according to which humour generally prevents the audience from engaging in critical reflection.

There is psychological evidence that humour, because of the related cognitive processing, is well suited to do just this kind of bypassing of rational judgement (Young 2008, 2019, 77–84). First, according to the *discounting cue hypothesis* of humour (Nabi et al. 2007), people perceive humour differently from serious discourse. When they interpret humour, they view it as a nonserious form of communication and are thus less willing to scrutinise the message. If this is true, then the Daily Stormer's humorous style of communication primes its visitors against scrutinising what is said. The style guide corroborates that the site intentionally uses humour as a discounting cue. For example, the guide instructs that the Norwegian white supremacist and misogynist mass murderer, Anders Bering Breivik, 'should be forever referred to as a heroic freedom fighter. This is great because people think you must be joking. But there is a part of their brain that doesn't think that'. (DSSG, 15.)

Second, Dannagal Young has developed a *counterargument disruption model of humour*, also called the 'resource allocation' hypothesis (Young 2008, 2019, 77–84). Although the discounting cue hypothesis assumes that interpreters of humour are not *motivated* to examine the message critically, Young proposes that the interpreter's *ability* to critically reflect on the message is hindered by the complex cognitive processing required by humour apprehension. According to neuroscientific studies, bringing together the frame of interpretation needed to make sense of humour is costly to the human brain (Coulson and Kutas 2001). After engaging in the interpretation of humour, less cognitive energy remains for critical examination of the message conveyed implicitly. If this is correct, then humour quite concretely hinders the capacity of the audience to use their reasoning to evaluate the message, making it extremely usable in indoctrination.

We do not need to decide which of the accounts is true because it is the phenomenon both aim to explain is crucial: people engaged in interpreting humour do not use their critical reasoning as much as they do in serious contexts. Thus, the use

of humour seems to function in a way that warrants classification of the Daily Stormer's messaging as a form of indoctrination, at least in the Kantian picture of indoctrination.

This conclusion is obviously rather theoretical in nature. However, the point connects nicely with the above discussion concerning the distal purpose of humour and the human needs for connection and community. Recall that humour involves the act of bringing together two incompatible frames of reference and 'bisociating' them with an ambiguous item. We should conceptually distinguish different aspects in this process.

First, the hearer might lack the capacity to understand a joke, which ability itself can serve to mark an in-group from the out-group (e.g., inside jokes access to culturally relative stereotypes). Second, as has been emphasised, understanding a joke and appreciating it as funny are distinct matters (Cohen 1999, Chapter 1; Gruner 1997, Chapter 1; Young 2019, Chapter 5). However, appreciating a joke is ambiguous further between two importantly distinct readings. Consider, on the one hand, how an antiracist might well understand and bring together the frames that are essential to a racist joke but is not (emotionally, volitionally and morally) *capable* of employing those frames properly so that bisociation cannot take place. On the other hand, the antiracist might simply be unwilling to employ the frames and thus volitionally resist the invitation to appreciate what is funny. This volitional refusal to connect the frames is different from the mere inability to connect them (situations in which we feel ashamed after feeling mirth due to an inappropriate joke are markedly different from those in which we fail to see anything funny).

This difference between ability and willingness to bisociate is not clear-cut and highly context dependent. Our prior expectations, emotional state and attitude towards the humourist can all function to prevent us from bisociating the frames, in which case, it might not be clear-cut whether this is due to inability or our volitional state. However, crucially, in a circumstance where the social rewards of community and belonging are sought—as when the aggrieved young whites approach the Daily Stormer site—the willingness to try to appreciate the humour will play into the hand of the humourist. Therefore, it seems that the indoctrination at play on the Daily Stormer relies on two different functions that the humour helps it achieve: first, the people longing for connection find an in-group *with* whom they laugh (reward); second, the use of humour makes those comers to the site evaluate the dehumanising racist content less critically (bypassing rational scrutiny). In such ways, at least, we can view the use of extremist humour itself as manipulation.

4.2 | Ideology and Indoctrination

I mentioned that there are other views of indoctrination in addition to the bypassing of rational capacities just discussed. According to another view, indoctrination takes place when what is transmitted or disseminated is an ideology. Let us examine this view next to see how it applies to the case of the Daily Stormer.

Since at least Marx, ideologies have been viewed as system-of-beliefs, lens-like epistemic constructs through which we view the world. In the traditional sense, the term *ideology* is mostly pejorative: ideologies shape, colour and distort our perception of the social and political reality (Freeden 1998, 15; for a recent defence of this position, see Mills 2017). A historically influential view of ideology in this sense is that of Tracy (1817), who viewed a comprehensive explanatory theory of human experience and the world as an essential part of ideology (I ignore his vast sociological analysis of ideology here). On the basis of the above discussion, the antisemitic white supremacist agenda of the Daily Stormer clearly disseminates such a worldview (which is how the style guide also explains the aims of the site). However, if we view indoctrination as a transmission or dissemination of ideology and view ideology as a comprehensive explanatory theory of human experience and the world, then it is difficult to see how the humour on the Daily Stormer relates to this indoctrination. I will now argue that humour, in fact, is precisely what *enables* indoctrination.

The political theorist Freeden (1998, 2003) defines ideologies in a way that is helpful. In his view, ideologies should not be viewed as content (e.g., beliefs and systems of beliefs) but rather as ways of interpreting political reality. Ideology is also not necessarily something that distorts the view of reality but is necessary to give meaning to it. We all have one. In Freeden's view, ideologies differ in the way they give meaning to the public but contested concepts (following Gallie 1955), such as 'equality', 'freedom', 'liberalism' and 'democracy'. Ideologies differ in what kind of value (positive or negative, Freeden 1998, 55–56) they attach to such concepts and ideas and in how they conceptually and logically relate and arrange those concepts to each other. As a result, the 'explanatory theories of human experience and of the world' of, say, white supremacists and liberals, will be very different. They view things, such as *liberty*, very differently, give it a different value, disagree over what policies add or diminish it in society and first and foremost, whose liberty it is that matters the most. Here, it is useful to notice two things. The difference between a liberal and a white supremacist ideology is two-fold: they differ regarding the *interpretation* of concepts and the *relevance* of concepts. The disagreements about the meaning and implications of 'liberty' or 'gender' are of the first kind, whereas the disagreement about the notion of 'race' might be of the latter kind. That is, although the white supremacist ideology construes reality in terms of *racial essences* (Mallon 2006), the liberal ideology mostly deems such notions to the heap of superstition along with 'witches' and 'phlogiston'.

Let us explore how the Daily Stormer uses schismogenesis to support the dissemination of ideology. The humour on the site effectively communicates who belongs to the in-group and the out-group—who it is we laugh *with* and who we laugh *at*. Just as humour effectively creates and marks social distinctions, it effectively communicates those distinctions and the related values of the groups (Meyer 2000). Interestingly, the psychological mechanisms of humour interpretation might be crucial in this context.

When the susceptible audience attempts to parse the humour on the Daily Stormer—to grasp what is funny—they need only to

adjust their interpretational framework of reality. The ridicule and humour contain all the cues needed for such adjustment: who are the others, inferior to and different from valued us, which concepts are meaningful and important ('race', yes and 'gender equality', laughable nonsense) and what kinds of values to attach to those concepts ('whiteness', good and 'feminism', ridiculous and harmful). If we consider ideology in Freeden's sense, as a way of interpreting concepts and reality, then we can see how merely the attempt to grasp extremist humour leads naturally to acquire the extremist ideology. No 'brainwashing' is needed, for when one tries to get the joke, he will voluntarily engage in adjusting the meanings, significance and values attached to concepts and categories already in his possession. If this succeeds, he will thereby acquire the ability to see the world through the relevant ideological lenses.

Above, I noted that understanding a joke involves (i) the possession of frames of reference that are brought together, (ii) the ability to bisociate those frames and (iii) the willingness to bisociate the frames. The last point is satisfied by the Daily Stormer's visitors, due to their desire to find human connection, as discussed above. The frames are, on the one hand, what is literally said and, on the other, the ideology. To grasp what is funny on the site, one must imagine a world in which whites are above subhuman others, deserving ridicule and degradation. Notably, for those who are not willing to connect these frames, the extremist humour appears as crass, tacky and inhumane. What is easy to miss is that precisely this crassness, derogation and dehumanisation reveal the ideology and its commitments. The social relationships between, and worth of, different groups of people are exhibited right there in the ridicule and derogation itself. Moreover, this arguably is the white supremacist ideology at its sincerest, since the derogation and dehumanisation of nonwhites is the 'comprehensive explanatory theory of human experience and the world', according to it. The less crude tenets of white supremacy can be considered just rationalisations of this ominous foundation (in this assessment, I rely on Semelin 2007). If we understand the extremist ideology in this sense, we can see how the willing audience of extremist jokes could parse that ideology on the basis of the humour alone and even in absence of any additional cues and information (which on the Daily Stormer are of course plenty). In this light, coming to see the world through the lenses of the extremist ideology might be possible merely by consuming extremist humour.

Importantly, this process of indoctrination through humour seems possible, or at least highly effective, only in the case of hostile, Manichean ideologies, such as antisemitism and white supremacism. They involve mindsets that are antipluralist, closedminded and intolerant of difference (Montuori 2005). The moral worth attributed to individuals in such ideologies is ultimately determined by their social group (e.g., Rangel and Keller 2011). Ridicule and exaggeratedly derogatory jokes (e.g., 'carbohydrate-addict sl*ts' above) work well to disseminate such black-and-white Manichean attitudes (although obviously jokes about criminals, blue-collar folk or bankers can work in similar ways). As extremist worldviews simplify human existence into differences between the intrinsic moral worth of different social categories (Cassam 2021, 83 ff), both the values and the relevance of certain categories that form the heart of the ideology can be very easily communicated via humour.

As I noted above, one might understand a joke but not find it funny. The ability to employ the frame to grasp the joke is crucial here. Once you have acquired the ability, you will likely find it easier to employ that frame of interpretation on other occasions. Foreigner's first encounter with a Swedish joke in Finland is unlikely to produce amusement, but as the foreigner learns the relevant stereotypes while trying to get the joke, she will acquire the ability to parse subsequent jokes that rely on the stereotype (Young 2019, 93–95, describes this process in more detail). Similarly, the newcomer to the Daily Stormer might not find the jokes too funny initially (they are crass, offensive and simpleminded), but if they are motivated to get the jokes, they will quickly learn the relevant way to read the jokes. They thereby acquire ideological lenses and will be able to employ those lenses on subsequent occasions to explain other things in addition to jokes: political affairs, the social reality, their own grievances and the behaviours and views of other people.

The style guide for the Daily Stormer might thus be right when it describes (referring to Hitler's similar points in *Mein Kampf*) the process of indoctrination as one of repetition:

The goal is to continually repeat the same points, over and over and over and over again. The reader is at first drawn in by curiosity or the naughty humour, and is slowly awakened to reality by repeatedly reading the same points. We are able to keep these points fresh by applying them to current events.

(DSSG, 10.)

Getting what is funny means taking in the ideology. Repetition then enforces it. As the Daily Stormer's humour is mostly made in the context of commentary to current events, the humour itself directs the audience to use the ideological frame to explain 'human experience and the world'.

Finally, we can see how something, such as *dogmatism*, can follow. Recall that some views of indoctrination connect it to influences that *result* in dogmatism (DiPaolo and Simpson 2016; Ranalli 2022). While dogmatism is often defined as the intellectual vice of ignoring or dismissing relevant challenges to one's beliefs (Battaly 2018), some emphasise the psychological manner or the way in which dogmatic beliefs are held: they are held unwaveringly (Cassam 2021, Chapter 4; see White 1967). If we view ideology as the interpretative lens through which people devise explanations and rationalisations of political and social reality, that ideology can remain unaffected by counterarguments or evidence. The reason is rather obvious: people employing a certain frame of interpretation will interpret also all the counterarguments and evidence through that same frame, giving them, too, an ideological gloss. Counterarguments that conflict with the frame of interpretation are likely to be viewed as fallacious and to be 'just the kinds of statements that are to be expected' from the outgroup, the ridiculous, the enemy. Thus, something, such as an unwavering commitment to ideology, results. If what I have said above is correct, inducing an extremist ideological framework of interpretation in an individual is likely very easy, requiring only humour, but unravelling it once it has been acquired might be much harder.

5 | Conclusion

I have above argued that humour is as if made to serve the purpose of extremist indoctrination. First, humour serves deep human needs of belonging. It can produce a sense of communality and serve to delineate, create and enforce group boundaries. Therefore, although extremist humour is used to create distinctions and schismogenesis, laughing at 'the other' might be effective in indoctrination precisely because it reveals to us who we are *laughing with*. The deep human longing for connection and belonging can be harnessed for the purposes of the indoctrinator.

Second, understanding humour is construed as a cognitive task requiring bringing together two conflicting frames of reference and bisociating them. I paid attention to the psychological mechanisms of humour appreciation and noted how there is evidence that the processing of humour is likely to hinder critical reflection of the intended message. If this is true, then the way our brains process humour lends itself to the purposes of the indoctrinator and enables manipulative uses of humour.

Finally, following Freeden (1998), I argued that we need to understand ideologies as frames of interpretation of social and political reality that give meanings and values to our concepts and social categories. In the case of extremist humour discussed here, the other frame of reference required to understand the humour is just the extremist ideology itself. In the process of trying to make sense of humour, the willing audience will parse that ideology and acquire the ability to use that interpretative frame. After this ability is acquired, its use does not need to be restricted to humour but comprehensive explanations of human experience and the world will follow naturally through repeated use. Dogmatism is likely to result because the frame of interpretation is a *way* of evaluating things, including counterarguments, and thus is not easily shaken by external influences. If I am correct, then the dark side of ideological humour discussed above is something we should pay more attention to. Specifically, the aggrieved young men susceptible to the siren song of extremist ideologies might be turning to the dark side the very moment they start to find the extremists to be funny.

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Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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