RESEARCH ARTICLE

MISLEADING MEMES
The effects of deceptive visuals of the British National Party

Ofra Klein
European University Institute

ABSTRACT:
This study investigates how visual manipulation is employed on the Facebook page of a far-right party; and whether manipulation evokes different forms of engagement from Facebook users. The study takes as a case the Facebook page of the British National Party (BNP), which has recently been censored from the social media platform. It therefore provides a rare insight in the visual practices of the party's online political communication. A manual coding of 342 images into *factual, funny, fallacious* or *fabricated* content finds that completely fabricated information in images is rare. However, most images do contain information that is presented in a fallacious or misleading manner. The results show how deliberate manipulated images evoke more engagement in the form of comments and more negative emotional responses than images that present information in a factual or funny manner.

KEYWORDS: content analysis, far-right, internet memes, online propaganda, misleading information

CORRESPONDING AUTHORS: Ofra Klein, ofra.klein@eui.eu

1. Introduction

Visual forms of political manipulation are an age-old phenomenon, but much has changed since printed posters and leaflets. Whereas before, political propaganda was difficult to manipulate and hard to circulate, nowadays it is easier for almost anyone to produce fake political imagery in a convincing manner and rapidly disseminate them. Photoshop allows for falsifications that are sometimes impossible to distinguish from reality. Images that are plausibly manipulated can often spread widely before any corrections are made (Highfield and Leaver 2016, 52).

Images as these are often referred to as memes (Shifman 2014; Mina 2019). Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (2006, 3) coined the term 'meme' as a cultural variant of the gene. He described memes as "non-genetic behaviour and cultural ideas, which are transferred from person to person". When the reach of a meme is large, one can speak of a viral effect, as the content has spread like a virus online (Shifman 2014, 11). Internet memes play an increasingly important role in the dissemination of political information to citizens and voters (Penney 2017).

Despite the suggestion that images are suitable for spreading manipulated forms of information (Marwick and Lewis 2017), there is a dearth of studies that examine how information is communicated in these online visuals and what their impact is. Studies focusing on phenomena such as fake news, misinformation and disinformation rely almost solely on textual content and have a strong focus on foreign, often Russian, disinformation by bots and trolls (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Narayanan *et al.* 2018). Manipulated content spread by established political actors, such as parties and politicians, has been neglected in research. Nevertheless, the prominent, and often legitimate role of these actors can make their discursive practices particularly salient for influencing peoples' political views and setting the agenda. Moreover, as a recent study of Pew Research Center has found, most American internet users perceive political parties and politicians as the main source of fake news, instead of journalists, foreign actors or the public (Mitchell, Gottfried, Stocking, Walker, and Fedeli 2019).

Information manipulation does not limit itself to the right side of the political spectrum (Waterson 2017a). Nevertheless, far-right actors are considered one of the primary creators and distributors of manipulated information online (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Faris *et al.* 2017; Humprecht 2018; Marwick and Lewis 2017; Narayanan *et al.* 2018; Sunstein 2018). These groups are characterized by their populist, nativist and authoritarian ideology (Mudde 2007). Nativism refers to a combination of emphasizing one's own culture, traditions and nationality, and negatively portraying culturally

deviant outgroups (Mudde 2007; Rydgren 2005). The populist nature of these groups is visible in their anti-elitist sentiment and opposition to the establishment (Mudde 2007).

This study aims to fill the above-mentioned gaps by analysing how information is disseminated in images by the far-right British National Party (BNP). The BNP was formed in 1982 by John Tydall, a former supporter of the fascist party National Front. It was most successful under leadership of Nick Griffin, who downplayed the party's previous anti-Semitic views and broadened its issue scope (Copsley and Macklin 2011: 85). The BNP is an example of a party that has been remarkably successful online. It was the first British party to create a webpage in 1995 (Copsey and Macklin 2011, 96). Despite it being a rather small party, it held "sophisticated e-campaigns" and adopted innovative strategies, such as an online television channel (Small, Taris and Danchuk 2008, p. 138). The website was the most viewed of all political parties in Britain in 2007, and in Europe in 2011 (Copsey and Macklin 2011, 96). Also on social media, the BNP attracted many more followers than offline. Due to its hateful posts, the party was censored from Facebook in April 2019 (Hern 2019). The BNP is a particularly interesting case for studying its online visual propaganda, as its strong visual culture has been subject of earlier studies (Lee and Littler 2015; Engström 2014).

Beyond looking at how visual propaganda of the party is employed; the paper also addresses the effects of visual manipulation on user engagement. Engagement refers in this paper to how often users comment below a post, and how often they – through the click of a mouse –indicate their emotional reaction towards the image. Content that evokes much engagement of users or many strong emotional responses, such as anger, tends to be amplified by the algorithms of these platforms (Matamoros-Fernández 2017, 939). Therefore, such content is likely to reach a broad audience online.

The paper addresses the following questions *how is visual propaganda employed on the Facebook page of the BNP?* And *how does this visual propaganda influence user engagement?* Memes and visuals are becoming a mainstream form of communication in this post-text world (Bowles 2018). Understanding how these visual pieces of culture are used for political communication and manipulation provides an insight in the way in which social media has been able to amplify the voice of the far-right. Studying symbols and references allows for understanding how the far-right has been able to enter the mainstream (Miller-Idriss 2018). Moreover, now that younger generations are shifting their attention to visual social media platforms (Perrin and Anderson 2019), a better understanding of manipulative memes and their effects is necessary.

In the following sections, I will elaborate on the concepts of propaganda and media manipulation in images, and their possible effects on user engagement and emotions. Next, this study outlines the research design and methods after which the findings are

presented. The analysis shows that most content on the page of the BNP is presented in a fallacious or misleading way. This representation often evokes more anger and disbelief compared to images representing content in factual or funny ways. The paper concludes with a brief reflection on these results and the implications for understanding far-right politics.

2. Propaganda, media manipulation and emotions

"In the widespread sense that we have entered a post-truth era" there has been a surge in research on phenomena such as fake news, misinformation, disinformation and malinformation (Benkler, Roberts and Faris 2018, 23). This study uses the umbrella concept propaganda. Benkler, Roberts and Faris (2018, 26) define propaganda as "*intentional* communication designed to manipulate a *target population* by affecting its beliefs, attitudes, or preferences in order to obtain behaviour compliant with *political* goals of the propagandist". They indicate three critical elements of propaganda, namely "(a) an actor with the intent to manage a (b) target population's attitudes or behaviours (c) through symbolic manipulation informed by a psychological model of belief or attitude formation and revision, as opposed to rational or deliberative approach" (Benkler *et al.* 2018, 29). Research in the field of political mobilization and communication refer to frames as the tool that is employed by political actors to shape the public's interpretation of political issues (Kriesi 2012a, 4). Frames are "central organizing ideas that provide coherence to a designated set of idea elements" (Kriesi 2012a, 4).

Manipulation accounts for those forms of propaganda that might not necessarily be considered as normatively inappropriate (Benkler *et al.* 2018, 31). Benkler *et al.* (2018, 31) for example argue that whilst outright false or materially misleading content (such as falsified videos or images) are clearly normatively inappropriate, using emotional language is not necessarily deemed as such. For example, they compare the positive emotions that were evoked by Martin Luther King Jr's "I have a Dream" speech as considered desirable, compared to frames that evoke negative emotions about immigrants. This normative distinction fits with the typology created by Tandoc, Lim and Ling (2018), who categorize manipulations based on their *levels of facticity* and their *levels of deception*. Manipulations can be considered wrong when they contain information that is not factual. However, factual content can also be presented in a deceiving manner. This is the case for sensationalist-, junk- and partisan news (Faris *et al.* 2017; Narayanan *et al*. 2018; Humprecht 2018). These often use "emotionally driven language with emotive

expressions", "misleading headlines" and "excessive capitalization" to deceive the viewer (Narayanan *et al.* 2018).

Types of manipulation can differ in their persuasive power (Tandoc *et al.* 2018). For example, complete fabrications are not factual, whereas sensationalist or partisan news often contain aspects of truth. This makes that the latter has a stronger power to persuade than the former (Sunstein 2014). While Tandoc *et al.* (2018) rely on the level of deception to create their typology, there is a distinction between the aim or purpose to deceive, and the power to actually deceive. Whilst satire or parodies are not meant to deceive (Wardle and Derhakshan 2018), they can be deceiving. Tina Fey's portrayal of Sarah Palin in Saturday Night Live, for example, made viewers more sceptical of Palin (Baumgartner, Morris and Walth 2012).

Making a distinction between various forms of information representation is important, as people respond differently to true than to false stories. False content leads to much more engagement than factual content, as false content is considered more novel (Vosoughi, Roy and Aral 2018). A sentiment analysis of users' textual responses to false and true tweets showed that false news led to more surprise and disgust, whereas facts provoked sadness, anticipation, joy and trust (Vosoughi *et al.* 2018, 1150). That content that evokes high arousal emotions is more likely to go viral was also shown by Berger and Milkman (2012). Larsson (2018) refers to this phenomenon, where people are more inclined to share online what upsets them than what makes them happy as the "indignation effect". This is problematic, as Facebook and other social media platforms tend to reinforce content that is highly emotional and engaging their algorithmic design (Yardi and boyd 2010). Consequently, anger has become a useful tool for mobilization (Matamoros-Fernández 2018).

Emotions are important for political mobilization, as they can alter political behaviour and matter in voting decisions (Kriesi 2012b). "Emotions help us gather and process information about the world, more rapidly than the conscious part of our brains could proceed" (Jasper 2018, 8). Brader (2005, 388) argues that "emotions play a fundamental role in reasoning and are as likely to enhance rationality as to subvert it". He himself found that, by using music and images in their campaign ads to elicit emotions such as fear or enthusiasm, candidates could significantly alter the motivational and persuasive power of these adds. Similarly, adding emotional words or images to misleading political messages can make them more persuasive (Huddy and Gunnthorsdottir 2000).

Different types of emotions have different political effects. Anger, for example, increases political mobilization, more so than anxiety or enthusiasm (Valentino, Brader, Groenendyk, Gregorowicz, and Hutchings 2011). Anger arises "when threats are attributable to a particular source", giving the individual a certain feeling of control over the

situation, whereas with anxiety, the individual is less certain and thus less in control (Valentino *et al*. 2011, 159; Lerner and Keltner 2001; Smith and Kirby 2004; Tiedens and Linton 2001). Consequently, anger triggers risk-seeking behaviour, whereas anxiety leads to risk-avoidance (Lerner and Keltner 2001; Valentino *et al.* 2011).

Fear and anger "have been used as the exemplars for most theories of emotions in politics, selected to exaggerate the suddenness and disruptive power of emotions" (Jasper 2018, 4). Besides these, what Jasper calls reflex emotions, which are "fairly quick, automatic responses to events and information", far-right groups also often rely on what he (2018, 4) refers to as moral emotions, or the "feelings of approval or disapproval (…) based on moral intuitions or principles, such as shame, guilt, pride, indignation, outrage, and compassion".

Most research about fake news, misinformation, disinformation and malformation analysed textual rather than audio-visual misinformation (Tucker *et al.* 2018, 40). However, images can be more effective than text for political persuasion, as they contain certain manipulative techniques that make them more suitable for transferring a distorted view of reality.

3. Memes as modern-day propaganda

In 2018, the New York Times wrote that we are entering a post-text future, which is characterized by a "decline of text and the exploding reach and power" of a "multimedia internet", dominated by images, videos and audio (Manjoo 2018). Visuals, and in particular internet memes, have become a more and more dominant medium to transfer cultural messages (Highfield and Leaver 2016).

Memes can be considered a form of modern-day propaganda. They often present a simplistic message conveying "one uncomplicated idea or slogan" (Shifman 2014, 67). Through their briefness, facts can more easily be left out. There is limited space for sharing detailed information or presenting counter arguments. Simplified messages can be especially persuasive if viewers have little or no knowledge on the topic that is being addressed (Baumgartner and Morris 2008). This simplicity means that images almost completely rely on visuals to convey a message.

Visuals are effective for propagandizing political views for several reasons. Images are less threatening and are understandable to a larger audience than text (Entman 2004). Moreover, visual frames have a stronger influence on an audience (Schill 2012), as their influence is more subtle. A distorted view of reality can be created using manipulated images. Visual messages are especially memorable and leave a stronger memory mark

than text (Joffe 2008). Information spread via images can therefore be retrieved better at a later stage, than information transferred using text. Photographs are perceived as less falsifiable, causing less scepticism with the audience (Messaris and Abraham 2001, 217).

Images tend to evoke stronger emotions than texts (Joffe 2008, 85). They can be particularly effective for arousing strong emotions, such as fear and anger, which can influence political views (Gross 2008). Iyer and Oldmeadow (2006) for example show how people who saw imagery of a kidnapping felt significantly more fear than people who only read about it.

As misleading content in visuals might be highly effective in influencing emotions and political mobilization, the remaining part of the paper will form a case study analysing how visual propaganda is employed by the British National Party (BNP), and how this influences emotions and user engagement.

4. Design and methods

The data from this study was gathered from the Facebook page of the BNP. During the time of this study, in August 2018, the party had 216.352 followers on Facebook, whereas during the local elections of May 2018, the last BNP councillor retired due to a lack of support (Pidd 2018). Analysing the content of such a popular page can thus give a good indication of what types of memes 'work' in terms of attracting support and gaining resonance with online followers.

For this study, the URLs of images that were posted on the page of the BNP were gathered using the image retriever from *Netvizz* (Rieder 2013). Additionally, text that accompanied the images were collected. Only the images that were visible on the page at the period of data gathering were included. Images or posts that Facebook or page owners have removed cannot be retrieved retrospectively. As hateful content is often censored from Facebook, the images were stored offline, as to be able to access them at a later stage. Therefore, URLs were put into the Chrome Extension Image Downloader as to download and save all images. For this study, the most recent 342 images were coded, covering a year between August 2017 and July 2018.

Images come in different forms, such as photographs, fabricated visuals, memes, cartoons, screenshots of Tweets, newspaper headlines or graphs. Almost all images analysed for this study (98%) had a corresponding caption adjoining the image. This study is not a complete image analysis, but rather a multimodal analysis (Serafini and Reid 2019). Multimodal forms of analysis are becoming increasingly used "in contemporary forms of

representation and communication", particularly by "social science researchers working across online platforms and other forms of digital phenomena" (Serafini and Reid 2019, 2). When it comes to the study of online visuals these additional captions are not often considered (Highfield and Leaver 2016; Pearce *et al.* 2018). Nevertheless, this additional caption is visible to viewers when they scroll through the Facebook timeline. It should therefore be included in the study as to understand the context of the visual (Serafini and Reid 2019).

The first step in understanding how images were used for manipulation was to identify categories of information manipulation. Manipulated frames by Wardle and Derakhshan (2018) and Humprecht (2018) were taken as a starting point for analysing the framing of information in images. After an iterative process of going over a subset of the images to identify the different types of manipulative frames that were present in the images, a categorization was made consisting of *factual, funny, fallacious* and *fabricated* frames. These four categories differ in their level of *facticity* and their aim to *deceive* the viewer. Table 1 summarizes these four categories on these two axes.

Table 1 – The level of facticity and the aim to deceive for different ways of information representation

	High facticity	*Low facticity*
High (aim of) deception	Fallacious	Fabricated
Low (aim of) deception	Factual	Funny

Source: Authors elaboration

After identifying the different categories, the images were analysed through a process of latent content analysis (Krippendorff 2004, 296; Neuendorf 2002, 23). Content analysis is "a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (Berelson 1952, 18). Latent coding, in contrast to manifest coding, does not just count visible aspects in the image, but needs the interpretation of the researcher to make a judgement. In this case, images were coded into the category to which they most clearly belonged. For each image, Google and Google image search were used as to identify the source of the image as well as to get more background and context on the text in and next to the image. If not much information was found, coders searched online using keywords that were posted in or next to the meme and searched for news articles posted around the time that the meme was posted.

Images that stated information about the party, that summed up their policy proposals or were pictures of the politicians without any further information were coded as *factual*. So were images dedicated to British heroes, British holidays and the British

nation. Images that were not factually wrong, but framed information "in a certain way by cropping photos or choosing quotes or statistics selectively" were coded as *fallacious* (Wardle and Derakhshan 2018, 49). These misleading types of images often apply a sensationalist, partisan or exaggerated frame (Humprecht 2018). Images containing made up (news) stories or images that were debunked by fact checking outlets were coded as *fabricated.* Images that used satire to express political criticism were coded as *funny.* A few cases were coded in the category *fuzzy*, as not enough information could be found about the image to make a sound judgement.

About 10 percent of the images was analysed and discussed by two coders. Agreements were made on difficult cases. To illustrate these different forms of manipulation in the results section, a more qualitative analysis was carried out, consisting of making field notes on the topics, actors, colours and language used in the images.

The second aspect of the study consisted of looking at how users interacted with these different forms of information representation. This study operationalizes user engagement by looking at the number of comments by users, and their reactions through clicks. Users can post one or multiple comments (💬) below images and they can, with the click of a mouse, react to the image. Users can like (👍) a post, they can indicate whether the post made them laugh (😂), feel angry (😠), sad (☹), enthusiastic (♡) or surprised (😮). They can only click on one of these options for each image. Users can share the image on their own page, so that their friends can see it. However, as this is private data that is related to a personal users' timeline, information on shares are not retrieved by Netvizz. As the interactions are anonymized and cannot be traced back to individual users, the privacy of users is warranted. No other information on the user, such as name, gender or location, was gathered.

To test the effects of online visual propaganda on users' engagement, I carried out ANOVAs to compare the mean values of Facebook reactions for images that portrayed information in a funny, factual or fallacious manner. As the number of fabricated images was very low (N=4), these were not included in the statistical analysis, but were instead described in the text.

5. Results

Table 2 summarizes how information was represented in images on the Facebook page of the British National Party. In 37 percent of all images, information was depicted without a clear frame. Images that used humour to portray a topic or person were relatively common, occurring in almost 9 percent of all instances. Most images – over 50

percent – used a form of manipulation, and thus relied on a fallacious frame. Four images (1 percent) contained completely fabricated content.

Table 2 – Overview of the types of information used in visual images

Type	Number	(%)
Factual	127	37,13%
Funny	30	8,77%
Fallacious	179	52,34%
Fabricated	4	1,17%
Fuzzy	2	0,58%
Total	342	100%

Source: Authors elaboration

Most images presented information without a clear frame. These factual messages often informed users about the policies of the BNP (Figure 1), or the specific activities that members of the party undertook. These images often use limited colours, either relying on white or yellow. Pictures of BNP politicians show them often in normal clothing, handing out flyers on the streets, and engaging with people. The images providing an overview of the BNP's policies are clearly structured, they show a professional picture of the leader of the party, his name, and clearly indicate how to connect with the party on Facebook, Twitter and through the webpage. Many of these images contained the words "Share & Like" as to encourage users to bring this content under the attention of their broader networks. The logo of the party, a heart representing the British flag, is almost always present on these images. Other images coded as factual expressed support or pride towards the army, the English football team and the nation, and wished BNP supporters happy holidays. These visuals often showed the British flag as a background, contained poppy flowers and words such as pride and respect. These images fit well with the nationalist aspects of BNP's ideology.

Content can also be brought in a funny or humorous manner. Satire was rather common in images of the BNP that criticize the elite. Most such memes make fun of Diane Abbott, Member of Parliament for Labour, who is often mocked for allegedly being stupid. Her inability to do mathematics is a returning topic for scorn. Similarly, Jeremy Corbyn was often portrayed in a mocking way. One image showed Jeremy Corbyn in between military men, wearing an "I love the IRA" t-shirt. The picture referred to Corbyn's past in which he arguably spoke out in support of the paramilitary organization. Images making fun of these politicians portray them in very unflattering ways. Jeremy Corbyn often is pictured as dressed very shabbily (Figure 2), and Diane Abbott is shown pulling weird faces. Satirical imagery differs from other forms of manipulative content in that it

primarily focusses on mocking the alleged shortcomings of politicians. The images fit the populist ideology of the BNP.

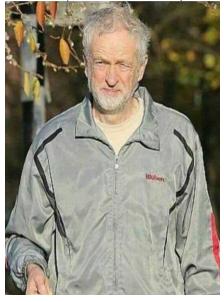**Figure 1 – Example of a factual visual**

The third category of images, those with a fallacious frame, apply various manipulative techniques to propagandize information. Often these different types of manipulative tactics were used in combination and were therefore not specified. The following paragraphs provide examples of the ways in which images were fallacious.

Images can be fallacious by offering too little information, and therefore making the image suggestive. Only one example occurred in the sample of images that was analysed for this study. The image portrays a woman, wearing a headscarf and having a phone in her hand. She walks past the victim of a terrorist attack in London. A few other people, who are not wearing a headscarf seem to help the victim. The image was posted on the page with the caption "*London terror attack: A picture says a thousand words*". Without providing any further contextual information, it suggests that the veiled woman does not care about victims of the attacks, whereas all other people in the images are surrounding the victim. This image 'became an Islamophobic meme' online (Hunt and Pegg 2017). The image that was posted on the page of the BNP seems to be blurred, which underlines the suggestion that the woman walks past in a disinterested way. A sharp version of the image (see Hunt and Pegg 2017), clearly shows the distress

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on the woman's face. Suggestive pictures such as these leave it to the interpreter of the image to decide which message they take from it.

Figure 2 – Example of a funny visual. The caption states: "Have you seen this man? Recently escaped from a secure mental institution, he suffers from delusions of grandeur and was last seen at Highgate Cemetery visiting the grave of Karl Marx. He responds to the name Jeremy"
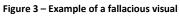

Slightly more common on the page were images that were fallacious because they were posted in the wrong context. These primarily consisted of screenshots of newspaper articles that were posted as if these were current items. One such example was a news article from 2008 that described how the police apologized for an add they put out with a puppy in it, because it "upsets Muslims". Similarly, statements made by Sadiq Kahn, major of London, were often decontextualized as to portray his inability in leading the city.

Fallacious images most often used a combination of exaggerated, sensationalized or partisan frames. Exaggerated post suggest that a specific event, situation or opinion is more widespread than it actually is. Many images on the page of the BNP use exaggerations. The BNP often refers to a child sex abuse scandal, where several men were convicted for grooming young girls for sex. Posts on the page of the BNP suggests that these sex scandals are occurring in "*all towns in the UK with a reasonable Muslim population*". Similarly, images showing pictures of Muslims advocating for Sharia law in London were captioned stating that this phenomenon was happening "*right now in our towns and*

cities". Rarer were exaggerations that were used to criticize political opponents. In one example, the failure of Ukip is shown, as it is argued that with Henry Bolton leaving, the party would be "*looking for their seventh leader in seventeen months*", which was an overstatement.

Exaggerations often go together with sensationalist content, which relies on emotional descriptions and scandalized reporting (Humprecht 2018, 12). The abovementioned child sex abuse scandal is sensationalized by using emotional phrasing. One image describes it as "*acts of war*" or the "*worst ever slavery of whites*". The image portrayed in Figure 3 was shared multiple times on the page of the BNP, showing that it was considered by the page moderator(s) as effective in getting the attention of users. The image shows a crying girl and makes use of black and red letters. The text in the image makes sure to link the crime to Muslims, and to portray them as an outgroup by describing in capital letters that "*our*" children are "*not halal meat*" and that the men on trial are "*Asian Muslims*" accused of "*gang rape of white girls*". This combination of colours is also visible in images that portray outrage about ritual slaughter. These images show bloodied sheep and are captioned in red letters with a horror font. Sensationalized posts attempt to heighten the emotional aspect of the message by portraying Muslims as terrifying, violent or monstrous. Muslims are often presented with a burqa to emphasize their alleged faceless nature and heighten the fear towards them. The helplessness in countering this "Muslim takeover" is often stressed by portraying Theresa May's incapability in handling the situation. She is often presented as very emotional, distraught and about to cry (Figure 4).

Images can be fallacious or misleading by framing information in a partisan manner. In this case current news or happenings are described from a political perspective. Examples are linking low unemployment, problems with healthcare or homelessness to immigrants (Figure 5). Most partisan frames are combined with sensationalized or exaggerated reporting. An example is shown in Figure 6. The way in which the image is portrayed creates an effect of compassion. The elderly woman in the picture is even given a name as to make the message more personalized. This is strengthened by her looking into the camera and being portrayed in a colour compared to the background of the image. The background shows a large amount of people ("immigrants"), who are less visible, almost faceless and in black and white. This inequality between the woman who gets nothing, compared to the migrants who get everything (despite being, as the image suggests, with many more), can create the feeling of being considered and treated as "second class citizens". This is a phrase that is used in several of the images of the BNP. The examples given in the text correctly underline the strong nativist nature of many of these fallacious images.
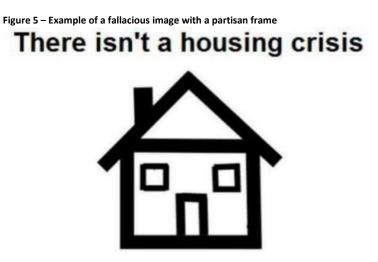
Figure 3 – Example of a fallacious visual

Figure 4 – Example of an image with an emotionalized Teresa May

Figure 5 – Example of a fallacious image with a partisan frame

Figure 6 – Example of a fallacious image with a partisan frame

Fabricated content was less common. The only completely false content on the page were conspiracy theories related to planned or organized replacements. Fears were expressed that immigrants would replace "white people", that non-white males would dominate white males, or that Islam would dominate Britain. Examples of such posts claimed that the "*left-wing wants white people to have fewer children so that immigrants*

can replace us"; or "*advertisers deliberately do not show any white male in dominant roles*". Just as exaggerated posts, images containing conspiracies use visuals that evoke strong emotions. Conspiracy theories on Islamic takeover for example represented Teresa May with a photoshopped headscarf, and the burning of the British flag in the background (Figure 7).

Figure 7 – Example of a fabricated image, with the caption "A high Court judge has set the precedent that Britain now has two laws of the land and that Shariah (Islamic Law) is to be recognised in British Law."

As posts presenting complete fake information were rarely occurring, the responses to these images were analysed qualitatively. Anger and disbelief were the main responses of users on most of the posts. However, the post on advertisers not willing to show white males evoked a lot of humorous reactions; and so, did a post stating that the Tories had a secret plan to sell out Britain to Muslims. Despite the overly serious tone in which these posts were brought – the latter post even contained an article fabricated by the BNP to support this story -, the responses suggest that many users perceived the story as too far-fetched to take it seriously.

Table 3 portrays how the three main categories of information representation in images - factual, funny and fallacious – relate to how users engage with the content. The outcomes of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) indicate that funny images evoked significantly happier responses than images containing either factual or fallacious information (f=12.1;p<0.001). Similarly, images containing factual information evoked more

enthusiasm (f=5.58;p<0.05) than imagery that was fallacious or funny. Images that were fallacious or misleading created many angrier (18.24; p<0.001), surprised (11.07; p<0.001) and sad responses (4.11; p<0.05) as well as many more comments from followers (7.75; p<0.01) than factual or funny imagery.

Table 3 – Comparison of mean values of followers' activity for different types of information in images

	Factual	Fallacious	Funny	F	p
Number of images	127	179	30		
👍 – like	230.8(337.04)	265.7 (338.03)	226.4 (141.91)	0.50	
😠 – anger	16.35 (44.13)	87.61 (142.47)	8.367 (17.05)	18.24	***< .001
😔 – sadness	1.606 (6.24)	6.631 (22.58)	1.667 (3.84)	4.11	* <.05
😮 – surprise/disbelief	1.488 (3.08)	4.274 (7.27)	1.467 (1.36)	11.07	***< .001
😂 – hilarious	12.85 (50.90)	16.75 (34.88)	115.6 (150.92)	12.1	***< .001
♡ – love	10.02 (17.99)	6.302 (14.17)	4.267 (4.72)	5.85	* <.05
💬 – comment	49.9 (92.43)	119.9 (230.23)	60.10 (62.62)	7.75	** <.01

Source: Authors elaboration

6. Discussion and conclusion

This paper analysed how information is presented in images created and distributed on Facebook by the British National Party and how users engage differently with these forms of visual manipulation. The findings show that images do not usually consist of outright lies or hoaxes. However, most images do present information in a manipulated or fallacious manner. Most posts on the page presented information that was factual, but framed, by selectively using quotes or statistics (Wardle and Derakhshan 2018, 54). This finding suggests that scholars should more carefully distinguish between different degrees of manipulation in content, as to better understand the phenomenon, rather than merging categories of partisan, misleading and completely fabricated content (cf. Humprecht 2018). The low number of completely fabricated images on the page furthermore puts a critical note to the assumed relevance of the phenomenon of fake news (cf. Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2018; Allcott and Gentzkow 2017).

The outcomes of this study are in line with the findings of Humprecht (2018), who found a high amount of partisan news stories in the UK and a relatively low number of stories emerging out of rumours. On the page of the BNP "emotionalized, scandalized and conflict-oriented" content dominated as well. This lack of complete fake news items and the absence of a fake new industry in Britain has previously been linked to the presence and role of highly partisan newspapers in the British context (Waterson 2017b). Nevertheless, complete fabrications might not be as effective in influencing people's

views than stories that have some aspect of truth in them (Sunstein, 2014). In this sense, the finding that almost half of the images are manipulative, is worrying.

In line with Vosoughi *et al.* (2018), I found that different ways of portraying information seemed to evoke different interactions and emotional responses from users. Funny images led to significantly happier responses than visuals containing either factual or misleading information. Similarly, users were more enthusiastic about images containing factual information than about visuals with fallacious or funny content. Images that were fallacious aroused more angry, surprised and sad responses than factual or funny content. Moreover, fallacious images also evoked many more user activity in the form of comments than images that were factual or funny. These findings suggest that false or misleading information seems to induce participation in online political talk.

Images can powerfully shape how viewers think about certain political issues and can evoke strong emotions. Emotions, that were evoked by manipulated and fake, such as anger, sadness and disbelief have been shown to affect political beliefs and political behaviour. This is the case for both offline and online political behaviour. Vosoughi, Roy and Aral (2018) found that online content that evokes anger and disbelief increases people's online involvement in politics and is shared more often than content that leads to happiness or joy. In turn, an increased online involvement can also reinforce offline mobilisation (Vissers and Stolle 2014).

The persuasive potential of images is often overlooked, but important now that younger generations are shifting to visual-based platforms (Anderson and Jiang 2018). These platforms are used for spreading so-called computational propaganda (Woolley and Howard 2017). The fear of the misleading abilities of visuals is not limited to images. With the emergence of a phenomenon called deep-fakes not only images can be mimicked, but also video material (Chesney and Citron 2019). The easy access to tools to manipulate reality convincingly, is thus, an alarming development in the field of political communication.

This study offers a methodological framework for further research. Images might become an interesting new venue for online research, compared to the strong big-data and textual focus in online research. These forms of data contain a "richness that scholars will not see if we continue an overreliance on tagged data sets" as well as other forms of big data analyses (Gerrard 2018, 9). With the increasing multimodal nature of our interactions, this visual aspect should not be overlooked (Matamoros-Fernández 2018).

Visuals play an increasingly important role in the online strategies of parties and movements. Penney (2017) for example shows how the Bernie Sanders campaign during the 2016 US Presidential election made strategic use of bottom-up online groups to heighten the popularity of Sanders using memes. Moreover, Baldwin-Philippi (2019)

shows how memes were used strategically by the Trump campaign to amplify a populist message. She argues how the unprofessional look of many of these memes suggested that anyone could participate in creating political content using a meme generator.

The visuals of the British National Party seem to fit a clear online strategy. Different aspects of their far-right ideology were represented using various tactics. Funny images often mocked politicians' inabilities, fallacious images tended to use exaggerations to describe the subordinated positions of the "white British", and to exaggerate the danger or presence of foreigners in the country. Fabrications were exclusively conspiracy theories that feared that "the system", whether it be leftist politicians, the mainstream media or advertisers, had a purposeful plan to install Sharia law in Britain, or "ethnically cleanse" the British population for the sake of diversity. Factual posts primarily address information about the party, or express pride for the army, the national soccer team, national heroes or for Britain itself. The way images look suggests a strategy as well. Images referring to the ingroup or the nation often contained lighter colours and positive symbols (the flag, the poppy), images that referred to the outgroup relied on strong emotional colours and language, which was often underlined, capitalized or in bold letters. Images about the party itself on the other hand, had a much more professional outlook.

While memes are employed by political actors on the left- and right side of the political spectrum (Waterson 2017a; Penney 2017), they are especially a useful medium to diffuse populist political propaganda. Their briefness and visual aspects fit well with the simplified, sharp and emotional nature of far-right discourse (Bartlett 2014). Future studies should address the varieties in use of visuals between populist actors as well as the use of cultural, visual and symbolic elements that make this modern-day form of propaganda so effective.

Despite the limited electoral success of the BNP, the online influence of the party goes beyond electoral mobilization. Online pages with a large reach, such as BNP, play a key role in the mainstreaming of far-right discourses. This is shown by Berntzen and Weisskircher (2016, 570) who argue that, despite PEGIDA no longer being "a label for street mobilization", the Facebook pages of this movement provide "permanent arenas for disseminating their views". This is important as through the ability "to circumvent traditional channels of communication and control", these groups can spread their messages and frames transnationally. Far-right actors draw inspiration from each other by taking over symbols, songs and political discourses (Wodak, 2013). Images are of importance for this, as these are understandable for broader audiences, even transnationally (Doerr, 2017). Doerr (2017) shows how an anti-immigrant cartoon aided the Swiss People's Party (SVP) in gaining broader support and reaching the mainstream. The same

poster was adopted, like a meme, by far-right parties in different European countries. Online, such transnational adaptations of a meme might occur more swiftly and virally, reaching mainstream audiences.

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AUTHOR'S INFORMATION:

Ofra Klein is a Ph.D. researcher at the European University Institute and a visiting PhD scholar at the Centre d'études européennes et de politique comparée at Sciences PO. She previously held a visiting fellowship at the Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society. Before her PhD, she worked as a research assistant at VU University Amsterdam and the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University. Her research interests are in the field of far-right online mobilization and internet memes.