

Neo-Nazi Terror Groups Are Using iFunny to Recruit

The Gen-Z meme website is also being used to broadcast propaganda from select neo-Nazi groups such as The Base.

By Mack Lamoureux By Zachary Kamel

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A PHOTO THE GROUP TOOK WITH A GOAT'S HEAD.

A neo-Nazi terror group is recruiting new members using a meme-sharing website popular among Gen-Z, tapping into a new generation of young extremists.

Last week, The Base uploaded a new propaganda video showing the group training in the United States on the meme website iFunny. The video shows 11 members, all dressed in camouflage and armed with assault rifles, marching and conducting firearms drills, and culminates with a good old-fashioned book burning in a poorly built fire. (Members tossed the United States flag into the flames for good measure.)

While most of the comments on the video ridicule The Base for having no military know-how, at least two commenters spoke about how they have already been in touch about joining the group.

"Pretty cool," one poster wrote. "I'm completing my vetting right now."



A SCREENSHOT OF THE VIDEO OF THE GROUP FIRING IN LINE.

The Base, while still in its infancy, has members across the U.S., Canada, Europe, and Australia, and is growing quickly. It has held several paramilitary style training camps in the U.S. within the past year. Like other far-right extremist groups, The Base is an accelerationist group, meaning it wants to speed up the collapse of society via attacks and other chaotic actions so it can create a new, all-white world.

While recruits come from a variety of sources, postering, word of mouth, other like-minded groups, one consistent pipeline has been iFunny. (Previous stories reported by VICE, and the *Winnipeg Free Press*, show the Base vets via phone calls followed by real world meetups.)

Do you have information about far-right extremists and groups including the Base? We'd love to hear from you. You can contact Mack Lamoureux securely on Signal on +1 780-504-8369, on Wire at @mlamoureux or by email at mack.lamoureux@vice.com

iFunny is a giant in the meme world. According to *Similar Web*, the site ranks among the top 300 art sites on the internet and within the top 3,000 most popular websites in the United States. It consistently gets over 5,000,000 visits per month. Within that user base is a thriving hive of far-right extremists which has been growing for several years—as a *Buzzfeed News* story pointed out earlier in the year. Now, while it's been known for several years that the far-right uses iFunny groups using the site to directly recruit members has yet to be examined in depth.

The Base's recruitment video was also published on a terror-focused channel on Telegram, an encrypted chat service that has become one of the homes of far-right extremists once they are purged from more mainstream platforms.

When VICE reached out to iFunny for a response, the website deleted the users flagged as examples and said it is attempting to "tighten" moderation. In an emailed statement, iFunny said it's trying to improve both its real-life moderation team, which works 24/7, as well as its constantly updated machine-learning algorithm to pick up "keywords and symbols that can even be potentially used to humiliate groups of people on various grounds."

"We conduct proactive monitoring of such content, users and communities, carefully check all incoming complaints from users, media and public organizations," said an iFunny spokesperson.

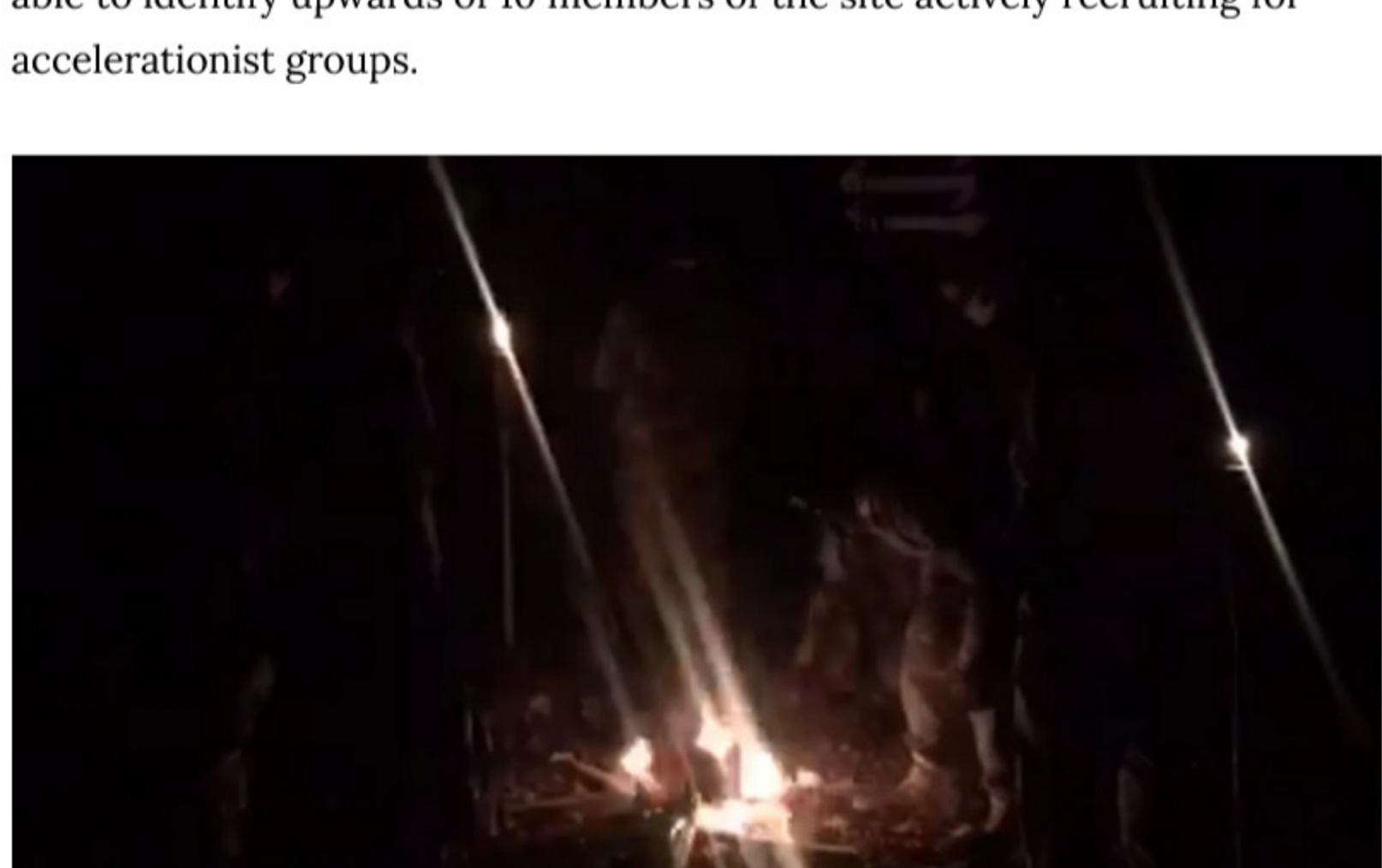


iFunny is an obvious target for extremist groups because modern-day propaganda comes in meme form, and websites with young audiences are ripe for grooming, said Joshua Fisher-Birch, a research analyst at the Counter Extremism Project. The majority of The Base's members are young men and, according to its own posts online, the minimum age to join the group is 17.

"iFunny caters to a young and online demographic, which correlates to many white supremacist accelerationist groups," said Fisher-Birch. "There's also a lot of content on the site involving ironic displays of white supremacism, which helps create a space where some users might be susceptible to individuals pushing a white supremacist accelerationist agenda."

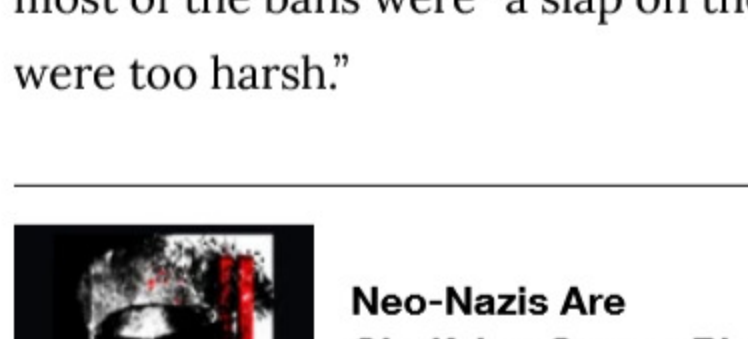
One of the more active recruiters for The Base is a member who goes by MemeMercenary. Like fellow recruiters, many of the posts he puts up feature an email or QR code that prompts users to get in touch with the group to initiate the vetting phase. MemeMercenary, who had almost 5,000 followers by the time of his removal, has been featured 47 times on iFunny, meaning his work has been hand-selected by moderators to land on the front page of the website.

Other users recruited for multiple groups. One user, called The Ecologist, promoted both The Base as well as a fledgling eco-fascist group. VICE was able to identify upwards of 10 members of the site actively recruiting for accelerationist groups.



THE NEO-NAZIS ATTEMPTING TO BURN A BOOK. PHOTO VIA SCREENSHOT.

It's important to note that the neo-Nazi community is only a small part of iFunny. A former volunteer moderator, who asked to remain anonymous due to a non-disclosure agreement they were asked to sign, told VICE that while they encountered "hateful" posts they never actively saw recruitment taking place on the app. They said volunteer mods have since been pushed out, and described the moderation of the site, then and now, as a disaster, saying most of the bans were "a slap on the wrist since they decided perma bans were too harsh."



"The people that are now left in charge pushed out many of the people that made the app good," said another former moderator. "I remember that one of the mods wanted to push hard on removing ALL the white supremacist/nationalist content of the platform completely. They were told no."

iFunny did not reply to direct questions regarding moderation.

Earlier this year, after an 18-year-old Ohio man was charged with threatening a police officer, *Buzzfeed News'* Ryan Broderick chronicled the proliferation of far-right users who use iFunny to radicalize others.

As Broderick outlined, while the purging of neo-Nazis from other social media seems to be causing them to ramp up on iFunny, it isn't necessarily new. Atomwaffen, a prominent accelerationist group connected to five murders, has had a presence since it formed in 2015. Samuel Woodward, an Atomwaffen member accused of stabbing a gay Jewish man to death, was an active user under the name Saboteur. Woodward has since become a celebrated meme within the thriving hive of iFunny extremists.

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