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The Alt-Right Movement Behind Trump's Presidency

By Philipp Oehmke

7/14/2017

They helped him get elected, and now the alt-right movement is flourishing under Donald Trump's presidency. Their recipe: racism, Islamophobia, sexism and chauvinism packaged in a hypocritical veneer of hipster cool.

Of course he's staying in a Trump hotel - if only for the message it sends. In his room on the 35th floor of the Trump Soho in New York City, Milo Yiannopoulos is sitting in front of his laptop, making a few final changes to his speech.

It's a Friday morning in late May, a few days after an Islamist terrorist killed 22 people at an Ariana Grande concert in Manchester. In two hours, Yiannopoulos will give one of his now-infamous, mockery-filled speeches outside the City University of New York on 42nd Street.

This time, a Muslim woman named Linda Sarsour will be the target of his attack. Yiannopoulos didn't know who the woman was until recently when he learned that Sarsour was scheduled to be the commencement speaker at the University's graduation ceremony the following week. A crude coalition of orthodox Zionists, anti-Islam activists and Trump fans announced a rally to protest Sarsour's speaking engagement -- and Yiannopoulos, who was forced to resign from the radical

right-wing website Breitbart in February after allegedly making statements supporting pedophilia, is anxious to finally return to the spotlight.

And he'll do so with this hate-filled tirade against a woman who meant nothing to him until recently.

But it's raining heavily outside. It's even hard to see Manhattan's skyline through the rain from his 35th-floor window. The new, brown suede Gucci boots will be ruined.

Yiannopoulos has brought along Sebastian, his stylist, who has dragged two suitcases filled with outfits and several Gucci shopping bags into the hotel room. Clothes are strewn around the room and on the bed, and you have to be careful not to step on one of his pairs of Louis Vuitton glasses.

"No problem," says Yiannopoulos, "they're from last season, anyway."

Joining him in his hotel room this morning are his speechwriters and advisers, Chadwick Moore and Matthew Perdie, who are pacing back and forth behind Yiannopoulos, proposing ideas for the speech. To their great amusement, they have just discovered that Sarsour, the last name of the Muslim commencement speaker, apparently translates as "cockroach" in Arabic. Huge laughs. We can definitely work with that, says Yiannopoulos.

A young man is lying on the bed, covered in a blanket, reading a book called "The Plant Paradox," which claims that healthy food is fake news and is actually harmful.

A man named Xavier, who served with the U.S. Marines in Iraq and Afghanistan for 14 years, is leaning against the wall near the door, his tattooed forearms crossed in front of his chest. He is wearing the tag of a fellow soldier killed in Iraq on a wristband. Yiannopoulos is wearing pearl bracelets.

Xavier is part of his security team, says Yiannopoulos. Or at least until the Trump administration deports him - an allusion to the bodyguard's Mexican first name. Everyone laughs - except Xavier.

A Cool Right-Wing Movement?

Yiannopoulos makes a lot of jokes like this. It's the same tone he uses in his speech for the protest rally. He continues to type away at his laptop, clearly in good spirits. "We all agree that Linda is a Sharia-loving, terrorist-embracing, Jew-hating, ticking time bomb of progressive horror. I'll call her Linda," Yiannopoulos says, pausing for a moment to give his speechwriters a knowing glance, "because her surname Sarsour is Arabic for cockroach and you know how I just hate to be disrespectful."

Cheers in the hotel room. Yiannopoulos crows: "These things always come to my mind just two hours before a speech!"

At this moment on the 35th floor of the Trump Hotel, it seems hard to imagine that this jovial, strikingly attractive, expensively dressed 33-year-old man, with a German mother and a Greek father, who grew up in the English county of Kent, is considered one of the country's most dangerous radical right-wing agitators.

On the other hand, this is often the case with agitators. It's especially applicable to the new alt-right movement in the United States, which has been growing steadily since the election of Donald Trump. The term "alt" is short for "alternative." Some also call it the "new right" or the "cool right." A cool right-wing movement? Right-wing movements have been a lot of things since the end of World War II, but never cool. There have been old Nazis and neo-Nazis, boorish members of the far-right National Democratic Party of Germany and unrepentant skinheads but a broader radical right-wing counterculture has never existed. Cool protest movements were always on the left.

Alt-right is more of a convenient term than a precise political designation. It is a catch-all phrase for opponents of the left-wing culture of political correctness, Trump fanatics, chauvinists, social media trolls, anti-Islamists, immigration opponents, racists and neo-Nazis. What they have in common is that they feel more comfortable in virtual forums than in political parties. Strangely enough, the current president of the United States can be counted as part of the movement.

The alt-right tries to distinguish itself from the traditionally conservative, reactionary or fascist right-wing movements. It is often young, modern and even hip, anchored in pop and consumer culture and has a strong presence on Twitter and Instagram. It would be incorrect to define the alt-right as simply socially disadvantaged and frustrated members of the white working class, as Trump voters often are.

Yiannopoulos, for example, is a gay Briton who lives in Miami with his black boyfriend, whom he says he has just given a Tesla sports car, the status symbol of the liberal elite. He recently established Milo Inc. in Miami, which he hopes to turn into a right-wing media empire with its own book publishing company, YouTube channels, news websites and events. Yiannopoulos says that he raised \$12 million (€10.5 million) in venture capital from conservative investors within a month.

Enabling Trump's Presidency

It is an unbelievable sum and some in the alt-right community question have questioned the amount. On the other hand, Yiannopoulos has supposedly long been a favorite of Robert Mercer, a computer scientist, hedge fund manager and billionaire believed to be the secret mastermind behind the Trump presidency. Mercer, who keeps a low public profile, has not only invested \$10 million in Breitbart, but also funded Cambridge Analytica, a data analysis firm that scanned voter profiles for Trump. Apparently he knew early on that Hillary Clinton could not win the election. And it was reportedly Mercer who bankrolled Yiannopoulos's scandalous tour of several universities last summer. Yiannopoulos himself does not comment on his investors, but it appears likely that Mercer provided a large share of the capital for Milo Inc.

There is, after all, a great desire for a strong, new platform for the alt-right, particularly now that the most effective voices of the right, Breitbart and Fox News, have recently shown signs of vulnerability.

Yiannopoulos himself worked at Breitbart until February. The right-wing website, once run by Stephen Bannon, who is now a senior advisor to Trump, played a large part in enabling Trump's presidency and, until recently, it was the center of the alt-right movement. But Breitbart lost some of its influence when Bannon joined the Trump team and Fox News underwent an identity crisis when founder Roger Ailes and chief commentator Bill O'Reilly were forced to resign, both due to allegations of sexual harassment. There is plenty of room now for a new, multimedia alt-right network.

What Yiannopoulos has in common with both Trump and others in the alt-right movement is the conviction that the country's leading media organizations -- the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, CNN and NBC, to name a few -- have a liberal bias and have joined forces with academic institutions to transform American society into a dictatorship of good taste, identity politics and minority rights.

The entanglement in this seemingly asymmetrical struggle, in which those on the right are at a disadvantage from the start, is used as justification for their brazen appearances. This too is a fundamentally right wing, but also fundamentally American, theme: the underdog fighting the system and taking the country back.

Donald Trump is an imperfect vehicle for this purpose, but the only one that was available, says Yiannopoulos. As such, Trump is essentially the president of the alt-right movement or at least this is how Bannon explained it to him. Yiannopoulos says that Bannon is perhaps the most intelligent person he has ever met.

A Solo Effort to Spread Rumors

The alt-right has everything a movement needs: its own echo chamber, primarily on the internet, its own symbols, myths, martyrs and stories and even its own vocabulary. It is the first protest movement that is taking full advantage of digital technology and one that would be inconceivable without the internet. One of its primary tactics, internet trolling, is the practice of insulting and provoking political enemies online until they lose their composure.

This is one reason that some of the alt-right protagonists have become huge stars in the shadow world of the internet while remaining relatively unknown to the general public. Or has anyone ever heard of Mike Cernovich?

No? Cernovich's tweets are read more than 100 million times a month. During the election campaign, he mounted what was essentially a solo effort to spread rumors about Clinton's supposedly concealed neurological condition from his suburban home south of Los Angeles.

Or Dave Rubin, whose internet talk show provides a platform for alt-right voices in a pseudo-credible setting. Another is Gavin McInnes, who founded the leftist *Vice Magazine* 20 years ago

and was dubbed the godfather of the hipster movement. Today, he and his "Proud Boys" stand up for "Western chauvinist civilization," defending it against Muslims, feminists and transsexuals. And then there is writer Bret Easton Ellis, author of classics like "Less Than Zero" and "American Psycho," who uses his podcasts to furiously defend freedom of the arts and free speech against a victim culture of liberal disciples of political correctness, the so-called "social justice warriors."

Three of these five men are gay. They lead modern lives that echo the free spirit of the late 1960s, lives that are only possible in a liberal, permissive society. So why do they want to destroy it?

Mike Cernovich says that we are at the beginning of the next stage of an information war. Conventional political conflicts - in legislatures and in the mainstream media - have lost their meaning. The only thing that counts today is the information war. Victory, by his definition, means taking advantage of the internet to shove the alt-right's issues into the center of the echo chamber of political discourse.

For Cernovich, "waging war" means tweeting. It means disseminating videos on Periscope and YouTube, and having them appear in as many different contexts as possible. Very few people have figured this out so far, says Cernovich. Milo is one of them, he says, and he is another. And yet they are dismissed as trolls.

The Unifying Element of Conspiratorial Hypocrisy

"The ideal troll," writes Yiannopoulos in his new book "Dangerous," "bait[s] the target into a trap from which there is no escape without public embarrassment. It is an art beyond the grasp of mere mortals. It is part trickery and part viciousness."

Cernovich runs his information war from a crowded study in his small house in a neighborhood where houses have the same floor plan and the roofs are covered with blue, glazed tiles. The view from his yard stretches across green hills to the Pacific sun behind them. It's not the kind of place one pictures as a major source of disinformation on the internet. "No one pushes the narrative through like I do," says Cernovich, opening his laptop.

He pulls up Twitter analytics, which shows that Cernovich's account was visited 118 million times in the last 28 days. "I may not be more influential than the *New York Times*," he says, "but I am more influential than any byline in the *New York Times*."

An attorney in his late 30s, Cernovich has never really practiced law. He met his first wife in law school and while she went to work for Silicon Valley firms, he spent his time in bars and at the gym. The marriage didn't last. Cernovich blames it on his wife's feminist career ambitions. After she made a significant amount of money from a startup IPO, he may have received seven-figures in the divorce settlement.

After that, Cernovich began writing somewhat misogynist self-help books for men on topics such as how to awaken the gorilla inside you, how to overcome fears and become emotionally and physically strong, and how to get women to go to bed with you.

Cernovich has set up a camera connected to his cell phone on a platform in his office in preparation for sending out his daily video blog. But it's a complicated day for him, a complicated day for the relationship between the alt-right world and its president. The previous evening, Trump ordered a military strike on an airfield operated by Syrian dictator Bashar Assad. The alt-right is in an uproar. The attack is an example of the "globalist and interventionist foreign policy" for which Cernovich had trolled Hillary Clinton for months. He thinks about how to twist the facts in his video blog so that everything starts making sense again.

Perhaps it's the fault of Trump's Jewish son-in-law, Jared Kushner, Cernovich speculates. He paints Kushner as the primary adversary to the alt-right's White House idol Stephen Bannon. Kushner, Cernovich says, is just a "basic bitch," a term he uses for most women and for especially despicable men.

An Electrifying Speaker

Then he goes live, simultaneously on YouTube and Periscope, a sort of Twitter for video messages. Each of his roughly 74,000 Periscope followers receives the following message on their mobile phone: "Mike Cernovich is live: The Real Story on Jared Kushner."

They see a man in front of vomit-green wallpaper; Cernovich has unbuttoned the top three buttons of his shirt, revealing his chest hair.

Some 984 viewers begin watching the video blog within the first 20 seconds. His viewership goes up to 2,593 after a minute and reaches 35,979 by the end of the broadcast. The viewers comment on Cernovich's address in real time in the form of countless short text messages, which scroll across the screen: @CrackAman writes: "Who are we fighting today, Mike?"

Cernovich has learned how to create artificial online avalanches day after day and draw attention from the mainstream media. Eventually, a news website will pick up his story, simply because it's suddenly everywhere on the internet, and then a broadcaster might run the story. Sometimes, stuff Cernovich sets in motion even makes it into the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*.

As he was pushing the theory during the campaign that Hillary Clinton suffered from a severe neurological disorder that the mainstream press was trying to cover up, he continually created new memes. Memes are funny or macabre images used to illustrate a specific statement or point of view that spread virally in social networks. They have the power to convey an entire story or an entire set of associations all at once. A classic meme, for example, was #HillaryZombie, a small photomontage in which Clinton the undead was made to look like someone who refused to disappear from the political scene. The meme was tweeted millions of times during the campaign.

By the time Clinton really did collapse for a brief moment at a 9/11 memorial event before the election, Cernovich had already been pounding home the message of her alleged illness for so long, that her brief health scare seemed not like an isolated incident, but as proof of a deeper health problem.

Nothing But a Career Strategy?

The most famous meme of the alt-right movement, of course, is the image of a green frog with a perverse look on its face. The frog's name is Pepe. Sometimes it appears with a Donald Trump hairstyle, sometimes wearing a "Make America Great Again" cap and sometimes dressed in a Nazi uniform.

On this day, Cernovich has to end his broadcast early. His five-month-old daughter Cyra is wailing downstairs. Cernovich's second wife is of Persian descent and his in-laws, who live around the corner in a house with a swimming pool, are Muslim. Cernovich appears to be a good and loving father and he says as long as "Cyra doesn't turn into a basic bitch," they will undoubtedly get along fine. His wife seems to hope that the things her husband says in public are nothing but a career strategy.

But is it enough to make a living? Cernovich claims that he makes his money on the sale of his books. "Gorilla Mindset," his self-help book for men with self-confidence issues, is ranked around 5,000 on Amazon. Perhaps he also lives off of the divorce settlement from his ex-wife, though that wouldn't be particularly gorilla mindset-esque.

Of course, Cernovich also appears on Patreon. Patreon is a website that stars of the alt-right movement increasingly use to make money, a sort of Spotify for alt-right content. As a "patron," subscribers to Patreon can pay for specific content by an artist, journalist or comedian.

Customers who pay \$15 for Cernovich's "High Impact Journalism" on Patreon receive both his video blogs and "exclusive online chats" with him or "members of my media team," which apparently consists of his wife and his daughter. Cernovich currently has 316 patrons on Patreon, earning him \$5,700 a month.

President Trump's son, Donald Trump Jr., has described Cernovich in a tweet as a true investigative journalist. When Cernovich recently accused one of former President Barack Obama's national security advisors of betraying official secrets, Trump Jr. tweeted about Cernovich: "In a long gone time of unbiased journalism he'd win the Pulitzer, but not today!"

When it comes to simulating serious journalism, feigning reach and asserting influence, alt-right activists are masters. It's like the court jester tearing the book of wisdom from the philosopher's hands and running away with it. Someone like Cernovich, who used the hashtag *#Pizzagate* to claim that the Clintons were running a child prostitution ring from a Washington pizzeria, has simply flipped the accusations of fake news - with backing from the White House, indeed, from the president himself.

Trump, for his part, derives portions of his worldview from alt-right websites. The *New York Times* recently reported that there was a printout of an article from *GotNews*, the website belonging to radical right-wing internet troll Charles Johnson, on Trump's desk. And Cernovich has been heading to Washington more often recently to attend press conferences at the White House. He belongs now.

Dave Rubin, with the perfect face of a news anchor, is the biggest illusionist associated with the alt-right movement. He describes himself as a liberal who just happens to have a few problems with his fellow liberals at the moment.

On the surface, his life looks like that of a model progressive. He lives in a modernist house made of exposed concrete, glass and Scandinavian wood. Inside, an artist friend is at work on a painting on a large canvas. There are framed covers of the *New Yorker* on the wall in the foyer. This is where Rubin lives with his husband David, who is making coffee with an Italian coffeemaker. From a studio in his converted two-car garage, Rubin broadcasts his "Rubin Report," in which he, with affected genuine curiosity, often provides other alt-right figures with talking points in the form of suggestive questions.

He has two Muslim guests on his show today. Rubin says he is very interested in their view of Trump, especially now, in light of the travel ban for citizens of several predominantly Muslim countries. But it soon becomes apparent that the two guests, an Egyptian woman named Yasmine Mohammed and Faisal Said al-Mutar from Iraq, are ex-Muslims - and that they despise Islam.

And while the entire setting suggests that this is an ordinary talk show, Rubin has Mohammed explain how bad Islam is. She claims that she was "married to al-Qaida" against her will.

Mutar, the Iraqi, clearly enjoys the fact that for him, the normal boundaries of political correctness have been suspended and that he, as a hater of Islam, has a voice that right-wing America loves to hear.

Like Cernovich's video blog, Rubin's talk show is also available on Patreon. Rubin earns \$28,070 a month through the platform and has 4,374 subscribers.

Roots in 'Gamergate'

That evening, he moderates an event at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, at the invitation of the right-wing student organization Young Americans for Liberty and the conservative think tank, Ayn Rand Institute. The USC campus is an oasis in the middle of Los Angeles, a place that exudes affluence, education and culture. The fury of the angry white lower class feels far away. But the auditorium is filled to capacity and there are two armed security guards.

The unifying element in the auditorium is conspiratorial hypocrisy. Rubin, the moderator, says: "So this is supposed to be an alt-right meeting. Well, looks quite diverse for that."

At the podium, Rubin is conversing with Colin Moriarty, a former moderator of an online game community. The man's claim to fame is that on International Women's Day, he tweeted: "Ah. Peace and Quiet. #ADayWithoutAWoman."

He was subsequently forced to leave the company he had founded with three friends, which made him a martyr and a hero of the anti-feminism wing of the alt-right. Today he runs a video blog filled with his opinions on politics and history instead of computer games. His monthly Patreon income: \$32,428.

The online computer gaming community is an important point of origin for the alt-right. It was there, long before Trump's rise to prominence, that the minor culture war, known as "Gamergate," began three years ago - a struggle that the alt-right fights on a large scale today. Put simply, it was the uprising of pale, pimpled computer gamers, who are primarily interested in tits and ass, against a growing number of women in the gaming world and against a growing level of diversity in general. Female programmers were trolled and harassed to the point that the FBI eventually launched an investigation. Many of the channels and memes the alt-right uses today were established at the time, as was much of the vocabulary, such as the term "social justice warrior," a derogatory expression for liberal activists.

This entire background was reflected in Moriarty's tweet. But Moriarty acts as if there were no such relationship and he pleads innocence in the role of a fighter for free speech, describing his tweet as nothing but a joke. Rubin, too, wants to be seen as a free speech advocate. That's why he keeps stressing that not just alt-right figures, but all sorts of people have been guests on his show.

Later, when the speakers take questions from the audience, harmless looking students stand behind microphones and rattle off all the codes of the alt-right movement. They talk about Pepe the Frog or about Kekistan, a fictitious, proto-fascist country, and their biggest grievance is that in the current liberal society, nothing can be said anymore. Suddenly it all begins to feel a little ominous.

Xavier, the former Marine, announces that there are two Chevrolet Suburbans waiting for Yiannopoulos downstairs, in front of the Trump Hotel Soho in New York. The route has been mapped out militarily, he says, and the vehicles are ready for the trip to 42nd Street, where the crowds are waiting. Despite the rain, a few hundred counter-demonstrators have turned up. Yiannopoulos sees this as a good sign.

"If I didn't show up with a bunch of fucking Navy Seals wherever I go, they would kill me," he says. Xavier protests that he was a Marine, not a Navy Seal.

"Milo," the brand, is based on triggering the outrage of the liberal left. That's the business model. Twitter banned Yiannopoulos from the platform for life after he harassed African-American actress Leslie Jones so aggressively that she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

When I later ask Yiannopoulos, during a brief respite from the action, whether he doesn't just do what he does because of the turmoil he expects to unleash and whether his appearances would be somehow pointless without the protests, he becomes angry.

As a comfortable reporter, he says, it is probably hard to imagine what it feels like when your own physical safety is constantly being threatened. "People attending my events have even been shot at!" he exclaims.

He gets into one of the SUVs. Two more of the black vehicles follow. "We'll be driving up like Al Gore at a climate summit," says Yiannopoulos, clearly enjoying his own joke.

Toolbox of Provocations

Thus far, Yiannopoulos has derived his political mindset from what is essentially a pop culture argument: When the left-wing establishment in the Western world was setting the tone, it was suddenly subversive and cool to be on the right, just as it was cool to be a leftist in the 1960s. In his book "Dangerous," published on July 4 by his newly founded Milo Inc. publishing company, he writes about the influences of his youth. "I spent my youth in drug-saturated nightclubs in London, losing my virginity in interracial vesomes with drag queens, experimenting with every depraved form of escapism I could find. And I listened to a lot of Mariah Carey, Marilyn Manson and Rage Against the Machine. I also studied music theory, Schopenhauer, and Wittgenstein, and I read Margaret Thatcher biographies, shot my dad's guns, and dreamt of meeting George W. Bush. (I did later in life, but by then he wasn't right-wing enough for me.)"

The book, though only available by advance order before publication, had reached the number one spot on Amazon in the United States in early June. It is currently number four on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

Last summer, he took his toolbox of provocations to appearances at a number of elite universities, the nerve centers of liberal American culture. At each stop, he attracted furious, screaming protesters. There were almost always riots and, on one occasion, gunshots were in fact fired. In a world that defines itself through images on social networks, Yiannopoulos has always been a winner. He was the victim of an angry mob that was trying to deprive him of his right to free speech and he was able to cry foul each time.

Unfortunately, this is also the problem at today's rally. Yiannopoulos has discovered that the objective of the rally is to prevent Sarsour from giving her commencement speech - a problem given that he constantly claims about his own free-speech rights being denied. Somehow, he has to resolve this contradiction in his speech.

In the car on the drive over, Yiannopoulos reworks the text.

He adds that although he opposes Sarsour, he has nothing against her speaking at the university. On the contrary, he writes, he would even pay her for it because her stupidity amuses him. He writes that he would pay her \$1,000 or - and Yiannopoulos is laughing again - however many goats that is in her currency.

He watches a livestream of the protest rally on his mobile phone. The speaker ahead of him is already on. The counter-demonstrators are whistling and shouting.

"If they're making such a fuss about someone I've never heard of, then we're good," he says.

An Afternoon of Shopping

The ex-Marine suggests a bulletproof vest. Yiannopoulos thinks about it for a moment, but then decides against it, saying it will ruin his outfit. Someone hands him a bottle of chilled Chardonnay. Yiannopoulos drinks half the bottle in large gulps.

Having arrived at the rally, Yiannopoulos opens his Trump Hotel umbrella and walks to a small stage with his entourage of stylists and advisers, flanked by three former Navy Seals, who are actually ex-Marines.

He looks satisfied as he gazes down at his adversaries in black hoodies, who are standing behind a police barrier, screaming and shouting. Like dogs in a cage, says Yiannopoulos, as if they would lunge at him at any moment. Directly in front of him, separated from the counter-protestors by another barrier, are his fans. Some are wearing motorcycle helmets and carrying protective shields and sticks.

The "Based Stickman" is there too. An almost mythical warrior of the alt-right world, he is famous for turning up at demonstrations dressed in something resembling armor and carrying a large club. Everyone there is familiar with the video of the Based Stickman hitting an Antifa demonstrator in the head with his stick at the University of California at Berkeley a few weeks earlier.

While the violence of the alt-right has been mainly limited to internet trolling in recent years, it now looks as though the trolls have left the web and are now standing on 42nd Street in downtown Manhattan, with their ugly grimaces and American flags, clad in helmets and armor.

And Milo Yiannopoulos's speech? There he is standing behind the podium with his Trump umbrella. No one can understand a single word he says. The noise from the crowd drowns out all the jokes that were so carefully conceived in the hotel room. After 20 minutes, the Seals/Marines take Yiannopoulos back across the street to the hotel. Oddly enough, he seems very satisfied. He drinks the rest of the bottle of wine. And now he wants to get rid of everyone except his closest associates and spend the rest of the afternoon shopping.

The next day, back in Miami, where he rents a villa that serves as the headquarters of Milo Inc., Yiannopoulos sends a text message with a link to a *New York Times* article about the protest rally. In the article, the paper writes: "At the protest, even Mr. Yiannopoulos briefly acknowledged Ms. Sarsour's right to speak, before making a racially tinged joke about her getting paid in goats."

In the text message, Yiannopoulos writes in reference to the link: "I can make them print anything."

He writes another text message a minute later. It simply says: "Hahahaha."