



A Spoonful of Sugar Makes the Hate Speech Go Down: Sugar-Coating in White Nationalist Recruitment Speech

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Abstract

I argue that popular understandings of white nationalist double speak strategies do not fully represent the practice of these strategies, and identify a linguistic tactic used by white nationalists that I call sugar-coating. Sugar-coating works by packing an otherwise unacceptable utterance together with some kind of reward, thereby promoting uptake. I contrast this with existing notions of double speak, such as figleaves (Saul 2017, 2021), dogwhistles (Haney-López 2014), and bullshit (Kenyon and Saul 2022). I argue that sugar-coating more accurately reflects the practice of white nationalist recruitment rhetoric, as described in the *Daily Stormer Style Guide*.

Keywords Sugar-coating · Double speak · Figleaves · Dogwhistles · Bullshit · Racist speech · White nationalist speech · Hate speech

The language of white nationalist movements is rife with double speak and performative deception. In this paper, I use what I will charitably call the stylistic advice offered in the *Daily Stormer Style Guide* to identify a linguistic tactic that I call sugar-coating, which is used by white nationalists to promote uptake for their ideology. Sugar-coating, as I characterize it, does not serve to obscure or deny the racism of an utterance, but rather serves to make that racism more palatable to a broad audience. This function is accomplished by packaging a racist utterance together with some sort of reward mechanism. In this paper, I consider two such rewards: humour, and heroism. Both rewards feature prominently in the tactics described by the *Style Guide*. Finally, I compare sugar-coating with other existing notions of double speak, in order to highlight its key functions for white nationalist recruitment. Sugar-coating gives audiences a reason to give uptake to racist ideology beyond the ideology itself, and makes racist ideas more palatable. In making racist ideology more palatable, sugar-coating contributes to the normalization not only of racist ideas and speech, but also of self-identification with white nationalism.

For the purposes of this paper, I will focus largely on the *Daily Stormer Style Guide* as representative of certain overall tactics for white nationalist recruitment and public speech, following the precedent of sociologists Kathleen Blee and Peter Simi, experts on white supremacist movements¹ (Blee and Simi 2020, p. 42). I certainly do not believe it to comprehensively list the entire breadth of white nationalist speech, but it presents a mostly consistent and (shockingly, in many cases) explicit set of guidelines, complete with their rationalizations. The information presented offers a valuable insight into the workings of white nationalist recruitment.

1 Double Speak

I also follow Blee and Simi in the use of the phrase ‘double speak’ to refer to a wide range of deceptive and misleading speech. I will not be agonizing over a precise definition of double speak, as I wish for the phrase to encompass a broad range of tactics employed in white nationalist speech. Blee

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¹ Blee and Simi primarily use the term ‘white supremacist,’ whereas I will use ‘white nationalist’ in order to highlight the recruitment objectives and political identity motivations of the actors in question. The language used in the *Style Guide* features both ‘nationalism’ and ‘white supremacism’. I am thankful to an anonymous referee for calling my attention to this terminological distinction.

and Simi characterize double speak as “a communication style that relies on deception and often the use of euphemistic words designed to sidestep a more candid mention of a harsh or distasteful reality” (Blee and Simi 2020, p. 11). It is not my purpose in this paper to distinguish exactly what is or is not double speak, but I will use the phrase as something of an umbrella term, roughly along these lines.

Much existing philosophical literature about white nationalist speech has been concerned with three main sorts of double speak: dogwhistles, bullshit, and figleaves. I will argue that the instructions contained in the *Daily Stormer Style Guide* reveal another important form, which I will call *sugar-coating*, which differs from these better-known forms in its effects on the broad uptake of racist speech. Ultimately, the overall program of language employed by white nationalists is best understood with a multifaceted analysis that draws on all of these techniques. In order to contextualize the notion of sugar-coating that I develop, I will begin with a brief discussion of these three better-known forms of double speak.

1.1 Dogwhistles

Dogwhistles are a tool frequently used by speakers who wish to draw on racist attitudes of their specific targeted audience, but not alienate portions of the broader public who are not explicitly racist. There are some challenging questions about how exactly to parse out what makes an utterance a dogwhistle in particular, as opposed to a code more broadly, but these challenges are not going to be my focus here. Jennifer Saul and José R. Torices both make the distinction between overt and covert dogwhistles (Saul 2019; Torices 2021). An overt dogwhistle has been variously presented as a type of coded utterance that typically delivers an explicit message to one audience, and a more specific, hidden message to another audience (see, for instance, Haney-López 2014; Saul 2019; Torices 2021). Discussion of “states’ rights” as a coded way of referring to racist anti-Black policies in the American south is perhaps the textbook example of this sort of overt dogwhistle (Haney-López 2014, p. 13). Although this example is now somewhat infamous, in the 1960s, the language of “states’ rights” was used as a means of communicating racist ideas to racist voters, without need to explicitly refer to race at all. A politician in the American south could say “I support states’ rights,” and this would be understood by voters from the South to be a proclamation in defense of segregationist attitudes, while presenting a seemingly innocuous stance to voters elsewhere not in the know.

A covert dogwhistle, on the other hand, relies on activating underlying racial resentment in an audience, without the audience being aware of this happening (Saul 2019, p. 6). The exemplar given by Saul is the Willie Horton political

ad used by George H. W. Bush’s campaign, which she takes from the work of Tali Mendelberg (2001). This advertisement presents the story of Willie Horton, a Black man who committed rape and murder while on release through a prison program devised by Bush’s opponent. By connecting the image of a Black man with criminal activity, the ad activated the subconscious racial resentment of viewers. This did not directly change levels of racial resentment, but resulted in a shift of racially resentful voters towards Bush (Saul 2019, pp. 6–7). Covert dogwhistles can, in at least some cases, be countered simply by calling attention to their presence (Saul 2019, p. 7). Even when the reaction to this calling out is overwhelmingly negative, when people who are subconsciously racially resentful, rather than consciously racist, are confronted with and start to think about their reaction to a racially charged ad, for instance, that can undermine the ad’s effectiveness.

1.2 Bullshit

The original philosophical definition of bullshit is due to Harry Frankfurt’s *On Bullshit*, wherein he describes bullshit, and the bullshitter, as being entirely unconcerned with the truth (Frankfurt 2005, p. 55). Frankfurt takes this to mean that bullshit is, in some sense, opposed to both truth-telling and lying. On Frankfurt’s account, both truth-telling and lying are concerned with the truth, intending either to declare it, or to deny it. Bullshit, on the other hand, neither declares nor attempts to deny truth (Frankfurt 2005, p. 56). Various shortcomings of Frankfurt’s definition have been well-covered over the intervening years, and despite its undeniable influence I prefer to focus on a more recent definition of bullshit, due to Tim Kenyon and Jennifer Saul in their paper “Bald-Faced Bullshit and Authoritarian Political Speech: Making Sense of Johnson and Trump.” For Kenyon and Saul, bullshit is “characterized by a speaker’s indifference as to whether their speech provides the basis for an audience to uptake or recover truths” (Kenyon and Saul 2022, p. 176). This alternative formulation preserves a sense in which the bullshitter remains indifferent to the truth, but it interprets that indifference through the relationship between the speaker and the audience. This, Kenyon and Saul argue, makes better sense of the behaviour of politicians like Boris Johnson and Donald Trump, and I will argue that it makes better sense of certain practices of white nationalist recruitment, as well.

1.3 Figleaves

Finally, a figleaf is a sort of secondary utterance that “casts some doubt on the idea that the speaker is racist” in light of some primary, otherwise clearly racist, utterance (Saul

2019, p. 9). These figleaves can be uttered at the same time as the statements they are meant to ‘cover up’, after the fact, or even beforehand. Saul’s paper divides figleaves into synchronic and diachronic types: those which take place at the same time as the masked utterance, and those which take place at a different time, respectively (Saul 2019, pp. 9–11). Figleaves have a wide range of levels of sophistication and plausibility. They can range from the much-ridiculed and obvious ‘I’m not racist, but...’ to more sophisticated and subtle examples, such as an overall collection of utterances providing a reason to doubt that any one utterance reveals an individual’s true beliefs on a subject (Saul 2019, p. 13). In her discussion of figleaves, Saul also makes reference to the Norm of Racial Equality, introduced (but not defined) by Tali Mendelberg’s 2001 *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality*. Saul’s account suggests that the Norm of Racial Equality is best put as “don’t be racist” (Saul 2019, p. 2). Figleaves, on Saul’s account, are one way of convincing an audience that an utterance does not violate this norm.

2 The Daily Stormer Style Guide

Before presenting the notion of sugar-coating, it will be necessary to discuss the document serving as my central evidence. The *Daily Stormer* is a neo-Nazi and white supremacist website, established in 2013 by Andrew Anglin (SPLC n.d.). Its purpose is propagandic, and it is largely geared towards spreading white supremacist ideology on an outreach basis. A remarkable feature of the site is that it has an official set of instructions for its writers, the *Daily Stormer Style Guide*², which outlines the manner in which contributions to the site are to be written. Aside from some jarringly horrific examples to illustrate its points, the first third-or-so of the *Style Guide* is mundane. Emphasis is placed on proper formatting of titles, the use of American English as opposed to British, and suitably accessible grammar and paragraph length.

For the remaining two thirds of the document, however, the content shifts dramatically. For instance, it includes a list of “allowed and advisable” slurs, and instructions for their use in the context of the articles (DSSG 2017, p. 9). Emphasis is placed on techniques and writing styles that make the blatantly racist content more palatable to a broader audience, with a heavy emphasis on humor and a “light tone” for the site overall (DSSG 2017, p. 9). It also exhorts the authors to minimize any and all nuance, and refers them

to *Mein Kampf* for an overview of the site’s philosophy on propaganda.

That white nationalists write horrible things is certainly not a novel insight. What makes the *Daily Stormer Style Guide* interesting as a window into white nationalism is the explicit detail with which it describes many of the tactics used in their recruitment writing. The reader does not need to guess why the white nationalist relies on humour to disseminate their vitriol, because the *Style Guide* explains it in rather grim detail. For this reason, the *Style Guide* offers a rare insight into the intentions of the white supremacist when they use the various techniques of double speak that I will describe below. It should be noted that although I am taking the *Style Guide* to be emblematic of white nationalist techniques more broadly, it is an individual set of directions, and it would likely be a mistake to assume that the conclusions I reach here can be directly and immediately generalized to all white nationalist double speak.

The *Daily Stormer Style Guide* is not itself a case study in the sorts of double speak that I discuss, but instead a manual recommending and explaining double speak strategies. It is written for an audience of authors for the *Daily Stormer*, and as such makes no pretenses whatsoever about its racist intentions and hateful contents. What it offers is instead a window into the strategies that the white nationalist authors of the *Daily Stormer* are using.

3 Sugar-Coating

One of the core strategies that the *Style Guide* recommends for *Daily Stormer* authors is what I will call sugar-coating³. I refer to the utterances in which this strategy is used as being sugar-coated. This metaphor of sugar-coating is inspired by the function which these utterances seem to perform for the white nationalist. They do not *cover up* the racism of the utterance, as do figleaves, nor do they signal discreetly to only some parts of the audience, as do dog-whistles. Instead, they serve to make an overtly racist utterance more palatable.

An utterance is sugar-coated when the utterance is accompanied by some sort of reward for its hearer that encourages them to listen, and to be more favourable to utterances of a similar sort in the future. Such an utterance not only damages the target, in the case of racist speech, but also rewards the audience. I see sugar-coating as encompassing a modest range of different strategies. In the same way that many different sorts of utterances can serve as figleaves on Saul’s account, there are many different ways to sugar-coat a harmful piece of speech. The *Style Guide* advises its readers to

² Throughout this paper I will cite the *Daily Stormer Style Guide* as DSSG, as its author, although almost certainly Andrew Anglin himself, is not explicitly given.

³ A metaphor for which I am thankful to Bianca Cepollaro—it would have been all but impossible to make this paper readable without it!

make use of two techniques in particular. The first and most obvious of these is to sugar-coat with humour, and the second is to sugar-coat with heroism. In either case, the hateful content of a *Daily Stormer* article is packaged together with this rewarding material, in order to promote uptake among readers.

3.1 Sugar-Coating with Humour

The ability of humor to make hateful rhetoric more palatable to a broad audience is one that the authors of the *Style Guide* are very aware of. In fact, the *Style Guide* likens humour to a “delivery method ... like adding cherry flavour to children’s medicine” (DSSG 2017, p. 13). For example, consider this instruction: “when using racial slurs, it should come across as half-joking – like a racist joke that everyone laughs at because it’s true” (DSSG 2017, p. 9). In an article that advances racist claims about Black criminality, the author might include a joking admonition such as: we can’t be racist; racism is a crime, and crime is for Black people⁴. There are a few functions such a joke might be thought to serve, but as far as the *Style Guide* is concerned, the intention is explicitly to maintain a veneer of humour that serves to lessen the shock value of the appalling hate peddled on the site. The *Style Guide* is itself aware of this, instructing its authors that their writing “should not come across as genuine raging vitriol” (DSSG 2017, p. 9). It goes on to elaborate that the focus should be on presenting the content as “self-deprecating humour” and that a *Daily Stormer* author should come across to their reader as “a racist making fun of stereotypes of racists,” with the goal of maintaining a “generally light tone” (DSSG 2017, p. 11).

These humour-laden tactics of white nationalist sites like the *Daily Stormer* are paradigmatic examples of sugar-coating. When white nationalist media advances a racist idea under the guise of a joke, or shrouds the utterance in a veil of ironic distance and humour, they are not always trying to block inferences that the utterance is racist, nor to create deniability⁵. According to how the *Style Guide* describes their tactics, the goal is to achieve greater uptake for the racism by packaging it with something fun and engaging. In order to make sense of how humour could possibly function as sugar-coating, I will introduce an account of jokes, from Ted Cohen.

Ted Cohen’s 1999 *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* offers a great deal of insight into the way that (at

least some) jokes work. There are two particular insights of his that will be relevant to what I wish to say on the subject of sugar-coating. The first is that jokes can be made to serve as “devices for inducing intimacy” (Cohen 1999, p. 4). The second is that even a joke in poor taste, or one that we might consider to be inappropriate, might nevertheless be funny. Although Cohen specifically focuses only on *jokes* in this book, he suggests that his comments might “apply as well to other forms of humor,” which is a position I am inclined to share, and will be adopting here (Cohen 1999, p. 1). Cohen takes ‘jokes’ to specifically be a small subset of the possible structured efforts at humour. He does not offer a precise definition of a joke, and neither will I, but I take it as relatively uncontroversial that there are funny things that are not jokes, and that when the *Style Guide* refers to ‘lulz’ they are referring to a broader class of things than jokes specifically.

Cohen notes that jokes, in leaving much unsaid, rely heavily on mutually understood information. This information serves as a “background of awareness” that both the teller and the hearer possess, and which acts as a “foundation of the intimacy” that a successful telling of the joke will induce (Cohen 1999, p. 28). This intimacy, on Cohen’s account, is a shared sense of community between the teller and the hearer. When the intimacy is thus inspired by a joke, Cohen takes it as having two constituents: a shared, or at least partially shared, outlook on the world, and a shared feeling (Cohen 1999, p. 28). The shared outlook comes from the necessary shared information, beliefs, perspectives, et cetera, that serve as the background for the joke. The shared feeling is a mutual response to a successful joke: typically, that it is funny, and the shared experience of mirth that comes with that outcome. These mutualities of viewpoint and experience serve as the constituents of the intimacy that Cohen describes.

For Cohen, this intimacy is a beautiful interaction. He writes of the intimacy achieved through joking that it is “the satisfaction of a deep human longing” and that it can serve to “exhibit that we are, at least a little, alike” (Cohen 1999, p. 29). Although I am about to speak somewhat critically about the bonding that people might experience through humour, I wish to briefly acknowledge that the class of examples that draws my focus is united mostly by malicious intentions, and that I do not wish to be taken as condemning humour in general terms. Bonding over a good joke seems like a perfectly natural and desirable state of affairs, and I would not want to disparage that activity in any categorical way.

Cohen’s account of intimacy as a result of shared humour is helpful for understanding how humour can work as sugar-coating. The goal of sugar-coating an utterance is to package the utterance together with some sort of reward. In the case of sugar-coating with humour, the reward—or at least one of the rewards—is the sense of intimacy that

⁴ This is a very slight rewording of what is, at the time of writing, the highest-voted joke on the “Boycott These Jokes” page of Laugh Factory, with over 20,000 “laughs” from members of that site.

⁵ I return briefly to the topic of denial later, but for detailed discussion of creating deniability, see (van Dijk 1992; Saul 2017, 2018; Blee and Simi 2020; Wodak 2021; Camp 2022).

the humour promotes. The *Style Guide* describes this tactic, saying that their readers should be “drawn in by curiosity or the naughty humour, and [be] slowly awakened to reality by repeatedly reading⁶ the same points” (DSSG 2017, p. 10). The emphasis placed on repetition, and on drawing the readers in, reveals part of the sugar-coating strategy. The sugar-coating does not need to work forever, and eventually becomes irrelevant. It is most important that the sugar-coating do its work in the beginning, in order to draw people in. The sugar-coating functions to give the audience a reason to come back. In the case of humour, the audience continues to consume the *Daily Stormer*’s hateful content not merely for its own merits, but because the intimacy of humour offers them encouragement for doing so.

The other important part of Cohen’s discussion of jokes for the purposes of my analysis is his commentary on inappropriate jokes. I take it as uncontroversial, and so does Cohen, that there are indeed some jokes which are inappropriate under certain—or indeed all—circumstances. After some analysis of what, if anything, makes these inappropriate jokes morally unacceptable, Cohen concludes by commenting that “if there is a problem with such jokes, the problem is compounded by the fact that they *are* funny” (Cohen 1999, p. 84). This, I think, is a useful insight in our efforts to make sense of the staying power of racist humour as a tool for white nationalist recruitment. Cohen rightly observes that there is a tendency, when offended by a joke, to remark that the joke is not funny. Cohen claims that to deny an inappropriate joke is funny is “a pretense that will help nothing” (Cohen 1999, p. 84). It is an important part of the function of humour as sugar-coating that the humour is in fact funny, to at least somebody. Moreover, I could no more convince such a somebody that something is not funny than I could convince a dedicated fan of hip hop music that such music is not good. I join Cohen in claiming that it is part of the problem with inappropriate humour that it is, in fact, funny. Maybe not to me, but certainly to somebody. And it is precisely that somebody upon whom the sugar-coating will be most effective.

An interesting possible objection to Cohen’s denial of its usefulness is that saying “that’s not funny” might serve to call attention to ways in which the joke conflicts with values that the teller or listener purports to hold, or that they should be ashamed not to hold⁷. Although it is certainly plausible that calling attention to a conflict between the shared values supposed by a joke and the values that the teller or listener think of themselves as holding might be helpful, a denial of the humour of a joke does not, in itself, serve to call

attention to this conflict effectively. Tactics like denial of humour work best in direct personal encounters, where we as listeners deny that a joke being told to us is funny, but are much less effective when used by a third party to block the sugar-coated outreach from a teller to a listener. This discrepancy of effect arises because when we are the listener, we are able to deny the mutualities of experience upon which the intimacy of jokes is built, and thereby block the reward mechanism essential to sugar-coating speech. When we are not the listener (or at least not the primary listener) this denial is much less effective, because the mutualities of experience already do not include us. Unfortunately, it is in these third-party circumstances that we most often find ourselves in relation to media like the *Daily Stormer*. None of this is to say that we should simply throw up our hands in defeat whenever a racist utterance is sugar-coated with humour, but rather to highlight a way in which the white nationalist’s tactic is resilient to one of the most obvious countermoves.

3.2 Sugar-Coating with Heroism

Related to the use of humour as sugar-coating, the *Style Guide* also repeatedly emphasizes the crucial importance of cultivating an us-versus-them mentality. Consider, for instance, the following excerpts from 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. The melodramatic nature of it also increases entertainment value.” (DSSG 2017, p. 11)

“Firstly, [melodramatic writing in a heroic style] 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 2017, p. 14)

Notice the emphasis that the *Style Guide* places on entertainment value. They are presenting themselves, and their white nationalist allies, as “virtuous and heroic,” while the anyone opposing them is “disgusting and evil” (DSSG 2017, p. 11). For instance, the *Style Guide* describes referring to far-right terrorist Anders Breivik as a “heroic freedom fighter” (DSSG 2017, p. 15). The leaders of far-right nationalist parties are always to be referred to as heroes. *Style Guide* authors present their writing as taking place within a cosmic moral struggle. This hyperbole, as they correctly note, encourages an emotional response from the reader. People like to feel that they are on the side of the heroes, even when the assumptions that underpin that

⁶ The use of “reading” here is not strictly literal, as large proportions of the content are either insinuated or communicated through imagery.

⁷ I am thankful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection as a consideration.

worldview have produced a deeply distorted vision of what side that is. This message of heroism, presented as standing up against an insidious evil, serves as a sugar-coating for the racist content of the speech.

The second excerpt above points out that this sort of emotional effect takes place whether the reader wishes it to or not. I am not convinced that the effect is as reliable as the *Style Guide* makes it out to be, but it is important to note that this sugar-coating tactic does not need to be fully effective in convincing all readers to respond positively to the passage; it only needs to convince some. You and I are likely not moved by a white nationalist describing themselves as being “gods made flesh, bearing the light of truth and power,” but that does not mean that the writing itself is not constructed in a moving way (DSSG 2017, p. 14). What matters is that this style of writing can be emotionally engaging⁸ for *some people*, and for those people, depending on the emotional engagement, it will potentially serve as a very effective sugar-coating.

It is worth briefly noting that some of the heroic framing employed by the *Style Guide* authors can work hand-in-hand with the establishment of a humorous tone, which we have already seen is another option for sugar-coating. There is a level of tongue-in-cheek silliness to phrases like “we stand as gods made flesh” that could, in some circumstances and to some audiences, be funny. I won’t dedicate much space to that connection in this paper, but it strikes me as an interesting avenue of further analysis. The essential aspect of heroic framing that I have highlighted here is its particular use as sugar-coating in itself, accomplished by way of the rousing surge of emotion that the charged prose is meant to engender in its readers.

4 Distinguishing Sugar-Coating

One might object that the notion of sugar-coating that I have developed so far is either not necessary, or that it does not properly distinguish itself from existing notions of double speak that are already available. In this section, I will compare the notion of sugar-coating to several existing notions of double speak: figleaves, dogwhistles, bullshit, and denial. I will argue that sugar-coating can in fact be clearly distinguished from each of these notions, and that it offers a valuable insight into the recruitment practices of white nationalist outreach sites like the *Daily Stormer*. In these various cases, the core distinctions between sugar-coating and existing notions of double speak are functional: sugar-coating has a unique function in the recruitment process for white nationalists, and is employed by authors who are

more comfortable with being broadly and overtly perceived as racist, allowing it to dispense with the function of creating deniability.

4.1 Distinction from Figleaves

An objector might wonder if sugar-coating is just a special sort of figleaf⁹. Although I am not aware of any attempt to use heroic framing as a figleaf, it is certainly well-documented that humour can be used in this way (Saul 2021, forthcoming). If a speaker follows a racist utterance with the declaration “I’m only joking,” or otherwise packages a racist claim inside a joke, this can serve to cast some doubt on whether or not the speaker’s utterance can really be thought of as racist, or if it is merely a joke. After all, many jokes contain claims which the speaker clearly does not believe to be true. The figleaf takes advantage of this to block the inference that the speaker is racist. So, if this is a way to use humour as a figleaf, it might seem possible that sugar-coating with humour can simply be reduced to a special case of this sort of figleaf.

There is, however, an interesting difference between sugar-coating, as developed from the *Daily Stormer Style Guide*’s instructions, and figleaves, in that sugar-coating does not make any attempt to mask that the writer is in fact racist. As such, sugar-coated utterances are rather different from figleaves, since they serve to alter some property of the quality of being racist, rather than directly masking the racism as such. These authors are not interested in masking the fact that they *are* racist, but rather in making these racist utterances more palatable to an audience. At a superficial level, this bears resemblance to the racial figleaves described by Jennifer Saul. It differs, however, from a true figleaf, in that there is no interest in presenting the content, nor the speaker, as anything other than racist.

The *Style Guide* advises writers not to present themselves as non-racists, but rather as self-aware racists who don’t take themselves “super-seriously” (DSSG 2017, p. 11). This is certainly consistent within the *Style Guide*, which states that “the *Daily Stormer* is not a “movement site.” It is an outreach site” that is meant to spread white nationalist ideas (DSSG 2017, p. 10). Racial figleaves, however, are intended to mask racist statements, making them appear to be somehow *not* racist.

Consider, for contrast, the infamous assessment of Mexican immigrants offered by Donald Trump:

When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not

⁸ I find, personally, that it strongly engages the emotion of revulsion.

⁹ I would sympathize with such an objector: in fact this paper arose out of an attempt to analyze the *Style Guide* as white nationalist instructions for the use of figleaves.

sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with [them] ... They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people (Washington Post Staff 2021).

Here, the effect of the figleaf “some, I assume, are good people” is to decrease the credibility of the claim that Trump is racist, as it is meant to show that he clearly does not hold some sort of negative opinion of *all* Mexicans. The function, as Saul explains it, is to reassure some of those who adhere to the Norm of Racial Equality that Trump is not—or might not be—a racist. This is inconsistent with the sort of tactics we see being suggested by the *Daily Stormer Style Guide*.

The goal of the humour sugar-coating that the *Style Guide* recommends cannot possibly be to suggest that the writer is not racist. Recruiting readers to racist thinking is, after all, the point. The goal is to present racist ideology as being funny, or as the *Style Guide* itself puts it, “within the confines of lulz” (DSSG 2017, p. 14). In this way, sugar-coating does not change the qualities of the speaker, but instead changes the properties of the quality itself. It is not meant to hide the fact that the statements are racist, nor even that the authors are racist. Its goal is to diminish the perceived repulsiveness of the racism.

This sugar-coating function is better suited to the purposes of recruitment than a figleaf. Recall that on Saul's account, part of what can make figleaves effective is that the Norm of Racial Equality is a rather weak principle: “don't be racist” (Saul 2019, p. 2). However, even this weak principle is inconsistent with a white nationalist movement's self-identification. Figleaves that allow speakers to get around this norm don't make identification as racist more acceptable, but rather give people a convenient way to think that they, or others, are not racist after all (Saul 2019, p. 9). Figleaves, as Saul says, can have the pernicious effect of changing what sorts of speech are permissible, but do not seem to make identification as racist more acceptable *per se*. Sugar-coating does something else: by changing how people see racism, through making it more palatable, they are able to push the envelope of what is palatable further and further.

The *Style Guide* emphasizes that the agenda is dehumanization—the goal is to “dehumanize the enemy, to the point where people are ready to laugh at their deaths” (DSSG 2017, p. 14). Desensitizing the readership to racism by repeated exposure is essential to this strategy, and as the quotation above suggests, ‘humour’ remains explicit in the end goal. Ultimately, there is a fundamental distinction between figleaves and sugar-coating. Figleaves are defined by Saul in functional terms: a figleaf “casts some doubt on the idea that the speaker is racist” (Saul 2019, p. 9). It is not the form of the utterance, but its function that serves as the

defining feature of the figleaf, and this function is simply not the function that authors adhering to the *Style Guide* are employing. They are not interested in being perceived as non-racists.

4.2 Distinction from Dogwhistles

It is easy to see why sugar-coating stands clearly distinct from overt dogwhistles, largely due to the self-aware and open racism of the authors of the *Daily Stormer*. For the public and proud racist, there is less of a need to conceal their racism. There is not much point in using overt dogwhistles to pretend an utterance isn't racist when other utterances in the same article use explicit slurs. Overt dogwhistles are primarily meant to discreetly signal racist ideas, without being noticed by broader audiences, but this is clearly not what the *Daily Stormer* is trying to accomplish. Owing to the recruitment goal of the *Daily Stormer* itself, the obscuring tactic of an overt dogwhistle is less desirable than the luring of sugar-coating. Their goal is not, after all, to acknowledge overtly racist supporters while not alienating less-racist audiences, but rather to make audiences who are not overt racists more comfortable with racist ideology. Covert dogwhistles, which activate underlying racial resentment without the audience's knowledge, are similarly at odds with the recruitment-focused goals of the *Daily Stormer*.

4.3 Distinction from Bullshit

In general, I hesitate to refer to white nationalist rhetoric as being bullshit, as I feel that it diminishes the gravity of the speech, despite Frankfurt's assurances that bullshit is a “greater enemy of the truth” than lying (Frankfurt 2005, p. 61). Although the philosophical literature is quite clear that bullshit is certainly no blameless offense, I worry that no amount of care will suffice to keep colloquial ideas about bullshit being a low-stakes, relatively harmless activity from appearing in any account that directly refers to white nationalist rhetoric as being bullshit. This could result in grouping profoundly racist vitriol in a category which is, on balance, not taken very seriously in practice. I agree with Quassim Cassam when he says that it is “a travesty to describe hate speech as mere bullshit since this does not even come close to capturing what is wrong with it” (Cassam 2021, p. 62). However, there are aspects of the writing which fit with certain accounts of bullshit very well.

The Kenyon and Saul account of bald-faced bullshit includes discussion of power moves and audience relativism, two concepts which will both be useful in the analysis of some sorts of sugar-coated speech. Audience relativism is a feature of speech that enables a particular utterance to be bullshit with respect to one audience, while not being

bullshit with respect to another (Kenyon and Saul 2022, p. 180). The paradigmatic example used by Kenyon and Saul comes from an interaction between Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and US President Donald Trump. Trump (falsely) declared to Trudeau that the US has a trade deficit with Canada, and then later admitted that he had no idea at all if that was true. This utterance, say Kenyon and Saul, is bullshit when Trudeau is taken to be the audience, but plausibly a deceptive lie when Trump's base is taken as the audience (Kenyon and Saul 2022, pp. 180–181). Power moves, on the other hand, are uses of bullshit to convey contempt for an audience, or to use power in an effort to redefine reality (Kenyon and Saul 2022, p. 186). I will argue that these two notions *do* have a great deal of relevance to a comprehensive analysis of white nationalist double speak.

The Frankfurtian conception of the bullshitter, as being unconcerned with the truth of what they say, does not reflect the attitudes encouraged by the *Style Guide*. The troubling fact is that these white nationalists *believe* the hateful content of their messages. The Kenyon and Saul definition of bullshit, although it may seem similarly ill-suited at first glance, is better able to make sense of these attitudes. Remember that bullshit, for Kenyon and Saul, is “characterized by a speaker’s indifference as to whether their speech provides the basis for an audience to uptake or recover truths” (Kenyon and Saul 2022, p. 176). I argue that the authors of the *Daily Stormer* are in fact deeply invested in whether or not their speech provides such a basis for their readership: indeed, this investment is central to the point of sugar-coating! The *Style Guide* describes the readers of the *Daily Stormer* as having been “at first drawn in by curiosity or the naughty humour,” and subsequently “awakened to reality” (DSSG 2017, p. 10). The fact that this so-called awakening requires the racist content to be sugar-coated to achieve does not diminish that it is in fact seen as an awakening. The *Style Guide* instructs authors to write without worrying about nuance, and to focus entirely on making things as black and white as possible (DSSG 2017, p. 11). This clearly demonstrates a certain lack of concern with the full breadth and depth of even their purported truth, but the language they employ is such that I argue they nevertheless intend to lead their readers to an ultimate truth through these simplifications, much in the same way that a high school chemistry teacher does not typically fret the details of quantum-mechanical atomic structure when introducing molecular bonds.

So, if white nationalist writing fails to meet this essential characterization of bullshit, how can it possibly be said to be bullshit? To answer this question, I turn to one of the tools from Kenyon and Saul’s account: audience relativity. What I have described above is the function of the sugar-coated white nationalist writings with respect to a particular

audience: prospective converts to white nationalist ideology. It is the process which takes place for those readers who are lured towards the site by “curiosity” or “naughty humour,” and for whom the sugar-coating—either through humour or through heroic framing—stands some chance of being effective at securing uptake (DSSG 2017, p. 10). The intention is altogether different for those readers who are engaging for other reasons, especially journalists.

With respect to journalists who have the misfortune of needing to engage with the contents of the *Daily Stormer*, I argue that the *Style Guide*’s advice does in fact constitute advice for a program of bullshit. There is no serious hope, and in fact it seems no desire whatsoever, to win most mainstream media reporters over to the side of white nationalism. The goal here is simply to make them engage. The *Style Guide* explicitly spells this out: “all publicity is good publicity” (DSSG 2017, p. 14). The outrageous claims put forward by authors following the *Style Guide* provoke media response by either trolling public figures, or whatever other unconventional means of garnering attention those authors can devise (DSSG 2017, p. 14).

I argue that these articles, which use outrageous claims to draw media attention, constitute audience-relative bullshit utterances. The outrageous claim *always* reinforces the core principles of the white nationalist agenda. The importance of this consistency is reiterated regularly in the *Style Guide*, which explicitly says that the *Daily Stormer*’s “goal is to continually repeat the same points, over and over and over and over again” and thereby centralize the white nationalist ideology (DSSG 2017, p. 10). So, as I have argued above, for the curious reader and prospective convert, it is not an act of bullshit, as it is invested in the so-called awakening process that is the core motivation of the *Daily Stormer*. For the journalist, however, there is no concern whatsoever with uptake of the so-called truth. So, to the wider audience, this very same utterance is an act of bullshit. Bullshit is usually done with some sort of ulterior motive. I argue that there are two such motives for these sorts of bullshit articles.

First, the bullshit garners media attention, which is considered valuable by the *Daily Stormer*. It is one thing for them to publish an article, but quite another for that article to be responded to by a mainstream media platform, which will have a far greater reach than the original would have had on its own. This puts more eyes on the *Daily Stormer* article, which furthers its effectiveness as a recruiting tool. The more people that are made aware of it, the more prospective converts who might be intrigued by the “naughty humour” of the articles, and the better the chances that the sugar-coated content will secure uptake in more people (DSSG 2017, p. 10). This is the core response that the white nationalist writings are targeting. In fact, the *Style Guide* marvels that this same tactic continues to work, over and

over: “I keep thinking this will stop working eventually, but it never does” (DSSG 2017, p. 14).

The loose relationship that these writings have with the truth is an explicit strategy in the *Style Guide*. The *Style Guide* instructs authors to take advantage of “stereotypes about racists being inbred hillbilly r*****s” in order to “make them believe that you believe things you do not actually believe” (DSSG 2017, p. 17). If we take a moment to sort out the string of ‘believes’, one of the goals of the white nationalist author becomes clearer. As far as their secondary audience, the general media, is concerned, authors following the *Style Guide* are actively propagating false beliefs about some of their own beliefs. It does not matter for the authors of the *Daily Stormer* if the mainstream media takes up belief in the position that they are advancing. Given the heavy emphasis on outrageous claims about celebrities and brands, and the generally disparaging assessment of the mainstream media’s ability to assess their claims, I believe that Kenyon and Saul put it best: the white nationalists are “fucking with” their secondary audience (Kenyon and Saul 2022, p. 189). By this, I mean that the white nationalists are openly and blatantly bullshitting in order to provoke outrage from the media. Using bullshit in this way does not diminish the white nationalist in the eyes of their peers, but demonstrates a laudable ability to antagonize an enemy. This overt antagonism is the second motivation for the bullshit article, and is a brand of power move.

Power moves, on Kenyon and Saul’s account, are acts of bullshit that are entirely obvious; they are “particularly flagrant floutings of communicative norms” that demonstrate “disrespect or contempt for the immediate audience” (Kenyon and Saul 2022, p. 186). Power moves are also present in the trolling and media-disrespecting audience-relative bullshit that the *Style Guide* recommends. One of the core features of a power move is to demonstrate contempt for the audience. That is precisely what I believe is shown in *Daily Stormer* tactics that provoke a rise from mainstream media outlets. Consider the case of the *Daily Stormer* claiming that “Taylor Swift was [their] “Aryan Goddess” and that [they] believed her to be a secret Nazi” (DSSG 2017, p. 17). The *Style Guide* reports that this took off in the news cycle, and derisively comments that the media was “giving actual explanations as to why [Swift was not a Nazi]” (DSSG 2017, p. 17). The attitude betrayed in this story is one of immense and overt contempt for the mainstream media. By baiting the media with outrageous and implausible claims about beloved public figures, the *Daily Stormer* is able to effectively demonstrate their contempt for the media, which is a major theme of much of the content of the *Style Guide*.

This attitude is consistent with certain other tactics employed by white nationalist movements, as described by Blee and Simi. In their descriptions of white nationalist

violence, they explain that white nationalists often seek to provoke counter-protestors into attacking, in order to frame any violence on the part of the white nationalists as having been a necessary act of self-defence (Blee and Simi 2020, p. 15). White nationalists seek to provoke outrage in order to take advantage of the outraged response, and I suggest that antagonizing their opponents through audience-relative bullshit is one of their chief means of achieving that goal. This audience-relative bullshit, then, works in tandem with sugar-coating. Outrageous bullshit garners media attention and spreads sugar-coated content further afield than would otherwise be possible, and then readers for whom the sugar-coating is effective are drawn to engage more with the site and its ready supply of sugar-coated hate.

4.4 Denial

One of the main roles that double-speak is often taken to play is to provide an air of deniability, allowing the white nationalist to deny their hateful beliefs in some outwardly plausible way. This function is raised in the analysis from Blee and Simi (2020), in the accounts of dogwhistles and figleaves, and also given a very thorough analysis in Ruth Wodak’s *The Politics of Fear* (2021). Wodak, following Teun van Dijk’s (1992) paper “Discourse and the Denial of Racism,” uses a typology of the denial of racism into five broad types: act denial, control denial, intention denial, goal denial, and mitigation (Wodak 2021, pp. 81–82).

Sugar-coating is in contrast with many understandings of denial, because it is primarily employed by overt white nationalists, instead of politicians who have an interest in maintaining a veneer of mainstream appeal. For instance, act denial—a claim to have not said a racist thing at all—does not serve to advance the agenda of the *Daily Stormer* and its authors. However, goal denial and mitigation are both plausible avenues for understanding the tactics developed in the *Style Guide*. Goal denial, as Wodak presents it, is characterized by a basic formulation: “I did not do/say that, in order to...” where this is followed by some unacceptable goal, like inciting violence (Wodak 2021, p. 82). This is compatible with sugar-coating, which sometimes presents the most violent intentions of the racist doctrine as jokes. Sugar-coating is also sometimes compatible with mitigation as a type of denial, which is characterized by downplaying seriousness and intensity of a belief (Wodak 2021, p. 82). However, the compatibility between sugar-coating and these types of denial does not necessarily suggest that either one can or should be reduced to the other. The most interesting function that sugar-coating plays is, as I have argued above, not denial, but one more akin to luring, with the overarching goal of recruitment.

5 Conclusion

In the *Daily Stormer Style Guide*, white nationalist authors describe the process of achieving what I call sugar-coating: packaging utterances with racist ideological content together with some manner of reward mechanism in order to promote uptake by a broader audience. They describe doing this through the use of humour, which engages a sense of intimacy and shared mirth, as well as through the use of flowery and theatrical prose to engage an emotional reaction from their reader. The *Daily Stormer* uses sugar-coating as part of a program of recruitment, in an attempt to get new audiences to adopt white nationalist ideology.

Sugar-coating stands as a new notion within broader literature about double speak. Unlike figleaves and dog-whistles, the purpose of sugar-coating is not to attempt to obscure the racism of the author, nor the utterance, but rather to make it easier for that racism to achieve uptake in a broader audience. It is used in tandem with outrageous bullshit utterances to reach a considerably greater audience for white nationalist audiences than would otherwise be possible. As a practice of double speak, sugar-coating is particularly insidious because its function of making racist ideology palatable is an avenue towards audience members being willing to self-identify with white nationalist movements. My hope in writing this paper is that with the phenomenon better identified, it may be easier to prevent this sort of white nationalist recruitment in the future.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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