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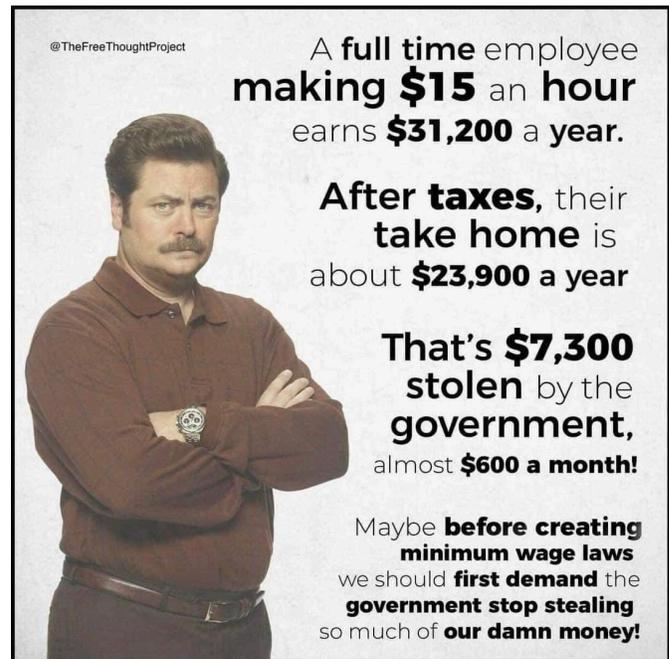
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The Math of Misinformation: Analyzing TheFreeThoughtProject's Meme

Misinformation is a delicate issue in today's political climate, and unfortunately, memes play a large role in its dissemination. If there is a political affiliation, there is a meme group for it, and where there are political memes, there is grossly misleading propaganda that gets shared around. For example, consider the attached

TheFreeThoughtProject meme as an example of mematic misinformation; this cyber object uses unclear math and suppressed evidence to create a false dilemma between minimum wage rates and taxation rates to ultimately persuade the audience towards the Libertarian ideal that taxation is theft and that minimum wage laws are pointless. While the correctness of a party's political beliefs may be up for debate, the soundness of their rhetorical choices is not.



This paper seeks to debunk the faulty logic used in the meme, explain why it is rhetorically

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effective despite being unsound, and ultimately propose a mock-up counter-meme that could be employed as a corrective tool for recirculation.

To begin, the first thing one should do when analyzing a meme that employs mathematics in its argument is to double check the numbers. Specifically, the crux of this argument rests on the final annual net income number; the lower the number, the higher our implied outrage should be. The intended emotional impact of this meme becomes an important area of focus when one considers that those numbers were fabricated to appear higher using sneaky mathematics. While it is difficult to determine the origin of the numbers used for these calculations, as the meme does not cite any of its sources, it is not necessarily impossible.

First off, the calculation for gross annual income is easy to surmise. Assuming there are 52 work weeks in a year and one is working full-time with an average of 40 hours a week, then the annual gross income calculation for a raised minimum wage would look like this:

Calculation A: Raised Minimum Wage Annual Gross Income for Full-Time Employee

$$\frac{52 \cancel{\text{ weeks}}}{\text{year}} \times \frac{40 \cancel{\text{ hours}}}{\cancel{\text{ week}}} \times \frac{\$15}{\cancel{\text{ hour}}} = \frac{\$31,200}{\text{year}}$$

Conversely, the tax rate calculations are less easy to pinpoint. According to TurboTax, the state with the highest income tax as of 2020 is California at 13.3% (“States with Lowest Tax”). Using the online federal income tax calculator, SmartAsset, provides us with this chart (“California Income”):

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**Table A:
SmartAsset’s Estimated Californian Income Tax Breakdown for 2020-2021 filing season.**

Tax Type	Marginal Tax Rate	Effective Tax Rate	2020 Taxes*
Federal	12.00%	6.60%	\$2,059
FICA	7.65%	7.65%	\$2,387
State	4.00%	1.75%	\$546
Local	0.00%	0.00%	\$0
Total Income Taxes		16.00%	\$4,991
Income After Taxes			\$26,209
Retirement Contributions			\$0
Take-Home Pay			\$26,209

Take note of the two highlighted sections (*em. mine*). The first row indicates that this income tax in California would be \$4,991. It is important reiterate that this would be the maximum income tax for this given salary in the United States, given that California has the highest income tax rates among all states. This leaves the net salary after taxes and contributions no lower than \$26,209, which is illuminated in the second row. This \$2.5k difference in TheFreeThoughtProject’s estimations is significant enough that it should not be brushed off as a mere calculation error.

Upon further investigation, it appears that this meme was utilizing not *only* income tax, but likely a combination of income, sales, fuels, and property taxes. For example, the same SmartAssets calculator provides us with the following estimated tax burden chart for the given salary in California (“California Income”). Please make note of the highlighted section once again (*em. mine*).

Table B.

SmartAsset’s Total Estimated 2020 Californian Tax Burden

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● Income Tax	\$4,991
● Sales Tax	\$826
● Fuel Tax	\$255
● Property Tax	\$1,921
Total Estimated Tax Burden	\$7,993

According to Table B, the total tax burden for someone living in California paying for all four categories of taxes would be about \$7,993, which looks much closer to TheFreeThoughtProject's \$7,300 theft claim. While the number is not exactly equivalent, it is much closer in estimation than \$4.9k, so it is not wild to assume that this was the method in which they came to their final calculations.

This instance is a great example of appealing to ignorance using mathematics in a meme. Because no one bothers to check the calculations, it is easy for the audience to assume that a discussion *about income* may only be referring to *income* tax. This is not just a potential outcome, but a real interaction happening with the audience. Considered an unnamed commentor on the Facebook post of this meme in which they remind everyone to “add another \$300/month or more for property tax,” a simple misinterpretation that would add an extra \$3.6k to the meme's already wildly skewed tax calculations ("Free Thought").

The author took the *highest* amount of collective taxes in the *highest* taxed state to hyperbolize their argument and provide rage fuel for the audience. This intentional misdirection is important to clarify in discussion concerning taxes and minimum wage workers, considering the National Low Income Housing Coalition's 2020 report found that full-time minimum wage workers cannot afford a one-bedroom apartment in 95% of U.S. counties, meaning it is unlikely

many minimum wage workers even own property on which to pay said taxes ("Out of Reach", 4).

This issue of adding in numbers unrelated to the minimum wage worker's situation is more bizarre when one considers the evidence that is not present: the opportunity cost of keeping the minimum wage the same. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the minimum wage as of 2021 is \$7.25 ("Minimum Wage"). Using the same calculation for annual gross income, someone working full time at 40 hours a week for a year would make \$15,080. This means that even if in this scenario we applied the Libertarian ideal of no taxes, the opportunity cost for the employee would be \$8,820 lost to the world with the raised minimum wage that *still has taxes*.

This is where the main problem with TheFreeThoughtProject's argument lies. Through unclear math and misdirection, they create a false dilemma: either the minimum wage is raised or the taxes are lowered, and only one of those can have any real benefit. Tricks like this obfuscate the real issues surrounding certain topics, making effective and productive public discourse harder among people of varying political identities.

For example, there are valid conservative concerns surrounding raising the minimum wage, such as inflation, but instead of focusing on legitimate areas of discourse, this meme seeks to conflate the opportunity costs of two separate issues: minimum wage rate and tax rate. The opportunity cost of raising the minimum wage might be that the value of a dollar goes down, while the opportunity cost of taxes is that you have less dollars.

Because of the conflation of these two ideas, it appears to the minimum wage worker that they ultimately lose in the area where they clearly have something to gain; in this instance, there

is no clear immediate downside to being paid more for the same amount of work, but the meme frames the change as a gross loss of the taxed \$7.3k rather than the net gain of \$8.8k that it is.

However, this false dilemma is not just an instance of accidental conflation of monetary concepts; it is intentional. Aside from also desiring no taxes, the libertarian party also wants to abolish the federal minimum wage, believing the market should be free to decide wage rates for itself. In this instance, it benefits the author to characterize one issue they do not support as the cause behind the other.

While this may seem like an overanalysis of a simple meme, the implications of such casual misleading cyber-objects have real world consequences. For one thing, TheFreeThoughtProject alone has a decent-sized following of over 361k on their instagram (thefreethoughtproject), with over 8k interactions on this particular post across their multiple platforms and nearly 3k shares from their Facebook post alone ("Free Thought"). Even if TheFreeThoughtProject's following is not as impressive in comparison to other social media behemoths, this particular instance is indicative of a larger problem. It is not just one political party or candidate, but all affiliations and their constituents that are constantly contributing more to the misinformation problem every day, not only through creation of grossly misleading memes like these but also through sharing and interacting with them unknowingly. This makes effective counteractive measures extremely important in the combat of misinformation.

However, as anyone who has attempted to convince a conspiracy theorist might know, logic is simply not enough to counteract any strong emotions stirred by falsity. Rather than relying on a PSA or an informative graphic, cyber objects like these are best challenged on their own turf. For example, a counteractive "correction meme", particularly one with a mocking or

comical tone, would likely be the most effective method for distributing a correction both widely and quickly.

That being said, as with anything political, such measure have the potential to be abused. When considering the utilization of counter-corrective memes, many questions concerning the authority of rhetoric arises. Who gets to decide which memes are deserving of correction, what is the standard of truth needed for such revisions, and is there a way to return the discussion to more relevant aspects of issues without debasing the character of an entire political party? These are already relevant questions that many social media platforms are struggling with today in their conversations regarding internet censorship, and, if this paper is any indication, these topics should be at the forefront of discussion in the rhetoric community, particularly as the shift towards electracy based communication becomes more prevalent and memes grow in their lasting impact.

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