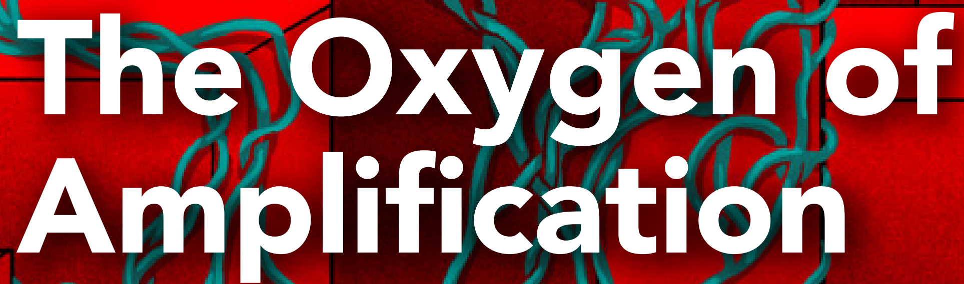

The Oxygen of Amplification

Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators Online

By Whitney Phillips

Data&Society

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MAPPING THE MEDIA ECOSYSTEM

We live in a time where new forms of power are emerging, where social and digital media are being leveraged to reconfigure the information landscape. This new domain requires journalists to take what they know about abuses of power and media manipulation in traditional information ecosystems and apply that knowledge to networked actors, such as white nationalist networks online. These actors create new journalistic stumbling blocks that transcend attempts to manipulate reporters solely to spin a beneficial narrative – which reporters are trained to decode – and instead represent a larger effort focused on spreading hateful ideology and other false and misleading narratives, with news coverage itself harnessed to fuel hate, confusion, and discord.

The choices reporters and editors make about what to cover and how to cover it play a key part in regulating the amount of oxygen supplied to the falsehoods, antagonisms, and manipulations that threaten to overrun the contemporary media ecosystem—and, simultaneously, threaten to undermine democratic discourse more broadly. This context demands that journalists and the newsrooms that support them examine with greater scrutiny how these actors and movements endeavor to subvert journalism norms, practices, and objectives. More importantly, journalists, editors, and publishers must determine how the journalistic rule set must be strengthened and fortified against this newest form of journalistic manipulation—in some cases through the rigorous upholding of long-standing journalistic principles, and in others, by recognizing which practices and structural limitations make reporters particularly vulnerable to manipulation.

With a particular focus on coverage of internet trolls, conspiracy theories, and networks of white nationalists during and after the 2016 US presidential election, this report explores these issues through the perspectives of those who must navigate this territory every day: the journalists themselves. The report's three parts incorporate interviews with 50 individuals with intimate knowledge of the contemporary news media. Fifty-six percent of these respondents are women, 30% are people of color, and 26% are natural-born citizens of countries outside the United States, with additional insights gleaned from the scores of the more informal discussions the author – a frequent expert commentator on stories about internet trolling – has had with reporters since 2010. While each part may be read on its own, each informs and is informed by the others.

PART ONE

"In Their Own Words: Trolling, Meme Culture, and Journalists' Reflections on the 2016 US Presidential Election," provides a historical overview of the relationship between the news media and far-right manipulators during the 2016 US presidential election.

PART TWO

"'At a Certain Point You Have to Realize That You're Promoting Them': The Ambivalence of Journalistic Amplification," identifies the intended and unintended consequences of reporting on bigoted, damaging, or otherwise problematic information and the structural limitations of journalism (economic, labor, and cultural) that exacerbate these tensions; and

PART THREE

"The Forest and the Trees: Proposed Editorial Strategies," recommends practices on establishing newsworthiness; handling objectively false information; covering specific harassment campaigns or manipulators, bigots, and abusers; and reporting on the internet that are particularly critical in an era of disinformation.

Author: Whitney Phillips; PhD 2012, English with an emphasis on folklore, University of Oregon

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PART ONE
IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

TROLLING, MEME CULTURE, AND JOURNALISTS' REFLECTIONS ON THE 2016 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Analyzing the relationship between journalism and the amplification of harmful, polluted, or false information before, during, and after the election requires understanding the influence of earlier online subcultures on the journalists involved. In particular, the subculture that organized around 4chan during the previous decade had a direct impact on the ways many journalists conceptualized and reported on the emerging alt-right narrative. This impact hinged on the changing use of the term "troll" across that decade, as well as an under-examined division among journalists who were troll-trained (through previous exposure to and familiarity with the subculture) and those who were not troll-trained, or who simply rejected the category of trolling.

THE AMBIGUITY OF "TROLLING"

Currently, the term "trolling" is used to describe an enormous range of behaviors online. Depending on who is speaking, "trolling" can subsume acts as simple as disagreeing with someone on social media, as contradictory as feminist activism and violent attacks against feminists, and just about everything in between, rendering the term so slippery it has become almost meaningless.[1] Despite the nebulousness of the "troll" framing, many within the news media, on social media, and even in some academic circles have credited some combination of "trolls" with shifting the norms of acceptable public discourse and contributing directly to Trump's electoral victory in 2016. This narrative is problematic because it lumps too many individuals and actions into an imprecise category, in turn providing violent bigots, antagonists, and manipulators a built-in defense of plausible deniability, summarized by the justification "I was just trolling." The narrative is also problematic because it obscures the history of subcultural trolling and its direct influence on many of the journalists who covered 2016 US politics.

THE TROLL-TRAINED VERSUS NOT TROLL-TRAINED DISTINCTION

Younger respondents (in the 28–32-year-old range) frequently prefaced discussions of alt-right memetic warfare with unprompted discussions of their own teenaged experiences with subcultural trolling and/or 4chan. The precise orientation to trolling culture of these troll-trained reporters varied between those who had been subcultural trolls, those who were troll adjacent, and those who were steeped in the norms of meme culture.[2] For those whose careers required them, daily, to plunge the internet depths, the widespread sharing of antagonistic memes, racist jokes, and general "shitposting" during 2016 was entirely par for the internet course. These journalists' news reports often focused on how "funny and bizarre" this content was, often with the assumption that much of it was ironic.

Running just a few steps behind these (typically) younger troll-trained reporters were more traditional, (typically) older reporters – as well as reporters whose bodies numbered among those being targeted by far-right antagonists' violent bigotries – inclined to approach trollish materials with much more credulity. From their vantage point, there was nothing funny, bizarre, or ironic about any of it, so they tended to amplify what the "trolls" said as fact, with more forceful urgency. Some within this group actively rejected the "troll" frame, taking, instead, a hard line against any element of irony in their reporting. However, as the far-right antagonists in question actively employed "classic" trolling strategies, those who were not-troll trained and those who rejected trolling strategies were particularly vulnerable to their subsequent onslaught of targeted manipulations. The result of the interplay between troll-trained and troll-untrained (or troll-rejecting) reporters was to further muddle the term "troll," to filter violent bigotries into mainstream discourse, and to catalyze the visibility of alt-right manipulators. As the stories themselves and social media reactions to these stories ricocheted across and between online collectives, what was meant as trolling was reported (and reacted to) seriously, and what was meant seriously was reported (and reacted to) as trolling—all while those on the far-right fringes laughed and clapped.

The nonstop coverage devoted to alt-right antagonists operating under the banner of trolling illustrates the fundamental ambivalence of amplification. However critically it might have been framed, however necessary it may have been to expose, coverage of these extremists and manipulators gifted bad actors a level of visibility and legitimacy that even they could scarcely believe, as nationalist and supremacist ideology metastasized from culturally peripheral to culturally principal in just a few short months.

PART TWO
"AT A CERTAIN POINT YOU HAVE TO REALIZE THAT YOU'RE PROMOTING THEM":

THE AMBIVALENCE OF JOURNALISTIC AMPLIFICATION

Journalists, particularly those assigned to politics and technology beats, were presented with a unique challenge before, during, and after the 2016 US presidential election. The bigoted, dehumanizing, and manipulative messages emanating from extremist corners of the internet were impossible, and maybe even unethical, to ignore. At the same time, news coverage of those messages helped make the messages, and their messengers, much more visible than they would have been otherwise, even when the reporting took an explicitly critical stance. Similar tensions marked stories that didn't have, or at least didn't seem to have, an explicit political agenda, including online harassment campaigns, social media hoaxes following mass shootings and other tragedies, and the plethora of misleading narratives circulating social media.

Speaking to this tension pre-and post-election (and particularly looking forward to the 2018 midterms), all of the reporters interviewed for this project acknowledged, and most expressed deep concern, about the impact of publicizing polluted or potentially damaging information. Just as many reporters expressed deep concern about the impact of *not* publicizing such information. As a result, responses to the question "to amplify or not to amplify," or alternatively put, "to report or not to report" often contained a baked-in ambivalence that simultaneously reflected long-standing tensions within journalism *and* seismic shifts within the information ecosystem ushered in by social media; as soon as the reporter finished listing the dangers of amplification, they would then explain the dangers of doing nothing.

TO AMPLIFY OR NOT TO AMPLIFY

Amplification of harmful, polluted, or false information:

- Increases the likelihood, and raises the stakes, of harassment
- Increases the likelihood that similar disinformation and harassment tactics will be used in the future
- Makes particular stories, communities, and bad actors bigger – more visible, more influential – than they would have been otherwise

- Makes it very difficult, if not impossible, not to benefit those looking to manipulate journalists
- Risks normalizing and desensitizing people to harmful views
- Risks lending credence to false narratives
- Relinquishes control of the narrative to bad actors and bad information
- Privileges certain kinds of personalities and information
- Flattens more complicated and contested conversations

On the other hand, not covering stories with false, dehumanizing, or manipulative elements can be just as problematic. Not amplifying harmful, polluted, or false information:

- Allows for the possibility that worse information will take its place
- Means that another reporter will get there first, and cover the story poorly because of a lack of understanding of the story's subject and/or the overall information landscape
- Risks missing an opportunity to educate the public
- Risks reducing specific instances of abuse, harm, or manipulation to abstract concepts, rather than individual lived experiences
- Allows poisonous ideology to flourish, and cedes cultural territory to bigots and manipulators
- Can inadvertently contribute to the process of radicalization
- Doesn't mean that the issue, whatever it is, will go away

STRUCTURAL LIMITATIONS

Journalists' decision to amplify a story or not isn't solely a matter of personal ethics or experience. Rather, these choices reflect a variety of political-economic, techno-cultural, and ideological forces that reporters and editors say direct, or at least strongly influence, the kinds of editorial choices they are able to make. This report identifies four categories of broader cultural forces, as well as a number of long-standing tensions within the profession of journalism, that simultaneously catalyze the spread of bad information and stymie opportunities to contextualize, decode, and respond ethically to networked mis- and disinformation campaigns online.

The Tyranny of Analytics

In the social media age, the measurability and commoditization of content, in the form of traffic, clicks, and likes, has tethered editorial strategy to analytics like never before. The emphasis on quantifiable metrics stacks the news cycle with stories most likely to generate the highest level of engagement possible, across as many platforms as possible. Things traveling too far, too fast, with too much emotional urgency, is exactly the point, but these are also the conditions that can create harm.

The Information Imperative

Journalism is guided by the basic tenet to publish, and therefore to spread, newsworthy information. Stories deemed relevant to the public interest are thus marked by what can be described as an information imperative: the norms of journalism dictate that these stories must be amplified. While the information imperative serves a critical democratic function, it can also be harnessed as a tool of manipulation, a point exacerbated by the ubiquity of social media. According to respondents, two primary factors complicating the information imperative, particularly in digital environments, are the prevalence of "iterative reporting" and the frequent inclusion of false equivalencies in news reports, particularly in the US. Iterative reporting is the expectation that journalists should report on what other journalists are already covering. The inclusion of false equivalencies in news reports represents the journalistic norm of reporting on both sides of a story (described by several reporters as "both sides-ism") on steroids, as positions that are false, manipulative, dehumanizing, and in many cases not worth reporting at all, are given an equal platform to positions that are factually true, relevant to the public interest, and unquestionably newsworthy.

Labor Issues

Reporters – especially interns, reporters early in their careers, and freelancers – are often required to meet excessive word, story, and/or traffic quotas, too easily resulting in rushed and imprecise reporting. Excessive writing demands, and the liabilities they can create for reporters, are not new to the institution of journalism; reporters and editors alike have long needed to navigate this perennial journalism challenge. However, the ever-increasing demands of producing content online further exacerbates the problem. In addition, the push to make reporters as visible as possible, which connects to the push to make their reporting as lucrative as possible, serves as a greased wheel for harassment. Many reporters have inadequate protections from the onslaught of harassment they face on social media, a particular problem for female journalists, journalists of color, and queer journalists. This harassment often prompts news coverage of the harassment, in turn spreading the abusers' messages, normalizing abuse as part of the job, and incentivizing future attacks.

The Homogeneity of (Imagined) Audiences and Hegemony of Newsrooms

Concerns about "bad information" entering the media ecosystem hinge as much on *who* is doing the reporting as on *what* is being reported. Who is reacting to that reporting is also significant. Many journalists observe that mainstream news is still produced for an audience presumed to be majority white, who are interested primarily in dramatic, emotionally reactive content. Many journalists also observe that the overwhelming whiteness of mainstream newsrooms has a direct impact not just on how these stories are told, but what stories are deemed worthy of telling in the first place.

PART THREE
THE FOREST AND THE TREES:
PROPOSED EDITORIAL STRATEGIES

Part Three departs from Part One and Two's focus on the forest of journalism and instead homes in on the trees: specific editorial best practices designed to minimize narrative hijacking by bad-faith actors, and to maximize reporters' ability to communicate critical truths. These sets of recommendations identify best practices for assessing newsworthiness; reporting on objectively false information; covering targeted manipulation campaigns and specific manipulators; and more broadly, reporting on the internet.

Many of the recommendations made here echo the core tenets of good journalism, which have guided reporters, editors, and publishers in their efforts to grapple with issues of newsworthiness, untruth, and manipulation by state and business actors since the start of the profession. These recommendations – shaped by interviewees themselves – build on these tenets to reflect the challenges specific to social media and networked manipulation campaigns. While Part Three is geared most directly to working journalists, these suggestions about how best to respond to problematic information are also applicable to everyday users of social media, who serve as critical links in the overall amplification chain.

TIPS FOR ESTABLISHING NEWSWORTHINESS

Journalists must always assess the newsworthiness of information, especially when it concerns potential manipulations. There are three broad criteria to assess:

- *Tipping Point – has the story extended beyond the interests of the community being discussed* (Moschella and Watts 2017)? In the case of online memetic content, this question would direct reporters to consider whether a particular meme has been broadly shared by anyone outside the core group of participants.
- *Social Benefit – will the story have a positive social benefit, open up a new conversation,* or add weight or exemplars to an existing conversation?
- *Potential Harms – will the story produce harm (embarrassment, retraumatization, professional damage),* or could an audience *use* the story to cause harm (attacking sources, imitating crimes)?

TIPS FOR REPORTING ON OBJECTIVELY FALSE INFORMATION

As in all contexts, journalists must take special care when reporting on objectively false information, whether satire, hoaxes, conspiracy theories, or political manipulations. One research participant offered the following criteria:

- Determine if the story reaches the tipping point
- Determine if there would be a public health takeaway (i.e., something worth learning) from the debunking; for example, explanations that identify and analyze manipulators' rhetorical strategies, including their use of humor
- Determine if there is a political or social action point (i.e., something worth doing) related to the falsehood itself; for example, editorials that provide media literacy strategies for recognizing and resisting networked manipulation campaigns
- Determine if the risk of entrenching/rewarding the falsehood in some stories is worth dislodging the falsehood in others.

If the answer to each of these questions is no, then the story isn't worth reporting at that time. If a story ultimately passes the tipping point and does become appropriate to report, reporters should be transparent about the origins and context of the information. Whenever possible, experts in the particular subject area should be recruited to write or consult, to ensure the clearest and most informed refutations possible.

TIPS FOR REPORTING ON SPECIFIC HARRASSMENT CAMPAIGNS OR OTHER COORDINATED MANIPULATION ATTACKS

Journalists must take special care when covering the coordinated campaigns of polluted information. The following journalism best practices were suggested by research participants:

- Treat **violent antagonisms as inherently contagious**, akin to coverage of suicide,[3] mass shootings,[4] and terrorism,[5] all of which are known to inspire and even provide behavioral blueprints for future copycat attacks. Similarly, **wall-to-wall coverage of online harassment and manipulation incentivizes future attacks** by signaling that such behaviors will result in the desired outcome – non-stop attention for the attackers.
- When stories focus on the targets of online harassment, reporters should be careful **not to minimize their subjects' experiences by suggesting that digitally mediated harm is less serious or less real** than physical harm.

- Reporters should reflect on how stories profile primary and secondary victims, and what information that reporting publicizes about them. Reporters should **minimize the inclusion of unnecessary identifying information**, talk to the victim – and ideally their friends and family – about these details, and see what information they are comfortable sharing publicly.
- To the extent possible, **stories should specify the number of participants in a particular online attack/campaign**, rather than using vague mass nouns (i.e., trolls did this, the alt-right did that). Important contextualizing information includes the apparent number of online participants (based on observational data), why the reporter believes this count is accurate, and any unknown variables that might impact the readers' understanding of the story. When describing media manipulation campaigns of any kind, stories and their headlines should employ the most precise language possible.
- Given how nebulous the term has become, and how easily it is used to cloak hateful behaviors, **"troll" should be used sparingly in stories and headlines**, if at all.
- Publications should **avoid publishing listicles that round up the worst examples of racist or misogynist expression without significantly commenting** on that expression; while they may seek to call attention to abuse in order to condemn it, these articles inadvertently provide abusers, and their abusive messages, a much larger platform.
- Stories should avoid framings that fall back on "both sides-ism," in which the attack is described, followed by an overview of what both the attackers and the attacked have to say about it; such a framing elevates the perpetrators to an equal platform as those being harmed. Particularly in cases where the attacks are motivated by racial or gender animus, **reporters should foreground the perspectives of those harmed**, and not give aggressors an opportunity to justify, spin, or further normalize their hateful behavior.
- Reporters and their **editorial teams should exercise an abundance of caution when reprinting memetic images** used during particular attacks, especially when the images are dehumanizing and bigoted. When sharing an image is deemed necessary, editorial teams, along with members of the communications team, should consider including captions from the story and/or other contextualizing information within the image itself so it can't be hijacked and spread by manipulators as easily.
- When approaching breaking stories about identity-based harassment and violence online, reporters should **be especially conscientious about the histories of this violence**, and the histories of the activists who have been working to combat it.
- Reporters should make an effort to **talk to people who have direct, embodied experience with the interpersonal, professional, and/or physical implications** of a given issue, while also being sensitive to the emotional labor of the ask.

- If a story includes, or seems like it may include, polluted information, reporters shouldn't just quote from, but should **actively consult with experts who have studied computational and/or networked propaganda**, or other forms of media manipulation.
- Reporters should consider their personal relationship to the story, and how their own experiences factor into the conversation. They should **take preemptive protective and/or self-care measures – both at the level of individual mental health support and/or the kinds of safety trainings** and resource-sharing offered by organizations like the International News Safety Institute and the International Women's Media Foundation – if a story is likely to trigger post-traumatic or secondary stress responses.

TIPS FOR REPORTING ON SPECIFIC MANIPULATORS, BIGOTS, AND ABUSERS

In the instance that reporters are asked to cover specific manipulators, bigots, or abusers, several guidelines will help bolster the positive impact of the reporting, as well as protect the reporter:

- While stories must address the manipulators, bigots, and abusers involved in particular attacks, **reporting should avoid framing bad actors as the center of the narrative.**
- When framing a story about specific white nationalists and supremacists, reporters and editors should **run a newsworthiness calculus on each personal detail** they are considering reporting.
- Reporters and editors should be aware of how strategic many groups of white supremacists and nationalists are in their communications and messaging, which is geared toward maximizing recruitment. Similarly, reporters and editors should be aware that **extremist groups, along with other groups of media manipulators, are eager to use journalistic norms as a weapon against journalism.**
- Building on longstanding best practices in journalism, reporters and editors should **respond with heightened vigilance** when antagonists, bigots, or other stripes of manipulator reach out with a tip or unsolicited commentary. Ask whether or not the apparent agenda can be verified.
- In cases when a reporter is inclined to reach out directly to a specific antagonist, manipulator, or abuser, they should **first reflect on whether the story absolutely requires quotes from these individuals.**

- If the story does warrant an interview (because it helps establish context, because it more clearly illustrates what exactly the individual is advocating, because it serves a counter-argumentative function), reporters should situate bigoted or manipulative sources' statements historically and ideologically, and **minimize the inclusion of euphemistic dog whistles**.
- Reporters should be aware that all communications in emails and in interviews, in fact **anything reporters say publicly or even semi-privately about a particular story and/or subject, may be used** against the reporter and/or their publication.
- Whether subjects are directly interviewed or are observed on social media, **reporters should weave the performative nature of manipulators' actions** into the story.
- Stories should **minimize focus on individual motivations** or personal psychology.
- Stories should a**void deferring to manipulators' chosen language, explanations, or justifications**; for example, when violent white supremacists claim they are just trolling in order to deflect personal responsibility for spreading hate. They may say it's "just trolling," but stories should describe the behaviors, and their impact on targeted communities, as accurately and as free of euphemism as possible. Just as importantly, stories should not employ the aggressors' insider lingo to describe specific actions or targets.

TIPS FOR REPORTING ON THE INTERNET

The following are a series of suggestions applicable to all stories with online elements. By standardizing these more general strategies, reporters not specifically assigned to digital culture or technology beats, as well as the editors overseeing these stories, will be better equipped to navigate the increasing overlap between "internet" and "non-internet" subjects:

- Rather than pointing to the fact that something on the internet exists, stories should **focus on how a particular interaction, technology, or community works and why** that matters to a broader audience.
- Editors should **avoid assigning breaking stories about online communities or behaviors to people unfamiliar with those communities** and behaviors.
- Stories should be framed especially carefully when they address behaviors on and around 4chan following a tragedy. Reporters assigned to these stories should conduct background research on the history of 4chan and other online subcultures, and should **assume that claims emanating from 4chan, particularly in the wake of a tragedy, are pointedly performative,** and almost certainly false.
- Given the tendency for people online – from reporters to massive YouTube audiences

– to equate "poor quality" with "authenticity," manipulators have increased efforts to play into this confirmation bias. Reporters should therefore **take caution when anyone claiming to have a tip sends over files with overly amateur and/or analog stylings**; for example, poor photo quality, shaky video, images sloppily annotated using iPhone markup tools, and anything photocopied.

- Reporters and their editors should internalize the idea that **social media does not constitute a "person on the street" scenario**, nor is an embedded tweet or Facebook post akin to a pulled quote. Regardless of the kind of story being reported, reporters should avoid linking to a handful of social media posts and then attributing that perspective, positive or negative, to "the internet."
- Reporters should **talk to sources for digital culture stories at length, ideally face-to-face**.
- Reporters, editors, and publishers should be reflective about **how social media and other digital tools complicate established reporting practices.**
- Reporters, editors, and publishers alike should prefigure every professional decision with the recognition that **individual journalists are an integral part of the news being reported, and further, that the institution of journalism is, itself, the system being gamed by manipulators.**

ENDNOTES

1 For more on the many problems associated with the contemporary troll frame, particularly when used to describe bigoted, identity-based antagonisms, see Phillips (2016) and Phillips and Milner (2017).

2 Sometimes used interchangeably with "internet culture," meme culture refers to the aesthetic, behavioral, and rhetorical traditions associated with the sharing and remixing of memetic media across social platforms; see Milner (2016) for more on the logics of memetic spread. Although it is frequently used as shorthand in academic and journalistic circles, "meme culture" (along with "internet culture") belies the fact that multiple, sometimes overlapping, sometimes outright conflicting, cultures employ similar expressive traditions and practices.

3 See Phillips (1974); Gunn and Lester (2012); Bohanna and Wang (2012); Tufecki (2015).

4 See McBride (2017); "Recommendations for Reporting on Mass Shootings" (2017).

5 See Beckett (2016); "Terrorism and the Media: A Handbook for Journalists" (2017); "Ankara Memorandum on Good Practices for a Multi-Sectoral Approach to Countering Violent Extremism" (2016).

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PART 1

In Their Own Words

Trolling, Meme Culture, and Journalists' Reflections on the 2016 US Presidential Election

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Author: Whitney Phillips; PhD 2012, English with an emphasis on folklore, University of Oregon

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Access the full report at http://datasociety.net/output/oxygen-of-amplification/

On September 10, 2016, then-candidate Donald Trump's eldest son Donald Trump Jr. posted an image to his Instagram page. A friend had just sent it to him, he explained to his one million followers, a statement offset with three "Crying Laughing" emoji. In the image, his father stands, poorly photoshopped, alongside a gang of what the photo's caption describes as "The Deplorables," a remix of a promotional still from the Sylvester Stallone action film *The Expendables*. Moving left to right, the coterie includes Trump advisor Roger Stone, Trump campaign surrogates Ben Carson and Chris Christie, Trump's middle son Eric Trump, vice presidential candidate Mike Pence, Trump himself, Pepe the Frog[1], longtime Trump advisor Rudy Giuliani, Donald Trump Jr., conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, and Breitbart editor Milo Yiannopoulos. "All kidding aside," Trump Jr. continued, following his string of emoji, "I am honored to be grouped with the hard working men and women of this great nation that have supported @realdonaldtrump and know that he can fix the mess created by politicians in Washington. He's fighting for you and won't ever quit. Thanks for your trust! #trump2016 #maga #makeamericagreatagain #basketofdeplorables."

This image, like so many iterations of the "deplorables" meme that circulated social media in late August and early September of that year, stemmed from an August 25 speech in which then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton connected Trump and his campaign to the burgeoning "alt-right."[2] In addition to framing the alt-right as the radical, white nationalist fringe of the Republican party, Clinton described participants as a "basket of deplorables," and denounced Trump for emboldening hate. Clinton's speech was followed by a flurry of journalistic hot takes, alt-right reaction memes, and cacophonous social media posts responding to Clinton's "basket of deplorables" comment in particular. The Deplorables, as they had immediately taken to describing themselves, were "thrilled" (Rapaport 2017).

This narrative was kicked into even higher gear when the Clinton campaign responded to Trump Jr.'s September 10 Instagram post with a "Pepe the Frog" explainer, which embedded the full "The Deplorables" image within the text. In addition to reiterating Donald Trump's connection to the alt-right, the explainer—which has since been deleted from Clinton's campaign website—condemned the cartoon's white nationalist symbolism (Ohlheiser and Dewey 2016). Across Twitter, Facebook, and countless op-eds, members of news media roared with derision, a sentiment captured by *The Verge's* Adi Robertson in her article "Hillary Clinton Exposing Pepe the Frog Is the Death of Explainers" (2017).

Clinton's speech, and the print and television coverage that kept it in the news for weeks, was a watershed moment in the alt-right narrative. It was also a long time coming. The term "alt-right" can be traced back to 2008, when white nationalist Richard Spencer began using the term to describe far-right views that conflicted with traditional conservatism. As George Hawley explains (2017), this "first wave" of the alt-right was grounded in a number of ideological predecessors, including the staunchly isolationist, anti-immigrant, and anti-globalist paleoconservatism movement; radical libertarianism; European right-wing movements; anti-immigration movements; and the traditional white nationalism of groups like the Klan and the Aryan Nations. The term gained some traction upon Spencer's creation of the website *Alternative Right* in 2010, which Spencer left in 2012, and shut down in 2013.

After that, the "alt-right" label went into a kind of hibernation; a second version of the website *Alternative Right* carried the torch, as did pockets of participants on sites like 4chan and Reddit, but it wasn't widely known beyond those limited, insular circles.

This changed in 2015, when as Hawley notes, the term was unexpectedly revived across a number of online spaces. While the nationalist, white identity-obsessed core of the alt-right remained the same, the nature of its supporters began to shift. Alice Marwick and Becca Lewis chronicle this evolution in their 2016 report on online misinformation and disinformation. They explain that the "accommodatingly imprecise" alt-right label had, by the 2016 election, been embraced by, or at least was being used to describe, a range of "conspiracy theorists, techno-libertarians, white nationalists, Men's Rights advocates, trolls, anti-feminists, anti-immigration activists, and bored young people" (3). The re-emergence of the alt-right also coincided with, and indeed was driven by, a rising tide of global far-right extremism. As Jacob Davey and Julia Ebner (2017) explain in their report on the mobilization of the "fringe insurgency," participants—however they might have described themselves—effectively harnessed social and memetic media, as well as strategic network alliances around the globe, to forward extremist causes.

Hillary Clinton did not, in short, conjure the alt-right out of the ether. Rather, her speech, and the news cycle it catalyzed, reflected a growing concern not just over the alt-right's increasing influence, but also the fact that Donald Trump was, if not actively embracing

WHAT CLINTON'S SPOTLIGHT—ONE BRIGHTENED EXPONENTIALLY BY JOURNALISTS COVERING THE STORY—DID DO, HOWEVER, WAS CATAPULT THE GROUP, TO THE EXTENT THAT IT COULD BE CALLED A COHESIVE GROUP, ONTO THE NATIONAL STAGE.

the movement, then not protesting when the movement actively embraced him. **What Clinton's spotlight—one brightened exponentially by journalists covering the story—did do, however, was catapult the group, to the extent that it could be called a cohesive group, onto the national stage.** Not only did the alt-right emerge with a mascot in the form of Pepe the Frog, it suddenly had a focused point of identity in the reappropriation of the term "deplorables." The fact that both Pepe and the "deplorables" label appeared to be somewhat ironic attracted participants with a variety of motivations, including the impulse to embrace offensive messages in order to undermine "political correctness."

The entire "basket of deplorables" narrative was, in short, a great victory for the alt-right movement. It also supported the idea, floated by many during the election, that alt-right trolls had won what *Politico*'s Ben Schreckinger later described as "World War Meme" (2017). Two months before the election, Jesse Singal of *New York Magazine* emphasized a similar point in his article "How Internet Trolls Won the 2016 Presidential Election" (2016), as did *The New Yorker*'s Andrew Marantz in his article "Trolls for Trump," published a week before election day, and a framing that Caitlin Dewey also adopted in her November 3 *Washington Post* Story, "The Only True Winners of this Election Are Trolls" (2016).

Of course, what exactly was meant by the term "troll" in these discussions was often a point of considerable confusion. At times, "troll" was used to identify irony-poisoned aggressors associated with sites like 4chan, 8chan, and parts of Reddit and Twitter forwarding a pro-Trump, anti-PC, anti-"social justice warrior" agenda. The social media exploits of these aggressors – including their white supremacist remixes of Pepe the Frog – were so focused, so incessant, and so offensive that they were framed by participants, observers, and even many journalists as "shitposting."[3] At other times, "trolling" described the white supremacists and neo-Nazis that populated sites like *The Daily Stormer* and other extremist online communities. At still others, it labeled the activities of far-right outlets like *InfoWars*, *Ending the Fed*, and, most conspicuously, *Breitbart*, all of which harnessed and commoditized Trump's Make America Great Again (MAGA) base. The term "troll" was also used – by supporters and detractors alike – to characterize "alt-right" media personalities like former *Breitbart* editor Milo Yiannopoulos, avowed white nationalist Richard Spencer, and of course Trump himself, who was often crowned as the biggest troll of them all.[4]

Despite the nebulousness of the "troll" framing, many within the news media, on social media, and even in some academic circles credited these individuals (at least, some combination of these individuals, since there was so little consensus on what "troll" was referring to) with shifting the norms of acceptable public discourse – known as the Overton Window – so far to the right that Trump was able to shimmy himself through, directly into the Oval Office.

This was not the only explanation forwarded in election postmortems. Russia's interference in the 2016 election,[5] the influence and proliferation of bots,[6] far-right media's effectiveness in creating alternative news and information networks,[7] and of course the sheer number of people who turned out to vote for Donald Trump,[8] have all generated intense analysis. That said, post-election, the link between extremist, white nationalist "trolling" and Trump's presidential victory quickly became a meme unto itself. Echoing the articles mentioned above, publications such as *The New York Times* published post-election stories with titles like "How the Trolls Stole Washington" (Hess 2017), and social media interest in the connection between Trump and trolling reached a fever pitch. Notably, a Medium article written by author Dale Baran, which asserted that 4chan and its resident trolls were a "skeleton key" for Trump's rise, became an immediate viral sensation, and ultimately yielded a book deal for Baran. Additionally, writers like Angela Nagle (2017) argued, to much acclaim, that the violent extremists, trollish shitposters, and high-profile personalities constituting the alt-right hadn't just won the election, they'd won the media, and by extension, American culture more broadly.

The narrative that "alt-right" actors – particularly those trumpeting white supremacy while also wearing the "internet supervillian" mantle of trolling – were able to reroute the course of American politics is compelling and seemingly intuitive. The data, however, tell a far more complicated story. In their analysis of mainstream media coverage and Twitter linking patterns during the 2016 US presidential election, Faris, Roberts, and Etling (et al.), in collaboration with the Media Cloud, Berkman Klein, and Center for Civic Media, conclude that far-right media, from small extremist blogs to larger outlets like *Breitbart* (a dragnet that certainly included its fair share of "trolls," depending on how someone was using that term), did in fact set the mainstream agenda. But not without help. As

THE TAKEAWAY FOR ESTABLISHMENT JOURNALISTS IS STARK, AND STARKLY DISTRESSING: JUST BY SHOWING UP FOR WORK AND DOING THEIR JOBS AS ASSIGNED, JOURNALISTS COVERING THE FAR-RIGHT FRINGE—WHICH SUBSUMED EVERYTHING FROM PROFESSIONAL CONSPIRACY THEORISTS TO PRO-TRUMP SOCIAL MEDIA SHITPOSTERS TO ACTUAL NAZIS—PLAYED DIRECTLY INTO THESE GROUPS' PUBLIC RELATIONS INTERESTS.

influential as these far-right media may have been within a certain user base, they simply didn't have enough clout to shift the national conversation themselves, and certainly didn't have enough votes to win an election. These media, instead, depended on the signal-boosting power provided by center-left establishment publications like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *CNN.com* to ensure that their messages would spread to a national, or even global, audience.[9] That's how Pepe the Frog lept onto the public stage. That's how Donald Trump Jr.'s Instagram post became a national news story, and ultimately, a talking point in two presidential candidates' campaigns. That's how many Americans first heard the term "alt-right."

The Overton Window may have shifted during the election, in other words, creating space for far-right ideology to flourish. But as the Media Cloud, Berkman Klein, and Center for Civic Media report suggests, this outcome had as much, if not more, to do with mainstream amplification as it did with organic reach. The point that mainstream outlets helped facilitate the far-right's influence aligns with Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw's foundational 1972 account of how establishment news media set campaign agendas and shape political realities. In the context of the 2016 election, this point is also strikingly ironic, given that the left-leaning publications that helped bolster far-right messages were precisely the outlets that far-right media, personalities, and folk participants simultaneously railed against as being biased, corrupt, and of course, fake.

The takeaway for establishment journalists is stark, and starkly distressing: just by showing up for work and doing their jobs as assigned, journalists covering the far-right fringe – which subsumed everything from professional conspiracy theorists to pro-Trump social media shitposters to actual Nazis – played directly into these groups' public relations interests. In the process, this coverage added not just oxygen, but rocket fuel to an already-smoldering fire.

Jacob Davey and Julia Ebner's (2017) research on global far-right extremism provides disturbing corroboration. Their report illustrates how extremist fringe groups launder information through more palatable channels, with the goal of appealing to and ultimately radicalizing people, particularly young people, within the mainstream—tactics that include the targeted manipulation of media outlets through the spread of far-right memetic media, as well as other narrative hijacking strategies. While the study focuses most intently on coordinated grassroots efforts, its findings speak to how easily mainstream news publications have been and continue to be commandeered as unwitting mouthpieces for extremism.

Targeted assaults against democracy, as well as the panoply of destructive bigotries, media manipulations, and conspiracy theories emanating from the far right, aren't the only point of concern, however.[10] Establishment journalism also plays a principal role in helping spread a spectrum of information that doesn't have, or at least doesn't seem to have, an explicit political agenda. Examples include online harassment campaigns, social media hoaxes following mass shootings and other tragedies, and the plethora of misleading narratives circulating social media. Some of this information, particularly in the context of social media hoaxes, which in certain cases might seem like harmless internet fun,[11] isn't as obviously threatening to democracy as far-right extremism, and therefore might not seem as obviously deserving of critical attention.

That said, in the aggregate, a media ecosystem overrun by falsehoods, antagonisms, and manipulations, even when the manipulations are "fun," is less likely to inspire public trust when critical truths are reported, as Alice Marwick and Becca Lewis suggest in their 2016 misinformation and disinformation report. It is also less able to facilitate deliberative public discourse, and is generally less equipped to respond effectively to the very real threats to democracy gathering momentum around the globe, as suggested by a recent dis-, mis-, and mal-information report published by the Council of Europe (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017). In short, nothing, anymore, is just harmless internet fun.

This three-part project explores these issues from the perspective of those who must navigate this territory every day: the journalists themselves. To this end, I have conducted dozens of semi-structured interviews with staff writers, editors, and freelancers working within what is variously described – sometimes neutrally, sometimes pejoratively – as the center-left, mainstream, liberal, or establishment news media, with a specific focus on print publications.[12] Respondents hailed from large national publications like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, global publications like *The Guardian*, culture and entertainment-focused publications like *The Atlantic* and *Slate*, and technology-focused publications like *Vice*'s *Motherboard*, among many others. I also consulted with several reporters writing for left-leaning local publications, though my dominant focus was on center-left establishment outlets. In terms of political positionality, the choice to focus on these outlets, and not outlets within the center-right or far-right axis, is based on the enormous influence mainstream outlets wield in terms of their ability to amplify information—a fact underscored by the Media Cloud, Berkman Klein, and Center for Civic Media's report on center-left print publications.[13] To round out this picture, I have also interviewed a number of journalism professors, journalism ethicists, and researchers at news watchdog organizations.

In total, I have interviewed 50 individuals with intimate knowledge of the contemporary news media. Fifty-six percent of these respondents are women, 30% are people of color, and 26% are natural born citizens of countries outside the United States. These conversations complement the scores, maybe even hundreds, of more informal discussions I've had with reporters since 2010, when my work on trolling subcultures – and the relationship between online harassers, manipulators, and the journalists who cover them – first brought me into frequent contact with members of the news media.

Pulling from these interviews, my own work and observations, and other published work, this report will explore the overlapping challenges both faced and caused by contemporary news media. The metaphor of a coastal redwood grove provides a useful, if perhaps unexpected, conceptual entry point. In the redwoods, each tree stands alone, massive and formidable in its own right. Simultaneously, each tree is linked through a complex, densely intertwined root system, raising questions about where the line between this tree and that tree should be drawn. Further, these connected trees comprise a much larger and more intricate ecosystem, including many more organisms than the trees themselves. Journalism is no different. Each facet of journalism discussed in this report, from labor issues to economic pressures to reporters' lived experiences, is its own issue, and poses its own complications. At the same time, one cannot cleanly or easily demarcate *this* facet of journalism from *that* facet of journalism. The roots are simply too tangled.

The structure of the full report reflects this fundamental interconnection. While each part may be read on its own, each informs and is informed by the others. Part One, "In Their Own Words: Trolling, Meme Culture, and Journalists' Reflections on the 2016 US Presidential Election," describes how journalists describe the relationship between the news media and media manipulators, particularly related to the 2016 US presidential election and the rise of the white nationalist alt-right. It also illustrates the degree to which internet trolling and chan[14] cultures influenced that rise, and it discusses how journalists' experiences, worldviews, and identities help shape the news. Part Two, "'At a Certain Point You Have to Realize That You're Promoting Them': The Ambivalence of Journalistic Amplification," builds upon Part One's exploration of the intended and unintended consequences of reporting on, and therefore amplifying, bigoted, damaging, or otherwise problematic information. In addition to identifying a litany of amplification pros and cons, it discusses the economic, labor, and cultural forces that exponentially complicate the question "to report or not to report." As a call-response to Part Two, Part Three, "The Forest and the Trees: Proposed Editorial Strategies," discusses the kinds of interventions journalists can immediately make, even as the forces discussed in Part Two demand longer-term institutional retrofitting.

The takeaway from the full, multipart report is that the interconnectivity of the problems plaguing the contemporary news media demands an interconnected set of solutions. Focusing on trees won't be enough. Focusing on forests won't be either. We need to focus on both. For now, however, Part One will zero in on the journalists themselves, on the grounds that there is the news, and there are the people who produce the news. You can't fully understand the former if you don't also try to understand the latter, and the best way to do that, is to ask them.

ON ASSESSING THE "ALT-RIGHT"

The journalists I spoke to affirmed at least the baseline assertion of the Media Cloud, Berkman Klein, and Center for Civic Media study: establishment journalists (that is to say, themselves) *did* afford far-right elements an enormous platform. The most emphatic of these perspectives was summed up by Ashley Feinberg, then at *Wired*, now at *The Huffington Post*. "Without journalists reporting on them, there's no way they would have gotten the attention they did," she asserted. She also directly challenged the idea that far-right personalities like Richard Spencer or Milo Yiannopoulos were somehow cultural tastemakers, capable of setting the tone for the election. Rather, she argued "We're setting the tone for them by covering them that way . . . at this point we have built the world that they told us existed. We are the reason that these people are getting actual legitimate platforms now."

Other journalists were more measured in their framings. Emma Green at *The Atlantic* noted that wall-to-wall coverage of far-right elements "creates a cycle where the line between a constructed reality that is amplified by the mainstream media then flips into something that's covered more, that people attend, that then has real life consequences . . . it becomes hard to delineate the boundaries between what's constructed and what actually would have existed without that kind of media attention."

Still others avoided making direct claims about what specifically catalyzed the rise of the alt-right, and instead focused on what all that coverage ended up doing. Several claimed that mainstream coverage made far-right extremism seem much more prominent and influential than it really was. Others highlighted how the coverage lent coherence to an amorphous mass of disparate personalities and motivations, in the process helping facilitate unified messaging and, in turn, ease of recruitment. This point in particular was so concerning to Oliver Lee Bateman, a history professor who has written for *Vice*, *The New Republic*, and *The Paris Review*, that he stopped covering the alt-right beat altogether. Journalism professor, news diversity advocate, and anti-harassment activist Michelle Ferrier summed up another common point when she asserted that coverage of white nationalist and supremacist elements – particularly coverage that failed to challenge extremists' version of events, and which merely reiterated their perspectives without fully contextualizing them – legitimized violent voices and reduced the bodies of women and people of color to objectified pawns in the far-right's game.

Similar perspectives were expressed by reporters working in Europe. *Libération* staff writer Guillaume Gendron affirmed the news media's role in amplifying hate. As an example, he described a 2013 controversy surrounding the far-right French comedian Dieudonné, who "jokingly" ascribed anti-Semitic messaging to inanimate objects and obscure hand gestures. Gendron connected that controversy to French coverage of Pepe the Frog, which came to be associated with far-right candidate Marine Le Pen's ultimately unsuccessful 2017 bid for the French presidency. The takeaway from both cases, Gendron underscored, was how much oxygen mainstream media coverage gives to dehumanizing messages, in turn making these messages much more prominent, and therefore much more culturally impactful, than they would have been otherwise.

Felix Simon, a freelance reporter for Germany's *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)*, *Die Welt*, and the Swiss *Neue Züricher Zeitung* (NZZ) similarly noted that "Sadly enough, the mutation of the (formerly largely academic and anti-EU) 'Alternative for Germany' (AfD) to a far-right/nationalist/neo-Nazi hotbed was, to a certain extent, only made possible through the unwitting support of the press. By reporting on nearly every single outrageous and abhorrent tweet or statement from an AfD member, many outlets have contributed to the spread of these ideas, even if it was not their intention." The preponderance of coverage of the AfD echoed "fake news" discourses in the US, Simon continued; as the German press had already been branded as the "Lügenpresse" (Pinocchio-press) by the AfD and their supporters, critically reporting on the AfD's activities opened journalists up to the already-primed accusation that they were biased against the party, while not reporting on the AfD opened them up to accusations that they were failing to report the news.

Despite these concerns, many of the reporters I spoke with suggested that things in post-election America were, in some circles, getting a little better, particularly around the issue of trolling. "At least in the media circles where I run," former *Refinery29* senior editor Laura Norkin noted, "the conversation seems to be, no one wants to talk about trolls, and no one wants to lift them up." Another editor at a business publication agreed, stating that many journalists have figured out how to avoid feeding "small fish" trolls on social media, but that most still struggle to apply the same approach to prominent conspiracy theorists and other far-right extremists seeking national publicity. This editor specifically reflected on the difficulty of covering the statements, and particularly the tweets, of Donald Trump, which are often highly provocative and, as he noted, trollish in style. A third editor emphasized how much of a mixed bag this reporting remains. While some reporters have become increasingly wary of manipulators, he said, others—particularly those who still believe, the editor explained somewhat ironically, that "the internet is a place where you can find true information"—are easily, if unwittingly, recruited as agents in an information war they don't realize they're part of.

The basic understanding that one's reporting could end up benefiting extremists, or otherwise contribute to the spread of misinformation, was deeply concerning for almost every person I spoke to. "It makes me queasy," one staff writer at a large global news platform said, speaking to the inescapable symbiosis between the news media and far-right messaging. This queasiness, she explained, is shared by all the members of her newsroom; they are constantly holding meetings about it, and she admitted to feeling uncomfortable answering my questions on the topic—not because they weren't worth answering, she said, but because she still isn't sure what to say.

Many reporters extended this same sense of queasiness to the ways far-right extremism has personally benefited them. As Roisin Kiberd, freelance writer for *Motherboard*, lamented, "We're all damned, because we all profit off it. Even if we don't make money off it, we tweet and we get followers from it." Another reporter at a large national news outlet, who has written extensively about far-right groups, underscored this point. "The people I'm covering are some of the worst people I've ever met, their attitudes are despicable, I feel like they're getting less resistance from the culture and system and I feel like something really bad is coming down the line," he said, before pausing. "It's really good for me, but really bad for the country."

Although all the reporters I spoke with affirmed, at some basic level, that journalists help amplify extremist content, the savviness and overall media manipulation skills of "alt-right" participants was more hotly debated. Some maintained that these actors are deliberate and sophisticated in their planning, and through high intelligence and cunning, actively outmaneuver journalists; this position most closely echoes the "four dimensional chess" theory popular on 4chan and other message boards (which attributes a kind of superhuman perspicacity to far-right actors). Others acknowledged that, yes, these individuals do manipulate journalists, but not through sophistication—rather, they do it by being obnoxious and impossible to ignore, a position that implicitly places the blame at the feet of journalists incapable of not taking their bait. Still others suggested that the issue isn't that bad actors are especially smart, but that the news media apparatus is especially dumb and easy to game. Several of these respondents also emphasized that the most prominent "alt-right" media manipulators – notably Milo Yiannopoulos – had careers in traditional media before they rebranded as far-right extremists. In short, they have an insider's perspective on social media dynamics, based on their own vocational training. "Not that it's all that tricky to figure out," another technology editor snorted.

Within these conversations, many reporters also acknowledged that some journalists are themselves manipulators, cynically repeating lines they know are false and misleading because it will get them clicks. Max Read, editor of *New York Magazine*'s technology blog Select All, stated, "There are so-called journalists more than happy to embrace the fucked-upness and make a buck off it." *Libération*'s Gendron agreed. "I think some people are really honest when they report on this. Some people really believe, and I believe, that there is a real danger, that there's a real radicalization going on. Sometimes there's a naïveté behind it. But you also have some people that are cynics, and think that there's a good click to be earned, it's a cheap way to look like you're fighting intolerance from your keyboard. So there's all of this."

"I THINK SOME PEOPLE ARE REALLY HONEST WHEN THEY REPORT ON THIS. SOME PEOPLE REALLY BELIEVE, AND I BELIEVE, THAT THERE IS A REAL DANGER, THAT THERE'S A REAL RADICALIZATION GOING ON. SOMETIMES THERE'S A NAÏVETÉ BEHIND IT. BUT YOU ALSO HAVE SOME PEOPLE THAT ARE CYNICS, AND THINK THAT THERE'S A GOOD CLICK TO BE EARNED, IT'S A CHEAP WAY TO LOOK LIKE YOU'RE FIGHTING INTOLERANCE FROM YOUR KEYBOARD. SO THERE'S ALL OF THIS."

THE 4CHAN CONNECTION

My interviews revealed another thread in the "alt-right" narrative, one I was initially surprised to uncover: the stealth impact of early trolling subculture – that is to say, trolling circa 2008 – on coverage of the 2016 election. Not all reporters were equally impacted by this influence; in fact, the vast majority of reporters at the outset of Donald Trump's campaign were unaware of, or simply indifferent to, the rhetoric and aesthetic of early trolling. The reporters who did possess this knowledge, however, made up for their limited numbers by playing a major, if inadvertent, role in the rise of the alt-right's visibility. Understanding how requires a dive into the history of trolling subculture, which dovetails with meme culture and American popular culture more broadly. As the following discussion will show, where subcultural trolling came from, what it turned into, and who it influenced provides critical background for understanding the profound challenges the contemporary internet poses to establishment journalists.

Currently, the term "trolling" is used to describe an enormous range of behaviors online, including the far-right elements listed at the outset of the report. "Trolling" can also—depending on who might be speaking—subsume acts as simple as disagreeing with someone on social media, as contradictory as feminist activism and violent attacks against feminists, and just about everything in between, rendering the term so slippery it has become almost meaningless.[15] Meaningless, but not inconsequential. The fact that the term is used to describe everything from Nazi violence to G-rated silliness makes it a perfect rhetorical vessel for media manipulation; the polysemy of trolling provides violent bigots, antagonists, and manipulators a cloaking device and built-in defense of plausible deniability. Both are encapsulated by the oft-lobbed response, "I was just trolling," which for many absolves online actors of any personal responsibility for the things they choose to say and do to others online.

THE FACT THAT THE TERM IS USED TO DESCRIBE EVERYTHING FROM NAZI VIOLENCE TO G-RATED SILLINESS MAKES IT A PERFECT RHETORICAL VESSEL FOR MEDIA MANIPULATION; THE POLYSEMY OF TROLLING PROVIDES VIOLENT BIGOTS, ANTAGONISTS, AND MANIPULATORS A CLOAKING DEVICE AND BUILT-IN DEFENSE OF PLAUSIBLE DENIABILITY.

"Trolling" hasn't always been so nebulous. As I chronicle in my 2015 book *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*, the term trolling initially meant something very specific to participants on and around 4chan's /b/ or "Random" board, where the subcultural sense of the term first took hold around 2003.[16] This emergent sense of trolling, which referred to the deliberate,

highly performative (even choreographed) provocation of targets, enjoyed a "subcultural golden age" from about 2007-2011, which was followed by a slow strange integration into mainstream culture between 2011-2013. Trolling then took a dark turn in 2014 with the Gamergate hate and harassment campaign, which targeted a number of women in the games industry and others who pushed back against violent misogyny.[17] Post-Gamergate, the fissures that had already begun to emerge on 4chan rapidly deepened, setting the stage for 4chan's subsequent emergence as a breeding ground for far-right extremism during the 2016 election.

Well before the political turn of Gamergate, during the golden age and mainstreaming eras of subcultural trolling, trolls were characterized by a number of consistent subcultural markers. Most basically, these early trolls self-identified as such. Trolling may have been an action, but it was also, and perhaps more importantly, a deliberately chosen, carefully cultivated online identity. Trolling was who someone was online, not just what they did. Beyond self-identifying as such, these trolls employed a highly stylized, highly recognizable, and often highly offensive vernacular and aesthetic. Trolls summarized their motivations, and overall orientation to online spaces, using the term "lulz," antagonistic laughter indicating that a troll's target had reacted with a strong negative emotion like anger, frustration, or shock ("lulz" is a corruption of the common internet acronym L-O-L, laugh out loud). Another common feature of early subcultural trolling was trolls' insistence on anonymity. As a consequence, precise demographics of the groups orbiting 4chan's /b/ board could be very difficult to establish. What wasn't difficult to establish, however, was the trolls' symbolic demographics: the fact that their interests, pop cultural references, and communication styles were raced white, gendered male, and aligned with millennial, middle-class, American mores (Phillips 2015).

While there was a lot about early trolling that was clear and consistent, one thing the subculture did *not* exhibit was a clear, consistent politics. As Jessica Beyer (2014), Gabriella Coleman (2015), and I (2015) all illustrate in projects focused on different facets of trolling subculture, there was often a great deal of political variation within early trolling communities, which also overlapped with hacking communities, including the ever-shifting trolling and hacker collective Anonymous (a descriptor derived from the fact that participants posting to 4chan almost always did so anonymously). That isn't to say that these communities, particularly the trolling activities associated with 4chan's /b/ board, weren't home to a great deal of transgressive, dehumanizing, and in some cases outright extremist behavior. They absolutely were, a point Coleman (2015) underscores when she describes these elements as "terrifying" (21) and "hellish" (51), with long-lasting consequences for those targeted.

The issue, Beyer, Coleman, and I each emphasize, is that these communities weren't *uniform* in that transgression, dehumanization, and extremism. In addition to engaging in far-right identity antagonisms, for example, participating trolls on 4chan's /b/ board frequently attacked far-right communities and media figures, with *Fox News* and its conservative pundits, along with white evangelical Christians, particularly favorite targets. In some instances, they even called attention to decidedly progressive issues like systemic racism in news reporting (Phillips 2015, 85-86).

The ideological promiscuity of trolling targets during this time stemmed from two of the most basic tenets of early trolling subculture: trolls' claim that "nothing should be taken seriously" as well as their insistence that lulz – which, to reiterate, is amusement derived from another person's distress – was the only reason to do anything. For the trolls I studied, the specific nature of the target, including its political orientation, was often less important than its overall "exploitability," that is to say, its likelihood of generating the strongest possible reaction in audiences, which included audiences of other trolls. Trolls' fetishization of "exploitable" situations and targets helps explain why trolls would be inclined to call attention to something like racist news coverage; they cared less (if at all) about the injustice of racism, and more about its ability to aggravate defensive white people. Trolls' lulz fetish also helps explain why early trolls were as quick to attack far-right groups as progressive groups; those most committed to their cause, whatever the politics, were most likely to generate the most amusement for the trolls. In contrast, those who didn't particularly care (again, whatever the politics) were not worth the trolls' time or energy.

TROLLS DIDN'T OCCUPY THE LEFT OR THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM, AT LEAST NOT IN ANY TRADITIONAL SENSE. RATHER, THEY OCCUPIED THE SIDE OF PURE PRIVILEGE, IN WHICH THEY BELIEVED, FIRST, THAT THEY HAD THE RIGHT TO SIDESTEP ANY AND ALL ISSUES OF CONSENT, AND SECOND, THAT THEY DIDN'T HAVE TO HAVE, OR AT LEAST DIDN'T HAVE TO DECLARE, A POLITICS.

The trolls' lulz calculus thus underscores why it was so difficult to make blanket assertions about the overall politics of early trolling. Trolls didn't occupy the left or the right side of the political spectrum, at least not in any traditional sense. Rather, they occupied the side of pure privilege, in which they believed, first, that they had the right to sidestep any and all issues of consent, and second, that they didn't have to have, or at least didn't have to declare, a politics. They got to pick and choose the degree to which their personal beliefs aligned with their online activities—a courtesy they did not similarly extend to their targets, who weren't just goaded into taking a side, but were punished the moment they did.

These successful trolling efforts would then be integrated into the broader subcultural trolling argot, which included as many playful jokes, remixes, and pop cultural references as it did explicitly violent jokes, remixes, and pop cultural references; G-rated content swirling, always, alongside the most offensive, mean-spirited, and politically myopic content imaginable. And all of it couched under an aggressive, head-spinning irony; running across the top of the /b/ board's home page, for example, was the – itself deeply ironic – disclaimer that "The stories and information posted here are artistic works of fiction and falsehood. Only a fool would take anything posted here as fact."

The result of this ever-churning, ever-evolving, ever-ambivalent memetic cacophony was to cohere participating trolls even closer together through a highly recognizable trolling style; to attract additional trolling participants into the fold; and to increase the visibility of trolling subculture, including its distinctive aesthetic, across a number of other online communities. The visibility of trolling subculture online was so pronounced that I regularly noted during my dissertation project (2008-2012) that trolling on and around 4chan was the most influential cultural force most people didn't realize they were actually quite familiar with.

First, discourse emanating from 4chan had an enormous impact on how people communicated with each other online (the term lulz, references to "feels" in the context of feelings, and most basically the subcultural definition of the term troll, among many other common turns of phrase, all came courtesy of activity on 4chan). It was also the primordial ooze that gave rise to Anonymous, whose high-profile trolling and hacking exploits gave way, starting around 2011, to more explicitly progressive causes and operations like the Occupy Wall Street protests.[18]

Trolls on 4chan were also responsible for popularizing a number of explicitly political memes—at least, memes created by trolls for lulz, that were then adopted earnestly by sincere political operatives. And that were, in turn, afforded a great deal of further coverage by journalists. The most conspicuous of these cases was the Obama/Joker/Socialism meme, part of trolls' overall effort to exploit tensions around the burgeoning far-right Tea Party and Birther movements, which spent the summer of 2009 airing a range of demonstrably false grievances. These included Obama's rumored socialism, Obama's rumored being a secret Muslim, and Obama's rumored missing birth certificate, a falsehood famously stoked by now-president Donald Trump. Despite the fact that it was aggressively nonsensical, the image of Obama as Socialist Joker was swiftly embraced by anti-government protesters, becoming a frequent, bizarre sight at their rallies—an outcome both precipitating and precipitated by the fact that the image had also become a frequent sight in the pages of large national news outlets.[19]

The Obama/Joker/Socialism story unfolded well before subcultural trolling reached its peak of mainstreaming, around 2013; back in 2009, 4chan was not yet the go-to resource for reporters looking for a scoop on unfolding internet controversies. At the time, in fact, few people outside the subculture realized the role 4chan's participants played in seeding the image (I only knew because I was engaged in intense ethnographic observation for my dissertation and watched many of the conversations unfold in real time). While it remained an early, mostly uncredited example of trolls' ability to influence popular culture, the overall process – in which trolling content would be absorbed through and then amplified by more mainstream channels – proved to be a harbinger of countless media cycles to come.

The pop cultural visibility of trolling content became even more conspicuous once the mainstreaming period of subcultural trolling began.[20] During this period, the vast majority of the most recognizable internet memes originated on, or at least were further popularized by, 4chan and its resident trolls. Speaking to the ubiquity of trolling memes across social media, danah boyd (2017) goes so far as to argue that 4chan helped create meme culture as we now understand it; the ephemeral nature of the site, the result

of limited server space, demanded that older content constantly be replaced by new. Simultaneously, 4chan's community norms demanded active participation from users, prompting an almost ceaseless supply of novel memetic content drawing from the community's established argot and aesthetic. [21] An argot and aesthetic that, in turn, became a normalized part of online discourse, not a small point considering how problematic (offensive, dehumanizing, fetishizing) the expression could be. The most resonant of these memes and references wouldn't just roil across 4chan's various boards. Because they were being seen by so many eyes firsthand on 4chan and secondhand via social media sharing and further remixing, troll-made memes began appearing in Hollywood films, cable television shows, and even retail chains like Hot Topic (Phillips 2015)—all of which ensured that the memes and their underlying trollish sensibility reached ever-widening audiences, whether or not those audiences had any idea that a particular meme had been a "trolling thing" first.[22]

Trolls' cultural impact wasn't limited just to memes. They wielded a great deal of influence over journalists as well, particularly once 4chan *did* become the go-to resource for reporters looking for scoops, around 2011; as I chronicle throughout my book (ibid), subcultural trolls delighted in this role and actively seeded misleading stories, memes, and information – for the lulz, of course – at every possible opportunity. Through these efforts, they became so well-versed in media manipulation strategies that it was possible to predict the trolls' behaviors (and journalists' reactions to their behaviors) with clockwork efficiency.[23]

The fact that 4chan's participants could be funny and creative and profoundly (if stealthily) influential on the broader popular culture cannot, should not, and must not be separated out from the grotesque bigotries, targeted antagonisms, and glaring instances of myopia that were equally characteristic of the young subculture. Trolls did real damage, and could be – often were – extremely dangerous. What these more ambivalent contours *do* do, however, is set the stage for what happened during the 2016 election.

THE FACT THAT 4CHAN'S PARTICIPANTS COULD BE FUNNY AND CREATIVE AND PROFOUNDLY (IF STEALTHILY) INFLUENTIAL ON THE BROADER POPULAR CULTURE CANNOT, SHOULD NOT, AND MUST NOT BE SEPARATED OUT FROM THE GROTESQUE BIGOTRIES, TARGETED ANTAGONISMS, AND GLARING INSTANCES OF MYOPIA THAT WERE EQUALLY CHARACTERISTIC OF THE YOUNG SUBCULTURE.

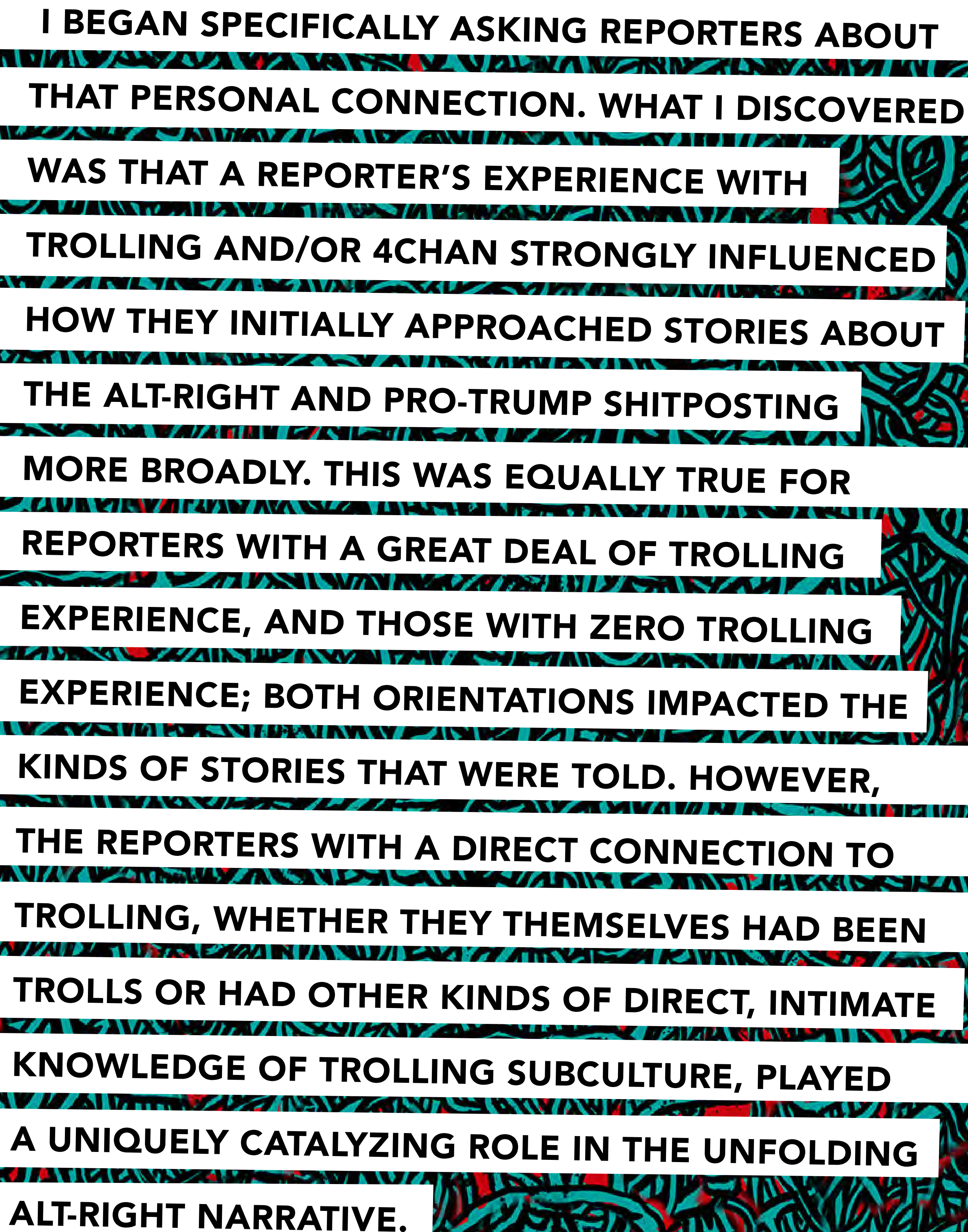
THE TROLL-TRAINED VERSUS NOT TROLL-TRAINED DISTINCTION

One of the very first journalists I spoke to for this project admitted that she "grew up" on early 4chan, and she chillingly summarized the connection between early subcultural trolling and the recent surge in far-right extremism. She noted that her generation (at least, the mostly white, mostly male or male geek space-oriented, mostly privileged individuals who embraced trollish elements of internet culture) "raised all the kids who are Nazis . . . because they saw us, and we were like, don't take anything seriously." In other words, people of her trollish, internet culture ilk normalized a uniquely potent form of detached irony, including ironic racism, that the similarly raced and gendered younger class latched onto as a default mode of being, seeing, and communicating online —a point another white, female, late-twenties freelancer echoed when referring to her own teenaged experiences on the site.

These weren't the only times early 4chan came up in conversation. As I began interviewing more and more reporters, I found that the younger respondents (in the 28–32-year-old range) who work for internet-focused publications, or within the technology sections of establishment outlets, frequently prefaced discussions of "alt-right" memetic warfare with unprompted discussions of their own younger-self experiences with trolling and/or 4chan. After several interviews of this nature, I began specifically asking reporters about that personal connection. What I discovered was that a reporter's experience with trolling and/or 4chan strongly influenced how they initially approached stories about the

IN OTHER WORDS, PEOPLE OF HER TROLLISH, INTERNET CULTURE ILK NORMALIZED A UNIQUELY POTENT FORM OF DETACHED IRONY, INCLUDING IRONIC RACISM, THAT THE SIMILARLY RACED AND GENDERED YOUNGER CLASS LATCHED ONTO AS A DEFAULT MODE OF BEING, SEEING, AND COMMUNICATING ONLINE

alt-right and pro-Trump shitposting more broadly. This was equally true for reporters with a great deal of trolling experience and for those with zero trolling experience; both orientations impacted the kinds of stories that were told. However, the reporters with a direct connection to trolling, whether they themselves had been trolls or had other kinds of direct, intimate knowledge of trolling subculture, played a uniquely catalyzing role in the unfolding alt-right narrative.



I BEGAN SPECIFICALLY ASKING REPORTERS ABOUT THAT PERSONAL CONNECTION. WHAT I DISCOVERED WAS THAT A REPORTER'S EXPERIENCE WITH TROLLING AND/OR 4CHAN STRONGLY INFLUENCED HOW THEY INITIALLY APPROACHED STORIES ABOUT THE ALT-RIGHT AND PRO-TRUMP SHITPOSTING MORE BROADLY. THIS WAS EQUALLY TRUE FOR REPORTERS WITH A GREAT DEAL OF TROLLING EXPERIENCE, AND THOSE WITH ZERO TROLLING EXPERIENCE; BOTH ORIENTATIONS IMPACTED THE KINDS OF STORIES THAT WERE TOLD. HOWEVER, THE REPORTERS WITH A DIRECT CONNECTION TO TROLLING, WHETHER THEY THEMSELVES HAD BEEN TROLLS OR HAD OTHER KINDS OF DIRECT, INTIMATE KNOWLEDGE OF TROLLING SUBCULTURE, PLAYED A UNIQUELY CATALYZING ROLE IN THE UNFOLDING ALT-RIGHT NARRATIVE.

It is worth noting that having such knowledge didn't necessarily mean that that person had been a troll, or even that they'd spent much, or any, time on early 4chan; recall the broad pop cultural spread of the site's memetic output. Even if they had spent time on 4chan, especially its /b/ board, that didn't necessarily mean they'd ever participated in trolling as such; they may have been lurkers solely interested in the site's creatively absurdist output (i.e., they came for the memes, and left when things got too unruly). A very small number of the reporters I spoke to would have described themselves as trolls, or at least suggested as much through somewhat evasive answers (in 2017, being a subcultural troll isn't something many liberal-leaning individuals are keen to advertise, even in reference to their teenage years). Much more common, however, was for younger reporters with connections to trolling subculture to be either *troll adjacent* or, more simply, *from the internet*.

"Troll-adjacent" reporters[24] may never have identified as trolls in their younger years, but they verifiably aligned with 4chan's symbolic demographics, particularly in terms of race; all of the troll-adjacent reporters I spoke to, and all the reporters these reporters cited as further examples, are white. These reporters spent significant amounts of time on similar kinds of forums as teenagers (Something Awful, for example, which ran parallel to 4chan in popularity in the early 2000s), and they were just as fluent in the overall aesthetic, language, and ethos of trolling as the trolls themselves. Despite this overlap, those within the troll-adjacent, "forum kid" grouping (as one reporter described it) had then, and continue to have now, the tendency to be both "dismissively and crusadingly antagonistic" toward trolling subculture; forum kids thought the trolls on 4chan were nerds, and also worth getting into fights with. The *Gawker* reporters I spoke with suggested that the majority of *Gawker* writers would have fallen into this grouping,[25] further noting that these "dismissively and crusadingly antagonistic" framings became integrated into how the site approached 4chan and trolling more broadly.[26]

Rounding out the category of reporters versed in trolling subculture were reporters who didn't directly identify with chan culture or forum culture, but regarded themselves as being "from the internet." Through a combination of osmosis, research, and familiarity with meme culture, these reporters could easily recognize the aesthetic and language of trolling, even if they themselves didn't participate. Like self-identifying trolls and troll-adjacent reporters, reporters from the internet shared many of the same inside jokes with trolls and the troll adjacent, and often approached online culture and controversy using a "weird internet" framing (the essence of which is that the internet is a strange, offset place with its own set of rules). Like troll-adjacent reporters, reporters "from the internet" tended to be white; within the group of reporters "from the internet" interviewed, only one was a person of color, demographics also borne out through my years attending various internet conferences and other research on early 4chan-era meme cultures.[27]

Though their precise orientation to trolling culture varied, the trait each of these three groups (those who had been trolls, those who were troll-adjacent, and those who were steeped in internet culture) shared was that they were, as one of the former *Gawker* editors put it, "troll-trained." They were therefore in a unique position to respond when pro-Trump rumblings first began emanating from sites like 4chan and Reddit, which many of these reporters had already been assigned as beats. Pro-Trump, anti-Clinton content wasn't just circulating on these sites. As one former reporter at *The Daily Dot* noted, he

encountered similar memes, and a similar rhetoric, across social media, including one Facebook meme page he joined for fun at the outset of Trump's campaign called Donald Trump's Dank Meme Stash.[28] Because the group was steeped in irony and was so clearly drawing from the language and aesthetic of trolling, this reporter assumed that the content he encountered, including a plethora of what came to be known as "fake news" articles, was satirical. Some of it was, or at least was being shared satirically by liberals who had encountered the content elsewhere, and thought it was funny. Some of it, however, was not satirical, and instead was the intentional messaging of far-right extremists. "I didn't see that this was something fundamentally different," the reporter said, almost incredulous. "I really should have."

This experience was common among the troll-trained journalists I spoke to. For those whose careers required them, daily, to plunge the internet depths, the memes, racist jokes, and general shitposting they were seeing at the outset of the election on Reddit and 4chan, as well as across their own Twitter and Facebook feeds, was entirely par for the internet course. These were the kinds of behaviors, and the kinds of people, they had been participating with, reporting on, and in many cases actively taunting, for years. They knew what to do. For the reporters "from the internet," out came the listicles and other "weird internet" pieces that spotlighted the most outrageous and offensive memes circulating social media, which often affixed a shruggie-shaped question mark over whether the memes were "really" racist (as opposed to trollishly racist, which was treated as a different thing, per the presumably offset rules of the presumably offset weird internet). For the reporters with an existing animus against chan and trolling cultures, out came the "dismissively and crusadingly antagonistic" articles calling attention to that old enemy 4chan, designed to both mock and denounce the site and its users. For just about all of them, out came the Twitter snark about how "funny and bizarre" it was that "these people [were] using swastikas, using Nazi language to support Trump," as another former *Gawker* reporter explained.

"I DIDN'T SEE THAT THIS WAS SOMETHING FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT," THE REPORTER SAID, ALMOST INCREDULOUS. "I REALLY SHOULD HAVE."

AN INFERNO OF FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM

Collectively, these reporters' responses had two basic, and sometimes overlapping, effects on the broader media narrative: to separate the memes from their underlying messages, and to fan the flames of a growing fire. This oxygen, in turn, catalyzed forces much bigger, and which went down much deeper, than anything that had existed during 4chan's subcultural golden age (again, around 2007-2010) or period of mainstreaming (around 2011-2013).

Like Reddit, which proved to be a hotbed of fascist, pro-Trump content during the runup to the 2016 election (see Koebler 2016), 4chan also emerged as an incubator for increasingly extremist ideology. This outcome wasn't an accident. 4chan took the far-right turn it did because it was already leaning in that direction; Gamergate made sure of it. *Gawker*'s Sam Biddle presaged this point during the height of the harassment campaign (2014) and in its immediate aftermath (2015). The "fascistic current" that had always been present on 4chan, Biddle argued (ibid), was the spark that first ignited, and then continued to kindle, the Gamergate campaign. In the process, the site became – to borrow a derisive term frequently employed by the far right – a safe space for self-selecting misogynists and racists whose bigotries were an identity first, source of lulz second. Far-

EVEN AS TRUMP INCHED TOWARDS THE REPUBLICAN NOMINATION, MANY TROLL-TRAINED JOURNALISTS HADN'T YET REALIZED THAT THERE WERE SINCERE NEO-NAZIS MIXED IN WITH THE TROLLS. OTHERS, PARTICULARLY THOSE WHO HAD BEEN TARGETED BY GAMERGATE, MAY HAVE HAD AN INKLING. AND YET, FOR MANY OF THE REPORTERS I SPOKE TO, THOSE DOTS REMAINED UNCONNECTED DURING THE CRITICAL FIRST FEW MONTHS OF THE ELECTION CYCLE.

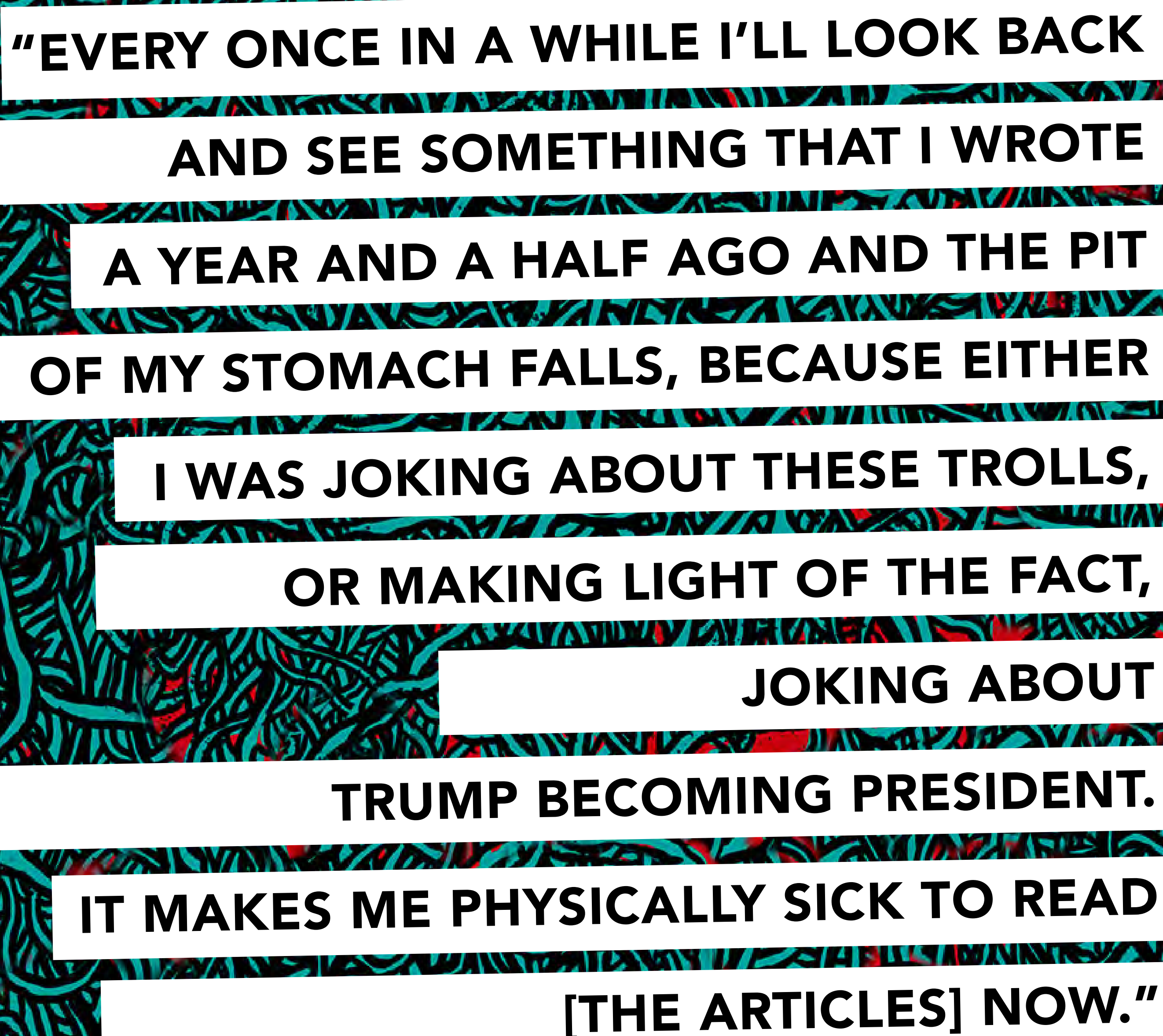
right extremists, who have long used the internet for radicalization and recruitment,[29] took note. By 2015, the white supremacist website *The Daily Stormer* was already actively recruiting on 4chan,[30] particularly on its /pol/ or "politics" board, as that board supplanted the /b/ board as 4chan's most active and infamous destination.[31]

It is difficult to empirically verify exactly how these shifts impacted 4chan's userbase. During the period between the height of Gamergate and when Trump announced his candidacy for president in June 2015, it is not possible to know exactly how many new recruits were attracted to trolling spaces, how many existing users quietly stepped away out of concern, or how many stayed put and were subsequently radicalized throughout the election cycle, like a lobster cooking in a slowly heated pot. What is known, in hindsight, is that the period leading up to and immediately following Trump's presidential announcement was one of ideological crystallization—one rendered opaque by the aesthetic and behavioral continuity between subcultural trolling of the past and emerging white nationalism of the present. Even as Trump inched toward the Republican nomination, many troll-trained journalists hadn't yet realized that there were sincere neo-Nazis mixed in with the trolls. Others, particularly those who had been targeted by Gamergate, may have had an inkling. And yet, for many of the reporters I spoke to, those dots remained unconnected during the critical first few months of the election cycle.

The fact that so many of these reporters drew a line between online play and offline politics appears to stem from how unlikely a Trump presidency seemed at the time. Like an enormous number of journalists, cultural critics, and pollsters – and even Donald Trump himself (Kruse 2016) – these reporters assumed that Trump would never win. His campaign was, to so many people, for so many months during the election, just a lark, just a joke, just a media circus. It was very easy, in turn, to look at what was blazing online and dismiss it as just hot air, just internet weirdness, just trolls being trolls. These reporters recognized the clothes the wolf was wearing, and so they didn't recognize the wolf.

An overwhelming percentage of the journalists I talked to expressed regret over not seeing the signs earlier; for remaining ensconced in what many described as their own liberal bubbles and not anticipating what was just beyond the horizon; for personally and professionally benefiting from such a dark political turn. But no group was more remorseful than the reporters who applied weird internet framings or otherwise shined a half-righteous, half-ironic spotlight on early "alt-right" antagonisms.

Looking back at the information she had at the time, when it seemed like Trump's candidacy would be a flash in the pan, one *Gawker* reporter admitted feeling torn; she's not sure what she could have done differently. And yet, she admitted, "Every once in a while I'll look back and see something that I wrote a year and a half ago and the pit of my stomach falls, because either I was joking about these trolls, or making light of the fact, joking about Trump becoming president. It makes me physically sick to read [the articles] now." Another reporter writing for a technology and culture section experienced a similar emotional reckoning. She noted how, as Trump's campaign was picking up steam, she wrote a series of articles that essentially pointed and laughed at the proliferation of swastikas in a particular online gaming environment. After the Charlottesville white supremacist march, she decided to go on *The Daily Stormer*, which she'd heard referenced many times during the election but had never visited. There had never been any reason to; as far as she knew, trolling and neo-Nazism were two totally separate worlds. Upon seeing precisely the imagery she thought was a joke a few months earlier, and in the process, realizing just how wrong her assumption had been, "it was a kind of abject horror," she told me. "Because I feel like I'm part of it, because I've just been writing about the internet like it was no big deal, for years now."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Taken by themselves, these troll-trained reporters' early framings go a long way toward explaining how the early alt-right narrative emerged as it did, when it did. But this was only half of the story, as the previous former *Gawker* reporter explained. "Surely if we expose this," she said, recounting the initial logic behind writing Trump and trolling takedown pieces, "it'll put people off it." In short, by exposing trollish antagonisms to the harsh light of reason, she assumed these antagonisms would dwindle in influence. "Obviously this was not the case," she said. In fact, those early efforts to surface "funny and bizarre" examples of pro-Trump Nazi imagery only served to bring more reporters to the story, resulting in a mushrooming of additional iterative coverage.

ON SEEING WOLVES, BUT NOT SEEING TROLLS

It is here that the "troll trained" classification emerges as a key narrative catalyst. Because running just a few steps behind these (typically) younger troll-trained reporters were more traditional, (typically) older reporters inclined to approach trollish materials with much more credulity. One such reporter, who covers the alt-right beat for a large national news organization, explained that his formative years online didn't draw from the same well of irony that characterized trolling and chan cultures. Rather, he grew up participating on BBS forums (bulletin board systems were early precursors to social media sites) in the late 80s and early 90s, where he encountered a great deal of far-right extremism that never for a second framed itself as anything other than sincere. Participants may have employed humor in some of their conversations, but there was no question as to whether or not they meant it when they talked about, for example, wanting to establish a white ethnostate. So, when he encountered similar expressions emerging from 4chan and other sites like *The Daily Stormer*, this reporter's impulse was to take the messages at face value. He was also, he explained, closer to the issues, with childhood memories of the historical realities of fascism. From his vantage point, there was nothing funny or bizarre about any of it—and so he actively rejected the "troll" frame, taking, instead, a hard line against any element

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of irony in his reporting. "Maybe I was wrong to underplay that," he admitted. "But these guys, they're not messing around."

THESE REPORTERS WERE, TO BE CLEAR, CORRECT TO SEE THE WOLF; THE MESSAGES EMANATING FROM FAR-RIGHT EXTREMIST CIRCLES DURING THE ELECTION WERE UNQUESTIONABLY TINGED WITH WHITE SUPREMACIST HATE. ALSO UNQUESTIONABLY, HOWEVER, THESE MESSAGES WERE TINGED WITH THE RHETORICAL STRATEGIES AND AESTHETICS OF "CLASSIC" TROLLING.

Like this reporter, other more traditional reporters – and reporters whose bodies numbered among those being targeted by far-right antagonists' violent bigotries – saw the wolf clearly. Their limitation, however, was that they were often unable to see the trolls, a discrepancy recalling an optical illusion that, when observed from a certain perspective, appears to be one image, and when observed from another perspective, appears to be something else entirely.[32] These reporters were, to be clear, correct to see the wolf; the messages emanating from far-right extremist circles during the election were unquestionably tinged with white supremacist hate. Also unquestionably, however, these messages were tinged with the rhetorical strategies and aesthetics of "classic" trolling. Reporters who *only* registered "wolf" were therefore particularly vulnerable to their subsequent onslaught of targeted manipulations. *Slate*'s assistant interactives editor Andrew Kahn highlighted a range of these strategies, all of which were honed on early 4chan. "Alt-right" instigators would "pose as idiots," Kahn explained, forward outrageous, over-the-top statements and images, ironically reclaim negative stereotypes (for example the giddy embracing of "deplorables"), and employ campy framings of racist ideology.

In particular, Kahn cited a Twitter feud between Richard Spencer and Josh Marshall, editor of the left-leaning *Talking Points Memo*. In response to one of Marshall's insults, Spencer tweeted a clip of the song "Tomorrow Belongs to Me," set in 1930s Nazi Germany, from the Liza Minnelli musical *Cabaret*. Spencer's tweet, in turn, prompted a slew of journalists and social media observers to respond, including Jason Kander, the nephew of the man who had written the song; Kander proclaimed that his uncle John Kander was gay *and* Jewish. "Sing it proud," Kander snarked. While many declared this a great embarrassment for Spencer (*Mashable*'s Marcus Gilmer stated that Spencer had been "owned," 2017), Kahn suggested that the absurd juxtaposition was, more than likely, entirely the point. It certainly got Spencer a whole news cycle's worth of free publicity.

Beyond this example, figures like Spencer and Milo Yiannopoulos played to the trolling crowd by employing 4chan- and 8chan-specific references to simultaneously befuddle, enrage, and goad reporters while also speaking to their shitposting armies in winking code. Yiannopoulos in particular leaned on the trolling frame, though his repeated claims to irony-poisoned innocence have since been debunked; drawing from a cache of leaked emails, *BuzzFeed*'s Joseph Bernstein (2017a) chronicles the "coy dance" Yiannopoulos undertook pre- and post-election to minimize the visibility of neo-Nazi and white supremacist elements of the far right, and to maximize its plausibly deniable trollish side.

A leaked style guide for the neo-Nazi website The Daily Stormer, acquired and published by The Huffington Post's Ashley Feinberg (2017), reveals a similarly coy dance. The style guide's author, purportedly the site's founder Andrew Anglin, encourages prospective Daily Stormer writers to employ strategies that will, first, normalize white supremacist messages, and second, actively scramble the brains of establishment journalists. To help accomplish the former, the guide's author encourages prospective writers to hijack as many memes as possible. "Don't worry if the meme was originally Jewish," the guide states. Not only do these memetic references facilitate sharing and repetition of neo-Nazi messages (the author refers to Hitler's highly repetitive Mein Kampf as a rhetorical model), the deliberate interspersion of "the vicious and the mundane," as Feinberg describes it, helps ease readers into a white supremacist mindset without hitting them over the head with explicit bigotry. "It should not come across as genuine raging vitriol," the style guide reads. "That is a turnoff to the overwhelming majority of people."

The guide also affirms the value of trolling. "Trolling is something a bit higher level than normal news writing, but it is good to understand the methods and incorporate them whenever possible," the guide reads. "This is a way through which one can create incidents, where the media responds with outrage, and they cannot help but give it endless coverage." Such "incidents" include efforts to assign racist motives to celebrities, like when *The Daily Stormer* claimed that pop singer Taylor Swift was their "Aryan Goddess," whom they (purportedly) believed was a secret Nazi (Sunderland 2016). Journalists are eager to believe the worst about racists, the guide explains. Consequently, "you can make them believe that you believe things you do not actually believe very easily, and they will promote it to try and make fun of you." Ultimately, however, the joke's on the journalist; "All Publicity is Good Publicity," one section header reads.

It is unclear if this document was leaked as the result of a genuine tactical mistake or if it was seeded deliberately as a meta-troll, perhaps in the effort to publicize media manipulation best practices. In any case, *The Daily Stormer* style guide – like Yiannopoulos' bad-faith laundering of white supremacy into the mainstream, to borrow Bernstein's (2017a) evocative framing –

CONSEQUENTLY, "YOU CAN MAKE THEM BELIEVE THAT YOU BELIEVE THINGS YOU DO NOT ACTUALLY BELIEVE VERY EASILY, AND THEY WILL PROMOTE IT TO TRY AND MAKE FUN OF YOU." ULTIMATELY, HOWEVER, THE JOKE'S ON THE JOURNALIST; "ALL PUBLICITY IS GOOD PUBLICITY," ONE SECTION HEADER READS.

illustrates the ambivalence of the wolf/troll binary. Those who could not see wolf *and* troll, and instead employed binary modes of seeing and thinking, were therefore unable to unpack and effectively push back against the aggressive performativity and enveloping sense of irony that remained a hallmark of even the most explicitly violent, white supremacist spaces.

Aaron Sankin of *Reveal* news underscored that these tauntings also represented an impossible collision between trolling culture and more traditional far-right conservatism, which already frames establishment media as the enemy. The difference here was that subjects weren't lying to reporters solely to spin a beneficial narrative. That's partisan politics as usual, which reporters, particularly those on the politics beat, are trained to decode. These manipulators also lied to reporters because it was funny culturally to do so, because that was all part of the game. According to many of the reporters I spoke to, it was this combination that proved to be such a journalistic stumbling block. Troll-adjacent reporters in particular cited trolling-untrained reporters' inability, or unwillingness, to recognize when trolling was afoot as one of the reasons that alt-right personalities were able to spread their messages so far and so easily; these reporters were, as one technology and culture editor lamented, "totally unprepared to talk to someone who could reach that level of selling a line," particularly when the line was half-ironic to begin with.

This problem was most glaring when reporters without troll training would be assigned to write stories about 4chan or other "real life trolls." Jason Koebler, editor-in-chief at *Motherboard*, underscored the impact of not having a baseline familiarity with trolling subculture, and yet trying to write about it anyway. Because these reporters didn't know, or didn't care, to treat every single statement with suspicion, because they often seemed dazzled by – even darkly attracted to – this new, strange world, they tended to give an inordinate amount of credence to the things the "real life trolls" said in interviews. They would then, in enormous national and global platforms, publish the antagonists' hateful, manipulative responses verbatim.

In general, this report avoids calling out specific articles as instances of harmful journalism, but a small handful of examples help illustrate the hazards of such stories, particularly those that rely on first-person profiles of bigots, abusers, and manipulators.[33] One particularly egregious case is reporter Joel Stein's 2016 *TIME* magazine cover story on trolling, titled "How Trolls Are Ruining the Internet." In the article, Stein copied and pasted two of the emails he'd exchanged with avowed neo-Nazi and serial online abuser Andrew Auernheimer (described by Stein as "probably the biggest troll in history"), who had demanded payment in exchange for an interview. "That's when one of us started trolling the other, though I'm not sure which," Stein stated in the article. This "trolling" culminated in Auernheimer's final email to Stein, in which the neo-Nazi – to paraphrase – declared that Jews deserved to be murdered (he used the phrase "you people" in the email itself, but the violently bigoted implication was clear; later, in a blog post Stein also quoted in his article, Auernheimer discussed the emails and referred specifically to *TIME*'s "Jew wallets"). "For a guy who doesn't want to be interviewed for free," Stein wrote in his follow-up message to Auernheimer, "You're giving me a lot of good quotes!" Stein's framing of neo-Nazi hate-mongering, explicitly, in his own article, as "good quotes" epitomizes the dangers of reporting on "real life trolls." Even if a particular article takes an overall condemnatory tone toward its subject, as does Stein's, the manipulators' messages are still amplified to a national or global audience, and the manipulators themselves still get exactly what they want—lulzy attention (lulzy for the antagonists anyway), greater recruitment power, and perhaps most of all, to be taken seriously by the wider public.

INTERNET LITERACY AND AMPLIFICATION: A FORESHADOWING

As illustrated by the 4chan case study, reporters' internet literacies greatly impacted how the alt-right narrative unfolded. These literacies, in turn, had a great deal to do with who the reporters were: where they were coming from, what they had experienced online and off, and what, as a result, they felt they needed to take seriously. As Part Two will address in greater detail, each of these variables – particularly related to reporters' raced, classed, and gendered identities – directly influenced the kinds of stories about the alt-right that were subsequently published.

Just as reporters' literacies played a significant role in how the alt-right narrative unfolded, so too did their audiences' literacies, another thread that will be revisited in Part Two. The assumptions reporters made about their targeted, intended audiences were probably correct, one technology section editor noted; regular readers of the internet-focused *The Daily Dot*, for example, could be expected to decode certain stories in certain ways, as could regular readers of *The New York Times* be expected to decode the kinds of stories familiar to them. What reporters covering "alt-right" antagonisms didn't anticipate, however, was the impact this reporting would have on unintended audiences; how differently articles about Pepe the Frog or shitposting more broadly would scan for *Daily Dot* readers as opposed to *New York Times* readers, to say nothing of how they'd scan for

AS THE STORIES THEMSELVES AND SOCIAL MEDIA REACTIONS TO THESE STORIES RICOCHETED ACROSS AND BETWEEN ONLINE COLLECTIVES, WHAT WAS MEANT AS TROLLING WAS REPORTED (AND REACTED TO) SERIOUSLY, AND WHAT WAS MEANT SERIOUSLY WAS REPORTED (AND REACTED TO) AS TROLLING—ALL WHILE THOSE ON THE FAR-RIGHT FRINGES LAUGHED AND CLAPPED.

Daily Stormer readers. As the stories themselves and social media reactions to these stories ricocheted across and between online collectives, what was meant as trolling was reported (and reacted to) seriously, and what was meant seriously was reported (and reacted to) as trolling—all while those on the far-right fringes laughed and clapped.

The definitional and ideological muddling that resulted from the collapsing of "troll," "white nationalist," and "neo-Nazi" (much to the delight of the latter two groups) also reveals the degree to which reporters' cultural literacies – or lack thereof – impact the news cycle, and in turn, the broader political landscape. In the 4chan case, the rhetoric, aesthetic, and overall memetic appeal of trolling subculture – which some journalists saw as internet business as usual, some saw as so egregious that the only possible corrective was a spotlight, and some saw as cynical clickbait – managed to assert an enormous influence during the election. Not directly, not in a way that advertised. Rather, these elements reshaped political reality under the radar of millions, many journalists very much included. Through reporters' subsequent public commentary—commentary that fueled, and was fueled by, the public commentary of everyday social media participants—countless citizens were opened up to far-right extremists' tried and true, even clichéd, manipulations. This outcome persisted even when the purpose of these articles and this commentary was to condemn or undermine the information being discussed.

In this way, discussions of media literacy, both at the level of everyday citizens and within the institution of journalism, dovetail with discussions of the ethics of amplification. It is problematic enough when everyday citizens help spread false, malicious, or manipulative information across social media. It is infinitely more problematic when journalists, whose work can reach millions, do the same. At least, it *can* be infinitely more problematic. It can also be a critical contribution to public discourse.

The nonstop coverage devoted to "alt-right" antagonists—whether described as trolls or neo-Nazis or anything in between—illustrates this ambivalence. However critically it might have been framed, however necessary it may have been to expose, coverage of these extremists and manipulators gifted participants with a level of visibility and legitimacy that even they could scarcely believe, as nationalist and supremacist ideology metastasized from culturally peripheral to culturally principal in just a few short months. Indeed, complimenting *The New York Times*' Alan Rappeport's (2016) report that alt-right participants were "thrilled" over the exposure afforded by Hillary Clinton's deplorables speech, *The Guardian*'s Lois Beckett (2017) highlights how pleased neo-Nazis have been with the journalists who cover them; as one white supremacist gushed, "All the things they're doing are so good." Gaby Del Valle of *The Outline* (2017) raises a similar point, noting *Breitbart* writers' glee over *BuzzFeed*'s almost nonstop coverage of alt-right personalities.

As uncomfortable and distressing as the claim might be, the feedback loop between extremists and the reporters who cover them in turn loops the discussion back to the opening of this report. Nothing has been better for alt-right trolling (whatever that word even means) than establishment journalism. I make a very similar argument in my first book,[34] which posits a reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationship between early subcultural trolls and the news media, with a particular focus on how Fox News's sensationalist coverage of Anonymous helped catalyze, and, later, helped crystallize, the emerging subculture. The most significant difference in the present media ecosystem, of course, is that the "trolls" in question are now emboldened, and often violent, white supremacists, who have shown themselves more than capable of taking their shitposting to the streets, with the Charlottesville white supremacist march being the most conspicuous, but hardly the only, example.

HOWEVER CRITICALLY IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN FRAMED, HOWEVER NECESSARY IT MAY HAVE BEEN TO EXPOSE, COVERAGE OF THESE EXTREMISTS AND MANIPULATORS GIFTED PARTICIPANTS A LEVEL OF VISIBILITY AND LEGITIMACY THAT EVEN THEY COULD SCARCELY BELIEVE, AS NATIONALIST AND SUPREMACIST IDEOLOGY METASTASIZED FROM CULTURALLY PERIPHERAL TO CULTURALLY PRINCIPAL IN JUST A FEW SHORT MONTHS.

Part Two of this report will dive more deeply into the ambivalent ethics of journalistic amplification. In addition to exploring reporters' concerns about reporting on extremist, misleading, and manipulative information, it will explore their concerns about *not* reporting on this information. It will also situate amplification tensions within broader political, economic, and socio-technological structures, and will revisit how reporters' politically situated bodies are woven, fundamentally, into the news. Part Two will thus underscore just how fraught questions of amplification really are; just how damned if we do, damned if we don't the landscape can be.

That said, ours is not a hopeless situation. By articulating exactly what is at stake, and exactly how the institution of journalism has facilitated the spread of bad information, meaningful interventions are possible. These interventions won't solve the underlying problems, particularly those related to the global rise of far-right extremism. They can, however, stymie the hijacking, rerouting, and weaponization of the news media against the news media—and against all global citizens of goodwill. They can also create a bit more space for the kinds of deep-dive cultural inquiries necessary to understanding exactly how we got here, and where we need to go next.

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ENDNOTES

1 Pepe the Frog is an anthropomorphic cartoon, originally created by Matt Furie in 2005 for his comic *Boy's Club*, which was popularized across online collectives in the mid-2000s and early aughts. Though the image was originally used to communicate a range of emotional states, it was embraced by pro-Trump communities in 2015 as a half-ironic symbol of white supremacy (in many images, Pepe was even styled as Adolph Hitler). For more on the history of the meme, including Furie's May 2017 decision to kill Pepe off due to its newfound bigoted associations, see Sanders (2017).

2 The term "alt-right" has always been something of a misnomer within mainstream circles, as it subsumes a number of disparate far-right groups, many of whom explicitly reject the label. Furthermore, as the term became more and more conspicuously tethered to white nationalist and supremacist ideologies in late 2015 and early 2016, many news outlets began scare quoting the term or choosing to employ an entirely different framing. That said, in casual conversation, "alt-right" is still common shorthand for white nationalist communities and cultural elements. The term also helps distinguish traditional conservatism, even far-right conservatism, from emergent, identity-based extremism. I have chosen to use "alt-right" sparingly, when sources used the term themselves, and in the context of the broader discursive category—always with the implied caveat that "alt-right" is imbued with white nationalist ideology.

3 The term "shitposting" posed something of a problem for outlets whose house style prohibited use of obscenity; the term was frequently placed in scare quotes or was written around euphemistically, although on Twitter it was used by journalists more freely. The term shitposting isn't just restricted to far-right antagonisms, or to behaviors within the US; see McEwan (2017) for a discussion of Australian shitposting, and how the practice serves to accrue social capital within bounded communities.

4 In the year following Trump's inauguration, particularly in the final months of 2017, more and more information has been released about Russia's interference in the 2016 election. Much of this attention has focused on "Russian trolls," social media propaganda, and disinformation operatives working out of the Kremlin-backed Internet Research Agency (IRA), colloquially described as a troll farm. As this report focuses primarily on US-based journalists' actions and attitudes in the immediate run-up to and aftermath of the 2016 presidential election, as well as the rise of stateside extremism during that same timeframe, I am sidestepping discussions of Russian trolls and troll farms like the IRA. For an account that specifically addresses Russian troll activities, see Stewart, Arif, and Starbird (2018).

5 For more on the Internet Research Agency, see Albright (2017a); for more on Russia's amplification of far-right memes, see Arnsdorf (2017); for more on how Russia used Twitter to share misinformation about the 2016 election, see Kantrowitz (2018).

6 For more on the impact of social bots on the US election, see Bessi and Ferrara (2016) and Albright (2017b).

7 For more on the history and effectiveness of the alternative media ecosystem, see Starbird (2017).

8 For more on the demographics of Trump voters, including challenges to the widespread assumption that they were overwhelmingly working class and not college educated, see Carnes and Lupu (2017). For the role whiteness played in Trump's victory, see Coates (2017).

9 The same analysis holds for establishment cable and television news networks like NBC, CNN, and the more left-leaning MSNBC; however, the Media Cloud, Berkman Klein, and Center for Civic Media study focused on print publications, as does this report.

10 For an anatomy of one far-right conspiracy theory, including evidence of Russian amplification efforts such as strategic retweets and @-mentions of right-wing media figures, see *Reveal* news' "Pizzagate: A Slice of Fake News."

11 For example, when one BuzzFeed reporter jokingly photoshopped a sex toy in the background of a photo of Trump sitting in the Oval Office (McLaran 2017), or when another reporter at *Vice* used a "prank site" to make it seem as if Trump had tweeted derisively about the band Pavement (Schonfeld 2015).

12 The term I encountered most frequently in my interviews was "establishment media," which could be seen as a positive or a negative framing, depending on how one feels about the establishment more broadly; in fact, "establishment media" is often used derisively by alternative and fringe media to undermine the credibility of mainstream reporting. I am using the term "establishment" to reflect these publications' rootedness within the media ecosystem, their historical legacies (particularly in the case of papers like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*), as well as – echoed above – their extraordinary power to amplify information across the nation and globe. I have augmented "establishment" with "center left" to acknowledge that these publications do tend to lean politically liberal, particularly related to social issues, but are more centrist than far-left progressive.

13 Again, while there is a great deal to say about cable and radio outlets, analyses of nonprint media falls outside the scope of the present study.

14 "Chan" refers to a number of message and image boards, most conspicuously 4chan, which was created in 2003 as a riff on Japan's Futuba Channel, as well as 8chan, an even more extreme version of 4chan; these boards tend to value anonymity and are home to a great deal of explicit, antagonistic, and wholly unsafe-for-work conversation and content.

15 For more on the many problems associated with the contemporary troll frame, particularly when used to describe bigoted, identity-based antagonisms, see Phillips (2016) and Phillips and Milner (2017).

16 A more general sense of the term "trolling" long predated 4chan; in an online context, its use can be traced back to the late 80s and early 90s on Usenet, an early online discussion system. As I chronicle in my book, however, until the early-mid 2000s, "troll" (or "troller") was typically used as a post hoc descriptor for problematic behaviors; "trolling" was something a person accused someone else of doing, not something a person claimed to be. For more on the early history of subcultural trolling, see Bakioglu (2008), Dibbell (2009), Knutilla (2011), Olson (2011), Bernstein et al. (2011) and Auerbach (2012).

17 For more on the history and political impact of Gamergate, see Chess and Shaw (2015).

18 In her analysis of Anonymous' emergence as a politically engaged, global activist force, Coleman (2015) discusses how surprising, even puzzling, this outcome was. How did Anonymous, she asks, which was forged in "the terrifying fires of trolling" (51), and was steeped in the most racist, misogynist, and violently aggressive outcroppings of early 4chan, manage to take such a hard left turn? This mystery has only deepened in the Trump era, as the same subcultural stock that gave rise to left-leaning, activist Anonymous has also given rise to violently racist, far-right extremism. For more on the strange political bifurcation(s) that have taken place within the troll space, see Phillips, Beyer, and Coleman (2017).

19 For more on the history of the Obama/Joker/Socialist meme, see Phillips (2009).

20 For a more detailed account of this process, see my chapter "The Lulz Are Dead, Long Live the Lulz: From Subculture to Mainstream" (2015,137–152).

21 For an analysis of the logics animating memetic spread, as well as many of the visual and vernacular markers of memes emerging from 4chan, see Ryan M. Milner's (2016) *The World Made Meme*.

22 In a forthcoming essay reflecting on memetic remix in the Trump era, Milner (2018) explores the tension between the fun, creative aspects of meme culture and its more destructive contours ("meme culture" is also sometimes described, nebulously, as "internet culture," a universalizing elision Milner critiques). Popular memes originating on sites like 4chan or Reddit may achieve a family-friendly veneer, or at least mainstream acceptance, through subsequent remixes, reposts, and fading memories of where the meme came from. That said, these memes, like so many aspects of meme culture/"internet culture," contain traces of, or have simply run parallel to, violent and dehumanizing antagonisms. This trace, Milner argues, is akin to an illness in the body, or a sour note in a song. In other words, while meme culture – and online remix more broadly – is worth celebrating for many reasons, the connections back to spaces like 4chan should give researchers and everyday participants considerable pause.

23 Trolls' reactions to mass shootings are the most egregious in this regard; over the years, subcultural, self-identifying trolls developed what can only be described as a tragedy script, which participants used to forward iterations of the same stale manipulations and memes. Getting reporters to tie the shooter to 4chan, floating the name "Sam Hyde" as the suspect, and falsely identifying survivors to maximize confusion have, in turn, become ritualized behaviors that reporters ritually parrot (even as the term "troll" has massively shifted in

meaning). When I am contacted by reporters for comment on these behaviors (part of my own macabre ritual), I give the same warning I have given, over and over, for the better part of a decade, and send links to similar stories written in the wake of similar shootings—information the reporters often minimize or outright omit from their stories, all but ensuring that the cycle will begin anew, again, the next time around.

24 Several internet culture reporters formerly of publications like *Gawker* and *The Daily Dot* helped me refine the "troll adjacent" category.

25 *Gawker*'s hard-line stance against 4chan further calcified during 2014's Gamergate hate and harassment campaign. As wave after wave of 4chan- and 8chan-affiliated harassers antagonized *Gawker*'s reporters for having planted a social justice flag, Gawker's reporters antagonized right back. Most conspicuously, *Gawker* writer Sam Biddle tweeted to "Bring back bullying" in response to the "nerds" at the heart of Gamergate. This prompted a ferocious social media response, a great deal of coverage across the political spectrum, and a follow-up from *Gawker* Editor-in-Chief Max Read (2014), who described the overall Gamergate campaign as a "small, contemptible crusade," and participants as "dishonest fascists" and "an ill-informed mob of alienated and resentful video game-playing teenagers and young men." In this piece and others that followed it, *Gawker* thus positioned itself – according to another former *Gawker* editor – as a publication fighting a culture war, not just reporting on one.

26 Even academic researchers were impacted by this editorial approach. Starting in 2010, Gawker published a number of snarky takes on scholarship on trolling and meme cultures (some of mine included), often employing less than generous framings of the research; we weren't critical enough of trolls, the argument typically went, stemming from the ambivalence tightrope that so much early research had to navigate.

27 It is certainly not the case that memetic play online is restricted to white participants; for example, memes and other expressive digital practices suffuse the discursive identity space of Black Twitter (see Brock 2016). Here I am referring to folkloric traditions and communities steeped in 4chan's – very particularly raced, gendered, and classed – influence.

28 "Dank meme" is an ironic term indicating a kind of delight in overplayed, absurdist, and otherwise sub-par memes.

29 For more on how hate groups embraced the early web, see Schneider (1995); for more on the white supremacist site *Stormfront*'s online recruitment and propaganda in the late 1990s, see Backover (1999); for more on how YouTube was immediately embraced by white supremacist groups in the aughts, see Mock (2007).

30 *The Daily Stormer* was founded in 2013 by Andrew Anglin, then in his late twenties, who'd spent a great deal of time on 4chan as a teenager; in an interview with *The Atlantic*'s Luke O'Brien (2017), he declared that "4chan was more influential on me than anything."

31 Complicating this picture, Gamergate precipitated a mass exodus from 4chan to the even more extremist 8chan when 4chan's administrators began deleting threads that mentioned Gamergate. Their reasoning, explained site founder Christopher "moot" Poole in an announcement to the site (see "Gamer Gate - moot Responds"), was that Gamergate threads violated site policies against posting personal information, i.e. doxing, and organizing raids. The ban included threads on /pol/, prompting the creation of a /pol/ mirror on 8chan. Echoing the above point, it is not possible to know how many (or if any) of the users who left 4chan in 2014 returned in 2015.

32 A common example of this kind of illusion, upon which I base the troll/wolf visual metaphor, is that of a rabbit and a duck. Other examples include images that appear as a young woman from one angle and a much older woman from another (often described pejoratively as an "old hag" or witch). In presenting this metaphor, I am also drawing inspiration from the work of Tara McPherson (2003), whose critique of the black/white binary in the cultural imagery of the American South includes a discussion of sight-limiting "lenticular logic." In illustrating this concept, McPherson discusses a 3D postcard of the film *Gone with the Wind*, which shifts between images of a white woman wearing a hoopskirt standing in front of a large antebellum plantation house, and a racist image of a black "mammy" character. By restricting viewers' eyes to one image at a time, McPherson argues, the postcard obscures the tangled nature of race, class, and gender within a particular bounded space and time.

33 In Part Two of the report, I explain in more detail my choice to avoid critiques of specific articles and

specific journalists; the basic explanation is that not knowing the circumstances behind the article's publication (specifically, what editorial choices were made by whom) compromises my ability to present a fair and accurate critique. This article, for which I was interviewed, is one of the rare exceptions, as Stein's explicit framing of violent racism as being good for his story provides rare front-stage insight into an editorial calculous that typically only occurs backstage (i.e., not within view of the story's readers.

34 Specifically, see my chapter "The House That Fox Built: Anonymous, Spectacle, and Cycles of Amplification (pp. 51-70), Phillips 2015b.

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The Oxygen of Amplification

Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators Online

By Whitney Phillips

Data&Society

PART 2

"At a Certain Point You Have To Realize That You're Promoting Them":

The Ambivalence of Journalistic Amplification

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Author: Whitney Phillips; PhD 2012, English with an emphasis on folklore, University of Oregon

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Access the full report at http://datasociety.net/output/oxygen-of-amplification/

Journalists, particularly those assigned to politics and technology beats, were presented with a unique challenge before, during, and after the 2016 US presidential election. The bigoted, dehumanizing, and manipulative messages emanating from extremist corners of the internet were impossible, and maybe even unethical, to ignore. At the same time, news coverage of those messages helped make the messages, and their messengers, much more visible than they would have been otherwise, even when the reporting took an explicitly critical stance. Part One presented journalists' reflections on this tension. Its primary case study was the 4chan connection case, which illustrates how the rhetoric and aesthetic of early trolling subculture, catalyzed through journalistic amplification, helped shape the emergence of the early alt-right news narrative.

Part Two of the report dives more deeply into the fundamental ambivalence of amplification. It begins with reporters' own calculations about giving oxygen to "polluted information" (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017). It then shows how this calculus isn't solely a matter of personal ethics or experience. Rather, it reflects a variety of political-economic, techno-cultural, and ideological forces that these reporters say direct, or at least strongly influence, the kinds of editorial choices they are able to make. As will become apparent, these tangled roots extend so far down into the soil, and play such a significant role in how the news is produced, that it is simply not possible to identify best practices for reporting on harmful, bigoted, or other forms of manipulative content without first taking into account these broader structures and systems. Individual trees can't be cleaved from the broader, wilder forest.

ON WEIGHING THEIR OPTIONS

All of the reporters interviewed for this project acknowledged, and most expressed deep concern, about the impact of publicizing polluted or potentially damaging information. Just as many reporters expressed deep concern about the impact of *not* publicizing such information. As a result, responses to the question "to amplify or not to amplify" often contained a baked-in ambivalence; as soon as the reporter finished listing the dangers of amplification, they would then explain the dangers of doing nothing. The following is a breakdown of respondents' most common concerns about the risks of either option.

- **Amplification of harmful, polluted, or false information increases the likelihood, and raises the stakes, of harassment.** Even when a story presents positive coverage of a person or group, *The Verge*'s Adi Robertson explained, amplification "paints a target on people's back," which she says becomes even riskier when the people in question are already being harassed or are members of vulnerable populations.

- **Amplification increases the likelihood that similar disinformation and harassment tactics will be used in the future**. "When you know it will reliably get sucked up into the machine," *The Washington Post*'s digital culture reporter Abby Ohlheiser observed, "It's easy to see how someone driven by the desire to cause chaos or gain attention might be motivated to wash, rinse, and repeat the same hoaxes and tricks over and over again."

- **Amplification makes particular stories, communities, and bad actors bigger – more visible, more influential – than they would have been otherwise**. As one reporter noted, manipulations framing extremists as a "silent majority" are dangerous because they give "the illusion of overwhelming support for abusive, racist, nondemocratic ideology and perspectives."

- **Amplification makes it very difficult, if not impossible, *not* to benefit those looking to manipulate journalists.** The main issue, Max Read of *New York Magazine* said, is that these manipulators, particularly high-profile pushers of far-right extremism and conspiracy theories, are "so deeply disingenuous, and so completely uninterested in giving you any answer beyond the one that services their needs at that exact moment, that you are quite possibly doing your reader a disservice just by reporting on them."

- **Amplification risks normalizing and desensitizing people to harmful views.** As one technology editor offered as a personal example, the "language of violence" they encounter every day through their reporting has desensitized them to such an extent that they sometimes fail to register violent threats, even when these threats are directed at them personally or their newsroom more broadly.

- **Amplification risks lending credence to false narratives.** One *BuzzFeed* reporter lamented that reporting "just gives something more growth, in front of more eyeballs." Even worse, they said, "The preemptive debunk [in which the story hasn't yet reached critical mass] does even more damage, because it suggests that something at the very least dignifies a response." These reporters' concerns are echoed by a corpus of psychological research about the stickiness of repetition, even in cases of attempted debunking (see Begg, Anas, and Farinacci 1992; Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Seifert, et al. 2012).

- **Amplification relinquishes control of the narrative to bad actors and bad information.** By publishing stories about sensitive or potentially misleading information, one editor of a technology section underscored, citing the Pizzagate conspiracy[1], reporters could set in motion even worse harassment or manipulation campaigns.

- **Amplification privileges certain kinds of personalities and information.** The result, Adi Robertson explained, is to essentially stack the algorithmic deck with bad or limited perspectives, making it more difficult to find other (more accurate, more relevant, more important) stories.

- **Amplification flattens more complicated and contested conversations.** Multiple reporters expressed concern that discussions of systemic racial injustice and everyday instances of white supremacy during the election had been supplanted by more sensationalist, neon-flashing-light coverage of individual neo-Nazis.

On the other hand, not covering stories with false, dehumanizing, or manipulative elements can be just as problematic.

- **Not amplifying harmful, polluted, or false information allows for the possibility that worse information will take its place.** Max Read explained that this is particularly dangerous for people who aren't familiar with online manipulators, and who would therefore be most inclined to accept their misleading claims as plausible.

THE LESSON OF HISTORY SUGGESTS THAT IF YOU LET FAR-RIGHT GROUPS HAVE THE STREETS TO THEMSELVES, THEY DON'T JUST GO HOME BECAUSE THERE'S NO ONE TO FIGHT. THEY'LL FIND SOMEONE TO FIGHT, SOMEONE TO BEAT UP. ANY UNCONTESTED SPACE, THEY'LL TAKE OVER."

- **Not amplifying means that someone else (in your newsroom, in another newsroom) will get to the story first, and maybe get it wrong.** Of the impulse to preemptively volunteer for a problematic story rather than waiting for a less experienced or internet-cultures[2] savvy colleague to get the assignment, one staff writer at a large national publication explained that while individual reporters might draw from a reserve of defenses and best practices, these defenses and best practices might not be uniform throughout the newsroom. Colleagues, in short, can be as much of a concern as competitors.

- **Not amplifying risks missing an opportunity to educate the public.** "You need to be able to issue correctives to bad and dangerous information, and instances of bad reporting," *Motherboard*'s Emanuel Maiberg argued.

- **Not amplifying specific instances of abuse, harm, or manipulation risks reducing these concepts to clinical abstraction.** "By not addressing the full impact of harassment," *BuzzFeed* senior reporter Lam Vo explained, "You can lose sight of the human toll, and the impact it has on people's lives."

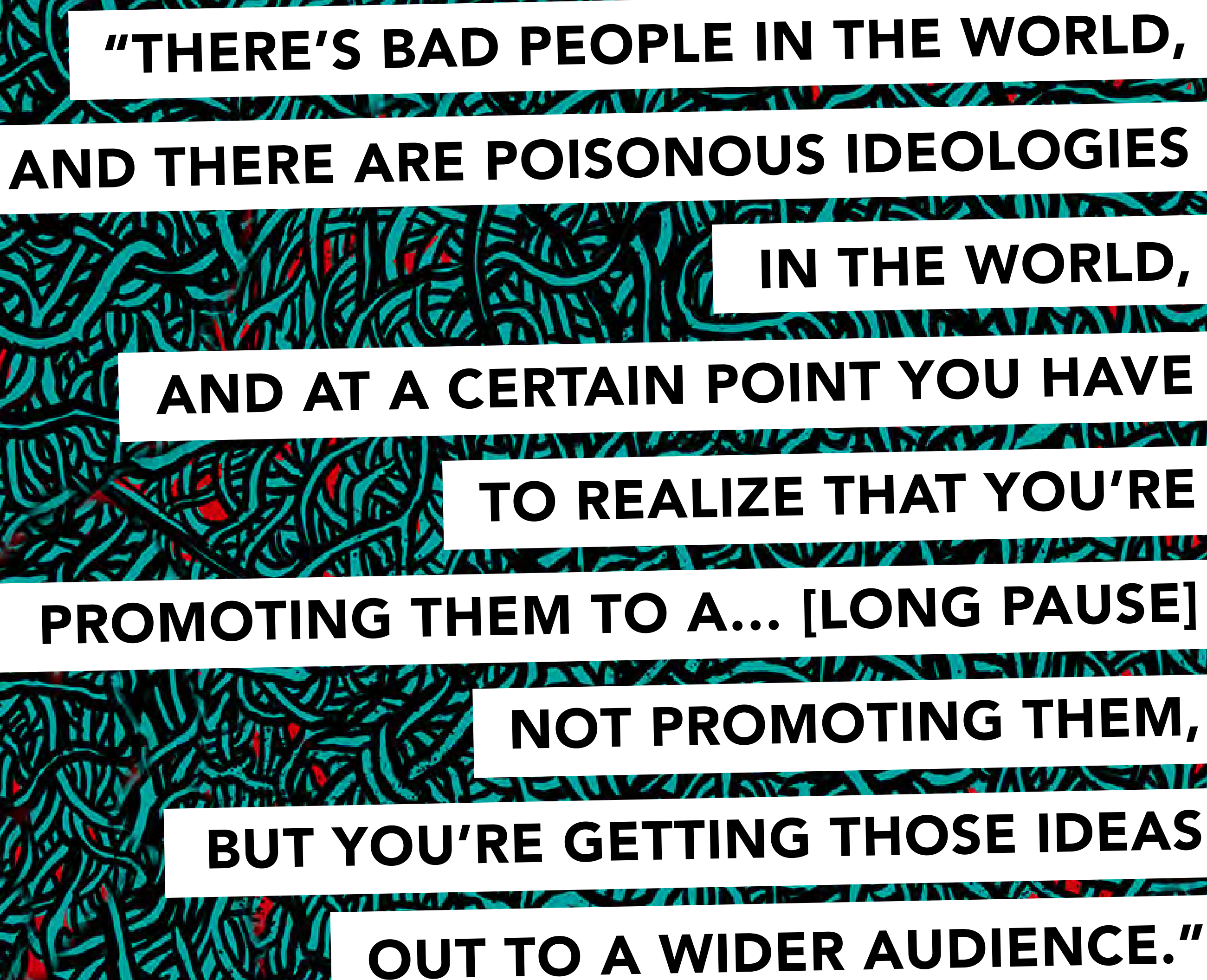
- **Not amplifying allows poisonous ideology to flourish and cedes cultural territory to bigots and manipulators.** A politics reporter at a global outlet noted that "The argument from a lot of editors and reporters is that, because all these people want is

attention, then they'll leave; if there's no attention, and no counterprotestors, they'll just stand around in the park for a bit, then leave. The lesson of history suggests that if you let far-right groups have the streets to themselves, they don't just go home because there's no one to fight. They'll find someone to fight, someone to beat up. Any uncontested space, they'll take over."

- **Not amplifying can inadvertently contribute to the process of radicalization.** As Emma Grey Ellis of *Wired* explained, when online conversation reaches a certain level of toxicity, you have to start moderating content. But, she says, if you take away a person's microphone, you risk making them angrier and even more likely to lash out. You also risk further severing their connection to the outside world, to education and community, and to the possibility of future self-reflection. "That sends them to even worse places," she said. "That seems like a no-winner."

- **Not amplifying doesn't mean that the issue, whatever it is, will go away.** For Emanuel Maiberg, this is precisely what happened during the Gamergate hate and harassment campaign. "Nobody in videogames planted a flag," he said, and that just made the underlying problem of inequality, and the resulting harassment of female games designers and journalists, much worse. "At a certain point, choosing to step away and not amplify isn't just unfeasible, it becomes irresponsible . . . By not addressing something, you are making a political statement."

One alt-right beat reporter for a national outlet, who rejected the "troll" frame for bad actors (I introduced this reporter in Part One) perfectly summarized the amplification tension when he noted that the institution of journalism is synonymous with amplification. "There's no way around that," he said. Nor is there any way around the fact that "there's bad people in the world, and there are poisonous ideologies in the world, and at a certain point you have to realize that you're promoting them to a . . . [long pause] not promoting them, but you're getting those ideas out to a wider audience." For him, the goal of getting those ideas out to a wider audience is targeted resistance; that people can't push back against the monsters they don't know are there. But in shining that spotlight, bigots' messages spread even further, with the potential for further recruitment, further unpredictable engagement, and further radicalization. Both options are just as likely, and just as vexing, in every case.


"THERE'S BAD PEOPLE IN THE WORLD,
AND THERE ARE POISONOUS IDEOLOGIES
IN THE WORLD,
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STRUCTURAL COMPLICATIONS

As has long been the case in journalism, but particularly as the information landscape has shifted toward networked sharing, the question "to cover or not to cover" isn't just a personal conundrum. It also hinges on a number of external forces.

The most immediate of these is what happens within reporters' own newsrooms, as they are often asked to frame stories in ways that run counter to their own instincts or ethics. Indeed, over the years, including during the data collection period for this project, I have had a number of conversations with reporters in which they admit to wishing they could, for example, avoid use of the word "troll" when describing online abuse and harassment. However, the word "troll" guarantees engagement, so even when the reporter chooses not to use it, their editors often slap trolling into the headline as a clickbait insurance policy. In other cases, reporters have lamented having to cover hoaxes or other manipulation campaigns, as doing so only gives the manipulators what they want and increases the likelihood that the same tactics will be used again in the future. But, many of them have said (sometimes fighting back a sigh), this is the story they've been assigned to write.

The fact that what gets covered isn't always what journalists *want* to cover is precisely why I have chosen, with a few notable exceptions (one of which I discussed in Part One), not to include pointed critiques of individual stories or reporters. Without knowing the full circumstances behind a story's publication – including what editorial calls were made by whom – it is difficult to levy accurate criticism. This section will focus, instead, on the broader forces that simultaneously catalyze the spread of bad information and stymie opportunities for ethical intervention, both at the personal and institutional level. Here I identify four broad categories of structural challenges. The first two align with existing media critiques, particularly of the commercialization of the news media. The last two add novel tangles to the discourse and push the conversation well past the line where journalism is presumed to end.

The Tyranny of Analytics

First, and perhaps most obviously, journalism is supported by advertising. This fact underscores a corpus of media-studies scholarship spanning decades. Neil Postman's foundational *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), which shows how the push for ratings and ad revenue fused the news media with entertainment media, provides one prominent example. Robert W. McChesney's equally foundational *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* (1999), which illustrates the impact of ad-supported media on democracy, provides another.

In terms of the basic underlying economics, little has changed since Postman and McChesney (along with many others writing in a pre-social media context) first published these critiques. It's not just that editors are under enormous pressures to meet readership quotas to placate their publication's owners; it's that publications' owners are under enormous pressures to find ways to return on their corporate backers' investments. What distinguishes the pre- and post-social media landscape is that now, more media are pouring more information into the public sphere with more pressure to capture the greatest possible share of the attention economy. Metrics have always mattered. But in the

social media age, the measurability of content, in the form of traffic, clicks, and likes, has tethered editorial strategy to analytics like never before.[3]

Speaking to this overall system, *BuzzFeed* senior reporter Lam Vo argued that journalism's obsession with numbers (of readers, page views, and other forms of audience engagement) produces a "sensationalist outrage industry" subject to the "tyranny of the loudest." In such a system, Vo stated, the things that are most easily measured – namely knee-jerk responses, and often explicitly negative ones – are privileged over less measurable outcomes, like whether or not an article made a person think, or was culturally important.

Digital anthropologist and author Rahaf Harfoush, who has written for outlets like *The Daily Dot*, *Wired*, and *Fast Company*, further underscored the implications of analytics-based editorial models. As she explained, our present environment of highly sensationalist, incessant viral breaking news "works directly against the measured and responsible information creation that we need to cultivate today." Similarly, Emma Green, staff writer at *The Atlantic*, noted that the market demand for the most extreme editorial framings possible throws journalism into a perpetual emergency mode, hardens language and ideology so thoroughly that disagreement becomes an act of war, and supplants carefully sourced nuance with shouted hot takes.

These screaming matches, in turn, are given longer shelf life (and are further commoditized) by corporate culture's second layer of influence on the news: the preponderance of stories about the internet, particularly in the form of tweet roundups or aggregations of previously published content. Such stories can often be boiled down to the assertion "here's what people on the internet are mad about today." *Libération*'s

THINGS TRAVELING TOO FAR, TOO FAST, WITH TOO MUCH EMOTIONAL URGENCY, IS EXACTLY THE POINT. IN SUCH AN ENVIRONMENT, THE SPREAD OF SENSATIONALIST, ANTAGONISTIC, OR OTHERWISE MANIPULATIVE INFORMATION ISN'T A SURPRISE. IT'S A TRIED-AND-TRUE BUSINESS STRATEGY, WITH NEWLY HEIGHTENED STAKES.

Guillaume Gendron, describing what he called the "trolling investigation niche" of stories that emerged in France before their 2017 election, explained the economic incentive driving this kind of reporting. "Investigative reporting is the most expensive. [Stories about the internet are] cheap. You can do it from your computer, you don't have to interview anyone, you don't really have to fact-check because it's all anonymous sources, and because you do print screen capture, you have the proof, even if when you think about it, it's not really proof because you don't know who posted it, you don't know if the person posted it to trick you." Another editor admitted that there's "a lot of temptation to

do stories about something that's getting a lot of attention online because what the hell, it's low cost to do it, it'll be a quick write-up, it'll get some traffic. There's always a sort of implicit justification in there, that if you do some of these stories, get the traffic at a low cost, then that's what subsidizes you to do real journalism." This "necessary evil," the editor mused, "is also where newsworthiness becomes a euphemism for traffic."

Of course, these economic mechanisms don't happen in a vacuum. When reporters and editors talk about traffic, they are implicitly talking about their audience, and what those audiences choose to click. "We are giving people what they want," Adi Robertson explained. "And what they want is to gawk at terrible things." One editor of a technology section agreed, sighing that people feed themselves candy all day, and that makes it more difficult to sell quiet, reflective thought pieces, or pieces that don't crassly employ sensationalist framings. This editor wasn't the only person to use a food metaphor disparagingly. "It's so easy to see what people care about when you have access to site analytics," another editor stated. "People like to say they're reading deep journalism, investigative stories, and yes some of those do very well, but for the most part, people are interested in the junk food."

Conversations about readers' preferences are complicated by the algorithms that advertise stories to readers, which essentially provide menu options; while the equivalent of a lightly dressed kale salad might be somewhere on that menu, what tends to float to the top is rarely the healthiest option. As Wikimedia harassment researcher and *BuzzFeed* research fellow Caroline Sinders observes, "Algorithms tell us what's trending, which may be an organic pattern [initially] but becomes artificial as soon as the pattern is publicized and becomes a panic. This creates false patterns. Is it a naturally occurring trend? Or a botnet attack? Is it because the alt-right is really doing something? Or because people need eyes on their websites so they can make money?" The entire menu can be rigged, making people's choices not always – at least not exclusively – an expression of organic interest.[4]

In short, the emphasis on quantifiable metrics – the fact that the business of the news hinges on clicks and likes – stacks the news cycle with stories most likely to generate the highest level of engagement possible, across as many platforms as possible. Things traveling too far, too fast, with too much emotional urgency, is exactly the point. In such an environment, the spread of sensationalistic, antagonistic, or otherwise manipulative information isn't a surprise. It's a tried-and-true business strategy, with newly heightened stakes.

The Information Imperative

Journalism is guided by the basic tenet to publish, and therefore to spread, newsworthy information. Stories deemed relevant to the public interest are therefore marked by what can be described as an information imperative: the norms of journalism dictate that these stories must be amplified (a norm reflected by *The New York Times*' motto, "All the News That's Fit to Print"). While the information imperative serves a critical democratic function, it can also be harnessed as a tool of manipulation, a point exacerbated by the ubiquity of social media. According to respondents, two primary factors complicating the information imperative in digital environments are the prevalence of "iterative reporting" and the frequent inclusion of false equivalencies in news reports, particularly in the US.

BY REPEATEDLY LINKING TO THE SAME STORY OR SIMILAR STORIES WITHIN A NETWORK OF SITES, MISLEADING, FALSE, AND MANIPULATIVE MESSAGES ARE REINFORCED.

Regarding iterative reporting, professor and freelance reporter Oliver Lee Bateman notes – echoing the "clickbait subsidy" reporter quoted in the previous section – that many stories get covered because they have already been covered. For-profit outlets are, of course, driven by a desire to capitalize on clicks. Consequently, if another story at another outlet has already achieved that objective, it makes sense to jump on the news cycle bandwagon, both for coattails-clicks and in the effort to keep pace with what's trending.

Not every platform is equally guilty of this impulse. *Motherboard* Editor-In-Chief Jason Koebler emphasized that their core mission has been to focus on original reporting, not to regurgitate existing stories. Still, even the most original content can get sucked up into the misleading iterations of other outlets; Koebler noted that one of their scoops might be repackaged, sensationalized, or outright misrepresented (sometimes purposefully, sometimes because of a basic misunderstanding of the article) three or four times for different audiences. Like a game of telephone, he said.

Also like a game of telephone, the information game of the news is very easy to hack; manipulators looking to sow discord or confusion only need to convince one reporter at one outlet of a particular false narrative for that narrative to spread like wildfire.[5] Whether problematic information enters the news cycle as a result of good-faith mistakes, bad-faith sloppiness, or targeted manipulations by bad actors, the underlying mechanism aligns with "network propaganda" as described by the Media Cloud, Berkman Klein, and Center for Civic Media report on the 2016 election (Faris, Roberts, and Etling, et al.). By repeatedly linking to the same story or similar stories within a network of sites, misleading, false, and manipulative messages are reinforced. This reinforcement lends the story credence, aids recall, and makes the story – even if totally false – all the stickier once loosed within mainstream channels.

Besides helping explain how bad information can masquerade as legitimate information, the iterative nature of the news also provides a pathway for minor stories (which of course can also align with the false plants described above) to enter national prominence. As *The New York Times*' technology writer Farhad Manjoo explained, stories that enter the media ecosystem through publications with very low bars of newsworthiness, and very little editorial oversight, can filter all the way up to publications like the *Times*. In short, major coverage can be triggered – and easily gamed – by seeding information in smaller outlets first.

This process isn't just applicable to individual stories; it applies to entire genres. Regarding the "trolling investigation niche" stories that emerged during the 2017 French election, *Libération*'s Guillaume Gendron noted that these stories didn't accurately reflect

online activities in France. He suggested that they were, instead, essentially imports of stories published by large prestige outlets in the US. Trolling investigation stories were compelling and clickbaity, Gendron noted, easily fit into broader narratives about the French election, and as previously discussed, were cheap and easy to produce. The fact that there *wasn't* a large community of French trolls apparently didn't matter to the unfolding narrative. The French trolls that did exist were emboldened (or even outright created as a new conceptual category), a wave of American trolls were attracted to the "Pepe Le Pen" cause (a riff on the "Pepe the Frog" meme), and the highly clickable narrative that shitposting trolls had global reach was spuriously reinforced.

According to many respondents, the news media's information imperative is also driven by the push to provide equal coverage to both sides of a conflict, no matter the nature or truth-value of the claims being made, or the motivations of those involved. This impulse goes above and beyond the established journalistic norm of reporting on both sides of a story, described by several reporters as "both sides-ism." It represents, instead, "both sides-ism" on steroids, as positions that are false, manipulative, dehumanizing, and in many cases not worth reporting at all, are given an equal platform to positions that are factually true, relevant to the public interest, and unquestionably newsworthy. Rather than helping achieve fair and balanced reporting, as is ostensibly the goal, reporting on polluted information simply because it is opposed to accurate information filters false and manipulative positions into the hyper-networked media ecosystem. As this ecosystem is simultaneously governed by iterative reporting, stories featuring extremism, along with other forms of dis- and misinformation, exponentially increase the likelihood that the polluted elements of a story will, in turn, be reported again and again, like a pinball that explodes into more pinballs the second it touches a solid object.

Some reporters described false equivalency reporting as a good-faith, if overcompensatory, impulse. One editor of a business publication suggested that establishment journalists, who often lean politically left, feel compelled to include contrarian, conservative

"IN THE UK," ONE US-BASED REPORTER FOR THE GUARDIAN EXPLAINED, "PEOPLE DON'T PUSSYFOOT AROUND WHETHER SOMETHING IS A FACT OR NOT, AND THOSE FACTS DON'T GET SWEPT UP INTO CULTURE WARS LIKE THEY DO HERE. THEY'RE JUST FACTS."

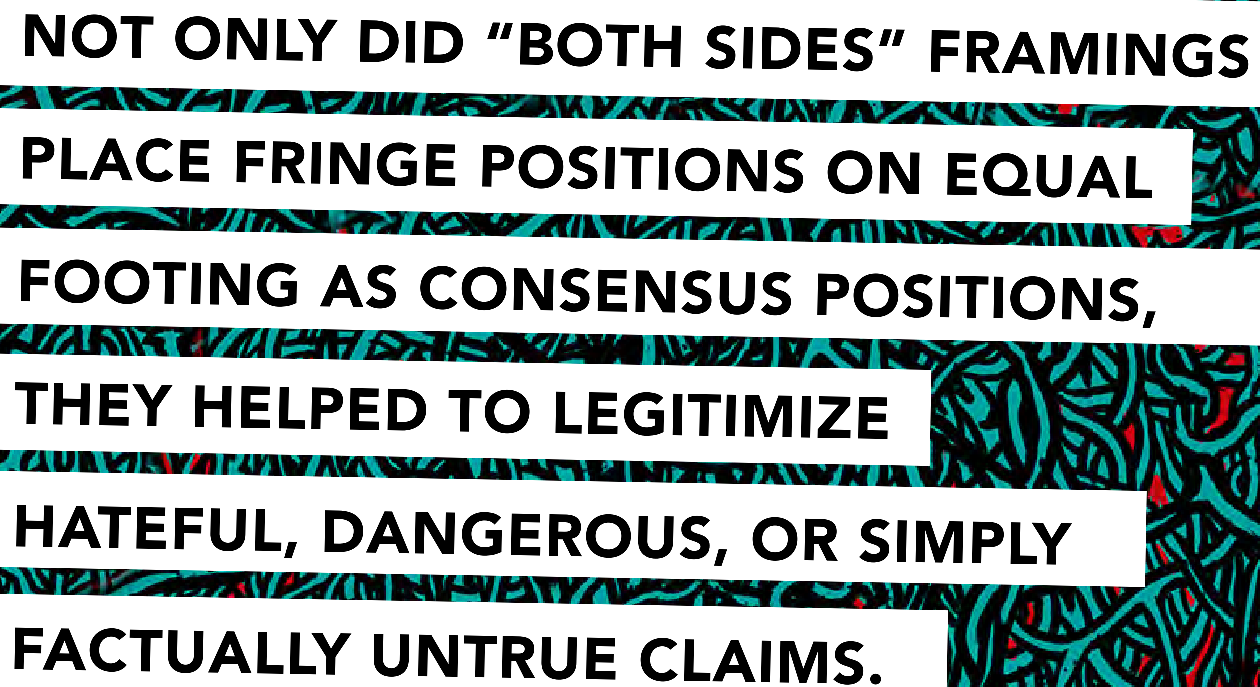
perspectives to balance out their liberal politics. The idea is this, he said: if we include the other side, no one can accuse us of being biased ("You still will be," the editor quipped, after a pause). Others connected the impulse to the professional norms of journalism itself, specifically to the privileging of journalistic objectivity and idealized notions of reporters having a clinical "view from nowhere"—despite the fact that such a thing has never existed.[6]

As more than one reporter asserted, this push for impartiality holds particular sway in the US. "In the UK," one US-based reporter for The Guardian explained, "people don't pussyfoot around whether something is a fact or not, and those facts don't get swept up into culture wars like they do here. They're just facts." In the US, in contrast, facts are often framed as one side to a story, with a contrary side included as a counterpoint—a point of great consternation for reporters. As one American entertainment section editor explained, "I honestly think it's a bastardization of what a nonbiased media is supposed to achieve. It's like making a photocopy of a photocopy of a photocopy." She said that when journalism first emerged as a profession, the goal was to present facts and help people understand the value of those facts. Over time, however, presenting the facts transformed into "inviting talking heads to speak their piece." As a result, this reporter continued, "Now people think that nonbiased reporting means everyone gets equal time, regardless of the factual nature of their claims. Give me my fair airtime; this is Donald Trump in a nutshell."

In the case of far-right antagonisms during the election, the tendency for journalists in the US to apply "both sides," false-equivalency frames to far-right extremism had an even more nefarious implication, one underscored by a number of the reporters I interviewed: normalizing that extremism. Not only did "both sides" framings place fringe positions on equal footing as consensus positions, they helped to legitimize hateful, dangerous, or simply factually untrue claims. The opinion, for example, that it's perfectly acceptable to be a flag-waving white supremacist is not the same as the fact that white supremacy poses a direct threat to public health, and to democracy as a whole. And yet that was a false parallel too many journalists entertained during the election, allowing far-right extremism to breeze into the public square not as an abomination, but as the moral and political equivalent of *not* being a flag-waving white supremacist.

It is at this point that discourses of "both sides-ism" (particularly its extreme articulations) butt up against discourses of free speech, or at least, a particular construction of free speech. As black entrepreneur, author, technology analyst, and founder of Stop Online Violence Against Women (SOVAW) Shireen Mitchell noted, "free speech" defenses are most commonly used to justify white people's hateful speech against communities of color; rarely are similar kinds of defenses proffered to protect black or brown speech.[7] How these discourses play out – and what groups these discourses privilege – in turn influence the stories that are subsequently published. Journalism ethicist Kathleen Culver underscored this point when she explained how deeply free speech discourses are woven into the overall newsworthiness calculus. Particularly when it comes to reporting on hate speech, the question in newsrooms tends to be whether or not someone *can* say something, not whether or not they *should*.

Max Read of *New York Magazine* added an additional layer to this point when he noted that "There's this sense of everything has to be included all the time because that's what free speech is, and if you're not including it you're censoring people, which is even worse than whatever the possible speech might have been." The presumption that all speech on the internet must be heard, regardless of what that speech might end up doing to the people who hear it, thus aligns with the "libertarian, content-neutral ethos" that legal and technology scholar Nabiha Syed (2017) says characterizes dominant discourses surrounding speech online. Like the early hacker ethic that "information wants to be


NOT ONLY DID "BOTH SIDES" FRAMINGS
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HATEFUL, DANGEROUS, OR SIMPLY
FACTUALLY UNTRUE CLAIMS.

free," regardless of what kind of information it might be, the idea that all online speech is valuable speech simply because it has been spoken discourages critical assessment of the relative benefit and harm of different speech acts. If all speech is fundamentally equivalent, what purpose would restraint or moderation serve *other* than censorship?

Journalists' concerns over censorship, or at least, concerns over the *accusation* of censorship, stem from yet another factor catalyzing the information imperative: the fact that social media has created infinitely more gates for information to pass through, and considerably fewer gatekeepers to vet what makes it in. There are still institutional gates, of course, and many of them remain formidable. But journalists are no longer unique in their ability to publicize information to a broad audience. To the contrary, they are often forced to play catch-up with the hundreds of millions of average citizens who are perfectly capable of producing their own news. These intermingled audiences of citizen-produced media, in turn, don't just have the ability to see much of what isn't being covered by mainstream organizations. They also have the tools needed to raise hell in response.[8]

The differences between the pre- and post-digital news landscapes are especially striking when considering how journalists covered far-right extremism in the 1970s and 80s. Before social media, before stand-alone websites, before BBS systems, local white supremacist groups spread their messages using all the media they had at their disposal, including printed fliers, cartoons, and other self-published materials. While these messages were every bit as incendiary as content posted to *Stormfront* in the early 90s or *The Daily Stormer* today, circulation was typically restricted to insular, and often geographically bounded, groups. Whether or not the groups received broader attention for their exploits hinged almost entirely on whether journalists were inclined to cover them. Many journalists were not. As Matt Carroll, formerly of *The Boston Globe* and now at Northeastern University explained, journalists in the 70s and 80s wouldn't just *not* report on hate groups. They would take steps to actively marginalize them. It was understood, Carroll continued, that these people and their beliefs were dangerous, and not worth the risk of reporting. Speaking to his own newsroom, Carroll speculated that this choice likely stemmed from the fact that reporters then were closer in time and in memory to the horrors of the Holocaust, as well as lynchings in the American South—unlike many present-day reporters, who don't draw from embodied knowledge of these events and therefore tend to be more abstract in their framings, particularly around anti-Semitism.[9]

Former Charlotte News reporter and current University of Kansas journalism professor Barbara Barnett corroborated Carroll's framing. She recalled that when she was sent to cover North Carolina Klan rallies in the late 1970s and early 80s, she would only report the basic facts of the rally, including that it happened, when it happened, and where. Detailed profiles of attendees were omitted, as were their racist slurs and dehumanizing statements. Barnett traced this impulse, in part, to the era's strict separation between opinion and news, and to the post-Watergate political climate in which reporters were especially wary of being manipulated by sources. As she noted, if a source was insistent on pushing their own agenda in a piece – regardless of their political affiliation – her editor would encourage them to take out an advertisement.

Auburn University professor and associate director for journalism John Carvalho, who worked as a newspaper reporter in Florida during the same timeframe, had similar experiences. He explained that the choice not to cover hate groups, or to minimize the coverage they did receive, reflected a sense of social responsibility within the local news media. This approach wasn't strictly ideological, he said, although dislike of the Klan certainly factored into the calculus. Rather, the main issue was that the stories would be inflammatory, and would likely incite violence in the communities they served, lived in, and cared about.

Carroll, Barnett, and Carvalho each emphasized that these strategic silencing efforts were not codified within their respective institutions. Rather, editorial choices about hate groups were made after ad hoc, collective gut checks in the newsroom. Reporters didn't want to give oxygen to these groups, for a variety of reasons; and because the groups had no way to bypass journalists' gatekeeping, and because the broader public had no way of knowing what was being spiked, journalists never had to show their work, or answer to anyone but themselves. These days, journalists have to answer to everyone, including far-right extremists, who cry fake news the second they don't get the coverage they want, and who still cry fake news when they do. It is little wonder that, in this climate, the journalistic instinct – particularly toward far-right extremism – has veered away from restraint and towards oversharing.

Labor Issues

This section will consider how a variety of labor issues contribute to the amplification of misleading, antagonistic, or otherwise problematic information. First, it will show how inadequate protections for reporters – from lack of editorial oversight to unreasonable writing demands – create the perfect conditions for falsehoods, antagonisms, and manipulations to thrive. It will then discuss the profound, if not immediately obvious, implications of the harassment of journalists, particularly female journalists and journalists of color. In essence, harassment functions as a "soft target" (in counterterrorism parlance, an area with few security protections and unrestricted public access, like a mall) for the overall media system; a particular problem, given how few resources many reporters have for dealing with it. Not only do these attacks become part of the news cycle, either in the form of incessant abuse on social media or as additional published stories chronicling that abuse, the public visibility of harassment incentivizes future harassment by providing attackers a spotlight.

The most straightforward labor issue is that reporters – especially interns, reporters early in their careers, and freelancers – are often required to meet excessive word, story, and/or traffic quotas. These requirements, which demand too much work for too little pay in too little time, too easily result in rushed and imprecise reporting. Quota pressures have the added drawback, one technology section editor explained, of forcing reporters to go wading into online communities and ecosystems they don't understand, with the goal of surfacing fast and dirty reportable content. Stories (often listicles) that focus on the latest offensive memes emanating from 4chan, 8chan, or any number of "alt-right" Discord channels[10] are perfect examples; even when these articles have a purportedly educational slant ("here's what the alt-right is doing, so you can know it when you see it"), they take what otherwise would have remained ephemeral, give it a static landing page, and serve it up, often without any meaningful context beyond the images themselves, to tens of thousands, even tens of millions, of new readers.

Even for full-time staff writers, writing demands exacerbated by the pressures of an ever-quickening, social media-fed news cycle can hinder a reporter's ability to slow down and carefully explore each aspect of a story. In addition, the threat of layoffs, top-level demand to break stories first and issue corrections later, and/or hostile work environments stemming

A PERSON'S ABILITY TO FEED ONESELF OFTEN HINGES ON THAT PERSON'S ABILITY TO PUBLISH AS MANY ARTICLES AS POSSIBLE, AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE.

from sexual abuse and harassment[11] can all contribute to an unforgiving work environment. That said, many freelance journalists are in an even more precarious position. Not only do freelancers typically receive less oversight from their editors, they often have fewer opportunities to talk preemptively with their editors about how to approach challenging stories. As one staff writer explained, for her freelancer friends it's often "publish and hope for the best," which is exactly when things tend to go wrong. This reporter admitted to feeling some survivor's guilt over this point, given how relieved she is that she's no longer in that position.

Further, because these freelancers are tenuously employed, either paid by the word or paid by the article, they often have less leeway in turning down stories they might not feel comfortable writing; **a person's ability to feed oneself often hinges on that person's ability to publish as many articles as possible, as quickly as possible.** These reporters may have ethical ideals they would prefer to adhere to, but theirs is not an environment terribly conducive to ethical decision making. Here's one freelancer's take:

> I've never had a central place to go. And what does that do? It leaves you on your own. And then you're faced with this sort of Dr. Faustus situation where it's like, do I become a brat, do I go showboating on Twitter, getting in fights with people, and start a Patreon, do I start some sort of GoFundMe for my tweets, and write angry pieces and claim to have some sort of ideology behind them but really just fight all day on the internet. Or do I follow maybe something else and maybe not get any feedback at all. Which is happening to me now, the only feedback I ever get for my writing is negative, it's crazies in my DMs which I shouldn't really leave open but I do out of morbid curiosity. And I get weird people who hunt me down on Facebook sometimes. And then every so often, I meet someone in real life and they tell me they read my articles and they have nice things to say, and that's really cool, but I don't really have any feedback and I can understand why people go looking for the Twitter life."

"The Twitter life" isn't restricted to freelance reporters, of course; many staff writers and editors are also expected to maintain a visible social media profile, and to engage with readers

across a variety of platforms.[12] Yet there is particular pressure for freelancers to be public-facing, since that is the direction their next job will come from.

The catch, of course, is that by promoting themselves on social media, freelancers are also opening themselves up to harassment. This can be equally true for staff writers—though these attacks are much more devastating when a person has, or feels like they have, no one to turn to for help. For freelancers, the injury of being attacked without recourse is exacerbated by the insult of how little they're being paid to begin with. As one former freelancer, and now staff writer, explained, she was subjected to a devastating, violently racist, weeks-long social media assault over an article that earned her $250. "I don't want this to sound smug," she said, explaining the difference between her life as a freelancer and her life as a staff writer. "But being on staff and knowing that you have an institutional support structure makes a huge difference to me, to know that it's not totally my problem if people are coming after me."

The institutional support structure this reporter enjoys isn't uniform across newsrooms. While some of the staff writers I spoke with described heartening experiences in which teams of editors swooped in after targeted social media attacks, many others lamented the response, or lack thereof, of their publications. One staff writer at one of the most prestigious publications in the US readily conceded that issues related to harassment (along with a variety of other issues) are much, much worse for freelancers. "But don't overestimate what staff writers have," he said, noting that in response to unfolding harassment campaigns against their writers, the older, white male editors in his newsroom were often not aware of the kind of abuse that was possible online, were not sympathetic when they were told the details, and in many cases, were simply unable to conceptualize what any of it even meant, often responding more with fascination than genuine concern. This staff writer noted that people in his newsroom didn't even know who they should email if they were being harassed. He said that when the issue came up, many of the people he knew would instead reach out to a fellow reporter at a different publication "who everyone knows gets harassed a lot," for advice. To this point, speaking to a recent experience in which she had been relentlessly targeted by a far-right media personality, another staff writer stated bluntly that "it falls to us to figure out what tools we have at our disposal to protect ourselves."

The harassment that reporters experience – staff writers and freelancers both – isn't an accident. As Caroline Sinders explained, online harassment stems largely from established marketing practices, particularly search engine optimization (SEO). SEO is designed to make an individual reporter and their publication as visible as possible, all the better to commoditize content (and people) with. Reflecting on this relationship, Sinders noted:

> "It makes sense for a news outlet to have their journalists be well known, because it brings people to the news site. It also makes sense to have certain kinds of structured headlines that can be clickbaity and provocative. And it makes sense to push those across multiple platforms, because the more eyeballs you get on the page the more money you make, the more ad revenue you make. And that can translate to a certain level of notoriety. But that doesn't change the fact that when you tag people and tie them to a story, you're creating these mini-marketing campaigns that are designed to go viral. But you're tagging a person to a viral marketing campaign, which is really similar to having someone be attached to a viral harassment campaign."

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GOLD STANDARDS, WEAPONIZED.

The push to make reporters as visible as possible, which connects to the push to make their reporting as lucrative as possible, thus serves as a greased wheel for harassment. These are marketing gold standards, weaponized.

The abuse reporters face is so pronounced and so persistent that many "ruefully accept that abuse is part of the job," as *The New Statesman*'s Helen Lewis explains, further noting that the bar of concern, now, isn't whether or not abuse occurs (it will), but whether or not an attack bleeds over into embodied spaces. In more extreme cases, this harassment—particularly when initiated by extremist actors and outlets—becomes part of its own unfolding news story, resulting in even more harassment, and even more stories about it. Not only is the abuse, and the victim's trauma and/or embarrassment, made all the more visible, future abuse is incentivized by incessant coverage, which essentially functions as a blueprint for further attacks. Caroline Sinders cites the Gamergate harassment campaign as an especially conspicuous example of this cycle, in which the journalists covering the story were subjected to ferocious pushback, in turn prompting countless stories about the hateful reactions these journalists faced.

A similar story unfolded in the wake of the CNN "HanAssholeSolo" controversy. In July 2017, reporter Andrew Kaczynski published a profile of Redditor HanAssholeSolo, who posted, and later claimed to have created, a GIF of Donald Trump "attacking" the CNN logo using footage from an old World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) broadcast. Trump tweeted the image out on July 2, as part of his ongoing feud with CNN, which he continually accused of being "fake news." Kaczynski's profile of HanAssholeSolo, which noted the user's penchant for sharing anti-Semitic memes, included a sentence – later revealed to be the addition of a member of CNN's standards department (Perlberg 2017) – that threatened to reveal HanAssholeSolo's true identity if they continued posting hateful content online. Far-right media outlets immediately mobilized. Not only did they level multiple false accusations against Kaczynski, they relentlessly attacked him on social media, and even posted the personal information of some of his family members (Tani 2017). These attacks, in turn, prompted countless response pieces from other outlets, ensuring that the story, and the falsehoods about Kaczynski seeded by far-right instigators, persisted into subsequent news cycles.

The example most frequently cited by the reporters I spoke to, however, concerns the lawsuit filed against *Fusion* reporter Emma Roller. On April 29, 2017, Roller tweeted a picture of far-right figures Cassandra Fairbanks and Mike Cernovich making the "ok" sign as they stood at the White House press briefing podium. The photo's caption reads, "just two people doing a white power hand gesture in the White House." Roller's comment was in reference to a months-long campaign on 4chan and 8chan attempting to link the "ok" sign, along with a litany of other innocuous-seeming items – including milk – to white supremacy. The purpose of these efforts, *BuzzFeed*'s Joseph Bernstein explains in a pair of articles about the incident (2017b, 2017c), was to troll journalists into repeating the shitposters' claims that non-supremacist content was in fact secretly supremacist (Bernstein links the trend to the early success of Pepe the Frog). In the process, journalists would be exposed as gullible and inherently biased against Trump supporters, while the reporting would reinforce the racist connotations, essentially creating a reality in which items like milk, the "ok" hand gesture, and of course Pepe the Frog, *were* symbols of white supremacy.[13]

Unsurprisingly, Roller's tweet (which she subsequently deleted) prompted a roar of responses across establishment, far-right, and social media. More surprisingly, Fairbanks later filed suit against Roller, claiming defamation; Roller knew the sign wasn't a symbol of white supremacy, Fairbanks alleged, but chose to make the statement anyway. Several of the reporters I spoke to, one of whom had faced similar legal threats from a far-right personality, said that this case was particularly concerning, not just because of the questions of legal liability it raises. It is also concerning, they explained, because it illustrates how effective far-right attacks against journalists are at drumming up publicity; in a statement pledging to fund Roller's legal defense, *Fusion*'s Editor-in-Chief Dodai Stewart explicitly denounced the lawsuit as "an obvious publicity stunt and an attempt to intimidate reporters who scrutinize the activities of the extreme right" (Bernstein 2017b). The case sets a precedent, in other words. Maybe not a legal precedent, but certainly a news cycle precedent, evidenced by how many articles were published following the announcement of Fairbanks' suit.

Even when attacks against journalists – whether in the form of targeted abuse or legal threats – don't provide fodder for further news stories, it's an ever-present specter in the newsroom. Before a sensitive article of theirs is published (the most nerve-wracking, several reporters noted, are articles about race or other social justice issues), many reporters described feeling a sinking sense of dread, wondering if this article, this time, would be the thing that upends their entire lives. "I brace myself," one female reporter at a global news publication admitted, a point many of the reporters I spoke with echoed. Women, people of color, and nonbinary reporters face a disproportionate percentage of this onslaught, and a disproportionate percentage of this anxiety, a point Marie K. Shanahan (2017) emphasizes in a discussion of the "occupational hazard" of abuse against journalists. A keynote panel at the 2015 Online News Association conference, "We Belong Here: Pushing Back Against Online Harassment," addressed similar issues, underscoring the frequency, ferocity, and underlying sexual and racial violence of these attacks.

Of course, targeted personal attacks aren't restricted to women and people of color. As one white male technology editor noted, "I've been at a bar or a concert at 11pm on a Saturday and someone will come into my Twitter DMs and say 'fuck you! I hate this story!' that you did six months ago. And that affects you"—though he immediately followed this statement with the caveat that this doesn't compare to the kinds of violent, identity-based attacks that women, people of color, and Jewish and Muslim reporters field on a regular basis. The difference in kind between attacks against one's published writing and attacks against one's skin, beliefs, and body, was corroborated by the fact that a majority of the white women and all of the women of color I spoke to raised the issue of harassment within the first few minutes of our conversation ("RIP my mentions," several sighed). In contrast, only a few white men brought the issue of harassment up themselves, and when I asked several others what they thought, their responses were often underwhelming. One white male editor at a prestigious national publication suggested that if harassment was such a problem for young reporters, they should just stay off Twitter—making the abuse they receive, in his mind anyway, at least partially their own fault.[14]

It should go without saying that many reporters don't have the option of staying off Twitter, or opting out of public conversation more broadly. They have to be visible; they have to engage. That is their job. In doing that job, however, they open themselves up to targeted

attacks, which grow all the louder and more threatening for members of marginalized groups. The hate and harassment deployed against these individuals can be so severe that Michelle Ferrier, a journalism professor of color and diversity advocate, said she's taken to encouraging young female journalists to consider writing under assumed names.

"WE HAVE BEEN SILENCED IN SO MANY WAYS," FERRIER STATED. "ENCULTURATED TO BELIEVE THAT WE JUST NEED TO SUCK IT UP AND TAKE IT, THIS EMOTIONAL HARM, THIS DAMAGE. BUT THIS IS BODIES, THIS TOUCHES BODIES."

Ferrier acknowledged that such a suggestion is a radical departure from the "star system" that contemporary journalism has created. But this isn't a system worth preserving, she argued. Besides having irreparably collapsed the distance between people's personal and professional lives and placing enormous pressures on reporters to publicly perform at all times, the star system facilitates harm, especially for those whose identities subject them to constant bigoted attacks. Not just external harm either, restricted to the attacks themselves. Internalized harm stemming from the message, sometimes stated explicitly and sometimes implied, that these reporters' bodies are not worth protecting. That abuse is normal; that it's something to ruefully accept as part of the job. "We have been silenced in so many ways," Ferrier stated. "Enculturated to believe that we just need to suck it up and take it, this emotional harm, this damage. But this is bodies, this touches bodies."

Shireen Mitchell expanded on this point. Attacks against female journalists of color in particular have been so normalized in journalism and beyond, she said, that the violent threats they receive are frequently dismissed as mere name calling, something that can be shrugged off, or at least solved by logging off a platform ("If the harassment is so bad, just stay off Twitter."). "Anyway," she said, parroting an all too frequent rejoinder. "Aren't you women used to it by now?" According to Mitchell, this problem goes much deeper than the institution of journalism itself, much deeper than issues of platform moderation. "Ultimately," she said of the harassment certain journalists can expect just by existing in public, "this is a social norm problem."

The labor issues discussed in this section are a point of concern, first and foremost, because they represent a failure to protect, and a failure to respect, the bodily autonomy of the people who produce the news, particularly female journalists, queer journalists, and journalists of color, who are disproportionately impacted by identity-based harassment online. Beyond that, these issues fuel existing amplification fires, and create entirely new ones. Most pressingly, abuse and harassment directed against journalists provides fodder for additional stories and additional harassment, incentivizes future abuse by signaling to harassers that attacking a journalist will get your name in lights, and further normalizes abuse as an occupational hazard, particularly for historically underrepresented populations. In short, the issue isn't just that harassment is a pressing labor issue, although it is. It also provides bigots, harassers, and manipulators a direct path into the news cycle.

The Homogeneity of (Imagined) Audiences and Hegemony of Newsrooms

As the previous section illustrates, questions about amplification encompass much more than the news itself. They also encompass economic systems; they also encompass ideology. More than that, they encompass bodies. When considering labor issues, the degree to which reporters' bodies are protected, respected, and granted meaningful autonomy directly impacts emerging media narratives. Just as impactful are which raced, classed, and gendered bodies get to sit in the newsroom seats; which raced, classed, and gendered bodies are featured in the stories that are subsequently produced; and which messages about which bodies are amplified as a result. Given the importance of bodies in the newsroom, concerns about "bad information" entering the media ecosystem thus hinge as much on *who* is doing the reporting (and who is reacting to that reporting) as on *what* is being reported.

The first *who* to consider is the audience. For many of the reporters and editors I talked to, their audiences are often strikingly homogeneous. This isn't necessarily a claim about actual demographics. Rather, audiences are homogeneous, even outright predictable, in their tastes. As one technology section editor explained, their reporters could write "literally any article" about the iPhone, and it will perform tremendously well, even if the article itself provides little or no new information. Conversely, when the site tries to report on more politically challenging stories – the example the editor gave was thoughtful discussions about diversity in tech – engagement plummets.

THE NEWSROOM, CONCERNS ABOUT "BAD INFORMATION" ENTERING THE MEDIA ECOSYSTEM THUS HINGE AS MUCH ON WHO IS DOING THE REPORTING (AND WHO IS REACTING TO THAT REPORTING) AS ON WHAT IS BEING REPORTED.

The tendency for audiences to stick to the things they like requires editors to essentially "play the hits," as this editor described it. You need to keep traffic stable, he said, and that won't happen if you defy your audience's expectations. So you publish the things you know they'll read, and publish less of the things you know they won't, even if that means filtering out the kinds of stories you wish they were reading instead. As another technology editor explained, Facebook's algorithms – which push content to users based on their previous site activity – further entrench this cycle. Having content fed to people within our target audience is nice for traffic, this editor conceded. But, he said, that just creates an audience feedback loop where reporters are only talking to like-minded people, who want to keep reading the same kinds of things. And so their newsroom keeps churning out the same kinds of stories, all to ensure that the hits keep coming.[15]

Within this context, the question of audience demographics becomes both more pointed, and more opaque. Many of the tech reporters and editors I spoke to, along with several reporters at large national and global outlets, said they believed their audiences skewed white, and in the case of technology sites, skewed male. That they skewed college educated was another characteristic posited by journalists at prestigious legacy publications. When pressed on why they thought so, respondents said it was somewhere between a gut feeling and an educated guess. It is possible to measure online audiences directly.[16] One managing editor of a technology and culture publication was able to confirm that their audience does indeed skew white and male, based on data gathered from Facebook and other third-party ad trackers. That said, the relationship between analytics teams and editorial teams can vary from publication to publication; as this editor emphasized, not all editorial teams necessarily know their site's actual demographics, and instead rely on more inferential information, most significantly, what stories do well, and what stories do not. Regardless of the actual numbers, however, and regardless of whether or not reporters know what those numbers are, reporters' and editors' assumptions about the race, gender, and class of their audiences underscores the importance of *imagined* audiences, above and beyond measurable demographics.[17]

One white staff writer at a large technology site essentialized the issue when she noted that, obviously, women read, and so do people of color. But that's not who these big publications imagine they're talking to, and that has a major impact not just on what stories are covered, but how they're covered. One freelance writer of color, who has written for outlets like *Fast Company* and *The New Yorker*, agreed. The fact that these publications are talking primarily to white people, or at least are presenting content that aligns with white, middle-class to upper-middle-class sensibilities, may not be explicitly acknowledged, but is embedded within subtler editorial choices.[18] Most notably, this reporter explained, is the racially coded "explanatory comma" as discussed on NPR's Code Switch podcast (Meraji and Demby 2016), which includes information the presumed audience is presumed to need. White things, or things perceived to be white, don't get this comma; things associated with other races do. This reporter said that as she reads large national publications like *The New York Times*, she often wonders, "Does someone black read this? I don't think they think so."

The whiteness of audiences, or at least the presumption of the audience's whiteness, is concerning to many reporters and editors, particularly as they reflect on the stories that were published during and immediately following the 2016 US election. For Emanuel

Maiberg, editor at *Vice*'s *Motherboard*, the worry is what doesn't get amplified as a result, and whose voices don't get heard. The reporter discussed in Part One, who writes for a large national publication and rejects the troll frame when covering the alt-right (himself a white immigrant to the US), is even more pointed in this worry. His concern is that the audience's seemingly insatiable appetite for stories about white people (an audience, it is worth repeating, that he presumes is itself majority white) ensures that "the hits" of mainstream news coverage will only ever focus on white perspectives and experiences—even when those perspectives and experiences are steeped in white supremacist violence. Focusing specifically on stories that paint an "entertaining boogeyman" portrait of neo-Nazis, he further worries that conversations focused on far-right extremism deflect focus away from discussions of structural bias, and the ways the everyday practices of white people contribute to supremacist ideologies.[19]

A white female reporter at a technology and culture publication emphasized this last point, noting the deep resistance she encounters (once again, from an audience she believes to be mostly white and mostly male) whenever she writes about anything even remotely addressing diversity or inclusiveness. Yes, she gets pushback from white nationalists and supremacists; that's expected, she says. But she also gets pushback from mainstream white people, mostly men, who profess to abhor white nationalism yet rankle at the tone of what they denounce as "social justice stories." As she says, "It's not just the alt-right. It's the whole culture"—a statement itself trained on the (presumably) white elements of the culture.

Of course, this isn't just an issue of audiences, whether actual or imagined; reporters can't be absolved of all charges of political myopia on the grounds that they're just giving the (white) people what they want. What somebody reports, or doesn't, has a lot to do with who that person is. Stories stem from bodies. Consequently, if the majority of the bodies in the newsroom are white and have similar cultural and economic upbringings, you can expect a lot of the same kinds of stories, and a lot of the same kinds of blind spots to the cultural and economic upbringings of others.[20] This is hardly a novel revelation; over a century ago, African-American journalist, editor, and early data scientist Ida B. Wells made exactly this argument in her groundbreaking expose of the white press's avoidance, minimization, and even outright derision of the systematic lynchings of black Americans.

One of the reporters I spoke to, a white woman writing for a culture and entertainment publication, described this process in terms that essentially amount to self-replicating whiteness. As a person raised on the mostly white, overwhelmingly male 4chan, she explained, as well as other similarly masculine geek spaces, she's most familiar with things that fall under the white male technology and culture umbrella. She doesn't have much experience with communities outside that orbit, and so she doesn't write much about them. She added that, in particular, people of color wouldn't have much reason to talk to her anyway, or really any white journalist, since journalists (she seemed to be referring primarily to the white ones) "fuck up a lot." She said this problem is even more pressing amongst her coworkers, the majority of whom are white men, who she suggested were fundamentally ill-equipped to even begin dealing with the issues faced by communities outside white male tech and geek circles. At least she was aware of her limitations, her responses seemed to suggest. Another white female technology and culture reporter agreed, underscoring how her white male colleagues' frequent lack of connection to

communities of color – and to women's issues more broadly – have an enormous bearing on how their stories about women and people of color are framed, if the stories are even written to begin with.

"WHEN YOU DON'T HAVE TO DEFEND YOUR PERSONHOOD, OR CONSIDER THAT YOUR PERSONHOOD MAY BE UNDER THREAT," SHE SAID, "THERE ARE LEVELS AND LAYERS OF STORIES YOU DON'T SEE."

These concerns didn't emerge from a free-floating animus against white people generally or white men in particular. In most cases, the overall discussion of race, gender, and reporting was initiated by the observation, made by white reporters and reporters of color alike, that much of the high-profile, establishment media coverage of far-right extremist groups during the election was written by white people, especially white men. Up to a point, this race and gender distribution is reflective of the majority whiteness and maleness of many newsrooms; more coverage is published *by* them, because there are simply more *of* them. More than that, however, white men tended to cover far-right extremist communities – which aren't just supermajority white but are also often violently misogynist (see Lyons 2017) – because those were the bodies most likely to be granted access by participants. And not just granted access. Those were the bodies most likely to feel safe even making the attempt. Most of the female reporters of color I spoke with called attention to this discrepancy; they wouldn't have been welcome in those spaces, and weren't exactly eager to cozy up to people who didn't think they belonged in the country. Or worse.

A number of white respondents and respondents of color asserted that the impact reporters' whiteness had on the overall media narrative was exacerbated by their need to maintain the access their racial identities had afforded in the first place. The consensus take on the issue was summarized by one female reporter of color, who noted, "Only white people have access to these groups, and those white people want to keep that access, so they throw these softball questions, which creates a defanged picture of what the groups are doing and plays into the 'both sides' argument in which Nazis are as palatable as civil rights activists." The irony, this reporter remarked, is that the "both sides" argument was almost always a misnomer to begin with; the only side getting the deep-dive journalistic treatment was the white side. How these groups – and the overall issue of street-marching, Nazi insignia-wearing white supremacy – affected communities of color wasn't part of the ongoing, mainstream conversation.

One local freelance journalist of color spoke directly to this point, and perfectly encapsulated the ways that identity doesn't just influence what injustices a person can see, but how (or if) those injustices are responded to. "When you don't have to defend your personhood, or consider that your personhood may be under threat," she said, "there are levels and layers of stories you don't see." She was not the only reporter to connect identity with seeing, and seeing with reporting. Another female reporter of color, who has written for *Vice* and *GQ*, noted that when yours is a body that no one has ever threatened to rape or kill, when your identity has never been explicitly delegitimized, it is all too easy to see violently racist, misogynist behaviors as trolling. Or to echo Shireen Mitchell's earlier point, as simple name-calling, something you should (so the argument goes) be able to brush off. "Because the threat isn't at their front door," this reporter explained of those who frame white supremacy as an abstract nuisance. "Because it isn't going to impact them."

The myopia with which so many white journalists approached far-right extremism is reflected, she continued, in their chummy, "look at this funny kooky guy" coverage, as if these figures were characters in a Christopher Guest mockumentary. In contrast, this reporter said, black and brown activists are covered in mainstream outlets far less frequently, an especially troubling comparison when one considers that the black activists who were profiled during the election, including civil rights activists DeRay Mckesson and Bree Newsome, were fighting for social justice and equality, while the most prominent white extremists profiled during the election, for example Richard Spencer and Milo Yiannopoulos, were fighting for social *in*justice and *in*equality.

Coverage of Richard Spencer is a perfect example of the rock star, anti-hero treatment white extremists have enjoyed. Not only did coverage during the election hand Spencer microphone after microphone, even bullhorn after bullhorn, not only did it sidestep the impact his hateful messages have on communities of color, articles published in outlets like *The Washington Post, Los Angeles Times*, and *Mother Jones* took the time to fawn over his fashion choices (G'Sell 2016). The abstraction of style (a charismatic demeanor; suits) from substance (calls for a white ethnostate) particularly rankled one reporter who writes for a large global publication. As he noted, a person's experience with the embodied realities of hate – or perhaps more accurately, a person's *lack* of experience with those realities – sets the stage for a great deal of irresponsible coverage. As he explained:

> The way Richard Spencer has been dealt with . . . the way in particular last year he was treated . . . with kid gloves just because, I dunno, he had a nice haircut, he went to these Ivy League schools, he wore Brooks Brothers suits, whatever, and at that time I definitely thought, this is a bunch of white people in establishment media in the Northeast, a bunch of white people who have very similar class positions as this guy . . . who just, whatever he says, it's not going to affect them, like they're not going to be deported or ethnically cleansed, they're not gonna be the ones who . . . they have no reason . . . and I'm not saying these folks don't find this guy's views repellent and disgusting, they probably do. But it's far more abstract than, you know, the fear that a person of color might have about this person coming into power, or an undocumented person, or LGBTQI people, you know? . . . I thought about race and class a lot when I saw stories about the 'Dapper Nazi.'"

This reporter's caveat that "I'm not saying these folks don't find this guy's views repellent and disgusting, they probably do" was a common refrain among reporters critical of this type of overly chummy coverage. Beyond that basic point, however, the criticisms forked. For many of the white, natural-born US citizens I spoke to, the primary critique was that these reporters lacked perspective and framed their subjects more as a mechanism of pointing at things without adequately reflecting on, critiquing, or contextualizing these things ("Here's a Nazi! And here's another Nazi! And here's three more over there!"). This criticism also frequently dovetailed into accusations of having been duped; that these reporters had simply been outsmarted by "alt-right" manipulators, which was as much a critique of other people's coverage as it was an implicit affirmation of their own canniness. In short, this was bad journalism, with bad political effects.

The reporters of color I spoke to, as well as immigrant reporters (including the "Dapper Nazi" disclaiming reporter quoted above), reporters with strong ties to their Jewish identities, and female reporters focused on issues of sexual violence, all tended to invert this critique: that this was bad politics, with bad journalistic effects. Specifically, many speculated that the impulse to hand bigots a microphone likely stemmed from the utter shock these reporters experienced upon discovering that bigots like this even existed. At least, the utter shock their white editors experienced, in turn dictating what facets of the story reporters were assigned. That there were people in the United States willing to march without masks in white supremacist demonstrations, that there were people who proudly and publicly identified as neo-Nazis, was so unbelievable, and therefore so fascinating, that it had to be chronicled. Communities of color, in contrast, as well as Jewish and immigrant communities, did not need convincing that these people existed. They already knew; they have never had the luxury of not knowing. As one female Muslim reporter noted, the "Racists! In America! Can you believe it??" framings that characterized so much white coverage, particularly in response to the Charlottesville white supremacist rally, was a position only someone who had never experienced a lifetime of systemic, targeted racism could entertain.

Motherboard's Emanuel Maiberg, a Jewish man born in Israel, affirmed this point. As he explained, he didn't need any convincing that there were Nazis, nor was there any mystique around the notion of anti-Semitism (a framing almost identical to that forwarded by former *Boston Globe* reporter Matt Carroll, mentioned in the Information Imperative section, when referring to reporters with personal memories of the Holocaust). So when he first started encountering pro-Trump swastikas and other alt-right shitposting, there was no curiosity, no intrigue, and no – as he described it – "freak show entertainment" element. Another Jewish reporter agreed, noting that several members of their family had been killed in the Holocaust. Regarding the Charlottesville marchers chanting Nazi slogans like "Blood and soil," they flatly stated, "My family literally died because people walked down the street chanting that." What possible point of attraction would Nazi sloganeering hold for this reporter; what possible point of attraction would white supremacist violence hold for people of color who have, themselves, been subjected to this violence. "You know they want me dead, right?" Sydette Harry, a black writer, Mozilla editor, and Coral Project editor-at-large mused, reflecting on why chummy coverage of far-right extremists was such a personal, visceral affront.

The consensus of these criticisms, particularly those forwarded by reporters of color and other individuals quite literally in the crosshairs of far-right extremism, was that too many reporters, the vast majority of whom were white and male, could summarize their position as, “these people suck, but they don’t scare me.” Not surprisingly, none of the white reporters I spoke to admitted to espousing this framing—though I did talk to several white reporters that other reporters critiqued on precisely these grounds, indeed who I would critique on precisely these grounds. From these reporters’ perspectives, they were giving far-right extremists the *opposite* of sympathetic coverage. They were, instead, giving far-right extremist figures “enough rope to hang themselves,” with the added rationale that light disinfects. I have no doubt that many, that most, of these reporters sincerely believed this.

The problem, however, one raised by the vast majority of the journalists of color I spoke with, was that these reporters, however noble their intentions might have been, were simply unable to see that for many communities of color, for many women, for many trans people, for many immigrants, the very presence of a Sieg Heil-ing white supremacist is tantamount to incitement—a point that would have been immediately apparent, had anyone bothered to ask them. The mainstream amplification of white nationalist and supremacist, neo-Nazi, and other extremist messaging is thus imbued with an ironic twist: that coverage designed, ostensibly, to reject white supremacy and the misogyny it frequently espouses ultimately privileged white (male) bodies, white (male) experiences, and white (male) assumptions about the world. Even if accidentally, it did what it was pushing back against.

“YOU KNOW THEY WANT ME DEAD, RIGHT?”

ADDRESSING THE DISEASE, NOT JUST THE SYMPTOMS

In exploring the economic pressures, information imperatives, labor tensions, and identity issues journalists must navigate in the contemporary media landscape, the above analysis has shown that there are vast structural issues catalyzing, and even outright encouraging, the proliferation of damaging, false, and manipulative information. The issue isn't that the media system is broken; the issue is that the media system is working as it was designed to work: commoditized content spreads as quickly as possible, as seamlessly as possible, across as many different platforms as possible, with the best possible instruments for measuring, analyzing, and catering to target audiences. The fact that the system works as well as it does makes efforts to fix it all the more vexing; how do you fix something when its primary defect is that it's doing its job? And yet try to fix it we must; too much is at stake, for too many bodies.

The first and most critical step is to address the deeper structures that all but guarantee amplification run amok. The following list represents a multifront response, one that will require technological solutions and institutional restructuring, but perhaps more importantly, the biggest ask of them all: radical self-reflection.

First, publications must critically interrogate the implications of remaining as for-profit enterprises tethered to corporate investments.[21] Under the present system, national and global news cycles are skewed by considerations above and beyond whether a given story is factually accurate or culturally valuable. Publications must also consider what will get them the clicks they need to stay afloat, at times in conflict with a story's accuracy and its news value. There is, in short, a serious price to pay for the business of the news, a point both Postman (1985) and McChesney (1999) emphasized long before Facebook or Twitter threw existing concerns over infotainment into hyperdrive. For Postman, a news media beholden to corporate, commercial interests undercuts civic engagement and supplants coherent, fact-based discourse for empty non sequiturs. Similarly, McChesney highlights how the "hypercommercialization" of news and entertainment media undermines participatory democracy and harms the overall body politic. Again, the underlying economic structures described by Postman in the 1980s and McChesney in the 1990s have remained constant. But the media landscape has itself become more crowded, more competitive, and more ripe for manipulation in the intervening decades, making an already consequential problem that much more pressing.

Speaking to the out-of-control spread of far-right extremism masquerading as "trolling" during the 2016 presidential election, a process described in Part One of the report, the alt-right beat reporter profiled in that section emphasized the negative impact corporate interests have on unfolding news narratives. The fact that so many (typically younger, trolling and meme culture-informed) reporters responded to far-right antagonisms by surfacing those antagonisms, often in order to point and laugh at them, was a problem, he stated. It would have been better if they hadn't done that. When told about the guilt and anxiety many of these reporters are now grappling with, however, this reporter's

THE ISSUE ISN'T THAT THE MEDIA SYSTEM IS BROKEN; THE ISSUE IS THAT THE MEDIA SYSTEM IS WORKING AS IT WAS DESIGNED TO WORK: COMMODITIZED CONTENT SPREADS AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE AS SEAMLESSLY AS POSSIBLE ACROSS AS MANY DIFFERENT PLATFORMS AS POSSIBLE, WITH THE BEST POSSIBLE INSTRUMENTS FOR MEASURING, ANALYZING, AND CATERING TO TARGET AUDIENCES.

tone shifted. "They shouldn't be so hard on themselves," he said, slowly. "They were just doing what the attention economy demands," which as he explained, doesn't just shape expectations around what journalists do, but what the appropriate objects of journalism are. "It's not the fault of any one individual," he stated, followed by a pause. "And if it is, it's the people making really high-level decisions about how media companies do business." Given the dwindling public trust in the institution as a whole, the resultant flourishing of misinformation and the "fake news" market, and most pointedly, the ease with which the news cycle is hijacked by bad-faith actors, the people making these high-level decisions must contend with the fact that the economic foundations upon which their businesses are built worsen, if not directly cause, many of the problems currently plaguing the institution. If there ever was a time for institutional retrofitting, this is it.

Relatedly, exploitative labor practices, in which too much work is being demanded too quickly for too little pay, must be minimized. It might not be in a news company's short-term economic interests to do so, but it will serve the longer-term interests of the specific journalistic platform and the institution as a whole. High-pressure, rush-job reporting, particularly when it involves the surfacing of digital subcultural content, serves as a soft informational target that too easily filters false, damaging, and misleading information into the media ecosystem, where it can have a devastating interpersonal or even national political impact. Furthermore, as the economic viability of the profession decreases, it is likely that the homogeneity of newsrooms will only increase, the result of only certain kinds of people, with certain degrees of economic stability, having the option to try in the first place. As good as some of these journalists might be, ever-increasing homogeneity in any sector is hardly a winning strategy for navigating an increasingly diverse, increasingly pluralist public sphere. This is particularly true in journalism, where entrenched cultural myopia around issues of race, gender, and class so easily facilitates the unchecked amplification of hateful content.

Second, news publications large and small must reject what Marie K. Shanahan (2017) describes as the institution's bystander approach to public online discourse, and take more seriously their role within the public sphere. The degree to which news reporting influences democratic participation is evidenced by a study by King, Schneer, and White (2017), which revealed a ~62.7% increase in public conversation about a predetermined issue following coverage of that issue by small- to medium news outlets. In short, what journalists report, people discuss; civic discourse gets its shape from the news. For Joshua Stearns, associate director of the Public Square Program at the Democracy Fund, this degree of influence demands a sweeping recalibration of approaches to online community formation and management; along with higher education and libraries, Stearns said, there are few other institutions better positioned to protect and cultivate diverse voices and expression. But so far most newsrooms aren't living up to that potential. For Stearns, rethinking the role of comment sections on news sites is one good first step – though certainly not the only first step – towards that goal.

Andrew Losowsky (2017) of the Coral Project agrees. While news-related comments are decried by many, Losowsky insists that there is, at least potentially, a great deal of value in the comments, and in the communities that can form around them. The problem with comments, Losowsky argues, isn't the act of commenting itself. It's most news organizations' lack of strategic planning regarding their comments. This results in

a lot of *more* for average readers: more abuse, more spam, and of course more disdain for comments sections. It also results in a lot of *less* for the publications themselves: less reader engagement, less control over the conversation, and less of a stake in civic discourse more broadly.

What is needed, Losowsky argues, is a much more pointed approach, one that considers what the news organization hopes to achieve through reader engagement, what options – including but not limited to freeform comment sections – would be most appropriate for their readers and for the organization's overall objectives, and what UX designs would be needed to achieve those objectives. As part of this assessment, Losowsky emphasizes, it is critical for news organizations to honestly assess their available resources and not over-promise and under-deliver on community management. Even if not having comments proves to be the best option, these choices should be weighed intentionally, always with an eye toward maximizing civil discourse. Without these conversations, the institution will only ever be what Shanahan (2017) critiques: a bystander within the public sphere.

The issue isn't just publications' own comment sections, however. The news media might initiate a conversation (or expand on/further amplify an existing conversation), but as Shanahan (ibid) emphasizes, social media is where the conversation unfolds, evolves, and ricochets between audiences – particularly when the publication has closed their comments sections. Most pressingly in the context of harassing speech, social media responses to the news ultimately influence further news coverage, establishing both a feedback loop and fundamental permeability between publication and platform. While it is appropriate that questions of moderation on platforms like Facebook and Twitter fall – of course – to the platforms themselves,[22] news organizations have a significant vested interest in these conversations as well, not just in terms of the role social media plays in shaping the news cycle, but also the threats social media users pose to their employees. News organizations should, as a result, cultivate strategic collaborative relationships with social media platforms to address these issues directly; whether they like it or not, the two institutions are in this together.[23]

Thirdly, journalists must have access to robust, consistent, clearly-articulated safety procedures and protocols. This doesn't just mean effectively responding to harassment after it occurs. Recalling the Coral Project's employee doxxing and harassment guide, which provides clear instructions before, during, and after an attack, Andrew Losowsky underscores the importance of preemptive steps, akin to a disaster preparedness plan, and tips for reducing risk before a single harassing message is posted. Losowsky also stressed how important it is to specify exactly who in the organization to contact, and what to expect from that contact, in the event abuse does occur. In a speech given at the 2017 News Xchange conference (2017) sponsored by Eurovision, *The Guardian* executive editor Mary Hamilton also stressed the importance of preemptive action, adding that harassment risks should be more evenly distributed across the newsroom; the same handful of reporters shouldn't be the only people on staff reporting on sensitive topics. Augmenting these strategies, publications should also, as online community moderation and harassment researcher Kat Lo argues, provide mental health services for employees, including training in recognizing and responding to post-traumatic stress and secondary trauma, as well as training in conflict resolution and de-escalation strategies. Publications' general counsel, human resources personnel, and ombudspeople should also be provided the appropriate training.

Speaking to the opportunity for strategic collaborative relationships between news organizations and social media platforms, Wikimedia harassment researcher and *BuzzFeed* research fellow Caroline Sinders suggested a radical rethinking of how journalists should be allowed to exist on social media sites like Twitter. Reporters aren't regular users, she asserted, and as a consequence should be provided more and different user abilities. One of her suggestions was for platforms to provide reporters with a multilevel account, where they could switch between their personal feed and followers and their professional feed and followers. Another suggestion was the ability to quarantine and/or hide mentions from a designated time period. Sinders also advocated for the batching of mentions, and having these batches reviewed by multiple people within the newsroom so that the emotional labor of sifting through toxic threats could be distributed. The ultimate goal, Sinders explained, is to find ways to give reporters more control over how information about them is amplified online.

Finally, and arguably most critical of all, issues of diversity and inclusion must be prioritized. Most straightforwardly, more women, people of color, and people from diverse economic backgrounds should be hired, since perspectives outside the white, upper-middle-class, cis male hegemonic norm will provide a much-needed supplement and, when needed, corrective, to the myopia ushered in by social privilege. As one female journalist of color insisted, these hires must be woven into every level of the organization, from human resources to editorial to management, to ensure that diverse perspectives have full representation within the organization – rather than being relegated as some sort of vestigial (and easily excised) appendage. Furthermore, these individuals shouldn't only be assigned the "race" or "gender" beat, though of course those are particularly good places to initiate discussions of diversity and inclusiveness. They should also be positioned within and across a number of beats, to reflect the fact that the intersections of race and gender, along with class, are suffused throughout every beat, every section of news, and every segment of society.

Beyond immediate hiring decisions, however, newsrooms must engage in more radical self-reflection about how the aforementioned points of myopia negatively impact—and as Ida B. Wells' work shows, have for over a century negatively impacted—specific news narratives, as well as the overall health of the institution. In short, the problem of white supremacy must be taken seriously by white journalists not just as an abstract concept applicable only to bad others, but as a deeply engrained cultural bias that white reporters directly benefit from, and all too often, directly replicate—even when filtered through a seemingly anti-racist framework. White supremacy isn't just about harmful action deliberately inflicted on another person. It is just as impactful, and just as pernicious, when it takes subtler forms: editorial choices that spotlight only those with existing platforms, hiring decisions that value only certain kinds of experience, lines of sight that linger only on that which is familiar. This will be an unwelcome challenge to many white readers; as a number of the reporters I spoke with emphasized, white people do *not* like talking about white supremacy, at least not as it relates to their own whiteness. As a white person, I am sympathetic; it's a distressing conversation.

But as Sydette Harry explained, speaking to the immediacy of the issue and profundity of the stakes, and indeed, providing the only appropriate concluding remark for this entire discussion, "Your discomfort is not enough of a reason to not tell the truth about this."

Harry's point speaks to the fact that, at bottom, these are not questions just for industry insiders. These are not questions just for academics. These are moral questions that extend deep enough into the ground, and cover enough land, and impact enough life, to implicate everyone. We all have a role to play in whether or not these questions are asked, and the degree to which they are answered.

Parts One and Two have sought to articulate what, exactly, has intertwined with what to bring us to this moment, from the rhetorical norms and visual aesthetic of a subculture that peaked 10 years ago, to the ways a person's connection to the past informs how they navigate the present, to the altar of the bottom line, to the institutional implications of harm, and a variety of points between. Part Three will take a more practical approach, turning its focus to the specific strategies journalists (and anyone concerned about the ethics of amplification) can employ whenever presented with the deceptively complex question, "Should I fan this flame?"

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ENDNOTES

1 Proponents of the Pizzagate conspiracy maintained that then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton was running a Satanic child sex ring out of the back of a Washington, D.C., pizza shop. She wasn't. The case was complicated by the fact that it wasn't clear how many of the people sharing the story and posting theories to various online forums genuinely believed the allegations were true, and how many were engaged in media manipulation efforts. The range of (often unverifiable) participant motivations raised a number of questions about the relative benefits and drawbacks of amplifying the story. Explainers and other articles debunking the conspiracy were exactly what was needed for some readers. Simultaneously, these articles played right into the manipulators' hands, providing a blueprint for future manipulations in this case and in future cases. News coverage also helped legitimize the conspiracy for participants who believed, by default, that anything journalists say is a lie. Citing the fundamental untrustworthiness of establishment journalism, one conspiracy theorist traveled from North Carolina to D.C., and in the process of conducting his own investigation, opened fire on the shop.

2 "Internet culture," sometimes described as "meme culture," is a nebulous, and sometimes contentious, term. While "internet culture" is frequently used by everyday social media participants, and even some journalists and academics, to describe the collectively created memetic media that spreads across and between online platforms, there are in fact many different kinds of cultures that create and share many different kinds of memes. "Internet culture" in the singular form (as the term is most frequently employed) belies that plurality. The reference above describes reporters who are unfamiliar with the different forms these cultures can take, particularly regarding their vernacular aesthetics, behavioral norms, and humor.

3 For more on the editorial implications of measurability, as well as the different forms measurability can take, see the work of Christin (2014) and Petre (2015).

4 The question of whether to give the audience what they want or what they need is a longstanding debate within journalism (see Lavine and Wackman 1988; DeWerth-Pallmeyer 1997). For more on how algorithms further complicate these already thorny issues, see West (2016).

5 In one February 2018 case, manipulators on 4chan set traps for reporters by posting multiple false links between the Parkland, Florida, mass shooter and white supremacist groups. Reporters would come looking on 4chan for any reportable connection, and participants speculated in private Discord chats, so it wouldn't take much to convince people. The Anti-Defamation League was the first to publish an account of the bogus link, citing confirmation from the leader of the group the shooter allegedly trained with (who, as it turns out, had himself been fooled by the manipulation campaign). Other outlets followed suit, and the hoax became front-page news. *Politico*'s Shawn Musgrave (2018) chronicled the response to the story within far-right circles. "All it takes is a single article," one commenter posted to Gab, a social networking site popular with white nationalists. "And everyone else picks up the story."

6 For more on the myth of journalistic objectivity, as well as critiques of the "view from nowhere," see the work of Rosen (2010), Brewin (2013), and Stephens (2014).

7 One example of this discrepancy can be seen in the 2017 controversy over the NFL's "take a knee" anti-racist protests, in which a number of players would kneel during the National Anthem to protest systemic violence against people of color. These protests angered many on the right, including President Trump—a position complicated by the fact that many of the most vocal opponents of player protests were, simultaneously, the most vocal proponents of free speech defenses of anti-Semitic and racist speech. As Betsy Woodruff of *The Daily Beast* noted (2017), while Attorney General Jeff Sessions and the Justice Department more broadly has actively defended the rights of white nationalists to speak at college campuses, Sessions (along with Trump) apparently draws the line of respectability at football players—many of whom are of color, and all of whom were standing in solidarity with communities of color subjected to state violence—who are exercising their equally-protected speech rights.

8 For a breakdown of the ways digital technologies have impacted mainstream journalism, see the work of Anderson (2013), Anderson and Caumont (2014), and Entman and Usher (2017). For more on the historical

relationship between the news media and their audiences, see Ananny (2014). For more on how digital media have impacted theories within journalism studies, see Steensen and Ahva (2014).

9 Carroll was not the only respondent to make such a claim; several others who had been trained in the 70s, 80s, and early 90s linked pre-internet journalism practices to major, mid-century events and cultural traumas. The alt-right beat reporter profiled in Part One, who refused to report on the trollish elements of far-right extremism because of childhood memories of the historical realities of fascism, provides one conspicuous example.

10 A voice and chat app designed for gamers, which was widely adopted by white nationalists in early 2017.

11 See Pilon and Guthrie (2017) for an account of the “shitty media men” list that circulated following a rash of high-profile harassment and assault cases in the media and entertainment industries.

12 Nancy Baym describes a strikingly similar dynamic in research on the relationship between musicians and fans on social media; see Baym (2013; 2018) for more on the ambivalence of musicians’ relational labor.

13 For more on efforts to troll with false symbols, see Ellis (2017), as well as the Anti-Defamation League’s explainer, “No, the ‘OK’ Gesture is Not a Hate Symbol.” For more on how Pepe the Frog and other memes can become hate symbols through social consensus, see Milner and Phillips (2016).

14 It is worth underscoring that the abuse journalists face is not restricted to Twitter. One female journalist at a large national publication noted that while some of the abuse she receives comes from Twitter, a great deal also comes from her email, her Facebook account, mailed complaints to her publication, and emails to her editor. In short, staying off Twitter, were that even an option for some journalists, wouldn’t come close to addressing the underlying problem.

15 During the final editing stage of this project, Facebook announced significant changes to their algorithm; content posted by friends and family will now be prioritized over content posted by news publishers. It remains to be seen how these changes will impact the editorial decision-making process described above.

16 For the history and evolution of audience measurement, see Webster, Phalen, and Lickty (2013); for a discussion of how the news media use audience data and metrics in the digital age, including how news organizations supplement quantitative data with “editorial expertise and other forms of qualitative judgment” (7), see Cherubini and Nielsen (2016).

17 For historical background on how media institutions’ definitions of their audiences shape the content that is produced, see Ettema and Whitney (1994).

18 For more on the history of racial (and racist) representation within the news media, see Gonzalez and Torres (2012); for an analysis of how news and opinion media coverage amplifies distorted, racially biased representations of black families, see Dixon (2017).

19 For more on how framings of white supremacy as fringe extremism preclude a meaningful interrogation of structural racism, see Daniels (1997).

20 For more on how diversity within the newsroom (or lack thereof) impacts diversity of news sources, see Diddi, Fico, and Zeldes (2014).

21 For a model of nonprofit news reporting, see ProPublica (“About us”).

22 For a deep dive into social media content moderation, see Gillespie (2018).

23 For more on the increasing intermingling of news reporting and community management, see Braun and Gillespie (2011).

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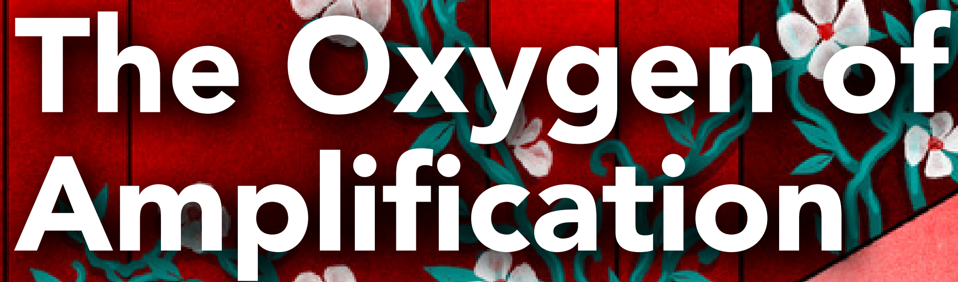

The Oxygen of Amplification

Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators Online

By Whitney Phillips

Data&Society

PART 3

The Forest and the Trees: Proposed Editorial Strategies

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Author: Whitney Phillips; PhD 2012, English with an emphasis on folklore, University of Oregon

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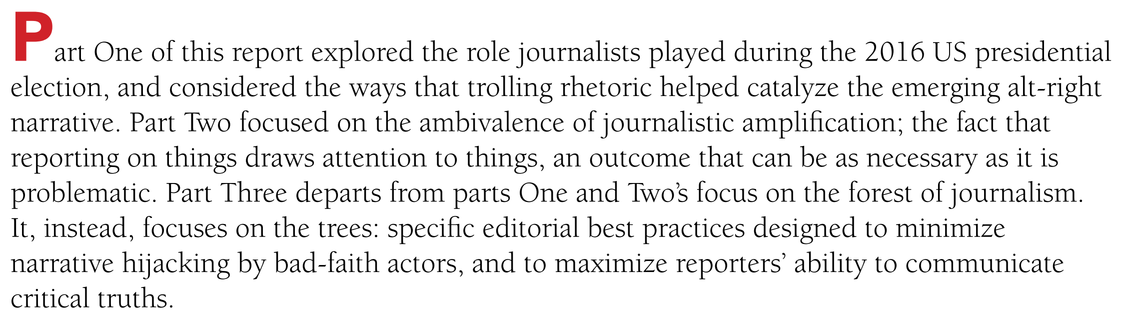
Access the full report at http://datasociety.net/output/oxygen-of-amplification/



Part One of this report explored the role journalists played during the 2016 US presidential election, and considered the ways that trolling rhetoric helped catalyze the emerging alt-right narrative. Part Two focused on the ambivalence of journalistic amplification; the fact that reporting on things draws attention to things, an outcome that can be as necessary as it is problematic. Part Three departs from parts One and Two's focus on the forest of journalism. It, instead, focuses on the trees: specific editorial best practices designed to minimize narrative hijacking by bad-faith actors, and to maximize reporters' ability to communicate critical truths.

Many of the recommendations made here echo the core tenets of good journalism, which have guided reporters, editors, and publishers in their efforts to grapple with issues of newsworthiness, untruth, and manipulation by state and business actors since the start of the profession. These recommendations—shaped by interviewees themselves—build on these tenets to reflect the challenges specific to social media and networked manipulation campaigns. Given its focus on editorial strategy, Part Three is geared most directly to working reporters and editors. That said, suggestions about how best to respond to problematic information are also applicable to everyday users of social media, who serve as critical links in the overall amplification chain.

The first two sections in this third and final part of the report address whether or not something is worth reporting, and what to do if the object of that reporting is objectively false. The following two sections focus on approaches to targeted manipulation campaigns, and specific manipulators. The last section discusses general strategies for reporting on the internet, capped off with a reminder of how many trees compose the journalism forest.

TIPS FOR ESTABLISHING NEWSWORTHINESS

Not every piece of information is worth reporting. In all cases, for all stories, journalists must assess what is newsworthy and what is not. To assess newsworthiness – a particularly important task when the story contains manipulative elements posted to social media – ***First Draft News***' Claire Wardle encourages reporters to ask whether or not the story has extended beyond the interests of the community being discussed. In the case of online memetic content, for example, the question would be whether a particular meme has been broadly shared by anyone outside the core group of participants. This is the "tipping point" criterion (Moschella and Watts 2017): if the story hasn't yet reached that point, all reporting will do is provide oxygen, increasing the likelihood that it *will* reach the tipping point. When presented with a story pitch that will take a small issue and make it much bigger through amplification, former senior editor at *Refinery29* Laura Norkin asks herself, "If we didn't cover this, and it didn't get covered elsewhere, would it just go away?" If the answer is probably yes, and the coverage would have no social benefit otherwise, her policy is to pass on the story.

The question of "social benefit" is critical for April Glaser, technology writer at *Slate*. When weighing the question of newsworthiness, she considers whether the reporting will have a positive social benefit, if it will open up a new conversation, and/or if it will add weight and exemplars to an existing conversation. If the answer to these questions is yes, the story is likely worth reporting. But, Glaser also emphasizes that the quest for knowledge must be balanced with careful consideration of the harm – embarrassment, retraumatization, professional damage – that this knowledge might cause. Another staff writer covering cybersecurity reiterates Glaser's point, and adds a further wrinkle. The question isn't just what harm could be caused by published information, he says. The question is also what harm could the *audience* cause by using that information, for example by finding and attacking someone quoted in the story, or replicating the crimes the story chronicles. Put another way, to assess newsworthiness, one must also assess what weapons the story would hand to its audiences.

THE QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE MUST BE BALANCED WITH CAREFUL CONSIDERATION OF THE HARM —EMBARRASSMENT, RETRAUMATIZATION, PROFESSIONAL DAMAGE— THAT THIS KNOWLEDGE MIGHT CAUSE.

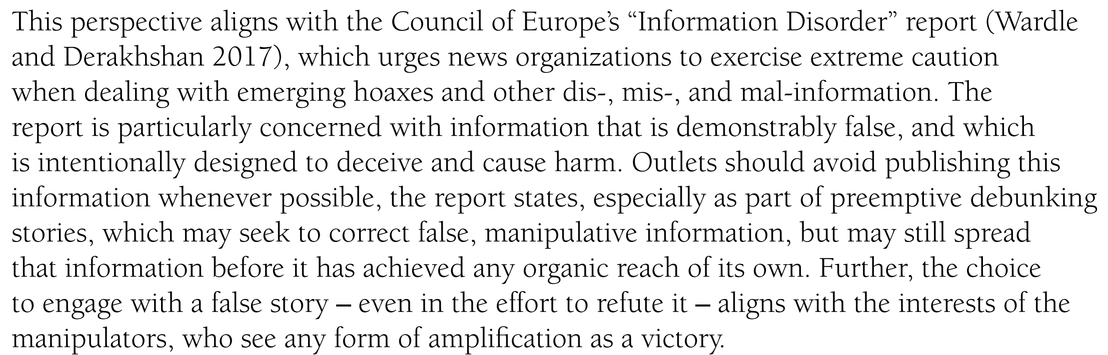
TIPS FOR REPORTING ON OBJECTIVELY FALSE INFORMATION

Within journalism, there is a long-standing injunction against blending opinion and news reporting. While it is critical to maintain that separation, reporters should, at the same time, avoid overcompensatory framings that preclude them from making forceful truth claims. One staff writer at a large global news outlet highlighted this tension. On one hand, she noted, you need to indicate when false claims are false. However, in so doing, you risk injecting (or being accused of injecting) opinion into the reporting. She noted that one common workaround she's used, and has seen many other reporters use, is to editorialize by proxy. This approach uses a euphemistic "critics say" or "others say" as a way to hint that something isn't what it appears to be, without having to assert a clear position. While editorializing by proxy might feel more comfortable from a reporting perspective, this reporter conceded, not taking a clear position risks lending plausibility to objectively false and/or manipulative claims. Furthermore, couching fact as opinion does not lend greater objectivity to the reporting. It actually undermines that objectivity. The reporting of facts (and, conversely, debunking of untruths), this reporter maintained, must therefore not be conflated with editorial stances.

As for the question of whether to report on falsehoods, one science and technology staff writer at a large culture and entertainment site employs the following criteria:

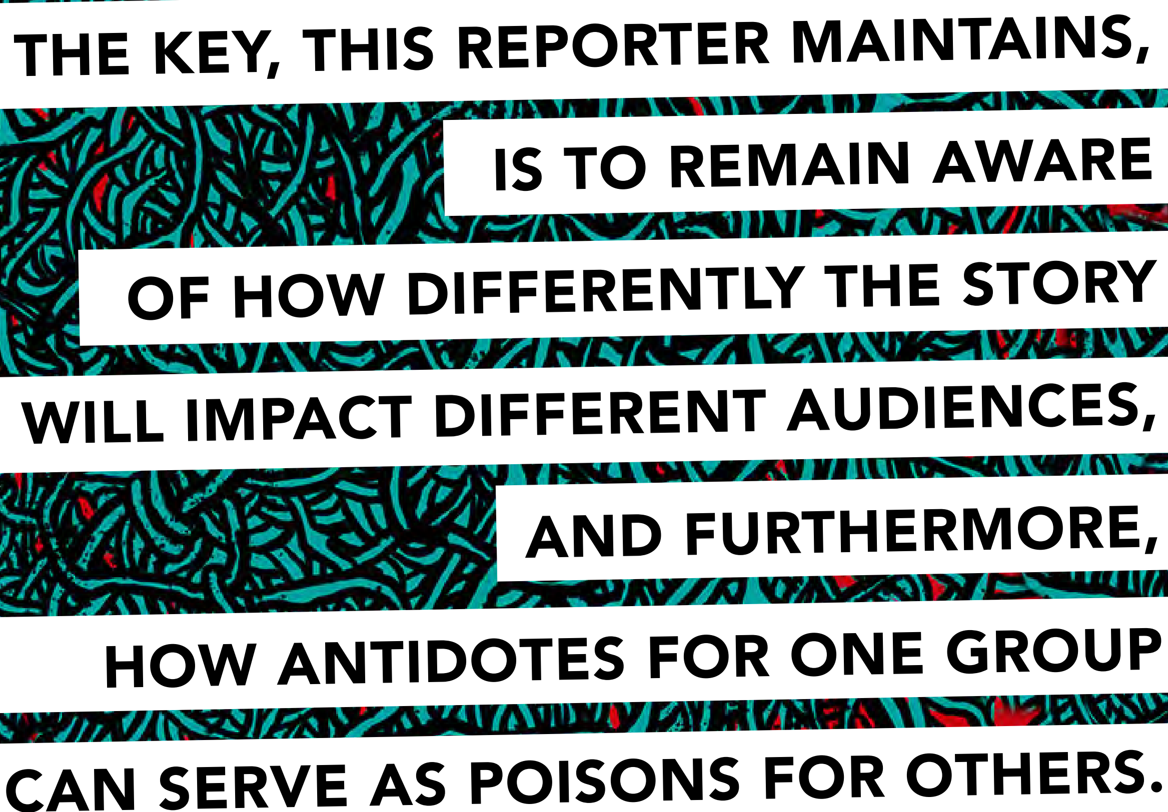
1. Determine if the story reaches the tipping point (drawing from Claire Wardle's definition, that it extends beyond the interests of the community being discussed)[1]
2. Determine if there would be a public health takeaway (i.e. something worth learning) from the debunking; for example, explanations that identify and analyze manipulators' rhetorical strategies, including their use of humor
3. Determine if there is a political or social action point (i.e., something worth doing) related to the falsehood itself; for example, editorials that provide media literacy strategies for recognizing and resisting networked manipulation campaigns
4. Determine if the risk of entrenching/rewarding the falsehood in some stories is worth dislodging the falsehood in others

If the answer to each of these questions is no, then the story isn't worth reporting at that time. If a story ultimately passes the tipping point and does become appropriate to report (because of clear risks to public safety, because of the underlying media systems the story unearths), reporters should be especially careful to follow established best reporting practices, with particular attention paid to the origins of the information, as well as its broader context—both of which should be discussed transparently in the article itself. Whenever possible, experts in the particular subject area should be recruited to write or consult on editorial pushback, to ensure the clearest and most informed refutations possible.



This perspective aligns with the Council of Europe's "Information Disorder" report (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017), which urges news organizations to exercise extreme caution when dealing with emerging hoaxes and other dis-, mis-, and mal-information. The report is particularly concerned with information that is demonstrably false, and which is intentionally designed to deceive and cause harm. Outlets should avoid publishing this information whenever possible, the report states, especially as part of preemptive debunking stories, which may seek to correct false, manipulative information, but may still spread that information before it has achieved any organic reach of its own. Further, the choice to engage with a false story – even in the effort to refute it – aligns with the interests of the manipulators, who see any form of amplification as a victory.

As true believers and cynical troublemakers often seed the same false story for very different reasons, it can be difficult to balance the risks of entrenching false narratives and the need to challenge those narratives. This possibility is particularly concerning to a technology section reporter at a large national news organization frequently tasked with debunking far-right hoaxes and rumors. As they note, while many readers benefit from these debunkings, there are countless others who do not, and who, instead, become links in the chains of future manipulation efforts, or who merely gloat over the fact that a prominent outlet was tricked into covering the story. The key, this reporter maintains, is to remain aware of how differently the story will impact different audiences, and furthermore, how antidotes for one group can serve as poisons for others.



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TIPS FOR REPORTING ON SPECIFIC HARASSMENT CAMPAIGNS OR OTHER COORDINATED MANIPULATION ATTACKS

Harassment campaigns and other coordinated attacks are particularly challenging to report on responsibly, as the entire purpose of these attacks is to generate oxygen, draw more people into a story, and create the biggest public spectacle possible. That said, there are a number of ways to minimize the potential fallout from these stories.

First and most critical, reporters and editors should **treat violent antagonisms as inherently contagious, and in coverage, draw from best practices for reporting on suicide,[2] mass shootings,[3] and terrorism,[4] which are known to inspire copycats when reported.** In order to minimize the contagion effect, stories should keep the story specific to the communities affected, focus on the impact of an attack, minimize sensationalist language and headlines, and reduce antihero framings of the perpetrator (see below for tips on reporting on specific harassers and manipulators). Stories should not provide more information about an attack, or the specific attacker, than is needed, especially if that information provides a blueprint for undertaking future attacks. Instead, stories should include only as much information as is necessary for the average reader to understand the issue and grasp its public health implications.

Second, when stories focus on the targets of online harassment, reporters should **be careful not to minimize victims' experiences by suggesting that digitally mediated harm is less serious or less real than physical harm**. The reality of the emotional, professional, and interpersonal impact of this harm (for the targets themselves, as well as for their friends and family) must be made explicitly clear.

That said, reporters should **reflect on the ways stories profile primary and secondary victims, and what information that reporting publicizes about them**. It is critical to remember that victims' Twitter handles or Facebook accounts aren't just social media profiles; they are potential roadmaps to continued targeted abuse. This point has been explicitly weaponized by white supremacist writers, as a leaked style guide from *The Daily Stormer* indicates (Feinberg 2017); its author, purportedly the neo-Nazi Andrew Anglin, advocates linking to the social media profiles of existing or ideal/desired targets of mob harassment in *Daily Stormer* articles. Given that individual harassers and those affiliated with more formal networks may be inclined to harness information for their own malignant ends, stories should include searchable social media details about victims, or any vulnerable person, sparingly, if at all.

Building on this point, *BuzzFeed News's* Craig Silverman encourages reporters to **minimize the inclusion of unnecessary identifying information in stories about harassment targets**, for example the victim's town or place of employment, which could provide avenues for further harassment. Whenever possible, reporters should **talk to the victim – and ideally to their friends and family as well – about these details, and see what information they are comfortable sharing publicly**. Even when not conducting formal interviews with targeted individuals or members of a targeted community, reporters must remember that embedded tweets pulled to illustrate harassment – either the harassment itself or responses to the harassment – aren't static pieces of evidence. They are attached to people who may not want to be included in the story. In every case, **work to balance victims' right to privacy and bodily autonomy with the news value of the story**.

Third, to the extent possible, reporters should **specify the number of participants in a particular online attack/campaign, rather than using vague mass nouns** (i.e., trolls did this, the alt-right did that). Claims such as "Twitter trolls attacked X" or "the alt-right is targeting Y" implies a larger, more powerful, and more coherent group than is typically participating, thus serving as a magnet for additional participants (and risking that the group will, as a result of the coverage, actually become larger, more powerful, and more coherent). Important contextualizing information includes the apparent number of online participants (based on observational data), why the reporter believes this count is accurate, and any unknown variables (for example, if it's not yet known if participants are part of a botnet attack, if there is any reason to suspect that multiple accounts may be run by the same person, or if the sincerity of participants is in question). It is particularly critical for reporters to note when attacks are limited to a handful of participants—and in those cases, reporters should revisit the "tipping point" criterion and determine if the story is even worth reporting. In all cases, reporters should guard against the false magnetism of stories, which can catalyze a panic across social media and contribute to the virality of harm.

In a similar vein, when describing media manipulation campaigns of any kind, stories and headlines should **employ the most precise language possible**, a point media historian Caroline Jack emphasizes in her lexicon of terms for problematic information (2017). Reporters should be especially wary of behavior-cloaking euphemisms when describing harassment and attacks; the word "troll" is most conspicuous in this regard, as it is often used in the place of more accurate behavioral descriptors like violent misogyny, identity-based harassment, and online stalking (confusingly, "troll" is also used to describe silliness and satire—even in these less serious cases, the specific behaviors should be named throughout). Avoiding euphemistic terminology can be especially difficult when an antagonistic group moves faster than reporters' ability to put a label on it, as one digital culture reporter noted of the swift adoption, and subsequent avoidance, of the term "alt-right" by many journalists. Even as these labels may shift, stories should foreground terminology that reflects the precise embodied impact of a particular behavior rather than detached, abstract framings or framings that align with the antagonists' preferred narratives or self-justifications.

Regarding the "troll" frame specifically, reporters and editors should **avoid the impulse to use "troll" as shorthand in stories and headlines**. The term has a long history online, and while that history is relevant to certain discussions, its colloquial definition has become hopelessly muddled, especially since "trolling" became associated with white supremacy and neo-Nazi attacks. When used as a broad behavioral catchall, "troll" simply doesn't say anything explanatory about the behaviors being described; all it does is provide manipulators and abusers a convenient rhetorical excuse.

Fourth, publications should **avoid publishing listicles that round up the worst examples of racist or misogynist expression without significantly commenting on that expression**. Aggregation stories, which are common on multimedia-heavy sites like *BuzzFeed*, and which easily filter into the broader ecosystem when they are linked to by other publications, might call attention to the abuse in order to condemn it. Regardless of reporters' good intentions, however, these stories also risk ventriloquizing the abuse, and providing future abusers a convenient collection of images and expressions from which to draw. The goal, according to journalism professor and anti-harassment advocate Michelle Ferrier, is to file stories that present clear, accurate descriptions of harm that highlight injustice and violence without losing sight of the visceral impact on targeted bodies (including cases when those bodies belong to the journalists themselves).

Fifth, when discussing these cases, reporters should **avoid framings that fall back on "both sides-ism," in which the attack is described, followed by an overview of what both the attackers and the attacked have to say about it**. As Laura Norkin, formerly of *Refinery29* argues, this elevates the perpetrators and supporters of hateful behaviors to an equal platform as those being harmed. In cases where the attacks are motivated by racial or gender animus, reporters should take a moral stance. If it is not possible or appropriate to include a strong editorial framing, the conversation should be situated within broader trends; for example, discussions of online ethics, cycles of media amplification, parody and performance, and the embodied impact of offline attacks, as demonstrated by *The New Statesman*'s Amelia Tait (2017) in her coverage of a racist-parody Twitter account and the vitriolic reactions it generated. This information is truth additive, and ensures that news coverage isn't merely pointing at and parroting harmful interactions.

Sixth, reporters and their editorial teams should **exercise an abundance of caution when reprinting memetic images used during particular attacks, especially when the images are dehumanizing and bigoted**. This includes cases when the image itself is not overtly offensive, as extremists often adopt seemingly harmless symbology (Pepe the Frog, the "ok" sign) to facilitate ease of sharing, and ease of publication by establishment outlets. As mentioned above, articles containing a litany of the most offensive or shocking examples (whether the image itself is offensive or shocking, or if the underlying message is the source of offensee and shock) will only help ensure the images' spread and searchability. Stories should not include an image when a text description will suffice. These descriptions should carefully explain what is known about the image, particularly what discourses surround it, and through what communities the image is known to have travelled. To collate this information, Aaron Sankin emphasizes the utility of reverse-image searches, which allow reporters to trace the origins of specific images (Google allows users to search by image, and

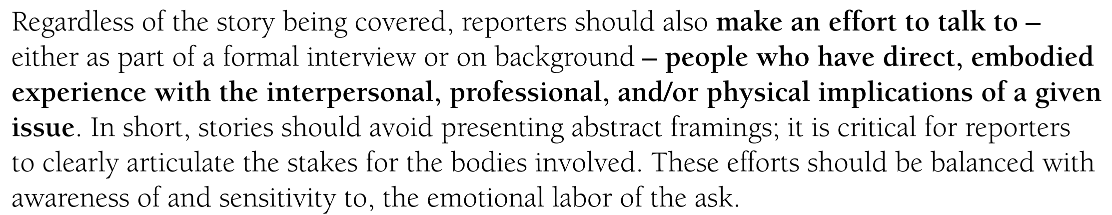
services like TinEye offer a reverse-image search engine). A search for similar kinds of images on the database *Know Your Meme* is also prudent, as this additional step can help establish a broader memetic context.

Focusing on discourse and spread, rather than claims about definitive meaning, will allow reporters to redirect the conversation away from the manipulators' chosen frame, and call attention to bigoted dog whistling without having to make unverifiable (and potentially legally compromising) claims about participants' "true" intentions. The question at issue is what messages have been communicated about a particular image or symbol, and more importantly, what impact the image or symbol has on the people who see it.

When sharing an image is deemed necessary, editors and members of the communications team should **consider including captions from the story and/or other contextualizing information within the image itself so it can't be hijacked and spread by manipulators as easily**. This is not a call to tamper with or misrepresent photojournalistic work. Memetic media has already been altered by countless participants; annotating an existing image doesn't destroy it, it merely makes it more difficult to be further weaponized.

Seventh, when approaching stories about targeted harassment and violence online, reporters should **be especially conscientious about the histories of identity-based violence, and the histories of the activists who have been working to combat it.** As multiple reporters of color suggested, many (often white) reporters insert themselves into social justice discourses about race, gender, and class without fully historicizing the issues, or acknowledging the individuals and groups who have been fighting these fights for decades, often with little recognition.

This point connects to how reporters and editors should engage with and cite expert sources. Reflecting on the hundreds of interviews she's given for stories about the hacker collective Anonymous, anthropologist Gabriella Coleman underscores how important it is for reporters and editors to **foreground expert perspectives, particularly when the expert offers historicizing information, and/or when they warn against problematic editorial framings**. The alternative, which Coleman identifies as "stubbornly (or cynically) moving forward on false premises – whether out of an inflated belief in [the reporter's or their editor's] own judgment or out of a cynical belief that all that matters is delivering an entertaining or sensationalist story" (Coleman, 2017: 41) – risks undermining the civic value of the reporting. These stakes go up when stories address networked manipulation, harassment, and/or high-profile bad actors. In cases where stories include, or seem like they may include, polluted information, reporters shouldn't just quote experts, but should **actively consult with experts who have studied computational and/or networked propaganda, and other forms of media manipulation**. This consultation should address how the story will label, frame, and contextualize the communities and/or behaviors, and address how best to identify and preempt manipulation tactics.


Regardless of the story being covered, reporters should also **make an effort to talk to** – either as part of a formal interview or on background – **people who have direct, embodied experience with the interpersonal, professional, and/or physical implications of a given issue**. In short, stories should avoid presenting abstract framings; it is critical for reporters to clearly articulate the stakes for the bodies involved. These efforts should be balanced with awareness of and sensitivity to, the emotional labor of the ask.

Finally, reporters should **reflect on any personal connections to a story, and how these connections factor into the underlying issue, controversy, or policy**. This isn't merely a call for reporters to honestly assess their own points of political myopia, and to supplement that perspective with expert commentators as needed. It also means taking preemptive protective and/or self-care measures – both at the level of individual mental health support and/or the kinds of safety trainings and resources offered by organizations like the International Women's Media Foundation and PEN America[5] – if a story is likely to trigger post-traumatic or secondary stress responses.

TIPS FOR REPORTING ON SPECIFIC MANIPULATORS, BIGOTS, AND ABUSERS

Journalists, particularly those assigned to politics and business beats, are trained to identify and ward off manipulation efforts by state and corporate actors. However much experience these reporters have with traditional persuasive media and disinformation campaigns, contemporary social media pose novel challenges for even the most seasoned reporters, and require an augmentation of existing knowledge about information abuses. The following strategies scaffold onto existing good journalism practices to better confront networked actors and manipulations.

While stories must address the manipulators, bigots, and abusers involved in particular attacks, reporting should **avoid framing bad actors as the center of the narrative**. Doing so only reinforces the idea that similar kinds of behaviors will result in nonstop attention from journalists and across social media users; provides a public, easily searchable blueprint for bad actors looking to replicate harmful behavior (see above point on contagion effects); and directs attention away from the underlying context of an attack. Stories should focus instead on the systems being gamed (per *The Verge*'s Adi Robertson), the communities being created (per *New York Magazine*'s Max Read), and the performative strategies being employed (per *The Huffington Post*'s Ashley Feinberg).

When framing a story about specific white nationalists and supremacists, reporters and editors should **run a newsworthiness calculus for each personal detail – about their family, their hobbies, their day to day activities, and so forth – that could be reported**. Information that does not reach the tipping point, can't be framed to serve the public's benefit, and/or can be easily weaponized by manipulators, should be minimized or omitted. A particularly instructive, and particularly high-profile, case study can be found in 2017's now-infamous "Nazi next door" story published by *The New York Times*' Richard Fausset (officially titled "A Voice of Hate in America's Heartland").[6] In this story, the ho-hum details of a Nazi-sympathizing white nationalist's life – details interspersed with a number of the subject's coded references to trolling culture, of which Fausset seemed to be unaware – were foregrounded as decontextualized observations ("this person exists, and he shops at Target"). Missing from these observations were pointed, critical reflections on the broader context of white supremacist ideology pre- and post-election. Also omitted was even the vaguest sense of the impact these ideologies have within Jewish communities and communities of color across the country, or even within the profiled white nationalist's own neighborhood. Fausset similarly failed to consider the impact the article would have on communities sympathetic to white supremacist views. Fausset's framing suggested that all his readers would be on the same page; that they already knew that, and knew why, fascist, neo-Nazi ideals are abhorrent. While many certainly did, Fausset didn't account for readers outside the target audience. Even if it was the opposite of Fausset's intentions, the article's framing primed its ability to recruit and further radicalize a certain subset of the (unintended) audience—or at the very

least, to serve as a trophy and manipulation incentive for extremists who thought it was hilarious to see neo-Nazi memes published by *The New York Times*.

Raising these critiques of Fausset's piece isn't to universally condemn all coverage of far-right extremists. Rather, it is a reminder that some, perhaps even much, of the information about individual bigots is not newsworthy. Instead, it merely provides free PR and recruitment opportunities for the individuals, groups, and ideologies being profiled—even if the profile is an ostensible condemnation.

Building on this point, reporters and editors should **be aware of how strategic many groups of white supremacists and nationalists are in their communications and messaging**, which is geared toward maximizing recruitment. The leaked *Daily Stormer* style guide speaks to these strategies, as it encourages potential contributors to avoid racist epithets and other expressions likely to repel mainstream readers. Instead, prospective writers are encouraged to hijack existing memes, whatever their origins, with the rationale that memes are familiar, funny, and naturally lower the audience's critical defenses. The guide also encourages writers to lean heavily on humor, on the grounds that racist jokes plant the seeds for racist beliefs. Beyond that, racist jokes – the bread and butter of many far-right extremists – are easier to trick establishment journalists into publishing. Davey and Ebner (2017) chronicle similar efforts in their report on the rise of global extremism. Particularly, they focus on the ways that far-right extremists reframe hate speech in terms of free speech, a much more palatable concept for potential recruits and journalists alike. Reporters should take for granted that these individuals always have ulterior motives; otherwise they would not be talking to the press.

Reporters and editors should **be equally aware that extremist groups, along with other groups of media manipulators, are eager to use journalistic norms as a weapon against journalism**. In order to spread their messages as far as possible, as quickly as possible, they will engage in strategies such as "source hacking," as described by Data and Society's Media Manipulation Initiative research lead Joan Donovan (Scarpelli 2017). This involves seeding false or misleading narratives with authoritative sources, in the hopes that other outlets pick up, amplify, and therefore reinforce the initial falsehood. More journalists on the story, in turn, means more opportunities for more misleading interviews, thus providing the manipulators increasing opportunities to hijack the news narrative.[7]

Building on long-standing best practices in journalism, reporters and editors should **respond with heightened vigilance when antagonists, bigots, or other stripes of manipulator reach out with a tip or unsolicited commentary**. This is basic advice to all journalists, regardless of what subject is being reported; as April Glaser of *Slate* stresses, reporters should always consider what sources are hoping to get out of a given interaction, and how they might be trying to use you. When reporting on known manipulators, however, or on individuals who have even tenuous ties to spaces that employ networked manipulation tactics (notably, 4chan), this foundational line of questioning should be handled with even more caution. It's not enough to ask what the source's agenda might be. Reporters must also **ask if it is even possible to verify their source's apparent agenda.** If the source is in any way subject to Poe's Law, an internet axiom stating that satire and sincerity can be impossible to parse online (see Phillips and Milner 2017), the tip should be treated with extreme suspicion, and ideally omitted, unless it can be verified independently of the source—a vetting that should take into account the possibility that this "proof" may have been seeded preemptively by the manipulators.

In cases when the reporter is inclined to reach out directly to a specific antagonist, manipulator, or abuser, they should first **reflect on whether the story absolutely requires quotes from bigoted, manipulative individuals**. First, by handing bad actors a platform, reporters allow these individuals to tell their story on their own terms, and in so doing, give them equal time to justify/spin/further normalize their behaviors. John Herrman of *The New York Times* is especially wary of efforts to repeatedly interview the same abusive or manipulative source(s), since efforts to maintain access to dangerous individuals often requires cozying up to them, or at least paying lip service to their version of events. When presented with the opportunity to interview a source that is, by all accounts, up to no good, reporters should therefore remind themselves that it isn't a journalistic necessity to quote a subject directly; that option, April Glaser of *Slate* argues, should be exercised depending on what is most directly aligned with the public's interest. For Abby Ohlheiser, digital culture reporter at *The Washington Post*, the question of whether to include quotes from, say, neo-Nazis, requires a further assessment of fairness. "To whom you are being 'fair'" she encourages reporters to ask themselves. "Is it just the Nazi? What about that person's victims or their ideology's targets?" A good rule of thumb is, if the answer to that question is "just the Nazi," reporters should think twice about their approach.

If the story does warrant an interview (because it helps establish context, because it more clearly illustrates what exactly the individual is advocating, because it serves a counter-argumentative function), reporters should **situate bigoted or manipulative sources' statements historically and ideologically, and minimize the inclusion of euphemistic dog whistles** (i.e., "identitarian," currently the preferred framing for many white nationalists and supremacists). If the individual is known to make misleading or manipulative statements to the press, or if they have made violently bigoted statements in the past, *Vice* and *New Republic* reporter Oliver Lee Bateman advocates for a clear and direct disclosure of those facts, so that readers know how to couch the individual's claims. Another technology and culture reporter affirms this point, noting that while reporters needn't provide a breakdown of every single problematic thing the individual has ever said or done, if a person is being quoted as a source or expert, their overall orientation to the truth is critical to readers' ability to assess their claims. Similarly, *The Guardian*'s Olivia Solon calls for the use of contextualizing qualifiers when reporting on antagonists and manipulators, to ensure that readers are fully apprised of who the person is, what they believe, and what they have done (or would like to do). Finally, if the interview is to be conducted on camera, *FAZ* and *Die Welt* writer Felix Simon urges producers not to air it live, and suggests the inclusion of fact-checking captions, subtitles, and other additional commentary.

As an additional tip for one-on-one interviews, reporters should **be aware that all communications in emails and in interviews, in fact anything reporters say publicly or even semiprivately about a particular story and/or subject, may be used against the reporter and their publication**. Several reporters mentioned that hoaxers, bigots and manipulators often secretly record their interviews with reporters, and/or will attempt to engage the reporter in seemingly casual conversations on Twitter or Facebook, with the explicit objective of posting those interactions to social media and humiliating the reporter and their publication. Reporters should consider whether this additional layer of personal exposure—a layer above and beyond the news value of the interview—is worth quotes, especially from individuals who will probably lie anyway.

In this same spirit, whether subjects are directly interviewed or are observed on social media, reporters should **weave the performative nature of manipulators' actions into the story**. Regarding humorous expression, or what might be regarded as humorous to participants, Andrew Kahn, assistant interactives editor at *Slate*, encourages reporters to lean in to the fact that such communication can be simultaneously playful and political, ironic and sincere—a point of ambivalence the leaked *Daily Stormer* style guide encourages its writers to exploit through the rhetorical buffer of lulz. If reporters present these utterances as "just" joking, Kahn warns, that minimizes the utterances' very real impact and risks further normalizing harmful messages. If reporters present the utterances as entirely serious, Kahn continues, that misses the opportunity to fully contextualize the story and risks crystallizing the statements into the ideology being ascribed to them (i.e., "I'll show *you* deplorables"). Beyond this, Kahn argues, attempts to "unmask" purportedly ironic behavior as fundamentally unironic imposes a false dichotomy between deliberate fakes and deliberate propaganda. The acknowledgment of provocation, performance, and manipulation – and the deep ambivalence therein – is a much more useful frame, Kahn argues; it gives the reporter a better grip on the overall narrative and allows them to sidestep the manipulators' games, which in turn allows the reporter to add shading and nuance to the discussion.

Further, given the deep performativity of these behaviors, *New York Magazine*'s Max Read encourages journalists to **minimize focus on individual motivations or personal psychology**. While these questions are certainly interesting, indeed while they serve as the bedrock for much investigative reporting, profiles that overemphasize motives and psychology tend to restrict focus to the individual, and more problematically, to information that is often unverifiable to begin with. In so doing, focus is directed away from the performative and/or ideological elements of a particular behavior or community.

No matter the specific framing, stories should **avoid deferring to manipulators' chosen language, explanations, or justifications**. Joel Stein's *TIME* magazine interview with avowed neo-Nazi and serial online abuser Andrew Auernheimer, discussed in Part One of the report, provides one example. Not only did Stein frame his subject as a "troll" throughout (thereby minimizing the embodied impact of Auernheimer's targeted attacks), he explicitly described him as "probably the biggest troll in history," a tag line Auernheimer could have written himself. Beyond this specific example, employing manipulators' framings has the effect, *Motherboard*'s Emanuel Maiberg notes, of allowing manipulators to set the narrative and linguistic agenda, carve the world up into categories of their choosing, and appear to wield much more influence than they actually do. They don't have the numbers to steer the cultural conversation on their own, and they should not be given any assistance, inadvertent or otherwise, in these efforts.

GENERAL TIPS FOR REPORTING ON THE INTERNET

The following are a series of suggestions applicable to all stories with online elements. By standardizing these more general strategies, reporters not specifically assigned to digital culture or technology beats, as well as the editors overseeing these stories, will be better equipped to navigate the increasing overlap between "internet" and "non-internet" subjects.

First, rather than merely pointing to the fact that something on the internet exists, *Motherboard*'s Emanuel Maiberg encourages reporters to **use framings that focus on process and mechanics**. This includes how a particular interaction, behavior, or community works and why that matters to a broader audience. It also includes the specific technologies themselves; Maiberg points to how the "ephemeral, anonymous, image-based architecture" of 4chan facilitates a certain type of behavior, just as the platform architecture of Twitter and Discord and Facebook and every other platform facilitate unique behavioral contours. Not only will system-focused framings allow readers to get a better handle on a particular story, it helps mitigate knee-jerk, hyperbolic responses to artificially-inflated narratives.

Speaking to the need to carefully contextualize, editors should **avoid assigning breaking stories about online communities or behaviors to people unfamiliar with those communities and behaviors**. That's where the most mistakes happen. Editors should find someone else to cover the story, or wait until the story can be contextualized for a general audience. Stories should be framed especially carefully when they address behaviors on and around 4chan following a tragedy. It is almost guaranteed – particularly after mass shootings – that 4chan participants, participants on other chans, neo-Nazis, and those simply looking to manipulate the media will try to manufacture a story that either links the perpetrator to 4chan explicitly, or merely tries to insert mentions of 4chan into the unfolding narrative. Reporters assigned to these stories should **conduct background research on the history of 4chan and other online subcultures,** and should **assume that claims emanating from 4chan, particularly in the wake of a tragedy, are pointedly performative, and almost certainly false**. It is critical for everyone in the newsroom to remember that reporting such stories, even for the purposes of debunking falsehood, will only embolden the hoaxers, contribute to the chaos of the moment, and most pressingly, incentivize future bad actions.

Similarly, reporters should **take caution when anyone claiming to have a tip sends over files with overly amateur and/or analog stylings; for example poor photo quality, shaky video, images sloppily annotated using iPhone markup tools, and anything photocopied**. As Emanuel Maiberg emphasizes, haphazard-looking content can be as staged as professional content; in fact, the tendency for people online – from reporters to massive YouTube audiences – to equate "poor quality" with "authenticity" has resulted in an uptick in manipulation attempts playing to this confirmation bias.

Given the ease of fabrication and manipulation online, reporters and their editors should **internalize the idea that social media does not constitute a "person on the street" scenario, nor is an embedded tweet or Facebook post akin to a pulled quote**. Not only is this information unreliable (the profile might be a bot, the person might be joking in ways inscrutable to the reporter, etc), but by collating average citizens' tweets, reporters are directing readers to those citizens' profiles, and opening them up to direct, targeted harassment. For similar reasons, regardless of the kind of story being reported, reporters should **avoid pulling a handful of social media posts and then attributing that perspective, positive or negative, to "the internet."** Any conceivable perspective could be supported by that approach, and does not a critical mass make—although reporting on it as such could artificially create exactly that.

Instead, reporters should **talk to sources for digital culture stories at length, ideally face-to-face, whenever possible**. According to *The New York Times*' Farhad Manjoo, this approach yields greater insight into the totality of that person's perspective, since a person's online performative self may not accurately reflect that person's true perspectives and motives, and/or may obscure details that would help shed light on the person's digital footprint. If there is no time to conduct such interviews, Manjoo stated, reporters should at least reflect on the fact that the character(s) this person plays on the internet likely don't tell the whole story.

No matter what this story might be, Laura Norkin, formerly of *Refinery29*, encourages reporters to "**ask yourself why, and why now.**" What is the point of having this conversation today? As with all good reporting, but particularly when the topic butts up against networked manipulation campaigns, if there is any doubt about the relevance of the story, or the ethics of covering it, reporters and their editors should ask someone. Reporters and their editors should ask *two* someones, and through this feedback, identify and preempt any holes in the initial framing or in the final product. Soliciting these kinds of ethical gut checks might seem like a steep investment, but as Norkin insists, "It's not going to slow you down as badly as a horrific misstep will."

Emma Green of *The Atlantic* encapsulates these strategies as "an effort to listen, to try and see the world widely and well, and to write as generously and with as much of an eye toward understanding as possible," a framework she notes is especially useful, and even comforting, when online spaces are engulfed in chaos. The call, in a nutshell, is for journalists to **be reflective about the unique contours of digital spaces and tools, and the ways these spaces and tools challenge established reporting practices.**

For Andrew Marantz of *The New Yorker*, these choices come with a significant burden of responsibility. It's not just that journalists play an important role in the amplification of information. What gets reported – and what doesn't – becomes part of broader cultural narratives, and those broader cultural narratives directly impact the lives of countless citizens. For this reason, journalists of all positions, at all publications, must not pretend to be disinterested parties, or outside the systems they describe, or without a subject position. Reporters, editors, and publishers alike should **prefigure every professional decision with the recognition that individual journalists are an integral part of the news being reported**. There is no escape for anyone.

This approach is especially important when reporters wade into manipulation efforts spearheaded by those who seek to undermine deliberative democracy and actively pollute the public sphere. In a very practical sense, these individuals are relying on reporters to become part of the narrative in the effort to ensure the success of whatever latest attack, hoax, or campaign to strip entire communities of their human dignity. The underlying task for any journalist hoping to make socially responsible choices is therefore to understand how the institution of journalism is, itself, the system being gamed by manipulators.

THE UNDERLYING TASK FOR ANY JOURNALIST HOPING TO MAKE SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE CHOICES IS THEREFORE TO UNDERSTAND HOW THE INSTITUTION OF JOURNALISM IS, ITSELF, THE SYSTEM BEING GAMED BY MANIPULATORS.

THE PATH AHEAD

The strategies suggested in this part of the report are an outcropping of the broader discussions explored in Parts One and Two. The first of these recurring discussions is the deep ambivalence of journalistic amplification, as well as the tangled historical, economic, and ideological forces that profoundly complicate questions about whether or not to give fresh oxygen to a story. The second recurring discussion is the underlying human element, and the often-overlooked human cost, of the news. The third is the deep interconnection of these issues; the fact that no single question, and no single answer, can be considered alone.

This final point in particular speaks to the redwood grove metaphor introduced in Part One. Like the redwoods, whose roots intertwine so densely that they can deliver nutrients – or poisons – to entirely different trees, so densely that it can be difficult to determine where one tree ends and another begins, each facet of journalism feeds into all the others. This interconnection isn't restricted to journalism. What happens in the news reaches into social media, bounces back to search, rolls into advertising, creeps across pop culture, loops through to our living rooms, and lodges in our hearts, which get we sit down in front of devices in order to read the news. Similarly, just as the composition of the soil, or if there's fire, or if there's rain, directly impacts the trees' growth, a whole host of factors, from labor, to algorithms, to reporters' own lives, all influence which stories flourish, which stories wither, and what difference that makes to the broader media ecosystem.

When considering the future of journalism, and more broadly, the future of democracy, the interconnection of trees, of roots, of lofty institutions, is what catapults the political stakes clean through the treeline. We must find ways to defend against narrative hijacking, and targeted antagonisms, and media manipulations, and those looking to burn their own house down for a laugh, because these issues don't end at the edge of the news. There is no edge of the news. The specific policy and editorial strategies proposed in these pages might not fully map all of this territory. The hope, however, is that they stoke conversations around a single, unifying purpose: better journalism, for a better democracy. A healthier forest for all.

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ENDNOTES

1 This reporter did not specifically use the phrase "tipping point," but they described an identical calculus.

2 See Phillips (1974); Gunn and Lester (2012); Bohanna and Wang (2012); Tufecki (2015).

3 See McBride (2017); "Recommendations for Reporting on Mass Shootings" (2017).

4 See Beckett (2016); "Terrorism and the Media: A Handbook for Journalists" (2017); "Ankara Memorandum on Good Practices for a Multi-Sectoral Approach to Countering Violent Extremism" (2016).

5 See IWMF's "Journalist Safety" section at https://www.iwmf.org/our-research/journalist-safety/; and Pen America's Online Harassment Field Guide at https://onlineharassmentfieldmanual.pen.org/.

6 The high-profile visibility of this story, as well as the deluge of journalistic and social media critiques it inspired (including a published response by Fausset himself, in which he both stood by his reporting and acknowledged its shortcomings) prompted its inclusion in this section. See p. X-X in Part Two for an explanation of why I have chosen to minimize targeted criticisms of specific articles and journalists.

7 See the iterative reporting and network propaganda discussions included in Part Two of the report.

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