



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

CONTENTS

Introduction	3
On Weighing Their Options	3
Structural Complications	8
Addressing the Disease, Not Just the Symptoms	30
Acknowledgments.....	36
Endnotes.....	37
Works Cited.....	39

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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, technological, 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 conspiracy¹, 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.

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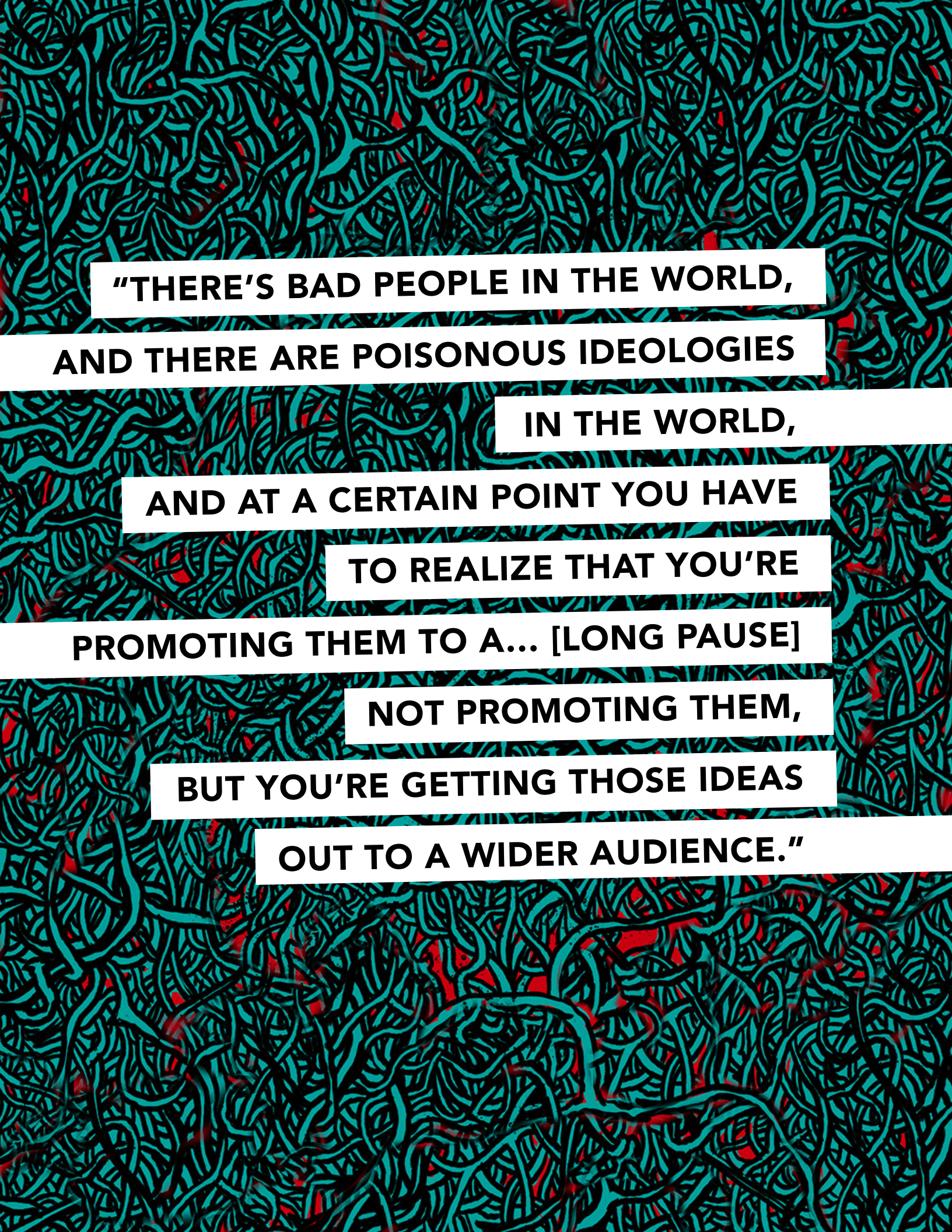
ANY UNCONTESTED SPACE, THEY'LL TAKE OVER."

- **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-cultures² 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.



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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*

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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 Sinderson 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.

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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 Eting, 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

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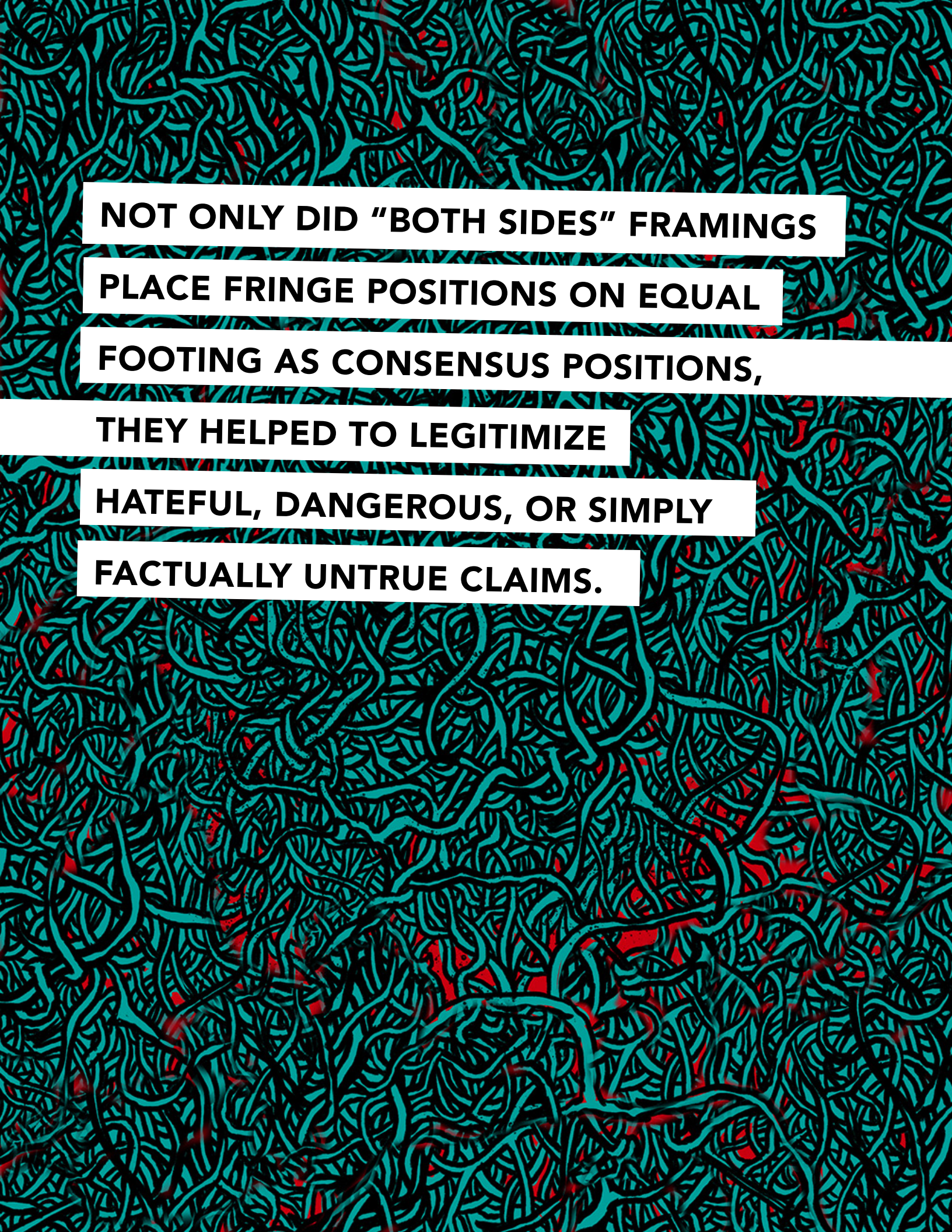
perspectives to balance out their liberal politics. The idea is this, he said: if we include the other side, no one can accuse us of being biased ("You still will be," the editor quipped, after a pause). Others connected the impulse to the professional norms of journalism itself, specifically to the 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



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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 channels¹⁰ 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

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AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE.

from sexual abuse and harassment¹¹ 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 Sinderson 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, Sinderson 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 clickbait 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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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 Sindors 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.

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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.

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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.

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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 injustice and inequality.

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?”**

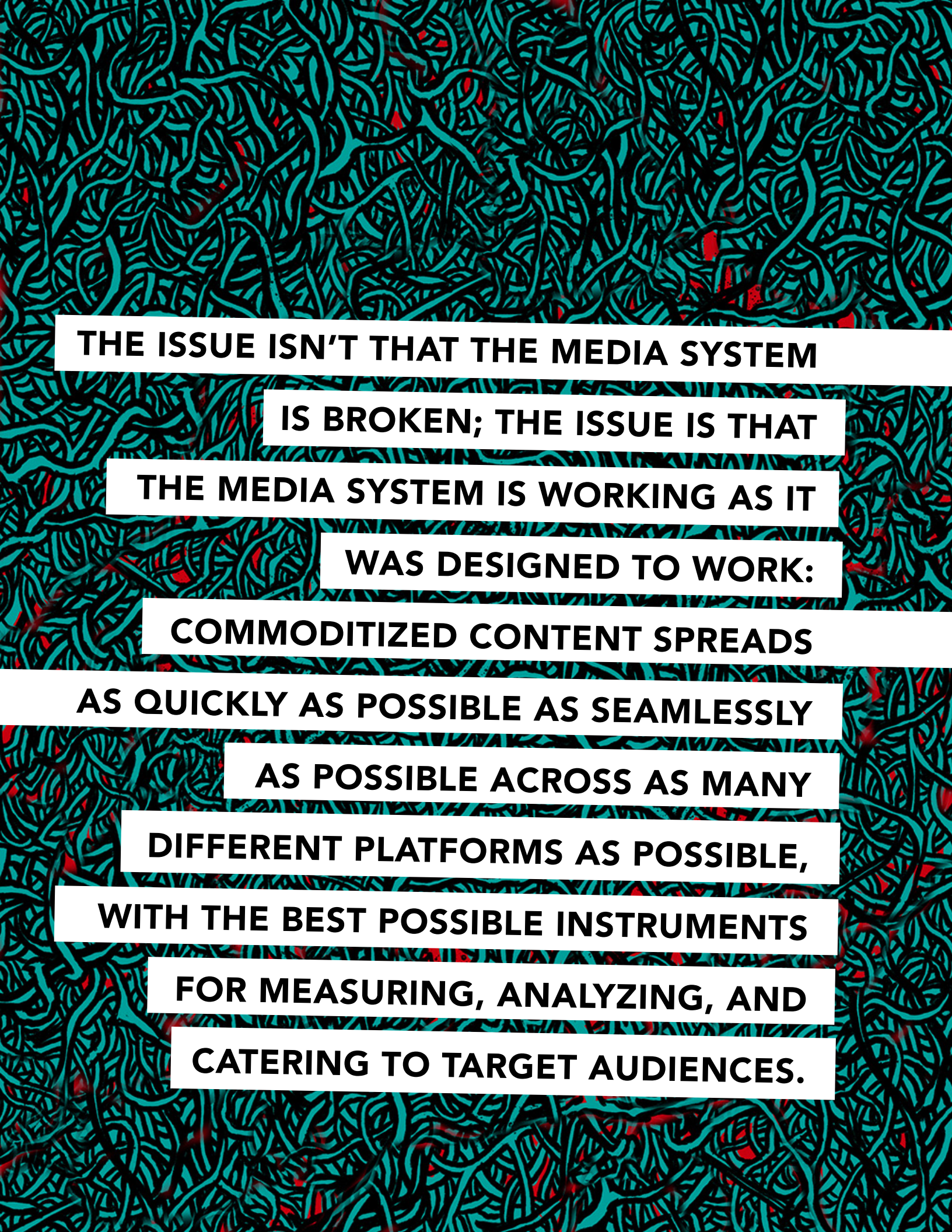
ADDRESSING THE DISEASE, NOT JUST THE SYMPTOMS

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



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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, Schmeer, 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 ombudspople 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 Sindere 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. Sindere 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, Sindere 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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