The Oxygen of Amplification

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

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Data&Society

CONTENTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ON ASSESSING THE "ALT-RIGHT"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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THE 4CHAN CONNECTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE TROLL-TRAINED VERSUS NOT TROLL-TRAINED DISTINCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

AN INFERNO OF FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM

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

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

EVEN AS TRUMP INCHED TOWARDS THE REPUBLICAN NOMINATION,

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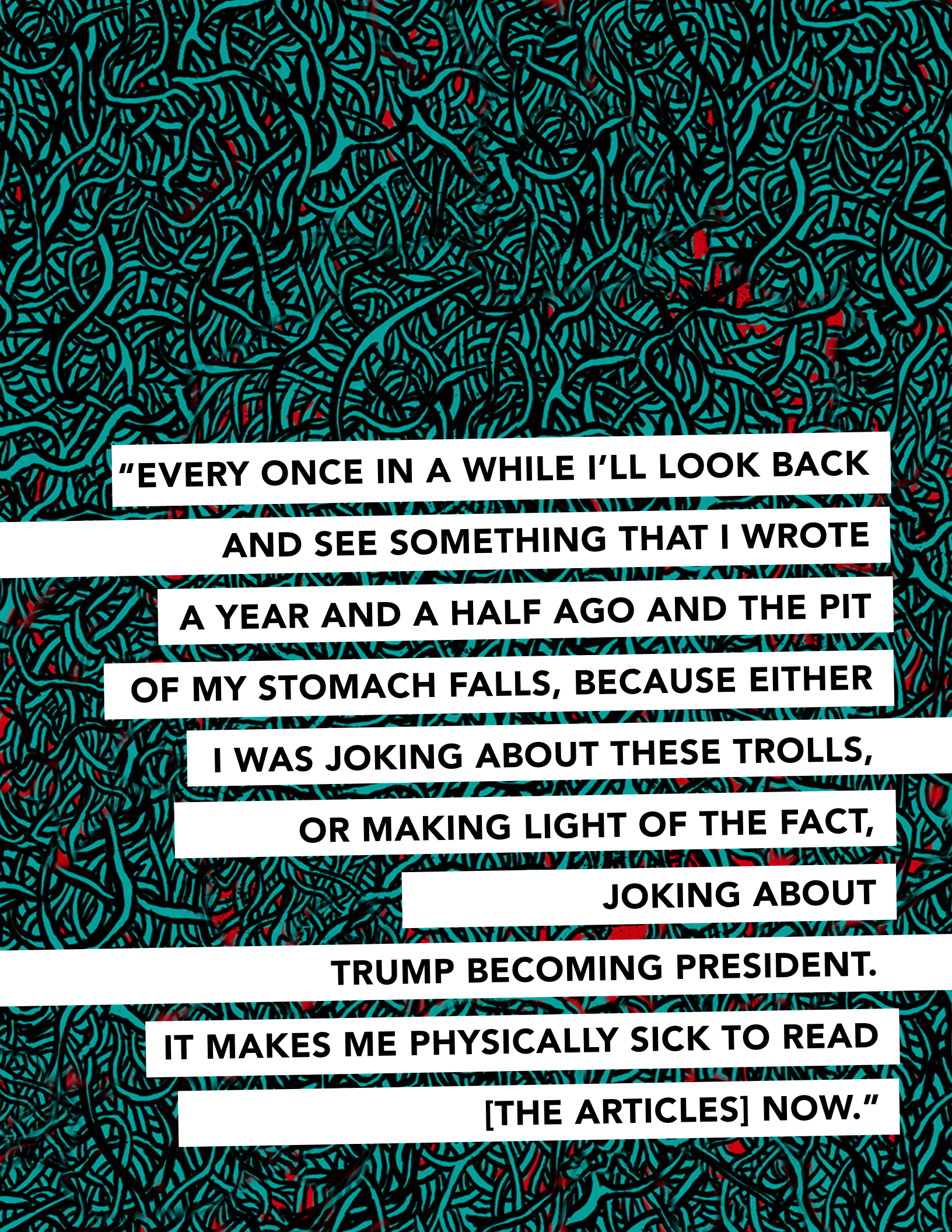**CRITICAL FIRST FEW MONTHS OF THE ELECTION CYCLE.**

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

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

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

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

Looking back at the information she had at the time, when it seemed like Trump's candidacy would be a flash in the pan, one *Gawker* reporter admitted feeling torn; she's not sure what she could have done differently. And yet, she admitted, "Every once in a while I'll look back and see something that I wrote a year and a half ago and the pit of my stomach falls, because either I was joking about these trolls, or making light of the fact, joking about Trump becoming president. It makes me physically sick to read [the articles] now." Another reporter writing for a technology and culture section experienced a similar emotional reckoning. She noted how, as Trump's campaign was picking up steam, she wrote a series of articles that essentially pointed and laughed at the proliferation of swastikas in a particular online gaming environment. After the Charlottesville white supremacist march, she decided to go on *The Daily Stormer*, which she'd heard referenced many times during the election but had never visited. There had never been any reason to; as far as she knew, trolling and neo-Nazism were two totally separate worlds. Upon seeing precisely the imagery she thought was a joke a few months earlier, and in the process, realizing just how wrong her assumption had been, "it was a kind of abject horror," she told me. "Because I feel like I'm part of it, because I've just been writing about the internet like it was no big deal, for years now."

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Taken by themselves, these troll-trained reporters' early framings go a long way toward explaining how the early alt-right narrative emerged as it did, when it did. But this was only half of the story, as the previous former *Gawker* reporter explained. "Surely if we expose this," she said, recounting the initial logic behind writing Trump and trolling takedown pieces, "it'll put people off it." In short, by exposing trollish antagonisms to the harsh light of reason, she assumed these antagonisms would dwindle in influence. "Obviously this was not the case," she said. In fact, those early efforts to surface "funny and bizarre" examples of pro-Trump Nazi imagery only served to bring more reporters to the story, resulting in a mushrooming of additional iterative coverage.

ON SEEING WOLVES, BUT NOT SEEING TROLLS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

INTERNET LITERACY AND AMPLIFICATION: A FORESHADOWING

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ENDNOTES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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