

# Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online

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Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Internet subcultures take advantage of the current media ecosystem to manipulate news frames, set agendas, and propagate ideas.
- Far-right groups have developed techniques of “attention hacking” to increase the visibility of their ideas through the strategic use of social media, memes, and bots—as well as by targeting journalists, bloggers, and influencers to help spread content.
- The media’s dependence on social media, analytics and metrics, sensationalism, novelty over newsworthiness, and clickbait makes them vulnerable to such media manipulation.
- While trolls, white nationalists, men’s rights activists, gamergaters, the “alt-right,” and conspiracy theorists may diverge deeply in their beliefs, they share tactics and converge on common issues.
- The far-right exploits young men’s rebellion and dislike of “political correctness” to spread white supremacist thought, Islamophobia, and misogyny through irony and knowledge of internet culture.
- Media manipulation may contribute to decreased trust of mainstream media, increased misinformation, and further radicalization.

# UNDERSTANDING MEDIA MANIPULATION

In early October 2016, Wikileaks posted a dump of 20,000 hacked emails from the Gmail account of John Podesta, Hillary Clinton’s campaign chairman. Users on an internet message board called 8chan/pol/—short for “politically incorrect”—immediately began combing through the emails looking for damaging material about Hillary Clinton. Using social media, they spread allegations that George Soros was funding liberal protesters to disrupt Trump rallies, that a vast ring of pedophiles was operating out of a Chevy Chase, Maryland pizza parlor, and that Clinton had a secret desire to assassinate Julian Assange. Despite the spurious, even fantastical nature of such allegations, they spread through social media to far-right blogs and eventually to the mainstream media. As one 8chan poster wrote: “The media isn’t doing their job. With thousands of emails released, the only things they’ve reported on even marginally has been what WE’VE dug up. They literally can’t be bothered to do any digging at all.”

In the months leading up to the 2016 U.S. election, a number of subcultural groups who organize online made a concerted effort to manipulate the existing media infrastructure to promote pro-Trump, populist messages. These messages spread through memes shared on blogs and Facebook, through Twitter bots, through YouTube channels, and even to the Twitter account of Trump himself—and were propagated by a far-right hyper-partisan press rooted in conspiracy theories and disinformation. They influenced the agenda of mainstream news sources like cable television, *The Washington Post*, and the *New York Times*, which covered Clinton conspiracy theories more than Trump’s alleged sexual assaults and ties to Russia.<sup>1</sup>

Many of these far-right online groups consider themselves members of a new “alt-right” movement, and have even claimed credit for “meme-ing Trump into the White House.”<sup>2</sup> Provocateurs like Milo Yiannopolous have explicitly linked the alt-right to the methods of online “trolling,” and the underground imageboards 4chan and 8chan:

*The alt-right is a movement born out of the youthful, subversive, underground edges of the internet. 4chan and 8chan are hubs of alt-right activity. For years, members of these forums – political and non-political – have delighted in attention-grabbing, juvenile pranks. Long before the alt-right, 4channers turned trolling the national media into an in-house sport.*<sup>3</sup>

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However, scholars Whitney Phillips, Jessica Beyer, and Gabriella Coleman are skeptical of the narrative that 4chan and the alt-right were the critical force underwriting Trump's success, arguing that this explanation minimizes broader socio-cultural trends<sup>4</sup> and gives too much power to a very small number of people.<sup>5</sup> There is still a great deal of ambiguity around the outcome of the election and why the majority of experts and predictions did not foresee Trump's win. Given this confusion, the alt-right was happy to take credit. However, determining the lines of critical influence is too complicated to conclude so tidily. This piece attempts to ask what those lines of influence—media manipulation—actually look like.

**Taking advantage of the opportunity the internet presents for collaboration, communication, and peer production, these groups target vulnerabilities in the news media ecosystem to increase the visibility of and audience for their messages.**

In this report, we delve into how various internet subcultures—sometimes summarized as the “alt-right,” but more accurately an amalgam of conspiracy theorists, techno-libertarians, white nationalists, Men's Rights advocates, trolls, anti-feminists, anti-immigration activists, and bored young people—leverage both the techniques of

participatory culture<sup>6</sup> and the affordances of social media to spread their various beliefs. Taking advantage of the opportunity the internet presents for collaboration, communication, and peer production, these groups target vulnerabilities in the news media ecosystem to increase the visibility of and audience for their messages. While such subcultures are diverse, they generally package themselves as anti-establishment in their reaction against multiculturalism and globalism, while promoting racist, anti-feminist, and anti-Semitic ideologies. We use the term “far-right” to characterize these players collectively, though many of these communities resist identification with the term.

To understand the context for media manipulation and disinformation, we must go down several rabbit holes. A variety of different movements, moments, and developments have coincided to shape the contemporary media landscape. While it is impossible to ascertain its impact on the U.S. election, it is important to examine the relationship between internet subcultures and narratives put forward by various media organizations. What follows is an attempt to parse out and create definition around the moving pieces of this loosely connected network—namely: who is involved, their motivations, and where they operate online. This mapping is by no means comprehensive, and the categories identified here are not always distinct from each other.

# WHO IS MANIPULATING THE MEDIA?

The term “alt-right” is a neologism that puts a fresh coat of paint on some very long-standing racist and misogynist ideas. It can be convenient to use the term as a catch-all for the groups involved in far-right media manipulation, but while many of the groups we identify in this report can be characterized as such, others cannot. Many of these segments have their own agendas, but, as this document details, share similar tactics. Furthermore, some participants in this ecosystem are organized by their beliefs (like Men’s Rights Activists), while others are organized by particular media or platforms (such as individual blogs and podcasts). Thus, the lines between these groups are always blurry and uneven.

## INTERNET TROLLS

“Trolling” developed in tandem with the internet.<sup>7</sup> Initially, the term “troll” described those who deliberately baited people to elicit an emotional response. Early trolls posted inflammatory messages on Usenet groups in an attempt to catch newbies in well-worn arguments.<sup>8</sup> During the ‘00s, this motivation became known as the “lulz”: finding humor (or LOLs) in sowing discord and causing reactions. Trolls have a history of manipulating the media to call out hypocrisies and hysterias, learning early on how to target public figures and organizations to amplify their efforts through mainstream media.<sup>9</sup> They have often claimed to be apolitical and explained their use of shocking (often racist or sexist) imagery as merely a convenient tool to offend others.

Trolling can refer to relatively innocuous pranks, but it can also take the form of more serious behaviors. Trolling can include “mischievous activities where the intent is not necessarily to cause distress”<sup>10</sup> or it can seek to “ruin the reputation of individuals and organizations and reveal embarrassing or personal information.”<sup>11</sup> In practice, however, trolling has grown to serve as an umbrella term which encompasses a wide variety of asocial internet behaviors.

For the purposes of our discussion, we will focus on one type of trolling prevalent on the anonymous imageboard 4chan/b/ in the mid-2000s. Amongst the diverse ecosystem of the contemporary media landscape, 4chan is both relatively obscure and disproportionately influential. The site is simple. Posts consist only of images and text posted anonymously, which disappear very quickly, often after only a few hours.<sup>12</sup> Despite this, 4chan is not a free-for-all; each sub-board has a designated topic and specific norms which are strictly enforced by other users.<sup>13</sup> (4chan’s popularity has given rise to a variety of other “chans” including 8chan, 2chan, and

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Wizardchan; see the “Forums and Message Boards” section below for more.)

Most of 4chan’s boards are dedicated to topics that would be at home on any online message board—sports, music, fitness. But 4chan’s most notorious board is /b/. Originally reserved for “random” content, in practice /b/ is home to deliberately offensive language and pictures—a constant, ever-changing stream of racial and sexual epithets, porn, and grisly images chosen precisely for their transgressive nature.<sup>14</sup> In addition to producing a hyper-exaggerated visual discourse for users of /b/, such images also function as a way to shock and deter outsiders from coming into the community.

The style of trolling developed by 4chan’s /b/ users can be characterized by four properties that are key to understanding the current practices of media manipulation:<sup>15</sup>

- The use of deliberately offensive speech
- Antipathy toward sensationalism in the mainstream media
- The desire to create emotional impact in targets
- The preservation of ambiguity (Poe’s Law: “Without a clear indication of the author’s intent, it is difficult or impossible to tell the difference between an expression of sincere extremism and a parody of extremism.”<sup>16</sup>)

*Offensive speech.* Hate speech violates sensibilities, and people take it very seriously, making it exactly the type of moral boundary that 4chan users love to transgress. By its very nature, hate speech is directed towards racial and sexual minorities and women, and 4chan presumes that everyone is white and male until proven otherwise.<sup>17</sup> 4chan participants usually dismiss their cavalier use of “fag” or “n\*\*\*\*\*” as ironically funny, or as a way to maintain boundaries: people offended by such speech will stay away from spaces that use it, as intended. This practice also dovetails with an extremist commitment to “free speech,” which is strongly tied to the polarized discourse against political correctness.

**Trolling the mainstream media to exploit its penchants for spectacle, novelty, and poignancy is not only a favored pastime for trolls but is often used as a justification for trolling behavior.**

### *Trolling and the mainstream media.*

Internet scholar Whitney Phillips argues that much trolling is a reaction to the mainstream media, particularly the type of tragedy-of-the-week moral panic perpetrated by talk shows and cable news.

She provides an illustrative example. A 4chan user trolled message boards run by the *Oprah* show posing as a pedophile, with a ridiculous, over-the-top story of having “over 9000” penises with which to rape children. (The phrase “over 9000”







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comes from 90's anime show *Dragon Ball Z* and was a popular in-joke on 4chan at the time.) Oprah's team fell for the story, and Oprah herself warned her viewers that a known pedophile network "has over 9000 penises and they're all... raping... children."<sup>18</sup> Trolling the mainstream media to exploit its penchants for spectacle, novelty, and poignancy is not only a favored pastime for trolls but is often used as a *justification* for trolling behavior. This enables trolls to maintain a quasi-moral argument that, by trolling, they are exposing the hypocrisy, ignorance, and stupidity of the mainstream media.

*Emotional affect.* The goal of trolling is engendering negative emotional responses in its targets, and as such, requires a certain lack of empathy. Sometimes trolls distance themselves from their victims by constructing arguments for why the victims deserve the abuse. This is the case with many Facebook trolls who post gory pictures and silly jokes to the memorial pages set up for deceased teenagers, justifying this as a reaction to sanctimonious "grief tourists" who pretend to care about people they didn't know.<sup>19</sup> In other instances, trolls scoff that their targets care too much about the internet, which, after all, is not "real life." The ability to create this response is discussed as if a game, with trolls working together to "score points"—an indignant, angry, or tearful response is the ultimate goal.

*Poe's Law.* A very successful troll plays with ambiguity in such a way that the audience is never quite sure whether or not they are serious. This is a key feature of many subcultural spaces, where racist speech and content is bandied around in such a way that it can be read either as the trolling of political correctness or as genuine racism.<sup>20</sup> Determining intent is often impossible, especially given that participants are most often anonymous.

## GAMERGATERS

In the last decade, the community of self-identifying "gamers," organized largely around their consumption of video games, has been newly politicized. Although many male geeks are privileged in terms of race and gender, the geek identity has long had a reputation for suffering forms of social oppression.<sup>21</sup> They may have been bullied by a "Chad" (internet slang for the stereotypical tanned, buff "bro") or had a difficult time pursuing romantic relationships. They may be unemployed and uneducated. This is reflected in some of the terms they use to describe themselves—as "betas" (non-alpha, weak, compromised, fragile, or pathetic men) or "NEETs" (Not Engaged in Employment or Training, a term that originated in a report by the Social Exclusion Task Force of the UK government). Thus, they are very resistant to discussions of white privilege and male privilege as they do not see themselves as privileged, but as disadvantaged.<sup>22</sup>

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This is best demonstrated by Gamergate, an online movement that used the strategies and tactics of participatory culture to target feminist media critics and game developers. Gamergate's origins are complicated. Briefly, software developer Zoe Quinn became the target of an organized brigade after her ex-boyfriend published

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a 10,000-word screed about her on his blog. He claimed that Quinn lied to him, cheated on him, and, most damagingly, slept with a video game reviewer to get favorable coverage for her game *Depression Quest*. While these claims were

questionable, they led to significant harassment of Quinn under the pretext of reforming “ethics in video game journalism.”

“Gamergater” has become shorthand for a particular kind of geek masculinity that feels victimized and disenfranchised by mainstream society, particularly popular feminism.<sup>23</sup> When feminist media critics like Anita Sarkeesian criticize the portrayal of women in video games, this group claims their culture is being attacked and free speech is being infringed upon, opening an opportunity to interpret feminist critique as the systemic oppression of geek identity. These individuals—who are often, but not always, young white men—see gaming culture, and nerd/geek culture overall, as a refuge under siege from “political correctness” and “social justice warriors.”<sup>24</sup>

IRC chat logs have since revealed that a group of 4chan users strategically engineered Gamergate to foster support among a diverse array of constituents, including Men's Rights Activists, journalists, gamers, and conservative political commentators in the service of harassment.<sup>25</sup> By contriving to have these groups work together, the manipulators were able to amplify their harassment of Quinn and other feminist critics of video games such as Anita Sarkeesian and Brianna Wu.<sup>26</sup> This harassment took place primarily on Twitter with the hashtag #gamergate, which was used to insult feminists and women in the video game industry far more than it was used to discuss the ethics of video game reviews.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, trolls with no interest in video games used the hashtag to create more chaos, which was blamed on Gamergate.<sup>28</sup>

Although the activity around Gamergate has largely dissolved, it was nonetheless a crucial moment for the development of online subcultural tactics, strategies, and skills. In particular, three tactics used during Gamergate can help us understand the subsequent emergence of the alt-right:

- Organized brigades
- Networked and agile groups
- Retrograde populism

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**Organized brigades.** Sarkeesian refers to these groups as “cybermobs”—collectives which engage in a cooperative competition to increase harm to their victims, reinforcing social dominance over marginalized groups.<sup>29</sup> People work together to learn personal information about their targets. They gain status in their community as they escalate the harassment. In this way, online harassment, like trolling, becomes informally gamified.

**Networked groups.** Gamergate shows that groups of people with all sorts of ideological conflicts—from white supremacists to libertarians to video game fans to Men’s Rights Activists—can and will come together around a common cause and just as quickly disappear. These groups are *networked* and *agile*.

**Retrograde populism.** Gamergate participants asserted that feminism—and progressive causes in general—are trying to stifle free speech, one of their most cherished values.<sup>30</sup> They are reacting to what they see as the domination of the world by global multiculturalism and the rise of popular feminism. This is a retrograde populist ideology which reacts violently to suggestions of white male privilege, is directly linked to the language of the Men’s Rights Movement, and is also present in the messaging of the alt-right.<sup>31</sup>

Ultimately, Gamergate demonstrated the refinement of a variety of techniques of gamified public harassment—including doxing (publishing personal information online), revenge porn (spreading intimate photos beyond their intended recipients), social shaming, and intimidation. It also provides insight into *gender* as a key rallying point for a range of online subcultures. Moreover, it set the conditions for the rise of the alt-right. Several of the most active promoters of Gamergate are now core alt-right figures, including Milo Yiannopolous, Vox Day (Theodore Beale), Matt Forney (of Men’s Rights blog *Return of Kings*), and Andrew “weev” Auernheimer. Gamergate’s success at mobilizing gamers to push an ideological agenda indicates the fruitfulness of radicalizing interest-based communities.

## HATE GROUPS AND IDEOLOGUES

White supremacist and white nationalist groups have long used the web in the hopes of recruiting new members, but the emergence of the self-styled “alt-right” has increased their visibility.<sup>32</sup> The “manosphere” is a loose collection of blogs and forums devoted to men’s rights, sexual strategy, and misogyny. Both groups may use trolling tactics to draw attention to their causes, or may present themselves as more serious and scholarly.

## THE ALT-RIGHT

The term “alt-right” was coined by Richard Spencer in 2008 to describe right-wing political views at odds with the conservative establishment.<sup>33</sup> Spencer, a highly-ed-





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ucated prep school graduate (and Duke PhD dropout) went on to found the publication *AlternativeRight.com* and became head of the National Policy Institute

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(NPI), a white nationalist think tank.<sup>34</sup> His various publications and affiliated groups (*VDARE.com*; *American Renaissance*; *The Occidental Quarterly*; *Counter-Currents Publishing*) were an attempt to intellectualize white supremacist ideology

(NPI’s *Radix* magazine looks more-or-less like a left-wing academic journal and publishes what it calls “critical theory”).

The term “alt-right,” however, fulfilled several other goals. As a neologism, it allowed ideas long seen as unacceptable to mainstream media to seep into public discourse.<sup>35</sup> In political punditry, this is called “opening the Overton window,” or expanding the range of what is politically acceptable.<sup>36</sup> By re-branding “white nationalism” or “white supremacy” as “the alt-right,” these groups played on the media’s fascination with novelty to give their ideas mass exposure. The anti-Semitic blog *The Daily Stormer* pioneered a number of the alt-right’s aesthetic elements, many of which cribbed directly from chan culture: memes, 80s sci-fi, Italo-disco/synthpop music, and, as founder Andrew Anglin puts it, “Non-ironic Nazism masquerading as ironic Nazism.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, white nationalism was re-engineered to appeal to millennials.

The term “alt-right” is accommodatingly imprecise. On one hand, it describes an aggressive trolling culture present in /b/ and /pol/ that loathes establishment liberalism and conservatism, embraces irony and in-jokes, and uses extreme speech to provoke anger in others.<sup>38</sup> On the other, it denotes a loosely affiliated aggregation of blogs, forums, podcasts, and Twitter personalities united by a hatred of liberalism, feminism, and multiculturalism.<sup>39</sup> Per Poe’s Law, attempting to determine which of these people are “serious” and which are “ironic” is impossible. Even among those who do seem ideologically committed—people generating thousands of words of blog posts per week discussing, for instance, the impact of immigration on Europe—the group is diverse in its beliefs and marked by constant infighting and squabbling. People who the mainstream media views as “leaders” of the alt-right, like Richard Spencer and Milo Yiannopolous, are by no means universally embraced or even accepted. Similarly, some alt-right media (like *the Daily Stormer* or *Fash the Nation*) are explicit in their promotion of anti-Semitism and neo-Nazism, while others condemn it.<sup>40</sup> Attempting to form coherence out of this loose aggregate is very difficult. Ambiguity is, itself, a strategy; it allows participants to dissociate themselves with particularly unappetizing elements while still promoting the overall movement.<sup>41</sup>

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Overall, the alt-right is characterized by a deeply ironic, self-referential culture in which anti-Semitism, occult ties, and Nazi imagery can be explained either as entirely sincere or completely tongue-in-cheek. Many alt-right advocates vociferously argue against labels of racism or Neo-Nazism. Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos explained, “Are [8chan/pol users] actually bigots? No more than death metal devotees in the 80s were actually Satanists. For them, it’s simply a means to fluster their grandparents.”<sup>42</sup> This perspective holds that, for 8chan participants, defending Hitler is simply a strategic move to annoy people and deter outsiders from taking part. However, this description is disingenuous. While these spaces are diverse, white nationalism (if not white supremacy) is a consistent subcurrent in alt-right communities. Many alt-right actions—propagating Nazi symbols, using racial epithets, or spreading anti-immigrant ideology—support white nationalist ideologies. Whether undertaken sincerely or ironically, the outcome is the same.<sup>43</sup> There seems to be a coherent willingness to act in support of white nationalism, even in the parts of the alt-right that do not explicitly adopt or claim it as an ideological commitment.

In a perceptive essay, M. Ambedkar describes the unifying aesthetics of the alt-right:

- “The cult of tradition which idealizes a primordial past (think Make America Great Again, or Mussolini’s call to build a new Rome, a call recently echoed by White Nationalist Richard Spencer).
- fear of difference, whether difference be sexual, gendered, religious, or racial.
- a cult of masculinity that tends to manifest itself in an obsession with sexual politics (refer to online pick-up artistry and the heteronormative gender roles embodied in the nuclear family.)
- a hostility towards parliamentary politics and criticality.
- a belief in permanent warfare and a corresponding cult of action for action’s sake.
- a worship of technology, not in the manner of an Enlightenment-esque worship of reason, but faith in technology to conquer and to reaffirm inegalitarianism.”<sup>44</sup>

The “cult of tradition” surfaces in fringe movements associated with the alt-right that advocate a return to an imaginary past where men were men, immigration was limited, and so forth. (Many figures in the contemporary Men’s Rights Movement, like Jack Donovan, who advocates for homosocial tribalism, and Daryush “Roosh” Valizadeh of the blog *Return of Kings*, also believe in a return to what they see as a pre-modern masculinity.) The blogger Mencius Moldbug, originator of the “Dark Enlightenment” movement, is a software developer and former libertar-



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ian who believed that liberal democracy was, essentially, incompatible with freedom and the free market, instead advocating for a return to monarchic feudalism.

**While these ideas are on the fringe, they enjoy currency even among some powerful players who draw parallels between meritocratic fiefdoms and technology startups.**

(His popular, now defunct, blog, primarily consists of very long posts about political theory.)<sup>45</sup>

Such neoreactionary politics work alongside Silicon Valley politics of tech-

nolibertarians and the Californian Ideology, a mix of objectivism and technological determinism.<sup>46</sup> While these ideas are on the fringe, they enjoy currency even among some powerful players who draw parallels between meritocratic fiefdoms and technology startups. For instance, Balaji Srinivasan, a Bitcoin entrepreneur and board partner at venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz, gave a talk at the Y Combinator incubator in 2013 advocating for a Silicon Valley exit, which would involve building “an opt-in society, ultimately outside the US, run by technology.”<sup>47</sup> In his book *Zero to One*, Peter Thiel, who funds Moldbug’s company, argues that one of the advantages of a start-up is its resemblance to a monarchy, where the leader has all the power but all the responsibility should the company fail, rather than a democracy, which he sees as incompatible with startup success.<sup>48</sup>

Alt-right ideology is hardly new. In his incisive report on the “origins and ideology of the Alternative Right,” Matthew Lyons identifies two groups rooted in fascism and opposed to neoliberal promotion of immigration and globalization in the name of free trade. The first are the paleoconservatives, who, in the 1980s, rallied against mainstream neoconservative thinking on free trade, interventionism, and immigration; they are the modern incarnation of the isolationist America First movement of the 1940s. The second are the European New Right, who attempted to re-brand fascist ideology by appropriating liberal language and strategies, and opposed multiculturalism and globalization.<sup>49</sup> While both these movements maintain their own identity distinct from the alt-right, sometimes with heated in-fighting, the underlying ideologies are undeniably simpatico. For instance, enthusiasm for French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen demonstrates lines of commonality between the French National Front party (the modern instantiation of the New Right) and the alt-right.

### THE MANOSPHERE

The so-called manosphere is a sprawl of blogs, forums, and websites devoted to discussing masculinity. Its two most significant subcultures are Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs) and pick-up artists (PUAs), but it also includes anti-feminists, father’s rights groups, “incels” (involuntary celibates), androphiles (same-sex attracted men who don’t identify as homosexual), paleomasculinists (who believe male domination is natural) and even more obscure fringe groups.<sup>50</sup>

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While different things motivate members of the manosphere, they share a fairly dismal view of women as fickle, opportunistic creatures who are constantly looking to manipulate “high status” men (known collectively as “Chad” or “alphas”) and exploit them for their money.<sup>51</sup> (Pick-up artists emulate high-status men to sleep with as many women as possible; MRAs eschew feminists in favor of women who adhere to traditional gender roles; and fringe groups like Men Going Their Own Way swear off women entirely.)<sup>52</sup> These groups share a strong dislike for feminists, who they see as emasculating, and “political correctness,” which they view as censorship. Mark Potok of the Southern Poverty Law Center characterizes the manosphere as “an underworld of so-called Men’s Rights groups and individuals on the Internet, which is just fraught with really hard-line anti-women misogyny.”<sup>53</sup>

The manosphere often adopts liberal tropes of oppression to portray men as the victims of feminism gone too far. The *American Prospect* wrote that “MRAs claim to be a movement for positive change, with the stated aim of getting men recognized as an oppressed class—and women, especially but not exclusively feminists, as men’s oppressors.”<sup>54</sup>

### MEN’S RIGHTS ACTIVISM

The Men’s Rights Movement (MRM) emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s among male college students in response to second-wave feminism.<sup>55</sup> The early Men’s Rights Movement acknowledged the ills of sexism but also aimed to bring

**Despite the existence of multiple men’s rights groups, most of them have a reasonably consistent value set and ideological orientation. Their central belief is that men and boys in the Western world are at risk or marginalized, and in need of defense.**

attention to the many burdens facing the male consciousness in patriarchal society, related to health, emotional lives, and relationships.<sup>56</sup> In the 1980s, the mythopoetic men’s movement emerged, which rejected the earlier, pro-feminist men’s movement and instead argued that men in modern society were being feminized and kept away from their true masculine nature.<sup>57</sup>

This movement, while purportedly to the benefit of all men, quietly articulated gender politics as white.<sup>58</sup> The mythopoetic men’s movement spoke to public paranoia about the changes around whiteness as a social category and “white male selfhood as a fragile and besieged identity.”<sup>59</sup> The dominance of white men in society has been increasingly challenged since the 1960s, given the increase of white women and people of color in the workplace; popular movements around feminism, LGBTQ rights, and ethnic and racial identities; and economic instability and shifts from a manufacturing to a service economy.<sup>60</sup> As a result, many middle-class, white, middle-aged heterosexual men do not experience or view them-

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selves as powerful—in fact, they feel powerless and in need of defense.<sup>61</sup> It comes as no surprise that many men currently involved in the Men’s Rights Movement fit this same demographic.

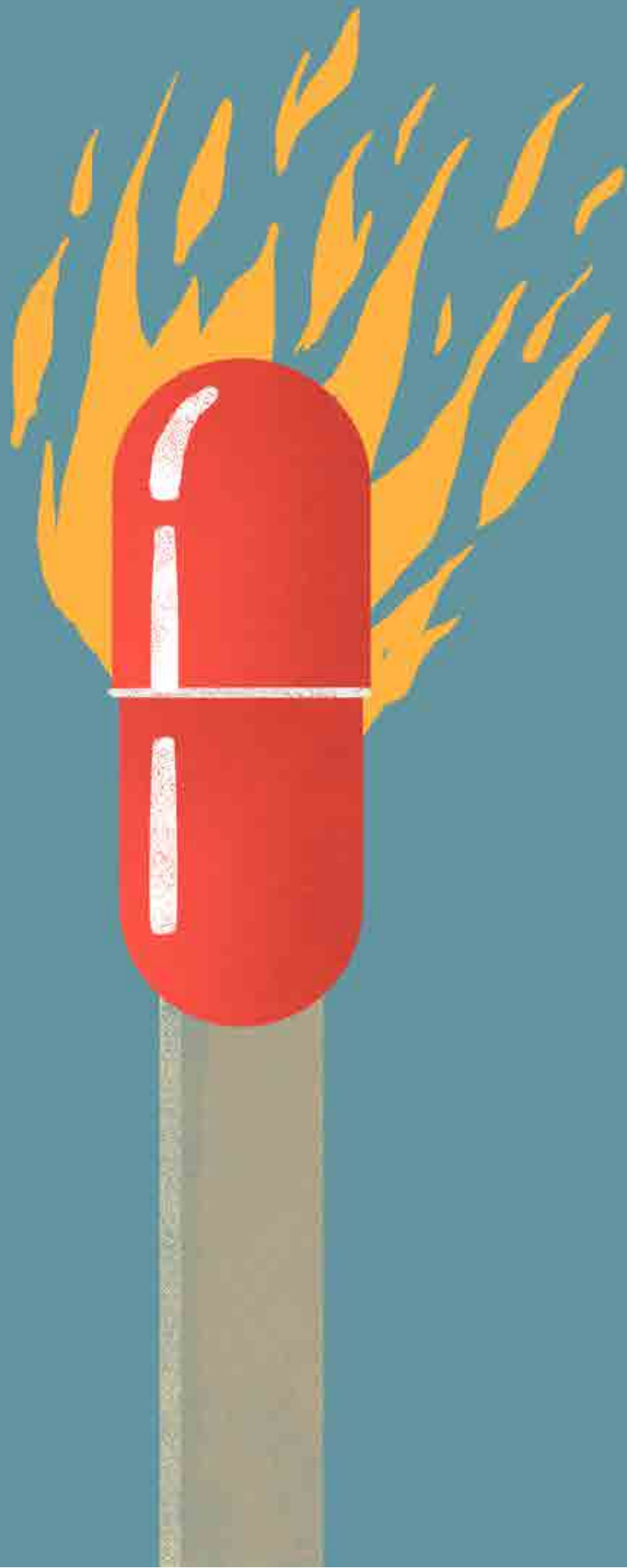
Despite the existence of multiple Men’s Rights groups, most of them have a reasonably consistent value set and ideological orientation. Their central belief is that men and boys in the Western world are at risk or marginalized, and in need of defense.<sup>62</sup> Most Men’s Rights Activists try to gain recognition for this cause and campaign for Men’s Rights in areas such as family law, parenting, reproduction, compulsory military service, and education. MRAs attempt to prove the validity of their claims by furthering several frameworks and narratives, which have proven quite successful in promoting their cause and attracting new members. These narratives include the idea that men and boys are victimized; that feminists in particular are the perpetrators of such attacks; and that misinformation, political correctness, and the liberal agenda are used to hide the truth from the general public.

MRAs have long congregated online. Blogs and forums associated with the MRM include *A Voice for Men*, run by well-known MRA Paul Elam, *Return of Kings*, *Chateau Hartiste*, *Vox Populi*, *Sluthate.com*, and the Men’s Rights and redpill subreddits (a reference to taking the “red pill” from *The Matrix*). These communities share a common vocabulary and often overlap with the alt-right and neoreactionary movements.<sup>63</sup>

### PICK-UP ARTISTS

The “seduction community” purports to be a self-help movement that teaches men—typically those stereotyped as nerds—how to be successful with women.<sup>64</sup> To move from an “average, frustrated chump” to a pick-up artist (PUA), men must learn a series of skills that break down the rules of courtship and romance. To PUAs, attraction has rules that can be practiced, learned, and perfected, referred to as “game.”<sup>65</sup> This rule-based approach to complex relational dynamics uses traditionally male frames such as science, sports, and the military, and appeals to men immersed in internet culture and video games.<sup>66</sup> At seminars and workshops, on DVDs, and on message boards and forums, aspiring PUAs trade advice, techniques, and field reports, narratives of their experiences picking up women.<sup>67</sup> While dating advice broadly understood can help shy, awkward, or frustrated young men gain confidence in social interactions, the PUA community distorts this by dehumanizing women and granting all sexual agency to men.<sup>68</sup>

The internet has been instrumental in the popularization of PUA techniques. The first forum for pick-up was alt.seduction.fast, a Usenet group founded in 1994.<sup>69</sup> This turned into a message board called “Moderated ASF.” With the mainstreaming of pick-up in the mid-2000s due to journalist Neil Strauss’s bestseller *The Game* and VH1’s subsequent reality series “The Pickup Artist,” the number of online forums



## WHO IS MANIPULATING THE MEDIA?

exploded. Today, for example, the Seduction subreddit has more than 200,000 subscribers. On such boards, men swap tips on how to be more “alpha” and attract women through a variety of tactics, including “negging”—subtle put-downs that make women eager for approval—kino, or touching, and ways to get past “token resistance,” or women’s refusal to have sex.

While the gender politics of the seduction community were always problematic, in the last few years, a subset of pick-up artistry has incorporated the ideology of Men’s Rights Activism. In online forums like *theredpill* subreddit or the blog *Return of Kings*, posters blame feminism for creating an unbalanced “sexual marketplace” in which rich, good-looking, and confident men get their pick of women, while most men are either left “involuntarily celibate,” or resigned to sleeping with old or overweight women. These posts characterize this state of affairs as not simply against their wishes, but as detrimental to society.

In this discourse, men are the victims of feminism’s social changes, which devalue their status and make it more difficult for them to find a mate they consider suitable (a conventionally attractive woman who is not promiscuous or career-oriented and values traditional gender roles). A blog post on *Return of Kings*, for instance, reads:

*There’s no denying that long term relationships are on the decline. Social conservatives are often described as hateful and misogynist for railing against promiscuity, but the statistics don’t lie. Marriages in which the wife was a virgin have an 80% chance of succeeding, while the figure for brides who have had 15 or more premarital partners is just 20%. Basically, there’s an ever-increasing number of washed-up old hags out there who are coming to regret their earlier promiscuity, and are now facing the realization that they will probably die alone and childless.<sup>70</sup>*

To such commenters, women are the recipients of “female privilege,” and enjoy control of the domestic sphere, a media that caters to women, and a legal system biased against men in divorce proceedings.<sup>71</sup> This “red pill” ideology combines resentment of women and feminists specifically with the rejection of male privilege. It is intrinsically sexist, as much of the content on these sites portrays women as emotional and unbalanced and men as logical and superior. Throughout the manosphere, feminism is both an explanation and scapegoat for the changing status of men, especially white men, in American society.

## CONSPIRACY THEORISTS

Several internet platforms have become fertile ground for the growth of conspiracy theories. Without the barrier of traditional media gatekeepers, amateur filmmakers can post their own conspiracy “documentaries” to YouTube.<sup>72</sup> On forums like

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4chan and Reddit, users can dissect event footage in real time and instantaneously form theories that align with their worldviews.<sup>73</sup> These groups often undergo polarization effects: as skeptical users opt out of these communities, they become echo chambers of like-minded believers without exposure to any differing views.<sup>74</sup> Generally, conspiracy theories express anxieties about losing control or status in a particular milieu. Some theories have an ideological bent; for example, anti-Semitism is a common theme. Others simply seem to express a distrust of government or the “official stories” of the media.

**However, other scholars have shown that theories can spread simply due to faulty information flows within communities. That is, if someone is only exposed to information dominated by conspiracy theories, they will be more likely to believe in them.**

Conspiracy theories are driven by a belief in the machinations of a powerful group of people who have managed to conceal their role in an event or situation.<sup>75</sup> These theories have existed for hundreds of years, with early believers arguing that the Illuminati and secret Jewish factions were secretly plotting to

take over the world.<sup>76</sup> More recent conspiracy theories have focused on alternative accounts of specific events, such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings. The overarching themes of these theories have remained remarkably consistent: they reliably *express anxieties about loss of control within a religious, political, or social order.*<sup>77</sup>

In the case of the far-right, these anxieties include:

- Anticipated loss of white primacy in the U.S. due to the country becoming a majority-minority nation by 2040<sup>78</sup>
- Islamophobia linked to the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent increased public acknowledgment of American Muslims as members of American society
- Fear of immigration, particularly from Muslim nations such as Syria
- Fear of the emasculation of men linked to the transformation of traditional masculinity and feminists’ challenges to traditional gender roles
- Transphobia and homophobia linked to the rise of newly-articulated gender identities including trans people and nonbinary individuals
- Fears of a vast Jewish conspiracy that controls the media
- Fears of losing control of key civic and educational institutions to so-called “Cultural Marxism” (the Frankfurt school of critical theory) that, they claim, dominates popular culture and discourse
- Fear of erosion of morality and traditional values by globalist liberal elites



## WHO IS MANIPULATING THE MEDIA?

(Clinton, Soros), who, some believe, worship pagan gods and sacrifice children<sup>79</sup>

Scholars have identified various factors that can contribute to the growth of conspiracy theories. American historian Richard Hofstadter identifies a “paranoid style” or mentality consistent in American political rhetoric. Hofstadter found that a significant minority of the population adhered to an “apocalyptic and absolutistic framework,” which he believed originated in the class, ethnic, and religious conflict inherent to American culture.<sup>80</sup> However, other scholars have shown that theories can spread simply due to faulty information flows within communities. That is, if someone is only exposed to information dominated by conspiracy theories, they will be more likely to believe in them.<sup>81</sup> This is especially salient given that far-right media networks repeatedly affirm conspiracy theories even if/when they are debunked.

Regardless of how or why they spread, conspiracy theories can have tangible negative effects. Exposure to anti-global warming theories can lead to decreased efforts to reduce one’s carbon footprint, and exposure to anti-vaccine theories can lead to reduced intention to get vaccinated.<sup>82</sup> Perhaps most troubling, terrorist organizations and authoritarian regimes consistently use conspiracy theories as propaganda tools.<sup>83</sup> Even in democratic societies, such theories are linked to acts of mass violence, such as Timothy McVeigh’s Oklahoma City bombing.

Mass media has greatly profited off the appeal of conspiracy theories despite their potential for harm. Network news channels feature “documentaries” investigating theories without fully refuting them.<sup>84</sup> In 2011, when Donald Trump began promoting the “Birther” conspiracy theory, claiming President Obama was born outside of

**Online communities are increasingly turning to conspiracy-driven news sources, whose sensationalist claims are then covered by the mainstream media, which exposes more of the public to these ideas, and so on.**

the United States, mainstream news outlets like CNN and Fox News covered these claims extensively. Out of this environment, an entire industry of conspiracy and fringe theory has emerged. Alex Jones, one of the most famous conspiracy theorists in America

today, runs a multi-media franchise based on spreading such beliefs. Other news sources have cropped up in recent years that operate by making conspiratorial insinuations and drawing suggestive conclusions from available facts.

Thus, the current media environment consists of an ongoing and problematic cycle. Online communities are increasingly turning to conspiracy-driven news sources, whose sensationalist claims are then covered by the mainstream media, which exposes more of the public to these ideas, and so on.

### INFLUENCERS

A range of prominent online trolls, gamers, ideologues, and conspiracy theorists hold outsized influence among the other actors and play a distinct role in media manipulation efforts. As significant nodes in these networks, they hold the power to amplify particular messages and make otherwise fringe beliefs get mainstream coverage. They include people like Richard Spencer, the white supremacist leader of the National Policy Institute and editor of *altright.com*, who is notable for having been punched on camera by an anti-fascist activist; Andrew Anglin, the *Daily Stormer* blogger who masterminded much of the alt-right's trolling with the goal of making white nationalism palatable to a millennial audience; Milo Yiannopoulos, the anti-feminist, anti-Islam media personality who was removed from the Breitbart masthead after his remarks about pedophilia came to light; and Andrew "weev" Auernheimer, a notorious hacker and internet troll who now uses his talents to spread white nationalist ideas.<sup>85</sup>

These men often rise to prominence due to a particularly nuanced understanding of technological platforms or attention hacking tactics.<sup>86</sup> Once they gain prominence, they exploit their own notoriety for increased coverage. Auernheimer is a particularly compelling case: he had long been a significant figure in chan and troll culture and gained mainstream visibility through his technical exploits. In 2010, a group he was part of, Goatse Security, found a significant vulnerability in the AT&T website, publicized the flaw, and in the process revealed the personal information of 114,000 user accounts.<sup>87</sup> He was tried and eventually convicted under the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, and was sentenced to 41 months in federal prison. However, the case was highly controversial, and he became something of a folk hero among technologists and civil rights activists.<sup>88</sup>

Before this incident, Auernheimer had frequently expressed homophobic, racist, and anti-Semitic views, but these were often dismissed as "trolling."<sup>89</sup> After his conviction was overturned and he was released early from prison, weev revealed a large tattoo of a swastika and began openly identifying as a white supremacist.<sup>90</sup> He became the site administrator of *The Daily Stormer* and frequently appears on the site and its affiliated podcasts. He now explicitly uses trolling to promote white nationalist ideology. In 2015, for example, Auernheimer exploited Twitter's "promoted tweets" feature to amplify white nationalist messages.<sup>91</sup> In 2016, he hacked unsecured printers on a dozen college campuses to print anti-Semitic and racist fliers.<sup>92</sup> The novelty of the attack method and weev's involvement meant that the original message—which probably only a few hundred people saw—was immensely amplified by media coverage.

## **HYPER-PARTISAN NEWS OUTLETS**

In the last ten years, an extensive, hyper-partisan right-wing network of news websites and blogs has emerged.<sup>93</sup> While there is a long history of the American radical right taking advantage of new media, from anti-communist radio networks in the 1950s to Limbaugh and Beck in the 1990s,<sup>94</sup> the current network goes far beyond Fox News. *Breitbart* is at the center of this new ecosystem, along with sites like *The Daily Caller*, *The Gateway Pundit*, *The Washington Examiner*, *Infowars*, *Conservative Treehouse*, and *Truthfeed*, many of which have only existed for a few years. Some may be categorized as the *alt-light*, media which parrot some far-right talking points while strategically excluding more extreme beliefs.

During the 2016 election, many of these sites published articles in support of Donald Trump's agenda, including anti-immigrant rhetoric, conspiracy theories about Clinton's emails and involvement in Benghazi, and concern around the Clinton Foundation. While research shows that most Clinton supporters got news from mainstream sources like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, many Trump supporters were surrounded by this far-right network, which peddled heavily in misinformation, rumors, conspiracy theories, and attacks on the mainstream media.<sup>95</sup> A study by *Buzzfeed* found that during the 2016 election, articles from hyper-partisan news outlets inspired more engagement on Facebook than those from mainstream media sources.<sup>96</sup> Of the top 20 articles with the most engagement, 17 were pro-Trump or anti-Clinton.

Benkler et al. describe hyper-partisan sites as “combining decontextualized truths, repeated falsehoods, and leaps of logic to create fundamentally misleading view of the world.” This is not fake news per se, but propaganda rooted in an ideologically-driven worldview.<sup>97</sup> See “What Motivates Them?” below for further discussion of the diverse incentives driving actors in this space.

## **POLITICIANS**

During the 2016 U.S. election, politicians functioned as amplification nodes for many of the ideas outlined in this report. Republican nominee Donald Trump has long been known as an enthusiastic conspiracy theorist. Perhaps most famously, in 2011 he became one of the biggest proponents of the “Birther” theory, the belief that President Obama was not actually born in the United States.<sup>98</sup> He has also openly embraced anti-vaccination conspiracies for several years.<sup>99</sup>

Throughout the 2016 election, Trump consistently amplified conspiracy theories that would otherwise have been confined to fringe right-wing circles online. He made several claims that can be traced directly to conspiracy-focused sources, such as Alex Jones and his website *Infowars*.<sup>100</sup> The mainstream media considered such claims newsworthy, because they were being made by someone who was not only

## WHO IS MANIPULATING THE MEDIA?

a public figure, but was running for political office. For example, after the tabloid *National Enquirer* promoted a conspiracy theory claiming that candidate Ted Cruz's father was involved in the Kennedy assassination, Trump asserted the same thing during a Fox News interview.<sup>101</sup> Trump's claim was so outlandish that it was then reported on by a variety of mainstream news outlets. A conspiracy theory could now go from fringe speculation to the headlines of network news within weeks. And even if the mainstream news was reporting on it in shock or disgust, it still led millions of viewers and readers to be exposed to these ideas.

Hillary Clinton attempted to associate Donald Trump with what she characterized as “fringe” ideas in order to delegitimize him amongst more mainstream Republicans. However, by addressing the ideas, she also gave them new visibility and legitimacy. For example, Clinton gave a speech in Reno, Nevada on August 25, 2016 in which she accused Trump of trafficking in “dark conspiracy theories drawn from the pages of supermarket tabloids and the far, dark reaches of the internet” and “retweeting white supremacists online.”<sup>102</sup> She mentioned Alex Jones of *Infowars* and Steve Bannon of *Breitbart* by name, and summarized:

*This is not conservatism as we have known it. This is not Republicanism as we have known it. These are race-baiting ideas, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant ideas, anti-woman — all key tenets making up an emerging racist ideology known as the 'Alt-Right.'*<sup>103</sup>

By naming the alt-right as a significant opponent, Clinton inadvertently cemented their importance. Likewise, when she used the term “basket of deplorables” to refer to Trump supporters who were “racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic—you name it,” these supporters proudly embraced the expression.<sup>104</sup> Her campaign posted an “explainer” about the Pepe the frog meme, which they described as a white supremacist symbol that is “more sinister than you might realize.”<sup>105</sup> This delighted chan denizens, who saw it as an example of “meme magic” and a symbol of their significance.<sup>106</sup>



# WHERE DO THESE ACTORS OPERATE ONLINE?

Social and participatory media is key to the manipulation of mainstream media. It enables those with relatively fringe views to find each other, collaborate on media production and knowledge dissemination, and share viewpoints that would be unacceptable to air in their day-to-day life.<sup>107</sup>

## BLOGS AND WEBSITES

A number of ideologically-driven blogs and websites have become important information hubs for the far-right. Alex Jones's *Infowars*, for example, is an influential source for conspiracy theorists, and Roosh V's blog *Return of Kings* has become essential reading for many members of the Men's Rights Movement. Specific communities sometimes form in the comment sections and forums associated with these sites. *The Daily Stormer*, a neo-Nazi website, attracts a group of readers and commenters who call themselves the "Stormer Troll Army" or just "Stormers."<sup>108</sup> This community carries out actions (often harassment campaigns) at the request of the site's founder, Andrew Anglin.

Many of these websites interact extensively: they link to each other, engage with each other's content, and quote each other.<sup>109</sup> Yet they also define themselves in opposition to each other. For example, after the alt-light website *Breitbart News* opened a bureau in Israel, Stormers overwhelmed its comment section in an event it called "Operation: Kikebart."<sup>110</sup>

## FORUMS AND MESSAGE BOARDS

There are many online spaces for those interested in discussing far-right ideas. These include *My Posting Career* (a white supremacy message board characterized by hyper-ironic, self-aggrandizing posts and a palpable sense of superiority over chan participants and MRAs); the comment sections and forums of *Right Stuff* and *The Daily Stormer*; and various subreddits, most notably *the\_donald* (a very popular pro-Trump subreddit where many chan memes get mainstream visibility) and *theredpill* (MRA and pick-up artist activity).

The center for chan-style far-right organizing is a board on 8chan called /pol/—the result of an ideological schism that took place among users of 4chan between 2008 and 2016. 4chan was the most significant origin point of the hacktivist movement Anonymous in 2003. In 2008, Anonymous launched "Project Chanology," a successful campaign against Scientology. Anonymous' loose collective participated



## WHERE DO THESE ACTORS OPERATE ONLINE?

in a series of other actions but by this time had largely abandoned 4chan for IRC, Jabber, and other less public spaces.<sup>111</sup> This arguably left an ideological vacuum within the chans once such “moralfags,” who used 4chan’s powers of trolling and agile organization for principled activity, departed.<sup>112</sup>

In 2011, 4chan’s founder, moot, deleted 4chan’s news board (/n/) due to racist comments and created /pol/ as a replacement forum for political discussion. A study of 4chan’s /pol/ describes it as “a containment board, allowing generally distasteful content—even by 4chan standards—to be discussed without disturbing the operations of other boards, with many of its posters subscribing to the alt-right and exhibiting characteristics of xenophobia, social conservatism, racism, and, generally speaking, hate.”<sup>113</sup> /Pol/ was explicitly set up so that moderators of other boards could direct racists there as a way to remove racist content from other parts of 4chan.

A few years later, 4chan became a central place for Gamergaters to organize harassment and dox victims. This dismayed 4chan’s founder, who banned all talk of Gamergate from the site.<sup>114</sup> It was at this point that Gamergaters decamped to 8chan, a clone of 4chan explicitly designed as a “free-speech-friendly 4chan alternative.”<sup>115</sup> Hate speech and extremist ideology flourished on 8chan, now uncontested by the more moderate voices that had been present on 4chan. Both 8chan/pol/ and 4chan/pol/ are currently active, although 8chan “/pol/ acks” (the term they use to self-identify) tend to dismiss 4chan users as “newfags” and “shills.”

In a fashion similar to 8chan, there are now several websites designed specifically for discussions banned on more mainstream sites. Voat is a Reddit clone that bills itself as “the place where you can have your say” where “No legal subject in this universe should be out of bounds.” Banned subreddits such as Pizzagate, Fatpeoplehate, and Coontown have moved to Voat, which has no regulations around racial epithets, brigading, or hate speech. Gab.ai is a far-right oriented, invite-only Twitter clone that states in its Community Guidelines, “Gab’s mission is to put people and free speech first. We believe that the only valid form of censorship is an individual’s own choice to opt-out.” Most of these sites are either anonymous or pseudonymous, but their explicit self-designation as far-right organizing spaces makes them safe harbors for this type of discussion.

Discord is a voice and text chat application designed for use with online, multiplayer games. It has become very popular for a wide variety of discussions unrelated to gaming, as it resembles groupware applications like Slack that facilitate not only discussion, but collaboration. While groups of all political persuasions use Discord, it hosts large communities devoted to Donald Trump (Centipede Central), Marine Le Pen, Anticom organizing, and other far-right causes.<sup>116</sup>

## WHERE DO THESE ACTORS OPERATE ONLINE?

### **MAINSTREAM SOCIAL MEDIA SITES**

Mainstream social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are used by members of the far-right to spread extreme messaging to large numbers of people and to seed topics for journalists. On Facebook, private groups share memes, which are then circulated further through personal networks. Facebook is also a central space for spreading misinformation, as it is a popular location for hyper-partisan news organizations and “fake news.”<sup>117</sup> Far-right actors frequently game Twitter’s trending topics feature to amplify certain stories or messages.<sup>118</sup> And YouTube gives a platform to conspiracy theorists and fringe groups who can make persuasive, engaging videos on outrageous topics. In the Case Studies, we have provided specific examples of far-right actors using mainstream social media sites to increase visibility for their desired messaging.

# WHAT MOTIVATES MEDIA MANIPULATORS?

“Media manipulation” covers an array of practices. On one hand, people circulate content to push their worldview, often using the mainstream media to increase its audience. (We might more accurately call this “propaganda.”) On the other, there are people who strategically spread so-called “fake news” to make money; trolls who create chaos for fun; politicians with a vested interest in propagating certain frames; and groups who use the media in an attempt to affect public opinion. (See the “Misinformation” section for more discussion.)

Regardless, the actors creating and spreading disinformation, propaganda, and/or fake news are usually motivated by a combination of one or more of these categories—ideology, money, and/or status and attention.<sup>119</sup> For example, the two young men behind LibertyNewsWriters.com include rumors, hyperbole, and exaggeration in their stories to appeal to a pro-Trump, anti-liberal audience because it nets them more than \$40,000 a month in advertising revenue.<sup>120</sup> However, a website like *Breitbart News* has both economic and ideological goals it aims to promote with its coverage. (The late Andrew Breitbart conceived the site as a conservative counterpart to the *Huffington Post*, to “wage information warfare against the mainstream press.” The site is partially funded by Robert Mercer, a hedge-fund tycoon and Trump supporter.)<sup>121</sup> On social media, users often share content they believe will both appeal to their audience and be consistent with their desired self-presentation. Other participants are motivated by the “lulz”—the enjoyment they get at the expense of others.

## IDEOLOGY

There are significant ideological differences between the alt-right, chan culture, Men’s Rights Activists, and the vast array of other people who participate in the type of media manipulation outlined in this report. Many of the popular beliefs in these subcultures can be traced back to longer-standing arguments in far-right circles. For example, dislike of “political correctness” dates back to the early 1990s when conservative commentators accused colleges and universities of suppressing conservative thought in favor of radical left-wing ideology.<sup>122</sup> White nationalist groups, anti-immigration activists, and paleoconservatives have long been making arguments against multiculturalism.<sup>123</sup>

Despite their differences, many of these groups share the following traits:

- Contempt for both traditional Republicans (“cuckservatives”) and liberal activists (“social justice warriors”)

## WHAT MOTIVATES MEDIA MANIPULATORS?

- Disdain for multiculturalism and immigration
- Strong antipathy towards feminism and nonbinary gender identities
- Belief in intrinsic differences between people of different races and genders
- View of “political correctness” as censorship and an assault on free speech
- Belief that a “culture war” exists, which the liberal left-wing is winning
- Embeddedness in internet culture (imageboards, forums, podcasts, blogs, memes)
- Promotion of nationalism and anti-globalism
- Tendency to construct and spread conspiracy theories<sup>124</sup>

Many participants are motivated by the desire to share and spread these ideological commitments. As previously mentioned, there is a widespread belief on the far-right that the left-wing is winning the culture war through the spread of “cultural Marxism.” Cultural Marxism is a far-right term for the Frankfurt School, a school of critical theory that emerged in 1930s Germany and was associated with the Institute for Social Research. Members of the Frankfurt School, which included social theorists Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Jürgen Habermas, were concerned with the failure of Marxist revolution in Western Europe and the rise of Nazism. Their works examined and critiqued the culture of advanced industrial capitalism, and are still widely read.<sup>125</sup>

According to the theory of Cultural Marxism, the Frankfurt School was a Jewish conspiracy to weaken Western civilization.<sup>126</sup> This belief originated with religious paleoconservatives in the 1990s, such as Paul Weyrich, who also founded the Model Majority and the Heritage Foundation. It was amplified by Pat Buchanan, Lyndon LaRouche, and Fidel Castro, and gained wider acceptance among the Tea Party, white nationalists, and conspiracy theorists.<sup>127</sup> According to adherents, the Frankfurt School is responsible for, among other things, widespread acceptance of homosexuality; rock music; modern art; 1960s student activism; the Civil Rights Movement; feminism; environmentalism; and so forth.

From this perspective, using the Internet to spread far-right ideology is an attempt to fight the dominance of left-wing cultural criticism (and Jewish ascendancy). Both the alt-right and white nationalist groups believe that they must work from the ground up to establish counter-narratives, which today can best be done online. This imbues online participation with a sense of importance and urgency, and simultaneously positions the far-right as an oppressed minority struggling against a domineering status quo.

## WHAT MOTIVATES MEDIA MANIPULATORS?

### RADICALIZATION

Far-right movements exploit young men's rebellion and dislike of "political correctness" to spread white supremacist thought, Islamophobia, and misogyny through irony and knowledge of internet culture. This is a form of radicalization happening primarily through forums, message boards, and social media targeting young men immersed in internet culture.

The manosphere popularized the term "red pill" to refer to its radicalization. In the popular sci-fi movie *The Matrix*, Morpheus asks the protagonist, Neo, to choose between a red pill and a blue pill. If Neo chooses the red pill, the secrets of the

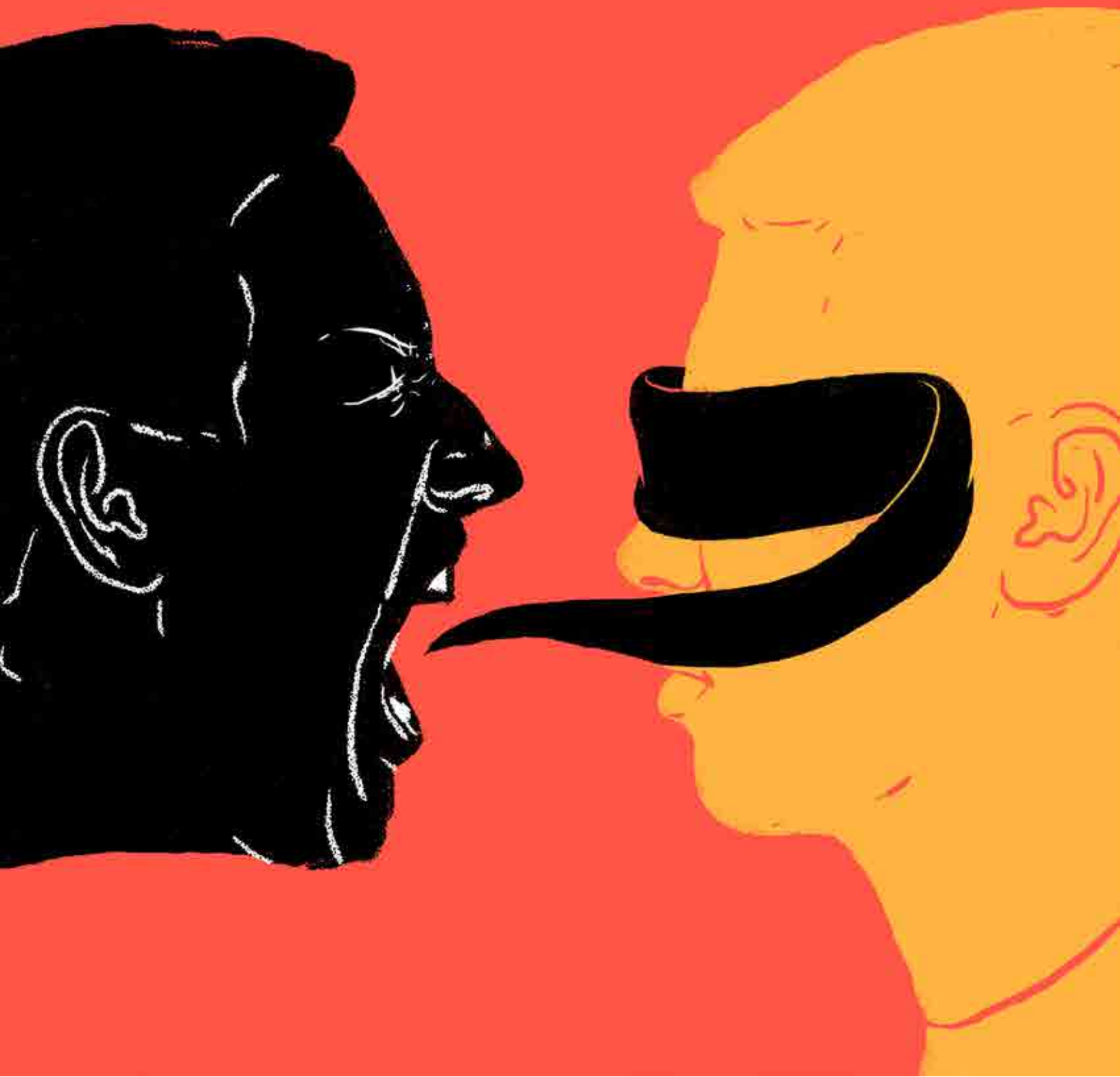
**Like the consciousness-raising groups of second-wave feminism, "redpilling the normies" describes spreading parts of alt-right ideology to further its more extreme elements.**

Matrix will be revealed; if he sticks with the blue pill, he will go back to his normal, everyday life. To MRAs, being red-pilled means eschewing liberal ideology and recognizing that men, not women, are the oppressed class. To the

alt-right, it means revealing the lies behind multiculturalism and globalism and accepting the truth of ethnonationalism. To conspiracy theorists, it may mean realizing the influence of Bohemian Grove, or the Illuminati, or the Skull and Bones, on society. To white supremacists, it means waking up to the widespread control of Jewish elites and the destruction of the white race. Red-pilling is the far-right equivalent to consciousness-raising or, in today's lingo, becoming "woke."

Red-pilling has become shorthand for radicalization: conditioning young men into alt-right views. "Normies" is the derisive term used for traditional conservative and centrists. Like the consciousness-raising groups of second-wave feminism, "red-pilling the normies" describes spreading parts of alt-right ideology to further its more extreme elements. For instance, while John Doe may not accept the idea of a vast Jewish conspiracy, his friends and family may be comfortable with anti-Muslim sentiment. A 4chan troll may be more receptive to serious white supremacist claims after using ethnic slurs "ironically" for two or three months.

But why is radicalization possible? Many chan users post about feeling unable to relate to mainstream culture, reflecting a sense of *anomie*. Anomie, as Emile Durkheim theorized, follows from rapid social change. This can lead to a mismatch between what society claims individuals can achieve and what is actually achievable, resulting in weakened group ties, a lack of adherence to social norms, fragmentation of identity, and purposelessness.<sup>128</sup> However, because they are primarily white men, they are unable to adopt an empowered minority subject position in the same way that a white woman feeling alienated by sexist culture might become a feminist or a black man might embrace anti-racist activism.<sup>129</sup> This is partly why Gamergate could rally so many geeks to embrace misogyny. By positioning geeks





## WHAT MOTIVATES MEDIA MANIPULATORS?

as an embattled minority under attack from politically correct feminists, gamers saw fighting against diverse representation as necessary to protecting their culture.

### **MONEY**

Throughout the 2016 US election season, a variety of actors leveraged social media and advertising networks to purposefully spread factually inaccurate, if not outright deceptive content. Such “fake news” often leveraged narratives that appeared ideologically driven, but were constructed by people with no ideological agenda. Such content was produced and spread by people who were seeking money without fame. For example, during the election, teenagers in a town in Macedonia created a range of websites with names like USConservativeToday.com and posted stories claiming that Hillary Clinton would be indicted for crimes related to her emails.<sup>130</sup> These actors claimed to be apolitical and stated that they simply found that publishing pro-Trump content generated more advertising revenue than pro-Clinton content.

In other cases, individuals have used media provocation explicitly for financial gain and a level of fame or influence. Milo Yiannopoulos, dubbed an “Internet supervillain” by *Out* magazine, built a personal brand by strategically outraging the media through Twitter harassment and other shock tactics.<sup>131</sup> After getting banned from Twitter for abusive behavior, he negotiated a \$250,000 book deal with an imprint of Simon & Schuster and went on a college campus speaking tour specifically designed to generate attention out of outrage (the book deal was later cancelled after a video surfaced in which he defended pedophilia).<sup>132</sup> More ideologically-driven figures, such as the neo-Nazi Andrew Anglin, hate Yiannopoulos both because he is Jewish and because they believe he makes light of their ideas and “has no real beliefs.”<sup>133</sup>

### **STATUS AND ATTENTION**

Users may also partake in media manipulation as a way of gaining status and acceptance within online communities. On Facebook and Twitter, status is generated through likes, shares, and comments, so users are incentivized to create

**Taken as a whole, these communities may feel that by manipulating media outlets, they gain some status and a measure of control over an entrenched and powerful institution, which many of them distrust and dislike.**

content that will resonate with their friends, followers, and groups. Even within anonymous communities, users can still communicate high status through slang, in-jokes, and subtle conversational cues, so individuals may partake in variations of the same prac-

tices.<sup>134</sup> Taken as a whole, these communities may feel that by manipulating media outlets, they gain some status and a measure of control over an entrenched and powerful institution, which many of them distrust and dislike.

## WHAT TECHNIQUES DO MEDIA MANIPULATORS USE?

“Lulz”—a deliberate corruption of “lol,” which stands for “laugh out loud”—is a motivating force for some manipulators. The term refers to taking enjoyment at the expense of a victim, a kind of directed schadenfreude.<sup>135</sup> It has been used for years by trolls who explain their often-disruptive actions by simply stating “I did it for the lulz.” Those driven to manipulate the media for the lulz may simply enjoy spreading chaos. Because trolls have long had a complicated relationship with the media, they may also specifically relish targeting news outlets as their victims. In some cases, the intent of lulz versus ideology may be deliberately unclear: Internet users often post racist or sexist content but claim to do so merely as a way to generate lulz through the offense of others.



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Groups of white nationalists, Men's Rights Activists, neo-Nazis, neo-reactionaries, techno-libertarians, Islamophobes, paleoconservatives, and various other fringe groups might have remained subcultural were it not for several features of the contemporary media environment that make manipulation possible. These and other far-right groups have developed a series of techniques to exploit media vulnerabilities and amplify their messaging.

## PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

In many ways, places like 8chan/pol/ exemplify Henry Jenkins' concept of participatory culture.<sup>136</sup> These environments have “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices.”<sup>137</sup> On the chans, rough MSPaint art is normal; sharing images is required to post on the board; posters review each other's content and help to improve it; and “newfags” are encouraged to lurk in order to understand the culture. Thus, there is a low barrier to entry, and various forms of “legitimate peripheral participation” exist in which curious onlookers can slowly learn group norms and become accepted contributors.<sup>138</sup>

For instance, on 8chan/pol/, an anon posts a flowchart that demonstrates inconsistencies in liberal thought, asking for feedback. It is wordy and complicated. Another anon replies:

*This may seem like a good argument to people who already agree with it, but it won't make it past any memetic defenses of the brainwashed. You need to make the message short and simple, so that the reader has already intaken [sic] all of it before their brain shuts it down. And you need to make it funny so that it sticks in their brain and circumvents their shut-it-down circuits.*

In another thread, posters debate the best way to convey anti-Semitic ideas. One replies:

*Don't forget the easiest way to identify a jew [sic] through conversation and to rally leftists to your side: Israel/Palestine. It's the easiest fracture point for the left as most support Palestine and yet subconsciously support the Israelis for being a minority. This conflict in their mind will prime them to receive harsher truths that they can then consolidate. Also, if they see one of their jewish*

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*friends/acquaintances speak ill of Palestinians they will subconsciously associate jews with their stereotypes.*

Thus, anons educate each other and collaboratively develop techniques for spreading ideas and “redpilling the normies.”

Members of these communities share a wide range of literature to educate themselves on the media and public opinion and to cement their identity as in-the-know, educated “memetic warriors.” This includes classic media studies and sociology texts, such as *Understanding Media* by Marshall McLuhan and *The Crowd* by Gustave Le Bon, as well as material on propaganda and persuasion techniques. They circulate bestselling self-help texts like Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, books by the “father of public relations” Edward Bernays, pioneering leftist community organizer Saul Alinsky’s *Rules for Radicals*,<sup>139</sup> as well as lesser-known literature on subliminal advertising and government brainwashing tactics. A particularly popular topic is social engineering, the practice of psychological manipulation to get people to take certain actions. The works they share range from peer-reviewed academic publications to radical manifestos and fringe conspiracy texts, from marketing texts to CIA training materials, and from background literature to step-by-step manuals. Taken together, they indicate the community’s interest in developing increasingly sophisticated understandings of the media environment in order to better exploit it.

## NETWORKS

Because many of the subcultures outlined in this document are highly networked, their members are agile, able to assemble and disassemble smaller teams for campaigns as needed. For instance, after a Milo Yiannopolous speech at Berkeley was disrupted by anti-fascist activists (Antifa), a group of /pol/ users formed a channel on the gaming chat app Discord to discuss “Anticom” (anti-communist) strategies and activism. In this channel, participants worked together to gather information on Antifa activists who had been arrested, organized in-person meetups, swapped strategies on infiltrating Antifa groups, shared Anticom memes, and strategized how to get Anticom messages to larger audiences. While some of these users came from /pol/, others were recruited through Reddit and Twitter.

Another example is the use of hashtags on Twitter. Often, anons will work together to get a hashtag to trend, sometimes by creating large amounts of fake accounts.<sup>140</sup> In other instances, they will take an extant hashtag, like #BlackLivesMatter, and manipulate or “hijack” it—in this case, posting messages critical of BLM to diminish the ability of supporters to use the hashtag to find each other.

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Alt-right blogger Mike Cernovich frequently uses the streaming app Periscope to connect with his audience.<sup>141</sup> After four Chicago teens filmed themselves torturing a mentally disabled man, Cernovich claimed they were Black Lives Matter supporters.<sup>142</sup> Using Periscope, he and his followers “brainstormed” the hashtag #BLMKidnapping and coordinated to make it trend on Twitter; it was used 480,000 times in 24 hours and trended across the United States.<sup>143</sup> While police and BLM advocates decried the connection, the theory spread widely and was mentioned in most of the mainstream media stories about the kidnapping.<sup>144</sup> On his blog, he wrote, “The media refused to cover this story until we broke it on my Periscope.”<sup>145</sup> Cernovich and his audience had effectively changed the way the story was framed in mainstream media.

### MEMES

An internet meme is “a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission.”<sup>146</sup> Limor Shifman defines a meme as “cultural information that passes along from person to person, yet gradually scales into a shared social phenomenon.”<sup>147</sup> While virtually anything can be a meme since it’s a unit of information, in modern internet parlance, a meme is a visual trope that proliferates across internet spaces as it is replicated and altered by anonymous users. The best-known alt-right meme is Pepe, a green cartoon frog with a complicated history who more-or-less represents “owning your loserdom.”<sup>148</sup> He is an alt-right in-joke and was the source of both hilarity and delight when the Anti-Defamation

**The milder images are intended to work as “gateway drugs” to the more extreme elements of alt-right ideology.**

League labeled him a hate symbol.<sup>149</sup> When Hillary Clinton’s team issued an “explainer” on Pepe, it validated /pol/ as a serious opponent rather than an insignificant internet subculture. As meme

scholars Ryan Milner and Whitney Phillips wrote in the *The New York Times*, “this appropriation was meant as a joke [by /pol/], one intended to goad mainstream journalists and politicians into, first, panicking over a cartoon frog and, second, providing the alt-right a broader platform.”<sup>150</sup>

But memes also refer to image macros, which are images that quickly convey humor or political thought, meant to be shared on social media. These images are strategically created as *propaganda* by alt-right users to spread elements of their ideology to normies (Figure 1, Figure 2). The constant creation of image macros allows anons to be agile and iterative, trying many messages and strategies, pursuing those that stick and abandoning unsuccessful tries. *The Daily Stormer* neo-Nazi blog has a “Memetic Monday” where they post dozens of such image macros, designed to be shared on Facebook or Twitter. Some sink without a trace, while others spread rapidly across the internet. Some are deeply racist or explicitly evoke Nazi imagery, while others are relatively mild (such as the anti-Hillary image



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macro in Figure 1). The milder images are intended to work as “gateway drugs” to the more extreme elements of alt-right ideology.



Figure 1: Anti-Hillary Meme posted on Daily Stormer, 3/6/17

Image macros are designed to be shared from individual to individual on social media, taking advantage of the fact that propaganda spread through interpersonal ties is more successful than that generated by a top-down apparatus.<sup>151</sup> Moreover, because dozens of image macros are generated that convey similar messages, people in such networks are regularly exposed to repetitive messaging which increases the effectiveness of such propaganda.<sup>152</sup>

The alt-right has also been successful at creating memes that do not involve images. For instance, the (((echo))) meme surrounds the names of Jewish people with parentheses. The meme originated in a browser extension that appended Jewish names with such parentheses; users often manually add echo parentheses to posts in far-right online spaces. The goal is to demonstrate the extent to which Jewish people are present in elite circles and upper echelons of media by drawing attention to how frequently they are mentioned in the press.



Figure 2: Anti-Islamic Meme posted on Daily Stormer, 3/6/17

Another example is the word “cuck,” an insult referring to someone so brainwashed or ignorant that they unwittingly aid their enemies. “Cuck” suggests being a willful participant in one’s own undoing due to adopting a supposedly corrupted value system; it is a more specific variant of “sheeple” (blending of sheep and people) or “lemming.” “Cuck” originates in racial cuckold porn, in which white men are willingly humiliated by inviting black men to have sex with their white wives while they watch. Thus, the word “cuck” is intrinsically linked with white supremacist ideology and serves as a dog whistle to those on the far-right.<sup>153</sup>

A popular variant of this is “cuckservative,” which refers to mainstream Republicans who hold opinions deemed insufficiently conservative on issues like immigration, transgender rights, and Israel.<sup>154</sup> The racial subtext of the term is important. Richard Spencer strongly protested the use of “cuck” to refer to liberals or beta males. “Cuckservative is, put simply, important: it has gotten under the skin of our enemies and has become a harbinger for something beyond conservatism. Thus, it is important that we get it right—and not allow the meme to be turned into just another synonym for ‘liberal’ ... The #cuckservative meme doesn’t make any sense without race. It’s all about race.”<sup>155</sup>

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### BOTS

Social bots are pieces of software that create content on social media and interact with people.<sup>156</sup> Increasingly, bots are used for political reasons: to inflate the numbers of followers a politician has; to spread propaganda; to subtly influence political discourse; and to aggregate and broadcast content.<sup>157</sup> In countries ranging from Azerbaijan to Italy to Venezuela, bots have been used by governments and political elites,<sup>158</sup> often to attack dissidents or manipulate news frames around an issue.<sup>159</sup> This is especially true during sensitive, contested political events such as national elections or the UK's referendum to leave the European Union.<sup>160</sup>

Bots were used extensively during the 2016 presidential election.<sup>161</sup> For instance, during the first presidential debate, bots generated 20% of the Twitter posts about

**Bots are cheap and easy to deploy, and constantly-changing, so they can be quickly leveraged to spread information on current issues.**

the debate, despite representing only 0.5% of users.<sup>162</sup> Significantly more of this traffic came from pro-Trump bots than pro-Clinton bots.<sup>163</sup> This remained constant throughout the election;

researchers estimate that about a third of all pro-Trump tweets on Twitter were generated by bots, more than four times that of pro-Clinton tweets.<sup>164</sup> Many of these bots spread what is known as “computational propaganda”: misinformation and negative information about opposition candidates.<sup>165</sup>

The impact of bots on political discourse is unknown, but research suggests it can have significant amplification effects. Bots are cheap and easy to deploy, and constantly-changing, so they can be quickly leveraged to spread information on current issues.<sup>166</sup> Because of this, many varied actors, from governments to individuals, can easily deploy bots, although there is some evidence of a link between pro-Trump bot traffic and Russian state propaganda.<sup>167</sup> Moreover, it is often difficult for average users to distinguish between “real” users and bots.<sup>168</sup> To complicate matters further, many accounts that appear to be bots are often teams of users manually producing content. During the Pizzagate conspiracy theory (described in Case Studies, below), for instance, a combination of bots and bot-like accounts were used to make the topic trend, suggest grass-roots activity, and provide enough legitimacy that real people were inspired to join in.<sup>169</sup> Thus, bot traffic contributed to the spreading—and mainstreaming—of the theory.

### STRATEGIC AMPLIFICATION AND FRAMING

Using the power of networked collaboration and the reach of influencers, media manipulators are able to trade stories “up the chain” of media outlets.<sup>170</sup> This strategy was described in detail in a 2012 book by business marketer Ryan Holiday, who exploited news blogs to get free PR coverage for his clients. Ideologues and political trolls have since adopted similar strategies for their own causes.<sup>171</sup> Trading

## WHAT TECHNIQUES DO MEDIA MANIPULATORS USE?

up the chain involves planting a juicy story with a small or local news outlet, who may be too understaffed or financially strained to sufficiently fact-check it. If the story performs well enough, mid-sized and national news outlets may cover it as well, either to promote or debunk it. In either case, the story gets amplified beyond its original scope.

**For manipulators, it doesn't matter if the media is reporting on a story in order to debunk or dismiss it; the important thing is getting it covered in the first place.**

Current media manipulation involves a range of variations on this process. In some cases, manipulators deliberately plant bait for local outlets by generating hoaxes (for an illustrative example, see our case study about fake white student union Facebook pages). In other cases, influenc-

ers like Alex Jones may promote a conspiracy theory that has been making its way through networked communities. In the process, the story will get picked up and covered by “alt-light” and even mainstream outlets. Throughout the 2016 election, Trump often played the role of amplifier. If he tweeted about a conspiracy theory or made a false claim at a rally, it was considered newsworthy because of his candidacy.

For manipulators, it doesn't matter if the media is reporting on a story in order to debunk or dismiss it; the important thing is getting it covered in the first place. The amount of media coverage devoted to specific issues influences the presumed importance of these issues to the public.<sup>172</sup> This phenomenon, called agenda setting, means that the media is remarkably influential in determining what people think about. The media agenda affects the public agenda. In this sense, by getting the media to cover certain stories, even by debunking them, media manipulators are able to influence the public agenda.

Manipulators also recognize the value of defining and framing a news story from the beginning. Studies have shown that when people are presented with information that contradicts their pre-existing beliefs, they will double down on their original opinions rather than amending them.<sup>173</sup> This means that genuinely correcting misinformation is almost impossible for the mainstream media once a story has already gained popularity. Additionally, an accurate version of events is often more complicated, and more boring, than a compelling false narrative.<sup>174</sup> The combined effect is that the original framing of a story—the one crafted by media manipulators—is usually the one that sticks.

# WHY IS THE MEDIA VULNERABLE?

While there has been a notable rise in far-right online activity, this would be less significant if the mainstream media had not amplified its messaging. The mainstream media was susceptible to manipulation from the far-right press due to a number of dynamics: low public trust in media; a proclivity for sensationalism; lack of resources for fact-checking and investigative reporting; and corporate consolidation resulting in the replacement of local publications with hegemonic media brands. Concerns about the news media have amplified in recent years across the political spectrum. While right-wing critics argue that liberal elites dominate the mainstream media, left-wing theorists argue that media is over-reliant on corporate and government sources, panders to advertisers, ignores dissenting voices, and supports the status quo.<sup>175</sup> Such widespread distrust of the mainstream media from both the left and the right helped create the conditions for both the emergence of the hyper-partisan far-right press and subcultural media manipulation.

## LACK OF TRUST IN MEDIA

Trust of the mainstream media is at an all-time low. A Gallup poll released in September 2016 found that Americans' trust in the mass media "to report the news fully, accurately and fairly" was, at 32%, the lowest in the organization's polling history.<sup>176</sup> While confidence has been falling relatively steadily throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the number fell a steep eight percentage points from 2015, marking the trend as particularly prevalent in the past year. A Data & Society report found that most teens express distrust of the news and assume much of it is biased.<sup>177</sup>

It is also worth noting that according to Gallup's poll, trust in the mainstream media is particularly low among right-wing and Republican survey participants, at only 14%.<sup>178</sup> This statistic is remarkable when considering the new emergence of hyper-partisan right-wing media outlets that form "a distinct and insulated media system."<sup>179</sup> Much of the coverage from these outlets is devoted to attacks on the mainstream media, so those who gravitate to these sources may become increasingly distrustful of, and insulated from, outside coverage.

However, such lack of trust has other recent precedents. For instance, leading up to the Iraq War, *The New York Times* published a number of articles that indicated Iraq may have been in the process of developing weapons of mass destruction. The coverage was cited by Bush administration officials to bolster support for the invasion, but it was later revealed that the *Times* reporting was largely based on faulty information. In a 2004 mea culpa, the paper admitted that it should have

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been “pressing for more skepticism” in its reporting and was “perhaps too intent on rushing scoops into the paper.”<sup>180</sup> The paper also admitted it was encouraged to report on these claims by United States officials who were already convinced of the need for an invasion.<sup>181</sup> *The New York Times*, considered one of the United States’ flagship publications, was severely criticized for relying on sources sympathetic to the Bush administration and failing to perform its duties as a “fourth estate” check on government power.<sup>182</sup> These revelations had significant impact on public trust.<sup>183</sup>

## DECLINE OF LOCAL NEWS

Due to a confluence of economic and technological factors, local news has declined significantly in recent years. One important change has been the shift to online news consumption. Many local newspapers do not have the resources to invest in digital publishing, meaning they lose out on valuable online readership and face declining print circulation.<sup>184</sup>

Those who do publish digital content are faced with the breakdown of traditional business models. Internet users who get their news piecemeal through social media or search engines are rarely willing to pay subscription fees to publications, which removes a traditional source of revenue and forces online publishers to rely almost purely on advertising.<sup>185</sup> However, big portions of ad spending are getting redirected to digital intermediary platforms like Google and Facebook, which aggregate news from other sites but don’t produce it themselves.<sup>186</sup> Additionally, classified advertising revenue has been lost to sites like Craigslist.

In the face of such steadily declining revenue, both off- and online, many local newspapers ceased publication throughout the 2000s. Others got sold to publicly traded chains and private equity funds, who saw an opportunity to buy them at bargain prices.<sup>187</sup> In the process, local papers were consolidated into a few ultra-powerful companies, described by Penelope Muse Abernathy as “the new media barons.”<sup>188</sup> In order to save costs, these consolidated companies often discouraged extensive local reporting in favor of more broadly applicable content. In other words, the larger the media firms became, the less connected they were to individual communities.<sup>189</sup>

Consolidated ownership has also hurt local news because the “new media barons” greatly prioritize short-term profits over quality civic journalism.<sup>190</sup> In particular, private equity firms—who can operate with less regulatory oversight and transparency than publicly traded companies—often radically restructure newspaper companies with the goal of reselling them at a profit within a few years. As part of these leveraged buyouts, they often lay off large portions of newsroom staffs and shut down investigative projects that do not promise short-term payoff; in some cases, they close entire local newspapers as a method of cost-cutting.<sup>191</sup>

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As outlined in Abernathy's report on new media ownership, this confluence of challenges threatens to create "news deserts," or regions where communities can no longer access local news.<sup>192</sup> Local news is a vital tool for civic engagement; the FCC has reported that as much as 85% of the news that feeds local democracy comes from local papers. Without news media providing this civic function, the public becomes less informed about issues that affect them and there is an agenda-setting vacuum left behind. Communities may also lose a powerful force of representation, since local news outlets have long served as a way to direct the attention of larger media outlets or government branches to local issues.<sup>193</sup>

## THE ATTENTION ECONOMY

Social media—and largely, the internet as a whole—is an attention economy where the most valued content is that which is most likely to attract attention. The overload of information enabled by the internet makes attention an extremely valuable resource.<sup>194</sup> Viral content, from funny videos to sensational headlines, garners the clicks, retweets, and likes, and thus advertising revenue.<sup>195</sup> Online media like *Huffington Post*, *Vice*, and *Vox*—even news outlets as traditional as *The New York Times*—value pageviews, "most emailed" articles, and trending topics.<sup>196</sup> Sites like *Buzzfeed* and *Upworthy* carefully track what they publish in order to understand how content flows across social platforms like Facebook and Twitter. They use this knowledge of virality to produce brand-sponsored content or refine social messaging.<sup>197</sup> Thus, in a media-saturated world, both traditional and new media seek to cover whatever can attract "eyeballs."<sup>198</sup>

Since the 1990s, traditional newspapers have engaged in a wide variety of cost-cutting measures, as discussed in the last section. Across the board, staff have been cut and reporters have more responsibilities.<sup>199</sup> Fewer papers can afford foreign correspondents or reporters in Washington, DC. There is less fact-checking and investigative reporting.<sup>200</sup> At the same time, there is a constant need for novelty to fill up a 24/7/365 news cycle driven by cable networks and social media. As a result, news items are often published before they are finished, let alone fact-checked.<sup>201</sup>

To respond to such pressure, mainstream news organizations frequently source stories directly from Twitter, or from blogs like *Gawker* (now defunct) or *Gothamist*. Such blogs are deeply incentivized to produce a constant stream of new content, since they are dependent on page views and the most captivating blogs are those that update frequently.<sup>202</sup> New and old media alike employ software that provides detailed data that shows exactly which articles get the most clicks, shares, likes, and comments. This allows newspapers and blogs to tailor future content to drive their metrics up, incentivizing low-quality but high-performing posts over high-quality journalism.<sup>203</sup>



## WHY IS THE MEDIA VULNERABLE?

Thus, content that is novel, sensational, or emotional is catnip to reporters. Donald Trump produced a constant stream of new scandals and outrageous statements during the 2016 election, and as a result got far more coverage than other candidates.<sup>204</sup> Due to the need to constantly produce news content that will lead to the greatest amount of clicks, with limited resources, reporters and bloggers rely on social media, so a trending hashtag or viral video can frequently lead to mainstream coverage.<sup>205</sup> These factors—and trolls' expert understanding of them—make media manipulation more likely.



# WHAT ARE THE OUTCOMES?

We do not yet know the full impact of far-right media manipulation and spread of disinformation. However, we can expect the continuation of some current trends: an increase in misinformation; continued radicalization; and decreased trust in mainstream media.

## MISINFORMATION

“Fake news” is a contested term, but generally refers to a wide range of disinformation and misinformation circulating online and in the media.<sup>206</sup> The term itself has quickly become contentious and politically-motivated: it was first used to describe sites that intentionally posted fictional partisan content as clickbait, but Donald Trump’s administration quickly adopted it to discredit accurate but unflattering news items, ironically making the term itself a form of disinformation. Regardless

**Regardless of how the issue is labeled, the spread of false or misleading information is having real and negative effects on the public consumption of news.**

of how the issue is labeled, the spread of false or misleading information is having real and negative effects on the public consumption of news.<sup>207</sup> Even when misinformation is debunked, it may continue to shape people’s attitudes.<sup>208</sup>

As such, it is important to parse out the types of misinformation that exist and explore the motivations for their creation and dissemination.

On one end of the spectrum, there are sites explicitly created and designed to deceive people, publishing provably false claims. These sites are generally designed to look like reputable news sources, in some cases even impersonating specific outlets. As mentioned previously, sites with names like USConservativeToday.com and LibertyNewsWriters.com posted sensational, partisan stories specifically to increase readership and make money.<sup>209</sup>

Other outlets may spread information that falls on a continuum between true and false. Publications with highly ideological agendas, such as *Breitbart News* or *Occupy Democrats*, often deliberately manipulate information to fit into a specific world-view. For instance, in 2014 the *Washington Free Beacon* published an article claiming that the U.S. government was funding a research effort to track and surveil conservative statements on social media, which was picked up by *Breitbart* and eventually *Fox News*.<sup>210</sup> While the project did exist, its findings were mischaracterized. Similarly, liberal activists publicized a story from the *Conservative Daily Post* claiming that the Trump administration would charge political protesters as terrorists.<sup>211</sup> This was based on an informal proposal by Senator Doug Erickson to charge pro-

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testers who blocked businesses with economic terrorism.<sup>212</sup> In both cases, the news stories were a combination of facts and misinformation.

Mainstream publications regularly post “clickbait,” consisting of sensationalist and sometimes misleading headlines designed to increase article views.<sup>213</sup> News sources may also report on other cases of false information they find to be newsworthy, thus unintentionally giving them more exposure.

There’s considerable debate over the most effective way to address “fake news.” Some scholars argue that services like Facebook and Google are now undeniably media platforms with a responsibility to flag false stories and even alter economic incentives for publishers (and Facebook has indeed started to take some action).<sup>214</sup> Others argue the solution lies in teaching greater media literacy and “emotional skepticism” to the public.<sup>215</sup> Unfortunately, none of the proposed solutions are easy, and their effectiveness remains largely untested and may even backfire.<sup>216</sup>

## GROWING DISTRUST IN THE MEDIA

The extent to which the historically low levels of trust in mainstream media can be traced back to media manipulation is unclear, but it is worth noting that distrust of the media can become a self-perpetuating phenomenon. Groups that are already cynical of the media—trolls, ideologues, and conspiracy theorists—are often the ones drawn to manipulate it. If they are able to successfully use the media to cover a story or push an agenda, it undermines the media’s credibility on other issues. Meanwhile, more members of the public are exposed to its weaknesses and may turn to alternative news sources.

Overall, media distrust has significant impacts. People who do not trust the media are less likely to access accurate information, which has civic and political ramifications.<sup>217</sup> They are more likely to vote along partisan lines rather than considering current national conditions.<sup>218</sup> Overall, low levels of trust in media weakens the political knowledge of citizens, inhibits its watchdog function, and may impede the full exercise of democracy.<sup>219</sup>

## FURTHER RADICALIZATION

Far-right ideologies such as ethnonationalism and anti-globalism seem to be spreading into subcultural spaces in which they were previously absent. The seduction community, for instance, has historically attracted ethnically diverse men. But recently, the pick-up artist Roosh described his first book as “an inside look to how the globalist establishment is attempting to marginalize masculine men with a leftist agenda that promotes censorship, feminism, and sterility,” and his blog *Return of Kings* has recently posted rants about interracial pornography and other favorite annoyances of the alt-right.

## WHAT ARE THE OUTCOMES?

There are also signs of radicalization across areas of gaming and fandom. The backlash against multiculturalism and feminism is increasing, as properties like *Rogue One*, *Iron Fist*, and *Ghostbusters* are embroiled in controversies over representation. The gamer-based pushback against issues of representation and multiculturalism can be seen in the recent activities and statements of YouTuber JonTron, who hosts a popular video game show. Following recent public political changes, JonTron has visibly defended and forwarded racist, jingoistic ideas. This led to a live-streamed debate in which he parroted many of the standard talking points of traditional white supremacy, including the idea that middle- and upper-class blacks commit more crimes than lower-class whites.

This comes on the heels of fellow YouTube game content producer PewDiePie's release from his contract after organizing a "prank" that arranged for young children to hold up a sign saying, "Kill all jews [sic]." There is speculation within the white nationalist community that this could be the start of radicalizing public YouTube celebrities who, upon having to deal with public backlash, are more likely to seek out ideas and allies that support their previous statements. Once again, this exemplifies how commitments to "free speech" in certain communities can serve as an on-ramp for far-right radicalization. It also further cements the relationship between movements like Gamergate, and the larger culture surrounding certain video games, to issues of racism and white supremacy.

We believe that far-right radicalization warrants greater attention. It is troubling how quickly far-right messaging is spreading through subcultural spaces, from sci-fi fans to furies.<sup>220</sup> The young men most at risk are those who feel disenfranchised in other areas of their life, especially those who already feel alienated from mainstream culture. It is this alienation and feeling of outsider-ness that radicalization strategically exploits. While it is impossible to determine who, exactly, inhabits many of the spaces we document in this report, it seems probable that income inequality plays a role. While Richard Spencer and other alt-right leaders wear an elite mantle, most members of the far-right do not. It remains to be seen how economic circumstances contribute to the embrace of such ideologies.

# CONCLUSION

One major unanswered question from this report is to what extent far-right media manipulation affected the results of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. On one hand, it is impossible to quantify this in any substantive way. However, knowing that a confluence of factors contributed to Trump's victory, it is important to tease out this particular piece of the puzzle. We argue that the spread of far-right messages, not only through partisan cable news and online sources (or "fake news"), but through the mainstream media, may have had a significant effect on agenda-setting, particularly with regard to the type of coverage that each candidate received. There is increasing evidence that Trump voters primarily consumed hyper-partisan news, much of which, like *Infowars* and *Breitbart*, played a key role in amplifying subcultural messages, and which overwhelmingly supported Trump's candidacy.<sup>221</sup> A major study from the Harvard Kennedy school found that mainstream media coverage of Hillary Clinton was more negative than that of Donald Trump.<sup>222</sup> Given increased media distrust and increase in partisan news coverage, this report helps to explain why the far-right was so successful at amplifying their messages.

**The mainstream media's predilection for sensationalism, need for constant novelty, and emphasis on profits over civic responsibility made them vulnerable to strategic manipulation.**

How do we explain the rise of the far-right online? The manosphere has existed online for decades, and has a well-developed set of rhetorical strategies that portray men—especially geeky or socially unsuccessful men—as victims of radical feminists. During Gamergate, the far-right drew from troll culture and participatory techniques to coalition-build around social media campaigns and intimidation of opponents. At the same time, the chans had a long history of using inflammatory language—what we might characterize as "extreme speech"<sup>223</sup>—to rile up their targets and separate themselves from outsiders and normies. The rhetoric and iconography used by the alt-right and many of the other fringe groups in this document framed racism and sexism as edgy rebellion. These conditions created a perfect environment in which far-right messaging could fester: young men who were disaffected, bored, and online; a strong dislike of feminists and "social justice warriors;" fluency in the language of social media and memes; and racial frames of white supremacy that appealed to young white men.<sup>224</sup>

However, as we have reiterated throughout this document, many of these beliefs would remain subcultural were it not for their amplification by mainstream media. The mainstream media's predilection for sensationalism, need for constant novelty, and emphasis on profits over civic responsibility made them vulnerable to strategic manipulation. Many far-right participants are very knowledgeable about



## CONCLUSION

these dynamics. The ability for far-right individuals to network, collaborate, and come together quickly around breaking news issues, and their knack for creating spectacle that appeals to news media, made it possible for them to surface propaganda and effectively spread misinformation. As we have shown, in addition to the obvious impact that increased racist, sexist, and homophobic speech may have on individual people, the increase of far-right messaging has potentially grave impacts on democracy and civic participation. We hope that our work helps complicate simplistic narratives around “fake news” or “Trump memes” and provide a foundation for future research and activism.



# QUESTIONS

There are still major uncovered pieces of this complex puzzle. We hope that other researchers, journalists, and activists can help answer some of the following questions.

- What role does mainstream news media play in influencing the public's opinions and attitudes in a political election?
- To what degree did the actors we're talking about shape mainstream media narrative and/or frames in this election? And how influential was that?
- What is the relationship between hyper-partisan news platforms and far-right subcultural groups?
- How much are these processes affected by platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Google? Are there technical solutions that can be implemented?
- How can mainstream media cover the far-right and subcultural groups without promoting problematic agendas?
- Who influenced the Trump campaign's tactics, frames, and priorities?
- Were campaign actors like Steve Bannon learning from far-right networks and their memes, or trying out different messaging strategies in these networks?
- What is the extent of far-right radicalization?
- Was there a rise in people subscribing to far-right ideologies during the 2016 election?
- How many people were politically mobilized due to their participation in far-right online activities?
- Are there similarities between far-right radicalization and other types of radicalization (such as Islamic fundamentalism)? What can we learn from other radicalization processes?
- How do the economic interests of news media organizations and social media companies affect their participation in this ecosystem?
- What can we learn about misinformation from previous forms of "alternative knowledge," such as studies created to counter climate change science and the public health risks of tobacco?
- What are the similarities between older forms of white nationalism and the messaging of the alt-right?

# CASE STUDIES

## THE WHITE STUDENT UNION

Andrew Anglin is best known as the founder and editor of *The Daily Stormer*, an openly Neo-Nazi news outlet that claims to be “The World’s Most Visited Alt-Right Web Site.”<sup>225</sup> Modeled after 4chan and 8chan, the site heavily utilizes racist memes and imagery and encourages active comment threads below each piece. 4chan greatly influenced Anglin’s own fascist beliefs, and he claims that he is “at heart a troll.”

Anglin is acutely aware of the influence he wields among his site’s readers, known as the “Stormer Troll Army” or just the “Stormers.” According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, he explicitly stated that “using the daily news is a means to propagandize people.” He also often mobilizes his followers by directing them to harass specific targets or manipulate the media on his behalf.

This was the case in November 2015, when he directed his followers to set up fake White Student Union pages on Facebook for universities throughout the United States—and then contact local media outlets about the groups.<sup>226</sup> He stated openly that he hoped real groups would indeed crop up on college campuses, so perhaps he thought this stunt would be the first step towards that goal.<sup>227</sup> Alternatively, he may simply have been hoping to prove he could trick the media into moral outrage and simultaneously spread some racial tension throughout college campuses.

In the latter sense, he was highly successful. Local media outlets promptly reported the story and amplified his message (although some did note it was unclear whether the groups existed outside of Facebook).<sup>228</sup> *USA Today* picked up the story and covered it without a hint of skepticism.<sup>229</sup> Soon, an anonymous user on Medium revealed the pages as a hoax engineered by Anglin.<sup>230</sup> By this point, however, the entire incident was considered a newsworthy controversy, and was thus covered by *Gawker*, *The Daily Beast*, and even the *The Washington Post*.<sup>231</sup>

Anglin responded to the controversy by denying his direct involvement in the Facebook pages. He did, however, claim the groups were real and stated he was in contact with some of their leaders on college campuses.<sup>232</sup> When reporters contacted the page owners, they maintained their anonymity but claimed to be real students.<sup>233</sup> Alt-light websites like *Breitbart* then defended this version of the narrative in their coverage, claiming there were indeed real White Student Unions forming on campuses.<sup>234</sup>

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This incident illustrates the way that racism, trolling culture, and collaborative group tactics can create a potent force capable of manipulating a vulnerable media environment. Anglin used his site to direct a group of collaborating, networked readers to carry out a hoax he suspected the media would cover. The media, hungry for stories about racial tension on college campuses, took the bait and amplified what was essentially a non-story. Their coverage ironically made the incident newsworthy, justifying additional coverage from a range of national news sites.

Even though the incident did not lead to legitimate White Student Unions on these campuses, it was still a success for Anglin. It led to a great deal of free publicity for *The Daily Stormer* and proved he could induce moral outrage from the media on demand. He also successfully created an alternative narrative that circulated throughout right-wing media. And by revealing faults in mainstream coverage, he could reinforce his followers' loyalty to his own site—and perhaps even attract some new readers.

## TRUMP AND THE STAR OF DAVID IMAGE

On July 2, 2016, Donald Trump tweeted an image of Hillary Clinton next to a Star of David graphic labeling her the “Most Corrupt Candidate Ever!” (Figure 3).<sup>235</sup> The image’s background consisted of piles of U.S. currency. The combination of the Star of David, the money, and the suggestion of corruption evoked stereotypical ideas about Jewish people and referenced conspiracy theories about Jewish control of monetary systems.<sup>236</sup> National media outlets immediately noticed the image’s anti-Semitic references and published critical responses or stories highlighting the social media backlash.<sup>237</sup>



Figure 3: Hillary Clinton Meme Tweeted by Donald Trump

Less than two hours after the original image was posted, Trump’s account deleted it and reposted a new version of the image, in which the star label is replaced by a circle, thus removing the most blatant anti-Semitic symbolism.<sup>238</sup> Simultaneously, his team and supporters began claiming the star had not actually been a Star of David. Trump himself tweeted, “Dishonest media is trying their absolute best to depict a star in a tweet as the Star of David rather than a Sheriff’s Star, or plain star!”<sup>239</sup> His campaign released an official statement claiming the criticisms were “false attacks by Hillary Clinton.”<sup>240</sup> However, in the following days, the image was sourced to a June 15 tweet from an openly racist and anti-Semitic account called @FishBoneHead1.<sup>241</sup>

The incident illustrates the way that coverage of the Trump campaign by mainstream media amplified the alt-right’s message—and then allowed Trump’s team to reframe Trump as a victim of the media’s response. Within a few weeks, the image spread from alt-right users on Twitter and 4chan to Trump’s 9.5 million Twitter followers to the widespread viewership of national news outlets.<sup>242</sup> The media was put in the position of either ignoring the image, and thus failing to criticize it, or covering it and thus amplifying its message. By posting an image open to multiple interpretations, the campaign maintained plausible deniability and even reframed Trump as the victim of unfounded media attacks. This also allowed the campaign to maintain Trump’s more mainstream base who may have been offended by direct anti-Semitism. Seen in this light, the incident was not an embarrassing failure by the Trump campaign but rather a successful example of media manipulation.

## HILLARY'S HEALTH

In mid-August 2016, after watching an out-of-context video, far-right bloggers began circulating conspiracy theories suggesting Hillary Clinton was covering up massive health problems.<sup>243</sup> They suggested she was both physically weak and cognitively impaired, suffering from a range of issues including Parkinson's disease, dementia, and seizure attacks. Paul Joseph Watson, an influential conspiracy theorist and an editor for *Infowars*, promoted the theories in a video titled "The Truth About Hillary's Bizarre Behavior."<sup>244</sup> Around this time, Trump began alluding to her health issues during his campaign rallies.<sup>245</sup>

Before long, more mainstream conservative news outlets, such as the *Drudge Report*, began to question the state of her health, discussing Clinton's former blood clot, as well as instances in the past when she had fallen.<sup>246</sup> Sean Hannity devoted multiple nights of coverage to these issues on his Fox News show, in which he brought on various medical experts to speculate on the state of her health.<sup>247</sup> Most of these sources did not fully endorse the conspiracy theories, but they profited off them all

the same, reframing facts and posing open-ended questions in ways that seeded doubts among readers and viewers.



Figure 4: Hillary's Health Photo Collage

By the beginning of September, the concerns about her health had moved beyond conspiracy theorizing into more general paranoia and skepticism. The hashtag #HackingHillary spread through Twitter, amplified by influential accounts and personalities like Mike Cernovich; users mocked her past coughing fits by making photo collages and video clips (Figure 4).<sup>248</sup> The health rumors were so widespread that Clinton addressed them herself in a humorous segment on Jimmy Kimmel Live, in which she opened a jar of pickles to prove her strength.<sup>249</sup>

In September, Hillary Clinton abruptly left a 9/11 memorial event, and her campaign provided the vague explanation that she was overheated.<sup>250</sup> Many social media users did not trust this official statement and instead speculated on other explanations.<sup>251</sup> When Clinton's doctor later disclosed that she was recovering from pneumonia, many felt this justified their distrust, and conspiracy theorists felt it was proof of a larger cover-up about her health.<sup>252</sup> Despite a doctor's report that showcased her overall good health standing and her recovery from the illness,

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doubt had seeped extensively into mainstream coverage. In the following days, outlets such as NBC News published stories listing “unanswered questions” about Clinton’s health and asking why she would hide the diagnosis if not suffering from other illnesses.<sup>253</sup>

This case demonstrates how, through online networks, amplification, and strategic framing, various actors moved conspiracy theories into the mainstream news discourse during the election. In this case, networked individuals spread Clinton’s health conspiracy theories within their communities, thus illustrating the narrative’s resonance. Influential conspiracy theorists and far-right media outlets then endorsed the theories, which spread the message to a wider audience and to more mainstream conservative outlets. By framing the theories as questions worth exploring, these outlets were able to pursue their own ideological agenda without fully endorsing the claims. This led to more generalized paranoia and rumors spreading across social media. The combined effect was a mainstream narrative about Clinton’s health that was easily reinforced when an isolated event took place that neatly fit into it.



## PIZZAGATE

During the election, conspiracy theories spread throughout 4chan and extremist circles of Twitter and Facebook, claiming that Hillary Clinton was deeply involved in a child sex ring and satanic rituals. These claims were then taken up by a series of sites designed to look like mainstream news outlets, which published sensationalist false content to gain advertising revenue.<sup>254</sup> Throughout late October and early November, more and more such sites published versions of the same story on Facebook, and their links gained hundreds of thousands of shares, reactions, and comments. (The conspiracy theory was also spread by amplification from Trump's team when his pick for National Security Advisor tweeted about it.)<sup>255</sup>

Soon after, WikiLeaks published hacked emails from Hillary Clinton's campaign, and 4chan users communally combed through emails from her campaign chair John Podesta. They honed in on an email conversation in which Podesta and the owner of a Washington, DC pizza restaurant called Comet Ping Pong, discussed the details of a Clinton fundraiser set to take place there. Now thoroughly "convinced" of the conspiracy theory about Clinton, 4chan users identified a series of "clues" that they believed pointed to the fact that Comet Ping Pong was the headquarters of the purported child sex ring.<sup>256</sup> The theory became known as Pizzagate.

The restaurant owner and his employees soon became the victims of continual harassment, receiving death threats and other threats of violence.<sup>257</sup> On December 4, a man entered Comet Ping Pong carrying an assault rifle, claiming to be there to investigate the claims himself (he fired shots, but no one was harmed).<sup>258</sup> The man was not himself an active member of the alt-right; he has even claimed he is not political and did not vote for Donald Trump.<sup>259</sup> He did, however, state that he read a number of articles on the subject and listened to Alex Jones, who actively promoted the theory.

As in previous cases, mainstream outlets considered the gunman incident newsworthy, and in covering it, they increased exposure to the conspiracy theories. Additionally, even though the gunman did not find any evidence to support his beliefs, the incident has not placated many of the conspiracy theorists. As recently as March 25, 2017, protestors gathered outside the White House to demand further investigation.<sup>260</sup> Many expressed frustration that the mainstream news was not taking their concerns seriously and covered the story only dismissively; they felt that, even if the claims were not true, they merited a more robust investigation.

Pizzagate illustrates a particularly wide range of related phenomena: a conspiracy theory developed and grew within online networked communities; misinformation and "fake news" spread virally through social media; believers undertook collaborative efforts that ultimately reinforced their previous views; an individual was

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quickly moved to action through exposure to false information; and coverage from the mainstream media simultaneously amplified the theory and left its believers feeling disenfranchised. Perhaps most importantly, the incident also demonstrates the real-world harassment and violence that can emerge as a direct result of media manipulation and misinformation online.

# APPENDIX: CAST OF CHARACTERS

*Alt-Light* Media outlets that espouse some far-right talking points while strategically excluding more extreme beliefs such as scientific racism or anti-Semitism. Example: *Breitbart News*.

*Alt-Right* Term coined by Richard Spencer to describe a version of white nationalism that positions itself as comprised of younger, wealthier, and better-educated individuals than traditional white supremacist groups like the Klu Klux Klan. Deeply entwined with social media and staples of internet culture, like memes. Believes that “political correctness” threatens individual liberty. Example: Jared Taylor of the *American Renaissance*, Mike Cernovich of *Danger and Play*.

*Anons* Users of 4chan or 8chan, since all users are anonymous.

*Anonymous* Hactivist movement that originated on 4chan, known for campaigns against Scientology and the Klu Klux Klan, in support of Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, among others.

*Anti-Immigration Activists* Believe that the US’s current immigration policy is unsustainable and threatens the existence of the US as a nation-state. Often anti-Islamic and/or ethnonationalist. Example: VDARE.

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<i>Breitbart</i>	Anti-establishment right-wing publication funded primarily by hedge fund magnate and Trump supporter Robert Mercer.
<i>Conspiracy Theorists</i>	Groups of people who believe in large-scale schemes or organizations that control politics, access to information, and privilege. Example: radio host Alex Jones, <i>Infowars</i> .
<i>Hyper-Partisan Right Wing Press</i>	Sites like <i>the Daily Caller</i> , <i>the Gateway Pundit</i> , <i>the Washington Examiner</i> , <i>Infowars</i> , <i>Conservative Treehouse</i> , and <i>Truthfeed</i> , primarily funded since 2008.
<i>Libertarians</i>	Adherents of a political and social philosophy that posits unrestricted, free-market capitalism as a solution to most social problems. Believes that government is a threat to personal freedom. Example: Ron Paul, the Freedom Caucus, the Tea Party.
<i>Men's Rights Activists</i>	Groups and individuals who believe that certain institutions and social customs discriminate against men. Often hostile to feminism and the idea of male privilege. Existed before social media, but more prominent and active due to social media. Example: <i>A Voice for Men</i> blog, TheRedPill subreddit.
<i>National Socialists (Neo-Nazis)</i>	A subset of white supremacists who advocate fascism as a political solution, adhere to strong anti-Semitic beliefs, and promote scientific racism (or “race realism”), the idea that the races are biologically different. Example: Andrew Anglin of <i>The Daily Stormer</i> , <i>The Right Stuff</i> blog, <i>Fash the Nation</i> podcast.
<i>Neoreactionaries (Dark Enlightenment)</i>	Niche group of bloggers who believe that liberal democracy is incompatible with freedom and advocate a return to monarchic feudalism. Example: Mencius Moldbug.

## APPENDIX

### *Pick-up Artists / the Seduction Community*

Heterosexual male online community that shares experiences and pseudo-scientific techniques that they believe can increase romantic and sexual success with women. Argue that women prefer “alpha” males and that tactics like “negging” (backhanded compliments) are effective. Example: Roosh V and his *Return of Kings* website.

### */pol/ acks*

People who post on the 4chan or 8chan/pol/ image-board, which is used to discuss “politically incorrect” ideas.

### *Techno-Libertarians*

Popular Silicon Valley philosophy that applies a hacker ethos of free and open information to politics. Example: Peter Thiel, Bitcoin user communities.

### *The\_Donald*

Large and active Reddit community devoted to Donald Trump. Members call themselves “Centipedes.”

### *Trolls*

Contested term, but generally refers to people who maliciously attempt to provoke reactions in others online for their own amusement.

### *White nationalists*

Believe in a white race, and that white people should act to preserve white culture and establish white states. Often believe that immigration and multiculturalism threaten white culture and traditionally-white states. Also known as *ethnonationalism*.

### *White supremacists*

A subset of white nationalists who believe white people are superior to other races.

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