Bridging White Supremacist Discourse:
An ethnography of the online world of the 'Alt-Right'

By

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Abstract

This thesis examines the social world of white supremacy using online ethnography of an Alt-Right forum on 4chan. For four months, I conducted fieldwork on 4chan's "politically incorrect" (/pol/) message board three to four days a week, observing the interaction of users in real time, compiling ethnographic fieldnotes, and archiving relevant documents and forum threads. This data was systematically analysed and provides the foundation for the case studies at the centre of this thesis: (1) users use of the metaphor of "red pills" to describe their entry to the Alt-Right and adoption of core tenants of movement ideology; (2) the way they translated this ideology for a wider (offline) audience through a campaign to poster the phrase, "It's Okay to be White" around local neighbourhoods; and (3) the way they constructed collective meaning out of an act of racist violence from a self-identified insider to the community, Stephan Balliet, who killed two people near a synagogue in Halle, Germany, during the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur. This ethnographic examination of 4chan not only provides a ground-up view of what is generally regarded as among the darkest corners of the internet, based on the everyday interactions of participants in the community, but contributes to wider academic debates about the contemporary landscape of racial inequality and online white supremacy.

I attest that the work in this thesis is all my own, except where otherwise stated and cited.

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Introduction: Blending Old and New Racisms in the Alt-Right

Since the mid-2010's, significant academic and public attention has been directed towards the rise of the Alt-Right, a "relatively new and amorphous group whose proponents include open and proud white supremacists and white nationalists, far-right political pundits and anonymous online trolls" (Hartzell, 2018, p. 7). The Alt-Right exists predominantly on social media, frequenting online platforms such as Twitter, Reddit, 4chan and 8kun[1] (Winter, 2019). The movement itself is leaderless, but its membership is largely made up young, anti-feminist, pro-white men (Green, 2019; Hartzell, 2018; Winter, 2019). Part of the Alt-Right's appeal to younger disaffected men is its presentation as an edgy alternative to both the political correctness of mainstream discourse *and* more traditional forms of overt racism and white nationalism (Daniels, 2018; Hartzell, 2018; Winter, 2019). From this position, members of the Alt-Right develop a distinct brand of white supremacy through seemingly youthful internet activities, like the creation of memes and dissemination of hateful jokes directed at non-white minorities and racialised 'Others' (Daniels, 2018; Green, 2019; Hartzell, 2018; Winter, 2019).

The presentation of white supremist ideology as a kind of politically incorrect humour obscures the Alt-Right's overt racism, creating a surface appearance of a group of youthful pranksters incapable of having any tangible effect on the offline world. Yet, despite these claims, members of the Alt-Right are frequently associated with some of the most violent, extreme acts of far-right terrorism, hate-crimes, and overt displays of white supremacy. The 2017 'Unite the Right' rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, which was attended by hundreds of proud white supremacists and members associated with far-right extremists, was an event organised by Alt-Righters (Hartzell, 2018; Hawley, 2019; Winter, 2019); the users in Alt-Right spaces such as 4chan and 8kun frequently

[1] Formally known as 8chan, 8kun was rebranded after being temporarily suspended after the white supremacist shooting targeting Hispanic individuals in a Walmart store in El Paso, Texas.

coordinate harassment campaigns against 'antis' (Green, 2019); and several terrorist attacks in 2019 alone – including the Christchurch Mosque Shootings in New Zealand (Wendling, 2019) and the Poway Synagogue Shooting in California (Beauchamp, 2019) – were planned and executed by Alt-Righters.

This thesis examines online white supremacy through in-depth ethnographic fieldwork on an Alt-Right forum on 4chan. While generally regarded as one of the darkest corners of the internet, a site where xenophobes, social conservatives, white nationalists, transphobic people, antisemites, and Islamophobic people congregate (Hine et al., 2017), 4chan as a whole is not predominantly a racist website (Hawley, 2019). Established by a 15-year-old, Christopher Poole, in 2003, the imageboard was initially set up for discussion of Japanese anime, although its anonymous nature and lax moderation of its already-limited rules meant it was quickly favoured by online trolls with generally unsavoury views (Hawley, 2019; Winter, 2019). The 'Politically Incorrect' (/pol/) was introduced in 2011 as a 'quarantine' for distasteful views that, by 2011, had started to dominate many of the boards on 4chan (Hawley, 2019). As one of the primary sites online where members of the Alt-Right gather to talk about politics and current events, it provides an ideal site for examining contemporary developments in online white supremacy.

For four months, I conducted fieldwork on 4chan's politically incorrect message board three to four days a week, observing the interaction of users, compiling ethnographic fieldnotes, and archiving relevant documents and forum threads. While it is technically possible to study /pol/ using methods of content analysis such as a keyword search of the archive, or a quantitative analysis using web-crawling technology (Hine et al., 2017), such approaches belie a fundamental reality of online culture at 4chan. That is, the lived-in experience of these spaces is rooted in everyday online interaction: casual browsing, observation, gradually familiarising oneself with the language and culture of a community. Methodologically, I therefore decided it was most appropriate to study

this space – and the emergent meanings being produced there - by immersing myself in the community day-in-and-day-out and observing interaction in real time.

My research is situated within an expansive body of literature related to online supremacy and the relationship between mainstream and extremist discourses on race (Bliuc, Faulkner, Jakubowicz, & McGarty, 2018; Brown, 2009; Daniels, 2009; Hartzell, 2018; Meddaugh & Kay, 2009; Perry, 2000; Statzel, 2008; Vysotsky & McCarthy, 2017; Winter, 2019). In the context of 'New' and 'Colour-blind' racism – where expressing overt racist views is a considered a socially undesirable act – white supremacists seek to use 'free spaces' on the internet, where they can express their extremist views without the associated stigma (Adams & Roscigno, 2005; Bjork-James, 2015; Dentice & Williams, 2010; Simi & Futrell, 2006). Additionally, to secure the longevity of the movement, white supremacists sought to sanitise the movement's public image. To do this, they largely drew on discourses on race that had flourished in the mainstream political landscape. Thus, estranged from socially desirable discourse, white supremacists increasingly made use of the frames of 'new racism' – that is, expressing racialised views without explicitly referring to race or skin colour – to shape the purpose and function of the movement (Brown, 2009; Dentice, 2018; Flores-Yeffal et al., 2011; Hartzell, 2018; Perry, 2000). For example, the users of Stormfront, an online white nationalist discussion forum, are not permitted to use racial epithets (Bjork-James, 2015; Daniels, 2009; Statzel, 2008; Vysotsky & McCarthy, 2017). In addition, prominent white supremacists, such as David Duke (former Grand High Wizard of the Klu Klux Klan), have repeatedly sought to align their views with what Bonilla-Silva (2017, p. 54) calls 'abstract liberalism', or an attempt to align racist sentiment with seemingly 'liberal' or 'left-leaning' rhetoric.

In a surprising and perplexing turn of events, then, white supremacists – fuelled by an inherently racist identity – are, like many well-intentioned people, claiming to be 'non-racist' (Bjork-James, 2015; Statzel, 2008; Vysotsky & McCarthy, 2017). The use of this sentiment affords members of such racist movements security from stigma, whilst simultaneously facilitating recruitment of those

who might otherwise be discouraged from joining a racist organisation (Dentice, 2018; Dentice & Williams, 2010). In addition to facilitating recruitment, the strategy also affords the movement an opportunity to position itself as no different to the political mainstream. In this context, scholars have observed white supremacists and white nationalists alike framing their violence as 'freedom fighting' (Meddaugh & Kay, 2009, p. 264), calling for the revitalisation of the environment and other green projects (Mix, 2009), and generally locating pride in whiteness as consistent with a celebration of multiculturalism (Berbrier, 1998; Hague, Giordano, & Sebesta, 2005). These trends are especially visible among the Alt-Right as members go a step further and insist they are fundamentally different from more serious white supremacists. Their use of humour and the sanitisation of white supremacist sentiment affords members of the Alt-Right an opportunity to establish what Stephanie Hartzell (2018) calls a discursive 'bridge' between mainstream discourse and overt racism. The result of this matrimony is perplexing, with Alt-Righters frequently sharing content which merges the inclusive language of diversity and multiculturalism with other sentiment that echoes the most vicious racism of a previous era (Hartzell, 2018).

To date, research on this phenomenon has focused primarily on infiltration, or how members of the Alt-Right attempt to impose their ideology on the political mainstream (Winter, 2019). While these studies certainly provide valuable insight into the strategies used by white nationalists in online space, comparatively little research has investigated the bidirectional nature of this discursive bridge between mainstream discourse and extremist thought; in other words, we know much about how white nationalists seek to infiltrate the mainstream through the use of popular racist memes, videos and jokes (Daniels, 2018; Hartzell, 2018; Winter, 2019), but comparatively little about how they respond to real-world events around them (Bliuc et al., 2018; Winter, 2019). This thesis aims to fill that gap.

This thesis contributes to the literature on online white supremacy primarily in three ways. First, I develop a portrait of the ideology and values of the Alt-Right through ethnographic analysis of

everyday social interaction on 4chan, opening a window on the meaning-making practices of participants in this online forum. Second, I contribute to the broader work of theorising how members of the Alt-Right seek to impose their ideology on mainstream thought and develop strategies for attracting new members. Third, I go beyond this focus on *infiltration* (Mondon & Winter, 2020) to also examine how forum participants are simultaneously *reactive* and develop collective responses to unfolding events in the world beyond. Each of these strands is developed through a fine-grained ethnographic case study, and together, help map the discursive bridge between mainstream racial discourses and more overt forms of white supremacy being fostered in online spaces like 4chan.

Bridging White Supremist Discourse: Chapter Outline

Studying white supremacy online presented a series of steep ethical and practical challenges. I therefore begin this thesis by describing my approach to the research. In chapter one, I draw on the notion of "methodological moulds" to explain how the choices and assumptions made in the project were shaped by the specific conditions in which it took place. I pay particular attention to how core features of the field site – 4chan – shaped the initial decision to carry out online ethnography at all, and more broadly, reflect on what it means to approach online space ethnographically. I also examine how ethical considerations shaped key methodological decisions throughout the project.

Chapter Two locates the research within the broader literature on online white supremacy, with a particular focus on what Stephanie Hartzell (2018) calls the 'rhetorical bridge' between white nationalism and mainstream public discourse. In this section, I explore the historical origins of the Alt-Right, before explaining its links to earlier white nationalist movements. Following this, I set forth the theoretical grounding of this thesis. In this section, I argue that the emergence of the Alt-Right can be explained by several interlocking factors. Specifically, I point to the emanation of so-called 'new' or 'colour-blind' racism in the wake of Jim Crow segregation as being central to our

understanding of the Alt-Right today. While there is a plethora of existing literature on new racism – that is, the form of racism that traffics in coded rhetoric and sanitised, seemingly 'plausibly deniable' terms to entrench racial otherness – comparatively little research has sought to apply the theoretical explanation of contemporary racism to contemporary pro-white groups, despite an alleged resurgence in white identity politics (Mondon & Winter, 2020), particularly with the rise of Trumpism in the USA and Brexit in the UK (Lumsden & Harmer, 2018). Following Hartzell (2018), I contend that the Alt-Right presents a unique case study in this context, as an amorphous group that both embraces the racism of the 'old' – by relying on overt racial slurs and white racist violence – while simultaneously drawing on many of the techniques of 'new' racism – by attempting to afford itself a semblance of plausible deniability through its members' use of coded rhetoric, satirical humour, meme culture and trolling. This amorphous positionality, I argue, allows the Alt-Right and its dispersed global membership to establish what Hartzell (2018) calls a 'rhetorical bridge' between contemporary 'politically correct' mainstream racial sensibilities and the overtly racist and violent ideologies that one might more readily associate with the radical right.

In Chapters Three to Five, I outline the key findings of this thesis. Each of these analytical chapters draw on a specific case study, drawing out the ethnographic data to illustrate the arguments put forth. As such, the chapters are arranged according to three different types of events or issues which play out at an individual, community, or global level. In each chapter, I seek to explore how each event in the offline world is addressed and reacted to online. In this way, the chapters seek to draw out the linkages between mainstream discourses and white racist violence. This in turn enables an examination of the way these online interactions then affect actions offline, creating a feedback loop between the online/offline world.

In Chapter Three, I explore how people on 4chan describe their entry into the movement through an examination of their "red pill" moments, an idea commonly associated with multiple manosphere communities, which refers loosely to a process of radicalisation. In an Alt-Right

context, red pills are snippets of information that in some way enlighten the individual to their reality: that they are supposedly the victims of an omnipresent force of anti-male and anti-White conspiracies. This case study does not deal with a singular event and/or issue, rather it analyses one thread, with more than 300 posts, where users describe the "first thing or event that caused [them] to begin questioning the leftist status quo". Using Stuart Hall's (1997) notion of the 'spectacle of the "Other"', I argue that descriptions of red pill encounters establish a regime of representation by naturalising difference between themselves and those who they view as their natural 'opponents'[2]: usually Jewish people, non-Whites, and women. Not only do users seek to invert mainstream discourses on race, gender, and multiculturalism by presenting themselves as under attack, they imagine themselves as the last-remaining defenders of the natural order of being.

While Chapter Three reveals the ways in which an initial event and/or issue red pills people into realising the racial and gendered 'truth' of the world, Chapter Four explores the ways in which these 'truths' are actively constructed and maintained. Drawing on the work of Whitney Phillips (2015), in this chapter, I explore one community-organised event: the 'It's Okay to be White' (IOTBW) trolling campaign, where users dress up in Halloween costumes, before posting A4 sheets of paper and stickers with the phrase, 'It's Okay to be White', around their local neighbourhoods. At the core of this ritual is the promotion of white supremacist ideas in mainstream spaces using language that can be defended as little more than a celebration of identity embedded in support for multiculturalism. Not only does this make the messaging more palatable to audiences hostile to overt displays of racism, but creates opportunities to generate what users call "salt": an angered leftist response on social media or sensational news stories in the mainstream media. And because the phrase can be interpreted as relatively innocuous, angry responses can be

[2] A fundamental assumption that undergirds this thesis is that 'race' and 'gender' are social constructions and, as such, they do not have any 'natural' opponents.

woven into the Alt-Right's grand narrative of white male victimisation, further embedding the conceived identity and threatened existence of this community.

Chapter Five draws on /pol/ users' responses to an event of global significance: a terrorist attack on a synagogue in Germany perpetrated by a self-identified member of the Alt-Right, Stephan Balliet, in October 2019. I take as an opening for reflection what might seem at first like a perplexing response to the shooting on /pol/. Where one might expect users of the forum to celebrate a community insider taking their white racist violence to the real-world, Balliet is instead ridiculed as a grossly incompetent idiot, who has embarrassed both himself and the Alt-Right community. This moment in which Balliet is positioned as an outsider violating shared norms is analysed as a window on the values prevailing in this online community. And I argue that /pol/ users' reactions to the Halle Synagogue atrocity are another indication of the discursive reconstruction taking hold of the contemporary far-right landscape as a result of colour-blind racism emerging in mainstream culture.

Overall, this thesis argues that the Alt-Right is a manifestation of both the 'old' and overt forms of racism one might associate with traditional white supremacist organisations, and the 'new' racism that thrives in the mainstream. The case studies show how participants of Alt-Right spaces, such as /pol/, are able to establish such a rhetorical bridge between extremism and the mainstream by drawing on a variety of personal and in-group experiences but also in how they react and respond to events occurring in the world around them. The chapters are organised thematically to trace a pathway of radicalisation that can unfold on the forum, using ethnographic case studies and thick description to unpack how individuals begin to associate with the Alt-Right through 'red pill' experiences (Chapter Three), how these experiences translate into real world rituals and communal action like the 'It's Okay to be White' campaign (Chapter Four), and finally, how these processes can become the foundation of extreme acts of terrorism and racist violence (Chapter Five). Even as members of the Alt-Right set about repackaging white supremacy through online

memes and humour, ultimately, the ideological work being done in places like /pol/ is intimately connected to the most dangerous and violent forms of contemporary racism.

Chapter One: Methodological Moulds in an Online Ethnography of White Supremacy

As this research focuses on the lived-in experiential and interactional nature of an online community, an immersive ethnographic approach, specifically catered for the online environment, was best-suited to this project's aims (Bryman, 2012b; Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, & Cui, 2009; Murthy, 2008). The research methods in this project were guided by a range of factors, however, including practical elements specific to the chosen field site and ethical issues which arise from both the type of research methods used and studies of online extremism more generally.

This chapter begins by outlining the epistemological grounding that informed this research, before explaining the use of online ethnographic methods necessitated by the nature of the field site itself. I explain why research on problematic groups, such as white nationalists, as well as the method of online ethnography, requires a reflexive interrogation of research ethics before specific methods are settled. Taking such an approach requires researchers to reconsider the 'ethics of responsibility', expanding the now well-entrenched principle to include a duty of care not only to participants, but to family members, peers, colleagues, research assistants, and even other people writing about, and researching, the far-right (Rambukkana, 2019). Having discussed how my research methods were informed by ethics, I proceed to provide a detailed outline of the specific online ethnographic methods used.

Epistemology, Ethics and Method: The 'moulds' of qualitative research

This research uses a qualitative research design, grounded in social constructivist epistemologies. Social constructivism sees social reality as a "constantly shifting emerging property of individuals' creation" (Bryman, 2012c, p. 36). As social constructivism is grounded in an understanding that social reality is the result of individuals' subjective meaning-making processes (Creswell, 2014), it rejects the norms of positivistic and 'objectivist' scientific methods, and favours inductive generation of theory (Bryman, 2012c). This view is consistent with ethnographic research methods,

which view social reality as experientially-driven, derived from a series of subjective interactions and meaning-making processes (Fetterman, 2004).

Ethnographic research is an immersive research strategy that aims to develop what Geertz (1977) calls 'thick description' of social life – a detailed written account of a group's everyday behaviours, customs, rituals, and so on (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Fetterman, 2004). Ethnographers adopt a naturalistic approach to research, by studying people in their own environments. They immerse themselves in a cultural setting for a prolonged period, and conduct observations of everyday behaviour, while supplementing their observations with interviews and other research (Fetterman, 2004). Ethnographers attempt to uncover patterns of everyday behaviour (Maharaj, 2016), while placing observations within a wider socio-political and socio-historical context, in attempts to interpret the cultural meaning of certain behaviours (Fetterman, 2004). Online ethnography applies these same principles to online or digital culture, with some adaptions to method (Garcia et al., 2009; Hine, 2000; Hutchinson, 2014; Pink et al., 2016).

While the initial selection of online ethnography was grounded in epistemological considerations, online ethnographic research methods also provide a solution to a research problem confronting scholars interested in chan culture. While relatively 'simple' in design (Hine et al., 2017), /pol/ exhibits a number of unique features which make it a formidable imageboard that is notoriously difficult to study systematically (Hawley, 2019). Specifically, the board's highly anonymous and ephemeral nature, in conjunction with its subcultural elements steeped in memetics, in-jokes, and inaccessible language, in some ways necessitates an immersive research approach. In this sense, the field acted as a methodological mould, which shaped the research methods in this project.

The Field as a Methodological Mould

While generally regarded as one of the darkest corners of the internet (Hine et al., 2017), 4chan as a whole is not predominantly a racist website (Hawley, 2019). Established by 15-year-old, Christopher Poole, in 2003, the imageboard was initially set up for discussion of Japanese anime,

although its anonymous nature and relaxed moderation of its limited rules meant it was quickly favoured by online trolls with generally unsavoury views (Hawley, 2019; Winter, 2019). 4chan is not a unique discussion forum; any user can post (without registration or logging in) to a variety of boards dedicated to different topics, including Japanese anime, videogames, technology, LBGT issues and pornography. At the time of writing, 4chan had 74 boards, broadly separated into seven categories, two of which are classified by 4chan as 'Not Safe for Work' (NSFW): Japanese Culture, Video Games, Interests, Creative, Other, Miscellaneous (NSFW), and Adult (NSFW) (Figure 1).

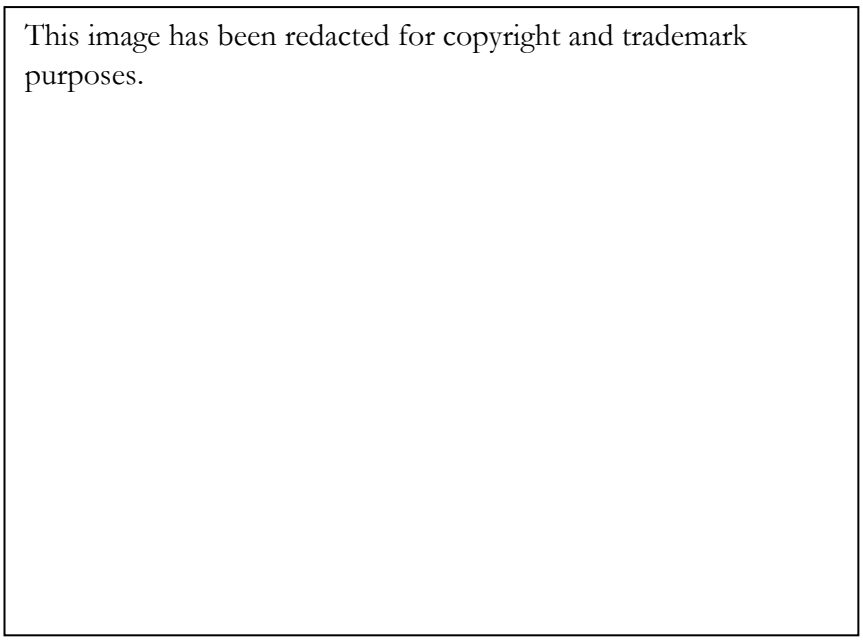


Figure 1: The homepage of 4chan

The 'Politically Incorrect' (/pol/) was introduced in 2011 as a quarantine for distasteful views that, by 2011, had started to dominate many of the boards on 4chan (Hawley, 2019). /pol/ styles itself as a place for its users – Anons[3] – to discuss politics, or views regarded in the mainstream as 'politically incorrect', although its position as an apparent beacon of 'free speech' (See Figure 2) provides a safe haven for the platform's most aggressively bigoted users; while not all posts on /pol/ can be categorised as adherents to far-right or even Neo-Nazi ideology, its pages are filled

[3] Users derive the name from the collectively anonymous nature of the forum. Users choosing to post anonymously – 4chan's default setting – appear under the username, 'Anon'.

with swastikas, racial slurs, antisemitic/Islamophobic, and misogynistic sentiment at all times (Hawley, 2019).

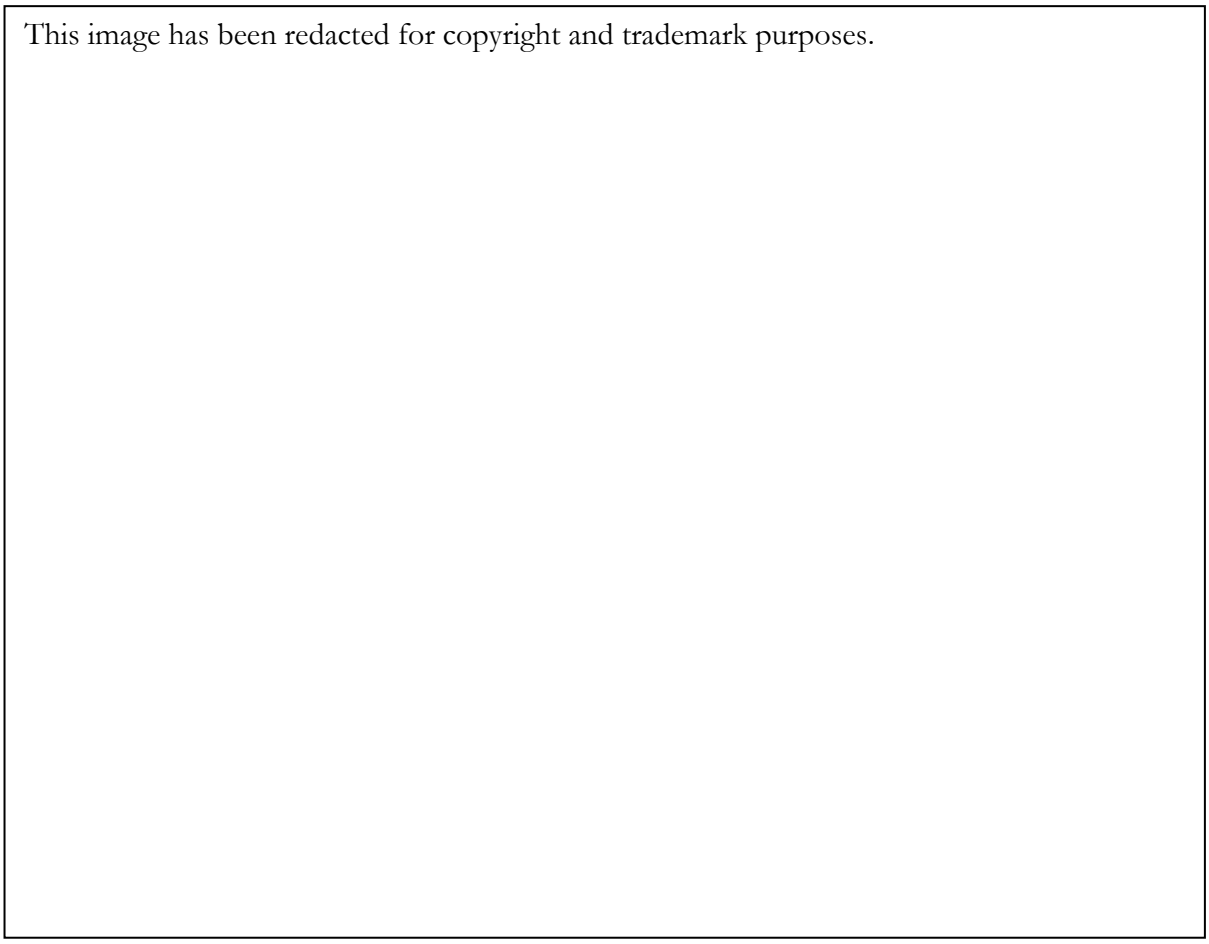


Figure 2: The 'Politically Incorrect' (/pol/) board on 4chan

Anonymity, Ephemerality and Subculture

4chan and /pol/ work in much the same way as any other online discussion forum. Users can post or reply to any board without registering an account, with the proviso that any Original Post (OP) includes an image, whether that be a screenshot, meme, photograph, GIF, or video file. While it functions in much the same way as a regular internet forum, a few unique characteristics of 4chan make it difficult to study systematically, most notably its highly-anonymous, ephemeral and subcultural nature (Hawley, 2017). Users of 4chan do not require login details or registration to use the board, and while they have the option of using a username, posts are automatically

anonymised, with each poster given the near-ubiquitous username, 'Anonymous'. The username is so common on 4chan that users have derived a collective nickname for each other: 'Anons' (Hawley, 2019; Nagle, 2017; Winter, 2019). When Anons post a thread, they are assigned a user ID (e.g. QpEPuGWT) unique to that thread, which allows users to identify each other. In addition, Anons can identify their geographic location or political ideology by choosing a flag to appear alongside their username. However, using this flag as an indicator of actual location is not reliable since users can choose to identify under any of the available flags, which countries and political affiliation (See Figure 3).[4]

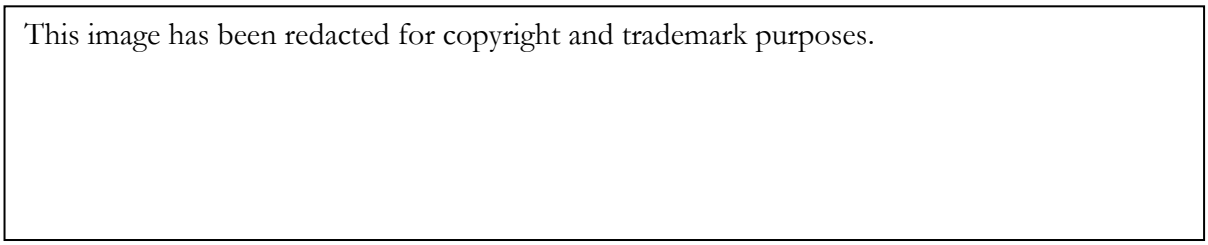


Figure 3: A post on /pol/ indicating the user's username, post ID, and flag

The design of 4chan and /pol/ entrenches the board's ephemerality. There are 200 active threads (including two 'stickied threads' at the top of the board) at any given time, separated into 10 pages. Threads are arranged according to which topic received the most recent reply. As other threads receive replies, a thread is gradually 'bumped' down the list of available threads; should the thread receive another reply, it is bumped back up. Once a thread is bumped to 201st place, it is automatically moved to an archive, where it remains for three days. Archived threads can be read, but they cannot be commented on. After three days, the thread is permanently deleted from the main 4chan websites, although it will be archived on a secondary website, 4plebs.org.[5]

[4] It is common for users of /pol/ to 'LARP' (live-action role play) on the boards for entertainment or ideological purposes. For example, an American user wanting to present a specific country in a negative way might post using the flag of that country, pretending to be a 'local'.
[5] The 'Politically Incorrect' (/pol/) archive can be found here: https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/.

The features fostering impermanence are also evident within individual threads. Each thread contains a maximum of 1000 posts; while users can continue to post to a thread after this point, preceding posts are automatically deleted from the record, and, importantly, *do not* feature in any archived versions. In addition moderators have imposed a 'bump limit' once a thread reaches 300 posts. At this point, replying to the thread, does *not* place the thread at the top of the queue. Instead, the thread continues to get 'bumped down' the list, until it is eventually retired.

These design features create a fast-paced, transitional, and disorienting environment which can seem anarchic when viewing it as an outsider (Hawley, 2019; Nagle, 2017). While no similar study has been performed with /pol/, its busier sister board, 'Random' (/b/), has an average thread lifespan of only 3.9 minutes, and a thread that receives no replies and is posted during the board's busiest hours can be deleted in as little as 28 seconds (Bernstein et al., 2011). Given the fast-paced nature of /pol/ it is no surprise that attempts to study it systematically result in overwhelming datasets. In a study of the site in 2017, for example, a team of computer and social scientists managed by Gabriel Hine, collected all the threads posted over a 2.5 month period and were left with a dataset that contained over 8 million posts (Hine et al. 2017). Even when systematic data-collection methods are successful, the comparatively slow-paced nature of academia means researchers studying chan culture are enmeshed in a near-constant state of playing 'catch up'; by the time research gets published, many of the insights have already become outdated (Hawley, 2019).

The fast-paced nature of 4chan boards is only compounded by communities' subcultural elements. The community's lingua franca is extremely confusing at first, appearing to be English, but upon closer inspection reveals itself as an odd language that combines racial slurs, memes, ironic humour, gaming language, and well-established internet-speak (Hawley, 2019). In addition, those new to /pol/ often find themselves having to navigate the unwritten cultural customs of the board. Anons admonish 'newfags' for failing to demonstrate adequate awareness of the community's rules

(Hawley, 2019; Marwick & Lewis, 2017), while simultaneously retelling folklore-like stories of the Alt-Right's greatest meme campaigns, notable events, and stories about their red-pill moments.

While it is technically possible to study /pol/ using methods of content analysis such as a keyword search of the archive, or a quantitative analysis using web-crawling technology (Hine et al., 2017), such approaches belie the lived-in reality of online culture, where online experience is shaped by everyday online interaction: casual browsing, observation, gradually familiarising oneself with the language and culture of a community. As online ethnography is a research methodology that specifically aims to interrogate subjective everyday experiences of online space, it is consequently the most appropriate research design to use for this project.

Ethics and Methods

The interrelationship between ethics, subject matter, and methods in this study necessitated a constant reflective process which centred research ethics as a primary methodological concern. As such, every stage of this project, from the planning, fieldwork, writing, and eventual writing up of this research, was grounded in complex ethical debates surrounding research on inherently harmful communities and the use of covert online ethnography (Massanari, 2018). Indeed, as much as the research methods chosen in this project were shaped by the nature of /pol/ itself, certain hallmarks of ethnography, such as the use of participant observation and interviews (Bryman, 2012b), are complicated by the general hostility the Alt-Right has towards the academy (Massanari, 2018; Rambukkana, 2019) and the potential for researchers actively engaging in extremist spaces to inadvertently signal ideological agreement (Bjork-James, 2015). As ethical considerations are central to this project, a comprehensive discussion of ethics is warranted here.

Attention, 'legitimacy' and direct interaction

The very act of conducting research on the Alt-Right begets a number of potential ethical issues. For example, given that the Alt-Right playbook is defined by generating as much mainstream

attention as possible (Green, 2019; Marwick & Lewis, 2017), scholars have rightfully asked whether reproducing and quoting the words of the Alt-Right in academic work constitutes a form of symbolic violence (Hawley, 2017; Massanari, 2018). Indeed, describing the most violent, misogynistic, racist, antisemitic and Islamophobic words and actions of Alt-Righters gives its adherents an academic platform – small as it may be – and may serve to fuel a sense of 'legitimacy' within the far-right (Hawley, 2017). Conversely, the alternative option, censoring the words of Alt-Righters, risks whitewashing extreme ideas, thereby undermining the severity and seriousness of its message (Hawley, 2017). As there are no established academic guidelines on studying the Alt-Right, how individual scholars navigate this issue is often left down to individual discretion (Massanari, 2018; Rambukkana, 2019).

Given that adherents to Alt-Right ideology are generally averse to academia, an institution many of its 'members' see as coterminous to the 'liberal elite' they supposedly stand against (Hartzell, 2018), any sense of legitimacy the 'movement' derives from critical scholarship seems marginal, at most. While members of Alt-Right groups have been witnessed strategically aligning the movement with people who would otherwise be 'Outsiders', such as gay Alt-Lite[6] personality, Milo Yiannopolous,[7] and Samoan man, Tusitala "Tiny" Toese (HoSang & Lowndes, 2019),[8] there is little evidence to suggest that adherents to Alt-Right beliefs seek any 'legitimacy' from left-leaning academia. Furthermore, although the Alt-Right is contemporaneously treated as a serious threat, its adherents still veil much of their rhetoric in ironic humour in a bid to forge an identity as 'jovial' white nationalists (Greene, 2019). As such, neutralising the overt bigotry on display in /pol/ may ultimately play directly into the hands of Alt-Right strategy. Uncensored statements will therefore

[6] Associated with the Alt-Right, the Alt-Lite is a loose right-wing political movement which embraces many of the central ideas of the Alt-Right but eschews its overtly racist and violent methods. As such, it is often seen as a 'tamer' Alt-Right which can act as a gateway to more extreme ideas.
[7] Milo Yiannopolous is a far-right political commentator and former editor of Bretbart News, a far-right media company, and his known for his anti-Islamic anti-feminist stance on several social and political issues.
[8] Tusitala "Tiny" Toese is a Samoan-born member of the 'Proud Boys',a far-right neo-fascist organisation. Toese is known for his violence at several far-right demonstrations, most notably in Portland, Oregan.

be presented throughout this thesis, although it is important to acknowledge that some adherents to Alt-Right rhetoric do not endorse overt racism – some even actively disavow it.

Where I was initially open to the idea of using participant observation and interviews – two research methods considered central to ethnographic research methods (Bryman, 2012b; Fetterman, 2004; Garcia et al., 2009; Hutchinson, 2014) – both of these methods involve directly engaging in the online activities of the Alt-Right. As such, the use of participant observation and interviews would run the risk of either inadvertently signalling ideological agreement with interlocutors (Bjork-James, 2015), or 'outing' myself as a researcher, thereby escalating the chances of harassment and abuse. To minimise this, I opted to conduct observation of the daily activity of /pol/ users (Bryman, 2012a) in real time. Although this was ultimately an ethically-based decision, it ironically resulted in me having to reconsider my positionality as a 'lurker'.

With this project, my decision to remain an observer of /pol/ placed this research in controversial ethnographic territory. While there are still limited ethical guidelines on online ethnography (Rambukkana, 2019), the practice of lurking – observing online communities without express knowledge or consent – is generally frowned upon (Garcia et al., 2009; Murthy, 2008). Lurking, these critics rightfully allege, can belie many of the principles of ethical ethnographic research, especially where knowledge co-construction is concerned (Emerson et al., 2011; Walstrom, 2004). Lurking also risks potentially entrenching disproportionate power imbalances between researcher and participant (Garcia et al., 2009), while others allege that it does not constitute a form of 'participant observation' at all, since the method is typically premised on direct participation and interaction with key informants (Bryman, 2012b; Fetterman, 2004; Walstrom, 2004).

While recognising these critiques, research on problematic groups nuances the ethical debates around online 'lurking' (Bjork-James, 2015; Rambukkana, 2019). For every ethical concern lobbied at this research's potential to 'lurk' in online space (Garcia et al., 2009; Murthy, 2008), there is a counteracting parallel concern associated with directly engaging with communities and people

known for violent language and actions against 'Others' and those who stand against the Pro-White Movement (Bjork-James, 2015). Adrienne Massanari (2018) stresses that, while there are power asymmetries with lurking insofar as the researcher ultimately controls the narrative in published academic work, these critiques rarely account for the reversal of power imbalances that can occur online. Hate groups, for example, radically shift researcher-participant power dynamics by mobilising the surveillance potential and (pseudo)anonymity afforded to online space. Researchers revealing their personal identity to participants in the far-right renders them 'visible' to the Alt-Right surveillance panopticon, where they can be not only targeted by a handful of far-right trolls, but hundreds, sometimes thousands of them (Massanari, 2018). The resultant online abuse that can emanate from a large number of anonymous social media accounts exerts a significant amount of power over targets', including researchers', lives, thereby reversing the traditional view that a researcher holds more power in human research (Massanari, 2018). Thus, while cognisant of potential ethical critiques of passive observation or lurking online, I was simultaneously aware of the ethical issues of direct interaction with key informants. As such, I ultimately decided to remain a passive observer of the /pol/.

Informed Consent, Anonymity and Privacy

As Bryman (2012a) argues, it is not safe to assume that just because users post to a publicly accessible online environment, that such interactions are perceived by its authors as automatically public. This is true even for pseudo-anonymous environments, where pseudonyms and nicknames can often be directly tied back to a person's offline persona (Carter, 2005). Quoting directly from publicly-available fora means that individual posts can be quickly identified by conducting a quick internet search (Hutchinson, 2014). Bryman (2012a) and King (1996) argue that the need to gain informed consent from forum users is dependent on whether the community has placed certain barriers to access, such as requiring a log-in or payment to see the forum, and whether anonymity is guaranteed by the design of the website itself. As 4chan is a highly-anonymous space by default,

it is not possible to obtain informed consent from its users; in addition, as threads are impermanent and anonymous, participant anonymity is partially guaranteed by the nature of the space itself. Finally, 4chan does not have any barriers to access in place (no log in or registration is required) and Alt-Right strategy is premised on generating as much attention as possible (Hawley, 2019). That said, I did work to ensure the anonymity and privacy of third parties who might be implicated into discussions on /pol/, without their awareness. To this end, when users posted information about non-famous individuals not affiliated with the movement, such as screenshots from dating app, Tinder, or personal anecdotes which discuss other non-affiliated people by name, these details were anonymised in my dataset and/or deleted if anonymity could not be guaranteed.

The risk and responsibility of such research does not only extend to participants and researcher, but also to additional parties, including family members, peers, colleagues, research assistants and research supervisors who may also be the targets of directed abuse (Rambukkana, 2019). Although my lack of direct interaction with users of /pol/ meant that any risk posed to my personal safety were relatively low, I still took specific steps to guarantee my own cyber-security. I only accessed my field site from my university computer in my office. I ensured that the anti-virus software on my personal computer was up-to-date to avoid potential data/security breaches. While conducting research, I remained active on social media, especially Twitter, but I avoided posting directly about my research, but to protect close family members and peers, my social media accounts that normally displayed personal information, such as my family members, friends and relationship status were locked down. To avoid becoming oversaturated with extremist content, I limited the time spent online (see below). Going into this research, I knew that I would encounter distressing information on a regular basis; to mitigate potential risks to my mental health I designed a comprehensive risk-mitigation strategy, including a plan for witnessing a livestreamed terrorist attack (see Appendix 1), which was approved by Victoria University of Wellington's Human Ethics Committee. In addition, Rambukkana (2019) argues that the ethics of responsibility extends to

which scholars to cite in published work. To accommodate for this, I drew mostly on the work of scholars who have already published work on the Alt-Right or the far-right

Observation and Field Work

I visited the field site – the /pol/ board on 4chan – three to four days a week, between September 2019 and December 2019, with sporadic visits in January 2020. Access to /pol/ was gained by entering the relevant URL address on my computer's internet browser. With each visit, I spent around two hours browsing the image board per day, with a half-hour break taken at the mid-point. Previous research has indicated that spending two hours in an online field is an appropriate length of time to get a sense of relevant discussion topics for the day (Flores-Yeffal, Vidales, & Plemons, 2011). Because /pol/ is visited by users from around the world, it was important to account for the field site's global reach. To account for differences in time-zones, I varied the time of day I conducted fieldwork to maximise exposure to 4chan users from a wider range of countries. All my fieldwork was conducted between 9am and midnight, New Zealand Standard Time. At times, my fieldwork times were mandated by scheduled community events or significant world affairs; on one occasion, for example, I ensured I was online for /pol/'s annual Halloween celebrations, as a post on the forum had informed me that users were preparing to engage in a collective postering/meme campaign (see Chapter Four). Field work was not only limited to scheduled visits, however; when I was not actively working, I kept a very close eye on my personal social media accounts and current affairs and, if breaking news necessitated, I would stop what I was doing to conduct fieldwork.[9]

Where participant observation in 'offline' or 'physical' ethnography generally involves the observation of social interactions between community-members, observation in online space

[9] This happened twice during my fieldwork. The white supremacist terrorist attack on a synagogue in Halle, Germany, in October 2019, caused me to abandon another writing task to conduct fieldwork (see Chapter 6). The London Bridge Knife Attack in November 2019 resulted in me travelling to university on a Saturday morning to collect data.

involves researchers observing online interactions (Garcia et al., 2009). Online behaviour and interactions generally change depending on the nature of the online space itself. In a discussion forum, such as 4chan, users interact with each other by posting discussion threads on topics that seem relevant to the community (Hutchinson, 2014). Such threads can often consist of text-based messages, but online interaction often consists of non-static data, such as GIFs, videos, and audio clips. For the online ethnographer, then, observation of these interactions involves the researcher watching as a series of images and text appear on the screen, documenting any observations that seem relevant, important, or interesting at the time (Bjork-James, 2015).

For this project, observation meant watching the daily behaviour of 4chan's users in real time and archiving relevant threads by saving the entire webpage as an HTML file which can subsequently be accessed using an internet browser. HTML files are a preserved replication of a webpage, saved to a local driver. Because they preserve what a webpage 'looks like' at a given time, saved HTML files can give an accurate portrayal of the field post-fieldwork and aid in the recollection of what happened during fieldwork. In addition to 'looking like' the original observed thread, HTML files retain some of a webpage's functionality, such as the ability to hover over hyperlinks, scroll through the page, and quickly navigate to quoted material.[10] By using saved threads in HTML format, I was able to 'revisit' a replication of the field post-fieldwork. However, saved HTML files do not allow users to review non-static imagery such as GIFs, and videos, nor do they give an accurate impression of the 'pace' of a thread (how many replies were posted every ten seconds, etc.). In order to capture the interactional nature of any non-static communication, I used the screen-recording software, Movavi, to record any observations where non-static imagery was involved (Garcia et al., 2009). This undoubtedly aided with my recollection of key events, but it also allowed me to easily document observations in ways that traditional fieldnotes do not afford.

[10] The alternative method of archiving discussion forum threads by copy/pasting the entire thread into a separate word processing document (Garcia et al., 2009), does not retain some of these more interactional features of a webpage and therefore I decided against this method.

Saved HTML webpages do not retain all functionality of the original page. For example, I could not expand images by clicking on them in the saved version and a user's 'flag', usually the national flag of the country a user was posting from, was not always visible in the replicated version of a page. In addition, if users posted videos to the thread, these cannot be viewed in a saved HTML thread. To accommodate for this, I supplemented my saved threads by using www.archive.4plebs.org/pol/, a website which archives all /pol/ threads while retaining most of the original pages' functionality, including the ability to expand photographs/memes and view video files, if applicable. Neither saved HTML files are compatible with my chosen coding software, NVivo, which meant that I still occasionally had to make use of copy/pasted Microsoft Word documents during analysis.

Fieldnotes

Fieldnotes are an essential tool in ethnographic work, and have a variety of functions (Eriksson, Henttonen, & Meriläinen, 2012; Maharaj 2016). For this research, I used fieldnotes to record observed behaviours and interactions as a means to form part of this project's 'thick description' (Emerson et al., 2011; Geertz, 1977; Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018), and to aid the processes of reflexivity (Maharaj, 2016). However, as online space is inherently different to the physical spaces fieldnotes have traditionally been used in, the process of writing fieldnotes, just like the process of participant observation, needs to be adapted for the online environment (Garcia et al., 2009).

Emerson et al. (2011) argue that fieldnotes are essentially a written account of what a researcher has seen, heard and experienced in the field, and as such, they should be as detailed as possible. Writing fieldnotes generally consists of a researcher recording observations in one of three formats: (1) Mental notes, which consist of quick mental memos consigned to memory for later transcription; (2) Jotted notes, or scratch notes, which are brief notes or phrases to trigger memory later in the fieldnote writing stage; and (3) full field notes, which are detailed observations made as soon as possible and are designed to be used as a primary source of research data (Bryman, 2012b).

No matter which 'type' of fieldnotes ethnographers choose, notes are typically developed into what Geertz (1977) calls 'thick description'; detailed accounts of real-life events, behaviours, and interactions. When done well, qualitative fieldnotes provide rich descriptions of social life, detailing the everyday behaviours, interactions, and activities of social groups in ways that other qualitative methods cannot achieve (Emerson et al., 2011). Because fieldnotes are reasonably flexible in practice, they are a relatively easy research method for novice ethnographers to use. However, they are simultaneously informed by highly-subjective decision-making processes and all researchers engaging with the method need to undergo rigorous reflexive practices (Maharaj, 2016).

Online space can simplify the process of writing fieldnotes. Because 'the field site' is primarily located on the researcher's screen, digital software, such as screen-recorders, can capture entire experiences which can be replayed multiple times after the fieldwork has been completed (Garcia et al., 2009). Additionally, some of the contemporary issues with writing fieldnotes, such as disrupting the daily life of participants (Maharaj, 2016) are alleviated online by the lack of physical proximity between researcher and participant (Hine, 2000). Writing fieldnotes is often a long-winded process (Emerson et al., 2011), sometimes involving revisions and clarifications (Maharaj, 2016). Yet, with online ethnography, some of the more laborious elements of writing fieldnotes, such as taking minutes to accurately relay what a participant has said or done, can be recorded in seconds in online space by using a screen-capture software (Garcia et al., 2009).

As I made observations of the behaviours in /pol/, I recorded key behaviours, statements and interactions, while simultaneously keeping track of my own thoughts, feelings, impressions and insights in a separate Microsoft Word document. My focus during fieldwork was on immersion in the field site itself, which meant I favoured taking down 'jottings' of key words, phrases, and observations which could be committed to a more detailed 'thick description' once my field visit had ended (Emerson et al., 2011). For the most part, jottings consisted of quick screenshots of posts, images, and videos that I found interesting or relevant to the research topic. Where users

posted links to articles or documents that were relevant, these were summarised in my fieldnotes and saved for later analysis (Bryman, 2012b).

In addition to extensively documenting key observations (Bryman, 2012b), fieldnotes are an essential tool in the process of reflexivity because they allow researchers to critically reflect on the selective processes of fieldwork (Eriksson, et al., 2012). Because ethnographers cannot capture all experiences of online space, the process of writing fieldnotes is naturally selective, and because in ethnography, fieldnotes are used as a primary source of data, the selective decisions made in the field invariably shape a study's results and findings (Eriksson et al., 2012). This is particularly salient when considering ethnographic studies of the far-right, where the identity, values and belief systems of a researcher may be diametrically opposed to their participants (Bjork-James, 2015). Because the "social identities of the researchers affect how knowledge about the research subjects is produced" (Eriksson et al., 2012, p. 10), ethnographers must undergo a rigorous process of reflexivity, which involves positioning the researcher in relation to the field and the study's subjects and acknowledging potential biases and influences. This allows readers to assess the knowledge claims presented in an ethnographic study with a researcher's positionality in mind.

My positionality as a critical criminologist means that my views are fundamentally different to that of the group being studied. While this research is underscored by an aim to understand the worldview of contributors to Alt-Right space, it is simultaneously informed by an understanding that the violent ideology of white nationalism needs to be challenged. During fieldwork, the tensions between my positionality and the users of /pol/ were always evident to me. In the first few days of fieldwork, for example, I found myself constantly attempting to challenge the knowledge claims that users of /pol/ presented; should they present a false statistic about 'black-on-white crime' for example, my immediate reaction was to search for contradicting statistical information to counteract this. Upon closer inspection, I realised that this practice was counterproductive to my overall goal of understanding the far-right. Thus, although I continued

to disagree with the knowledge claims of /pol/ users, I created a new section in my fieldnotes, entitled 'Key Learning Points', which forced me to be more attentive to the perspectives and information being presented by the users of /pol/.

Data Analysis

At the end of each field visit, fieldnotes, documents, video recordings, photographs, and archived threads were collected and saved as data. As this project generates an immersive understanding of the world of /pol/ users, I adopted an approach to data analysis that was grounded in the data itself (Emerson et al., 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Coding ethnographic data generally involves two stages (Emerson et al., 2011). Firstly, I read the entire corpus of fieldnotes in its entirety. During this stage, I developed a series of memos and lines of potential analyses, although the focus was primarily on refamiliarizing myself with the fieldwork experience (Emerson et al., 2011). In the first stage of data analysis, I printed out my fieldnote portfolio and handwrote a series of memos, clarifications, and additional insights (Maharaj, 2016). During this stage, I wanted to organise my data into clearly-defined 'categories', arranged according to the 'type' of topic, issue, or event being discussed. This allowed me to organise my data in relation to my first research question: "What types of events and/or issues do users of /pol/ deem relevant and important for their cause?" Having conducted an initial reading of my fieldnotes and organisation of my data, I imported the data into qualitative coding software, NVivo, for the second stage of analysis.

The second stage of analysis was inspired by McNamee, Peterson and Peña's (2010) similar study of online hate groups, which adopted a grounded theoretical approach to coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theorists, like ethnographers, advocate for an immersive research experience which places priority on deriving analytical categories from research data, not from pre-conceived concepts or hypotheses (Charmaz, 2006; Emerson et al., 2011). Grounded approaches involve making constant comparisons across data to allow the researcher to "formulate, modify, and extend theoretical propositions so that they fit the data" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 172). For this

study, I performed an initial round of open coding (Emerson et al., 2011), coding my data line-by-line in NVivo, and categorising units of analysis according to an exhaustive list of symbolic and contextual codes or themes (McNamee et al., 2010). Following this, redundant or similar codes were collapsed and refined and – in a final round of coding – arranged on an axis of broad thematic categories (McNamee et al., 2010). This intensive process of defining, refining and comparing codes, allowed me to select representative case studies for the final thesis that best exemplify broader analytical themes directly relevant to this project's research questions.

Summary

As this chapter has demonstrated, epistemology and research methods are inextricably linked (Bryman, 2012c; Creswell, 2014). Just as this project's methods were informed by my epistemological standpoint, they were simultaneously moulded by the design of the chosen field site and thorny issues pertaining to research ethics emanating from both the study of white nationalism and online ethnographic methods. Through sustained observation of the conversations happening on /pol/, I was provided a window into understanding how this subculture works (Bjork-James, 2015). Through everyday observation in real time, I not only gained insight into the variety of topics, events, and issues up for discussion, but I also developed an appreciation for how wide the scope for 'acceptable conversations' is. There was certainly no shortage of topics and relevant data that participants offered themselves, as others have found (Bjork-James, 2015). On one day, for example, I observed a thread about 'based cookware', where participants discussed which cooking pot is the most 'racially pure' (incidentally, the cast iron skillet is a favourite, which, I would interject, is technically a pan) and, in the very next thread, just fifteen minutes later, I found myself learning how users convince 'normies' that the Holocaust was a 'hoax'.

Crucially, this research was not guided by pre-determined notions of what was 'important'; although I was broadly focused on conversations related to real-world events, issues and topics,

the boundaries of the project were guided by the users of /pol/ and my interaction with the data (Bjork-James, 2015; Carter, 2005; Garcia et al., 2009; Hine, 2000; Pink et al., 2016). While this is an inherently selective process (Maharaj, 2016), it is important to remember that online experiences are inevitably subjective, especially in amorphous environments like /pol/. As such, this project does not stake any claims in objective truth; rather, its purpose is to interrogate the ways in which online community, culture and identity are subjectively forged through interaction and experience.

Following from this discussion of methods, the next chapter presents the theoretical groundwork for the thesis, while chapters three to five present my findings. Specifically, in the next chapter, I discuss what it means to define the Alt-Right as a 'rhetorical bridge' (Hartzell, 2018) in the context of colour-blind or new racism, while Chapters Three to Five, elaborate how this bridge operates on the individual, communal, and global level.

Chapter Two: The Alt-Right, Colour-blind Racism and Rhetorical Bridges

This chapter provides the conceptual and theoretical work needed for the remainder of this thesis. It begins by exploring the origins of the Alt-Right and its relationship to several white supremacist movements. Drawing on an already expansive set of literature on 'colour-blind' and 'new' racism (Alexander, 2012; Bonilla-Silva, 2001, 2017; Matias & Newlove, 2017), coupled with Stephanie Hartzell's (2018) work on bridging white nationalist discourse, I explore how adherents to Alt-Right ideology seek to position themselves at the nexus of mainstream sensibilities on race and gender which seemingly eschews the racial violence of the past, while simultaneously embracing an openly pro-White philosophy. Finally, the chapter considers some of the key techniques proponents of the Alt-Right use to engineer this discursive bridge, principally by using seemingly 'plausibly deniable' humour, memes, and trolling.

Alt-Right

The Alt-Right movement can be traced back to a speech by Dr Paul Gottfried at the first annual H. L. Mencken Club meeting in 2008 (Hartzell, 2018). The Mencken Club was the seemingly intellectualised manifestation of what its founders – Richard Spencer[11] and Gottfried – envisioned as an emergent alternative for "independent-minded intellectuals and academics of the Right" (Hartzell, 2018, p. 17). Gottfried's speech, *The Decline and Rise of the Alternative Right*, made no attempt to specifically define what the 'Alternative Right' would be, but instead imagined a group of "full of young thinkers and activists," (Gottfried, 2008) positioned firmly within what would become known as the white nationalist intelligentsia (Hartzell, 2018). The annual meetings of the Mencken Club were organised to appear like academic conferences, inviting influential far-right speakers to present their views, and organising discussions and networking opportunities for

[11] A well-known white supremacist and early influencer of the Alt-Right.

attendants. Seven professors, two lawyers, and five writers, who drew either extensively on racist pseudoscientific theory, such as Charles Murray,[12] or other far-right publications, such as Taki Theodoracopulos,[13] were invited to attend the inaugural meeting (Hartzell, 2018). Even in its earliest inception, then, the Alt-Right was imagined in two ways. Firstly, members of the Mencken Club positioned the alternative right as a necessarily *youthful* movement – despite a vast majority of its original members being over the age of 60 – and secondly, it aimed to articulate a message that – although framed in racist, discredited pseudoscience – at least appeared academically legitimate (Hartzell, 2018). In addition to this pseudo-intellectualism, to appeal to younger people, the mobilisation of other techniques was vital. Most importantly was the use of the Internet, and with the founding the *Alternative Right* blog in 2010,the Mencken Club's youngest member, Richard Spencer, took the movement 'online' (Hartzell, 2018; Winter, 2019).

Notwithstanding divergent, sometimes contradictory understandings of what, exactly, the 'Alt-Right' is, both insiders and outsiders position it as a technologically sophisticated, group of young proud white nationalists, white supremacists, right-wing political commentators and 'edgy' online trolls (Anglin, 2016; Bokhari & Yiannopoulos, 2016; Gilroy, 2019; Green, 2019; Hawley, 2017, 2019; Wilson, 2018; Winter, 2019). It is, for Green (2019), an umbrella term, describing a coalescence of new manifestations of extreme right communities. Unlike some of its predecessors, the Alt-Right has no formal leadership, nor do its members subscribe to any kind of 'manifesto' or clearly-stated guiding principles (Anglin, 2016; Hawley, 2017).[14] Although adherents of Alt-

[12] Charles Murray is an American political scientist, known for his work with conservative think tanks and controversial work on race, gender and social class. His work frequently touts the notion of 'innate deficiencies' between different racial and gendered groups and, for this reason, he is a go-to pseudoscientific scholar for the far-right.

[13] Taki Theodoracopulos is a Greek journalist and writer known for his controversial views on race and gender. Currently writing for his own webzine, *Taki's Magazine*, Theodoracopulos once claimed that black people had lower IQs than 'non-white' people and has publicly supported the Greek ultranationalist Political Party, Golden Dawn.

[14] This approach fits well with the mobilisation of new strategic innovations on the internet such as the perpetuation of the "leaderless resistance" strategy, where terrorist organisations capitalise on the lack of physical proximity between users to distance the ideological and theoretical positions of a website from the activities and behaviours of its adherents (Berlet & Vysotsky, 2006). As such, members of an extremist group are encouraged to act as 'lone wolves' in their commission of terrorist attacks (Reid & Chen, 2007).

Right ideology have attended offline rallies, much of its recruitment work, radicalisation, identity-work, networking, and so on, occurs on social media platforms (Green, 2019).

Bokhari and Yiannopoulos (2016) identify four types of Alt-Righters: the 'intellectuals' who present themselves as naturally intelligent members of what has become known as the 'intellectual dark web' (Hartzell, 2018); the 'natural conservatives;' "mostly white, mostly male middle-American radicals, who are unapologetically embracing a new identity politics that prioritises the interests of their own demographic" (para. 22); the 'meme team' a collection of seemingly youthful rebels drawn to the Alt-Right precisely because it seems fresh and transgressive (para. 45); and the '1488rs', a group of radical Neo Nazis (para. 61). The goals of each of these factions are various, with some of the seemingly moderate members simply wanting to see an end to mass immigration and 'political correctness' (Hawley, 2019) whereas the more extreme factions wish to establish a white ethnostate (Anglin, 2016; Hawley, 2017). While seemingly separate, as white supremacist and self-identified member of the Alt-Right, Andrew Anglin (2016) argues, the various threads of thought that exist within Alt-Right culture each have an important contribution to its overall identity and cohesiveness. The transgressive 'meme team' for example, are responsible for creating seemingly fun jokes that present serious ideology in an ironic way; the conspiracy theorists are responsible for 'critiquing' mainstream media narratives; the Manosphere is in charge of heading the anti-feminist, homophobic, and Men's Rights factions of the Alt-Right; and the 'old' white nationalists provide a range of essential concepts, resources, literature, and 'research' (Anglin, 2016).

While contributors to the Alt-Right may be motivated by different things, they are united in their belief that straight white men are morally, intellectually and racially superior (Green, 2019). Given the myriad contributors to Alt-Right communities, it is perhaps more productive to envision its ideology – as others have done – according to what it stands against as opposed to what it stands for (Bokhari & Yiannopoulos, 2016). The Alt-Right's unifying themes consist of a broad-based

rejection of what it sees as the erosion of 'Whiteness' in 'Western Civilisation' (Hartzell, 2018). It consequently stands against what its members perceive as the cause of such erosion: traditionally left-leaning, feminised, and 'colour-blind' 'political correctness' (Hartzell, 2018). As proponents of the white genocide conspiracy theory – the belief that 'Western civilisation' is being undermined by feminist and multicultural forces, which combined encourage poor birth rates among whites as a deliberate manoeuvre to kill off this race – members of the Alt-Right argue that increased race mixing, immigration, diversity, and feminism are at the source of the constructed decline in the white man's supremacy (Hartzell, 2018; Wilson, 2018).

The movement supposedly presents an alternative to this liberal left status quo, whilst simultaneously presenting a new approach to white nationalism (Hartzell, 2018). Members of the Alt-Right claim to be 'enlightened' individuals, proponents of the rather intellectual-sounding 'studies' of "race realism" or "human biodiversity" (Hawley, 2019). Yet, as Hartzell (2018) points out, the Alt-Right is a contemporary manifestation of both 'old' forms of racism – complete with a reliance on derogatory slurs, demeaning antisemitic caricatures, exaggerated crime statistics, and so on – and 'new' racism – where its members position themselves as proponents of diversity, multiculturalism and equality. Anglin (2016) argues that the end goal of the Alt-Right is to incubate its own sustainable counter-culture, before eventually altering dominant cultural and political values. While Anglin (2016) is one of the more extreme self-identified Alt-Righters, he argues that the values of the Alt-Right are informed principally by its antisemitism[15]; commitment to establishing a separate white ethnostate either via mass deportation "of all non-White immigrants, *regardless of whether or not they were born here*" (emphasis added). This includes scientific reason, or the rejection of "the pseudo-scientific claims that 'all races are equal'"[16]; opposition to feminism; endorsement of white history; cultural normalization, or the attempt to rid society of a range of

[15] 'Antisemitism' is not one of the commonly-accepted values of the Alt-Right. Some perceived 'insiders' to the movement, reject antisemitism, whereas others welcome it.
[16] Jews, Anglin (2016) notes, are not included in the definition of 'Whiteness'.

'social ills', including pornography, addictive drugs, and crime; common sense economics; and, finally, the recognition that the so-called 'White Struggle' is global in nature. Thus, proponents of Alt-Right thought make use of the familiar tropes of its predecessors, while simultaneously attempting to forge its own extreme pathway, or as Andrew Anglin (2016) puts it, attempting to 'reboot' white nationalism.

The Internet and White Supremacy in the Age of Colour-blindness

While the Alt-Right is a relatively recent community on and offline, its emergence continues a decades-long trend of the far-right making use of internet technology for its own strategic, ideological and community purposes. The remainder of this chapter seeks to explore this trend of white supremacists' movement to online spaces as a by-product of changing public sensibilities on race and racism, most notably the shift towards 'new' or 'colour-blind' racism, particularly in the wake of Jim Crow segregation in the US (Alexander, 2012; Bonilla-Silva, 2001, 2018; Matias & Newlove, 2017). Following Mondon and Winter (2020), I argue that the shift towards more covert expressions of racism had the effect of stigmatising overt expressions of white supremacy, which catalysed a widespread movement of extremists into online space. In addition, as other scholars have noted (see for example Mix, 2009), the public shift towards more 'colour-blind racial sentiment in the mainstream, resulted in white supremacist groups online engaging in what Mondon and Winter (2020, p. 154) call 'discursive reconstruction'. This section concludes by noting how the Alt-Right in its current inception should be conceived as both a continuation of this decades-long trend of aligning extremist views with the colour-blind status quo, while simultaneously openly espousing some of the overtly violent rhetoric of Jim Crow. The chapter reflects on some of the key techniques the Alt-Right uses to do this, such as trolling and the creation of seemingly 'satirical' memes.

Out with the 'Old', in with the 'New': Colour-blind and New Racism

In many ways the Alt-Right is the posterchild of the culturally pervasive logic of 'colour-blind' or 'new' racism: a racial ideology that traffics in coded rhetoric and innuendo about race without directly referencing any of its supposed physical determiners, such as skin colour. As prominent sociologist, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2017), argues, this form of racism became the ideology for a new racial order in the US in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement as the mechanisms for instilling racial otherness changed. For Bonilla-Silva (2017, p. 3), the practices of 'new racism' are "subtle, institutional and apparently nonracial," and draw on a wide variety of tools, semantic moves and techniques vastly different to Jim Crow era methods of enforcing racial inequality. Specifically, he contrasts the overt methods of Jim Crow – which included things like using racial slurs, banning People of Colour from certain establishments, or explaining racial inequality as a product of presumed biological and moral inferiority – with more covert behaviours used today. Instead of using racial slurs, a colour-blind racist "otherizes softly" (Bonilla-Silva, 2017, p. 3), referring to People of Colour by dehumanised pronouns, such as 'these people' or 'they'. Rather than explaining racial inequality as a product of presumed biological factors, new racists refer to a presumed culturally engrained laziness and poor work ethic. And rather than denouncing interracial relationships as outright 'wrong', a person espousing a colour-blind racist point of view might express concern about the extra burden placed on interracial couples, especially if they choose to have children.

Scholars interested in colour-blind or new racism generally trace its origins to the end of Jim Crow segregation and a series of civil rights victories in America during the 1950s and 1960s (Alexander, 2012). These civil rights successes essentially had the effect of ending *de jure* racism – that is legally-codified segregation, and so on – and corresponded more generally with notable shifts in public attitudes towards race and racism. As Bonilla-Silva (2017) points out, since the late 1950s attitudinal research has consistently shown that whites subscribe less to views associated with Jim Crow and are now less likely than they were in the 1940s, for example, to hold stereotypical views of black Americans. Without meaning to disparage the end of *de jure* racism, the end of Jim Crow did not

denote the end of racism itself; rather, with overt expressions of racism now occupying space as a highly-stigmatised behaviour, people who still held such beliefs merely reclined to private space where they could express themselves freely, denied their racism when accused of it, and developed new techniques of race talk (Bonilla-Silva, 2017).

Bonilla-Silva's (2017) seminal and frequently revised interview-based text, *Racism without Racists*, argues that there are four central frames to contemporary colour-blind racism. These are: (1) *abstract liberalism*, or the appropriation of central tenets of political and economic liberalism (such as 'equal opportunity' and 'free choice') to explain issues with race and racism (p. 54); (2) *naturalization*, which includes explaining away racism and racial phenomena by attributing them to 'natural' occurrences (i.e. whites and blacks are still geographically segregated because it is 'natural' for racial groups to gravitate towards likeness) (p. 56); (3) *cultural racism*, explaining racial disparities as the result of culturally-ingrained attitudes and behaviours (p. 56); and (4) the *minimization of racism*, denying the existence or the relevance of racism on determining the everyday life chances of People of Colour and other minority groups (p. 57). Taken together, the use of these central frames and a subscription to the logic that underpins them, is the bedrock of a new perplexing racial order in which structural and institutional racism continues to thrive, while its key benefactors – generally well-meaning whites – can make use of a plethora of arguments, phrases, and stories to both explain away and justify racial inequality.

Discursive Reconstruction

As indicated above, one of the lasting legacies of the post-1960s racial consensus was its role in catalysing a shift away from overt racial sentiment towards expressions of racial otherness that were more sanitised and, even though they still contained racial themes, were littered with statements that orators could plausibly claim to be 'non-racist.' For the most part, this literature on colour-blind and new racism has focused primarily on sentiment that exists in mainstream discourse, from people who would not identify – privately or publicly – as being racist. As Bonilla-

Silva (2017, p. 7) points out, this focus on non-extreme racism is a deliberate exercise, and represents these authors' warranted attempts to distance themselves from what he has called the 'prejudice problematic', or a commonly accepted understanding of racism as being something that is inherent to an individual's attitudes or beliefs, as opposed to something that is structurally and systemically embedded. For Bonilla-Silva (2017) and several other scholars interested in new racism, it is necessary to distance scholarship on racism away from these individualistic readings – a focus on the individual bigots, the white supremacists attending rallies, the neo-Nazis, and so on – and towards a conceptualisation of racism that truly interrogates its structural linkages (see also Alexander, 2012; Brewer and Heitzeg, 2008; Neville, Gallardo, & Sue, 2016).

While not meaning to disparage Bonilla-Silva's (2001) critique of the individual problematic, it is important to note that, just as the shift towards sanitised racism catalysed a series of changes to the discursive landscape of mainstream race talk, it simultaneously triggered a series of developments in the contemporary far right and white supremacist space that is particularly relevant for this thesis and any analysis of the Alt-Right more generally. Writing specifically about the development of a 'post-racial consensus' in Europe with an apparent defeat of fascism in the Second World War and about the advent of similar sentiment in the US in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Mondon and Winter (2020, p. 154) argue that these developments catalysed a 'discursive reconstruction' within several white supremacist and white nationalist groups. This involved white supremacist and white nationalist groups actively distancing themselves from the more illiberal aspects of their racial ideologies – biological determinism and fascist nostalgia for a (mythical) long-lost past, for example (Mondon and Winter, 2020). This was evident in far-right groups rejecting the brazenly racist politics of the extreme right, whilst keeping its more extreme ideological roots subtly intact, albeit hidden. As prominent critical criminologist, Barbara Perry (2000, p. 120) puts it, this was most frequently achieved through adopting several codewords and dog-whistles to communicate racial otherness: 'old' racists now profess their 'love' for the White race, as opposed to their 'hatred of racialised others';

racist conspiracy theories, such as the Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG) theory[17] was recharacterized as 'government interference'; and overt references to race and skin colour were re-coded in terms that suggested welfare dependency or criminality instead. So strict was this newfound conformity to appear 'non-racist' and 'colour-blind' that "nobody – not even the most committed and ideological of white supremacists – wants to admit to being a racist" (Gilroy, 2019, p. 9).

Thus, in addition to altering the discursive landscape of race talk in the political mainstream, the emergence of colour-blind sensibilities also resulted in important changes for how race was discussed in extreme spaces. As I have argued in this section, white supremacist and white nationalist groups also responded to new racism, principally by reconstructing their language and sanitising much of their violent rhetoric so that it appeared 'non-racist' and plausible. In addition, the stigmatisation of overt racist sentiment also catalysed another strategic manoeuvre in the far-right: their movement into anonymous online free spaces.

The Internet and White Supremacy

As alluded to above, part of the embracement of the internet by white supremacists emanated from shifting societal attitudes and norms. As discourses pertaining to race and racism became increasingly colour blind (Alexander, 2012; Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Pérez, 2017), the overt espousal of racist attitudes became stigmatised. As such, white supremacist groups changed in one of two ways. Firstly, they either attempted to align their explicit racism with the new status-quo by repackaging white supremacy as white nationalism (Hawley, 2017), or by presenting themselves as controversial celebrants of an as yet unrecognised form of multiculturalism (Berbrier, 1998; Hague, et al., 2005). Others sought the free space of the internet, where racist views could be openly

[17] A common antisemitic conspiracy theory that holds that the American government is 'occupied' or under the control of conspiratorial Jewish forces.

expressed away from any associated stigma (Dentice, 2018; Dentice & Williams, 2010; Wilson, 2017).

Although in his study on the history of the far-right's use of the internet Winter (2019) argues that white supremacist mobilisation of the Internet was relatively slow, there is ample evidence to suggest that they were among the first to make use of the technology (Levin, 2002). Early examples include a computer bulletin-board in the mid-1980s created by the White Aryan Resistance (WAR) to disseminate white supremacist material (Castle 2012), the creation of USENET newsgroups,[18] rec.music.white-power in the mid-1990s by the National Alliance affiliate Milton Kleim Jr (Winter, 2019), and, of most note, the establishment of *Stormfront.org* in 1995 by former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan in Alabama, Don Black (Bjork-James, 2015; Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Caren, Jowers, & Gaby, 2015; Dentice, 2018; Dentice & Williams, 2010; Levin, 2002; Vysotsky & McCarthy, 2017; Winter, 2019).[19] Prior to the emergence of the so-called Alt-Right, *Stormfront* was at the nexus of the contemporary online white supremacy scene (Berlet & Vysotsky, 2006; Reid & Chen, 2007).[20]

The internet was embraced by the far right for a number of reasons. The freedom and annonymity provided online affords ample opportunity to disseminate propaganda materials previously available in physical form such as pamphlets, brochures and stickers (Adams and Roscigno, 2005). The lack of regulation on the internet hastens the speed of dissemination, while simultaneously ensuring that white supremacist propaganda does not need to be filtered through mainstream media outlets, enabling the spreading of pseudo-scientific and pseudo-academic thought (Adams

[18] In a guide on how to effectively mobilise the new technology, Kleim reportedly stated: "USENET offers enormous opportunity for the Aryan Resistance to disseminate our message to the unaware and the ignorant. It is the only relatively uncensored (so far) free-forum mass medium which we have available" (cited in Winter, 2019, p. 44).

[19] To date, *Stormfront* is the oldest surviving online White Nationalist participatory forum and, despite attempts to cast itself as a non-violent, non-racist website (Vysotsky & McCarthy, 2017), it has been previously labelled the "murder capital of the internet" (Beirich, 2014).

[20] Its membership included Anders Breivik, the terrorist responsible for the bombing of a government building in Oslo – killing eight – before dressing up as a police officer, boarding a Ferry to Utoya Island and staging a shooting spree at a Workers Youth League summer camp, killing 69 (Beirich, 2014).

& Roscigno, 2005; Berlet & Vysotsky, 2006; Bjork-James, 2015; Bostdorff, 2004; Perry & Scrivens, 2016; Simi & Futrell, 2006). As well as this, white nationalist web-users can make use of alternative modes of communication, such as radio shows, YouTube channels, and online magazines. Meanwhile, the transnational nature of the Web means members of white supremacist groups can reach a wide audience and mobilise a large number of potential sympathisers (Bostdorff, 2004; Brown, 2009). The networked nature of such information is important. For example, racist internet communities provide its users with information about upcoming offline events that might otherwise be unknown (Perry & Scrivens, 2016; Simi & Futrell, 2006). The nature of internet interaction also means that being actively involved in one extremist community provides access to a range of other white supremacist sites (Reid and Chen 2007).[21] As such, the internet is used for networking individuals, while simultaneously networking related ideas (Bostdorff, 2004).

The internet thus offers an opportunity to create and spread information and propaganda, connect to others with similar views, and attract new supporters from all over the globe to an extent never previously possible. In addition to providing a space for access and promotion, the internet enables what Klein (2012) calls 'information laundering': the process of washing stigmatised sentiment 'clean' to present its message in sanitised, technologically sophisticated forms, to the mainstream.

Information Laundering

The essence of the Internet itself affords white nationalist movements an opportunity to present themselves as technologically and academically legitimate. As Wilson (2018) points out, even those with the smallest degree of technical savvy can present ideas in a seemingly sophisticated way,

[21] In an analysis of 23 separate Ku Klux Klan websites, for example, Bostdorff (2004) observed how members cross-fertilise ideas by linking to other white supremacist pages and groups, while in a quantitative network analysis of white supremacist websites, Reid and Chen (2007) found that white supremacist groups typically do not operate in isolation, but are organised in "networked web clusters… acting as nodes that link to different clusters". This transnational networking is demonstrated in a study by Caini (2009), which illustrated how Italian far-right websites present themselves as internationally relevant by offering content in other languages, such as English, and by having dedicated sections to the discussion of relevant global news and movements.

thereby negating their extreme ancestry, affording its users an opportunity to secure "pseudo-credibility" (Barkun 2017, p. 438).

In its initial inception, the internet was heralded in utopian terms, with some positioning it as one that would democratise information (Daniels, 2009, 2012). Radical differences in the process of publication, however, resulted in significant changes to how such information was filtered. Pre-internet sources of information – such as newspapers, magazines, periodicals, radio, television, and books – were pushed through rigorous editorial processes, which ultimately filtered out stigmatised, unsuitable, inaccurate, or extremist content. The Internet, by contrast, does not have any formal gatekeepers, and, as Barkun (2017) argues, this environment of free information – a principle one might associate with liberal democracy – is ironically anarchic in nature. With no formal editorial practices in place, the boundary between the fringe and the mainstream has unravelled. By virtue of its size and influence, users of the Internet can ascribe 'pseudo-credibility' to their information in one of three ways: (1) through multiple postings of the same information, (2) polished and professional presentation, and (3) hopping from less respectable sources to sources which have a greater stake in mainstream 'credibility' (Barkun, 2017). With the rise in access and use of the internet (by 2019, approximately 58% of the world's population had access to the internet (Internet World Stats, 2019), this creates a sphere where information is easily produced and manipulated.

The sheer quantity of data projected onto information superhighways (otherwise called media ecosystems) (Bliuc, Faulkner, Jakubowicz, & McGarty, 2018; Daniels, 2018; Klein, 2012; Winter, 2019) – consisting of news sites, virtual encyclopaedias, electronic books, databases, libraries, blogs, video-sharing platforms, social media, discussion forums, and so on – provide a rich opportunity for white supremacists to forward an agenda of 'mainstreaming' hateful rhetoric (Barkun, 2017; Klein, 2012). To do this, white supremacists capitalise on the perceived legitimacy of both the academy and the Internet, by 'laundering' information (Klein 2012). By presenting

themselves as groups which wield a significant amount of both academic and techno-ethos, white supremacists manage to effectively wash their intolerance 'clean' through the exploitation and use of Internet-specific processes (Klein, 2012).[22] Noting that the pathways to false knowledge and propaganda are identical to those which direct an Internet user to legitimate sources, Klein (2012) and Borrowman (1999) argue that the key to white supremacist success in online space rests in their ability to integrate their hateful messaging within the seemingly credible structures of the information superhighway. Thus, groups seeking to launder information typically try to manipulate search engine algorithms, infiltrate mainstream news and research websites, post actively on mainstream social networks, and actively participate in their own seemingly legitimate blogs (Klein, 2012). Consistent with Borrowman's (1999, p. 45) concept of 'techno-ethos' – "the credibility or authority that is constructed in the programming proficiency demonstrated on a flashy Web site" – the 'flashier' such content looks, the more effective it is at laundering information, since popular conceptions of white supremacy still stereotypically associate its adherents with the "gap-toothed rednecks" of the American South (Daniels, 2009, p. 3).

The Alt-Right's use of the Internet, then, is not new; however, the Alt-Right's rhetorical style is notably different to its predecessors. Where previous online white supremacist groups presented themselves as serious (Vysotsky & McCarthy, 2017), participants in Alt-Right spaces attempt to position themselves as a youthful collection of pranksters (Hartzell, 2018). By using ironic humour, satire, trolling, and memes, its members position themselves as a harmless group of transgressive comics, unlike white supremacists (Greene, 2019). This reliance on humour not only aids the movement's recruitment strategy (by repacking extremism as fun), it simultaneously masks its racist messaging, enabling it to filter into the mainstream.

[22] Klein (2012) borrows extensively from Borrowman's (1999) concepts of *academic* and *techno-ethos*. Writing about hate speech and Holocaust denial on the Internet, Borrowman (1999) argues that hate groups present themselves as agents with academic ethos, "the credibility that comes from being recognized as an expert in a given field of knowledge" (p. 45) and techno-ethos, "

Bridging White Nationalist Discourse and Mainstreaming White Supremacist Hate

Given its rootedness in this coalescence of these socio-political and historical forces – the emergence of colour-blind sentiment in the mainstream, coupled with the rise of the internet and the perceived legitimacy ascribed to information presented online – it is perhaps unsurprising that a movement like the Alt-Right would eventually come to fruition. The Alt-Right is, after all, a white supremacist movement that exists primarily in online space that attempts to present much of its overtly racist ideology in seemingly more palatable and intellectualised ways. Indeed, the rise of the Alt-Right, according to prominent sociologist, Jessie Daniels (2018, p. 62), is a continuation of "a centuries-old dimension of racism in the U.S." – white supremacists' prowess with new technologies, and its ability to adapt accordingly to changing circumstances.

Yet, just as the rise of the Alt-Right is entirely precedented, perhaps even expected, there are elements of the movement that make it a unique addition to contemporary online white nationalism. Stephanie Hartzell's (2018) conceptualisation of the Alt-Right as a 'rhetorical bridge' between mainstream sentiment and extremist thought is useful here. As Hartzell (2018) points out, even a casual visit to an Alt-Right space – whether it be online or offline – will reveal a series of internal ideological inconsistencies. On the one hand, it appears as if the Alt-Right seeks a return to the 'old' forms of racial discourse; users of its online spaces frequently post vulgar imagery promoting racial violence and instilling the idea that white people are naturally superior to all those racialised as 'non-white' (Hawley, 2017). This is, after all, a movement largely responsible for the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, where several attendants were videoed one evening roaming the streets chanting, "Jews will not replace us" (Hartzell, 2018); that same weekend an anti-racist counter-protester, Heather Heyer, was killed when she was run over by white supremacist, Alex Fields Jr. (Hawley, 2019). On the other hand, however, the Alt-Right is a movement that, like its predecessors, goes to great lengths to prove that it is 'non-racist'. As HoSang and Lowndes (2019) point out in their analysis of the Proud Boys, Alt-Righters frequently engage in 'racial borrowing', where symbols usually associated with leftist liberation struggles, such

as the Swahili word for freedom, *Uhuru*, are routinely appropriated for white supremacist causes. Likewise, the Proud Boys frequently tout their non-white membership as evidence that they are not racist, just supposedly concerned about the future of 'the West' (HoSang and Lowndes, 2019, p. 123).

For Hartzell (2018), this somewhat perplexing phenomenon can be explained by conceptualising the Alt-Right as a rhetorical bridge between mainstream colour-blind sentiment and white nationalism. This strategy, also known as mainstreaming (see Mondon & Winter, 2020; Winter, 2019), entails adherents strategically positioning themselves at the nexus of mainstream discourse and extremist ideas. In so doing, Alt-Righters can simultaneously claim to be opponents of mainstream political correctness, while simultaneously appropriating many of its key principles, such as multiculturalism and diversity. The overarching objective of this strategy is to shift the Overton Window of politically acceptable discourse towards more pro-white ideas and white identity politics (Greene, 2019; Kelly, 2017; Lyons, 2017). In this way, people who may not yet identify with explicitly pro-white ideologies may find themselves sympathising with the Alt-Right's plausible deniability (Hartzell, 2018). As Hartzell (2018, p. 24) continues, the best-of-both-worlds approach that the Alt-Right has adopted means that the movement can selectively sway between 'reasonable racism' (Meddaugh & Kay, 2009, p. 254) and overt white supremacy, when convenient:

> In moments when the "Alt-Right" itself becomes "too extreme" to be acceptable to mainstream white audiences, it is arguably *white nationalism*—with its arsenal of intellectualism and veil of academic legitimacy—that emerges as a comparatively reasonable alternative. In other words, the construction of the "Alt-Right" as a rhetorical bridge does not just enable white nationalist arguments to maneuver into mainstream public discourse via the language and framing of the "Alt-Right." This rhetorical bridge also enables white nationalism to move away from the "Alt-Right" when doing so is necessary to maintain rhetorical distance from white supremacy [Emphasis in original].

The remainder of this chapter – and indeed this thesis – seeks to explore some of the key ways in which the Alt-Right seek to engineer this discursive bridge. Specifically, it discusses the Alt-Right's use of meme culture and trolling, as well as social media activism, to sanitise movement ideology.

Meme Culture and the Alt-Right

In attempting to mainstream white supremacy, the Alt-Right exploits social media and its communication strategies to present white supremacy – an otherwise serious and inherently violent ideology – as fun, jovial and, in the words of one Alt-Right insider, Curtis Yarvin, "the funniest fucking thing in the world" (cited in Bokhari & Yiannopoulos, 2016). In so doing, the far right "have projected a view of their activities no longer as radical evil, but as daring, transgressive, comic, ironic and futuristic" (Gilroy, 2019, p. 3). According to George Hawley's (2017, p.68) overview of the far-right, the Alt-Right, however is:

> ostentatiously vulgar and offensive, violating every contemporary taboo related to race, ethnicity, religion, and gender…. Some elements of the new Alt-Right proudly flew the swastika and repeated the slogans of the older white-nationalist movement, such as '1488'…. While some voices of the Alt-Right displayed these symbols and slogans earnestly, others, perhaps most, of the Alt-Right presented them in a peculiar way. The new Alt-Right put swastikas in Pepe's eyes because it was hilarious.

The Alt-Right's reliance on humour and seemingly 'edgy' attempts at ironic satire lie at the centre of much of the movement's ideological and strategic work (Gilroy, 2019; Green, 2019; Greene, 2019). Its members capitalise on trolling, or what some scholars call the 'logic of lulz' (Greene, 2019; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Milner, 2013). 'Lulz', an alternative term for 'lol' or 'laughing out loud', refers loosely to a "detached and dissociated amusement at others' distress" (Milner, 2013, p. 66). Trolling generally relies on dark, playful humour, its orators deliberately saying or doing provocative or offensive things (Green, 2019). It often manifests in harassment of targets, playing pranks, disseminating disturbing images and videos, or deliberately voicing controversial viewpoints to elicit an inevitable shocked response. The behaviour, as Whitney Phillips (2015)

notes, is common among teenage boys, particularly those immersed in meme culture (Nagle, 2017; Neiwert, 2017). With trolling, amusement is derived from the joke itself (i.e. the act of showing an unsuspecting person a pornographic, violent, or racist image), or from the outrage it elicits from its subjects (Green, 2019; Hawley, 2017). While Alt-Right trolls may target any outspoken opponent, such as popular celebrities, journalists, and academics (Hawley, 2017), trolling what many of its members see as 'the Jewish mainstream media' has become something of a national sport (Bokhari & Yiannopoulos, 2016).

While the principle purpose of lulz is presented as fun and amusement, the behaviour also has some important strategic functions including community cohesion, creating community boundaries, and engaging in processes of online 'Othering'. This will be explored in depth in chapter four. Part of the success of these strategies lies in the structure of the internet itself, which as Daniels (2012, 2018), and Winter (2019) argue, support racism, white supremacy, and violence by creating a permissive structure which facilitate non-radical movement into extremism.

The Emerging Media Ecosystem of White Supremacy

The global reach of the internet supports the attempts by white supremacists' to establish a translocal or global white identity (Bliuc et al., 2018; Winter, 2019).[23] Daniels' (2012) sociological review of the literature on cyber racism argues that an important agent of institutional racism lies within the industry and design of the internet itself. Specifically, they take aim at the industry's purblind inability to 'see' race. This idea of colour-blindness in technology – both in the industry and in popular understandings of technology – serves as a key mechanism which enables white nationalists to exploit technological innovations (Daniels, 2012). She argues that algorithms are the most exploited technological innovation, as they deliver results for those seeking to confirm a

[23] As Daniels (2012) notes, this problematises the traditional analysis of the state as the primary agent of structure.

racist belief, speed the spread of white supremacist ideology, and move white supremacist talking points into the political mainstream.

Perhaps the most-cited example of this media ecosystem working to propagate white supremacist ideals is with Dylann Roof, the extremist responsible for the shooting at a black church in Charleston, in June 2015 (Winter, 2019). While Roof's entry-point into white supremacy may be disputed, his 'manifesto' (published online) describes how an ill-conceived search on Google delivered him straight to the far right as a result of the media furore over the Trayvon Martin shooting, which "prompted me to type the words 'black on white crime' in Google, and I have never been the same since that day" (cited in Winter, 2019, p. 56). Roof's self-described entry-point into white supremacy was not an active search for racist content; rather, he was confronted with a carefully constructed, pre-packaged answer to his question (Perry, 2000). Here, it is the calculated exploitation of industry-designed algorithms – the bedrock of the contemporary media ecosystem – coupled with the perceived legitimacy of any information that appears online that facilitated Dylann Roof's 'slip' into extremism (Klein, 2012). Algorithms in other social media platforms such as YouTube, contribute by funnelling the content people are exposed to related to their interests and viewing histories. In YouTube, for example, as users finish watching one video, the algorithm attempts to calculate user preferences, automatically playing a related video. What often ends up happening, Hatewatch (2018) argues, is that users are presented with a more extreme white supremacist conspiracy theory, thus drawing the individual further and further into the web of the far-right. Thus, the internet hosts a social media ecosystem that enables and furthers white supremacism (Bluic at al., 2018). This comprises of a web of interrelated platforms which work collectively to provide individual racists with a range of outlets, including chat rooms, news commentary websites, YouTube, social media platforms, and blogs.[24]

[24] At the centre of this ecosystem are two known white supremacist websites – *The Daily Stormer* and *The Right Stuff*.

The Alt-Right also effectively mobilise social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook. Social media affords its users unique opportunities to form what Bonilla and Rosa (2015, p. 5) call 'mediatized publics'. In a phenomenon known as 'hashtag activism' (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015, p. 8), the hashtag is utilised purposefully by white nationalists to amplify Alt-Right rhetoric (Wilson, 2018). Indeed, Bonilla and Rosa's (2015) ethnography of #Ferguson, the digital protest formed primarily on Twitter in response to the police shooting of unarmed American teenager, Michael Brown, noted how social media allows its users to strategically formulate shared identity while simultaneously contesting racial meaning and opposing state abuse of power. The hashtag symbol (#) provides a dual-index of information, both in the clerical sense – by organising all information related to a specific topic under one banner – and in a semiotic sense – by ascribing meaning to each social media utterance (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Those physically displaced from protests occurring IRL (in real life) create a feeling of shared temporality, thereby 'feeling' like they are 'participating' in protest, by joining various Twitter campaigns, keeping real-time tabs of unfolding events and – through monitoring live streams – bear witness to police responses to protests (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). As much as the Alt-Right is receptive to mainstream media accounts of events around them, they are also in-tune with trending social media topics and political events. For example, Wilson (2018) notes how members of the Alt-Right flooded social media platforms with Tweets and posts related to a far-right conspiracy theory - #WhiteGenocide – to rope potential newcomers into the movement. Such posts were strategically positioned alongside, or in close proximity to, mainstream trending topics on Twitter, thereby providing a bridge between mainstream discourse and fringe alternatives (Wilson, 2018).[25] The Alt-Right has also been observed using techniques of inversion to flip seemingly progressive anti-racist scripts. Wilson (2018) cites the example of the reversal of the hashtag trend, #BlackLivesMatter, which was quickly appropriated and inverted by the far-right; soon the parallel trends, #WhiteLivesMatter,

[25] Specifically, in response to the Attacks, members were urged to "get on Twitter spread the #WHITEGENOCIDE message to copy paste this #Paris #ParisAttacks #ParisShooting #Whitegenocide. Now" [sic] (cited in Wilson, 2017, p. 428).

#AllLivesMatter, and #BlueLivesMatter appeared in the social media ecosystem. What this shows is that the internet, and social media in particular, presents a unique opportunity for adherents to Alt-Right ideologies to present their narratives alongside the anti-racist, 'politically correct' sentiment they claim to stand against. In this way, digital space, especially progressive digital hashtags, are ideal locations for building a rhetorical viaduct between the extreme and the mainstream.

Summary

Overall, this chapter has laid the theoretical and conceptual groundwork for this thesis, while positioning the Alt-Right in its socio-historical and political context. Specifically, it explored the relationship between the emergence of mainstream colour-blind sensibilities and the development of what Mondon and Winter (2020) call 'discursive reconstruction' within contemporary white supremacist groups. Drawing on Stephanie Hartzell's (2018) work, I have contended that one of the key challenges posed to contemporary racial politics by the Alt-Right is its adherents' ability to both embrace overt forms of racism championed in the 'past' while simultaneously presenting itself in seemingly plausibly deniable ways.

Through an ethnographic exploration of one online platform associated with the Alt-Right, the remainder of this thesis presents a detailed exploration of the nature of this threat on the individual, community, and global level. In the next chapter, I show how Hartzell's (2018) theorised discursive bridge is embedded in the ideology of movement insiders, creating a regime of representation that both creates community and draws in individual users feeling disenfranchised in the contemporary world, through an exploration of 4chan users' 'red pill' experiences.

Chapter Three: Down the Rabbit Hole: The Red Pill, White Victimisation and the Epistemological Menace of Online White Supremacy

"What was your first redpill; the first thing or event that caused you to begin questioning the leftist status quo?" The 4chan user asking the question on the website's 'Politically Incorrect' board accompanies their textual message with an image of Alt-Right mascot, Pepe the Frog, loading a red pill capsule into what looks like a Second World War artillery gun. Pepe is dressed in German Second World War military fatigues, the flag of 'Kekistan', /pol/'s imagined nation/religion, emblazoned onto his Stahlhelm. Pepe and his surroundings are rendered in black-and-white, except for the red pill he loads into the artillery gun (Figure 4).

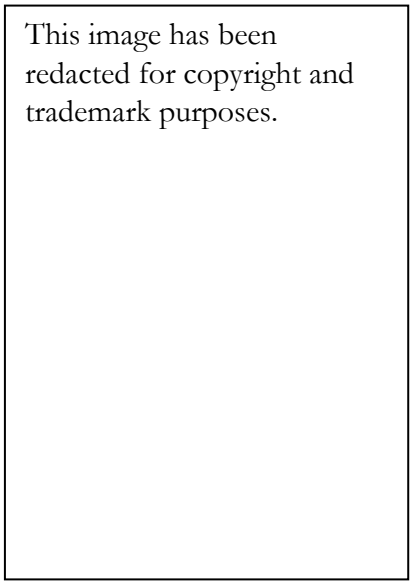


Figure 4: The Alt-Right's mascot, Pepe the Frog loading a red pill

As I browse through nearly 300 responses to the Original Poster's (OP's) question, I find myself reading user anecdotes that have, by now, become familiar. In the thread, /pol/ users detail their first encounters with 'red pills', snippets of racialised or gendered information which, for them, unveiled the supposed racial and gendered truth of the world: that they are the victims of a coalition of anti-White and anti-male conspiratorial forces. Throughout the thread, users discuss falling

"down the rabbit hole", a mashed-up reference to both Lewis Carroll's classic children's novel, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *The Matrix*, a popular science fiction film from which the analogy of the red pill is derived. "Black lives matter pissed me off and then I started to fall down the rabbit hole," one of the Anons replies. "Trayvon martin [sic] incident woke me up to media spins. Bataclan woke me up to nationalism. Everything else just added more wood to the fire," writes another user, alluding to the shooting of an unarmed black teenager, Trayvon Martin, in 2012, and the November 2015 Paris attacks, where armed perpetrators who had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), killed 130 people in the French capital, including 90 at a rock concert at the Bataclan theatre. "I saw the statistics of crime by ethnicity in my country, brought it up on the internet in a discussion, got called a racist," says another post. For this user, that their enlightenment to the objective 'truth' of white racial superiority was shut down as 'racist' on the internet had the radicalising effect of them seeing that not only are whites ostensibly superior, but they are also the subjects of an aggressive anti-White conspiracy intent of undermining this truth.

This chapter explores the metaphor of the red pill, an analogy which guides much of the Alt-Right's thinking on race, gender, left-wing politics, and the so-called 'Jewish Question' (JQ). It begins by outlining the cinematic origins of the red pill metaphor, before teasing out the parallels Alt-Righters see between themselves and *The Matrix*'s (The Wachowskis, 1999) protagonist, Neo. Having explored the origins of the metaphor, I draw on ethnographic data taken from one thread published on 4chan, a discussion about what events and/or issues were the 'first' that caused users to 'question' the status quo. While not oriented towards analysing a single event or issue, the topic set in the original post means that the resulting replies lend valuable insight into what kind of real-world circumstances drive people to participate in Alt-Right spaces.

In this chapter, I argue that the metaphor of the red pill is the driving force of some of the daily activities, discourses and behaviours of /pol/ users. Specifically, using Stuart Hall's (1997) notion of the 'spectacle of the "Other"', I demonstrate how red pills are weaved into broader 'regimes of representation' in which an 'essentialised Other' – women, Jewish people, Muslims, 'non-White' people, etc. – is presented as the Alt-Right's natural and inferior enemy. By specifying a 'non-White' and non-male 'Other', Alt-Righters construct themselves as victims under attack by feminist, multicultural, leftist, and Jewish forces. Specifically, the red pills discussed in the analysed thread indicate a widespread deployment of languages of white male innocence (Ross, 1997) and encroachment (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997) which seek to invert mainstream discourses on race gender, and multiculturalism. By affording red-pilled ideologies a semblance of plausible deniability (Hawley, 2019; HoSang & Lowndes, 2019), Alt-Righters claim to be the orators of a morally defensible position which justifies – in their minds – their assaults, harassment, and violence directed at their opponents. In the final discussion section of this chapter, I explain the broader significance of these frames of white male victimisation, by drawing on Jessie Daniels' (2009, p. 8) notion of the 'epistemological menace' of online white supremacy.

The Matrix is Everywhere: The Cinematic Origins of the Red Pill Meme

> You're here because you know something. What you know you can't explain, but you feel it. You've felt it your entire life—that there's something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is, but it's there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad…. The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us. Even now, in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work … when you go to church … when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth…. You are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else, you were born into bondage. Born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind. (Morpheus, to Neo, The Wachowskis, 1999, [27:11-28:25])

For the Alt-Right, the popular science fiction film, *The Matrix* (The Wachowskis, 1999) – specifically the famous 'red pill' scene from which the above quote is derived – is a significant

cultural artifact which typifies the epistemological basis of the movement (Greene, 2019; Hartzell, 2018; Hawley, 2017; Heikkilä, 2017; Kelly, 2017; Nagle, 2017; Stern, 2019). Partially inspired by Baudrillard's (1994) work, *Simulacra and Simulation*,[26] the film is set in a dystopian future where human beings are unknowingly trapped inside a computer simulation, known as 'the matrix', to distract them from their reality: that their bodies are harvested for energy by sentient parasitic machines. The lead character, Neo (Keanu Reeves), a computer hacker, is awakened from this illusory world when he is freed from the matrix by Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), captain of the hovercraft, the *Nebuchadnezzar*, and leader of a rebellion against the machines.

In the red pill scene, Neo learns about his entrapment in a computer simulation for the first time. To be awakened, Neo must choose between a red and a blue pill; swallowing the former, Morpheus explains, will indicate a choice for Neo to have the truth revealed to him, whereas taking the latter represents a choice to remain in the fantasy, to subject himself to a life of control and coercion (Greene, 2019; Hartzell, 2018; Hawley, 2017; Heikkilä, 2017; Kelly, 2017; Nagle, 2017; Stern, 2019). Neo takes the red pill.

Over the next few weeks aboard the *Nebuchadnezzar*, Neo experiences a series of life-changing revelations, beginning with his rebirth in a pod of gooey liquid attached to an elaborate electrical grid, from which the machines harvest human energy. Having been rescued and taken aboard the hovercraft, Morpheus slowly teaches Neo how everything he believes to be 'true' is part of a machine-orchestrated ploy to keep the human population pacified and ignorant. Neo learns that, since losing a war against the machines sometime in the 21st Century, the machines have since taken over the world, save for the last human refuge, the underground city of Zion. He also learns that the purpose of the *Nebuchadnezzar* and her crew is to hack into the matrix and gradually 'unplug' enslaved humans from it, thereby recruiting them into the uprising. At first, Neo enters

[26] Before filming commenced, the main cast and crew members were required to read Baudrillard's (1994) *Simulation and Simulacra*; the book even makes an appearance early in the film as a hollowed out storage space for the main character's illegal goods.

an understandable stage of denial, at one point in the film demanding that the crew let him go. Over time, however, Neo demonstrates his prowess in the martial arts, and subsequently takes a central role in the rebellion.

For the Alt-Right, Neo's red pill moment in *The Matrix*, his subsequent 'awakening' to the 'truth', and symbolic 'rebirth' and 'transformation' mirrors many of their own perceived personal experiences with seemingly life-changing information. In *The Matrix*, those who have been unplugged have been individually selected and awakened to a reality hidden from everyone else: that they are the subjects of external agents exerting control over human thought, perception and action (Hartzell, 2018; Hawley, 2017). In Alt-Right rhetoric, the simulated world of the matrix acts as a stand-in for a coalition of ideological forces, such as contemporary feminism, diversity, 'political correctness', gender fluidity, anti-racism, and so on, which deny the 'reality' of the 'natural' racial and gendered order of humanity (Hartzell, 2018; Hawley, 2017; Kelly, 2017; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Nagle, 2017). These 'myths' Alt-Righters allege, are propagated by a collection of conspiratorial leftists and a Jewish elite who have brainwashed modern white men and women into believing that race and gender are social – not biological – constructs, and that inherently 'anti-White' phenomena, such as mass immigration and interracial relationships, are beneficial for white people (Hartzell, 2018). Like Neo's physical and mental enslavement to the machines before him taking the red pill, Alt-Righters imagine blue-pilled individuals (often referred to as 'normies') as shackled by these ideological forces, which function – as they do in *The Matrix* – to deplete the collective energy of an oppressed group.

Although it is often symbolised in Alt-Right communication chambers by the imagery of blue/red pills (see Figure 4), the act of 'taking the red pill' often consists of an individual encountering provocative racialised or gendered information which unshackles them from their imagined mental prison. Such red pills manifest in several forms, from anecdotes involving racialised 'Others'; powerful encounters with manipulated statistics, graphs or memes; popular films; and racially-

charged real-world events or issues, such as police shootings of unarmed black men or the mass incarceration of African Americans. While they can appear in various forms, the outcome of such red pill experiences is usually the same: through an encounter with red pills, a person is made suddenly aware of the innate biological racial and gendered differences, the problems associated with mainstream multiculturalism and feminism, and perhaps most importantly, that for their entire lives they have been lied to and brainwashed by a secret cabal of anti-White and anti-male oppressors. In this way, becoming red-pilled means shirking these 'myths' of contemporary life, rejecting and unlearning them entirely, before relearning the 'objective truth'. Like Neo in *The Matrix*, red-pilled individuals must also undergo a difficult and mentally-taxing process in which they learn about the painful reality of their alleged subjugation before they can reach a point of racial enlightenment and clarity (Hartzell, 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Once exposed to this 'truth' there is, as one /pol/ user, publishing to the thread that opened this chapter puts it, no return: "Once you're redpilled there's no going back. All you fuckers are here forever."

The parallels red-pilled individuals see between themselves and Neo, however, do not end with their self-identity as members of a privileged elite who ostensibly know the 'truth' of the racial and gendered order of humanity. Rather, becoming red-pilled marks an individual as a potential saviour of the white race or – at the very least – as a person implicated into a broader process of identifying an elusive white prophet who will inevitably liberate the mentally enslaved white community. One of the key plot points in *The Matrix* centres on the mystery of whether Neo is 'The One', a deified human prophet who is destined to free all of humanity from their enslavement, bringing about an end to the war. It is this parallel between Alt-Righters and Neo that contains the most symbolic significance for the movement. Like the crew aboard the *Nebuchadnezzar*, Alt-Righters see themselves as playing an important role in unplugging their subjugated folk from an imagined mental prison. In this way, red-pilled individuals often imagine themselves as heroic actors who, through great adversity and self-sacrifice, are implicated into a broader process where the white race will eventually be saved.

The remainder of this chapter discusses /pol/ users' self-described moments where they 'took the red pill'. The data for this chapter's analysis is derived from /pol/ users' responses to a single discussion topic posted to the forum: the aforementioned thread which asks fellow Anons to describe their 'first' red pill. While these posts appeared on the forum at a specific moment in time, users' responses to the thread – which contained over 300 replies when I stopped observing it – lend valuable insight into what types of events and/or issues can trigger an individual's pathway into the Alt-Right. While users ultimately draw on myriad personal experiences and at times, seemingly superficial, even mundane, encounters with racialised and gendered information, to describe their 'red pill moments', they are nonetheless united by the common belief that straight white men are the collective victims of a (usually Jewish-orchestrated) conspiracy to undermine the true value of whiteness. In the following sections, I demonstrate how this rhetoric is produced by first essentialising a racialised and gendered 'Other', before explaining how these 'Others' are presented as existential threats to white male hegemony.

Regimes of Representation and the Essentialised 'Other' on /pol/

In his seminal text on the 'Spectacle of the "Other"', Stuart Hall (1997, p. 232) coined the term 'regime of representation' to describe the ways in which difference and otherness is portrayed in a repository of different images. Similar to Bonilla-Silva's (2017) second core frame of colour-blind racism – naturalization – Hall (1997) argues that a central component of a racialised regime of representation is naturalizing 'difference', typically between black and white people. As both Bonilla-Silva (2017) and Hall (1997) argue, the logic of naturalization is relatively simple: by representing the differences between black white people as naturally ordained, then they are rendered immobile to change and are thus positioned as fixed. For Hall (1997), this regime of representation draws principally on a liberal use of racial and gendered stereotyping which position the 'Other' as essentially different from its oppositional group. As I explore in this section, almost all of /pol/ users' descriptions of their own red pill moments contain some reproduction of racial

and gendered essentialism, which are subsequently weaved into a grand regime of representation where straight white men are presented as superior to the imagined 'Others'.

Although red pills can manifest in a variety of different digital mediums, from a cartoonish meme through to personal anecdotes rendered in textual form, they often contain an element of racial or gendered essentialism, where a marginalised 'Other' is cast as culturally or genetically inferior, subversive, conniving, or malicious (Hawley, 2017; Milner, 2013). In the observed thread on 4chan, one /pol/ user touts decontextualized crime statistics to essentialise 'non-white' people as criminals, making an allusion to '13/50', a coded meme referencing the over-representation of African Americans in US crime statistics (Anti-Defamation League, n.d.).[27] They write: "My first redpill on race was the 13/50 state, then learning that in my state it's actually 3/50. Ridiculous." "Race and IQ," reads the very next post, a simple allusion to the pseudoscientific claim about supposed natural intellectual, psychological and moral differences between whites and racialised others. Many proponents of presumed innate racial differences in intelligence frequently draw from Herrnstein and Murray's (1996) deeply controversial book, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Social Life*, which, among other things, argues that economic, and thereby racial, inequalities in the United States could partially be explained by genetic disparities in intelligence (see also Hartzell, 2018; Hawley, 2019). The book has such an intensive following in Alt-Right circles that its ideas are often abbreviated to simple references to its name. One /pol/ user, agreeing with the above statement about race and IQ, for example, couples the ideas proselytised by Herrnstein and Murray (1996) with an explicitly racist slur: "[I] couldn't figure out why niggers [sic] were such a disaster. Thought it was muh [sic] slavery shit. Someone red pilled me on the bell curve and then it all came clear."

[27] Each number in the 13/50 meme supposedly represent two different statistics. The '13' in this case, indicates the general population of African Americans living in the US and the '50' represents the supposed proportion of murders allegedly committed by African Americans.

While many of these red pills relate to presumed genetic differences between whites and 'non-Whites', equally as many of them speak to antisemitic discourses which present Jewish people as the secretive orchestrators of the Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG) conspiracy, which holds that mainstream media, culture and political institutions are under the control of a powerful cabal of Jewish supremacists (Statzel, 2008). In addition to alleging that Jewish people are disproportionately represented in positions of power, one of the principal presumed successes of this conspiracy is the 'Holohoax', a term used widely by Holocaust deniers to mock what they see as ridiculous lies in official historical accounts of the atrocity (for an example of a Holocaust denier using the term, see Anglin, 2016). In the thread, for example, one Anon describes their red pill moment in the following way: "the holocaust. it wasn't any one infographic or video, it was just the sudden realization 'oh wait this is all totally ridiculous and I don't have to believe it.'" Another user concurs, summarising their red pill with a simple, yet meaningful word: "Holohoax." Some Anons describe multiple red pills at once, each about different issues. An American user, for example, details their red pills about both blacks and Jewish people in one post, writing: "My first red pill on blacks was just being around them. My first red pill on Jews was learning about the USS Liberty." For this user, one only needs to be around whom they racialize as black to see their inherent racial 'inferiority', while simply learning about the sinking of the US naval ship, USS *Liberty* – an event often cited in antisemitic circles – ostensibly proves the underhandedness and conniving nature of Jewish people.[28]

Finally, many of the red pills cited in the thread rely on essentialised discursive frames about the innate nature of women. Indeed, reading through Alt-Right representations of women might

[28] For the uninitiated, the USS *Liberty* incident occurred during the 1967 Six Day War between Israel and several of its territorial neighbours in the Middle East. The attack on the US ship, *Liberty*, occurred when Israeli jet fighters and torpedo bombers attacked the ship in international waters. The attack killed 34 crew members and wounded 171 others. The Israeli government apologised for the incident, claiming that *Liberty* had been misidentified as an Egyptian vessel. Despite the Israeli government paying compensation to the US government and the families of those killed in the attack, the incident is used today by antisemitic conspiracy theories as alleged 'proof' that the state of Israel, and its predominantly Jewish population are wickedly clever, capable of getting away with all kinds of secret atrocities.

remind avid cinemagoers of the famous film-noirish femme fatale caricature from the 1920s-1950s pulp fiction. Like all the best femme fatales, respondents in the thread describe women as archetypically conniving, maleficent, and sexually deviant. Often, these narratives are enmeshed in deeply personal anecdotes which involve scarring negative experiences with women. One user weaves his experience of a breakup into a narrative that blames women's liberation for the degeneracy of the western world, writing:

> my girlfriend told me she loved me everyday and then dumped me seemingly out of nowhere. i looked for info to explain what the fuck happened, how to get girlfriends back, etc. etc. eventually i accidentally found political info about how women's liberation was the event that destroyed the western world. found this place and fell down the rabbit hole from there.

Personal stories involving seemingly 'cruel' or 'malicious' women is a common red pill mentioned in the thread. Often, these narratives begin with a quick personal anecdote, before attributing blame for a negative experience to women's liberation. One example of this occurs when a user describes being "abandoned" by his mother wanting to return to the workforce. The user's mother's decision to "force" him out of home-schooling and into the public schooling system "was two birds with one stone because now I was exposed to blacks and the cruelty women put their children through because of women's rights and the sexual liberation movement." Although many users feel it necessary to detail their personal experiences at the hands of malevolent women, others apparently do not. This is evidenced by the following one-worded red pill: "Women," writes an Australian user, plainly.

As these examples show, /pol/ users' initial encounters with red pills are often characterised by information which essentialise the 'Other' – whether it be 'non-Whites', women, Jewish people, or Muslims – as culturally or genetically inferior, subversive, conniving or malicious (Hawley, 2017; Milner, 2013). As Stuart Hall (1997) points out, the specification of a racialised 'Other' is common in racist circles, principally because it functions to send an imagined out-group into symbolic exile, while solidifying in-group cohesion and solidarity. However, while it is not surprising to see an

'Other' named in explicitly racialised terms, the above examples also illustrate how women are often cast as an essentialised 'Other' in Alt-Right narratives. A central strategy used to advance the ideology of the red pill involves marrying networked racism and misogyny together to create a master frame of collective white male victimisation. By imagining themselves as connected via shared experiences of white male victimisation, the Alt-Right seeks to construct an imagined collective identity that is supposedly under attack by anti-male and anti-white forces.

The Construction of Mythical Whiteness and its Threats

The Alt-Right and the wider manosphere – which includes, MRAs (Men's Rights Activists), Pick-up Artists (PUA's), and 'involuntary celibates' (incels), among others – imagine themselves as connected through shared experiences of white male victimisation (Blodgett & Salter, 2018; Coston & Kimmel, 2013; Ganesh, 2020; Kelly, 2017; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; May & Feldman, 2018; Nagle, 2017; Phillips & Yi, 2018; Reitman, 2018). For these movements, this self-perception is premised on the construction of a 'referent object' to borrow a term from International Relations scholars, Barry Buzan, Ole Weaver and Jaap de Wilde (1998, p. 22) – an idealised form of whiteness in need of protection from external physical and symbolic threats. To create the sense of a mythical white identity, the Alt-Right synthesise elements from fantasy literature, 1950s advertisements, classical art, and mythology (Blodgett & Salter, 2018; Kelly, 2017; Zuckerberg, 2018). This imagined society is demarcated by a perceived natural order of being, which structures society along a racialised and gendered hegemony (Green, 2019; HoSang & Lowndes, 2019; Kelly, 2017). Unsurprisingly, in the Alt-Right conception of this mythical whiteness, white men and women are placed at the top of this racial hierarchy, with 'non-White' races occupying the lower tiers.

Although Alt-Right ideology is principally concerned with race (Hawley, 2019; Winter, 2019), it is important to consider how rigid hierarchical conceptions of gender also contribute to the construction of archetypal whiteness. In addition to riffing the notion that black women are

notably 'less beautiful' than their white counterparts (Feagin, 2013), white women themselves are also believed to occupy a naturally defined place in the white nation. As Hawley (2019) points out, the Alt-Right is heavily influenced by the notion of 'sex realism', a position which argues that the presumed genetic disposition of women means that they are better suited to traditional domestic roles reminiscent of the 1950s nuclear family. In addition to concentrating on stereotypical gendered roles, which include childrearing, cooking, cleaning, etc. (Statzel, 2008), the far right is obsessed with women's sexual politics. Here, women's value is reduced to whether their sexual practices supposedly guarantee the survival of a racially pure white lineage or stoop into 'degeneracy', an all-encompassing communal buzzword of sorts that encapsulates anything that challenges the patriarchal, heteronormative, white-centric vision Alt-Righters advance (Green, 2019; Kelly, 2017).

In 4chan, the ideal of a mythical whiteness 'under attack' is most frequently elicited in the above-mentioned thread when users discuss mass immigration. As Hartzell (2018) argues, the ostensible erosion of white society is constructed as materially evident in the increased prevalence of racial mixing, immigration and the promotion of a more racially and ethnically diverse population. For adherents to the 'great replacement' conspiracy theory,[29] rising immigration and race-mixing constitute a form of 'white genocide' to the extent that they contribute to the perceived decline of the more ethnically 'pure' white population (Ebner, 2020b; Ganesh, 2020; Hartzell, 2018). As such, users discussing this red pill often do so with a sense of existential urgency. Referring to white demographic replacement, for example, one /pol/ack[30] describes how his first red pill, the realisation that immigrant birth-rates vastly outpace that of white people, led him to see how the white race faces an empirical threat:

[29] The 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory argues that white people in European homelands are being replaced by non-white people through mass immigration, the encouragement of interracial relationships, the promotion of feminism, and so on. Those who subscribe to this conspiracy theory often cite erroneous statistics to substantiate their views. Before committing the Christchurch Atrocity on March 15, Brenton Tarrant, the terrorist responsible for the killing, published a 'manifesto' entitled, 'The Great Replacement' to the far-right bulletin board, 8chan.
[30] Like 'Anon', '/pol/ack' is another moniker /pol/ users use to refer to each other.

> the abysmal, below replacement level [white] birth rates, the shrinking demographics of all european [sic] nations and the migration crisis going on, [which brings in] millions [of immigrants] a year. Millions a year that have on average 4-6 kids while we are having 1.2 on average. When my generation dies, half the amount of whites in the world will die out just naturally because of this and with immigration birth rates entire countries are set to disappear in 100 years.

This user employs apocalyptic language that is familiar to white genocide conspiracy theories (Ebner, 2020b). Their post is undergirded by the suggestion that mass immigration in European homelands constitutes an extermination of the white race. In addition to providing seemingly irrefutable evidence of this fact, in typical apocalyptic style, they provide a time limit on how long it will take before whites are wiped out: approximately 50 years. For them, it is not just that whites will become significantly less powerful, but that the demographic replacement with 'non-white' people will bring about a civilisational decline.

For other users, the 'great replacement' is not only a prediction of what the future will look like but a contemporary empirical reality. This is evidenced when users allude to personal experiences of bewilderment at the sudden influx of immigration in countries that they imagine to be 'white'. For example, one user describing his first red pill posts an image of a quizzical cartoon frog with an outstretched neck, along with the accompanying text: "where the fuck did all these immigrants come from?" (See Figure 5). Another describes a visit to Cologne in 2015-2016 where he started to ask himself why there were so many "non-Germans" in Germany. A /pol/ack user agreeing with this sentiment puts it in more explicit terms, describing his red pill as the moment he saw "videos of nigger hoards flooding into Europe."

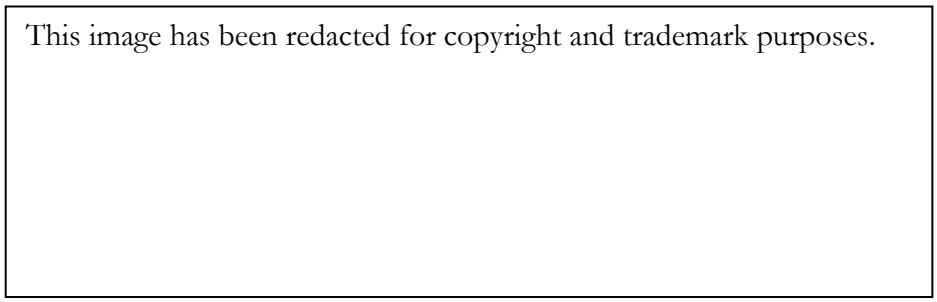


Figure 5: Where did all these immigrants come from?

As Kelly (2017) observes, personal anecdotes of white male victimisation are often knitted into the broader grand narrative that white men are a collectively victimised group. The earlier example where a user weaves a personal story about a breakup into a wider narrative about the devastation inflicted by the women's liberation movement might serve as a useful reminder of this point. Yet, anecdotes which feed into these narratives can also involve seemingly innocuous, even playful, social media jokes. In one post epitomising white male victimhood narratives, for example, a user posts a screenshot taken from Twitter which reads: "finally allow him to take you on a date then after have him drop you off at your other man's house #WasteHisTime2016".[31] The social media joke is, on /pol/, rearticulated as proof that women have turned 'against' men. "This fucking shit," the Anon writes:

> I understand that a significant portion of it was purely bantz, but there was a lot that wasn't. Fucking furious reading through them at the time, it was the first time the veil was ripped away and I started to see women as they really are.

For this user, what might otherwise be interpreted as an innocuous social media joke is experienced as an attack on men, weaved into a grand narrative where the odds are supposedly stacked against them. Other users on the forum concur with this sentiment. For example, one user posts a personal anecdote where he describes being involved in a fight with another girl in elementary school, weaving it into a grand narrative of white male victimisation (see Figure 6). The user's

[31] In order to protect the identity of this Twitter user, a screenshot of the tweet has not been reproduced here.

comparatively harsh punishment compared to the girl – whom he sees as an equally culpable opponent – left him with the sudden realisation that "the cards were stacked against me as a boy in school." Here, users have rearticulated personal experiences of perceived victimisation as evidence of a pervasive assault on them as individuals but also on the hapless community of straight white men as a whole.

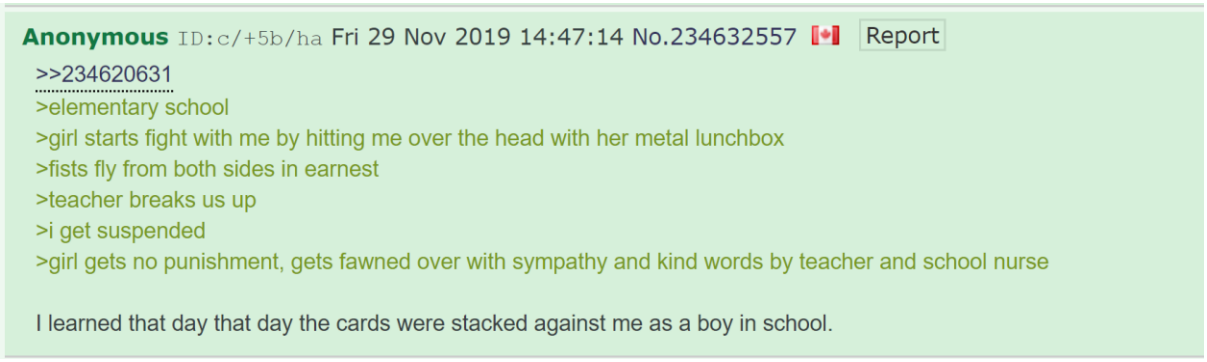


Figure 6: An elementary school fight and white male victimisation

"Yet I was the one being told how shit my race was?!": White Innocence and the Language of Encroachment

It might seem perplexing that a movement defined by notions of racial and gendered supremacy go to such lengths to document its victimisation and perceived emasculation. Yet, as numerous scholars have pointed out (see for examples Bostdorff, 2004; Caren, et al., 2015; Winter, 2019), white supremacist reliance on white victimhood narratives is entirely consistent with its broader strategy of appropriating the seemingly plausible frames of colour-blind (Alexander, 2012; Bonilla-Silva, 2001, 2018; Matias & Newlove, 2017) or 'new' racism (Pérez, 2017).

When viewed in this context, the Alt-Right's mobilisation of victim narratives can be seen as a strategic discursive manoeuvre to afford itself a semblance of plausible deniability (Hawley, 2017; Hawley, 2019; HoSang & Lowndes, 2019). By fusing a sense of nostalgia for a long-lost white identity with the rhetoric of victimhood, the Alt-Right seeks to invert the language of the academic and activist left, to present straight white men as the real victims of oppression, thereby justifying – at least in their minds – reactionary discrimination towards women, People of Colour, immigrants and Muslims (Coston & Kimmel, 2013; Kelly, 2017; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Marwick

& Caplan, 2018; Matias & Newlove, 2017; Vysotsky & McCarthy, 2017). While there are many strategies used in far-right circles to advance this kind of sentiment, I have focused on two specific discursive strategies – the articulation of 'white male innocence' (Ross, 1997) and 'languages of encroachment' (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997) – both of which are salient in /pol/users' discussion of their first encounters with red pills.

One of the central frames of white victimisation narratives revolves around the notion of white racial innocence. As Ross (1997) points out, rhetorics of innocence and victimisation are often successfully mobilised to attack the 'Other', in this case, 'non-White', feminised, left-leaning liberals. Such sentiment is evident in even a casual browse of an Alt-Right internet forum, where users construct a physical assault on an innocent white nation. Prominent white supremacist and self-identified 'member' of the Alt-Right, Andrew Anglin (2016), for example, points out how the term, "vibrant diversity" is a far-right meme referring to the imagined "rapes, mass-murders, terrorist attacks, etc. committed by non-Whites in White countries." The term "rape-fugee" is used to similar ends, constructing refugees as a threat to innocent white womanhood in need of protection (Gilroy, 2019).

For Ross (1997, p. 28), the invocation of the innocent white victim is almost always immediately followed, implicitly or otherwise, with the conjuration of its opposite, the "defiled [black] taker". Thus, it is not just that the white nation is 'under attack' that is central to white male victimisation, but that it is often supposedly innocent whites that are implicated in this assault. While Ross' (1997) work pertains mostly to how narratives of innocence are reimagined to attack racial others, it can be applied to the Alt-Right's attacks on the left, women, immigrants, Muslims, Jewish people, and so on. For an example of this in the red pill thread, see the following post. The user describes his red pill as follows: "The "tea party movement"[32] my mother was a part of it. Sweetest woman in

[32] The American Tea Party Movement is a conservative movement within the Republican Party. It typically takes a libertarian, right-wing populist stance on several social, political and economic issues. It is frequently accused of being a racist movement by left-wing activists.

the world and she was "racist" for showing up." Here, by referring to his mother as 'sweet', the user conjures an image of innocence before juxtaposing it with the 'racist' label she receives, presumably from a leftist/anti-racist.

Another user similarly relies on a presentation of his white innocence being destroyed at the hands of a 'non-White' other. In the post (Figure 7), the user describes his first interaction with another black student when he was seven years old.

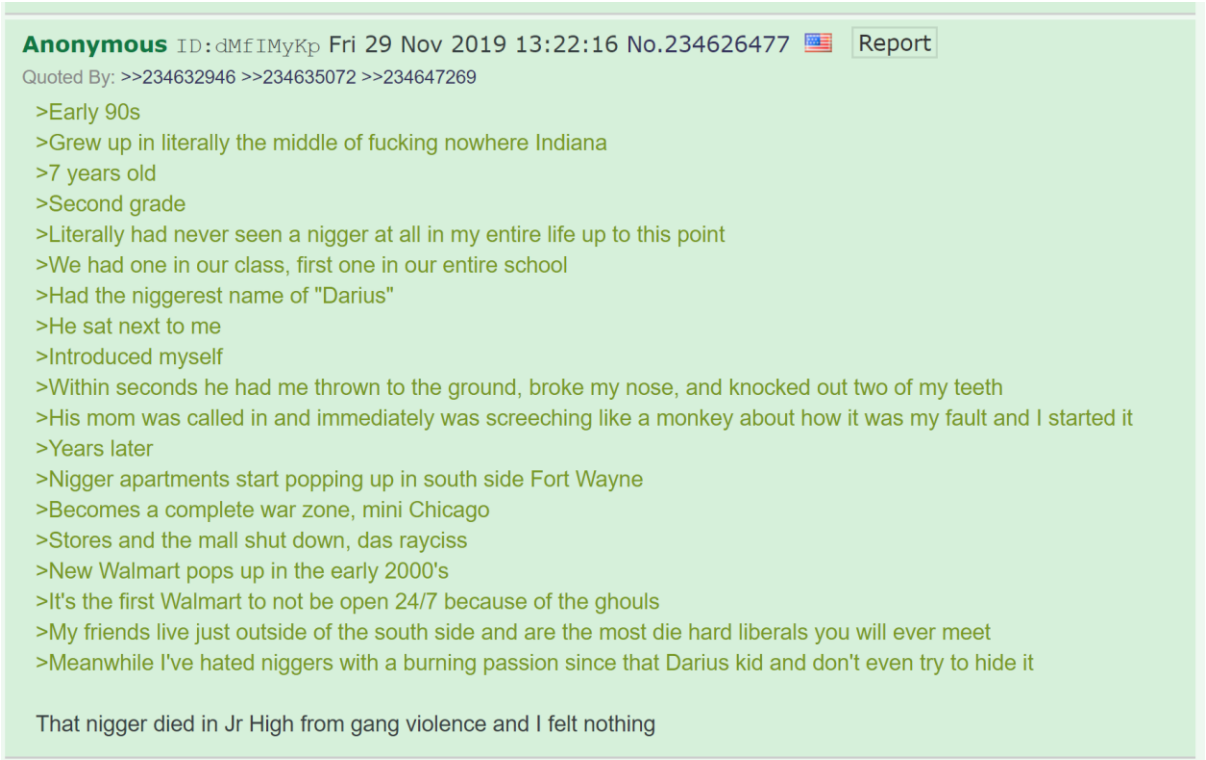


Figure 7: A user describes his red-pill moment

As we can see from this post, the user describes his encounter with a 'non-White' student (whom he calls "Darius"), culminating in a fight. As if the physical assault is not enough to confirm the user's innocence, the Anon describes how he was re-victimised by the assailant's mother who refused to appropriately discipline her child: "his mom was called in and immediately was screeching like a monkey about how it was my fault and I started it." The Anon concludes his anecdote: "I've hated niggers with a burning passion since that Darius kid and don't even try to hide it." This user peppers his post with a liberal dose of racial epithets, using phrases such as "the niggerest name of 'Darius'" and references to a 'screeching monkey' to attack the racial 'other'.

For him, the flippant use of these epithets pales in comparison to his own experience of physical assault, thereby justifying his self-declared impassioned hatred of all 'non-Whites'.

For Ross (1997), the invocation of the innocent white victim in racist narratives is just the first step in a two-pronged ploy, the second of which involves questioning the "actual victim" status that is, for the far-right, too readily applied to its opponents. To explain how the red pill ideology is characterised by this move, it is useful to draw on Delgado and Stefancic's (1997) notion of 'languages of imposition/encroachment'. Both Ross (1997) and Delgado and Stefancic (1997) were writing about the same issue: arguments against affirmative action policies in the US, a hot button topic for the colour-blind racist – white supremacist or otherwise – looking to prove the existence of 'reverse discrimination' against whites (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Coston & Kimmel, 2013; Gallagher, 1997; Green, 2019; Rambukkana, 2017). Delgado and Stefancic (1997) argue that languages of encroachment aim to invert the logic of progressive movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement or the Women's Liberation Movement and present it as regressive and unprincipled. The 'Other', in this context, is now asking for "special status", they are "imposing" themselves where it is not wanted and "encroaching" on spaces where they do not "belong" (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997, p. 98). An important component to this kind of impositional narrative in Alt-Right spaces is not just that women and 'non-Whites' are asking for "too much", but that they are supposedly doing so to the detriment of the straight white man (Bostdorff, 2004). As such, adherents to red pill ideology feel comfortable in not only withdrawing support from socially progressive movements but actively, sometimes violently, rejecting it.

In /pol/, languages of imposition are most frequently used when Anons discuss the ideological threat presented by modern feminism. For users, feminism appears to be a Trojan horse for anti-White ideals, a way of subversively imposing a feminist agenda that ascribes preferential treatment to women. The textbook indicators of impositional narratives – the notions of "encroachment"

and "preferential treatment" for women – are at times directly elicited in users' descriptions of their red pill moments:

> Modern feminism and diversity shit encroaching on everything where it didn't belong, such as my uni, was the first time I started noticing there was something wrong. It made me feel really disenfranchised, especially considering I never got a good lot in life in the first place and yet I was the one being told how shit my race was.

> I realized (((feminism))) wasn't about gender equality at all, but preferential treatment for women. I then realized that pointing out that men objectively had it worse made people call me a sexist (incel wasn't a term back then) and I first began to get a glimpse of the clown world.

> Feminist push in my country even though it was already massively feminist

Just as these comments are laden with the narratives of encroachment, they also seek to unsettle conventional notions about the 'real victimisation' of People of Colour, women, immigrants, etc. The first two users' comments, for example, each tacitly suggest that while white men were being labelled the oppressors, deep-set conspiratorial forces were scheming against them (Coston & Kimmel, 2013). As May and Feldman (2018) argue, these frames of white male entitlement are "easily radicalised" and tied to white nationalism and extreme racism. One example from the thread that typifies this progression from anti-feminism to full-blown white nationalism reads as follows:

> [I realised] that feminists lied about dumb shit to push their agenda. I instantly went from being a male feminist to an anti feminist in the apace of one evening once I learned this and went down a rabbit hole, leftists in general were next, then realising whites were under attack, and in about a year I finally accepted that the JQ [Jewish Question] was valid.

"After that I questioned EVERYTHING": The Epistemological Menace of the Alt-Right

Thus far, this chapter has explored how the ideology of the red pill is littered with discourse that strategically positions adherents to Alt-Right ideologies as the defenders of a natural racial and gendered 'truth'. By claiming that this truth is under attack by a secretive cabal of anti-White and

anti-male forces, red-pilled individuals proselytise that any harassment, abuse, or violence directed at racialised and gendered 'Others' pales in comparison to this alleged subjugation of straight white men, thus affording the movement a semblance of plausible deniability. While the use of this discursive strategy is undoubtedly essential to contemporary understandings of the daily life of spaces like /pol/, by way of discussion, the chapter turns briefly to an analysis of its broader significance. Specifically, drawing on prominent critical race and internet scholar, Jessie Daniels' (2009), work on the 'epistemological menace' of online white supremacy, I argue that the threats that the Alt-Right and users of its online spaces, like /pol/, present, lie not just in its reproduction of overtly racist sentiment, but also in its potential to erode many of the hard-fought-for tenets of the civil rights and women's liberation movements.

Writing about the "epistemological menace" of online white supremacy, Daniels (2009) argues that scholars interested in online racism need to be more attentive to how the Internet and social media structure how racialised and gendered knowledge is produced and consumed online. Processes of digital (un)learning are essential to these pedagogical practices. Learning is indeed central to the Alt-Right experience; users of websites like 4chan learn how to successfully troll and make funny memes (Green, 2019; Lee, 2020; Marwick & Lewis, 2017), they learn specific 'techniques of neutralization' (Vysotsky & McCarthy, 2017), they share reading lists, websites, videos, and graphics. Yet, the learning curve endemic to taking the red pill is not just about learning a set of regressive racist and misogynistic scripts or techniques, the process of being red-pilled involves users encountering and learning an "alternative way of knowing – that is an alternative epistemology" (Daniels, 2009, p. 119). Users of /pol/, for example, learn that mainstream culture and its associated institutions are allegedly inherently 'anti-White' – a knowledge claim that is often repeated as a fundamental truth. One user posting to the red pill thread, for example, publishes the following conspiratorial message:

> This is a data gathering thread. They want to know what the first step is, so they can shut it down and prevent the entire chain. What they don't understand is that there is no first step. It has gotten to the point where

> literally every aspect of mainstream culture - every film, every news outlet, every song, the entirety of non-empirical academia and education, all of it - is a first step for someone…. There is literally no possibility to not see the bullshit now.

This user relies on all-encompassing language, marking every film, news outlet, song, and tertiary institution as symptomatic of an omnipresent force of anti-Whiteness. For them, the prized 'evidence' of white genocide – red pills – are everywhere, and so obvious to a person looking to find them that it has become impossible not to see through "the bullshit".

Drawing on Charles W. Mills' (1997) work on white epistemologies of ignorance and Feagin's (2013) seminal work on the white racial frame, Daniels (2009) argues that the 'epistemological menace' that the internet presents to our accumulation and production of knowledge about race and gender in the digital era, rests on its ability to allow whites to withdraw from pluralistic civic engagement into racially-segregated digital spaces. The insular nature of these spaces, where knowledge claims are first affirmed and then validated online, means that websites like /pol/ become an echo-chamber of pro-white epistemologies, allowing users to participate in a "self-perpetuating cycle" of knowledge construction (Daniels, 2009, p. 55).

In the thread analysed in this chapter, the illusion of ubiquitous anti-Whiteness is temporally rendered in digital space. The thread itself functions as a crowd-sourced compendium of red pills, where users can not only go to recount their own red pill experiences but also read about the hundreds of red pills other members of the forum have encountered. The publication of red pills in this manner allows Alt-Righters to see how they relate to the experiences of hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of other like-minded pro-white advocates. This is evident in the way that users interact with each other in the thread, their comments often indicating a close affinity with the experiences of many of their international peers. For example, one Anon describes his red pill in the following way: "Thinking as a kid why it was okay for every group of people to band together except whites. Figure it was because it would be too unfair since we would crush them." "Brooo i

distinctly remember this fucking feeling," another American user writes in response, "If whites were treated the same as other ingroups the other ingroups would be fucking done lmao." Here, both users share an experience of undergoing the same thought-process, which led them to the same conclusion: that anti-White forces have effectively banned white interest lobby groups to constrain the innate racial supremacy of whites. This interaction demonstrates how Daniels' (2009) 'epistemological menace' of white supremacy can play out in the insulated online community of /pol/. Here, evidence of white victimisation – in the form of an erroneous claim about white activist groups – is first asserted and then affirmed in an insulated process of ad hoc peer review.

Daniels' (2009) conception of a "self-perpetuating" epistemological cycle is premised on processes of digital (un)learning. Just as the red pill experience is marked by the learning of racist and misogynist messages, it also involves a process of unlearning liberal beliefs which supposedly shackle members of the group in a mental prison (Kelly, 2017). Here, users describe experiences of forgetting 'everything' fed to them by the conspiratorial left. In a post typifying this sentiment, one user describes their initial experience of taking the red pill, and subsequent journey down the rabbit hole, as follows:

> Gender pay gap was one of my first [red pills]. It's spouted universally as absolute truth, but all it takes to debunk it is a 10 second Google search. If something so widely believed could be such a shallow lie, anything could be. And it turned out most of it was. Democracy, the 'enlightenment', equality... I kept researching and the facades kept dropping.

Some of this Anon's peers share similar experiences of encountering seemingly earth-shattering information which changed their perceptions of reality and 'truth'. One user recounts how he was bombarded with "verifyably [sic] inaccurate news stories" about Republican legislation which left him enraged. When the user conducted some of his research, he discovered that mainstream media had spun an "entirely bullshit" misrepresentation of the legislation. For this user, this red pill experience engendered a sense of distrust in mainstream media, concluding his anecdote: "I realized the entire leftist media is like this, and it's mostly leftist media." Another /pol/ack

describes how, after encountering 'proof' of an Atlantis-like advanced civilisation, he realised that "many people had to be lying to maintain this coverup [sic], and that most people were going along with the lies just to get along... after that, it was a flood of realization. After that, I questioned EVERYTHING."

These interactions demonstrate that it is not just racist and misogynistic scripts that participants in /pol/ learn from each other. Rather, the key pedagogical outcome of interactions on /pol/ is one of unlearning mainstream narratives about things like multiculturalism, diversity, and human rights. For users, this is often described as a disorienting and emotionally taxing process, where they have had to relearn fundamental assumptions about the nature of truth and reality. "I cant [sic] even remember, [sic] when I was redpilled," one user tells his peers. "I took in like hundreds of redpills a day. My entire world changed." In a later post, another user echoes this sentiment of having lost track of time after taking their red pill: "I don't remember. I feel like I was always here, the symbiosis was so strong."

For Daniels (2009), these kinds of posts exemplify the main epistemic threat the Alt-Right presents to our consumption and production of racial, and I would add gendered, knowledge in online space. As Daniels (2009) might point out, the cultural values that the Alt-Right take issue with – that of racial and gender equality – are those that were settled by the victories of the civil rights and women's liberation movements. This epistemic threat is even more salient when considered in the context of Alt-Right strategies of 'mainstreaming' its talking points (Mondon & Winter, 2020; Winter, 2019). Users of spaces like 4chan do not simply produce and reproduce their alternative ways of knowing in their online echo-chambers. Rather, armed with the philosophy of the red pill, they seek to take their message to the public in a bid to shift the Overton Window of politically acceptable racial discourse (Greene, 2019; Heikkilä, 2017). Much like Neo in *The Matrix*, through gradually unplugging normies from their illusory world, Alt-Righters aim to the shift the mainstream epistemological landscape of how issues of race and gender are navigated, one red pill

at a time. By encouraging others to 'take the red pill', then, users of spaces like 4chan can start to chip away at developing a critical mass following which, if successful, will supposedly liberate members of the white race from their presumed mental prison.

Summary

This chapter explored the metaphor of the red pill, an analogy which positions adherents to Alt-Right ideology as 'enlightened' individuals who, through chance encounters with racialised and gendered information, have realised the supposed truth of their existence: that they are the victims of a widespread anti-White and anti-male forces. After exploring the cinematic origins of the metaphor, the chapter illustrated how users' descriptions of their own red pill experiences serve to construct themselves in relation to essentialised racial and gendered 'Others', who are imagined as being culturally, genetically, and morally inferior to white men. A central pillar of red pill ideologies is that this innate truth has been subversively suppressed by a collection of feminist, Jewish, multicultural and leftist co-conspirators intent on denying the 'objective reality' of white male superiority. In the chapter, I showed how such narratives of white male victimisation undergird users' descriptions of red pills, principally through the mobilisation of discourses of white male 'innocence' and the languages of imposition and encroachment. By presenting themselves as the collective victims of oppression, red-pilled individuals claim that their reactionary discrimination, attacks, harassment, and abuse of women, People of Colour, Jewish people, and Muslims is justified – at least in their minds.

What is particularly notable about /pol/ users' descriptions of their red pill experiences is how they are littered with sentiment that is both reminiscent of the overt expressions of racism typical of Jim Crow – complete with racial slurs, epithets, and open calls for violence – while simultaneously seeking to sanitise movement ideology by presenting straight white men as a collectively victimised and marginalised group. In this way, the case study presented in this chapter

is demonstrative of how Alt-Righters manage to engineer a discursive bridge between mainstream public sentiment and extremism.

The chapter has demonstrated how seemingly chance – even mundane – daily encounters with racialised and gendered information can translate into a radicalising process which can undermine the epistemological basis of core liberal democratic principles championed in progressive social rights movements, such as racial and gender equality. In the next chapter, I point to how the underlying epistemic assumptions of red-pilled ideologies manifest in real-world collective action. The chapter explores the collective activity many Alt-Righters see as a national 'duty' of sorts: 'ped-pilling normies'. As a rough equivalent to conscious-raising, red-pilling involves conditioning young white men into seeing things through an Alt-Right lens (Hartzell, 2018; Hawley, 2019; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). In a bid to stimulate targets' racial/gendered awakenings, red-pilling manifests in 'red-pillers' subversively exposing normies to snippets of racialised or gendered information. The next chapter explores one such 'red-pilling campaign' through an analysis of /pol/'s annual Halloween ritual: the 'It's Okay to be White' (IOTBW) sticker/poster campaign.

Chapter Four: On the Salt Flats of 4chan: "It's Okay to be White", Trolling and Mining Salt on 4chan

I have come to /pol/ today with the intention of observing the community's planned Halloween activity. Sure enough, after briefly browsing a thread where users discuss the best supplies to store for the apocalypse, I encounter a thread entitled, 'IOTBW'. I instantly recognise the acronym and click into the thread. OP has posted a picture which shows a hand appearing in the left with a sticker affixed to the index finger. They write:

> It's okay to be white
>
> Thread
>
> 10/31/19

"Fucking based. Every Anon that does this is a true hero," the first reply in the thread reads. Others ask for 'friends' to join them: "Looking for a friend: rochester minnesota [sic] anyone?" an Anon posts. "Anyone else in Louisiana?" asks another. "Keep up the good work lads!" one Anon using the UK flag posts. They add: "and remember NO VANDALISM USE THE ORIGINAL POSTER and be excellent to each other, and party on lads!" Elsewhere in the thread, a /pol/ack using the American flag posts a request for information: "Quickly, bros. I need the file for the card sized iotbw posters. I'm sorry for procrastinating." In response, one Anonymous user posts a series of three images in quick succession, all of them variations of the same five-worded phrase: "It's Okay To Be White" (See Figure 8):

Figure 8: The 'It's Okay to be White' poster

As the thread continues, /pol/ users post several photos which feature IOTBW posters and stickers pinned up in a number of locations. In one picture, an A4 sheet of paper with the phrase is stapled to a wooden lamp post in an urban area (Figure 9). Several photographs show IOTBW fliers spread haphazardly on the ground (Figure 9). In another image, an entire wall in a university building appears to be covered in IOTBW posters. In other photos, users hold the posters up to cover their faces, while others mask themselves in several disguises suitable for any generic Halloween party. In one comment, a user posts an image – presumably of themselves – in full clown makeup and attire as they clutch their printed copies of the poster. Another user posts a similar image of a person holding an A4 poster to the camera, this time dressed up as a skeleton.

When the Anon is advised by another /pol/ack to cover their eyes, they post another image of themselves in the same costume, this time opting to cover their face with comically big aviator sunglasses.

Throughout the thread, similar images continue to appear, while some users opt for more creative ways of disseminating the message. In one post, for example, a user posts a link to a YouTube video which shows a huge banner with the phrase, 'It's Okay to be White', stencilled in block letters above a busy motorway bridge (Figure 10). Another Anon encourages their peers to make use of the AirDrop feature on their iPhones, an app which allows Apple users to wirelessly send files to other nearby Apple devices. "Targets will see the image preview for the IOTBW poster regardless if they choose to accept and save it," the Anon advises.

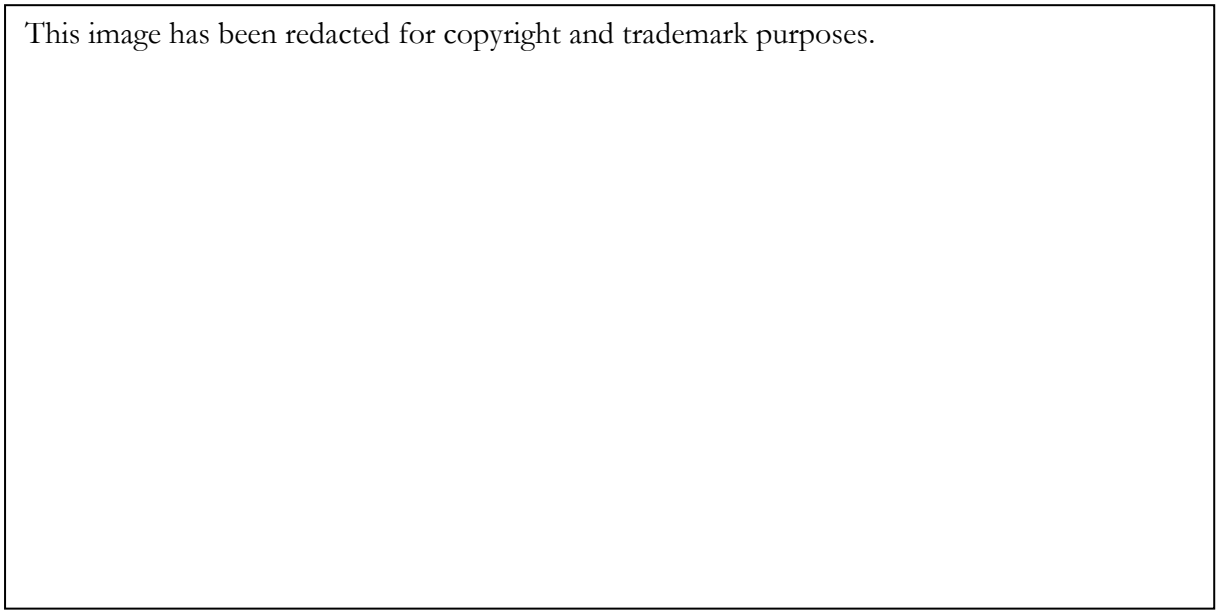


Figure 9: Photos of IOTBW fliers posted to 4chan

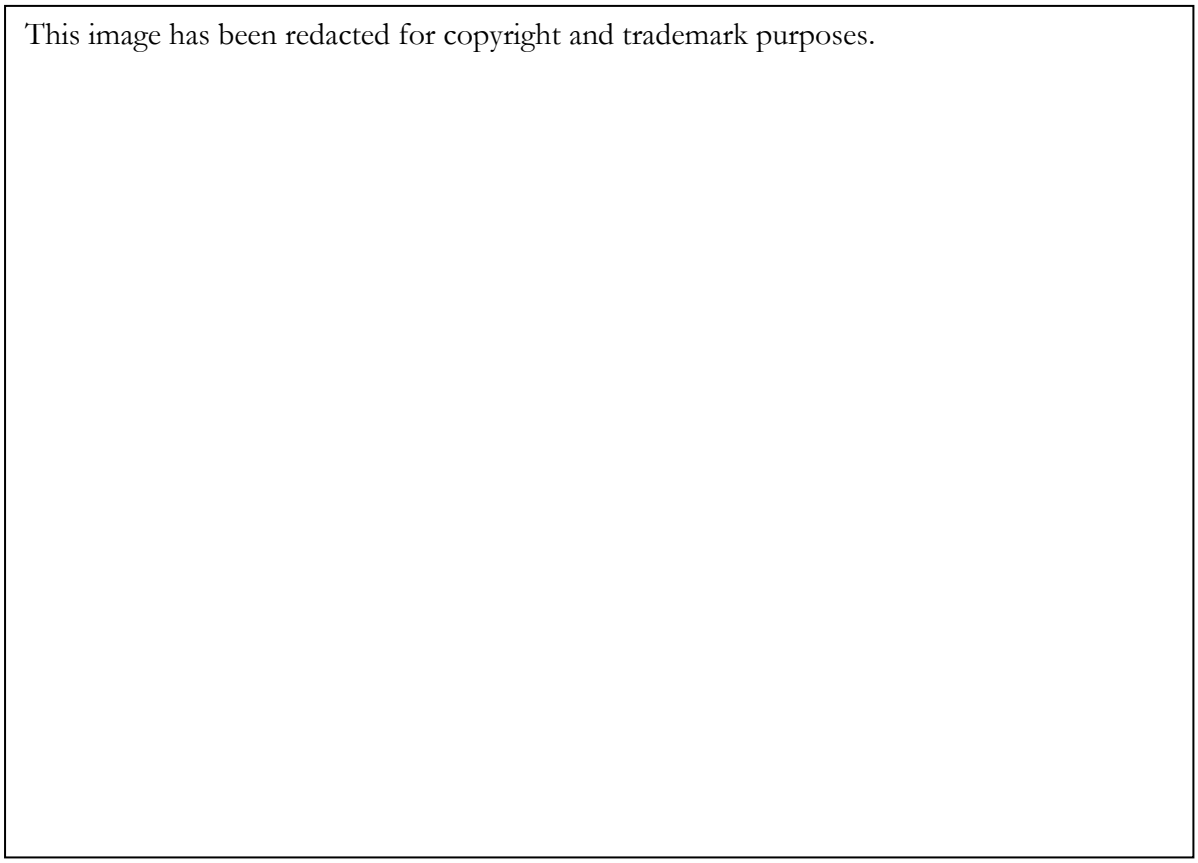


Figure 10: A YouTube screenshot showing an 'It's Okay to be White' banner on a motorway bridge

Just as the thread is flooded with IOTBW imagery – complete with anonymous people dressed in Halloween garb and photos of the poster in several different locations – users express enthusiasm for what they call 'salt'. "I cant [sic] wait for the MSM [Mainstream media] salt mine tomorrow, sweet, sweet salt," one user writes. Another /pol/ack excitedly asks: "Are we going to have IOTBW salt threads? Or will the tranny mods ban those too?" "Cant [sic] wait for the 2k19 salt," says another comment. Another user encourages others to "go forth and spread the righteous word so I have a reason to wake up tomorrow collecting all the salt." This anticipation of salt continues throughout the subsequent threads about IOTBW.

As the day continues, the Politically Incorrect board is flooded with several similar threads, where users post images of their IOTBW posters and of themselves, eagerly anticiptating 'sweet, sweet salt'. These users are not infatuated with the common kitchen condiment, however. They are instead expressing desire for another subcultural commodity in /pol/: 'salty', or 'exaggerated'

reactions to the ostensibly innocuous flier, ideally from leftists, anti-racists, or the mainstream media. When the salt-mining expedition yields results, users enthusiatically season the board with its salt. In one example, an Anon using the US flag posts a screenshot from Snapchat with an IOTBW poster pictured, writing: "Thanks whoever posted one in the University of Minnesota, someone I know got triggered by it and ranted on snap[chat] about it. Top kek"[33]. Another comment includes a screenshot from Twitter where a hand-written IOTBW poster is taped to a wall: "Really Santa Clarita?" the Twitter user posts, "Be better." Other posts include links to mainstream media stories about the posters. For /pol/ users, the best kind of salt will contain especially exaggerated responses, such as news stories where relevant authorities have been notified. One user, for example, posts several links to different news articles about the campaign (Figure 11), but quotes extensively from one specific item of salt. "crazy reaction, getting an FBI investigation," the Anon writes, before quoting from an official statement in response to the posters, authored by the President of Western Connecticut State University [WCSU] Dr John B. Clark (2019):

> a full scale police investigation is underway, which includes frequent communication with representatives of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Connecticut State Police, and Danbury Police with review of footage from our surveillance cameras as well as interviews with individuals who may have witnessed any of this despicable and utterly unacceptable behavior (para. 2)

In the official statement, Clark (2019) proceeds to express his shock at this "sick and outrageous behaviour," before asserting that WCSU has worked "so hard to be a warm, diverse and caring community for all." In response to this statement, one /pol/ user writes: "This is exactly the type of reaction i [sic] was hoping for, hopefully people will realise their bullshit."

[33] In the language of imageboards like 4chan, 'kek' means 'lol'. It originates from some gaming communities which translate the phrase 'LOL' in game-chats to 'KEK' (Burton, 2016; Greene, 2019).

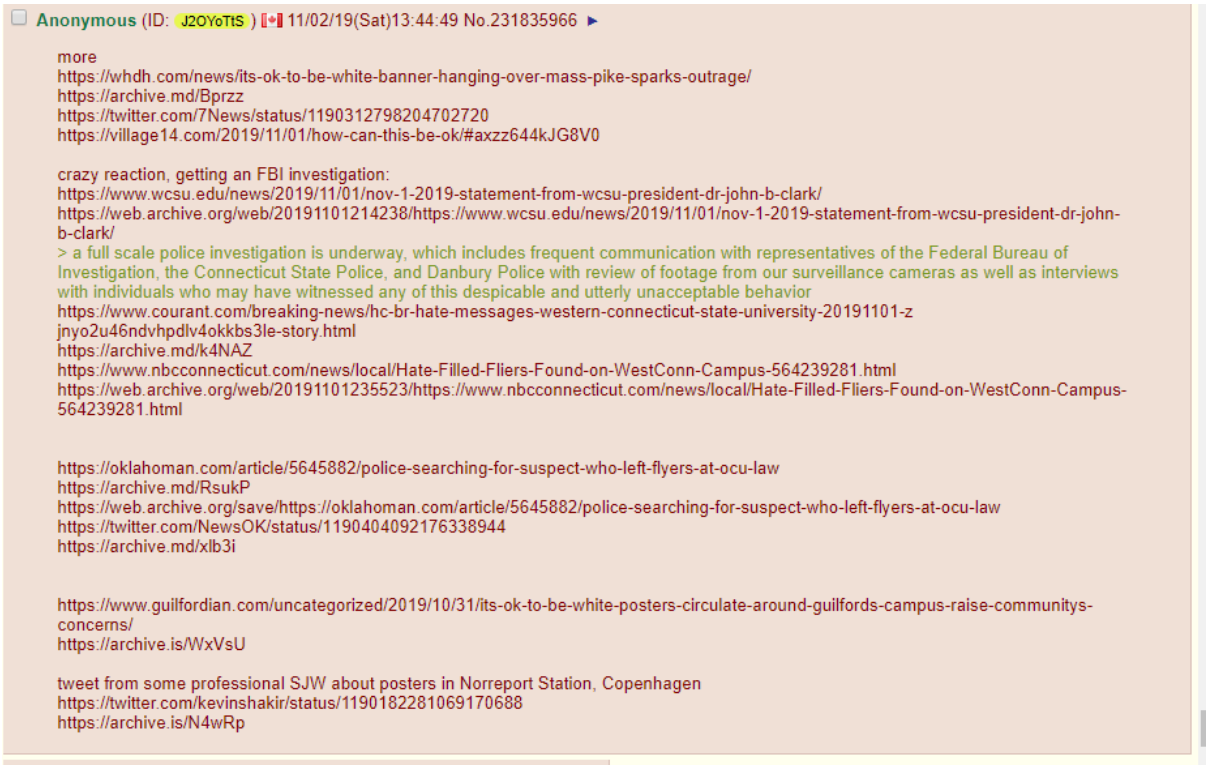


Figure 11: Users publish examples of 'salt' to /pol/

This chapter explores the IOTBW campaign and the way the Alt-Right's wider strategy of trolling veils their ideological material as a 'simple', 'harmless' prank. I argue that the 'salt-mining' excursions observed with IOTBW is one of many trolling campaigns serving to operationalise the the red pill awakening laid out in the previous chapter, into tactical 'red pill campaigns' aimed at widening the Alt-Right community globally. As well as widening awareness to their campaign, trolling is part of a processes of online othering where clear boundaries between insiders and outsiders are delineated, through memetic humour, but also in overtly bigoted ways. Thus trolling campaigns such as IOTBW, is one of the key ways in which adherents to Alt-Right ideology seek to afford themselves plausible deniability while simultaneously advancing inherently problematic views about essentialised 'Others'.

On the Salt Flats of 4chan: The IOTBW Campaign and Trolling the National Media

/pol/'s annual Halloween salt-mining expedition, dubbed 'Operation IOTBW' by holiday celebrants, serves as a useful reminder of how the Alt-Right weaponises the provocative,

antagonistic humour endemic to trolling for its own strategic ends (Blodgett & Salter, 2018; Ganesh, 2020; Green, 2019; Greene, 2019; Hartzell, 2018; Hawley, 2017; Hawley, 2019; Heikkilä, 2017; Kelly, 2017; Nagle, 2016, 2017; Neiwert, 2017). While the phrase itself dates back to some fairly 'old' white supremacist sentiment (see below), this specific ritual started in late-October 2017, when an anonymous /pol/ user posted to a thread entitled "DISTURBING POSTERS POP UP AROUND BOSTON COLLEGE".[34] In the thread, OP published an image from a local news story about several 'racist fliers' found pinned around Boston College's campus. The flier showed an image of an adapted Uncle Sam recruitment poster which read: "I want YOU to love who you are. Don't apologize for being white" (See Figure 12). Needless to say, the posters were widely condemned by the college's community and the police launched an investigation upon receiving reports (7 News Boston, 2017). The next day, October 25, 2017, an Anonymous user posted yet another thread dedicated to the Boston College story, encouraging his fellow Anons to take advantage of the public and mainstream media backlash against a comparatively 'trivial' message. "/pol/ i [sic] have an idea," the post began:

> recently a "disturbing" poster went up at Boston college (pic related). the left went ape shit and called the cops for an investigation and it made the news…. what if we made signs like this pop up in college campuses around the world? a simple sign that just says "its ok to be white" the left going apeshit over something so trivial would show just how anti white the political climate is and it would wake up normies/lemmings.

The original idea put forward in this archived thread propelled many /pol/ users into action and, between the 25-31 October 2017, they collectively designed a poster, planned their activity and set a global date – the eve of Halloween – to put their plan into action.[35]

[34] As 4chan threads are automatically deleted after a few days, the original discussion is not available. However, the thread has been archived and available to read on 4plebs: https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/146524824/#146524824

[35] While the original archived threads are too detailed to go into a great amount of detail about how the design of the poster was pitched, refined, and finalised, in this chapter, I have provided a list of these archived threads in Appendix B.

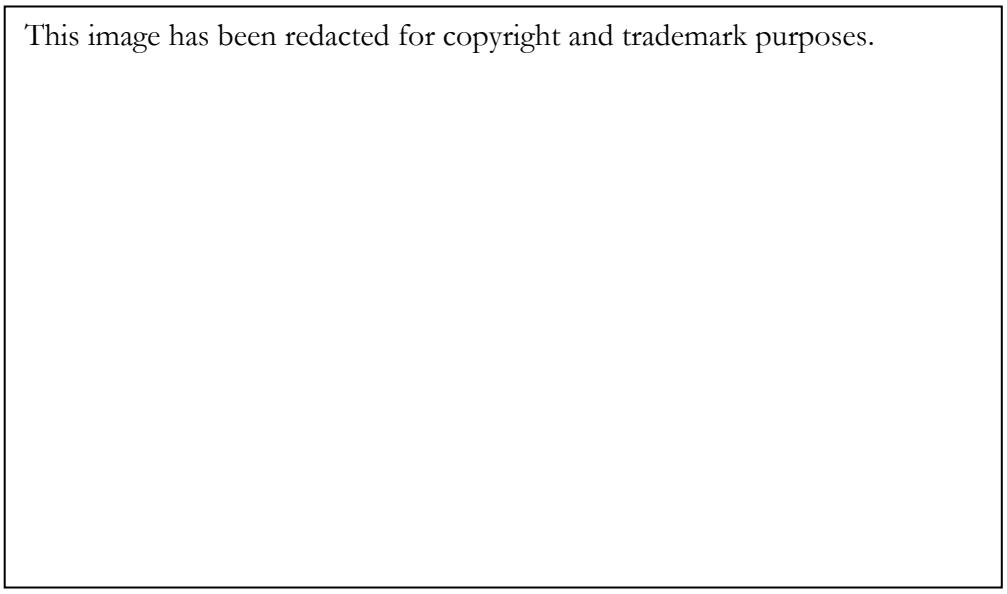


Figure 12: The poster inspiring the IOTBW campaign (source: 7 News Boston, 2017)

Although the final IOTBW poster may look like it was put together by a novice word processor user over the course of a few minutes and not by the hivemind of 4chan's 'Politically Incorrect' community over the space of several days, the amateurish look of the end product is the result of careful strategic planning. As Beilby (2017) points out, the original architects of IOTBW intended the poster to appear benign and trivial to amplify the emotional effect of any disproportionate mainstream media response to it. For users, the power behind IOTBW lies in its subtlety; it makes use of a plain white background and inoffensive font style precisely because 4chan users do not want to give their 'enemies' anything of substance – overt white supremacist/patriotic imagery, colours, even emboldened font or punctuation – to react against (Beilby, 2017).

If, as the above user suggests, the point of the campaign is to provoke the left into some kind of salty response, it seems to have been effective (Beilby, 2017). In the days following the first 'raid', several news items pertaining to the poster appeared in local news stations, particularly in the US (see for examples, Blazina & Myers, 2017; George, 2017; Hartman, 2017). The IOTBW poster has since generated widespread mainstream attention internationally as an apparent 'white supremacist' symbol (Beilby, 2017; Hawkman, 2019), each utterance of the phrase swiftly, decisively and, to the delighted amusement of the Alt-Right, publicly condemned. Internationally, the phrase has been

uttered by several politicians and popular news pundits, including far-right Australian Senator, Pauline Hanson, who proposed an "It's OK to be white" motion to the Australian Senate with the intention of highlighting the "deplorable rise of anti-white racism and attacks on Western Civilisation" (Bourke, 2018). In New Zealand, the popular auction site, Trade Me, removed the sale of some IOTBW t-shirts listed on its platform, causing the supplier, VJM Publishing, to shift to an alternative platform (Palmer, 2019). At the time, VJM Publishing claimed the t-shirts were a way of counter-signalling the "anti-white bigots" and encouraged buyers to "resist the Orwellian thought police with this t-shirt… help [us] stand up for free speech by telling them where to stick it!" (cited in Palmer, 2019).

As well as maintaining community cohesion, campaigns such as IOTBW, can be argued to be examples of the operationalisation of the red-pill into tactical red pill moments, where users attempt to generate widespread support for Alt-Right views. As I explain the following sections in this chapter, Operation IOTBW is an example of red pill operationalisation in two distinct ways. Firstly, the implicit messaging of the slogan itself plays on rhetors of white male victimisation through its allusions to the demoralising and emasculating forces of 'white guilt'. Secondly, as a trolling campaign, Operation IOTBW is designed to provoke shocked or outraged responses which can subsequently be repackaged as evidence that anti-Whiteness is an empirical reality.

The Operationalisation of the Red Pill Metaphor and Synthesising 'White Guilt'

As discussed in the previous chapter, the process of becoming red-pilled does not occur randomly or in isolation; it is instead premised on individuals encountering red pills which take them 'down the rabbit hole'. For users, these formative experiences with red pills are essential to the longevity of the Alt-Right; without taking the red pill, individuals remain ignorant to their racial and gendered reality and will continue to exist as unwilling subjects of subversive anti-White and anti-male forces. Given the centrality of red pill experiences, it is unsurprising that the act of red-pilling normies is constructed as a national 'duty' of sorts in Alt-Right spaces (Hawley, 2019; Marwick & Lewis,

2017). As a rough equivalent to conscious-raising, red-pilling involves conditioning young white men into seeing things through an Alt-Right lens (Hartzell, 2018; Hawley, 2019; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). In a bid to stimulate targets' racial/gendered awakenings, red-pilling manifests in red-pillers subversively exposing normies to snippets of racialised or gendered information. In short, the aim of such red pill campaigns is to bring potential sympathisers to the point of racial/gendered enlightenment described in the previous chapter, by subversively directing normies' attention to the 'reality' of anti-male and anti-white conspiracies.

As alluded to above, even the phrase, 'It's Okay to be White', is reminiscent of some of the core characteristics of red pills, drawing explicitly on rhetors of white male victimisation and elucidating a perceived erosion of Western white identity (Ganesh, 2020). In threads about the IOTBW campaign, this rhetoric is most often incited when users refer to a crippling sense of 'white guilt' that has demoralised the white nation. A central belief of white supremacist thought rests on the premise that young white men have been brainwashed into believing in their own personal culpability for race-based atrocities of the past, such as slavery and colonisation (Brown, 2009; Ferber, 2000; Schafer, Mullins, & Box, 2014). As Abby Ferber (2000) points out, such rhetoric recasts anti-racist endeavours – often epitomised by affirmative action programs in employment and education – as part of a widespread conspiracy to instil a deep-seated 'guilt complex' in all whites. Here, it is argued that guilt and shame are used as weapons to immobilise and demoralise straight white men (Ferber, 2000). In this context, the statement, 'It's Okay to be White', exists is a tacit suggestion that some unseen subversive forces believe the opposite to be true.

While the articulation of 'white guilt' is certainly not new to white supremacist discourse, it is nonetheless given a fresh lick of paint with the IOTBW campaign. In numerous threads dedicated to IOTBW, /pol/ users frequently post links to what they call the campaign's 'anthem': a song – entitled 'It's Okay to be White' – written and performed by white power band, Aggressive Force. The anthem's lyrics speak directly to perceived experiences with white guilt, users reminded that

they are "taught to feel guilty of the whole White race" before concluding with an annoyingly catchy chorus: "It's okay to be proud and it's okay to be bold and it's okay to be white." Users opting to have the anthem playing in the background can simultaneously read through the hundreds of posts from their 4chan peers, which seem to solidify their understanding of themselves as the oppressed subjects of 'white guilt.' In one discussion thread, for example, a /pol/ user posts a picture of the IOTBW poster, alongside the following question for discussion. "Hey bros," OP writes,

> why is it mostly white people that I've seen so far who are chimping out on this? I'm a third world flip myself, and i [sic] honestly don't see the problem with this statement. How can we convince people that this shit isnt [sic] even inherently bad or evil?

"Virtue signaling [sic]," the first reply reads, "they [white liberals] are hit hardest by the programming." Another user posts a graph taken from the American National Election Studies' [ANES] 2018 pilot survey, which purports to show mean in-group levels of 'warmth' towards different racial/ethnic groups (See Figure 14).

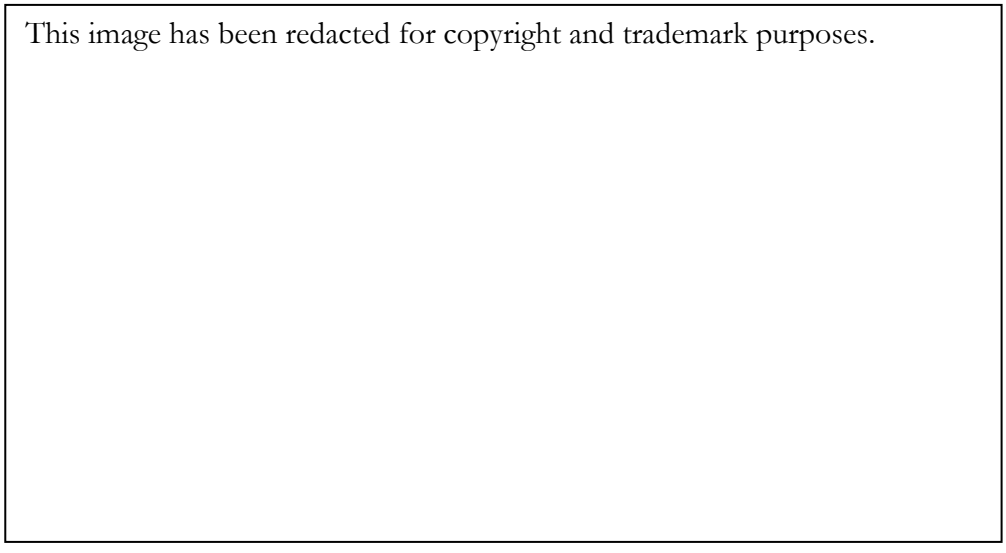


Figure 14: Re-posted ANES graph purporting to show mean in-group bias by race/ethnicity

The user accompanies the graph with a decontextualized quote taken from a separate source altogether, a media analysis of the ANES study published in an online Jewish Magazine, *Tablet*, which reads:

> white liberals were more favourable toward nonwhites and are the only group to show this preference for group [sic] other than their own. Indeed, on average, white liberals rated ethnic and racial minority groups 13 points … warmer than whites. As is depicted in the graph below, this disparity in feelings of warmth towards ingroup vs. outgroup is even more pronounced among whites who consider themselves 'very liberal' (Goldberg, 2019)

Despite quoting from a section of the article that actually analyses a separate graph to the one posted above, the Anon couples academic-looking data presentation with an analysis that reads similarly to a peer-reviewed scientific article to present white guilt as a scientifically proven phenomenon. In response to OP's question about why whites are so quick to 'chimp out' about the IOTBW campaign, the Anon concludes with their own personal analysis: "because ironically whites are the biggest adherents of antiwhite ideology. this [sic] kind of self hatred [sic] is unique to white westerners. white [sic] people need to realise that racetraitors [sic] are our chief enemy." By articulating their perceived experiences with white guilt, /pol/ users present themselves as combatants in the passive resistance needed to counteract the oppressive forces of white genocide. In this context, the phrase, 'It's Okay to be White' is imagined as a seemingly affirmative statement, asserting little more than whites' innate right to harbour pride in their own people.

"They Actively Hate Us for Being White": Evidencing Anti-Whiteness

Just as the implicit meaning of the phrase, 'It's Okay to be White' is laden with white victimisation narratives, successful red-pill campaigns, as explained above, require the active conditioning of potential sympathisers. As Hawley (2017) explains, Alt-Right trolls show little concern for what their opponents think of them, but they are not reluctant to capitalise on the perceived 'useful idiocy' of normies. Rather than shying away from near-universal opposition to trolling escapades,

Alt-Righters encourage each other to embrace it. As one instructional post on trolling, published in far-right blog, *The Right Stuff*[36] puts it:

> You should assume that you will never manage to convince your ideological enemies of the merit of your position. Rather, the purpose of trolling is to convince people reading your comments of the merit of your position. On many different web forums, lurkers outnumber posters by 10 to 1. The purpose of trolling raids is to convince these anonymous people, not the person you disagree with. As such, you can win hearts and minds even when met with universal opposition (cited in Hawley, 2017, p. 72).

In a paradoxical turn of events, then, part of the strategic motivation for Operation IOTBW is to stimulate the very anti-White sentiment that draws so much of the Alt-Right's ire (Beilby, 2017). As one /pol/ user explains in a discussion about the purpose of IOTBW, the point of the campaign is to "[prove] that no matter what white people do, it's always wrong". In this context, items of salt are essential commodities not just because they elicit 'liberal tears' (Tuters, 2019) – although this is undoubtedly a motivating factor. Rather, salt functions as "irrefutable" empirical evidence of the plight of the straight white man. In one post epitomising this sentiment, a /pol/ user writes in response to some salt: "They want us dead. They actively hate us for being white."

As this section has shown, /pol/ users' Halloween antics are a reminder of how the metaphor of the red pill is operationalised into sophisticated and deeply meaning tactical red pill campaigns. By regurgitating notions of 'white guilt' and 'victimisation' in the phrase 'It's Okay to be White', Alt-Righters effectively reproduce the idea that they are the subjects of subversive conspiratorial forces that espouse anti-White ideology. In addition, users' diligent mining of salt serves to evidence and entrench this conspiracy, thus aiding in the process of red-pilling any potential sympathisers. As much as this sentiment is actively manufactured in such trolling campaigns, the meaning derived from Operation IOTBW is simultaneously informed by its relationship to the 'Other'. In this way,

[36] *The Right Stuff* (TRS) is a neo-Nazi and conspiracy theory website that hosts s blog, a paid-for blog and several racist and antisemitic podcasts.

trolling exercises are constituent to processes of online othering as a mode of community construction and cohesion, a topic this chapter now turns to.

"(((White people)))": Marking the 'Other' in IOTBW

As scholars have pointed out, trolling is premised on an interactional negotiation of identity between the troll and an 'Other' (Hardaker & McGlashan, 2015), and it is for this reason that the practice is central to processes of online othering (Lumsden & Harmer, 2019). As Milner (2013, p. 88) argues, in his study of the 'logic of lulz' in 4chan and Reddit, trolling is a necessarily polyvocal phenomenon, where "publics need counterpublics [and] trolls need countertrolls". As a practice which necessitates the provocation of an 'Other' (Binns, 2012; Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014; Greene, 2019; Hardaker, 2010; Hardaker & McGlashan, 2015; Mantilla, 2015; Milner, 2013; Phillips, 2015), trolling campaigns only work insofar as they actually generate the intended response. Thus, trolls derive meaning from, and are empowered by, the target's reaction to the provocation, and it is from this antagonistic interactional negotiation that trolls come to define themselves in relation to the 'Other' (Hardaker & McGlashan, 2015).

As Phillips (2015) explains, humour – especially the vitriolic, abusive forms of humour inherent to trolling – lies at the nexus of social cohesion in trolling communities. As Phillips (2015, p. 28) elaborates, in trolling communities, "lulz functions both as punishment and as reward, sometimes simultaneously". The 'reward' with trolling is derived from the enjoyment a troll gets in provoking the shock, outrage, and offense they seek (Green, 2019). At the same time, by masking such provocative behaviours in "hyper-humorous, hyper-ironic and hyper-distanced" (Milner, 2013, p. 88) modes of communication, Alt-Right trolls draw on their own niche understandings of meme culture to delineate clear boundaries between in-groups and out-groups, those 'in' on the joke and the 'other', the 'normies' who take the joke too seriously. In Phillips' (2015) conceptualisation of the 'mask of trolling', 'lulzy play' is described as a process in which trolls decipher coded in-jokes which may be indecipherable to any outsider. In these communities, one's ability to successfully

decode a specific in-jokey reference – be it a meme, a slogan, a specific type of replicated activity, etc., - marks that individual as one of "'us' who laughs versus a 'them' who does not" (Phillips, 2015, p. 31).

A reminder of the specific mechanisms of trolling at play with IOTBW is useful here. As previously mentioned, in the context of 'new' or colour-blind racism, where old forms of entrenching racial 'Otherness' are now politically unpalatable (Perry, 2000, 2001), the Alt-Right weaponise the "hyper-humorous, hyper-ironic, hyper-distanced mode of discourse" (Milner, 2013, p. 88) endemic to trolling to afford the movement's antics a semblance of plausible deniability (Green, 2019; Greene, 2019; Hawley, 2017; Hawley, 2019; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Nagle, 2016, 2017; Neiwert, 2017; Wendling, 2018). In this discursive switch, what is otherwise earnest white nationalist sentiment – complete with its affirmation of whites' innate racial superiority and the 'threats' supposedly presented to it by the forces of multiculturalism, feminism and Jewish control – is repackaged in purportedly 'playful' or 'ironic' ways (Hartzell, 2018).

Like all trolling campaigns, IOTBW is motivated by generating 'lulz' - a form of sadistic humour that celebrates the anguish, distress, or outrage elicited from trolling targets (Buckels et al., 2014; Citron, 2014; Green, 2019; Greene, 2019; Hawley, 2017; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Massanari, 2019; Mantilla, 2015; Milner, 2013). With IOTBW, 4chan's 'Politically Incorrect' community engage in what Whitney Phillips (2015, p. 5), in her seminal study on the role of trolling in contemporary media culture, calls "media fuckery" which is "the ability to turn the media against itself… by either amplifying or outright inventing a news item too sensational for media outlets to pass up". This form of trolling often unfolds as a seemingly 'playful' 'game' where users compete to concoct the most creative ways of generating fake news items. This is evident in the observations presented above in the ways /pol/ users repeatedly modify the presentation of IOTBW's message; while most users happily publish the flier in its official plain-text form, others escalate their methods, with some hanging huge banners over busy motorways and making use of wireless file-sharing

apps on mobile phones. One Anon even claims to have hacked wirelessly into thousands of printers in Hawaii, before printing hundreds of IOTBW fliers on each device (Figure 15).

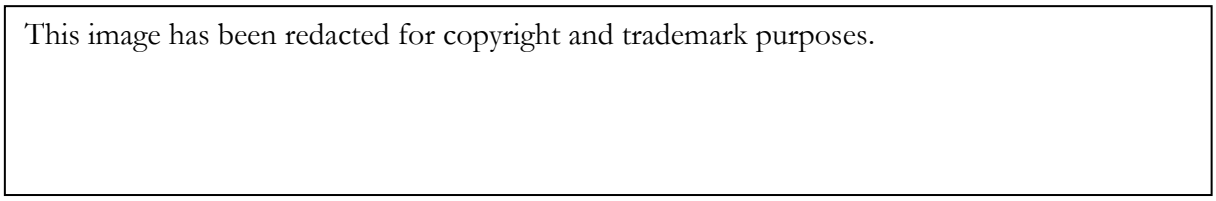


Figure 15: Hacking publicly listed printers

Although these behaviours are certainly symptomatic of what Phillips (2015) calls 'lulzy play', disregarding trolling activity like IOTBW as simply a 'prank' performed in the pursuit of 'lulz' belies the broader political context in which these kinds of behaviours occur (Green, 2019; Lumsden & Morgan, 2017; Phillips, 2015). The 'harmless prank' excuse used frequently by online trolls, as Jane (2014b) points out, is also often cited by individuals alleged to have committed hate crimes or hate speech in offline contexts. Furthermore, despite 'lulz' supposedly dishing out 'equal opportunity laughter' (Milner, 2013; Phillips, 2015) where anyone and everyone 'foolish' enough to take a troll's bait seriously is treated with open ridicule, research suggests that 'lulzy' humour is often mobilised to entrench pre-existing racial, gendered, religious, and ableist inequalities (Jane, 2014a, 2014b; Lumsden & Harmer, 2019; Lumsden & Morgan, 2017; Massanari, 2019; Milner, 2013). Thus, while it is certainly plausible that some online trolls genuinely believe their actions are performed "for the lulz" (Citron, 2014; Mantilla, 2015; Milner, 2013; Phillips, 2015), this excuse does not hold up to close scrutiny.

As previously mentioned, one of the purposes of humour is the creation of inner and outer groups in any community. Trolling and lulz seeking is no different. Lulz seeking facilitates the construction of community in transgressive communities by offering solidarity and an escape from loneliness and isolation. Pérez (2017, p. 958), for example, posits that sharing jokes at the expense of an out-group can "foster greater social affiliation and decreased social distance with their 'in-group'". Trolling also serves to shape online identities by entrenching an emotional gap between the trolls

and their victims (Green, 2019). It can also serve to police in-group members. As Green (2019) points out in his analysis of an Alt-Right trolling campaign which targeted two dissenting straight, white men, 'Carl the Cuck' and 'AIDsSkrillex', ridicule served to 'other' the targets' perceived homosexuality and femininity in order to position them as 'outsiders'. The purpose of trolling, in this context, was to clearly mark the boundaries of acceptability for adherents to Alt-Right beliefs. Most importantly, however, by packaging offensive behaviour as "just a joke" or "for the lulz" (Nagle, 2017), trolls are absolved from any serious responsibility. As Alt-Right insiders Bokhari and Yiannopoulos (2016) evasively argue, the "true motivation" of a troll is not bigotry or racism, but "lulz."

Indeed, there is a longstanding and well-established link between humour and the construction of in-group solidarity and cohesion (Pérez, 2017; Phillips, 2015). There is, however, a notable difference between the in-jokey references one might find in, say, the local university korfball team (#BowlsOfSoup)[37] and the kinds of explicitly racist, misogynistic, antisemitic, and Islamophobic humour endemic to the Alt-Right. In the case of Operation IOTBW, for example, although the trolling campaign is premised on an in-joke – where users derive an immense amount of pleasure from harvesting salt – the 'othering' occurring here is not just about having a laugh at the expense of an 'Other', it is derived from the meaning attached to *why* outsiders do not understand the memetic power of IOTBW. For users, this interactional negotiation of identity is always undergirded by racial and gendered meaning, although in keeping with the spirit of ambiguous dogwhistling inherent to trolling and the analogy of the red pill in general, essentialised knowledge about the 'Other' is often produced with the use of coded language and symbology which – again – requires a fairly well-versed subcultural in-group knowledge to successfully navigate. One example of this occurs when a user subtly indicates that opposition to IOTBW is the result of

[37] I would like to apologise for deliberately 'Othering' any readers in a bid to prove a point. Unlike the Alt-Right who mobilise humour for the purposes of exclusion, readers who are curious about the meaning of this in-joke are more than welcome to attend a VUW korfball session – of which the first two are free – where it will be explained in detail. Become one of 'us'!

Jewish brainswashing of the white population. The /pol/ack, who is potentially LARPing – yet another subcultural term which means 'Live Action Role Playing', alluding to a user who deliberately pretends to be someone they are not – posts the following message to an IOTBW thread:

> Im [sic] brown, Idc [I don't care about this poster]. It really is ok to be white just like it is ok to be any other color. Notice (((who))) is doing the complaining--either parentheses themselves or those trained by parentheses.

While it may initially appear to be an odd typo or technical glitch to the outside observer, the practice of enclosing words in (((triple-parentheses))) is a common white nationalist dogwhistle used to identify suspected Jewish people, or proponents of Jewish conspiracies, and mark them for potential harassment/targeting (Anglin, 2016; Lee, 2020; Tuters & Hagen, 2019). The practice, known as 'echoes' or 'echoing' in far-right circles, originates from a white supremacist podcast where the broadcaster used to play an ominous-sounding audio 'echoing' effect every time a person with a Jewish-sounding name was identified (Anglin, 2016; Tuters & Hagen, 2019). In this context, the above user's identification of "(((who)))" marks any dissenter or opponent of the poster as "parentheses", a term intended to signal a Jewish conspiracy or the obliging white 'slaves' of such conspiracies.

Having identified a Jewish-controlled 'Other', users can mark them as beyond the pale of racial belonging in /pol/ - as 'non-whites'. One user combines the practice of echoing with explicit processes of racial othering, writing: "[Opponents of IOTBW are] not white they're (((white))). (((White))) people can't stand it when white people don't hate themselves." Another user engaging in this practice posts a screenshot of a Twitter thread, where a self-identified Jewish woman condemns white fragility on social media during Stephen Lawrence Day, an annual commemoration of a 1993 racist attack in the UK which led to the death of 18-year-old black man, Stehpen Lawrence (See Figure 16). After quoting the aformentioned post about why it's mostly

white people 'chimping out' about IOTBW, the anonymous 4chan user identifies such dissenting whites as non-whites, writing: "(((White people)))".

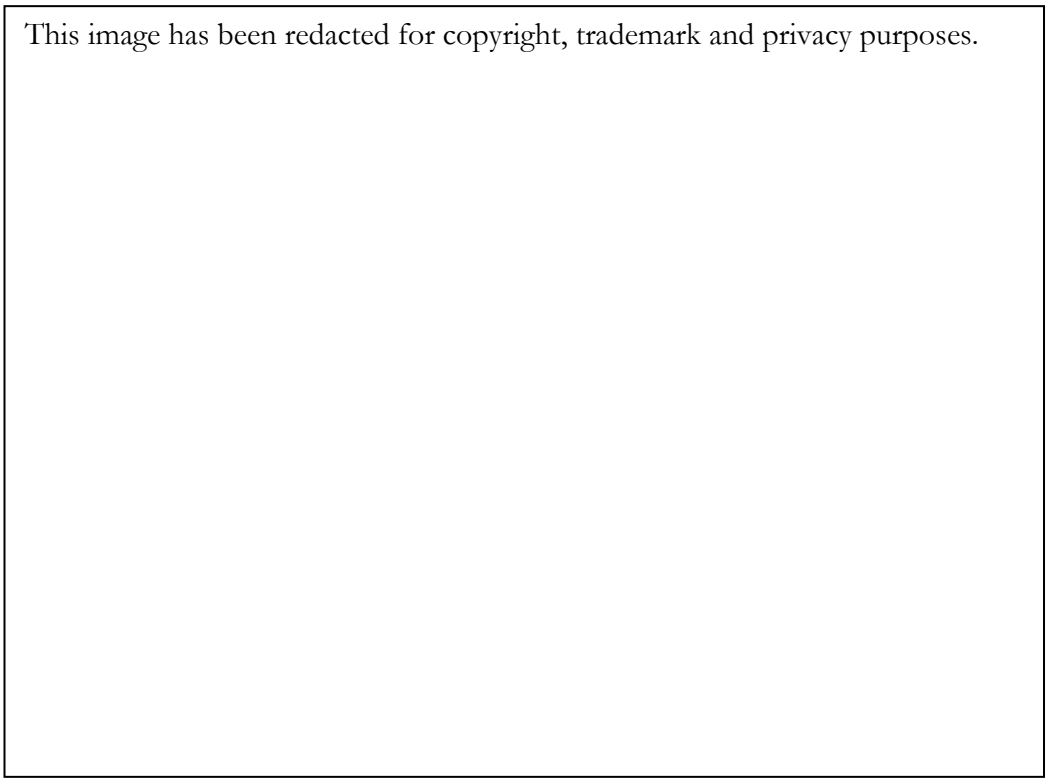


Figure 16: An (anonymised) Twitter user condemns white fragility on Stephen Lawrence Day in the UK

The above examples demonstrate how Alt-Right trolling campaigns, like IOTBW, are implicated into dualistic processes of 'nebulous othering' (Tuters & Hagen, 2019). With IOTBW, just as opponents to the poster are identified as 'humourless' 'Others' who have failed to demonstrate an understanding of the joke, they are simultaneously identified as 'non-White' 'Others' who are the unwitting 'White slaves' to 'white guilt', if not the actual Jewish agents of it, themselves. As identified in the previous chapter, this labelling of a non-White 'Other', an oppressive force supposedly seeking to eradicate all forms of whiteness, is mobilised into explicit campaigns of hatred. In response to one item of salt, for example, where a normie condemned a poster in her community on Twitter, one /pol/ user posted to the forum: "that sounds like a self hating [sic] White tranny or just a flat out [sic] Jew." As clearly identified by this user, opposition to IOTBW places the opponent in several categories of 'Otherness'. In addition to being outed as a person

not 'in' on the joke, they are identified as one of several potential 'enemies': a self-hating race-traitor, a 'tranny', or, if none of the above apply, a 'Jew'.

At times, classifying the 'Other' according to their 'Jewishness' moves beyond flippant allegations. On occasion, users will go on evidence-seeking missions to locate information that can be used to essentialise the 'Other'. In one prominent case from IOTBW 2019, 7 News Boston aired a short two-and-a-half-minute story about a bystander who stopped his car during his morning commute to take down an IOTBW banner hanging from a highway overpass. A textual report accompanied an online version of the story, the opening line reading: "An outraged man traveling on the Mass. Pike stopped his car Friday morning to rip down a sign hanging from a highway overpass in Newton that read "It's OK to be white" (7 News Boston, 2019). In an interview for the story, the bystander condemns the sign for its "straight-up racism", while an ADL expert labels the campaign as 'bigoted' and 'hateful' (7 News Boston, 2019).

For users, this kind of mainstream news item epitomises the exact qualities of salt they aim to generate, and as such, they proceed to bask in the glory of their salt-mining success on 4chan. Others, however, were more interested in the bystander's 'Jewish-looking' physical features and attire, taking advantage of an opportunity to mark him as an active agent complicit in the subjugation of whites. One /pol/ack posts a screenshot from the 7 News story which shows a portrait image of the bystander. "Here's the guy who tore down the sign in Massachusetts," the Anon writes. "Is he?" they ask. In response to this Anon's ambiguous question, another user replies: "the nose... the hollywood-like [sic] glasses... Oh yes he is." Another confirms, posting a text-based graphic which reads: "Large nosed man rubbing his hands together and smiling" (Figure 17).

Figure 17: A variation of the 'Happy Merchant' to signal an opponent's inherent Jewishness

The bystander's dualistic 'Otherness' as both a 'humourless normie' and an alleged Jew marks him as a ripe target for other, more insidious, forms of trolling. In one post on /pol/ about the bystander, for example, an Anonymous user describes him as a "Total jew [sic] boomer… joomer", whilst another post declares that "[Bystander's name]" is truly a Jew lmao!"

Summary

This chapter has explored 'Operation It's Okay to be White' (IOTBW), a trolling campaign designed to mask serious white supremacist sentiment as a harmless prank. As discussed in this chapter, the purpose of this salt-mining expedition is to operationalise the red-pilled sentiment described in the previous chapter to ultimately widen the reach of Alt-Right ideology and community. Much of the sense of community cohesion derived from the campaign stems from the shared joke between /pol/ users; by publishing this seemingly meaningless phrase around their local communities and triggering an apparently disproportionate response from its targets, /pol/ users indulge in their collectively-mined salt.

At the same time, this chapter reveals how adherents to red-pilled ideology use seemingly plausible deniable slogans that can be denied to be explicitly racist to both recast themselves as victims of 'white guilt' and reposition any opposition to the posters as 'anti-whiteness'. In this context, anyone protesting posters declaring that it's 'okay to be white' are recast as agents in a pervasive anti-white conspiracy or, if the opponent is white, as 'race traitors'. To aid in this process, /pol/

users deliberately seek out particularly emotive responses to the campaign as substantive proof of their own perceived victimisation. Having identified themselves as the outsiders, users engage in a process of othering by identifying stereotypical features that mark the 'Other' in essentialised ways.

At least at first glance, /pol/'s communal behaviour might seem relatively innocuous. Indeed, much of the behaviour observed during the campaign from 2017-2020[38] does not amount to anything illegal beyond breaching local tresspassing and advertising ordinances. Yet it is important to remember that any innocuity with IOTBW is by design and that the phrase is undergirded by some inherently toxic and harmful ideologies. These ideas – that whites are an oppressed minority, that the forces of feminism are corrupting Western values, and so on – is identical to that of several far-right terrorists who carried out racist attacks, especially in 2019. The next chapter turns to just one of these cases – the Halle Synagogue attacks from October 2019.

[38] A quick search of 4pleb's /pol/ archive revealed that the IOTBW tradition continued in several countries during Halloween in 2020.

Chapter Five: You Bollocksed it up, Herman: /pol/'s response to the Halle Synagogue Shooting

> Hi, my name is Anon, and I think the holocaust never happened. Feminism is the cause of the decline of the West which acts as a scapegoat for mass immigration. And the root of all these problems is the jew. Would you like to be friends? (Anti-Defamation League, 2019)

These were the words allegedly spoken by Stephan Balliet during a livestream broadcast on the popular game streaming platform, Twitch, on 9 October 2019.[39] Shortly after uttering these words, the 27-year-old attempted to attack a synagogue with home-made guns and explosives in Halle, Germany (Koehler, 2019). Prior to commencing the attack, the attacker posted an 11-page 'manifesto' and a link his livestream to the now-defunct German imageboard, Meguca, which was styled similarly to 4chan; Meguca trafficked in the same nods to anime subcultures, contained a plethora of far-right memes and, as the shooter identified, its users are generally known simply as 'Anonymous' or 'Anons'.

Shortly after starting the livestream, the man who appeared in the video mounted his smartphone to his military-style helmet, before filming himself as he drove to the synagogue in Halle.[40] Throughout the livestream, the shooter appeared to struggle with his home-made weapons, which repeatedly malfunctioned; his guns continuously jammed, and his explosives failed to detonate. He attempted to gain entry to his target, where a congregation of 51 worshippers were celebrating Yon Kippur (Koehler, 2019). As he approached the synagogue's wooden door, he fired his home-made shotgun at the locked barrier, without managing to gain entry. An attempt to breach the synagogue's entrances was again thwarted when the shooter's explosives did not work. By this point, Balliet was clearly frustrated with himself; he reportedly swore in German, sweated

[39] Despite admitting to the shooting and livestreaming the attack, Stephan Balliet is yet to go to trial at the time of writing. The actions described in this chapter must therefore be regarded as allegations as they have yet to be proven in court.

[40] The Halle shooter's livestream has been banned by the Chief Censor of New Zealand. Descriptions of it here rely on well-documented accounts found in the media, watchdog reports, and academic analyses.

profusely, and referred to himself as a "loser" at different stages in the stream. Having failed to gain entry to the synagogue, the shooter shot and killed a 40-year-old German woman walking nearby, accidentally shooting his rental car's front tyre in the process. The perpetrator then attempted to kill a second person who had stopped to assist the first victim, but his weapon jammed multiple times (Koehler, 2019). Following this, the attacker drove away from the scene aimlessly, before stopping at a Turkish kebab restaurant. There, a second victim, a 20-year-old man, was shot and killed. Approximately six minutes later, police arrived on the scene and engaged in a firefight, where the perpetrator sustained a minor neck injury, but was able to escape. He then changed vehicles in a neighbouring village, seriously injuring two more victims who refused to give up their car. He stole a taxi and attempted to flee, before causing a traffic accident with a heavy vehicle and was arrested at the scene of the crash, 25 miles from his initial target (Koehler, 2019).

The Halle synagogue shooting was eerily similar to other white supremacist attacks in 2019, including the March 15 mosque shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand (ABC News, 2019; Wendling, 2019), the Poway Synagogue shooting in California (Beauchamp, 2019; Warzel, 2019), and a white nationalist attack targeting Hispanic people in a Walmart store in El Paso, Texas (Macklin, 2019). Indeed, the Halle shooting was just the latest example of an emerging trend in globalised far-right violence. While each of these aforementioned attacks were obviously similar because they were rooted in white supremacist ideology, they simultaneously shared similar *modus operandi*, not seen before March 15 (Koehler, 2019). The perpetrators of all of these attacks demonstrated an intimate familiarity with chan culture, either through the inclusion of multiple references to popular subcultural memes, the use of language designed to provide a shout-out to extreme spaces like 4chan, 8kun and similar image boards; and the broadcasting of propaganda material on channels popular with people deeply entrenched in chan culture.

This chapter focuses on /pol/ users' responses to the Halle synagogue shooting as a case study. I explain a slightly perplexing series of interactions observed on 4chan's Politically Incorrect board

in the aftermath of the terror attack. Rather than openly celebrating Stephan Balliet, the Halle shooter was greeted with ridicule and mockery. Here, /pol/ users focused on the perceived 'failures' of the shooting – the relatively low 'kill count', the series of humiliating developments, the onscreen weeping, and so on – to position the attacker as an 'outsider' to the movement, despite his self-identification as an Anon. In addition to performing a function of social exclusion, memetic humour is mobilised to prescribe notable lessons other future terrorists can learn from Balliet's perceived 'failures. Thus/pol/ users use the 'loss' at Halle as a point of reflection, often asking the same question, sometimes unknowingly: "How can the next terrorist do better next time?"

"You bollocksed it right up, Herman": Responses to the Halle shooting on /pol/

"RIP /pol/", the title of the first thread I look at, reads. In the thumbnail, I see an image of the alleged shooter, presumably a screenshot from the livestream. In the photo, Stephan Balliet sits in his vehicle, looking ahead. He appears to be sweating profusely and while it is difficult to be sure, his watery eyes indicate that he may have been crying. The presentation of a *crying* terrorist perplexes me, as does the accompanying text: "Hanz Bumble Fuck Untermensch[41] is the final nail in the coffin and will be the last reminder of this place" OP writes.

Immediately underneath the first post, another user provides a green-text[42] version of events:

> >cringenat drives up to a synagogue
>
> >gets cucked by a door
>
> >tries to get pipe bomb but accidentally breaks his laptop
>
> >gets pipe bomb but fails at breaching the door
>
> >old lady tells him that he's retarded

[41] '*Untermensch'* is a German word denoting a racially or socially inferior person.

[42] In 4chan, 'green-texting' is a common form of communication. They can be divided into two categories: green-text 'stories' and '>implying' green-text comments. Green-text 'stories' are concise statements which relay the sequence of a story using 4chan's inbuilt green-text code. They are often used to summarise longer pieces of information/sources to make them more accessible and/or relay anecdotal experiences/stories without having to draft lengthy paragraphs. '>Implying' green-text comments use 4chan's green-text code to mock implications presented in another user's post.

>cringenat shoots old lady

>cringenat heads back to synagogue and still can't enter

>shoots old lady again but blows out his tires by accident

>wanders around panting, tries to shoot man but gun jams

>cringenat tries to shoot synagogue door while man honks at him repeatedly

>enters car

>screeches profanity

>apologizes to viewers for fucking up so badly

>drives to kebab shop while playing anime music

>tries to shoot men in kebab store but fails as he gets cucked by vending machine and gun jams

>tries to shoot nobodies on the street

>misses and gets cucked by gun jams AGAIN

>goes back into his car and screeches profanities while playing anime songs

>goes back to kebab store and kills dude behind vending machine by shooting him 3 times while playing dead

>drives tries to shoot at random civilians

>fails

>drives far away, breaks into tears, and calls himself a loser.

>throws his smartphone away on the street

This user's summary of the shooter's livestream focuses on many perceived 'failures' with the attack. In less than 200 words, the user has presented a concise narrative about how other Anons should respond to the shooting. The use of the insult, 'cringenat' is potentially a reference to the 'Cringeworthy' meme, a slang term used to denote a 'failed' phenomenon recorded on social media (Know Your Meme, 2013); here, 'cringe' and 'nationalism' are combined to prescribe an overarching identity for the shooter as someone who made a cringeworthy attempt at terrorism and who, in the words of another /pol/ user posting later in the thread, "failed laughably". The elements of cringe highlighted in the above post include multiple operational failures, including the shooter's inability to breach the target's doors, malfunctioning weapons, inadvertently destroying his vehicle and his laptop, and getting "cucked" by various inanimate objects. In addition, the user accents many of the seemingly 'cringe' elements voiced/performed by the shooter himself: Balliet 'screeches profanities', pants, plays anime music in the background,

apologises to his audience for "fucking up so badly", and calls himself a loser while allegedly weeping. For /pol/acks who may not have seen the livestream, this user's account acts as an authoritative source: "The greentext is on point," one user posts. "very good summary actually [sic]" another agrees.

Just as the 'cringenat' post is treated as an authoritative source, other users fill in missing details that have not been included in this green-text account. "You forgot the best bit, which happened later" one user posts, before providing their own green-text observation:

> The suspect tried to flee in a Volkswagen, he had rented from a car rental. It was followed by an 80 km long chase from Halle till Burgenlandkreis through entire Sachen-Anhalt. First he drove to Wiedersdorf near Landsberg. Armed with combat gear, helmet and heavy weapons, he heads to a workshop and demands a new car. But the employee refuses. An electrician also dismisses the suspect. Stephan Balliet then opens fire and shot the electrician.

Other /pol/acks chime in with their additional details:

> also he accidentaly [sic] turn [sic] on the windshield wipers

> I like how, after leaving the kebab shop, he apologizes to the viewers (again) for fucking everything up and admits that they are probably laughing at him. The only spark of intelligence in the entire shit-show.

Here, users of /pol/ discuss the latest form of right-wing 'entertainment' at great length. Just as they reportedly did with other far-right massacres, users relay their favourite moments in detail. At times, an appreciation of the entertainment value of the shooting is expressed using simple affirmative sentences/phrases:

> My sides
> Holy fuck this is hilarious hahahahaha.
> Topkek
> This guy was just too nervous to do achieve [sic] anything, Trying [sic] to open the front door was laughable
> Epic fail

A notable feature of these comments is that they do not appear to celebrate or glorify the actions of the killer; thus, in stark contrast to Balliet's predecessors who are openly lauded as heroes, the Halle shooter is the subject of intense ridicule. Far from sharing a joke *with* the terrorist, /pol/ users share jokes at his *expense*. Such interactions are sourced from a deep-seated sense of disappointment and embarrassment emanating from the perceived failures of the attack. As one Anon puts it: "This has been the single most embarrassing moment I've ever experienced as a kraut on /pol/," while another criticises the shooter's "sloppy" craftmanship: "Seriously, Herman, you bollocksed it right up…. Fucking embarrassing."

Proximity and Symbolic Threats

The responses to the shooting on /pol/ seem perplexing at first. Where one might expect users of the forum to celebrate a self-identified insider taking their white racist violence to the real-world, Balliet is framed here as a grossly incompetent idiot, who has embarrassed both himself and the Alt-Right community. He is multifariously described in the various observed threads dedicated to the topic in the following ways: "fuck up", "idiot", "autistic cunt", "faggot", "time waster", "beta terrorist", "subhuman shithead", "bitch", "pathetic", "swarthy german [sic] mother fucker", "random retard", "pussy", "incel", "utter spastic", and so on. Just as users quickly lobby a series of insults at the shooter himself, they simultaneously take aim at his actions, criticising his methods:

> [Streaming on] Twitch was a mistake
>
> watching the vid. Did this guy have any fucking idea what he was doing? Pathetic on so many levels. And how in the fuck is he just on the street fucking off for so long… What in the actual fuck. And he obviously has no idea how to use those firearms. Call of Duty isnt [sic] quite as realistic as he thought?
>
> He could have opened the garage door in the synagoge [sic] [by] pushing [it] with the car VW.
>
> kraut couldnt [sic] even get past a door
>
> Brentan [sic] spent two years preparing for the event and was armed to the teeth. And this guy used the most unreliable weapons one could imagine. I can understand his point, but really... Did he even test the guns? He

> knew they would jam 90% of the time and you can't expect mass shooting to be succesfull [sic] when your weapons are complete shit.

Here, users subject Balliet to a process of peer-review where his identity is ridiculed and his methods mocked. He is subsequently presented as an incompetent shooter, unworthy of any praise. One Anon summarises the communal attitudes towards the shooter in the following way: "He was a terrible shooter, but at least hes [sic] a pretty good joke."

Targeted ridicule and abuse, such as this, are common in spaces like 4chan (Green, 2019; Greene, 2019; Hawley, 2017; Lees, 2016; Lyons, 2017; Nagle, 2017; Powell, Stratton, & Cameron, 2018; Rambukkana, 2019). Yet, when insults such as "faggot", "cunt" and "retard" are used, they are generally directed at conventional outsiders to the movement who seem to represent the 'politically correct' culture its members profess to stand against: feminist gamers (Greene, 2019; Hawley, 2017; Main, 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017), effeminate men (Green, 2019), non-white adversaries, and so on. What is notable about the Halle shooting is that the central target of ridicule does not appear, initially at least, to be a conventional outsider to the Alt-Right. In fact, the shooter is, for all intents and purposes, a member of the very in-group tearing him apart online; like his abusers, he too identifies as an 'Anon', he also espouses beliefs that deny the Holocaust, he is anti-feminist, anti-immigration and he has perpetrated an antisemitic attack, which, had it been 'more successful', would almost certainly have been *lauded* on 4chan.

Stephan Balliet's case bears some resemblance to Green's (2019) analysis of a separate case of targeted ridicule within the Alt-Right. Two 'characters' lie at the centre of Green's (2019) analysis: men who would soon receive the nicknames, 'AIDS Skrillex' (AS) and 'Carl the Cuck' (CC). In 2016, a video of both men at a campaign rally for then-presidential candidate, Donald Trump, was circulated widely online. In the video AS and CC, both white men, are seen debating Owen Shroyer, a pro-Trump radio host. Videos of the heated exchange went viral on 4chan's /pol/ board and soon, both dissenting white men were the subjects of an intensive abuse campaign; AS's

and CC's real names, social media accounts, and phone numbers were soon published online, and both were the central figures in a number of visual memes mocking the exchange. The memes targeting AS and CC cast them as effeminate, homosexual white liberals, yet as Green (2019, p. 82) argues, it was their proximity to their opponents which ultimately drove the intensity of the attacks:

> AS and CC are particularly disruptive as strangers. They are straight, white men. Men who are not economically or geographically distant—they are not easily identifiable as being part of a liberal metropolitan elite—but men very much like those who are attacking them online. They speak the same language, dress the same, visit the same bars and eat the same food. They could be neighbours, they could be work colleagues. It is this closeness that both intensifies their disruptive power and drives the ferocity of the attacks against them.

If AS and CC represent a proximate threat as disruptive *strangers*, the disruptive power of the Halle shooter rests in his self-identity as an 'Anon', an anti-feminist, anti-immigrant, Holocaust denier. The proximate threat the shooter supposedly represents to Anons is explicitly acknowledged by them. After receiving a detailed account of the shooting, one Anon states: "JUST… FUCK. Tell me he didn't post here." "he [sic] probably did, judging by his competetence [sic]" one user replies. "Yeah he's a cringe autist calling himself "Anon" and listening to weeb tunes in his car, so [him posting here is] basically a guarantee" says another.

'Doorcuck': The Estrangement of a Terrorist

The proximate threat posed by the Halle shooter necessitates an intense communal deconstruction of his identity. Drawing on memetic irony, users attack the perceived affiliation the shooter claims to have with chan culture, thus estranging him from the collective. There are a number of attempts to do this in the dozens of threads about the shooting, but the renogotiation of the shooter's identity as a Holocaust denier in particular provided the memetic material needed to successfully recast Balliet as an 'outsider'. Here, the fact that a *wooden* door ironically stopped Balliet from gaining entry to the synagogue is juxtaposed with his claim that "the holocaust never happened"

(Anti-Defamation League, 2019). Like the far-right shootings that inspired the attack in Halle, /pol/ users derive memetic meaning from the events presented in the livestream, although these memes ultimately serve to share jokes at the killer's *expense*.

Of all the derogatory names thrown at Balliet, one nickname in particular sticks: "Doorcuck". The first reference to the term appears in the thread, 'RIP /pol/', mentioned above, when the user who posted a green-text version of how the terrorist attack unfolded emphasises the moment when Balliet gets "cucked by a door". 'Cuck' is a term derived from 'cuckold', or the husband/partner of an adulterous spouse. It is also a genre of pornography, which involves, generally white, men witnessing their partners have sex with other, usually black, men (Green, 2019; Kelly, 2017; Lyons, 2017). Use of the term in Alt-Right speak is partially symptomatic with the movement's seeming obsession with black 'hyper-sexuality' and the perceived white women's sexual 'degeneracy' brought about by Western feminism and 'political correctness' (Kelly, 2017). The underlying sentiment of the racialised term refers to a metaphorical 'cuckolding' the white nation faces at the hands of a non-white foreign entity (Nagle, 2017). In the Alt-Right, the term is most frequently used to deride 'cuckservatives', establishment conservatives who are seen to be complicit in the degradation of Western 'white values' (Main, 2018), yet it also refers to a general state of mind, where forwarding multicultural ideals is seen to be synonymous with being automatically submissive to a foreign 'Other' (Kelly, 2017). Taken in this context, the phrase, "cucked by a door", positions the Halle shooter as a submissive, effeminate white man, who – by mere implication of being labelled a 'cuckold' – fails to assert his 'rightful' place in the white male hegemony. Thus, despite the shooter's self-identity as an 'Anon', a term employed to signal his in-group belongingness to the Alt-Right, users of /pol/ engage in processes of deliberate estrangement, where Balliet's identity is renegotiated and ultimately settled as a 'beta cuck', the antithesis of the white masculinist ideal many of its contributors strive for.

If identifying the shooter as a 'cuck' was not enough to satisfy fellow /pol/acks' need to position the terrorist as an outsider, the shooter was soon given a new nickname which would ultimately settle this status: 'Doorcuck'. In one thread, entitled 'DOORCUCK MEME THREAD', a user encourages others to "post the best [memes] you have". Other Anons quickly oblige by publishing a series of static image-based memes, most of which are designed to mock the shooting and the perpetrator behind it. That the shooter was supposedly 'cucked' by an inanimate object features prominently in the memes published in this thread. One meme uses the 'Who Would Win?' meme format, an image series which presents two opponents against each other in a hypothetical battle (Know Your Meme, 2017b); of the many iterations of this meme, one positions 'one autistic goy' against 'a synagogue door' (See Figure 18). Another pits a 'Nazi incel' against a 'wooden door' (Figure 19). Another pits 'one autistic goy' against 'a synagogue door' (Figure 19). Another meme uses the 'I Fear No Man' meme template, a series of remixable images, videos and GIFs which borrow from a promotional video for the video game, *Team Fortress 2* (TF2). In a typical iteration of the meme, a stoic character, originally 'the Heavy', a leading playable character in TF2, is depicted proudly declaring they 'fear no man' before admitting one vulnerability (Know Your Meme, 2017a). In this context, the Halle shooter is shown professing a chronic fear of wooden doors (See Figure 20).

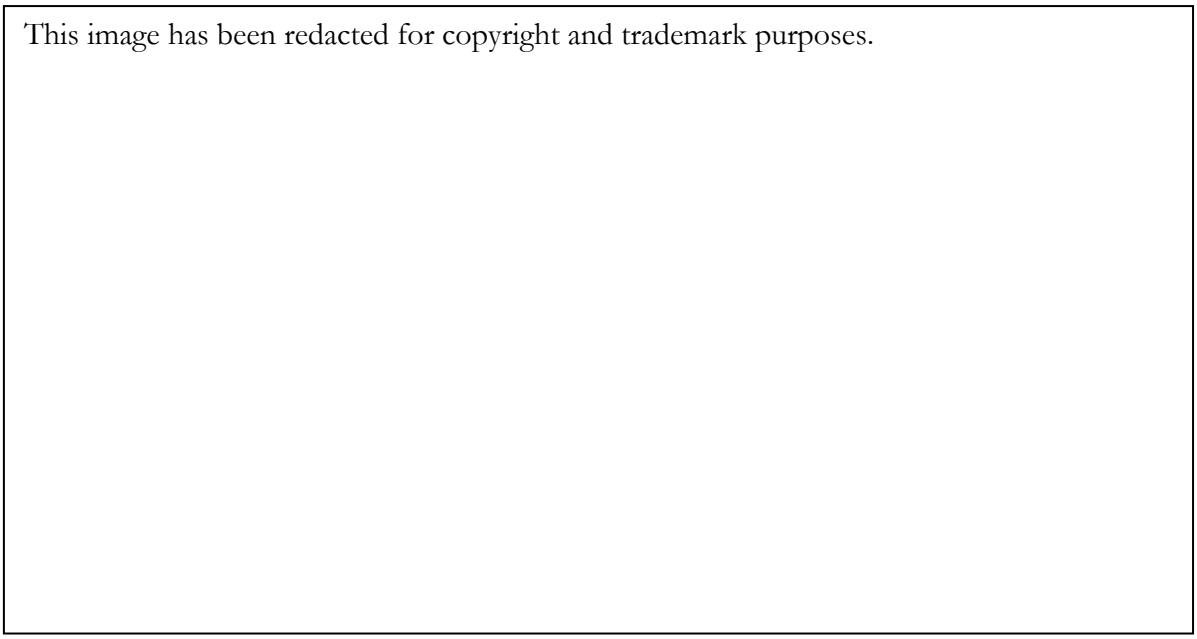


Figure 18: A 'Who Would Win?' meme pitting 'one autistic goy' against 'a synagogue door

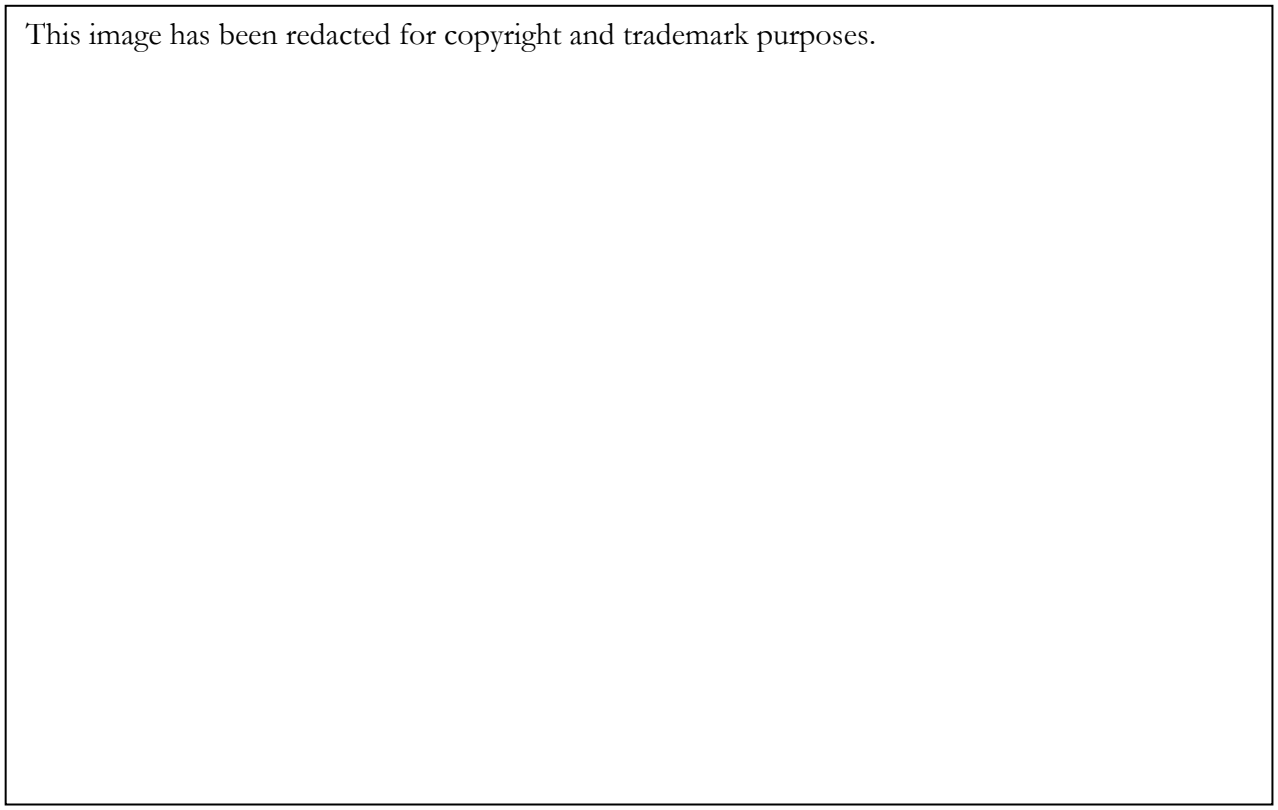


Figure 19: A 'Who Would Win?' meme pitting a 'Nazi Incel' against a 'wooden door'

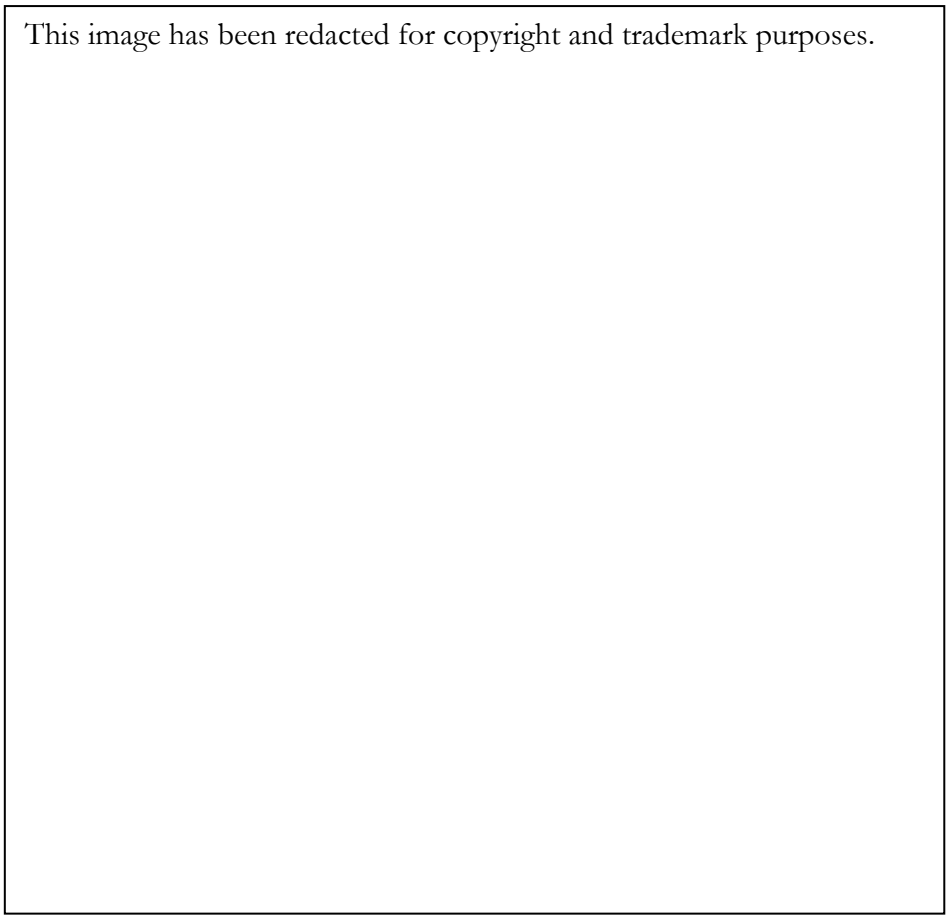


Figure 20: An 'I Fear No Man' meme, depicting the alleged Halle shooter confessing his fear of wooden doors

"Fucking Wooden Doors"

While the shooter being barred by a door undoubtedly positions him as an incompetent 'cuck' – at least from the perspective of /pol/ users – an interpretation of the shooting, and the memes that it inspired, would be incomplete without assessing the meaning ascribed to the door in question, specifically the material from which it was made. Among the many false claims about the Holocaust that so-called 'Revisionists' make, one focuses on a wooden door found in the gas chamber at Auschwitz extermination camp (Miller, 1995). As the 'Revisionist', Germar Rudolf (2003), put forward, the gas used to execute captives in the Holocaust, Zyklon B, requires an airtight room in order for it to be effective. In addition to positing that Zyklon B was actually used as a lice disinfectant and not as an agent to exterminate Jewish prisoners, Rudolf (2003) points to a widely-circulated photograph of a wooden door in the gas chamber at Auschwitz as evidence

(See Figure 21). The central argument of this particular Holocaust denial myth is that a wooden door does not provide the air-tight conditions needed to contain the gas in one room, thereby 'proving' that the Holocaust either did not happen or that it was 'exaggerated' (Miller, 1995; Rudolf, 2003). The conspiracy theory surrounding the lack of air-tight conditions within the chamber is not the only denial myth featuring a wooden door; deniers also point out that at least one of the doors within the gas chamber opens inwards, where, presumably after a mass-gassing, hundreds of bodies would remain. Deniers therefor lobby two accusations based on this observation: firstly, had bodies piled up in the gas chamber, it would be impossible to re-enter the room with a door that opened inwards, and secondly, the flimsy design of the door in question would not be strong enough to withstand the force of Holocaust victims who, once they realised they were being murdered, would be in a state of immense panic, and would have presumably attempted to break the door down (Rudolf, 2003). Thus, this image shown in figure 21, often used as 'evidence' in 'Revisionist' groups, implies that a wooden door does not provide the air-tight conditions needed to successfully exterminate victims and consequently provides proof of their conspiracy theory.

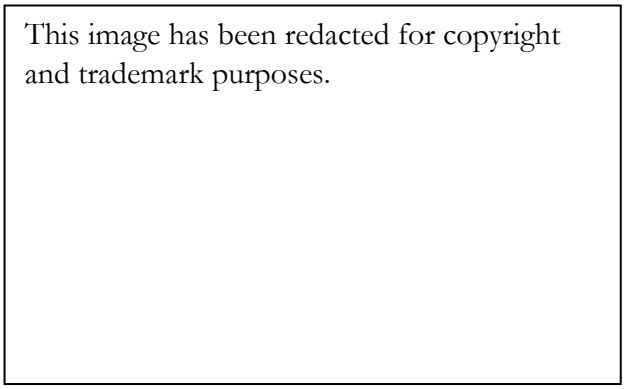


Figure 21: The two doors often used to deny the possibility of the Holocaust (source: Rudolf, 2003, p. 24)

For the antisemitic contributors to /pol/, a substantial component to Holocaust denial rests on the assumption that wooden doors are materially weak and ultimately incapable of withstanding the brute force of a person dedicated enough to get through them. In this context, the appearance of a wooden door during the Halle synagogue attack represents a formidable symbolic foe. When

the shooter fails to break the wooden door at the synagogue down, a foundational premise of Holocaust denial – and, by extension, the shooter's identity – is undermined, an ironic point not lost on /pol/'s contributors. For example, one user jokes: "WTF I believe in the Holocaust now!?" In another thread, which simply refers to the shooter as a "fucking loser" in the title, an Anon posts the following message: "A fucking wooden door… reminds me of another fucking wooden door." Other users on /pol/ follow suit, posting similar comments. For example:

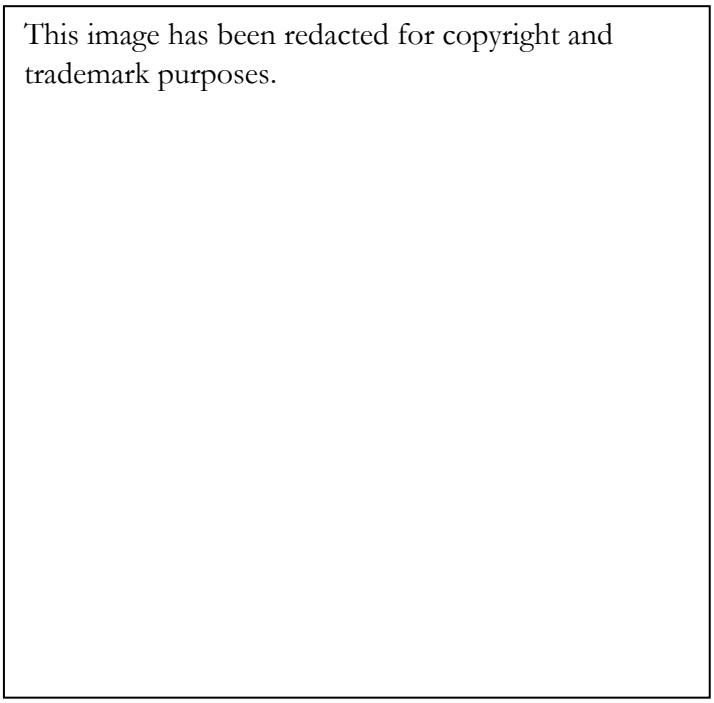
> /pol/ BTFO[43] by wooden doors
>
> wooden doors stronger than previously thought!
>
> So the Jews have proven wooden doors to be sturdy and safe. Interesting.
>
> >holocaust denier is stopped by a WOODEN DOOR

This single moment which spans just a few seconds in the livestream provides more than enough grist for the memetic mill and is repeatedly referenced in the numerous memes posted in the aftermath. By labouring this point over and over again, /pol/ contributors reinforce Balliet's position as a 'weak terrorist' but also as an inadvertently hilarious meme. As one user puts it: "Honestly one of the most incompetent shooters I have ever seen. This guy did absolutely ZERO planning, failed to do a proper reconnaissance of the area, did not stress test his weapons, and most of all proved his physical weakness to the world when he failed to break down a flimsy wooden door."

In the DOORCUCK MEME THREAD, a user remixes the 'Ay, Tone' meme, a series of memes often used to forward antisemitism, which parrot the speech patterns of a character from the television show, *The Sopranos*. In the image posted on /pol/, *The Sopranos'* character, Tone, asks: "Wooden doors?"; Paulie replies: "Ay, Tone. On my mudda. Wooden doors."; "Geddafuckouttaheeee." (See Figure 22). Another regurgitated meme which featured prominently

[43] 'BTFO' means 'blown the fuck out', and is typically analogous to terms such as 'owned' or 'wrecked'.

in numerous threads about the Halle shooting took a screenshot from the shooter's livestream which shows him standing outside the synagogue's wooden door, home-made weapon in hand; on the building's brick wall is a plaque which simply reads ">Wooden doors" (See Figure 23).



22: 'Ay, Tone' meme referencing wooden doors

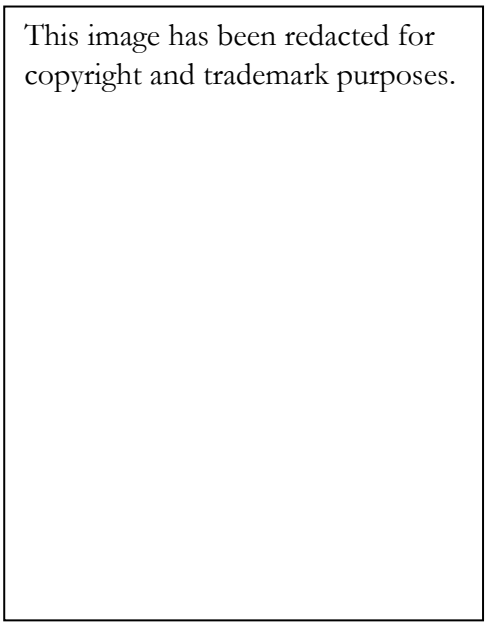


Figure 23: Screenshot from the shooters' livestream showing the ">Wooden doors" imprint

Thus, recognising the proximate threat presented by the shooter, users of /pol/ seek to deliberately estrange him from the in-group. To do this, they predominantly capitalise on the memetic potential of one pivotal moment in the shooting: Balliet's inability to break down a wooden door at his target. Not only does this moment solidify his status as an effeminate 'beta terrorist', it simultaneously undermines his position as a holocaust denier. The shooter's identity is consequently translated from an "Anon" and a "holocaust denier" to a "Nazi incel" and "Doorcuck".

"Not One of Us": The communal rejection of a failed terrorist

Having positioned Balliet as an embarrassment, /pol/ users engage in a deliberate process of estrangement, where Anons dissociate the community from right-wing extremism. This estrangement is performed in two key ways with Halle: (1) the *rejection of violence,* and (2) the *detachment of belonging.*

In the first discursive manoeuvre, glorification of the shooting and the shooter himself is explicitly *rejected*, as the following interaction shows. In DOORCUCK MEME THREAD, an Anon using the German flag posts the following message discouraging others from publishing memes which may be misconstrued as glorifying white supremacist violence. The threat posed here, the user argues, is that the shooting could be used to shut /pol/ down, a response which would prove disastrous for the rest of the community: "[This is a] Jew thread so they can later point to all the "memes" 4chan created saying we glorify this kind of shit." Other /pol/acks reject the notion that any glorification of violence is taking place. Replying to the above post using green-text irony, one user writes:

> >we glorify this kind of shit
>
> >literally every meme is mocking the retard

Another user quickly rejects the notion that anyone on /pol/ is celebrating the attack: "nobody glorified a single thing he did, everyone [here] is making fun of the German incel." Again, responding to the accusation that the shooter's behaviour is at the heart of celebration on /pol/, one user points out that most material posted in the aftermath of Halle openly mocks the shooter:

> Most of the jokes here are clowning on this literal retard who wanted to pull a New Zealand 2.0 complete with anime and random /pol/ memes but was just exposed as the limp wrist he was when it got to the door

These comments afford Anons a degree of plausible deniability (Hawley, 2019; HoSang & Lowndes, 2019) which serve to dissociate chan culture from the perpetration of horrific violence. At the same time, however, many of the comments are characterised by 4chan's infamous sense of irony that is often difficult to read through. Just one example of this occurs when one user who posts a comment where, if taken literally, the text claims /pol/ is a peaceful environment: "4chan is tame and only a few threads are from these racist autistic cunts. Most of us know the world is filled with good people trying to make a living for their families." Just as the text of the comment appears to disavow violence, it makes an appearance in a thread where links to the Halle shooter's livestream are readily distributed, memes deifying the Christchurch killer are frequently published, and graphic images depicting the murder of Jews, Muslims and other minorities are commonplace. In this sense the sub textual positionality of the user's outwardly plausible comment is juxtaposed with its sandwiched positioning between two memes: one depicting Pepe the Frog looking through the scope of a sniper rifle while the user calls for the murder of Angela Merkel, another showing the Happy Merchant, an antisemitic memetic caricature being shot at point blank range with the comment, "Fight Global Warming. Help save the planet. Kill a Jew."

In a second discursive manoeuvre, users work to *dissociate* the Halle shooting perpetrator from chan culture as much as possible. In response to a user who suggests that the shooter must have posted frequently on /pol/, one Anon points out that the manifesto and livestream link were posted on a "tiny g*rmanoid [sic] imageboard" and immediately clarifies: "We are mocking him

here." The user has drawn a clear 'us' and 'them' distinction by singling out the German origins of the obscure anime imageboard, Meguca, as *separate* to 4chan, notwithstanding notable stylistic similarities between the two boards. Other Anons agree with this analysis, with varying degrees of severity:

> I bet he was a dailystormer autistic cunt who maybe visited 4chan once in awhile [sic]
>
> this guy clearly isn't one of us [sic]
>
> That guy was fucking pathetic, don't associate him with here

/pol/ users recognise the dangers of being associated with right-wing extremism. Despite the terrorist's self-identification as an 'Anon', /pol/acks work to find any evidence whatsoever that sever ties to the Alt-Right. To do this, they point to other racist communities, such as *the Daily Stormer*, and make pointed statements about whether he *belongs*. This rejection of violence and of a violent person should not be misconstrued as the users of /pol/making a sudden widespread commitment to non-violence, but rather as an instrument to establish norms around 'acceptable' (i.e. 'competent') terrorism. Extremism is not admonished *per se*, rather 'poorly planned' or what users call 'low IQ' terrorism, is condemned.

"We Can Learn from This": The Lessons of 'Fail' Terrorism

Just as /pol/ users subject the Halle shooter to severe ridicule, they opportunistically capitalise on the potential to learn from the terrorist's mistakes. These lessons are often discussed in terms of the Halle shooter's relatively 'low score' (Ebner, 2020b; Evans, 2019). As I observe a thread about the attack, one user refers to the shooter's 'score' before encouraging others to reflect on the fact that Halle was supposedly carried out by an 'incompetent terrorist':

> The most dangerous [thing] this cunt did was set the bar to the lowest possible point. A down syndrome autismos sperg could out perform this dumb cunt. Just think about that for a moment.

Another user ponders on 'what might have been' had the shooter not been "too autistic to acquire an actual firearm. Or if he knew how to scale a wall. Or not nigbraining out at a flimsy door." Both of these comments involve a similar rhetorical move. Firstly, the shooter is described in a derogatory way – as a "cunt" or "autistic"[44] – before expressing a yearning sentiment for an alternative outcome. Finally, both of these comments have an implied suggestion that someone attempt to 'outperform' the Halle shooter. Thus, the scripts used to demean Balliet as an 'outsider' are translated into motivational learning curves: "If Stephan Balliet, an 'incompetent incel cuck', can perpetrate a shooting", this narrative seems to say, "imagine what a *competent* Anon with a real gun can do."

Indeed, much of the commentary on /pol/ does not disavow Balliet's violence *per se*; rather a common narrative that emerges is that Doorcuck simply was not the "best" person for the job. This sentiment is often iterated with references to 'high IQ' shooters, such as Anders Breivik and Brenton Tarrant[45]. For example: "Pol should rather realize that have [sic] to be high iq [sic] to achieve anything. Brentan [sic] spent two years preparing for the event and was armed to the teeth." Another user posts the following comment: "Alright /pol/ this convinced me that all successful shootings have to have backing."

The above sentiment suggests that, even though the Halle terrorist apparently failed, there are still notable lessons onlookers can learn from such mistakes. As a result, users guide and coach their peers on how to get a 'score' higher than the terrorist at Halle (Ebner, 2020b; Evans, 2019; Nagle, 2017). For example, one Anon makes recommendations about how to maximise time arguing that the Halle shooting proved "you can have an ass load of time to [do] your damage" before pointing out that the shooting was only using DIY weapons. "Think what you will," this user concludes,"

[44] Some caution is needed when interpreting the use of the word 'autistic' or 'autist' in 4chan. The word can carry multiple meanings, depending on context. The term 'autist', for example, is an ambiguous term on 4chan which can be both a positive affirmation and an insult.
[45] Whether either of these men actually had a high IQ is besides the point. 'High IQ' in this context refers to whether someone appears outwardly intelligence or well-prepared.

"but you can still learn from this video." The levels of commitment to this pedagogical task vary, with one user taking the time to write a 236-word suggestion for how the next shooter can maximise their time. This /pol/ack stresses that it ultimately does not matter "if objectives have been completed or not.". One user acknowledges the perceived 'failure' of Balliet's actions, before offering words of encouragement: "Greentext failed, [but] we'll get them next time".

Thus the ridicule lobbied at Balliet does not only entrench the killer's 'othered' identity, but is also utilised to present him as a 'useful idiot', a term to denote a person who often inadvertently mobilises for a cause without fully appreciating the intended goals, aims, or objectives of the movement (Green, 2019). In this presentation, the killer is still an 'outsider' but one with an ambiguous placement in the Alt-Right. There are many comments on /pol/ which position Balliet as a wayward, poorly-disciplined, poorly-prepared or aloof terrorist simply in need of adequate mentorship from more 'learned' shooters. As one Anon puts it, "We need *better people* to kill… kikes, not some random retard [Emphasis Added]." After acknowledging the shooter's failures, one poster on /pol/ puts a call out for another mentor to come forward: "Can someone please show him how it's done," they write, "tarrent part 2 :)"

Summary

The final case study of this thesis relates to /pol/ users' responses to an event of global significance: The Halle Synagogue shooting in Germany. As explained in this chapter, this far-right attack was similar to many of its predecessors – including an attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, an attack on Latinx shoppers in a Walmart store in El Paso, Texas – in several ways. Like several of the far-right shooters before him, Balliet had livestreamed his violence to a website associated with, and modelled on, far-right discussion forums like /pol/ on 4chan and 8kun. Similarly, Balliet shared much of the ideology with terrorists like Brenton Tarrant (as indicated through his open disavowal of modern feminism, the destruction of the so-called 'West', and so on) and referenced many of these attacks in his so-called manifesto. Finally, Balliet

had explicitly labelled himself an 'insider' to Alt-Right communities, like /pol/, through his embracement of the communal moniker, 'Anon'.

Rather than openly celebrating the actions, as they had reportedly done with other incidences of white racist violence, such as the Christchurch mosque atrocities and the shooting in El Paso, /pol/ users' reactions to the Halle shooting was not one of celebration and glorification, but collective condemnation and disavowal. Instead, /pol/acks openly ridiculed Balliet, presenting his attack as a fiasco inviting mockery. They derided the shooter's many perceived 'failures' – his inability to successfully enter his targeted location, his comparatively low 'kill count', his on-screen weeping and profanity, and so on – to recast him as an 'outsider', despite him labelling himself an 'Anon'. As I explained in the chapter, this ridicule of a far-right shooter serves to estrange Balliet from the community, disavow his violence, and present an alternative reading of the Alt-Right that suggests that, rather than celebrating such atrocities, contributors to /pol/ do not endorse white supremacist violence.

While initially quite perplexing, /pol/ users' reactions to the Halle Synagogue atrocity are indicative of a discursive reconstruction that took hold of the contemporary far-right landscape as a result of colour-blind racism emerging in mainstream culture (Mondon and Winter, 2020). As others have argued (see Gilroy, 2019) the pressure for everyone to appear 'non-racist' has simultaneously forced extremely racist people to conform to these scripts – at least outwardly. As this chapter has indicated, this discursive shift is particularly evident when perceived movement insiders commit violent hate-based atrocities against a marginalised 'Other'. Throughout the threads dedicated to discussion of Doorcuck, for example, users posited that /pol/ was a peaceful online environment and that any violence committed by its members were exogenous to the movement. As I have indicated in this chapter, just as adherents to Alt-Right ideology claim to reject racist violence, several posts in the threads dedicated to discussion of the Halle Synagogue Attacks highlighted how movement insiders can supposedly 'learn' from Balliet's failures. In this way, the atrocity is

recast not just as a failure inviting open ridicule, but as a demonstrative learning opportunity for any potential white supremacist terrorist observing the thread.

Conclusion: Bridging White Supremacist Discourse

Through a close analysis of case studies which unfolded on several levels of analyses – the personal, communal, and global – this thesis has shown how the contributors of one online environment associated with the Alt-Right, 4chan's 'Politically Incorrect' (/pol/) board, work to establish a discursive bridge between events unfolding in mainstream society and more extremist thought. The research took a particular interest in how users of this space – Anons or /pol/acks – react to and respond to events occurring in the world around them. The ideas of colour-blind and new racism are central to this discursive practice, as I have argued throughout this thesis. Specifically, users of /pol/ seek to afford the online movement a degree of plausible deniability by decorating Alt-Right ideology and epistemology in ways that suggest that straight white men are the victims of a worldwide conspiracy to undermine the perceived innate superiority of white masculinity. By presenting themselves as the victims of such a conspiracy, movement insiders insist that any physical or symbolic violence directed towards movement outsiders is justified, because such instances of violence pale in comparison to their own victimisation. By immersing myself in /pol/ for four months and engaging with the space ethnographically, I was able to develop a rich insight of the day-in-and-day-out online interactions that occur in real time in this environment, whilst developing an understanding of the racial and gendered meanings being produced there. This approach not only helped effectively combat the methodological issues inherent to 4chan's innate ephemerality, it was also suited to the Alt-Right's ever-changing, fluid and amorphous nature itself.

This research has contributed to the literature on online white supremacy in three key ways. Firstly, through the use of three ethnographic case studies which unfolded on three levels of analyses – the individual, communal and global – I have developed an ethnographically-rich portrait of the ideology of the Alt-Right, its adherents' values, and the everyday social interactions and meaning-making practices that take place mostly in its online communities. Secondly, this thesis contributes

to broader work theorising how adherents to Alt-Right ideologies seek to impose their value system and key ideas on mainstream thought as well as how they strategically raise consciousness about key movement ideas. Thirdly, by drawing on Stephanie Hartzell's (2018) conceptualisation of the Alt-Right as a 'discursive bridge', this thesis moves beyond mere analysis of how the Alt-Right seeks to infiltrate mainstream discourse, instead examining how /pol/ participants are reactive and develop communal responses to events occurring around them.

Given the centrality of the ethnographic approach to this research, this thesis began with a discussion of its methods. In Chapter One, I developed the notion of 'methodological moulds' to guide my discussion of research methods and ethics. Specifically, I contended that the methodological choices and assumptions brought to this piece were often shaped by the environment in which the research took place. The temporal and experiential features of the chosen field site – 4chan's 'Politically Incorrect' (/pol/) board – shaped my initial decision to approach this environment ethnographically. Particular attention was also given to the ethics of research on the far-right. Thus, in addition to presenting a theoretical and analytical contribution to literature on the far-right, this thesis contributes to considerations of methodological approaches and consideration within criminology and ethnography. In this contribution, I have argued that ethnographic research on the Alt-Right must be guided by what I call the 'moulds' of ethnographic research: epistemology, the field site, and research ethics.

Chapter Two located the thesis within the broader literature on online white supremacy and the Alt-Right and laid the theoretical, contextual and conceptual groundwork for the remainder of the thesis. After exploring the historical emergence of the Alt-Right, I discussed how the movement can be explained by a series of several interweaving factors, specifically the emergence of 'new' and 'colour-blind' racism and its role in catalysing a discursive shift within the contemporary white nationalist movement away from overt expression of racism, towards more sanitised and ostensibly 'plausible', subtle forms of bigotry. The Alt-Right presents a unique point of intervention in this

literature, principally because much of its sentiment – its use of obviously racist stereotypes, jokes, and caricatures, and its adherents open calls for white racist violence – seems to signal a resurgence of overt white racial politics. Drawing on Stephanie Hartzell's (2018) conceptualisation of the Alt-Right as a 'discursive bridge' between mainstream racial sentiment and overt racism, I contended that the Alt-Right occupies an amorphous space between the open and proud white supremacy one might more readily associate with traditional extremist groups, like the Ku Klux Klan, and the more subtle and elusive forms of racism that dominate mainstream sensibilities today.

While separated by self-contained case studies, Chapters Three to Five – the main analytical components of this thesis – contain unifying theoretical and conceptual strands. By separating the case studies into multiple analytical frames at the individual, communal, and global levels, the thesis provides insight into how Alt-Right insiders consistently engineer a rhetorical bridge between mainstream sentiment and extremist thought. One of the implications of this is that the thesis ultimately highlights how colour-blind sentiment is ironically embedded in the underlying epistemology of the Alt-Right (Chapter Three), it drives communal action (Chapter Four), and it is used pervasively when insiders react to real-world violence committed by perceived insiders.

Chapter Three explored the metaphor of the 'red pill', a far-right meme broadly encapsulating a process of radicalisation and self-described entry point into the Alt-Right for many of its adherents. Through an ethnographic exploration of one thread where /pol/ users discuss the first time they were enlightened to their supposed racial and gendered reality, the thread illustrates the types of events and/or issues which propelled individuals into associating with and spending time in online Alt-Right communities. Drawing on Stuart Hall's (1997) work on the spectacle of the 'Other', I pointed out how many of the descriptions of /pol/ users' red pills contain essentialised information about racial and gendered others which cast them in specific regimes of representation. These regimes of representation are littered with the outdated sentiment that might remind one of what several scholars on race and racism have called 'old racism'. Yet, at the same

time, users' descriptions of red pills are weaved into a broader grand narrative which – through mobilising languages of imposition and encroachment – position straight white men as a systemically oppressed minority. Here, in a rhetorical move typical of new racism, Alt-Righters claim to be the orators of a morally defensible position which supposedly justifies their assaults, harassment, and abuse of the essentialised and carefully regimented 'Other'.

While Chapter Three revealed how the logic of colour-blind racism is endemic to Alt-Right thinking, Chapter Four showed how this ideology is practically sustained in the collective activities of the forum. Drawing on the work of several scholars interested in trolling, the chapter explored the 'It's Okay to be White' (IOTBW) trolling campaign, where, each Halloween, /pol/ users place stickers and posters with the phrase around their local neighbourhoods. Although it may initially seem like Operation IOTBW is a relatively innocuous joke designed to generate 'salt' (seemingly overblown reactions from the campaign's targets), the chapter revealed a more insidious objective of the campaign. Specifically, I argued that, by reproducing and presenting items of salt for their peers, /pol/ users can cite further evidence of their perceived oppression which further entrenches users' constructed identity and supposedly endangered existence.

Chapter Five, the final case study of this thesis, explored the fatal consequences of red pill ideologies. The chapter was situated around /pol/ users' collective reactions to a terrorist attack perpetrated by a self-identified 'Anon': Stephan Balliet's attack of a Synagogue and a local Turkish Kebab store in Halle, Germany. In addition to serving as a useful reminder for how inherently harmful the subcultures of places like /pol/ are, the chapter dealt specifically with an initially perplexing development: rather than openly glorifying and celebrating Balliet's white racial violence, as they had reportedly done with similar white supremacist attacks in 2019, users of /pol/ actively ridiculed the attacker and disavowed many of his actions. The chapter advanced two potential ways of analysing this phenomenon. Firstly, I argued that the collective ridicule of Balliet served to clearly mark the boundaries of inclusion/exclusion in /pol/. Secondly, as is consistent

with the discursive reconstruction that struck several white nationalist groups in the wake of the civil rights era, the rejection of Balliet's actions may afford /pol/ users enough plausible deniability to posit that they reject the violence associated with 'old' racism and that white nationalism has changed. With this veil of plausible deniability supposedly still intact, users use the Halle Synagogue Shooting to prescribe a number of notable lessons for the next white supremacist killer.

Overall, this thesis' key findings indicate that analyses of white supremacist violence need to extend beyond a focus on individual extremists or high-profile events, such as mass shootings and attacks on opponents. While such atrocities are significant, it is important to recognise that the ideology that often underpins them is not entirely divorced from racist – albeit disguised and subtle – scripts and practices that exist and in fact thrive in mainstream culture. As the case studies in this thesis demonstrate, white supremacy too often *results* in white racist violence, but one's extremist trajectory begins at much earlier stages in life. Scholars need not look for seemingly obvious or clear-cut examples of racism to identify this ideology at play. As evidenced in Chapter Three, it can be seen in individuals' reactions to seemingly innocuous social media campaigns or personal experiences involving racialised 'Others'.

It is not just that adherents to Alt-Right ideologies are adept at distorting and manipulating mainstream ideas to suit their own agenda – although this is certainly the case. Rather, it is also important to evaluate how far-right talking points have long been a staple of the political status quo in many Western democracies. Beyond the obvious example of former US President Donald Trump, there is a plethora of right-wing politicians who have directly engaged with, and emboldened, white supremacist discussion points, sometimes directly. For example, this was evident when Australian Senator, Pauline Hanson, proposed an "It's OK to be white" motion to the Senate in 2018; when another Australian Senator, Fraser Anning, attributed blame for the March 15 Christchurch shootings to increased interracial tensions stemming from New Zealand's immigration policies (Press Association, 2019); and when former Deputy Prime Minister of New

Zealand, Winston Peters (2005, para. 43), compared Islam to Hydra – a mythical serpent with several heads which, Peters asserted in a speech to Grey Power, an advocate group for the elderly in New Zealand, was supposedly capable of "striking at any time and in any direction" (see also Botha and Poynting, in press). These racist musings are hardly aberrations. How can they be when the orators of this sentiment have campaigned, fundraised, and advocated on similar platforms – usually at great personal expense – in order to get into the positions of immense privilege and power from which they speak?

Overall, this thesis argues that the Alt-Right is a manifestation of both the 'old' forms of racism and new and colour-blind racism. It contributes to the literature on contemporary racism and the far-right's role in perpetuating racist violence, by providing unique ethnographic detail on the relationship between everyday life and violent extremism. Considering the mutually constitutive relationship between offline experiences, online identity and community, and white supremacy, it illustrates how understandings of the far-right, in particular the online spaces used by them, must be considered, not only through their impositional strategies, but also through the mundane interactions that are part of its everyday life. In this way, this thesis is a launching pad for further criminological inquiry that seeks to interrogate the nature of the rhetorical bridge between mainstream sensibilities and violent ideologies. If, as this thesis has argued, the longevity of the Alt-Right is secured by engineering a discursive bridge between more politically palatable rhetoric rooted in mainstream discourse and seemingly estranged, overtly racist narratives, then the key to unpacking and ultimately dismantling its influence lies in a thorough, and critical, interrogation of white supremacy's institutional and systemic footholds.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Risk Management Plan

Due to the sensitive nature of this research, I have designed the following risk management plan – in consultation with my supervisors – to mitigate any potential risks to emotional wellbeing as well as my physical and cyber security.

This project presents two potential types of risks:

1. Ongoing risks which may result from sustained access to an offensive website
2. Specific incidents which – although extremely unlikely – still need to be controlled for

Ongoing Risk Mitigation

Because I plan on accessing a White Supremacist/White Nationalist discussion forum, it is important that I control for any potential adverse risks to my emotional health. To ensure that I am in a fit state of mind to conduct this study, I plan to have the following strategies in place:

1. I will commit to ongoing fortnightly counselling with a qualified mental health expert throughout my field work. In order to ensure that I actually attend these sessions, counselling sessions will be scheduled as part of my study hours. The sessions are intended as a debrief for this research, but other aspects of my personal and study life may also be addressed. While I do have access to a close network of peers, friends, and family, it is important that I seek support from a trained professional who is experienced with dealing with stress and sensitive topics
2. I will ensure that I attend regular debriefing sessions with my supervisors, both of whom are experienced with conducting ethnographies and working with sensitive issues

Specific Risks

In addition to ensuring that I mitigate any ongoing risks, by attending regular counselling, I am also aware that some specific incidents/events will require immediate action on my part. While I expect that each of these incidents is highly unlikely to occur, it is still important that I have a

plan in place to manage them. Below, I have provided details of potential incidents which may occur throughout this research, and specific strategies to deal with them.

Risk/Incident	**Probability**	**Strategy/Response**
Researcher witnesses the live-stream of a violent incident	Highly Unlikely	1. Immediately cease watching the material and stop field work for the day to avoid inadvertently watching the same material 2. Seek guidance/support from supervisors 3. Address incident in counselling session 4. If distressed, seek support from Counselling Services at Victoria University of Wellington IF the advent takes place in New Zealand: 1. Immediately dial 111 – follow instructions 2. Follow steps 2-4, as above.
Researcher witnesses a video recording (not live) of a violent incident	Possible	1. Seek guidance/support from appropriate support persons 2. Address incident in fortnightly counselling sessions 3. If distressing, seek support from Counselling Services at Victoria University of Wellington
Witnessing the glorification of known far-right terrorists	Likely	1. Seek guidance/support from appropriate support persons 2. Address incident in fortnightly counselling sessions 3. If distressing, seek support from Counselling Services at Victoria University of Wellington
Attempted cyber-attack	Highly Unlikely	1. Research will be conducted on university computers and will be protected by the university's anti-virus software 2. Should I become aware of a potential cyber-attack, ITS and the University's security team will be notified immediately Due to the anonymous nature of the chosen site, it is highly unlikely that users will have access to the information needed to hack any university account. However, should I inadvertently click on a link that I suspect has a virus, ITS will be immediately notified
Witnessing the publication of harmful/offensive material	Highly Likely	In addition to regular counselling every fortnight, I intend to do the following to mitigate the risks associated with frequently accessing material that is harmful and extremely offensive: 1. Daily self-reflection task designed to assess my emotional preparedness for field work 2. Ongoing consultation with academic supervisors 3. If content is distressing, I will cease field work immediately, and contact Victoria University of Wellington's Counselling Services 4. Regular 5 minute breaks will be taken every 30 minutes. 1 hour into every field site visit, I will take a 30 minute break

		which consists of me leaving the office and going on a walk, either around campus, or – when possible – outside. 5. Field notes will serve as a dataset as well as a source of reflection
Encountering peers (academic or otherwise) who may find the nature of my research offensive, or take it as an implicit endorsement of White Supremacy	Likely	Generally speaking, I maintain a strict policy around not talking about my research with people I suspect may find it offensive. This is primarily because I acknowledge that White Supremacy **is** offensive and I intend to respect the wishes of those who do not wish to discuss it. Criminologists often have to make discretionary decisions about what aspects of their research they disclose in their everyday conversations with others. The study of crime necessitates discussions of sensitive issues, especially around sexual violence, racism, hate crimes, and so on. As a researcher experienced in the study of sensitive/controversial issues (White Supremacy, human rights, prison reform), I am well-accustomed to having such conversations if necessary. That said, I am also aware that most people have a 'limit' on what they are prepared to discuss (For example, I cannot talk about crime involving animal harm) and will take the following steps to minimise any offense my topic causes: 1. Premise any discussion of my research with an explanation of its intent: understanding the ways White Supremacy operates in order to effectively challenge it 2. Acknowledge the rationality and validity of offense 3. Where necessary (the person is visibly distressed/upset, or I suspect that an explicit description of my research will be offensive), I will divert the conversation. If someone asks what my research is about, for example, I might explain it in broad terms (i.e. "I am looking at racism on the internet") as opposed to explicit detail (i.e. "I am looking at White Supremacist communities online"

Appendix 2 – List of original IOTBW Threads Posted to 4chan in October 2017

- https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/146437112
- https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/146524824
- https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/146549101/
- https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/146553204/
- https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/146559640/
- https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/146564416/
- https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/146570595/
- http://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/147006237/
- http://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/147048073/
- http://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/147166795/
- http://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/147214077/
- http://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/147221485/
- http://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/147255766/
- http://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/147270419/
- http://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/147332985/