

From Twitter to Charlottesville: Analyzing the Fighting Words Between the Alt-Right and Antifa

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This study examines the Twitter rivalry of two groups of the alt-Right and antifascist movement to understand how certain appeals, launched through social media, may promote material violence. Several studies have explored the impact of extreme political rhetoric in motivating hostile responses, such as the one that erupted at the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. The present study contributes to this literature by examining how Twitter can offer a staging ground for political hostilities to swell, circulate, and sometimes activate the call for confrontation. A textual analysis deconstructs the Twitter accounts of the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers and Antifa over a six-week-period culminating in the violent Charlottesville rally. A focus on the groups' framing of the opposition and use of persuasive appeals offers insight into the priming nature of political extremism happening on Twitter today.

Keywords: fighting words, alt-Right, Antifa, Twitter, Charlottesville, Unite the Right rally

The Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, which began with a parade of torch-bearing White nationalists and ended in the tragic killing of a counterprotester, exposed the public to what one news outlet called America's "ugly wake-up call" (Nelson, 2017). Though culture war conflicts between the Far Right and Far Left had been flaring up for months, occasionally erupting in cities such as Berkeley and Philadelphia, few Virginia officials had expected the turnout and turmoil from this event that began with the attempted removal of a Confederate statue. But to those who had been following on Twitter, where right-wing extremists and antifascists have been engaged in constant verbal warfare, the tragic events of Charlottesville seemed less like a sudden flash point and more like the arrival of a slow-moving hurricane.

This case study examines the Twitter rivalry of two factions on opposite ends of the political spectrum to understand how persuasive appeals, launched through social media, may promote material violence. A textual analysis deconstructs the Twitter feeds of two groups of the alt-Right, the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers, and two chapters of the opposing antifascist movement (known collectively as Antifa) over a six-week period in 2017 culminating in the mid-August Unite the Right rally. In analyzing the online activity of the alt-Right and antifascist movements, the intent is not to draw a moral equivalency between those groups who traffic in White nationalism and those who oppose it. Only one side came to Charlottesville bearing a message of bigotry, chanting, "Jews will not replace us" (Woods, 2017).

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In contrast, Antifa stands against neo-Nazism and all other forms of hate. But the words of aggression leading to Charlottesville, whether trained to incite or directed to defend, had been telegraphed on both ends of this fight online. This study takes a closer look at the nature of those fighting words and the rhetorical pretexts that were expressed to justify forceful action.

Studies on media-activated violence have produced a wealth of research—from studies that examine the role of hate speech in inspiring racist paranoia or actual hate crimes (Daniels, 2009; Posselt, 2017) to studies of the use of social media by terrorist networks to radicalize and activate followers (Awan, 2017; Morris; 2016). A notable subset of this field explores the impact of extreme political rhetoric in motivating hostile responses (Binder, Kasja, Dalrymple, & Scheufele, 2009; Sunstein, 2009; Wojcieszak, 2009). Kalmoe (2014), who examined the use of fighting words in politics, asserts: “Although political speech may seem less compelling than most forms of violent media, psychologists have found violent speech and text sufficient to spur aggression . . . even when the text is subliminal” (p. 547).

The present study contributes to this literature by examining how Twitter can act as a staging ground for political hostilities to swell, circulate, and sometimes activate the call for confrontation. The kinds of persuasive appeals that were used to inflame the aforementioned communities reveal how fanatical groups, operating under the guise of politics, will use a rhetoric that can suggest forceful action without openly advocating a call to arms. Though this study illustrates several instances when the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and Antifa used their Twitter feeds to circulate a call for battle, other forms of inciting rhetoric—such as mockery, nationalism, and appeals to defense—were equally as effective in priming the community for a state of combat while not crossing the vague line into fighting words or, worse, something that could get one’s account removed from Twitter.

Background

In exploring the online rivalry between the alt-Right and Antifa, this study reflects the bitter clash of the American Right and Left taking place in numerous cultural sectors today, including town halls (Abramowitz, 2010), college campuses (Arriaga, 2017), social networks (Hemphill, Culotta, & Heston, 2016), and the blogosphere (Baum & Groeling, 2008). Steady polling has shown that a deep partisan divide polarizes much of the U.S. electorate (Jones, 2016), especially through the 2016 election and into the Donald Trump presidency. Wagner and Clement (2017) report, “Seven in 10 Americans say the nation’s political divisions are at least as big as during the Vietnam War” (para. 1). Research shows that the divide is exacerbated among audiences who selectively expose themselves to partisan media that repeatedly validate their beliefs while tarnishing the opposition (Tsfati & Nir, 2017).

This present climate of partisan tribalism has given rise to new actors and factions representing the far ends of the political spectrum. On the right, speakers such as Richard Spencer, Milo Yiannopoulos, and Gavin McInnes lead a growing movement that condemns political correctness and multiculturalism in the United States while embracing an unapologetic defense of Western civilization and White-identity politics. Patriot groups such as the Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, Proud Boys, and Identity Evropa, noticeably emerged on the protest scene in 2017, pledging to resist

America's enemies, foreign and domestic, through rallies and occasional street fights. On the far left, Antifa represents a fast-growing crusade designed to confront all forms of fascism, principally the aforementioned groups but also, at times, law enforcement. Antifa has no single spokesperson but rather presents its movement as a collective of nameless vigilantes, typically outfitted in concealing masks and black combat gear, ready for battle.

Like warring political gangs, these groups have occasionally engaged one another locally over issues such as hate speech on college campuses, Confederate statues, and the Donald Trump presidency. In April 2017, large brawls broke out between the Oath Keepers and Antifa during a pro-Trump rally near the University of California, Berkeley. The alt-Right event had been well publicized on Twitter and was met by dozens of anti-Trump and Antifa protesters. From there, it quickly escalated into a bloody encounter that saw Identity Evropa founder Nathan Damigo punch a protester in the face. The scene, captured on video, was then used as fodder back on Twitter, continuing the cycle of online antagonism and real-world altercations that would carry into the summer of 2017.

These conditions set the stage for the hyperpolarized Twitter environment through which the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and Antifa communicated their rivalry leading up to the events in Charlottesville. During the period under investigation here, these groups launched 847 tweets and 1,168 community appeals. This study details how a majority of messages emanating from both sides were fixated on the opposition. To better understand the activating nature of these groups' distinct discourses, the analysis poses the following questions:

RQ1: Who were the subjects of the alt-Right and antifascist groups' opposition?

RQ2: How did each side characterize the enemy, and how did each side frame itself?

RQ3: What types of appeals did the Proud Boys/Oath Keepers and Antifa communicate to their followers, and how often did they express forms of hostility over Twitter?

RQ4: What pretexts were used to justify the necessity for action against the enemy?

Literature Review

Little scholarly literature exists on the alt-Right and Antifa, two movements that seem to grossly personify the current tribalism of U.S. politics. Prior studies in the communication of politically extreme movements provide valuable insight into the groups' ideologies and discursive strategies. Studies of the ultraconservative John Birch Society, for example, explore the group's common use of conspiracies surrounding the spread of communism to reveal an underlying ideological fixation on the "disease of collectivism" (Stewart, 2002, p. 426). And research into the left-wing hacktivist group Anonymous, often deemed an anarchist organization in the press, found clear political motivations behind its operations (Coleman, 2014). Thus, by studying the rhetoric of the alt-Right and Antifa, this research aims to render a clearer picture of these contrasting campaigns, peeling back some of the notoriety and hyperbole to locate those underlying ideologies, discourses, and contradictions.

Right-Wing Culture Wars

For alt-Right groups such as the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, much of the rhetoric centers on topics of culture war and nationalism. An initial review of 50 of the groups' tweets (5% of the sample) found interest in subjects such as the "threat of Muslim refugees," the "invasion of illegal immigrants," "the war on Christmas," the removal of Confederate statues, and other topics speaking to right-wing populist anger. What Kalmoe (2014) called "subliminal" political texts might best be illustrated in such issues, which echo the same concerns often discussed in conservative media but can serve as "cues" to activate aggressive responses (p. 547).

The debate over foreign refugees, for example, may have a place in mainstream politics, but it can also provide a pretext that allows extremist groups to voice intolerance inside an accepted platform, such as national security. The Oath Keepers are one such group that has vowed to defend the Constitution "against all enemies, foreign and domestic" (Avlon, 2014, p. 1). The group made headlines in 2017 when it staged the "March Against Sharia" in towns across the United States. Watchdog organizations such as the Southern Poverty Law Center saw these marches as anti-Muslim rallies in disguise (McKay, 2017), indicative of an underlying Islamophobic, xenophobic, and nativist sentiment taking shape in the patriot movement. Avlon (2014) explained that "a modern multicultural America" has spurred the resurgence of "white-identity politics" that is often expressed through these nationalist pretexts:

This desire to take the country back is combined with an idealized vision of America's past, a more pastoral time of small town values and small government. It is unspoken that this was a largely white America. It's consistent with the way Confederate flags that occasionally wave in protest crowds are explained away by saying they represent "heritage, not hate." (p. 83)

Representatives of the alt-Right commonly reject charges of racism. In 2017, a lawyer for the Proud Boys sent a cease-and-desist letter to the *Baltimore City Paper* after that news outlet referred to the group as an "alt-right fraternity" that uses terms like "Western civilization" as a code for "whiteness" (Woods, 2017, para. 2). The letter went on to claim: "The Proud Boys were founded by Gavin McInnes in 2016. The Proud Boys and Mr. McInnes do not now, nor have they ever, espoused white nationalist, white supremacist, anti-Semitic, or alt-right views." But as this study demonstrates, Twitter provides a digital record that captures the day-to-day viewpoints of its users in their own words. Early examination of the Proud Boys' account quickly turned up derogatory statements about the transgender community, Muslims, Jews, and "non-Europeans" as well as evocative allegiances to "blood and soil." And, as the *City Paper* highlighted, the Proud Boys' founder himself once tweeted in all caps, "10 things I hate about Jews!" which included a video link.

Left-Wing Populism

For Antifa, the left-wing campaign expresses a different brand of populism than the nationalistic rhetoric of the alt-Right. Antifascist movements have periodically surfaced in Europe and the United States since the 1960s. Theirs is an ideology aimed at resisting forces of hate and oppression and the institutions that enable them. Mudde (2004) has defined this style of populism as "an ideology that considers society to

be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the 'pure people' vs. 'the corrupt elite'" (p. 562). Although the amorphous antifascist movement has no direct representatives, its Twitter posts, like the signs supporters carry, identify those it deems fascist and the "corrupt elite" that supports them. An initial review of Antifa's Twitter feed reveals a focus on hate groups such as neo-Nazis and alt-Right factions like the Proud Boys as the flag bearers of modern-day fascism. It also previews the movement's populist ire directed toward police agencies, conservative media, and universities, each perceived as sympathetic to the Far Right agenda.

In many ways, the challenge of how to classify Antifa's form of politics—as activism or vigilantism—addresses a deeper question about whether this group brings an extreme approach to its rivalry with the Right. The answer may lie not in Antifa's ideology but in its actions. A more appropriate comparison to the antifascist movement might be found in the 1980s self-appointed street crusaders known as the Guardian Angels. Wearing signature red berets, the Guardian Angels were commonly referred to as vigilantes by the media and the New York Police Department, with whom their brand of street justice was unpopular. As one reporter wrote, "Some transit police resent them, and others call them vigilantes bent on taking the law into their own hands" (Everett, 1980, p. 8). Many citizens, however, admired the Angels for what they represented—"civic justice"—and wanted more of them patrolling the subways (Ostrowe & DiBiase, 1983, p. 185).

Similar to how some regarded the Guardian Angels, today some people hold Antifa in high regard for its hard-hitting response to hate groups and Far Right factions. But, also like the Angels, Antifa has received similar criticism from law enforcement and civilians that deem their destructive, and sometimes violent, protests as criminal. In this way, the Guardian Angels and Antifa present the same challenge to their causes—whether it be safer streets or stopping fascism—in that both groups have adopted violence to achieve peace and thus, in the eyes of some, have become part of the problem.

Twitter Combat

Fighting words can take many forms, especially in the context of social networks like Twitter, where factors such as anonymity may disinhibit users to express themselves in ways they never would offline. Perhaps even more germane to the present study is the factor of fragmentation, which often develops online when like-minded listeners "insulate themselves from competing positions" (Sunstein, 2007, p. 72). Sunstein (2009) found that polarized groups that deliberate issues together are "far more likely to support aggressive protest action" than would otherwise be true of the individual (p. 18). Echoing this point in his work on political extremism, Warner (2010) wrote, "If individuals are only in contact with people they already agree with, there is a danger that their opinions will polarize and become increasingly radical" (p. 431).

Twitter has become a domain ideally suited for cultivating these fragmented and hyperpolarized communities and an unintended incubator for political extremism. It has also become a space for political factions to clash and for rivalries to amplify, as was observed between the alt-Right and Antifa in the months leading up to Charlottesville. Thus, as this case study examines the inflammatory rhetoric of these groups, it also explores Twitter as a platform for political confrontation. Here, new forms of fighting words have taken shape: 280-character insults and responses that engage the opposition directly; incendiary memes that

mock one's enemies with belittling images; and strategies such as "doxxing," in which one side exposes the actual identities and locations of its enemies. These tactics were all part of the digital arsenal of the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and Antifa as these groups waged their respective online campaigns in 2017.

Although Twitter is a far less formal venue than other political forums, its terms of service still prohibit threats of violence and other "behavior that crosses the line into abuse, including behavior that harasses, intimidates, or uses fear to silence another user's voice" (Twitter, 2018). In 2016, the company took further steps to curb extremist voices, purging thousands of terror-related profiles from its network and suspending several "high-profile accounts associated with the alt-right movement," including that of Richard Spencer (Guynn, 2016, para. 1). Thus, like the political arena, Twitter has its own constraints that prevent its users from engaging in direct hostile exchanges, though some do anyway. It is in this context that groups such as the Proud Boys and Antifa communicate through a shrewd rhetoric that appears nonviolent in form but can, and in this case did, precede real confrontation.

The Power of Pretexts

The desire to maintain a valuable presence on Twitter is one motivating factor that limits the combative tone of the politically extreme movements that traffic in this social network. In the case of alt-Right factions, which have in effect been put on notice, another mitigating factor is their desire to be seen as legitimate actors on the national stage, shedding their characterization as White nationalists. But despite these imposed and self-imposed restraints, extremist groups have established a versatile code language of hot-button issues that allow them to inflame racial tensions and tempt violent confrontation in subtler ways. Kalmoe (2014) investigated the use of provocative political metaphors as "violent cues" that have the capacity to "activate the same cognitive and emotional processes triggered by other kinds of violent imagery" (p. 547). In other words, one does not have to communicate a textbook definition of fighting words to incite hostile action. In politics, pretexts are much more common rhetorical forms for conveying aggression without crossing a line into perceived belligerence.

In this study, key pretexts are considered for their ability to effectively establish the necessity to take action against an enemy under well-encoded justifications. These include national security fears on the right and the crusade against fascism on the left. Such pretexts are powerful because they offer the appearance of mainstream politics that can draw more moderate followers into the fray by giving them a socially accepted framework. For example, the two Far Right groups in this study have each sought to identify their movements with hot-button issues of heritage and borders, such as the removal of Confederate statues or the acceptance of refugees—policies inferred by group members as so dangerous as to demand civilian resistance. And that is where dangers can arise, when some may interpret the calls for "necessary resistance" as a proverbial green light for morally justified violence.

Bandura's (1990) theory of moral disengagement describes how reprehensible behavior, such as incitements or acts of violence, is often justified along seemingly moral grounds: "People do not ordinarily engage in reprehensible conduct until they have justified to themselves the rightness of their actions . . . destructive conduct is made personally and socially acceptable by portraying it in the service of moral purposes" (p. 163). For example, Sargsyan and Bennett (2016) explore how leaders of deadly

insurgencies in Iraq evoke powerful emotions in their followers, such as “anger, humiliation, fear, [and] shared experiences of suffering or injustice” (p. 609), to embed in them a rationale for violence and self-sacrifice. Bandura (1990) further describes the euphemistic language that is often employed to mask these objectionable actions by presenting them in a respectable light: “Through sanitized and convoluted verbiage, destructive conduct is made benign and those who engage in it are relieved of a sense of personal agency” (p. 170). He also notes how the attribution of blame on a perceived enemy is typically accompanied by a steady dehumanization of the enemy (p. 180). These factors that Bandura describes for the individual may well apply to politically extreme movements such as the alt-Right or Antifa, which evoke their own set of principles and sense of justice to rationalize their targeting of the opposition.

Method

To analyze the provocative nature of the alt-Right and Antifa movements on Twitter, this case study monitored the activity of four representative accounts. On the right, the Proud Boys’ and the Oath Keepers’ official Twitter accounts were selected for their characteristic expression of Far Right political views and their opposition to Antifa. On the left, the Antifa Berkeley and Antifa NYC accounts were chosen to represent two of that campaign’s most active bases, where conflict with the alt-Right had begun to spill over into local altercations. The collection of tweets from these accounts began on July 1, 2017, after weeks of rising tension and occasional confrontations. The six-week analysis was not originally intended to culminate in the Unite the Right rally of August 12, but as that approaching event became a dominant topic among these groups, it became apparent that Charlottesville could become a defining moment. In total, 847 separate tweets were collected during this period (384 from the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers and 463 from Antifa NYC and Antifa Berkeley). The study concluded on August 15, a date marked by headlines from the post-Charlottesville press event at which the president of the United States declared, “There’s blame on both sides and I have no doubt about it. . . . You have some very bad people in that group, but you also had people that were very fine people on both sides” (Wang & Breuninger, 2017, para. 55).

In their study of Twitter as a platform for survivors of abuse, Weathers, Sanderson, Neal, and Gramlich (2016) analyzed each individual tweet to first “gain a sense of its meaning” (p. 63). The tweets were then “micro-analyzed and classified into emergent categories based on these meanings.” Following this approach, this study performed two reviews of the respective tweets, once during the daily collection phase and a second time at the conclusion of the study. The evaluation of tweets initially identified the focus of opposition, which included references to enemy groups, individuals, institutions, and ideologies. The study also recorded the descriptions of that particular opposition as well as any references the group made to itself.

Beyond manifest content, an individual tweet’s form was analyzed for its intended appeal to the larger community. For this task, a codebook was developed based on message forms identified in the pre-analysis. These common appeals were then expanded on as the study progressed to allow for an inclusive approach that would avoid a rigid, predetermined framework for analysis. The codebook’s reliability was also tested for its capacity to identify common appeals. Three coders separately analyzed 40 appeals using Krippendorff’s alpha coefficient, which resulted in an 85.3% level of agreement. In all, the research located 12 appeals, which together presented a loose spectrum of attitudes. These ranged from the passive (appeals to logic, protest, or solidarity) to the partisan (supporting/condemning President Trump, culture war,

nationalism) to the belligerent (appeals to mockery, defense, or force). Along this spectrum, other identified appeals included calls to expose, fear, or vilify the enemy, and an "other" category.

Tweets were reviewed from the perspective of their overall intent. Tweets that appeal to logic, for example, offer a reasoned argument. Such tweets explain the hypocrisy of the opposition's stance, which was a common strategy. Some tweets convey more than one appeal and were coded accordingly, such as a tweet that communicates a message of solidarity (i.e., expressing group unity) as well as an appeal to defense (i.e., "fight back" rhetoric). But returning to a tweet's overall intent, a logical appeal could not simultaneously contain a message of force, because the latter message would wholly cancel out the former. Also important to the coding process was the treatment of retweets, which tended to serve one of two purposes. The retweet of a prior post was usually treated as an intended message of the group, no different than the individual who holds up another protester's sign to wave it in support. But sometimes a group retweeted a post made by the opposition in order to share a ridiculing response on its page. These examples are akin to the individual who takes the enemy's sign for the sake of deriding it and, as such, were treated as appeals to mockery.

Additional analysis was conducted to measure how often these rival movements expressed varying forms of hostility, based on a proportional breakdown of identified appeals: 528 from the Proud Boys/Oath Keepers and 640 from Antifa NYC/Antifa Berkeley. For this analysis, it was hypothesized that nonviolent oppositional appeals (logical arguments and calls for protest) and messages of solidarity would be more prevalent than call-to-arms appeals (promoting defense or force), given Twitter's terms of service, which prohibit the latter (see chi-square test results later in the Findings Part II: Appeals to the Community section). Finally, special attention was given to a subset of messages that present justifications for violent action. This portion of the study is concerned with how extreme positions endorsing conflict were rationalized along seemingly political or cultural grounds. Such pretexts were categorized through a qualitative frame analysis of only those tweets that appealed to fears or professed the need for defensive or forceful action.

Findings Part I: Institutional Enemies

At the time of this study, the Twitter accounts of the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers and of Antifa Berkeley and Antifa NYC had acquired more than 40,700 and 29,300 followers, respectively. The daily exchange therefore represents more than four distinct voices. Rather, it is a mass communication of political dogmatists united around a series of preferred discourses. And the most popular of subjects—perceived enemies—reveals that the central focus driving the conversation in these communities is not what each stands for but what it stands against.

The Proud Boys' and the Oath Keepers' claim that patriotism guides their mission is contradicted by a dominant communication that was far more fixated on enemies of the state than on love of country. Figure 1 illustrates the 234 references to perceived adversaries: groups, individuals, institutions, and ideologies. For these alt-Right factions, the focus of their opposition can best be categorized into internal and external threats, reflecting a nationalist character indicative of that movement.

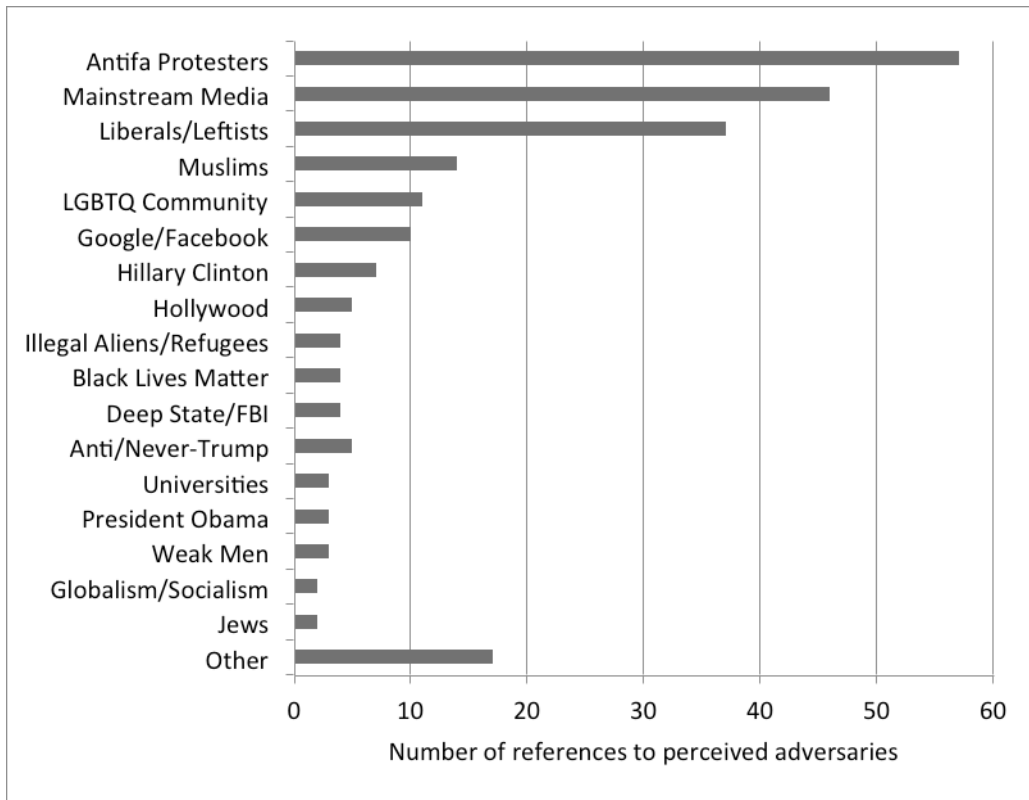


Figure 1. The Proud Boys' and the Oath Keepers' focus of opposition (N = 234 references to enemy groups, individuals, institutions, and ideologies).

The findings demonstrate these groups' common disdain for "outsiders"—primarily immigrants, refugees, and a globalist ideology that they view as encroaching on U.S. sovereignty. But even more than external adversaries, the analysis reveals that these groups were incited by perceived domestic threats, which receive about 90% of their attention. Among these, the Proud Boys/Oath Keepers positioned Antifa as their chief opposition, along with U.S. institutions such as the mainstream media, the liberal electorate, and so-called deep state conspirators in the federal government. A preoccupation with cultural enemies was present as well, targeting groups such as Black Lives Matter and the LGBTQ community.

Unlike the Proud Boys/Oath Keepers, Antifa presents itself as a global movement, sharing posts from an international network of followers and expressing a common cause with freedom fighters battling ISIS in Syria or protesters fighting neo-Nazis in Europe. Perhaps not surprisingly, the most commonly cited rival is the American alt-Right movement (see Figure 2). In 344 references to the opposition, Antifa regularly tweeted about groups like the Oath Keepers, the Proud Boys, Identity Evropa, and their leaders. Antifa also aligns these groups with other movements it deems fascist, including White supremacists, the pro-Trump electorate, Fox News, and law enforcement. Through these targets, it is evident that Antifa views fascism—whether in the form of racism, terrorism, or police bias—as all cut from the same cloth.

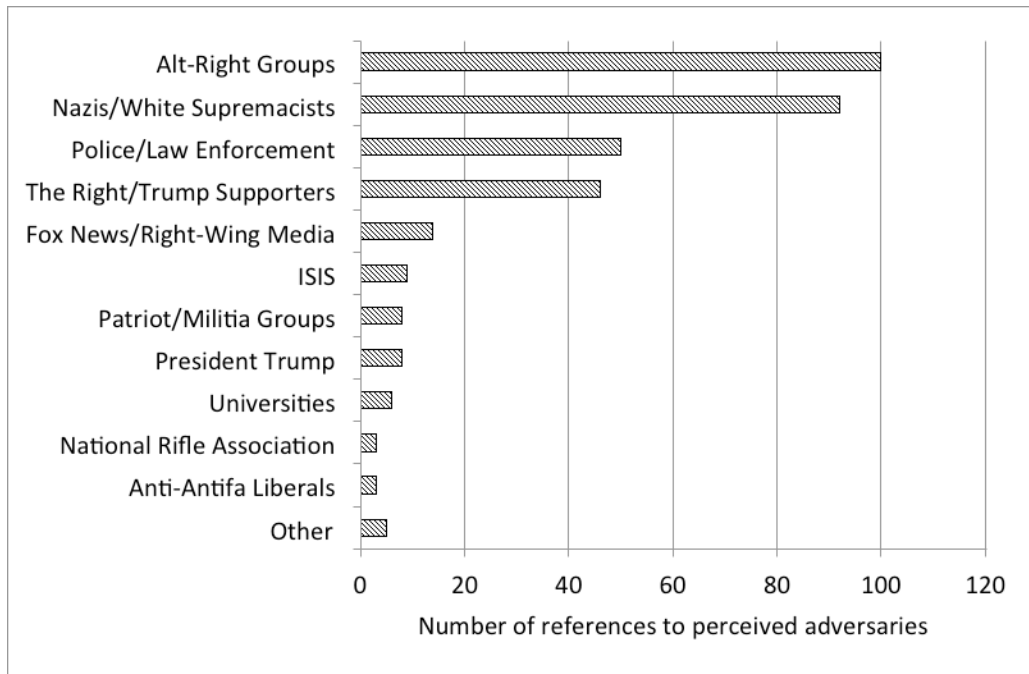


Figure 2. Antifa NYC's and Antifa Berkeley's focus of opposition (N = 344 references to enemy groups, individuals, institutions, and ideologies).

Framing the Enemy and the Campaign

Tables 1 and 2 present the four most identified adversaries of the Far Right and Far Left groups, illustrating that each group characterizes the opposition in telling juxtaposition to how it defines itself. For the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers, a collective hostility toward Antifa, the media, the American Left, and Muslims exhibits these groups' primary focus on political/cultural rivals. But the sharp rhetoric by which these perceived adversaries are framed—as “domestic terrorists” and “violent”—reveals a discursive strategy in how they are elevated from political foes to public threats.

On Twitter, these alt-Right groups have built a preferred reality that paints their own community in a dire wartime-like state. In this world, the media are presented in Orwellian terms—not only as “fake” but also as “brainwashed,” “dangerous,” and “aligned with the enemy.” And the deeper ideological menace behind it all, the American Left, is characterized as a “radical” and “unpatriotic” insurgency and “violent.” For the Oath Keepers, a more exclusive paranoia is expressed, presenting a reality in which American Muslims are bringing sharia law onto U.S. soil and training terrorists in local mosques. For the Proud Boys, a preoccupation with manhood was ever-present in descriptions of the group's enemies as “not masculine” and as “weak.”

Table 1. Alt-Right: Framing the Opposition and Itself.

Main subject	Common descriptors
Antifa 57 references (23% of sample)	Domestic terrorists; instigating violence; Nazis; weak; not masculine; on the run; lame; thugs
The media 46 (20%)	Fake; brainwashed; elitist; unethical; disgrace; enemy; psychos, dangerous; inciting violence; anti-Trump; aligning with Islamic extremists; liberal
The Left 37 (16%)	Radical; acting like Nazis; unpatriotic; communists; scared; laughable; losers; rioters; clowns; attacking; violent; hateful; beaten; villains
Muslims 14 (6%)	Terrorist; dangerous extremists; wants to kill; promoting sharia; training terrorists; dishonest
Its own movement	Western chauvinists; created the modern world; proud White males; patriots; fighting for country; blood and soil; blood of patriots; martyrs; heroes; defenders; kicking ass; tough; fighters; protecting

In contrast to these descriptors, the Far Right groups characterized themselves nobly as “patriots” and “martyrs,” “fighting for country.” Such heroic renderings feed the larger narrative of war with the Left by filling their Twitter communities with the sense that they are the brave national defenders in this story. Also instructive is the way in which these groups define themselves in cultural rather than political terms, with self-references such as “Proud Western Chauvinists” who “created the modern world” and “white males.” Phrases such as “blood and soil,” which was later chanted by the White nationalist mob in Charlottesville, are also present, emphasizing a link between the fight for American freedom and a distinctly Western heritage.

In Antifa’s framing of its foremost opposition, one interwoven quality is commonly ascribed: racism (see Table 2). In varying degrees, Antifa characterizes the motivations of the alt-Right, traditional hate groups, police/state agencies, and the American Right as “racist,” “anti-Semitic,” “anti-Islamic,” “anti-immigrant,” or as “giving a platform to racists.” Though these factions are referenced separately, a strategic effort is made to show the overlap between them. More moderate groups like the Proud Boys are referred to as “Suit and Tie Nazis” and framed as “dangerous” and “violent,” while neo-Nazis are labeled “domestic terrorists.”

Table 2. Antifa: Framing the Opposition and Itself.

Main subject	Common descriptors
Alt-Right 100 (29%)	Racist; anti-immigrant; suit and tie Nazis; violent; dangerous; beating protesters; weak; cowardly; babies; hiding; goons; stupid
Hate groups 92 (27%)	Racist; anti-Semitic; Nazis; anti-immigrant; domestic terrorists; alt-Right; killers; attacking
Police/state 50 (15%)	Sympathetic to alt-Right; aligned with Klan; racist; unjust; skewed; hypocrites; crooked; harassing protesters; attacking; dangerous
The Right 46 (13%)	Anti-Islamic; White nationalist; bigot; anti-Semitic; giving platform to racists; calling for an ethnostate; terrified; MAGA cowards; starting fights; menaces
Its own movement	Resistance; revolution; fighters; insurrection army; martyrs; prisoners; victims of police; self-defense; stopping hate; standing up to fascists; patriotic; global bloc; aligned with anti-ISIS fighters; crusade

Antifa also expresses a strong distrust for select police and state agencies, which it characterizes as “unjust,” “crooked,” and “sympathetic” to racist groups. In contrast, the group often portrays itself as “victims of the police” and “martyrs.” A recent study of Twitter finds that such “moralistic” descriptors, especially those that appeal to anger or disgust, are more likely to go viral (Brady, Wills, Jost, Tucker, & Bavel, 2017, p. 7315). In other words, incendiary phrases like “racist” and “violent” not only stir hostility but can also attract a following in this domain. To further promote its cause, Antifa uses language that aligns its campaign with other movements that “stand up to hate” as part of a larger “revolution,” “resistance,” or “insurrection army.”

Findings Part II: Appeals to the Community

Much can be learned about these groups from the causes they champion and enemies they pursue, but the intent of those words can best be understood by examining the persuasive nature of their tweets. Figure 3 presents a comparison of 12 common appeals denoting the intended messaging of a given tweet. The previous section establishes that most tweets are fixed on the opposition; here we see that the nature of those disparagements ranges from logical arguments, to mockery and vilification, to direct calls for physical force.

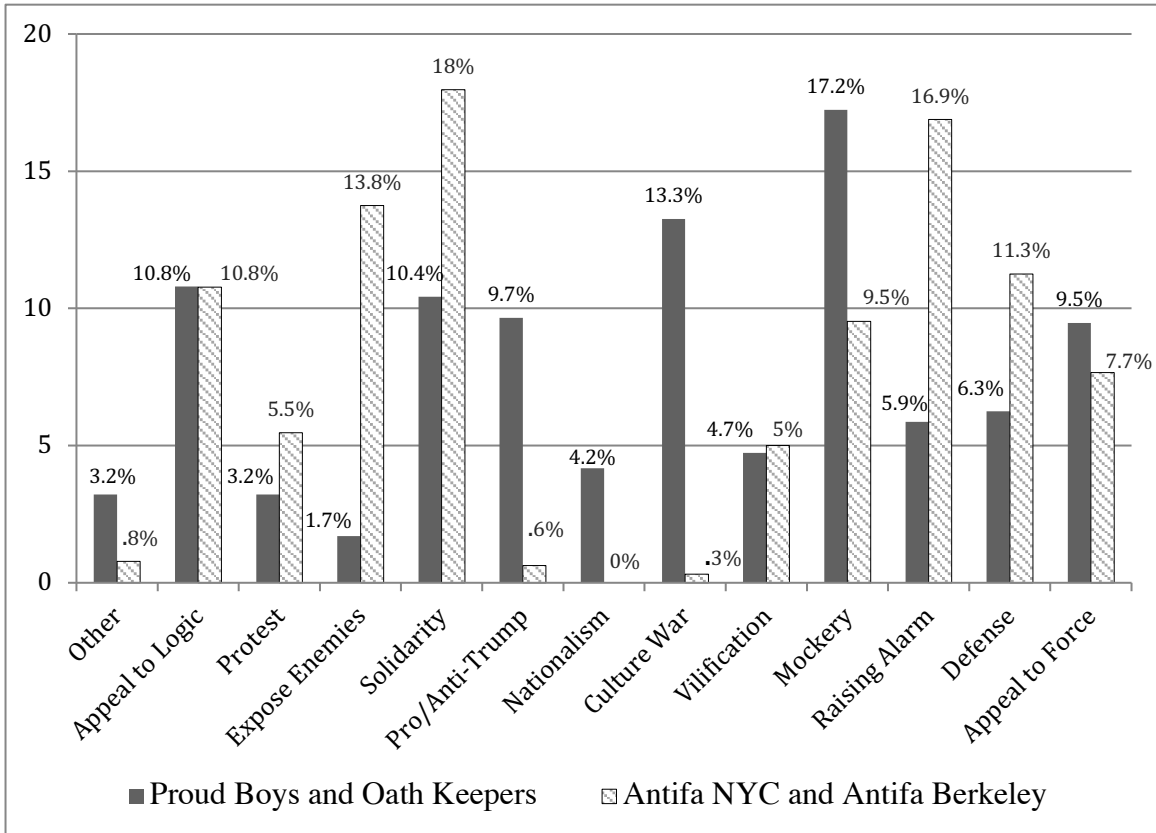


Figure 3. The use of persuasive appeals in rival Twitter accounts: Percentage of the 528 community appeals identified in the Proud Boys/Oath Keepers Twitter feed compared with the percentage of the 640 community appeals identified in Antifa’s Twitter feed.

Analysis of the 528 appeals identified in the Proud Boys/Oath Keepers Twitter accounts and the 640 appeals from Antifa enables an overview of certain parallels and contrasts. Both factions appeal to an apparent need for force and defense, though Antifa more commonly promotes the latter. And both groups often use mockery to disparage the opposition and alarmist rhetoric to heighten fears. But the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers almost exclusively assert appeals to culture war and nationalism, whereas Antifa is far more active in the use of doxxing to expose the identities of its foes.

For a relative comparison, Figures 4 and 5 capture the proportional breakdown of appeals from the rival campaigns. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test was performed to compare observed appeals to an expected breakdown, where the common appeals are clustered into categories by overall intent. Given Twitter’s terms that prohibit certain belligerent behavior, it was hypothesized that messages of nonviolent opposition and solidarity would be more common than incitements of conflict and calls to arms. From the

initial findings of the pre-analysis, the study anticipated that messages of solidarity and nonviolent opposition would each account for approximately 30% of the sample, conflict incitement and nationalist/culture war appeals would account for 15% each, and calls to arms would account for 5%. The "other" category would comprise the remaining 5% of the sample.

However, the presence of fighting words was much greater than predicted, even under Twitter's increasingly enforced terms of service. Thus, as illustrated in Figures 4 and 5, the call-to-arms and incitement appeals outweigh more moderate messages of nonviolent opposition and group solidarity, and the null hypothesis is rejected for both the Proud Boys/Oath Keepers, $\chi^2(5, N = 528) = 66.29, p < .05$, and Antifa Berkeley/Antifa NYC, $\chi^2(5, N = 640) = 73.66, p < .05$.

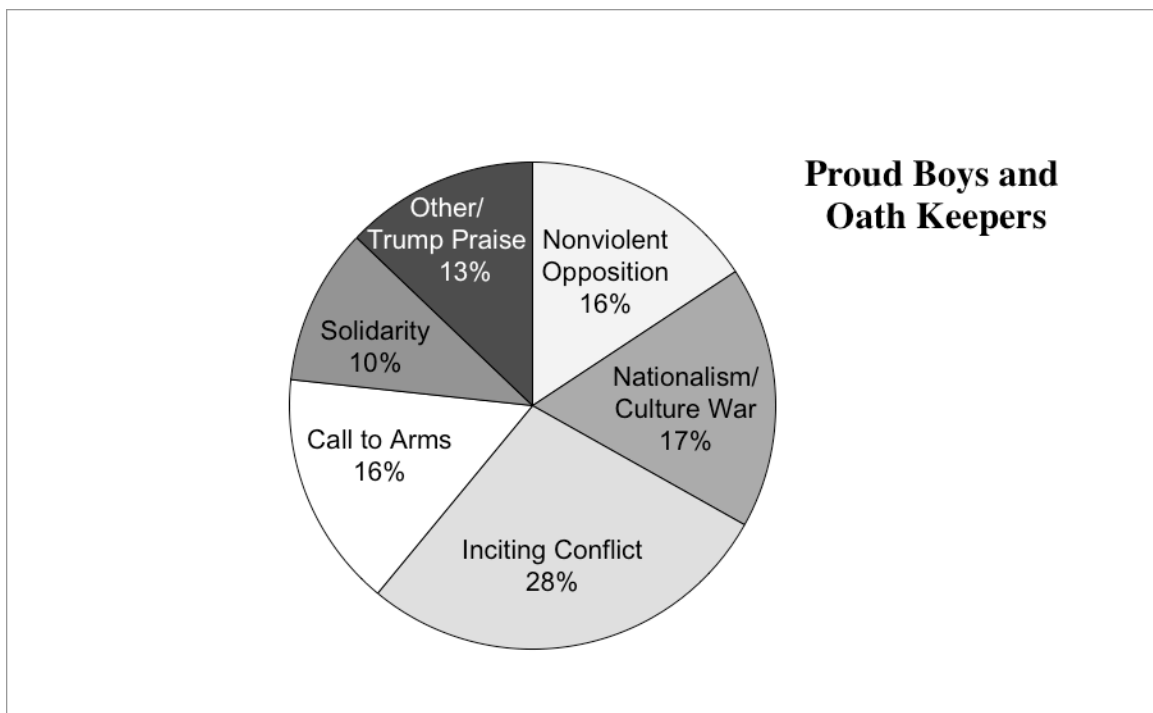


Figure 4. Breakdown of the Proud Boys/Oath Keepers' Twitter messages: Percentages of the 528 appeals by message category.

In qualitative terms, the exchange on the right was often characterized by bellicose provocations such as, "What a perfect day to fuck it up at an impeachment march" and "Always #ready for war." Sometimes hostile words were accompanied by violent images: cartoons of blood-tipped knives, playing cards featuring Oath Keepers beating Antifa protesters, or an image depicting the Proud Boys chasing down Antifa members beneath the caption "Run you little bitch." Other tweets are more blunt in directing the fight to the enemy: "The radical left is planning an Impeachment March on July 2nd. We will be there countering their actions," and "Battling Antifa. I need all available Patriots to 400 Esplanade Ave New Orleans 70116 ASAP." A tweet in late July read, "The left is preparing lynch mobs to descend on the Unite The Right rally in Charlottesville, VA . . . This is going to be fun."

Inciting words of insult or fear mongering were also effective in creating a sense of war that the alt-Right groups were building among members. Tweets like "You people started a civil war" were intended to fill these self-ascribed patriot movements with notions of national defense. One retweet from a celebrated figure of the alt-Right read, "Let's honor our ancestors by continuing this sacrifice in fighting bleeding for our country heritage, culture n civilization Blood and Soil!" Inciting tweets also bore messages of cultural derision and sometimes outright bigotry: "Proud Boys went to Islamberg and came out clean on the other side," "Jewish leftists are pathetic morons," and "I don't think White males are the enemy of minorities and women. Uneducation, dependency and ignorance are."

On the left, a sharp contrast exists in Antifa's framing of culture and identity, where a commitment to protecting minority communities and combating racists is at the forefront of discussion (see Figure 5). Alarm-raising appeals are common: "Racial hatred and racist violence in south Brooklyn as two white men attack interracial couple, threaten to lynch" and "Racist Alt-Right Group 'Proud Boys' Growing in Albany, NY!" Like their adversaries, Antifa's Twitter feed also featured standoffs with pro-Trump protesters whom they called "red hats" and "MAGA cowards," a reference to President Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan. Other staunch proclamations welcomed confrontation: "Whenever we see them, they need to be confronted and opposed. At the bars, on the street, at their rallies, wherever." Another common appeal is the group's frequent vilification of police agencies they view as assisting the Far Right while targeting Antifa's members: "People are standing up to racist violence and what do the police do? Harass them."

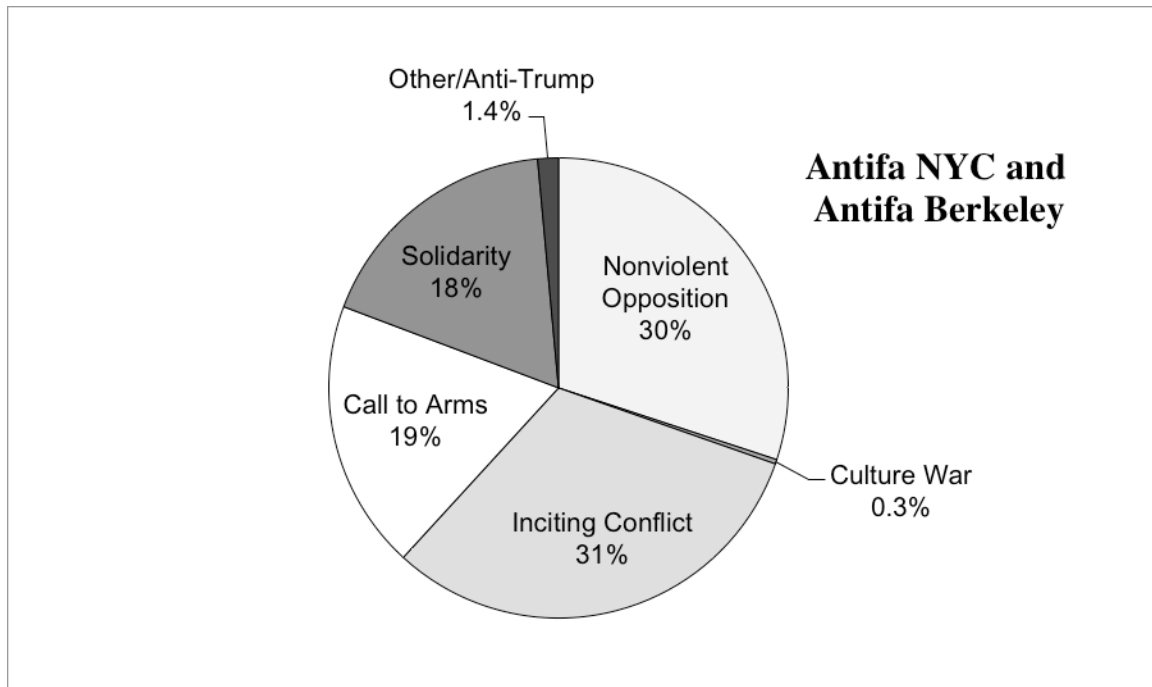


Figure 5. Breakdown of Antifa NYC/Antifa Berkeley's Twitter messages: Percentages of the 640 appeals by message category.

As the Charlottesville rally drew closer, Antifa's defensive rhetoric elevated. Over one month, the two Twitter accounts made 37 references to the upcoming event, urging followers to attend and stand up to White nationalists. Although most of Antifa's combative tweets were signals to defend, some crossed the line into force, such as a meme that read, "When you punch a Nazi the whole world punches with you." Beyond physical provocation, the group also used Twitter to expose the identities of its enemies. Following Charlottesville, much of the group's Twitter activity shifted to documenting that event, exposing the identities of those who merged with neo-Nazism: "We're documenting New Yorkers who attended the Charlottesville fascist rally." The group also used Twitter to memorialize the young protester who was killed there, voicing appeals to solidarity: "Moment of silence for #HeatherHeyer in Union Square NYC. Rally in solidarity with #Charlottesville."

Pretexts for Violence

As revealed in the six-week sample, the use of select pretexts serves a strategic function beyond the inflation of facts. For groups such as the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers, who regularly traffic in conspiracies, false claims helped foment their followers around particular narratives that justified their rage or even built a case for action. Such "political" pretexts also provided the illusion of legitimacy for their cause. Rather than fanaticism, they are seemingly propelled by a reasoned stance. For example, the "March Against Sharia" rallies that the Oath Keepers staged in 2017 was ostensibly about stopping Islamic law from infiltrating U.S. cities. Of course, nowhere in the country was this actually taking place, but this

claim provided a useful pretext for some to openly voice Muslim hate: "Angered and clutching signs denouncing the Islamic religion, attendees at some of the rallies included white supremacists and anti-government militias carrying rifles" (McKay, 2017, para. 2). On Twitter, these Far Right groups had put forth two dominant assertions about left-wing America, while Antifa embraced its own refrain.

"Our Country Has Been Taken From Us"

The claim that the United States is under siege from left-wing threats that have already taken away American freedoms was the bedrock of the Proud Boys/Oath Keepers' argument. Over the weekend of the Charlottesville rally, the Proud Boys presented "full livestream" coverage from the violent protests that opened with the filmmaker declaring, "We are taking this country back." This particular premise resounded throughout the summer in the groups' Twitter feeds with provocative posts such as, "Remember what it took to earn this country. The blood of Patriots" and, "If you think they will give you your country back without a fight, you are sadly mistaken." Connected to the sentiments of uprising were claims that freedom of speech and religion are being seized by "leftist forces" at universities, in government, and in the media—all supposedly working surreptitiously to steal the country away from a White, Christian America.

"The Left Is Attacking"

The framing of U.S. liberals as the instigative force in society was critical to creating an illusion of victimization. Beyond stolen freedoms, the Proud Boys/Oath Keepers consistently painted conservative America as under assault: "Proud Boys are under attack once again . . . we won't let them win! Not in our town," and "Left-wing Antifa terrorists have attacked Americans." A dehumanizing rhetoric was also sometimes used to describe the Left as a sickness, implying something to be treated: "Liberalism is a mental disease," "a cancer to this country," and "In the name of humanity, the LEFT must go!" Coupled with live video of actual brawls with left-wing protesters, the prospect of ridding the United States of this enemy was made tangible and perhaps alluring by these frequently posted scenes.

"Only We Can Stop the Fascists"

For Antifa, the predominant designation of "fascist" to define most enemies springs from the notion that hate groups, alt-Right factions, and terrorists share the same oppressive features—mainly cultural bigotry. Antifa often extends this charge to involve the fascist support system that includes Fox News, labeled the "alt-right mouthpiece," and President Trump, described as "mainstreaming neo-Nazi talking points." But most of all, Antifa branded local police forces as "sympathetic to the alt-right" and even as protecting groups like the Ku Klux Klan: "Cops and Klan go hand in hand." Such claims provide a premise in which Antifa members could see themselves as the only vigilantes that could stand up to these fascists where the police would not. Leading up to Charlottesville, one tweet declared, "We are the only ones we can rely on to protect our friends, families, and communities, never the State. Answer the call to #defendcville!"

In many respects, Antifa is a defender of human rights in this story. Thus, it is difficult to apply the concept of moral disengagement to a movement that is compelled to resist and counter hate. But by framing itself as the sole force that can stand up to fascists in the face of police inaction, Antifa also elevates its campaign to that of freedom fighters in a corrupt state. Followers of that message, no matter how well intentioned, may embrace the notion that “resistance” is effectively a justified call to arms. For the Proud Boys/Oath Keepers, these factions have not only rationalized their underlying cultural intolerance as some form of patriotic nationalism (“blood and soil”) but also raised themselves to the status of army-like defenders. Moreover, their rhetoric about left-wing America as a “cancer” and “disease” is one that strategically dehumanizes the enemy as it condemns it. Bandura (1990) established how dehumanization of one’s adversary allows an offender to absolve itself of any reprehensible behavior (p. 180). In this way, these pretexts were perhaps the real fighting words of these campaigns, for they helped build a foundation of false logic that provided the subliminal rationale for permissible action.

Discussion

Despite its efforts to purge threatening voices from its network, Twitter is host to some of the most contentious factions of the current hyperpartisan climate. While some call for stricter oversight of the platform, the ability to monitor the sources of hostility is not that simple. There is no perfect algorithm to effectively discern impassioned political debate from the extremist dogma that fuels radical movements. This study provides a road map for future investigations into the kinds of “enemy-based” rhetoric on Twitter, particularly between the alt-Right and antifascist Left. In some ways, these camps represent extreme ends of a greater split that has been occurring among the U.S. electorate as Twitter becomes the digital epicenter of that discord.

The first part of this study illustrates how the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and Antifa exercised their rivalry online by targeting, first and foremost, each other. Their ire toward other groups was equally instructive in revealing the nature of these disparate movements. The Far Right groups are notably fixated on perceived enemies of American culture—immigrants, Muslims, Black Lives Matter, and the LGBTQ community—evidencing an ideology that is motivated by identity politics despite previous denials of this charge (Woods, 2017). Most of Antifa’s opposition encompasses Far Right groups and racist factions, including the alt-Right, and their perceived support among law enforcement.

Both groups also voiced more blanket attacks on the American Right and American Left. Whereas Antifa often frames “the Right” as White nationalist or sympathetic to racists, the Proud Boys/Oath Keepers regularly cast “liberals” and “leftists” as unpatriotic or communist. Future studies should examine specifically this form of rhetoric that effectively widens the zone of one’s opposition to encompass nearly half the U.S. populace. Such purist discourse, which attacks a political mind-set as the underlying issue, is indicative of a pattern of thriving debate on Twitter. As research continues to find that online political participation channels into off-line activity (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Wojcieszak, 2009), a critical question is whether this tribalism that is openly displayed on Twitter is directly feeding the divisive rhetoric increasingly found in mainstream politics.

The second part of this study explores the types of appeals that help steer these groups into a combative mind-set. And this brings us back to fighting words. Porta (1995) defined political violence as any form of physical confrontation, destruction of property, rioting, or clashes with police—all activity in which the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and Antifa engaged in 2017. Yet anonymity on Twitter makes it unlikely, if not impossible, to link any single account—even one that openly promotes force—to an ensuing act of violence. However, studies in fight rhetoric are often more concerned with how hostile climates are created and then spread, emphasizing their potential to deliver an array of consequences, which can include violence but also tolerance for others' violence as well as bigotry and a deeply fractured polity.

This study's deeper focus seeks to locate some of the subliminal political speech that Kalmoe (2014) suggested is capable of spurring aggression without overtly endorsing it. To that end, the research examines the recurring pretexts that were used to provide a certain level of moral justification for the need to retaliate. The Far Right groups primed their communities with a nationalist message of an America that is being taken from them by insurgent left-wing forces. By fervently advocating that their groups needed "to take America back" from these domestic threats, the coded message was clear: take action. And in Antifa's dire message of confronting America's racists where authorities would not, it casts itself as a civil rights agent with a moral duty to protect. The self-aggrandizement of both of these groups as America's defenders fits squarely into Bandura's (1990) concept of moral disengagement; they sought to justify the "rightness of their actions" while presenting themselves in a respectable light (p. 163).

Beyond rhetoric, further practices may well have crossed a critical red line, raising new questions about whether certain online trends are capable of causing material damage. Among these, the practice of doxxing, most common in Antifa's Twitter feed, exposes the identities, and sometimes locations, of adversaries. On the right, the Oath Keepers and the Proud Boys frequently streamed live videos advertising violent gatherings in progress, including the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville. Both actions effectively made the provocative appeals of these groups more tangible, and potentially inviting, by pinpointing the enemies' actual whereabouts and celebrating the prospect of some form of retribution.

Online, this confluence of extremist perspectives presents a state where eventual conflict seems inevitable. The expressed beliefs of the Far Right that their America has been stolen and that liberals pose serious threats, juxtaposed to left-wing notions of sanctioned fascism spreading unchecked hatred across the country, were two lit fuses leading toward the same outcome. Twitter, as a space for political debate, becomes an arena for activating violence, where rival communities may indulge fantasies of civil war before acting on them. At the same time, it is critical for future scholarship to follow how Twitter's antiharassment efforts may play a measurable role in mitigating the antagonistic climate of politics that has developed there.

As for the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, and Antifa, their conflict continues to unfold both online and in the public square. In the post-Charlottesville era, it is hard to imagine that cooler heads will prevail. But in a timely follow-up to that event that saw a young protester killed, Proud Boys members staged a second Unite the Right rally in 2018 (Li, 2018, para. 2). Once again, it was promoted across their Twitter feeds. But just prior to the event, Twitter suspended the Proud Boys accounts from its network for violating its policy that prohibits "violent extremist groups."

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