

Radical-Right Populist Media Discourse in Social Media and Counter Strategies: Case Study of #ConfederateHeritageMonth 2021 Twitter Campaign

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Social media offer an opportunity for marginalized radical groups to bypass the mainstream media and gain political subjectivities in the public sphere. This study investigates how a populist right-wing group—the neo-Confederates—used the hashtag #ConfederateHeritageMonth in April 2021 to create a parasitic public sphere and construct their own collective memory on Twitter, and how their discursive actions were neutralized by their opponents. As a right-wing populist group, neo-Confederates have limited access to the mainstream public sphere, as is their memory discourse on the American Civil War. As is the case of many other radical and extremist groups, it is on social media where they can negotiate and shape their collective memory. In this study, quantitative and qualitative research methods were used to uncover neo-Confederate’s main themes of the Civil War memory on social media (the Confederacy as a legitimate part of American history; the Confederacy as a struggle for states’ rights), as well as counter strategies to neutralize them.

Keywords: collective memory, Twitter, alternative media, Civil War, neo-Confederates, right-wing populism

Social media offer an opportunity for various radical and extremist groups, including right-wing populists, to bypass the mainstream media and gain political subjectivities in the public sphere (Couperus, Tortola, & Rensmann, 2022, p. 3). As such, social media can be regarded as a conduit through which those marginalized identities are negotiated and constructed and, eventually, may be able to counter hegemonic discourses (Wasilewski, 2018). In other words, social media “might spread officially suppressed opinions and some form of counter-public sphere might develop in (. . .) social networks” (Birkner & Donk, 2020, p. 368). One of the popular strategies toward creating counterpublics is “hashtag activism,” which relies on the use of hashtags by minorities and radical groups (Wonnenberger, Hellsten, & Jacobs, 2021). Such alternative online public spheres allow their participants to construct their group identities and collective memories. The latter seems to be especially important as contemporary identities are built around collective acts of remembrance and forgetting (Winter, 2008, p. 7).

This study answers two main research questions about the #ConfederateHeritageMonth 2021 Twitter Campaign:

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RQ1: How did neo-Confederates, as a right-wing populist group, construct a counter-collective memory about the American Civil War by tweets with the hashtag #ConfederateHeritageMonth?

RQ2: Which genres (following Lievrouw's, 2011, typology) were employed to deconstruct the neo-Confederate collective memory by its opponents?

As a right-wing populist group, neo-Confederates and their memory discourse have limited access to the mainstream public sphere, constructed and shaped by professional gatekeepers—politicians, journalists, scholars, and so on (Brown, Mondon, & Winter, 2021; Peucker & Fisher, 2022). As is the case of many other populist movements, it is on social media where they are able to negotiate and shape their collective memory.

The novel aspect of this study is that it examines the issue of collective memory and media within the perspective of the radical public sphere. As such, it helps one to understand the role of social media, such as Twitter, in the construction of collective identities of right-wing populist groups.

Mediated Collective Memory

There is no exaggeration in Nora's (1989) statement that we live in the time of the "acceleration of history" (p. 8), when the way the past is interpreted impacts the present and the future. In contemporary discourse, three phenomena concerning time history, memory, and remembrance, merge together into collective memory. In this study, collective memory is synonymous with what Assmann and Czaplicka (1995) call "cultural memory," meaning it is a sociopolitical phenomenon "fixed in immovable figures of memory and stores of knowledge" (p. 130). The idea that human memory can function only within a collective context was first introduced by Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s. The French philosopher argued that all remembering "relies on the dynamics of groups such as families, social classes, and religious communities" (as cited in Russell, 2006, p. 796).

As such, each group identity relies on collective memory. The corpora of persons and events from the past establishes common values, narrations, and explanations that integrate individuals within a community. In addition to this, collective memory indicates who belongs to a given community and who does not. In other words, it allows group members to distinguish "us" from "them" (Pelinka, 2017, p. 621). This feature is especially important when it comes to right-wing populist movements, as contemporary national identities become more and more multicultural and inclusive. According to Greven (2016), right-wing populists "juxtapose their identity and common interests, which are considered to be based on common sense, with the identity and interests of 'others,' usually minorities such as migrants, which are supposedly favored by the (corrupt) elites" (p. 1). Therefore, right-wing populism can be defined as "a response to and rejection of the order imposed by neoliberal elites, an order that fails to use the resources of the democratic nation-state to harness global processes for local needs and desires" (Kaya & De Cesari, 2020, p. 15). Moreover, right-wing populism considers itself as a real representative of "the real people" (Müller, 2016, p. 35). As such, the movement is always antielitist, antipluralist, and antidemocratic, declaring other political ideologies as illegitimate. For this reason, right-wing populists use the past not only to construct their own collective memory but also to identify their enemies. Neo-

Confederate groups share most of the right-wing populist agenda, including conspirational thinking as well as distrust toward the federal government and multiculturalism among others (Carmichael, 2011, pp. 10–11; Peters & Besley, 2017). Some even go as far as summarizing the entire right-wing populism as “Neo-Confederate” (Fletcher, 2016, p. 301).

There is no doubt that in contemporary societies, traditional carriers of memories, such as families or religious communities, have been replaced by the media. They may not only “uncover” memories that otherwise would be forgotten or marginalized in public discourse but also change the very way people remember (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, & Levy, 2011, p. 6). Some schools of thought maintain that the mainstream media “manufacture consent” according to the wishes of the ruling elite (Herman & Chomsky, 1994), and “tend to tilt toward the wishes of corporations and business and professional associations” (Gilens & Page, 2014, pp. 567–568). Mediated collective memory is no exception. Neither the growing number of private media outlets in the digital age nor their vast political sympathies (or the lack thereof) seem to secure the existence of the pluralism of ideas and values in the public sphere (Fuchs, 2018, p. 88). Seemingly inclusive in its nature, collective memory constructed by mainstream media is therefore founded on the exclusion of all those elements that are regarded as either too radical or too divisive (Florini, 2016, p. 114; Wasilewski, 2016, p. 128; Wasilewski, 2019, p. 80). Especially about national traumas, such as civil wars, the media—as well as the entire official system of collective remembrance and forgetting—tend to avoid creating divisions within the society (Knott, 2020).

As memory discourse moves from traditional mass media to online media, collective memory loses its hierarchical structure. Although in the past the mainstream media were able to set the dominant frames of narration, as well as establish the corpora of persons and events from the past, with the emergence of the Web 2.0, it is almost impossible to speak of one nationwide collective memory (Rutten & Zvereva, 2013, p. 6).

The development of online media has also been regarded as “a necessary precondition for the success” of right-wing populist movements in the United States and elsewhere (Schroeder, 2018, p. 60). Although their contemporary strength rests on social and economic conditions (Müller, 2015, p. 82), among other things, there is no doubt that this could have not been achieved without digital media becoming one of the key sources of information for the growing number of people. However, digital media not only allow right-wing populists to circumvent traditional media (Schroeder, 2019, p. 3) but seem to be able to frame the discourse and set the dominant agenda that are later adopted by mainstream media (Mounk, 2018). Much like other alternative media, digital media provide space for the construction of collective memories, which, in traditional media, would be marginalized. Therefore, populist social media messages and posts reveal the group identities of their users, as well as indicate their understanding of the past (Krämer, Fernholz, Husung, Meusel, & Voll, 2021, p. 237).

Alternative Media, Right-Wing Populism, and Memory

According to the propaganda model or biased pluralism paradigm, corporate media dominate the media landscape; however, their domination is often questioned by various voices of dissent (Herman, 2007, p. 91). Alternative media construct “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional

interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). It must be noted, however, that it does not mean that mainstream media are always "oppressive" and alternative media "liberating." As it has already been indicated, the latter may serve radical and extremist groups, allowing them to access publics with their opinions and ideas (Luna, Toro, & Valenzuela, 2022). One of the popular strategies toward creating counterpublics and counterdiscourses is so-called hashtag activism, which relies on the use of hashtags by minorities and radical groups (Wonnenberger et al., 2021). Research on online activism indicates that hashtags have the potential not only to create counterpublics but also access the mainstream public sphere (Daniels, 2016; Graham & Smith, 2016; Wang & Zhou, 2021).

Even though alternative media, as well as subaltern counterpublics they create, are often associated with left-wing communication outlets, they are more and more often used by right-wing populist groups. In fact, according to the latest research, suspicion of mainstream media and trust in alternative media (as well as the willingness to dehumanize historically disadvantaged groups) define the U.S. populist right supporters (Forscher & Kteily, 2020, p. 111). Such public spheres are governed by an "us" versus "them" political imaginary (Schlesinger, 2020). In this case, what emerges is a "parasitic public," as it does not aim at striving for equality but at limiting the debate. Such a public "articulates with and feeds off of the power structure's oppressive norms through demagogic rhetoric intended to limit discursive space for others and strengthen its own circulatory, material power" (Larson & McHendry, 2019, p. 519). In response to counterdiscursive challenges posed by right-wing alternative media and parasitic publics, dominant publics reorganize themselves, often by adopting themes and ideas disseminated in parasitic publics.

Alternative media serve two main purposes. First, they "express opposition vertically from subordinate quarters directly at the power structure"; second, they "build support, solidarity, and networking laterally against policies or even against the very survival of the power structure" (Downing, Ford, Gil, & Stein, 2001, p. ix). In addition to this, alternative media have potential to construct group identities. Although the corporate media tend to focus their attention on large groups, such as nations, contributing to their further integration (Dayan, 1998, p. 105), alternative media often run counter to the mainstream narrative, representing those that do not fit into the notion of national unity (Harcup, 2013, p. 126; Stein, 2011, p. 150). Because of this, right-wing populists use alternative media to target mainstream media, accusing them of promoting multiculturalism that, in their opinion, dismantles the idea of a nation built on ethnicity (Mudde, 2007, p. 9). Instead, they use alternative media to shift the mainstream agenda by introducing to it such themes as "national sovereignty, the preservation of the dominant group's culture, and opposition to mass migration and multiculturalism" (Schroeder, 2019, p. 3). In the case of parasitic publics, "the affective contours of Whiteness" are essential for their formation (Larson & McHendry, 2019, p. 523).

Alternative media are much more than just media outlets run by amateur activists. It means that radical and extremist voices (e.g., right-wing populism) may gain an equal position to moderates. What is more, alternative media are often sources of so-called fake news, fabricating information and contributing to political polarization (Klawier, Prochazka, & Schweiger, 2021). According to Lievrouw (2011) alternative media (which she associates with activist media) "employ or modify the communication artifacts, practices, and social arrangements of new information and communication technologies to challenge or alter dominant, expected, or accepted ways of doing society, culture, and politics" (p. 19). In her opinion,

this ability to modify the process of communication is demonstrated through five basic genres, or “types of expression or communication” (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 20). These are: culture jamming, alternative computing, participatory journalism, mediated mobilization, and commons knowledge. These genres have been successfully used by both left-wing and right-wing populist movements (Wasilewski, 2017).

The first genre, culture jamming, uses popular culture to “repurpose” its elements and redefines their purpose and meaning (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 22). When it comes to memory discourse, culture jamming may take the form of communicative actions that modify the established meaning of events and persons from the hegemonic corpora of collective memory. For example, whereas George Washington appears in the mainstream collective memory as one of the “founding fathers” of the American nation, in an alternative memory discourse, the first U.S. president might be depicted as a slave owner and racist.

Alternative computing, as the second genre listed by Lievrouw (2011), involves both programming skills and ethical commitments. Among other things, it includes the development of software that serves to highlight human rights and other activist purposes. However, its more radical forms may include “sabotage directed against organizations that activists consider to be engaging in exploitative, unjust, or corrupt activities” (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 24). Alternative computing can be used to distort memory discourse (e.g., by creating Internet bots that spread alternative information on past events and figures, which may eventually reframe the mainstream narrative).

The third genre, participatory journalism, can be associated with alternative news outlets, blogs, and social media sites that produce information and opinions that oppose the mainstream discourse. Participatory journalism depends largely on the work of volunteers and covers those topics that the corporate media often marginalize or dismiss as unimportant or radical (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 25). Independent websites and other forms of online communication that, at least partially, devote their space to historical information can be considered parts of such journalism.

Mediated journalism, on the other hand, goes beyond online communication. It uses alternative media to mobilize users and engage them in “live and mediated collective action” (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 25). Scholars indicate that modern social movements and online communication are inseparable and interdependent (Russell, 2016, p. 31).

Finally, the fifth genre—commons knowledge—refers to the bottom-up work of amateurs who provide knowledge, undermining schemes, and hierarchies constructed by professionals. As the corporate media rely on official sources (e.g., politicians, experts), alternative media give space to those who are often overlooked by the mainstream (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 178). Wikipedia is an instructive example of how online activists and amateurs democratize knowledge and the access to it (Lievrouw, 2012, p. 487).

The Civil War, American Collective Memory, and #ConfederateHeritageMonth

One of the cornerstones of American collective memory is the trauma of the American Civil War 1861–1865 (Olick, 1999, p. 344). The scale and brutality of this conflict, as well as its short- and long-term consequences, have not only determined the United States’ economic and political progress but also shaped

the idea of a multicultural nation in the contemporary western world. In their book on the legacy of the Civil War, Grant and Parish (2003) stress that "the Civil War, like the French and Russian Revolutions, was so critical a moment in the formation of the world in which we live that it compels us to contemplate the most basic features and values of modern society" (p. 2). This explains why the memory of this tragic event is still present in political and popular discourses in the United States and has the potential to cause conflicts. It also explains why right-wing populists consider the Civil War and its legacy as one of the pillars of their collective memory.

Historian Blight (2001) lists three dominant narratives of the Civil War, namely: the reconciliationist vision, the White supremacist vision, and the emancipationist vision (p. 2). These were all developed soon after the end of the conflict and have been present in American memory discourse ever since. The White supremacist vision (popular not only in southern states), included terror and violence in the South and supported Jim Crow laws until the second half of the 20th century. The emancipationist vision introduced the idea of the Civil War as the reinvention of the American republic, together with the abolition of slavery. However, over time, these two narratives have been largely marginalized, as "the inexorable drive for reunion both used and trumped race" (Blight, 2001, p. 3). The reconciliationist vision has been widely adopted by the U.S. mainstream media, which—as it has already been indicated—have become one of the main carriers of collective memory. Together with neoliberal elites, the corporate media stand guard over "color-blind" public discourse, including memory discourse (Wasilewski, 2019, p. 80). Repeating the claims about a "post-racial" era, the media "frame racism as a relic of the past and obscure contemporary racial injustice" (Florini, 2016, p. 114).

The hegemonic memory discourse on the Civil War meets opposition from both the radical left and populist right of the U.S. political spectrum. While the left criticizes the liberal elite's tendency toward a "polished" version of the past, which blurs the divisions between victims and perpetrators, the populist right challenges collective memory even more deeply, by presenting perpetrators as heroic and patriotic (Zavatti, 2021).

For many right-wing populist movements based on ideology of the White-nationalism (Stack, 2017, p. A15), such as neo-Confederates, the contemporary mainstream discourse on the Civil War attempts to "completely eradicate the Confederate flag and any memory of the righteous cause for which it stood" (Neiwert, 2017, p. 63). As such, opinions are eradicated from the mainstream public sphere; neo-Confederates use social media to construct their own collective memory.

One of the examples of this is the public sphere created around the Twitter hashtag #ConfederateHeritageMonth. The hashtag was first used in November 2014 but did not gain popularity until two years later. For some Twitter users, it was an attempt to celebrate Confederate Heritage Month online as more and more southern states were withdrawing from observing this controversial tradition held in April (Nichols & Best, 2018; Weinberg, 2011).

Method

Research Questions and Design

This study aims to answer two main research questions about the #ConfederateHeritageMonth 2021 Twitter Campaign:

RQ1: How did neo-Confederates, as a right-wing populist group, construct a counter-collective memory about the American Civil War by tweets with the hashtag #ConfederateHeritageMonth?

RQ2: Which genres (following Lievrouw's, 2011, typology) were employed to deconstruct the neo-Confederate collective memory by its opponents?

As both questions refer to discourse, this study uses discourse analysis as an analytical and interpretative framework. It draws, first and foremost, from the works of van Dijk and his perspective of discourse. He understands discourse broadly, as a mode of organizing knowledge and ideas rooted in language and serving to legitimize certain values and opinions or—in other words—to “reproduce power” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 259; 2008, p. 192). At the same time, discourses are much more than just linguistic units built of words and sentences, a phenomenon that is especially noticeable in online communication. Discourses may also contain “paraverbal and non-verbal dimensions,” such as sounds, images, or films (van Dijk, 2008, p. 192). Discourse analysis of online communication should then investigate not only the linguistic features but all dimensions of an interaction. What is important for such interactions is their context—or “interactional, social, communicative, political, historical and cultural frameworks” (van Dijk, 2008, p. 192), which are defined and interpreted by the participants.

Although discourse analysis provides a theoretical framework for the study, the following research draws from political discourse analysis as a research technique. Although there is a plethora of approaches to discourse analysis, such as critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010), thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2008), or the discourse-historical approach (Reisigl & Wodak, 2008), memory discourse belongs to the domain of politics and should be investigated as such (Bramall, 2013). Donati (1992) defines political discourse as “the interactions of individuals, interest groups, social movements and institutions through which problematic situations are converted to policy problems, agendas are set, decisions are made and actions are taken” (p. 139). By consequence, political discourse analysis investigates the ways in which political reality is framed through discourse (van Dijk, 1997).

Sample

The research conducted here investigated all the tweets published with the hashtag #ConfederateHeritageMonth in the period of April 1, 2021–April 30, 2021, the time period covered by the research study marked Confederate Heritage Month, which used to be officially observed in several U.S. states in April. Moreover, April is the month when the largest number of tweets with the hashtag was recorded. The Twitter data were imported by QDA Miner 6 software, which was also used for further coding and analysis. Such a query produced a total number of 547 tweets. Although the study included a

preliminary quantitative content analysis, it relied, first and foremost, on qualitative methods. In the first step, the collected tweets were divided into two main groups: (1) those posted by neo-Confederates; and (2) those posted by their antagonists. As prior research on right-wing populist movements and collective memory remains sparse (Nadel, 2020; Wasilewski, 2019), it was impossible to design key categories deductively. Therefore, in both groups a random sample of tweets was selected to inductively construct a set of recurring themes (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). Another step involved adding tweets to each thematic category; new units were added until the criteria of saturation were met (Saunders et al., 2018). Consecutive tweets were added to the research sample until the frames they carried repeated themselves and no new frame appeared. Altogether, around one fourth of all the tweets were included in the qualitative research.

Quantitative Findings: Construction of the Public Sphere

As it has already been indicated, this study included a preliminary quantitative content analysis. Although it was designed to provide empirical material for further qualitative research, it also extracted some valuable information. The content analysis was performed with the help of QDA Miner 6 software that made it possible to retrieve all the tweets with the hashtag #ConfederateHeritageMonth posted in the investigated time period, as well as helping to classify tweets within the designed thematic categories. Other data displayed here resulted from the usage of online tools, such as Hashtagify, as indicated in the captions of the figures below.

The total number of tweets posted with the hashtag #ConfederateHeritageMonth in April 2021 was 547. Together, they constituted a parasitic public sphere, whose participants discussed and negotiated the place of the Confederacy in American collective memory (O'Hallarn et al., 2018; Swasy, 2016, p. 3). According to Figure 1, the number of tweets published daily varied significantly. On April 1, 2021, the first day of Confederate Heritage Month, 26 tweets were published, whereas on April 30, 2021, there appeared only 19 new tweets with the above-mentioned hashtag. The highest daily number of tweets, 40, was recorded on both April 9 and April 13; the lowest, 5, was on April 22. On the remaining days, the number of tweets did not fall below 10 and did not surpass 31.

As shown by Figure 2, the scale of the posted tweets indicates that #ConfederateHeritageMonth had a limited scope when compared with other Twitter campaigns. Despite a large digital presence of right-wing populists, not all of their initiatives are able to attract a considerable number of users and manage to reach the mainstream, as occurred in this case.

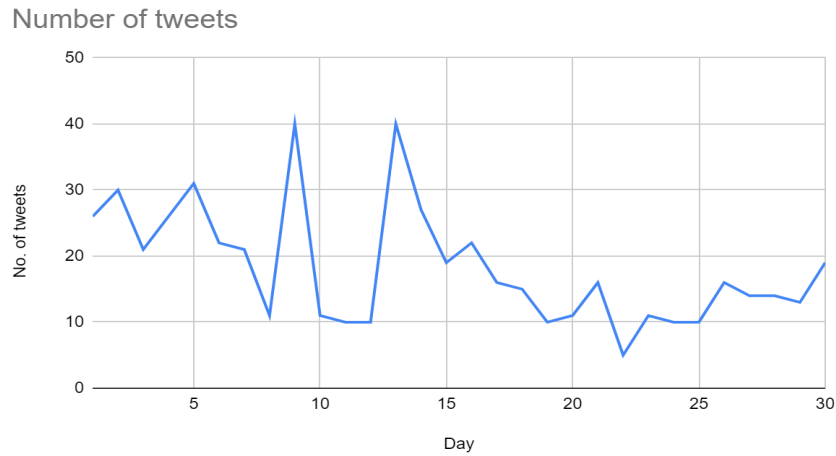


Figure 1. Number of tweets with the hashtag #ConfederateHeritageMonth posted from April 1 through April 30, 2021.

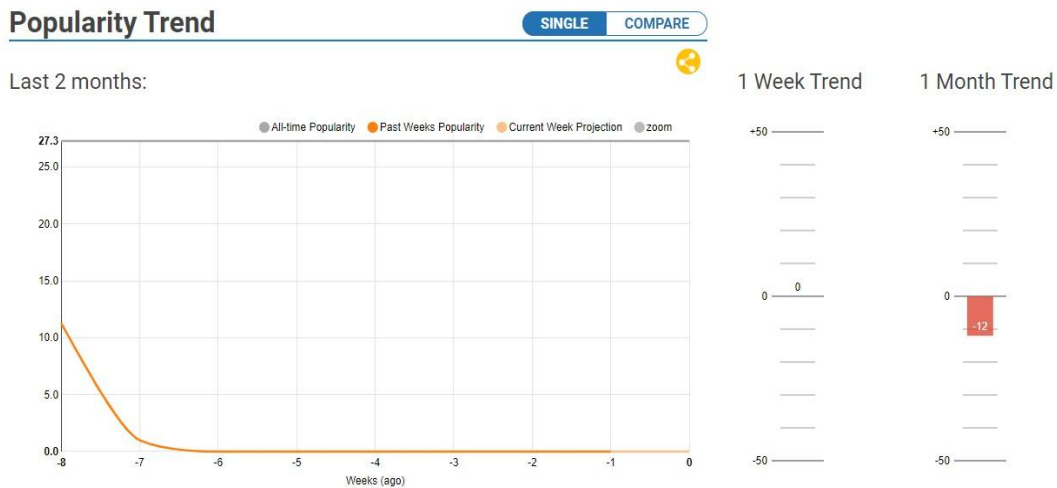


Figure 2. Popularity trend of the hashtag #ConfederateHeritageMonth. The data and graphics were acquired by the Hashtagify tool.

Other quantitative data disclose more details of the parasitic sphere analyzed here. It is hardly surprising that almost all the tweets published in the time period were in English (Figure 3) and posted from the United States (Figure 4). Although the Civil War may fascinate people from different countries, when it comes to collective memory, it is exclusively an American experience (Frisch, 1989).

Top 6 Languages Used

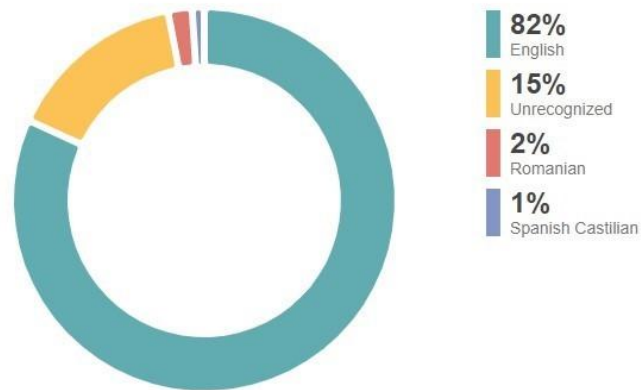


Figure 3. Languages used in the posted tweets with the hashtag #ConfederateHeritageMonth. The data and graphics were acquired by the Hashtagify tool.

Top Countries

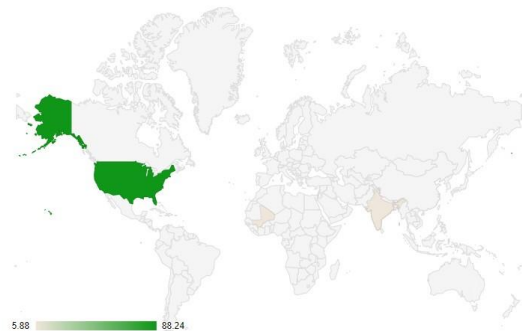


Figure 4. Countries of origin of the posted tweets with the hashtag #ConfederateHeritageMonth. The data and graphics were acquired by the Hashtagify tool.

Despite the relatively high number of posted tweets with the hashtag #ConfederateHeritageMonth, the number of participants of the parasitic public was much lower (Figure 5, Table 1). Almost 60% of all the tweets posted in the time period were authored by only six users. What is more, 18.5%—that is, 101 tweets, were posted by one user, @N1¹, who runs a Twitter profile dedicated to the history of the Civil War. The second top author was @U1—an online personification of General Ulysses S. Grant with 78 posted tweets, which comprised 14.3% of the total number. A closer look at the most prolific authors shows that the public

¹ This and other accounts included in the analysis were anonymized, except for commercial accounts.

sphere, which was originally created by neo-Confederates with the intention of changing the predominantly negative narrative on the Confederacy in the mainstream discourse, eventually came to be dominated by their antagonists.

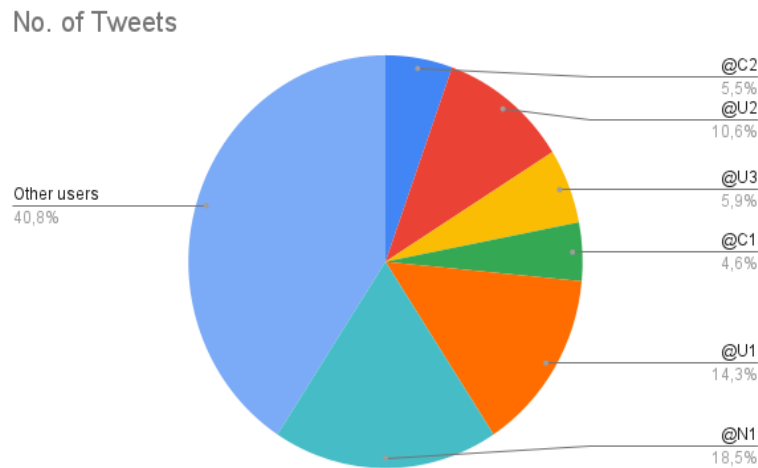


Figure 5. Top six authors of the posted tweets with the hashtag #ConfederateHeritageMonth.

Table 1. Most Prolific Authors and the Number of Their Tweets (April 1, 2021–April 30, 2021).

No. of tweets	Authors
25	@C1
30	@C2
32	@U3
58	@U2
78	@U1
101	@N1
223	Other users

Note. C users represent neo-Confederates; U users represent their opponents; the N user was considered neutral here because of the encyclopedic character of the account.

Qualitative Findings

As seen above, the content analysis has provided some basic information concerning the creation of a parasitic public sphere by Twitter users who posted their tweets with the hashtag #ConfederateHeritageMonth during the period analyzed here. It has helped to determine its scope and limits, as well as indicate some basic features of its participants. However, it has not answered questions about the discourse that constituted the described right-wing populist public sphere. Since the portrayal of the Confederacy in the mainstream media remains negative (Florini, 2016, p. 114), it was assumed that

the main purpose of the described alternative public sphere was to negotiate and construct a counternarrative. Moreover, it should be remembered that contemporary right-wing populist discourse is framed by such categories as ethnicity and race, which mainstream discourse usually rejects. Therefore, one of the goals of the qualitative research was to investigate how this narrative was constructed and what its main discursive features were. As a result, the qualitative analysis indicated two prevailing themes among the tweets posted by those users who can be described as neo-Confederates, namely: (1) the Confederacy as a legitimate part of American history, and (2) the Confederacy as a struggle for states' rights.

The first theme, which can be summed up as "the Confederacy is a legitimate part of American history," rests on a conviction that both sides of the Civil War should be equally remembered and honored. Consequently, this theme avoids moral judgment while stressing the need to pay tribute to all the fallen in the conflict. According to this theme, American history is one, and, regardless of the past divisions, collective memory should include and appreciate various attitudes and traditions as together they have built the American experience. Without them, American memory would be defective. This is why it is important to "defend" it against attempts to eradicate the Confederacy's heritage from American collective memory, which neo-Confederates (and other right-wing populists) perceive as one of the aims of multiculturalism. In other words, as #HeritageNotHate, one popular hashtag that often followed #ConfederateHeritageMonth, has proclaimed, it was supposed to be all about heritage, not hate. The following tweets illustrate such a discursive strategy (original text)²: "Twitter seems to be full of ignorant and hateful people. I'll keep on posting this month to keep them triggered. I'm proud of my heritage. Your overused comebacks and memes won't change that" (C4, personal communication, April 4, 2021); "Our Heritage is a gift, paid for with the blood of our Ancestors . . . We must defend and protect that Heritage with all our hearts!" (C5, personal communication, April 6, 2021); "Many of my followers during #confederateheritagemonth have seen offensive images for the simple goal of creating hostility. But remember, they aren't after you, they are after America" (C2, personal communication, April 19, 2021).

Another discursive strategy manifested within the first theme relied on introduced, selected examples from the past. By reminding users that not so long ago, the portrayal of the Confederacy in American popular culture (and collective memory) was far from negative, it stressed the character of contemporary exclusive mainstream discourse, which—according to right-wing populism—promotes radical values, fueled by multiculturalism and political correctness (Manucci, 2020, p. 124). As a consequence, the traditional need of reconciliation and unity (though only within the White population) has been absent in mainstream discourse. Here are two sample tweets, all posted by @C2, a Twitter user impersonating Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederate States: "In 1951 the US issued a commemorative stamp for the GAR [Grand Army of the Republic] and the UCV [United Confederate Veterans]. Why weren't we perceived as 'traitors' in 1951?" (C2, personal communication, April 28, 2021); "The Littlest Rebel is a

² In this and the following illustrations of themes and frames, we included those tweets whose content allows the reader to understand the strategies of framing. Moreover, they also explain the research method and the way of thinking employed by this study's author.

1935 American drama film directed by David Butler, it focuses on the tribulations of a plantation-owning family during the #civilwar & stars Shirley Temple” (C2, personal communication, April 28, 2021).

The latter tweet is especially interesting because it illustrates how the memory discourse on the Confederacy and its legacy refers to a broader discourse on multiculturalism in contemporary America, which right-wing populists have been trying to reframe (Giroux, 1995).

In addition to this, the first theme demonstrated itself in tweets that carried the images of the Confederate battle flag (also known as “the Southern Cross” or “the Rebel flag”). They often carried slogans, such as “Celebrating the Confederate Heritage Month” or “Proud of my ancestry.”

The second theme, which the analysis indicated as one prevalent in the tweets, considered the establishment of the Confederacy as a legitimate rebellion against the federal government. According to this theme, the southern states defended the original meaning of the Constitution as it had been envisioned by the founding fathers. Another reason why the South had every right to secede from the Union was the tariff system imposed by the government in Washington, which was destructive for the South’s economy. Although the theme referred to the past, it was built around the contemporary right-wing populist combination of identity and economy (Öniş & Kutlay, 2020). By highlighting these two reasons—states’ rights and tariffs—the theme aimed to marginalize the role of slavery in the memory of the Civil War, as well as to remove it as the leading element of the Confederacy’s legacy. What is more, according to this theme, racism should not be associated with the South, as it was omnipresent among the northern elites as well. Here are some examples (original writing): “The International #Lincoln War was fought over States Rights Not slavery” (C6, personal communication, April 4, 2021); “You are confusing the cause of secession (first 7 states) with the cause of the war (legality of secession). Moreover, illegal violations by the North over property in the territories & nullifying the fugitive slave act is not preserving slavery” (C2, personal communication April 4, 2021); “This month we celebrate our confederate forefathers in their noble defense of their homeland” (C7, personal communication, April 9, 2021); “#RobertELee was, in my estimation, one of the supremely gifted men produced by our Nation. He believed unswervingly in the Constitutional validity of his cause which until 1865 was still an arguable question in America”—Eisenhower (C2, personal communication, April 16, 2021); “It was a war for independence and not a civil war” (C1, personal communication, April 29, 2021).

The above two themes could be found in most of the tweets that were posted in support of the Confederacy and its legacy.

As has already been indicated, the public sphere constructed by the hashtag #ConfederateHeritageMonth, which aimed to build a positive narrative concerning the Confederacy and its legacy, was eventually dominated by opposing voices. Their discursive actions intended to deconstruct the pro-Confederacy narrative by introducing counterthemes and eventually led to the deconstruction of the right-wing populist public sphere. The following study uses Lievrouw’s (2011) genres to classify these actions: culture jamming, alternative computing, participatory journalism, mediated mobilization, and common knowledge.

Culture jamming assumes selecting elements of dominant culture and assigning to them a new meaning, one that often carries dissenting values (Dery, 2010). As Atkinson (2019) writes, it “entails the appropriation of images or ‘memes’ in popular culture and using them in critiques against power structures in society” (p. 5). In the described public sphere, the dominant culture manifested itself in various pro-Confederacy slogans, pictures, and graphics, such as the Confederate battle flag or the memes with the South’s military and political leaders. In fact, the very hashtag #ConfederateHeritageMonth was itself such a formative element. Together, they created the foundations of the public sphere. Therefore, those who wanted to deconstruct it, had to, first and foremost, deconstruct Confederate symbols. In most cases, they employed a strategy that involved the mockery and parody of Confederate symbols. This allowed them not only to deprive the symbols of their original meanings—which some might consider sacred (Wasilewski, 2016)—but also make them irrelevant. Figures 6–8 illustrate the refiguration of Confederate symbols.



Figure 6. A tweet mocking the Confederacy symbolized by its flag. Two men carrying a coffin with the Confederate battle flag bear the superimposed faces of Gen. William T. Sherman (right) and Gen. Ulysses S. Grant (left). This symbolic funeral represents the defeat of the Confederacy and its legacy (U3, personal communication, April 24, 2021).



Figure 7. A tweet, posted by @U1 (an account impersonating Gen. Ulysses S. Grant), sets together "symbols of hatred and bigotry": the Confederate battle flag with the Nazi flag and a cap with Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign slogan: "Make America Great Again" (U1, personal communication, April 28, 2021).

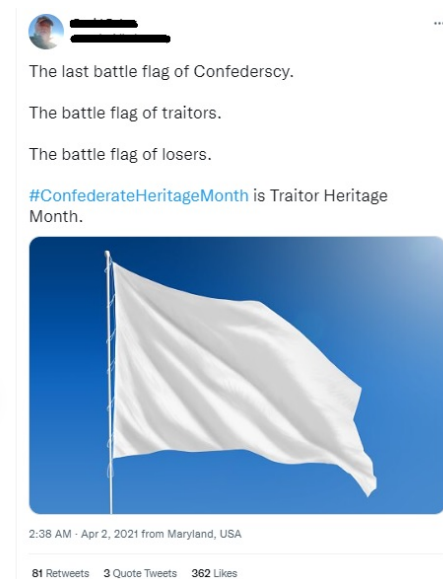


Figure 8. A tweet mocking the Confederate battle flag—here replaced by a white flag as the symbol of surrender. Moreover, the tweet transforms the hashtag #ConfederateHeritageMonth into "Traitor Heritage Month" (U4, personal communication, April 2, 2021).

Alternative computing often involves the use of bots or the spread of misinformation (Atkinson, 2019, p. 5). However, the limited scope of the described public sphere did not demand such an extensive use of computer techniques from those who aimed to deconstruct the discourse. Therefore, in this case, alternative computing can be understood as such activities that did not require professional skills or software, but that achieved similar goals, that is "reconfigure systems" (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 98). For example, one of the participants of the #ConfederateHeritageMonth public sphere, @U1 retweeted each tweet supporting the Confederacy with one and the same comment: "You can argue about tariffs and improvements all you want, but the real cause of the Civil War was the South's desire to preserve race-based slavery" (U1, personal communication, April 6, 2021).

@U1 repeated the above comment 78 times. It means that the user's tweets comprised almost 14.5% of all those posted with the hashtag #ConfederateHeritageMonth. The comment refers to one of the two main pro-Confederate themes in the described public sphere, that is, the theme suggesting that the real cause of the Civil War was the unfair tax system imposed by the federal government on the southern states. By pasting the same phrase to the retweeted posts, the user imitated a computer bot, following tweets published with the hashtag #ConfederateHeritageMonth, and depriving them of their original pro-Confederacy meaning. As a result, @U1 managed to "hack" and reconfigure the public sphere.

Participatory journalism, as the third genre, aims to introduce into the public sphere issues and values that are marginalized by the mainstream media. As such, alternative media create "a diverse media space in which any and all voices can be heard" (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 121). Although pro-Confederate participants of the public sphere described here relied heavily on radical-right and conservative news outlets, their opponents distributed information from their own sources. One of the leading alternative sources of information was the Mississippi Free Press's (MFP) Twitter profile, @MSFreePress, as well as that of its founder, Donna Ladd, @U1. The total number of tweets published by these two accounts or later retweeted by other users was 62. The Mississippi Free Press is a nonprofit journalism website and multimedia network launched in March 2020.

The MFP was first to break the news that Mississippi Governor Tate Reeves had signed a proclamation declaring April as Confederate Heritage Month. Until then, the governor and his office had not officially published the document, and it took an intensive journalistic investigation to find out that such a proclamation existed, with a copy of it posted on the Sons of Confederate Veterans' Camp 256 Rankin Rough & Ready Facebook profile (Ladd, 2021). Breaking the story, as well as follow-up news published by the MFP, provided Twitter users with information that mainstream news outlets were not interested in, but that uncovered state authorities' racism and pro-Confederacy sympathies.

This study did not investigate if and how anti-Confederacy tweets with the hashtag #ConfederateHeritageMonth had led to mediated mobilization. What can be said for sure is that news about public protests, which aimed to remove Confederate statues across the country, attracted attention and praise from some users of the public sphere, who willingly retweeted it. For example, many published tweets carried a link to articles describing the stealing of the Jefferson Davis Memorial Chair in Selma, Alabama, on March 19, 2021. In April, "White Lies Matter," a group that claimed responsibility for the theft, threatened to turn the chair into a toilet unless the Richmond branch of the United Daughters of the Confederacy hung a banner

quoting Assata Shakur, a Black Liberation Army activist, on the 156th anniversary of the end of the Civil War (Brockell, 2021). Even if the publication of this and similar stories did not directly result in public mobilization, then it certainly reconfigured the main frames of the discourse within the #ConfederateHeritageMonth public sphere.

Commons knowledge is often associated with large independent projects, such as Wikipedia. However, this can be any online initiative that "provides an alternative and complement to the expert-driven" knowledge and information (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 178). In the described public sphere, it was the account @N1, which not only delivered independent historical information but also became one of the leading participants of the public sphere. Unlike tweets posted by neo-Confederates and their antagonists, which were highly politicized, messages published by @N1 focused on historical facts. However, it does not mean that tweets posted by the @N1 user were politically neutral, especially when compared with mainstream sources of information. One of their main features was the language, which was direct, clearly indicating the author's sympathies. Here are two examples: "Despite his racist views, violence against Black people, and participation in the rebellion against the United States, Hampton remains revered in much of South Carolina. Streets, parks, and schools are named in his honor. #ConfederateHeritageMonth" (N1, personal communication, April 11, 2021); "Many of the wounded members of the 1st Kansas were executed by the confederates, who refused to take Black prisoners. This fact is often omitted from historical markers and other summaries of the battle. (@kansashistory) (@BlackPastOnline) #ConfederateHeritageMonth" (N1, personal communication, April 4, 2021).

Conclusions

This study has found that social media provide right-wing populists with space for the construction of collective memories. In this case, it was Twitter and its hashtag system that allows users to share a topic or theme. Tweets posted with the hashtag #ConfederateHeritageMonth in April 2021 constructed a parasitic public sphere, in which collective memory was negotiated and shaped by neo-Confederates. It must be added, however, that it was a one-issue public only, belonging to a larger right-wing populist public on Twitter. As the research results indicate, both the parasitic public sphere and collective memory were built around themes, frames, and interpretations that are distinctive for U.S. right-wing populism, but because of Twitter had the potential to access to the mainstream. Parasitic publics, including this one, "redirect in-group attention and anxiety from the precarious conditions of their own making to an out-group, thereby diffusing intragroup conflict and uniting the in-group against a common 'enemy'" (Larson & McHendry, 2019, p. 531). However, the created parasitic public sphere, as a one-issue and relatively small public, was prone to being "hacked" or taken over by those Twitter users who disagreed with its principles. In this case, tweets published by neo-Confederates were not only outnumbered by those posted by their opponents but also the messages they carried were neutralized by opposing actions, which could be classified according to the five main genres. Thus, the neutralization of the right-wing populist narrative made it impossible for the analyzed public sphere to affect the mainstream discourse. The research indicates that online strategies, devised and employed by right-wing populists to persuade their targeted audience to accept their memory discourse can be successfully contained by other social media users.

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