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Understanding the Alt-Right Brand Through a Comparative Look at Internal vs. External Rhetoric

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Abstract

This project examines the communications of the alt-Right, a relatively new white supremacist social movement in the US. The popularity of the alt-Right can be attributed to not only changing social conditions leading to rising instability but also rhetorically astute uses of new media. The alt-Right has been able to define its brand as an anti-political correctness coalition, and to communicate that brand identity to the public. When the brand identity eventually fell apart, so too did the movement.

Executive Summary

The goal of this project is to explain how the alt-Right social movement communicates both within its ranks, and to perspective members.

The alt-Right started as an online movement reacting against what they saw as an oppressive politically correct culture. It combined elements of traditional white supremacists, personal freedom-oriented Libertarians, men's rights activists, and ironic meme makers. One thing overwhelmingly united them: they were mostly white and mostly male. And they thought that the liberal privileging of oppressed identity groups left them out. The predominant cultural narrative was that groups mainly composed of white men were privileged, and the needs of other groups needed more legislative and cultural attention. The nascent alt-Right correctly identified that there was a gap between privilege rhetoric and how difficult their lives were. They rebelled.

This rebellion crystallized through the Gamergate movement. Men pushed back against feminist cultural critics and game developers who were encroaching on a gaming community they felt women had no place in. Having honed their craft in real life and online trolling campaigns, the milieu of groups that would go on to form the alt-Right relentlessly harassed feminists journalists and game developers. Their vitriol was influenced by racism, sexism, anti-Semitism and more.

This campaign was led by overtly far-Right elements, followed up by an army of trolls who did their bidding. Milo Yiannopoulos typified this trend. Several months before Gamergate, he was writing articles on how gamers were losers who lived in their parent's basement and had nothing going on for them. When Gamergate erupted, he was writing articles in favor of male gamers and their free speech rights. He characterized gamers as being under attack by feminists and Cultural Marxists.

Opposition to political correctness would become a rallying cry within the alt-Right. To them, political correctness was a conspiracy theory that flipped the narrative used by mainstream liberals. It was white people and Western culture that were under attack, not minorities. The political correctness conspiracy theory is thematically linked to the Cultural Marxism conspiracy theory. At the heart of both of these theories is the Right-wing idea that traditionally disenfranchised groups asserting their power is an unfair attack on systemically privileged groups.

This narrative proved useful as online alt-Right forces intentionally sought out lonely, vulnerable young men. To the men who felt that their natural place at the top of the hierarchy of social groups was being threatened, the alt-Right could point the finger at liberals, the far Left, and immigrants as undermining the West. To the men who were depressed and had no social support, the alt-Right provided advice and support before slowly introducing you into their ideology. The alt-Right sought to provide a sense of community. A tribe to call your own.

The alt-Right bolstered its victim narrative and established a sense of community through public demonstrations. These demonstrations were intentionally held in liberal areas because they knew they would be shouted down. They were able to meet online friends in real life while reinforcing the victim narrative. Milo Yiannopoulos and other speakers would go to liberal college campuses for a similar reason – to spread their ideas and reinforce their narrative.

One protest event stood out above the others. The Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville was meant to unite the various warring factions of the online alt-Right, as well as with the older generation of white supremacists who had by this point started showing up to events and protests. They framed the event as an urgent call to defend free speech, while also paying

homage to white history. That narrative was manufactured for the popular press. Internally it was a time to build community and reinforce victim status.

The alt-Right used branding techniques to establish a brand identity and promote its brand to the public. Its brand was composed of several smaller brands that had united to battle political correctness, and the Cultural Marxists advancing it. The alt-Right brand's target audience was socially isolated, often depressed, young white men. The alt-Right movement provided a community of predominantly white men who together rebelled against what they viewed as an oppressive culture destroying what they valued.

I will first review literature on related topics, then argue that Milo Yiannopoulos was instrumental in creating an alt-Right brand during Gamergate formed out of three main groups – men's rights activists, libertarian gamers, and white supremacists. The alt-Right brand he formed is an example of the outlaw archetype. Trump tapped into this brand identity during his presidential election. But shortly after the election, the alt-Right began to split up.

During the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, organizers strove to smooth over tensions, but instead exacerbated them. The rally climaxed with the unfortunate death of activist Heather Heyer. The alt-Right, and its relationship with Trump, deteriorated shortly thereafter.

The report concludes with a look at how an advertising agency would seek to intentionally do what elements of the alt-Right have inadvertently been doing.

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Introduction

It is a truism in politics that when the center falls out, the political extremes fill in the gap. In America, the political center has been a bipartisan commitment to the neoliberal deregulation of the economy. This deregulation of the economy has greatly increased inequality (Jacobs, 2014). The poor are leading increasingly precarious lives and the destruction of the safety net of the middle class has led to increased feelings of anxiety on both the Left and the Right. Isolated bursts of political activity have been indicative of a greater sense of urgency bubbling underneath the surface.

For many election analysts and forecasters, Donald Trump's successful 2016 presidential election came out of nowhere (Silver, 2016). Who could vote for such a charlatan, and why? Much of his support is coming from what the Left call the petite bourgeoisie (Myerson, 2017). Known in American society as the upper middle class or small business owners, these folks are some of the first people to turn to reactionary politics to defend the privileges they feel they are owed. While they are not a part of the one percent or the ruling elite, they aspire to be. Any threat of downward mobility or competing groups' upward mobility leads to economic and cultural anxiety. Reactionary, authoritarian politics are soon to follow as the petite bourgeoisie desperately seek to maintain their position of relative wealth.

Donald Trump's rise is emblematic of and was fueled by a larger movement. This movement, dubbed the alt-Right, is a milieu of far-Right extremists including men's rights activists, anarcho-capitalists, Libertarians, reactionaries, Nazis, other fascists, and miscellaneous white supremacists. In the wake of Trump's electoral victory, the alt-Right has been emboldened to commit numerous terrorist attacks on people of color and Leftists. The most notable of these

events took place during the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville. A white nationalist drove his car into a crowd of protestors, killing one and injuring many.

Of interest to me in my research of the alt-Right is how the movement grew and the role of its rhetorical strategies in that process. Communications scholars have a unique task in examining the way rhetoric and branding play in creating, influencing, and responding to mass events. It is through these communications processes that people understand the wider world and can then form groups with similar understandings.

Packaging and selling an ideology as a continuation of the sense of self is a similar process to the corporation's creation of a brand identity. The way that brands are constructed and disseminated with the goal of consumption provides a useful theoretical framework for my analysis of the growth and rhetoric of the alt-Right social movement as an ideology constructed and disseminated with the goal of consumption. Both processes fulfill the need to belong.

My purpose here is twofold. First, I will be tracking how the alt-Right internally communicated amongst itself throughout its growth. This discussion will include an analysis of Gamergate, and how it came to define the alt-Right. It will talk about the alt-Right's branding process, and how Trump was able to target that brand with his own personal brand. Finally, it will go over the importance of online forums and social media in recruiting new members and ensuring ideological conformity. To accomplish these goals, a broad overview of the groups making up the alt-Right and their distinct beliefs and rhetorical strategies will be necessary.

My second aim in conducting this research will be to look at how the alt-Right was perceived from a broader cultural standpoint. How did the alt-Right describe itself to outgroup members, often with subtle nods to the ingroup? What have been some of the responses from mainstream conservatives and liberals, as well as radical Leftists? How are events like the Unite

the Right rally in Charlottesville perceived by the general public, and what is their purpose in being organized? What are the perceptions of the alt-Right as a brand?

My discussion of the alt-Right as a brand begins with an overview of the research that has already been conducted about far-Right rhetoric, and how it can fit into my discussion. This research will include a discussion of various Right-wing ideologies, how political discussions are framed, how fringe groups interact with establishment groups, and finally a look at Right wing organizing and rhetoric with an emphasis on the United States and on digital media.

Part 1

Literature Review: Agitation and the Historical Emergence of the Alt-Right

Agitative Groups and the Rhetoric of Public Discourse

To understand the alt-Right as a brand, it is also necessary to look at the group as a broad political group agitating for its demands against a somewhat hostile establishment. In this section, I summarize research with the goal of establishing language and concepts from which I can draw when discussing the details of the alt-Right in later chapters of this report.

The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control (Bowers, 2010) provides a useful and easy to understand framework to understand the rhetoric of agitative groups. They are as follows:

Agitation: When a group without decision making power advocates for significant change and encounters resistance. Bowers frames agitation as belonging to one of two camps: vertical deviance which accepts the fundamental logic of the system but wants to change aspects of it, or lateral deviance which does not accept the system and seeks to build a completely new one.

- **Petition**

- Asking the establishment to change through accepted mediums of discourse. For example, submitting grievances through forms or petitions directly to the institution is one form of this strategy. This method of agitation accepts the integrity and does not question the validity of the institution in question.

- **Promulgation**
 - Winning social support through media campaigns, public meetings, popular mouthpieces who can serve as legitimizers, and conversations. Building alliances.
- **Solidification**
 - Solidifying as a group ideologically. A group is formulated through signs, chants, propaganda, publications, and symbols. The brand of a social movement is defined in this strategy. In other words, once a group of people have become aligned in pursuit of a goal, solidification is the process of forming a collective identity. To form, groups solidify what they do and do not believe in, goals, vernacular, and how to determine who is and is not a group member.
- **Polarization**
 - Declaring any non-supporters of the agitative group to be supporters of the establishment and attempting to win them over. This process makes use of flag individuals and flag issues, or people or political issues of rhetorical simplification to be amplified and exploited. For example, if a middle school class wants to leave school early but is restricted by their teacher, that teacher is a flag individual (though the teacher is following procedures and hierarchy outside of their control). Inventing derogatory jargon to refer to those outside the group is also a tactic in this strategy.
- **Nonviolent Resistance**
 - Agitators breaking laws or rules they consider to be unjust in a peaceful manner to draw attention to the laws.

- **Escalation and Confrontation**

- Overpreparation by the establishment in response to planned agitative actions.

When the establishment overreacts to agitation, or turns on non-agitators, its legitimacy as a decision-making body is called into question.

- **Gandhi and Guerilla**

- A division of labor among agitators in which many are committed to nonviolent resistance, while few are committed to physical acts of violence against the establishment. While people perpetrating the violence against the establishment believe they are directly battling the establishment, this also serves to polarize non-agitators and solidify the brand of the agitative group.

An interesting addendum to add to Bowers' approach is the concept of a radical flank influencing a moderate agitative group (Haines, 1989). A positive radical flank effect influences a moderate group by granting it legitimacy and funding because it looks relatively harmless in comparison to a radical agitative group. A negative radical flank effect occurs when people lump a moderate and radical group in the same movement, assuming their goals and activities to be the same. Looking at the alt-Right as a radical flank is one way to interpret their influence on the broader conservative movement.

Sydney Tarrow explores the broader ebb and flow of broad social movements by contextualizing what he calls contentious politics in his book *Power in Movement*. Tarrow details the cyclical nature of movements, and how past struggles inform the language of new struggles. Contentious politics can be understood as being anything outside of the discourse expected by the elites in a given context. To synthesize Bowers, contentious politics starts at polarization, though of course most groups that engage in polarization also make use of the forms of agitation

earlier in the list. The expression of Bowers' framework will depend on a given social and cultural context.

According to Tarrow, social movements will have repertoires of actions tailored to the time and place where the action is being contested. Tarrow details how the transition from feudalism to the nation-state as the organizing unit of society allowed massive movements to start to form because they were organized nationally rather than locally. However, the formation of the state also allowed for the formation of massive police forces and suppression. As the scale and complexity of movements ramped up, protest shifted from physical action to symbolic (rhetorical) action.

Contrary to some social theorists, Tarrow asserts that social movements need identifiable opportunities to form. The existence of objectionable conditions is not enough in and of itself for a movement to form in opposition to those conditions. A publicly identified weakness in the power holding establishment is necessary for groups to mobilize in sufficient numbers to be considered a movement. However, these opportunities can be seized on by the already powerful all too easily, and often the movements that form during political opportunities are still beholden to the reactions of the established political class.

Movements can be crushed, grow and then shift to become less radical, or successfully transition to revolutionary agitation. It depends on an array of factors, ranging from movement size to forms of agitation to establishment response. During periods of demoralization, activists leave their organizations in droves but maintain friendships and contacts. It is out of these organizations and informal connections that the next social movement is mentored.

Tarrow's conception of social movements is tied to a publicly accepted narrative of events. Murray Edelman goes a step further, explaining how all of politics – establishment and

agitative – is constructed through public spectacle. In *Constructing the Political Spectacle*.

Edelman describes politics as events that are framed in such a way to construct an audience and response to the events. There is no such thing as neutral politics, and when politics is presented as neutral, it is under the guise of what the establishment deems normal and acceptable.

The dominant ideology is portrayed as neutral due to widespread acceptance, and other groups also view politics through the frame of their beliefs. Politics is made up of the language and ideas that political actors hold. A political divide isn't just two groups in disagreement. It is people of different political beliefs who have constructed completely separate worlds for themselves to inhabit and act in.

The way any group of political actors formulates a political issue naturally leads to their solutions being the best ones, because they frame the question in such a way that their answer must be correct. The way issues are framed is dubious – at one point in time, an event could be labeled as a disaster, or as a non-issue based on the context. For example, antiwar movements are often revitalized during Republican presidencies, despite the also frequent wars waged by Democrats. This effect exists because Democrats are skilled at shifting the issues being discussed to domestic social issues, which they can halfheartedly address while continuing to wage war. Republicans do not bother hiding their wars because to Republicans war solves problems rather than create them.

Politics are framed in such a way that individual actors can view themselves and their interpretations as rational, but there are subtle forces undermining that rationality. Language is viewed as neutral, but the words use to describe something alter the way it is perceived. To continue the war example, the same actions can earn someone the title of patriot or war criminal.

Neither of these descriptors are technically inaccurate, they view the same stimulus through a different lens to come to different associations.

Intra-group associations are reinforced through ambiguous stimulus. The news reporting of an event as it happens can be used to push a number of narratives. The narrative the viewer chooses to use is in a sense predetermined by their ideology and in-group. Each group will interpret ambiguous information in a way that reinforces its worldview.

The way an in- or out-group is formulated is also entirely arbitrary. When an issue is created, a group must also take the blame. This group is constructed through the blame making process. During the election, both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders discussed inequality, an issue that voters had identified as important. But they framed their political enemies in totally different tones. These enemies – either immigrants and coastal elites or the wealthy – served as referent points for the followers of the political leaders. Groups that are blamed for issues are constructed through ideology, with political leaders serving as mouthpieces for the ideology they espouse (Edelman, 2010).

Different ideological groups will thus frame reality through their ideological lens. Framing events in this way reinforces their interpretation of the world in a manner that also reinforces the groups' existence. The alt-Right does this just like any other political group. To understand the rhetoric of the alt-Right and far-Right, one must also understand their various ideologies.

Overview of the Far-Right

Any analysis of a new Right-wing political movement requires an understanding of the history of the Right in the United States. In order to frame deviations from the establishment, I

begin with an overview of the Right-wing establishment. It consists of an ideological current known as Neoconservatism.

Pan and Turner (2016) in *Neoconservatism as Discourse: Virtue, Power, and US Foreign Policy* describe the contemporary history of Neoconservative scholarship, as well as providing their own approach. Past research focuses on the “3P’s” approach to define Neoconservatism. This approach can be summarized as looking at Neoconservatism either through its adherents (people), its policies, or a consistent ideology (principles).

The people position to understanding Neoconservatism looks to individuals who are Neoconservatives or influence Neoconservative thought as making up what it means to be a Neoconservative. Neoconservatives began to acquire political power in the 1960s during a period of reaction to the New Left. The presidency of Bush Jr. is an example of a Neoconservative in power. This approach provides a simple framework to look at Neoconservatism. If someone’s politics look like this or that person’s, then they are Neoconservative. However, this approach is circular. If the only way to define someone as Neoconservative is their own admission of Neoconservatism, what is it about them that makes them Neoconservative?

The second common approach in the literature is the policies approach. This approach holds that certain policy positions are definably Neoconservative. Namely, the policies of aggressive promotion of free market capitalism and democracy, and the willingness to use military intervention and regime change to promote these goals. There is some use in using these policies as representative of Neoconservative discourse, but actual positions on specific policies have been debated within the Neoconservative movement and Republican Party. While certain positions may come to dominate within Neoconservative circles, they by no means define what it means to be Neoconservative.

Another way to look at what defines Neoconservative is through a principle-based approach. The authors studied by Pan and Turner tend to each come up with their own principles, but they have similarities. Common threads include a belief in American exceptionalism, imperialism, the promotion of an American form of democracy abroad, and capitalist internationalism. The question, though, still rests on what exactly binds these qualities together and makes them Neoconservative. If it is because these arguments are advanced by Neoconservatives, then this approach is dependent on the people approach to defining Neoconservatism.

Rather than relying on Neoconservatism as a self-reinforcing ideology, Pat and Turner advance a discursive approach. They view the pillars of virtue and power as being unquestioned norms in society, and it is due to their unquestioned nature that they control normative discourse. By virtue, they mean that America views itself as being the moral standard of the world, and by power they mean that America views itself as a country that can impose its will on other countries, whether that be through economic or militaristic means. In other words, this approach describes the US as the world police, both determining global rules and enforcing them. It also bears a resemblance to the policy and ideology of manifest destiny. The belief in American cultural superiority and global state building is not new, and the discursive approach allows us to see Neoconservatism as a continuation of conservative norms that have existed since the founding of the United States.

George Hawley (2017) offers a historical overview of the birth of Neoconservatism in his book *Right Wing Critics of American Conservatism*, before going on to give a who's who of the Right outside of the Neoconservatives. Hawley describes the Neoconservatives as a coalition of free market Libertarians, cultural conservatives, and foreign policy hawks that came together

during the McCarthyite era united by a fear of communism. Neoconservatism came to be defined as aggressive ideological defense against communism, and a big state necessary to support a powerful military industry. Neoconservatism also became a refuge of the previous generation's Left who had become wary of the New Left of the 1960s. Hawley lists the main reason for their electoral success (and disdain from the rest of the right) as being a willingness to pay lip service to the rhetoric and ideals of equality.

The remainder of the Right does not so much as bother paying lip service to the language of equality. Hawley defines the Left as holding equality as the highest value in a hierarchy of values, and the Right as being any group that does not hold equality as the highest value in its hierarchy of values. Hawley's definitions create an interesting dichotomy in which equality is rhetorically owned by the Left and other values are owned by the Right. The Neoconservative use of equality as a rhetorical tool indicates that the New Left was successful in changing culture. However, it also shows that political groups can adapt their rhetoric to conform to cultural norms while exhibiting similar policies to earlier groups.

One example of a group that holds a different value higher than equality is Libertarians. Libertarians hold liberty as the highest value in a society and are generally opposed to government-imposed structures and rules. The key distinction to make between liberty and equality is the distinction between freedom to and freedom from. Liberty is the freedom to do what you want so long as you have the power and ability to do it (presumably without harming anyone else but the extent of not harming others is debatable both in theory and practice). It is strongly individualistic and thus at odds with the value of equality. Liberty can be critiqued as exclusionary and elitist because one's freedom to act is necessarily a will imposed on others. Over generations the freedom to act out of self-interest leads to a deep

inequality with no sense of social responsibility. In contrast, equality is the freedom from – freedom from oppression, from hunger, from other people acting in their own self-interest in a way that harms you. Equality can be critiqued by those on the Right as being authoritarian in the sense that it does not allow for absolute freedom of the individual. Libertarians value liberty and personal freedom over equality and group freedom.

Hawley divides the Libertarians into two types – those who cede the existence of a government, and those who do not. Hawley refers to those who do as mainstream Libertarians, and they have had some difficulty defining what Libertarian means. Some focus on free market capitalism as a definition of liberty, while others focus on cultural markers of liberty such as legalized cannabis. It has been the free market capitalists who drive Libertarian thought and influence mainstream conservatism as they are the ones with the well-funded research institutions and publications. But institutional support does not signify a lack of controversy.

Mainstream Libertarians have had a problematic relationship with race and the New Deal due to their principled opposition to state enforced equality. Many Libertarians do not view themselves as racist, but as opposed to state sponsored opposition to racism. In theory this is an ideologically consistent worldview, but in practice the branding of liberty can be used by more nefarious actors to justify racism and other forms of inequality.

The other type of Libertarian is one who does not believe in any government whatsoever. They are also referred to as anarchists or anarcho-capitalists. They focus on a moral commitment to liberty, rather than a logical one. Anti-state Libertarians believe in localized communities based upon voluntary associations. These associations are based on the NAP, or non-aggression principle. This principle means that no party should seek to harm another, and if the principle is

breached than the aggrieved party can justifiably retaliate. The NAP is problematic and fiercely debated in that it is difficult to determine what constitutes aggression.

Of note in the radical Libertarian tradition is a favorable view of hierarchy. Radical Libertarians can believe that local patriarchs take care of the people in their communities because it is beneficial for them to do so. In addition, strict morality can be culturally enforced rather than enforced by a government to ensure a cohesive society. This approach is antithetical to democracy, and theorist Hoppe follows this approach to its logical conclusion, favoring monarchy over democracy and arguing that monarchs take care of the people as property.

While claiming to be against government overreach, radical Libertarians are authoritarian in other sense of the word. Some oppose the state because it does not repress immoral behaviors enough. These radical Libertarians desire a society that bears many of the traits of fascism – an ethno-nationalist state, tribalism, and fierce moralism – but seek to instill these values from a bottom up, cultural framework rather than a top down government framework.

This type of thinking owes its ideological roots to the European New Right. Calling itself an Identitarian movement, the New Right is an anti-American, anti-capitalist far-Right movement that uses cultural understandings of nationality to promote exclusion and separatism. Rhetorically, the New Right is marginally different from the form of fascism that gave rise to WWII but draws on the history of interwar fascism. Identitarians highly value culture and view materialism as a way of degrading that which makes a tribe whole. Their brand is focused on tribe solidarity, and a tribe is often defined by who or what is not in it. According to Carl Schmitt, an Identitarian theorist, politics is a zero-sum game described as conflict between distinct groups. All groups are either friends or foes. Schmitt himself was an interwar fascist who allied with the Nazis when they came to power.

The later thinkers of the New Right favored a trans-national meta-politics. They did not seek to attain specific aims but alter culture enough to make their ideas seem acceptable in the long run. The alt-Right explicitly pays homage to New Right thinkers such as Evola, de Benoist, Junger, and Dugin. In addition, this concept of meta-politics has percolated from the academic fascists of Europe to the rank and file of the far-Right across the world.

Overt white supremacists in America have traditionally operated separately from European fascists due to their anti-American stance. Europeans viewed American capitalism as destroying their culture. In addition, Hawley points to the distinctions between European and American white supremacy as different in their definitions of whiteness. Europeans are more likely to focus on national identity and an imagined racial lineage to define whiteness, while Americans are more likely to focus on skin tone and a pan-European ancestry. The exact definition of whiteness is constantly being negotiated in white supremacist circles.

The white supremacist brand is often presented as speaking to potential consumers of its ideology through science-based racism. The legitimacy to claims of IQ tests or crime statistics proving the existence and superiority of races is lacking, but the usage of these claims shows an understanding of the need to make white supremacy palatable to a less extreme audience. American white supremacists have shown a great deal of marketing savvy in being early adopters of organizing on the Internet. White supremacists also participate in meta-politics, biding their time until their ideas are more palatable to the mainstream.

Lastly, I wanted to briefly mention the use of religion in conservatism as a guiding force for morality. While religious ideals can be interpreted any number of ways, conservatives use religious traditions as a defense against progressivism. Whittaker Chambers' famously asserted that communism is a vision of a morally correct world without god, and the Soviet Union must

be opposed specifically on religious grounds – because if there was no god, communism would be the correct way of organizing the world.

The various ideologies listed above have all had some form of influence on the emergence of the alt-Right. The types of influence can broadly be defined in two categories. First, the alt-Right movement explicitly rejects Neoconservatism and defines itself in opposition to it. Second, it has been informed to varying degrees by Libertarianism, and the New Right.

The Alt-Right

According to the SPLC (n.d.), the alternative Right, or alt-Right, “...is a set of far-Right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that “white identity” is under attack by multicultural forces using “political correctness” and “social justice” to undermine white people and “their” civilization. Characterized by heavy use of social media and online memes, Alt-Righters eschew “establishment” conservatism, skew young, and embrace white ethno-nationalism as a fundamental value.”

The term alt-Right was invented and popularized by Richard Spencer. He, like former Trump aide Stephen Miller, attained notoriety during the 2007 Duke lacrosse scandal by advocating for lacrosse players at their university who had been accused of rape (Wiedeman, 2017). Since then, Spencer’s think tank National Policy Institute and website altright.com have been well known in portraying the alt-Right as white nationalists.

The alt-Right bears significant ideological overlap with traditional white supremacists (Forscher, 2017). But it developed as a movement in separate circles with its own distinct identity. One example of this difference is the alt-Right media empire *Breitbart* developing to attract a new generation of conservatives that would have been turned off by the Neo-Nazism of

older sites such as *Stormfront* (Piggott, 2016). White supremacy became cool again on websites that old school racists would struggle to use.

Social media sites such as Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan have featured prominently in shaping alt-Right discourse and recruiting adherents. In her book *Kill all Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*, Nagle (2017) studies the online culture wars that provided formative breeding grounds for the alt-Right. In these online culture wars, political correctness acted as a proxy for a greater ideological battle over the nature of the Internet. The chief combatants in the battle for the Internet are the communities of 4chan and Tumblr, two prominent social media sites with vastly different subcultures.

4chan's subculture is an important piece of the puzzle in understanding how the alt-Right grew into the force it is today. 4chan is made up of a series of image boards, with image threads dominated by topics including anime, videogames, and pornography. Anonymity is expected and valued in a community that is also steeped in an ironic coolness. No other community online or otherwise has more fully embraced the worldview of the TV show *South Park*. Make fun of everything, and whoever cares first loses. It's a nihilistic, scarcely regulated environment in which the newcomer will be shocked to see frequent displays of porn, gore, and shock for shock's sake.

The 4chan community has been integral in developing the now dominant meme culture online. For example, the rage comics of the mid 2000s originated on 4chan, as did the infamous Pepe the Frog meme. Nagle smartly points out the Harambe meme as a turning point in Internet discourse. Harambe was a gorilla in a Cincinnati zoo who was shot in its enclosure when a child fell in. Afterwards, 4channers created the #RIPHarambe hashtag, and ironically publicly

mourned him. This act was done for the community's amusement, mocking a society that publicly mourns celebrities, but can seem superficial when doing so.

Harambe was a flashpoint, but since the late 2000s, 4channers had become aware of their growing power as a massive anonymous group of people. They could use their collective power for good, or evil. Mostly they used it for fun. In 2008, they protested Scientology for removing a video online that they liked (Beran, 2017). 4chan was a place where emotionally and physically isolated young men (and it was a culture dominated by men) could hang out away from controlling influences. It had a strictly Libertarian worldview in its beginnings: leave us alone and we'll leave you alone. From this ethos was birthed the concept of an online raid, in which large numbers of 4channers would invade another blog, YouTube video, or other website of a transgressor to troll them. From *Urban Dictionary* (2002), the online slang dictionary of record, a troll can be defined as "one who posts a deliberately provocative message to a newsgroup or message board with the intention of causing maximum disruption and argument."

Who were 4channers trolling? Enter Tumblr. Tumblr is the antithesis of 4chan. 4channers didn't care about anything, but Tumblr users cared about everything. It was primarily populated by young women rather than young men. Tumblr users became known outside of Tumblr for their earnest efforts to understand gender outside of the constructed binary and to support each other in their mental health struggles.

The same user expressing experiences with depression and contemplating suicide would have been awash in sympathy and well-wishers on Tumblr, and sarcastically told to "An Hero" on 4chan. An Hero is a meme on 4chan that arose after a well-wisher wrote of someone they had known who had just successfully completed a suicide attempt, that this person was 'an hero'.

The earnest display of emotions and bad grammar made the post a target of ridicule for 4channers, who ruthlessly mock any displays of sympathy or honest emotion.

The movements started by each website's communities would soon hit the real world, and their competing visions were headed for a collision course. Tumblr users became targets of the national conservative media when they sought to change language and practices on campuses to make them more inclusive. 4channers viewed this activism as getting in the way of them having the ability to do or say what they want and hated these feminazi (feminist-nazi) libtards (liberal-retard) for stepping on their fun. Where 4channers sought to care the least, Tumblr users sought to be seen as the most caring.

The online battles over cultural norms needed a catalyst, and that came in the form of Gamergate. Gamergate was made up of two parts: Anita Sarkeesian's *Feminist Frequency* and Zoe Quinn's *Depression Quest*. *Feminist Frequency* uses basic gender study concepts to critique the male dominated gaming industry and games more generally, while *Depression Quest* is an abstract, narrative driven game in which the player character has depression and struggles through an ordinary day. Sarkeesian was attacked from a blatantly misogynist angle, experiencing rape and death threats for daring to say that video games should include women too. There were allegations that Quinn was sleeping around for good reviews for her game. If you were to ask a 4chaner why they were enraged by Quinn, they would tell you something about ethics in game journalism.

But there are deeper motives behind their outrage. The boys and men of 4chan are threatened by women taking agency over their sexuality and other aspects of their lives. And this sentiment wasn't unique to 4chan, it was also part of a web of communities and websites called

the manosphere. The manosphere is composed of men's rights activists, pickup artists, and the involuntarily and voluntarily celibate.

Men's rights activists, or MRAs, felt left out of a Tumblr defined feminism that prioritized less privileged voices and did not care for men. Pickup artists would teach men self-help tricks to better themselves, but the goal was always to manipulate women into sex. Involuntarily celibate people referred to themselves as incels and were bitter and demoralized due to their lack of self-worth. Voluntarily celibate people, or volcels, sought to empower themselves by flipping the narrative so that not having sex was a choice. The MGTOW (men going their own way) subculture was borne from volcels. Though the rhetoric reflected a belief in empowerment, the reality was that a lot of these young men were bitter.

This toxic mix of entitled masculinists lashed out at what they perceived to be a rampant and controlling feminism. It was a group of mostly privileged young men who believed in a hierarchy where one group gains by the loss of another. Their place is at the top, so a feminism attentive to the needs of women was working directly against their interests. It was no wonder that young men lacking in confidence would tear other groups down. It was all they had.

4channers were as distasteful as possible for the sole purpose of shock value. They made anti-Semitic and Holocaust jokes, rape jokes, and jokes making fun of any and all marginalized identities. The 4Chan community believed at the time that everyone knew it was for fun, but it also attracted the people who seriously held those views. 4channers ironically expressing white supremacist ideas was the perfect place for white supremacists to publicly share their ideas. The white supremacists provided a guiding, radicalizing light.

Over time, the idea that feminists controlled the media and culture became normal among the online groups who derided political correctness. And according to the far-Right, the liberal

feminists were working with Cultural Marxists and ISIS, both of whom were trying to destroy the fabric of Western society. The battle for political correctness that started in a series of raids and on college campuses became much more. It was a battle for Western society itself.

How did 4chan get to the point where it is so synonymous with the alt-Right? Nagle talks about how the practices of the far-Right were influenced by the French New Right and Antonio Gramsci since the 1960s. Culture is the vehicle through which society brings about change, not electoral politics. The alt-Right is not an expression of a new ideology, it is fascism repackaging itself in a form that will allow it to be popular. As expressed by real life troll Milo Yiannopoulos, the alt-Right was sexy, it was liberating, it was fun. In a world that felt controlled by the Left, it was the Right that was breaking the rules.

Far-Right Free Spaces

In order to break culturally normative rules, you need a space where it feels safe to do so. Far-Right safe spaces in the physical world are used to form a basis of intra-group communication in forming a brand. In my discussion in this section, I rely heavily on the ethnographic research of Simi and Futrell. They had unprecedented access to Nazi communities in Southern California for many years. Though not all alt-Right adherents would claim the Nazi moniker, the ethnographic research is useful in getting a deeper understanding of the way aggrieved groups find spaces to operate within a larger society.

According to Simi (2010) free space is defined as “a metaphor social scientists use to describe settings where marginalized groups feel some degree of freedom to express oppositional identities and beliefs that challenge mainstream ideas (p. 2).” Free spaces are also necessarily

movement spaces, because marginalized groups use their spaces to validate and advocate for their identity.

There are broadly three types of groups active in the white power movement. American Nazis and KKK groups have merged in iconography and beliefs since the 1960s. In addition, there are Christian Identity groups that use a religious justification derived from a twisted reading of the Bible to validate a racial holy war. They view white people as God's chosen people and Jewish people as the spawn of Satan. The last classification of groups offered by Simi is Neo-Paganists. These folks believe in Norse gods as true white gods and abhor the cultural values of egalitarianism proliferated by Christianity.

When Simi and Futrell talk about the different free spaces these groups occupy, much of their writing focuses on rituals. Rituals are coded patterns of behavior. And white supremacist rituals serve to reinforce white supremacist norms that are not tolerated in mainstream society, such as racism and violence.

Examples of white supremacist rituals include cross burning, stomping and chanting, and the usurpation of cultural norms with those more suitable for white power activists. Simi talked about how a birthday celebration or barbeque are ways to subtly instill white supremacist symbols as normative. Simple examples of this effect could include swastika candles and invitations being sent to white people only.

White power activists form their free spaces as representative of the world they want to build. For many, this means integrating into normal society, hiding beliefs, and indoctrinating children at home. Strict gender norms and recreation are important points for white power activists, as they believe a nuclear family unit is the core building block of a society. They are threatened by census data showing white identifying people are decreasing compared to other

groups, so child rearing is an important form of activism. For others, those same worries manifest as living in isolated Aryan communities that stress self-reliance and white solidarity. For others, their sense of community comes from gangs, street warfare, and openly celebrating white supremacy without caring who might be offended. There are four fundamental areas where white power activists socialize and advocate. Private parties, the white power music scene, private Aryan communities, and online.

Private parties are family friendly events that allow for a free flow of networking and camaraderie between activists of all ages. At parties (and other events) a frequent topic of conversation is what exactly makes up a white person. An illuminating example of this is the case of the great white hope in boxing (Drupes, 2015). Boxing is a sport that white supremacists tend to enjoy because it advocates violence to a greater degree than other sports. Unfortunately for them, boxing has been dominated by black and brown people for at least thirty years. Up and coming white boxers are presented as hoped for white dominance, as Gerry Cooney was framed by promoter Don King in his 1982 championship match with African American Larry Holmes.

The legacy of the great white hope myth lead to interesting discussions about whiteness during the rise of Saul Alvarez, a light skinned Mexican who came to prominence in 2013. As he won, commentators on popular white supremacist site *Stormfront* tried to claim him as their own despite Alvarez's proud displays of his Mexican heritage. As Alvarez is from a country typically deemed not white, this sparked debate among those who wanted to claim him as white for his athletic ability and those who wanted to keep a "clean bloodline".

Academic arguments often use things like athletic performance, IQ tests, and crime statistics to justify the white supremacists' perspective of race. Legitimizers like Kevin MacDonald argue for a Jewish race preservation strategy (Druxes, 2015), while Charles Murray

argues that whites are intellectually superior in *The Bell Curve*. Academics who go through the motions of scholarship grant white supremacists a certain amount of credibility when discussing their work.

On the opposite end of the spectrum from intellectual racism is racist fun. White power concerts draw bigger crowds than house parties, with some events drawing international attendance. The white power music plays a useful role in solidifying the white power brand. Songs are about nation, race, blood, decline, hatred, treason, revolution, and references to mythology (Druxes, 2015). One quote from Simi's interview with a white supremacist (2010) sums up the recruiting usage of music in the white power movement:

“I had some racist views before I started listening to [white power] music but once I heard that first Skrewdriver song, I was sold. It really did change my life. I started going to white power shows whenever I could, and I'd drive anywhere... It connected me to other people who were willing to say, “You know, I'm a racist. So what? I'm proud of who I am.” (p. 64)

Skrewdriver is the most famous white power band. They emerged from the British punk scene during the 1980s as a reaction to punk's Left leaning aesthetics. Their lyrics affirming a white power identity have been used to recruit and organize within white power spaces. They are also an example of a trend – white power cooptation of Left leaning cultural markers and symbols. This trend is relevant both in far-Right free spaces and in public discourse.

White power music festivals are held on private land. They feature speeches, ritualistic reenactments of cross burnings and lynchings, and are an opportunity for white power activists to let down their guard. It is at festive events like music festivals or private conferences that the disparate groups within white power spaces can come together to discuss common ground.

In terms of online activism, Simi and Futrell focused their efforts on white supremacist forums as ways for isolated individuals to make connections. These spaces operate as supportive echo chambers. Members lament their experiences living in a world in which their ideas are scoffed at and are drawn further into the movement to cure their loneliness. The online community is a way for many who cannot commit to actively living a white supremacist lifestyle, whether due to time or location constraints, to stay connected. Ideology is discussed, and useful propaganda material is distributed, such as tools for home schooling, music, video games, music, clothes, etc. (Simi, 2010).

White power websites are part of an interconnected web. Less extreme/mainstream pages will be an entry point for conservatives and will then link to more extreme sites (Druxes, 2015). For example, the Facebook page of Hungary's far-Right party Jobbik features arguments about welfare, immigrants, and jobs that would be common talking points for conservatives. In these more mainstream spaces, white power activists engage in dogwhistles – using innocent sounding terms to advance their agenda. They then further radicalize mainstream conservatives by linking them to outside sites and sources to reinforce their points. For example, a mainstream conservative who may be worried about immigrants taking jobs may be directed to anti Islam arguments and outright white supremacy. Conversion to radicalism is a long-term project.

Conversion will occur through a combination of group integration and successful rhetoric. When correctly formulated, rhetoric will serve to indoctrinate a wider public slowly and innocently. Another word for this sort of rhetoric, of course, is propaganda.

Far-Right Propaganda and Media Coverage Throughout History

Fascists draw from the past, and modern scholars should analyze the alt-Right as a continuation of a fascist ideological tradition. The most famous form of fascism for the Right, Left, and academics is Nazism and Nazi scholarship is as good a place to start as any. Nicholas O'Shaughnessy looks at the Nazis and their rise to power with the use of propaganda as a guiding force in *Selling Hitler: Propaganda and the Nazi Brand*.

O'Shaughnessy charts the history of the Nazi Party, from the party's early beginnings to its growth with Hitler's influence. It began in the wake of the Great Depression during which Germany was overburdened with paying off its debts from the first World War. Middle class Germany was hurting, and the soft spoken liberal Weimar Republic was viewed as bad at making deals, and not capable of bringing Germany out of the recession. There was an opportunity for contentious politics, provided that a political actor could provide a resonant spectacle.

Hitler injected an awareness of spectacle when he joined the Nazi Party. He scheduled big public demonstrations and meetings in Communist dominated areas. The Nazis also provided social services in their early days, directly challenging the Communist claim to providing a new vision for Germany. The Nazis clashed with the Communists as they grew, both rhetorically and physically. The taking on of the national socialist moniker was a propaganda strategy to play up the similarities and differences with Communism. Propagandistic literature and social rituals were also modified after the Communist example.

Even at this early stage, Hitler was aware of the manufactured nature of public events. Fights were incited to promulgate and thus gain further support, solidify their existing base of support, and polarize the apolitical. Of early note is the Munich Beer Hall Putsch. This was a failed coup attempt by Hitler and his paramilitary early organization, the Brown Shirts. They had

been gaining popularity prior to the event and were starting to win elections after Hitler served a short stint in jail.

The Nazis defeated the Communists in government the same way they did in the streets – through intimidation and violence. Political opposition was brutally repressed while the appearance of normalcy was upheld. Elections were held with the Nazis as the only option. Goebbels believed that public participation in rallies and other public events was a greater expression of democracy than voting. Hitler admired Goebbels' ability to manipulate public narratives and had promoted him to a high place in the party. To Goebbels, the portrayal of reality or an event was more important than the event itself. In fact, it was a common belief in the Nazi party that the reason the British had done so well in the previous war was because they were better able to mobilize their society toward war with superior propaganda.

In addition to their admiration of the British use of propaganda, the Nazis admired the recently maturing American invention of consumer advertising. It had matured with the introduction of the television, and the government's realization that it could slip pro war and nationalist messages into consumer advertising. This same style had made its way to Britain. The Nazis believed, and were correct in believing, that the subtle tweaking of the messaging put out by the British state was essential in manufacturing a public appetite for war.

The Nazis made use of these propagandistic devices domestically for a time while maintaining ties to the rest of the world. It was important to convince the Germans of Nazi Germany's greatness in relation to the rest of the world. Berlin hosted the Olympics in 1936 and the rest of the world was wowed by the newfound vigor of Germany.

At that time, the first concentration camps were already in existence and the Nuremberg Laws had codified Anti-Semitism into law. But what kind of propaganda can make dehumanization okay? And what kind of propaganda then allows for ethnic cleansing? Goebbels' approach to propaganda was simple, and agreeable to any advertising professional today. Hit the public over the head with one message crudely, repeatedly, and across different media. The specifics of the message itself would change all the time, but its incessant repetition ensured that it was always top of mind for the German public. It wasn't confined to distributed media, but also became participatory in grand public displays.

Through their propaganda, the Nazis created a series of enemies that were interconnected in their opposition to Germany. Fascism is an ideology that links people to land, family, tradition, and a manufactured culture and past. The Nazis viewed internationalist Bolshevism and individualist capitalism as twin ideological threats, masterminded by the Jew. All threats were linked to the Jew, the Nazis going so far as to label the British the "Aryan Jew" (O'Shaughnessy 2016). And in an interesting parallel to the Cultural Marxism epithet used by the Right today, Nazis referred to internal enemies of the state as Cultural Bolsheviks.

War was framed as a necessary self-defense measure against the ideological and physical forces encroaching on the prosperity of the Germans. Indeed, it was morally right – the Germans needed to expand their living space and were entitled to do it. Jews stood in as a trans-national mastermind that simplified concepts of international trade for the German public. Nazis weren't rebelling against any form of Judaism, they were rebelling against Jewish people as a signifier for economic conditions outside of their control.

Jews were dehumanized as being inferior and as bringing disease and societal decay. They were the catch all symbol for all external threats afflicting Germany. All threats and

enemies were Jewish in some manner. To accomplish this effect, the arts and education were also viewed as Jewish. Strength and emotions became more valued in society, whereas reasoning became less valued. This is apparent in the history of the word fanatic. To be fanatic previously had a negative connotation, an unhealthy devotion. But to be a Nazi fanatic became an honor of the highest order.

The previous chapter has outlined who the far-Right is, how the alt-Right began to form, and the role that rhetoric plays within groups and in the public sphere. To analyze any social movement, it is crucial to also analyze their communications to understand not only the mechanics of their organizing but also their ideology. Understanding a group's internal formulation of its ideology can give clues to how the movement can grow and act in the public sphere. In my next chapter I look more closely at the founding of the alt-Right and how its brand was defined through internal rhetoric.

Part 2

The Internal Rhetoric of Brand Creation

Establishing Ideological Purity: More Than Just a Game

In this section, I will define how internal communications amongst the alt-Right created a cohesive brand identity, despite there being a range of ideologies and disagreements within the movement. To do this I will be using the Gamergate campaign as a key moment that facilitated connections that would become the alt-Right. First, I will be looking at the different subgroups that would unite against feminism, political correctness, and Cultural Marxism. Then, I will provide detail regarding Milo Yiannopoulos' potent role in establishing a unified alt-Right brand. Finally, I explain where the alt-light came from, and why it split with the alt-Right.

White supremacy expert Mark Rupert defines the alt-Right as “a reaction against modern liberal culture and things like multiculturalism and what they associate with political correctness” (Rupert, 2018). It is a reactionary movement composed of atomized and isolated people who feel as if Western society is taking a turn for the worse. They aim to restore a future that is a truer reflection of an idealized past. Gamergate fits into this idea of a reactionary movement because it is a metaphor for reaction against society at large.

The narrative advanced about Gamergate is that it is either a movement for ethical games journalism or an attack on women in the games industry, depending on the group framing the issue (Hathaway 2014). Regardless, it was a defining moment in the Internet culture wars. It began with a blog post written by Eron Gjboni, about the alleged sexual proclivities of his ex-girlfriend Zoe Quinn (Jason, 2016).

“And I keep thinking back on this and I’m like “Five guys. Man. she (sic) cheated on me with five guys? Five guys.”

And now I can’t stop mentally referring to her as Burgers and Fries (Gjoni, 2014).”

Quinn had recently released a game called Depression Quest, which stimulates the experience of living a day as a young depressed person. She had a public history of depression, making non-traditional games, and advocating for inclusion in the gaming industry. Depression Quest earned mixed reviews, but that didn’t matter. Its existence broke the mold of what a game should be, and so was a threat to the entire category.

Games are portrayed in popular culture as a masculine space in which violent, imperialist franchises like *Call of Duty* reign supreme. Masculinity is the norm and people who deviate from that norm are harassed, often with such phrases as the classy, “Tits or GTFO (get the fuck out).” Women who play online games are frequently harassed. People of all ages, gender orientations, and colors play videogames, but the public image of gaming is dominated by adolescent men.

When these adolescent men felt that their space was encroached on they reacted to secure that space. Their repertoire for doing so had been codified in the trolling culture of the Internet. Trolling culture arose when people with less Internet literacy invaded the websites and chat spaces of early adopters. As Nagle goes over in her book *Kill all Normies*, transgressors would be ridiculed until they either conformed or left online communities. The people acting as online gatekeepers are colloquially known as trolls, and the environment they created that was hostile to outgroup members is known as trolling culture.

Trolling culture became especially vicious on 4chan before spreading to other venues. The idea, originating on boards /b/ (random) and /pol/ (politically incorrect) was to push acceptability to its utmost limits and anyone who complained was a normie (socially well-

adjusted and conformer to cultural norms; used derogatorily) and thus an outgroup member. These trolling efforts extended into racist, anti-Semitic, and especially sexist outbursts. If called out, trolls would claim to be acting ironically but it was difficult if not impossible to separate the actions and intentions of ironic vs. legitimate racists and sexists.

In the context of the gaming subculture frequented by atomized young men, trolling culture veered into a targeted harassment campaign. Online communities have before organized campaigns to use their collective power for various purposes. For example, Reddit's random acts of pizza community orders pizza for strangers in need, and there are frequent and well documented outpourings of support for emotional appeals that go viral on social media. Within the trolling subculture, campaigns cynically reject the feel-good nature of normie campaigns and seek to exert collective power to laugh at the inconvenience it causes.

One example of a campaign driven by laughs that is referenced by Nagle is the campaign against the Church of Scientology. This campaign was the result of 4channers discovering an unedited video in which Tom Cruise talks at length about Scientology. The 4channers ridiculed and shared the video, leading to the Church of Scientology taking it down from the video hosting site it appeared on. 4channers rebelled, appearing in anonymized public protests to denounce the interlopers who had removed their source of entertainment (Nagle, 2017).

Another example that illustrates this point is the Battletoads campaign (Battletoads Preorder, 2018). The Battletoads campaign and subsequent meme originally took place in 2007. 4channers would call the same GameStop store and request a copy of an old arcade style game called Battletoads. GameStop employees would respond to the first requests in a professional manner before becoming exasperated at the troll's repeated calls. Audio clips were posted for the community to enjoy in their sense of shared power.

These campaigns showcase the way the trolling subculture normalizes harassment to reinforce the ingroup. They also show the entitlement inherent to online trolling and harassment campaigns. These campaigns start because the community feels it is owed something, or something is being taken away. In a similar fashion, Gamergate was about an encroachment on a culture that they felt belonged to them.

Quinn's game was a threat to the gaming ingroup and Gjoni's long blog post spoke to the masculine trolling game community in a way it understood. In this mythology, women are either prudes or sluts. They are denied humanity and agency. Quinn, with her activism to make the industry less toxic and more inclusive in addition to her alleged sexual misconduct, became the ultimate transgressor and a flag individual for the movement. She represented a caricature that had existed amongst anti-SJW (social justice warrior, a derogatory term for Left leaning activists) gamers already – that of the anti-male feminist who seeks to destroy men and what they valued.

Gjoni aided this process with an understanding of how trolls thought. His account is littered with juicy details, memeable asides, and justifications for the gaming trolls' already established worldview. The quote above referring to Quinn's infidelity and the burger chain Five Guys was an instant hit, as it dehumanized her and was an easily spreadable and adaptable in-joke. Gamergate soon became about more than Quinn as journalists, game developers, and activists leapt in to defend her.

Another polarizing figure of Gamergate was Anita Sarkeesian, who runs a YouTube channel that critiques videogames from a feminist perspective. She canceled a talk at Utah State due to a shooting threat, the emailer claiming, "Feminists have ruined my life." (Ahmed, 2014).

While ostensibly a movement for gamers to establish ethics in game journalism, the implied cultural threat allowed the anti-SJWs to publicly harass outspoken women.

Newsweek had social media analytics company *Brandwatch* analyze the Gamergate hashtag on Twitter, #GamerGate, to get a feel for what was happening. “Twitter users have tweeted at Quinn using the #GamerGate hashtag 10,400 times since September 1. Grayson (who is alleged to have slept with Quinn and given her a positive review) has received 732 tweets with the same hashtag during the same period. If GamerGate is about ethics among journalists, why is the female developer receiving 14 times as many outraged tweets as the male journalist (Wofford)?” Grayson and Quinn were in a relationship, but Grayson never covered *Depression Quest* in his role as a games reviewer. The facts played second fiddle to the witch hunt.

I assert that there are three main identifiable groups that came together to wage the Gamergate campaign. Their interests merged as the campaign went on. They are the MRAs (men’s rights activists), white supremacists, and Libertarian minded gamers.

The MRA movement is a reaction to a modern feminism characterized by Tumblr identity politics and call out culture. Its ideological starting point is of acknowledging gender equality issues facing men, such as their reduced status as caregivers. It mischaracterizes feminists as man haters, and of wanting women to have supremacy over men, rather than equality (Jaye, 2017). Gjoni made Quinn’s image so that it fit this profile.

Stemming from a sense of entitlement, the MRA community embraced PUAs (pickup artists) who promised young men that if they followed some straightforward tips, they could get any woman they wanted. The problem was that not only did this perspective come from viewing women as objects, it also relied on manipulation and gaslighting. These PUAs weren’t healthy role models, and the young men who were attracted to their ideas saw popular female

empowerment as directly opposed to male empowerment. They view the world in a hierarchical fashion during which one group's gains come at the expense of another group. MRAs view themselves and their goals as diametrically opposed to those of feminism. One way the in-group of men polarized the issue in defining themselves as being anti-feminist and anti-SJW was through the use of the feminazi (feminist-nazi) slur.

MRAs have been around since before the Internet, but with the introduction of the Internet, a new group of especially bitter and antisocial people were able to connect. Incels (involuntarily celibate men) were especially bitter to women because they saw their lack of sexual activity as a flashpoint in a life that was generally not going well. Women are demonized either as prudes or sluts and likened to pieces of meat. It is from this community of extreme entitlement that Isla Vista killer Elliot Rodger was radicalized and would go on to attack a sorority, for the crime of not sleeping with him (Poston, 2018).

A subset of incels sought to empower themselves through the volcel (voluntarily celibate men) and MGTOW (men going their own way) movements. These strains of thought rejected all forms of contact with women and embraced a dominant, masculinist worldview as a way of reasserting power. For these communities, anger became empowering.

The men's rights community coalesced into an interconnected Internet culture known as the manosphere (Marche, 2016). This community empowered men with a moderate and a more extreme approach (Warzel, 2018). On one end are motivational types such as psychologist Jordan Peterson, who acts as a father figure to young men who desire an authoritative voice of guidance. On the more extreme end are online communities that encourage men to objectify women to empower themselves, degrade feminism, and advocate for a narrow slew of men's

interests. The way these interests are constructed is as opposed to the interests of other groups such as feminists.

The Futurist, a utopian technology blog catering to men, released a manifesto called the *Misandry Bible*. It details a worldview in which feminism is not about challenging patriarchy for the good of men and women, but about raising women above men. From the document's executive summary:

“The Western World has quietly become a civilization that has tainted the interaction between men and women, where the state forcibly transfers resources from men to women creating various perverse incentives for otherwise good women to inflict great harm onto their own families, and where male nature is vilified but female nature is celebrated. This is unfair to both genders, and is a recipe for a rapid civilizational decline and displacement, the costs of which will ultimately be borne by a subsequent generation of innocent women, rather than men, as soon as 2020 (Kahn, 2010).”

This narrative of societal collapse, of a decay of the natural order, is starkly similar to the narrative advanced by Nazis about the Weimar Republic before the Nazis took power (O'Shaughnessy, 2016). Liberal policies are criticized as destroying the natural hierarchy, leading to a complete degeneration of the social order. This idea of men and women each having their own natural place and a hierarchical family being the foundational unit of a society is fascist, although not uniquely so. The problem arose when men cherry picked statistics to show that *they* are oppressed, and women empowerment is bad because it subverts their natural place as subservient and guardians of the home.

MRAs believed that women were gaining newfound power through cultural changes. Political correctness, to MRAs, was an insidious conspiracy to defang men and destabilize

natural hierarchies. So, they fought a cultural shift through cultural means. The culture wars were fought through meta politics. Now we start to see what Gamergate meant to the MRAs. It was a battle to defend the very fabric of society. And they had a natural ally in this fight, the open white supremacists.

Ideologically, the white supremacists have similar views of the imminent collapse of society. For a long time, their responses ranged from withdrawing, to preparing for a war of races, to blending into society and slowly spreading their ideas (Simi, 2010). The white supremacists participating in Gamergate are the result of the folks who were trying to play it smart and safe by hiding their intentions. They knew that if they were overt and obvious with their thoughts and intentions they wouldn't be seen as a legitimate part of the gaming community or allies of the MRAs.

So, they cloaked their language in dogwhistles. A dogwhistle term is one that seems normal on the surface but gives a knowing wink to other people who hold the same ideology. Dogwhistle terms are connected to deeper sets of terms through complex webs of associations, so that when a politician says something like "crime and punishment," they are appealing Right-wing white people. They feel threatened by communities of color, who systems of police violence disproportionately target. Saying you will get tough on crime is really saying that you will get tough on the actions of nonwhite people in a way that neuters an imagined threat. It doesn't seem racist on the surface but is built on assumptions of a racist power structure.

One important dogwhistle term that has been around for some time is "Cultural Marxist/ism". The term has its origins in Nazi Germany, when the Nazi party would label its internal enemies Cultural Bolsheviks (O'Shaughnessy, 2016). This is a concept that pops up again and again: the idea that resistance is led by foreign infiltrators. Fascism and populism more

generally envisages the nation state as a body, with the head represented by the leader and other parts of society playing the roles of various body parts (Moffit, 2017). Those who do not buy into the goals of the head of the nation are viewed as pathogens. Or more bluntly, foreign infiltrators. To be expelled.

Cultural Marxism is an outgrowth of the Cultural Bolshevik conspiracy theory. It has its origins in the Right's response to the Frankfurt school (Lind). In Right-wing mythology, the Left could not accomplish a revolution through force, so turned to the destruction of culture first as a way of accomplishing its goals. "Today, with economic Marxism dead, Cultural Marxism has filled its shoes. The medium has changed, but the message is the same: a society of radical egalitarianism enforced by the power of the state (Lind)."

Through the moniker of Cultural Marxism, white supremacists deride any critical deconstruction of culture as a means of ultimately destroying it. This leads immediately to anti-intellectualism, and the importance of fighting meta-political cultural wars. Feminists critiquing video games is not viewed as a standard practice shared with other art forms, but as a means to destroy the culture claimed by isolated men. The video games became another element of the culture wars, wars that had replaced economic battles.

"I think that Cultural Marxist thing is important, especially in an environment where the president was elected on a platform that meant different things to different people, but a unifying thread was this opposition to political correctness. There's that whole narrative that political correctness is a deliberate attempt to destroy the republic by Cultural Marxists who couldn't do it through proletarian revolution (Rupert, 2018)."

White supremacists were able to tap into this web of associations to talk about political correctness. They linked the politically correct culture that MRAs and Libertarians despised to

Cultural Marxism. This links “groups that are gaining by my loss in the zero-sum game” in MRA and Libertarian minds from liberals to Jews, Leftists, and academics. And groups on the other side of this divide – such as white supremacists – were allies in the culture wars.

4chan embodied the Libertarian ethos embedded in the Internet from the very beginning of its founding. The Internet was meant to be a place free of tyranny, government regulators, and overzealous moderators. It was from 4chan that the Libertarian collective Anonymous was formed (Kushner, 2017). While the dominant ideology of 4chan is strongly Libertarian, ironic Nazism thrived as a form of transgression against political correctness.

The Libertarian leaning folks of 4chan lived up to the original idea of the Internet as a lawless utopia, as described in Barlow’s *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*. “Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather.

We have no elected government, nor are we likely to have one, so I address you with no greater authority than that with which liberty itself always speaks. I declare the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you seek to impose on us (Barlow, 2018).”

This Libertarian ethos fed into the trolling culture that would grow and develop online. The Internet, in the beginning, was a space for socially isolated people to gather outside of societal norms. These people were mostly white and male, and believed their intelligence to be somewhere above average. Trolling began as a means to punish newcomers for invading their space. But the Internet soon became too big to be the Libertarian utopia some still dreamed of.

The governments of flesh and steel, and corporations influenced by advertising dollars, sought to regulate the Internet.

Regulation was necessary for the internet to become commercialized, but for early adopters it meant a changing culture and an influx of transgressors. There was a large overlap online between the Libertarian early Internet adopters and the gamers. They were both isolated young men on the cutting edge of technology. And so, the reputation for a toxic gaming culture was originally inherent in a male centric Internet culture that was unfriendly to outsiders. When these Libertarian gamers saw people that they viewed as outsiders imposing their views onto the one community they had, they reacted according to their repertoire of ousting infiltrators – by trolling.

MRAs, white supremacists, and Libertarians all came together to accost women (especially women of color) because they tried to invade video games. And the poster boy of Gamergate – the guy who, more than anyone, brought these disparate groups together – was Milo Yiannopoulos.

Yiannopoulos got his start as an editor and writer for *Breitbart*, a far-Right website catering to an Internet savvy generation of culture warriors. Like his contemporaries, he traded in outrage porn by feeding incendiary headlines to a far-Right echo chamber. He was not originally a fan of games, tweeting in 2013, “Few things are more embarrassing than watching grown men get excited about video games (Glitch, 2015).” And in 2014, “Are online gamers as overweight, awkward, and lazy as we think they are? writer (of linked article) trying to be nice but answer is yes (Glitch, 2015).”

Yiannopoulos saw the potential of uniting the MRAs, white supremacists, and Libertarians. In Bowers’ terms, he played the role of promulgator, solidifier, and polarizer. Put in

common terms, he spread ideas relevant to all these groups, established an internal identity, and provided an enemy for them to oppose. In 2015, Milo went on his Dangerous Faggot tour of college campuses, during which he attacked feminists and political correctness, and stood on the side of gamers (Nolan, 2016). He publicly distanced himself from the open white supremacists, but they fed off his efforts.

“The rise of feminism has fatally coincided with the rise of video games, Internet porn, and, sometime in the near future, sex robots. With all these options available, and the growing perils of real-world relationships, men are simply walking away (Beran, 2017).”

The above quote was from a talk he gave in 2016. He cleverly ties together moderate and radical MRAs with Libertarian gamers. And he offers a believable boogeyman (or bogeywoman): feminists, and their destructive influence on culture. These feminists and other Left-wing activists would protest Yiannopoulos at his appearances, reinforcing his victim narrative.

During the Gamergate trolling campaign, white supremacists were able to ingratiate themselves to other trolls with no ideological focus. And they wormed their way in, using irony as a tactical shield (“Irony, Entryism and Tokenism,” 2017). Crucial to this group identity formation was similar media consumption. After waging cultural war against Leftists and the mainstream media, MRAs, white supremacists, and Libertarians fraternized and developed something of a common identity.

Establishing a Brand Identity Through Yiannopoulos

Through Yiannopoulos, the alt-Right formulated an identity and persona. A brand. In advertising theory, there are 12 brand archetypes, derived from Jung's original personality theories. The alt-Right falls under the outlaw archetype (Smith, 2016).

The outlaw brand is one that shakes up social norms in pursuit of its own goals. "Toward the negative end of the archetype, the Outlaw is provoked to anger when encountering personal offense. It doesn't mind being feared by others, as fear is seen as power (Smith 2016)." Such a characterization describes the alt-Right well.

The alt-Right outlaw branding is reinforced internally through a narrative that adherents are oppressed by society and its shifting culture. They view themselves as standing outside of modern trends and seek to reverse these trends. They desire to exert their power to reassert a simpler, nostalgic form of the past.

The alt-Right are transgressing against what they view as an authoritarian society. In fact, MRAs, white supremacists, and Libertarians all were doing that separately, with separate and distinct outlaw brands. It is not a great surprise that they united together against their common enemy of political correctness through an overarching outlaw brand.

Political correctness operates as a flag issue, or in other words an issue important to a cause in their rallying against it (Bowers, 2016). Alt-Right activists are fighting a culture. This idea of rebelling against a culture and gaining power through cultural control can be traced back to the European New Right, as well as interwar fascism (Hawley, 2017). The wannabe intellectuals of the alt-Right focused on meta politics – the idea of changing culture to make the political arena more palatable to your ideology.

Trump was the catalyst to move from meta political cultural battles into electoral political battles. He represented the alt-Rights' cultural attitudes manifested as a political actor. Donald Trump is a larger than life troll with no respect for American establishment political rituals. Trolls everywhere, including Yiannopoulos, saw themselves reflected in Trump.

Yiannopoulos was aware of the rhetorical power that lay in linking Trump to the brand he had played a part in creating. But he wasn't just some message board opportunist who happened to go viral. Yiannopoulos had a well formulated agenda and was propped up by a large scale Right-wing propaganda apparatus, as leaked documents revealed later. He wrote for *Breitbart*, a large scale Right-wing propaganda outlet.

Breitbart was conceived as a conservative response to popular liberal news sites like *The Hill* and *Huffington Post* by billionaire conservative family the Mercers (Bernstein, 2017). Executive chairman Bannon had other motivations but depended on the Mercers to pay the bills. Yiannopoulos made a name for himself as a sharp-tongued critic of liberalism, particularly by questioning the black status of liberal activist Shaun King. This criticism was reminiscent of Trump's claims that Obama was not a legitimate president because he had been born in Kenya. In addition to Yiannopoulos' skill at stirring up controversy, he is also a gay man. His identity could be weaponized against identity conscious liberals.

Yiannopoulos and *Breitbart* keenly maintained their public identities as non-white supremacists, relying on lawsuits and public statements. But despite frequent claims to the contrary, *Breitbart* staff were on the same page. They intentionally posed as moderate rebels to the Republican establishment, while acting as an entry point to the more overtly white nationalist elements of the alt-Right.

When Yiannopoulos was working on an alt-Right manifesto, he asked open and proud Nazis what information to include. Examples include website administrator for popular Neo-Nazi website The Daily Stormer Andrew ‘Weev’ Auernheimer, anti-Enlightenment, neoreactionary, and feudalist blogger Curtis Yarvin, white nationalist blogger Devin Saucier, and white nationalist author, activist, and punching bag Richard Spencer (Bernstein, 2017). On publicly interacting with Neo-Nazis, Yarvin advises, “Deal with them the way some perfectly tailored high-communist NYT reporter handles a herd of greasy anarchist hippies. Patronizing contempt.” Yiannopoulos responded, “I have been struggling with this. I need to stay, if not clean, then clean enough (Bernstein, 2017).”

Yiannopoulos and his white supremacist cohort were playing the meta political game. While the Mercers supported *Breitbart* and Trump, they did not play a part in encouraging positive coverage. Their original presidential candidate was Ted Cruz. Yiannopoulos saw, immediately after Trump announced his candidacy and before the Mercers did, the opportunity Trump represented in normalizing white supremacist discourse.

On January 19th, 2015, Yiannopoulos penned an article titled ‘Donald Trump, King of Trolling His Critics, Should Be the Internet’s Choice for President’ (Yiannopoulos, 2015). That was only three days after Trump announced his candidacy. The appeals to the brand had already been formulated.

“He’s (Trump) identified the weakness of the current political system, where career politicians speak in soundbites to increasingly disillusioned audiences. He has swooped in to exploit it. Like the trolls, I suspect he’s the only candidate who is in the process purely for the lulz (laugh out loud, plural, misspelled) ... I suspect many people will vote for Trump for the same reason many people voted for Britain’s second most famous blonde bombshell (after

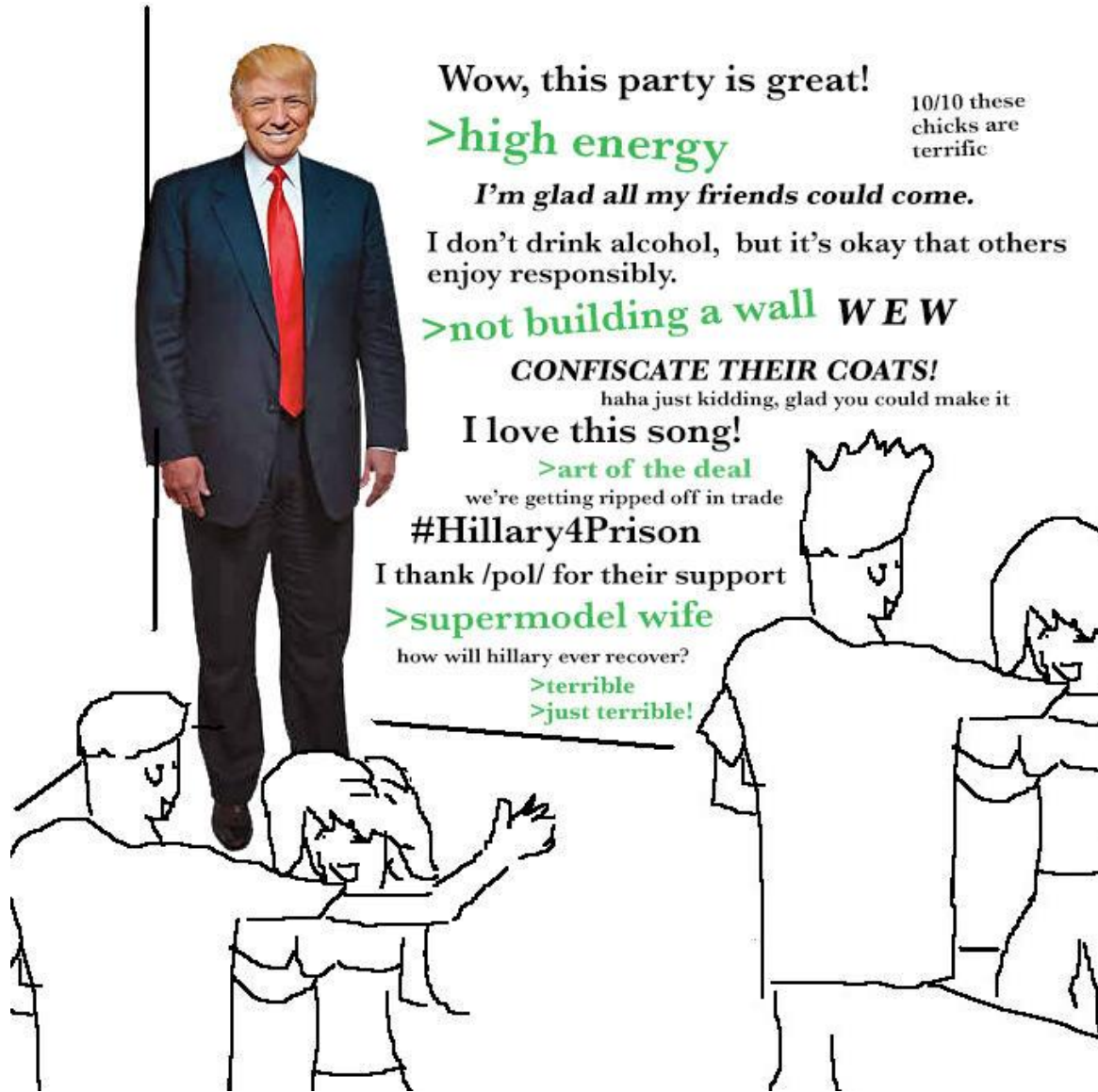
Yiannopoulos), Boris Johnson: they'll do it for a laugh and to stick it to the perpetually offended (Yiannopoulos, 2015).”

Yiannopoulos portrays Trump as the candidate who makes politics interesting to the disillusioned. And the alt-Right brand is built on the backs of the disillusioned. In online communities where people communicate their disenchantment through irony and where empathy is seen as the least cool thing, Trump was the cool thing. He didn't take politics seriously. He didn't care what you thought about him. When people would say Trump “told it like it is” that wasn't a reference to policy or truth. It was a reference to Trump bullshitting a bullshit political system.

Of course, Trump was also bullshit. He speaks in sound bites. He can scarcely string a sentence together. His campaign's lack of professionalism was visible to the public. By any form of measured political analysis, Trump should be a branding disaster.

But he wasn't a branding disaster, and it's because his personal brand was the brand his followers most identified with. His words, tweets, and actions were eminently memeable. In an online world tuned in to in-jokes and among people who were attentive to hierarchy, how do you not make fun of low energy Jeb? Or lying Ted? The jokes practically write themselves.

Included here is an example of the in-jokes used to integrate Trump into the alt-Right's self-narrative. The below meme is most relevant to the incel community. It ordinarily features a person in a party environment, with some humorous dialogue detailing their discomfort in that environment. Users commiserate over shared experiences with depression, social anxiety, and not fitting into normie society.



(I Wish I Was Home, 2017)

While I found this meme in a meme database, context clues reveal where it would originally have been created and shared. On the image is a reference of thanks to 4chan's /pol/ board, where ironic political incorrectness was streamlined for use by the Trump campaign. Another clue as to its origins is the green text and ">" format for text. On 4chan, that is used to

denote storytelling (though the stories do not have to be true or even realistic). Other in-jokes included are less specific to /pol/ and relevant to the wider alt-Right community.

An incel meme appearing on /pol/ indicates that there is a significant number of people identifying as incel on /pol/, in addition to other parts of the manosphere. Within the incel group subcategory of the alt-Right, men are divided into one of two categories. The alpha or beta, the chad or the virgin. In their mythology either a man sleeps with women and has worth or he doesn't and doesn't. This meme usually features a beta where Trump is standing. But Trump reverses the expectation. He is portrayed as a master of the environment through numerous in-jokes.

One in-joke is the reference to Trump and his supporters as high energy. This bears some resemblance to the Nazis use of the term fanatic (O' Shaugnessy, 2016). Being a devotee became valued over previously held values such as rationality. In a political campaign, you don't want or need everyone to think for themselves. You need people to dutifully fulfill what's asked of them. For the alt-Right trolls, being high energy meant making memes and cheerleading for Trump as a form of intra-group competition. It also meant viciously trolling other campaigns and their supporters.

The Hillary references are a reference to Hillary Clinton, Trump's opponent in the general election. What is notable here is that once again, he disavows respectable political etiquette. This time by insinuating that his opponent had broken the law, rather than pretending that their differences were solely policy based and they could still get along. And that he would throw her in jail for it, which breaks from the established repertoire of American political discourse. Typically, Republicans and Democrats have an under the table agreement to not prosecute each other for their corruption-based crimes. The open secret of corruption and

collusion amongst political elites leaves an opportunity open for populist challengers from the left and the right. It's what made Trump's rhetoric resonate.

MRAs, white supremacists, and Libertarians started to gather in the same online social circles to discuss Trump's presidency. This transition was facilitated heavily by *Breitbart*, which existed at the center of a complex web linking together online Right-wing communities (Piggott, 2016) (Benkler, Faris, Roberts, & Zuckerman, 2017). As a result, some of the internal language began to bleed together.

A subtle undertone of anti-Semitism crept into their language, with conspiracy theory mainstays like Cultural Marxism and NWO (or new world order, the idea that there is a Jewish conspiracy to form a world government) merged with updated terms such as globalist. The globalist conspiracy theory features similar themes of a shadowy Jewish cabal controlling international politics and finance but is updated with the language of free trade to reflect recent developments in neoliberal economic policies. Another important term was a verb – to be red pillled. To be red-pilled meant to become politically aware and make a commitment to never turning back, a reference to *The Matrix* (Squirrell, 2017). It was originally used in MRA communities but proved to be versatile, as being red pillled meant accepting the dogma of whatever group was using the term.

MRAs, white supremacists, and Libertarians had been united during the Gamergate campaign against what they saw as an attack on their distinct cultures. Donald Trump brought that fight to the mainstream and became a populist that expressed alt-Right concerns in a way that no one else in power was doing. There was a significant amount of overlap in the two campaigns – Gamergate didn't die down until mid-2016, while Trump's campaign was picking up steam in late 2015 and early 2016.

It can be easy to unite against a degeneration of gaming or Western culture, but much harder to unite around a vision of the future. Varying visions of the world, the utopia, they were trying to create, eventually lead to conflicts within the alt-Right. Traditional conservatives and Libertarians embraced Trump, who promised to Make America Great Again by empowering American capitalist and industrial interests. But white supremacist national socialists saw Trump as a stepping stone to something greater. To them, he was a pawn that would advance the white nationalist movement.

Schism in the Movement

The nascent alt-Right soon ran into a branding problem frequently faced by social movements and rarely by corporations: they split up. As alt-Right affiliated organizations began to form and ideologies began to differentiate certain groups from other groups, a split in rhetoric and aims became apparent. A large chunk of the alt-Right was more moderate. They were happy to support Trump, and wanted to restore American institutions, not tear them down. This first group came to be known as the alt-light. The more extreme elements of the alt-Right wanted to forcefully remove immigrants and people of color to establish a white ethno-state. This second group retained the alt-Right moniker and would go on to form inter-generational contacts with older generations of white supremacists.

Like the formation of the alt-Right, the breakup of the alt-Right was driven by Yiannopoulos' antics. He was the most famous of the conservative provocateurs who would go on tours of college campuses with the intent of riling up Left leaning students and antifascists to provoke a backlash. Internally, this strategy reinforces the victimhood narrative. Externally, the controversy often generates more press attention than if the event had gone forward without any

complaints. Other well-known stokers of the campus outrage machine include Ann Coulter and Ben Shapiro.

The particular event that received widespread press attention and took on national significance took place at UC Berkeley. Yiannopoulos was set to speak on February 1st, 2017, having been invited for a College Republicans feature on free speech. He never took the stage. Antifascist protestors incited Yiannopoulos fans and damaged property, resulting in pandemonium (Wong, 2017). Worried riot police canceled the event. Arguably, Yiannopoulos got what he wanted – a claim to victimhood, a bigger audience, and a string of interviews with major media outlets. President Trump tweeted that universities must do better to protect free speech.

From that point forward the idea of free speech would become a crucial flag issue for the alt-Right. But it meant different things to different people. To the moderates who had voted for Trump and believed in American institutions, free speech meant what it is generally understood to mean in America. A belief in the free marketplace of ideas, and that both parties can state their claims peacefully and that the best ideas will win out. To the white supremacist fascists, free speech was a shield they could use to advocate for so called peaceful genocide with impunity.

The conflict between MAGA (make America great again) Americans and sieg heiling Neo-Nazis became a more public spat in June. There had been quite a few public brawls between antifascists and the alt-Right, and the alt-light leaning people were sick of it. Two different rallies were held in DC at the same time, with a notable variation in the speakers' messages.

The Rally for Free Speech was originally meant to be for the entire alt-Right, but quite a few speakers dropped their engagement when famed Neo-Nazi Richard Spencer was confirmed

in the run up to the event. One far-Right journalist named Laura Loomer said at the time, “I’m not sharing the stage with an anti-Semite (Marantz, 2017).”

Spencer had previously acquired notoriety for leading a sieg heil to celebrate Trump’s victory and getting punched on camera during the protests after Trump’s inauguration. He was, and at the time of writing remains, the most famous open Nazi in America. For all of the far-Right personalities that weren’t comfortable with open Nazism, the Rally for Free Speech was an opportunity for them to state their boundaries. They organized another event to take place at the same time, dubbed the Rally Against Political Violence (Marantz, 2017).

Gavin McInnes, founder of the Proud Boys (an organization that takes pains not to overtly characterize itself as white supremacist but has organized with the alt-Right) said, about the difference between the two rallies, “They care about the white race. We care about Western values.” Both rallies were sparsely attended. As the alt-light and alt-Right grew apart, the white supremacists clung tight to the moniker of alt-Right. Their intention, from the beginning, was to maintain a fascist ideology but with a new clean-cut face. While this approach brought in a slew of new recruits, many newcomers found their bedfellows unappealing.

One way of describing the difference between the alt-light and the alt-Right is of civic nationalists vs. ethnic nationalists. The alt-light believe in Western culture and maintaining some essence of America-ness. Meanwhile, the alt-Right viewed their goal as the establishment of a racist white ethno-state that got rid of other races through genocide. These categories are not necessarily discrete.

The alt-Right brand was abandoned by civic nationalists and belonged to the white supremacists at this point. But rather than fade apart, the alt-light and alt-Right had one last

hurrah to mend their differences. The appropriately named Unite the Right rally took place in Charlottesville in August 2017 and will be the focus of my next chapter.

Part 3

The External Rhetoric of Brand Communication

Charlottesville and the Problem of Free Speech

In this section, I will first look at the context of events leading up to Unite the Right. With that context comes the history and rhetorical framing that influenced the rally. I then follow up with the alt-Rights' relationship with Trump and the fallout caused by the rally. I conclude the chapter by describing what appears to be the alt-Rights' decline.

In the wake of the disastrous free speech rallies that presented a vision of a divided and poorly organized Right, the alt-Right organizers planned a rally titled Unite the Right. This event took place in Charlottesville August 11-12, several months after the June rallies in DC. However, it had been planned for several months. Tensions had long been simmering under the surface of the alt-Right, and organizers were aware of the need for a unifying event. In Bowers' terms, the alt-Right brand needed to solidify into a coherent movement.

While it is simple to look at the event and say that it was necessary for the Right to unite, the framing of the event needed to be meticulously planned to grant it an air of legitimacy. After all, the Nazi skinheads of previous generations didn't get very far with brute force and anger alone. If the alt-Right were to grow, it needed a compelling narrative for a mainstream conservative audience. The flag issue that they settled on centered around a retelling of Confederate history and an appeal to the enduring American value of free speech.

To understand where this argument came from and why it is compelling, we must start at the beginning (of the Confederacy, not the founding of the country). After the Civil War, Confederate memorabilia and public imaginings of its history were prominent during two periods

(Whose Heritage?, 2016). Those periods took place during the early 1900s as a physical manifestation of Jim Crow and during the 1950s and 1960s as a reaction to the gains of the Civil Rights Movement.

The Confederacy has thus always been a representation of white America's latent white supremacy. In its own words (from the Mississippi Declaration of causes for succession), "They (the North) assume that the negro is equal, and hence conclude that he is entitled to equal privileges and rights with the white man. If their premises were correct, their conclusions would be logical and just but their premise being wrong, their whole argument fails (Whose Heritage?, 2016)." The Confederacy existed to protect the material interests of the South's white ruling class. An interest in the institution of slavery. Southern ruling class whites used the rhetoric of an overreaching federal government to convince poor local whites to side with them and the institution of slavery. Never mind that their resistance would have put power in the hands of regional elites, rather than national ones.

The myth constructed in the States that had been part of the Confederacy was a narrative of resilience. Of resisting the cultural forms of domination that were imposed after military domination. The story the Confederacy narrative tells of American society is an entirely different one from the narrative of DC politicians, or the narrative of media centered in Los Angeles and New York. The Confederate narrative is one of resisting intrusion, of battling for tradition, of tribalism. The Confederate narrative is low hanging fruit for modern far-Right groups to latch onto. Whoever can be portrayed as a foreign or alien entity must be defended against.

The alt-Right hacked into the Confederate narrative for their own ends. They took one issue venerated by American institutions – free speech – and claimed that Leftist and government interlopers aimed to destroy it. The framing of a white defense of culture, of a defense of a white

(Confederate narrative) America (symbolized by free speech) was an excellent understanding of who their brand should be targeting (Lopez, 2017). When a national movement arose to dethrone Confederate monuments, Confederate rhetoric of rebellion was the first response within the Right's repertoire.

The modern Right frames free speech as the value that is under attack and in need of defense. At the heart of the so called free speech attack was a Confederate statue in Charlottesville that had been slated for removal. Locally, this was a nonissue. Ironically, the alt-Right came in from afar to attack locals and the decisions made by locals when this is something the alt-Right claims that immigrants do. They are angry that others may impose beliefs and culture on them, yet the alt-Right in this instance imposes its beliefs on the people of Charlottesville. The will of the locals didn't matter, the removal of a Confederate statue was part of a national branding campaign.

The trend of removing Confederate memorabilia from public life had begun some years prior (Whose Heritage? 2016). In 2015, white supremacist terrorist Dylann Roof shot up a black church in Charleston, South Carolina. He had posed with Confederate and KKK memorabilia and they were equally important in his ideological self-image. It exposed an ugly truth – that nostalgia for the Confederacy and support for the KKK are linked, both on a social and on an individual level. Roof's memorabilia sent shockwaves through liberal America. Many localities suddenly became aware of the fact that they had a black president in Obama but still had public monuments to commemorate the defenders of slavery.

The first icon to fall was the Confederate flag flying in Columbia, South Carolina. The addition of the free speech rationale to keep Confederate icons was introduced in May, when New Orleans took down its Confederate statues to much protest and fanfare. The tactic of using

free speech as a flag issue had been introduced just prior when Yiannopoulos and other conservative firebrands used free speech as an issue in danger on college campuses. It was natural to utilize that framing for Confederate icons when the opportunity presented itself.

Leftists were portrayed as violent in their persecution of the alt-Right and of free speech on campuses and other liberal strongholds. This was, in addition to a construction of common identity, also an attempt to establish that identity through theatrical displays of victimhood. The alt-Right does this safe in the knowledge that law enforcement is far more likely to treat them with sympathy than the Left (Charlottesville Violence Planned 2017). Yiannopoulos framed the issue of free speech at a college event in this way, “where the alt-Left sees the words ‘free speech,’ they see blood. Many such rallies across the country have been cancelled this month as the violence from the Left continues to chill conservative voices (Yiannopoulos, 2017).” The event in question was a UC Berkeley free speech event taking place at the end of August, immediately after Charlottesville. The framings were nearly identical.

Externally, the framing of Unite the Right was focused on Bowers’ strategies of polarization and of escalation and confrontation. They simplified the free speech question into a binary: either you support our right to say whatever we want (and be free of the consequences associated with that speech) and are for us, or you desire to suppress our speech and are against us. It had the added benefit of confusing the issue in media accounts, though that confusion didn’t last forever.

Internally, the Unite the Right rally was crucial in solidifying a decaying alt-Right. This was the most important event to date. The one to drum up support for, to show the world that this was a real social movement, not just some losers online. Because for a lot of people this was an

online only endeavor. For isolated men, it was a group of pen pals that had accepted you. The fascism was incidental.

One Twitter user described the tactics of camaraderie that the alt-Right used to worm their way into online depression communities. They would offer fatherly advice and a sense of community. Underneath it all was a tale of white Western supremacy. Because these atomized, depressed young men needed a group to accept them, and the alt-Right provided that.

Unite the Right was to be a coming out moment for the online alt-Right communities and a way for isolated internet friends to come together. To meet their friends irl – in real life. The movement wouldn't feel real otherwise. "A bunch of the group planned on attending the now infamous Charlottesville rally. It was sold as a Unite the Right rally for everybody against political correctness rather than an exclusively alt-Right rally, so many of the 'normies' were interested in going for the social aspect (Mr.HappyDieHappy, 2018)." The ideological makeup was glossed over to have as big of a showing as possible.

But it was at Charlottesville that the cloudiness around the ideology of the alt-Right would be cleared for all to see. The night before the official Unite the Right rally, a couple hundred men marched on UVA's campus in formation with lit torches chanting, "Jews will not replace us," and, "Blood and soil," references to anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and to fascist ideology viewing the nation as a body (Heim, 2017). Patient brand management utilizing free speech as a flag issue be damned. Unite the Right would be the biggest Neo-Nazi public gathering in a generation. The Neo-Nazis desired a show of force.

And forceful they were. That night, roughly 250 white supremacists attacked roughly 30 university students who were counter protesting. It foreshadowed the events of the next day. Shouting matches between alt-Right and Leftist forces grew into violent confrontations, while

police stood by and watched. Both sides were left with injuries. And the alt-Right could have retreated to lick its wounds if not for the murder of antifascist activist Heather Heyer, who was run over by a car. Murder severely damaged the brand's public image (Heim, 2017).

Trump sought to smooth over criticisms of the alt-Right by saying, "You had a group on one side and group on the other and they came at each other with clubs – there is another side, you can call them the Left, that came violently attacking the other group. You had people that were very fine people on both sides (Jacobs & Laughland, 2017)." However, the damage that had been done to the alt-Right brand stuck.

Trump and the Alt-Right: An Evolving Relationship

There is much to be said about Trump's relationship with the alt-Right brand. The two wouldn't be the same if not for each other – Trump needed the alt-Right to get elected, and the alt-Right needs a figure like Trump to bring their ideology to a nationwide audience. While everyone in the alt-Right movement is sure to have an opinion about Trump, Steve Bannon was the bridge connecting the movement to the man.

Their relationship began long before Trump's campaign. David Bossie, president of Citizen's United (yes, *that* Citizen's United), apparently introduced the two in 2010 (Kranish, 2018). Trump's political advisor Sam Nunberg claimed that the two became "ideological soul mates" as Bannon pushed for Trump to run for president as early as 2012. A month after Trump's campaign announcement in 2015, Bannon published a piece on *Breitbart* praising Trump's political manifesto (Beckworth, 2017). Of course, Yiannopoulos' tongue in cheek endorsement for Trump came even earlier, several days after Trump's announcement. This

wasn't a matter of the Mercers masterminding collaboration behind the scenes. Trump and Bannon were working together from the beginning.

Bannon and *Breitbart* played the role of playful foil to Trump's anti-PC crusade. He was shocking yes, but *Breitbart* was always there to be a little more extreme. To make Trump seem a little more reasonable. During one discussion Bannon said, "You got to remember, we're *Breitbart*. We're the know-nothing vulgarians. So we've always got to be to the right of you on this." "Oh, that's OK," Trump said (Kranish, 2018).

Breitbart, and by extension the alt-Right, played the role of a radical flank to Trump. The alt-Right anchored the far-Right positions to the right of Trump. At the same time, Trump was moving a lot of people further to the political Right who would then be more susceptible to the alt-Right brand. It was a symbiotic relationship, a win for all parties involved.

Despite his early appeal, Trump was running a shambolic presidential campaign. He brought Bannon on board to explicitly aid in his election campaign. His role was necessary in getting Trump elected, Nunberg asserts, "I don't believe the president would have been able to pull off that upset at the end without Steve Bannon (Kranish, 2018)." And for Bannon the benefits of working with Trump were clear. He was consistently the firm, far-Right voice in the room. When Trump's mind would change by the minute and his other advisors were willing to moderate their messages and goals Bannon would stay firm.

One of the first memorable effects of Bannon's influence on Trump was the January 2017 travel ban. Trump signed an executive order that would outlaw people from seven Muslim majority countries to travel to the United States (Perez, Brown, & Liptak, 2017). Legally this was a disaster for both of them. It was instantly challenged and never went into full affect, with

border enforcement agencies confused as to what they were supposed to do. But Bannon was trying to get something else out of it – a spectacle to energize his base.

Bannon timed the document signing so that it would occur on a Friday, knowing protestors would marshal a display of resistance over the weekend. Establishment Republicans weren't happy. They typically do their best to avoid protests. But Bannon's aim wasn't to slide policies under the door when nobody was looking, he wanted a grand battle on the public stage. You can't have a movement without a unifying public narrative. He viewed the rash of airport protests that sprang up that weekend as an opportunity to mobilize the alt-Right against them (Perez, Brown, & Liptak, 2017).

While the travel ban was stymied in courts, anti-Muslim sentiments grew in regularity and normalcy. Pew reports (2017) that 2016 had more hate crimes committed against Muslims than any year on record including a drastic increase from 2015. Though it's important to note that anti-Semitic hate crimes were still by far the largest category, the national spectacle revolved around Muslims and hatred of Muslims. That was the spectacle that had been created, because Muslims are an easier scapegoat for the present day American political climate than any other national or religious group.

Breitbart was one of a number of outlets that had been pushing an Islamophobic line for a while. After all, if Western culture was falling, another culture needed to stand against it as a malevolent force. With the fear mongering associated with the Islamic State and increased Muslim refugees flooding into the United States and Western Europe (both of which heavily influenced by US led bombing campaigns), Islamophobia has become a more pressing concern than anti-Semitism for many white supremacists. The threat of Islam replacing Christianity in the West is especially intoxicating for American evangelical conservatives.

The issue of Islam destroying the virtuous Christian West birthed another spectacle in ACT for America's March Against Sharia Law. The march took place June 10th, 2017 in almost thirty cities across the country (ACT). The aim was to stoke hysteria regarding Muslim refugees resettling in the United States and introducing what ACT for America terms Sharia Law.

ACT for America openly organized with Neo-Nazi, white supremacist, and alt-Right groups. Vanguard America (an alt-Right era Neo-Nazi group) spokesman Richard Rivera told media at the New York City march, "I don't believe in having Muslims in the United States. Their culture is incompatible with ours (ACT)." During this event and previously, ACT for America official spokespeople argued that they are against Sharia Law, not Muslims. They have sent out statements to branches of the organization that remind members that they are not a racist organization. However, they have continuously conflated Sharia with all Muslims, and Sharia as being a threat capable of destroying American society.

Their characterizations of Sharia are entirely incorrect. Sharia is a set of religious practices separate from the legal system. And legal experts denounce claims of foreign infiltrators being able to supersede American laws as preposterous (ACT).

Yet, Sharia was the flag issue that at least momentarily united moderate conservatives with the alt-Right. In my own firsthand experiences observing the March Against Sharia Law in San Bernardino, online organizers reiterated the anti-racist identity of the protest. However, signs displayed by demonstrators displayed rampant Islamophobia and there were no speakers to dissuade them. Alt-Right organization Proud Boys, which has been described in media reports as a fight club, showed up and fought with Left wing demonstrators. What I found most interesting about the march was the mixture of flag waving conservatives fearful of immigrants and militant white supremacists organizing together. This pattern was repeated across the country. Bannon

had been hoping for an energetic xenophobic response to the travel ban counter protests and was not disappointed. The Islamophobic sentiments from the Christian Right had been building for some time.





Photos of March Against Sharia Law in San Bernardino captured by the author

ACT for America was originally founded in 2007 and is an SPLC designated anti-Muslim hate group. They have had an enormous amount of success currying favor with conservative elected officials from the local to federal level and with law enforcement and military groups. While some may believe that institutional support grants their project an air of legitimacy, they have never been particularly clever about hiding their ideology or goals. Brigitte Gabriel, one of the founders of ACT for America, declared in a book released in 2008, “It is not yet politically correct to talk about a religious war. But this is exactly what we are facing: a religious war declared by devout Muslims (ACT).” According to the SPLC, ACT for America has successfully influenced the passing of 201 anti-Sharia laws in 43 states.

Sharia Law has been a flag issue for the Christian Right since at least 2007 with ACT for America's founding. Since then, it has been picked up and propagated by white supremacists and then the alt-Right. This has been an important development in white supremacy rhetoric in America. Fascism here has incorporated Christian symbols and rhetoric since the founding of the KKK, and Christianity has also worked its way into American Nazism (Simi).

The idea of Sharia being a threat allows white supremacists to distance themselves from their racism by portraying the threat as a cultural clash. And because Muslims are linked to Sharia and Sharia is linked to a threat to America, it gives them a moral standing to wage religious war. Which is what they want. Neo-Nazis have a phrase they ritualistically chant called rahowa (Simi). Rahowa stands for racial holy war. White supremacists use the moral standing of religion to frame issues in a way that is conducive to their cause. They isolate their interpretation of their religion and the one they oppose from traditionally accepted teachings so that each religion reinforces their worldview.

This approach has huge crossover appeal with evangelical conservatism. Evangelical conservatives also endorse anti-intellectualism, resulting in a natural affinity with the Cultural Marxism conspiracy theory. And an affinity for Trump's attacks on academics, coastal elites, and Muslim refugees. It was not in spite of their Christianity that they overwhelmingly voted for him, but because of it and the culture around it.

There are overwhelming similarities in the ways evangelical Christians and white supremacists think of the world. That's one of the reasons I saw them organizing together. Yet a long running alliance hasn't quite come together, in part due to the fallout from the Unite the Right rally. The alt-Right brand began to be associated with violent confrontation, and there is limited appeal in participating in violent spectacle.

The Alt-Right's Decline and Brand Decay

It is with immense pleasure that I can conclude this report detailing the shrinking influence of the alt-Right. They as a brand overextended themselves. Much of this report has looked at the movement rather than at the multitude of influential figures making up the organizations and leadership of the alt-Right. Suffice it to say that movements with authoritarian dispositions depend on their leaders, and the leaders of the alt-Right had difficulty working together for very long. The alt-Right has been plagued with big egos, big tempers, and big scandals. Including, but not limited to, the figureheads discussed in earlier sections of this report.

The beginning and the beginning of the end share a common thread – Yiannopoulos. Before Unite the Right and March Against Sharia Law, his influence faded just as quickly as it had appeared. In February 2017, recordings surfaced in which Yiannopoulos appeared to endorse pedophilia. Yiannopoulos says in the video, “We get hung up on this child abuse stuff... This is one of the reasons why I hate the Left, the one size fits all policing of culture, this arbitrary and oppressive idea of consent... In the gay world, some of the most important enriching, and incredibly life-affirming, important, shaping relationships are between younger boys and older men. They can be hugely positive experiences very often for those young boys (Ostertag, 2017).”

Yiannopoulos had been scheduled to give a talk at CPAC, the conservative political action conference. He had been regularly appearing on mainstream talk shows as a guest and was a unifying figure of the alt-Right. Everything was gone, including his position at *Breitbart*. He has his own blog site now which does fairly well, but nothing like the impact he was having before. *Breitbart* occupies the center of the conservative online news ecosystem (Benkler, Faris, Roberts, & Zuckerman, 2017). After his comments came out, Yiannopoulos' audience was reduced to the people who were already his fans.

Bannon's influence also disappeared practically overnight. On August 18th, 2017, Trump publicly announced that Bannon no longer works at the White House (Beckwith, 2017). Less than a week after Unite the Right, Trump removed Bannon because he had become a face of the alt-Right. The damage to the brand meant that it was no longer possible to have a direct representative in the White House.

For his part, Bannon grew sick of working for Trump, declaring, "I'm sick of being a wet nurse to a 71-year-old man (Sinclair, 2018)." Bannon had doubts about Trump's capabilities not only to lead a white nationalist movement, but also to function as a human being. And Trump didn't like that Bannon had been receiving credit in the media for what Trump wanted credit alone for. It was a bitter separation, but one that both parties wanted in the short term.

Bannon triumphantly returned to *Breitbart*, where he remained until January 2018. He was then summarily fired when reports emerged of Bannon denigrating Trump and Trump's family (Gray, 2018). He also had all funding revoked by Rebekah Mercer, who was furious with him. Since then, he has returned to a meta political approach without a sponsor or institutional support. In March 2018, he made an appearance at a meeting of France's National Front party saying, "Let them call you racist. Let them call you xenophobes. Let them call you nativists. Wear it as a badge of honor (Dabashi, 2018)."

Proudly calling yourself racist doesn't work very well, and Richard Spencer can help explain why. Spencer also gave up, but for a different reason. After planning a college tour "going into Marxist controlled territory", he was counter protested and outnumbered. He quit the college tour and released a video saying, "Antifa is winning to the extent that they're willing to go further than anyone else... When they (the speaking engagements) become violent clashes and pitched battles, they aren't fun (Lennard, 2018)."

In the video, Spencer specifically mentions Charlottesville's Unite the Right rally as a turning point for the alt-Right brand (Lenz, 2018). "What changed was Charlottesville. There were many things about Charlottesville that were very trying," he said. Realizing he had bitten off more than he could chew, alt-Right lawyer Kyle Bristow severed ties with Spencer and the far-Right (Lenz, 2018). Spencer was losing support and demoralized.

The story of waning influence and rising tensions was replicated across the alt-Right. Other famous figures not listed here have also had personal problems or professional rivalries. And the breakdowns in their relationships can be traced back to tension from Charlottesville (Weill, 2018). It was a defining moment for the alt-Right, but not in the way they had hoped.

This report has given scant attention to the Left-wing activists who showed up and opposed the alt-Right at every turn, but the alt-Right would not have collapsed without their efforts. Antifascists outorganized, outmarched, and outnumbered the alt-Right. But while the alt-Right in its current incarnation is rapidly subsiding, white supremacy in the United States is alive and healthy. We as engaged citizens must organize to oppose white supremacy and fascism wherever they appear. This report aimed to explore the ways in which they brand themselves and communicate to potential members – I hope it is of help in future efforts.

Part 4: Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the alt-Right – a coalition of MRA's, white supremacists, and Libertarian gamers – was created in the wake of Gamergate. Crucial in the formation of the alt-Right brand were Milo Yiannopoulos and Steve Bannon. The alt-Right brand was created in line with the outlaw archetype. Like other groups of outlaws, the alt-Right had trouble resolving conflicts. It first split with the alt-light and then ultimately fell apart after the appropriately named Unite the Right rally.

Part 5: The Creative Brief

What it is: In the advertising world, a creative brief is the document that the strategic team delivers to the creative team. It combines brand history, client desires, and research into a document that boils the information down to its simplest point. From that point, the creative team expands from that point to flesh it out. Think of the work as being an upside-down triangle stacked on top of a normal triangle. The creative brief is the point where they meet. This document imagines the alt-Right as a client for an advertising agency.

Background: The alt-Right is a social movement that aims to popularize white supremacy in the United States. Their ultimate goals include the establishment of a white ethno-state, the genocide of non-white people, and a healthy white community.

Insight: People join the alt-Right in search of a community that accepts them for who they are, not for an excuse to commit murder.

Get: In our advertising, we want to **get** isolated and depressed young white people

To: **to** participate in alt-Right activism

By: **by** reaching them during vulnerable moments and offering a community of support, while de-emphasizing ideology.

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