4CHAN FAVOURS THE AUDACIOUS: IMPACT OF DECENTRALIZATION ON DIGITALLY NETWORKED MOBILIZATION

BY

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

AND THE SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

OF MCMASTER UNIVERSITY

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

TITLE: 4chan Favours the Audacious: Impact of Decentralization On

Digitally Networked Mobilization

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NUMBER OF PAGES: xi, 124

Lay Abstract

This thesis uncovers important differences between online based social movements on the far-right. This thesis compares two far-right communities: the decentralized 4chan/pol to the centralized Stormfront. The findings make three important contributions to the field of social movements and far-right studies. First, the findings reveal that members of 4chan/pol are able to successfully sustain mobilization that does not depend on organizational involvement and cultivation of solidarity among constituents. This allows members to bypass significant upfront costs of activism without eventually dissipating, similar to movements on the left. Second, the findings reveal that solidarity amongst ingroup members is achieved as a result of mobilization, and not the other way around. For 4chan/pol members, solidarity is sustained through the opposition to the mainstream media rather than through building bonds with members of the ingroup. Finally, the findings reveal how decentralized spaces like 4chan/pol capitalize on offline mobilization of other far-right movements to radicalize supporters during and immediately after the unsuccessful insurrection on the United States Capitol on January 6th, 2021.

Abstract

Decentralization is the process by which the decision making, and planning activities of a community or movement are distributed away from a central authority and spread out more evenly among its members. Decentralized movements have started to regain prominence as digital networking became widely available around the world through the internet and mobile phones over the last two decades. However, there is still a gap in understanding whether digitally networked movements can be sustained over longer periods of time and under what conditions. This dissertation is a mixed-methods study consisting of content analysis and semi-structured in-depth interviews with users of online far-right communities. Specifically, it is a comparative analysis of a decentralized online far-right community (4chan/pol) and centralized online far-right and mainstream communities (Stormfront and Twitter, respectively). The central aim of this dissertation is to show how decentralization impacts essential elements of digitally networked mobilization.

The research questions are threefold. First, what is the impact of decentralization on which logic of mobilization (connective or collective action) a movement adapts? Second, does connective action truly do away with the need for collective identity formation, as its proponents have claimed? Third, what is the role of decentralized movement communities during major on-the-ground mobilization events? In chapter two I identify how decentralization impacts the logic of mobilization used by proponents of the far-right political project to sustain decentralized protest for a generalized far-right position. In chapter three I use interview data to show how collective identity remains an integral component of decentralized communities by introducing the concept of *Oppositional Identity*. Finally, chapter four follows the use of online memes and

discourse during the events of the January 6th Insurrection on the Capitol to reveal how

decentralized communities capitalize on failed offline mobilization attempts of specific issue-

based movements to further radicalize individuals who engage in right-wing activism.

Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank my supervisor, Melanie Heath for helping me through all the ups and downs of this journey. When I first found out Melanie was going to be my supervisor and shortly thereafter got to meet her, I knew it that she was the right person to help me become the researcher and sociologist I want to be. I have always looked up to her and was able to learn so much from her on how to take my research to the next level. Working on a paper together with her showed me the passion and hard work she puts into everything she does which was the inspiration I needed to go on to complete my dissertation and publish two articles before defending. Thank you Melanie, I am grateful for all your support throughout the years.

Next I would like to thank my committee members, Tina Fetner, Lisa Kaida, and Jeff Denis. Tina has been an inspiration throughout my time at McMaster both as a teacher and a researcher. I met her first while doing my MA and immediately after taking her class asked her to be the second reader for my major research paper. Her comments and suggestions were always direct, honest and immensely helpful. Even though she was a late edition to my PhD committee, I was overjoyed when she agreed to come on. I am eternally grateful to her warm demeanor and the passion she brought to the department of Sociology.

I first met Lisa, while taking her immigration class and despite it being one of the toughest classes I'd ever taken it remains to this day one of my favorites. She challenged her students but treated them with kindness and fairness in a way that I wanted to emulate in my own teaching and life. Her comments and advice have helped me immensely throughout the years of writing my dissertation. Her helpful suggestions on how to turn my work throughout the years into publications have been invaluable to my growth as a researcher.

Finally, I would like to thank Jeff Denis. Like Tina, I first met him in the MA program and his class on Race & Ethnicity inspired my already growing interest in the topic. My engagement with far-right groups in my research was in large part due to the discussions we had in his class and his feedback on my work back then as well as when doing the Race comp. He's always been helpful and kind throughout my journey and I owe a lot of my success to his helpful advice over the years.

I want to thank my dad, Marat. He taught me to persevere in the most challenging situations and to always believe in myself. He's been there throughout the years to help me make big life decisions and keep me mentally strong when things got tough. I've learned so much from his example that it would be impossible to summarize in a short paragraph. Everything he's had to overcome in his life has given me inspiration and courage to take on challenges head on and I am eternally grateful for that.

I also want to thank Sarah Adjekum. You have been my best friend and my rock for longer than I can remember. Whenever things were at their toughest you were always there to tell me to believe in myself and never failed to offer support. You showed me how to be patient and give grace when the world seemed unfair. The way you give your absolute to most to everyone in

your life has been an inspiration to me for a very long time. Thank you for always being there for me when I needed it most and listening to my silly ideas over the years and taking them seriously and supporting them when no one else would.

Last, I would like to thank my mom, Nadia. You left this world too soon but even at 12 years old I had already learned so much from you that continues to make me who I am today. The memory of your love and kindness kept me strong when things got tough. The hardships you overcame in your life in Kazakhstan and in Canada have set an example for me to follow for the rest of my life. Thank you.

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Declaration of Academic Achievement

I declare that I am solely responsible for the research, analysis, writing, editing and all work pertaining to chapters one, two, three and five of this dissertation. Chapter four was a co-authored article that has been published in the prestigious New Media & Society journal. I was the lead-investigator and the corresponding author for this article. I was responsible for writing the vast majority (~95%) of the literature review, methodology, findings, and conclusion sections. I was also responsible for 50% of the research design, analysis and coding of the data collected for this article. My co-author Regan Johnston, who at the time the study began was a 2nd year PhD student at the McMaster Department of Political Sciences was responsible for coding and running the web scraper used to collect the tweets and 4chan/pol/ threads that were analyzed as well as the accompanying images. The original version of this article also had a quantitative component which Regan was mainly responsible for but upon the request of reviewers of New Media & Society, we scrapped this portion of the article in order to focus on the qualitative section of the findings which was written almost entirely by me. Dr. Tej Heer had a minor but important role to play by helping us with certain portions of coding and analysis as well as helping us edit each version of the article. Dr. Tej Heer, received his doctorate in physical and environmental sciences from the University of Toronto Scarborough in 2020. Both Regan and Tej were both informed of and gave consent to this article being used as a substantive chapter in my dissertation.

Chapter 1

Introduction

This dissertation is a mixed-methods study consisting of content analysis and semi-structured interviews with users of online far-right communities. Specifically, it is a comparative analysis of a decentralized online far-right community (4chan/pol) and centralized online far-right and mainstream communities (Stormfront and Twitter, respectively). I identify (1) how decentralization impacts the logic of mobilization used by proponents of the far-right political project, (2) how collective identity remains an integral component of decentralized communities although in a way that is distinct from traditional movements, and (3) how decentralized communities capitalize on failed offline mobilization attempts of issue-based movements to further radicalize individuals who engage in right-wing activism.

1.1 Mobilization 2.0: Digital & Decentralized

Widespread access to communication technologies has ushered in an age of digitally networked action among younger cohorts who are becoming less reliant on collective identity,

resource mobilization, and collective action frames (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Examples include the Arab spring (Abul-Fottouh & Fetner, 2018), Zapatistas (Russell 2005), los Indignados (Castaneda, 2012), Occupy New York (Gamson & Sifry, 2016), Occupy Hong-Kong (Cai, 2016), Anonymous (McDonald, 2015), Chilean Student Movement (von Bulow, 2018), and Hong-Kong Anti-Government protests (Davies, 2020). One feature these movements all have in common is that they are decentralized. Decentralization is the process by which the decision making and planning activities of a community or movement are distributed away from a central authority and spread out more evenly among its members. Decentralized Occupy activists accomplished significantly more when acting in accordance with the logic of connective action compared to movements backed by organizations (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Most movements exist on a continuum that ranges from highly centralized with strict hierarchies to highly decentralized eschewing leaders of any kind (even temporary ones) altogether. However, decentralized movements are not a new phenomenon and many of the hurdles that come with decentralization have been well documented by social movement scholars (McAdam & Diani, 2003). For example, despite gaining a lot of traction early on, the Occupy movement failed to accomplish certain objectives due to a lack of coordination that is common in decentralized movements (Roberts, 2012). Decentralized movements may also miss out on opportunities that may come with coalition building that are important to the movement's growth (Diani, 2003). As a result of this tendency to either dissolve or move towards centralization, the conditions under which such movements are sustained over longer periods of time have been hard to identify. For this reason, scholars have contended that digitally networked action is unlikely to lead to sustained protest and/or meaningful change (Tilly, 2004).

This dissertation investigates whether decentralization has an impact on digitally facilitated far-right mobilization. I explore whether decentralized far-right movements mobilize according to the traditional logic of collective action or if they have adopted the novel connective action model that harnesses affordances of communication technologies to gain a competitive advantage over traditional styles of mobilization. I also unpack how the concept of collective identity has transformed to accommodate digitally networked mobilization in decentralized communities. Rather than relying on the familiar feeling of "we-ness" that develops among members of traditional movements, decentralized far-right movements foster an *oppositional identity* -a type of collective identity that is constructed entirely in opposition to perceived mainstream media narratives along with those of mainstream academia and other state sanctioned institutions (schools, non-profits, government orgs). I document how decentralized online far-right communities operate during times of major on-the-ground mobilization events like the January 6th insurrection on the US Capitol. While spaces like Twitter are important to mobilizing participants in the days leading up to and during specific mobilization events, spaces like 4chan/pol/ capitalize on such events to radicalize others into more extremist far-right beliefs after the mobilization event has been deemed unsuccessful.

1.2 4chan/pol

4chan's /pol/ (*politically incorrect*) image board was selected for a number of important reasons: (1) its popularity among users with far-right ideologies (Colley & Moore, 2022); (2) 4chan by design has limited moderation with each board having its own volunteer "janitors" to monitor content. However, interviews with 4chan/pol *janitors* have characterized image board moderation as a largely "hands-off" endeavor, allowing vitriolic content to disseminate (Arthur,

2020). (3) No other far-right online community contained as many features of true decentralization as 4chan/pol because of its horizontal power structure that lacks any ranks or identifiable markers for users, no way to track an individual based on how many posts they have made, when they joined, their username or any rank they may possess based on previous activity in the community. A new member has the same tools available to them for posting as does a janitor or a veteran member. 4chan/pol has almost no rules other than not to post something that is expressly illegal or posting **detailed** identifying information of another person (home address, phone number, etc.).

1.3 Stormfront

The reasons for selecting Stormfront was its label as the oldest operating far-right online community and its explicitly centralized structure. Stormfront is centralized because it has a top-down far-right organizational presence, and a hierarchical member structure complete with badges and post-count to delineate the leaders from the newbies, as well as consistent contributions from prominent far-right figureheads (ie. David Duke, Don Black). Stormfront also has a much more extensive list of rules (ie. words that can and cannot be said, image and video content that can and cannot be posted) that must be followed and are enforced regularly in a top-down manner.

1.4 Twitter

Twitter was selected as a comparative group to 4chan/pol in chapter four because of its extensive coverage in social movement literature as a tool of digitally networked mobilization, particularly when it comes to single issue-based movements. By comparing the two

communities, I demonstrate why connective action for a generalized ideological position like the far-right can be sustained through constant attempts to recruit and radicalize members of single-issue based movements that can temporarily benefit from the affordances of a platform like Twitter, but wane overtime through in-fighting and general movement fatigue. This comparison allows this dissertation to demonstrate why sustained connective action for a generalized ideological position such as the far-right does not exist in a vacuum but works in concert with far-right mobilization of other types.

1.5 Social Movements and Connective Action

Adaptation of digital communication technologies on a massive scale has had an undeniable impact on political mobilization in the past several decades. Communication technologies seem to facilitate a sort of bypass of traditional phases of collective identity building, integral to traditional movements that follow the familiar logic of collective action. Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) framework of connective action has been critical for analyzing this type of digitally networked mobilization based on individual action frames that inspire an otherwise disconnected set of actors to act, often forgoing the development of collective identity and collective action frames. Connective action emerges when organizations take on a peripheral role in social movements thereby giving up power and control to movement participants rather than central parties and movement leaders. The organizational capacities of digital technologies such as the internet, social media, chat applications and wireless devices allow such movements to function without relying on organizations to provide physical spaces, resources and coordination of movement activities.

Critics of connective action have argued that all documented examples of connective action point to the fact that it is not sustainable over longer periods of time with the end result being movements either dissolving or reaching a collective inertia where mobilization activity comes to a halt (Shahin & Ng, 2021). Such findings seem to support claims that meaningful activism can only occur via traditional logics of mobilization (Servaes & Hoyng, 2017). Meanwhile, proponents of connective action have urged scholars to study conditions under which it is successful in maintaining engagement and focus over long periods of time (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). While it is true that extant research has yet to identify examples of sustained connective action, all such examples have looked at single issue-based movements rather than movements for a general ideological position. This dissertation adapts Mario Diani's (2003, p. 1) definition of social movements which explained that movements are "complex and highly heterogenous network structures that cannot be reduced to specific insurrections or revolts, but rather resemble strings of more or less connected events, scattered across time and space." Conceptualizing social movements in this way allows for a more robust study of how decentralization affects digitally networked mobilization.

Social movements can be loosely defined as organized attempts to realize social change. Sociology has a rich tradition of analyzing social movements and identifying patterns across movements that explain the conditions under which people are likely to participate in social movements, the likelihood of movements creating some kind of social change, and the variety of effects that social movements have on the world around us. The debate over connective action is an important debate within the sociology of social movements for a number of reasons. First, because collective action which has been such a robust theory when it comes to explaining why individuals engage in large scale mobilization (Poletta & Jasper, 2001), has struggled to explain

a significant portion of digitally networked social movement activity in the new millennium (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Connective action, as an alternative logic of mobilization is by far the most ambitious attempt to challenge the supremacy of collective action by explaining the mechanics behind these numerous instances of digitally networked mobilization. Bennet and Segerberg's seminal article and subsequent book on connective action have received a combined 6500 citations since their initial publications in 2012 and 2013 respectively, indicating that scholars of social movements have had much to contribute to the conversation on this debate. Proponents of connective action do not seek to do away with collective action all together. Rather, they suggest that collective action is but one logic of mobilization that contemporary movements adopt but on its own cannot account for some of the mobilization that's been facilitated by widespread access to new media technologies. However, as a relatively new theory, connective action is yet to be sufficiently tested both empirically and theoretically. Ergo, this dissertation is in part an effort to hold connective action to empirical and theoretical scrutiny.

1.6 The Study of Far-Right movements

It is first important to define what is meant by the term 'far-right.' The term 'far-right' has historically held several meanings ranging from ultra conservative parties and politicians to militant white supremacists (Mudde, 2019). Durham (2000) sees the far right as including both movements that are conspiratorial but not always race-based and movements pushing for white supremacy, as well as ultranationalists and Christian fundamentalists. For the purposes of this dissertation, I take far-right to refer to an amalgam of anti-egalitarianism, disavowal of democratic processes, white nationalist terrorism, calls for authoritarianism, ethnic cleansing and/or forced ethnic migration with the end goal being separatist ethno-states composed of an

ethnic (European) or racial (white) core (Durham, 2007, Goodwin, 2006, Miller-Idriss, 2020, Vertigans, 2007). Indeed Miller-Idriss (2020) argues that "the term "far right" must always be used and understood as representing a spectrum of beliefs and approaches (p. 17)." Although this definition may contain within it multiple overarching ideologies that are all seemingly blurred into one group, it is this blurriness that allows adherents of this ideologies to find common ground online and mobilize according to temporarily aligned grievances (Mudde, 2019). For example, a member of the misogynist incel (involuntary celibate) movement and a white nationalist terrorist may temporarily find common cause in mobilizing against women in an attempt to bring about traditional gender roles (Hoffman et al., 2020). Both 4chan/pol/ and Stormfront cater to all sorts of individuals who subscribe to any combination of the far-right beliefs outlined above. For this reason, I chose to adapt a broad definition of the far-right because it reflects the populations that make up the two communities I chose to study. In turn all references to a generalized far-right ideology, refer to a set of one or more combined beliefs outlined above.

An important way this dissertation deviates from past research is by pivoting the conversation on digitally networked action and decentralization towards movements on the far-right. Given that the framework of connective action was designed to explain mobilization with little organizational oversight, it seems a natural fit for far-right movements that have struggled at length to sustain organizational support and mainstream coverage (Blee & Creasap, 2010). In addition, the reactionary nature of far-right movements means their goals often differ from progressive movements, and thus may lead to differences in their ability to sustain connective action. Another reason to look at far-right movements is the extensive research available on the development of collective identity in online far-right communities in recent years (Gal, Shifman

& Kampf, 2015). This research seems to fly in the face of the assertion that connective action eliminates the need for collective identity (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Hence, by examining digitally networked action on the far-right, this dissertation uncovers conditions under which connective action can be sustained and also tests its claims about the instrumentality of collective identity in the context of digitally networked mobilization.

1.7 Methods

1.7.1 Content Analysis

I opted to conduct a mixed-methods content analysis for chapters two and four of this dissertation. In chapter two, content analysis allowed me to compare mobilization attempts in a decentralized movement community and a centralized movement community in holistic way that measured which attempts were popular among the members of each one and how the popular mobilization attempts differed between both communities. For chapter four, content analysis enabled me to gather and analyse large amounts of threads prior to, during and after the January 6th mobilization event between a mainstream platform like Twitter and a decentralized far-right platform like 4chan/pol. This was the best way to track how memes and discourse were used on each platform during specific times as well as compare their use across the two platforms.

1.7.2 Conducting Online Interviews

Along with content analysis, I also conducted a total of 39 qualitative interviews. There were 21 interviews with users of 4chan/pol and 18 interviews with users of Stormfront. Interview data were important to determine whether collective identity was indeed relevant when it came to mobilization that followed the logic of connective action. Interviews allowed me to gain a deeper

understanding about how each participant saw their own participation in their respective community in a way that would have been impossible to determine by simply reading online threads and responses. Participants were asked to describe their experiences with other users of 4chan/pol and Stormfront, how close they felt with other users, if and how their political orientation has changed after joining, whether they have participated in any online or offline action on behalf of any movement or ideological belief, and their main reason for visiting and participating in these online communities. Participants were also asked to describe shared meanings, symbols, phrases, images, and other cultural artifacts that were important in their respective community. Responses of participants were coded inductively into thematic clusters based on differences and similarities in collective identity processes across both communities. Participants were allowed to stay anonymous in order to protect their privacy and allow them to be more candid in disclosing their thoughts and stories of their participation in these online communities.

Verbal informed consent was given prior to each interview but participants were never asked to provide me their name or other identifiable personal information. The recorded interview data were destroyed once transcribed. I received ethics clearance MREB #1937 on September 3rd, 2019. All participants gave informed consent to the possibility that I might have to turn over anonymous interview data to law enforcement should they ever request it. They were made aware of this possibility in the letter of information, and they were once again reminded of this when giving verbal consent. The transcripts will be destroyed five years after the start of data collection on November 5th, 2024, as stated in my ethics application. This fact was also made clear to participants in the letter of information and when obtaining verbal consent.

It is also important to mention my own positionality with respect to my participants. As a cis straight while male, it was likely easier for me to gain the trust of some of my participants and build rapport with them. Moreover, the risk to my self was also likely reduced relative to any other intersection of identities, many of which are consistently threatened and dehumanized within the online communities the participants of this study frequent. Thus, on the one hand, it is a privilege for me to able to conduct this type of research without experiencing many of the drawbacks someone who isn't white, or male (among many other identities) would likely experience. On the other hand, this privilege allows me to conduct research I am uniquely positioned to do (due to the aforementioned decreased risks and greater rapport building) which can then be used to help contest the far-right project through deeper understanding of how its adherents think and act online. Despite a relatively lower risk to self, the risk was not completely non-existent. I was exposed to extremely graphic and vitriolic language, images and videos for a span of five years. I had to be strict about the amount of time I spent engaging with these data so as to reduce the negative psychological impact such exposure inevitably has. I also received threats and accusations and was even sexually harassed (over email) as I recruited potential participants for interviews. I have since, spoken on panels and about suggestions on how University departments can help mitigate such risks for students researching similar topics (ie. providing access to alternative McMaster emails, VPNs, etc.).

1.7.3 Data

Quantitatively, I was able to gather thousands of threads from 4chan/pol and Stormfront over the course of five years from 2016-2021 and hundreds from Twitter over the course of a thirteen-day window leading up to and immediately after the Insurrection. As threads within image boards on 4chan/pol are not officially archived, analysis of previous threads using

4chan/pol is not possible (4chan, 2021). To address this limitation, we selected image boards from 4plebs.org, a crowd-sourced data archive of 4chan/pol image boards and threads (4plebs.org, n.d.). All threads and posts were examined to identify prevailing themes pertaining to mobilization on each platform. Qualitatively, a random sample of threads was chosen from both 4chan/pol and Stormfront in chapter two in order to extract more complex data not just from the threads themselves but also responses to the threads. In chapter four, out of the 4chan/pol threads that were scraped, one thousand were randomly selected to be compared to the 803 Twitter posts gathered by the scraper. For both chapters, qualitative analysis of the selected threads and tweets allowed me to identify prominent thematic differences across communities in question. These differences are discussed in more detail in each respective chapter. Chapter three utilizes entirely data from interviews with users of 4chan/pol and Stormfront. Interviews were conducted over Skype or Signal apps. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Responses were coded and analyzed using MAX QDA software. Further details on coding and analysis of interviews is provided in chapter three.

1.8 Contributions

The central aim of this dissertation is to show how decentralization impacts essential elements of digitally networked mobilization. The research questions are threefold. First what is the impact of decentralization on which logic of mobilization (connective or collective action) a movement adapts? Second, does connective action truly do away with the need for collective identity formation? Third, what is the role of decentralized movement communities during major on-the-ground mobilization events? Each of these questions is answered within its own independent article, each of which builds on the last. All three articles provide their own unique

contribution to the sociology of social movements and the interdisciplinary field of far-right studies. The first article (Chapter 2) demonstrates that connective action is indeed sustainable over longer periods of time despite claims to the contrary. The second article (Chapter 3) shows how sustained connective action does not diminish the importance of collective identity by describing how members of a decentralized community develop an *oppositional identity* as they participate in connective action. The third article (Chapter 4) focuses on a major offline mobilization event to reveal how decentralized communities are able to turn a failed coup into an opportunity to further radicalize disgruntled supporters of the issue-based movement into a more extreme far-right ideology. In essence, decentralized communities spend less time lamenting on losing the proverbial battle and more time recruiting and mobilizing to win the proverbial (race)war.[1]

This dissertation contributes simultaneously to the sociology of social movements and the field of far-right studies by synthesizing insights from both and presenting empirical content and interview data to fill in important gaps from both fields. On the one hand, examining far-right movements proves fruitful in answering questions about connective action that deal with sustainability and collective identity. On the other hand, engaging with a connective action framework uncovers important information about how decentralized digitally networked far-right movements persist over longer periods of time and how they interact with centralized and single-issue far-right movements to promulgate the far-right project further into mainstream politics. Below, I summarize scholarly contributions of each substantive chapter.

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[1] Racewar is a very salient umbrella term on 4chan and often encompasses within it war on lgbt, women, disabled, and other marginalized groups.

Chapter Two – "Decentralized Hate: Sustained connective action in online far-right community." – asks whether connective action can be sustained over longer periods of time in a decentralized online far-right community. The findings of this chapter reveal that connective action can be sustained over longer periods of time when three features are present in an online community: (1) Members of the community must have a high time-preference. (2) Members of the community must look favourably on experimental tactics. (3) Members of the community uncompromisingly value anonymity. Meanwhile, the comparative case – a centralized community whose members adapt the familiar logic of collective action – exhibits the opposite features: (1) Members with low time-preference. (2) Adherence to traditional tactics. (3) A relative indifference towards anonymity. The main contribution of this chapter is to demonstrate that connective action can be sustained for longer periods of time when it comes to social movements for a generalized ideological position (far-right).

Chapter Three – "The Oppositional Identity: The essential role of collective identity in far-right connective action." – is the first study that relies on interviews with either 4chan or Stormfront users (as opposed to content analysis for example) to make claims about collective identity within both communities. Interview data in chapter three challenge the assertion that collective identity matters significantly less in movements that mobilize according to the logic of connective action. Members of a decentralized movement community embrace the fluid signifier of "anon" and act out this identity in opposition to a static "they," represented by mainstream media. This conception of "anon" is fluid because as mainstream ideas represented by the media change, so must the collective identity of anons on 4chan. In order to better explain this process, I develop the concept of *oppositional identity* to emphasize a malleable collective identity formed and reformed in opposition to constantly shifting political opinions of mainstream

institutions that are themselves amenable to the Overton Window of public opinion. Meanwhile, users on the centralized Stormfront focus on cultivating a static "we" among those who perceive a sense of threat (to whiteness) from a fluid "they." All groups who come to be viewed as anti-white are viewed as opponents of the movement while the perceived threat to whiteness and identifying as white serves as the basis for collective identity. These findings reveal that connective action does not preclude the formation of collective identity within decentralized movements. Participants who reported engaging in connective action confirm experiencing strong connections with other "anons" through shared cultural experiences via on- and offline mobilization.

Chapter Four – "Pepe the frog, the greedy merchant and #stopthesteal: A comparative study of discursive and memetic communication on Twitter and 4chan/pol during the insurrection on the US Capitol." – captures how a decentralized movement for a generalized far-right position functions during times of major offline issue-based mobilization events. The chapter focuses on the events of 6 January 2021 to map out the roles played by centralized and decentralized communities before and after the insurrection on Capitol Hill. While Twitter was the preferred platform when it came to mobilization, the scope of this mobilization was narrower than 4chan/pol. In contrast, 4chan/pol users capitalized on the insurrection to recruit and mobilize users into far-right causes such as anti-Semitic racism and violence. This chapter also shows that while decentralized platforms lack ideological coherence where context is often crucial (Wiggins, 2022), the opportunistic attempts to radicalize users toward a generalized far-

right ideology[2] in the wake of a failed coup, mean that decentralized communities play a crucial and ever dangerous role well after mobilization in centralized communities wanes.

1.9 The Sandwich Thesis Format

The following three chapters constitute three independent articles that are nonetheless connected to the central research question of my dissertation: What are the impacts of decentralization on online far-right movement activity? I opted to do a sandwich thesis because it was the most parsimonious way to examine disparate aspects of the online far-right. In particular, it enabled me to look at the content of various platforms like Twitter, 4chan, and Stormfront and ground my findings in a way that is in direct conversation with preceding literature. For example, chapter 2 addresses the debate on the sustainability of connective action as a logic of mobilization and is constructed as a critique of both sides of the debate grounded in content analysis data. Similarly, chapter 4 branches off of prior recent studies that track 4chan and Twitter activity during large scale mobilization events and builds on these findings by describing how both platforms are used in concert to one another during the January 6th resurrection. Finally, chapter 3 engages with the debate among social movements scholars on whether collective identity is an important feature of movements operating according to the logic of connective action. With the help of interview data, I introduce the concept of "oppositional identity" to demonstrate that while collective identity may work differently in decentralized spaces like 4chan/pol, it remains integral to the general far-right project spearheaded by the platform. Each of these contributions is stronger when embedded in the most current research on

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[2] An adherence to any combination of the following: anti-egalitarianism, disavowal of democratic processes, white nationalist terrorism, calls for authoritarianism, ethnic cleansing and/or forced ethnic migration with the end goal being separatist ethno-states composed of an ethnic (European) or racial (white) core.

far-right mobilization and therefore each chapter was written as a separate research article with chapters 2 and 4 promptly published to continue this pertinent conversation in their respective journals. Lastly, since chapters 2 and 4 rely on a content analysis and all three chapters analyze content or interview data on 4chan/pol, there is likely to be some repetition throughout this manuscript. Nevertheless, each chapter presents unique empirical findings and analyses that help answer the research questions.

Chapter 2

Decentralized Hate: Sustained connective action in online far-right community.

A version of this chapter has been published as:

Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) framework of connective action has been critical for analyzing digitally networked mobilization based on individual action frames that inspire an otherwise disconnected set of actors to act, often forgoing the development of collective identity. Critics of connective action have identified the conditions under which digitally networked action becomes unproductive and fragmented (Shahin & Ng, 2021). Such findings seem to support claims that meaningful activism can only occur via traditional logics of mobilization (Servaes & Hoyng, 2017). Meanwhile proponents of connective action have urged scholars to study conditions under which it is successful at maintaining engagement and focus over long periods of time (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

While the stylized image of social movements has led many researchers to look for these conditions on the left (McAdam et al., 2005), Kathleen Blee (2017) suggests that 'greater attention to (the far-right) could also broaden our understanding of the changing forms of contemporary social movements' (p. 8). Given that the framework of connective action was designed to explain mobilization with little organizational oversight, it seems a natural fit for far-

right movements that have struggled at length to sustain organizational support due to a spurned public image (Blee & Creasap, 2010). Moreover, the reactionary nature of far-right movements[3] means their goals often differ from progressive movements, and thus may lead to differences in their ability to sustain connective action. Hence, studying digitally networked action on the far-right may teach us more about the conditions under which connective action flourishes and when it is counterproductive.

This study examines how mobilization in centralized (Stormfront) and decentralized (4chan/pol/) far-right spaces reflects two distinct sets of organizational elements, the former following the classic collective action model and the latter embracing the logic of connective action. I argue that decentralized far-right communities are unique because, unlike previously studied emergent, issue-based movements and centralized communities, they allow members of far-right groups to participate in connective action in perpetuity. I identify three conditions that are necessary to sustain digitally networked connective action on 4chan/pol/. First, I explain how a decentralized community like 4chan/pol/ offers mobilization opportunities for individuals with high time preference—those that put significant value on immediate, self-sufficient action, over delayed, collective-oriented participation. I show that such opportunities are scrutinized in centralized communities like Stormfront, which has a strong organizational presence and a clear top-down hierarchy. Second, I demonstrate how experimental far-right philosophies and tactics, such as accelerationism, encounter consistent resistance in centralized environments like Stormfront while receiving support in decentralized spaces like 4chan/pol/. I show that connective action sustainability depends in part on the group's willingness to adapt new and

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[3] Groups that mobilize by means of or towards achieving any number of the following: anti-egalitarianism, disavowal of democratic processes, white nationalist terrorism, calls for authoritarianism, ethnic cleansing and/or forced ethnic migration with the end goal being separatist ethno-states composed of an ethnic (European) or racial (white) core.

experimental ideologies. Finally, this study reveals that decentralized spaces rely on actively maintained anonymity practices to avoid centralization, as calls to action that disregard anonymity encounter persistent resistance from incumbents.

Connective Action and Decentralized Movements

Widespread access to communication technologies has ushered in an age of digitally networked action among younger cohorts who are becoming less reliant on collective identity, resource mobilization, and centrally developed oppositional action frames (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Although these features are still crucial to sustaining many social movements, information technologies facilitate alternative opportunities for mobilization based on loosely connected individual action frames (Wright, 2015). Bennett and Segerberg (2013) call this type of political participation *connective action* . Examples of connective action at work include the Occupy protests domestically as well as internationally (Nielsen, 2016). Domestically, decentralized Occupy activists accomplished significantly more when acting in accordance with the logic of connective action compared to movements backed by organizations (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Decentralized protest was also sustained for an extended period within the Occupy Hong Kong movement five years later while the Chinese government squandered resources into a fruitless search for a central organization responsible for providing the movement with resources and oppositional frames (Cai, 2017). Communication technologies were used to spread information about the government's actions in Hong Kong to the effect that nominally disparate individuals came together to act in accordance with individual action frames based around anti-government sentiment. Individual action frames that motivate participants who engage in connective action partially alleviate the feeling of alienation that those on the periphery of centralized movements often experience (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Hence, communication

technologies facilitated a sort of bypass of traditional phases of collective identity building, familiar to traditional movements.

Nevertheless, decentralized movements are not a new phenomenon and many of the hurdles that come with decentralization have been well document by social movement scholars (McAdam & Diani, 2003). For example, despite gaining a lot of traction early on, the Occupy movement failed to accomplish certain objectives due to a lack of coordination that is common in leaderless movements (Roberts, 2012). Scholars have argued that leaders are essential to sustained mobilization over extended periods of time as they allow movements to take advantage of time-sensitive opportunities and efficiently direct the flow of resources (Zald & McCarthy, 2002). Decentralized movements may also miss out on opportunities that may come with coalition building that are important to the movement's growth (Diani, 2003). Decentralized movements, which organize through the logic of connective action, may also tend towards a more traditional and centralized framework after the initial spark of the movement dissipates (Toepfl, 2017). As a result of this tendency to either dissolve or move towards centralization, the conditions under which connective actions are sustained over longer periods of time have been hard to identify. For this reason, scholars have contended that digitally networked action is unlikely to lead to sustained protest and/or meaningful change (Tilly, 2004). Some have gone so far as to dismiss connective action as collective inertia, suggesting that digitally networked action is rarely sustainable over long periods of time (Shahin & Ng, 2021). Shahin & Ng (2021) followed the anti-Aadhaar campaign, a connective action movement in India that failed to achieve its objectives. They contend that the movement failed to sustain itself because institutional actors (legacy media, party leaders, etc.) easily influenced members. In addition, transitory action frames and a lack of positive emotionality challenged sustainability. The

authors argue that these were not conditions specific to the movement but rather features of connective action that inevitably result in collective inertia. Indeed, research on leftist movements has yet to definitively identify elements conducive to sustained connective action.

The present study departs from prior studies in two important ways. First, by analyzing movements on the far-right rather than progressive movements. Second, by pivoting away from the limited single-issue focused definition of social movements used by both Bennett and Segerberg (2013) as well as Shahin and Ng (2021). Diani (2003) defines social movements as 'complex and highly heterogenous network structures that cannot be reduced to specific insurrections or revolts, but rather resemble strings of more or less connected events, scattered across time and space' (p. 1). Following this definition, this study analyzes connective action on behalf of a generalized ideological position of the far-right rather than focus on issue-specific movements like prior studies. Conceptually, far-right movements may offer unique insights to research on digitally networked action due to their large online presence over the past three decades (Caiani & Parenti, 2016). Furthermore, far-right movements are known for their reactionary element, with goals less about realizing social change and more about disrupting existing systems of social order and maintaining privilege (Robin, 2011). It remains to be seen whether connective action features identified by Shahin and Ng (2021) have a negative impact on accomplishing these goals.

Connective Action on the Far-Right

Connective action is integral for understanding young individuals who have been radicalized online but remain distrustful of formal leadership structures (Doroshenko et al., 2019). The infamous imageboard 4chan was once a space for edgy teens to hone their internet trolling expertise (McDonald, 2015). However, it's *politically incorrect* board better known as

/pol/ has for some time now been saturated with jarring far-right imagery and propaganda (Baele et al., 2021). For nearly a decade, 4chan/pol/ has sustained a safe-space for far-right movement activity that ranges from radicalizing multiple lone-wolf terrorists to inspiring multiple reactionary movements including #gamergate (Salter, 2018), QANON (de Zeeuw et al., 2020), and boogaloo boys (Tuters, 2021), to name a few. In recent years, far-right groups have also utilized news outlets like FOX News and Breitbart to mainstream far-right ideas once relegated to spaces like 4chan/pol/ and Stormfront (Kaiser et al., 2020). For example, members of Tucker Carlson's team report using stories from Stormfront as supporting material for the show (Confessore, 2022). Meanwhile Breitbart served as a go-between for FOX and the neo-Nazi site Daily Stormer which was loosely based on 4chan/pol/ (Kaiser et al., 2020; SPLC, n.d.). Hence, as the far-right garnered a vast mainstream presence on legacy media, the more radical and uncensored spaces on the internet continued to serve a crucial function for the proliferation of far-right ideas and news stories.

Although 4chan/pol/ users celebrated the influx of far-right representation on mainstream media, they are unlikely to be influenced by institutional actors such as the media to the same extent as participants of the anti-Aadhaar campaign, because 4chan exists in direct opposition to both media and the state (Tuters & Hagen, 2021). Moreover, transitory action frames do little to impede sustained action or discourage users from engaging in offline activism. One example is the 'It's Okay To Be White Million Poster Pinup' where users were encouraged to distribute posters containing this slogan to provoke 'liberal snowflakes' and the media (Kasimov, 2021). This campaign ended up receiving international coverage with media outlets reporting on the posters appearing in American and Canadian cities. Finally, reactionary movements are more dependent on what Shahin and Ng (2021) term 'negativity,' since they are movements that form

in reaction to an opponent that acts as a source of shared grievances for members. Hence the far-right reactionaries of 4chan/pol/ have accomplished quite a bit over an extended period, unimpeded by conditions described by Shahin and Ng (2021).

The longstanding relationship between far-right movements and technology is not the only reason for studying connective action on the far-right. Connective action also provides opportunities for single members of far-right movements to play a role in advancing far-right causes without being in geographical proximity to other like-minded individuals. Historically, decentralized networks consisting of single members were crucial in setting up the infrastructure which was invaluable towards the mainstreaming of a centralized political Nazi party in Germany (Anheier, 2003). Much like in the present day, this success resulted from these actors' rejection of mainstream politics, their unassuming profile (educated white middle class men), and their exposure to the 'pre-political field' of Nazi networks and milieus where joining an outright movement was not always necessary or possible (Anheier, 2003, p. 51). Widespread access to the internet and the normalization of far-right ideas by mainstream and alternative media, has contributed to the growth of this pre-political field[4] on a global level (Miller-Idriss, 2020).

White supremacists across the United States have historically found support for their ideas on sites like Stormfront that connect them to KKK chapters in their state and advertise rallies (de Koster & Houtman, 2008). However, leading up to the 2016 presidential election and thereafter, these ideas gained legitimacy as mainstream right-wing media incorporated them into their news stories. Meanwhile, far-right social media personalities received unprecedented

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[4] A space where adherents of a certain ideology (ie. nazis) who are normally far too outnumbered to have significant political impact to even form a movement can interact with others of like mind while remaining dormant, ready to reveal their sympathies (and enforce them) should a nazi leader take office.

exposure on social media platforms like YouTube, Twitter and Facebook (Tufekci, 2018). Mainstreaming of far-right ideology was occurring on several fronts as far-right groups took advantage of the presidential election to enter the public sphere (Kaiser et al., 2020). Persistent use of dog-whistles and appeals to authority figures like the former white house chief strategist Steve Bannon allowed alternative right-wing media to expose American households to far-right talking points (Miller Idriss, 2020). The impact of these mainstreaming efforts was most visible during the Unite the Right Rally in 2017 where roughly 600 far-right protestors representing different factions from across the country converged on Charlottesville (Ellis, 2018). The rally was by far the biggest one in the past decade primarily because its organizers used social media to recruit attendees from all of United States (Ellis, 2018). Digitally organized rallies demonstrate that geographically dispersed proponents of far-right ideology no longer must wait for something like the Nazi party to come to power to contribute to the far-right political project.

The Present Study

Although Bennett and Segerberg (2013) explain that widespread access to the internet has facilitated new forms of political mobilization, it is not clear what conditions are required to sustain digitally networked action over long periods of time. Research has also not considered whether and how platform differences may impact the logics of mobilization adapted by users. For example, while connective action is dependent on effective use of communication technologies, not all instances of mobilization facilitated by such technologies qualifies as connective action. Bennett and Segerberg (2013) explain that horizontal relations arising from a lack of organizational backing are equally important for connective action to occur. However, organizational presence within an online community may result in either connective or collective action. To deal with this problem, the present study adapts a comparative approach that looks at

two differently structured online far-right communities: the centralized Stormfront with a strong top-down organizational presence, hierarchical member structure complete with badges and post-count to delineate the leaders from the newbies, as well as consistent contributions from prominent far-right figureheads (ie. David Duke, Don Black), and the decentralized 4chan/pol with virtually no organizational presence and an entirely horizontal member structure where there is no explicit way to tell a new member from a veteran.[5] In the following, I ask:

> *RQ1: Do mobilization attempts on Stormfront and/or 4chan/pol/ follow the logic of connective or collective action?*

> *RQ2: What conditions are necessary for sustained digitally networked connective action?*

This study contributes to social movement literature by answering these questions via a comparative analysis of online discussion responses to five years' worth of mobilization threads in a relatively centralized (Stormfront) and a relatively decentralized (4chan/pol/) online community. Rather than being emergent issue-based movements, both Stormfront and 4chan/pol/ align more closely to Diani's (2003) definition of social movement as they 'consist of groups and organizations, with various levels of formalization, linked in patterns of interaction (rather than being) specific insurrections or revolts' (p. 1). The present study also capitalizes on the increased presence of far-right ideas and alternative media within the mainstream between 2016 and 2021 when far-right mobilization was on the rise.

Methods

This study adopts a mixed-methods content analysis. First, I collected quantitative data which included mobilization threads and their responses on 4chan/pol/ (n = 3637) and

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[5]There are certain ways of posting (words and phrases) that may alert other 4chan/pol users that someone is likely a new or experienced user but there is no way to tell for sure.

Stormfront (n = 1010).[6] Mobilization threads on Stormfront were collected from the 'Activism'

sub-section of the forum. Threads ranged from April 2016 and April 2021 and had to have a

minimum of four responses to be considered. To collect mobilization threads on 4chan/pol, I first

utilized the search function of the 4chan archive 4plebs.io to identify threads which contained

one or more action terms associated with mobilization on 4chan/pol/. The list of terms was

derived from systematic analysis of threads on 4chan/pol/ that identified 2025 call to action

threads. I compiled a list of the most common terms in these threads to use when searching for

mobilization threads on 4plebs.io. The search came up with 7228 threads between 2016 and

2021. I then systematically coded each thread as a mobilization or non-mobilization thread

depending on whether it called upon 4chan users to engage in some form of action ranging from

online raids, sending spam, rallies, voting, contacting politicians, spreading memes, creating,

printing, and distributing leaflets offline, or boycotting products for any reason. This process

eliminated 3089 threads that contained one or more terms that were searched for but did not call

upon 4chan users to take part in some form of collective and/or individual action. An additional

502 threads were eliminated because they received less than four responses, leaving a total of

3637 threads to analyze.[7]

First, the mobilization threads were deductively analyzed in accordance with a three-

model framework loosely based on Freelon's (2010) methodology for studying political

discussion online (see Table 1.1). Freelon's suggested categories were simplified for the

purposes of this study, but some of his codes were kept. A random sample of 80 threads from

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[6]This difference in the number of threads can be attributed to the fact that threads disappear relatively quickly on 4chan when they do not receive constant engagement while on Stormfront threads stay up indefinitely.
[7] It was difficult to reliably compare threads with less than four responses on both platforms. 4chan/pol/ threads are always competing with one another for engagement and a lack of responses within the first few minutes of a thread being posted can lead to a thread being drowned out by other threads being posted at the same time.

each community were analyzed. Each response in all 80 threads was coded as either supportive, critical, or off topic. Following this, the thread itself would be categorized based on prevalence of each type of response. Threads that received majority supportive responses would be classified as majority-supportive, while those that received majority critical or off-topic responses would be respectively classified as majority-critical or majority-off-topic.

A majority of a type of response for the purposes of this study means that the total number of responses of a certain type would have to be greater than the combined number of the other two types of responses. Majority supportive threads would be identified as encouraging mobilization because they support the author of the thread and often provided ideas on how to improve upon the type of mobilization being suggested. Majority-critical threads were viewed as a form of discouragement from mobilization because respondents were often disagreeing and arguing with the author of the thread. Finally, majority off-topic posts served mostly to derail mobilization attempts while avoiding out-right critique. The purpose of applying this coding framework to my analysis was to identify which attempts at mobilization received support and which attempts at mobilization were either criticized or derailed via off-topic banter. A mobilization thread where the majority of responses were supportive was interpreted as a thread where the proposed act of mobilization is encouraged by members of the community. Threads with the majority of responses being critical or off-topic were interpreted as threads where the proposed acts of mobilization were discouraged by the members of the community either directly or indirectly.

Table 1.1. Content Analysis Coding Framework.[8]

| Mode of Communication	Code	Description
Supportive	Ideological Homophily	Support for posts (including author's post) whether in the form of building from, reiterating, or simply agreeing.
	Mobilization	Directive for further mobilization or suggestions for improving mobilization attempt in question.
	Intra-ideological questioning	Asking of honest questions from a cooperative/supporting perspective.
	Intra-ideological reciprocity	Responding to posts that criticize and argue with author or those supporting the author of the thread.
Critical	Simple Disagreement	Disagreeing or discouraging mobilization without providing justification.
	Rational-critical argument	Posts that critique or discourage the author's call for mobilization by attempting to present an argument from evidence that is not anecdotal and with minimal flaming.
	Inter-ideological questioning	Asking of honest questions from a competing or critical perspective.
	Inter-ideological reciprocity	Support for posts critiquing the author of the thread whether in the form of building from, reiterating, or agreeing.
Off-Topic	Monologue	Lengthy self-referential posts that do not engage with the author of the thread or replies.
	Personal showcase	Advertising of personal or affiliated creations, content, and works. This content can be visual, aural, textual, or any combination of these. (Ie. a link to a personal blog or youtube channel).
	Other	Other posts that do not engage with the author of the thread or replies (ie. posting of seemingly unrelated images or arbitrary statements including flaming without obvious support/criticism of author/replies.

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[8] Freelon's framework was originally fully adapted as a method for this study but during the peer review process, reviewers and editors insisted that it was far too complicated for simply classifying agreement or disagreement (or ignoring) suggestions for mobilization and asked me to simplify it. This table is the end-product of these requests.

Second, the mobilization threads were inductively analyzed to identify major organizational differences between attempts at mobilizing users on Stormfront and 4chan/pol. Each thread was imported into MAXQDA software where it was coded following Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) typologies of connective and collective action frameworks. Specifically, each thread was analyzed for 1) organizational versus individual coordination of action, 2) organizational versus individual production of action, 3) platform-based benefits to organization versus individual. These typologies served as a basis for analyzing whether mobilization attempts that received support on 4chan/pol and Stormfront fit the logic of connective or collective action. An emergent coding approach was then used to identify three major drivers of mobilization that sustain either connective or collective action on 4chan/pol/ and Stormfront. This was accomplished via an in-depth reading of 80 mobilization threads and responses from each platform.

Findings

My findings reveal ten different types of mobilization threads that were present to varying frequencies on both platforms. Mobilization threads with majority supportive responses on 4chan/pol overwhelmingly advocated for individually coordinated and executed styles of activism (see Table 1.2). Such threads, including the poster/leaflet distribution, online raids, memes creation/circulation, and self-improvement training, were significantly more prevalent on 4chan/pol/ (see Figure 1.1) and more likely to follow the logic of connective action. On Stormfront mobilization threads with majority supportive responses mostly advocated for organizational coordination and production of action consistent with the collective action model (see Table 1.2). Such threads, including rallies, meetups, petitions, and donation drives, were significantly more prevalent on Stormfront (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1. Percentage of mobilization threads on 4chan/pol/ & Stormfront by mobilization type.
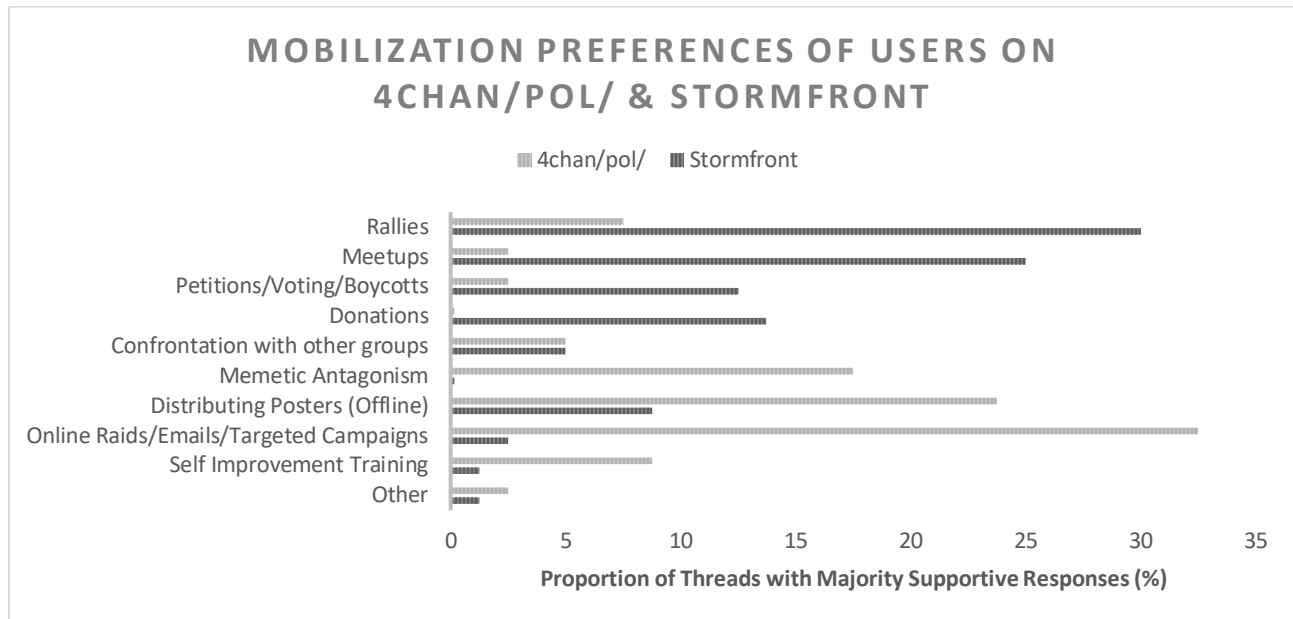
Table 1.2. Response breakdown to different types of mobilization threads.

	4chan/pol/			Stormfront		
	Critical	Supportive	Off-Topic	Critical	Supportive	Off-Topic
Memetic Antagonism (n=17) (n = 0)	**23.53%**	**58.82%**	**17.65%**	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Distributing Posters (Offline) (n=16) (n=9)	**15.63%**	**68.75%**	**15.63%**	44.44%	22.22%	22.22%
Online Raids/Emails/Targeted Campaigns (n=24) (n=2)	**29.16%**	**58.33%**	**12.5%**	50%	50%	0.00%
Rallies (n=3) (n=16)	33.33%	0.00%	66.67%	**37.50%**	**50.00%**	**12.50%**
Meetups (n=2) (n=25)	50%	0.00%	50%	**20%**	**80%**	**0.00%**
Petitions/Voting/Boycotts (n=1) (n=10)	0%	0%	100.00%	**10%**	**70%**	**20%**
Confrontation with another group (n=4) (n=4)	25.00%	25.00%	50%	50%	25.00%	25%
Donations (n=0) (n=13)	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	**38.46%**	**61.54%**	**0.00%**
Other (n=2) (n=1)	50.00%	50.00%	0%	100%	0.00%	0.00%
Self Improvement/Training (n=11) (n=0)	**18.18%**	**72.73%**	**9.09%**	0%	0.00%	0.00%

I found three ways that each respective set of mobilization types on each platform benefited either individual (4chan/pol/) or organizational (Stormfront) needs of activists allowing for sustained connective or collective action. First, decentralized spaces like 4chan/pol/ are attractive to individuals with high time preference. Meanwhile centralized spaces like Stormfront are more conducive to low-time preference users. My findings also suggest that decentralized spaces like 4chan/pol/ are more suited for experimental mobilization efforts, such as those grounded in far-right accelerationism, while the centralized structure of Stormfront precludes its members from both suggesting and participating in such experimental mobilization. Finally, decentralized spaces offer participation opportunities for individuals who highly value anonymity that centralized spaces are not designed to accommodate. Anonymity severely limits organizations' ability to penetrate and function in such spaces leading to sustained connective action. The following sub-sections will discuss in more depth how varying intensities of each of these drivers of mobilization sustain connective action on 4chan/pol/ and collective action on Stormfront.

Time Preference[9]

Stormfront and 4chan/pol/ users differed on time preference when it came to mobilization. Stormfront users favoured long-term mobilization such as recruitment into the KKK, white nationalist conferences, local meetups, and long-term online projects such as Wikipedia editing (see Figure 1). Don Black, the founder of Stormfront, consistently advocated for the importance of sustained human and financial resource flow into the white nationalist movements. Donations to build churches and help white families were also frequently sought

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[9] I appropriate this term from the field of economics. In the context of consumer behaviour, high time preference means a person values the immediate purchase of less or inferior goods to the future purchase of more or superior goods. Ergo, in the context of activism, high time preference activism is when activists value instant action that may be smaller in scope, relative to delayed action that may be larger in scope and more organized.

out. This type of participation suggests a long-term commitment to incremental change. *Britannic Nationalist*, a senior member on Stormfront captured the prevailing long-term outlook of the community:

> "…compare the 2000s to the 2010s. There's been a substantial shift towards 'nationalism', even if it's mainly the civic variety. The 2000s were almost completely pro-immigration. The 2010s are much more mixed in that regard. There's every reason to believe this trend will continue and the 2020s will likewise see a substantial shift in our direction." (3 March 2020)

Long-term oriented mobilization threads on Stormfront were exceedingly well-received with users offering support and suggestions for improvement. Conversations in local meetup threads suggested that users were happy to find someone who mirrors their views and excited to meet in real life. Even when meetups were far away or expensive to attend, users promoted the event to others. When a Knight's Party Klan event was advertised, *TexasKKK*, a Stormfront user who could not go, promoted it: 'always a good event in Harrison. I always enjoy spending time at the Christian Revival Center and being around like-minded people. I encourage others to attend' (29 August 2020).

Mobilization threads that were more short-sighted in nature such as confrontations with leftist groups or online campaigns, were less frequent and contained the largest proportion of critical responses. Disagreements over the usefulness of these types of coordinated action were frequent. Authors of such threads were also sometimes challenged to prove their identity and intentions. For example, when *Denis_D* a Stormfront member, attempted to mobilize white Irishmen into printing flyers and joining him on an impromptu recruitment campaign, he was challenged by a senior member who took issue with this approach: 'What is your game Denis,

what is your agenda? Looking forward to a more detailed synopsis.... (15 April 2020).' Similarly, when a new member named *ChrisPochari* suggested an impromptu rally in California, he was immediately lambasted. One senior member wrote, 'Seems a rather foolish waste of energy to me. We need a bit more cunning than that (Charlottesville) crapshow' (24 December 2019). While another one responded, 'The LAST THING we need is another "Charlottesville" [...] a no-win situation in these absurd times' (24 December 2019).

These examples demonstrate that users on Stormfront have a low time preference. They prefer to take their time when it comes to mobilizing. First, this is evidenced by their preference for well-organized events that are scheduled ahead of time. Second, they are far more likely to respond positively to mobilization threads initiated by the community's senior members. Ergo, Stormfront members are expected to post for some period before their suggestions to mobilize are taken seriously. Centralization attracts and retains individuals with low time preference by design. Mobilizing users on Stormfront requires a hefty time investment and the ability to either ascend through its hierarchy or endorsements from distinguished members.

Things work very different on 4chan/pol/. 4chan/pol/ caters to users with a high time preference—they act first and ask questions later. In this way, activism on 4chan is akin to its structural characteristics, namely ephemerality. Threads on 4chan disappear if they don't receive engagement. Similarly, ideas for action must come quickly for users to stay interested. Due to its preference for anonymity, 4chan does not rank its users. There is no way to tell one user from the next, which means mobilization threads are not evaluated based on the author of the thread but rather its content. Nevertheless, much like with Stormfront, certain types of mobilization are preferred over others.

Poster printing and pasting campaigns, creation and dissemination of political memes and calls for self-improvement are mobilization threads that received the most supportive responses (see Figure 1). Notably, 4chan/pol/ users responded well to posters with minimalist designs that were nonetheless useful for disseminating a far-right message. One example was 'Operation Blank Slate,' where the author of the thread urged users to 'put up blank pieces of printer paper, the kind you can buy in sheets of 500 at a time, all over the cities and towns.' The author reasoned,

> "…because of the black square challenge, I think we could get a reaction out of people by taping a piece of blank paper on the walls. The genius here is that we are still getting a reaction. We don't even need to say anything at all." (6 May 2020)

This call to action was a response to the black square challenge that went viral shortly after George Floyd's death at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer. Another example of 4chan's love affair with minimalist design was 'Operation Widespread.' Users were urged to print posters containing QR codes that would link to far-right propaganda websites. The author of the post argued that this was 'infinitely more effective than using swastikas because QR codes encode large amounts of information but allow the posters to maintain the same (minimalist) aesthetic' that 4chan/pol/ users prefer. Self-improvement threads called on white men to work out, read a (fascist) book, learn social skills, and learn a trade, all to prepare for the coming race war. One such thread turned this practice into a game by assigning a number to each task and calling on users to roll a random number to decide what to do and later report on their progress.

Lastly, creating and spreading far-right memes was an effective mobilization strategy on 4chan/pol/. Such memes were used for the purposes of mainstreaming far-right ideas by bundling them together with "funny" viral images and catchphrases. Memes also served the purpose of

turning members of different outgroups against one another. One thread urged users to create memes that blamed Jews for slavery. The intent of this campaign was to turn Black people against Jews. Another thread proposed a meme campaign that pins white trans people against trans people of color by spreading memes about how there is a lack of representation of trans people of color in the media.

My findings suggest that the decentralized structure of 4chan is conducive to users with high time preference. This is important because it reveals the utility of specifically decentralized spaces to far-right networks. Decentralized spaces like 4chan/pol/ allow far-right movements to tap into the human resources of individuals for high time preference activism. This type of activism is only possible where no organizational leaders need to sign off on a particular mobilization attempt, which is consistent with the model of connective but not collective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Mobilization efforts on 4chan/pol/ received positive responses when participation was possible almost instantly, allowed for high levels of autonomy, and low coordination and production of action by organizations. Users who chose to engage in these operations did not necessarily discuss their reasons for engaging beforehand, nor did they have to share their personal information or have a long history of posting on 4chan/pol/.

Experimental Tactics: Accelerationism

Mobilization efforts on 4chan/pol/ frequently contained references to accelerationism. Accelerationism, at its core is a politically neutral set of ideas that suggests that the only way to resist an unfavourable political structure and set of power relations that prevail in a particular context (be it local or global), is to accelerate its demise by any means necessary. In essence, if the prevailing 'system' functions to the detriment of a group of people, rather than working towards decreasing existing inequalities within this system, accelerationists believe exacerbating

these inequalities will lead to the eventual collapse of the system itself. Far-right accelerationists believe that the Western world is headed towards an inevitable race war, as the 'white race' exceedingly becomes a minority and people of color continue to amass wealth and political power (Miller-Idriss, 2020). They also believe that the only way to save the white race is to expedite the race war which will bring about the triumph of the whites and reinstate a society governed by uncontested Western values (Richards, 2020).

While 4chan/pol and Stormfront users both subscribed to the belief that white people are an oppressed minority, references to accelerationism in mobilization threads on Stormfront were rare. While it is discussed in several threads on Stormfront's philosophical and humor sections, only one white power activist group on Stormfront consistently mentioned accelerationism as a viable strategy (2% of the Stormfront sample). This group was the Shieldwall Network headed by Billy Roper, a self-proclaimed 'Balkanizer' and sustaining member[10] on Stormfront. Attempts to inspire accelerationist activism, while rare, were also the threads that contained the most critical responses on Stormfront with one user stating, 'How is hurting whites going help?' (28 January 2021), while another responded, 'I've never heard a satisfactory explanation of why worsening social conditions would be beneficial for us' (28 January 2021). Unlike other critical takes on Stormfront which tended to include some form of evidence to justify disagreement, criticism of accelerationism was inflammatory and derisive. One response in an accelerationist thread read 'Enough with the revolution, anarchy and civil unrest horseshit already. History has proven we won't do any of that (race war). What we should do, is withdraw our wealth. Quit investing in the jews. They are destroying the white race while whites willing(ly) hand over their

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[10] Stormfront users are given various badges and titles that act as ranks of seniority based on past contributions such as post-count or the date they signed up.

money to them' (28 January 2021). Another user responded: 'accelerationism is utter garbage, and betrays an ignorance, or at best a misunderstanding, of history' (28 January 2021).

In stark contrast to Stormfront, on 4chan/pol/, the support for accelerationism was marked. Accelerationist posts were most frequent on mobilization threads that called for distributing posters around real life neighbourhoods, spreading political memes, and disseminating news stories and narratives via coordinated online campaigns. In a thread dubbed 'operation challenge Christianity' users were urged to target Christians under the guise of non-Christians in order to 'piss them off and make them wake up.' The reasoning behind this attack on Christians is so that they feel threatened by Jews and Muslims. The author of the thread argued that:

> "…all possibilities would be good for us, every problem that exists in the modern world would be solved. Jewish Overpopulation? No problem, we'll genocide them as we've done before. Muslims? Blasted back to the Middle East. Niggers? Brutally kept in check. I envision a world sort of like the European Colonial period at the height of its power."
>
> (18 September 2019)

The author of the thread reasons that, either white Christians win the race war and restore white supremacy or white people can rebuild a pre-Christian white civilization in the aftermath of the race war. This rebuilding of society into smaller, ethno-states is an end goal of accelerationists (Miller-Idriss, 2020).

Responses to accelerationist threads varied between supportive and critical. Despite the support for these threads on 4chan/pol/, there was some dissent. One user wrote:

'…your [*sic*] making white people feel attacked. You're going to get people worked up over your nonsense. Either way this is just "I can't find a problem so I'm going to make one" accelerationist bullshit.' (26 November 2019)

However, such dissent was met with widespread disapproval. 4chan/pol/ users who did not support accelerationist calls to action were often accused of being Jewish or non-white. One user responded with 'Sure thing kike, that's why some random anon was visited by the FBI for posting IOTBW[11] posters' (26 November 2019).

The decentralized structure of 4chan/pol/ is integral to the sudden growth and mobilization of experimental ideas like far-right accelerationism. In contrast, on Stormfront, movement leadership would not only have to approve accelerationist ideas but also implement significant changes to the stated goals of the community and its affiliated white power websites. A hierarchical leadership structure results in leaders that risk falling out of favour with the userbase by introducing radical new ideas too quickly, as was the case when Billy Roper's accelerationist thread was overwhelmingly criticized. A lack of a leadership structure and far-right mission statements on 4chan/pol/ allows for the introduction of new ideas at very little personal cost. Furthermore, some types of mobilization efforts on Stormfront are inimical to the goals of accelerationism. For example, requests for donations to poor white families, are antithetical to bringing about a race war which accelerationists believe can only be expedited by exacerbating inequalities (not reducing them with donations).[12] Similarly, the presence of voting, petitions, and boycott threads on Stormfront suggests that users maintain some optimism about promoting white nationalist goals through official democratic channels. Indeed, 75% of the

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[11]Reference to one of the most successful poster campaigns on 4chan where users all over US and Canada spread posters that read "ITS OKAY TO BE WHITE"

[12] Far-right accelerationists believe that making things worse for some white people is necessary mobilize them.

replies to these threads on Stormfront were supportive. In contrast, such mobilization threads were rare on 4chan/pol/. Distributing posters and memes and coordinated online misinformation campaigns were much more amenable to accelerationist strategies as they are not inhibited by centralized authority or structure. Platforms like 4chan/pol/ allow for this type of sustained connective action because support is established by consensus of other anonymous users, none of whom can rely on rank or leveraging of online relationships (via usernames) to dissuade others from taking part.

Anonymity

Mobilization threads that received the most support on 4chan/pol/, allowed for users to maintain their anonymity or provided directions on how to stay anonymous where risk of exposure is high. Mobilization threads on 4chan/pol/ regularly encouraged users to take precautions not to reveal their identity. Users were explicitly prohibited from revealing their political views to anyone. One user urged others to 'ignore the diversity hires unless absolutely necessary to talk to them, associate only with white coworkers and stop chit chatting when a niggerfaggot comes by, …never say slurs or say anything which could be considered racist by HR, rather do the opposite, complete non action and non recognition of their existence' (24 February 2021). Such threads would typically suggest that 4chan/pol/ users should 'work, hobby, eat, socialize and exercise…don't look for arguments and remain open-minded' (30 March 2021). The underpinning logic of such threads is congruent with the concept of mainstreaming far-right ideas via adopting a respectable image of men who are organized, well-dressed, articulate, and non-threatening (Miller-Idriss, 2020). Just as far-right messages are more likely to become accepted within the mainstream when bundled with viral cultural references and humor, individuals who subscribe to far-right ideology are more likely to be taken seriously when they

adapt a non-threatening image of respectability. This guiding logic was even more apparent

when it came to offline based mobilization such as distributing posters with far-right messages.

Although distributing posters was a type of mobilization that came with a high risk of

identity exposure, such threads were nevertheless popular on 4chan/pol/ because they tended to

provide detailed instructions for anonymity. 4chan/pol/ users would be instructed to 'place the

(posters) in a route that doesn't trace back to your house, go by foot, (because) car registration

can be easily spotted by cameras, DO NOT BRING YOUR PHONE. It will track you' (29

December 2020). In 2020, similar types of threads attempted to capitalize on the outbreak of

COVID and BLM protests to maintain anonymity: 'cover your face with a covid mask or dress

like an antifa, duh so many opportunities with this pandemic.' When it came to the spreading of

memes and targeted social media campaigns, users were instructed to protect their anonymity via

online privacy tools. Mobilization threads that received a lot of critical responses were

overwhelmingly ones that compromised users' anonymity such as rallies, meetups, and

donations. These were incidentally the categories of mobilization that were most well received

on Stormfront.

On Stormfront, anonymity did not hold the same level of importance as on 4chan/pol/.

Mobilization threads that received the most support were ones that exposed users' identity.

Rallies, conferences, meetups, petitions, and donations all required users to compromise their

anonymity. Even the innovative attempts at mobilization on Stormfront seemed to not value

anonymity as exemplified by a thread on 'Driveby Activism' by sustaining member *Cold Water*:

> "When you're in your car stopped at a stoplight you can look around to see if there are
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> any white people in the car next to you or on the sidewalk. You can then start talking
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> loudly about white issues. If you have someone with you, talk to her as if you are holding

a conversation. If you're alone you can act as if you're holding a conversation on the cell phone. Since you're holding a private conversation people can't really object to it." (18 September 2016)

It is important to state that in the cases of meetups and conferences, users were given some degree of protection from exposure via private security and secret locations. Nevertheless, users were not provided with opportunities to remain anonymous from other members of Stormfront or white nationalist organizations that hosted these gatherings. Hence, mobilization attempts on Stormfront seemed to adhere to the logic of collective action where organizations manage the coordination and participation of members via a centralized space.

One final finding that speaks to the importance of anonymity on 4chan/pol/ was the significant difference in off-topic posts between the two platforms. Off-topic comments in online political discussion are often inimical to mobilization, given that they often consist of personal rants and monologues (Freelon, 2010). However, off-topic posts may serve another function on 4chan/pol/. While my methodology precludes me from deliberating intentionality, such posts were most frequent in threads that urged users to engage in action that would compromise their anonymity. The overwhelming presence of off-topic posts had the effect of drowning out these mobilization attempts with what appeared to be nonsensical banter. Given that anonymity-compromising mobilization attempts were also the ones most frequently coordinated and managed by centralized organizations, majority-off-topic posts on 4chan/pol/ act as a type of (organic or deliberate) connective action that works to maintain 4chan/pol/ a decentralized community.

In sum, anonymity is paramount to users on 4chan/pol/ while it is surprisingly treated as an afterthought on Stormfront. Maintaining anonymity becomes an integral component of

sustained digitally networked action in decentralized spaces like 4chan/pol/. Attempts at centralizing mobilization efforts on 4chan/pol/ via organizational involvement are easily resisted when organizations are unable to distinguish themselves from everyday users. When efforts are made by organizations and their representatives to bypass this hurdle by advertising offline meetups and rallies, the userbase on 4chan/pol/ adapts critical and communication strategies in opposition to such events thereby maintaining the emphasis on digital networks (rather than in-person gatherings) as the only viable way of organizing. As such, rather than leading to 'collective inertia' as was the case with the anti-Aadhaar movement described by Shahin and Ng (2021), individualization seems to have a sustaining effect on connective action on 4chan/pol/.

Conclusion

Researchers have questioned whether digitally networked action can be sustained for long periods of time, particularly when movements eschew centralization and adapt a connective action framework. In this article I have demonstrated that sustained digitally networked action in support of a general ideological position (far-right) occurs on both centralized and decentralized online platforms. The centralized platform Stormfront relies on organizational support and white power figureheads to consistently mobilize its members who reinforce this status quo through their preference for traditional movement tactics, hierarchical distribution of members, and their deference to movement leaders. Due to strong organizational involvement, mobilization on Stormfront reflects the familiar framework of collective action. On the decentralized platform 4chan, three mutually reinforcing conditions are necessary for sustained connective action. First, mobilization efforts must appeal to users with high-time preference. Calls to action that could be immediately implemented and allow for high degree of autonomy received consistent support, while calls to action that were not immediately actionable were criticized. Fast-paced action and

high autonomy also allowed for unorthodox strategies such as those embedded in accelerationist philosophy to be evaluated on their own merit unlike on Stormfront where such calls to action were criticized as non-traditional. The lack of organizational involvement on 4chan/pol/ made calls to action antithetical to the values of some far-right organizations a viable form of mobilization for a digital network of anonymous users. When anonymity was threatened via mobilization threads that promoted organizationally backed action, users either criticized or drowned out such attempts with banter and trolling. This commitment to anonymity is precisely what makes it difficult for organizations to establish themselves in a community like 4chan/pol/, while users' high time-preference and openness to experimental tactics makes the formation and operation of native organizations from within very difficult. Sustained connective action then, requires members to not only be mobilized against an opponent but also to deter the movement from centralizing.

This article dispels the myth that connective action is limited to single issue cases with initial viral growth and subsequent collective inertia (Shahin & Ng, 2021), or that movements that initially adapt a connective action model eventually transition into a centralized collective action model (Toepfl, 2017). Instead, connective action in support of a general ideological position can be sustained when platform affordances and users' participatory preferences coincide and are actively enforced by users themselves. The findings in this study do not make claims about whether a particular emergent issue-based movement that engaged in connective action at a specific period of time will maintain its engagement or that it will not tend toward centralization and collective action. Rather decentralized platforms like 4chan and the 4chan/pol/ community specifically are perpetually producing reactionary mobilization efforts in support of a general far-right position that follow the model of connective action indiscriminate of what set of

users engage with these efforts. It is also worth considering whether sustained connective action was in part attributable to the growing activity of far-right groups as well as the global resurgence of far-right parties and the overall mainstreaming of far-right ideas (as I discuss on page 23) during the years the data for this study was collected. It would be interesting to compare how different political and media climates impact connective action on sites like 4chan/pol/.

Scholars have frequently studied progressive movements to track the course of decentralized mobilization, in part due to the tendency of traditional far-right movements to value a more hierarchical and authoritarian structure. This research reveals that studying the new far-right with its technological aptitude and pseudo-libertarian[13] values can contribute to our understanding of how decentralized digitally networked action is sustained over time. My findings support the notion that digital activism may innately favour movements on the right (Schradie, 2019). However, on the face of it, there is nothing uniquely right-wing about high time-preference, anonymity, and affinity for experimental tactics. Future research should consider whether there is merit for leftist movements to emulate the formula that sustains connective action on 4chan/pol/ or whether there are factors unique to these movements that may preclude them from doing so.

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[13]'White power' libertarians are often selective in their libertarianism. They believe in freedom for ethnic whites but not immigrants and non-whites, often valorizing authoritarianism. Such views are internally inconsistent with mainstream libertarian values, so it felt inaccurate to simply call them libertarian values here.

Chapter 3

The Oppositional Identity: The essential role of collective identity in far-right connective action.

Introduction

Does collective identity still matter to social movements in the digital age? Scholars have been asking this question for close to a decade with some dismissing its importance (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) and others arguing that it is more important than it has ever been (Kavada, 2015). Those arguing for the declining significance of collective identity claim that information and communication technologies have reduced the need for organizational involvement in providing spaces and tools for movements to organize (Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2015). According to these claims, individuals mobilize around shared issues and grievances rather than cohesive social bonds and shared experiences (Milan, 2015). Movements organized according to this logic engage in connective rather than collective action. In the opposite camp are scholars

who argue that collective identity remains a pivotal aspect of social movement participation and mobilization in the digital age (Rohlinger & Bunnage, 2018). Such claims seem to be supported with numerous studies detailing how collective identity is constructed and maintained by members of online movement groups over time (Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2015).

While the arguments of social movement scholars for the continued importance of collective identity in the digital age are often convincing, existing models of collective identity formation online have yet to definitively dispel claims of researchers who view collective identity as peripheral to digitally networked action. Rohlinger and Bunnage (2018) make a strong case for how collective identity is formed among members of left-leaning online movements with high to moderate levels of organizational involvement. Building on their work, this article considers whether a cohesive collective identity can form among members of decentralized far-right online movements without organizational involvement. This is important because it reveals whether movement spaces following the logic of connective action are indeed no longer relying on collective identity formation or whether collective identity remains an important component of digitally enabled activism, particularly on the far-right.

I draw on interview data that reveals how collective identity is formed and sustained in two online far-right communities (4chan/pol and Stormfront). First, I find while organizations help nurture a collective "we" on Stormfront resulting in a traditional collective identity, users on 4chan/pol/ construct what I call an "oppositional identity" --an identity in opposition to a "they" referring to mainstream media. Second, while collective identity is mostly a prerequisite to collective action on Stormfront, oppositional identity works in tandem with and complements connective action efforts on 4chan/pol. These findings show that collective identity remains an

important component of contemporary digitally networked social movements regardless of whether they mobilize according to the logic of collective or connective action.

Collective Identity in the Digital Era

In this section, I turn to the literature on collective identity to discuss the above problem in more detail. Ever since the adoption of information and communication technologies by social movement participants, social movement scholars have studied the influence such technologies have had on the development of collective identity (Coretti & Pica, 2015). The findings are often contradictory, fueling debate regarding the importance of fostering a collective identity for contemporary social movements. On one side of the debate are researchers who argue that collective identity is no longer a prerequisite for mobilization because communication technologies have allowed otherwise disparate individuals to engage in instances of connective action based on personalized rather than collective action frames (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; McDonald, 2015). A key factor in determining whether a movement operates around the logic of connective or collective action is the presence of organizations within a movement (Bennet & Segerber, 2012). It is precisely these two differences that differentiate connective from collective action. Collective action has traditionally required movement constituents to first build solidarity within community spaces like coffee shops, book shops, public parks and community centers (Taylor & Whittier, 1992). The procurement and maintenance of such spaces has historically required organizational funding especially as the movements grew and more resources were required (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). This investment from organizations and/or community coalitions would eventually lead to the development of collective identity which was necessary for collective action to take place because people were unlikely to engage in dangerous behaviour until they had formed bonds with fellow movement members (Flesher Fominaya,

2010). Even travelling to and visibly associating with other movement members was a barrier for some that eventually turned into a point of solidarity (Taylor & Whittier, 1992).

The rise in availability of digital technologies has all but eradicated such barriers and has provided people virtual spaces where they can meet like-minded individuals and form connections with one another based on single-issue, personalized grievances and actionable ideas of resistance to such grievances (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). As such communication technologies and virtual spaces have replaced organizationally funded physical spaces and thereby organizational centrality to the decision-making process of these movements (McDonald, 2015). Furthermore, the lack of barriers means far less time is spent developing mutually agreed upon collective action frames – generalized grievances of the group and what must be done to address them (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). The central differences between collective and connection action is that the former relies on organizational involvement when it comes to forming movements, building solidarity and tactics and the building of solidarity that inevitably leads to the development of collective action frames for mobilization. The latter, bypasses these requirements, viewing them as barriers to participation which have been overcome by technological affordances of the internet and allow actors to mobilize without organizational input (or interference) nor the need to agree upon collective grievances through solidarity building before taking action.

Organizational involvement has a direct impact on whether movements are formed around interpersonal networks that foster a sense of collective identity that is often necessary for collective action to occur. Low organizational involvement in spaces where communication is facilitated digitally is said to result in a less established or even a non-existent sense of collective identity within a movement (Milan, 2015). These findings are also consistent with offline based

youth movements like the Dreamers[14] where collective identity went from unifying to being a divisive force among members (Fiorito, 2019). Meanwhile shared subjectivities of exclusion and stigma among youth acted as a unifying force to keep movement actors together much like individuals are described as forming temporary bonds over loosely connected personal grievances to mobilize towards a shared goal in connective action literature.

As a counter, researchers in the opposite camp have presented evidence that overbearing organizational involvement is more likely to lead to a 'thin' collective identity while less organizational oversight, leads to a 'thick' collective identity (Rohlinger & Bunnage, 2018). Thin collective identity results when participants struggle to build trust, commitment and solidarity and instead are connected only through superficial bonds. Thick collective identity results when frequent and open interaction lead to the development of trust, commitment and solidarity among movement members leading to deeper and stronger bonds. While this research offers many valuable insights into the relationship between collective identity and communication technologies, it begs the question of what happens when organizational involvement in decentralized online social movement spaces is lacking. For example, Rohlinger and Bunnage (2018) compared movements where organizations are heavily present regardless of whether they foster a hierarchical or horizontal structure of communication with movement members. However, they ignored decentralized movements that mobilize under the logic of connective action. Meanwhile, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) dismiss the importance of collective identity to motivate connective action without considering the function collective identity serves in social movements outside of mobilizing them (Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Snow, 2001). They argue that movements that adapt the logic of connective action are unlikely to form strong collective

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[14] The Dreamers is the undocumented youth movement in the United States mobilizing to secure the passing of the federal Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act.

identities as communication technologies replace the need for the collective identity formation for collective action to occur. However, scholars like Polletta & Jasper (2001) have argued that collective identities need not always form prior to mobilization and instead can often be the intended or even unintended outcome of political action. Indeed, collective identity is associated with shared and reciprocated emotions, interactions and meaning making that fosters a connection to the broader movement or community that can just as likely occur during and post-mobilization (Flesher Fominaya, 2010). For example, Gawerc (2016) found that while pre-mobilization storytelling can establish enough of a base-level trust for initial collective action to take place, the strongest collective bonds were formed after movement participants engaged in action together. Similarly, Russo (2014) found that emotions and embodied experiences for activists on the Migrant Trail[15] resulted in the strongest collective identity formation among participants after they engaged in collective action together.

In sum, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argue that collective identity is no longer necessary for movements that mobilize according to the logic of connective action where actors spend little to no time on developing shared ideologies, tactics and frames. However, the fact that communication technologies make collective identity no longer a prerequisite for mobilization doesn't mean that collective identity is no longer likely to form or play an important role within decentralized movements that organize around the logic of connective action. While Rohlinger and Bunnage (2018) disagree with connective action accounts that minimize the importance of collective identity within digitally networked movements, by omitting decentralized movements from their model, they leave an important gap when it comes to collective identity and movements that follow the logic of connective action. This is a problem because it contradicts

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[15] Annual social movement event where the border-justice movement and allies walk seventy-five miles across the United States-Mexico borderlands in protest of migrant deaths.

their assertion that information technologies invariably help cultivate collective identities among movement members. In essence, when it comes to answering whether information technologies foster collective identity, neither of these two camps consider the decentralized movement context with sufficient detail. Nor do they consider movements on the far-right.

Collective Identity and the Far-Right

A second issue with conclusions coming from both camps is that they conceptualize organizational involvement in a way that is representative of progressive movements but not necessarily reactionary far-right movements. While there are many competing definitions of 'far-right movements,' for the purposes of this study I adapt the view of scholars who define such movements as those that organize around anti-egalitarianism, disavowal of democratic processes, adapt terrorist repertoires, call for authoritarian solutions and forced ethnic migration or ethnic cleansing and a white ethno-state (Durham 2007, Goodwin 2006, Miller-Idriss 2020, Vertigans 2007). Organizational support of movements may look very different on the far-right because many mainstream organizations are unlikely to knowingly support ideologies described above. Organizational support, when extended, often comes covertly from fringe groups such as far-right sympathetic clothing brands and mixed martial arts schools or via private donations and fundraisers (Miller-Idriss, 2020). Meanwhile, on the left organizations supporting and coordinating activism can only be loosely linked to the movements they are supporting, such as the case with MoveON featured in Rohlinger and Bunnage's study.

MoveON provided resources for various campaigns without necessarily sharing the specific values and goals of those involved in the campaigns. Indeed, in Canada and the U.S. there are numerous advantages for politicians and corporations alike in aiding progressive movements such as good public relations, securing votes, and coalition building (Amenta et al.,

2010). This is unlikely to be the case for radical movements on the far-right because the vast

majority of corporations perceive very little value and enormous levels of risk in associating

themselves with far-right movements like the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville[16] compared

to something like the George Floyd protests in Minneapolis.[17] Thus, while there are plenty

examples of progressive advertisement by Fortune 100 corporations that does not reflect the

values of executives, there are no empirical examples of the opposite (companies advertising in

support of far-right causes to secure capital or social benefits while their executives subscribe to

progressive values). The few organizations that supply far-right movements with resources are

predominantly ones that share their values and goals (Miller-Idriss, 2020). Following this, it is

uncertain whether a thick/thin collective identity model (Rohlinger & Bunnage, 2018) that

bifurcates hierarchical structure of communication (thin) with organizational prioritization of

collective identity formation (thick) is representative of some online far-right communities who

may simultaneously value hierarchies and collectivity.

Furthermore, far-right spaces like Stormfront and 4chan/pol are spaces where nationalist

language and sentiment is particularly salient. While a salient national identity need not

necessarily lead to collective identity development by itself (Poletta & Jasper, 2001), it can

contribute to collective identity development when combined with offline events that threaten the

nationalist identity (Bliuc et al., 2019) and involvement in activism (Flesher Fominaya, 2010). In

addition, while technology may inhibit the development of bonds that would have otherwise

developed among members of a traditional offline progressive movement, this effect is less

pronounced on the far-right because organizing offline is not always a viable option (ie. threat of

violence from counter protestors, loss of employment in case of being identified, vast majority of

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[16]Spotify removed all songs that were associated with Charlottesville rally from their platforms.
[17]Spotify added a moment of silence on the 8:46 minute mark to playlists and podcasts to honour George Floyd.

private businesses don't want to associate themselves with far-right but are mostly willing to associate with progressives, etc.). Members of far-right groups often report being the only person who holds radical views in their constituency and organizing online is sometimes the only way to develop a collective identity (Koehler, 2014; Simi & Futrell, 2006).

Finally, while emotion is important for collective identity formation in general (Hunt & Benford, 2004), ethnographic data on far-right groups demonstrates that emotions are especially important for movements on the far-right where they play a central role in mobilization and recruitment (Blee, 2007). For example, Virchow (2007) describes how far-right movements in Germany leverage tension and frustration to consistently mobilize and recruit members. This is important because research shows that emotionality often has a strong effect on collective identity development and vice-versa (de Volo, 2007; Russo, 2014). As such it is possible that any decline in collective identity processes that results from a reliance on communication technologies may be cancelled out by the greater tendency of far-right movements to rely on emotion and affect (not backed by credible evidence) for recruitment and mobilization. Below I introduce two cases of online far-right communities presented in this paper, one centralized (Stormfront) and one decentralized (4chan/pol/), pointing to their position in the far-right movement landscape and why I chose them for this study.

The Case of 4chan/pol/

Rohlinger and Bunnage only compared movement communities that have organizational backing. As a result, applying their model to a completely decentralized movement space like 4chan/pol makes it difficult to make predictions about how collective identity is enabled by information and communication technologies when there is little to no organizational involvement. 4chan/pol is a completely decentralized, far-right imageboard that acts as a hub of

far-right recruitment and mobilization (Kasimov, 2021). 4chan/pol users typically prefer to engage in far-right connective action where mobilization attempts can be quickly organized and executed by individuals. This type of mobilization includes poster/leaflet printing and distribution (Kasimov, 2021), the creation and distribution of digital memes that act as propaganda to mainstream far-right ideas into popular culture (Miller-Idriss, 2020), organized raiding of mainstream social media with far-right comments (Hine et al., 2016). Furthermore, 4chan/pol is a community where domestic far-right terrorists and their manifestos are often reposted and whose feats are venerated to the point of sainthood (Baele, Brace, & Coan, 2021). 4chan/pol also serves as a hub of experimental far-right ideologies and tactics such as accelerationism which makes it an attractive community to younger users and users disaffected with traditional far-right philosophies and tactical repertoires (Kasimov, 2023). Most importantly, strong anonymity norms on 4chan have contributed to the alienation of far-right organizational presence on the board allowing for sustained connective action to become the preferred logic of mobilization (Kasimov, 2023).

Some existing research suggests anonymous communities like 4chan foster radical individualism -the opposite of collectivity (Elley, 2021). Movement spaces where animosity and disagreement about political opportunities is high due to individual preferences can lead to a fragmented collective identity and inhibit the development of solidarity among members (Shriver & Adams, 2007). This would suggest that members of 4chan/pol are unlikely to cultivate a robust collective identity. Hence, Bennet and Segerberg's (2012) assertion that collective identity is not a necessary precursor to digitally-networked action seems to ring true here. However, other researchers have argued that collective identity does exist among 4chan users who all refer to

themselves as "anons"[18] and rely on shared meanings and symbols (which come from shared experiences) to communicate (Tuters & Hagen, 2021). Valacchi (2009) shows that movements can develop a collective "we" even in situations where a plurality of collective identities exist leading to the formation of coalitions and complementary goals and strategies among activists. Either way we are precluded from making predictions about collective identity in an anonymous far-right community like 4chan/pol. Furthermore, studies that have looked at collective identity on 4chan/pol (Devries, 2021; Tuters & Hagen, 2021) have mostly relied on content analysis and have not conducted interviews with actual users like the present study. Interview data can be crucial to gaining a deeper understanding of motivations of 4chan/pol users. While there is more research about collective identity on Stormfront, there is a similar lack of interview data from its users.

The Case of Stormfront

Stormfront is known for its hierarchical structure of communication. Administrators, sustaining members, and other white power movement leaders hold significantly more power to mobilize members. Kasimov (2023) found that calls to action from such members regularly receive positive responses while new members are often criticized or ignored altogether. Moreover, Stormfront and national white power organizations that back it, make no secret of the fact that their goals are to mobilize local and national constituencies alike. However, organizations and individuals also strive to cultivate a collective identity of white nationalists on Stormfront. For example, Simi and Futrell (2006) found that collective identity on Stormfront is not only a priority for adults but also children (stormfrontkids.org) with considerable resources going into cultivating a shared sense of white pride. Bliuc et al. (2019) found that users on

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[18]The word 4chan users use to refer to other 4chan users. Short for "anonymous user."

Stormfront experienced a reinvigorated sense of collective identity concurrently with offline action from other far-right groups. Likewise, Kasimov (2023) found that a quarter of all mobilization attempts on Stormfront are posts advertising meetups of local Klan chapters for the single purpose of getting to know other members. Such posts are frequently met with positive responses such as endorsements from members who have attended a past meetup (conferences or BBQs). Stormfront does not seem to neatly fit into the model provided by Rohlinger and Bunnage (2018). It is unclear whether this is a strictly far-right phenomenon or if the centralizing presence of far-right organizations on Stormfront also plays a role in collective identity formation leading to distinct differences from a decentralized space like 4chan/pol.

The Present Study

My study aims to answer whether a decentralized far-right space like 4chan/pol and a centralized space like Stormfront produce collective identity among their members and whether there are differences between the two communities in how collective identity is formed and maintained. This is an important question because it builds on recent research on how information and communication technologies impact collective identity development. It takes into account research from opposite camps, one that argues that communication technologies make collective identity more or less obsolete (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012) and the other positing that collective identity is very much at the core of most digitally networked movements with certain factors dictating whether it takes on a thick or thin configuration (Rohlinger & Bunnage, 2018). By using in-depth interview data this study reveals that users of decentralized spaces like 4chan have developed and actively maintain a complex, multi-layered collective identity that I call *oppositional identity* despite their preference for mobilizing according to the logic of connective action. On 4chan, sustaining an oppositional identity required a static "they" (legacy

media) and a fluid "we" (4chan's demographic composition). In contrast, Stormfront users had a static "we" (white separatists who view European culture as superior) and a fluid "they" (any and all perceived threats to whiteness). Hence, while Bennett and Segersberg (2012) may be correct in suggesting that connective action releases movements from relying on lengthy and often resource-intensive efforts at fostering collective identity, it does not preclude members of movements from forming a collective identity in the process of and even after engaging in connective action. Meanwhile, members of the centralized Stormfront, cultivate a more traditional collective identity focused around a collective "we."

Methods

I conducted 39 semi-structured interviews with users of 4chan/pol (21) and Stormfront (18) in order to identify if and how collective identity is constructed in each respective community. The interviews were conducted anonymously over the course of a year between 2019 and 2020. Anonymity was necessary to make sure that participants felt comfortable discussing their views on sensitive topics like white nationalism and participating in movement-related activities on- and offline. To ensure the highest level of anonymity possible no demographic data were collected. Based on interview answers and personal anecdotes 17 out 21 4chan/pol users that were interviewed were white identifying men and 1 of the participants was a white woman. The other 3 participants did not volunteer information about their race or sex. On Stormfront, 16 out of 18 people who were interviewed were definitively white men based on the information they volunteered to provide. The remaining 2 were men but did not volunteer information about their race/ ethnicity. Based on information that was volunteered during interviews, 27 participants were residing in the United States at the time of the interview, 8 resided in Canada, 2 resided in Europe, and the last 2 did not volunteer any information about

their geographical location. All names that refer to participants in this chapter are randomly generated and assigned pseudonyms.

Interviews conducted for this study were part of a larger research project about the impact of decentralization on social movement participation on the far right. Participants were asked to describe their experiences with other users of 4chan/pol and Stormfront, how close they felt with other users, if and how their political orientation has changed after joining, whether they have participated in any online or offline action on behalf of any movement or ideological belief, and their main reason for visiting and participating in these online communities. Participants were also asked to describe shared meanings, symbols, phrases, images, and other cultural artifacts that were important in their respective community. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Responses were coded and analyzed using MAX QDA software. Responses of participants were coded inductively into thematic clusters based on differences and similarities in collective identity processes across both communities. To accomplish this, coding techniques described by Aurini, Heath and Howells (2021) were utilized. Transcripts were read multiple times and divided into emergent categories. These categories were later refined into salient and reoccurring themes surrounding self-perceptions of participants regarding ingroup and outgroup characteristics and their respective feelings of belonging and antagonism towards each. All but two interviews were conducted on Skype. The remaining two interviews were conducted on the Signal mobile app because the two participants requested that skype not be used because it wasn't secure enough for their liking.

Participants were recruited through personal messages on Stormfront and a mix of personal messages and public messages on 4chan/pol. Throughout the recruitment process I received a lot of inflammatory responses from potential participants that included racial,

misogynist and homophobic slurs as well as a general level of mistrust because these individuals assumed that I was an undercover law enforcement agent or media member. A smaller subset of potential participants told me they were distrustful of academics and refused to be interviewed. After I had interviewed 11 participants from 4chan, one user reposted my recruitment message in a thread where they asked for guidance on how they should respond to me. Several responses warned 4chan members to stay away from academics and doing interviews altogether. While this incident had no noticeable impact on the acceptance rate to my interviews, it does suggest that my sample of participants was likely not fully representative of 4chan/pol as it lacked users who suspected I worked for law enforcement or media as well as those who distrusted academics. Several participants whom I interviewed were also concerned about one or both of these possibilities but were comforted by the fact that unlike them I wasn't anonymous and that the research study had received ethics approval from an accredited university.

Findings

On individual and collective levels, a sense of collective identity was as robust on 4chan as on Stormfront despite 4chan users adhering to the logic of connective action for mobilization. Contrary to connective action literature, which suggests collective identity may no longer be necessary for movements where connective action is preferred, this study found that an oppositional identity on 4chan complements mobilization attempts that follow the logic of connective action. Rather than being a precursor to collective action, the oppositional identity of 4chan users works in tandem with connective action due to the fluid nature of both.

When it came to Stormfront, a traditional form of collective identity formation was overwhelmingly preferred and practiced by users. Stormfront users both valued collective identity formation as a precursor to meaningful mobilization and as an end in itself. Collective

identity formation on 4chan and Stormfront differed. 4chan users build their identity in opposition to institutions such as the media and corporations. Rather than uniting around an agreed-upon "we," 4chan users preferred to view themselves as uniting against a nefarious "they." In contrast, users on Stormfront viewed themselves as part of the white race and more specifically as part of a group of white people who believe their culture is under threat. In the following sections I will provide qualitative evidence that support my claims about collective identity on 4chan and Stormfront.

Oppositional Identity on 4chan/pol/

Almost all 4chan users interviewed for this study contextualized their participation in the community in opposition to participating and consuming content on mainstream media. Users repeatedly spoke of having little to no trust in mainstream news outlets like CNN and FOX; nor were many trusting of mainstream social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Kyle compared the media to "old Pink Floyd shirts, you come in with a light and you come out with a rainbow." Similarly, James spoke fondly of his time on 4chan, reveling in the "exposing of the corrupt media and the corporate establishment" that he witnessed during Donald Trump's initial presidential campaign. Other 4chan users such as Luke relied on 4chan as an alternative source of news to the "media-controlled propaganda" watched by "normies." Miles was more measured in his stance on the media:

> They have an incentive to want to discredit (4chan) simply because we are better authorities on world events. I don't want to turn this into a rant on the media, but you can get more accurate and informative coverage of international topics on 4chan than you can on most other (news outlets). Wall Street Journal and Financial Times excepted.

Miles justified the belief that anonymous users in an online community were better equipped to report on world events by offering an example where information posted on 4chan about a coup in Chile was confirmed by friends and family in South America despite mainstream media in the West failing to report on it. This distrust of the media frequently spilled over to corporations and to a lesser extent academia as I would learn during the recruitment process.

While recruiting participants to interview, I received private messages and emails accusing me of trying to "write a hit piece" or "working with the FBI." At one point a 4chan user posted my recruitment message in a thread asking his fellow 'anons' to help him think of a clever response. The participants in the thread ultimately decided that sending me a photo of his genitalia was the most appropriate response, and he was happy to oblige. Comments in the thread praised this as an act in the true spirit of 4chan and warned others not to engage with any academics looking to do research on 4chan. As such collective identity on 4chan was less dependent on a collective "we" and more reliant on constantly constructing and reconstructing a "they."

Even 4chan users that agreed to be interviewed explained that they would likely be flamed by other 'anons' for talking to me. For many of them, racist and misogynist language was a way to retaliate against a media institution that they no longer trusted. Hunter said:

> How do you expect me to trust that the same media outlets and conglomerates that lied
> about weapons of mass destruction are suddenly just looking out for the good of the
> people with their blm this and metoo that and not just trying to use this to silence my
> friends and me when we're just using our right to freedom of expression?

Hunter believed that the United States has become entrenched in leftist discourse and politics and the media and corporations were being used to pacify "regular people" like him. What was

interesting about the collective identity formation on 4chan was that positioning the media as a "they" allowed for the development of collective identity across political differences. For example, Aiden said to me,

> …you can kind of start to see why a place like 4chan is so interesting because you have so many people on 4chan including me asking the same questions about the left's ideological presence in the mainstream. How can the left consider itself an agent of change when its messages are the messages of the people in power? You begin to see that white men being blamed for everything benefits them or else why would they push that message so hard? 4chan is a place those questions can be asked without someone calling you a Nazi.

Aiden and Hunter were both aware of the diversity of traditional political views that exists on 4chan but both preferred a space where their views could be openly expressed and debated. Clayton expressed a similar sentiment about posting on 4chan:

> … you can say that Hitler was right and nobody hates you. You can say, I don't know that Black people are worse than white people. You can just have any kind of controversial opinion you have and you won't get any hate for it. And that's very crazy. Like. It's unimaginable in today's world, especially in the real world.

Despite these comments, Clayton identified as a moderate conservative. He described being on 4chan like being "on another planet" and claimed that he felt privileged to belong to the community. Similarly, Kyle who self-identified as a "race realist"[19] believed 4chan allowed for unique conversations across political identities something he longed to do with his real-life friends and family but was afraid to:

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[19]A pseudo-scientific racism based on assigning specific physical and mental traits such as athletic ability and intelligence based on biological differences between races.

I would love if the political climate in the West would allow people to have discussions.

I'd love if the media didn't hound anybody down, if they had any dissenting view. But I

don't see that happening. I would love to have these discussions with people that I talk to

all the time because those people respect me. They hopefully think I'm an intelligent

person and I'd love to talk about this stuff, but I can't.

Kyle's views on media echo fears about the deterioration of free speech, unbridled wokeness,

and cancel culture in wider society (Ng, 2022). For many of the 4chan users I interviewed, real

diversity of opinion could only come from a space that radically resisted all forms of censorship,

no matter the collateral damage to identity groups. This view held that the media, with their

(surface level) commitment to the status quo of diversity and inclusion, were paradoxically

excluding people like them and were thus antithetical to the "kaleidoscope" of views represented

on 4chan.

For the people I interviewed, collective identity on 4chan revolved around a mutual

distrust of the media rather than a political or ascribed identity. This required constant

negotiation and renegotiation of what mainstream media narratives 4chan users opposed.

Accomplishing an anti-media identity meant accepting and often participating in different forms

of hate speech whether one endorsed such ideas or not. 4chan/pol/ users discuss a way of doing

things as an important component of collective identity formation. New users are expected to

"lurk moar"[20] before they post but also before they are able to understand which posts are ironic

and which aren't. There was simply no way of understanding 4chan/pol/ without first spending

many hours on the site. While this type of gatekeeping may seem like a deterrent at first, there is

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[20] Spend more time reading threads and comments of other users in order to understand the culture on 4chan before
making threads and comments themselves.

also no accounts to keep track of the fact that someone is a new user so users know that the

process of vetting is merit based and are encouraged to try.

In the case of Stormfront, users that I interviewed positioned themselves as an oppressed

minority of white people who were slowly watching their European culture disappear.[21] Rather

than organizing against a nefarious "they" such as the media, Stormfront users focused on the

"we" which encompassed anyone who was an "upstanding man or woman who is proud of his

European heritage, treats others with respect and isn't ashamed to speak the truth. (Noah)"

Participants in this group overwhelmingly reported a sense of belonging that was based on

biology and culture thereby positioning themselves in opposition to what they perceived as

threats against whiteness. While the threat makes it seem like there was also a "they" involved,

my interviews revealed that this "they" is malleable. In other words, "they" are whoever is

threatening white culture at the moment. This perceived sense of threat allowed Stormfront users

to look past the hierarchical communication structure of the board due to the emotional

connection they believed existed between themselves and higher-ranking Stormfront members

who by virtue of being white were also under threat. Tom explained:

> You gotta have an order to things. You gotta know who's done what for the group and
>
> who's been there from the get. But it's not just that. Even if someone's not done as much
>
> as someone (else) you gotta look past that or it all falls apart. You gotta remember they
>
> are fighting to survive just like you. Whenever I see someone disagree with the mods, I
>
> try to remind them we're all on the same side here.

Hence a thin collective identity does not necessarily result from a hierarchical communication

structure as proposed by Rohlinger and Bunnage (2018) with their case study of MoveOn. Rather

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[21]Only about a third of users on 4chan shared this view with the same conviction to users on Stormfront and it was much less salient in the interviews.

it seems that a hierarchical communication structure is likely to lead to a thin collective identity when those at the top of the hierarchy are not perceived to be under the same threat as those below. In the case of MoveOn, the organization's primary goal is to raise money for various well executed progressive campaigns. Evidently such an arrangement can be potentially problematic not only because of the hierarchy but also because those at the top aren't necessarily treated as insiders with shared lived experiences as those at the bottom of any singular campaign on MoveOn.

In contrast to 4chan users for whom accomplishing and sustaining a collective identity depended on a static "they" (the media) and a fluid "we" (4chan's identarian make up), Stormfront users had a static "we" (white people who valued European culture) and a fluid "they" (anyone who challenged whiteness as dominant). For Eric, it was the continued influx of immigrants into the country who "take jobs and do piss poor work at that." For Sam and Harvey, it was the Jewish media:

> Sam: It's comical that the Jews on CNN are still pushing the narrative that the holocaust and the antisemites (sic), when our (white) culture is being erased and we're meant to hush up and put up.

> Harvey: My stance is don't ask me what I think, look at the science yourself. It's clear as day that there is more Jews in power, in the politics, in the media, in colleges, CEOs. All our lives we're taught to look for the truth, and now all of a sudden the truth is hate? Doesn't sit right with me.

Stormfront users often pre-emptively explained their views as those of white separatists rather than white supremacists. For Cole this was an important distinction because "people on this board aren't trying to lynch anybody. We just want a place where we can raise our kids without

them being told they're racist if they want to date someone who looks like them." Cole expressed the view that Black people who respect his white heritage and way of life are entitled to live separately without being bothered by white people. Rather than positioning his identity against a "they," Cole and others on Stormfront were focused on the "we."

The contrast between how collective identity is accomplished on Stormfront and 4chan does not necessarily mean that users of both communities are two separate populations. The presence of self-proclaimed "race realists" on 4chan and Anti-Semitic media critics on Stormfront suggests that there is likely an overlap between the userbase of both websites. A total of three people I interviewed on Stormfront revealed that they are or at one point were users of 4chan. Connor told me that "Stormfront got boring fast, so I tried looking somewhere else and eventually stumbled on 4chan." He referred to 4chan as "a functional version of Stormfront's opposing viewpoints board with more swastikas." He explained that opposing viewpoints doesn't always mean liberal or left, but rather anything that doesn't fit with the grand narrative of the community. On Stormfront, posting on that board meant going against the community which could detract from the feeling of collective identity. Users report keeping track of and feuding with users that they don't get along with. Senior members are easy to tell apart from the newbies and some users experience frustration over being dismissed due to their low post count or lack of rank despite contributing what they feel were quality ideas. On 4chan, however, opposing viewpoints were part of the board's culture where users are "judged for their ideas (and not) a seniority-privileging ranking system." Even for a self-proclaimed white separatist like Connor that could sometimes be a good thing.

Oppositional Identity and Connective Action

Oppositional identity was reinforced on 4chan/pol through a reflexive process stemming from engaging in connective action. Rather than being an impetus to action as often seen in organizationally backed social movements, collective identity was more an outcome of digitally networked action. This finding is consistent with research that views collective identity as an outcome rather a precursor to mobilization (Gawerc, 2016; Hauns, 2000; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Russo, 2014). An anti-media focus on 4chan resulted in sustained connective action campaigns that ranged from spreading propaganda posters to carefully curated propagandistic memes aimed to confuse the media and "unhinge" the left. For Richard, connective action in the form of "shitposting" not only has the means to create social change but also helps maintain what he referred to as the "cultural identity" of the board:

> Shitposting has a lot in common with what the 1960s hippies would do when they had a freakout or the happening. The best shitposters right now are the modern-day equivalents to the great men of letters. I think a lot of social change has come out of these shit posts. So people use (shitposts) to frame stories. Like you're supposed to read them vicariously its almost like a second-person narrative. The way you are supposed to read it is "be me," "do this," "do that." You're supposed to be putting yourself in that other person's perspective.

Figure 2.1. Example of a 4chan second-person narrative post.

The post in Figure 2.1 encourages other 4chan users to raid and trigger Reddit communities while simultaneously upholding 4chan's oppositional identity in contrast to Reddit's (they require karma to post, we don't; they are average normies, we are not; they fall for feminine usernames' cries for help, we do not). For Kyle, making political memes with other 'anons' contributed to a shared sense of belonging specifically because their work was validated via outrage in the media:

> 4chan is a meme making factory, and I think it had a significant impact on President
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> Trump winning the election, the way that I see the Internet in terms of memes, is memes
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> come from 4chan and move on to become viral on other social media platforms. The
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> infographic on the corruption of Clinton that went all over the place started on 4chan.
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> Many of these infographics that I'm sure you've seen in your day-to-day life, started on
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> 4chan. I'm sure you remember the whipped-up hysteria in 2015 after President Trump
>
> tweeted a picture of him as a pepé at a podium. I mean, what's more insane than a green

frog being the symbol of white supremacy or whatever? And now everybody uses Pepes

regardless, because it's just it's an emot(icon). It's just a different way of having an emote

and hell it's a lot more racially diverse than having all different colors of skin for your

remotes on your android, which I think is crazy. Just make them all green.

Kyle was inspired to make political memes that would receive negative media attention by first

seeing that such memes like Pepe the frog (see also chapter four) were even being embraced by a

presidential candidate who frequently criticized the media. By taking part in in this type of

connective action, Kyle felt a deeper connection to his fellow anons, that evolved over time as

new media narratives developed that in turn required the production and dissemination of new

memes.

Mirroring Kyle's story, the oppositional identity of 4chan users was an ongoing process

of political action which contributes to identity building which then leads to further action

creating a feedback loop. On 4chan, collective identity isn't simply a state that needs to be

achieved for connective action to take place. Indeed, users who feel no connection to other anons

or are only starting to develop their oppositional identity can get involved in calls to action on

4chan/pol. This is consistent with Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) claims about collective

identity and connective action. However, my interviews with 4chan/pol users identify a way in

which the oppositional identity complements connective action repertoires.

Both connective action and oppositional identity are in constant state of flux. The former

with respect to the dynamic and ephemeral personal action frames of 4chan/pol users and the

latter with respect to the prevailing mainstream media talking points at any particular time. Since

these talking points are by nature fluid, any sense of collective identity is dependent on strict

opposition to ever-changing media narratives. A traditional collective identity would not be

conducive to connective action because then there would be potential for collaboration with media in the event that they drastically alter their previous position on an issue. This is exemplified by Shriver and Adams (2013) in their study on the Czech environmental movement and the Czech Green Party where collective identity was fragmented when half of the movement wanted to tap into state power (when an opportunity presented itself) to achieve their own ends and the other half was against leveraging state power of any kind. However, 4chan/pol users would immediately ostracize an individual or group who was found defending media talking points even if they were partially congruent with the prevailing views on 4chan/pol because their opposition to the media is at the core of the oppositional identity. Shane shared a personal story of how this happened to him:

> Shane: When you first start you're basically a newfag still fresh from, on that media narrative. It's inescapable. You come in spouting what you heard on tv. More often online from legacy sources. You will be flamed. Even if it's Tucker (Carlson). You can bet on that. I learned that's not reliable news. That's clown news.

As such opposing the constant cascade of media talking points becomes a reservoir for never-ending personal action frames for 4chan/pol users to criticize and mobilize against. Indeed, the very process of engaging in political action guided by different and sometimes opposing individual action positions collective identity as a shared desired outcome of each participant. Thus, the outcome of connective action becomes as much about satisfying individual action frames as it is connecting with other participants. Malcolm's story encompasses this perfectly:

> Malcolm: I saw how anons were all patting themselves on the back for the "it's okay to be white" poster thing. The media were eating it up and it brought us back to the days of when 4chan took on the church of scientology. I think this is the best example because it

wasn't about being white; it was about doing something to get a rise out of the media. It

was cool to be a part of something, so next Halloween there was a similar campaign. I

won't say what it is because I don't want to incriminate myself, but I played my part. By

myself sure it's great that I said fuck you to the big boys but when all the other anons are

posting about it even if some of them are calling it gay or a psyop, it feels good to be

involved in it.

Even though Malcolm would tell me later that he did believe in the message on the posters, here

he reveals that collective identity was an outcome that could only be accomplished by

participating in this type of connective action.

In contrast to 4chan users, Stormfront users felt that collective identity[22] was necessary

for collective action to take place on Stormfront. In fact, several people I interviewed told me

that they ultimately decided against taking part in collective action because they did not feel they

could fully trust other users on Stormfront. Barry explained that he "only use(d) Stormfront for

news on upcoming events and meetups (which) is the only way to meet people and find out who

your friends are." For Barry, being white and understanding that whiteness was under threat

meant that he wanted to be involved with "the movement." However, he did not want to

participate in movement activities until he had met other like-minded individuals. Stormfront

allowed him to survey different events and organizations backing them, so he could decide

where he was most likely to meet people he could get along with. Nick was another Stormfront

user who felt that a cohesive collective identity must precede action:

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[22]The language varied a lot but things like "the group" "we" "us" "Europeans" "whites" sometimes "Christian" or sometimes "he is a white man like me" or "man of god like him and him (referring to other members)" or even things that were said somewhat ironically like "stormers" and even "storm troopers." One participant said, "we're the frontline" while another person referred to Stormfront users as "the last line of defense."

> Nick: Right now, there is too much discord coming from all different sides on the board. You got members who are posting suggestions being shut down by others who think they know better. And maybe they do but nothing's coming out of it. We all feel that there is work to do, there is a sense of urgency and a sense of they're coming for us with the new laws and people getting fired for thinking like me and that. So I'm there to tell them we're all in the same boat and let's just come together and listen to leaders and organizers putting their neck on the line before it's too late.

For Nick, disagreement was viewed as an obstacle towards collective action that he was desperate to participate in. He already felt deeply connected to other members of the board, even ones he disagreed with, and was desperate for other members to develop a similar connection with each other as a preamble towards mobilization. Other users differed from Nick, having built close relationships with people on the board over the years and felt that merely participating on Stormfront was enough to do their part to preserve white culture.

> Patrick: I do as much as I can by coming on here and maintaining the relationships I have. That's the most rewarding thing about it. I don't have many events happening in my area and everyone around me is pretty much a lib or cuck-servative. I contribute to the pot the fact that I'm active on the boards and that shows newcomers who are more likely to participate in the voting, the lobbying, the rallies, that there are intelligent, dedicated people here worth fighting for.

Although Nick and Patrick have different participatory preferences, both approach collective identity as a precursor to collective action, a set of conditions that must be satisfied before mobilization can take place. In the case of Patrick this is true even though he himself is not looking to participate beyond posting on the forums. It is of course possible (even likely) that

participating in collective action will lead to a stronger collective identity for Stormfront users. However, interviews with Stormfront members suggest that collective identity on Stormfront occurs primarily through what Flesher Fominaya (2010) calls submerged day-to-day activities and interactions (online on Stormfront) over an extended period of time but also well before mobilization.

Figure 2.2 provides a useful graphic that illustrates the different processes at work on Stormfront and 4chan in terms of how collective identity is created and sustained. On Stormfront action comes from within a centralized "we" and is directed outwardly against a porous and malleable "they" so long as a sense of "we" is achieved first. Members like Nick and Patrick both focus on cultivating the "we" even though only Nick is interested in taking part in action himself. According to the participants I interviewed, this would be far less likely on 4chan where a sense of belonging, and collectivity comes only after taking part in action that challenges media narratives. Users, who did not engage in connective action were far less likely to speak of this sense of belonging although their initial distrust and dislike of media is what emboldened them to participate. On 4chan, connective action against a static "they" consistently creates and sustains a porous and malleable "we" with new entrants to the space being free and even encouraged to engage in action in order to develop a concrete understanding of "we" through action itself.

Figure 2.2. Graphic illustrating the process of traditional collective identity leading to collective action on Stormfront and an oppositional identity being forged through a feedback loop of connective action on 4chan.

STORMFRONT
TRADITIONAL COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

4CHAN
OPPOSITIONAL IDENTITY

THEY

ACTION

WE

WE

ACTION   THEY   ACTION

WE
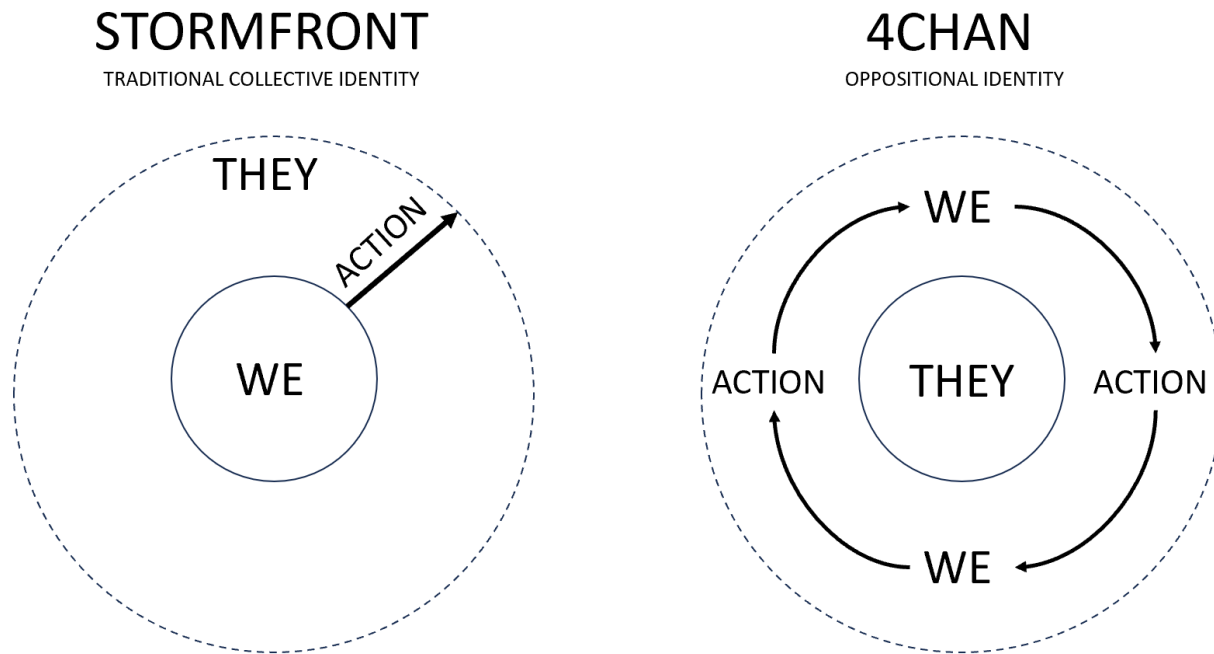
Conclusion

Rohlinger and Bunnage (2018) make an important contribution to studying collective identity formation within digitally-networked movements. Their thin/thick model adds to the body of research that argues against assertions that collective identity has declined in significance as movements have come to rely on information and communication technologies (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013). The case studies of 4chan/pol and Stormfront simultaneously serve as an excellent example of how collective identity formation remains integral to members of online-based movements on the far-right but also how collective identity formation works differently in decentralized far-right movement communities. Members of the decentralized

4chan embrace the fluid signifier of "anon" and act out this identity in opposition to a static "they," represented by mainstream media and to a lesser extent corporations and academic institutions. This conception of "anon" is fluid because as mainstream ideas represented by the media change, so must the collective identity of anons on 4chan. Meanwhile, users on the centralized Stormfront describe an inverse process to collective identity formation. They focus on cultivating a static "we" among those who perceive a sense of threat (to whiteness) from a fluid "they." All groups who come to be viewed as anti-white are viewed as opponents of the movement while the perception of being opposed by these groups serves as the basis for collective identity. Interviews with 4chan and Stormfront users also show that collective identity is treated as important even when the preferred logic of mobilization is connective action and/or the movement is centered on values and causes of the far-right.

The case of 4chan reveals that an absence of organizations does not preclude the formation of collective identity within decentralized movements. 4chan members engaging in connective action confirm experiencing strong connections with other "anons" through shared cultural experiences via on- and offline action leading to the development and maintenance of an oppositional identity. The case of Stormfront shows that a traditional collective identity remains important in online far-right spaces that are more centralized in structure. While there is a level of fluidity to this type of collective identity, it is still mainly centered around a shared sense of perceived oppression of the white race and grievances relating to whiteness. Stormfront users are more likely to engage in collective action once they have spent time establishing emotional bonds with other members.

These findings are important for several reasons. For one, they contradict assertions that the role of collective identity is diminished when connective action takes place. The case of

4chan/pol is especially important here because it is one of the few social movement spaces where sustained connective action has been confirmed by research (Kasimov, 2023). Important here is that an oppositional identity "they" seems to be the only way for a collective identity to form in movements where connective identity is sustained, at least in part, by a commitment to anonymity as Kasimov (2023) argues is the case on 4chan/pol. As such, it is the movements that adapt connective action strategies that are more likely to form oppositional identities rather than collective identity grounded in individual identities and values. In addition, researchers should also be mindful of differences between connective action mediated by mainstream social media like Facebook and Twitter against the likes of anonymous and somewhat submerged spaces used in this study.

It is also important to mention that an oppositional identity need not solely apply to cases like 4chan where far-right views are salient and mobilization is far likely to be on- than offline. For example, it would be interesting to apply the concept to movements like Occupy that researchers have used as prime examples of connective action. On the face of it, much like 4chan, Occupy also contained porous and malleable boundaries (we are the 99% which by definition must include most people) and mobilized primarily against a static (if symbolic) group (1%). The "we" in this case is fluid because constituents could come and go as they pleased and mobilize according to their personal grievances without first establishing strong bonds with other members of the movement. However, once constituents mobilized along side others, it was entirely possible for them to develop a collective identity that resembled something like the oppositional identity of 4chan users. While it is outside the scope of this article to confirm or deny this position, future research into connective action movements can trace how oppositional identities develop in different types of social movements.

The policy implications of the findings in this study are twofold. Greater attention needs to be given to how online far-right communities facilitate mobilization without the upfront costs of forming or joining a far-right movement. Rather than viewing online communities like 4chan/pol as transitional spaces where some users get radicalized into joining a far-right movement, such communities should be viewed as sites of perpetual far-right mobilization of users whose only connection to others is their shared antipathy towards mainstream media which only gets stronger as they take part in such mobilization. A second policy implication is that existing strategies for countering coalition building between different far-right movements are not guaranteed to be effective when it comes to countering a shared oppositional identity among individuals who subscribe to varied far-right beliefs because unlike in the former, the latter have no central point of failure (ie. leadership, single overarching grievance).

Chapter 4

Pepe the frog, the greedy merchant and #stopthesteal: A comparative study of discursive and memetic communication on Twitter and 4chan/pol during the insurrection on the US Capitol.

The January 6, 2021 insurrection on the United States Capitol Building came at a time when offline far-right group activity was seemingly on the decline. From 2019 to 2020, the number of active far-right hate groups in the U.S. declined by 11% (Wamsley, 2021). Yet the number of individuals who subscribed to far-right aligned beliefs[23] as well as far-right propaganda flyers increased during this period (Janik & Hankes, 2021). One explanation for such puzzling trends is that many adherents of far-right ideology have found online communities of like-minded individuals that offer more security and are less resource intensive than joining and

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[23] Believing and/or supporting any combination of the following: anti-egalitarianism, disavowal of democratic processes, white nationalist terrorism, calls for authoritarianism, ethnic cleansing and/or forced ethnic migration with the end goal being separatist ethno-states composed of an ethnic (European) or racial (white) core.

participating in an offline group. Recent events like the January 6, 2021 insurrection and the 2018 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville serve as examples that such individuals are likely to participate in offline action despite not belonging to a specific far-right group (Devries, 2021). Thus, it is important for researchers to better understand the relationship between offline events and the discourse in online communities. This is especially true during times of significant social change, such as the defeat of President Trump in the 2020 Presidential Election that led to a sudden increase in far-right aligned individuals engaging in mobilization without being affiliated with specific far-right movements (Janik & Hankes, 2021). Such individuals are recruited and radicalized in online communities through the help of discursive and memetic texts that have reflexive relationships with offline political and movement activity (Janik & Hankes, 2020). Studying the link between online and offline far-right activity is necessary if scholars are to learn how the far-right project has benefited from information and communication technologies. Scholars agree that social media has become essential for political communication (Davey & Ebner, 2019; Reinsborough & Canning, 2017). Social media engagement has been reliably shown to lead to offline mobilization (Alberici & Milesi, 2016; Lee et al., 2017; McGarty et al., 2014). Particularly, there has been a massive global resurgence in far-right movements partially as a result of widespread communication between and within online far-right communities (Bael, Brace, & Coan, 2020; Zhang et al., 2017).

Researchers have also begun to study how offline events impact online far-right communities. Bliuc et al. (2019) found that "local race riots" correlated with a peak in activity on *Stormfront Down Under*[24] and led to significant changes to collective identity within the community. Meanwhile, Wiggins (2020) tracked the use of discourse and memes of the

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[24]A version of Stormfront for specifically Australian users.

Boogaloo Boys[25] on Twitter during the 2020 Virginia gun rally to consolidate identity among online supporters of the movement via conspiratorial thinking and folk heroism. While this research reveals important details about the relationship between offline events and online activity within far-right communities, no comparative study to date has looked at how discourse develops on two separate social media platforms during a dramatic movement event. Our research addresses this gap by comparing the utility of two online platforms in relation to far-right user popularity: Twitter (a social networking platform governed by an evolving terms of service criteria for user content) and 4chan/pol (a largely unregulated imageboard hosted on 4chan. 4chan, as a social media platform, is centered around user generated threads, which are transitory in nature and anonymous (Dewey, 2014; 4chan, n.d.). Of particular concern in this study is how social media platforms were used to share content relating to offline mobilization events of ingroup members, namely the U.S. Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021. Specifically, we examine how the platforms, Twitter and 4chan/pol, were used to promote far-right ideologies before, during, and after the January 6, 2021 insurrection.

To evaluate the utility of these platforms for far-right aligned individuals, we employ an emergent coding strategy to identify thematic clusters of content shared on 4chan/pol and Twitter. Our research design is as follows: first, we examine what similarities and differences exist between the nature of user posts that contain memes on Twitter and 4chan/pol, in relation to the events on January 6, 2021; we then examine if the platforms were used collaboratively in relation to users discussing topics related to the January 6, 2021 insurrection. Specifically, we examine if 4chan/pol and Twitter were used as separate entities or as complementary mediums to convey far-right messaging. We employ Shifman's (2014) definition of an internet meme to our

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[25]A fringe movement of anti-government militants with amorphous ideals ranging from white supremacism to anti-police brutality with an end goal of inciting a second civil war in the U.S.

analysis. Internet memes under this lens are defined as "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users" (7-8). Wiggins and Bowers (2015: 1892) expand on this definition, adding "Internet memes are messages transmitted by consumers–producers for discursive purposes." And by extension Internet memes are "…dynamic entities that spread in response to technological, cultural, and social choices made by people" (Shifman, 2012: 190). To contextualize our study, we begin by reviewing past research on the links between the online and offline dimensions of the far-right.

The Intersection of Online and Offline Hate

There is a relative lacuna of comparative research on the deployment of online far-right discourse in conjunction with offline collective action. Existing research establishes that the decentralized nature of the internet contributed to the proliferation of far-right content because of its lack of temporal and spatial barriers that often hinder offline far-right speech (Davey & Ebner, 2017; Perry & Olsson, 2009). Yet, as barriers to communication are minimized online, an unintended consequence has been the weaponization of internet sites to increase far-right organizational capacities, such as promotion, recruitment, and mobilization (Conway et al., 2019; Edwards & Gribbon, 2013). Social media platforms, in particular, facilitate the dissemination of far-right content because of their networked structure that increases user connectivity, scope, and visibility (Ekman, 2018; Perry & Olsson, 2009). The far-right conspiracy theory, QAnon, is one example of this weaponization as followers of its ideology use message boards on 8chan[26] to foster a participatory culture amongst each other (Jenkins et al., 2009; Marwick & Partin, 2022).

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[26]8chan is an even more extreme version of 4chan with a smaller but more radical userbase and even more relaxed restrictions on what can be posted.

While there are existing efforts by social media companies, such as Facebook and Twitter, to regulate user generated content by establishing terms of use, the spread of far-right content has overcome changing terms of service by adopting new strategies such as the use of seemingly innocuous symbols and memes to communicate hateful messages while bypassing security algorithms (Klar, 2022; Massanari, 2017). For example, using coded language or dog-whistles that sound innocuous to the public but carry a more focused implicit meaning[27] that other members of the far-right understand (Bhat & Klein, 2020). This not only accomplishes the goal of spreading far-right messages but also allows like minded far-right leaning individuals to connect online. This practice is not exclusive to the far-right. For example, in Wallis's (2011) examination of social change in China, new media technologies(social media, mobile devices, etc.) were utilized by youths as new avenues for connection and expression to avoid state censorship.

Online communities have been effective in establishing and maintaining a sense of collective identity among far-right activists (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; De Koster & Houtman, 2008). This is particularly of note given the fact that contemporary far-right movements often lack uniformity and cohesive movement frames (Sweeney & Perliger 2018). Anonymous decentralized spaces like 4chan/pol are especially effective in increasing the scope of individualized mobilization of the far-right (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). For this reason, studying online discourse in far-right communities has revealed important insights about how far-right ideas have been moving out of the fringe and into the mainstream in recent years. For example, Europol observed that online spaces result in stronger international connections between right-

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[27]For example, knowing and understanding the racist meaning of the (((they)))) meme that refers to Jewish people, that most lay people don't know and will not think twice about.

wing radicals (EUROPOL, 2020). Meanwhile, Wojcieszak (2010) found that exposure to neo-Nazi discourse online increased radical opinion extremism even among those who were regularly exposed to opposing (anti far-right) views in their offline social circles. At the same time, users on 4chan/pol are sometimes drawn to the community's antagonistic discourse as a way to distinguish themselves from their offline peer-groups who they pejoratively dismiss as 'normies' for having progressive political positions (Ludemann, 2021). Nevertheless, it is important to note that 4chan/pol plays host to a plurality of ideologies and political viewpoints that are loosely connected through a diverse stream of conspiracy discourse, generalized white supremacism and the wide-spread use of memes (Wiggins, 2022).

Memes are effectively used as virtual posters and leaflets to disseminate far-right messaging to normalize far-right ideology by embedding it within mainstream references and jokes (Cammaerts, 2018; DeCook, 2018). While researchers have previously studied the use of memes in conjunction with offline mobilization, no research has looked at the relationship between memes deployed in a far-right community like 4chan/pol and mainstream social media platform like Twitter during an offline mobilization event such as the January 6, 2021 insurrection. As such it has been difficult for researchers to identify whether a link exists between fringe far-right platforms and mainstream social media before during and after offline movement activity. Exploration of the existence (or lack thereof) of such a link is important because it reveals the function each platform serves in promulgating far-right ideologies. Understanding this function may help researchers and progressive activists organize and resist far-right activity more effectively, especially in cases where such activity is spearheaded by individuals loosely connected through online networks (rather than specific far-right groups). For example, identifying whether similarities or differences exist in the content and function of

memes used on both platforms can lead to the development of anti-recruitment and anti-mobilization efforts for each respective platform. We now briefly turn to discuss the utility of memes as carriers of ideological messages that have the power to radicalize and incite political action amongst members of the far right.

Memes & The Far-Right

Researchers have been studying how, when, and why memes are used to engage with the contemporary political milieu (Reinsborough & Canning, 2017; Moreno-Almeida & Gerbaudo, 2021). The deployment of memes as political instruments to meet ideological goals stems from the entrenched political power of visual content to present a particular world view (Bogerts & Fielitz, 2018). Memes usually take the shape of text, images, videos, gifs, or even soundbites that contain within them (often humorous[28]) cultural references that can easily be reproduced and shared online (Shifman, 2014). Much like propaganda posters, memes are effective in grabbing the attention of individuals with conspicuous imagery and references to popular culture (Beskow et al., 2020). A style guide on the Neo-Nazi community *The Daily Stormer* directs its members to "always hijack existing cultural memes in any way possible [because] packing our message inside of existing cultural memes and humor can be viewed as a delivery method. Something like adding cherry flavor to children's medicine" (Feinberg, 2017). Specifically, members are encouraged to carefully encode Nazi messages into viral memes with the agenda of normalizing these ideas within the public discourse. Online far-right communities such as 4chan/pol, 8chan, and Gab often act as a testing ground for these memes before they are deployed to more ubiquitous social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook (Papasavva et al., 2020). 4chan/pol, for example, often acts as a space of recruitment and mobilization of online memetic

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[28]While Internet memes are often used in humorous ways, usage of Internet memes by the far-right might denote extremist sentiment that is also meant to be humorous for its intended audience.

antagonism where users are provided with memes carrying pro-Nazi messages and encouraged to spread the memes on other social media platforms (Kasimov, 2021). While this has been a potent strategy in spreading far-right messages to larger audiences, platforms like Twitter do have anti-discrimination policies[29] put in place that allow them to remove text and images that are classified as hate-speech (Twitter, n.d.).

As a way to get around this censorship, some users have opted to 'hide in plain sight' on mainstream social media platforms through the use of dog-whistles such as the triple parenthesis meme (((they))) that carries an explicitly anti-Semitic message (Tuters & Hagen, 2019). The use of such memes allows those 'in the know' to flex their insider status and actively discuss racist ideas, while avoiding censorship on social media. These memes also provide exposure to their ideas by gaining the attention of curious users, who then go to search for what the meme means. Alternatively, the use of memes by groups such as the Proud Boys focuses on equating organizations such as Black Lives Matter to the KKK or the Nazis, by presenting them all as hate groups (DeCook, 2018). In this way, the Proud Boys use memes to simultaneously legitimize themselves by distancing themselves from Nazis while also disseminating racist and misogynist messages from what they claim is their true political centre.

Aside from encoding and disseminating right-wing extremist messages, memes are used to mobilize. Wendling (2018) found former president Donald Trump's 2016 campaign success to be attributable to its utilization of social media and deployment of viral memes. The 2016 election exemplifies the insidious power of humor and cultural references to incite political participation with many young voters claiming that their vote for Donald Trump was spurred by a desire to be part of the meme culture surrounding the election (Beran, 2017). While pro-Trump

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[29]Despite a change in ownership in 2022, Twitter continues to have a hateful conduct policy on its website.

memes varied in shock value, their usage has been used to promote (and amplify) vitriolic rhetoric and offline violence against the U.S. government. After President Trump warned that his impeachment would result in a civil war, the hashtag #Boogaloo2020 surfaced on Twitter as a reference to the plot of the 1984 movie Breaking 2: *Electric Boogaloo,* where an alternate reality exists where a civil war breaks out in the United States (Wiggins, 2020). The Boogaloo meme was quickly appropriated by a rhizomatic movement of individuals, some of whom held white supremacist ideals and were eager to accelerate the nation towards a civil war (Newhouse & Gunesche, 2020). The Boogaloo movement depended on memes to negotiate group identities through hyper narrative and identifying oppositional frames due to its hybrid structure of lone-wolf activism and cell-like organization spanning mainstream, radical right and even dark online communities (Goldenberg & Finkelstein, 2020).

The Boogaloo meme demonstrates the salience of memes to sustain collective identity among online far-right communities and coordinate connective action, defined as the mobilization of large numbers of individuals into a temporary movement-like group connected only through communication technologies and individual action frames (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013). Memes are uniquely suited for this type of mobilization because of their ubiquitous cultural appeal and their transmissible nature (McDonald, 2015). The Boogaloo meme attempted (with some success) to connect Donald Trump's call for a civil war (and by extension an implicit anti-Black ideology) with the goal of anti-police protestors in wake of George Floyd's death, by attempting to promote antagonism between anti-police protestors and the police (Wiggins, 2020). While no collective identity exists between Trump supporters and anti-police protestors, the memes helped identify a shared anti-state sentiment between the two which was temporarily exploited to incite connective action. Nevertheless, no research has documented the

contemporaneous production of memes on mainstream and far-right platforms in response to monumental offline events. It is thus unclear whether memetic content on different platforms results in complementary or antagonistic outcomes for the members of each respective community. Our study addresses this research gap.

The Present Study

Our study builds on, as a point of departure, Wiggins' (2020) study of how memes were used on Twitter during the attempt to incite a civil war through the use of the #boogaloo meme concurrently with a gun rally held in Richmond, Virginia in January of 2020. While this study sheds an important light on the use of memes on Twitter, it left unanswered the question of how far-right dedicated online communities like 4chan/pol respond to offline events in conjunction with social media like Twitter. That is, are the findings of Wiggins' (2020) study specific to Twitter or could they be extended to other, less regulated platforms like 4chan/pol? Meanwhile, Bliuc et al. (2019) found that offline far-right activity seems to invigorate members of explicitly far-right communities like Stormfront, leading to a stronger collective identity. Both studies lack a comparative analysis of their respective groups. Wiggins does not consider explicitly far-right communities, while Bliuc et al. do not include mainstream social media like Twitter in their analysis. We are not suggesting that such omissions weaken the contributions of either study, and we view the findings of each as essential at moving far-right scholarship forward. However, we also believe that a direct comparison of how each type of platform is used before and after a large mobilization event can reveal crucial links between online and offline far-right activity. We believe a direct comparison between Twitter and 4chan/pol/ will help scholars specializing in far-right movements to understand the impact of platform regulatory structure and offline events on the discursive and memetic strategies adapted by far-right aligned individuals online.

We capitalize on the events of January 6, 2021 to map out the differences in communication styles and thematic content of memes posted by 4chan/pol/ and Twitter users before and after the events of January 6th, 2021 to demonstrate the ways they contradict and complement each other. We collected text and image data over the span of thirteen days (6 days before/during and 5 days after the Insurrection). Our study focuses on two research questions: 1) To what extent were there differences in the thematic content of the memes posted to each platform before (and during) versus after the Insurrection?; and 2) More broadly, how do multiple social media platforms work together to facilitate the mainstreaming of ideas that are otherwise considered socially intolerable or extreme?

These research questions answer the call of social movement scholars interested in the use of communication technologies by the far-right to connect this research back to offline movements and events. At first glance, our findings reveal contradictory themes and content between the memes shared on the two platforms. However, when the timing of when the memes are shared is accounted for (before, during, or after the insurrection), the memes work in concert to radicalize and funnel individuals from issue-specific positions to generalized normalization of far-right ideology. Below we expand upon our research design, data collection, and findings.

Data Collection

We analyzed two datasets of randomly selected media (and accompanying text) posts on two social media sites, 4chan/pol and Twitter.

4chan/pol

4chan's /pol/ (*politically incorrect)* image board was selected for the following reasons. First, it is popular among users with far-right ideologies (Colley & Moore, 2022). Second, recent literature found that it produces more hate speech than similar sites like Gab (Zannettou et al.,

2018). Third, posts on the imageboard tend to be expressive of user sentiment (Topinka et al., 2021). Finally, it is by far the most active image board on 4chan (4stats.io, n.d.). 4chan by design has limited moderation with each board having its own volunteer 'janitors' to monitor content. However, interviews with 4chan/pol 'janitors' have characterized image board moderation as a largely 'hands-off' endeavor, allowing vitriolic content to disseminate (Arthur, 2020).

As threads within imageboards on 4chan/pol are not officially archived, analysis of previous threads using 4chan/pol is not possible (4chan, n.d.). To address this limitation, we selected imageboards from 4plebs.org, a crowd-sourced data archive of 4chan/pol imageboards and threads (4plebs.org, n.d.).[30] One thousand opening posts on /pol/ threads by 4chan/pol users were collected from 4plebs based on two different time frames, January 1-6, 2021 and January 7-13, 2021. Five hundred opening post threads were randomly selected from each time period.[31] The data for each of the selected time periods is based on the total number of 4chan/pol opening user posts (start of a thread) that contain media found on 4plebs (20,753 search results for January 1-6, 2021 and 50,946 search results for January 7-13, 2021). Reply posts to opening threads were excluded in the data collection.[32]

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[30] A community run archive that uses a web scraper to archive all posts to 4chan. A rudimentary online search of google scholar and the term '4plebs' reveals a significant number of publications have used 4plebs as major data sources for 4chan posts.

[31] Responses were not extracted through key words because the vernacular on 4chan/pol is already full of terms that may hold different meanings and references for insiders relative to outsiders. Keywords also don't work the same way as the hashtag mechanic on Twitter where users knowingly manipulate the algorithm to reach out to other likeminded users. The content of some posts was also limited to the meme that was posted and such posts would have been excluded from our analysis had we used keywords.

[32] Responses were not considered because we were specifically interested in how each platform was being used not necessarily the responses to this use of the platform. Memes and accompanying discourse required careful analysis and detailed discussion that we felt was more than sufficient for a single chapter or paper. Analyzing responses to a narrower selection of threads (like in Ch. 2) would make for a great follow up paper.

<u>Twitter</u>

Twitter's Premium API (Twitter Developer Platform, n.d.) was employed to collect data using the hashtag, '#stopthesteal,' because of its noted popularity leading up to and after the January 6, 2021 insurrection (Booker, 2021). Our search criteria specified that only tweets that contained media (ie. images, photographs) be collected, and retweets, quotes, and replies be excluded. Nine hundred seventeen posts were gathered between January 1-6, 2021 and 303 posts between January 7-13, 2021. As before, a random number generator was used to select a subset of 500 tweets from the first time period. As the second data frame contained only 303 tweets, we analyzed all the collected tweets.

Methodology

We conducted an inductive, data-driven thematic analysis on memes and surrounding text on Twitter and 4chan/pol via an event-oriented approach. We followed the framework of thematic analysis of Nowell et al. (2017) which consists of searching across a dataset of a range of texts to find repeated patterns of meaning. Thematic analysis can focus on either semantic or latent themes. Semantic referring to surface level meaning of the texts studied while latent analysis "goes beyond the semantic content of the data, and starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations and ideologies that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84)." We opted to conduct a latent analysis for two reasons. First, memes are texts that are already rich in meaning and require a level of interpretation that goes beyond simple semantic description (Shifman, 2014). Second, comparing how memes and surrounding text are used on two different social media platforms during a specific event requires a level of interpretative work that goes beyond the surface meaning of most 4chan/pol posts and tweets. For example, the cultural

significance of certain memes (Pepe the Frog isn't just a kid's cartoon but also constitutes part of the collective avatar (Devries, 2021) of 4chan/pol) is crucial to the understanding of how memes are used during large-scale movement events like the January 6th, 2021 insurrection.

The most prevalent themes on both platforms were coded and identified during live in-person meetings over Zoom and in-person where at least two of three authors were always present. The first and second authors coded all of the 4chan/pol/ posts and tweets ensuring intercoder reliability through extensive discussions (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). Phase one consisted of all three authors engaging in the emergent coding of each post and then collating the codes into two major themes: mobilization and identity formation. Importantly, these themes were not mutually exclusive and certain posts satisfied the theme of both mobilization and identity formation. The second round of inductive thematic analysis consisted of identifying how each of these themes were expressed on each platform. Specifically, we identified thematic differences in how memes were used for the purposes of mobilization and identity formation during the week leading up to and the week following the January 6th, 2021 insurrection. The qualitative analysis of these platform differences in meme usage is presented in the next section.

Findings

Our findings reveal intriguing differences in the thematic content of the memes posted to each platform in relation to the January 6, 2021 insurrection. First, we delineate how platforms like Twitter are used to mobilize users towards far-right causes, while 4chan/pol acts as a space for identity formation and boundary construction relying on ubiquitous memes and language; second, we show that the same memes that composed posts supporting mobilization on Twitter are eventually bundled with even more nefarious images and ideas such as fascism, white supremacy, and violence against the outgroup; and finally, we document how the revolutionary

vigor of #stopthesteal protestors gets repurposed away from political party targets such as the Democrats and toward religious and ethnic groups such as Jewish people on 4chan/pol/. Far-right recruiters on 4chan/pol/ capitalize on the Overton window[33] of a failed insurrection to radicalize disgruntled supporters of Donald Trump and the GOP. We expand on these findings below.

<u>Action Funneling on Twitter</u>

Participating in the January 6, 2021 insurrection was painted as the duty of anyone who wanted to call themselves an American because of how the U.S. was founded historically. Memes used to mobilize Twitter users channeled the identity of a *patriot* with repurposed Civil War imagery side by side with text on refusing to surrender and encouraging violent action such as to "tar and feather" traitors attempting to steal the election (see figure 3.1). Interestingly, these types of memes were also popular on 4chan/pol with depictions of Thomas Jefferson and Douglas Macarthur used to incite action prior to and during the insurrection (see figure 3.2). Memes on Twitter in the days leading up to and on the day of the insurrection also focused on the theme of freedom and being a patriotic American. One Twitter user said:

> Let's clear something up!! We LOVE DONALD TRUMP! But HE is NOT the REASON
> Patriots are in DC right now!!! Patriots went to DC FOR AMERICA!!! We've been
> SOLD like SLAVES to other countries because OUR REPRESENTATIVES are
> criminals!

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[33]The Overton Window refers to the range of policies politically acceptable to the mainstream population at a given time.

Figure 3.1. Memes used to mobilize on Twitter.

Figure 3.2. Memes used to mobilize on 4chan.

The patriot identity was bundled with one of a freedom loving American who was in danger of losing his freedom unless immediate action was taken. Memes with patriotic imagery such as the American bald eagle or references to the movie Braveheart were commonplace (see

figure 3.3). This type of meme was the least common in Wiggins' (2020) sample of memes that were used during the #boogaloo inspired insurrection in Virginia in 2020. In our sample this was the most common meme which signals a shift in the strategic use of memes for the purposes of inciting a civil war on Twitter. In the case of #boogaloo, the government itself was painted as treasonous but #stopthesteal specifically focused on the "treasonous" and "corrupt" Democrats that are threatening to take away the freedom of patriotic Republicans.

Figure 3.3. Freedom loving patriots as "us" on Twitter.

Unlike on 4chan/pol, where identity formation memes painted both Democrats and Republicans in coalition with Jews, the memes on Twitter established a dichotomy between democrats and republicans in the days leading up to the insurrection (see figure 3.4). A popular meme called on patriots to "drain the swamp." Another likened the democrats to terrorists and human traffickers because they are against "building the wall." Despite the patriotic themes of #stopthesteal resembling the civil war themes of #boogaloo, the focus on democrats rather than the government as a whole as the enemy, suggests an attitude that is more congruent with reform than revolution. Rather, the revolutionary efforts of patriots at Capitol Hill were channeled in an attempt to instill the "right" party (and president) in place rather than overthrowing the government as a whole which seemed to be the sentiment on 4chan/pol. Nevertheless, many threads on 4chan/pol supported the efforts of the insurrection and encouraged others to participate. One major difference between the two platforms was that images and videos of Capitol Hill were used to incite others to join the insurrection by Twitter users, while 4chan/pol users mostly used the images to document what was happening. This is not to say that the two sets of users belong to different groups. Rather, Twitter was simply the platform of choice for mobilizing others to this specific cause via the #stopthesteal hashtag.

Figure 3.4. The treasonous democrats as the other.

Bundling Pepe: Meme, Medium and Message

4chan/pol users predominantly used the platform to build and maintain identity. One of the ways this was accomplished on 4chan/pol was through using memes to employ a "specific semiotic construction" (Wiggins, 2019, p. 61). Under this linguistic conceptualization, 4chan/pol users employed memes for the specific purpose to delineate an "us" and a "them" narrative (Phillips, 2016). The most prevalent meme used to identify one as an insider was Pepe the Frog (figure 3.5). Pepe the Frog is a children's book character that has been appropriated and used by groups on the left and right in the past (Pelletier-Gagnon & Diniz, 2021). The appropriation of the meme by far-right groups led to it being declared a hate symbol by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) in 2016. However, the ADL have since then acknowledged that most uses of Pepe the Frog are not bigoted in nature and the interpretation of the meme as a hate symbol is context dependent (Anti-Defamation League, n.d.). Similarly, Pelletier-Gagnon and Diniz (2018) find that the meaning of the Pepe meme and how it is used is in a constant state of renegotiation and repurposing and is much better understood in relation to the time and place it is used in. In our case, Pepe was used in wide-ranging ways. The most common was to react to the news about the insurrection and pose questions about its meaning and repercussions on U.S. politics. As such, Pepe was used to position some 4chan/pol users as neutral bystanders who were there to "enjoy the show" from the sidelines.

However, Pepe the Frog was also repurposed to depict fascism, anti-Black racism, and to incite violence against people of colour. While the Pepe meme remained the most popular symbol of identity before and after the insurrection, posts after the insurrection were also more likely to use memes of Nazi and fascist imagery in conjunction and interchangeably with Pepe. In other words, such memes facilitated a gradual transition into more radical identity that was

facilitated by a progression from regular Pepe, to Patriotic Pepe to fascist Pepe and the establishment of 4chan/pol as a Nazi-friendly space (figures 3.5 and 3.6). Memes that were used to incite mobilization on 4chan/pol either depicted direct violence against the "other" or used appeals to authority to urge others to participate in a civil war (figure 2). Users repurposed themes of crusades to incite violence against anyone who was not white and therefore allegedly "sub-human." Similarly, the salient identity of Pepe the Frog, was used to spark conversations about "race realism" -a white supremacist philosophy- in conjunction with a meme that pictured a violent mob of Pepe's attacking Black people. Lastly, memes were also used to valorize those who took part in the Insurrection and were either hurt or killed in action.

Figure 3.5. Pepe the Frog as an ingroup on 4chan/pol/.

Figure 3.6. Hitler and the Nazis as an ingroup on 4chan/pol/.

Several memes of Ashli Babbit (shot and killed by Capitol Police during the insurrection) were accompanied by statements such as "say her name" or "are (((they))) going to get away with murdering Ashli Babbit?" Figure 2 depicts a drawing of Jesus validating Ashli's involvement in the insurrection. Such memes demonstrate that while radicalization occurs via the ubiquitous avatar of Pepe the Frog, those who "go all the way" and commit to the far-right by taking action are acknowledged as an individual rather than just another anonymous user. Memes that valorize individual and collective action for what are deemed as far-right causes are a staple on 4chan/pol (Kasimov, 2021). For example, "Saint Elliot Roger" a racist and misogynist mass murderer said to have inspired the incel rebellion is routinely praised on the platform. Such posts can sometimes have the effect of encouraging further action from other users in hopes that they too will get veneration from "fellow anons" (Miller-Idriss, 2020). The process of this type of radicalization seems to function as follows: 1) Pepe is bundled into memes that acknowledge individual or collective grievances to help an individual identify with Pepe; 2) Pepe is re-bundled with Nazi and fascist imagery so that the individual now identifies or is sympathetic to fascism; and 3) Pepe is replaced by the individual who is reintroduced as a "hero" or a "saint" once they have taken part in a far-right cause.

Redirecting anger and radicalization against a new outgroup

Although Twitter was effective at mobilizing users into a specific cause such as storming into the Capitol, it was less effective at keeping these users engaged once the insurrection was deemed a failure. Our data show a change in the thematic content of tweets before and after the insurrection suggesting that while the Democrats were viewed as the target outgroup in the days leading up to and during the insurrection, there was a disagreement on who exactly the outgroup was in the days after. While before and during the insurrection, Twitter users identified themselves as freedom loving patriots, for some this identity seemed to shift to apologists for Donald Trump after the insurrection had failed. This shift in sentiment signaled an implicit agreement with the notion that the insurrection was unconstitutional and served the purpose of damage control for the president who was being heavily criticized for encouraging the insurrection. One person tweeted, "the president did not incite the violence at the Capitol, change my mind. But you won't… your opinions mean nothing!" Memes in support of Donald Trump no longer spoke of freedom and the constitution but instead focused on loyalty to the president (see figure 3.7).

Figure 3.7. Outpouring of support for Donald Trump after the failed Insurrection.


There was also a shift in who was targeted as the "other" in memes posted after the insurrection. While supporters of Donald Trump maintained their antagonization of the Democrats, a significant number also shifted their focus on Mike Pence and the "traitorous"

Republican party as well as the (then) heads of social media companies such as Jack Dorsey of

Twitter and Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook (see figure 3.8). The former were deemed responsible

for the failed attempt of the Capitol Hill protestors to prolong the presidency of Donald Trump

and the latter were painted as enemies of free speech for allegedly censoring both Trump and

#stopthesteal content from their platforms. Some supporters of Donald Trump distanced

themselves from the insurrection via conspiracy theories that the Insurrection was staged to make

republicans look bad. The most common criticism of the Insurrection on Twitter by pro-Trump

posters was the conspiracy theory that it was in fact ANTIFA masquerading as Trump supporters

who have invaded the capitol (see figure 3.9). One user tweeted, "Facebook censored a news clip

reporting how Antifa infiltrated the #StopTheSteal rally." This demonstrates that while Twitter

was useful for funneling users towards a single goal such as storming the Capitol, once the

insurrection was deemed a failure, participants had a hard time agreeing on who to blame and

what to do next. The lack of a single, agreed-upon scapegoat led supporters of #stopthesteal to

argue against each other while being heavily criticized by their opponents. This illustrates the

limitations of Twitter as a platform for mobilization once the fervor of the previous days' events

tapered out.

Figure 3.8. The "other" shifting away from democrats to traitorous republicans and tech CEOs.

Figure 3.9. Conspiracy memes about ANTIFA and Democrats.
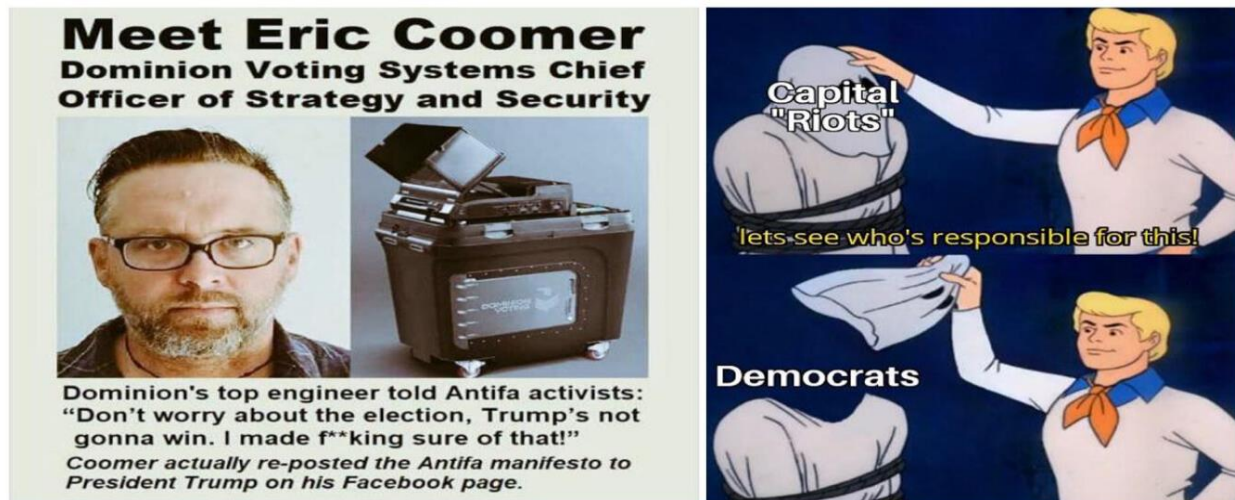
Unlike Twitter, the insidious capacity of 4chan/pol/ to recruit and radicalize users became apparent in the days after the insurrection. Far-right groups on 4chan/pol/ capitalized on the aftermath of the failed insurrection to channel the anger and disappointment of divided Trump supporters toward a new target through the help of the anti-Semitic angry merchant meme. In contrast to Pepe the frog, the merchant meme depicting an anti-Semitic caricature of a Jewish merchant (figure 3.10) was used to identify the United States government (including Donald Trump) as the enemy because of their alleged allegiance to Israel. The greedy merchant meme was used both before and after the insurrection as a way to focus the antagonism of the platform's users on a single enemy (Jewish people) and their allies (people of colour, the LGBTQ community, etc.). As such, it was deployed pre-emptively for the purposes of radicalizing Trump supporters should they find themselves in a position of weakness such as the one shortly after the insurrection. These findings demonstrate that despite the lack of ideological uniformity among users on 4chan/pol (Colley & Moore, 2022), the generalized tendency towards white supremacy allows for this meme to be adapted and used ubiquitously on the board.

Memes were used to depict the greedy merchant's agenda to take over the world and oppress

white people and culture (see figure 10).

Figure 3.10. The Greedy Merchant Meme on 4chan.

After the insurrection, the greedy merchant meme was used in conjunction with Donald

Trump's supporters' failed bid to overturn the election results (see figure 11). The insurrection

and its supporters were criticized because it was viewed as ultimately detrimental to the far-right

cause. Depictions of Donald Trump aligning himself with a Jewish conspiracy to control the

United States were commonplace (see figure 11). Mobilization posts and memes took a more

direct approach with one user stating "Americans it's over. You will never have another

republican president. The last chance is a civil war." The strategic deployment of greedy

merchant memes benefitted from 4chan/pol's unregulated structure where racist and hateful

speech and imagery are not banned like they are on Twitter. This affordance allowed 4chan/pol/

the opportunity to recruit and radicalize disgruntled Trump supporters eager to continue their

crusade to make America great again. As one 4chan/pol user stated

> All of you wignat fucking morons laughing at "MIGAPEDE" because they are stupid is
>
> an enemy. I don't care if you think its funny, there is nothing to gain from demoralizing
>
> Trump supporters. We should be channeling their anger and double down on the

revolutionary spirit. Imagine calling yourself an accelerationist while simultaneously

trying to the cull the flame of MAGA people. Yes they are stupid but they are also the

best weapon against a corrupt government.

This statement was accompanied by a meme of a Nazi soldier. Thus, far-right aligned 4chan/pol

users took advantage of the Overton Window of the insurrection to spread fascism, anti-Black

racism, and anti-Semitism along with targeting people of color and Muslims.

Figure 3.11. Donald Trump and his supporters as Jewish allies.

Conclusion

While the present study is merely a snapshot of online far-right communication styles, it

illuminates how differently regulated platforms and offline events influence memetic and

discursive practices on the internet. Our study builds on research that has revealed how platforms

such as Twitter are used for the production and dissemination of far-right memes and discourse

during large scale mobilization events (Wiggins, 2020). However, unlike past research that has

only considered a single platform at a time, ours identified important platform-based differences

in the use of memes. While Twitter was the preferred platform when it came to mobilization, the

scope of this mobilization was narrower than 4chan/pol. Few tweets used the #stopthesteal

hashtag in conjunction with memes to recruit or mobilize users for any other causes but to

support Donald Trump's presidency. In contrast, 4chan/pol users capitalized on the insurrection

to recruit and mobilize users into far-right causes such as anti-Semitic racism and violence.

Memes on 4chan/pol also heavily contributed to the conspiracy-laden identity discourse through

the mainstreaming of far-right ideology by bundling it with humour, appeals to authority, and

pseudo-science that worked to 'other' racialized and Jewish people. Our findings also suggest

that while platforms like 4chan/pol lack ideological coherence where context is often just as

crucial to the interpretation of discourse as the content (Wiggins, 2022), the opportunistic

attempts to radicalize users towards a generalized far-right ideology in the wake of a failed coup

mean that /pol/ continues to play a dangerous role long after Twitter becomes ouroboric to the

users who depend on it for mobilization.

Our study has demonstrated that Twitter and 4chan/pol serve somewhat different but

complementary functions in the overarching far-right online ecosystem. However, the following

limitations must be taken into consideration when examining content on 4chan/pol and Twitter.

Terminology on 4chan/pol user posts evolves quickly creating challenges when analyzing intent.

Colley and Moore (2022) note that the use of sarcasm (often with irony) by users on 4chan/pol,

coupled with the transitory nature, may create challenges when analyzing the data. The Twitter

posts collected via Twitter's Premium API do not include tweets deleted or suspended by Twitter

in accordance with its terms of service (Twitter, n.d.). This also doesn't include tweets deleted by

a user or accounts deleted by Twitter or by its user. This most likely impacted the allocated

proportion of categorized tweets in our thematic analysis as Twitter removed far-right content in

the aftermath of the events on January 6. This included Twitter deleting then-President Trump's

Twitter account and content that promoted QAnon conspiracy theories (Booker, 2021). We also

note that 4plebs data can be removed if a request is made to the site if a post contains

copyrighted material or personally identifiable information (4plebs.org, 2021). On both

platforms we excluded replies from our analysis, focusing on opening posts and user tweets, which could have impacted our classification efforts. Our scope was also limited as our data was split into two broad categories (before and after) that did not separate user posts by day, which may have impacted the degree of change by each classification. Additionally, we focused on one 4chan/pol imageboard and one Twitter hashtag, which precludes our findings from being generalizable to other imageboards or hashtags. Yet, our limitations demonstrate that avenues for future research can be explored, such as applying our findings to other imageboards or hashtags as well as different events or time periods.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Each of the previous chapters consisted of a stand-alone article that made its own contribution to the fields of social movements and far-right studies. However, they also built on each other to elucidate how digitally networked mobilization differs from more traditional movements, when observed from the context of far-right organizing. Below I summarize the findings and contributions of each chapter in a way that streamlines how they work together to explain more broadly the impact of decentralization on digitally networked action. I also discuss possible avenues for future research as well as limitations of this dissertation.

"Decentralized Hate: Sustained connective action in online far-right community" demonstrated that sustained connective action in support of a general ideological position (far-right) occurs on the decentralized online platform 4chan/pol. Three mutually reinforcing conditions are necessary for sustained connective action. First, mobilization efforts must appeal to users with high-time preference. That is to say, calls to action that are immediately actionable and allow for high degree of autonomy receive consistent support, while calls to action that are difficult to implement quickly are criticized. Fast-paced action and high autonomy also allow for unorthodox strategies such as those embedded in accelerationist philosophy to be evaluated on their own merit unlike on Stormfront where such calls to action are derided due to their non-traditional nature. The lack of organizational involvement on 4chan/pol/ makes calls to action that are incongruent with approaches of many far-right organizations, a feasible form of activism for a digital network of anonymous users. When anonymity was threatened via mobilization threads that promoted organizationally backed action, users either criticize or drown out such

attempts with banter and trolling. This commitment to anonymity is precisely what makes it difficult for organizations to establish themselves in a community like 4chan/pol/, while users' high time-preference and openness to experimental tactics makes the formation and operation of native organizations from within very difficult. Sustained connective action then requires members not only to be mobilized against an opponent but also to deter the movement from centralizing.

The major contribution of these findings is dispelling the myth that connective action is limited to single issue cases with initial viral growth and subsequent collective inertia (Shahin & Ng, 2021) or that movements that initially adopt a connective action model eventually transition into a centralized collective action model (Toepfl, 2017). Instead, connective action in support of a general ideological position can be sustained when platform affordances and users' participatory preferences coincide and are actively enforced by users themselves. One limitation of the findings in this chapter is that they do not make claims about whether a particular emergent issue-based movement that engages in connective action at a specific period of time will maintain its engagement or that it will not tend toward centralization and collective action. Instead, I suggest that social movement scholars should study Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) concept of connective action from the context of generalized 'capital M' movements as conceived by Mario Diani (2003) rather than specific instances of emergent single-issue mobilization which may indeed be doomed to suffer collective inertia. This conceptualization allows for 4chan/pol to be viewed as a movement for a generalized far-right position. Adapting this perspective shows how decentralized and anonymous far-right communities like 4chan/pol/ are perpetually producing reactionary mobilization efforts in support of a general far-right position that follows the model of connective action indiscriminate of what set of users engage

with these efforts. Whereas hidden networks of dispersed single members of the Nazi party were limited in their communication due to geographic barriers in the past (Anheier, 2003), widespread access to the internet circumvents such barriers, allowing for consistent and instantaneous communication between users separated by wider distances than ever before. Another limitation of the study as well as avenue of future research is the possibility that sustained connective action was in part attributable to the growing activity of far-right groups during the years the data for this study was collected. It would be interesting to compare how different political and media climates impact connective action on 4chan/pol/. Future research should consider whether there is merit for progressive movements to emulate the formula that sustains connective action on 4chan/pol/ or whether there are factors unique to movements oriented around social-justice that may preclude them from doing so.

"The Oppositional Identity: The essential role of collective identity in far-right connective action" builds on the findings of the previous chapter by asking whether sustained connective action truly does result in a diminished role for collective identity in digitally networked movements as proposed by Bennett and Segerberg (2013). To answer this question, this chapter marks the first instance of interviews being conducted with either users of 4chan or Stormfront. The case studies of 4chan/pol and Stormfront simultaneously serve as an excellent example of how collective identity formation remains integral to members of online-based movements on the far-right but also how collective identity formation follows a unique process in decentralized far-right communities. I develop the concept of *oppositional identity* to explain how members of the decentralized 4chan embrace the fluid signifier of "anon" and act out this identity in opposition to a static "they," represented by mainstream media and to a lesser extent corporations and academic institutions. This conception of "anon" is fluid because as mainstream

ideas represented by the media change, so must the collective identity of anons on 4chan. Meanwhile, users of the centralized Stormfront seem to follow a more traditional process to collective identity formation. They focus on cultivating a static "we" among those who perceive a sense of threat to their white identity from a fluid "they." All groups who come to be viewed as threats to white supremacy are viewed as opponents of the movement while the perception of being opposed by these groups serves as the basis for collective identity.

Interviews with users from 4chan show that an absence of organizations does not preclude the formation of collective identity within decentralized movements. 4chan users engaging in connective action confirm experiencing strong connections with other "anons" through shared cultural experiences. The case of Stormfront shows that a traditional collective identity remains important in online far-right spaces that are more centralized in structure. While this type of collective identity is fluid to some degree, it is still mainly centered around a shared sense of perceived oppression of the white racial identity and grievances relating to whiteness. Stormfront users are more likely to engage in collective action once they have spent time establishing emotional bonds with other members in manner widely described by social movement scholars (Polletta, 2001). These findings contradict assertions that the role of collective identity is diminished when connective action takes place.

Future research should be mindful of differences between connective action mediated by mainstream social media like Facebook and Twitter against the likes of anonymous and somewhat submerged spaces analyzed in chapters two and three. An even more intriguing direction for future inquiry is to ask whether the oppositional identity on 4chan/pol could ever result in the promotion of progressive politics if mainstream institutions such as legacy media ever reverted to a more conservative or even extreme right-wing position. There are reasons to

believe that this is the case because in the late 2000s 4chan did indeed host relatively progressive

radical movements such as Anonymous before its fall from grace and towards radical right-wing

politics (McDonald, 2015).

"Pepe the frog, the greedy merchant and #stopthesteal: A comparative study of discursive

and memetic communication on Twitter and 4chan/pol during the insurrection on the US

Capitol" ties the findings from the previous two chapters together to document why studying

movements for a generalized ideological position like the one on 4chan/pol is important. First it

helps scholars understand how connective action can be sustained over longer time frames.

Second, it shows that collective identity remains an important feature of movements mobilizing

to the logic of connective action. Third, it reveals how these types of movements work in concert

with single-issue based mobilization events where connective action is not sustained over longer

periods of time. Chapter four builds on past research that has revealed how platforms such as

Twitter are used for the production and dissemination of far-right memes and discourse during

large-scale mobilization events (Wiggins, 2021). While Twitter was the preferred platform when

it came to short-term, issue-specific mobilization in our study, the scope of this mobilization was

narrower than 4chan/pol. 4chan/pol users capitalized on the insurrection to recruit and mobilize

users into radical far-right positions such as anti-Semitism and violence. 4chan/pol's ability to

sustain connective action on the far-right, while also fostering a strong collective identity among

its users, equips it to mobilize users during the Overton Window opened by specific on-the-

ground mobilization events while also radicalizing other users who may support figures such as

Donald Trump but who were not necessarily supporters of explicit Nazi ideologies. The

decentralized nature of 4chan along with its immersive meme culture allows for not only

mobilization but also recruitment to take place without the need for (overt) organizational

involvement. In a sense, 4chan/pol users get recruited into the culture of 4chan/pol itself and due to its capacity to instigate connective action, users are constantly exposed to a wide variety of calls to action in an attempt to cater to their personalized individual action frames which shift further right, the more time they spend on the board. Recruiting users provides endless potential participants for connective action for a generalized ideological far-right position on 4chan/pol.

The following limitations must be taken into consideration when considering the generalizability of the findings in chapter three, it is possible that participants who agreed to be interviewed are not necessarily representative of the entire populations of 4chan/pol and Stormfront given that members of far-right communities are often very protective of their privacy and anonymity something that became apparent during the recruitment process. Allowing participants to stay anonymous throughout the interview process likely mitigated this limitation to some extent but not to eliminate it as a possible concern. These limitations allow multiple possible avenues for future research, such as applying our findings to other image boards or hashtags, as well as different events or time periods. Additionally, the majority of study participants were based in the United States and the large-scale mobilization event covered in chapter four was also in the US. As such it is not clear whether the findings of my research extend beyond the American context. Future researchers might want to look at platforms like Twitter and 4chan/pol/ during large scale mobilization in different countries such as the Freedom Convoy in Canada in 2022.

This dissertation has been a testament to why researchers and activists need to take digitally enabled activism seriously rather than dismiss it as simple clicktivism both for the sake of understanding how the contemporary far-right operates in order to resist it and also to learn how their successes can be adapted and their failures avoided in the context of organizing

towards social justice. The far-right frequently appropriates successful movement frames and language used by leftist movements (ie. using language from the civil rights movement to position whites as an oppressed group), in turn, it would be a mistake to ignore how their successes with digital technologies[34] can be of benefit to progressive movements.

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[34] Gaming social media algorithms to make their content go viral (Massanari, 2017). Using memes to encourage young people to vote for a candidate as a joke who then ends up winning (Beran, 2017). Sustaining connective action for a generalized far-right position (chapter 2) rather than a slow taper out into collective inertia (Shahin and Ng , 2021). Capitalizing on a failed mobilization event by consistent attempts to radicalize and recruit towards other far-right endeavours so as to not waste the momentum of movement constituents (chapter 4).

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