Extremism, fake news and hate: effects of social media in the post-truth era

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Extremism, Fake News and Hate: Effects of Social Media in the Post-Truth Era

A Thesis
Presented in
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Abstract:
This thesis examines the utilization of social media platforms (particularly Facebook & Twitter) by political actors, contemporary media, and ordinary people to disseminate false or misleading information. Furthermore, it examines how social media have aided in the mobilization of previously unpopular extremist social/political movements in the US. This research provides a rich historical account of news media and its dissemination technology. Additionally, the thesis looks to several theories to show that these events are best understood as examples of larger processes endemic to modern capitalist societies. Utilizing news media and archival records to create event catalogs, this research illustrates how fake news spreads through social media using three distinct events, the birther conspiracy, the pizzagate conspiracy, and a Russian attempt to sow discord in US politics. Finally, this research shows how several virtual “imagined communities” utilized social media to mobilize physically in one of the largest white nationalist rallies in recent memory. In contrast to similar works, this thesis demonstrates how social media in conjunction with alternative media have created competing knowledges defined by political discourses that now routinely conflict in profound ways.
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Introduction

This thesis aims to explain the relationship between social media and fake news\(^1\), as well as social media’s role in reshaping American politics. This thesis engages social media and the news shared on it as a major contributor to extreme political beliefs\(^2\). The thesis explains how the echo chambers of social media politically polarize users while isolating them from dissenting ideas. It then looks to a variety of cases where social media has had a direct role in influencing extreme events in the physical world. The first set of cases illustrate the bridge between social media and the physical world by showing the profound real-world effects of false stories and social media’s role in disseminating these stories. In addition to these cases, the thesis also analyzes the role of social media on the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville Virginia during August 2017. The analysis of these cases answer the following questions:

- How are social media utilized by political actors, contemporary media, and ordinary people to disseminate false or misleading information?
- How have social media aided in the mobilization of previously unpopular extremist social/political movements in the US?

These questions examine two concurrent phenomena that may have drastically altered the US political climate in recent years. The thesis will argue that these phenomena – dissemination of fake news and the mobilization of extreme political movements in the US – have become

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\(^1\) False news stories created and distributed online. These articles are produced for many reasons varying from satire to political manipulation. The phrase is also used by people — notably Donald Trump — as a derogatory term for news outlets and stories that the reader disagrees with or dislikes.

\(^2\) All references to extremism, extreme political beliefs, and the extreme right, refer specifically and exclusively to people and groups that advance beliefs of racial superiority or bigotry against people of any race, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, etc. In US political discourse these beliefs are typically endemic to the extreme right end of the political spectrum.
interrelated. Therefore, the author will argue that the spread of fake news is associated with the spread of alt-right discourses and mobilizations after 2015.

This thesis begins with a historical analysis of the standard of objectivity in news media, government and professional regulatory practices, the creation of the “post-truth” era, and the ubiquity of social media. It then tackles several relevant existing theories on media, neoliberalism, and social movements. This thesis utilizes event catalogs (Tilly 2002) to analyze a set of cases for emergent themes. These themes are then synthesized with existing theory to create theories that best answer these questions. Finally, the thesis concludes with a discussion of solutions created by the polarizing and mobilizing effects of the current social media climate.
Section 1: Literature and Historical Review

Historical Section

To understand how current media allow political and social actors to distort facts and mobilize people, one must examine the history of news media and the various technologies they utilize. This section details the shifts in US news media standards and norms, the shifts in media regulation by the FCC, and the advancement of various technologies used to disseminate contemporary news media. For some time, news, technology, and regulation followed a concurrent progression until regulation and news standards had begun to wane.

The History of Standards of Objectivity in the News

Despite being something that most modern Americans take for granted, the concept and practice of objectivity in news is relatively new. The modern objective news exists as a result of three things, the cheap mass production of print media, the protection of the press under the first amendment, a late 1800s movement against partisan presses, and a set of professional standards that emerged in reaction to World War I propaganda and the growth of marketing and public relations. According to Schudson, “‘Objectivity’ is at once a moral ideal, a set of reporting and editing practices, and an observable pattern of news writing” (Schudson 2001). With objectivity, the news ceases to be openly ideological and moves toward being educational. He goes on to argue that there are several measures to identify the presence of objectivity in modern journalism such as, allegiance to professional norms by journalists, ethnographic accounts of how journalists work, content analysis measuring neutrality, and resistance by journalists when their norms are openly challenged.

According to Schudson, the norms of objective reporting are articulated in four ways. The first of these norms is a ritual solidarity of the profession where journalists meet to celebrate
themselves by honoring members, recognizing new members and the promotion of older members to higher positions in the field. The second of these examples is how the group defines itself and its practices in contrast to other groups. Specifically, it holds its own practices as superior to those of other groups. The third example is the formalization and institutionalization of professional norms by the use of training or education (i.e. a journalism degree). The fourth of Schudson’s examples is the enforcement of professional norms by superiors in the workplace. He then argues that these social conditions formalize the norms of objective journalism by both providing social cohesion and social control.

The norms of objective reporting are the product of early American history. Newspapers in America were relatively unimportant until the rise of contention between the American Colonies and Britain in 1765. Soon after partisan press – news media driven by ideology – became the norm in American newspapers as the public was so polarized politically that it was easier to choose a side than to remain neutral. Soon after pro-British press was outlawed. After the American independence, the newspapers had become equally polarized on the federalist/antifederalist debate.

By the mid 1800s the steam powered press had brought about the first mass media in the form of the “penny press” newspapers. These highly commercialized newspapers heavily favored certain politicians and parties ignored or deplored the opposition. However, by the late 1800s journalism stared to shift as it formed an occupational culture and new norms. This transformation was hastened as a reaction to propaganda in World War I as well as part of the general professionalization of many occupations in the United States, including law and medicine. Practitioners were increasingly expected to undergo standardized training and to become members of a self-regulating profession. This transformation accelerated with the first
world war and by the 1920s the objective press became the norm and its practices became standardized. At this time, newspapers had begun to publish codes of ethics and promoted ideas of impartiality.

**Rise and Fall of Broadcast Media Regulation**

In addition to the norms and practices that were created by journalists and newspapers to maintain the integrity of their work, the birth of a new technology created the need for further regulation. During the beginning of broadcast radio, bandwidth was a prized and incredibly limited commodity. Early analog transmitters on the AM broadcast radio band required large bandwidths to broadcast a signal. Thus, the set number of possible simultaneous transmissions on a given band was lower compared to modern transmitters that operate on higher frequencies with different modulation technologies. As such the need for a regulatory body was clear leading to the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) in 1926 which was superseded by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in 1934. These commissions were created to regulate the allocation of bandwidth and to eventually regulate the content of radio broadcasts.

One of the FCC’s most important and earliest regulations was the Mayflower Doctrine in 1941 designed to, "provide full and equal opportunity for the presentation to the public all sides of public issues" (Pickard 2014, p104). The Mayflower Doctrine’s primary tool to achieve this aim was the prohibition of editorial pieces on the radio. The FCC argued,

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3 Broadcast radio is typically defined as commercial broadcasts such as those listened to on a standard AM/FM radio. The bandwidth is the range of frequency in hertz that the modulated carrier wave of a radio transmission is carried on. In other words, radio transmissions exist as block of frequencies centered around the frequency a listener sets on the radio. As such, there are a limited amount of these “blocks” in a given range of frequencies.
“under the American system of broadcasting [and] the limitations in frequencies inherent to the nature of radio, the public interest can never be served by a dedication of any broadcast facility to the support of his own partisan ends” (Pickard 2014, p104).

While many had questioned the constitutionality of the Mayflower Doctrine, the FCC held that since radio bandwidth was a limited commodity it needed to remain a politically neutral medium.

However, the doctrine was eventually repealed and replaced with the Fairness Doctrine in 1949. This doctrine was designed for the same reasons as its predecessor, however it functioned in a different way. The basic tenets of the Fairness Doctrine were, “(a) devote some of their programming to controversial issues of public importance and (b) allow the airing of opposing views on those issues” (Matthews 2011). In addition to these two basic tenets, the Fairness Doctrine also required broadcasters to notify anyone criticized during a broadcast and allow them to respond. Furthermore, if a political candidate was endorsed during a broadcast the broadcaster had to invite the opposing candidates to respond (Mathews 2011).

Just as the constitutionality of the Mayflower Doctrine was questioned by broadcasters, the Fairness Doctrine was subject to similar criticism. In 1969 the FCC was forced to defend its application of the doctrine to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court case was the product of a lawsuit by journalist Fred J Cook against Red Lion Broadcasting because Cook was attacked on-air by evangelist Billy James Hargis and was not given free air-time to defend himself as promised by the Fairness Doctrine. Ultimately these events led to the Red Lion Broadcasting Co. v. FCC in April 1969. The Supreme Court unanimously ruled in favor of the FCC as radio frequencies are considered government property unlike newspapers and are not subject to the First Amendment. In addition, as the FCC had argued radio frequencies are a scarce commodity
that are leased by the government. As such private censorship of public resources is not protected by the First Amendment.

In addition to the Fairness Doctrine was the Equal Time Rule for political candidates. This rule originating in the Radio Act of 1927 and the Communications Act of 1934 enforced fair representation of political candidates by forcing broadcasters that host a candidate to offer the same coverage to opposing candidates for the same office. The Equal Time Rule is still in effect today however it only applies to broadcast television and radio stations. In 1970 Nicholas Zapple argued that the Equal Time Rule must be expanded to include spokespeople and supporters of political candidates. After Zapple’s argument to the Senate, the FCC responded that a Zapple Doctrine would be included in the Fairness Doctrine that would ensure “quasi-equal opportunities” to major political parties (US Congress 1974, p23219-23222). Ultimately, until its repeal in 2014, Zapple Doctrine ensured fair and equal coverage of political candidates’ spokespeople and supporters as long as they belonged to a major political party.

In the 1980s, Fairness Doctrine was once again under constant scrutiny particularly by conservatives. To its critics the Doctrine was an attack on the First Amendment rights of radio and broadcast television journalists, even after the unanimous Supreme Court ruling against this view. In 1985 FCC Chairman Mark Fowler released a report criticizing the Fairness Doctrine. The report alleged that despite the Supreme Court ruling in the Red Lion case, the constitutionality of the doctrine remained unclear (Ruane 2011, p5).

Furthermore, the report claimed that the Fairness Doctrine stifled reporters on controversial issues therefore “chilling” free speech. The FCC report made its case that the Doctrine stifled free speech by noting that most violations occurred due to failure to provide all valid opposing viewpoints on an issue. They argued that broadcasters overwhelming started to
avoid violations by refusing to, “cover issues of public importance” (Ruane 2011, p6). The FCC argued that this was evidenced by broadcasters dropping planned content out of fear of violating the Doctrine.

In addition to these criticisms, the report pointed out that the Fairness Doctrine was ambiguously codified into law. A 1986 court decision held that the Fairness Doctrine was not codified into law by Congress. While Section 315 of the Communications Act of 1934 allowed the FCC to enforce Fairness Doctrine by acting in the public interest, it did not require the FCC to enforce the Doctrine (Ruane 2011, p7). The FCC repealed the Doctrine in 1987 claiming that it violated the First Amendment and that the scarcity argument in the Red Lion case was no longer valid. In 2011, following an executive order by former President Obama, the Fairness Doctrine was officially revoked and removed from the FCC rulebook (Matthews 2011).

After 60 years under the Communications Act of 1934 that founded the FCC, the legislation regarding telecommunications technology underwent a major overhaul with the Communications Act of 1996. This new legislation was designed to deregulate the communications industry in hopes that the new competition would inspire innovation and lower prices. One of the key changes in the law was the allowance of media cross-ownership. This shift was designed to, “let any communications business compete in any market against any other” (FCC 2013). The outcome by design was a smaller group of larger companies competing against each other. While some aspects of the law were intended to ensure access to the internet for all Americans, the law primarily was designed to lax restrictions on communications companies by the FCC.

During the nearly 20 years following the new communications act there has been a continuous struggle between the regulatory bodies and the telecommunications industry. The
most notable of these struggles started with the FCC Open Internet Order of 2010. The order consisted of three basic tenets. The first of these, required Internet Service Providers (ISP) to disclose their network management practices to their customers. The second of these rules was that ISPs could not block legal content on their networks. The third rule ensured that ISPs would not be able to discriminate in transmitting lawful traffic over their network. In 2014 the Order was challenged when Verizon sued the FCC stating that the FCC was overreaching their authority. The court agreed and vacated two of the restrictions, the no blocking rule and the no discrimination rule. As of 2018 the only remaining restriction of the Open Internet Order of 2010 is the rule requiring the disclosure of an ISP’s network management practices to its customers. Chairman Wheeler of the FCC did not appeal the court’s decision citing that the FCC would soon be rolling out new regulations for net neutrality.

In 2015, Chairman Wheeler’s new policy went into effect as the Open Internet Order. The most crucial part of this order for consumers was the Bright Line Rules. These three rules create the basis of net neutrality. The first of these rules prohibited blocking legal content on the internet. The second rule prohibited “throttling” content, unreasonably slowing legal content or services for customers. The third rule prohibited paid prioritization of content, the practice of allowing faster speeds for certain content for their affiliates or in exchange for money. These rules remained in place until late 2017, when former Verizon lawyer Ajit Pai, now Commissioner of the FCC led a 3-2 vote to repeal the Bright Line Rules.

To summarize these changes in the regulatory climate, one could say that the general political pressure to de-regulate and reduce the role of government in structuring industries meant that media are now far less stringently monitored and regulated than they had been in the
mid-century period. Some scholars might want to regard these changes as an integral part of the neo-liberal restructuring of capitalism (Harvey 2005).

**Shift to a Post-Truth Era**

At the same time that regulation of media was reduced, geopolitical events were changing the climate of journalism. In his 1992 article, *A Government of Lies*, Tesich described a “cultural syndrome” wherein Americans are so tired of the truth being associated with bad news that they choose to avoid truth in politics in its entirety. Tesich’s historical analysis explaining this syndrome recounts the media coverage of four events, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal leading to President Nixon’s resignation from office, the Iran-Contra scandal during the Reagan administration, and Operation Desert Storm during the first Bush administration. According to Tesich, during each of these events the American people were presented with information through the media that contradicted the political narrative offered by the political leaders of that time. Therefore, “[i]n a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world” (Tesich 1992).

Since Tesich’s 1992 article the term “post-truth” seems to have lain dormant until November 2016 when according to Google Trends, the term hit its peak popularity. In 2017, there have been a myriad of articles about how the various lies of the Trump administration in conjunction with “fake news” have brought us into an era of post-truth politics. Tesich’s post-truth era differs from our own contemporary period, as he focused on information avoidance due to how damaging it is to our beliefs and happiness. Our current post-truth world avoids information (as did Tesich’s) but it differs as it also denies the validity of claims firmly backed by empirical data and major media such as the large TV channels and leading print media have lost their primacy as news sources and platforms proliferate. The current post-truth era offers
many truths delivered through a multiplicity of new technological platforms. These platforms superimpose the function of entertainment on the traditional goal of informing the public; with entertaining “click-bait” drawing a larger audience than carefully collected information, media turn readily to reporting the fantastic and amusing, in many ways replicating the policies of the “penny press” in its search for maximum circulation through “human interest” stories (Schudson 1981).

Tesich begins his piece at the height of investigative reporting and the quest for truth. He then illustrates through the reactions to each revelation that over time the public had become accustomed to lies deception. Therefore, after each event the outrage over the scandal decreases until they cease to care at all. The article comes full circle when he explains the lack of outrage over leaked information that contradicted the dominant discourse on why the Gulf War began. Whereas only 20 years earlier people were outraged by the revelations of the Pentagon papers and the cause of the Vietnam War.

The first of Tesich’s events leading to the post-truth era was in 1971 when Daniel Ellsberg leaked classified documents known as the Pentagon Papers to the New York Times. The document that became known as the Pentagon papers was commissioned by Robert McNamara in 1967 under the title “History of U.S. Decision-Making Process on Vietnam Policy” (Arendt 1972). The document contained a complete list of US clandestine operations in Vietnam from 1945 to 1967, including a United States backed coup d'état in Vietnam, years before the Gulf of Tonkin incident. 4 The most significant problem that arose from the leak was that it contradicted Lyndon Johnson’s address to congress in 1964 that ultimately lead to the Gulf

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4 The Gulf of Tonkin Incident refers to the alleged attack on the USS Maddox. The incident led to a legal resolution that was ultimately used to legitimate open warfare with North Vietnam.
of Tonkin Resolution (Johnson 1964). This resolution from congress gave the Johnson administration military carte blanche in Southeast Asia. In reality, the majority of American interest in Vietnam according to McNamara was, “not to help a friend but to contain China” (Arendt 1972).

Two major outcomes resulted from Ellsberg’s leak. The first was the Credibility Gap, a term used by journalists and some scholars to describe a period of mistrust in government statements surrounding some cold war events, most notably the Vietnam War. At the time of the leak Johnson had already left office and Richard Nixon was left to deal with the fallout. Nixon denied the China containment strategy and established the White House Plumbers unit to prevent further leaks and to discredit Ellsberg. Despite the leak having no direct connection to Nixon himself, it was still damaging to the reputation of the presidential office and to the public opinion of the ongoing war at the time. Therefore, the Nixon administration ordered the New York Times to stop publishing classified documents. The second outcome came when the NYT refused Nixon’s order and therefore legal action was taken to try to silence the press. The case eventually went to the Supreme Court where they ruled in favor of the New York Times. Justice Black stated, “Only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government” (New York Times Co vs United States 1971). In doing so, the Supreme Court set a precedent that would protect and empower the press to seek out and report on all political matters without being silenced by the government.

Less than a year after this Supreme Court decision, the Washington Post reported that 5 men, including a former CIA agent and a GOP security aide, were arrested while breaking into the Democratic National Committee office with bugging equipment (Lewis 1972, Woodward and Bernstein 1972). Within months after the initial break-in the FBI was able to establish a tie
to the Nixon reelection campaign (Bernstein and Woodward 1972). The investigation heated up considerably in 1973 leading to the infamous Saturday Night Massacre when Nixon fired special prosecutor Archibald Cox and abolished that office (Kilpatrick 1973). Finally, after the Supreme Court forced Nixon to hand over tapes from the Oval Office, articles of impeachment were filed and Nixon resigned (Makenzie 1974, Kilpatrick 1974). Furthermore, during the investigation of the scandal, it was revealed that Nixon’s “plumbers” violated Daniel Ellsberg’s civil rights leading to his release (Hersh 1982). Between the Watergate break-in and President Nixon’s resignation, investigative reporting, particularly by the Washington Post, along with the publishing of leaked information by anonymous sources, brought this to public attention and widened credibility gap. As a result, the credibility gap created a “Watergate syndrome” where truth had begun to be equated with bad news. This Watergate syndrome marked a new paradigm of American indifference to scandals in the White House.

Between 1985 and 1986 the United States under the Reagan administration had secretly begun selling missiles to Iran in order to prevent Russian influence, to clandestinely support the Contras in Nicaragua, and to facilitate the release of American hostages by Hezbollah. Ultimately, after the investigation Reagan confessed his responsibility to the American people in 1987 and no charges or impeachment proceedings occurred. Shortly after, the original leaker Mehdi Hashemi was executed in Iran while Ronald Reagan suffered a substantial but temporary dip in approval ratings. According to Tesich,

“The high crimes and impeachable offences committed by Ronald Reagan and his Administration, which included our current President\(^6\), in the Iran-Contra scandal were

\(^5\) A rebel group in Nicaragua that set out to overthrow the Sandinistas. A goal of the early Reagan administration was the overthrow of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua by funding the Contra rebels. This became illegal under the Boland Amendment therefore the Reagan administration secretly sold weapons to Iran in part to secretly funnel weapons to Contra rebels.  
\(^6\) Referring to George H.W. Bush
far more serious and un-American than the crimes for which Nixon was kicked out of office. These latest crimes attacked the very heart and soul of our Republic.” (Tesich 1992)

During the Nixon administration, the Watergate and Pentagon Papers scandals were met with public outcry and large-scale investigations ultimately leading to the first and only resignation of the US Presidency. However, Reagan, after being involved in a scandal to overthrow a sovereign government by providing weapons to a diplomatic enemy, left the Presidency with a 64% approval rating and was succeeded by his Vice President. Tesich argued that this event evidenced that the American public didn’t care that this was happening and accepted Reagan’s omission of truth. This way, “we would see only what our government wanted us to see, and we saw nothing wrong with that. We liked it that way. Our government was looking after us.” (Tesich 1992).

The final event Tesich documented was the public release of April Glaspie’s diplomatic cables. Glaspie, the former US Ambassador to Iraq told Saddam Hussein, “we have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait” (Mearsheimer & Walt 2002). This statement was released by the State Department only after the US waged a war against Iraq for violating the border of Kuwait. Tesich argued that the lie in this case was that Glaspie, “in the firmest of tones had warned Saddam Hussein not to violate the territorial integrity of Kuwait” (Tesich 1992). Ultimately this was untrue even though the American people were assured it was true by the State Department. According to Tesich, the American people didn’t care:

It now turns out that it was all a lie. But the fact that the Bush Administration felt safe in declassifying those cables shows it was no longer afraid of the truth because it knows that the truth will have little impact on us. The Administration’s message to us was this: We’ve given you a glorious victory and we’ve given you back your self-esteem. Now here’s the truth. Which do you prefer? The implications are terrifying. We are being told
that we can’t have both truth and self-esteem anymore. We have to choose. One excludes the other. (Tesich 1992)

In a world where the truth is seemingly never positive and most always detrimental to our beliefs, we have chosen to deny it to enhance our lives. For Tesich, this narrative confirms that we are now in a post truth era.

While the case can be made that in 2017 Americans do care about the ongoing investigation into the Trump administration’s alleged collusion with Russia, public opinion about the scandal is split by partisanship. Tesich argued that the post-truth era of his time was the American desire to believe that the government was an incorruptible force. However, this concept and its application have evolved over the past 30 years into a similar but distinct form grounded in the dichotomy of American political partisanship.

**Transition to the Present**

The world Tesich described in 1992 was once of informational avoidance and apathy, whereas the post-truth world as it exists today is one where truth itself is contested by language and rhetoric across the political spectrum. Perhaps the most notable case of this is the denial of anthropogenic climate change. While scientists are clearly in consensus that humans are largely responsible for climate change, belief in the data is split across political lines. According to ANES’s pre-election data for the 2016 US Presidential Election, only 22% of surveyed Republicans believe that humans are primarily responsible for climate change. This is problematic as there is absolutely no scientific reason for contention about humanity’s role in climate change⁷ (Benestad et al 2015). Despite these findings there are people who not only avoid or ignore the data, but actually deny that it is true.

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⁷ Benestad et al 2015 was a meta-analysis of the internal validity of a series of scientific articles that deny humanity’s role in climate change. The findings of the analysis were that all of these
However, the fact that only 22% of these Republicans believe in anthropogenic climate change was expected since the political rhetoric from both their candidates and news sources deny climate change all together. While climate change has become a political issue, countless news articles and broadcasts continue to deny empirical knowledge, often with political language. Truth has become relative since people now get their news from sources based their political identity creating a vicious circle where news sources and political identities come to reinforce each other (Sunstein 2017).

The current post-truth phenomenon is strongly influenced by the proliferation of “alternative” media. Articles in alternative media sources commonly challenge viewpoints of mainstream media sources and often heavily utilize political rhetoric. These articles are often not subject to the same kind of scrutiny as those of mainstream sources and often make unsubstantiated claims. On one hand, alternative media allows diminished or subaltern voices to be heard across the political spectrum. On the other hand, subaltern news can be questionable in its professionalism since it can make unsubstantiated claims. Regardless of the validity of any of these claims, a dramatic shift has occurred in the way that many people view the mainstream media. The ever-increasing popularity of alternative media outlets is providing a voice for the people who feel victimized or forgotten by the media giants. Whereas 50 years ago people would either read one of a few newspapers or tune into a news radio broadcast, they can now turn to a nearly infinite number of news sites, blogs, podcasts, etc.

These alternative media sources “rebalance the power of the media” (Atton 2007). Specifically, it challenges the institutional power mainstream media has over the field (Couldry studies either lack replicability and/or utilized poor methods. Therefore, the article states that there is no scientific basis to deny anthropogenic climate change.
The mainstream media relies on the legitimation it gains by following professional norms and processes with traditional organizational structures defined by their field (Rauch 2016, Atton 2007). Alternative media deviates from mainstream media in terms of its criteria for legitimation and its utilization lower-budget technologies for the distribution of their content since they often operate on a smaller scale. Furthermore, the content of alternative media articles deviates from mainstream media as it seeks to amplify the voices of “marginalized and disadvantaged people” as well as “embracing critical and dissident perspectives that support social change” (Rauch 2016). As a result, these articles often rely on emotionally driven narratives and personal values over empirical data. Mainstream media continue to try and stay objective by sticking to factual reporting and objective analysis. However, Rauch argues that some of these practices are not mutually exclusive. Some mainstream media use emotion and bias while some alternative sources view objectivity as paramount above all else. Thus, she argues that the separating boundaries between the two have become blurred to the point that the dichotomy between mainstream and alternative is no longer valid.

A Brief History of Social Media, Smart Phones, and the “Share” Button

Two concurrent technological developments have occurred in the past fifteen years that significantly altered the social landscape of the industrialized world. The first of these technologies was social media. While social interaction on computers has been around since Community Memory was established at Berkeley in 1973, it remained benign until emergence of Myspace in 2004 (Slaton 2001, Stenovec 2011). During its golden years between 2005 and 2008, Myspace was on the rise to be the most popular site on the internet (Cashmore 2006, Gillette 2011). However, Myspace decidedly fell out of popular taste as evidenced by the massive user exodus to Facebook around 2008 (Arrington 2008). There are a few speculated
causes for the demise of Myspace, ranging from failure to innovate to Corporate meddling by Newscorp (Dredge 2015, Halliday 2011). Another possible cause was Myspace’s chaotic free for all environment as evidenced by the lack of control over by cofounder Tom Anderson.

“In any case, I would respectfully submit that we, the users of Google+ (and Facebook or Twitter) don't need to see you flipping us off, nor do we need to see you naked, or displaying something else generally considered offensive. When a social network [lets] that stuff slide, it turns into a cesspool that no one wants to visit... sorta like Myspace was.” - Tom Anderson, Cofounder of Myspace (Gabbatt 2011)

This statement by Tom Anderson was made in response to some users of Google+ protesting the removal of images deemed offensive or indecent by Google. Similar measures were carried out on Facebook, along with screening for hate speech and provocations to violence. Though Myspace gave users the ability to flag offensive or indecent images for review and removal, it was not well enforced.

Meanwhile a similar timeline was unfolding in mobile phone technology. The smartphone can trace its technological linage back to the IBM Simon Personal Communicator, first distributed in 1994 (Aamoth 2014). Like social media, the smartphone was relatively benign and unheard of outside of the business world until the introduction of the prolific iPhone and Android phones in the late 2000s. These two technologies converged in early 2007 with the release of the mobile Facebook webpage for smartphones (Arrington 2007). Soon after in 2008, Facebook had begun to launch their own independent apps for smartphones and a messaging app in 2011 (Adweek 2008, Facebook 2011).

The result of this convergence was the ability to access social media anywhere and anytime. The effect of this constant access has had many effects. First, constant access has made social media more accessible and even integral to other applications on the phone. Second, constant access has made it easier to post content to social media, especially with phones
containing camera and software to upload images to the user’s social media account. The convergence and proliferation of these two technologies has created a ubiquitous platform for social interaction and information sharing. Social media has made it easier than ever to form social groups without geographical boundaries with sometimes hundreds of thousands of members. At the same time, social media, in particular Facebook and Twitter, have made it easier than ever before to share news articles with other people simply by clicking the “share” button. Users are also able to share news articles and web links to entire groups as well. Therefore, one user has the ability to spread an article to hundreds of thousands of people with a single click. Meanwhile, all of this occurs on a platform that can be accessed anywhere by any user with a smartphone. While this technology offers great benefits, it can also have serious unintended consequences as it allows for the cultivation of political extremism and excitement to action.

Theory Section

While the previous section provided a rich historical background of the key elements of the contemporary media climate, these events are best understood as examples of larger processes endemic to modern capitalist societies. Just as the last section illustrated large shifts in news media and technology, this section details shifts the relationship between media and consciousness using the works of theorists that have tracked this relationship for decades. Following the works of Debord, Schudson, Foucault, Anderson, Sunstein, and Baudrillard, this section examines the various ways that media affects both the individual and collective consciousness. Additionally, this section looks to Bourdieu for a theoretical explanation of the relationship between neoliberalism and the media. Lastly this section highlights key theoretical concepts used by social movement theorists to examine how movements and protests take place.
Social Media as the Spectacle

One useful way to frame social media is through the framework of Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* (1983). In this work Debord presents the reader with the concept of the spectacle, a representation of culture that mediate social relation through images (Debord 1983, p1). This spectacle brings society together while paradoxically isolating individuals from each other. Within the spectacle, images become detached from real life and fuse together in a “common stream” (Debord 1983, p1). In this way, it is the “concrete inversion of life” as the images presented by the spectacle are lifeless and frozen. The representation of reality that the spectacle reveals to society is not merely a series of images but rather a world-view presented through these images. It is presented to society as a positive indisputable force that must be passively accepted (Debord 1983, p3).

The spectacle is essentially tautological, for the simple reason that its means and its ends are identical. It is the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire globe, basking in the perpetual warmth of its own glory (Debord 1983, p3-4).

The spectacle exists for the sake of itself. It is perpetuated by the passivity of society and exists as a global phenomenon. The spectacle is the product of human labor, and it is through the individual production of the spectacle that people become separated from each other (Debord 1983, p 8-10).

In many respects, social media can be conceived of as a spectacle. It too is a common stream of static images. The images that are endlessly scrolled through on social media can take many forms but all of them mediate social relationships. Like the spectacle, social media is overwhelming viewed as positive and passively accepted by its users. While there are ways to profit from social media, they exist for the sake of themselves and the enjoyment of their users. Users willingly individualize themselves to produce content that keeps the spectacle going.
Furthermore, the social media spectacle provides several world-views for its users to subscribe to. These world-views continue to perpetuate in near ideological isolation within social media.

**Surface Intensities and Aesthetic Populism**

In many respects, social media is an epitome of the postmodern world. For their users, social media platforms provide an environment to share and consume images of the “ideal” life. Such images can include images of the users’ food, coffee, a recent purchase, original artwork, or a self-portrait near an interesting object or place. Additionally, users often share content designed for mass distribution on the platform such as memes or news stories. This content gets sorted into a “common stream” for consumption and reproduction by the platform’s users.

Frederic Jameson, like Debord and Baudrillard; was critical of the reproduction and consumption of images. For Jameson, social media would be a technology of reproduction that provides a new form of consumption, the consumption of consumption (Jameson 1991, p276). Whereas a television commercial aims to sell a product, social media (through the labor of its users) depicts the consumption of products by other users to sell a lifestyle. This concept is exemplified by the fascination with food pictures on social media. When a user chooses to share a picture of their food at a restaurant, the purpose is not to advertise for the restaurant but to advertise the consumption of the restaurant’s food by the user. Additionally, when a user shares a news article on social media, the purpose is not to promote the New York Times or Buzzfeed but rather to advertise that they had read or agreed with the article.

Furthermore, Jameson argues that that one common trait of postmodern theories is the effacement of the “frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture” (Jameson 1991, p2-3). In this sense, postmodern culture is dominated by “aesthetic populism,” a cultural hierarchy that defies the previous norms of aesthetic distinction in favor of mass
produced kitsch. Underneath its “glossy advertising images,” this mass-(re)produced culture is depthless and superficial, composed only of simulacra (Jameson 1991, p9). In this surface-deep society, intense emotion takes a similar form. Surface intensities, the result of our loss of historicity and depth, mimic the appearance of the schizophrenia. These intensities can range from anxiety to euphoria and are characterized as sudden intense and fragmented moments of feeling. Such intensities are commonplace on social media where depthless content frequently sparks both outrage and euphoria.

**Informational Cascades, Echo Chambers, and the Rise of Extremes**

One of the basic design features of Facebook and Twitter that separated them from their predecessors is their streamlined and minimalistic appearances. While this should not be problematic it has become so in that all shared content looks nearly identical no matter where it comes from. This means that an article written by Pulitzer Prize winner Charlie Savage will fit the same format and be placed in the same space as something akin to a tabloid article. The aesthetics of these platforms conflate alternative and mainstream media. While not all alternative media is fictitious, some of it exists completely outside the bounds of fact. These sensationalized, heavily spun, or sometimes entirely fictional stories were once confined to tabloid racks and no directly connects us to the outermost fringes of the internet.

In an informational cascade, people cease relying at a certain point on their private information or opinions. They decide instead on the basis of the signals conveyed by others. Social media provide an obvious breeding ground for cascades and as a result, thousands or even millions of people who consult sources a of particular kind will move in one or another direction, or even believe something that is quite false. (Sunstein 2017, p111)

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8 In the Lacanian or psychoanalytic sense, not to be confused with the actual psychological condition
The social media environment is one that inspires a herd mentality. When enough people start fixating on a particular news article or topic it will spread quickly through people sharing the content. This is exacerbated further by the algorithms that curate the content. On a platform where fake news is visually similar to real news, “informational cascades” – where a news article goes viral in terms of its reach – accelerating the article into the mainstream of society.

This concept falls in line with the earlier example about Republicans and climate change. When confronted with crosscutting ideas social media users will often be more critical or avoid the idea entirely (Bakshy et al 2015). On the other hand, articles that align with the user’s beliefs will be more readily shared and liked by the user. The algorithms that curate content of Facebook react to these choices and display more favorable content and less content that challenges the user’s world-view. As a result, the user now sets the boundaries of knowledge while algorithms build the walls to shield those users from opposing viewpoints.

These findings align with Cass Sunstein’s commentary on the “daily me,” an individualized internet experience of curated content to fit the user’s preferences (Sunstein 2017). He argues that there are two growing dangers in regard to curation of internet content. First is our ability as individuals to filter out what we do not want to see. The second issue is the ability of the social media platform to filter content on our behalf:

Unplanned, unanticipated encounters are central to democracy itself… They are important to ensure against fragmentation, polarization, and extremism, which are predictable outcomes of any situation in which like-minded people speak only with themselves. (Sunstein 2017, p7-8)

The absence of these unanticipated experiences and ideas confines people to narrow but extreme world-views often without them realizing it. Furthermore, Sunstein argues that these unanticipated viewpoints are an essential part of free expression, and to hide them would be equivocal to censorship.
However, even though some information is concealed by the barriers of user choice and algorithms, obscure and unpopular ideas are more accessible on social media than they would be without it. During the Watergate scandal, there were fewer news sources and everybody for the most part read the same stories. Conversely in 2017, there are thousands of sources for news on social media, often in contradiction with each other and we can choose what perspectives they prefer:

The advent of right-wing talk radio and Fox News; the influence of social sites like Facebook, Twitter, Reddit; and the mainstreaming of conspiracy sites like InfoWars, which had almost five million visitors in the last month. By allowing partisans to live in their separate informational and misinformational bubbles, and, in some cases, to allow real news to be rendered as false — and false news to be rendered as true — they have all contributed to the calcification of the national divide. (Rutenberg 2017)

There is a news article to support just about any viewpoint these days and these articles can spread like wildfire even when they contradict empirical fact or the common-sense narrative.

The fragmentation of information sources can give way to the fragmentation of society by allowing us to polarize ourselves into groups often against each other.

According to Sunstein, polarization is the natural outcome of being surrounded by like-minded people and agreeable ideas. With polarization comes separation. Once a group has isolated itself from the others, extreme ideas can begin to form in the direction that brought the group together in the beginning. Separated from opposing viewpoints, groups are further polarized, which makes it easier to discredit an idea from outside the group (Sunstein 2011). For Sunstein, social media allows groups to congregate and isolate themselves to the point of becoming extremists just like cults and terrorists (Sunstein 2017).

Ultimately the rise of fake news, its proliferation on a technology that is ubiquitous in western society, and the polarized extremist groups fed by these stories, have redrawn the boundaries of society and knowledge. The boundary of fact and fiction is no longer confined to
established methods of journalism or science. In fact, there are established groups with thousands of members on Facebook that believe the earth is flat and there is a giant ice wall holding all the water in at the edges (Roose 2017). In addition to these obscure groups there are also several extreme political groups of Facebook as well. Typical group interaction consists of a member sharing an article or link and the users comment on it. Some of these groups like Uncle Sam’s Misguided Children are also an aggregated news source. This means that these groups have a staff that collect news from elsewhere and can rewrite the articles with a heavy political bias. This diminishes the original facts and promotes an emotionally driven narrative. Groups like these are the ultimate echo chambers – akin to intellectual silos – as they promote an extreme and narrow viewpoint with no outside opinion contradicting the ideas of the group.

**Competing Knowledges and Counter-history**

In addition to understanding how echo chambers are formed and how they produce politically extreme people, it is also important to understand the knowledge within the echo chambers. Such knowledge may clearly be fictitious to the outsider. However, those within the echo chamber may believe this knowledge with the same tenacity that the outsider would use to dismiss it. While this problem has all the pieces to construct a Gettier-style problem, there is another way to frame the problem. Rather than examining the contradictory knowledges through an understanding of truth and false, or truth and justified true belief, it is crucial to simply understand the knowledge base of an echo chamber. In addition to side-stepping some difficult epistemological questions outside the scope of this thesis, viewing the knowledge base of extreme conservatives and their history better help to understand why the cases examined within the thesis occurred.
The first step to such an analysis is to conceptualize the echo chamber as one that reverberates discourse rather than ideology. Throughout Foucault’s work the notion of ideology if refuted in the traditional sense. Rather than a clumsy authoritarian apparatus, for Foucault repression is subtle and refined, it is an insidious notion that becomes nearly inseparable from the self (Foucault 1980, p118). On the other hand, discourses are contextual to the time and place they come about (Foucault 1980, p112). These discourses form the basis for how people conceptualize knowledge and understand the world. Much like Thomas Kuhn’s paradigms, “These are not simply new discoveries, there is a whole new 'regime' in discourse and forms of knowledge” (Foucault 1980, p112).

Just as the Newtonian paradigm provided a profoundly different understanding of scientific phenomena than any other scientific paradigm, an extreme conservative discourse will provide a different view a social phenomenon than other political discourses. These views shape a knowledge of the social world and in Sunstein’s echo chamber, they reverberate and intensify. This knowledge is not bound by an abstract notion like absolute truth, rather the truth within the knowledge is determined by the dominance it has over other knowledges. Foucault implies a hierarchy of knowledges ranging from disqualified knowledges at the bottom to popular or common sense knowledge at the top (Foucault 1980, p82). These knowledges are in competition with each other to become canon in the popular discourse.

In addition to these competing knowledges there are also counterhistories. For Foucault, history is a product of discourse and an “intensifier of power” (Foucault 2003, p68). History has been used countless times to reinforce the power of governments by emphasizing the “yoke of the law and the luster of glory.” Since history is the product of discourse and discourse is the product of power, historical discourse is outside of the bounds of truth and rather dictated by the
dominant power structure of the time. Furthermore, if history is reframed in a way that does not glorify the sovereign, it can be seen as a “Janus-faced reality: the triumph of some means the submission of others” (Foucault 2003, p70). This counterhistory demonstrates struggles and resistance, but most importantly, it diminishes the exaggerated glory of the sovereign and the power of law.

Counterhistories are present in every discourse of thought. They are constructed as a record of the knowledge of the discourse. Unlike the absolutist view of the past under Roman history, a single event can have multiple histories as it is remembered through different discourses. For example, the disruption of an alt-right speaker at a university, like Milo Yiannopolis at DePaul University can have more than one history. Most people viewed the incident as inevitable and justifiable to stop a man with no academic or political qualifications from presenting his racist discourse. On the other hand, his followers’ counterhistory depicts the event disruption as an affront to free speech and that conservatives are being unfairly marginalized by a left-leaning university as part of a greater war against conservatives. It is safe to say that neither of these ways of framing the event are dispassionate. As such neither of these histories are true, but they are also not entirely false. It is important to frame these histories outside of the bounds to the abstract notion of truth and instead on the concrete notion of political power.

Political Functions of the News

In addition to his specific analysis of journalism, Schudson sees “the news” as a fundamental practice in modern capitalist societies and “the public” as a force that emerged with these societies, and it is this general examination of news and the public. According to Schudson (2008), the news media in a democratic society fulfills six functions, (1) it informs, (2) it
investigates, (3) it analyzes, (4) it creates social empathy, (5) it creates a public forum, and (6) mobilizes people and organizations. These functions serve a democratic society in different ways however a single “news organ” can fulfil multiple functions. In addition, when a particular source utilizes more than one of these functions, it can undermine its reliability to serve another function.

The first function of the news is to inform the public. The news tells the public things that it would otherwise not know about the government. In doing so, the news gives the public the ability to critique and act on the information reported.

Here journalism’s function is educational, informing the public—the ultimate democratic authority—of what its political representatives are doing, what dangers and opportunities for society loom on the horizon, and what fellow citizens are up to, for better and for worse. The educational function of journalism puts the public in the front seat and enables the citizenry to participate in self-government. (Schudson 2008, p9)

Educating the public about current events, policies, and political actions promotes social awareness of what is going on by creating transparency in otherwise secret or unseen events. In doing so, the news serves to empower the public by forming a collective that comes together and participates in the political process in a more direct way than previously possible. With credible news grounded in fact, an informed public can come together and engage in political action.

The second function of journalism is investigation. The investigative wing of journalism works toward uncovering secrets that would be contrary to the values and interests of the public. In this way journalists act as the “watchdgs” of democracy that seek out tyranny or corruption and expose it to the public. Schudson argues that this happens in two ways. First it inspires fear in powerful leaders that their actions could become public at any moment, which ensures that the leadership will regulate itself in a way that aligns with the interests of the public. Second, “in
alignment with the Habermasian public sphere”, investigative reporting, “inspires thinking, reflection, debate, and engagement among highly attentive elites” (Schudson 2008).

Unlike other functions, the investigative side of the news always works in a politically negative way. This means that rather than promoting and furthering an idea or policy, this function always attempts to foil certain ideas and actions to maintain the status quo. In its ideal application, investigative journalism will expose bad things to prevent them from happening rather than promoting the good. Therefore, it can keep politicians honest and expose injustice which is similar but not identical to informing the public. Whereas objectivity assumes an “open simple world” that can be described with relative ease, watchdog investigation assumes a “veiled complicated world” wherein the most important information is deliberately hidden from the public (Schudson 2008).

The third function of the news is its analysis of complicated material or events for the public. It is also known as explanatory journalism and its primary task is to convert scholarly or legal information into accessible public information. For example, it could take something like a healthcare bill to be voted on by the Senate and explain in common language what the bill means for the public. It can also analyze the efficacy of political or military decisions by devoting serious effort to producing a report grounded in data similar to academic work. It is designed to educate the public on complicated issues and their effects in a very deep way without obscuring issues with jargon or technical academic terminology. These articles are readily identifiable as they typically have the words “what [the subject] means for you” in the title or sub heading.

The fourth function of the news according to Schudson is the creation of social empathy, which examines how individuals or small groups link private concerns to public issues. Much like ethnographic methods of sociology social empathy stories work to show a case on the micro-
level and explain how this case embodies a much larger issue. This process humanizes the issues at hand thus helping the public understand the issues by empathizing with the subject’s private concerns. Perhaps some of the most notable and earliest of these reports according to Schudson were Bill Moyers’ interviews with people affected by then President Reagan’s budget cuts (Schudson 2008). This method provides access to a part of public life not experienced by everyone and serves a vital function in that the stories are not explicitly political but rather serve to bring the public together through sharing individual struggles.

The fifth function of journalism the creation of a public forums, traditionally trough the op-ed page in newspapers. The defining characteristic of the op-ed page from the rest of the paper is that the articles published on it are typically sourced from outside the publication. The result is a section that depicts the interests and opinions of the public through writers, columnists, academics, and regular people. While television diminished this type of journalism by maintaining a singular perspective on the world, the op-ed allows for many perspectives. As the United States, has started to move toward the internet for its news in recent years, and with access to many more publications, the public is now able to see more of these articles. Furthermore, in the current interactive era of the internet readers of these articles routinely comment on them for others to see.

Finally, the sixth function of the news is its ability to mobilize the public toward a political end. In particular, partisan journalism’s purpose is to rally an ideologically aligned group toward political action. Schudson argues that this was the dominant form of journalism in the past and that newspapers were often subsidized by political parties. Therefore, rather than objective reporting, partisan journalism’s goal is “political cheerleading” and mobilizing its readership to act towards a political end. The dominance of this type of reporting was ousted by
a reform movement started in the late 1800s that pushed for an educational perspective over a partisan perspective in journalism and elections. Even in 2017 the majority mainstream media has continued to remain mostly objective with minimal partisan bias. Despite this, partisan bias remains a secondary characteristic of most mainstream media with its primary focus on objective reporting of verifiable information.

**Construction of Communal Identity: Benedict Anderson**

In addition to the functions Schudson provides his readers, news media also ties people together to create communities. Benedict Anderson argues in his book *Imagined Communities* that mass print media ties its readers together, giving them a sense of community, without ever actually interacting with each other. Anderson asserts that a “national consciousness” is formed at the most primordial level by the creation and proliferation of “print-languages” (Anderson 2006). These languages create a unified communication method that many people understand. This is still relevant in today’s news media as the language used must be neither simplistic or too sophisticated. Therefore, news outlets make themselves accessible to the masses by writing at a reading level that aligns with the average education of their readerships. Furthermore, Anderson argues that print-languages provided “fixity” to language making it possible for us to read 100-year-old text and also ensuring that in 100 years, people will still be able to read news written today. These languages which are closer to some dialects than others become “languages of power.” The dominance of these languages allows them to win out over other dialects or languages in a country. Ultimately, when the entire population uses the same language it creates a national identity that the entire population shares.

In addition to print-language, mass media also creates a sense of national consciousness by reporting local and world news. As a result, otherwise isolated individuals are brought
together by the news they read about their nation and other nations. Even though any individual will never know all or even most of the members of a nation, they are all part of an imaginary community. "It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 2006). This communion comes from the “collective awareness” experienced by reading the newspaper as it connects readers to something larger that they all share a part in (Sheller 2015). Even today when printed newspapers are nearly extinct, the concept remains as people connect to this collective awareness through an equally mobile source in the forms of internet media and social media (Sheller 2015). In fact, social media create an imagined community with its own characteristics and sense of communal consciousness (Kavoura 2014). It is conceivable to think of the function of the Newsfeed of Facebook in the same way as the newspaper. Both the Newsfeed and its ancestor the newspaper are the products of their own kind of “print capitalism” and produce their own vernaculars, communities, and consciousness. The only addition in the Newsfeed over the newspaper is the inclusion of comments, opinions, and the activities of fellow members of the community in much greater frequency than previously possible. Therefore, in many ways not only does social media provide all the necessary components of an imagined community, it can in fact even function as its own virtual nation (Al-Rawi 2016).

**Media Events and Hyperreality**

Media events can take many shapes, from police chasing an infamous now white Ford Bronco to planes crashing into towers. These ceremonious events are the exception that bring the media-connected world together to watch cathartically while waiting for the resolution to the crisis (Dayan and Katz 1994). Media events are powerful shared experiences for many since
they don’t happen every day. For example, most of Americans know exactly where they were and what they were doing on the morning of September 11th 2001. Many of us old enough to remember also remember waiting anxiously to hear the verdict of OJ Simpson’s trial in 1995. Such events provide a connection between people that have never met in the same way as Benedict Anderson’s concept of national consciousness. However, while media events reaﬁrm the community by the communal experience of the event, the same events can divide a community along its currently existing “fault lines” such as race, gender, class, et cetera (Fiske and Hancock 2016).

While America watched the media coverage of the protests in Ferguson Missouri following the death of Michael Brown, this communal experience was felt differently by some people compared to others. In addition, media commentators provided viewers with multiple versions of the Michael Brown shooting that caused the subsequent protest. In essence, the media provided with two narratives regarding the initial shooting, Brown as the victim and Brown as the criminal. The situation was similar to the Rodney King affair from the early 1990s in both the nature of the event and the media coverage of the event. During these media events, “all media commentators present their view of events as truth” (Fiske and Glynn 1995, p516).

In Fiske and Glynn’s Trials of the Postmodern (1995), the authors present the concepts of “videolow” and “videohigh” (Fiske and Glynn 1995, p513-518). Videolow is defined as the out of focus, blurry, ambiguous image. Inversely, videohigh is the in focus, sharp version that can be broken down frame-by-frame. In a courtroom videohigh is often held highly as the orator of truth, however videohigh may not always be amenable to a media commentator’s depiction of truth. Such is the case in Fiske and Glynn’s example of how Rush Limbaugh aligned the footage of Rodney King and the police to his version of truth (Fiske and Glynn 1995, p515-516). In this
example Limbaugh manipulated the narrative in the footage by looping a three second clip of King moving his leg. Limbaugh argued that this was evidence of King lunging at the police. In this way, he utilized videolow footage in the same way that a courtroom would use videohigh footage (Fiske and Glynn 1995, p515).

During both the shooting of Michael Brown and the subsequent protests, different narratives were provided in a similar way. In the case of the shooting, there was no video, only opposing witness accounts and indications of a struggle between Brown and officer Darren Wilson. During the week-long protests in Ferguson Missouri news outlets were able to present narratives conducive to their versions of truth by controlling what footage they released. On one side news organizations emphasized footage of a heavily militarized police force moving against unarmed African-American protestors. On the other side, the footage was confined to criminal behavior and looting to create a narrative that the protesters were dangerous criminals. In these situations, “reality is always amenable to reconfiguration through the process of simulation. That is truths are never final, stable, or fixed for all times and places.” (Fiske and Glynn 1995, 512). Ultimately, the event probably contained elements of both narratives, but the reality of the situation was lost to the political polarization of its media coverage.

Similarly, these issues can also be framed through Jean Baudrillard’s concept of the “hyperreal” (Baudrillard 1994). Like Debord, Baudrillard is concerned about the role of images in society. For Baudrillard, society isn’t merely mediated by images but rather bombarded by images. This bombardment converts the social into the masses just as Debord’s spectacle perpetuates passivity in society (Baudrillard 1983, p23-24 p100; Debord 1983, p3). These images according to Baudrillard are often conflated for the real thing they represent and in many cases, precede the real thing in our perceptions.
Henceforth, it is the real it is the map that precedes the territory – *precession of simulacra* – it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. (Baudrillard 1994, p166)

Baudrillard is explaining through an allegory that a defining characteristic of post-modernity is that the model or simulation precedes the real. This simulation has no real origin or source. Despite this if the simulation is damaged or destroyed, our understanding of that which it describes becomes damaged as well. If the map in the example has greater primacy in our understanding than the territory it describes, then our understanding of the territory is baseless. Baudrillard argued that the errors that differentiated the map from the territory gave the map its charm. Furthermore, the conquest for “ideal coexensivity” is what transformed the map into the simulation that can be then simulated indefinitely. In this process the hyperreal – simulations without origin that gain primacy in our understanding over reality – sets the parameters for understanding reality.

However, a representation of “basic reality” like a map or a photograph is not immediately hyperreal. Baudrillard argues that there are four successive phases a representation goes through in its path to becoming hyperreal. First, the representation exists as a reflection of reality. It does so as being an attempt to create an equivalent to the real object. Second, it obscures or distorts the basic reality it represents. In this state the image is recognized as simulacra rather than reality because something is missing or altered. Third, the representation masks the absence of the reality it represents. In this stage the image staves off the evanescence of reality by retaining a simulation of what once was. Finally, the image reaches its fourth stage when it is no longer related to basic reality and exists as pure simulacrum. At this point the image is more real than the reality it was based upon and it becomes hyperreal.
The Disneyland imaginary is neither true or false: it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real. Whence the debility, the infantile degeneration of this imaginary. It's meant to be an infantile world, in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the "real" world, and to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere, particularly among those adults who go there to act the child in order to foster illusions of their real childishness. (Baudrillard 1994, p175)

On the first level, hyperreality implies an inability to distinguish reality from a preferable simulation that also seems real. However hyperreal images are more than an illusion, in many respects they become more real than the reality they are sourced from. In the Disneyland example, Baudrillard argues that a physical space was created “to reverse the fiction of the real.” That fiction in this case is that real childishness cannot be experienced by adults. Therefore, they go to this “infantile world” to escape adulthood and to pretend the real adults are elsewhere.

However, for the adults nostalgic of their childhood Disneyland offer more than an illusion. In this case Disneyland is a real place with real cartoon characters walking around, a place where all the Disney stories are real. To these people, at least for a moment, the employee in the Mikey Mouse costume and the equally simulated space of Disneyland become the real manifestation of childhood and all the fantasy that surrounds it. In the case of this thesis, the concept of hyperreality offers a unique way of framing fake news articles and the social media world. When framing social media through Debord’s spectacle, social media becomes a “separate pseudoworld” that remains relatively static as it can only be observed. On the other hand, framing social media as a hyperreal social space allows for a dynamic world that individuals interact with rather than observe.

**Neoliberalism and the Media**

The beginning of this chapter detailed the rise of objective news media through the creation of new norms and professional standards that consecrate the boundaries of professional journalism. In addition to these boundaries, the FCC was created in part to ensure fair and
objective reporting of the news on broadcast media such as radio and some television. These regulations were continuously challenged in the name of the First Amendment and eventually repealed starting in 1987. Furthermore, the professional standards and norms that separate professional journalism from tabloid reporting were successfully challenged by alternative media due to deregulation and new media formats.

The discontinuity present in modern journalism – the creation then abdication of norms, values, etc. – suggests a field that is at odds with itself. Pierre Bourdieu argued that the journalistic field is stuck between holding up the norms and standards that consecrate its professional boundaries and market pressure (Bourdieu 1996, p70). On one hand, professional norms such as a code of ethics legitimize the profession and separate journalists from paparazzi or tabloid reporters. On the other hand, the field has been commercialized and, “it favors those cultural producers most susceptible to the seductions of economic and political powers” (Bourdieu 1996, p70). The pressure to make a profit and to become popular in the market are antithetical to the values of professional journalism. The only way to sidestep this conundrum is to gain economic and political autonomy, something that few news organizations have.

Just as news organizations face market pressure at odds with its values, regulatory bodies such as the FCC can find themselves in similar positions. FCC Commissioner and former attorney for Verizon Wireless, Ajit Pai recently dissolved the protections put in place by his predecessor. However, this shift only represents one piece of a 30-year process of deregulating broadcast media in favor of large telecommunications corporations. In fact, such corporations did not exist prior to the Communications Act of 1996, a law designed to create fewer but larger telecommunications companies by allowing media cross-ownership.
The common thread behind both phenomena is a philosophy that, “liberty exists in private spaces in which individuals are free to enact their will when circumstances permit” (Stein 2004, p106). The neoliberal philosophy presents a utopia for its followers that is only achieved by financial deregulation. The neoliberal process is transformative and destructive to political measures and collective structures that contradict pure free market logic (Bourdieu 1998, p2).

The neoliberal programme draws its social power from the political and economic power of those whose interests it expresses […] Neoliberalism tends on the whole to favour severing the economy from social realities and thereby constructing, in reality, an economic system conforming to its description in pure theory, that is a sort of logical machine that presents itself as a chain of constraints regulating economic agents. (Bourdieu 1998, p2)

The proliferation of neoliberal policy has primarily been successful because some of its beneficiaries have considerable political and economic power. The power of those that neoliberalism serves lends a social power to the philosophy, giving it momentum and making deregulation seem like a viable policy to even those who gain nothing from its implementation. In this way neoliberal policy becomes a panacea and any failure in the policy is not the fault of the philosophy but rather the regulations that limit its full implementation.

In relation to news media neoliberal philosophy undermines the symbolic capital in the field by redefining success as market success. Rather than ensuring fair representation and objectivity, or hiring professionally trained journalists, many successful news outlets utilize sensationalism and “professional bloggers.” In the web2.0 age anyone with a Facebook account can produce and distribute news with the same efficacy as large professional organizations. Success in these alternative media is determined by market success and advertising. One key factor to the success of alternative media is the lack of any effective regulatory tool. In this way neoliberal philosophy and its policies have reshaped the journalistic field by making it irrelevant to producing successful news.
**Mobilization and Social Movements**

In addition to studying the relationship between fake news and social media, this thesis also examines social media’s use as a tool to mobilize extreme conservative fringe groups. Most of these groups have no physical presence and extensively utilize social media to communicate in relative secrecy. The extreme conservative groups that exist on the fringes of society due to their violent or xenophobic beliefs must enact a unique set of practices to meet like-minded people, recruit new followers, and to spread their discourse. Historically white supremacy and other xenophobic movements faced the struggle of finding people to join the movements due to the taboo nature of the groups. The internet and particularly social media have made meeting like-minded people easier than in the past as well as offering tools to disseminate information and organize events with relative secrecy. Despite the uniqueness of this situation, like most movements, the rise of the alt-right and other groups that protested in Charlottesville followed the formulas laid out by Charles Tilly, Sydney Tarrow, and others.

Before this rally or any protest in general, a group of people need to become mobilized. Mobilization begins at the moment people begin to make contentious claims (Tilly Tarrow 2015, p38-39). The mobilization typically intensifies as the resources to make collective claims increase, and demobilization occurs as these resources wane. In many cases this process of mobilization will give way to a counter mobilization by polity or other political actors. If these processes continue to intensify a contentious performance or event will occur (Tilly Tarrow 2015, p39). Typically, the analysis of a contentious performance starts with reconstructing the series of events using an “event catalog” (Tilly 2002, p249). In this case, “contentious performances are relatively familiar and standardized ways in which one set of political actors makes collective claims on some other set of political actors” (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, p14). In
this formula one set of actors chooses and enacts the appropriate performance from their repertoire of contention (McAdam et al 2001, p14-15). Performances can take a variety of forms from riots to online protests.

In the case of the Unite the Right rally that happened over the course of two days in Charlottesville Virginia, the original actors were the polity (Charlottesville city officials) and a loose collective of extreme conservative factions. The extreme right has a wide repertoire of contention, ranging from giving a particular university 1-star ratings on Facebook to KKK and neo-Nazi rallies. For this contentious episode, they chose a rally and a pre-rally march to protest the removal of the Robert E Lee statue from the park. In response, several liberal groups and protestors countermobilized against the event and shifted the contention from the polity vs alt-right to alt-right vs liberal protestors. With the shift in contention came a shift in repertoires from a rally to a violent protest.
Section 2: Methodology

Questions

The analysis of these cases answer the following questions:

• How are social media utilized by political actors and contemporary media, and ordinary people to disseminate false or misleading information?

• How have social media aided in the mobilization of previously unpopular extremist social/political movements in the US?

Methodology

Event Catalogs

These questions pose a unique methodological concern for a sociological thesis. Since the objects of analysis are events in the recent past rather than individuals, the success of the analysis hinges on finding a method of examining historical events that is still firmly grounded in sociology. To this end several sociologists\(^9\) have created useful methods of examining the past under the lens of our discipline. One useful method often used in the study of contentious episodes is the creation of event catalogs. “An event catalog is a set of descriptions of multiple social interactions collected from a delimited set of sources according to relatively uniform procedures” (Tilly 2002, p249). Additionally, similar methods are used in criminology and historical demography. According to Tilly, event catalogs focus around these three questions:

• “How does the phenomenon under investigation leave traces?”

• “How can analysts elicit or observe those traces?”

• “Using those traces, how can analysts reconstruct specified attributes, elements, causes, or effects of the phenomenon?” (Tilly 2002, p249)

Both phenomena under investigation leave observable traces that allow the selected cases to be reconstructed. Additionally, since Tilly’s application of this method was designed from the start to analyze contentious episodes, it is best suited over other historical methods to answer these questions. The analysis does evoke certain elements of Theda Skocpol’s comparative historical analysis, however Skocpol’s method is better suited for comparing entire movements or revolutions rather than individual cases in a single movement.

Data and Analysis

Following the event catalog method and using cases in Tilly’s other works\textsuperscript{10} as templates, each case was reconstructed into a narrative from archival and journalistic sources. After the reconstruction, each event was coded by the same basic criteria\textsuperscript{11} and a table was constructed with the results. Additionally, the analysis coded for emergent themes that were common to at least half the cases. Furthermore, images of key events were provided to add a richer description of the cases to the reader. After the data was coded, it was discussed within the framework of existing theories. This discussion creates theoretical explanations to answer the questions while utilizing the cases under observation. In the future, such explanations could be substantiated further with different methods in further research to increase the generalizability of the results.

Case Selection

One basic tenet in creating effective event catalogs is the use of uniform methods for case selection. As such a set of criteria were created to select cases best suited to answer the research questions. Fake news cases were selected based on the following criteria:

- Case must utilize social media to disseminate false information.


\textsuperscript{11} All events were coded by, origin, year, form, audience, platform, and outcomes. See figure 1 on pg. 58-59 for results.
Each case must be distinct from the other cases.

Each case must be grounded in political discourse common to social media

Each case must link directly to a significant event of controversy in the real world

The selection for the mobilization case was a bit limited as large-scale conservative extremist events are a recent phenomenon. While there have been many smaller KKK and neo-Nazi demonstrations in recent history, the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville Virginia was a natural choice. Additionally, the ideal case to answer the second research question must utilize social media as a mobilizing tool. Unite the Right is one of the few events of this type that this criterion could be confirmed without unique access to the group.
Section 3: Cases

The Real Effects of Fake News

The Birther Movement

The Birther Movement is the amalgamation of several conspiracy theories questioning the location of the birth of President Obama and the validity of his birth certificate. The conspiracy was most notably pushed by President Trump. Despite this both Donald Trump and Ted Cruz pushed the claim that their democratic opponent Hillary Clinton was truly responsible for the conspiracy (Trump 2015, Farley 2015). In fact, the term “Birther” as well as the allegations regarding President Obama’s birth and religion originated from Andy Martin in 2004 (Cheney 2016).

Andy Martin is a perennial republican candidate who has frequently ran for the US Senate in Illinois. The Birther Movement was born shortly after Barack Obama’s speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention when Martin spoke out against then Senator Obama claiming, “Obama is a Muslim who has concealed his religion” (Rutenberg 2008). Martin had continued to portray more falsehoods in a Fox News program where he claimed that, “[Obama] had once trained to overthrow the government” (Rutenberg 2008). These claims were soon used as a starting point for several other Obama related conspiracies. The whole affair had spun out of control by 2008 during Obama’s Presidential campaign when Donald Trump, Joseph Farah, and Jerome Corsi among others brought these conspiracies to the mainstream. With the conspiracy in the mainstream, Martin filed a lawsuit against the state of Hawai’i for a *writ of mandamus*\(^\text{12}\) to seek verification of Obama’s birth by the release of his long-form birth certificate.

\(^{12}\) An order to comply from a superior court
certificate\textsuperscript{13}. The Supreme Court of the State of Hawai‘i denied Martin’s petition on October 22\textsuperscript{nd} 2008, prompting several additional lawsuits by others questioning Barack Obama’s eligibility for the US Presidency.

Ultimately the smear campaign against Barack Obama was widely successful in the sense that the claims were so readily believed, even though they lacked any evidence. While Donald Trump, Fox News, World News Daily, and Jerome Corsi’s \textit{Obama Nation} all had a substantial effect on promoting these false claims, the internet and social media also played a major role in spreading these claims. Prior to the proliferation of social media and smart devices email forwards were widely used by conservatives to spread false claims and political rhetoric too extreme for mainstream media outlets (Hayes 2007).

These range from creepy rage-filled quasi-fascist invocations (“The next time you see an adult talking…during the playing of the National Anthem–kick their ass”) to treacly aphorisms of patriotic/religious uplift (“remember only two defining forces have ever offered to die for you, Jesus Christ…and the American Soldier”). (Hayes 2007)

Such emails act as an “informational staple” for the extreme right, who often dismiss mainstream media as a source of true and important information. Hayes argues that “whisper campaigns” have been around for ages but the ease and anonymity of spreading misinformation via email has made these campaigns more effective.

Such emails were used by conspiracy theorists and the extreme right to spread falsehoods about Barack Obama in an attempt to discredit him and sow dissent about his eligibility to become a US President. Such emails have even found their way into other media outlets claiming that Obama followed Wahhabism\textsuperscript{14} and that he joined a Christian church to aid his

\textsuperscript{13} See Martin v. Lingle
\textsuperscript{14} An extreme fundamentalist Islamic doctrine that labels all non-Wahhabi followers as apostates. Apostasy is viewed by some fundamentalists as a justification to kill. This doctrine has historically been at the core of Islamic terror organizations such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS.
candidacy for the Presidency (Hayes 2007). Not only is this claim false, but its original author is unknown even though it was later published in an online magazine called Insight. In addition to the emails, conservative blogs had begun to circulate falsehoods about Obama as well as Martin’s press release. These blogs and social media groups later created and distributed false information about Obama in the same way that they still do today in regards to Hillary Clinton.

**The Pizzagate Affair**

One of the more bizarre events influenced by the 2016 US Presidential Election was the debunked conspiracy theory known as Pizzagate. Prior to the beginning of this conspiracy Clinton campaign manager John Podesta fell for a spearfishing\(^{15}\) attack, leading to the second substantial email leak of the 2016 election. After WikiLeaks posted all of John Podesta’s emails on their site a conspiracy began to form on a Donald Trump forum on the site 4chan. Users of the site were dissecting the emails looking for any dirt they could find on Hillary Clinton. While doing so they read into an email conversation between the Podesta brothers about dinner plans at a Washington DC pizzeria. Though this conversation was truly about pizza, the phrase “cheese pizza” is often used by pedophiles to refer to child pornography. With that knowledge in hand conspiracy theorists on the forum began pouring over the emails for references to pizza, leading them to a mention of the pizzeria Comet Ping Pong. As with all rumors of this sort, the speculation spiraled out of control and soon there were rumors circulating on social media that the Clinton campaign was linked to a pizzeria with “killrooms” and child sex slaves where cannibalism and Satanism were practiced. On December 4\(^{th}\) 2016, an enraged and armed Edgar

\(^{15}\) Spearfishing is a type of social engineering exploit designed to target a specific person. That person is then deceived by a fraudulent link designed to mimic a real site that the victim is likely to enter their login credentials. In this case John Podesta received a fraudulent email claiming to be from Google. He then clicked a linked that redirected him to a fake Google website where he entered his username and password.
Welch entered Comet Ping Pong, fired shots into the walls, and went in search of child slaves inside the pizzeria (Aisch et al 2016). Welch came up empty handed and surrendered to the police (Kang and Goldman 2016). After the Welch incident, the conspiracy continued and Mainstream media was blamed for hiding the truth about Hillary Clinton and Comet Ping Pong. Several false videos and fake news stories were circulated on social media pushing the Pizzagate conspiracy, citing benign emails as coded messages for sexual services and pedophilia. Some stories also claimed that the sign on the pizzeria had satanic imagery and that the Podestas were kidnappers (Aisch et al 2016). In addition to the continued fake news circulating around the incident a Louisiana man, Yusif Jones, had begun making death threats to the employees of the pizzeria 3 days after the Welch incident.

**Russian Influence on the 2016 Election**

While the DNC hack and the alleged collusion between the Russian government and the Donald Trump campaign have been at the forefront of the investigations into Russian interference with the 2016 US Presidential Election, perhaps the most insidious method of Russian interference was its misinformation campaigns on Facebook and Twitter (Isaac and Shane 2017). Russian intelligence agencies have historically used a series of *active measures*\(^\text{16}\) such as *dezinformatsiya*\(^\text{17}\) and *kompromat*\(^\text{18}\) (Shelepin 1960, Andropov 1971, Mitrokhin 2007).

"The use of cyber and social media has significantly increased the impact and the capabilities that — obviously this has been done for years and years, even decades," said Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats. "But the ability they have to use the

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\(^{16}\) "Active measures" is the English translation of the Russian term for KGB and FSB manipulation of international affairs for the interests of the Russian government. The active measures toolkit ranges from informational attacks to assassinations for the intent of sowing discontent, mistrust, and manipulating foreign populations.

\(^{17}\) Dezinformatsiya or disinformation, is a type of active measure that utilizes false information or propaganda to influence a population.

\(^{18}\) Kompromat or compromising material, is an active measure utilizing embarrassing or otherwise compromising material to manipulate an individual towards a specific end.
interconnectedness [of the Internet] and all that provides ... they literally upped their
game to the point where it's having a significant impact." (Ewing 2017)

Whereas past attempts of spreading misinformation required leafleting and connections to
mainstream news presses, the modern dezinformatsiya machine (social media) is a cheap, and
effective tool where its users spread misinformation. This information can take a few forms, an
advertisement, an article, or even a paid commenter or troll. These misinformation pieces are
often shared by users who do not question the validity of the claim. This is typically the case if it
ideologically aligns with the user’s (mis)informational bubble, an informational space many
social media users find themselves in when surrounded only with information they agree with
(Bakshy et al 2015, Rutenberg 2017). Such active measures campaigns have historically been
used to so discontent and mistrust between allies or racial minorities and the government
(Mitrokhin 2007, Ewing 2017). While social media content was used as part of the multi-
pronged campaign to influence the 2016 Presidential Election, history suggests that this effect
would be only a side effect of the Russian exacerbation of existing US socio-cultural divides.
Such divides were ripe for exploitation due to the polarized extremist factions on the edges of the
political spectrum that have risen out of social media (Sunstein 2009).

As of November 2017, Facebook has discovered approximately 470 accounts and over
3,000 advertisements linked to the Russian government (Shane and Goel 2017, Shane and Isaac
2017). While most of the advertisements did not directly promote a Presidential candidate, they
promoted divisive issues such as gun ownership and LGBTQ rights. In addition to
advertisements, the Russia linked accounts were used to create pages and groups on Facebook to
enhance the distribution of material (Isaac and Shane 2017). As a result, these messages are
estimated to have been seen by 126 million Americans (Fowler 2017). Despite this Facebook
told Congress that the Russian operation was “fairly rudimentary” (Fowler 2017). According to
Fowler the algorithms on Facebook did most of the leg work. While effort went into the creation of these messages and advertisements, Russia was able to select who they wanted to target and Facebook did the work for them. Using these targeted marketing tools, the Russia-linked Internet Research Agency was able to target several cultural groups in the US and polarize them. In addition, Russian messages were shared unknowingly by celebrities which accelerated the distribution of their content (Fowler 2016).

**Social Media as a Mobilizing Force**

**Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville VA**

The Unite the Right rally was an attempt to unite the various factions of the American extreme-right to protest the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee from the recently renamed Emancipation\(^{19}\) Park in Charlottesville Virginia (Fortin 2017). The two-day event that took place in August 2017 was preceded by two smaller rallies, one organized by the white supremacist Richard Spencer and the other by the Ku Klux Klan (Lind 2017). The rally was organized by white nationalist Jason Kessler after his attempts to stop the removal of the statue had failed. On August 7\(^{th}\), less than a week from the date of the rally, the city rescinded the permit allowing the rally to occur at Emancipation Park (Graff 2017).

Citing concerns about the estimated attendance of the event, city officials in Charlottesville wanted the rally to be moved to McIntire Park for alleged safety reasons. Specifically, city officials were concerned that the large estimated attendance of the event would be too large for the smaller Emancipation Park located in the downtown area, leading to the possibility of the protestors congregating in the streets around the park. As a result, Kessler sought the help of the ACLU to sue the city of Charlottesville. Since the city had changed the

\(^{19}\) Emancipation Park was previously named Lee Park.
location on incredibly short notice while not altering any of the counter protests in the area, the judge suspected the location change was due to the nature of the protest, he filed an injunction in Kessler’s favor on August 11\textsuperscript{th} (ACLU 2017)

Unlike the previous protests in the months before the rally, the Unite the Right rally was intended to do as its name suggests in addition to protesting the statue removal. Therefore, the rally’s attendance was an amalgamation of several white nationalist, white supremacist, and neo-Nazi groups. Thus, many of the leaders of these extreme-right factions were also in attendance such as, Richard Spencer\textsuperscript{20}, Mike Enoch\textsuperscript{21}, Nathan Damigo\textsuperscript{22}, and David Duke\textsuperscript{23} (Fausset and Feuer 2017). Except for Duke, these group leaders gained their followers through the internet and social media (Diep 2017 & O’Brien et al 2017). In addition to these groups several armed militias also appeared at the rally to protest. The most popular of these militias include the Oath Keepers\textsuperscript{24} and the 3 Percenters\textsuperscript{25} (WBUR 2017). In opposition to the protestors, there were several left-leaning groups in attendance to protest the rally including Black Lives Matter, Redneck Revolt\textsuperscript{26}, and Antifa\textsuperscript{27}. In total, it was estimated that approximately 500 protesters were in attendance and more than 1000 counter-protesters.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Leader of the National Policy Institute, a white supremacist lobbying group.
\item Founder of “The Right Stuff,” a white nationalist blog and “The Daily Shoah,” an anti-Semitic podcast.
\item Founder of Identity Evropa, a white supremacist group.
\item Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.
\item Stewart Rhodes founded this organization in 2009 for current and former police and military to continue their oath to “defend the Constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic.” Oath Keepers in the police or military will disobey certain orders and the group often mobilizes to defend their interpretation of the constitution.
\item Oath Keeper Mike Vanderboegh founded the 3 Percenters with the same mission statement as the Oath Keepers. The primary difference between Oath Keepers and 3 Percenters is that the 3 Percenters is primarily for civilians.
\item An armed anti-racist and anti-fascist group
\item A collective of groups that fight white supremacy and fascism.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
The rally was originally planned as a one day event to take place at Emancipation Park on August 12th however a pre-rally march took place the night before as well. The march took place on the University of Virginia campus in Charlottesville, consisting of approximately 100 marchers (Lind 2017). The protestors marched carrying lit tiki torches while chanting white supremacist and Nazi slogans and periodically performing the Nazi salute. Meanwhile a peaceful counter-protest was in progress surrounding a statue of Thomas Jefferson. The white supremacists then marched toward the protesters at the Jefferson statue and surrounded the protesters. Soon after reportedly being attacked with pepper spray by the marchers, a counter-protester used a “chemical spray” on the marchers and a brawl ensued (Lind 2017). The event was later condemned by the mayor of Charlottesville and it increased tensions between protesters and counter-protesters the night before the rally.

The next day on August 12th protesters gathered early in McIntyre Park and chanted white supremacist and Nazi slogans while waving Confederate and Nazi flags, and Trump Pence campaign signs (Stolberg and Rosenthal 2017). The park was then surrounded by chanting counter-protesters including clergy and Harvard professor Cornel West. Despite the extremely polarized dynamic between protesters and counter-protesters, the event remained peaceful during the morning. As the beginning of the rally drew closer, both sides moved to Emancipation Park for the 12:00pm event (Stolberg and Rosenthal 2017). During this move taunting and fighting began and the arrests started to begin.

Before the rally was even scheduled to begin, the entire event was plunged into chaos. Protesters and counter-protesters used pepper spray and clubs on each other and the gathering was declared unlawful by the police. The sudden surge of violence prompted Charlottesville and the state of Virginia to each declare a state of emergency. Soon after Virginia State Police with
the assistance of the National Guard dispersed the crowd and arrested those who refused to leave only minutes after the scheduled start time of the rally (Stolberg and Rosenthal 2017). Nearly 100 extreme-right protesters moved from Emancipation Park back to McIntyre Park to try to continue the botched rally.

Finally, just before 2pm, as one group of counter-protesters was moving away from the event, Nazi sympathizer Alex Fields drove his car into the protesters, hit a parked car, then backed up through the protesters one more time as he fled injuring countless people and killing Heather Heyer (Stolberg and Rosenthal 2017 & Lopez 2017). Meanwhile in an unrelated incident two hours later, a police helicopter monitoring the rally crashed killing two officers (Lopez 2017). Several officials, including Attorney General Jeff Sessions condemned the attack as an act of domestic terrorism.

While many government officials were quick to unequivocally condemn both the hate groups present at the rally and the violence they caused, President Trump took a more weak-handed approach. In his first statement on the event Trump stated, "we condemn in the strongest possible terms this egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides, on many sides" (2017f). While some protesters and counter-protesters were violent, Trump’s statement stands apart from similar statements since he did not denounce the white supremacists, many of which were wearing MAGA28 hats. In addition, Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke tweeted, "Thank you President Trump for your honesty & courage to tell the truth about #Charlottesville & condemn the leftist terrorists in BLM/Antifa" (Cohen 2017). President Trump received similar praise by other white supremacist leaders as well. While this statement

28 Red hats distributed by the Trump presidential campaign with the words “Make America Great Again” printed on them in white letters.
boded well with the extreme-right, it was largely condemned by the media and many Republican government officials.

President Trump made another statement of the issue two days later, on August 14th. In this much less ambiguous statement Trump specifically condemned Nazism and white supremacy. This time Trump said, “To anyone who acted criminally in this weekend's racist violence, you will be held fully accountable. Justice will be delivered. [...] Racism is evil. And those who cause violence in its name are criminals and thugs, including the K.K.K., neo-Nazis, white supremacists and other hate groups that are repugnant to everything we hold dear as Americans” (Thrush 2017). The President was encouraged to make this statement by John Kelly despite believing that the first statement was sufficient (Lemire 2017). The statement was criticized for coming too late, causing Trump to criticize the “bad people” of the “#Fake News Media” (Perkins 2017). Trump had made two more statements on the event in which he pointed partial blame at an alleged “alt-left” and accused people who wanted confederate statues removed of “taking away our culture” (Krieg 2017). These statements resulted in several resignations from the President’s advisory boards.

Meanwhile, in the social media world users sorted through the footage of the rally and the march the night before in order to publish their names. This practice, known as doxxing, is a tool used to shame people on the internet. It is controversial for many reasons, including its margin for error. While many of the marchers’ identities were revealed to their families and coworkers, there was at least one case of mistaken identity (Victor 2017). Kyle Quinn, an innocent engineering professor, was nowhere near Charlottesville during the rally. He was however linked to the rally by a tweet with a picture of his face that was shared tens of thousands of times. He also received numerous hate messages on the social media platform and users were
pressuring him to resign (Victor 2017). Ultimately while doxxing people actually present at the rally resulted in some public shaming, it may not have had much of an impact.

One defining characteristic that separates the Charlottesville case from something like a clan rally was that no attempt was made by the protesters to conceal their identities (Thompson 2017). Instead Klansmen and white nationalists where shamelessly marching down the streets. Such a shift according to Richard Spencer is to normalize Nazi salutes and white nationalist ideology. Spencer claimed that the time for secret identities is over and that he doesn’t see himself as a marginal figure that needs to hide from society, rather he sees himself as a mainstream figure (Thompson 2017). By redefining the norms of society with white nationalism inside their bounds it is conceivable that the views of people like Richard Spencer will be legitimated by society. In conjunction with Trump’s refusal to unambiguously speak out against white supremacists Thompson fears that America is inching in that direction (Thompson 2017).
Section 4: Findings and Discussion

Findings

Figure 1: Table of Key Information from Cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source/Organizer</th>
<th>Year(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birther Case</td>
<td>Andy Martin (Origin) 2004-2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Multiple Sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pizzagate Case</td>
<td>Multiple Sources 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016 Election Case</td>
<td>IRA 2016-2017</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FSB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kremlin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unite the Right Case</td>
<td>Jason Kessler 2017</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Audience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birther Case</td>
<td>Misinformation American Voters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conspiracy Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pizzagate Case</td>
<td>Conspiracy Theory People Critical of Hillary Clinton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016 Election Case</td>
<td>Misinformation Campaign American People/Voters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unite the Right Case</td>
<td>Protest Rally Extreme Conservative Factions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>People for Statue Removal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Platform</td>
<td>Effects and Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Birther Case</strong></td>
<td>• Failed to Discredit Barack Obama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Several Failed Lawsuits to Deny Obama the Presidency</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Donald Trump Tried to Blame the Conspiracy on Hillary Clinton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mass Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Email Chains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Social Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pizzagate Case</strong></td>
<td>• May Have Had an Influence on the Election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Armed Assault of a Pizza Restaurant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Death Treats</td>
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<td>• 4chan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Reddit</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Twitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2016 Election Case</strong></td>
<td>• Small Influence on Election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Exacerbated Polarization Based on Politics, Race, Etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sow Discord</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Facebook</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Twitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unite the Right Case</strong></td>
<td>• Statue Removed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 3 Dead &amp; Multiple Injured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Demonstrated Strength, Size, and Support of Movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Shift from Anonymity to Pride in Identity/Affiliation (No KKK Hoods)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Event Speakers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2: Theory and Related Historical Event**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Concept</th>
<th>Related Historical Event/Shift</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Neoliberalism</td>
<td>• Deregulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Media Events &amp; Hyperreality</td>
<td>• Return of Sensationalism in News &amp; Post-Truth Era</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Aesthetic Populism</td>
<td>• Favoring Buzzfeed &amp; Alt-Media Over Traditional News Sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Echo Chambers</td>
<td>• Rise of Extremism in US Politics</td>
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### Emergent Themes

- **Social Media as Key Tool**
- **Cause or Effect of Polarization**
- **Discord**
- **Conspiracies**
- **Misinformation**
- **Social Media Effects Real World**

After rigorous coding of each of the four events under analysis, some trends and emergent themes appeared in the data. Beyond the obvious that social media has played a crucial role in each of these cases, there are some variations in how it was used in some cases. All three fake news cases shared the common intention of discrediting political candidates. While one of these cases was an organized campaign by a foreign government, the other two fake news cases
lacked the same type of coordination and took the form of conspiracy theories. The Birther conspiracy continuously made the news for nine years and was perpetuated by prominent conservatives, particularly Donald Trump. Conversely, the Pizzagate conspiracy was short-lived and did not share the same sort of popularity until the shooting. Following the incident at Comet Ping-Pong the event quickly faded away.

Of the three fake news cases, the Russian election interference stood out from the others as it was one part of a much larger campaign to influence the 2016 Presidential election.²⁹ Ironically the content released in this campaign was much subtler than the outrageous claims of the other cases. Rather than trying to convince Americans to buy into a scandal, Russian dezinformatsiya insidiously polarized American social media users by playing into their existing fears and points of contention. While the Birther case was similar in the sense that it aimed to portray an American political candidate as a religious extremist to feed into post-9/11 fears, it was still an outrageous claim to begin with. As evidenced in the images in this section, the Russian campaign was not making outlandish false claims but rather, false claims that seem real because they play into the fears of a particular group.

Lastly the alt-right Unite the Right rally stands apart from the other cases for a few reasons. Unlike the other cases, the rally was a physical event. It was organized on social media by an alt-right blogger and sever other prominent alt-right figures were scheduled to speak there. Rather than being a cause of polarization, it was a product of extreme political polarization. Furthermore, the rally was designed to unite the various extreme conservative factions and spread a different message than past rallies. Unite the Right and its aftermath not only showed

²⁹ The Russian interference campaign also relied on hacking the DNC and allegedly colluding with the Trump campaign. The Pizzagate case stems directly from John Podesta’s that were emails made public due to the Russian DNC hack.
that extremists can utilize social media to mobilize in large numbers, but it also demonstrated that the extreme right has the support of many more people than in the past. This unique incident was not condemned by President Trump. Despite its ultimate failure to save the statue of Robert E Lee, the rally was successful in pushing the extreme right into the mainstream. Most of all, as the images below depict, the rally demonstrated that racist and xenophobic groups are thriving and violent.

**Images**

![Donald Trump](image1)

*Figure 1 Donald Trump, a large proponent of the Birther conspiracy, using Twitter to spread misinformation*

![Secured Borders](image2)

*Remember about this stupid PC idea to forbid people from saying ‘Merry Christmas’, instead forcing them saying ‘happy holidays’. It is actually quite oppressive when liberals trying to forbid me from saying Merry Christmas and force me to use a greeting they prefer. And GOD FORBID you pull out a Nativity scene... oh, the horror! I say come Christmas 2017, a YUGE Nativity scene should occupy the lawn of 1600 Penn Ave! Thankfully, this PC absurd soon will be over. The left’s... See More*
Figure 2 One of the thousands of Russian Facebook posts designed to polarize Americans and sow discord

Figure 3 Two prominent Alt-Right members Tweeting about the Pizzagate Conspiracy

Figure 4 White supremacists with tiki torches surrounding counter-protestors around the Thomas Jefferson statue at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville
Discussion

How Fake News Becomes Real

In response to the misuse of their platform to spread propaganda and disinformation, Facebook announced in December 2016 that it would work with 3rd party sources to verify disputed information and claims in articles distributed on the platform (Levin 2017). However, many of these fact-checkers have voiced significant doubts in the success of this initiative as it approaches the one year mark. In addition, Facebook has continually refused to release any data showing the success of their efforts (Levin 2017). Furthermore, many of the fact-checkers hired by Facebook are journalists often work for news organizations that distribute articles on Facebook. This creates an obvious conflict of interest when screening articles with questionable validity (Levin 2017). While it may seem unimportant to put such an emphasis on verifying content on social media platforms, they are in fact significant information sources. Depending
on the age, 39 to 61 percent of social media users get political and government news on Facebook (Mitchell et al 2015). Respondents to the survey were broken up into generations and 39% of Baby Boomers, 51% of Gen Xers, and 61% of Millennials get their news from Facebook. Ultimately, if a sizable proportion of the population is getting its news from a media platform with questionable credibility, then many Americans have been unknowingly reading fake news.

While the wide-spread proliferation of fake news articles on social media platforms like Facebook is inherently problematic, it is not the sole reason that events like the Birther Movement or Pizzagate occurred.

“The more America becomes divided along its multiple axes of social difference, of which race, ethnicity, gender, class, and age are only some of the most salient, the more frequently media events and figures that dramatize these fault lines will occur, the more intensely they will grab the American imagination, and the more bitter will be the struggles to inflect them in one direction or another.” (Fiske and Hancock 2016, p291)

Due to the ongoing active measures implemented by Russia, these axes of social difference have been amplified and tensions are higher than usual. In a deeply polarized and conflicted society, media events can have dramatic effects. These events that in one sense bring people together (since media events by nature are experienced by everyone), also act to divide people based on an individual’s identity or placement in society.

During these media events, “all media commentators present their view of events as truth” (Fiske and Glynn 1995, p516). In the Pizzagate and Birther cases, conservative alternative media was manufacturing conspiracy theories that were eventually discredited. These cases had no basis in reality but became true when the evidence was fabricated to validate them. Much like

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30 Three generations were defined in the study. Respondents born between 1946 and 1964 were defined as “Baby Boomers,” those born between 1965 and 1980 were defined as “Generation X” and those born between 1981 and 1996 were defined as “Millennials.”
Fiske and Glynn’s example of Rush Limbaugh creating the footage he needed to push a narrative, these cases were evidenced by vague questionable proofs. However, in the dubious counter history pushed by the extreme-right about liberal conspiracies and government deceit, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama were believed to be guilty before the “proof” was ever found. Therefore, using questionable evidence and dubious claims to validate existing feelings of mistrust in these people was not difficult for those that believed these conspiracies.

It is crucial to recognize that the multitude of social media users that believed Russian disinformation, did not intentionally deceive themselves. As no person will ever meet every citizen of a nation or physically bear witness to every event as it occurs, our understanding of the world at large relies on second-hand accounts. These accounts typically come from news media and social media. Both social media and news media (alternative & mainstream) are largely mediated by images. In many ways, our understanding of these images is our understanding of the world.

Images produce a more urgent reality than events themselves. Images which once stood in for a reality outside themselves, now increasingly displace that reality altogether. (Fiske and Glynn 1995, 507)

Due to technological limitations, images in early newspapers were incredibly limited, now modern news media primarily consists of videos and images. These images are often captioned or framed in different ways to portray different views on what occurred. Therefore, “reality is always amenable to reconfiguration through the process of simulation” (Fiske and Glynn 1995, 512). This is inherently problematic as the same tools by which the connected world gains knowledge of itself can be used to intentionally deceive it. This was evident in the Russia case and by Andy Martin in the Birther case.
All three cases are similar in the sense that fictitious information was spread unknowingly after its original conception. In contrast, the Pizzagate case stands out from the other two since the original false information wasn’t intentionally created to deceive. Rather Pizzagate is the product of the inability to distinguish reality from a simulation that seemed more realistic than reality. Specifically, the 4chan users that were trying to decode John Podesta’s emails believed so strongly that Hillary Clinton was a criminal they unknowingly created a simulation to support this belief. At that moment, the “decoded” pizza messages were more real than anything the media or government would tell them. This pursuit of the hyperreal and the subsequent distribution of the simulated messages had caused a ripple effect, drawing in many others, including Edgar Welch and Yusif Jones. A similar effect happened in the Birther case after Andy Martin knowingly set it into motion. In that case deeply held xenophobic beliefs made the idea of Barack Obama being a Muslim born elsewhere would have undoubtedly seemed more real than the truth that he is a Christian born in Hawai’i.

According to Baudrillard, society lost its ability to determine images from the reality they originated from.

Thus information dissolves meaning and the social into a sort of nebulous state leading not at all to a surfeit of innovation but to the very contrary, to total entropy. (Baudrillard 1983 p100)

Baudrillard argued that we have transitioned into a postmodern society where we are bombarded with images. Moreover, this bombardment provides information at the cost of transitioning the social into silent masses. Ultimately reality and simulation become nebulous and indistinguishable. This means that reality is indistinguishable from simulation, and the hierarchy of reality over simulation is no longer relevant. Without the boundaries of reality, truth is individualized and amounts simply to belief rather than the pursuit of an absolute concept.
Communities of Hate

In the wake of the rally in Charlottesville and the growing extremist movements in the United States and Europe it is important to understand how these movements have spread. For years, American society has pushed extreme ideology and overt white supremacy toward the fringes of society. Public condemnation of neo-Nazis and the KKK has been an effective method for decades for keeping people sympathetic to white supremacist ideology from finding like-minded people since revealing those sympathies was dangerous. However, the internet and social media perform three distinct functions to help white supremacists meet and spread their ideology.

First, social media brings people together. Due to the large membership of these platforms and the anonymity they can offer to the savvy user, members of the alt-right and white supremacists can seek each other out by joining groups. These groups often forge imagined communities where otherwise isolated users can become connected and share information. In isolation, these groups become ideological echo chambers that amplify extreme ideas with no dissenting opinions. Furthermore, the group, often hidden from other users, provides a “safe space” for extreme ideas to be shared without consequence.

The second function social media serves for the extreme right is its ability to act as a power tool to disseminate information. Particularly Twitter has proven useful as a means to anonymously share and receive information. Since 2012 the following of American white nationalist groups on Twitter has increased six-fold (O’Brien 2017). This is particularly dangerous as there is a great deal of anonymity and ease in indoctrinating people though social

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31 While this section describes the extreme right in US politics, similar communities exist for people on the extreme left.
media (O’Brien 2017). Twitter has been extensively used by the US extremists and alt-right as well as other extremist groups such as ISIS to recruit followers and disseminate messages. In addition to Twitter there are several blog sites and chat rooms used to recruit followers that can be found in complete anonymity. Therefore, public condemnation is no longer a problem to potential white supremacists or neo-Nazis and they can actively seek out information and hate-friendly internet spaces with relative ease (O’Brien 2017).

The third function social media serves for extremists is to organize events. Before it was abruptly removed from Facebook the Unite the Right rally was using a Facebook event page to mobilize the various factions of the extreme-right (Heath 2017). Furthermore, many of the lead figures in these groups have massive social media followings that they used without cost or any real effort to spread information about the event to thousands of people. The same method was also used for the counter-mobilization to the event. Ultimately social media provide the means for fringe movements once deemed as deviant to push themselves into the mainstream with little effort. As a result, the public must figure out how to deal with extremists while they are present at hand since they can mobilize easily anywhere with devastating effects.

What Could Have Been Done Differently?

While many have called for censorship of extreme-right content from social media, such a seemingly simple solution would be misguided. Extreme-right rhetoric and hate speech are unfortunately not mutually exclusive, however it is imperative to tread carefully when censoring political speech that does not include hate speech. Such actions would only further catalyze the
exodus of extreme-right leaning people from *Leftbook*\(^{32}\) to other social media platforms\(^{33}\) where they would become further ideologically isolated and polarized. Despite this sounding like a win-win situation on the surface, pushing white supremacists into the fringes of society rather than confronting their ideas will not make the problem go away. In fact, the literature presented in the theory section explains the role of isolation, both spatially and ideologically, in creating polarized groups.

Despite all the problems that can rise out of social media, it is not intrinsically bad. It cannot create white supremacists or social justice warriors; it only catalyzes these outcomes. The polarization and political extremeness that flows through social media is magnified by algorithms designed to connect people to a product, people who may know each other, content a user might like, or users to likeminded users and groups. In this sense, it is a neutral but powerful connecting force. However, this process could also be inverted to expose users to ideas, viewpoints, and people that the user would not intentionally seek out. A socially conscious platform could intentionally expose its users to opposing viewpoints and new ideas. It could also aim to algorithmically isolate extremely political people from similar individuals rather than coalescing them together. In addition, further measures need to be taken to distinguish objective news media from opinionated news and blogs. The current model for screening fake news has proven ineffective and is fraught with conflicts of interest (Levin 2017). Ultimately, some of these measures are counterintuitive the current nature of social media,

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\(^{32}\) A slang term to refer to Facebook used by conservatives that believe Facebook is politically biased against conservatives.

\(^{33}\) Alternative platforms like Gab.ai have become havens for uncensored extreme-right rhetoric and hate speech.
however they are viable and easy to implement. Then with these measures in place, social media can do what it was designed to do, to bring people together.

**Limitations and Future Research**

While there are definite advantages to qualitative research such as increased depth and nuance, there are also limitations to this type of research. The most obvious of these limitations lie within the sampling process and low sample size. Whereas more positivistic methods would strive to remove the selection bias of the researcher, this project sought to explain larger phenomena utilizing carefully chosen samples to best illustrate these phenomena. Furthermore, with the unit of analysis being each event, there are only four samples. Lastly, the media bias within the articles selected to construct the event catalogs used for the analysis was carefully addressed but possibly not entirely avoided. While this research utilized archival records whenever possible, future research could look to these sources exclusively\(^3\). Despite these limitations, the research provided rich data and context on a some multifaceted and increasingly popular phenomena. Future research would attempt to close the gaps presented in this section by enriching this research a quantitative element. One possible direction would involve a secondary analysis of ANES data map changes in political extremism and media use on a larger scale over time. Such research was not included in this thesis as large longitudinal data sets like GSS and ANES have only begun to include variables regarding social media in the last year and the sample sizes of people who self-identify as politically extreme are very small, making analysis difficult.

\(^{34}\) Such records were not available for all cases.
Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated how social media have been utilized to disseminate false information and mobilize previously unpopular extremist movements in the US. Building upon the works of Baudrillard, Anderson, Debord and others, this work demonstrated a shift in how Americans consume news media and the role political discourses in news and social media. This shift in consumption dovetails with new dissemination technologies and deregulation by the FCC. The historical section of this thesis begins and ends with a largely deregulated news media with lax professional norms, and in both the mid 1800s and in 2018 political commentary took precedent over objectivity and political fairness in the news.

However, this does not necessarily indicate a causal relationship as several news organizations still follow strict professional norms. Rather, this work argues the shift is due to the existing polarization in American culture in conjunction with new technologies that ideologically confine and connect users to like-minded people and ideas. In this way, social media nurture extremism by creating communities that would otherwise be fractured by societal norms and by presenting or withholding information in a manner consistent with the beliefs of that community. The information presented does not need to align with the popular discourse or truth, rather it only needs to align with the existing beliefs of the community. Additionally, social media provides a unique and powerful toolkit to mobilize people to take political action.

Previous works have illuminated how social media have politically influenced people with “ideological echo chambers.” However, this thesis goes further and demonstrates how social media in conjunction with alternative media have created competing knowledges defined by political discourses that now routinely conflict in profound ways. These clashes are not confined to social media and often manifest physically and are occasionally violent.
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