

Mapping Connective Actions in the Global Alt-Right and Antifa Counterpublics

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The study examines how the Alt-Right and the Antifa counterpublics build counteridentities and influences through three connective actions: crowdsourced gatekeeping, hashtag-based framing, and political jamming. By studying social networks of Twitter-based information flows and semantic networks based on hashtag co-occurrence, coupled with bot-detection algorithms, the study presents how counterpublics build like-minded communities for information sharing and use Twitter mentions to seek rapport with fellow counterpublic members and challenge ideological opponents. Both counterpublics adopt counteractions to varying degrees in the form of oppositional framing, mockery, and trolls. Their hashtags suggest that the Alt-Right is a transnational alliance of populism and ethnonationalism capitalizing on U.S. President Donald Trump and his Make America Great Again movement, whereas Antifa's identity is more decentralized and activist-oriented, defined by progressive causes, offline rallies, and cyber operations. The results of the study shed light on digitally mediated counterpublics and how connective actions support their goals.

Keywords: counterpublic, connective action, collective action, Alt-Right, Antifa, social media

Fringe political groups are on the rise globally. Representing two factions on opposing ends of the ideological spectrum are the Alt-Right and Antifa. The Alt-Right (alternative right) is a loosely connected group of people who are sympathetic to the cause of far-right populism and ethnonationalism (Lyons, 2017). Long eschewed by establishment conservatives, the Alt-Right has distinguished itself by its opposition to multiculturalism, globalization, and the elite (Lyons, 2017). It has gained political clout through the election of populist leaders in the United States and through the rise of far-right parties in Europe (Lyons, 2017). Antifa (short for antifascist) is a global, self-organized vigilante movement that physically confronts the rise of the Alt-Right and other neo-Nazi groups (Bray, 2017). The two rival groups frequently confront one another on streets, resulting in riots, damage, and even deaths.

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The emergence of the Alt-Right and Antifa presents a new case for studying *counterpublics* (Fraser, 1990) and their online networks of *connective action* (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Counterpublics describe alternative public spheres in opposition to the dominant public (Fraser, 1990). Counterpublics relate to marginalized and discriminated groups (Clark, 2016; Duguay, 2016; Jackson & Welles, 2016) as well as to political minorities, such as the far-right in Europe (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018) and climate change skeptics (Kaiser, 2017). Recent studies have investigated counterpublics' use of digital technologies (Duguay, 2016; Eckert & Chadha, 2013; Jackson & Welles, 2015, 2016; Renninger, 2015; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015; Vicari, 2017). Whereas a great deal of focus has been placed on their counternarratives and actions (Jackson & Welles, 2015; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018), there is a lack of theorization as to how counterpublics leverage networked connective actions to build counteridentities and actions against a rival counterpublic that holds a competing ideology. Connective actions refer to a repertoire of digitally enabled, networked, personalized, and decentralized actions of mobilization that are distinct from the traditional collective actions characterized by the involvement of formal organizations and centralized resource mobilization (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Through network analyses of far-right and far-left hashtags (i.e., #bluehand, #whitegenocide, and #antifa), this study examines three connective actions: crowdsourced gatekeeping, framing through hashtags, and political jamming.

The Emergence of Fringe Political Groups: The Case of the Alt-Right and Antifa

The Alt-Right, or "alternative right," is a global sociopolitical undercurrent of the broader far-right movement. The Alt-Right comes in many forms, from White supremacy to the more moderate antiestablishment and antiglobalization populism (Mudde, 2017). Although the term *Alt-Right* is loosely defined and even misappropriated (Mudde, 2017), its followers and sympathizers are alike in their embrace of White identity politics and nativism, as well as in their opposition to the elite, globalization, and multiculturalism (Lyons, 2017). The ideologies of the Alt-Right, although looming in some aspects of American politics, are largely rejected by traditional conservatism. Therefore, the Alt-Right is marked by its fringe status in its contempt for and alienation from the political mainstream (Lyons, 2017). It should be noted that the Alt-Right has been creeping into mainstream politics through far-right parties in Europe and the Tea Party populist movement in the United States (Mudde, 2017). The Alt-Right ecosystem consists of speakers, think tanks, and media outlets, as well as Internet communities. Its online communities exist as loosely connected groups across Internet platforms, such as anonymous forums (4chan, 8chan), Reddit, and private social network sites (e.g., Gab; Daniels, 2018; Thompson, 2018).

Antifa is a self-organized, vigilante group that rises to fight racism, xenophobia, and other forms of injustice across Western democracies (Bray, 2017). It seeks physical confrontations with neo-Nazis through militant tactics and *doxxing* (i.e., exposing the private information of neo-Nazi members on social media; Bray, 2017). Antifa's radical approach stems from its followers' distrust of institutions that they consider complicit in fascism and racism (Beinart, 2017; Bray, 2017). It joins forces with such fringe political ideologies as anarchism, socialism, and communism (Beinart, 2017). Antifa has an active presence in Europe, mobilizing antiright rallies and protecting Muslim refugees from neo-Nazis. In the United States, Antifa has become a household name after its violent clashes with neo-Nazis on the University of California–Berkeley campus and in Charlottesville, Virginia (Bray, 2017). The Alt-Right's main object of hate is minority groups, including immigrants and refugees. Antifa's claimed goal is fighting against the Alt-Right to protect vulnerable minorities (Bray, 2017). The rivalry between the two groups is on display in violent on-street protests ("America's Extremist Battle," 2017) and on social media (Klein, 2019).

The Alt-Right and Antifa as Counterpublics

The concept of counterpublic (Fraser, 1990) derives from Habermas's (1989) vision that media form a public sphere for debating and deliberating issues. A public sphere, however, does not function as a singularity, but fragments into multiple, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting publics (Bruns & Highfield, 2016). The mainstream public has dominant powers in producing knowledge and social consensus (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018). Domination inevitably excludes certain groups from participating in public life. The marginalized groups then form counterpublics to challenge the dominant mainstream (Fraser, 1990). Asen (2000) associates counterpublics with oppressed identities, subversive media spaces, and underaddressed topics. Counterpublic studies commonly address African Americans, women, immigrants, and sexual minorities—those who are traditionally oppressed (see Eckert & Chadha, 2013; Jackson & Welles, 2015; Renninger, 2015). Counterpublics can be formed by those who perceive themselves as powerless, regardless of whether or not such a perception is accurate (Asen, 2000). Therefore, counterpublics are not necessarily associated with progressive causes (Kaiser & Puschmann, 2017) and can apply to the radical left and right (Downey & Fenton, 2003). Toepfl and Piwoni (2015, 2018), for example, contend that the European far-right formed a counterpublic because its voices were muted in the mainstream media. Similarly, Kaiser and Puschmann (2017) assigned the label to census-defying climate change skeptics.

The Alt-Right arguably is a counterpublic formed on the perceived oppression of White identity (Lyons, 2017). The group consists largely of White males, who are of the historically privileged class. Over the past decades, however, ethnic minorities in the United States have been gaining political voices and economic clout, whereas some working-class White males have suffered economic hardships (Hochschild, 2016). The society has moved to embrace diversity and multiculturalism, making the once culturally and economically dominant White males "strangers in their own land" (Hochschild, 2016). The perceived economic insecurity, cultural displacement, and fear of losing status drive right-wing and populist ideologies (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Mutz, 2018). Fueling the perceived oppression is censorship by the mainstream society. Outspoken Alt-Right speakers Richard Spencer and Milo Yiannopoulos have been frequently banned from public appearances and on social media (Ohlheiser, 2016). Gab, a private social networking site frequented by the Alt-Right, was once deplatformed because of its offensive content (Hagey, Wells, & Frosch, 2018).

Antifa is a counterpublic formed because of the suppression of their unpopular political belief and tactics. Bray's (2017) book chronicles how the Antifa movement suffers political alienation, media mistreatment, and repression from law enforcement and the moderate progressives in Europe and the United States. Whereas the censorship of Antifa is little reported, the mainstream media and political pundits often label Antifa as an "outside agitator" while criticizing its violence and fringe ideologies (Beinart, 2017; Bray, 2017).

Counterpublic Connective Actions on Social Media

Scholars have long recognized the centrality of media technology in counterpublics. Their early interests lay in media outlets owned by ethnic minorities and citizen-oriented media production (Asen, 2000). The more recent discussions involve digital media, which, according to Castells (2012), form "counterpower" in subversive communication networks to challenge institutional power. Digital technologies support counterpublics' two essential goals. The first goal is forming, redefining, and articulating an

alternative identity (Asen, 2000). Counterpublics are observed to have developed scripted languages and safe communicative space to be secluded from the mainstream (Squires, 2002). Social media platforms, in particular, become the very first mediated places for some marginalized populations to find collective identities and voices (Leung & Lee, 2014). In this realm, Renninger (2015) demonstrated how the asexual community used the less-regulated social network site Tumblr for private, in-group contact and identity expression. Eckert and Chadha (2013) found that the Muslim minority in Germany used blogs to express intersectional identities to challenge mainstream misperception. The second goal is to engage a wider audience, either by challenging the dominant public or seeking support (Asen, 2000; Squires, 2002). The literature presents diverse counteractions such as counterframing (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018) and hashtag hijacking (Jackson & Welles, 2015, 2016).

Despite ample examples of counterpublic members using social media for counteridentities and influence, there lacks a discussion of their actions under connective actions that have become the signature of online social movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). The notion of connective actions provides a useful framework to theorize counterpublics' digital actions and impacts. Unlike traditional activism, which requires formal organizations to play the central role in mobilizing resources and public participation, the logic of connective actions is that Internet users join social movements through "digital networking mechanisms" without the intermediation of traditional organizations (Vicari, 2017). Such collective participation tends to be self-motivated, personalized, and organizationally flattened, as well as geographically distributed (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Such characteristics match those of counterpublics as being grassroots and nonhierarchical (Downey & Fenton, 2003). Next, I synthesize previously identified digital counterpublic actions into three connective actions: *hashtag-based framing*, *crowdsourced gatekeeping*, and *political jamming*.

Hashtag-based framing. A hashtag is a user-assigned label to annotate social media texts. Common hashtags weave like-minded individuals into a networked public in redefining and reframing contentious issues (Bruns, Moon, Paul, & Münch, 2016; Hopke, 2015). Pond and Lewis (2017) call hashtags "the representative symbols of personalized action frames" (p. 5) that could redefine dominant narratives. When used as sense-making tools and interpretative schemata, hashtags highlight certain aspects of identities and events (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013): For instance, the use of #Solidarityisforwhitewomen and #NotYourAsianSideKick reveals how feminist identities intersect with racial identities (Kuo, 2018). When used for performative expressions, studies reveal how marginalized groups tell personalized stories through common hashtags to challenge hegemonic discourses (Liao, 2019; Papacharissi, 2012). In a move that embodies "frame alignment" (Benford & Snow, 2000), users connect between otherwise disconnected issues by using multiple hashtags in the same context (Vicari, 2017). Because counterpublics reflect diverse interests and causes (Asen, 2000), the frame alignment is a strategic step to "link their interests and interpretive frames with those of prospective constituents and actual or prospective resource providers" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 624). Through this lens, Tremayne (2014) shows how online groups/movements addressing different equality issues aligned with the #Occupy movement to project a unified voice. Jackson and Welles (2015) reveal how the Occupy movement and civil rights groups joined the Black counterpublics through shared hashtags.

Crowdsourced gatekeeping. Social media enable the sharing of user-created content to reach a mass audience. On Twitter, for example, users frequently retweet or share content via the @RT marker. Users can also mention other users (via the @ marker) for directed replies and commenting. Bennett and

Seegerberg (2012) call the personalized sharing “the linchpin of connective action” (p. 760). Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) further argue that the sharing embodies *networked gatekeeping* because users collectively filter the stream of user-generated content, finding the most relevant and important information. The most shared content and users become the prominent voice of a minority community (called *crowdsourced elites*) rising to challenge elite narratives (Jackson & Welles, 2015, 2016). Jackson and Welles (2015, 2016) observed that through everyday activism and citizen reporting, average members of African American neighborhoods could become opinion leaders to reset the news agenda. Driven by the goal of creating counternarratives, counterpublic members can leverage social media’s sharing features to create influencers.

Political jamming. Social media enable counterpublic members to co-opt existing communicative spaces of the dominant class through the subversion of original meanings, coupled with the use of humor, parody, and mockery (Cammaerts, 2007). Examples of political jamming include infiltrating established institutions’ social media pages, as in the case of the Occupy Central movement in Hong Kong (Chan, 2018), hijacking official hashtags in African American activists’ jamming of #myNYPD to mock and criticize alleged law enforcement brutality (Jackson & Welles, 2015), and in Cambodian youths’ production of satirical memes to protest against their authoritarian regime (Lee, 2018). The use of social media bots and trolls—that is, manipulating platform algorithms to spam other users and amplify certain viewpoints—raises the possibility of a new form of political jamming. Trolls are used to mislead, agitate, and disrupt opponents’ communication spaces, sowing distrust and divisions (Woolley & Howard, 2019); they have been used to wage information warfare between nation-states (Al-Rawi, 2019). Bots are used to automate information diffusion, which embodies what Chan (2018) refers to as *copy and paste jamming*, in which counterpublics leverage the “structural affordances of networked publics” (p. 11) to record and amplify messages. Both trolls and bots can be conceived as political jamming because they introduce noise into the signal in a saturated media space characterized by information overload and attention deficiency (Al-Rawi, 2019).

This study examines connective actions used by the Alt-Right and Antifa counterpublics, emphasizing how connective actions reveal counteridentities and counteractions. I conduct this work in consideration of two gaps in the literature. The first gap is the lack of theorization of Antifa and the Alt-Right as mediated counterpublics. Recent works detail the genesis of Antifa (Bray, 2017) and the Alt-Right (Mudde, 2017). Communication scholars have also studied how the two groups use Internet platforms (Daniels, 2018; Eddington, 2018; Klein, 2019). However, no study, to my knowledge, has discussed the Alt-Right and Antifa through the lens of counterpublics, presenting a missed opportunity to update the old theoretical framework with recent cases. More important, the second gap is a lack of research on linking connective actions to counterpublics’ goals of identity articulation and building counteractions. This study thus expands the literature’s focus on rhetoric (Klein, 2019) to consider a broader repertoire of digital actions. Guided by the aforementioned three connective actions, I propose the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the Alt-Right and Antifa counterpublics use the crowdsourced gatekeeping process to develop counteridentities and counteractions?

RQ2: How do the Alt-Right and Antifa counterpublics use hashtag-based framing to develop their counteridentities and counteractions?

RQ3: How do the Alt-Right and Antifa's counterpublics use political jamming for counteridentities and counteractions?

Method

The Alt-Right has popularized racially charged and conspiracy-sounding hashtags, such as #whitewomenaremagic, #whitegenocide, and #bluehand (Daniels, 2018; Morgan, 2016). According to the definition provided by the Urban Dictionary (Bluehand, n.d.), #bluehand is described as "an online movement against political correctness and Islamification of countries"; #whitegenocide is related to the White genocide conspiracy theory positing that immigration, racial integration, and other progressive policies have resulted in reverse discrimination against the Caucasian White. I selected the two hashtags because the hashtags represent the underlying core grievance expressed by the Alt-Right. The hashtags have also received mainstream media coverage (Morgan, 2016) and scholarly attention (Eddington, 2018; Graham, 2016) in studying the radical right. The Antifa counterpublic has a digital community center called It's Going Down, designed as a hub for the anarchist, antifascist, autonomous anticapitalist, and anticolonial movements. It uses a group of hashtags (e.g., #antifa, #allout, and #prisonstrike) to organize protests countering neo-Nazis (It's Going Down, 2017). The current study focuses on #antifa and its general use in everyday Antifa activities.

Data Collection

I used a customized Python script to grab all tweets available through the public Twitter Search API in the study period (between April 15, 2018, and August 15, 2018). The timeframe covers the one-year anniversary of the notorious Charlottesville car attack by an Alt-Right protester. The Python script (available on request) was set to run daily to ensure the thoroughness in data collection. However, given the black-box nature of Twitter API (Rafail, 2018), it is difficult to gauge the representativeness of this convenient tweet sample collected from the Search API. After removing duplicates, the data set includes 33,271 tweets from #bluehand, 58,917 from #whitegenocide, and 217,285 tweets from #antifa. To protect user privacy, the institutional review board at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst reviewed and approved the study protocol. Multiple steps were taken to minimize the exposure of personal information in data visualization. Following prior work (Jackson & Welles, 2015, 2016; Vicari, 2017), I used network analysis to reveal and quantify counterpublics' connective actions. Network analysis can visualize and quantify connections between entities—whether they are Internet users, words, or hashtags.

Social Network Analysis for Crowdsourced Gatekeeping (RQ1)

I first applied social network analysis to study user-to-user relationships formed on retweeting and Twitter mentions. *Betweenness centrality*, a network indicator measuring how central (and consequently influential) a user is in a network, was calculated to identify crowdsourced elites (Jackson & Welles, 2015, 2016; Vicari, 2017): Crowdsourced elites are those who are ranked highest by betweenness centrality. I then used the Python package *tsm* (Freelon, 2014) to create two social networks based on retweets and mentions. The retweet network (based on the retweeting of any of the three hashtags) has 1,011,167 nodes (i.e., accounts) and 196,518 edges (i.e., connections). The mentions network has 27,059 nodes and 39,664 edges. Blondel, Guillaume, Lambiotte, and Lefebvre's (2008) community detection algorithm was applied to compartmentalize Twitter accounts in a network into clusters (subgroups), revealing counterpublic groups distinguishable by ideologies and interests. The accounts in each identified cluster tend to have frequent

interactions (via retweeting or mentions) with other accounts in the same cluster but limited contact with accounts outside the cluster. The five biggest clusters were analyzed for their crowdsourced elites. To contextualize findings, I manually read all identified crowdsourced elites' tweets.

Semantic Network Analysis for Hashtag-Based Framing (RQ2)

Because hashtag co-occurrence indicates "frame alignment" (Vicari, 2017), I created semantic networks in which two hashtags are connected if they co-occur in the same text. Counterpublic identities are revealed through hashtag co-occurrence in the same Twitter user's bio, and the same goes for counteractions through a co-occurrence in the same user's tweets. To conserve computing resources, I limited the analyses to the 20,000 most frequently used hashtags in each network. The semantic networks were created using *quanteda*, an open-source R library for textual analysis (Benoit et al., 2017). Betweenness centrality was used to identify prominent hashtags. Blondel and colleagues' (2008) community detection algorithm was used to cluster hashtags into distinct subgroups for later interpretations.

Bots and Troll Detection for Studying Political Jamming (RQ3)

I focused on political jamming through bots and trolls using the *tweetbotornot* R library (<https://github.com/mkearney/tweetbotornot>), which relies on machine learning algorithms to score each account's bot probability. Accounts flagged as having above 99% probability of being bots were labeled bots in the study. Trolls were identified by checking with the API to see whether an account had been suspended by Twitter: Twitter routinely suspends users for spamming and posting abusive content.

Results

Crowdsourced Gatekeeping (RQ1)

Figure 1 presents the five largest user clusters in the retweet network identified by the community detection algorithm in network analysis. For simplicity, this figure visualizes only accounts that retweeted at least six other accounts in the same network. The largest cluster in pink ($n = 11,348$, encompassing 11.2% of the total accounts in the network) has its top-20 crowdsourced elites mostly tied to Antifa (hereafter labeled the *Antifa cluster*). They include city-specific Antifa groups (@EdinAntifa, @NYCAntifa, and @rosecityantifa), grassroots anarchist political organizations (@brnn_fed), local anarchist establishments (@pmpressorg), Antifa activists, and the official account of the Anonymous (@youranoncentral), which is a decentralized international hacktivist group. The crowdsourced elites also include Mark Bray, a historian researching and advocating for Antifa. The second-largest cluster in green ($n = 10,038$, encompassing 9.92% of the total network) features crowdsourced elites who are mostly conservative Christians and Trump supporters. Eleven of the top-20 accounts have keywords and hashtags on Twitter bios related to Trump and his Make America Great Again (MAGA) campaign (this cluster is labeled *MAGA Cluster 1*). The third-largest cluster in blue ($n = 9,957$, consisting of 9.84% of the total accounts) is dominated by grassroots and largely anonymous far-right accounts, such as accounts associated with the #bluehand movement (@bluehandarea and @bluearmyfaction), far-right media outlets, fellow #bluehand followers in the United Kingdom and United States, and self-identified Trump supporters (hereafter the cluster is labeled the *#bluehand cluster*). The fourth-largest cluster in gray ($n = 7,504$, encompassing 7.42% of the total accounts) is similar to the second-largest cluster in that its crowdsourced elites are exclusively pro-Trump conservative accounts (this cluster is labeled *MAGA Cluster 2*). The fifth-largest cluster in yellow

($n = 7,107$, 7.03% of all accounts) is primarily formed of discussions about the so-called “White genocide.” Its crowdsourced elites consist of accounts in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, South Africa, and Europe. Although geographically dispersed, accounts in the fifth-largest cluster share a common interest in preserving and protecting “White rights” (hereafter, the cluster is named the *White rights activist cluster*). In summary, the clustering of accounts shows how accounts form like-minded groups based on distinct identities and ideologies. The network also shows a clear chasm between the Antifa and Alt-Right clusters (note in Figure 1 the gap between the Antifa cluster and the rest), which means only a handful of accounts retweeted across the ideological lines (the bridges). The bridge accounts include an academic, a free speech advocate, a reporter from the *New York Daily News*, and a conservative account that claimed to “welcome moderate Democrat tweets on [their] page because the United States needs a two-party system” on its Twitter bio.

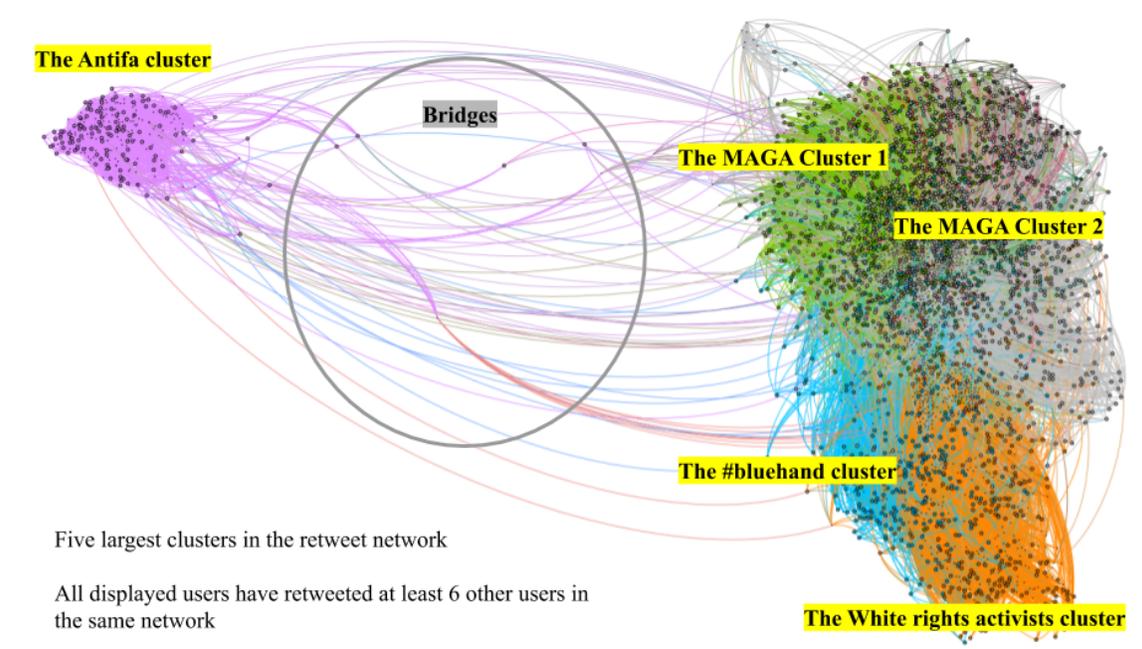


Figure 1. The retweet network.

Figure 2 presents the mentions network and its five largest clusters. Compared with passive retweeting, the Twitter mention is a more preemptive and direct way of user interaction. Counterpublics can build counterinfluence through directly tagging other users to draw their attention. The mention networks, which map out counteractions, reveal who counterpublic members seek to influence. Unlike the retweet network, which shows a clear ideological division line, the Alt-Right and conservative accounts seem to have a stronger presence in the mentions network. To contextualize findings, for each of the top-five clusters, I

manually reviewed the bios of its top-10 accounts by in-degree (the most mentioned) and out-degree centrality (the most active accounts in mentioning others). I then read the tweets sent by the top-five most active accounts in each cluster.

Five largest clusters in the mentions network

All displayed users have retweeted at least 7 other users in the same network

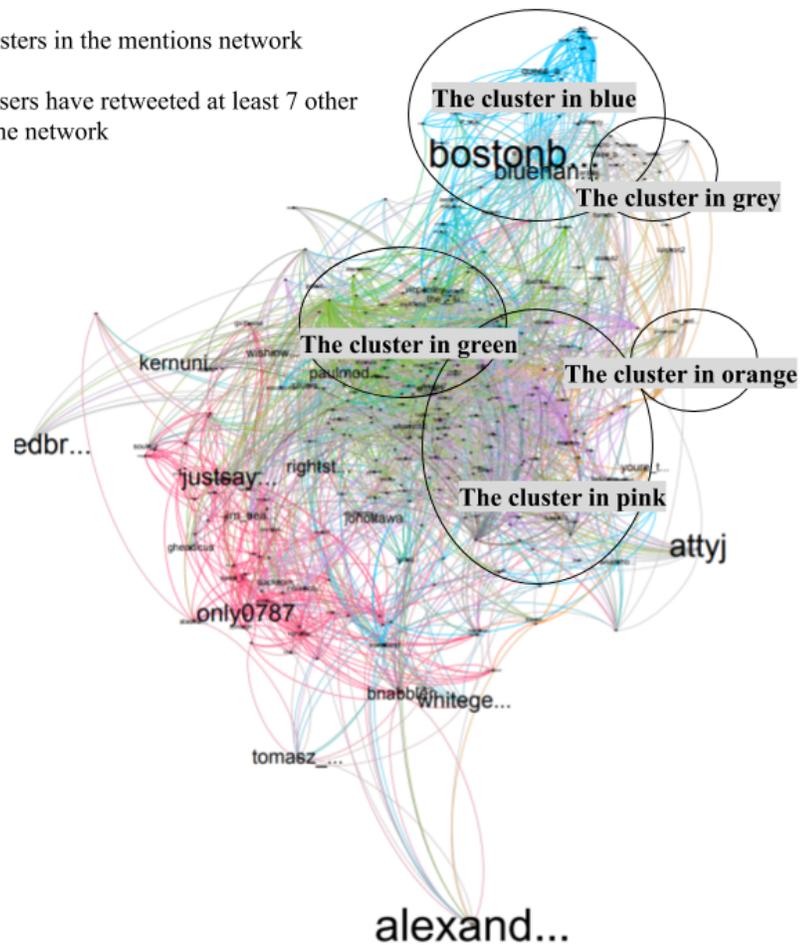


Figure 2. The mentions network.

The largest cluster in pink (encompassing 6% of the entire mentions network) shows a group of Trump supporters actively targeting other like-minded conservative accounts and also mainstream media and journalists (@cnn, @msnbc, @washingtonpost). The qualitative analysis reveals tweets meant for criticizing the mainstream media, such as the following example directed at CNN's Chris Cuomo: "I saw the video. Is it really ok to hit a bigot? I consider YOU a BIGOT Who are you to say it's ok to break laws and hit people?" The analysis also identifies some tweets directed at specific Antifa accounts aimed at mocking the Antifa movement: "Hey Winchester, when's your next violent democrat #Antifa rally?"

In the second-largest cluster in green (6% of the entire network), both Trump supporters and anti-Trump accounts were active in outreach. They targeted politicians (@realdonaldtrump, @potus, @maxinewaters), political parties (@gop), and government agencies (@thejusticedept, @fbi), as well as George Soros (@georgesoros), long accused by the political right for funding Antifa. The qualitative analysis shows that pro-Trump accounts' pointed criticism at Antifa's violence. Several of their tweets were directed at Donald Trump and law enforcement to call out Antifa as a domestic terrorist group: "@FBINewYork @WhiteHouse Is this #Legal? Endangering the Lives of #USA Government Employees? #Antifa Loves it!"

The anti-Trump accounts, presumably members of Antifa, sent threatening tweets to Trump and his conservative supporters as seen in the following tweet: "@FrankTunde64 @DontMessWMurphy @FL_lewoo @AuthenticAmUS @realDonaldTrump #antifa is now watching frank and his family very closely."

In the third-largest cluster in blue, the most mentioned are conservative news outlets and hosts (e.g., @seanhannity, @v_of_europe), conservative speakers (@kthopkins), the #bluehand official account, and the Trump White House (@pressec). The most active accounts include the #bluehand official account along with the so-called "#bluehand family members." The #bluehand followers used Twitter mentions to welcome new members and for in-group chats. An Antifa supporter was also identified, who used Twitter mentions challenging #bluehand followers. Within the fourth-largest cluster in gray, the most mentioned accounts are conservative news outlets and hosts (e.g., @foxnews), the founder of the conservative group Turning Point USA (@charliekirk11), and a congresswoman of the Democratic Party. The most active accounts' tweets include those by conservative accounts mentioning other conservatives to attack Antifa. Some tweets also mention Antifa accounts directly to challenge its actions. In the fifth-largest cluster in orange, the most mentioned accounts include a fake Antifa account propped by the Alt-Right (@bevhillasantifa7), a suspended Proud Boy account (@proudboysusa), conservative figures, and the Canadian prime minister. Similar to other clusters, the most active accounts are conservative accounts that sent tweets attacking Antifa.

Hashtag-Based Framing (RQ2)

Concerning the semantic networks of hashtags in Twitter bios (see Figure 3), I inspected each cluster's top-100 hashtags identified by betweenness centrality. Here, betweenness centrality serves as a proxy measure of prominence and salience. Next, I discuss several unique patterns that have emerged from the networks.

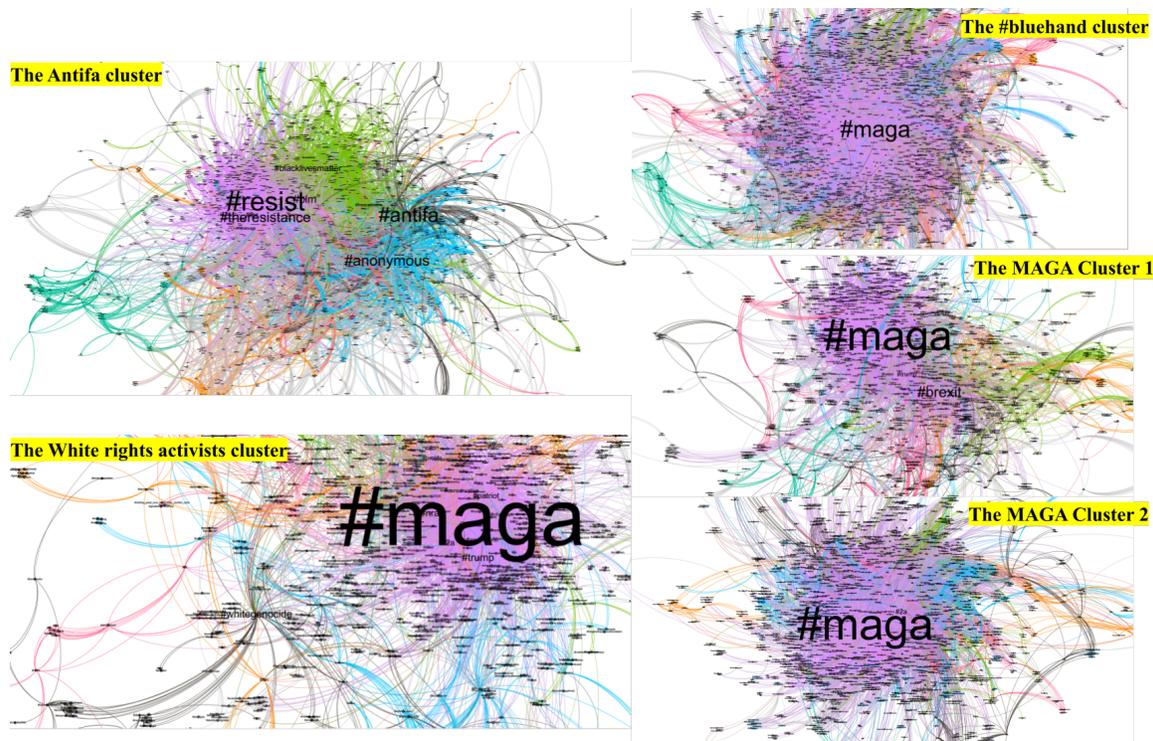


Figure 3. Hashtag network based on co-occurrence in Twitter bios.

First, hashtags by accounts in the Alt-Right clusters reveal the importance of local far-right populist parties and ethnonationalism movements across North America (#MAGA, #KAG), United Kingdom (#Brexit), Europe (#PVV, #AfD), and South Africa (#SouthAfrica). Although a transnational community, the Alt-Right counterpublic seems to capitalize on a central figure: Donald Trump because the most central hashtag in all of the four Alt-Right clusters is #maga, coupled with Trump-inspired hashtags (e.g., #maga, #trump, #draintheswamp, ##trumprain, and #kagr [Keep America Great]). Hashtags indicative of conservative causes are also dominant, including gun control (e.g., #NRA and #2a [Second Amendment]), antiabortion (#prolife), restrictive immigration (#buildthewall), free speech (#1a [First Amendment]), and America First, pro-Israel, and promilitary foreign policies (e.g., #patriot, #americafirst, #istandwithisrael, and #military). The #bluehand cluster, although centered around MAGA, extensively uses hashtags related to British politics, such as #brexit, along with #iamtommy and #freetommy, the latter two supporting jailed far-right activist Tommy Robinson. Hashtags by the White rights activist cluster have an explicit mention of issues in South Africa (#southafrica, #farmmurders), signaling the grievance over the alleged targeting of South Africa's White population by robberies and government land seizure (de Greef & Karasz, 2018), as well as hashtags related to far-right politics in Germany (#prodeutschland, which refers to a far-right, anti-Islamification movement).

Second, unlike the centralization of the Alt-Right clusters under the banner of Trump and MAGA, the Antifa identity, reflected by hashtag use in the Antifa cluster, is more decentralized and represented by the anti-Trump resistance movement (*#resist* and *#resistance*), the Anonymous (*#anonymous*), progressive social movements (*#blacklivesmatter*, *#metoo*), and progressive causes (*#freepalestine*, *#BDS*, *#medicareforall*, *#climatechange*). Unlike the MAGA-centered Alt-Right counterpublic, there appears to be no overriding political figure or party that leads the Antifa community.

Third, hashtag use reveals religious affirmation and hostility. The Antifa cluster is characteristically nonreligious (as reflected by the frequent use of *#atheist* on its Twitter bio), whereas the Alt-Right clusters use multiple hashtags indicating Christian faith (e.g., *#christian*, *#god*). The coalition between political and religious conservatism is present through the high centrality of *#ccot* (Christian conservatives on Twitter). The Alt-Right clusters also use a number of anti-Islam hashtags (*#banislam*, *#stopislam*, *#noislam*).

Lastly, hashtags related to conspiracy theories, such as *#pizzagate* and *QAnon* (*#qanon* and *#q*), including its German adaptation (*#merkelmussweg*), are also among the top hashtags. News media describe *QAnon* as a "complicated pro-Trump conspiracy theory" that has "jumped from fringe social media sites to mainstream attention" ("America's Extremist Battle," 2017).

Concerning the semantic networks of hashtags in tweets sent by accounts in respective clusters (see Figure 4), I applied the same procedure to analyze top hashtags in each cluster in the retweet network.

Antifa's hashtag network points to a number of offline protests, such as *Occupy ICE* (e.g., *#occupyicpdx*, *#occupy*). It is a protest modeled on the *Occupy* movement that targets the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency. The hashtags also show community-based vigilante activities, such as efforts to protect the city of Portland, Oregon, from White nationalists (e.g., *#DefendPDX*). In addition, the hashtags reveal the online hacktivist group *Anonymous's* cyberattacks at White supremacist institutions under the banner of *OpDomesticTerrorism* (*#OpDomesticTerrorism*, *#anonymous*).

Hashtags used in tweets from the Alt-Right clusters show traces of oppositional framing, aimed at labeling the Antifa movement as violent domestic terrorism (*#domesticterrorists*, *#terrorist*, *#hate*) and liberal users as immature (*#snowflakes*). The Alt-Right hashtags in tweets are geographically distributed, reflecting far-right issues and figures in the United Kingdom (*#FreeTommy*), South Africa (*#southafrica*), and the United States (*#kag*, *#maga*). The Alt-Right has also sought to co-opt the meaning of "the resistance movement" (originally an anti-Trump campaign) to reframe it as the resistance toward the political left and the establishment.

Both Antifa and the Alt-Right have used identity-affirming hashtags. For Antifa, its identity is presumably strengthened through joint activities in offline protests, as seen in the *#solidarity* hashtag. Based on the manual reading of tweets, I found crowdsourced elites in the Antifa cluster to have commonly invoked the theme of solidarity to call for participation in offline rallies and to help Antifa prisoners (e.g., writing letters to Antifa prisoners). For the Alt-Right, identity affirmation lies in asserting the virtue of being White (*#itsoktobewhite*), the grievance of reverse discrimination (*#reverseapartheid*), and its populist root (*#wethepeople*).

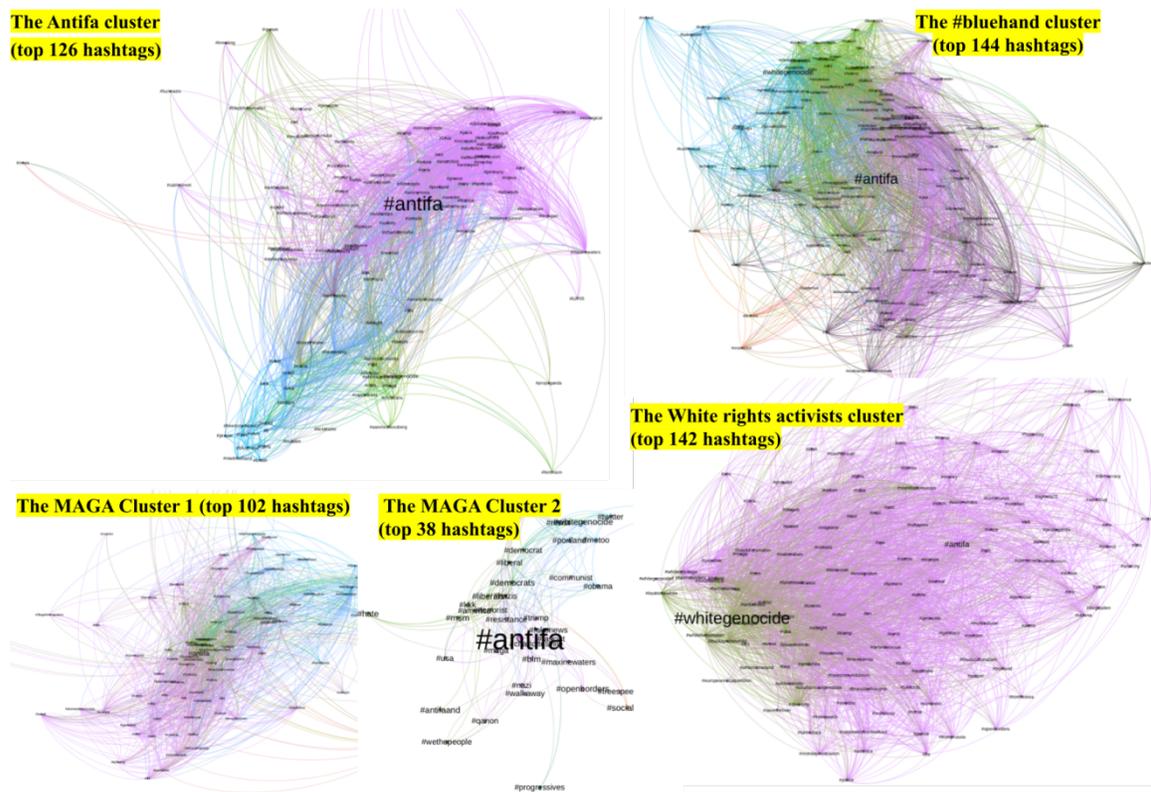


Figure 4. Hashtag network based on co-occurrence in Twitter tweets.

The counterpublics' hashtags indicate possible traces of their counteractions through the oppositional use of hashtags. The #antifa hashtag has been used extensively by accounts in the five Alt-Right clusters. Judging by the hashtags associated with #antifa in each network, and based on the manual reading of top Alt-Right accounts' tweets, the #antifa hashtag was used in the context of mocking Antifa's violence and immaturity. It is also interesting to note how hashtags used by the Antifa cluster collide with the set of hashtags related to #bluehand. Notably, #newbluehand is a hashtag popularized by Antifa seeking to infiltrate and co-opt the #bluehand. A review of such tweets also shows that Antifa accounts tweeted #bluehand to mock #bluehand accounts, as seen in the following example: "Proof that #Bluehand is nothing but an attempt by .@bluehandarea to massage his fragile ego. A dispute between members. . . ."

Political Jamming Through Bots and Trolls (RQ3)

Table 1 displays the summary statistics of bot and troll activities across the five clusters identified in the retweet network. The bot and troll activities are gauged on two levels: first, the proportion of accounts in a cluster that was deleted and suspended by Twitter (for trolls), and second, the proportion

of accounts tagged as bot-like by the bot-detection algorithm. The White rights activist cluster has a notably higher rate of suspended accounts, whereas the Antifa cluster has the highest ratio of bot-like accounts. The presence of bots in the crowdsourced elites (top 20 by betweenness centrality) is minimal. However, the #bluehand cluster and MAGA Cluster 2 have relatively higher numbers of suspended accounts of crowdsourced elites. From the manual reading of crowdsourced elites' tweets, a number of high-profile fake Antifa accounts emerged. One example is @bostonbobantifa, which was the most active account in the entire mentioned network. Journalists and citizen bloggers suspected that @bostonbobantifa was a troll (presumably a Russian one) given the Fake Antifa campaign aimed at discrediting Antifa through hoaxes (Mufson, 2017).

Table 1. Bot/Troll Activities by Cluster.

Variable	Antifa cluster	#bluehand cluster	MAGA Cluster 1	MAGA Cluster 2	White rights activists cluster
Bots in the top-50 crowdsourced elites (<i>n</i>)	0	0	1	2	0
Suspended accounts in the top-50 crowdsourced elites (<i>n</i>)	11	28	15	24	17
Suspended accounts (%)	18.20	25.00	13.00	20.50	37.40
Bot-like accounts (%)	4.70	3.50	3.30	3.00	3.60

Note. MAGA = Make America Great Again.

Discussion

This study presents the case of the Alt-Right and Antifa as two emergent rival counterpublics. I propose studying the counterpublics' identities and counteractions based on Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) connective actions framework. In particular, I examine three connective actions that are enabled by social media's networked and dialogic affordance, namely, crowdsourced gatekeeping, hashtag-based framing, and political jamming through bots and trolls. With interest in connective actions, the object of investigation is less on discourse per se (what is communicated) and more on the metadata of discourse (how something is communicated), that is, how information diffuses in the communities, how hashtags are organized to carry symbolic meanings, and how platform algorithms are manipulated to create noises. The study demonstrates the feasibility of using network analysis and the bot-detection algorithm to identify connective actions. It shows how simply algorithmically identified structural characteristics of social media messages, rather than the message content, can reveal critical dimensions of counterpublic identities and actions. The emphasis on algorithmic analyses of metadata is not to obviate in-depth qualitative readings of communication content. As will be discussed, it is necessary to parse out key social media messages to better contextualize connective actions. Nevertheless, the study's methodological design provides a complementary framework for studying counterpublics and radical groups in general. I discuss four findings about the Alt-Right and Antifa's identities and counteractions.

First, I found that counterpublic members use multiple hashtags in Twitter bios and tweets as an indication of their converging identities and interests. Counterpublics' hashtag use gives a macro-level perspective on identity construction that would otherwise be missed by qualitative discourse analysis. The

ecosystem of the Alt-Right hashtags shows a global convergence of populism and ethnonationalism invigorated by Trump's election and policies. Antifa's hashtags suggest a comparatively decentralized, activist-oriented identity, defined more by progressive causes, offline rallies, and combative cyber operations. The finding bears down on the significance of studying hashtag occurrence because it conveys rich symbolic meanings (Eddington, 2018; Vicari, 2017). Precisely, hashtag co-occurrence serves the expressive and alliance-building function. Consider first how, by coplacing hashtags, users negotiate and make sense of the overlapping and multilayered nature of counteridentities. As in Kuo's (2018) work on hashtags reflecting intersectional feminism, we can also consider the Alt-Right counterpublic identity to be "intersectional" because its pride and grievance collide with racial, socioeconomic, or religious issues (Mutz, 2018). Next, consider how hashtag co-occurrence can be leveraged strategically to connect local issues to global movements. Among the most prominent hashtags, I observed the effort to link South Africa's "White genocide" issue with Trump's ethnonationalism movement. Also, in the post hoc qualitative analysis of hashtags, I found the #projectconnectsa hashtag: Its creator launched the hashtag putting #projectconnectsa alongside #brexit and #maga to draw global attention to the local issue presumably. In addition, a parallel case is the little-known RainMakersUnite movement: The movement account asked its followers to promote #RainMakersUnite alongside Trump's Twitter handle to increase the group's visibility. Both examples show how counterpublic members may strategically position hashtags for transnational alliance-building, which is commonly observed in online social movements (Tremayne, 2014).

Theorized more broadly, the hashtag-based coalition building embodies what Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford (1986) refer to as *frame bridging*, that is, linking "two or more ideologically congruent but structurally disconnected frames" to provide an organizational base for "unmobilized sentiment pools or public opinion preference clusters" (p. 467). Here, sentiment pools refer to aggregates of people who share common grievances but who previously lacked organizational resources to express discontent. Like the historical case of the "Fortress Europe" protest, in which Monforte (2014, p. 121) observed that activists constructed local and national issues at the EU level to achieve "crossnational solidarities," common references, and perceptions, the current study shows the construction of local populist and nativist causes at the national and international level. Previous works on frame bridging also highlight the importance of media and social networks: Mailing lists consolidated the alliance between the Christian Right and the Republican Party, forming the political organization called the Moral Majority. In the present study, Twitter hashtags provide such a venue for frame bridging between local populism and Trump's MAGA movement.

Second, similar to how hashtag occurrence reveals identities, it also shows the use of oppositional framing. By coplacing two hashtags, such as #whitegenocide and #masculinity, users make a conscious connection between two issues represented by the hashtags (Vicari, 2017), and in this particular example, a connection between White grievance and traditional masculinity. Based on the abundant use of #hate, #domesticterrorists, and #libertard, it appears that the Alt-Right seeks to portray the Antifa protesters as violent and senseless thugs. The Alt-Right's framing tactic seems to be borrowed from news media's old playbook of dealing with social justice protesters: Boykoff (2006) found that news media often use the frames of violence, disruption, and ignorance in covering protesters. Viewing hashtags as a framing tool has a methodological implication: Frames are often identified through coders' subjective judgment in manual content analysis or computational approaches to cluster texts by common linguistic elements (Walter & Ophir, 2019). Hashtag-based framing is unique in that hashtag users, as opposed to researchers, define the meanings of frames. This is not to suggest that one can disregard the context and the message underlying

a hashtag frame. Rivalry groups contest the exact meaning of hashtag frames. For instance, the Alt-Right and Antifa both use #resist and #resistance. Nevertheless, the common hashtags may suggest different targets of resistance and grievance.

Third, counterpublics build like-minded and close-knit communities for information sharing (via RT@) but use Twitter mentions to seek rapport with fellow counterpublic members and challenge ideological enemies. Hyperpartisan crowdsourced elites dominate each close-knit community (i.e., cluster). The crowdsourced elites identified in the present study are both similar to and different from those identified in prior works. To revisit, the platform architecture of Twitter, which enables selective following and interactions, gives rise to “opinion entrepreneurs”—quasipolitical groups as well as individual activists (Rojecki & Meraz, 2016). I concur with previous scholars on the statement that opinion entrepreneurs largely control the information flow within a counterpublic community. It speaks to the essence of “connective actions” in that individuals and amateurs, rather than established organizations, serve as opinion leaders (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). However, the Alt-Right is driven by its “spiritual leaders” (i.e., Donald Trump and European far-right parties). As the spiritual leaders gain institutional powers through elections, it becomes debatable as to whether the connective actions are genuinely grassroots and if the group is independent of organizational resource support. Another distinction is the role of news media. Previous studies have shown a notable role of news media (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013) and how crowdsourced elites’ power is unleashed by a changing media agenda (Jackson & Welles, 2015). In the current context, mainstream media play a peripheral role in retweet-enabled information sharing. Counterpublics are found to criticize mainstream media (via Twitter mentions and #msm). Due to their antielitist stance, the studied counterpublics may distrust mainstream media. Reciprocally, news media favor resourceful and established organizations over confrontational and volunteer-led groups (Andrews & Caren, 2010). It is also plausible that given that the Alt-Right has already gained a significant share of political power through electing populist and nationalist leaders, it is no longer dependent on national media to amplify its agenda.

Fourth, both counterpublics seek to challenge ideological opponents through oppositional framing, mockery via Twitter mentions, co-opting hashtags, and trolls. However, the Alt-Right and Antifa seem to have adopted different tactics. The Alt-Right is noted for its trolling (as reflected by its higher ratio of suspended accounts and prominent fake Antifa accounts), its extensive use of #antifa, and its dominance in the Twitter mention network to mock Antifa and attack mainstream media. Antifa’s counteractions appear to be more focused on offline rallies and cyberattacks against neo-Nazis (as suggested by its hashtags). This contrast may speak about Antifa’s priority in offline and direct tactics, such as its use of doxxing (Bray, 2017). The Antifa counterpublic may not appear as aggressive as the Alt-Right when it comes to online fights. The Antifa counterpublic also appears to lack structured leadership and powerful political actors. Barring the possibility that Antifa’s activities may have migrated to other hashtags and platforms, it is important to note the roles of counterpublic structure and norms in shaping respective connective actions.

In addition, the study identified two characteristics in the current counterpublics that could inform the discussion of radical politics. First, the Alt-Right has succeeded in forming ties with some marginal Christian groups despite the idea that such alliances are arguably unbiblical (Keller, 2018): It is Jesus’s teaching to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21, ESV). Second, the Alt-Right is tied to a number of conspiracy theories (such as #Qaron and #pizzagate). This convergence of the two political undercurrents warrants future study.

The investigation of the two counterpublics and connective actions is met with several challenges. First, precisely locating a counterpublic in the online space is a daunting task. My approach was using hashtags as the seeds to identify clusters in hashtag-based Twitter interactions. However, with the limited selection of hashtags, it is difficult to reach a generalizable conclusion about the counterpublics. Unlike high-profile social movements such as #MeToo and #OccupyWallStreet, which are united by a signature hashtag, the Alt-Right and Antifa use a variety of hashtag variants and the hashtag ecosystem is expected to vary over time. Particularly considering that the Alt-Right has appropriated the hashtag #antifa, some Antifa members may have moved to more privately used hashtags. Second, it should be noted that the two counterpublics operate on other platforms in addition to Twitter. As the two groups face increasing pressures of censorship, anonymous forums, private social networks (e.g., Gab), and even the dark Web may play a more pronounced role in mobilization. Third, the scope of qualitative textual analysis conducted is limited; only selected crowdsourced elites' tweets were studied manually. The study, therefore, is not able to deliver the contextual subtlety that is critical to counterpublics' identities and influence. Fourth, the boundary of counterpublics should be more clearly defined; due to the negative connotation associated with the two groups, Twitter users who use the studied hashtags and even those who identify with the far-right/far-left ideologies may not necessarily see themselves as members of the counterpublics. Readers are also reminded of the potential lack of representativeness of the collected study sample. This may be solved in future work that relies on the paid premium access to the Twitter API for more complete data sets.

Future studies should address the above problems and strive for new exciting directions: The release of electoral manipulation data by Twitter in 2018 makes it compelling to study the foreign influence of domestic counterpublics. The present data already show clear signs of trolling activities and possibly foreign intervention. As the current study shows the convergence and consolidation of more radical political counterpublics under the presumption that such radical counterpublics are largely alienated by more moderate political groups, future studies can explore connective actions by radical counterpublics to infiltrate the more moderate discourse and communities. This process will show the moderation and the mainstreaming of radical political claims.

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