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The Alt-Right: A Discourse Analysis

Deplatforming and the Role of Social Media in the Regulation of Speech

by

Michael Fry

A Starred Paper

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in English: Rhetoric and Writing

March, 2020

Starred Paper Committee:
Matthew Barton, Chairperson
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Nazi. This word often conjures up a dark image of human history for those who hear it. Today those who identify with the ideology put forth by Hitler's followers have rebranded themselves with more palatable terms such as Alt-Right or White Nationalist. While this ideology has changed its name it still largely resembles its origins from the WWII era. This ideology has changed its clothing, it has changed its style. This paper is intended to inform and bring light to the modern style of Nazi ideology. One of the more popular names for this style is the Alt-Right. The most basic understanding of this term refers to those who align themselves on the far right of the political spectrum.

The term Alt-Right has wider implications than being simply a marker of political affiliation. It is a label of a certain culture and style. While this paper is intended to inform the reader about what this style looks like, it is also created with the intention to start a conversation about how we address the discourse of ideologies like the Alt-Right. Society tends to hide what it is uncomfortable with, but it is important to realize the dark side of the cycle history has come back around and has brought with it a renewed popularity around the world of Nazi like ideologies. In order to prepare ourselves for the possible ramifications that come with these ideologies, it is important to understand the values of those who engage with these ideologies and how they construct their style.

Though this style can be seen as something new, in large part it is a recycling of past styles. It is part of a cycle of styles that seeks to eliminate what is different or what is seen as the other. It mirrors much of the ideology of the most well-known form of this style, which would be the Nazi's of World War II era of Germany. Throughout this paper there will be artifacts

presented that show this mirroring of Nazi ideals. While I will often refer to this as a style, it is important to keep in mind that this is also a culture. It is a way of life for many that present this style. A definition of this style is provided by a writer for the *Atlantic*, who went to high school with Richard Spencer; a prominent figure within this style, and conducted a lengthy interview with him. In his piece Graeme Wood defines the Alt-Right as, “white European cultural and racial supremacy, with a deep contempt for democracy” (43). Of all of the attempts to define this style, this one comes closest to embodying the style. The importance of this paper is to look at an element of society that is often ignored. In an age of an ever-expanding divide between Americans, we must at least attempt to understand where someone’s viewpoint is coming from. While the main intention of this paper is to illustrate style of the Alt-Right, I will also address the question of what societal change does this style seek and for whom? To illuminate the style of the Alt-Right I will look at themes of whiteness, how they see themselves as culture warriors, their stylistic homology, and tensions within the style. Before going too far into the rhetorical aesthetics of this style, it is important to discuss the figures who have brought this style into the view of the general public as they will be referenced throughout this paper.

Prominent Figures

The formation, evolution, and promotion of this style can largely be credited to figures such as Richard Spencer, Stephen Bannon, and Milo Yiannopoulos. These are some of the prominent figures who represent this style. One of the minor players in this style would be Milo Yiannopoulos. He has fallen from grace in this style due to comments about how it should be acceptable for young boys to have sexual relationships with older men. This incident caused him to lose his position as tech editor at the online news source *Breitbart*. This is significant as this

publication is a right leaning news source and losing this position shows how those within the style felt about his comments. Milo gained fame largely as a twitter troll. A troll being someone who seeks to enrage a target for a variety of reasons, whether it is because they do not like what someone stands for, or more often is done merely for sport. His most notable claim to fame is being banned from Twitter after leading a harassment campaign against actress Leslie Jones (Warzel). While he is no longer a prominent figure of the Alt-Right, I feel it is important to discuss him because he is a stark contradiction to the style of the Alt-Right. Milo is openly gay, and the style of the Alt-Right is adamantly anti-homosexual (Gstalter).

While Richard Spencer is most recognizable as the face of the Alt-Right, Stephen Bannon may be considered to be infinitely more influential. Stephen Bannon was once the Chairman of the online news source *Breitbart*. Bannon made his affiliation public when he stated how *Breitbart* is, “the platform of the Alt-Right” (Cox). Not only did Bannon have widespread influence through a news outlet, but he would go on to be part of Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign. Once Trump won the presidency, Bannon attained the position of chief strategist. This position came with, “an office in the West Wing and a direct line to the Oval Office — he initially reported to no one but the president” (Peters). Between Trump’s victory and Bannon’s ascendance to such a high position, the Alt-Right saw its views as being legitimized in public discourse. Like Milo Yiannopoulos, Bannon has seen a fall from grace within the Alt-Right community. After harsh comments about the president were revealed in a book about the White House, Bannon lost his close position with the president and his position as chairman of *Breitbart*. This leaves the Alt-Right with one prominent figure still standing, Richard Spencer.

Richard Spencer is credited with being the first to use and promote the term Alt-Right. In 2008 he used the term in a *New York Times* article, “What the Alt-Right Means” (Butts). Within this article he also provides some insight to the belief system of the Alt-Right when he, “explained that race is the foundation of a person's identity. As a white nationalist, Spencer believes that whites ought to have their own country. He also thinks that biracial marriage should be illegal and women should return to homemaker roles” (Butts). Around 2011 he started an online magazine called *Alternative Right* (Wood). This transformed into more of a blog, with an active comment section. A quote that sums up what Spencer might see as a goal of the Alt-Right comes from a private dinner he hosted for white nationalist. As he basked in the glory of protestors at this dinner he stated, “Let’s party like it’s 1933” (Cox). 1933 was the year Hitler ascended to power. Another bit of insight to this styles belief system comes from a viral video of a speech by Spencer. He ended this speech by proclaiming “Hail Trump”, which was followed by one armed salutes from the audience (Cox). This is a rehash of the salutes to the statement, “Heil Hitler”.

Text Used for Analysis

The primary text used for analyzing this style will be the blog *Affirmative Right*, which used to be called *Alternative Right*. This text allows us to examine the image and language usage that structures the homology of the style of the Alt-Right. This is the blog started by Richard Spencer and labels itself as the founding site of the Alt-Right. It produces a variety of articles and the comment sections of these articles are how I will attempt to discern who makes up the style, what symbols they use, and how they engage in the style. Images featured in this blog will also be used for my analysis. To supplement this text, I will also utilize an interview of Richard

Spencer in the publication the *Atlantic*. This article is useful as the author went to school with Spencer and provides insight of the face of the Alt-Right.

Theoretical Framework

To analyze this style, I will be utilizing Barry Brummett's theory of the rhetoric of style. First it is important to state how Brummett defines style, "I might use style to mean *the way in which we do something*, including how we speak, act, move, eat, dress, decorate, and so forth" (1). While this may seem to be a broad definition, to narrow it any further does an injustice to what I see as style. Style is everything. What we eat, how we eat it, how we interact with each other, the language we use with one another, so on and so on. There is a never-ending list to what style is. It is not simply the clothes we put on, the way we speak, or how we treat one another. It is all of this combined to create a picture of a lifestyle. It is the conscious and unconscious decisions we make every minute of every day.

The fascinating thing about style is how it can be seen differently depending on your perception of the style. Some may see the style of the Alt-Right as repulsive, yet to another it is their only home, the community in which they feel comfortable in. There are those who have a style of driving which is reckless and one of painful cautiousness. Once you begin to understand what style is, you begin to see infinite meaning of various people and objects we interact with throughout our life. It is important to have an understanding of what style is before attempting to analyze what a specific style is about. Something else to be aware of in relation to style is how it is made up of signs. These signs are all of the actions I mentioned previously, plus an infinite number of other signs. These signs form sumptuary laws. A sumptuary law, "dictates a close link between sign and reality: the sign is anchored rather than floating" (Brummett, 9). One

interpretation of this is that when we use a sign that does not correlate to a certain style, we are breaking a law of that style. We might be forming a new style, but that breakage prevents us from being a part of the original style. We rely on certain signs to convey meaning. Once we break from the established signs, our community may no longer accept or understand us. Signs are the building blocks of a style and they are chosen consciously and unconsciously. Now that I have presented a definition of style, I will introduce the elements that make up Brummett's theory of the rhetoric of style.

There are five components of Brummett's rhetoric of style, some of which I will emphasize more than others. The first of these components would be what is called primacy of the text. Brummett defines text as, "a set of signs related to each other insofar as their meanings all contribute to the same set of effects or functions" (117). Something that illuminates the importance of text is when Brummett states texts, "are primary sites for the construction of identity and social affiliation" (118). The younger generations of today largely form their identity and social affiliations through digital platforms. This is especially relevant to the style I have chosen to analyze. The modern Alt-Right was largely born on digital platforms and blogs like the one I will be using for my analysis, which is called *Affirmative Right*. It is on this blog where those who engage in the style of the Alt-Right gather. It is a community with most participation coming from likeminded people and it is rare that you will see dissent within this community. For the Alt-Right it is, dare I say, a safe space for them. It is a place where they can express their views without fear of retribution.

Blogs such as *Affirmative Right*, often call out to a certain audience with the text they produce. This brings us to the next element of the rhetoric of style, which is called imaginary

communities. The creation of the blog creates an audience which is structured as a reaction to the content of the blog. A blog about country music will likely draw in fans of the genre, but since it is not a real-world interaction, we do not truly know if they are. There could be people who come across the blog due to boredom, curiosity, or by accident. Users themselves create an imaginary community of the content creators as well. They likely envision someone who has the same views and beliefs, as being the creators of the blog. In reality the creator might be someone who holds completely opposite views. The creator could have started the blog to illuminate certain viewpoints that do not come out in public discourse, or they may have started it for a research project. My academic observation of the blog serves as a breakage with what the common user would think of as their imaginary community. I doubt many posting on this blog expect someone like me to engage with the text, much less writing a lengthy paper about it. This is why they are called imaginary communities; no one really knows for sure who the audience is. Users likely operate under the assumption that their fellow users are likeminded people. They cannot know whether this is true and is thus a figment of their imagination. The essence of this concept is “that rhetoric calls into being audiences, publics, and communities” (Brummett 121). Something fascinating about this style, which I will discuss in detail later, is when these imaginary communities become involved in real world actions.

The next element of the rhetoric of style is called market context. In today’s form of capitalism, ideas are bought and sold. There is a constant incorporation and exportation between styles and the marketplace. The marketplace often takes what it sees as being popular at the time and incorporates it into products to sell. An example of this can be seen with how hip-hop culture has become something you can buy. The marketplace has created a certain look that is supposed

to represent hip hop. In media this has created a caricature of hip-hop culture. Hip hop culture has in turn incorporated certain words that were once used as negative terms. An example of this would be the term thug. This was often used by the media as a highly negative term, often directed at young black men. It is meant to insinuate they are nothing but criminals. Hip hop incorporated this term as a term of pride. A term that meant you have lived a hard life and still have thrived. This is an example of, “a recurring strategy for the marginalized to appropriate a sign of their marginalization and to turn its meaning, to make of that a sign a means of refusal of disempowerment” (Brummett 105). From what I have gathered there is little exchange between the marketplace and the style of the Alt-Right. It seems the style does much more incorporation of mainstream entertainment and media, than the marketplace does of the style of the Alt-Right. As I will show later, this style creates much of its signs through the use of movies and video games.

This brings us to the next element, which is aesthetic rationales. The core of this element is how “reasons, motives, and so forth are *activated aesthetically* in a culture that is aesthetically dominated, as is ours” (Brummett 127). What this means is we are often more easily persuaded by visual elements than a sophisticated argument. Facebook is a great example of this. There are massive amounts of misinformation being spread through this digital platform. This misinformation is often accepted because of the way it is presented. Often it is an image accompanied by a short amount of text. If the message seems plausible, it is often accepted as true. Several unflattering images of Hillary Clinton were shared which featured simple text referring to various forms of evil she was said to be a part of. One of the most well-known of these accusations was one that claimed she was a part of a child sex trafficking ring. This led a

person to bring a gun to a pizza shop where it was said that children were kept hostage. This is probably the element that I will emphasize the most in my analysis of the Alt-Right. This style relies heavily on imagery from movies and video games to make their point. The most common form is using exceptionally unflattering imagery of a “liberal”, to create the most negative perception as possible.

The last element and one which I will emphasize in regard to this style, would be Stylistic Homologies. Stylistic homologies are basically what “gives coherence to any given style” (Brummett 131). Styles develop signs through language and image usage that have shared meaning. This is something that this style heavily engages in. They use many terms and images that the average person would likely have no idea what they meant, or they might have vastly different meanings for those signs. Brummett provides a great example of this when he mentions how some leaders are called cowboys for how they conduct business. This term for the average person implies a certain rugged form of leadership that borders lawlessness (Brummett 131). An example of a homology within the Alt-Right is the use of ((())) . This sign is a signifier of someone who has Jewish heritage. It is placed around someone’s name, or if it is a picture, it will be placed around their head.

Chapter 2: Main Elements of Alt-Right Style

Whiteness

One concept that leaps to the front of my mind while analyzing the discourse of the Alt-Right is that of whiteness. Whiteness is a concept developed by Minnie Pratt and Marilyn Frye. While they do not provide a simple definition of what whiteness is, there are some references that provide a picture of what this concept entails and how it is wielded as a cultural weapon. According to Pratt and Marilyn, “Whitely people tend to believe that one preserves one’s goodness by being principled, by acting according to rules instead of according to feeling” (“White Feminist Woman”). This provides an understanding of how the Alt-Right can see themselves as merely protecting a culture of “rules”. They seem to see their bigotry as a logical result of correcting behavior that breaks their cultural rules. The heart and potential pitfalls of whiteness come with the idea that “authority seems to be central to whiteness, as you might expect from a people who are raised to run things, or to aspire to that: belief in one’s authority in matters practical, moral and intellectual exists in tension with the insecurity and hypocrisy that are essentially connected with the pretense of infallibility” (Frye).

While the term whiteness is not meant to be about white people only, the Alt-Right is the epitome of whiteness. The Alt-Right often seeks to provide credibility to their arguments by pointing to certain achievements of white men and use it as proof they are meant to tell others the right way of doing things. This creates a culture which only looks at the positive contributions of white men, while ignoring the devastation these “contributions” incur to other cultures.

Here is where we can see the heart of whiteness come into play with the Alt-Right and relates to the insight from Frye about whiteness and authority, which is the idea of I know

better, so listen to me and follow my direction. This brings about an environment ripe for conflict. Whenever criticism is levied at this group, an intense and vile backlash is likely to ensue. A parallel between a time when white culture held an iron grip on society can be seen in the reaction to questioning of the system and the reactions of the Alt-Right to the questioning of their beliefs. If a person of color challenged a directive by a white person during the period before the civil rights movement, you can be sure they would face a swift and likely violent reaction. This is still the case today in many instances, but white people no longer have free reign to penalize behavior they disagree with to the extent they used to. The retribution often takes place online now, as seen with various instances from the Alt-Right, such as sending a flashing strobe meme to a journalist with epilepsy. If this concept were a piece of clothing, it would be the overcoat that encapsulates the overall substance that makes up the style of the Alt-Right.

Culture Warriors and Imaginary Community

A quote that is prevalent in the blog and is often stated by Richard Spencer, states how this culture sees itself in the midst of a culture war. This quote is about how, “War is politics by other means and politics is war by other means” (Wood 53). There are many variations of this sentiment that arise throughout blogs such as *Affirmative Right*. Spencer illuminates what is meant by this when he states, “We don’t all want the same thing. And that’s why I think there is a kind of state of war going on” (Wood 53). This is not a unique idea of politics, as a similar statement arises in Barry Brummett’s text *A Rhetoric of Style*. It can be seen how Brummett views politics in a similar light when he states, “politics may have to do with elections or with cultural artifacts, but it usually entails struggle over resources” (76). This community sees itself as battling for cultural resources. This comes through in the language and image usage within

Alt-Right blogs. Looking at some of the imagery featured on the blog *Alternative Right*, there are clear connections to the idea this style is engaged in a historic battle. The image below is one that was once the banner for *Alternative Right* and is an illustration of a battle mentality (See Fig.1). Other common images look like the above image of a kneeling knight, which are often taken from video games (See Fig.2).



Figure 1. War Scene



Figure 2. Kneeling Knight

Something that is especially interesting about this imaginary community is how many news articles allege that it is made up largely of intellectuals. One possibility for this could be due to the fact that the face of the Alt-Right, Richard Spencer, has two degrees. Attaining a bachelor's degree from the University of Virginia and master's degree from the University of Chicago. It seems this combined with an affinity for using ancient text, such as those from Nietzsche, gives the style an air of intellectualism. Many of the blogs and comment sections

within *Affirmative Right*, often contradict this idea. The spelling is often egregiously off and thoughts within blogs often lack a rational flow.

Chapter 3: Stylistic Homology of the Alt-Right

The weapon of choice for this community in this perceived battle would be memes. Memes often utilize pop culture imagery and repurpose it for various meanings. A common one is of Michael Jordan crying. There will often be this picture accompanied by text that alludes to a moment that would make sad. An example of this is a picture of Michael Jordan accompanied by the text “how you feel when your car will not start”, or similar events that would make you sad. The way the style of the Alt-Right uses memes, is as a form of propaganda similar to other historical styles.

Nazi propaganda would show those they do not like in the harshest light possible, often blaming Jewish peoples for all the ills of the country. This is a common tactic and weapon of the Alt-Right. Although this style utilizes memes to put their opponents in a negative light, often it is simply a picture without any text. Many of the memes utilized often resemble the imagery and even art style of Nazi propaganda. These pictures often accompany another stylistic homology of the Alt-Right, which is making allegations without any form of evidence.

Use of Images and Memes

I will provide a small sample of these images out of hundreds that can be found on *Affirmative Right*. One of these posts is titled, “Toxic Anti-Masculinity”. In this blog post there is a section titled, “Miscegenation”, this term refers to how this style feels “white males are also being reinforced to couple with women of other races, specifically black, Asian, and Hispanic”



Figure 3 Biracial Youth

(Benton). It is not said who or in what capacity in which white males are being told to do this. This section is then accompanied by an image depicting someone who is biracial (See Fig.3). The meaning supposed to be conveyed by this image is unclear. Though with the content it is involved with, I assume this is supposed to be a negative result of the allegation that white men are being told to mate with people of color.



Figure 4 Soy Drinker

Another image used in this blog comes in the more traditional form of a meme. The image above alludes to the myth that soy consumption leads to the feminization of men due to

estrogen being found in soy (See Fig.4). This is one of the more common ways “liberal” men are demeaned within the style. Another example of statements that are seen as fact without any reference can be seen in this same blog post when it is stated, “There is also co-morbidity with transgendered “males,” who have an additional 40% higher rate of suicide than their cisgender peers” (Benton). This assertion is made without any reference as to where this information came from.

Like their memes the language and tone of this style are often very aggressive, seek to insight those of differing viewpoints, and seeks to distance themselves from “normies”. This is a common term found throughout Alt-Right texts. The Richard Spencer interview with Graeme Wood I have previously mentioned, illuminates what is meant by this term. During one session of their interview Spencer had a companion who was open to sharing their controversial views, but not willing to have their real name exposed. His companion referred to himself as a “minion”, this term surfaces a lot throughout Alt-Right text and seems to mean they are a soldier of the Alt-Right. Before taking statements from the minion Spencer asked for them to not be named because as the minion stated, “I have a ‘normie’ [conventional] job,” the minion explained, and I don’t want to get punished for this” (Wood 43). This is another common aspect of the style. It is rare that those who participate in the style are willing to tie their real names to their statements. Another term that shows an aggressive tendency is the term “shit lord”. This is Alt-Right slang for someone who they consider an online activist (Wood 44). To illuminate what the Alt-Right sees as an activist, I will point to how it was referenced in the Richard Spencer interview with Graeme Wood. Richard Spencer and his minion gleefully talked about a shit lord who sent a short video clip with strobe lights via twitter, to a journalist who suffered

from epilepsy (Wood 44). This video, “triggered a series of seizures, leading to temporary partial paralysis on his left side. Spencer” (Wood 44).

What might be the most common term throughout Alt-Right text is the term “red pill”. This comes from another aspect of the stylistic homology of the Alt-Right, which is the appropriation of various aspects of pop culture, especially movies and video games. The term comes from the movie *The Matrix* “in which Keanu Reeves’s character discovers, after swallowing a red pill, that his universe is counterfeit, his fellow humans are enslaved to false dreams, and he himself is destined to free them” (Wood 48). This can be seen as a goal of the Alt-Right, which is to dispense red pills through blogs such as *Affirmative Right*. This blog even features a globe that shows in real time where in the world people are accessing the site. Accompanying this globe is the statement “red pills currently being dispensed”. Underneath this globe there is a counter of how many people have visited the blog, which at the last viewing was almost eight million.

One more aspect of the hostile language usage that makes up the homology of this style is featured in a blog post titled, “Questions from a student”. The author starts the article by mentioning how many Alt-Right sites have been getting requests from college students for answers to questions they seek to answer in research papers. Overall the tone is not aggressive until it comes to the question of accusations the Alt-Right is fascist. The answer states, “Actually Fascism wasn't even Fascist - it was an opportunist hodge podge of contradictory ideas starting from anti-Slav Imperialism, republicanism, and anti-clericalism, mixed with Leftist Syndicalism, that later compromised with the Monarchy and the Church. So your question is patently absurd”

(Liddell). When looking at the overall rhetoric of the Alt-Right, it does not seem to be an odd question. Yet the author felt the need to attack the person who posed the question.

Visual Aesthetics

While there are many more terms that fuse together the homology the of Alt-Right style, I feel it is important to touch on the visual aesthetic. Seeing as this style occurs largely through digital spaces, it can be hard to pin down what exactly is the visual aesthetic is in terms of clothing and fashion choice. The term, “fashy”, sheds some light on what this style sees as



Figure 5 Examples of Alt-Right Aesthetic

desirable fashion. It can be seen as an excorporation of the term fascist. Fashy usually relates to fashion inspired by fascist, or in most cases fashion of Nazi Germany. Short haircuts, khaki pants, and polo shirts. The images above are a representation of this (See Fig. 5 and Fig. 6). The only aspect that has not been incorporated is the infamous mustache of Hitler. Just about anyone who is associated with this movement will have the type of haircut shown in figures 4 and 5. It is



Figure 6 Tiki Rally

similar to the adherence to style found with gangs. We can also see the visual aspects of this style from pictures of the real-world gatherings of this style. Within these gatherings we see the visual aesthetic of the Nazi one-armed salute (See Fig. 7). This is not to say every person who



Figure 7 Salute

engages in the Alt-Right style is a Nazi sympathizer, but it occurs enough through various Alt-Right text that it is reasonable to see it as a unifying aspect of the Alt-Right style.

Chapter 4: Tensions/Contradictions

There are a couple tensions or contradictions that can be found within this style. One of the most obvious ones arises due to this style's overall dislike for homosexuality. There are often comments on blog posts that allude to or blatantly state that Richard Spencer is gay. Most often they use some form of derogatory language. An example of this can be seen in the blog post, "Toxic Anti-Masculinity", from which I found the image of someone consuming soy. A comment on this blog stated, "Woah, is that Richard Spencer at the top of the article drinking soy? Give me Dr. Pierce any day" (Benton). This appears to seek to connect Spencer to the myth that drinking soy leads to feminization and in turn alluding to him being gay. The author of the article replies by stating, "I think they have the same barber—or is "hairdresser" the right word?" (Benton). This being another shot at Spencer for being possibly being gay. The statement that he has a hairdresser is meant to assert he is more likely to be in a women's salon, than in a barbershop. The mention of a Dr. Pierce is an obscure reference to a white supremacist who was an author and activist. From what I can gather, this commenter sees Dr. Pierce as a more "manly" face of the Alt-Right. It seems this style accepts spokesmen like Spencer and Milo Yiannopoulos, who is openly gay, only because they are prominent figures espousing the views of the Alt-Right. If they were anyone else, they would likely be attacked by members of this style.

Another tension is the balance of advocating for violence, while at the same time stating the style does not seek to engage in violence. With much of the Alt-Right style seeking the "establishment of a post-American ethno state", it is hard to envision how this would be achieved without some form of violence (Wood 50). In a blog post on *Affirmative Right*, titled "Thoughts

on the State of the Alt-Right”, this tension is brought to light. The author states how the style of the Alt-Right is engaged in a, “guerrilla war” (Lawrence). The author then goes on to state, “I am not suggesting a physical war with the managerial state, and anyone who does so is either a moron or an enemy skill. But it should be clear to us by now that politics is war by other means” (Lawrence). This is a common way of communicating within this style, using military style rhetoric, but then declaring they do not condone violence. This tension becomes even clearer in Richard Spencer’s interview with the *Atlantic*. When the interviewer, who is half Chinese, asked Spencer whether he would be welcomed in this envisioned white post-American ethno state he replied, “I’m a generous guy” and, “If you truly identify with our people, I would not have any problem with that” (Wood 49). Spencer then follows this by stating how there will never be exceptions for, “A full-blooded African, no matter how wonderful he might be—I’m not sure that would really work” (Wood 49).

Throughout this interview Spencer states he does not advocate for violence, but does not acknowledge what implications his statements have. What would be done with full-blooded Africans? If they are not welcomed in this new America, it seems natural to assume they would be eliminated or moved to another country. Even if physical violence is not enacted against these peoples, their forced removal is still violence. It is removing their rights and relocating them involuntarily. Another example of this tension or contradiction, comes when he states what would likely happen to the interviewer if the Alt-Right “wins”. Due to the interviewer having advocated against the Alt-Right, Spencer states, “if the Alt-Right triumphs, we’re going to probably throw you in jail. We’ll hold you accountable” (Wood 44). This again implies a form of violence, which is taking away the freedom of dissidents. One more example of this tension

comes in how the community celebrated the case I mentioned earlier, where a shit load sent a strobe light video to a journalist who had epilepsy. While laughing Spencer and a friend talk about how, “We collectively almost killed him” (Wood 44). When the person who sent the video was arrested and charged with aggravated assault, Spencer “retweeted an appeal to crowdfund Rivello’s defense, “against lying #fakenews Kurt Kikenwald” (Wood, 44) The journalist name was Kurt Eichenwald. Spencer’s use of Kikenwald is a reference to the term kike which is a slur of Jewish people. Kurt is not even Jewish, he is Episcopalian (Wood 44).

Chapter 5 Conclusion

Through the past couple of years, the Alt-Right has been popping up more and more in the news. Much of this is due to instances where this digital style manifested in real life situations like gamergate and a tiki torch rally protesting the removal of confederate statues. I have always been fascinated with trying to understand the motivations and beliefs of the style of the Alt-Right. It is a murky landscape, full of contradictions and infighting. My intention in this analysis is to bring some clarity to what the Alt-Right style is.

In my interactions with Alt-Right texts there is a constant theme that runs through these texts, which illuminates the end goal or desire of this style. Richard Spencer put their goal in the most easy to understand language when he states how the end goal is the, “establishment of a post-American white ethno state, through a slow process of awakening ethnic pride and instituting government policies that raises a new white race consciousness” (Wood 50). The style not only seems to feel it is in a battle for the white race, but white men in particular. To put an even finer point on who this change is intended for, it is intended for heterosexual males who have strong masculine characteristics.

Most styles are born out of a power struggle. If we look at hippie style, it was born out of rebellion to what was seen as a stuffy culture. The youth shunned the suit and tie, for loose fitting or no clothing at all. Sexual repression was met with sexual experimentation. I see the power struggle that created the Alt-Right as a rebellion against an ever diversifying America and against politically correct culture. It is a rebellion against the alteration of gender norms. This style feels it is an oppressed population as centuries old white privilege slowly erodes. This is put clearly in the blog, “Thoughts on the State of the Alt-Right”, when the author states how the

style is being subjected to “a form of outsourced government repression” (Lawrence). This outsourced repression being enacted through groups like Antifa, which is an anti-fascist organization. This group feels it is being oppressed and denied social resources.

We can see examples of this in the few instances the imaginary community of the Alt-Right manifested into a real-world community. The first instance of this manifestation occurred through an event known as gamergate. This event was sparked as a backlash against feminist critiques of gaming culture. The critiques were mostly commenting on the toxic environment of video game culture. This caused intense harassment of women, minorities, and progressive voices (Lees). This harassment came largely from those aligned with the Alt-Right style, which came in the form of death threats and threats of rape. One of the prominent feminist voices on gaming culture had a least one event cancelled due to bomb and death threats. This is a great example of the power struggle that led to the further development of the style of the Alt-Right. Another example of how this style developed through a power struggle is the tiki torch rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. This rally was held to protest the removal of confederate statues. This removal was seen as a removal of their history for the Alt-Right. They felt their voices were being silenced and so this largely digital style made itself real to voice its disagreement with the direction of America.

Are those who engage in this style truly being oppressed? I think it depends on perspective. If you have the perspective of the self-proclaimed minion in the Richard Spencer interview, you could see how potentially losing your job for your views would feel like oppression. From another perspective this style is a reaction to a changing America. Does the Alt-Right have the potential to gain as much momentum as the Nazi style in which many within

this style idealize? It is hard to say, but there are signs that it is possible. It is important to note there is a shift occurring with the younger generations where living under authoritarian rule is seen as acceptable. According to Yascha Mounk and Roberto Stefan Foa the, “essential importance of living in a democracy has dropped off dramatically among the young, and support for “Army rule” has increased to one in six Americans. A generation ago it was one in 16” (Wood 50). This is the type of environment where a style like the Alt-Right can thrive. Will the Alt-Right style create a drastic change in American ideals? Or will it slowly fade and arise again like so many other nationalistic/racial superiority styles have throughout the world? Only history will be able to answer that question. In the meantime, it is important to have an understanding of the style of the modern Alt-Right in order to combat any possible real-world action this style might engage in.

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Deplatforming and the Role of Social Media in the Regulation of Speech

by

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Did you know the government has ‘weather weapons’, chemicals in the water are turning frog’s gay, Robert Mueller is a demon, and the Sandy Hook shooting was staged? These thoughts were put into the zeitgeist by the infamous YouTube character known as Alex Jones. While Jones was once seen as a spectacle and a source of amusement, the media and leaders of social media (SM) have decided he is a danger to society. This has led to Jones being banished from popular SM platforms. This action has created the need for a conversation to be had about the role social media plays in the regulation of speech.

A conversation is needed because of the vast power and influence SM holds in our society and to create an awareness of the integrity of those who operate SM platforms. Are they contributing to healthy democratic discourse? Or, are these platforms disrupting the democratic nature of our society by not being consistent in their power to ban people from access to the main arena of popular public discourse? Are they upholding the ideal of free expression that this country highly values, a country where, “no matter how abhorrent or outside of societal mainstream one’s thoughts, with few exceptions one has the right to stand in a public park and share those thoughts with others” (Leetaru). By examining the case of Alex Jones and illuminating the inconsistencies of SM in their use of a tool known as deplatforming, this paper is an attempt to create a complex conversation about how society manages the discourse of those who make us uncomfortable.

Defining Deplatforming

The concept of deplatforming is a relatively new phenomenon that people are still grappling with. Merriam-Webster defines deplatforming as a term which “generally refers to the

attempt to boycott a group or individual through removing the platforms (such as speaking venues or websites) used to share information or ideas” (Words of the Week). Even within the article that provides a definition to this term Merriam-Webster felt it important to mention how new this term is by stating, “Please note that this word is, as mentioned previously, still quite new, and therefore may be, as lexicographers have been known to say, of fluid meaning and application” (Words of the Week).

The ability to silence someone on such a large scale is something new in our society. With the popular mediums of the past, television and radio, it is unlikely one person would be banned entirely from them. Some might say that just because you have been banned from social media you have not necessarily been banned from public discourse as you can still utilize radio, television, and create your own website to participate in public discourse. This thought ignores the reality that social media is now the predominate form not only of where public discourse occurs, but it is also the medium where a large portion of society receives news from. Before implementing a tool like deplatforming it is important to consider the value of what some might see as low-value speech.

Value of Protecting Low-Value Speech

The logic for the need to be wary of censorship of low-value speech can be seen in a paper by Dale A. Herbeck titled, “Freedom of speech and the communication discipline: defending the value of low-value speech”. While this paper focuses on speech on college campuses, the integrity of popular discourse would benefit from expansion of this concept beyond college campuses to social media; where the user base and discourse interaction is much higher. Embracing diverse discourse should not be a principle of college campuses alone.

By limiting this concept to college campuses, we are only serving a minority of the population. Popular public discourse has just as much to benefit from diverse viewpoints, as does the discourse on college campuses. In his paper Herbeck states, “Instead of focusing efforts on silencing disagreeable viewpoints (even if those viewpoints are hateful and vile), institutions of higher education should undertake efforts to create a culture that resists inequity and bias: recruiting diverse students, faculty, and administrators; conducting workshops, programs, and counseling on inequality and bias in its various forms; and responding promptly to incidents of harassment and discrimination” (248). By allowing disagreeable viewpoints on SM, people can engage in efforts that create the culture mentioned by Herbeck, one that has the tools to respond to incidents of harassment and discrimination. Herbeck provides further credence to the argument that speech should receive exposure rather than be hidden away when he says, “if there be time to expose through discussion the falsehood and fallacies, to avert the evil by the processes of education, the remedy to be applied is more speech, not enforced silence” (248). The only way to illuminate the falsehood and fallacies of the discourse broadcasted by people like Alex Jones, is to allow their discourse to be available for all to examine. It seems people are banned from SM out of a sense of protectionism, out of a worry that one person will lead others to enact harm upon the world. Herbeck illuminates the agency of individuals when he states how it is, “wrong to treat human beings as inanimate objects that could be “triggered” into action” (250). It is important to trust people to make the right choices and not view people as robots who will unconsciously be moved, or “triggered” into action.

While the context for Herbeck’s arguments are in reference to college campuses, it would be beneficial for this to apply to society in general. Whenever disagreeable rhetoric surfaces it is

important that we require, “a contextual analysis of every situation where speech is to be punished; it requires that the danger of lawless action be immediate and likely; and, by its use of the phrase “directed to inciting,” it implies a requirement of intent by the speaker to stimulate illegal action” (Haiman 276). The phrase “directed to inciting” is from a court case that decided the speech from a KKK member who gave a hate filled speech that demanded “vengeance” against black people, was protected speech (Herbeck 251). While it is understandable some might feel free speech law does not apply to SM platforms, but it is important to consider as regulation of SM might be on the horizon. Regulation would likely hamper the ability for SM to silence users.

Our relationship with the popular SM platforms is comparable to that of Pullman, Illinois, a town that was founded in the late 1800’s by George Pullman. This town had no municipal government and for the most part every part of life in Pullman was controlled by George Pullman, who “had a strong sense of how its inhabitants should live, and he never doubted his right to give that sense practical force” (Walzer 296). If Pullman observed behavior deemed unacceptable, the observed would incur fines. People who chose to live here were subject to the whims of George Pullman, who essentially acted as governor, but was not elected into this position (Walzer 297). The immense control Pullman had over the residents went against the ideals of democracy and a requirement of democracy that “property should have no political currency, that it shouldn’t convert into anything like sovereignty, authoritative command, sustained control over men and women” (Walzer 298). Pullman saw his town as a private enterprise to do with as he wished, but this ignored the reality that his town was a part of a larger picture. His town resided in a country of laws which in many cases overrides the authority of

private citizens. SM platforms can be looked at in the same light as someone trying to set up a private town. Since they reside in a country governed by laws that supersede private ownership rights, SM platforms are not immune to laws that govern free speech. Since the users are what drive their profits, we could consider ourselves as citizens of the digital towns that are SM platforms. The ownership of a company does not give you wide sweeping authority, especially when your company has widespread power and influence within our country, has become a facilitator of local and global discourse, and has created a global digital town square.

As SM has become the public square where a large portion of the public engages in popular discourse, it is important to understand the power these companies have to silence individuals in this public square. This situation presents a need for a conversation and question our new reality where someone can be silenced with the push of a button. As our lives transition to becoming more and more digital, it is important to be aware of how these companies have the power to allow us to express ourselves and be engaged in local and global discourse. Not only how they allow this expression, but how they can eliminate the ability to be meaningfully engaged in social discourse.

This brings us to the heart of what this paper will be about. I will present the case of Alex Jones and how he was deplatformed by SM platforms, explain the concept of deplatforming, examine the rhetoric of these platforms in their reasoning for kicking Jones off their platforms and evaluate the consistency with past and present use of punishment tools like deplatforming. I will also analyze how well the actions of these companies line up with their slogans and mantras. I will address the possibility of regulation of social media in the future, which is one of the more vital aspects of this conversation because with regulation comes the likelihood of being held to

standards of free speech law and limits to ability to deplatform users. There will also be a discussion of how SM has taken on the role and power traditional news once held. This paper is not to determine whether SM platforms have the right to do this, but to question actions like deplatforming, its role in our evolving digital society, and whether it is conducive to the betterment of discourse in society. This conversation is essential as these platforms have “evolved into our global town squares, impacting nearly every country on earth, they have become modern lightning rods for the global tension between America’s historical adherence to communicative freedoms compared with the harsh restrictions of the rest of the world” (Leetaru).

Parallel to News Media

The prevalence and influence of SM is comparable to that of older forms of news media and the power it once held over the framing of popular discourse. A 2018 survey by the Pew Research Center found, “About two-thirds of American adults (68%) say they at least occasionally get news on social media”, and “A majority (57%) say they expect the news they see on social media to be largely inaccurate” (Matsa and Shearer). These statistics illustrate how SM is slowly taking over the role of older media. SM of today has taken on traditional medias role in terms of its societal purpose, which in practice is to, “inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and state” (Herman and Chomsky 298). There are distinct parallels with the perception of the societal purpose of traditional media and how social media advertises its societal purpose. The perception of traditional media was that it is “cantankerous, obstinate, and ubiquitous in their search for truth and their independence of authority”, which means to enable the public to, “assert meaningful control over the political process” (Herman and Chomsky 298). When, in practice

the societal role of traditional media was to defend the political agenda of privileged groups that dominate society.

SM often portrays itself as a portal for people to express themselves and be a part of a diverse community, but SM companies seek to protect their profits and defend the political agenda of privileged groups. SM portrays a sense of objectivity in their management of discourse, yet their actions show a lack integrity and consistency of deciding who can say what. Due to its influence SM holds immense power to frame societal discussions. When the discourse of Alex Jones is deemed unacceptable, yet the president's discourse is deemed acceptable in the eyes of SM, they are setting a confusing and inconsistent standard for society. The actions of SM show how they defend the privileged and silence the marginalized in a similar way to the case of how the traditional media managed discourse during the Watergate era.

During this era, "The major scandal of Watergate as portrayed in the mainstream press was that the Nixon administration sent a collection of petty criminals to break into the Democratic party headquarters, for reasons that remain obscure" (Herman and Chomsky). While the press protected the privileged political party that sought to oust Nixon, they ignored illegal actions taken against the Socialist Workers party, which held little in the way of powerful interest (Herman and Chomsky 299). During this time the FBI had been, "disrupting its activities by illegal break-ins and other measures for a decade" which represented, "violation of democratic principle far more extensive and serious than anything charged during the Watergate hearings" (Herman and Chomsky). Because of the interests involved in this situation, this was not a scandal highlighted in the media at the time. This is similar to how SM has suppressed the voices of the LGBT community, has played a role in elections and facilitated genocidal discourse

in Myanmar. To understand how SM has a similar reach and influence to that of older media, we can look at the amount of engagement with SM.

Chapter 2: Role and Prevalence of Social Media in Popular Public Discourse

There are some interesting statistics about SM usership, especially YouTube usership. YouTube has 1.9 billion users worldwide, 79 percent of Internet users have their own YouTube account, you can navigate YouTube in 80 different languages which covers 95% of the Internet population, 94 percent of American users between the age range of 18-44 year old accessed YouTube at least once a month, and people watch one billion hours of video on YouTube per day (Mohsin). Facebook might have even more impressive numbers. As of early 2019, “Facebook now serves 2.37 billion monthly active users, an increase of 55 million on the previous quarter” (Hutchinson). While Twitter has seen its usership decline, it still reaches a massive amount of people. As of early 2019 Twitter had 321 million monthly users (Kastrenakes). Between these three SM behemoths, the public has access to popular discourse on a scale that would be thought of as impossible before the internet. The massive usership numbers and the influence SM now has within our society is reason enough to question tactics like deplatforming.

One reason SM has grown to have such colossal usership and societal influence is due to how it is more accessible than TV and radio. People from all demographics can now not only have easy access to popular public discourse, but can engage with and create discourse. Deplatforming someone and cutting them off from social media access essentially cuts them off from a meaningful way of engaging in public discourse with a majority of the population. It is a way of censoring someone and in many cases is a reaction of cancel culture, rather than an action meant to protect the public from a figure that poses a credible threat to the public. Cancel culture is the phenomenon of the social media age where people seek to have the voice of a controversial

figure eliminated from public discourse. The origins of cancel culture started with the MeToo movement, and “other movements that demand greater accountability from public figures. The term has been credited to black users of Twitter, where it has been used as a hashtag” (What It Means to Get 'Canceled'). This form of culture seeks to censor and quarantine voices they disagree with.

Refuting the Private Company Defense and Our Transaction with Social Media

A common defense for SM to eliminate users is that SM companies are private companies, so they can eliminate users as they see fit. From a legal standpoint this is likely true, but has the legal system caught up to the discourse landscape that exist with SM? Our lives are transitioning to a digital landscape and SM has immense influence over our daily lives. We need only look at the Russian interference in the 2016 election and the Cambridge Analytica scandal to realize the impact of social media on our lives. Our data is one of the most valuable things we have control over, and we are engaged in a transaction with SM when we sign up for an account. SM companies allow the free use of their platforms in exchange for the use of our data. This exchange can be seen as one sided as SM companies make immense profits from selling our data and by advertising the size of its userbase to potential investors. Facebook alone made \$60 billion in the first quarter of 2019, which around 95% was from ad revenue (Hutchinson).

A legal argument could probably be made that this transaction should limit the power of SM to eliminate people from and take away their chance to engage in the public square of the digital age. It could even be said the terms of service are legally questionable allowing SM to do with our data as they wish, as it is unlikely everyone who signs what is essentially a contract is mentally capable of signing such a contract. It seems unlikely that regulation of SM of some

form will not occur in the near future, whether by government regulation or self-regulation. This regulation could hamper SM's ability to ban users to the extent they have recently. An example of deplatforming put into practice can be seen with the case of Alex Jones.

Chapter 3: Case of Alex Jones

Alex Jones is an infamous conspiracy theorist who found popularity first through radio and then through YouTube. He is one of the more well-known figures to be banned from all of the major social media and broadcast platforms of today, such as YouTube, Facebook, Apple's iTunes, Roku, Spotify, and Twitter. Jones's popularity can be illustrated by looking at his YouTube numbers of more than 2.4 million subscribers and how his videos have garnered close to 1.6 billion views (Roettgers). Another sign of his popularity comes with how he funds his show. Jones sells "health supplements", which are available on Amazon, and it is speculated that much of his revenue comes from these products (Emerson). The show *Info Wars* has a flashy set and while hosting Jones is usually wearing a nice suit and a Rolex watch, so even though numbers are not provided; he must sell a fair amount of supplements. He continues to sell these products even after being deplatformed.

On August 5th the process of eliminating the voice of Alex Jones across popular social media platforms was initiated. Apple was the first domino in the process of deplatforming Alex Jones when they banned *Info Wars*, the name of his podcast, for, "violations of its rules on "objectionable content"" (Hamilton). The term objectionable content is quite subjective and could apply to a wide range of content. Within the next 48 hours other popular social media platforms such as, Facebook and YouTube followed suit in banning Alex Jones and *Info Wars* (Kraus).

While Apple had a clean break with providing *Info Wars* content, Facebook's role in the deplatforming of Alex Jones was much more erratic. After a meeting with various media outlets who criticized Facebook for allowing Alex Jones to exist on their platform, a Facebook

spokesperson had this to say in a Twitter post: “We see Pages on both the left and the right pumping out what they consider opinion or analysis – but others call fake news. We believe banning these Pages would be contrary to the basic principles of free speech” (McHugh). When the founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, was asked why pages like *Info Wars* and holocaust deniers were allowed to remain on the site, Zuckerberg stated banning these pages would be, “too extreme” (McHugh). Zuckerberg would later follow up by saying he found the views of holocaust deniers as, “deeply offensive” (McHugh).

The first punitive actions by Facebook come on July 27th when they removed some videos from Alex’s page and suspended Jones’s account for 30 days, “saying he violated the site’s bullying and hate speech policies. While this means Jones is unable to use his personal account, The Alex Jones Channel page remains live and active” (McHugh). The final punitive action by Facebook comes a day after Apple’s banning of Alex Jones. Facebook acted after Alex violated his suspension and continued posting. Facebook stated it permanently removed Alex’s personal and affiliated pages for, “glorifying violence, which violates our graphic violence policy, and using dehumanizing language to describe people who are transgender, Muslims and immigrants, which violates our hate speech policies.” (McHugh).

The process YouTube took to ban Alex is quite murky, as they have a three strikes policy, but these strikes expire after three months. So, in order to be banned, “an account must receive all three within three months to get the ultimate penalty” (McHugh). Alex received his first two strikes after publishing two videos making allegations that those involved in the Parkland High School shooting were crisis actors. After this other Alex Jones videos were removed from YouTube, but these videos were lumped into one strike, rather than a strike for

each video. This strike fell outside of the three-month window, so it did not count as a third strike. On the same day as Facebook, YouTube banned Alex Jones without giving an explanation as to what caused his third strike to occur. Due to the way it is structured, YouTube's three strike policy allows for users to strategically violate policies.

Twitter was the last of the three major social media platforms, Facebook and YouTube being the other two, to ban Alex Jones. When questioned why Twitter had not banned Alex Jones, CEO Jack Dorsey stated that Alex had not violated the rules of Twitter and it's critical for journalists to "document, validate, and refute accounts like Jones's, among other defenses for keeping the accounts live" (McHugh). This provides a rationale for disagreement with the concept of deplatforming. We cannot refute and combat what is seen as controversial speech if it is not documented. This is the perfect medium for people to incriminate themselves.

On August 24th Twitter temporarily restricts Alex's account because of a clip "in which Jones rallies his users against the media, telling them to ready their "battle rifle". Twitter says this targeted harassment violates its standards" (McHugh). This is an especially interesting rationale as the president of the United States makes similar statements on a regular basis. When defending the decision to put Alex in "timeout", rather than ban him, Dorsey says, "The most important thing for us is that we are consistent in applying our enforcement," and "We can't build a service that is subjective just to the whims of what we personally believe. ... We need to make sure we are applying our rules consistently" (McHugh).

In early September Twitter banned Alex due to "new reports of Tweets and videos posted yesterday that violate our abusive behavior policy" (Schneider). It is not clear what Tweets and videos that are being referenced, but this came after Alex Jones confronted Senator Marco Rubio

outside of a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing (Schneider). To validate this move Twitter provided a link to their policy statement which states, "You may not engage in the targeted harassment of someone or incite other people to do so. We consider abusive behavior an attempt to harass, intimidate, or silence someone else's voice" (Schneider). Again, this is something the president does on an almost weekly basis through Twitter. This action is also at odds with Twitter's decision to not ban Alex after the battle rifles comment. These events help illuminate the inconsistency of the espoused ideals of the various popular SM platforms and how they treat users like Alex Jones, especially when we look at the content and people SM has allowed to remain on their platforms.

Contradictions and Inconsistencies

To illuminate the contradictions and inconsistencies of SM in their use of deplatforming, we can look at examples that involve content that has been allowed to remain. One example of YouTube's inconsistent application of their policies can be seen with how Logan Paul has been allowed to operate on the platform. His most well-known act that should have received an immediate ban was when he posted the body of someone found in Japan's suicide forest, which was so fresh it is unlikely the person's family had been notified yet. This is just his most well-known controversy. Logan has also tasered a dead rat and had his dad kiss a blindfolded woman who supposedly thought she was kissing someone else. Even if this was staged, it is made to appear as reality to viewers who for the most part are young teens. Logan also constantly violates rules relating to content for children; most of which relate to advertising. This is allowed on YouTube because at the moment they are not regulated like television. Logan Paul's channel is often promoted by YouTube and featured on its trending page, as it brings in tens of millions of

views. So, on the one hand Alex Jones has been banned, but Logan Paul has uploaded videos where he has shown a corpse, committed animal cruelty, is constantly advertising his merchandise to children, blindfolded a young woman so that she would inadvertently kiss his dad, and yet his channel has never even been suspended. The treatment of Jones is comparable to how a citizen of the town of Pullman might have been treated, with leaders of SM platforms acting in the role of George Pullman. Though in this case the penalty is much steeper than a fine.

Another similar inconsistency is visible with Facebook and YouTube allowing a video depicting the president of the United States killing political opponents and journalist to remain on its platform. This video is “an edited clip of a scene depicting a brawl inside a church from a 2014 movie. President Trump's head is superimposed on the main character in the video and it shows him shooting, stabbing, and assaulting other people in the church whose heads have been edited to show Trump's critics and the logos of news organizations. At one point, Trump is depicted as shooting in the head a person whose face has been replaced by a Black Lives Matter logo” (O’Sullivan). This video seems to violate Facebook’s policy against “language that incites or facilitates serious violence”, but there is a disclaimer to this rule which tries to “distinguish casual statements from content that constitutes a credible threat to public or personal safety” (O’Sullivan).

Facebook’s statement about “language that incites or facilitates serious violence”, is thought-provoking as a recent CNN investigation discovered Facebook rarely bans people who engage in this type of discourse. One case involved a user who called someone the N-word, told them to kill themselves, and provided illustrated instructions of how to slit your wrists (Cohen). The offender in this case was given the harsh punishment which stated that for, “30 days, she

wasn't allowed to send messages in Messenger”, but was still, “allowed to continue participating and posting on Facebook as usual” (Cohen). The investigation by CNN sent a Facebook spokesman 65, “pieces of content that vaccine advocates said they found offensive, including posts and comments, and direct messages (Cohen). Facebook sent these to their team that evaluates whether people should be punished for the type of language used. This team, “found that 39 of those pieces of content, posted by 31 separate users, violated their community standards, most of them regarding harassment”, and yet Facebook removed only one of the users (Cohen).

Twitter finds itself in a contradictory position as they allow the president to remain. On a near daily basis, President Trump threatens world leaders, political opponents, insults and ridicules those who oppose him, and yet all of the major SM platforms allow him to use their megaphones. A possible reason SM allows the president to operate on their platform, and hesitated to ban Jones, could be due to the number of visitors these figures bring to their platforms. These visitors are valuable for these platforms and might be why they were hesitant to ban Alex Jones. He brought an impressive number of visitors to their sites, especially YouTube.

YouTube had the most to gain from keeping Alex Jones on their platform, he was an asset until he became a liability. Jones first appeared on YouTube in 2008 and was known to push outlandish ideas long before this via his radio show. Alex Jones brought a lot of visitors to YouTube; this is evident through the amount of engagement and viewership he received on the platform. Before being deplatformed, Jones main channel had, “more than 2.4 million subscribers. His videos had attracted close to 1.6 billion views” (Roettgers). This is just counting the videos from his main channel and does not account for extra traffic YouTube received just

for videos that parodied Alex Jones, or channels that agreed with Alex's views and would repost his content For many of the popular platforms, figures like Alex Jones are a highly valued asset.

Chapter 4: Social Media and the Inevitability of Regulation

All of the popular SM platforms have at one time or another stated they stand for freedom of expression and promoting the ability to engage in diverse discourse. This might backfire on them, as there are signs SM will be regulated in the near future. Of all the SM leaders, Mark Zuckerberg has most frequently mentioned how his company stands for protecting speech. During a speaking engagement at Georgetown University, Zuckerberg's entire speech centered around how he felt protection of freedom of speech was vital aspect of Facebook. He acknowledges something I have referenced, which is how, "People no longer have to rely on traditional gatekeepers in politics or media to make their voices heard, and that has important consequences" (Zuckerberg). The consequences I envision are this access needs to be protected and the ideals of free speech should be applied to SM. Even Twitter once took a bold step and "once branded itself "the free speech wing of the free speech party" and famously refused demands by Congress to stop terrorists from using its platform" (Leetaru). Since SM has not aligned their actions with their professed ideals, the government has taken notice of their influence and power. Zuckerberg has been called to congress on a number of occasions due to government concerns about the power and influence Facebook holds in our society.

Facebook

There has been a controversy recently with Facebook because they have decided not to fact check political ads, which is something broadcast stations do not do as well. In their defense Facebook has cited Federal Communication Commission regulations that state, "the local TV or radio stations that are often network affiliates — have to accept ads from political candidates, regardless if they are true or false" (Fischer). This is an odd choice as SM media platforms have

not embraced the idea of being regulated. This strengthens the argument of the government if it decides to act. If SM is to be regulated, this likely takes away the censorship tool of deplatforming. History shows the regulation of SM is inevitable, as it can be compared to any broadcast/communication medium that has become popular. Hollywood was once completely unregulated, just as radio and television were eventually subject to regulation (Leetaru). An interesting quote that shows government concern over Facebook's ability to ban users come from Ted Cruz who has stated, "I am no fan of Jones — among other things he has a habit of repeatedly slandering my Dad by falsely and absurdly accusing him of killing JFK — but who the hell made Facebook the arbiter of political speech?" (Nicas). For SM platforms, regulation is coming.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

SM's has used the term "dangerous" when talking about Alex Jones and this position creates a stance that prevents SM from having defensible rhetoric. Defensible rhetoric "depends on and builds justified trust" (Booth 40). There is little proof that Alex Jones is dangerous and has directly caused real world harm. In creating this perception, the actions of SM are preventing a justified trust that they are looking out for their userbase. There were allegations that he was a major driver in a scandal that drove someone to bring a gun to a pizza shop in order to save sex slave hidden by Hillary Clinton, but the reality is that this conspiracy theory gained steam largely in the dark corners of the internet; where those banned from popular SM thrive. By creating a deceptive view of Jones, they are creating non-communities, which have the potential to create a winner takes-all situation (Booth 40). If you do not align your views with those in power, you will lose your ability to engage in a meaningful way in popular discourse. The current stance of SM is preventing a mutual understanding, which "creates communities in which everyone needs and deserves attention" (Booth 40). If SM is deceptive in their reasoning for banning Jones, they will struggle to have defensible rhetoric. One path to creating defensible rhetoric might be through embracing a community input driven process of discourse regulation.

A community input driven process of regulation of SM discourse would be the beginnings of creating online communities that pursue mutual understanding and allows everyone to receive attention. This is not to say everyone needs or deserves attention, but this might alleviate feelings of bias by both sides of the political spectrum. YouTube already has this type of system in place. Their platform has a thumbs up or thumbs down system. This provides a quick and simple way to view how a community feels about someone's rhetoric. If someone's rhetoric does not clearly violate laws, and the community has given it approval with a majority

of thumbs up, why should someone be eliminated from a platform? If a majority of society deems a certain form of discourse as corrosive, it should be highlighted in order to devise ways to combat possible actions that might occur due to this rhetoric.

The elimination of discourse is not a realistic way of combating corrosive discourse. This has been done throughout history without much of a meaningful effect. The ban of Nazi imagery in Germany is a great example of the ineffectiveness of trying to ban rhetoric and discourse. Even with efforts to suppress it, the ideology of Nazism is still present and gaining strength; not only in Germany, but around the world. According to an article by *Quartz*, there are clear instances of the resurgence of Nazism and Nationalism that are visible in 14 countries (Merelli). This resurgence is especially evident in Germany as in 2018 there was a nine percent increase of individuals who espouse extreme political views, which often relate to Nazi ideology. (Germany Experiences a Resurgence in neo-Nazis, Intel Agency Finds). The practice of banning rhetoric and discourse is even less effective and possibly more harmful today than what has been done in the past. Before the digital age, exiling someone or some form of discourse might have dampened the effects of the person or discourse, as you did not have anywhere to continue your rhetoric unless you moved away from that region. Now, those we exile from the digital public square are simply pushed into the darkest corners of the internet where rhetoric can become more concentrated within these dark echo chambers. Sometimes this practice can even amplify a certain form of discourse.

An article from the Guardian titled, “8chan: ex-users of far-right site flock to new homes across internet”, does a great job of illuminating how ineffective and possibly harmful tactics like deplatforming can be. By taking someone off of popular social media applications, we are

only driving them into hidey holes spread across the internet. Here these people are concentrated with likeminded people and fuel their controversial rhetoric in echo chambers. One of the echo chambers for those who have been banned from various popular social media applications is 8chan. 8chan was temporarily shut down after one of the many recent mass shootings that occurred in 2019. The shutdown happened because, “the security service provider Cloudflare terminated the extremist messaging board as one of its clients following the El Paso shooting” (Paul). This move did nothing to disrupt the community that might have been in support of the shooter, as, “ The removal of 8chan is just crossing one more platform off the list they won’t be using for the time being, but it won’t necessarily disrupt the community structure” (Paul). Often the main motivation for controversial rhetoric is attention, or what is known as, “the “gamification” of content – receiving votes for comments and posts” (Paul). Although, what is most important to understand about the effect of pushing controversial users off of popular social media is that we are pushing these users to sites that embrace anonymity.

The result of efforts to deplatform are “these user communities will shift into anonymized space. They’d rather shy away from being outed for having such opinions” (Paul). By banning people, we risk driving them to the darker corners of the internet where it is harder to keep an eye on, record, and track insidious discourse. We force them to sites that provide sanctuary for what some might see as the martyred and for controversial rhetoric Banning someone engages the Streisand effect, which is the concept that the more you try to hide and sensor something, the more attention you bring to it.

Efforts to ban and deplatform people have led to the creation of sites like Gab. This site advertises itself as a refuge for those who believe in free speech, but in reality, it is just an echo

chamber for those who have been banned from popular social media platforms. This site, “has become the go-to social networking site for the alt-right and, moreover, the furthest fringes of the far right” and the discourse of this site is mainly comprised of anti-Semitic, anti-black sentiments, and conspiracy theories (Coaston). Gab was created in 2016 by Andrew Torba as a reaction to widespread censorship that has occurred on popular SM platforms over the past couple of years. Instead of remaining on popular SM sites where their rhetoric can be examined and open to scrutiny, we are pushing users to sites like Gab where they can feel comfortable with likeminded people who will not challenge their views.

It is better for all views to be out in the light, so society is aware of those with extreme views, so we as a society have an understanding of where these views are constructed. This will allow us to understand why people might perpetuate certain views, and so we can devise ways to combat corrosive views. In order to prepare future generations whose lives will only become more digital for the foreseeable future to combat the logical fallacies that often come with conspiracy theories, we need to keep those who broadcast these theories in the light. In order to ensure they are seen as a societal laughingstock that Alex Jones became, they should be in view for society to judge.

By banning people, we risk making his views taboo, which brings followers who come along just for the sake of partaking in a taboo. In hiding discourse, we create an adventure for people to find it for the sake of engaging with artifacts that are controversial. By banning voices in a highly individualistic society like that of the U.S., we risk having people reacting with psychological reactance, which is, “the tendency to react against threats to our freedom by asserting ourselves” (Fugère). It is important to note that, “This tendency is so strong that when

someone explicitly tries to influence our opinions in one direction, we will even change our attitudes in a direction opposite to our original feelings” (Fugère). The more the powers that be of social media and society deny access to someone, the more likely we are to push people to follow them and possibly even ignore their better judgment and absorb certain views that might not make sense.

Banning Jones SM has now made it an adventure for those who are curious and further solidified Alex’s role as a martyr to his followers. This feeling of martyrdom has been expressed by Jones as he has said, “The more I’m persecuted, the stronger I get” (Nicas). Whether SM likes it or not, they play a major role in broadcasting the views and opinions of the average person. In a world where the divide between the two ends of the political spectrum is widening by the day, we need to have a conversation about the effectiveness of tools of censorship like deplatforming. From what I have observed, deplatforming only serves to make martyrs of those who are banned. This creates a view that their discourse is being banned because they are speaking the “truth”. The inconsistencies of SM in their application of a tool like deplatforming should make us question whether they have the integrity and ability to discern what is and is not acceptable popular public discourse.

The purpose of this paper is to question the current status of discourse management in our society. It is important to question the tactic of deplatforming because of the idea that corporations are considered people, which was established by the court case *Citizens United*. We as a society need to question whether we are comfortable with immensely powerful “people” deciding what acceptable discourse is and what is not. We should be wary of the effects of cancel culture and how it prevents us from observing a diverse form of public discourse. We are

living in an age where the slightest controversy means you should be exiled from the public square. A strong and fair society is one that allows a variety of viewpoints to be broadcast so we can debate the merits of various viewpoints and be prepared to combat viewpoints that might threaten the stability of society.

Deplatforming only serves to create a false view of society; it seeks to hide the uncomfortable elements of our world. We cannot try to protect society from itself, if it is meant to crumble due to corrosive discourse, then we should let it and rebuild from the remains. We should not be protectionist and allow SM platforms free reign to decide whose discourse is acceptable, as we never know what they will decide which type of discourse is to be targeted next. Every society faces dark times where the only way to improve and move forward is to understand who we are and find ways to better ourselves. From the events I have analyzed around the topic of Alex Jones and deplatforming, there is little evidence that SM has been consistent in their use of deplatforming and that this practice has been for the betterment of public discourse. This paper is just one side of a conversation that I hope inspires people to discuss the validity of deplatforming and the integrity of SM companies in their use of this tool.

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