There and Back Again: How White Nationalist Ephemera Travels Between Online and Offline Spaces

J M Berger, Kateira Aryaeinejad & Seán Looney

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This article represents an initial exploration of the content and posting strategies of the current wave of racist flyer drops in the US, focusing specifically on a dataset of all documented flyers posted in 2018. The dataset was generated by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and augmented by the authors. The dataset is unique among open sources and includes a large number of incidents which were not reported in the media.

The article consists of three parts. The first documents and briefly discusses the groups engaged in racist flyer development and drops. The second describes and characterises the text and image content of the flyers. The final section uses open sources and leaked material to describe the process by which flyer drops are instigated, planned and documented.

**Background**

The use and dissemination of printed racist propaganda products has a long history in the US. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, ephemeral publications such as flyers, pamphlets and posters were a primary propaganda tool for white nationalist extremists. White nationalist organisations such as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), for example, have routinely employed ephemera – including posters, flyers and pamphlets – for more than 100 years to recruit and influence sympathetic white Americans, and to intimidate black Americans and their white allies.

Such ephemeral posting has taken place continually, starting almost immediately after the conclusion of the Civil War. During the Reconstruction, this racist material was used by the KKK and others to defame and intimidate African Americans, and to fuel hatred and violence against them.

Racist flyers and posters have a long history in the US. In recent years, these ephemeral pieces of propaganda have been coordinated and amplified through the use of the internet and social media. In a vicious circle, racist flyers are propagated online, then printed by activists and distributed offline. After distribution, photos and other documentation of the flyer drops are then posted online in order to amplify their message and inspire further drops. J M Berger, Kateira Aryaeinejad and Seán Looney examine the patterns of racist flyer content and distribution in 2018, including the coordination of posting activity online and the content of flyers. The article draws on a dataset of flyer drops created by the Anti-Defamation League, which was enriched by the authors for content and analysis of online/offline connections.

Americans who had been freed from slavery, and to deter policies that would benefit African-American populations. Similar materials were also deployed by the ‘second-wave’ organisation using the KKK name during the early 20th century.

More recently, in the 1960s, the ‘third-wave’ KKK deployed posters and flyers in an intimidation campaign targeting civil rights leaders. These posters and flyers sometimes took on a particularly gruesome form, one even showed ‘photographs of Medgar Evers, Ed King, James Meredith, Bob Moses, John Salter, Emmett Till, and others, with crosses drawn over those already dead’. In some cases, these campaigns were tied to instances of actual violence against African Americans in the same areas where the flyers were distributed. Such episodes of violence only supplemented the intent of the campaigns, spreading fear and intimidation among targeted communities.

One intimidation campaign employed by racist extremists took place in North Carolina in the late 1970s, in prologue to the KKK and the American Nazi Party Greensboro massacre. The campaign included rallies, posters and pamphlets. Other examples of extremists’ use of flyers include adherents of the racist Christian Identity movement’s investment of significant resources in flyering from the 1950s through the 1980s, and the neo-Nazi National Alliance’s anti-semitic flyer campaign following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001.

Modern violent skinhead groups have also been known to make use of flyering. For some, traditional propaganda tracts are almost entirely absent from their operations and ephemera dominates. This ephemera can serve to cement identity and belief structures wherein ‘[a]n understanding of the ideology … has to be pieced together through its occasional flyers, and the clothing, tattoo insignia,

3. See, for example, the Ku Klux Klan Collection, David M Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, <https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/findingaids/kukluxklan/#collectionoverview>, accessed 26 December 2019.
and music predilections of its members. Some groups, however, encounter difficulty motivating adherents to take part in flyering, ephemera and other real-world activism. As noted by W M L Finlay, white nationalist propaganda aims to:

- normalize positions of hostility through their discursive constructions of groups, group relations and those fellow members who do not respect their prescribed boundaries. Assertions of threat from others is [sic.] presented as justification for hostile positions towards them, and in these assertions the identities of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are taken as background, common-sense categories.

In this article, ‘us’ and ‘them’ will be referred to using the nomenclature of social psychology, as ‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’ respectively. With the rise of the internet, much scholarly focus has turned to new media tools employed by extremist movements. Right-wing extremists have a particularly long history online, dating back to bulletin board systems of the 1980s through to the development of online forums and static websites and their emergence on to social media platforms. Right-wing and white nationalist extremists have used these platforms to recruit by disseminating memes and talking points, some of which seek to link their views to mainstream politics. In many respects, these more recent social media campaigns have followed a similar template to the tactics of the Islamic State including the use of coordinated activity by human users and partially or fully automated accounts. But while Islamic State has been subjected to significant de-platforming efforts, the pressure placed on right-wing extremists and white nationalists has been uneven, allowing those movements to maintain a significant public presence. Nevertheless, de-platforming campaigns targeting right-wing extremists on the major social media platforms have had some effect in reducing the presence of the most egregious right-wing extremist content, driving users to less-open platforms such as Gab, Telegram and Discord, where content policing is made more difficult by various factors, some structural (as with Telegram and Discord) and some ideological (as with Gab). Telegram and Discord also devote fewer resources to content moderation than their larger peers, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

Despite all of this activity – or because of it – old media tools are still deployed with significant impact by extremists of every type around the world, remaining significant in both their real-world deployment and their influence on format and content of online material. In recent years, white
supremacist offline propaganda has surged in the form of flyer, poster and decal drops, particularly on college campuses, but also in residential and commercial areas.17

In a new-media world, such old-media tools might seem obsolete. They can only reach small audiences, and they are not interactive. They require physical deployments, a time-consuming and costly process in comparison to the relative ease and reach of a tweet, a Facebook post or a YouTube video, which can reach thousands or even millions of people in an instant.

Yet racist flyers, stickers, pamphlets and posters are still widely employed by some white nationalist groups – and their use appears to be growing, with massive increases in the deployment of propaganda in real-world locations recorded in 2018, as tracked by the ADL. According to ADL investigative researcher Carla Hill:

Data collected by the Anti-Defamation League’s Center on Extremism shows a staggering 182 percent increase of propaganda incidents in 2018, with 1,187 cases reported, compared with 421 in 2017. This is the highest number of reported propaganda efforts on record.

And the messages are everywhere: Hanging from freeway overpasses, stuck to utility poles, plastered to shop windows or left on the windshields of parked cars. They’re even found tucked into books inside neighborhood book swap boxes, libraries and book stores.18

The ADL ascribes this increase in part to a desire for operational anonymity, with white nationalist groups seeking outlets for dissemination of propaganda which are less easily attributed to individual actors.19 In addition, collaborative offline activities may offer a gateway to the creation of stronger in-group bonds, while sending a frightening message to targeted communities that members of a white nationalist organisation are active in their real-world communities.

In order to better understand the nature of this propaganda and how it is propagated, the authors of this article examined the ADL’s published dataset of offline propaganda incidents.20 Using the published data, we created an enriched dataset containing the full text of every flyer we could identify through online searches, breaking out references to online content (including URLs), and identifying the types of locations targeted for drops. We characterised the content and examined how material is derived from online sources and how documentation of physical drops is re-used in online posts. Finally, we exploited leaked internet chats to describe how flyer campaigns are instigated and organised.

Dataset

The original ADL dataset contained 1,188 entries consisting of white supremacist flyer drop/ephemeral propaganda incidents during 2018, including the date of the incident, the city and state, the identity of the group responsible (if known) and a short description of the context. We began from this base and searched each incident to determine if we could identify the complete content of each flyer from news reports and other sources. We collected images for each incident when available and created multiple entries for each individual flyer in cases where multiple flyers were deployed. At the end of this process, we were able to identify only 379 incident entries for which substantially complete flyer data could be obtained. Nine of these instances included flyers that only contained images – the remainder (370) contained at least some text.

We enriched the dataset by adding fields describing the flyer content, including as much text as possible and informational content such as URLs, email addresses and phone numbers. We cleaned the text by cross-referencing flyers that were dropped in different locations, filling in text when necessary and appropriate for flyers where some of the text was not readable in the images we found, but which could be clearly identified as identical to a flyer from another location. A handful of inconsistent or irrelevant results were removed from the dataset prior to calculating the totals above.

After cleaning the data, we found 108 distinct flyers. Flyers contained two different types of content – informational and ideological. Informational content consisted of website URLs or contact information for people seeking to reach out to the flyer’s creators.

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Ideological content consisted of slogans and narratives that advance an extremist worldview. We examined each type of content in turn.

Groups Distributing Flyers

Forty clearly identified groups were responsible for flyer drops. The overwhelming majority (78%) of flyering incidents were attributed to just two of the groups, Identity Evropa and Patriot Front. More than 90% of all reported flyering incidents were attributed to just four of the groups.

Of the 40 groups, 29 participated in fewer than five documented incidents, and 18 participated in only one. Twelve groups affiliated with independent regional KKK groups accounted for 8.8% of all flyer drops, with only one – the Loyal White Knights – participating in more than five. The four groups identified as responsible for the majority of the flyering incidents are described here, with additional information in the section below on flyer content.

Identity Evropa: According to the ADL, ‘Identity Evropa … is a white supremacist group focused on the preservation of “white American culture” and promoting white European identity’, most famously associated with the slogan ‘You will not replace us’. In 2019, after the period covered in this study, the group rebranded itself as the ‘American Identity Movement’. The group advances a ‘white genocide’ narrative, arguing that the ‘white race’ is in danger of extinction from various threats, including immigration and intermarriage. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, Identity Evropa attempts ‘to frame their views in ways that appeal to mainstream conservative audiences’, arguing for more restrictive immigration policies and ‘pro-American’ talking points. The group was prominently represented at the violent ‘Unite the Right’ rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017, where a white supremacist killed protestor Heather Heyer in a vehicular attack.

Figure 1: Top 10 Groups, by Incident, 2018

Source: Author generated.
group maintains a website, a YouTube channel (as of the time of writing),25 multiple Twitter accounts and other online outlets. No official presence for the group could be identified on Twitter or Facebook under either name at the time of this publication, although some Twitter accounts used the name for parody content.26

**Patriot Front:** A splinter from the neo-Nazi Vanguard America group, Patriot Front is a nationalist, anti-Semitic group with strong neo-Nazi overtones. The split primarily reflected differences over tactics, with Patriot Front arguing for a less overtly Nazi-oriented approach designed to entice mainstream conservatives. The group argues that America was 'passed down to us by our fathers', meaning it is exclusively the domain of people of European descent, referred to as the 'founding stock'. In addition to its prolific flyering activity, the group organises physical training and, at times, confrontational protests.27 The group has maintained an extensive presence online and on social media, although it is also constrained by content moderation steps implemented by social media companies.

**Loyal White Knights of the KKK:** The Loyal White Knights are a branch of the KKK based in North Carolina. The KKK is one of the oldest racist 'brands' in the US, with groups operating under its name since the immediate aftermath of the American Civil War in the 1860s.28 The KKK encompasses a wide variety of white supremacist views, with its greatest focus on strongly held anti-black and anti-Semitic views. According to the ADL, The Loyal White Knights is 'one of the largest and most active Klan groups in the United States' with approximately 100 members.29 Unlike Identity Evropa and Patriot Front, it is relatively inactive and inaccessible on social media. It maintains an organisational website.30

**The Daily Stormer:** Leafletting as 'The Daily Stormer Book Club', The Daily Stormer is a popular neo-Nazi and alt-right website that publishes extremely offensive content. Although generally against all non-white people and communities, it is especially known for anti-Semitism. The website is also known for troll-like behaviour and targeted harassment campaigns, with a special focus on actions to harass and intimidate Jews and women both online and offline. The website targets a younger audience than some other extremist groups, using humour and memes to promote messages of hate. The 'Daily Stormer Book Clubs' are envisioned as local chapters for millennial white nationalists to organise offline activities including weapons training and political activism.31 The site has faced periodic de-platforming, but it was online and accessible at the time of this writing.32

**Informational Content**

Out of the 379 flyering incidents for which we could identify content, 246 (64%) included at least one URL, and 15 (4%) included more than one. Only five flyers included an email address, and four included physical addresses, all of which were post office boxes. These purported to provide contact with the flyers' sponsors. Phone numbers were included on 61 flyers, as detailed below. In a handful of cases, we could not obtain an image of specific flyers with clearly legible URLs. In many cases, this was due to a decision by news outlets to crop or blur content such as contact information from the flyers.

By far the most common URL was bloodandsoil.org, which redirects to patriotfront.us, the website of Patriot Front. The patriotfront.us URL was fifth. Second was identityevropa.com; third was dailystormer.name. The website of white nationalist publication, American Renaissance, was fourth. Sixth was a YouTube channel, YouNationalist, which included neo-Nazi content. A Twitter handle for 'Patriots of Appalachia' was seventh, but the account was recently renamed by its owners (the new account is called 'Reviving Tribalism' and no longer refers to the purported organisation).

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25. Identity Evropa YouTube Channel, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8ZmnNg0kKjX2g0NeXsuXg>, accessed 14 June 2019. When accessed, there were no videos available on the channel.
The most common phone number (used in 25 incidents) included was a government tipline for US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, as part of a Patriot Front flyer that urged readers to report ‘illegal aliens’. The second-most used phone number was the public switchboard for the White House, included in an Identity Evropa flyer urging readers to call the president and urge him to take action against a ‘caravan’ of immigrants said to be approaching the border. The remaining phone numbers purportedly allowed readers to reach the extremists who posted the flyers (or recorded messages from the same), mostly in connection with KKK groups, with no specific number appearing more than a handful of times.

I ideological Content

Three ideological strains dominated the flyer drops: neo-Nazi, Identitarian/nationalist, and KKK-style retro white nationalism. Within these broad categories, content focused on various sub-themes such as white racial grievances, anti-Semitism and anti-immigration content.

White grievance: Many flyers articulated broad white racial grievances, emphasising perceived stigmas associated with white identity. This included slogans such as ‘white genocide’, ‘white lives matter’ and ‘it’s OK to be white’. Some included more verbose (paragraph-length) content, including some KKK flyers and a handful of flyers associated with the religious/neo-Nazi ‘Creativity Movement’. White grievance material complained of ‘anti-white’ sentiments in society and suggested that white people are stigmatised for being or identifying as white. Some of the material attempted to assure white readers that ‘it’s alright [sic.] to be white’ and that they should not ‘feel GUILT for the imagined sins of your Forefathers’.

Identitarian/nationalist: Identitarian content skewed nationalist, implicitly or explicitly associating ‘American’ national identity with white racial identity and/or Christianity. Identitarianism, more broadly, associates European descent with national and cultural legitimacy in both the US and Europe, relying on conspiracy theories that immigrants are trying to ‘replace’ the national identity of majority white countries through demographic change. Proponents of nationalism may attempt to frame their views around a national identity in messages that do not explicitly cite other co-identities such as race or religion, and this tactic was seen within the dataset. Flyers frequently suggested ‘reclaiming’ or ‘reconquering’ America, sometimes without further explicit racial or religious content. Patriot Front flyers referred to ‘Occupied America’, usually without explicit additional racial or religious context.
KKK: Klan flyers usually reflected the language of older white nationalist movements. They were usually much more verbose than flyers from other groups, some with 300 words or more, citing Christian scriptures and emphasising African-American rather than (or in addition to) immigrant out-groups.

After removing duplicates, we performed a semantic analysis of the contents of the flyers using Voyant Tools in order to gain general insight into the most frequently cited words and phrases. While the sample size was relatively small, the economy of language used in most postings suggests that the selection of terms should provide at least some insight into the nature of the messaging. The flyers contained 1,679 unique terms excluding common stop words such as ‘the’, ‘and’ and ‘or’. The top 10 terms, including group names, can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1: Top 10 Terms**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Term</th>
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<td>white</td>
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<td>34</td>
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<tr>
<td>america</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>american</td>
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<tr>
<td>race</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>identity</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>black</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>men</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blacks</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>klan</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author generated.

The top collocates (words that appear in proximity to each other), excluding complete group names, were:

1. White people
2. White American
3. America Identity
4. Identity America
5. White rights
6. White matter
7. White black
8. White America
9. America American
10. Black white

Given the starting criteria for the dataset (white supremacist flyers in the US), none of these terms were unexpected. However, these lists of terms do highlight the usefulness of the ‘white nationalist’ label when referring to white supremacist movements such as those discussed here. While racial terms were clearly dominant in the content, national identity was closely tied to racial identity, to the point of being nearly inseparable.

One interesting divergence between the flyer dataset and previous studies of online-only extremist content was the relative lack of appeal to mainstream politics. A survey of alt-right Twitter accounts revealed a large amount of content in support of US President Donald Trump. The flyer content reflected some comfort level with the current administration, such as those urging readers to call the White House or report illegal aliens to the government, but Trump’s name appeared in only two flyers, in a total of nine incidents. Only one flyer contained the phrase ‘Make America Great Again’ (a Trump campaign slogan used widely in the online sphere) and one indirectly referenced it. One particular, broadly distributed Daily Stormer Book Club flyer made reference to the Brett Kavanaugh Supreme Court hearings, arguing that allegedly Jewish and pro-Jewish members of Congress were behind allegations of sexual misconduct against the then-nominee.

Because of the brief nature of messages, flyers mostly focused on presenting vague ideas or connecting audiences to other material (mostly group websites or information for further content) rather than elaborating on an extremist world view. About 94% of the flyers in the dataset identified the sponsoring group (such as Identity Evropa or the KKK). It was much less common for flyers to explicitly identify the specific audience to which they were addressed, such as ‘white people’ or ‘white Americans’, or to include explicitly racist content. Instead, they often relied on coded or veiled language, using phrases such as ‘love your race’.

Similarly, out-groups were often defined vaguely. Less than half of the flyers identified specific out-groups such as African-Americans, Jews or Muslims. Jewish people were the most frequently cited out-group, when one was specified. Threats from out-

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groups were also frequently vague in nature or omitted entirely. When a threat was described, it was often presented in very general terms such as ‘crime’ or ‘immigration’.

About 68% of flyers included some call to action, most often urging readers to join the extremist movement, and only rarely urging hostile action against out-groups. Most calls to action were vague, including terms such as ‘fight’ or ‘resist’.

Taken as a whole, the extremist flyers seemed to intentionally obscure – to a greater or lesser extent – the violent or hostile intent of the groups that produced them. The inclusion of only partial systems of meaning and vagueness of the content is likely to draw in curious people who might react negatively to content that starts with a more explicitly provocative assertion. It may also represent an attempt on the part of the groups themselves to avoid flyer takedowns in locations where explicitly racist content would otherwise be deemed unacceptable.

Online and Offline Synchronisation

There is no clear line of demarcation between online extremism and the current generation of flyer drops and ephemeral propaganda. Extremist flyers point readers to online destinations, but they also emanate from online destinations, and after they have been deployed, they are amplified again online.

The most obvious relationship between the flyer campaigns and online recruitment was the inclusion of URLs and email addresses on flyers, which appeared on most of the flyers we documented. URLs were included in 64% of flyer incidents, and on 52% of the unique flyers we identified. One of the key objectives of these flyer drops, it therefore seems, was to introduce readers into the online recruitment ecosystem.

Group-aligned flyers were most likely to contain contact information of some sort, whether that contact avenue was online (email) or via a phone number. Flyers with no contact information were relatively rare, often appearing only once in the dataset, and appeared to be hand-crafted by individuals, rather than using a template. Other flyers contained only the logo of the group itself, mimicking advertisements or marketing strategies used by popular companies or brands.

Flyers including website information not only directed audiences to online destinations: in some cases, they also originated there. We found evidence to suggest that flyering campaigns were organised online, with content and posting strategies refined and disseminated through a variety of methods.

Some organisations simply posted printable flyers online, relying on website visitors to produce and disseminate them locally. Organisations within the dataset that engaged in this practice included the Daily Stormer Book Club, New Jersey European Heritage Association and American Renaissance, although the latter’s online flyers did not appear in our dataset.36 Patriot Front has, in the past, offered flyers and posters on its website. However, we were unable to confirm that Patriot Front still provides pre-templated flyers and posters: the site was offline at the time this article was written, and there were signs that it had abandoned this practice.37

At the time this article was written, it was difficult or impossible to access caches of printable flyers for Patriot Front and Identity Evropa on the open web. Except for flyers posted by the Daily Stormer Book Club, the vast majority of the dataset could not be found in a printable form on open platforms.

Printable flyers were not available on the groups’ websites or open social media platforms, nor were they available within the first 200 results searching Google for the organisations’ names paired with various phrases relevant to downloading and printing. Image searches produced many images showing variants of flyers posted in real-world locations – such as news and other coverage of drops that had already occurred – but relatively few raw materials for printing posters.

Searches of ungated online white nationalist forums – including the alt-right social network Gab.com and message boards VNN and Stormfront – yielded some printable flyers that were unbranded or represented obscure organisations not found in the dataset. In at least one instance, the White Knights of Texas, a KKK group, announced a flyer campaign on Stormfront but declined to post printable flyers, instead directing interested parties to contact them via email.38 Virtually no printable versions of the flyers found in the dataset were

found using this method, although the content was very similar.39

A large number of printable flyers not associated with specific groups were also found using image and keyword searches on forums dedicated chiefly to trolling, including 4chan and 8chan, but none were represented in the 2018 dataset. Technical issues may have obfuscated some relevant results; for instance, a 2019 8chan thread of posters and flyers purported to offer flyers from Patriot Front and other groups, but featured only a few live images, with most of the posted images in the thread inaccessible at the time we viewed it. None of the accessible images were clearly represented in the dataset.40 Some ephemeral propaganda efforts originating on 4chan and featuring the 'Honkler the Clown' meme (a relatively recent effort to associate a cartoon clown with white supremacy) were, anecdotally, more successful during 2019, resulting in real-world sticker and flyer deployments.41

The unavailability of the most prominent flyers was not always accidental; sometimes it was the result of strategic decision-making. Users in a private Patriot Front chat on Discord, a communication app primarily intended for online gamers, were specifically instructed not to distribute printable material. '[D]o not post our posters or flyers around. We keep them members only for a reason', the leader of Patriot Front posted to Discord.42 Instead, flyers were distributed through a variety of private, specialised or obscure online forums. Leaked Discord chat logs published by left-wing media outlet Unicorn Riot revealed several elements of this distribution system.43 Discord users also exchanged tips on best practices regarding how and where to mount flyers, and how to document flyer drops for later promotion online.44

In some cases, flyers for specific groups, such as the neo-Nazi Atomwaffen Division, were posted as images directly to Discord.45 Various organisations created threads specifically for flyers and literatures, but these were not prominent groups and were not reflected in the dataset.46 In several cases, queries about flyers for the more prominent organisations were directed to specific users, who did not respond within the chat threads in view of other Discord users.

Instead, flyers were distributed through email, private messages and/or offline contacts. Printable flyer files were sometimes advertised through public postings but with some or all printable content offered exclusively via email, allowing the organisations to coordinate with would-be posters.47

In other cases, Discord posts revealed flyers were printed by the centralised organisations, with fully rendered flyers sent via postal mail or otherwise physically delivered to activists who would then carry out the actual posting. In the case of Identity Evropa,

39. Searches were conducted on 19 April 2019.
posters were sometimes disseminated to volunteers by designated coordinators in each state.\textsuperscript{48}

Taken together, these data points strongly suggest that the major flyering organisations (Patriot Front, Identity Evropa and the various KKK branches) are prioritising control of the distribution of flyers over widespread availability of content, and that most of the organisationally affiliated flyers were printed by people with meaningful relationships to the named organisations. For Patriot Front and Identity Evropa in particular, tight control of content resulted in highly recognisable brands with familiar design elements, such as colours and fonts. KKK materials also had a fairly consistent appearance, albeit much cruder.

This approach was measurably more successful than simply crowdsourcing the material to anyone who wanted it, not just with respect to controlling the brand, at least in 2019. While crowdsourced content was commonly found in various online forums, the dataset offered scant evidence that this material was frequently posted or that it made a significant impact when it was. Most of flyers in the dataset (87\%) were posted by Patriot Front, Identity Evropa and branches of the KKK, all of which maintained strict organisational control over printable content. It should be noted that the dataset skewed toward groups that generated more news coverage. In these cases, we were more likely to find flyer images. However, the overall ADL dataset (including incidents for which we could not identify flyer content) reflected similar distribution.

After-action posting also increased the impact of flyer drops among white nationalist adherents and generated enthusiasm for more. Patriot Front very consistently posted images of flyer drops on Twitter and Gab.com, as well as posting short stories about flyering incidents on its website. Identity Evropa did not have a presence on Twitter at the time of this writing, but it documented its activities in a similar fashion on Gab.\textsuperscript{49} Both groups documented their campaigns in a rigid, standardised format – for example, in one Discord chat, a user’s photographs of a flyer drop were rejected for poor quality.


Published photos emphasised both the flyer content and the setting where the flyer was placed.

As seen in Figure 5, Patriot Front’s self-reported activities\(^{50}\) generally corresponded to flyer drops found in the database. Flyer drops were also discussed widely on a variety of extremist forums, including links to the sponsoring organisations’ self-promotion and links to news stories covering the drops.\(^{51}\)

**Discussion**

The posting of ephemeral propaganda – such as flyers, posters and stickers – has a long history of practice that is fundamentally different from online-only propaganda. Yet, as this study shows, this offline endeavour is intimately linked to online spaces in its modern manifestation.

**Flyer Content**

The most frequently and explicitly enumerated element of ideology was white racial identity, sometimes paired with national or religious identity, while the most commonly recommended action was to join or contact a group for additional information. Unlike some of their historical predecessors, the collected flyers were mostly devoid of graphic or overtly racist imagery and text. Instead, the flyers seemed more intent on facilitating further engagement with the sponsoring or supported organisation, usually in an online space.

**Online–Offline Coordination**

The bulk of documented flyer content consistently followed a pipeline from where they were devised and staged in online spaces to deployment in physical spaces, where they invite the offline audience to seek more information or join an organisation via an online conduit, such as a website or email address. The sponsoring organisations then amplified the offline activity by promoting it online, creating enthusiasm among online adherents and prompting some to take part in additional campaigns. While the flyer drops themselves take place in the real world, virtually every element of their deployment was coordinated in online spaces, then instrumentalised afterward for additional online propaganda and to project the strength and presence of the sponsoring organisations.

Yet the physical projection of these online spaces is important and consequential. While flyers transmit a message in the same way that a social media post does, the message reaches relatively few people, limited by the geography in which the flyers are located and their often-swift removal.

**The Importance of Offline Propaganda**

Despite its relatively limited reach, physical propaganda can have a heightened impact in a number of ways. By its very presence, it sends an unarticulated but unmistakable message that white nationalist adherents are physically present in or near targeted communities. For out-group audiences, this can instil fear and intimidation in the same manner as it has in the past, as noted earlier. For receptive in-group audiences, this can signal the prospect of real-world contact with people who may share an unpopular or taboo worldview, with most flyers offering some avenue to actualise that contact. In this way, they mirror the communicative impact of other low-tech means of communication,\(^{52}\) such as murals which etch out a territory to which a terrorist group lays claim.\(^{53}\)

For non-receptive in-group members and out-group audiences, an assertion of physical presence can raise the spectre of potential confrontation or even violence in real-world spaces, while diminishing trust between in-group and out-group

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50. Self-reported locations identified in tweets scraped from @patriotfront2 on Twitter on 14 April 2019.
52. Scrivens and Conway, ‘The Roles of “Old” and “New” Media Tools and Technologies in the Facilitation of Violent Extremism and Terrorism’.
members in a given community. It telegraphs that supporters of extremist and racist worldviews are in your space and willing to take physical action— even just through the act of handing out flyers—in the name of that belief. The persons responsible could be sitting next to you in a restaurant, neighbours, or in a position of authority at your workplace. In addition, while extremists can reach large audiences online, flyering offers them an opportunity to distribute extremist materials to individuals who might not otherwise engage in the online spaces where they are likely to encounter them, potentially amplifying their effect. Flyering in a community can, therefore, present a more real, tangible threat than online posts alone, resulting in a more urgent sense of alarm and concern.

The physicality of the flyer drop is then amplified and reiterated in online posts documenting incidents in various communities, imbuing the online group with a real-world legitimacy it would not otherwise be able to access. These posts help inspire more volunteers to take part in the campaigns, but more importantly, they signal that the organisation is more than just a collection of ‘keyboard commandos’ operating only in the virtual space.

Finally, the act of flyering can offer a real-world community-building function for those who take part, solidifying relationships that may have

54. Scrivens and Conway, "The Roles of ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Media Tools and Technologies in the Facilitation of Violent Extremism and Terrorism‘.
previously been confined to online spaces and offering the excitement of a shared activity that carries a transgressive aura with relatively lower significant legal, reputational or physical risks.56 Mobilising adherents for these activities may also make it easier to mobilise them for higher-impact activities in the future.57 The community-building effect carries back into the online spaces, where users become identified with and even lauded for their willingness to take offline action. Where still available, groups’ social media postings of flyer drops connected a team or community member mentality, in some cases including photos of the individuals involved.58

### Conclusion

This article reviewed a dataset of white nationalist flyer drops and examined how this activity is coordinated in online spaces. White nationalist flyering in the US has a history measured in centuries, and there is little reason to think that this activity will slow or stop any time soon.

Nor can online countermeasures be expected to meaningfully disrupt this activity. As detailed above, the four sources that posted the largest number of flyers have all faced countermeasures online. While none of the major flyer sources have been subjected to online suppression at the scale applied to Islamic State and Al-Qa’ida, the most prolific posters have faced significant countermeasures, and most have already moved some of their activity to closed platforms such as Discord, and private chats or correspondence. One Daily Stormer flyer listed several web domains for the site which had been suspended prior to its current one, which was live at the time of writing.59 Because of this, these groups are likely to maintain robust online infrastructure even if denied access to the largest platforms.

All of this raises some interesting questions about the effectiveness of online suppression of extremists in preventing their offline activities, particularly terrorism.

Terrorism is a communicative crime – intended, by definition, to sway an audience. Removing extremist content from open online platforms can accomplish a number of useful goals, therefore, including preventing terrorists from amplifying their offline violence, reducing the potential for copycat attacks and reducing the available audience for recruitment efforts, social division and polarisation.

In addition to these more measurable goals, some policymakers hope that suppressing extremist content online will result in lower levels of violent extremism in the real world. Research supports this premise,60 although much remains to be learned about the mechanisms and effects of online communities on offline behaviour, and vice versa.

The evidence is less clear as to the size of the effect and possible unintended consequences. For instance, some preliminary studies suggest that extremists who are de-platformed may radicalise more often or faster than those who are not.61 To date, no study has attempted to disentangle the complex and multicausal factors in the violent extremism operating environment in order to clearly address the question of whether online suppression can be said to cause a reduction in violent extremism.

56. Carla Hill, ‘White Supremacists Have a New Strategy’, *Politico Magazine*, 5 March 2019. While the act of flyering is not without these risks, it can be carried out more anonymously and with less risk of confrontation than participation in a protest, for example.

57. For a discussion of the importance of peer contact and possible connections between proselytising in the radicalisation of homegrown US jihadists, see Jytte Klausen et al., ‘Radicalization Trajectories: An Evidence-Based Computational Approach to Dynamic Risk Assessment of “Homegrown” Jihadists’, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (2018), DOI:10.1080/1057610X.2018.1492819.


This study of online–offline dynamics in the context of flyer campaigns does not include adequate data to address the question of how online suppression may or may not affect offline activity, but it does suggest useful avenues for future research.

One potential approach to this question would track and compare activity across platforms, seeking to correlate offline activity with activity on open social media platforms, message boards and more private forums such as Discord or Telegram. Such efforts, especially if they included sustained monitoring over time, could analyse in more detail how de-platforming events play out in affected communities, and how and whether the dynamics around de-platforming impact offline activities.

J M Berger is a Research Fellow with VOX-Pol and a PhD candidate at Swansea University’s School of Law, where he studies extremist ideologies.

Kateira Aryaeinejad specialises in research on violent extremism and is currently based in Washington, DC.

Seán Looney is a PhD Student in Law at Swansea University and University Grenoble Alpes.