

VOX

Pol

THE ALT-RIGHT TWITTER CENSUS

DEFINING AND DESCRIBING THE
AUDIENCE FOR ALT-RIGHT CONTENT
ON TWITTER

J.M. Berger

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FOR ALT-RIGHT CONTENT ON TWITTER

About the author

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Acknowledgements

This study was commissioned by the Center for American Progress and published by the VOX-Pol Network of Excellence. Views expressed herein are solely those of the author.

Special thanks to Clint Watts, Andrew Weisburd, Jonathon Morgan, Lisa McInerney, Maura Conway, Casey Michel, Judd Legum, Max Bergmann, James Lamond, Yasmin Green, Bill Strathearn and Dan Sturtevant.

Data collection and analysis were carried out using custom software coded by Jonathon Morgan and Dan Sturtevant, based on concepts initially developed by Bill Strathearn and J.M. Berger. Morgan also provided updates to the software for this study.

Locations were analysed using BatchGeo and visualized in Google Earth. Terms and word-pair analyses were conducted using Voyant Tools (voyant-tools.org).

Erratum: Due to a collection error discovered after publication, some tweets in this dataset were truncated. This mainly affected the precise counts of top hashtags and may also have had a minor impact on the order in which the hashtags were ranked. We do not believe the impact is material to the study's overall findings.

ISBN: 978-1-873769-89-8

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Designed and typeset by Soapbox, www.soapbox.co.uk

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INTRODUCTION

Figure 1. Twitter profile for Richard Spencer, founder of the alt-right



The so-called ‘alt-right’ is an amorphous but synchronized collection of far-right people and movements, an umbrella label for a number of loosely affiliated social movements around the world, although its centre of gravity is in the United States.¹

Many factors have contributed to the alt-right’s rise to prominence, but one of the most visible is its online presence. Alt-right views have been promoted online by a small army of trolls and activists staging harassment campaigns, pushing hashtags and posting links to extremist content and conspiracy theories on social media. Since 2016, the alt-right and its allies have held an increasingly prominent place in American and European politics, rallying support behind a variety of causes and candidates.

This study seeks to evaluate the alt-right’s online presence with robust metrics and an analysis of content shared by adherents. The alt-right has many components online; this report will primarily examine

1 Thomas Chatterton Williams. “The French Origins of “You Will Not Replace Us””. *The New Yorker*, December 4, 2017. www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/04/the-french-origins-of-you-will-not-replace-us

its presence on Twitter, in part because the movement is particularly active on that platform, and in part because Twitter's data access policies allow for more robust evaluation than is possible on other platforms.

This report will:

- Create a demographic and identity snapshot of a representative portion of the audience for alt-right supporters on Twitter
- Examine content shared within the dataset
- Describe the methodology used to derive these findings
- Propose avenues for further research based on this report's findings

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The alt-right emerged from an American white nationalist milieu depleted by decades of gradual fragmentation and growing social stigma. In 2010, white nationalist ideologue, Richard Spencer, founded a website called *Alternative Right*, kicking off the movement in its present form.²

Alternative Right sought to put an intellectualized spin on a disparate collection of ideas, from unvarnished white supremacy to more generic forms of cultural illiberalism, including a strong opposition to immigration that crossed identity groups, such as race and religion.

With some adherents promoting a white, heterosexual, cisgendered identity, and others promoting a more nebulously defined Western civilization, the alt-right has come to be particularly distinguished by its hostility toward Islam and Muslims.

The movement's centre of gravity is found in the United States, but its reach extends internationally, including notable alignments with right-wing movements in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands

2 'Alt Right: A Primer about the New White Supremacy'. Anti-Defamation League (ADL). Undated, retrieved June 24, 2018. www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/alt-right-a-primer-about-the-new-white-supremacy. 'Alt-Right'. Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). Undated, retrieved June 24, 2018. www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/alt-right

and Germany. Alt-right leaders have drawn heavily on European influences, particularly the Nouvelle Droite movement in France, which resembles the alt-right in its ideological accommodation and in its prioritization of cultural awareness over organizational activity.³

Over its short history, some of the alt-right's primary ideologues have attempted to make a distinction between the alt-right and white nationalism, convincing few.⁴ Even some of the movement's leading figures have repudiated the alt-right as racist, while still maintaining anti-immigration and pro-Western beliefs using less racialized rhetoric. These defectors have at times called themselves the 'New Right', while detractors derisively refer to them as 'alt-lite'.⁵

Because the alt-right originated online and continues to enjoy a significant centre of gravity on social media, its online adherents offer a window into the movement's current status and consensus beliefs. This study examined Twitter accounts that followed self-described alt-right users and found a movement in significant flux, with few standout leaders or ideologues, and a sometimes-bewildering collection of ideas and beliefs. Key findings include:

- Four overlapping themes dominated the alt-right network described in this study – support for US President Donald Trump, support for white nationalism, opposition to immigration (often framed in anti-Muslim terms), and accounts primarily devoted to transgressive trolling and harassment.

3 Dana Kennedy. 'The French Ideologues Who Inspired the Alt-Right'. *The Daily Beast*. December 5, 2016. www.thedailybeast.com/the-french-ideologues-who-inspired-the-alt-right. Tom McCulloch. 'The Nouvelle Droite in the 1980s and 1990s: Ideology and Entryism, the Relationship with the Front National'. *French Politics*, 4.2 (2006), pp. 158–178.

4 Adrian Florido. 'The White Nationalist Origins Of The Term "Alt-Right" – And The Debate Around It'. NPR.org., November 27, 2016. www.npr.org/2016/11/27/503520811/the-white-nationalist-origins-of-the-term-alt-right-and-the-debate-around-it?t=1534781671383

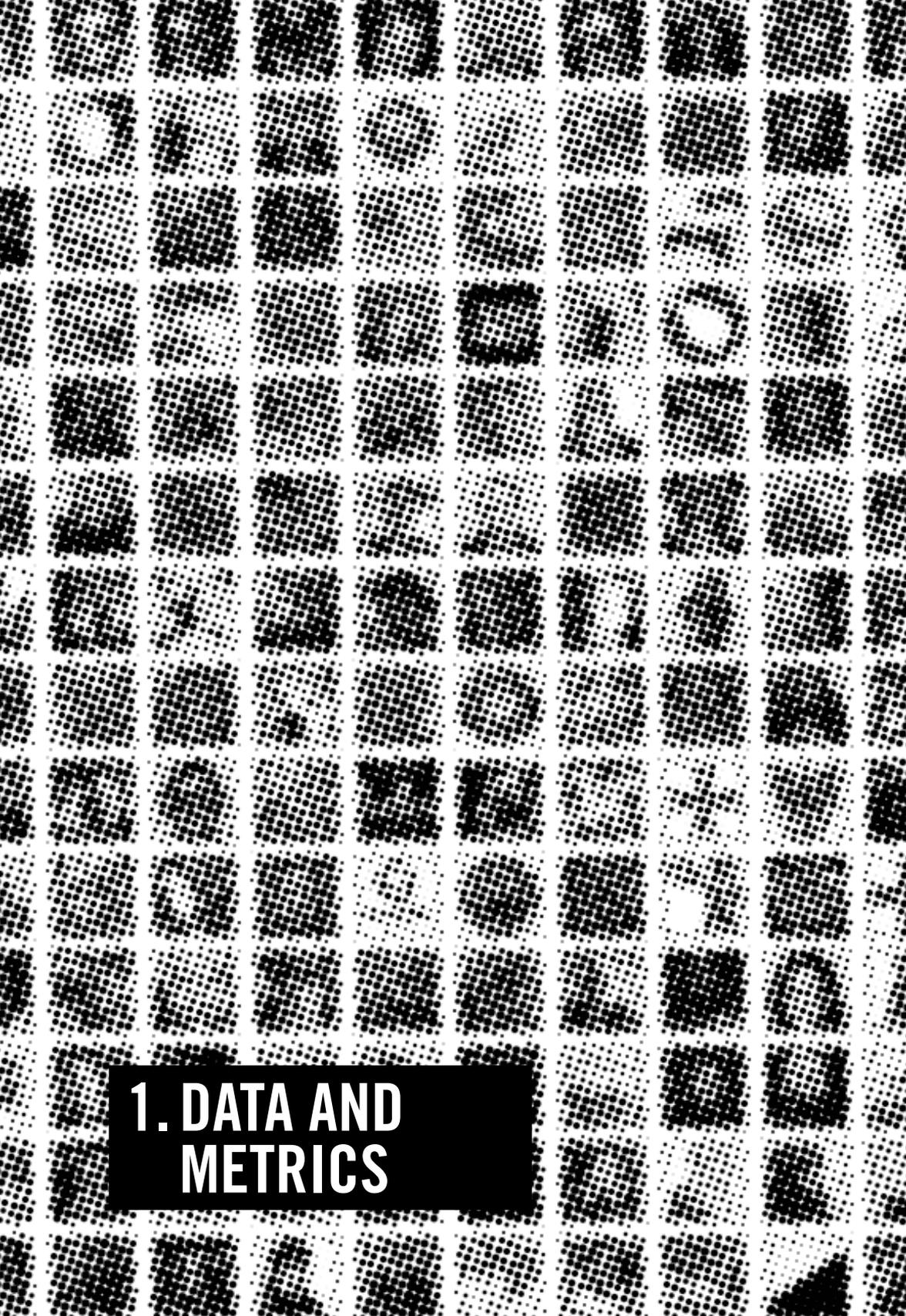
5 'From Alt Right to Alt Lite: Naming the Hate'. ADL. Undated, retrieved June 24, 2018. www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/from-alt-right-to-alt-lite-naming-the-hate

- [@realdonaldtrump](#) was the most influential Twitter account among all users analysed in this study; [@richardbspencer](#) was the most influential account within the specific network of users who followed accounts that contained the phrase ‘alt-right’ in their Twitter profiles.
- Support for Trump outstripped all other themes by a wide margin, including references to his name and various campaign slogans in hashtags and user self-descriptions. The most common word in user profiles was ‘MAGA’ (short for Make America Great Again, Trump’s 2016 campaign slogan), and the most common word pair in user profiles was ‘Trump supporter’.
- In addition to prominent Trump supporters, many of the most influential accounts in the network promoted conspiracy theories. For the most part, conspiracy content was marbled into the network, serving to support one of the themes identified above, rather than existing as an independent theme.
- Many overt white nationalists were extremely influential within the alt-right network, and white nationalist hashtags and websites were widely shared. Twitter has suspended a number of prominent white nationalists, who would otherwise have ranked among the most influential accounts.
- A substantial number of less prominent accounts were also suspended during the period of this study. Suspended accounts showed a bias towards white supremacist content, especially among top influencers, but the data suggested a stronger link between suspensions and the possible use of manipulative techniques such as automation.
- The alt-right network was most consistently ‘for’ Trump, but users frequently defined themselves by what they were ‘against’. Top word pairs in user self-descriptions included ‘anti-EU’, ‘anti-Islam’, ‘anti-globalist’, ‘anti-feminist’ and ‘anti-Zionist’.
- While the alt-right’s presence on Twitter was substantial, probably encompassing more than 100,000 users as a conservative estimate, the sample analysed here showed extensive evidence

of manipulation, including manipulated follower counts, follower tracking, and automated tweeting. Neither the source nor the exact scope of these efforts could be conclusively determined.

- Many ideological elements were on display in the data this study analysed, but no single set of beliefs or identity markers emerged as clearly dominant. Some of the most influential accounts found in the data held strongly opposing views and engaged in feuds with each other. A number of influential figures who hold valued places in the network belonged to racial or sexual identity demographics that have been targeted for hostile action by other components of the network.
- While the alt-right pre-dates Donald Trump's presidential campaign, the data paints a clear portrait of a moment that is now primarily centred on support for his presidency and, more broadly, for a far-right agenda undergirded by a shared hatred for Muslims, immigrants and minorities. In light of this, it is more useful to think of the alt-right as an extremist political bloc rather than as a fully formed extremist ideology.

In the pages that follow, this report will examine data associated with accounts that followed at least one account with some variation of 'alt-right' in its Twitter profile, including followers and friends (accounts followed by a user), influential users, popular content (including hashtags and URLs), and terms that members of the dataset used to describe themselves. The accounts examined here are a representative portion of the total alt-right population on Twitter, which is considerably larger. The report concludes with an overview of the findings and recommendations for future research.



1. DATA AND METRICS

1.1. METHODOLOGY

To create a dataset, 439 accounts were identified by manually surveying various alt-right networks on Twitter and identifying only those accounts that self-identified with some spelling or punctuation variation of 'alt-right' in the account's username, display name or the Twitter bio field. Followers of these seed accounts were then collected for analysis.

The sum of all follower counts for potential seeds totalled nearly 200,000, which was too much data to analyse in a practical time frame, so the seed group was limited to users who had fewer than 5,000 followers, and was sorted according to online influence. The sum of all follower counts for these users was limited to 50,000, which resulted in a final seed dataset of 41 accounts. There were three reasons for these criteria:

1. The 50,000 limit was aimed at creating a dataset that could be collected and analysed in one to two months in compliance with the rate limits imposed by Twitter's API.
2. The upper limit of 5,000 followers was intended to optimize the dataset for alt-right adherents, by avoiding high-profile users who attract significant numbers of non-adherent followers, such as journalists, researchers and critics.
3. By using a larger group of seeds with lower follower counts, the dataset was more likely to capture a diverse cross-section of the movement encompassing multiple sub-networks, rather than skewing the focus towards specific personalities or subsets of alt-right views.

Data was collected about all of the followers of these 41 users, which resulted in a dataset of 29,913 accounts (including the seeds and excluding accounts suspended during collection). The total was lower than the gross sum of 50,000 because of the significant number of users who followed more than one seed.

For each user in the dataset, profile data was collected along with their 200 most recent tweets. Also collected was a list of accounts that the user follows. Initial collection began on 8 April, 2018, and lasted several days. Data from the accounts was re-collected and re-analysed periodically through June 2018.

Between the time that collection began and the conclusion of the study, at least 1,436 users were suspended, changed their Twitter usernames, or voluntarily deleted their accounts. At least 285 accounts were marked 'temporarily unavailable' as a result of violations of Twitter's media policy. This prevented the collection of their tweets and accurate analysis of interactions with their accounts. These accounts were therefore excluded from calculations that required such insights.

The final dataset for followers of alt-right users consisted of 27,895 accounts including seed accounts that had not been suspended. Referred to hereafter as 'the alt-right dataset', these users are an audience for alt-right content online. While most members of the dataset were obviously supporters of the movement, to a greater or lesser extent, some followers were not engaged with or supportive of alt-right ideology, including journalists covering the movement, anti-fascist activists and curious bystanders.

A control group was created for purposes of comparison. The control group was seeded with users who tweeted a hashtag related to a specific genre television show. Analysis of these users showed a high level of engagement with fandom for the show and related content, meaning the community was reasonably cohesive. Followers were collected using the same approach used to generate the alt-right dataset, resulting in a control group of 33,766 accounts.

The average member of the alt-right dataset had a median 561 followers, and followed a median 224 accounts, compared to the average control group member's 466 followers and 1,122 accounts followed.

Both datasets were mostly in English; 85% for the alt-right audience, and 75% for the control group. The next largest alt-right language group was Dutch, comprising 6% of users. Only 0.5% of the alt-right audience had verified accounts, compared with 3% of the control group.

The typical alt-right account had 1,143 tweets over its lifetime, compared with 1,341 for the control group. However, the average age was 3.5 years (2.6 median) compared with 5.4 years (5.6 median). This reflected a much higher rate of tweeting by alt-right users, who tweeted 15.2 times-per-day on average, based on each user's last 200 tweets, compared to 7.8 tweets-per-day in the control group.

Several metrics indicate a very significant presence of automation, fake profiles and other social media manipulation tactics. These tactics were so ubiquitous in the dataset that they could not easily be separated from accounts that behaved organically, and the findings in this report should be read with that in mind. An extensive exploration of this issue can be found in [Section 1.7. on page 37](#).

Table 1. Data snapshot

METRIC	ALT-RIGHT AUDIENCE	CONTROL GROUP
Average followers	6,778.7	26,477
Average followed	5,296.5	10,981
Median followers	561	466
Median followed	224	1,122
Average tweets-per-day	15.2	7.8
Median tweets-per-day	2.07	0.72
Average number of tweets	10,886.6	12,095.3
Median number of tweets	1,143	1,341
Languages	85% English 6% Dutch 9% all others	75% English 9% Spanish 16% all others
Verified accounts	0.5%	3%
Average account age	3.5 years	5.4 years
Median account age	2.6 years	5.6 years

1.2. TWEET CONTENT

Content tweeted by users within the dataset generally reflected the conflicted, inconsistent nature of the alt-right community. While the social network was heavily focused on promoting content created by alt-right and white nationalist personalities, many users tweeted criticisms of other people under the alt-right umbrella, including influential users, reflecting an internal struggle within the movement over whether or not white nationalism should be a defining characteristic of alt-right ideology.

The most prevalent categories of content included:

- **Pro-Trump content:** While some exceptions could be found, users in the dataset tweeted overwhelmingly about Donald Trump in high volumes and in generally positive terms, although much of this content was often framed negatively, as attacks on perceived critics and enemies of the president, including the mainstream news media.
- **White nationalist content:** White nationalist content comprised a substantial portion of the content tweeted by users, and white nationalist users were generally more influential than other users, even more than those self-describing as alt-right. While the most influential white nationalist content was carefully agnostic with respect to specific movements or ideologies, less influential users were often associated with neo-Nazi and identitarian beliefs.
- **General far-right content:** Although white nationalism outperformed other far-right beliefs found in the dataset, a variety of other views were present, including both hard-right attitudes just outside the realm of mainstream conservatism and fringe-right nationalism lacking an overt racial element.

- **Anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim content:** This content was widespread within the two preceding categories, but some users were more specifically, or exclusively, focused on attacking immigrants and Muslims.
- **Trolling/shitposting:** Some users tweeted deliberately transgressive, offensive or provocative material while attempting to set a humorous tone. It was not always clear whether such posts reflected a genuine ideological commitment, or whether they were shared for other reasons, under the guise of trolling, practical jokes or unfocused anti-social sentiment.⁶
- **Conspiracy and fake news content:** Many influential users could be found spreading conspiracy theories and false information, almost always subsidiary to one of the themes above. No particular conspiracy theory rose above the others, although a modest bank of accounts working in concert drove a hashtag related to the QAnon conspiracy theory to a top ranking.

Sample text from the major categories appear in the following sections.

Sample pro-Trump tweets

User self-identified as alt-right.

Quote-tweeting a user responding to Donald Trump's Twitter handle and proposing a poll on the 'best president'

Tweet content:

#RedWaveRising2018
#RedwaveRising
#TrumpTrain
#Trump

⁶ 'Shitposting'. Know Your Meme. Updated January 16, 2018. knowyourmeme.com/memes/shitposting

Account self-identified as red-pilled (a slang term referring to being 'awakened' to alt-right views). Account was suspended after collection.

Quote-tweeting a user criticizing the Trump administration's immigration policies.

Tweet content:

**Cry harder [emoji]
There's a new sheriff in town
#TrumpsPartyNow**

User self-identified as alt-right.

Tweet content:

**What a time to be alive [emoji] Great pick
@realDonaldTrump**

Former Social Democrat leader Martin Schulz told Germany's national news agency DPA, 'Grenell isn't behaving like a diplomat, but instead like a right-wing colonial officer'.

User self-identified as having a gab.ai (alt-right social platform) account.

Tweet content:

New York Times Reveals Soros & Clinton Paid Women to Accuse Trump of Rape (with URL)

Sample white nationalist tweets

User self-identified as alt-right.

Tweet content:

We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children. #14Words for #FathersDay [emoji]

User is a prominent white nationalist.

Quote-tweeting an academic article on whiteness and school curricula.

Tweet content:

Imagine thinking you are pushing the frontiers of academic knowledge spewing garbage like this.

User self-identified as nationalist. User account was deleted but not suspended.

Quote-tweeting another user commenting on differing views among white nationalists regarding who is white.

Tweet content:

OMG, so I guess the only real whites are Nordic? No Teutonic, no Anglo-Saxon, no Celts, now no Mediterranean? Wow, talk about splitting split hairs!

User identified as alt-right.

Tweet referencing Twitter action against white nationalism.

Tweet content:

Is this a Twitter warning to ban us for pointing out the recessiveness of certain genes, a biological fact based on #MendelsLaws? [mentions other Twitter users]

User identified as alt-right and referenced neo-Nazi identity markers.

Quote-tweet referencing anti-Semitic harassment.

Tweet content:

More Jewish fable... You white people sticking up for yourself and having the same racial consciousness I possess for my own (((people))) is 'white fragility'.⁷

Sample anti-immigrant/Muslim content

User identified as anti-immigrant.

Tweet content:

[flag emoji] France: 'French back government's refusal to dock migrant ship' [with URL]

7 Punctuation is as shown. The triple parentheses are a white nationalist way of denoting Jewish identity.

User identified as white and used alt-right identity markers.

Quote tweet referring to anti-immigrant comments by Donald Trump.

Tweet content:

Our country is not the 3rd world's waste management facility.

User identified as alt-right.

Tweet content:

#Alright [sic] News > Robert Spencer: Nigel Farage Warns 'We'll Lose' A Battle Between the West and Islam [with URL]

User identified as pro-Trump.

Tweet content:

[emoji] HERE COME THE LIBERALS [emoji]

Maine: Main dies after brutal beating by Muslim migrant mob in Lewiston Park

[emoji] Where are the news reports?

[emoji] Where is the outrage?

[URL]

User identification unclear; user suspended.

Tweet content:

Gang of Somalians shoots party goers with pellet gun in Maine and than beat a white man to death but the police seem to be more interested whether there were racist words exchanged rather than a dead of a young father. [with URL]

Sample trolling/shitposting

User self-identified as shitposter.

Quote-tweeting an exchange between other Twitter users regarding Star Wars.

Tweet content:

JEW-JEW BINKS AHAHAHA

User not self-identified as alt-right or shitposter. User suspended.

Tweet content:

Image shows group of teens wearing 'Make America Great Again' hats.

Tweet text: "Took my students to one of the Holocaust museums in our city and the employees started freaking out. I don't know why they're so sensitive".

1.3. INFLUENTIAL ACCOUNTS

Influential users were identified with an established metric based on interactions within the dataset. The influence metric has been tested against content in previous research by this author and has subsequently been evaluated using diverse datasets over time.⁸

Each interaction directed to a user in the dataset by another user in the dataset was counted and then weighted. Retweets were multiplied by five, replies to tweets were multiplied by 10, and mentions that were not replies to tweets were multiplied by two. The sum of the results represented the influence score.

High-scoring influencers tend to be strongly associated with whatever common interest is shared by the seed accounts. Influence may also reflect users carrying out online attacks against other users, but limiting the dataset to followers of the seed accounts helps offset the impact of such widespread trolling.

As expected, the accounts identified by the influence metric were among the best-known and most-circulated figures in the alt-right movement. However, some accounts were pseudonymous or less known, with fewer followers. The presence of manipulative activity in the dataset, discussed further in [Section 1.7. on page 37](#), strongly suggests that some accounts on the list had their influence artificially inflated.

The standing policy of VOX-Pol recommends against identifying user handles in studies of social media activity out of privacy and other considerations. Additionally, after a past study of white nationalist activity on Twitter by the author, users identified as being influential subsequently exploited their rankings for self-promotion. Further

8 J. M. Berger. 'Who Matters Online: Measuring Influence, Evaluating Content and Countering Violent Extremism in Online Social Networks'. International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, King's College London, March 28, 2013. [icsr.info/2013/03/who-matters-online-measuring-influence-evaluating-content-and-countering-violent-extremism-in-online-social-networks](https://www.icsr.info/2013/03/who-matters-online-measuring-influence-evaluating-content-and-countering-violent-extremism-in-online-social-networks)

complicating the issue, some users who are highly influential within the alt-right strongly reject the alt-right label. For all these reasons, we have elected not to identify the most influential users in the dataset, but to describe them more generally.

One exception was made, based on the fact that the user's connection to the alt-right is extremely public and uncontroversial, and whose ranking is unsurprising. The most influential user in the dataset was [@richardbspencer](#), the Twitter account of Richard Spencer, founder of the now-defunct website, [alternativeright.com](#), which gave the alt-right its name. Spencer is the primary public face of the alt-right movement, although he is not universally loved within the community of users contained in the dataset.⁹

In addition to Spencer, the top 20 most-influential users included:

- Three prominent male American white nationalists and a prominent Australian white nationalist identifiable by their real names.
- A popular American white nationalist online magazine.
- Five online personalities strongly associated with the alt-right, most of whom were associated with podcasts or YouTube channels. Some were pseudonymous, and others identified themselves with real names. Follower counts ranged from about 14,000 to about 40,000.
- Six apparently pseudonymous accounts primarily tweeting white nationalist content. These accounts had followers ranging from about 4,000 to 300,000.
- A Twitter account associated with the pseudonymous publisher of a right-wing fake-news and conspiracy website.

9 John Woodrow Cox. "Let's party like it's 1933": Inside the alt-right world of Richard Spencer'. *The Washington Post*, November 22, 2016. www.washingtonpost.com/local/lets-party-like-its-1933-inside-the-disturbing-alt-right-world-of-richard-spencer/2016/11/22/cf81dc74-aff7-11e6-840f-e3ebab6bcd3_story.html?utm_term=.aaoc1e9a8b7

- The Twitter account of a prominent conservative activist situated on the far-right edge of mainstream politics, who does not identify as alt-right and who has criticized the movement.
- Of those clearly identifying in gendered terms, 14 of the top 20 identified themselves as male and two as female.

MOST-FOLLOWED ACCOUNTS

The most-followed accounts contained within the dataset were very similar to the most influential accounts, with a handful of exceptions. [@richardbspencer](#) was the most-followed account within the dataset.

The remainder of the top 20 included:

- Six white nationalists identifiable by their real names, including five men and one woman.
- One male far-right commentator identified by his real name.
- Seven pseudonymous accounts tweeting a variety of white nationalist or alt-right content. Three did not identify with a gender in their basic profiles, four identified as male.
- Four white nationalist or alt-right online outlets, including an online magazine, podcasts/YouTube channels and a hosted audio/video platform with an accompanying YouTube channel.
- Two female online personalities strongly associated with the alt-right.
- One pro-Trump political activist who did not self-identify as alt-right.

‘anti-feminist’, ‘anti-Zionist’, ‘anti-PC’ (anti-political correctness), ‘anti-Communist’ and ‘anti-war’. ‘Anti-white’ was included among the top word pairs, generally in the context of a response to critics of the movement.

Beyond this telling list of what the movement is against, only one theme emerged in the ‘for’ column – President Trump. The top word pair was ‘Trump supporter’, followed by various combinations of Trump’s campaign slogan words and hashtags, including MAGA and KAG (‘Keep America Great’).

Table 2. Top 25 profile words

TERM	FREQUENCY
MAGA	1,389
Anti	850
Trump	843
Conservative	786
Nationalist	786
White	786
Love	782
Pro	717
Right	671
I’m	597
Life	587
American	581
Christian	581
Proud	568
People	534

TERM	FREQUENCY
Just	525
God	510
World	482
Free	470
Follow	454
Like	442
Truth	419
2a	391
Politics	389
America	381

Table 3. Top 25 word pairs

FIRST TERM	SECOND TERM	FREQUENCY
Trump	supporter	138
Anti	EU	77
Anti	Islam	57
MAGA	KAG	54
Trump	MAGA	50
MAGA	Trump	47
Anti	globalist	38
MAGA	Trump2020	31
MAGA	trumptrain	29

FIRST TERM	SECOND TERM	FREQUENCY
MAGA	conservative	27
MAGA	americafirst	27
Anti	feminist	27
MAGA	2a	26
MAGA	NRA ¹⁰	25
Anti	Zionist	25
Anti	PC	25
Trump	train	24
Anti	communist	22
MAGA	patriot	21
MAGA	draintheswamp	20
MAGA	buildthewall	20
Anti	white	20
MAGA	proud	18
Anti	war	18
MAGA	Christian	17

ACCOUNT CREATION DATES

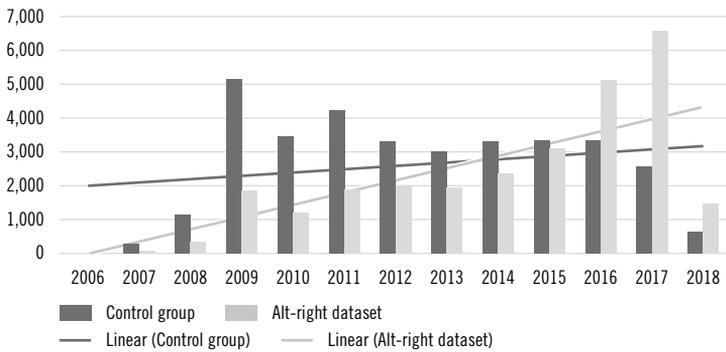
Just over 58% of accounts in the alt-right dataset were created after 2014, compared with 47% of the control group. The highest number of alt-right accounts were created in 2016 and 2017, compared with 2009 and 2011 for the control group.

¹⁰ The National Rifle Association (NRA) is an American pro-gun organization.

The highest number of alt-right dataset accounts created in a single month was 748. That was in January 2017, the month of Trump’s inauguration. A second notable spike occurred in August 2017, with 689 accounts created. Similar-sized spikes in the control group dataset took place in March and April 2009.

The discrepancy in timelines between the two datasets is probably partly explained by users creating accounts specifically to participate in the alt-right movement, which did not exist in any meaningful way before 2010, and which rose in prominence alongside the Trump campaign and presidency. Another contributing factor was a crackdown on alt-right accounts in late 2016, which probably resulted in users creating new accounts to replace accounts that had been removed earlier.¹¹

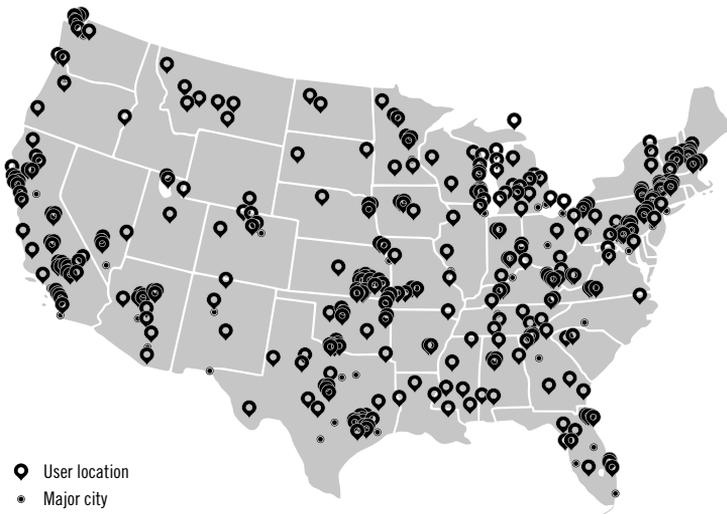
Figure 3. The number of accounts created per year



11 Adam Shaw. ‘As Twitter cracks down on alt-right, aggrieved members flee to “Gab”’. FoxNews.com, November 28, 2016. www.foxnews.com/politics/as-twitter-cracks-down-on-alt-right-aggrieved-members-flee-to-gab

LOCATION

Figure 4. Continental US locations claimed by users in the alt-right dataset

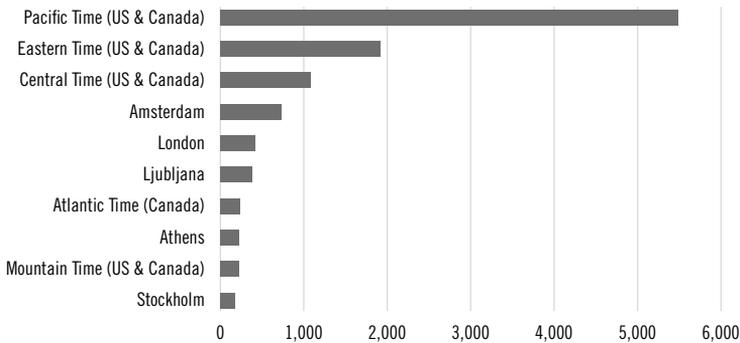


Users have an option to provide a location in their Twitter profile, but they are not compelled to provide accurate information, or to provide the information in a standardized format. A method we used for a previous paper to clean this data and estimate locations was unavailable as a result of the discontinuation of a particular Python package.

Locations were resolved to the best extent possible and maps were created using BatchGeo, a third-party service, which resulted in estimated locations for 14,691 accounts, but the results were not error-free or precise enough to allow meaningful analysis. A few general observations were possible. A majority of accounts resolved to locations in the United States, with additional large concentrations in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Finland and Germany.

The Twitter API stopped providing time-zone data to the collection app during the course of analysis, and a second collection method also failed to produce time-zone data, but an earlier version of the dataset

Figure 5. Top time zones listed by users in alt-right dataset



collected time-zone data for 13,660 accounts. Of those, 8,715 indicated one of the four major time zones in the continental United States, in addition to a number of cities and states.

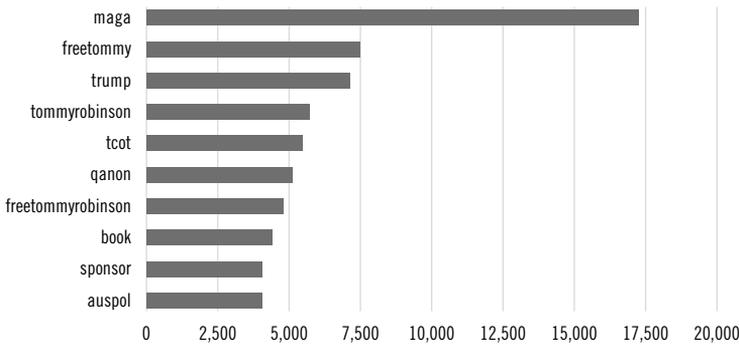
The largest city-based time zones detected were Amsterdam (735), London (416), and Ljubljana (387). With respect to Ljubljana, a notable number of accounts identified themselves using similar language in Twitter's location field as being based in Slovenia, a much higher number than found in the control group, but not all accounts using the location corresponded to accounts using the time zone. Some 85.6% of accounts that named the Ljubljana time zone were created prior to 2015, a trend running opposite to the rest of the dataset.

During the collection period, a populist right-wing party recorded substantial gains in a Slovenian election, which was reflected in some top hashtags and other content in the dataset.¹² Aside from election-related hashtags, the Slovenian accounts primarily tweeted English-language content relating to the alt-right, raising the possibility that the accounts were not authentic. Other indicators in the Slovenian subgroup indicated the presence of manipulative techniques at a similar scale to the overall dataset (see [Section 1.7. on page 37](#)). The source of manipulative activity in the subgroup could not be determined.

12 Barbara Surk. 'Slovenia Elections Tilt Another European Country to the Right'. *The New York Times*, June 3, 2018. www.nytimes.com/2018/06/03/world/europe/slovenia-election.html

1.5. TOP HASHTAGS

Figure 6. Top hashtags, by count



Hashtags used by members of the alt-right dataset followed most of the obvious political and extremist interests of alt-right adherents. In all, 215,497 distinct hashtags were detected in the last 200 tweets by each user of a large sample of the dataset.

The most-used hashtag, by a wide margin, was #maga, with #trump registered in third place. At least 2,000 distinct hashtags referred to Trump.

During the collection period, British authorities arrested and jailed Tommy Robinson, the founder of the right-wing, anti-immigrant, English Defence League, for illegally filming at the scene of court proceedings. Hashtags relating to Robinson trended among alt-right users during the period, including #freetommy (No. 2), #tommyrobinson (No. 4), and #freetommyrobinson (No. 7).

Fifth was #tcot, a hashtag that stands for ‘top conservatives on Twitter’, which has been used consistently over time to amplify far-right content.¹³ Sixth was #qanon, a reference to an alt-right conspiracy theory.¹⁴

13 Berger, op. cit., ‘Who Matters Online’.

14 Paris Martineau. ‘The Storm Is the New Pizzagate – Only Worse’. *New York Magazine*. December 19, 2017. nymag.com/selectall/2017/12/qanon-4chan-the-storm-conspiracy-explained.html

A minimum of 100 variations of QAnon-related terms appeared within the hashtag dataset. Users who included 'QAnon' in their profile description tweeted 4.5 times as often as the average member of the dataset, which is likely to have boosted the hashtag's performance relative to the conspiracy theory's adoption by members of the dataset. In a sample of accounts created on a different date (after the peak of the Tommy Robinson story), #qanon ranked third most-frequent of all hashtags.

Other top hashtags included #fakenews, #altright, #2a, and #whitegenocide, used to promote explicitly white nationalist content. Several hashtags referred to book promotion, which is discussed further in the following section.

Pro-Russia views, and the possible effects of Russian online influence operations, were also visible in the data, although in somewhat lower numbers than anecdotally observed by this author over the last few years.

The 14th most-used hashtag was #syria. Almost 300 additional hashtags contained the word 'Syria', and 74 contained the word 'Assad'. A total of 335 hashtags contained the word 'Russia', and 87 contained the word 'Putin'. While many hashtags mentioning Russia referred to the investigation into whether Trump colluded with Russia to swing the 2016 presidential election, a number of other pro-Russia issues were cited. 'Ukraine' was mentioned in 68 hashtags, and 25 mentioned 'Skripal', referring to the nerve agent attack on former Russian double-agent, Sergei Skripal, in England.

The hashtag #sdszate referred to the Slovenian election, and #pvv referred to a far-right Dutch political party. The hashtags #auspol and #svpol referred to Australian and Swedish politics respectively.

Erratum: Due to an error discovered after publication, some tweets in this dataset were truncated. The error stemmed from a change to Twitter API after the length of tweets was extended from 140 to 280 characters, during the period covered in the study. This error mainly affected the precise counts of top hashtags and may also have had a minor impact on the order in which the hashtags were ranked, which could not be more specifically quantified. We do not believe the impact is material to the study's overall findings.

Table 4. Top 25 hashtags

HASHTAG	COUNT
maga	15,546
freetommy	6,757
trump	6,400
tommyrobinson	5,133
tcot	4,920
qanon	4,604
freetommyrobinson	4,330
book	3,973
sponsor	3,644
auspol	3,634
svpol	3,406
fakenews	3,376
free	3,274
syria	2,993
whitegenocide	2,983
kindle	2,711
altright	2,584
deal	2,388
memorialday	2,257
sdszate	2,242
israel	2,110
pvv	2,083
2a	1,967
qanda	1,948
amazon	1,927

1.6. TWEETED URLS

Alt-right dataset users shared a wide variety of content, with 36,484 distinct domain names (counting subdomains separately) detected in the last 200 tweets of each account. Popular social platforms dominated the list, including YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and WordPress. (WordPress subdomains were consolidated into a single entry.)

The most-shared YouTube content represented a mix of material, with the most-relevant content pertaining to the arrest of Tommy Robinson. A mix of prominent and less prominent alt-right content was found among the top 50 YouTube links, including videos from alt-right personalities, Stefan Molyneux and Lauren Southern, and a white nationalist online channel, Red Ice TV. Less relevant content was also found in significant volumes, including non-extremist humour videos and music.

Out of 73,645 YouTube URLs, the most-linked specific URL received only 75 tweets, and the average YouTube URL received only 1.2 tweets. The overwhelming majority of YouTube URLs were tweeted 10 times or fewer, reflecting the fragmentation of the audience and the failure of any particular piece of content or personality to significantly differentiate from the crowd.

Title information could be resolved automatically from 58,743 of the YouTube URLs posted. Top terms in the titles of YouTube pages included Trump, white, Tommy and Robinson, war, world, black and news. Top word pairs, in order of frequency, included President Trump, white people, white genocide, new world [order], white guilt, New York, White House, Trump vs., and Trump rally.

Top Facebook links included Donald Trump's official Facebook page and unofficial groups supporting him. More than 22,000 Facebook links were shared, but only a handful were tweeted more than ten times each, and the overwhelming majority were tweeted only once

or twice each. Similar distributions were seen for YouTube, Instagram and WordPress, providing additional evidence of fragmentation in the alt-right media space, likely a product of its ideological ambiguity.

Amazon was ranked fifth among shared domains. Most of the Amazon links – more than 2,000 – appeared to be self-published books promoted by a handful of bot accounts that followed alt-right accounts without necessarily targeting that community specifically. The second most-tweeted Amazon link was to a book purporting to interpret Christian apocalyptic prophecies, and was promoted on Twitter with reference to a number of conspiracy theories, including chemtrails and historical occurrences. Several books reflecting alt-right ideas were promoted, including religious apocalypticism, conspiracy theories, men's rights, the legalization of marijuana, white nationalism, and pagan religions, but none of them was tweeted more than a handful of times.

Alt-right social platform gab.ai ranked 26th, and a notable number of users also referenced accounts on that site from their profile information. Gab describes itself as a 'social network dedicated to preserving individual liberty, the freedom of speech, and the free flow of information on the internet'. Many white nationalist and alt-right figures opened accounts on Gab after being suspended by Twitter, while others maintain a parallel presence.¹⁵

Most-tweeted news outlets included Brietbart.com and FoxNews.com, followed by a number of Dutch and European outlets. Below the top rankings, but within the top 100, were a variety of anti-immigrant, racist and/or conspiracy-oriented sites, including InfoWars, The Gateway Pundit, TruthFeed News, and VDARE. Several traditional conservative sites, including The Federalist and the National Review, also ranked in the top 100. As with the larger social platforms, the media landscape was very fragmented, with links distributed among a large number of different websites.

The table below shows the top 25 domains, minus social media apps and URL-shorteners, which are discussed in Section 1.7. on page 37.

15 Emma Grey Ellis. 'Gab, the Alt-Right's very own Twitter, is the ultimate filter Bubble'. *Wired*, September 14, 2016. www.wired.com/2016/09/gab-alt-rights-twitter-ultimate-filter-bubble

Table 5. Top 25 domains

DOMAIN	COUNT
youtube.com	73,645
facebook.com	23,387
instagram.com	11,658
wordpress.com	9,323
amazon.com	9,143
breitbart.com	5,189
foxnews.com	5,034
telegraaf.nl	4,101
pscp.tv	3,959
dailymail.co.uk	3,869
voiceofeuropa.com	3,630
tumblr.com	2,538
zerohedge.com	2,519
gab.ai	2,186
soundcloud.com	2,029
thegatewaypundit.com	1,804
ad.nl	1,672
theguardian.com	1,584
nos.nl	1,523
rt.com	2,934
dailycaller.com	1,408
linkedin.com	1,747
infowars.com	1,312
nova24tv.si	1,259
geenstijl.nl	1,145

1.7. SOCIAL MEDIA MANIPULATION

The alt-right dataset showed significant evidence of manipulation, including follower/friend distributions, the presence of manipulative apps, unusually high levels of tweeting activity and high influence scores recorded by relatively low-profile accounts.

All of these taken together suggest a significant portion of the dataset consists of accounts that employ automation and apps to manipulate follower counts and boost specific types of content, while some accounts were seen to be fake, meaning they are either bots (accounts that tweet automatically without human intervention), purchased followers, or sock puppets (single users who control multiple accounts).

SOCIAL APPS

While the most-linked-to domains pointed to large social platforms, the most-linked-to specific URLs pointed strongly towards apps used to monitor or manipulate follower counts. The top five URLs included fllwrs.com, unfollowspy.com, whounfollowedme.org, crowdfireapp.com, and uapp.ly.

The first three provide various features enabling users to track followers and follow back users who follow them. This is likely to play a significant role in distorting the distribution of friends and followers, further detailed below. Various strategies for following users and prompting them to follow back have been observed in extremist and state-sponsored influence campaigns, producing similar distortions.¹⁶

Specific apps used by this network have also been observed in past iterations of white nationalist social networks on Twitter, including Crowdfire, an app that empowers several tactics for growing follower

16 Fanyu Que, Krishnan Rajagopalan, and Tauhid Zaman. 'Penetrating a Social Network: The Follow-back Problem'. Cornell University Library, *arXiv preprint*, 2018. arxiv.org/pdf/1804.02608.pdf

counts and automating content.¹⁷ Significant automated content use was also detected, including using off-the-shelf Twitter apps such as If This Then That, Buffer, Crowdfire, Social Oomph, Dlv.it, Social Jukebox and StatusBrew. It is possible that other automated content appears in the network using less detectable methods, but the large number of visible methods was striking and may adequately explain the majority of automated activity found in the network.

TWEETING PATTERNS

Alt-right dataset accounts were about twice as active as the control group on both a mean and median basis. Based on the last 200 tweets, 35.5% of the alt-right database tweeted more than five times per day, compared with about 20% of the control group; 7.1% of alt-right accounts tweeted more than 50 times per day, compared with 4% of the control group, and 3% of the alt-right dataset had 150 or more tweets-per-day, compared with 1% of the control group.

In addition to having a larger number of high-performing accounts, the alt-right dataset also had fewer low-performing accounts, with 37.9% of the dataset averaging less than one tweet per day, compared with 56% of the control group.

Elevated tweeting levels are often an indicator of automated tweeting, whether the accounts are fully automated or supplemented by human operators. This data point is consistent with other evidence pointing to the use of Twitter apps, automation and other manipulative tactics.

17 J. M. Berger. 'Nazis vs. ISIS on Twitter: A Comparative Study of White Nationalist and ISIS Online Social Media Networks'. GW Program on Extremism, September 2016. Washington, DC: George Washington University. cchs.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2371/f/downloads/Nazis%20v.%20ISIS%20Final_o.pdf

INFLUENCE OUTLIERS

A significant number of accounts enjoyed outsized influence relative to the number of followers they had. While the influence metric is designed to offset follower counts as a primary criterion for influence, certain accounts outperformed their follower totals to an extent that suggested they were the beneficiaries of manipulative tactics such as automated retweets and mentions.

The average member of the alt-right dataset received 13.3 retweets from other members of the dataset within their last 200 tweets, compared with 3.6 in the control group.

Of the 500 most-retweeted accounts, 216 had 5,000 followers or fewer, compared with 161 in the control group. Within those subsets, the most retweets received by an alt-right user with the same parameters was 1,890, compared with 329 for the control group, while the average alt-right account received 268.3 retweets, compared with 91.8 in the control group.

In the alt-right dataset, 1% received more than 50 retweets from other members of the dataset, compared with 0.5% of the control group. Significantly, alt-right users receiving more than 50 retweets had an average of 157 followers, compared with an average of 1,315,413 followers for the control group.

Just over 6% of alt-right users sent more than 50 retweets to other members of the dataset, compared with 1.2% of the control group. Users sending more than 50 retweets to other members of the dataset had an average follower count of 7,203 in the alt-right dataset, compared with 53,322 in the control group.

There are a number of possible explanations for these disparities. Generally speaking, people who are engaged with extremism are likely to be less engaged with ordinary topics, resulting in organically greater group cohesion than would be expected in the control group. But these findings are consistent with the other evidence of manipulative tactics in the alt-right dataset, especially the extreme disparity in the average number of followers for users who received more than 50 retweets within the set.

FOLLOWER/FRIENDS RATIO

Control group members had higher averages of both followers and friends (accounts followed) than the alt-right group, reflecting in part a greater number of outlying high-follower accounts in the former dataset, and the latter dataset's association with a fringe movement.

The average ratio of followers to friends was nearly identical for the two groups, but the underlying distributions were very different. The distribution of followers and friends among users in an organic social network tends to be meaningfully random within a range, while showing some consistent trends – most importantly, a tendency for the most-active users to accrue more followers than they follow. But overall follower counts in the control group did not correlate with friend counts in a simple linear regression analysis ($r^2=0.0289$, $p = 0.30$).

In contrast, alt-right dataset users did not consistently accrue more followers than they followed. The alt-right dataset produced a very good fit for a linear model ($r^2=0.8323$, $p < 0.001$), meaning follower counts strongly and meaningfully correlated to friend counts.

These findings are consistent with the other evidence discussed in this section, which suggests that a substantial number of users engaged in programmatic following practices designed to modify follower counts, suggesting the presence of purchased followers and the use of follow-back schemes, which were observed in action within the dataset. The follow-back schemes appeared to use a combination of manual and automated following triggered by threaded tweets containing lists of user handles.

ATTRIBUTION OF MANIPULATIVE TACTICS

At least some of the manipulative tactics and inauthentic accounts in the network reflected the presence of commercial bots, including the previously discussed activity promoting book sales. However, the scope of activity throughout the dataset and the political nature of many high-volume accounts suggested that influence campaigns were also a significant part of the mix.

The last four years have given rise to a number of state-sponsored social media campaigns, particularly with respect to Russian efforts to sway the political landscape in Western countries. In the past, these campaigns have included fairly visible components that run parallel to or openly imitate an alt-right presence online.

Social media accounts that pose as alt-right adherents have been well-documented both in analyses of open-source activity and in material released by social media companies, which was confirmed to be of Russian origin. A Twitter account known as [@TEN_GOP](#), one of the most influential accounts in the alt-right space during the 2016 US presidential election, was confirmed by Twitter to be run by Russian troll farms, along with other prominent accounts in the alt-right space, although the alt-right was not by any means the only targeted demographic.¹⁸

More recently, reports suggest there is a growing presence of social media manipulation campaigns that originate with other actors, including some that may be orchestrated from within the alt-right itself, although the lines between a Russian-influence campaign and an alt-right-influence campaign can be blurry.¹⁹

As Clint Watts, a former FBI agent and social media analyst, writes in his book, *Messing with the Enemy: Surviving in a Social Media World of Hackers*, Russian disinformation activity 'provides the playbook for other nefarious social media influencers' who seek to manipulate public opinion by spreading disinformation and exaggerating the apparent popularity of divisive, fringe movements.²⁰ There is significant evidence

18 Chris Ladd. 'Jenna Abrams Is Not Real And That Matters More Than You Think'. Forbes, November 20, 2017. www.forbes.com/sites/chrisladd/2017/11/20/jenna-abrams-is-not-real-and-that-matters-more-than-you-think/#637093763b5a; Aaron Kessler. 'Who is @TEN_GOP from the Russia indictment? Here's what we found reading 2,000 of its tweets'. CNN.com. February 17, 2018. www.cnn.com/2018/02/16/politics/who-is-ten-gop/index.html

19 Molly K. McKew. 'How Twitter Bots and Trump Fans Made #ReleaseTheMemo Go Viral'. *Politico*, February 4, 2018. www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/02/04/trump-twitter-russians-release-the-memo-216935

20 Clint Watts. *Messing with the Enemy: Surviving in a Social Media World of Hackers, Terrorists, Russians, and Fake News*. New York: Harper, 2018, p. 242.

in the public record that alt-right adherents and their ideological allies have adopted and deployed manipulative tactics similar to those seen in state-sponsored campaigns.²¹

There were clear signs that some accounts in the alt-right dataset engaged with pro-Russian themes, including the prevalence of hashtags related to Russia and Syria (Section 1.5. on page 31) and the high ranking of Russia Today's website among shared URLs (Section 1.6. on page 34). We also found 935 links to 150 different domains ending with .ru in tweets from dataset members. But these items were just one part of a diverse array of content, rather than holding a commanding position, as seen in past networks more clearly linked to Russian-influence campaigns.²²

The mere presence of pro-Russian themes should not necessarily be taken as evidence of bots or other manipulations. Alt-right engagement with Russian-influence and pro-Russia issues is not confined to the online space, as documented in many media reports, and some of it is surely organic, the result of shared interests and values.²³

The data collected in this study overwhelmingly supports the theory that the alt-right dataset was significantly impacted by manipulative tactics, but the evidence was not adequate to attribute these

- 21 Carole Cadwalladr. 'Robert Mercer: the big data billionaire waging war on mainstream media'. *The Guardian*, February 26, 2018. www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/feb/26/robert-mercero-breitbart-war-on-media-steve-bannon-donald-trump-nigel-farage; Shawn Musgrave. "I Get Called a Russian Bot 50 Times a Day". *Politico*, August 9, 2017. www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/08/09/twitter-trump-train-maga-echo-chamber-215470
- 22 J. M. Berger. 'Here's What Russia's Propaganda Network Wants You to Read'. *Politico*, August 23, 2017. www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/08/23/russia-propaganda-network-kremlin-bots-215520
- 23 Casey Michel. 'America's neo-Nazis don't look to Germany for inspiration. They look to Russia'. *The Washington Post*, August 22, 2017. www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/08/22/americas-neo-nazis-dont-look-to-germany-for-inspiration-they-look-to-russia/?utm_term=.bc5860e41584; Casey Michel. 'Inside Russia's alliance with white nationalists across the globe'. *ThinkProgress*, October 15, 2017. thinkprogress.org/interview-russia-the-far-right-f3fd27ceb928

efforts to any single source. While influence doubtless played a role in the network, it is likely that much of the manipulation activity observed in this data was crafted and deployed from within the alt-right itself.

Relatedly, alt-right Twitter users recently claimed that their follower counts had been disproportionately impacted by a Twitter purge of bot accounts,²⁴ which appeared to target commercial bots of the type used by services that sell followers, according to data collected by the author at the time of the purge.

24 Taylor Lorenz. 'Inside Twitter's Bot Purge'. *The Daily Beast*, February 21, 2018. www.thedailybeast.com/inside-twiters-bot-purge; Matt Novak. 'Conservative Twitter Users Lose Thousands of Followers, Mass Purge of Bots Suspected [Updated]'. *Gizmodo*, February 21, 2018. gizmodo.com/conservative-twitter-users-lose-thousands-of-followers-1823185428

1.8. SUSPENSIONS

At least 1,436 accounts (roughly 4.8% of the alt-right dataset) were either permanently suspended, renamed or self-deleted during a two-week period in May 2018. Several hundred additional accounts were detected as having been temporarily suspended for violations of Twitter's Media Policy at various points in the process.

Partial data was captured from 1,310 of the permanently suspended (or otherwise unavailable) accounts. Most notably, accounts that were suspended had been tweeting at a much higher rate than the overall dataset, according to tweets-per-day data, based on the last 200 tweets, which were collected from 1,097 of the suspended accounts. Because accounts may have been suspended mid-collection, the actual tweets-per-day total for these accounts may be higher than recorded here.

Suspended accounts tweeted 33.7 times per day, compared with 15.2 times per day in the alt-right dataset, and 7.8 times per day in the control group. Median tweets-per-day clocked in at 7.8 for suspended accounts, 2.07 for the alt-right dataset, and 0.72 for the control group.

Suspended accounts had fewer followers and friends than accounts in the main dataset, in part because they had not been online as long. Over half (51.7%) of the suspended accounts were created in 2017 or 2018, compared with 28.8% percent of the main dataset, reflecting in part users who created new accounts after having been suspended.

Suspended accounts were more likely to identify as white nationalist, nationalist, or pro-white than the overall dataset, according to an analysis of profile data. The top two profile words, as in the main dataset, were 'MAGA' and 'anti'. The third most-used profile word was 'white', which ranked sixth in the overall dataset. Profiles of suspended users often contained violent content, including calls for war or genocide against minorities or immigrants, and Nazi and neo-Nazi terminology.

Some suspended users returned to Twitter successfully, while others were repeatedly suspended. Many migrated to Gab.ai, a social platform designed with the needs of the alt-right in mind.

As with the migration of ISIS from Twitter to Telegram,²⁵ Gab offers benefits in terms of a safe space for community-building and content-sharing, but it does not offer any clear growth potential. Most people who seek out Gab are already involved in the alt-right. Further diminishing its utility, in recent months, the so-called free speech network has itself started cracking down on its more extreme users, under pressure from its domain registrar.

25 J. M. Berger and Heather Perez. 'The Islamic State's Diminishing Returns on Twitter: How Suspensions are Limiting the Social Networks of English-speaking ISIS Supporters'. GW Program on Extremism, February 2016. Washington, DC: George Washington University. cchs.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2371f/downloads/Berger_Occasional%20Paper.pdf

1.9. ENGAGEMENT DATASET

In order to gain visibility on the wider movement, a secondary dataset was created consisting of accounts retweeted or mentioned by members of the alt-right dataset, that were not themselves part of the dataset, referred to hereafter as the engagement dataset.

Partial data was collected on 579,978 accounts that were mentioned or retweeted by a large sample of members of the alt-right dataset, and detailed data on the 5,000 most-influential accounts, as determined by the metric discussed in [Section 1.3. on page 21](#), with reference to engagement from members of the alt-right dataset only. The metric in this case pertains to influence over members of the original alt-right dataset, rather than influence among members of the engagement dataset.

Of the top 5,000 accounts, 614 were suspended, self-deleted or changed their names between the time they were identified and the time that the engagement dataset was analysed. The deleted accounts included a number of well-known trolls and prominent white nationalists. A number of deleted accounts identified themselves with neo-Nazi or anti-Semitic terminology. Given that many deleted users shared extremist traits, it is virtually certain that the dataset would have appeared less mainstream and more extremist if they had been included.

As expected, the engagement dataset contained more noise than the original, as a result of the inclusion of major media accounts whose content was retweeted and the inclusion of accounts that were targeted for harassment by alt-right adherents. Nevertheless, the results still skewed towards an alt-right ideological orientation, especially among the most influential users, shedding light on some of the most important figures in the movement, who do not necessarily follow any accounts self-identifying as alt-right (the criteria for inclusion in the alt-right audience dataset).

INFLUENTIAL ACCOUNTS

The 25 most-influential accounts in the engagement dataset reflected an alt-right orientation, including political figures and celebrities whose views align with the alt-right on various issues, and media outlets seen as friendly to the alt-right.

These users may or may not consider themselves to be part of the alt-right, and not all the accounts on this list would be classified as alt-right by an objective observer – particularly in light of internal disputes over the alt-right label and what it means. But all of them are popular targets for interaction by alt-right adherents, and in most cases, the reason for their popularity is fairly obvious and tied to the promotion of racially divisive and/or anti-immigration rhetoric and conspiracy theories.

As previously noted, VOX-Pol generally does not identify specific Twitter handles, but we again elected to identify the most-influential account in the engagement dataset, due to its high visibility and significance. That account was [@realDonaldTrump](#), the primary Twitter account of the president of the United States.

Given that the influence metric is based on the ability of an account to inspire interactions from a given audience, it is likely that [@realDonaldTrump](#) would rate as most-influential in any number of networks that engage even loosely with politics. However, President Trump's ranking was consistent with other data pointing towards his important position as an alt-right figurehead and ideological fellow-traveller. And the other most-influential members of the dataset reflected a pro-Trump focus.

The 25 most-influential accounts included:

- Eight European far-right accounts, including three 'fake news' outlets focused on Muslim immigration, two current or former elected politicians, and three British nationals. The latter included two male hard-core white nationalists, and a female media figure situated near or just outside the far-right edge of mainstream UK politics.

- Three extremely prominent conspiracy theorists associated with the alt-lite factions of the alt-right, including two American males and one British male.
- Three Americans who fall towards the far-right edge of mainstream politics, including one male and two females. Of the latter, one is very popular with white nationalists, although she does not self-identify as such. The other was African-American, whose presence on the list was likely primarily due to ideological affinities. The male figure was Jewish, and his presence on the list is likely due to a mix of ideological affinity and targeted ethnic harassment.
- Two Canadian alt-right online personalities, one male and one female.
- Two prominent American entertainment celebrities whose tweets are aligned with the alt-right, one male and one female.
- A number of prominent news outlets and social platforms, whose Twitter handles likely appear on this list because of the contents of tweets sent by pressing a Share button on their respective websites.

The top three influencers from the engagement list were more influential than the top influencer from within the primary dataset, [@richardbspencer](#).

The combined top 25 included nine users from the primary alt-right dataset and 16 from the engagement dataset, suggesting that the alt-right landscape online extends well beyond the original dataset.

NOTES ON AGGREGATE DATA

Keeping in mind the effects of account suspensions, the engagement dataset skewed more towards mainstream and conservative than the primary alt-right dataset, with Twitter profile terms such as ‘news’, ‘author’ and ‘conservative’ among the top-ranked profile terms.

Word pairs reflected similar content and orientation, with much less focus on ‘anti’ terms (although these were still present). Profile terms for the engagement dataset skewed strongly in favour of President Trump, with ‘MAGA’ in second place (after ‘news’) and ‘Trump’ in fifth.

The top news source linked by the engagement dataset was Breitbart. The *Daily Mail* tabloid was second, and Fox News was third.

Activity in the dataset suggested that while engagement dataset users were more circumspect about presenting a mainstream persona, many were fully engaged with alt-right ideas and communities. The top four hashtags included three pertinent to Trump, including #maga and #trump, and one pertaining to the World Cup, which was taking place during collection. But the fourth – and fifth-ranked hashtags were #qanon and #freetommy, which situate the dataset squarely in the alt-right space.

Other top-ranking hashtags included #syria (11th), #iran (#14th in the engagement dataset, compared with 60th in the primary dataset) and #russia (30th compared with 61st). While the alt-right dataset contained no conclusive evidence that Russian influence operations were being carried out by members of the dataset, the relative prominence of these hashtags and others among influential engagement users suggests Russian influence operations are successfully targeting accounts within or just adjacent to the primary alt-right audience.

The engagement dataset was considerably more active than the alt-right dataset, with tweets-per-day averaging 54.6 compared with the main dataset’s 15.2. Median tweets-per-day came in at 18, compared to 2.07 in the main dataset and 0.72 in the control group. Users in the engagement dataset relied on many of the same automation tools as the main dataset, but also included a number of pricey professional social media management tools, reflecting the inclusion of major media organizations, brands and celebrities.

1.10. ESTIMATING THE TOTAL ALT-RIGHT PRESENCE ON TWITTER

In a previous study, this author and a co-author were able to broadly estimate the size of pro-ISIS activity on Twitter using a number of overlapping techniques, including an in-groupness metric that accurately assessed whether someone was an ISIS supporter, and analysis of accounts followed by ISIS supporters. In-groupness is a measure of how closely an account conforms to the defining interest of an online community.

The previous techniques were unavailable for this study for several reasons. First, the amorphous nature of the alt-right seeds complicated the use of the in-groupness metric, which relies on seed accounts that share a clear, common interest. When the seed accounts are clearly similar to each other, the in-groupness metric can identify followers who share the seed group's interests with high accuracy. The author has applied the in-groupness metric successfully to a wide variety of networks with consistent results. The more similar the seeds, the better the result.

But because the alt-right means different things to different members of the seed group, the seeds were not sufficiently uniform to produce accurate results with the available in-groupness metrics, when accounts were coded for the use of alt-right keywords.

Another issue that diluted the effectiveness of the in-groupness metric was the large number of relevant accounts in the dataset. While some users were clearly irrelevant or actively opposed to the alt-right, the overall metrics suggested that a very high percentage of the dataset consisted of relevant accounts that had some meaningful engagement with alt-right views. When an extremely high percentage of the overall dataset is engaged with the seed accounts' thematic content, the sorting metric is naturally less useful.

Despite all this, the analysis of in-groupness and related metrics did produce useful and interesting results, including that both influence and in-groupness metrics consistently scored white nationalist accounts

higher than accounts that self-identified as alt-right. Supported by other data in this report, this strongly suggests the alt-right is meaningfully a white nationalist movement, despite internal rifts and some adherents' deliberate efforts to create an illusion of separation.

Regardless of these other points of interest, the in-groupness metrics did not provide adequate points of reference to assess the size of the alt-right network that extends beyond the database.

Finally, while the data clearly points to the widespread use of automation and manipulative techniques in the dataset, the increased sophistication of these efforts, relative to those observed in previous studies, made it difficult to credibly estimate how many accounts presenting as alt-right adherents were genuine.

What is clear, however, is that the alt-right community online is much larger than the datasets examined in this report. Nearly 580,000 accounts were sampled to create the Engagement database. Well over 1,000 of them used overtly alt-right or white supremacist terminology in their Twitter handles, nearly three times as many as found in the primary alt-right dataset.

In light of all this, it is probably reasonable to assume that the total number of alt-right adherents on Twitter, including deceptive accounts such as bots and sock puppets, exceeds 100,000, and probably exceeds 200,000. An analytically sound estimate with more precision could not be produced.

This estimate should be considered a baseline minimum, and an extremely conservative one at that, not including European far-right political parties, which were present but underrepresented in the dataset. Many of these parties, such as the Front National in France and the AfD in Germany, would not primarily identify themselves as alt-right, but they have clear social and ideological ties, in addition to imitating the alt-right's online tactics and sharing information sources. Language issues would also create structural barriers to inclusion in the primarily English-language alt-right dataset, and a more linguistically diverse set of seeds would likely produce a large number of relevant results. The broader far-right community on Twitter – including factions both inside and outside the alt-right's umbrella – almost certainly runs into the millions.



2. DISCUSSION

THE ALT-RIGHT'S PRESENCE on Twitter reflects the reality of the movement's landscape – disjointed and more clearly focused on external enemies (out-groups, in social psychology terms) than its own internal cohesion. Crossing national and sometimes even racial boundaries, the movement emerged in 2010 and continued for some years as a hodgepodge of grievances in search of a focal point.

Support for Donald Trump's presidential campaign provided a crucial, in-group definition that united a fractious group of far-right ideologues, nationalists, white nationalists, anti-Semites, homophobes, transphobes, misogynists, Islamophobes, libertarians and anti-establishmentarians. The Trump-supporting definition of the alt-right in-group allows some targets of alt-right discrimination – including a handful of African-Americans, Jews and LGBTQIA individuals – to operate within the in-group and sometimes even rise to positions of prominence.

Despite all this, the orientation of the alt-right is strongly and foundationally white nationalist, the largest part of a Venn diagram that most prominently includes vehement anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim bigotry, along with a host of other hatreds.

White nationalists ranked among the most influential Twitter accounts in this study, even more than accounts that self-identified as alt-right. While not everyone in the alt-right is a white nationalist, a plurality of the movement's adherents are.

Ultimately, the alt-right is a coalition of extremists, an extremist bloc rather than a fully distinct movement with a coherent ideology. While some people view the alt-right as their primary identity group, many more identify primarily with a subgroup under the alt-right's umbrella, such as white nationalism, or ideologies that are primarily framed as anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, anti-woman, or anti-LGBTQIA.

The alt-right's failure to provide a consistent and comprehensive ideological package represents its past and present, but not necessarily its future. Within the bloc, and especially over the past two years, adherents have waged a fierce competition for ownership of the alt-right label and the centre of gravity for the movement.

A critical inflection point revolves around the movement's association with overt white nationalism, including the extent to which white nationalism is its defining trait, and relatedly, the question of whether and when the use of extreme or violent provocation is acceptable as a tactic.

For now, overt white nationalists, such as Richard Spencer and David Duke, maintain a grip on the movement's centre of gravity, even as figures who have nominally repudiated white nationalism, such as Paul Joseph Watson and Mike Cernovich, still maintain positions of significant – and even superior – influence among online adherents.

If the alt-right is a coalition, it is also an arena, a testing ground for competing ideological strains during a period of great social uncertainty and upheaval in North America and Europe, where most of the movement's adherents reside.

Personal and social uncertainty, disruptions to the social status quo, and battles over legitimacy all heighten the risk that a more-specific and potentially very violent strain of extremism could emerge victorious in this contest. Therefore, it is important that future research on the alt-right explore these questions in more detail, examining the competing ideologies under the umbrella and monitoring which elements appear to be winning and how they may spread.

These questions may be critically important in the days to come. The alt-right presents a formidable challenge for those seeking to contain and counter violent extremism. White nationalists and far-right movements have recorded substantial gains in North American and European political circles in recent years, inserting themselves into the mainstream political discourse and radicalizing it through their tactics, including but not limited to the substantial online activity documented in this report.

The movement's online presence probably represents measures of both cause and effect, on the one hand reflecting a polarized political environment, while on the other hand offering mechanisms for recruitment and mobilization. This activity has already inspired some to commit violence in the name of white nationalism and other extremist causes under the alt-right's umbrella.

While social media companies and governments around the world have mobilized to combat jihadist recruitment and propaganda online, the task of crafting a response to the alt-right is considerably more complex and fraught with landmines, largely as a result of the movement's inherently political nature and its proximity to political power.

People involved in countering violent extremism (CVE) related to the alt-right milieu have not and will not enjoy the same resources seen in the counter-jihadist space. Even worse, the political leadership in some Western countries may actively seek to oppose or directly thwart such efforts.

In Hungary, for instance, the far-right regime of Viktor Orbán recently passed a law broadly criminalizing efforts to assist refugees, which as written could be construed to criminalize efforts to prevent extremist violence targeting that community. While Hungary is an extraordinary case, it illustrates a fundamental challenge for CVE practitioners when extremists participate in the state.

CVE, as it was originally conceived, carried the imprimatur of the state and was understood, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, to be a tool for use against violent non-state actors. As such, both CVE initiatives and the academic study of extremism have been supported by states with significant financial resources and broad cooperation on data acquisition.

When extremists favour incumbent political actors, or worse, when incumbent political actors tolerate or even encourage extremism, existing CVE paradigms are likely to fail and new ones must be devised. The rise of the alt-right highlights significant challenges and an uncertain path ahead for academics who study extremism outside of the jihadist sphere, and for activists who seek to counter it.

ADDITIONAL READING

Previous studies by the author have explored similar datasets using similar or identical methodologies to those described in this paper. They include:

- Berger, J. M. and Morgan, J. 'The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on Twitter'. The Brookings Project on US Relations with the Islamic World, Analysis Paper No. 20, April 2015.
- Berger, J. M., and Strathearn, B. 'Who Matters Online: Measuring influence, evaluating content and countering violent extremism in online social networks?' International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, King's College London, (2013).
- Berger, J. M. 'Nazis vs. ISIS on Twitter. A Comparative Study of White Nationalist and ISIS Online Social Media Networks'. GW Program on Extremism, September 2016. Washington, DC: George Washington University.

The VOX-Pol Network of Excellence (NoE) is a European Union Framework Programme 7 (FP7)-funded academic research network focused on researching the prevalence, contours, functions, and impacts of Violent Online Political Extremism and responses to it.



This project has received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration under grant agreement no. 312827

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