Rethinking Research Ethics, Power, and the Risk of Visibility in the Era of the "Alt-Right" Gaze

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Abstract

This essay explores what the "alt-right" (White ethnonationalist, fascist, misogynistic, and anti-intellectual communities) means for social media researchers in terms of research ethics, risk, and visibility. First, it outlines how #Gamergate and #OperationDiggingDiGRA indicated that academic researchers could be targets of their hostility. This essay then draws on the work of Foucault and Mulvey to theorize how far-right groups have a kind of "gaze." Then, it discusses how far-right extremism requires rethinking ethical questions around researchers and participants. Finally, some thoughts are offered as to what this means for how individuals, organizations, disciplines, and institutions can support research into these spaces.

Keywords

"alt-right," research ethics, visibility, surveillance, researcher risk

Introduction

In the past few years, far-right ideology has gained political and cultural power globally. From Brexit in Britain, to the successful election of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) to the German parliament, to the campaign and subsequent election of Donald Trump in the United States, to Marine Le Pen and her National Front party's unsuccessful bid for Emmanuel Macron's presidency in France, White ethnonationalism is increasingly visible. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given their demographics (typically young, White, college-educated men), there has been a concomitant rise in the visibility of these groups on university campuses. In the United States, for example, clashes between supporters of far-right figures like Milo Yiannopoulos and activists on the University of California at Berkeley campus made national news, and a gathering of White nationalists at the University of Virginia led to the death of one activist and injured numerous others after a far-right supporter hit them with his vehicle.

Far-right groups do not see university campuses simply as recruiting grounds; they also view them as potential threats. The Professor Watchlist site (www.professor-watchlist.org) is just but one example of how the far-right is also attacking intellectual freedom and specific academics on college campuses in the United States. Started by conservative wunderkind Charlie Kirk's Turning Point

USA, an activist non-profit organization focused on organizing students around ". . . principles of fiscal responsibility, free markets, and limited government" (Turning Point USA, 2017), the site debuted just after the US presidential election in November 2016 (Paiella, 2016).[1] Visitors were encouraged to submit the names of professors who ". . . discriminate against conservative students and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom" ("Professor Watchlist," 2017). The site listed individuals like Cornel West, Mark Crispin Miller, and Susan J. Douglas as responsible for supposed "leftist" crimes. Soon after the site's debut, #trollprofwatchlist trended on Twitter. Activists and academics used the hashtag to document their attempts to overwhelm the site with bogus submissions through the submission of pop culture icons (such as Professor Snape, James Moriarty, and Charles Xavier). Later, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP, 2017)

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encouraged its members sign a petition requesting to be to added to the watchlist in an effort to demonstrate solidarity with those already listed.

The case of Professor Watchlist reminds us that online spaces serve as a primary means through which the far-right influences, amplifies, and mainstreams their message of hate. My goal with this essay is to explore what the emergence of loud, angry, networked, and technologically proficient group of mostly White men means for social media researchers, and academics more broadly. What does it mean to do ethical new media research, especially research that connects explicitly to issues of power, justice, and personhood, during the rise of this kind of right-wing extremism? What new risks do we face as scholars, and how must we reconceptualize research ethics to account for these risks? I contend that we must attend not only to the new ways that White nationalist, Islamophobic, fascist, misogynistic, anti-immigrant, and anti-intellectual communities (often referred to in the United States at the "alt-right") are using social media, but also what impact this has on research into these technologies.[2] Scholars like Jessie Daniels (2009) have discussed the ways in which some of these groups have used online spaces as a communication and mobilization tool; however, less has been said about the ways these same tools have been used to observe and potentially harass those researchers whose work is perceived as a threat.

While we have traditionally viewed researchers as holding more power than their research participants, these hate groups complicate and, at moments, radically shift this dynamic. This power shift is likely even more pronounced for those of us who study social media, as we are expected to be visible on the platforms we research, which in turn makes us increasingly at risk of being targeted for our work. However, the risks faced are not only solely felt by those who actively do research on the far right but are also experienced by those whose work is perceived as being intertwined with issues of social justice, intellectualism, progressivism, and liberalism. Individuals working within the humanities and social sciences are particularly at risk, given the ontological and epistemological rationales for their research.

To unpack these complexities, I first discuss how #Gamergate, and in particular, #OperationDiggingDiGRA, represented a pivotal moment in online hate as it involved new tactics enabled by platformed sociality. Then, I describe some of the core ways that resurgent White nationalism and growing misogynistic movements' challenge require new interventions and support from scholarly communities. Drawing on the work of Foucault (1995) and Mulvey (1989), I offer a new way of understanding of how far-right groups use the threat of surveillance as a silencing tactic. Finally, I discuss how traditional ethical questions around researchers and participants need to be rethought in light of this "alt-right" gaze.

The "Alt-Right" Comes for Games Researchers (#OperationDiggingDiGRA)

The same network technologies that have increased global awareness of the far-right have also made academic research, and researchers themselves, more visible. Both of these realities might be good things on the surface—the former because it allows us to address the larger cultural problems that underlie these movements and the latter because the public deserves to have access to the results of academic labor. But the politics of online platforms are slanted in one direction, embracing a kind of cyberlibertarianism (Borsook, 2001; Turner, 2006) that too often shields harassers under the guise of "free speech" while offering little in the way of protection to those of us who are being targeted. The amplification of messages that platforms like Twitter encourages (through retweets, hashtags, etc.) is easily misused by those hoping to swarm or "sea lion" (Malki, 2014) victims, making them visible to a vast network of unknown individuals hiding behind egg or anime avatars.[3] The sociotechnical affordances of social media platforms privilege particular kinds of interactions—ones that make us more visible and public—while making more difficult those that offer us privacy or safety. Thus, the Internet often serves as both a "mechanism of harassment" and as a "force multiplier" by particular extremist groups (Daniels, 2009, p. 80).

White supremacy, anti-immigrant discourse, misogyny, and trans/homophobia are not new cultural problems, but they are amplified and made more visible online. We know that we bring our bodies into the immaterial realm of the Internet—and those that are marked as "other" often face hostility for simply existing in these spaces. However, the current strain of virulent racism and sexism that falls under the "alt-right" rubric is somewhat different. It has emerged from marginal spaces online (such as Stormfront.org and The Daily Stormer) to become a mainstream, acceptable discourse on platforms like Reddit, 4chan, and Facebook. While Donald Trump and other far-right political parties have provided singular ideologues that appeal to the disparate interests of White nationalists/Neo-Nazis, red-pill/pick-up artists,[4] men's rights activists, and so forth, the roots of the shift toward legitimizing these repugnant views started earlier. Like others, I would argue that #Gamergate (2014–2015) signaled the mainstreaming of the ideology and tactics of the "alt-right" (Jeong, 2016; Lees, 2016). Prior research refers these kinds of events and publics as "toxic technocultures," as they are indelibly linked to the kinds of technology that enables networked publics to connect around an issue or affective moment (Massanari, 2015). But instead of coming together to support network neutrality on Reddit or sparking the Arab Spring on Twitter, toxic technocultures use platform logics to their advantage in efforts to attack, harass, and silence those outside their communities. In addition, many of these "toxic technocultures" rely on a

unique vernacular, a mixture of memes and slang, to both spread their message on spaces like Reddit and 4chan and to "troll" others ("Explaining the alt-right 'deity' of their 'meme magic'," 2017).

While others have addressed the events of #Gamergate (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Mortensen, 2016) and provide an excellent discussion of how it unfolded and the cultural context in which it occurred, one moment is particularly important to revisit in light of how far-right extremism impacts new media researchers. As Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw (2015) detail in their work, at one point Gamergaters (GGs) turned their attention toward the work of games scholars. GGs became aware of a public Google document that contained informal notes from a "fishbowl" session on the topic of feminism in games that occurred in August 2014 at the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) conference. They defaced the document and created a series of YouTube videos to discredit some of the games scholars who had attended the fishbowl session. These videos disparaged their teaching and scholarship and also suggested that the document (along with other purported evidence) served as "proof" of a broad feminist conspiracy between the DiGRA organization (and academia generally) and gaming (Chess & Shaw, 2015). Using the hashtag #OperationDiggingDiGRA, these individuals publicly declared their intention to fact-check and peer-review every DiGRA conference paper, and later, just the "feminist" ones (after presumably stumbling across DiGRA's open-access conference paper archive and noting just how many papers they were committing to read). The DiGRA mailing list then received several messages from Gamergate supporters with the results of their "peer reviews," most of which demonstrated unsurprisingly a deep lack of understanding as to how research is actually conducted and reported (Bezio, 2014; Mortensen, 2016). Some months later, the main public face of Gamergate, a Reddit community called /r/KotakuInAction, hosted several threads about academic papers written about #Gamergate (including the Chess and Shaw piece mentioned above), creating yet another recursive layer of the "Digging DiGRA" operation.

The complexities of the Digging DiGRA moment served as an unwelcome notification for some games scholars that their work might be unearthed and subject to scrutiny by a hostile community. It highlighted the reality that those who analyzed games qualitatively, especially those approaching them from feminist, queer, and social justice perspectives, might be targeted by far-right activists. These approaches are already viewed with skepticism by many, who view them as "unscientific," subjective, politically motivated, or an assault on positivist traditions found in the "hard" sciences (physics, chemistry, etc.) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In turn, this additional scrutiny could result in harassment and/or doxxing (the release of private information about someone on public forums). Researchers would now need to keep a close watch on their Google search results, scour anonymous image boards, and trawl Twitter and YouTube to keep tabs on how

those affiliated with #Gamergate were discussing their work. For many tenured scholars, this would be an unpleasant task. For those who were untenured, and/or a member of a marginalized community, and/or facing a precarious professional situation (such as being an adjunct, a graduate student, on the job market, or in a university where their research was not valued), this kind of increased visibility could be profoundly damaging.

Digging DiGRA also highlighted, once again, the interconnected nature of the social media platforms we engage with—both as scholars and as simply "users." Platforms and their attendant algorithms are not neutral in their design (Bucher, 2012; Gillespie, 2010). They reflect a particular set of political-economic realities and often favor certain subject positions more valuable than others. For example, the same algorithmic logics which seek to make us visible to our friends and colleagues, and create what van Dijck (2013) calls a "culture of connectivity," work against us in the face of these extremist groups. As John Cheney-Lippold (2017) astutely argues, "Algorithmic agents make us and make the knowledges that compose us, but they do so on their own terms" (p. 11). Algorithms not only reflect social media's collective values of sharing, visibility, and access (which in turn reflects these platforms' larger political-economic realities), but they can also be used to covertly observe others at a distance. Researchers whose scholarship focuses on new media are aware of the optics of online reputation and the difficulties of countering platform logics and algorithms when brute force can overwhelm their supposed neutrality; however, they also are expected to be visible on these same platforms. This becomes a double bind—one that Digging DiGRA and #Gamergate underscored. Networks like Facebook and Twitter often provide essential professional and social support, but the visibility they provided could easily make one a potential target for harassment.

Visibility and the "Alt-Right" Gaze

While the above suggestions serve as a starting point for scholars, if their work engages with these kinds of toxic communities, simply assessing and mitigating researcher risk is not enough. Instead, there is a need for new theoretical understandings as to how the "alt-right" engages in surveillance of others. My use of the term "surveillance" here is purposeful and recalls Christian Fuchs' (2011) assertion that it be used to describe ". . . the negative side of information gathering, processing, and use that is inextricably bound up with coercion, domination, and (direct or indirect; physical, symbolic, structural, or ideological) violence" (p. 126). While often associated with state-level interventions (e.g., airport body scanners deployed to stop terrorism), Fuchs argues that surveillance can involve any sort of "asymmetrical power relations." In the case of the far-right's engagement with social/new media scholars, the asymmetry is, in part, due to the visibility of those being targeted and the

relative invisibility of those who are perpetrating the attacks. While these communities might couch their tactics in such a way to suggest that they are merely gathering and sharing information about individuals, the goals of these actions are to engage in asymmetrical information gathering of one or more particular individuals for the purposes of intimidation and harassment. Also, the surveillance attempts to quiet and subdue outsiders who might protest, implying any interventions will make them targets as well.

Foucault's (1995) work on regimes of visibility sensitizes us to the ways that technological apparatuses can be used as tools for discipline and surveillance. In his discussion of architect Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, Foucault (1995) argues the power of the technology is that it ". . . induce[s] in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (p. 201). Those who are under the surveillance come to assume others are looking at all times and come to discipline their own actions in light of this potential observation. Foucault later suggests that as these tools are normalized within a given space, they also are untethered from formalized structures, becoming

> . . . 'de-institutionalized,' to emerge from the closed fortresses in which they once functioned and to circulate in a 'free' state; the massive, compact disciplines are broken down into flexible methods of control, which may be transferred and adapted. (p. 211)

He refers to this as a kind of swarming in which control and surveillance technologies are decentralized and permeate all aspects of daily life. His use of the term "swarming" is telling here—like the "sea lioning" on Twitter that those who spoke out against #Gamergate experienced; both the surveillance and the punishment are carried out in public by a seemingly undifferentiated, amorphous body. In the case of the "alt-right," this effectively works to discipline the speech and actions of others even if they are not directly targeted.

While it serves as a powerful metaphor for surveillance, Foucault's panopticism has been criticized for not fully attending to the *mediated* nature of visibility (Thompson, 2005). Scholars have foregrounded the importance of media as an extension of the senses (McLuhan, 1994), as a way to render something or someone visible; still others have explored the pleasures inherent in looking at the other (Berger, 1990). In this regard, film theorist Laura Mulvey's (1989) concept of the "male gaze" is informative. Mulvey suggests that the camera is analogous to a prosthetic eye, and the pleasure of film is partially one that plays on the spectator's desire to look. She argues that this particular gaze is gendered: it is men who are doing the looking at women, with the camera mirroring a desire to possess and to control. This positions men as active agents doing the looking and women as passive objects to be looked at. This power differential is amplified, as the spectator remains shrouded in darkness while the object (displayed on the screen) is illuminated. Mulvey's theory is not without its limits, as scholars have critiqued it for ignoring particular subjectivities and viewing positions (hooks, 1992; Williams, 1997).

Envisioning the "alt-right" as an amorphous networked community that gazes, illuminates, objectifies, and actively constructs a particular social reality is fruitful. In particular, thinking of the "alt-right" as having a gendered and raced subjectivity is valuable. As seen during #Gamergate and Digging DiGRA, harassment was both targeted at individuals in marginalized positions (women, people of color, and those within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer [LGBTQ] community) and relied on a vernacular of gendered/raced insults. Again, this is not to suggest that the far right is unified or singular (or that it is made of all White, straight, cis-men as Milo Yinannpolous' gay minstrelsy act (Penny, 2017) highlights), but that it often reflects the (pseudo)anonymous, leaderless, and seemingly chaotic communities they inhabit. In addition, this metaphor underscores an important imbalance of power between the spectators (those within the "alt-right" communities), who remain shrouded in darkness, and the person being looked at (a particular researcher), who is rendered visible. While the latter is not entirely without agency, her actions are constrained by this gaze, itself uniquely shaped and enabled by networked technologies.

It is important to note, too, how this asymmetry works to create a sense of isolation in the targeted individual. While the concerns of right-wing activists may have little to do with those from the men's rights movement on a day-to-day basis, moments like #Gamergate demonstrate the ways that these disparate communities effectively rally as if they are an undifferentiated mass of Twitter eggs rather than individual people. The one who gazes in any given moment projects themselves as not simply a solo spectator but as part of a massive, all-seeing, all-knowing group. This is why the "alt-right" gaze is so effective as an intimidation tactic. It hides the reality that those gazing are actually disparate individuals, instead rendering them to the target as an undifferentiated mob. At the same time, this gaze works to highlight and isolate *a particular* person. Like a roving prison spotlight, the "alt-right" gaze has the potential to land on anyone at any moment. It is these movements' leaderless quality, and the relative capricious nature of its attention, which works much like the guard tower in Bentham's panopticon. We are unsure of if, or when, or by whom we might find ourselves being looked upon. Thus, we may discipline ourselves into silence and submission in an attempt to avoid detection.

New Ethical Questions

Far-right, extremist groups present numerous new ethical dilemmas. The issue of representation becomes especially tricky in light of the "alt-right" gaze. Because project goals, methodologies, disciplinary traditions, theoretical approaches, guidelines around authorship, and our own ethical stance

vary, we should expect to see a similarly broad approach to the ways we research and write about these communities. Some of us might choose to anonymize all aspects of our research—changing usernames, altering quotes to eliminate their findability, and changing the names of our research sites. Others might approach these same spaces differently, choosing not to alter quotations or usernames precisely because of methodological or disciplinary backgrounds. Still others will struggle with what constitutes appropriate representation of these far-right groups, and if reproducing the very words themselves is a form of symbolic violence.

The "alt-right" also challenges basic questions around researcher disclosure and authorship. Researchers are encouraged generally to not engage in any sort of deception or covert research with communities. However, the safety of researchers working around/in far-right spaces might challenge this long-standing tradition. This means we must be thoughtful as to how we will engage before, during, and after our research with certain communities. It might also upend the prevailing wisdom, particularly for those of us working within qualitative, ethnographic, and/or feminist traditions that we share our work with the communities we study. This idea of "covert" research might also extend to authorship—requiring new ways of authoring papers (anonymously, or with pseudonyms, or with a research group name that cannot be connected back to the authors, or through other idiosyncratic means) to ensure researcher safety. These necessary approaches will challenge the entire editorial process. In addition, individual tenure and promotion cases, where named authorship and citation counts are a primary mode of evaluation, will require new standards of evaluation as a result.

As articulated earlier, researcher risk also needs a significant ethical revision in the era of the "alt-right" gaze. Risk is generally conceived as something that occurs in a particular time and place—most often in the field during ethnographic work (Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2000). However, this assumes that the field is a static place that we go to, collect data from, and leave. For Internet researchers, in particular, this notion of field is insufficient in its scope and does not resonate with lived experiences (Hine, 2009; Markham, 2007, 2013). Unfortunately, risk in the case of the far-right extends beyond the researcher or even their department/institution, often including family, friends, and even tangential individuals in their personal and professional networks.

Rethinking Researcher Risk

While the ultimate impact of moments like #Gamergate/ Digging DiGRA are unknown, what is apparent is that undertaking research which critiques these kinds of "alt-right" publics is challenging. However, scholarly communities have yet to effectively mobilize support for those who are willing (and able) to research how hate movements take hold, how they propagate, and how they can be fought. Since the "alt-right" gaze works to disconnect particular individuals from their respective communities, those working in this area need to consider how scholars can support each other. Care ethics (Benhabib, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2005) and feminist communitarian ethics (Denzin, 1997) might provide fruitful ways forward for thinking in this regard. Both frameworks emphasize our collective interconnectedness and the importance of contextual understanding when making ethical decisions. Moving beyond a view that discards the emotional in favor of the rational, these approaches also demonstrate skepticism of universal rules and abstraction in favor of attending to the particulars of the relational context of a given ethical dilemma. They also attune us to the importance of care for the self, as self-care allows us to care for others and our communities. Working from an ethics of care perspective and taking into account the nature of this gaze, there are a number of ways that scholarship can move forward in this area while still remaining mindful of the threat that this kind of work presents:

1. For several reasons, it is critical to develop research networks around the "alt-right." First, research networks become a way to legitimize the importance of a field of inquiry and help us acknowledge what is, and is not, unique about the far-right in this political moment. In particular, learning from the work of scholars similarly embedded with "difficult" communities is critical so that others can assess and mitigate potential risks without entirely reinventing the wheel. For example, prior work on White nationalist groups (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Burris, Smith, & Strahm, 2000; Daniels, 2009; Ferber, 2004; Futrell & Simi, 2004; Kimmel, 2013; Koster & Houtman, 2008), and communities like Anonymous (Beyer, 2014; Coleman, 2014) and subcultural trolls (Phillips, 2011, 2015) who share a similar technological acumen, non-hierarchical leadership structure, and penchant for chaos, is critical to reexamine in light current events. Second, research networks focused specifically on the "alt-right" can serve to acknowledge the deep emotional effects of working around toxic communities. Unfortunately, scholars rarely acknowledge the challenging moments we experience while undertaking any kind of research, such as crying after an exhausting ethnographic interview (boyd, 2015) or feeling sexually attracted to an informant (Kendall, 2009). But confronting the far-right's brand of toxicity for any length of time is simply too much of a burden for an individual to bear—it requires a community of support. Third, research networks can offer a visible face for the "alt-right" to gaze upon, thus shifting the burden off of individual researchers and providing a buffer if harassment and doxxing do occur. It might also embolden individuals in lower status positions to undertake this important work,

providing an important avenue for them to receive mentoring, as well as a way to collaborate and commiserate with others.

2. Scholars need to acknowledge that doing work around the "alt-right" is risky. But the risks faced will be contextually, culturally, and temporally dependent. It might mean researchers are at greater risk some time after their work is publicized (perhaps even long after as with #OperationDiggingDiGRA). This means scholars must be thoughtful as to how they will engage (if at all) before, during, and after the research process. This stands in stark contrast to the ways researchers are trained to think about promoting work to their intellectual communities and the public. For example, researchers might chose to not explicitly share monographs and articles with particular communities given their volatility and/or the reality that they will act negatively. Instead, they might instead allow them to "be found" in the hope that this will provide some sort of invisibility, however temporary. However, with other projects or other communities, researchers might hope to address any potential issues up-front by directly engaging—letting these communities know that the work exists, and perhaps even inviting them to discuss it. Each researcher and each research project will likely require a different approach.

3. Scholars must also confront that risk of doing this kind of research will disproportionately affect marginalized and vulnerable populations (undergraduate and graduate students, people of color, adjuncts and non-tenured individuals, members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and asexual [LGBTQA] community, women, etc.). Therefore, it is important that those of us with privilege to offer public and private support of those in these positions who may be targeted. Similarly, mentoring practices with students need to be reassessed in light of these risks. This might mean being more direct about the potential downsides of particular research projects, even when students are enthusiastic and prepared to undertake them. Now is not the time to send a team of undergraduates off to do interviews with members of /r/The_Donald (the Donald Trump Reddit community) or 4chan's /pol (politically incorrect) board without close supervision and a serious assessment of the risks they will face.

4. Because of these risks, researchers need to foster an ongoing conversation about how departments, institutions, and professional associations support research in this area. While there are a number of excellent guides from organizations like Feminist Frequency (2016) and FemTechNet (2017) detailing how one can protect oneself from online harassment, these do not specifically address the unique threats the "alt-right" poses to researchers. However, Data & Society recently published an excellent guide for researchers that discusses some concrete steps researchers can take to protect themselves when conducting risky research (Marwick, Blackwell, & Lo, 2016). While these resources are important starting points, most scholars remain uncertain as to what departmental and institutional support they might have if faced with a targeted harassment campaign. And, while fostering dialogues with individual department heads and deans about these issues is important, working across institutions to develop a set of best practices to ensure researcher safety is also necessary.

5. Social media researchers might also play an important advocacy role. The "alt-right" is uniquely dependent on the sociotechnical affordances of social media platforms both as a channel of coordination and as a tool of harassment (Massanari, 2015). Therefore, those researchers who are comfortable doing so might consider engaging with technologists, legislative bodies, and law enforcement to help them better understand these threat these communities present—and how social media is the primary means by which they organize and harass. Social media scholars are uniquely positioned to understand and explain the nuances of what it means to be visible online, as well as the ethical ramifications of these complex issues. Similarly, they can explain how underlying design and governance choices can unintentionally support toxicity and lead to a normalization of far-right discourse on technology platforms. This is both the most concrete and critically important aspect of the work researchers can do. It is also ambitious as the political-economic realities of platforms mean owners will view these changes as alienating a very small, but very loud portion of their user base. In addition, all researchers would be well-served supporting efforts that address how the public services that are often used to dox targets infringe individual privacy. In the United States, for example, it is difficult to manage the opt-out process of people-finding sites like Intelius and Pipl. These data brokers make it an onerous task, often involving the disclosure of more personal information (a driver's license, date of birth, current address, email address, etc.) to have private information removed from the Internet. And this does not address the potential for others (family members, close friends, and associates) to be ensnared in a harassment campaign.

Moving Forward

Ultimately, the far-right forces us to think more carefully about how we are public online. For researchers working in

the area of new media studies, this is particularly challenging. Most of us are repeatedly encouraged by our supervisors and universities to promote our research on professional networks like Academia.edu, ResearchGate, SSRN (Social Science Research Network), and so on and engage in acts of public scholarship by writing opinion pieces, blogging, tweeting, and giving talks. This is compounded by the reality that we are studying the Internet, and, therefore, have even more reason to be visible online. Many researchers are expected to be academic microcelebrities—speaking, writing, and existing as semi-public figures (Marwick, 2013). But as Tressie McMillan Cottom (2015) argues, we have yet to fully account for the ways in which these pressures are dependent on social location. Being an academic microcelebrity as a Black woman without tenure is much different than being one as a tenured White man. As she argues, "Individuals experience microcelebrity and attention differently relative to the status groups in which they are embedded. With greater publics and attention, one's social location becomes more salient to the risks and returns to attention" (McMillan Cottom, 2015). And, our social location extends to the kind of research we do; those working from qualitative epistemological perspectives are already well aware of the ways our work is portrayed as "soft" or unscientific by the media and politicians (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This is even more noticeable as far-right groups gain political power and continue to portray their beliefs as mainstream.

Unfortunately, it is likely that few of us will find much guidance from our Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), Ethical Review Boards (ERBs), or university committees about how we should approach dealing with the far-right. While organizations like the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) and the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR) have produced useful ethics guidelines for professional and research practice (ACM, 2017; Markham & Buchanan, 2012), these do not fully address the complexities of work with/around far-right communities. This is especially true considering the increased researcher risk and realities of researcher visibility in light of the "alt-right" gaze.

The most challenging issue facing scholars in this moment is whether or not they should engage with the far-right on their terms. Returning to the Professor Watchlist example I offered in the introduction, the approach some academics took in the face of this list (submitting fake names for their inclusion) mirrors the same tactics used by "alt-right" communities. For example, in 2012, Occidental College created an online form where students could anonymously provide information about sexual assaults they had witnessed or experienced. The form was overwhelmed with over 400 false reports submitted by individuals associated with Reddit's men's rights communities (in an effort to suggest that false rape reports are rampant, despite evidence to the contrary), effectively making it useless (Marcotte, 2013).

While submitting fake names to professorwatchlist.org made the site unusable and also provided some sense of solidarity for those who were targeted, it enabled one group to control terms of the debate. As Whitney Phillips (2015) astutely argues, "feminist trolling," while potentially vindicating in some respects, still relies on logics that support (White) male domination. Like her, I feel some trepidation suggesting that academics embrace the tactics the "alt-right" uses—even if effective in the short term. While it inverts power asymmetry being used against us, it also problematically reproduces it. And it does not tackle the myriad social and cultural issues that provide fertile ground for the ideology these groups share to take hold. That being said, simply allowing those who are spotlighted by the "alt-right" gaze to individually suffer without support from their colleagues is neither ethical nor viable. Prior history would suggest that by doing nothing, the far-right will feel ever more emboldened to harass and intimidate. However, just what it means to "support" someone at these moments remains contextually dependent.

Researchers need a revised set of ethical and theoretical frameworks to contend with far-right extremism. Social media researchers, in particular, are uniquely qualified to contribute to this conversation. However, it is important that we mitigate researcher risk given the reality that academics will continue to be intimidated, harassed, and silenced. At the same time, it is also critical that we interrogate expectations of academic visibility and microcelebrity given the realities of the "alt-right" gaze.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. Many of the examples in this essay are US-based, but are certainly only a small subset of similar events happening worldwide.
2. The use of the phrase "alt-right" is problematic, as it works to normalize and legitimize their fascist, racist, xenophobic, and sexist beliefs. For the purposes of this article, I use the term in quotation marks to remind the reader that although this is how these groups have branded themselves, it is an inaccurate moniker. Alternatively, I use the term "far-right" (without quotation marks) to refer to these assorted communities. By using a collective term, however, I am not suggesting that these groups are monolithic or even in agreement with one another. However, the tactics and vernacular they employ are similar and often borrowed from subcultural trolling communities (Phillips, 2015). Research also suggests a significant overlap between, for example, men's rights activists, #Gamergate

activists, and Trump supporters on platforms like Reddit (Martin, 2017). Therefore, a collective term is warranted at times, especially when discussing the ways in which these groups have mobilized around moments like #Gamergate and on particular platforms such as Reddit, 4chan, and Facebook.

3.   The default avatar on Twitter is a cartoon egg. New accounts created quickly to harass or provoke others often feature the egg avatar (as the user has not bothered to upload another one) or an anime character, which rose to prominence during #Gamergate, possibly because of its visual connection to the group's mascot, Vivian James, and the community's ties to geek culture (Butt & Apperley, 2016; Read, 2015).

4.   Pick-up artists (PUAs) are part of the seduction community, men who use "scientific" sexual strategies such as "negging" to attract women (Strauss, 2005). The Red Pill is a Reddit community that practices an even more extreme and misogynistic version of pick-up artistry, espousing "rejection is not rejection" (Tait, 2017).

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