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The Ugliness of Trolls: Comparing the Strategies/Methods of the Alt-Right and the Ku Klux Klan

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Abstract

The alt-right claims that while the Ku Klux Klan's methods were ad hoc, its own positions are not. This allows them to accept the philosophy of white nationalism while rejecting comparisons with prior white nationalist organizations. I challenge this by comparing the methods of alt-right trolls and the KKK. A comparison of the methods of alt-right trolls and the KKK shows that each uses threats to police behavior, encourages comradery around ethnic heritage, and manipulates politics to exclude voices from public deliberation. Differences between alt-right trolls and the KKK originate in the technologies they use, not out of a concern for responsible advocacy.

Keywords

Alt-right; Trolls, Ku Klux Klan; race; gender; technology; internet; politics

Introduction

The internet allows both anonymity and groupthink mentality. Studies show that people feel more comfortable making vicious attacks if they never have to pay a penalty for what they say or see the effects of their actions (Awan and Zempi, 2017; Daniels, 2009a). In the 2016 election season, the spread of false news, the number of personal attacks, and the proliferation of hate speech online reached new highs (Anti-Defamation League, 2016a; Anti-Defamation League, 2016b; Piggott, 2016a; and Piggott, 2016b). Much of this hate speech was associated with the new 'alt-right' movement, which targets certain groups (like racial minorities and adherents of non-Christian religions) and ideologies (like feminism, diversity, and international cooperation) that the alt-right identifies as being un-American and dangerous (Guynn, 2016 and Romano, 2016). The term 'alt-right' was coined by Richard Spencer (Wallace-Wells, 2016) in 2008 as a way of distinguishing a brand of conservative thinking from the conventional right-wing views that encourage free markets, globalization, immigration reform, and pro-war policies (Spencer, 2008). Since then, the term has developed to incorporate a series of heterogeneous perspectives, policy positions, and ideologies. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC)'s description of alt-right ideologies references:

a break with establishment conservatism that favors experimentation with the ideas of the French New Right; libertarian thought as exemplified by former U.S. Rep. Ron Paul (R-Texas); anarcho-capitalism, which advocates individual sovereignty and open markets in place of an organized state; [and] Catholic traditionalism, which seeks a return to Roman Catholicism before the liberalizing reforms of the Second Vatican Council... (SPLC, 'Alternative Right')

Many articles point out how the ideas of the alt-right are repetitions of the old racisms and sexism that have plagued our society for generations (West, 2016; Willis, 2016; Allen, 2016; Drum, 2016). According to these articles, the alt-right is motivated by the same vision of society that motivated organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, the Nazi Party, and the Confederate States of America. Similarly, the articles say the alt-right, a movement composed almost entirely by Whites and largely by males (Kitchener, 2017), claims that women are inherently inferior and men are necessarily dominant. Often these pieces try to prevent the rebranding of racist and sexist thought under the guise of a new political group. They claim the alt-right is actually putting forth a dangerous ideology that, if carried to its logical end, will produce a highly segregated and discriminatory society along ethnic, racial, and gender lines. This belief leads the authors to the conclusion that the alt-right must be confronted more forcefully in the future.

Although the alt-right sometimes separates itself from racist organizations of the past, at other times it readily embraces them (possibly the most notorious example of this so far is alt-right organizer Richard Spencer's 'Hail Trump' chant, accompanied by Nazi salutes [Lombroso & Appelbaum, 2016]). Many participants in the alt-right movement acknowledge their ideas are related to those of sexist and racist organizations, but they argue that their movement is distinguished by its approach. They claim that unlike the Nazi party and Ku

Klux Klan, alt-right advocacy is measured and responsible (Barge, 2015; Londen, 2014), and that the alt-right is engaging in the democratic process by advocating for its beliefs respectfully while forcefully confronting those with whom it disagrees. This is the argument put forth by a number of avowed followers of the alt-right, including Daniel Barge, who says that the problem with the KKK was not its ideology, but that its solution was ad hoc and the result of not repatriating the emancipated black slaves after the Civil War (Barge, 2015). Similarly, John Londen says that it is the *nazification* of nationalism – ‘a larger, generic idea that has empirical validity for all peoples’ – that is dangerous because it allows a ‘moderate’ and ‘natural’ idea to be seen as extremist. The symbols, figures, and experiences of Hitlerian National Socialism were ‘a result of the specific circumstances in Germany and Europe at that time.’ The alt-right, existing in the twenty-first century must ‘confront the problems facing White people in the 21st century’ (Londen, 2014).

It is not enough to connect the ideology of the alt-right to racism or sexism, because those in the alt-right admit to the similarity but argue that their methodology is different. They claim that their movement is condemned for doing what it is supposed to do in a democratic society. We must challenge this assertion. A deeper analysis shows that while some advocates of alt-right ideas are respectful and responsible, large segments of the alt-right movement operate exactly as previous racist organizations operated.

First, I will clarify some poorly defined and ambiguous terms. Second, I will explore the methodology of the Ku Klux Klan to illustrate how it carried out acts of racism. Third, I will discuss the methods used by people who engage in hate speech online, focusing on those who disseminate alt-right ideology. Finally, I will compare the two methods and show that the differences between the KKK and the alt-right arise from the technologies and social forces that they had access to. I will also point out numerous similarities to illustrate that the contemporary dissemination of hate speech online bears a striking resemblance to the dissemination of hate speech in the past and represents a clear threat to the social health of our society.

Terminology

Alt-right essayist Brett Stevens explains that the alt-right movement is based on four centrally held tenets:

- Nationalism—promoting ‘the historical definition of related groups of people indigenous to a land,’ a concept that includes ‘culture, values, morality, religion, [and] heritage’,
- Decentralization—opposing both ‘centralization and the replacement of natural developments with human intentions,’ or trying to enforce common interests through government,
- Traditionalism—preserving ‘what achieved the best results in the past’ on the belief that some truths are unchanging, and
- Natural Law—organizing people around what’s natural, and then asking ‘how you can educate/brainwash them (same difference), force them to comply with laws and incentives, and otherwise control people’ (Stevens, 2016)

Stevens' focus on national identity, coupled with a competitive vision of nature, is hostile to egalitarianism and diversity. Although Stevens ignores it, the composition of the alt-right as a largely white male movement has produced an ideology that is white nationalist and patriarchal, or, as the SPLC puts it, 'a loose set of far-right ideals centered on "white identity" and the preservation of "Western civilization"' (SPLC, 'Alternative Right'; Romano, 2016). For the purposes of this paper, I will use the term alt-right to refer to this broad description put forth by Stevens and the SPLC.

The term trolling, has a remarkably loose meaning. The Oxford English Dictionary defines trolling as 'To post a deliberately erroneous or antagonistic message on a newsgroup or similar forum with the intention of eliciting a hostile or corrective response' (*troll*, v.). Some acts of trolling are relatively innocuous, such as providing a link to a site that redirects someone to another site they did not want to visit. Such acts are mischievous, but rarely cause any long-term negative outcomes. Trolling also consists of hate speech, such as using racial slurs or posting sexist images, creating anger and antagonism. Trolling is spread on many online forums, such as emails, comment threads, posted videos, or statements on social media. Trolling is always done to elicit an unfriendly reaction, and the venue for it is always the internet. In this paper, I will focus on trolling to disseminate hate speech online (hate speech being 'speech that offends, threatens, or insults groups, based on race, color, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, or other traits' [*Debating the 'Mighty Constitutional Opposites': Debating Hate Speech*]).

Methods of the Ku Klux Klan

I want to review how I will discuss the Ku Klux Klan, as the organization's various iterations have operated differently in different time periods. While I am mostly focused on aspects of KKK methodology that have stayed the same over time, there will be points where I will want to describe how tactics changed. For the sake of simplicity and concision, rather than to incorporate the entire history of the KKK into this paper, I will focus on the three eras when the KKK was most popular. These are the eras William Katz, emphasizes in his book *Invisible Empire: The Ku Klux Klan Impact on History* (1986): the Reconstruction Era (approximately 1863-1877), the late 1910s and 1920s, and the time of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s (which I will respectively refer to at times as era 1, era 2, and era 3). My comparison in the next section will examine the alt-right's similarities to the KKK in these eras rather than the KKK as it exists presently.

The Ku Klux Klan started as a social club sometime between December 1865 to August 1866 to provide members with fun and adventure. Several former Confederate soldiers felt that the club should provide a sense of mystery and intrigue, and so rather than call it 'The Merry Six' or 'Pulaski Social Club' (two suggested names), chose a name derived from the Greek word for 'circle of friends,' *kuklos*. For the same reason, they decided to hide their identities, names, and voices through disguises, nicknames, and using children's whistles for communication (Katz, 1986, pp. 7-8). The club gained popularity and spread. As it did, a new goal emerged in response to the situation in the South. In the Reconstruction era, many in the club felt it was unjust for schools to educate black children. A den in Athens, AL seized a

black student who had 'been too friendly with his teacher' and threw him into an icy river (Katz, 1986, p. 9). While doubtless it was not viewed as such by the student, this act was considered at the time to be a minor prank and not the work of a dangerous organization. The Klanwatch Project staff of the SPLC write that

Much of the Klan's early reputation may have been based on almost frivolous mischief and tomfoolery. At first, a favorite Klan tactic had been for a white-sheeted Klansman wearing a ghoulish mask to ride up to a black family's home at night and demand water. When the well bucket was offered, the Klansman would gulp it down and demand more, having actually poured the water through a rubber tube that flowed into a leather bottle concealed beneath his robe. After draining several buckets, the rider would exclaim that he had not had a drink since he died on the battlefield at Shiloh. He then galloped into the night, leaving the impression that ghosts of confederate dead were riding the countryside (Klanwatch Project Staff, 2011, p. 10).

Over time this so-called mischievous social club became politicized by the events of Reconstruction, in particular the fighting between President Johnson and the congressional Republicans over policy towards the South. While Johnson sought areas of compromise with the old leaders of the Confederacy, the Republicans in Congress pushed for stronger measures to penalize members of the Confederacy and enfranchise former slaves (Katz, 1986, 21). As time went on, the Republicans gained the upper hand and passed laws creating a new socio-political order in the South, including increased rights for women and blacks, a higher tax burden on the wealthy, integrated schools and workplaces, and the enfranchisement of the poor (Katz, 1986, p. 24). In response, the KKK's identity changed from an adventurous social club to a band of militants dedicated to protecting the South, and members started arming themselves (Katz, 1986, p. 27). Dens were mostly decentralized, with bands operating independently yet unified by purpose. A loose hierarchy organized and administered overarching codes and goals. Because they were carrying out illegal actions such as attacking others, making death threats, and damaging property, the group purposefully avoided putting any notes on paper (Katz, 1986, pp. 25-27). Groups of men carried out attacks, making sure they outnumbered their targets and using, 'death threats, random violence, and finally systematic torture and murders to instill fear and shock...' (Katz, 1986, p. 27).

In this way, the KKK methodology took shape. To police behavior, the KKK planned actions to intimidate and cause harm. For participants, the KKK encouraged comradeship and a unified identity focused on ethnic and cultural heritage. Within society, the KKK influenced politics by excluding 'undesirable' people and ideas from public deliberation.

Violent action is the best known of the KKK's tactics of intimidation, but this was not the only form it took. During Reconstruction, intimidation strategies included threats posted in local newspapers; in-person warnings given to black and white Republicans considered foreigners; masked gunmen walking the streets of town; and setting fire to barns, homes, town halls, and other spaces (Katz, 1986, 31). Many of these tactics persisted throughout the

other eras of the KKK of concern in this paper (Katz, 1986, pp. 90-92, p. 135). Additionally, blacks were the main, but not the only, target of aggression. The KKK's plan to promote Southern identity meant targeting all groups that did not fit. After Reconstruction this meant targeting northern 'carpet baggers' and other Republicans who were there to encourage the new order.

During the second era of the KKK, a significant effort went towards opposing new immigrants. With Presidents at the time voicing disdain about mixing races and cultures, the KKK began to target Catholics as well as blacks and northerners. In addition, adulterers, teenagers who disobeyed their parents, and people who did not attend Church were regularly targeted (Katz, 1986, pp. 90-91).

Finally, during the Civil Rights movement, targeting groups that 'did not fit' meant targeting journalists who reported on KKK activities as well as whites who supported the struggle of Southern blacks. Jews and Communists were also pursued (Katz, 1986, 136). Undercover FBI informant Gary Rowe Jr. reported several such events. Once, when the KKK gathered to confront the Freedom Riders coming into town, it was not just the blacks, or even just the white sympathizers, who were attacked. Rather, 'everybody who got off the bus was clubbed, kicked or beaten. There was fighting everywhere; blood spattered in the streets...The mob surrounded a photographer who came up to take a picture and beat him to his knees' (Rowe, 1976, p. 43). Of course, much of this intimidation and violence was done anonymously. In the early years of the KKK, the night rides were done fully costumed to disguise the identities of the riders and intimidate the victims (Parsons, 2005, p. 819). At public events, many KKK members wore white robes that covered their entire bodies and sometimes their faces. Some meeting places required people to appear without masks, but the KKK got around such laws by leasing land for short periods of time when they planned to hold a rally (Rowe, 1976, p. 20). KKK violence did not always involve wearing robes, especially during the Civil Rights Movement, but it was always conducted with members avoiding the use of each other's names and while using euphemisms for their actions (such as 'skinnin' heads' for fighting) (Rowe, 1976, p. 19-20).

Violence was clearly intended to control the behaviors of the population of the South and maintain the social order. One of the KKK's most brutal tactics, lynching, was widely used in the first two eras of the KKK, but not in the third. It is notable that lynching was often a social event. The lynch mob included both KKK members intent on killing but also 'respectable' women and men as well as children. Often, a core group would carry out the act (which could include shootings, stabbings, beatings, and hangings) in plain view of many citizens. Law enforcement rarely intervened, and in some cases even allowed the mob access to a victim who was already in jail waiting for trial. In many instances the body of a hanging victim was left displayed to the town for days (Lynching). Detailed knowledge of these acts was widespread, authorities who could have stopped the bloodshed were obstructed by the citizens who witnessed it because they refused to pass along any knowledge that would have allowed for those who committed the act to be punished. As Ida Wells-Barnett writes in *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*,

Men who stand high in the esteem of the public for Christian character, for moral and physical courage, for devotion to the principles of equal and exact justice to all, and for great sagacity, stand as cowards who fear to open their mouths before this great outrage. They do not see that by their tacit encouragement, their silent acquiescence, the black shadow of lawlessness in the form of lynch law is spreading its wings over the whole country (Wells, 1892).

The violence of the KKK was neither simply a private affair nor a matter of extremism. It was condoned and encouraged by the public.

The next tactic of the KKK was to encourage community along ethnic and cultural lines. In the first major era of the KKK members became part of a 'brotherhood' that had its own codes, secrets, and traditions. These benefits of membership attracted people to the KKK throughout its existence. Codes, secrets, traditions, and targets changed over time, but a member's sense of belonging was a constant part of the KKK's operating procedure. As William Katz says, '...Klansmen built on the US male's need to belong. A large amount of Klan success lies in its creation of a club where Protestants found fellowship with their "own kind"' (Katz, 1986, p. 86). Rowe's account gives a sense of how this worked, as he describes an elaborate initiation ritual complete with special dress, a room adorned with numerous Christian and American symbols, rituals akin to a religious ceremony, a set of ten questions which all initiates must be asked, and an oath of loyalty everyone had to take (Rowe, 1976, pp. 11-12). Among the questions asked were 'Do you believe in clannishness, and will you faithfully practice same towards Klansmen?' and 'Do you believe in and will you faithfully strive for the eternal maintenance of white supremacy?' (Rowe, 1976, p. 196). Yet it was not just the formal practices that encouraged community. Members regularly put their lives in other members' hands and trusted them with personal information. Rowe mentions how he would judiciously show his KKK membership card to police (Rowe, 1976, p. 12), presumably as a way of getting favors. Additionally, one of Rowe's most devoted advocates in the KKK worked tirelessly to keep him there, against the desires of other members, because of what Rowe and his advocate had been through together (Rowe, 1976, p. 28).

The KKK's third tactic was to manipulate politics by excluding certain people and ideas. Over time, the KKK became a force that politicians and political institutions could not ignore. Katz describes how, early on, the KKK directly intervened in the political process by intimidating blacks and white Republicans to keep them from voting. Some black families hid out in the woods for weeks before the election for their own safety (Katz, 1986, p. 32). During Election Day, armed KKK members patrolled the streets, moved election locations to places known only by Democrats, and seized ballot boxes to remove votes for Republican candidates (Katz, 1986, pp. 33-34). Eventually, the KKK became such an important political force that these direct interventions were less necessary and the KKK could wield power from a distance. Within several years of its formation, it became an 'invisible government that state officials could not control' in several counties (Klanwatch Project Staff, 2011, p. 14). In the second era of the KKK's existence it wielded power on a national level, holding numerous rallies and marches in Washington, DC, including one in 1925 that had 40,000 robed men and women walking down Pennsylvania Avenue (Katz, 1986, p. 103). The KKK

was so popular in the 1920s that few politicians from the South ventured to speak in opposition to its goals, including some who had denounced it not long before (Katz, 1986, 99). In Indiana, Grand Dragon David Stephenson knew the Governor, directly influenced many elections, participated in the crafting of important legislation, and famously declared 'I am the law in Indiana' (Katz, 1986, p. 101). Stephenson was so committed to carrying out the KKK's goals that he created his own private police force to intimidate other politicians, disenfranchise potential voters, and otherwise electioneer the vote. He almost ran for President, but was convicted of rape and murder (Abbott, 2012).

Although the national prominence of the KKK diminished by the time of the Civil Rights Movement, the tactic of influencing politics continued. Rowe's personal account of the KKK details numerous examples of the KKK's political influence in the 1960s. Rowe describes how the heads of the KKK purposefully avoided violence so as to 'create a respectable public image' and consistently voiced the claim that 'The KKK does not condone violence' (Rowe, 1976, pp. 6-7). Additionally, those seeking political office at times sought the KKK's endorsement (Rowe, 1976, p. 118), and White Citizen's councils applied legal and economic pressure on government to prevent integration at the same time as the KKK carried out its violent activities (Rowe, 1976, p. 132). Although the specifics changed across three eras, the idea of influencing politics was a constant.

The final point relevant to my discussion of the KKK is not a tactic, but a condition that allowed the KKK to successfully operate and upon which the KKK depended. This is the cooperative relationship between the KKK and regulatory agencies that might have otherwise held them in check, exemplified by the police allowing KKK-instigated mobs to operate or the KKK working to get sympathetic politicians into office. It is important that the KKK received help both from authorities who refused to interfere with its activities and from officials who actively helped them out. The support given by local police was the most notable, and occurred in all three eras of KKK activity. Early in the KKK's existence, the police protected the KKK, and would even feed information to the KKK about potential targets and actions. Katz says that this protection was more significant for the KKK than hoods because many KKK members were publicly known. As long as 'some lawmen listened to citizens who reported crimes, and routinely passed all information on to the local KKK', it was able to get away with many illegal activities (Katz, 1986, p. 34). Rowe confirms this in his account of the KKK during the Civil Rights movement. He rode with the police on a regular basis as part of a 'goodwill' effort on behalf of the KKK (Rowe, 1976, pp. 18-19), and saw up close how the police worked with and fed information to KKK members during the Freedom Rides and protests in Birmingham (Rowe, 1976, pp. 39 & 92). Other law enforcement agencies were limited in what they could do. For the first and second eras of the KKK's activities, the Army had too much territory to cover and conflicting orders. In addition, many Army officers were sympathetic to KKK activities (Katz, 1986, p. 34). During the Civil Rights movement, the FBI's jurisdiction prevented interference with day to day police activities. Even given the will to do so, FBI agents could not have intervened to stop KKK attacks on protestors in Montgomery, Birmingham, and other places (Katz, 1986, pp. 132-133).

The media often supported the KKK, particularly in the first and second eras when multiple newspapers published stories glorifying KKK activities. In the Reconstruction era, newspapers that were critical of the KKK were even attacked (Katz, 1986, p. 35). In the 1920s and 1930s, a fledgling advertising industry made it possible for the KKK to use new advertising techniques to get friendly copy. One KKK official at the time said ‘We have been given fifty million dollars’ worth of free advertising by the newspapers’ (Katz, 1986, p. 81). While glorifying coverage lessened during the Civil Rights era, and more newspapers covered KKK atrocities, the KKK still had a neutral relationship with numerous members the press.

The KKK’s tactics were not restricted to violence. The KKK had a much more complex relationship with society that enabled the organization to tailor its message and behavior to specific audiences using contemporary methods. We now turn to the similarities and differences we will see with alt-right trolls when we apply this framework.

Methods of Trolls

A potential objection to my analysis is confirmation bias, a fair concern given the difficulty of analyzing trolling in a systematic way. I address this worry by referring to studies of trolling behavior to show that the descriptions in this paper are representative of larger trends within the online community. Additionally, I will now illustrate that the framework of the KKK’s methodology is explicitly advocated by the alt-right, and that this means well-known philosophical methods make comparison feasible.

First, the alt-right lauds, as matters of self-defense and justifiable retribution, actions that intimidate opponents. James Lawrence, a contributing editor to one of the alt-right’s most popular blogs, says the alt-right ‘should...make the most of the internet’s formidable power to terrorise the Left and the false Right...’ (Lawrence, 2016). This ‘transgressive trolling’ is valuable for its ‘shock and awe’ effect that throws adversaries off balance, preventing them from doing other work since they are so busy ‘[putting] out fires.’ Another writer praises trolling’s ‘simplicity, repetitiveness, purity spirals, puerility, anonymity ... [and] virality (shock value)’ as a ‘gateway drug’ for the alt-right’s more serious ideas (Liddell, 2016).

The idea of trolling as a gateway drug illustrates the second strategy of comradery. Trolling is a simpler version of the ‘hard stuff’ the alt-right wants to addict people to, in this case, whiteness or Western values. Greg Johnson, editor-in-chief of the self-identified alt-right publisher Counter-Currents Publishing Ltd., says as much in an article contrasting those focused on White Nationalism with those interested in Western values (what he calls the ‘Alt-Light’). White nationalists should see the ‘Alt-Light’ as an ‘opportunity, not a threat,’ as ‘Our movement can only grow by converting people who do not already agree with us. That requires that we talk to people who do not already agree with us’ (Johnson, 2017). Using the internet is an important part of this strategy, as ‘[the Alt-light] was created by conservative clickbait websites like Breitbart’ (Wallace, 2016) and is able to spread rapidly when it employs social media (Wallace, 2010).

Finally, the alt-right makes clear that one of their larger goals is developing a politics of exclusion. Colin Liddell, Chief Editor of the blog *Alternative Right*, writes that social media has helped ‘extreme and aberrant’ ideas like ‘gay marriage’ to become popular (Liddell, 2014). Now ‘lazy, frustrated, self-centered loners and losers, largely cut loose from real society’ can bypass ‘ordinary people’ who ‘tend to be more conservative.’ Liddell links to an article that claims, ‘If everyone is spinning everything shamelessly and sensationally, people can just pick the spin they like the best ...’ since objectivity was ‘always more of a charming fiction than a reality’ (Donovan, 2014). Taken together, these articles argue that the alt-right’s views are normal, that any indication otherwise is the result of media bias, and that the best strategy is to advocate shamelessly for what one wants since factual accuracy is a fantasy. Excluding alternative views from politics is justified since such views are just propaganda produced by ‘freaks’ and the media. The three-part strategy used by the KKK of intimidation, comradery, and manipulating politics is advocated by people throughout the alt-right.

Although the KKK is an organization and the alt-right is a movement, we can still draw parallels. The KKK was supported by a movement (white nationalism), and the alt-right is promoted by organizations (Breitbart News and Richard Spencer’s National Policy Institute, just to name two). The phenomenon of the KKK cannot be separated from the white nationalist movement, nor the alt-right from its organizations. My analysis examines the set of practices and relationships that accompany each. There is a clear connection to the genealogical method described by Foucault, who says power operates through many ‘instrumental modes,’ for example ‘threat of arms, by the effects of speech, through economic disparities, by more or less complex means of control, by systems of surveillance, with or without archives, by rules, explicit or not, fixed or modifiable, with or without the material means of enforcement’ (Foucault, 2001, 344). Some of these instrumental modes are performed by organizations, and others are social practices. My comparison describes a type of power that operates with different ‘instrumental modes’ when applied to the KKK versus the alt-right, but nevertheless uses the same overarching methods.

As a final note before beginning my analysis, the logical form of my argument is inductive analogy, as it describes the methods of the KKK, then the methods of the alt-right, before concluding that the two groups are similar in that they use the same methods. The commonly accepted criteria for a good argument by inductive analogy is that (1) the similarities between the analogues should be relevant, (2) there should be a good number of similarities, (3) the dissimilarities should be few or irrelevant, (4) one should survey a healthy number of primary analogues, (5) there should be diversity among the primary analogues, (6) and the conclusion should be as specific as the evidence warrants (Hurley, 2010, pp. 510-511). All these criteria are satisfied by my argument. The methods each group uses are relevant to my claim that they use the same methods (#1), and my conclusion is quite specific inasmuch as I demonstrate they use many of the same tactics before concluding as much (#6). Similarly, I examine the KKK during all three eras in which it was strongest, citing studies that describe patterns among all the KKK’s groups (#4 and #5). The number of similarities found is also quite strong (#2), as I show that three of the KKK’s most commonly used tactics are also used by the alt-right. The criterion my argument is weakest on is #3, as there are

definite differences between the KKK and alt-right. The specific insults used, the places each group conduct their attacks, and the how the groups organize themselves are examples of their dissimilarities (though these same differences can be found in the KKK at different eras of its existence). I address this by making my conclusion more cautious. I do not claim that the KKK and the alt-right are the same; my conclusion is that they use many of the same methods. I believe that even though I do not thoroughly parse out all the differences, the evidence strongly supports this conclusion. The differences I have uncovered (e.g. the alt-right threatens people online, while the KKK did so in person) are irrelevant to my conclusion.

Trolling began on online bulletin board systems in the 1990s with the practice of flaming. Gizmodo journalist Ashley Feinberg says ‘The introduction of anonymity not only made users feel free from the repercussions that might otherwise give them pause, but it also dehumanized potential targets. In other words, the internet gave all our worst impulses just what they needed to thrive’ (Feinberg, 2014). Watching ‘flame wars’ on sites like Usenet gave birth to trolls who were entertained by igniting often pointless debate and disagreement. Those who enjoyed online arguments become known as ‘net.weenies,’ or ‘the kind of people who enjoy Insulting [sic] others, the kind of people who post nasty messages in a sewing newsgroup just for the hell of it’ (*Usenet: from Flame Wars to Killfiles*). The first recorded use of the term ‘trolling’ came in 1992, when someone wrote on the alt-folklore-urban board the statement ‘Maybe after I post it, we could go trolling some more and see what happens’ (Feinberg, 2014). The term first referred to minor pranks, such as speaking admiringly of the ‘para-homosexuality’ found in American fraternities in the hopes of upsetting many people (Brown, 2016). In time, individuals who engaged in trolling began to connect with each other on message boards, in particular the Usenet group alt-tasteless as well as 4chan’s /b/ board, and the character of trolling changed. Rather than simply posting statements to get a response, actions became more extreme. In 2011 a troll mocked the deaths of several UK youths and taunted their families, while other trolls bullied youth into suicide or made 911 calls to send a SWAT team to an unsuspecting person’s house (Brown, 2016). Trolls also changed their identities from people who do things ‘for the lolz’ to those who do things ‘for the lulz,’ the difference being that the former do things for laughter, and the latter for laughter at someone else’s expense.

As trolling developed, more collaboration became possible. 4chan’s /b/ message board, which allows for the posting of anything save that which is explicitly illegal (like child pornography), is responsible for numerous well-known acts of trolling carried out by many individuals at the same time. Examples include getting a swastika to appear on Google’s hot trends chart, hacking Sarah Palin’s email during her vice-presidential run, fabricating the death of Steve Jobs, and allegedly telling Justin Beiber fans to slit their own wrists to support the singer. Fernando Alfonso III says, ‘[4chan’s] influence is vastly understated in the media because 4chan is known as the place for misogyny, racism and pedophilia. Because of this dark side of the site, its influence often gets shrugged off by the mainstream media’ (Suber-Jenkins, 2016). While trolling has now spread across the internet, it began on sites that encouraged mischievous discriminatory behavior at others’ expense.

Trolling has expanded significantly since its beginnings, and as mentioned above, some examples of it are innocuous. The trolling done by the alt-right is anything but, and exemplifies the same methods of the Ku Klux Klan. To see these methods at work, I will examine each using examples drawn from news reports and studies. Both the alt-right and the KKK use threats and hateful language to create fear and influence people's behavior. Recently, alt-right trolls threatened members of government they felt were infringing their rights, just as the KKK threatened Republicans during Reconstruction. On November 19, 2013, Everest Wilhelmsen, a man associated with the Christian American Patriots Militia, wrote on Facebook that his group has the 'authority to shoot Obama, i.e., to kill him' (Morlin, 2013), while in November of 2014 another alt-right troll wrote a series of threats on Facebook, saying 'I think we all need to get our guns and shoot all of these out of control congressmen and senators and Obama!' He went on to call for their bodies to be hung in the street for a week, a clear reference to lynching (Morlin, 2015). Just like the KKK, these threats are phrased as a form of self-defense against elected leaders who have committed 'treason'. In these instances, the individuals' names are known; however, online hate speech is more often done in secret or by so many people that identifying those responsible is an impossible task. Reddit (a company that runs many online message boards and encourages sharing online content) CEO Steve Huffman experienced this when he tried to enforce the site's anti-harassment policies. When he attempted to increase monitoring of hateful speech and shut down a particularly nasty discussion board spreading conspiracy theories, he was attacked so viciously that he apologized and undid his actions (Williams, 2016). Many of the insults were sent directly to him, and are thus not publicly accessible, though in his apology Huffman implies they contained pornographic images. Two unrestricted examples of the messages Huffman received are 'That is a horrendous ethics violation for a CEO. Fire yourself' (*The Admins are suffering from low energy - have resorted to editing YOUR posts. Sad!*) and 'RESIGN YOU CUCK' (*The Admins are suffering from low energy - have resorted to editing YOUR posts. Sad!*) ('cuck' being short for 'cuckservative,' a derogatory term used by white supremacists to describe a fake conservative). In another example of untraceable hate speech, Chobani yogurt founder Hamdi Ulukaya received multiple racist messages and death threats when Brietbart News announced that he employed more than 300 refugees in his factory and was starting a foundation to help migrants (Gelles, 2016). As of this writing (September 2018), Ulukaya has not changed his policies, although that is the goal of those making threats and advocating a boycott (Peterson, 2016).

It is not just executives who receive anonymous threats, but non-white groups as well. One study shows how visible markers of a non-white identity, such as wearing a hijab, make one a ready target for direct threats, intimidation, insults, and derogatory comments (Awan and Zempi, 2017, pp. 370-1). The authors of this study describe how anonymity helps normalize this abuse by allowing trolls to escape detection, making them feel 'safe to express hate messages in the cyber world' (Awan and Zempi, 2017, p. 365). Studies such as Daniels (2009a) and Jakubowicz et al. (2017) document the parallels between online racism and the racism of the past, such as the use of hate speech (Daniels, 2009a, 36) for the purpose of 'offending, insulting, humiliating, intimidating and advocating the expulsion from the country of, or advocating violence against' someone (Jakubowicz et al., 2017, p. 179). Just

like the KKK, alt-right trolls threaten anyone who doesn't fit their White and Western identity.

These attacks are designed to intimidate for the purpose of policing behavior and are often executed anonymously, which again reveals a disturbing similarity with the KKK. And while it is true people of all races, genders, and ethnicities are attacked online, studies show that a disproportionate number of those attacks target women and minorities (Duggan, 2014). Research shows that there are more white supremacist hate websites on the internet than those supporting other races, and the exact number of those sites is difficult to calculate (Daniels, 2009a, p. 5). While the exact cause of the harassment is difficult to determine, some speculate that it stems from lack of diversity in Silicon Valley industries, which are only 27% female, 3.3% African-American, and 5.1% Hispanic (Houston, 2015). The result is that certain parts of the internet are 'marked' as hostile to anyone other than white males, and people may hesitate to make certain statements for fear of retribution.

To explore how alt-right trolls develop comradery along ethnic or cultural lines, we must examine how social media operates. Reddit's 'About' page mentions three actions that all users are encouraged to perform: Share, Vote, and Discuss. These mean, respectively, creating themed discussion boards where users can share 'content including stories, links, and images;' voting on which stories and comments they like best; and adding their own perspective to ongoing discussions (*Reddit*). People use Facebook 'to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what's going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them' (*Facebook-About*). In short, social media allows individuals to share and discuss matters of concern to them with the online community. Rather than encounter a plurality of viewpoints and individuals, studies show that the people tend to connect to others with similar political viewpoints (Duggan and Smith, 2016) and racial identity (Anderson and Hitlin, 2016). Using social media as a primary news source means that one will only see and discuss the views of those with similar outlooks and identities. For the alt-right community, this means encountering many views stating that Western identity is under attack. Alt-right radio host Alex Jones, who maintains the site Infowars, is noted for claiming that a 'new world order' is responsible for the tragic shootings in Sandy Hook and Orlando (Hananoki, 2016) and argues that a 'civil war is coming'. The latter was said after Infowars contributor Jerad Miller went on a shooting rampage while parroting talking points from Jones's show. Jones claims he is being set up, even though Miller's Facebook page displays numerous positive references to Jones's site alongside the statement 'get informed or get stupid' (Neiwert, 2014). Only seeing views that present the West as under attack creates a community that is hostile to alternative perspectives.

Trolls on Twitter illustrated this sense of comradery recently when they harassed a 7-year-old girl from Aleppo who was documenting the deteriorating situation in Syria. Rather than ask for evidence that this girl was who she said, she was reflexively attacked for being a 'terrorist' and putting forth 'propaganda bullshit' (Corbett, 2016). Social technology disseminates falsehoods rapidly and also contributes to a feeling of comradery among the believers. The widely discredited claim that the first slaves were Irish, not black, spread rapidly through social media sites like Facebook and Twitter (Amend, 2016). The alt-right's

claim that we are in an ethnic war, and its development of images, rhetoric, and slang which promote that contention, bear eerie similarities to the KKK. The same message sent by the KKK oath ('Do you believe in and will you faithfully strive for the eternal maintenance of white supremacy') is contained in the common alt-right slogan: 'Why the hell do I have to press 1 for English? Did America move?,' (*Phone frustration*).

This tactic of alt-right trolls fit into an epistemology commonly used online by white-supremacists. The lack of expert gatekeepers combined with search tools that are easy to exploit make it simpler for white supremacists to claim that they speak the truth. Jessie Daniels (2009b) discusses this in the context of 'cloaked websites' that pretend to give unbiased knowledge while actually providing propaganda to support a political agenda. Daniels says that 'the fact that cyber-racists have laid claim to 'truth' via the internet challenges the basis for any assertion about racial equality, because it calls into question what constitutes the 'truth' that we say we know about 'race', racism and racial inequality' (2009b, p. 674). Daniels concludes that 'the cloaked websites examined here are a small piece of a broader social landscape in which propaganda, advertising, politics and cyber-racism are converging in new ways that make it increasingly difficult to parse facts from political spoofs and marketing ploys' (2009b, p. 676). Daniels's analysis does not just apply to cloaked websites, but to the way alt-right trolls disseminate information on social media. Reddit, 4chan, and other sites used by alt-right trolls claim to speak the truth and manipulate online tools to support their assertions. They encourage dialogue within the group to build a collective identity. And because they make finding other evidence so difficult, challenges to one's epistemology become easier to ignore than to check via the arduous work of critical thinking. The alt-right's epistemology actively encourages comradery as a way to preserve their 'truth'. This jury-rigging of online media to support one's aims bears a clear resemblance to the KKK's use of newspapers to get out their message (though there are several differences between the ways the media are used, some of which Daniels covers in her book).

Alt-right trolls manipulate politics to exclude people and ideas, starting with the domain where they spend most of their time, the internet. While alt-right trolls have at times affected national governance, most of their energy is devoted to the online body politic. They are known to engineer behind-the-scenes the stories, images, and ideas that are 'trending,' and thus are highlighted on influential platforms like Google, Facebook, and Twitter. These manipulations push forward hateful symbols and ideas, preventing other stories from getting attention. In 2008, the site 4chan was probably responsible for putting the image of a swastika to the top of Google's 'Hot Trends' page. I say 'probably' because records are not available to confirm with certainty who was behind it, although investigators say it is the most plausible scenario (Sarno, 2018). Similarly, the Microsoft chat-bot Tay, an artificial intelligence programmed to interact and learn from Twitter users, 'learned' in less than a day to spout conspiracy theories, speak admirably of Hitler, and compare President Obama to a monkey (Hunt, 2016). Though definitive evidence is again impossible to find, the fact that Tay worked well in tests led investigators to conclude that a 'coordinated attack by a subset of people exploited a vulnerability in Tay' (Lee, 2016), while several Twitter accounts took

credit for having ‘taught Tay to be really racist’ (Hunt, 2016). Trending social media content like this is reminiscent of the anonymous KKK official who boasted about free newspaper advertisement.

One outcome of such trolling is an aura of fear that damages health both online and off. Awan and Zempi document how anti-Muslim hate online produces ‘isolation, depression, loneliness and a sense of rejection from wider society’ (2017, p. 374) as well as a feeling that one must always keep one’s guard up. These effects spill into the physical world, where online racism hurts the possibility of Muslims finding jobs, feeling comfortable doing everyday tasks like walking down a street, displaying their identity openly, and even leaving the house (p. 375). As Arwan and Zempit summarize, ‘Whether in cyber or ‘real’ world, anti-Muslim hate crime creates ‘invisible’ boundaries, across which members of the Muslim community are not ‘welcome’ to step’ (p. 376). The effect of online hate on emotional wellbeing is further documented by Tynes, who shows a direct link between individual discrimination and depression or anxiety (2008, p. 568), and Jakubowicz et al., who show that ‘microaggressions’ (a broad term that includes acts of trolling) can be more damaging than blatant racism and have a significant impact on one’s well-being (2017, p. 211). Given that 63% of adolescents and teenagers experience racism online (Tynes, 2008, p. 568), this harm pervades society. Just as the KKK’s election day actions led black families to fear for their lives, the actions of alt-right trolls create anxiety and depression in those who they target.

Trolls can influence how people involve themselves in US politics. One notable example is how shooter Dylann Roof was radicalized by reading blog posts on the Council of Conservative Citizens site (Cohen, 2015), which publishes user-submitted news stories with little to no verification. Daniels writes an insightful account of how radicalization works, saying that white-supremacist sites have both passive and active users (the latter add content to the site, the former do not). The participation of both passive and active users can vary from just visiting the site out of curiosity to supporting it with money and good reviews (2009a, pp. 50-51). Through their attempts at creating comradeship and an exclusive politics, white supremacist sites change passive members into active ones, or casual visitors into loyal ones. By using ignorance about racial issues to make their radical position sound normal, they get people to join their cause. In one case from the website Stormfront, a user named *kojac67* described the racist views of John Adams as logical before concluding ‘Who are we to know better?’ Daniels says ‘Here *kojac67* uses moderate-sounding rhetoric and an appeal to the nation’s founding ideals to make a point that runs counter to democratic ideals of equality for all. In this way *kojac67* shifts white supremacist rhetoric away from extremist expressions and places it within the more mundane, everyday expressions of white identity’ (Daniels, 2009a, p. 53). While Roof’s radicalization is perhaps the most notorious example of how trolls are affecting politics, it is not the only one. In 2014, a movement to overthrow elected leaders was organized on social media sites like Facebook and Tea Party Nation (Gettys, 2014). Actions like these, which attempt to exclude those they deemed opposed to American values (Chabba, 2016; Amsel, 2014; and *OAS Submission To Congress [Demands/Grievances, Articles of Impeachment]*), are reminiscent of the KKK’s continual

efforts to bring Whites to their side while driving others away. From taking down a major Microsoft project to shaping national news, it is clear trolls affect politics online (Rauch, 2013 and Bartlett, 2014).

Finally, just as the KKK had a collegial relationship with government for most of its existence, trolls have not often been confronted by the administrators of social media. Until recently, Facebook had unclear community guidelines, did not hire enough people to monitor all accusations of hate speech, and claimed that hate-speech laws do not apply to them (Ingram, 2016; Shahani, 2016). Twitter also dragged its feet when responding to accusations of hate speech (Jeong, 2016). Only recently have both sites taken actions to address the proliferation of hate speech trolling (Guynn, 2016; Oltermann, 2016). Reddit has yet to take any substantive steps, and has even allowed self-identified misogynist trolls to moderate its boards (Philips, 2012). Compounding the problem is that many government agencies refuse to take substantive actions. Numerous individuals in positions of authority either identify with the ideology being put forth or see no need to address hate speech online, and only a few governments (like that of Germany) are taking legal action (Rupar, 2016; Elias, 2013; Neiwert, 2014). Because of this, alt-right trolls are able to thrive.

Conclusion

The methods of the alt-right have significant similarities to those of the KKK, making the alt-right's claim that it only uses the ideas, and not the methods, of the KKK untenable. Beginning as mischievous groups interested in pranks, alt-right trolls and the KKK each grew into larger movements. Each mobilized hate-filled language, threatened people in what were supposedly safe spaces (homes or personal email/social media accounts) as well as in public, validated its own actions as a form of self-defense or justifiable retribution, used a decentralized organization where groups act independently of one another, developed elaborate and widely discredited theories which legitimated its vision of cultural superiority, created practices and images specific to them as a form of identification, and were able to rely upon the friendliness or indifference of the media as well as other authority figures.

There is an additional parallel between the Southerners who saw lynching as a form of entertainment and those today who view racist trolling as a side-show. Perhaps it is a small portion of the population who hack email accounts, send death threats, and perpetuate false stories about the 'oncoming civil war,' but society seems to have accepted their presence as minor troublemakers. Few politicians speak about trolling except in broad platitudes, and leaders in Silicon Valley dismiss the idea that trolling and false posts could affect national politics (Shontell, 2016).

The strategies of the alt-right are not less 'ad-hoc' and more conscientious than those of their forbearers. Nor are they tamer and more caring. They are the reinvestment of the same practices over the new medium of the internet. Rather than inscribe hate onto the bodies of African-Americans and women, alt-right trolls inscribe it onto the online personas of minorities and women. The example of actress Leslie Jones is illustrative here. For her role in an all-female reboot of the movie *Ghostbusters*, she was viciously attacked online to the point of quitting Twitter, posting 'I leave Twitter tonight with tears and a very sad heart. All this

[because] I did a movie' (Rogers, 2016). Similarly, Muslim woman Laila Alawa received online harassment after an article on a conservative website implied that she thought 9/11 was a positive thing (she said that 9/11 changed the world 'for good', i.e. permanently, not 'for the good'). While she has reported thousands of intimidating tweets to Twitter, less than a dozen have been removed. 'This has been really difficult,' she says, as she worries not only for her safety but for her ability to successfully run a business when online searches for her name display these falsehoods first (O'Brien, 2016). Such digital lynchings are not as physically harmful as stringing someone up at the nearest tree, but when a person's online persona is destroyed or controlled by others, they are not virtually alive. Black people are disproportionately marked by trolls as being un-American, terrorist, aberrant, and worse (Anderson and Hitlin, 2016). Similar attitudes are taken towards women, Muslims, and other disenfranchised groups. This is particularly harmful because it is impossible to delete or erase all the false information and because it takes place in a global forum that allows the actions of the alt-right to be broadcast worldwide.

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