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DIGITAL JOURNALISM AND THE FACILITATION OF HATE

Gregory P. Perreault

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Focus



Digital Journalism and the Facilitation of Hate

Digital Journalism and the Facilitation of Hate explores the process by which digital journalists manage the coverage of hate speech and “hate groups,” and considers how digital journalists can best avoid having their work used to lend legitimacy to hate.

Leaning on more than 200 interviews with digital journalists over the past three years, this book first lays the foundation by discussing the essential values held by digital journalists, including how they define journalism; what values they consider essential to the field; and how they practice their trade. Perreault considers the problem of defining “hate” and “hate groups” by the media, acknowledging journalism’s role in perpetuating hate through its continued ideological coverage of marginalized groups. Case studies, including the January 6 U.S. Capitol siege, the GamerGate controversy and the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, help to elaborate on this problem and illustrate potential solutions. *Digital Journalism and the Facilitation of Hate* draws attention to the tactics of white nationalists in leveraging digital journalism and suggests ways in which digital journalists can more effectively manage their reporting on hate.

Offering a valuable, empirical insight into the relationship between digital journalism and hate, this book will be of interest to students, scholars and professionals of social and digital media, sociology and journalism.

Gregory P. Perreault is Associate Professor of Digital Journalism at Appalachian State University, USA. His research extends to journalistic epistemology, hostility in journalism and digital labor.

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Series editor: Bob Franklin

Disruptions refers to the radical changes provoked by the affordances of digital technologies that occur at a pace and on a scale that disrupts settled understandings and traditional ways of creating value, interacting and communicating both socially and professionally. The consequences for digital journalism involve far-reaching changes to business models, professional practices, roles, ethics, products and even challenges to the accepted definitions and understandings of journalism. For Digital Journalism Studies, the field of academic inquiry that explores and examines digital journalism, disruption results in paradigmatic and tectonic shifts in scholarly concerns. It prompts reconsideration of research methods, theoretical analyses and responses (oppositional and consensual) to such changes, which have been described as being akin to “a moment of mind-blowing uncertainty.”

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Digital Journalism and the Facilitation of Hate

Gregory P. Perreault

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Acknowledgments

Books are not taken on lightly. This book is a passion project, stemming from a deep concern about the nature of hostility in the world and the ways in which digital journalism can inadvertently amplify this hostility. This has informed my own view of the world—that our world is best when we all have a chance to speak into it. The people who informed this view most were sadly those who found me absent more frequently in the writing of this text: my wife and children.

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Introduction

The Problem of Hate

Introduction

A recent US journalism school graduate woke to an unpleasant story assignment from her newsroom; she'd been assigned to cover a white nationalist summit. White supremacists gathered from around the USA in a small town in Tennessee—approximately 40 miles from Knoxville. Stormfront, a far-right neo-Nazi forum, sponsored the event. At the time, Stormfront boasted more than 300,000 members (Al Jazeera, 2017). When the reporter arrived at the event, she was confronted by complete chaos. On the one hand, there were the “Nazis who look like Nazis” as she described it—wearing Schutzstaffel patches on their clothes and tattoos of swastikas. But there were also the “Nazis in suits”—leaders of the event in sweater vests and sports coats more akin to a TED talk. Additionally, there were the police presence, media presence and counter-protesters. The police worked to protect space between the white supremacists and the counter-protesters. Perhaps unremarkably, such an event attracted significant attention from journalists.

As the journalist was assessing this particular situation and trying to determine the best approach to covering the event, her newsroom called and reminded her that she had not yet delivered her required daily Facebook Live. She needed to go live on Facebook, they reminded her, to meet her newsroom expectations. She went live on Facebook, and as she described it, the crowd maneuvered her toward the center of the summit. Once there, one of the summit's top organizers—Billy Roper—took over her Facebook Live. According to the journalist, the way he talked and the words he used seemed reasonable and rational at face value. It was only as she watched the comments popping up that she began to realize what he was saying: it was Holocaust denial.

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The journalist felt ashamed—she'd granted Billy Roper a platform for hate speech. Near the end of the day, in a smaller session, Roper pointed out her publication by name and offered his thanks for “finally giving my people a voice.”

In recounting this story, the journalist I spoke to expressed shame. She told me that “my Papa fought these people in World War II,” and she felt frustrated equally to see this same hate represented in small-town America and to be unable to cover it as well as she felt she could.

This is a situation that went wrong in a number of ways and should never have happened. This situation also illustrates perfectly the rationale for this book, which seeks to understand the ways in which journalism—and specifically digital journalism—has been complicit in facilitating hate groups and suggests ways, driven by the experiences of working journalists—to combat their influence. As a former journalist, I can say with confidence that very few journalists have actively promoted or encouraged hate groups. It is quite the opposite. Journalists are called to neutrality, clear-minded verification procedures and science-like precision.

Journalists are trained to report all sides of a story. I remember vividly even as a sports reporter confronting a story about a little league baseball team that had won the Little League Baseball World Series amidst a controversial coaching experience. I submitted a story to the *Palm Beach Post* detailing the story from the parents and coaches—not enough, I was told: I had only presented one side of this controversial coach story. This was little league sports. But I have to admit that when the editor told me, I was immediately receptive. I did need to make sure everyone could speak into this story.

This call to journalistic neutrality does not negate the fact that journalists are also activists for an open and inclusive public sphere. Indeed, the profession is built upon reliance on an open public sphere, and it is perhaps here that the most obvious chink in journalism's armor lies for white nationalists—they would argue that their voice is as important, or more so, than many of the other voices journalists include in the story. Even when buried, journalists' own commitment to an open and inclusive public sphere can lead them to lend coverage to such groups. But it is those very groups who would most like to see the public sphere closed.

Hence, it is quite natural that in conversation with journalists you would generally expect to find strong opposition to hate groups. So, when I propose in this book that journalists have been complicit in facilitating hate, this is by no means a reflection of the active

ideology, identity or practices of journalists. Journalists would hope their practice reflects the opposite.

Chignecto

It is in the dark—unreported or underreported—that marginalized groups can most often find themselves victims of hate. As I approach this topic, I think it's essential to share that my own family story, which has a large Indigenous presence, has a stake not just in the results of hate but in journalists reporting on it.

My family is Acadian: this French-speaking culture once had its own nation in the modern-day US northeast and Canadian Maritime provinces and continues to maintain a close relationship with the Indigenous peoples of Canada. When the French settlers arrived in the region, they had little power to offer. Yet, they found friendship, aid and compassion with the Mi'kmaq—a First Nation people of those provinces. *Chignecto* was particularly essential. *Chignecto* was a place of reciprocity among the First Nation for millennia, and the Acadians were welcomed to this place for trade, co-existence and intermarriage.

This peaceful exchange of culture, ideas and blood proved threatening during the Seven Years' War and led to the Great Deportation: when the British deported most Acadians from their land and killed many others. Some, such as my family, found safety and protection with the Mi'kmaq at that time. The affinity and partnership of the Acadian and the Mi'kmaq is a beautiful story that makes me proud of my background. And yet, that experience of oppression persists. In my family, our heritage is not often discussed, and if considered closely, one would see that my family made *whiteness* a goal to be achieved. To acknowledge the nature of hate in our world is to acknowledge natively troubling issues of power: who wields power (those who are white) and who is powerless.

Marginalization still exists in these communities today, often emerging amidst issues of language politics and Indigenous fishing rights in Canada. For example, in 2020, a lobster fisherman of the Sipekne'katik (the second largest Mi'kmaq band in Nova Scotia) found himself trapped in a lobster storage facility as a rally of 200 commercial fishermen threw rocks at him and hurled racial insults (McKinley & McKeen, 2020).

As a journalist, it doesn't strike me as surprising that the Mi'kmaq and other First Nation tribes receive little news coverage and yet are overrepresented as victims of hate crime (Wang & Moreau, 2020).

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I believe journalism plays an essential role in this story—journalism can call out injustice and can increase the scope of the *us* in a society. Too often, though, we in journalism can instead end up strengthening the power structures that exist and amplifying the marginalization of communities.

Hence, this is a topic that is important to me personally and motivates me to work toward a world more inclusive than my own or my ancestors have faced. So, consider this book, our *Chignecto*, the meeting place I offer to share what I have learned from the experiences in journalism and research that might work on the behalf of a more inclusive future.

My first encounter with the structural biases—the amoral biases that shape how much reporting occurs—in journalism came during my time as a sports reporter at the *Palm Beach Post*. As a sports reporter, any given day witnessed a deluge of press releases requesting me to report on one topic as opposed to another. As our newsroom made the move to digital, I found myself leaning on these press releases more rather than relying on my own original story development—press releases promised a guaranteed story and another week's paycheck in my pocket (this process, by the way, leads to what I will later discuss in this book as the problematic process of “churnalism”; Davies, 2011). I noticed, however, that an increasing amount of my press releases came from religious groups: evangelical softball associations, Jewish community centers offering yoga and the Catholic shuffleboard team. Then one morning, I read in the South Florida Sun-Sentinel—our competing newspaper—about a growing Muslim community in Palm Beach County (Soloman, 2008), and it occurred to me: I had never written about someone in the Muslim community, and I had never received a press release from the Muslim community. It was then I realized of course that the two were interrelated. A few searches through my news organization's database demonstrated what I suspected to be true: Muslims were nearly invisible in Palm Beach County—at least as measured by their presence in local news and press content. I was troubled by this, given what I'd just read, and this was my impetus to learn and study how journalists successfully (and unsuccessfully) worked toward creating a more equitable society.

Once I entered the academy, I conducted a few studies exploring issues of hate, but the impetus for the present book is of course the Capitol siege on January 6, 2021. As a scholar, I've studied a variety of topics related to journalists' uses of technology in the presentation of historically marginalized communities: digital journalism presentations of the Syrian refugee crisis, gaming journalists covering issues

of gender, live television reporting at the San Bernardino shooting and a variety of studies reflecting on technology and its implications. As a scholar in the field of journalism, I have published in some of the most highly rated publications in my field. At the time of writing, I'm currently serving as the Fulbright-Botstiber Visiting Professor of Austrian-American Studies at the University of Vienna, working on projects related to journalists' use of Instagram and how lifestyle journalists manage issues of hate. It's hard to study reporting on marginalized communities without running into the wall of hate—the groups that work very hard to restrain or decrease historically marginalized voices in our society. In short, this book you are reading is the product of more than six years of study, and thoughtful analysis that brings together the threads of many different studies conducted during that time.

The Capitol Riot of January 6

As I watched the riot unfold, I felt concern for US democracy. The supporters laid bare the blinding problem of hate in the USA as they entered the building with Confederate flags, shouted racist epithets and displayed Nazi symbols. It was like watching the attempted seizure of American democracy by a Who's Who of America's greatest threats—Confederates, Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan. Their behavior in the Capitol was both shameless and childish, with rioters putting their feet on the desks of Congress people, rifling through congressional memos, stealing laptops and defecating in offices. The National Guard eventually stepped in and forcibly removed the rioters from the premises.

For a period of about three years, I lived and worked in the inner city of Washington, DC—about six blocks from Capitol Hill. As anyone who has lived in inner-city DC will tell you, you never mess around near the Capitol. The Capitol police stood vigilant, pulling over anyone and everyone they deemed slightly suspicious and you certainly knew to never try to park near the Capitol building. And so, on January 6, 2021, as supporters of former president Donald J. Trump stormed the Capitol building, I felt a mix of shock, anger and fear. As a former Washingtonian, let me assure you—that should never have been able to happen. And, at the time of writing, it seems apparent it would *not* have happened if not endorsed to at least some degree by people in power.

That moment shone a spotlight on a significant problem in American society. As Marty Baron's character in *Spotlight* famously

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says, “when the light gets turned on, there’s plenty of blame to go around” (McCarthy, 2015). Some of that blame certainly falls on digital journalism.

Meredith Shriner, writing for the *New Republic*, on February 15 argued that the Capitol riots reflected on the problem of reporting as a “‘view from nowhere’—in which ‘objectivity’ is performed by reporters as a ‘he said, she said’ dance without regard to either news value or truth” (Shriner, 2021).

Republicans like Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell recognized years ago that “the view from nowhere” media doctrine could work to his advantage. With no lens of “right” or “wrong” imposed on political reporting—the entire idea of moral arbitration replaced with a meaningless array of horse-race or process coverage that treated both sides as equal regardless of who acted in good faith—he could manipulate the media into any outcome he wanted while avoiding critical skepticism.

(Shriner, 2021)

Shriner (2021) of course points to one aspect of the problem—objectivity—that will be discussed in more depth, but there are numerous problems highlighted by digital journalists’ coverage of hate.

Why Report Hate?

For such a seemingly dangerous field and amidst such increasing hostility toward journalists, it is remarkable to see journalists’ willingness to cover it. As media law scholar Brett Johnson, and his team (2021) argue, journalists simultaneously “essentialize[] hate speech as a necessary phenomenon for the exceptional American tradition of free speech” (Johnson, Thomas & Kelling, 2021, p. 12). In other words, journalists report on hate because they know it’s important.

There is less research than one might expect on the fraught topic of reporting on hate groups in the USA. But as one might suspect, this is a topic equally fraught in Europe, where there is a robust base of research.

Germany is often held up in many circles as a country, which has successfully confronted, reckoned with, and recovered from a white supremacist history. But similar to the current situation in the USA, Germany finds white supremacy increasingly reflected in its military and policing personnel. In 2020, a report in Germany noted more than 370 suspected cases of right-wing extremism among German security

and police; the military reported 477 cases. A key strategy in white supremacy is to infiltrate security and military personnel—a situation that allows for white supremacy to persist at a structural level (Meier, 2022, January 30).

One journalist, working for a hyperlocal news site in the rural USA, described uncovering a Ku Klux Klan leader who had moved to her community and was working to recruit members. She was only able to uncover the leader's identity once a close local police contact let her know that he was working to befriend members of the police force and fire department, and increasingly sharing some of his materials with them. She reported on his strategy, encouraging him to leave the community, but it does reveal that the strategy of white supremacy extends beyond individual acts to enacting structural change.

As Anna Meier, a foreign policy professor at the University of Nottingham, argues: “To view white supremacy in a structural sense means understanding it as a system of institutions and practices that position white people as the dominant group in society and make that positioning so natural as to be unremarkable” (Meier, 2022, January 30).

To understand that journalism serves as an institution necessitates a reckoning of the ways in which the practice of our field can be complicit in this situation. Research seems to reflect that is the case in Germany. Predominantly examining the pernicious dangers of anti-Semitism and growing anti-Muslim sentiment in Europe, this research has found that journalism's role in moderating such groups is vital, but in some cases unsuccessful. Baugut (2020), for example, found that Jews in Germany perceived that local journalism actually fostered anti-Semitism nearly a century after the fall of the Nazi regime. Baugut (2020) argues:

Some 75 years after the Holocaust...German Jews considered several media including quality newspapers to be a contributing factor to ongoing antisemitism.

From Jews' point of view, the selective perception and retention of “negative” or “threatening” characteristics of media coverage is arguably important for their safety; this seems to be particularly true for those who perceive high levels of antisemitism and consequently more strongly identify with their community...Plausibly, Jews' definition of unfavorable media coverage is shaped by their assumptions or experiences of the media's influence on [others] they perceive to be hostile.

(Baugut, 2020, pp. 20–21)

However, as Baugut (2021) argues, German journalists seek to combat this through numerous role applications depending on the context of reporting, and furthermore, the “Journalists’ personal perspectives as citizens may motivate them to act in line with their political convictions even when this requires deviation from what they perceive to be the general task of their profession” (p. 14). In other words, journalists may be willing to depart from their norms, in order to work more actively in the interest of targeted Jews. As with journalists elsewhere, the journalists in Baugut’s (2021) study were committed to enabling an open public sphere.

When undertaken correctly, journalists can create a positive news agenda with their reporting. When journalists quote minority groups targeted by hate—as with Muslims in Austria, Germany and Switzerland—the likelihood that minority groups will be differentiated from the accusations against them (e.g. a link between Islam and terror) is significantly higher (Matthes et al., 2020). The stakes are quite high given that a survey of 15 countries across Europe indicated that the mere exposure to populist—a social identity developed in regard to a *dangerous other*—messaging had the ability to encourage support for populist ideas (Hameleers et al., 2021).

It is helpful, perhaps to consider hate group messaging a bit more like a virus, that journalists can inadvertently spread merely through encountering it and not through any poor intention. And this has certainly been a part of the strategy of hate groups.

Hate Groups and Their Strategy

Michael Edison Hayden of the Southern Poverty Law Center was interviewed in a 2019 podcast episode of “All About Journalism” concerning the challenges facing reporters who cover hate. He pointed to the mosque shooting in New Zealand, which was racially charged and informed by the ideals of white nationalism.

These shooters are not just psychopaths. There are people who agree with them in our society and in our government...We’re not going to have journalism at all if the fascists win. People don’t realize the stakes sometimes. When you’re embedded in it, you do understand...Once you understand the underlying fear of these groups it becomes a lot more clear that the worst way you can cover these mass shooting events for instance is to be “It’s crazy! It’s white supremacy!” but never think about how someone becomes a white supremacist.

(O’Connell, 2019)

Most hate groups are linked to the concept of blood and soil. In America and Europe, this reflects the preservation of white ethnicity and often a white male dominance. The distinction between white supremacy and white nationalism is subtle but worth noting here. White supremacy aims to create a white ethnostate to rule over a given state, while white nationalism reflects the belief that the participants can create a separate white state (Hartzell, 2018). That said, in this book I will not distinguish strongly between the uses of the terms given that there is considerable overlap between hate groups with individuals who tend to float between the groups of Aryans, Ku Klux Klan and others. The demographic root of the problem of hate groups is located in young white males with research reflecting that the prototypical “recruit” for white supremacy is found among young white males who feel cast aside in society and have plentiful free time and with higher-than-average access to the internet. Propaganda from hate groups tripled during the first three years of the Trump presidency, 2016–2019 (Yellin, 2020). Historically, when a problem arises—young white men feeling powerless—it might seem reasonable to look to elites as the source of the problem but, in reality, disadvantaged groups tend to be targeted. In Charlottesville, throngs of people chanted “the Jews will not replace us”—perplexing and deeply troubling chants, given the state of the Jewish people and the relative historical proximity of the Holocaust. However, in white nationalist circles, narratively the Jews take on a powerful role in the upset of the white male-empowered status quo—they are perceived as *directing* actions taken by minority groups (Thompson, 2001).

In the 1990s, researchers argued that the USA would be at the forefront of a far-right revolution—a revolution motivated and promoted through digital means (Back, Keith & Solomos, 1998; Daniels, 2009). This argument came with some rationale. The Klan and Nazi groups had been pushed to the fringes of American society following the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Federal Bureau of Investigation counter-intelligence program and government hearings. Consequently, in spring 1984, Louis Beam Jr. created the Inter-Klan Newsletter and Survival Alert. This network was later shared with Aryan Nations as a way they could collaboratively avoid the ban on sending their publications through the US Mail. This network grew in the 1990s, eventually facilitating racist video gaming (Winter, 2019).

It’s fair to say that hate groups were at the forefront of digital technology long before journalists. And, while this far-right revolution failed to materialize in the time frame suggested—with the exception of Klan leader Don Black’s *Stormfront*—hate groups did find an impetus for growth in 2008 (Winter, 2019).

Historians note that the strategy of hate groups—especially white nationalists—shifted in the wake of the election of Barack Obama, who was the USA’s first black president. This shift in strategy reflected various factors: (1) an acknowledgment that their prior strategies had proved ineffective if a black man could be elected president; (2) an acknowledgment that, based on current population trends, whites could be a minority population during the 21st century—a concept that exposes a great deal of fear in among some white populations; and (3) the need for a softer, more mainstream-friendly messaging in order to better appeal to white-collar Americans.

Perhaps the moment that best illustrates this change in strategy was captured in the Al Jazeera English documentary *White Power (USA)*. During the documentary, the videographers capture the former head of the National Socialism Movement (US Nazi Party) marching down the streets of Tucson, Arizona, trying to start a chant to expel blacks, Hispanics and Jews. The new leader of the movement swiftly corrected him and started a new chant: “U-S-A! U-S-A!”

This small moment is indicative of larger strategy shifts that aim to ride populist, American conservative movements in order to mainstream the essential ideals of a hate group. As SPLC’s Hayden argues, hate groups have gone for a subtler look with more emphasis placed on the recruitment of white-collar workers in order to offer a more sophisticated message (O’Connell, 2019). Key to that strategy was seen to be translating that hate for online distribution. As Don Black, a prominent Klansman, told the Newhouse News Service: “Anyone can work to promote our ideas without being a member of any organization. I used to be annoyed by people who didn’t join my organization, but I see the advantage now” (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). Black points toward this new strategy—it’s not just about official recruitment but about feeding the poison of the ideology into numerous aspects of American public life.

After the election of Barack Obama, the Tea Party was the first populist movement in America to see this strategy deployed (Zeskind, 2012). While the Tea Party was never, officially, a movement that dealt with race, it takes very little digging to see that the basic politics of the movement had a strong racial underpinning. Using the language of white disposition and arguing that “country” is an essentially “white nation” (often with phraseology such as Christian, European nation), the movement popularized slogans such as the need to “Take our country back.” When such a phrase is employed, over throngs of cheering whites, it becomes clearer who a country needs to be taken back from. And it is exactly in this way that hate groups have begun operating

by focusing in particular on getting their message to the people and into national infrastructures, such as current members of the military, police officers, and firemen, and white-collar, middle-class Americans who are driven by fear.

Fear is key to the appeal of hate groups. As one white supremacist recruiter expressed it, the key to recruiting someone is to find that person's worst fear and "let it fester" (White Power USA, 2010). It may be that the recruit's girlfriend left him for a person who is black or that a person's job was taken away, with a new job given to someone who is Asian. Such moments can be latched onto by recruiters as an opportunity to scapegoat the race of a perceived beneficiary. The small anecdote from a person's life is made emblematic of a much larger campaign aimed at replacing whites in America. They build on subtle fears of immigration and rising birth rates of immigrants—nods to "Replacement Theory"—and make those issues personal to the new recruit (Jones, 2022). Using phraseology that is seemingly not race-based—such as "Take our country back"—allows these groups to sound as if they are simply speaking as a concerned, conservative voter and the implicit nature of the phraseology allows them to shrug off concerns as merely reading too much into their slogans.

White nationalists, for example, tend to use terms like "alt-right" as a way of providing a palatable, mainstreamed terminology (Berlet & Sunshine, 2019), and journalists, thus, have the unenviable task of explaining these nuances to their audiences without elevating them (Perreault & Meltzer, 2022). The term alt-right, short for "alternative right," was coined by Richard Spencer, the president of the National Policy Institute. Spencer is known for leading a rally in Washington DC following the election of Trump in which members "raised their arms in Nazi salutes and declared 'Hail, Trump'" (Greene, 2017, August 14). According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the term refers to a "set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that 'white identity' is under attack by multicultural forces using 'political correctness' and 'social justice' to undermine white people and 'their' civilization" (Southern Poverty Law Center). The use of the term, alt-right, is contested among journalists in part because it grants white supremacists the power to name themselves and provides the veil of a new phenomenon to disguise long-standing racism (Mohajer, 2017, Aug. 14). The label alt-right is valuable to white nationalists—and they often insist on its use—given such labels help to shape how the audience contextualizes a group. The term alt-right serves as a rhetorical Trojan horse, designed to bring white nationalism into mainstream public discourse (Hartzell, 2018).

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