

The Oxygen of Amplification

Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators Online

By Whitney Phillips

Data&Society

PART 3

The Forest and the Trees:
Proposed Editorial Strategies

CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Tips for Establishing Newsworthiness	4
Tips for Reporting on Objectively False Information	6
Tips for Reporting on Specific Harassment Campaigns or Other Coordinated Manipulation Attacks.....	9
Tips for Reporting on Specific Manipulators, Bigots, and Abusers	14
General Tips for Reporting on the Internet	18
The Path Ahead	21
Acknowledgments.....	22
Endnotes.....	23
Works Cited.....	24

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*This report is funded by Craig Newmark Philanthropies and News Integrity Initiative,
with additional programmatic and general support from other Data & Society funders.*

For more information, please visit <https://datasociety.net/about/#funding>.

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Part One of this report explored the role journalists played during the 2016 US presidential election, and considered the ways that trolling rhetoric helped catalyze the emerging alt-right narrative. Part Two focused on the ambivalence of journalistic amplification; the fact that reporting on things draws attention to things, an outcome that can be as necessary as it is problematic. Part Three departs from parts One and Two's focus on the forest of journalism. It, instead, focuses on the trees: specific editorial best practices designed to minimize narrative hijacking by bad-faith actors, and to maximize reporters' ability to communicate critical truths.

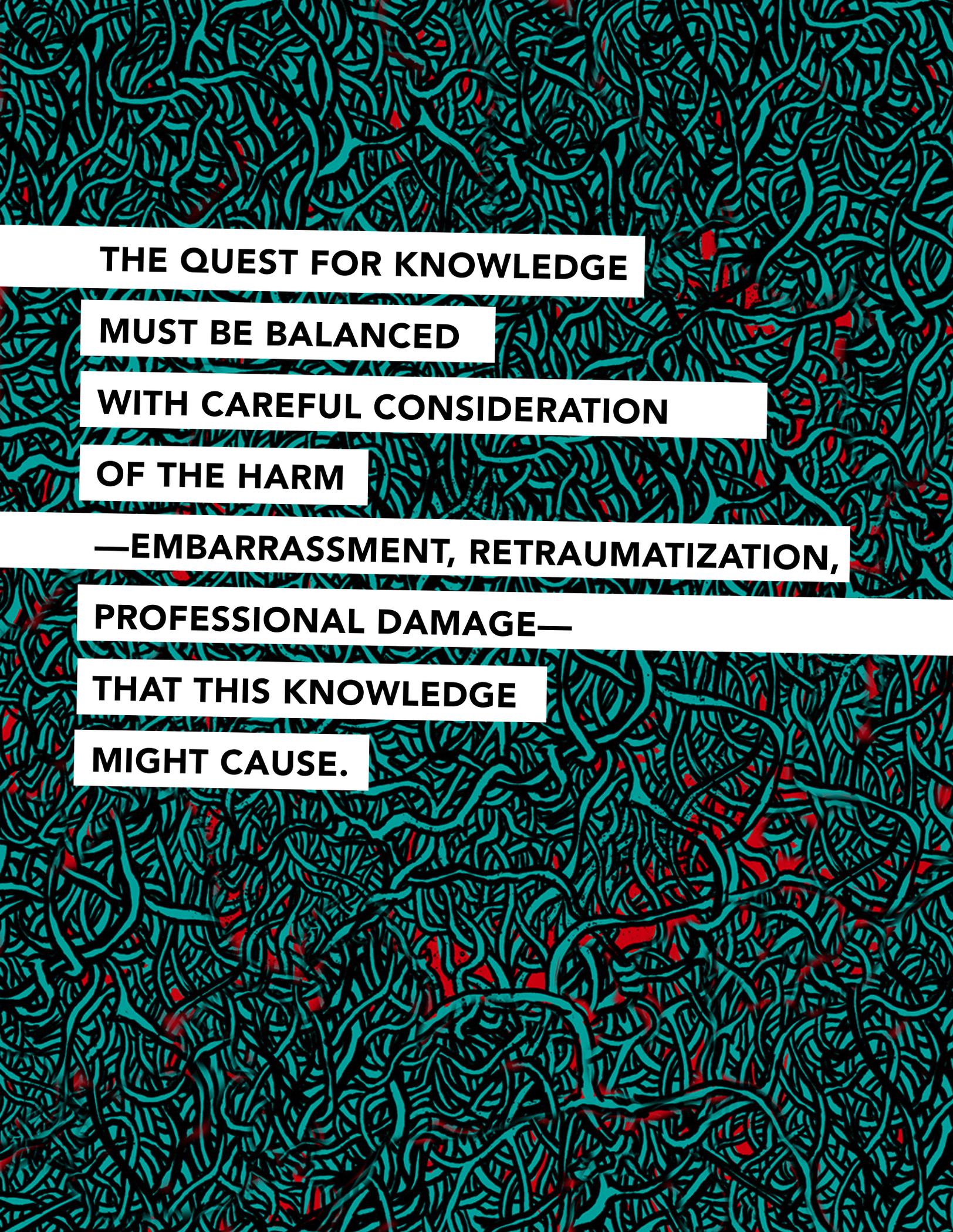
Many of the recommendations made here echo the core tenets of good journalism, which have guided reporters, editors, and publishers in their efforts to grapple with issues of newsworthiness, untruth, and manipulation by state and business actors since the start of the profession. These recommendations—shaped by interviewees themselves—build on these tenets to reflect the challenges specific to social media and networked manipulation campaigns. Given its focus on editorial strategy, Part Three is geared most directly to working reporters and editors. That said, suggestions about how best to respond to problematic information are also applicable to everyday users of social media, who serve as critical links in the overall amplification chain.

The first two sections in this third and final part of the report address whether or not something is worth reporting, and what to do if the object of that reporting is objectively false. The following two sections focus on approaches to targeted manipulation campaigns, and specific manipulators. The last section discusses general strategies for reporting on the internet, capped off with a reminder of how many trees compose the journalism forest.

TIPS FOR ESTABLISHING NEWSWORTHINESS

Not every piece of information is worth reporting. In all cases, for all stories, journalists must assess what is newsworthy and what is not. To assess newsworthiness – a particularly important task when the story contains manipulative elements posted to social media – *First Draft News*' Claire Wardle encourages reporters to ask whether or not the story has extended beyond the interests of the community being discussed. In the case of online memetic content, for example, the question would be whether a particular meme has been broadly shared by anyone outside the core group of participants. This is the “tipping point” criterion (Moschella and Watts 2017): if the story hasn't yet reached that point, all reporting will do is provide oxygen, increasing the likelihood that it *will* reach the tipping point. When presented with a story pitch that will take a small issue and make it much bigger through amplification, former senior editor at *Refinery29* Laura Norkin asks herself, “If we didn't cover this, and it didn't get covered elsewhere, would it just go away?” If the answer is probably yes, and the coverage would have no social benefit otherwise, her policy is to pass on the story.

The question of “social benefit” is critical for April Glaser, technology writer at *Slate*. When weighing the question of newsworthiness, she considers whether the reporting will have a positive social benefit, if it will open up a new conversation, and/or if it will add weight and exemplars to an existing conversation. If the answer to these questions is yes, the story is likely worth reporting. But, Glaser also emphasizes that the quest for knowledge must be balanced with careful consideration of the harm – embarrassment, retraumatization, professional damage – that this knowledge might cause. Another staff writer covering cybersecurity reiterates Glaser's point, and adds a further wrinkle. The question isn't just what harm could be caused by published information, he says. The question is also what harm could the *audience* cause by using that information, for example by finding and attacking someone quoted in the story, or replicating the crimes the story chronicles. Put another way, to assess newsworthiness, one must also assess what weapons the story would hand to its audiences.



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TIPS FOR REPORTING ON OBJECTIVELY FALSE INFORMATION

Within journalism, there is a long-standing injunction against blending opinion and news reporting. While it is critical to maintain that separation, reporters should, at the same time, avoid overcompensatory framings that preclude them from making forceful truth claims. One staff writer at a large global news outlet highlighted this tension. On one hand, she noted, you need to indicate when false claims are false. However, in so doing, you risk injecting (or being accused of injecting) opinion into the reporting. She noted that one common workaround she's used, and has seen many other reporters use, is to editorialize by proxy. This approach uses a euphemistic "critics say" or "others say" as a way to hint that something isn't what it appears to be, without having to assert a clear position. While editorializing by proxy might feel more comfortable from a reporting perspective, this reporter conceded, not taking a clear position risks lending plausibility to objectively false and/or manipulative claims. Furthermore, couching fact as opinion does not lend greater objectivity to the reporting. It actually undermines that objectivity. The reporting of facts (and, conversely, debunking of untruths), this reporter maintained, must therefore not be conflated with editorial stances.

As for the question of whether to report on falsehoods, one science and technology staff writer at a large culture and entertainment site employs the following criteria:

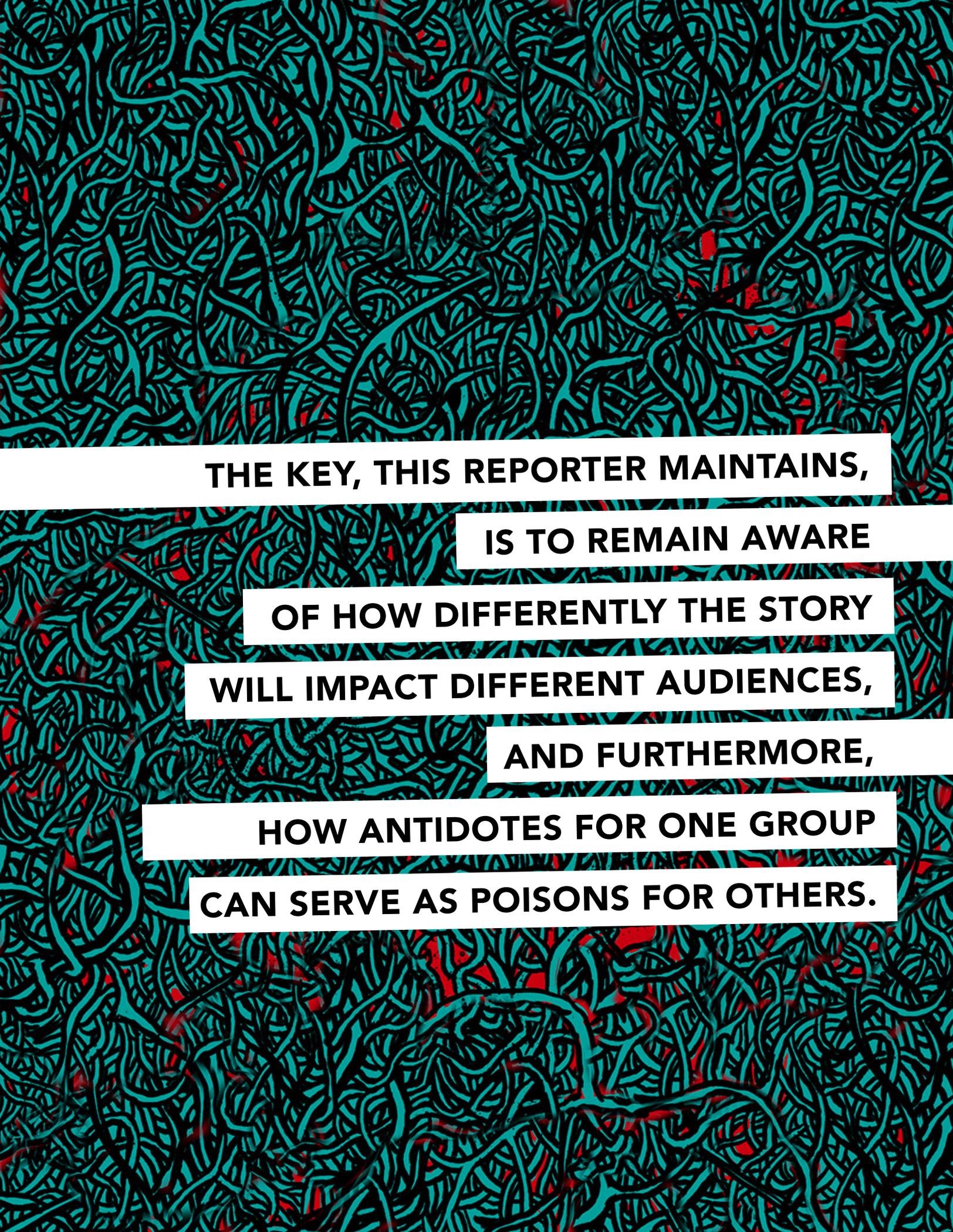
1. Determine if the story reaches the tipping point (drawing from Claire Wardle's definition, that it extends beyond the interests of the community being discussed)¹
2. Determine if there would be a public health takeaway (i.e. something worth learning) from the debunking; for example, explanations that identify and analyze manipulators' rhetorical strategies, including their use of humor
3. Determine if there is a political or social action point (i.e., something worth doing) related to the falsehood itself; for example, editorials that provide media literacy strategies for recognizing and resisting networked manipulation campaigns
4. Determine if the risk of entrenching/rewarding the falsehood in some stories is worth dislodging the falsehood in others

If the answer to each of these questions is no, then the story isn't worth reporting at that time. If a story ultimately passes the tipping point and does become appropriate to report (because of clear risks to public safety, because of the underlying media systems the story unearths), reporters should be especially careful to follow established best reporting practices, with particular attention paid to the origins of the information, as well as its broader context—both of which should be discussed transparently in the article itself. Whenever possible, experts in the particular subject area should be recruited to write or consult on editorial pushback, to ensure the clearest and most informed refutations possible.



This perspective aligns with the Council of Europe’s “Information Disorder” report (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017), which urges news organizations to exercise extreme caution when dealing with emerging hoaxes and other dis-, mis-, and mal-information. The report is particularly concerned with information that is demonstrably false, and which is intentionally designed to deceive and cause harm. Outlets should avoid publishing this information whenever possible, the report states, especially as part of preemptive debunking stories, which may seek to correct false, manipulative information, but may still spread that information before it has achieved any organic reach of its own. Further, the choice to engage with a false story – even in the effort to refute it – aligns with the interests of the manipulators, who see any form of amplification as a victory.

As true believers and cynical troublemakers often seed the same false story for very different reasons, it can be difficult to balance the risks of entrenching false narratives and the need to challenge those narratives. This possibility is particularly concerning to a technology section reporter at a large national news organization frequently tasked with debunking far-right hoaxes and rumors. As they note, while many readers benefit from these debunkings, there are countless others who do not, and who, instead, become links in the chains of future manipulation efforts, or who merely gloat over the fact that a prominent outlet was tricked into covering the story. The key, this reporter maintains, is to remain aware of how differently the story will impact different audiences, and furthermore, how antidotes for one group can serve as poisons for others.



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TIPS FOR REPORTING ON SPECIFIC HARASSMENT CAMPAIGNS OR OTHER COORDINATED MANIPULATION ATTACKS

Harassment campaigns and other coordinated attacks are particularly challenging to report on responsibly, as the entire purpose of these attacks is to generate oxygen, draw more people into a story, and create the biggest public spectacle possible. That said, there are a number of ways to minimize the potential fallout from these stories.

First and most critical, reporters and editors should **treat violent antagonisms as inherently contagious, and in coverage, draw from best practices for reporting on suicide,² mass shootings,³ and terrorism,⁴ which are known to inspire copycats when reported.** In order to minimize the contagion effect, stories should keep the story specific to the communities affected, focus on the impact of an attack, minimize sensationalist language and headlines, and reduce antihero framings of the perpetrator (see below for tips on reporting on specific harassers and manipulators). Stories should not provide more information about an attack, or the specific attacker, than is needed, especially if that information provides a blueprint for undertaking future attacks. Instead, stories should include only as much information as is necessary for the average reader to understand the issue and grasp its public health implications.

Second, when stories focus on the targets of online harassment, reporters should **be careful not to minimize victims' experiences by suggesting that digitally mediated harm is less serious or less real than physical harm.** The reality of the emotional, professional, and interpersonal impact of this harm (for the targets themselves, as well as for their friends and family) must be made explicitly clear.

That said, reporters should **reflect on the ways stories profile primary and secondary victims, and what information that reporting publicizes about them.** It is critical to remember that victims' Twitter handles or Facebook accounts aren't just social media profiles; they are potential roadmaps to continued targeted abuse. This point has been explicitly weaponized by white supremacist writers, as a leaked style guide from *The Daily Stormer* indicates (Feinberg 2017); its author, purportedly the neo-Nazi Andrew Anglin, advocates linking to the social media profiles of existing or ideal/desired targets of mob harassment in *Daily Stormer* articles. Given that individual harassers and those affiliated with more formal networks may be inclined to harness information for their own malignant ends, stories should include searchable social media details about victims, or any vulnerable person, sparingly, if at all.

Building on this point, *BuzzFeed News*'s Craig Silverman encourages reporters to **minimize the inclusion of unnecessary identifying information in stories about harassment targets**, for example the victim's town or place of employment, which could provide avenues for further harassment. Whenever possible, reporters should **talk to the victim – and ideally to their friends and family as well – about these details, and see what information they are comfortable sharing publicly**. Even when not conducting formal interviews with targeted individuals or members of a targeted community, reporters must remember that embedded tweets pulled to illustrate harassment – either the harassment itself or responses to the harassment – aren't static pieces of evidence. They are attached to people who may not want to be included in the story. In every case, **work to balance victims' right to privacy and bodily autonomy with the news value of the story**.

Third, to the extent possible, reporters should **specify the number of participants in a particular online attack/campaign, rather than using vague mass nouns** (i.e., trolls did this, the alt-right did that). Claims such as "Twitter trolls attacked X" or "the alt-right is targeting Y" implies a larger, more powerful, and more coherent group than is typically participating, thus serving as a magnet for additional participants (and risking that the group will, as a result of the coverage, actually become larger, more powerful, and more coherent). Important contextualizing information includes the apparent number of online participants (based on observational data), why the reporter believes this count is accurate, and any unknown variables (for example, if it's not yet known if participants are part of a botnet attack, if there is any reason to suspect that multiple accounts may be run by the same person, or if the sincerity of participants is in question). It is particularly critical for reporters to note when attacks are limited to a handful of participants—and in those cases, reporters should revisit the "tipping point" criterion and determine if the story is even worth reporting. In all cases, reporters should guard against the false magnetism of stories, which can catalyze a panic across social media and contribute to the virality of harm.

In a similar vein, when describing media manipulation campaigns of any kind, stories and headlines should **employ the most precise language possible**, a point media historian Caroline Jack emphasizes in her lexicon of terms for problematic information (2017). Reporters should be especially wary of behavior-cloaking euphemisms when describing harassment and attacks; the word "troll" is most conspicuous in this regard, as it is often used in the place of more accurate behavioral descriptors like violent misogyny, identity-based harassment, and online stalking (confusingly, "troll" is also used to describe silliness and satire—even in these less serious cases, the specific behaviors should be named throughout). Avoiding euphemistic terminology can be especially difficult when an antagonistic group moves faster than reporters' ability to put a label on it, as one digital culture reporter noted of the swift adoption, and subsequent avoidance, of the term "alt-right" by many journalists. Even as these labels may shift, stories should foreground terminology that reflects the precise embodied impact of a particular behavior rather than detached, abstract framings or framings that align with the antagonists' preferred narratives or self-justifications.

Regarding the “troll” frame specifically, reporters and editors should **avoid the impulse to use “troll” as shorthand in stories and headlines**. The term has a long history online, and while that history is relevant to certain discussions, its colloquial definition has become hopelessly muddled, especially since “trolling” became associated with white supremacy and neo-Nazi attacks. When used as a broad behavioral catchall, “troll” simply doesn’t say anything explanatory about the behaviors being described; all it does is provide manipulators and abusers a convenient rhetorical excuse.

Fourth, publications should **avoid publishing listicles that round up the worst examples of racist or misogynist expression without significantly commenting on that expression**. Aggregation stories, which are common on multimedia-heavy sites like *BuzzFeed*, and which easily filter into the broader ecosystem when they are linked to by other publications, might call attention to the abuse in order to condemn it. Regardless of reporters’ good intentions, however, these stories also risk ventriloquizing the abuse, and providing future abusers a convenient collection of images and expressions from which to draw. The goal, according to journalism professor and anti-harassment advocate Michelle Ferrier, is to file stories that present clear, accurate descriptions of harm that highlight injustice and violence without losing sight of the visceral impact on targeted bodies (including cases when those bodies belong to the journalists themselves).

Fifth, when discussing these cases, reporters should **avoid framings that fall back on “both sides-ism,” in which the attack is described, followed by an overview of what both the attackers and the attacked have to say about it**. As Laura Norkin, formerly of *Refinery29* argues, this elevates the perpetrators and supporters of hateful behaviors to an equal platform as those being harmed. In cases where the attacks are motivated by racial or gender animus, reporters should take a moral stance. If it is not possible or appropriate to include a strong editorial framing, the conversation should be situated within broader trends; for example, discussions of online ethics, cycles of media amplification, parody and performance, and the embodied impact of offline attacks, as demonstrated by *The New Statesman’s* Amelia Tait (2017) in her coverage of a racist-parody Twitter account and the vitriolic reactions it generated. This information is truth additive, and ensures that news coverage isn’t merely pointing at and parroting harmful interactions.

Sixth, reporters and their editorial teams should **exercise an abundance of caution when reprinting memetic images used during particular attacks, especially when the images are dehumanizing and bigoted**. This includes cases when the image itself is not overtly offensive, as extremists often adopt seemingly harmless symbology (Pepe the Frog, the “ok” sign) to facilitate ease of sharing, and ease of publication by establishment outlets. As mentioned above, articles containing a litany of the most offensive or shocking examples (whether the image itself is offensive or shocking, or if the underlying message is the source of offense and shock) will only help ensure the images’ spread and searchability. Stories should not include an image when a text description will suffice. These descriptions should carefully explain what is known about the image, particularly what discourses surround it, and through what communities the image is known to have travelled. To collate this information, Aaron Sankin emphasizes the utility of reverse-image searches, which allow reporters to trace the origins of specific images (Google allows users to search by image, and

services like TinEye offer a reverse-image search engine). A search for similar kinds of images on the database *Know Your Meme* is also prudent, as this additional step can help establish a broader memetic context.

Focusing on discourse and spread, rather than claims about definitive meaning, will allow reporters to redirect the conversation away from the manipulators' chosen frame, and call attention to bigoted dog whistling without having to make unverifiable (and potentially legally compromising) claims about participants' "true" intentions. The question at issue is what messages have been communicated about a particular image or symbol, and more importantly, what impact the image or symbol has on the people who see it.

When sharing an image is deemed necessary, editors and members of the communications team should **consider including captions from the story and/or other contextualizing information within the image itself so it can't be hijacked and spread by manipulators as easily**. This is not a call to tamper with or misrepresent photojournalistic work. Memetic media has already been altered by countless participants; annotating an existing image doesn't destroy it, it merely makes it more difficult to be further weaponized.

Seventh, when approaching stories about targeted harassment and violence online, reporters should **be especially conscientious about the histories of identity-based violence, and the histories of the activists who have been working to combat it**. As multiple reporters of color suggested, many (often white) reporters insert themselves into social justice discourses about race, gender, and class without fully historicizing the issues, or acknowledging the individuals and groups who have been fighting these fights for decades, often with little recognition.

This point connects to how reporters and editors should engage with and cite expert sources. Reflecting on the hundreds of interviews she's given for stories about the hacker collective Anonymous, anthropologist Gabriella Coleman underscores how important it is for reporters and editors to **foreground expert perspectives, particularly when the expert offers historicizing information, and/or when they warn against problematic editorial framings**. The alternative, which Coleman identifies as "stubbornly (or cynically) moving forward on false premises – whether out of an inflated belief in [the reporter's or their editor's] own judgment or out of a cynical belief that all that matters is delivering an entertaining or sensationalist story" (Coleman, 2017: 41) – risks undermining the civic value of the reporting. These stakes go up when stories address networked manipulation, harassment, and/or high-profile bad actors. In cases where stories include, or seem like they may include, polluted information, reporters shouldn't just quote experts, but should **actively consult with experts who have studied computational and/or networked propaganda, and other forms of media manipulation**. This consultation should address how the story will label, frame, and contextualize the communities and/or behaviors, and address how best to identify and preempt manipulation tactics.



Regardless of the story being covered, reporters should also **make an effort to talk to** – either as part of a formal interview or on background – **people who have direct, embodied experience with the interpersonal, professional, and/or physical implications of a given issue**. In short, stories should avoid presenting abstract framings; it is critical for reporters to clearly articulate the stakes for the bodies involved. These efforts should be balanced with awareness of and sensitivity to, the emotional labor of the ask.

Finally, reporters should **reflect on any personal connections to a story, and how these connections factor into the underlying issue, controversy, or policy**. This isn't merely a call for reporters to honestly assess their own points of political myopia, and to supplement that perspective with expert commentators as needed. It also means taking preemptive protective and/or self-care measures – both at the level of individual mental health support and/or the kinds of safety trainings and resources offered by organizations like the International Women's Media Foundation and PEN America⁵ – if a story is likely to trigger post-traumatic or secondary stress responses.

TIPS FOR REPORTING ON SPECIFIC MANIPULATORS, BIGOTS, AND ABUSERS

Journalists, particularly those assigned to politics and business beats, are trained to identify and ward off manipulation efforts by state and corporate actors. However much experience these reporters have with traditional persuasive media and disinformation campaigns, contemporary social media pose novel challenges for even the most seasoned reporters, and require an augmentation of existing knowledge about information abuses. The following strategies scaffold onto existing good journalism practices to better confront networked actors and manipulations.

While stories must address the manipulators, bigots, and abusers involved in particular attacks, reporting should **avoid framing bad actors as the center of the narrative**. Doing so only reinforces the idea that similar kinds of behaviors will result in nonstop attention from journalists and across social media users; provides a public, easily searchable blueprint for bad actors looking to replicate harmful behavior (see above point on contagion effects); and directs attention away from the underlying context of an attack. Stories should focus instead on the systems being gamed (per *The Verge's* Adi Robertson), the communities being created (per *New York Magazine's* Max Read), and the performative strategies being employed (per *The Huffington Post's* Ashley Feinberg).

When framing a story about specific white nationalists and supremacists, reporters and editors should **run a newsworthiness calculus for each personal detail – about their family, their hobbies, their day to day activities, and so forth – that could be reported**. Information that does not reach the tipping point, can't be framed to serve the public's benefit, and/or can be easily weaponized by manipulators, should be minimized or omitted. A particularly instructive, and particularly high-profile, case study can be found in 2017's now-infamous "Nazi next door" story published by *The New York Times's* Richard Fausset (officially titled "A Voice of Hate in America's Heartland").⁶ In this story, the ho-hum details of a Nazi-sympathizing white nationalist's life – details interspersed with a number of the subject's coded references to trolling culture, of which Fausset seemed to be unaware – were foregrounded as decontextualized observations ("this person exists, and he shops at Target"). Missing from these observations were pointed, critical reflections on the broader context of white supremacist ideology pre- and post-election. Also omitted was even the vaguest sense of the impact these ideologies have within Jewish communities and communities of color across the country, or even within the profiled white nationalist's own neighborhood. Fausset similarly failed to consider the impact the article would have on communities sympathetic to white supremacist views. Fausset's framing suggested that all his readers would be on the same page; that they already knew that, and knew why, fascist, neo-Nazi ideals are abhorrent. While many certainly did, Fausset didn't account for readers outside the target audience. Even if it was the opposite of Fausset's intentions, the article's framing primed its ability to recruit and further radicalize a certain subset of the (unintended) audience—or at the very

least, to serve as a trophy and manipulation incentive for extremists who thought it was hilarious to see neo-Nazi memes published by *The New York Times*.

Raising these critiques of Fausset's piece isn't to universally condemn all coverage of far-right extremists. Rather, it is a reminder that some, perhaps even much, of the information about individual bigots is not newsworthy. Instead, it merely provides free PR and recruitment opportunities for the individuals, groups, and ideologies being profiled—even if the profile is an ostensible condemnation.

Building on this point, reporters and editors should **be aware of how strategic many groups of white supremacists and nationalists are in their communications and messaging**, which is geared toward maximizing recruitment. The leaked *Daily Stormer* style guide speaks to these strategies, as it encourages potential contributors to avoid racist epithets and other expressions likely to repel mainstream readers. Instead, prospective writers are encouraged to hijack existing memes, whatever their origins, with the rationale that memes are familiar, funny, and naturally lower the audience's critical defenses. The guide also encourages writers to lean heavily on humor, on the grounds that racist jokes plant the seeds for racist beliefs. Beyond that, racist jokes – the bread and butter of many far-right extremists – are easier to trick establishment journalists into publishing. Davey and Ebner (2017) chronicle similar efforts in their report on the rise of global extremism. Particularly, they focus on the ways that far-right extremists reframe hate speech in terms of free speech, a much more palatable concept for potential recruits and journalists alike. Reporters should take for granted that these individuals always have ulterior motives; otherwise they would not be talking to the press.

Reporters and editors should **be equally aware that extremist groups, along with other groups of media manipulators, are eager to use journalistic norms as a weapon against journalism**. In order to spread their messages as far as possible, as quickly as possible, they will engage in strategies such as “source hacking,” as described by Data and Society's Media Manipulation Initiative research lead Joan Donovan (Scarpelli 2017). This involves seeding false or misleading narratives with authoritative sources, in the hopes that other outlets pick up, amplify, and therefore reinforce the initial falsehood. More journalists on the story, in turn, means more opportunities for more misleading interviews, thus providing the manipulators increasing opportunities to hijack the news narrative.⁷

Building on long-standing best practices in journalism, reporters and editors should **respond with heightened vigilance when antagonists, bigots, or other stripes of manipulator reach out with a tip or unsolicited commentary**. This is basic advice to all journalists, regardless of what subject is being reported; as April Glaser of *Slate* stresses, reporters should always consider what sources are hoping to get out of a given interaction, and how they might be trying to use you. When reporting on known manipulators, however, or on individuals who have even tenuous ties to spaces that employ networked manipulation tactics (notably, 4chan), this foundational line of questioning should be handled with even more caution. It's not enough to ask what the source's agenda might be. Reporters must also **ask if it is even possible to verify their source's apparent agenda**. If the source is in any way subject to Poe's Law, an internet axiom stating that satire and sincerity can be impossible to parse online (see Phillips and Milner 2017), the tip should be treated with extreme suspicion, and ideally omitted, unless it can be verified independently of the source—a vetting that should take into account the possibility that this “proof” may have been seeded preemptively by the manipulators.

In cases when the reporter is inclined to reach out directly to a specific antagonist, manipulator, or abuser, they should first **reflect on whether the story absolutely requires quotes from bigoted, manipulative individuals**. First, by handing bad actors a platform, reporters allow these individuals to tell their story on their own terms, and in so doing, give them equal time to justify/spin/further normalize their behaviors. John Herrman of *The New York Times* is especially wary of efforts to repeatedly interview the same abusive or manipulative source(s), since efforts to maintain access to dangerous individuals often requires cozying up to them, or at least paying lip service to their version of events. When presented with the opportunity to interview a source that is, by all accounts, up to no good, reporters should therefore remind themselves that it isn't a journalistic necessity to quote a subject directly; that option, April Glaser of *Slate* argues, should be exercised depending on what is most directly aligned with the public's interest. For Abby Ohlheiser, digital culture reporter at *The Washington Post*, the question of whether to include quotes from, say, neo-Nazis, requires a further assessment of fairness. "To whom you are being 'fair'" she encourages reporters to ask themselves. "Is it just the Nazi? What about that person's victims or their ideology's targets?" A good rule of thumb is, if the answer to that question is "just the Nazi," reporters should think twice about their approach.

If the story does warrant an interview (because it helps establish context, because it more clearly illustrates what exactly the individual is advocating, because it serves a counter-argumentative function), reporters should **situate bigoted or manipulative sources' statements historically and ideologically, and minimize the inclusion of euphemistic dog whistles** (i.e., "identitarian," currently the preferred framing for many white nationalists and supremacists). If the individual is known to make misleading or manipulative statements to the press, or if they have made violently bigoted statements in the past, *Vice* and *New Republic* reporter Oliver Lee Bateman advocates for a clear and direct disclosure of those facts, so that readers know how to couch the individual's claims. Another technology and culture reporter affirms this point, noting that while reporters needn't provide a breakdown of every single problematic thing the individual has ever said or done, if a person is being quoted as a source or expert, their overall orientation to the truth is critical to readers' ability to assess their claims. Similarly, *The Guardian's* Olivia Solon calls for the use of contextualizing qualifiers when reporting on antagonists and manipulators, to ensure that readers are fully apprised of who the person is, what they believe, and what they have done (or would like to do). Finally, if the interview is to be conducted on camera, *FAZ* and *Die Welt* writer Felix Simon urges producers not to air it live, and suggests the inclusion of fact-checking captions, subtitles, and other additional commentary.

As an additional tip for one-on-one interviews, reporters should **be aware that all communications in emails and in interviews, in fact anything reporters say publicly or even semiprivately about a particular story and/or subject, may be used against the reporter and their publication**. Several reporters mentioned that hoaxers, bigots and manipulators often secretly record their interviews with reporters, and/or will attempt to engage the reporter in seemingly casual conversations on Twitter or Facebook, with the explicit objective of posting those interactions to social media and humiliating the reporter and their publication. Reporters should consider whether this additional layer of personal exposure—a layer above and beyond the news value of the interview—is worth quotes, especially from individuals who will probably lie anyway.

In this same spirit, whether subjects are directly interviewed or are observed on social media, reporters should **weave the performative nature of manipulators' actions into the story**. Regarding humorous expression, or what might be regarded as humorous to participants, Andrew Kahn, assistant interactives editor at *Slate*, encourages reporters to lean in to the fact that such communication can be simultaneously playful and political, ironic and sincere—a point of ambivalence the leaked *Daily Stormer* style guide encourages its writers to exploit through the rhetorical buffer of lulz. If reporters present these utterances as “just” joking, Kahn warns, that minimizes the utterances' very real impact and risks further normalizing harmful messages. If reporters present the utterances as entirely serious, Kahn continues, that misses the opportunity to fully contextualize the story and risks crystallizing the statements into the ideology being ascribed to them (i.e., “I'll show you deplorables”). Beyond this, Kahn argues, attempts to “unmask” purportedly ironic behavior as fundamentally unironic imposes a false dichotomy between deliberate fakes and deliberate propaganda. The acknowledgment of provocation, performance, and manipulation – and the deep ambivalence therein – is a much more useful frame, Kahn argues; it gives the reporter a better grip on the overall narrative and allows them to sidestep the manipulators' games, which in turn allows the reporter to add shading and nuance to the discussion.

Further, given the deep performativity of these behaviors, *New York Magazine's* Max Read encourages journalists to **minimize focus on individual motivations or personal psychology**. While these questions are certainly interesting, indeed while they serve as the bedrock for much investigative reporting, profiles that overemphasize motives and psychology tend to restrict focus to the individual, and more problematically, to information that is often unverifiable to begin with. In so doing, focus is directed away from the performative and/or ideological elements of a particular behavior or community.

No matter the specific framing, stories should **avoid deferring to manipulators' chosen language, explanations, or justifications**. Joel Stein's *TIME* magazine interview with avowed neo-Nazi and serial online abuser Andrew Auernheimer, discussed in Part One of the report, provides one example. Not only did Stein frame his subject as a “troll” throughout (thereby minimizing the embodied impact of Auernheimer's targeted attacks), he explicitly described him as “probably the biggest troll in history,” a tag line Auernheimer could have written himself. Beyond this specific example, employing manipulators' framings has the effect, *Motherboard's* Emanuel Maiberg notes, of allowing manipulators to set the narrative and linguistic agenda, carve the world up into categories of their choosing, and appear to wield much more influence than they actually do. They don't have the numbers to steer the cultural conversation on their own, and they should not be given any assistance, inadvertent or otherwise, in these efforts.

GENERAL TIPS FOR REPORTING ON THE INTERNET

The following are a series of suggestions applicable to all stories with online elements. By standardizing these more general strategies, reporters not specifically assigned to digital culture or technology beats, as well as the editors overseeing these stories, will be better equipped to navigate the increasing overlap between “internet” and “non-internet” subjects.

First, rather than merely pointing to the fact that something on the internet exists, *Motherboard's* Emanuel Maiberg encourages reporters to **use framings that focus on process and mechanics**. This includes how a particular interaction, behavior, or community works and why that matters to a broader audience. It also includes the specific technologies themselves; Maiberg points to how the “ephemeral, anonymous, image-based architecture” of 4chan facilitates a certain type of behavior, just as the platform architecture of Twitter and Discord and Facebook and every other platform facilitate unique behavioral contours. Not only will system-focused framings allow readers to get a better handle on a particular story, it helps mitigate knee-jerk, hyperbolic responses to artificially-inflated narratives.

Speaking to the need to carefully contextualize, editors should **avoid assigning breaking stories about online communities or behaviors to people unfamiliar with those communities and behaviors**. That's where the most mistakes happen. Editors should find someone else to cover the story, or wait until the story can be contextualized for a general audience. Stories should be framed especially carefully when they address behaviors on and around 4chan following a tragedy. It is almost guaranteed – particularly after mass shootings – that 4chan participants, participants on other chans, neo-Nazis, and those simply looking to manipulate the media will try to manufacture a story that either links the perpetrator to 4chan explicitly, or merely tries to insert mentions of 4chan into the unfolding narrative. Reporters assigned to these stories should **conduct background research on the history of 4chan and other online subcultures**, and should **assume that claims emanating from 4chan, particularly in the wake of a tragedy, are pointedly performative, and almost certainly false**. It is critical for everyone in the newsroom to remember that reporting such stories, even for the purposes of debunking falsehood, will only embolden the hoaxers, contribute to the chaos of the moment, and most pressingly, incentivize future bad actions.

Similarly, reporters should **take caution when anyone claiming to have a tip sends over files with overly amateur and/or analog stylings; for example poor photo quality, shaky video, images sloppily annotated using iPhone markup tools, and anything photocopied**. As Emanuel Maiberg emphasizes, haphazard-looking content can be as staged as professional content; in fact, the tendency for people online – from reporters to massive YouTube audiences – to equate “poor quality” with “authenticity” has resulted in an uptick in manipulation attempts playing to this confirmation bias.

Given the ease of fabrication and manipulation online, reporters and their editors should **internalize the idea that social media does not constitute a “person on the street” scenario, nor is an embedded tweet or Facebook post akin to a pulled quote.** Not only is this information unreliable (the profile might be a bot, the person might be joking in ways inscrutable to the reporter, etc), but by collating average citizens’ tweets, reporters are directing readers to those citizens’ profiles, and opening them up to direct, targeted harassment. For similar reasons, regardless of the kind of story being reported, reporters should **avoid pulling a handful of social media posts and then attributing that perspective, positive or negative, to “the internet.”** Any conceivable perspective could be supported by that approach, and does not a critical mass make—although reporting on it as such could artificially create exactly that.

Instead, reporters should **talk to sources for digital culture stories at length, ideally face-to-face, whenever possible.** According to *The New York Times*’ Farhad Manjoo, this approach yields greater insight into the totality of that person’s perspective, since a person’s online performative self may not accurately reflect that person’s true perspectives and motives, and/or may obscure details that would help shed light on the person’s digital footprint. If there is no time to conduct such interviews, Manjoo stated, reporters should at least reflect on the fact that the character(s) this person plays on the internet likely don’t tell the whole story.

No matter what this story might be, Laura Norkin, formerly of *Refinery29*, encourages reporters to **“ask yourself why, and why now.”** What is the point of having this conversation today? As with all good reporting, but particularly when the topic butts up against networked manipulation campaigns, if there is any doubt about the relevance of the story, or the ethics of covering it, reporters and their editors should ask someone. Reporters and their editors should ask *two* someones, and through this feedback, identify and preempt any holes in the initial framing or in the final product. Soliciting these kinds of ethical gut checks might seem like a steep investment, but as Norkin insists, “It’s not going to slow you down as badly as a horrific misstep will.”

Emma Green of *The Atlantic* encapsulates these strategies as “an effort to listen, to try and see the world widely and well, and to write as generously and with as much of an eye toward understanding as possible,” a framework she notes is especially useful, and even comforting, when online spaces are engulfed in chaos. The call, in a nutshell, is for journalists to **be reflective about the unique contours of digital spaces and tools, and the ways these spaces and tools challenge established reporting practices.**

For Andrew Marantz of *The New Yorker*, these choices come with a significant burden of responsibility. It’s not just that journalists play an important role in the amplification of information. What gets reported – and what doesn’t – becomes part of broader cultural narratives, and those broader cultural narratives directly impact the lives of countless citizens. For this reason, journalists of all positions, at all publications, must not pretend to be disinterested parties, or outside the systems they describe, or without a subject position. Reporters, editors, and publishers alike should **prefigure every professional decision with the recognition that individual journalists are an integral part of the news being reported.** There is no escape for anyone.

This approach is especially important when reporters wade into manipulation efforts spearheaded by those who seek to undermine deliberative democracy and actively pollute the public sphere. In a very practical sense, these individuals are relying on reporters to become part of the narrative in the effort to ensure the success of whatever latest attack, hoax, or campaign to strip entire communities of their human dignity. The underlying task for any journalist hoping to make socially responsible choices is therefore to understand how the institution of journalism is, itself, the system being gamed by manipulators.

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THE PATH AHEAD

The strategies suggested in this part of the report are an outcropping of the broader discussions explored in Parts One and Two. The first of these recurring discussions is the deep ambivalence of journalistic amplification, as well as the tangled historical, economic, and ideological forces that profoundly complicate questions about whether or not to give fresh oxygen to a story. The second recurring discussion is the underlying human element, and the often-overlooked human cost, of the news. The third is the deep interconnection of these issues; the fact that no single question, and no single answer, can be considered alone.

This final point in particular speaks to the redwood grove metaphor introduced in Part One. Like the redwoods, whose roots intertwine so densely that they can deliver nutrients – or poisons – to entirely different trees, so densely that it can be difficult to determine where one tree ends and another begins, each facet of journalism feeds into all the others. This interconnection isn't restricted to journalism. What happens in the news reaches into social media, bounces back to search, rolls into advertising, creeps across pop culture, loops through to our living rooms, and lodges in our hearts, which get we sit down in front of devices in order to read the news. Similarly, just as the composition of the soil, or if there's fire, or if there's rain, directly impacts the trees' growth, a whole host of factors, from labor, to algorithms, to reporters' own lives, all influence which stories flourish, which stories wither, and what difference that makes to the broader media ecosystem.

When considering the future of journalism, and more broadly, the future of democracy, the interconnection of trees, of roots, of lofty institutions, is what catapults the political stakes clean through the treeline. We must find ways to defend against narrative hijacking, and targeted antagonisms, and media manipulations, and those looking to burn their own house down for a laugh, because these issues don't end at the edge of the news. There is no edge of the news. The specific policy and editorial strategies proposed in these pages might not fully map all of this territory. The hope, however, is that they stoke conversations around a single, unifying purpose: better journalism, for a better democracy. A healthier forest for all.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I could not have completed this project without the striking insights and even more striking candor of my many respondents. I thank them for their time and trust. Similarly I am very appreciative of those who reviewed and critiqued this piece during the production phase; the final product owes a great deal to that feedback. A hearty thank you, as well, to the entire team at Data & Society and its Media Manipulation Initiative, with a special thanks to Becca Lewis, Caroline Jack, Matt Goerzen, and Francesca Tripodi for their support throughout the project; Patrick Davison for his always-sharp edits, care, and diligence throughout the editing process, and patience with my *slight* dog-with-a-bone tendencies; Lauren Hanson for the research assist; Rati Bishnoi for the much-appreciated editorial and communications perspective and spot-on revision suggestions; Sam Hinds Garcia for one particularly surreal instance of fact checking and for helping guide the ever-expanding project down the comms runway; and danah boyd for the support, thoughtfulness, and, most critically of all, for giving the project a home. Data & Society's Media Manipulation Initiative project lead Joan Donovan deserves special recognition, not only for providing critical feedback and encouragement at every stage of the process, but for directing me to a number of resources on the historical implications of white supremacy within newsrooms, most notably the work of Ida B. Wells. My former Mercer University colleagues and students, particularly students who took my 2017 Public Discourse and Citizenship course, deserve an equally enthusiastic thank you, as do my future colleagues at Syracuse University, who I am so excited to work with (with a preemptive thank you to my SU Communication and Rhetorical Studies students, who I'm sure will contribute greatly to my thinking in many areas). I also appreciate the Communication Department at the University of Illinois at Chicago, particularly Zizi Papacharissi, Zachary McDowell, and their thoughtful and supportive graduate students, for hosting me in Chicago and allowing me to workshop an early draft of this report. I am, additionally, deeply grateful to Andrew Losowsky for the valuable and generous revision suggestions, Caroline Sindors for helping conceptualize how harassment fits into broader conversations about the news media, Felix Simon for inspiring me to develop the redwood grove metaphor into a recurring motif (which itself was inspired by the time I spent in the Arcata Community Forest, in California's inconceivably beautiful Humboldt County), Jason Koebler for going out of his way to be helpful and gracious (as always, you're awesome), Emanuel Maiberg for helping me think through a range of ethical conundrums, and Jessica Beyer, Gabriella Coleman, and Ryan Milner for the soundboarding, feedback, and solidarity through all of it. And WB, LB, KN, BD, LK, AP, LG, WI, NM, JWP, JE and JG, thanks for helping keep my spirits up. Finally, a big thank you to my family, with my apologies, as always, that so many of the things I talk about are distressing (you're in for a real treat, Spike & Littlefoot). Finally, thank you to Maple, my hero of 2017 and beyond.

Design by CStudio Design
Illustrations by Jim Cooke

ENDNOTES

- 1 This reporter did not specifically use the phrase “tipping point,” but they described an identical calculus.
- 2 See Phillips (1974); Gunn and Lester (2012); Bohanna and Wang (2012); Tufecki (2015).
- 3 See McBride (2017); “Recommendations for Reporting on Mass Shootings” (2017).
- 4 See Beckett (2016); “Terrorism and the Media: A Handbook for Journalists” (2017); “Ankara Memorandum on Good Practices for a Multi-Sectoral Approach to Countering Violent Extremism” (2016).
- 5 See IWMF’s “Journalist Safety” section at <https://www.iwmf.org/our-research/journalist-safety/>; and Pen America’s Online Harassment Field Guide at <https://onlineharassmentfieldmanual.pen.org/>.
- 6 The high-profile visibility of this story, as well as the deluge of journalistic and social media critiques it inspired (including a published response by Fausset himself, in which he both stood by his reporting and acknowledged its shortcomings) prompted its inclusion in this section. See p. X-X in Part Two for an explanation of why I have chosen to minimize targeted criticisms of specific articles and journalists.
- 7 See the iterative reporting and network propaganda discussions included in Part Two of the report.

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