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Twitter and White Supremacy: A Love Story

For *DAME Magazine*, October 19, 2017

By Jessie Daniels

The internet has been the biggest advance for white supremacy since the end of Jim Crow.

“I believe that the internet will begin a chain reaction of racial enlightenment that will shake the world by the speed of its intellectual conquest,” former KKK Grand Wizard David Duke [wrote on his website in 1998](#). White supremacists like Duke and Don Black, who started Stormfront—the largest and longest running portal for white supremacy online—saw the potential of the internet for spreading their message early on.

“Pioneering white nationalism on the web was my dad’s goal. That was what drove him from the early ’90s, from beginning of the web,” Don Black’s son, Derek (and Duke’s godson) explained in [a recent interview](#). “We had the latest computers, we were the first people in the neighborhood to have broadband because we had to keep Stormfront running, and so technology and connecting people on the website, long before social media.” Stormfront provided a hub for connections among white supremacists globally, even for children. “When I was a little kid, I would get on chat rooms in the evening ... and I had friends in Australia who I would talk to at a certain hour ... I had friends in Serbia I would talk to at a certain hour, ” Derek said.

While Derek would [leave the movement behind](#) as an adult, his father’s quest to make Stormfront into the gathering place for racial grievance-sharing and conspiracy-theory-spinning forged a set of connections among white nationalists that positioned them well to make the most of social media. Their opportunistic agenda converged with tech companies’ approach to all content as value-neutral. Then, both of these synced up with the peculiarly American anything-goes-approach to free speech. It’s this constellation of factors that prompted legal scholar Peter Breckheimer to refer to the U.S. as a [“haven for hate”](#) online as early as 2002.

When [Twitter launched in 2006](#), it unwittingly gave white supremacists an ideal venue for their hatred. Social media experts like to talk about the [“design](#)

affordances” of a platform, meaning the built-in clues that suggest how a platform is meant to be used. Twitter gained a reputation among some users for its use of hashtags for breaking news and for organizing, as in the [Arab Spring in 2010](#) and [Black Lives Matter in 2013](#). For ideologically committed white supremacists, the affordances of Twitter pointed to new mechanisms for the furtive spread of propaganda and for vicious harassment with little accountability.

The rise of social media platforms like Twitter, 4chan, and Reddit, meant that white nationalists had many places to go online besides Stormfront. It also meant that the spread of white nationalist symbols and ideas could be accelerated and amplified by algorithms.

Take Pepe the Frog, for example, an innocuous [cartoon character](#) that has so thoroughly [changed](#) meaning that in September 2016, the Anti-Defamation League added Pepe the Frog to its database of [online hate symbols](#). It was a transformation that began on 4chan and culminated on Twitter.

“Turning Pepe into a white nationalist icon was one of our original goals,” an anonymous white supremacist on Twitter [told a reporter for the Daily Beast in 2016](#).

The move to remake Pepe began on /r9k/, a 4chan board where a wide variety of users, including hackers, tech guys (and they were mostly guys), libertarians, and white supremacists who migrated from Stormfront, gathered online. The content at 4chan is eclectic, or, as [one writer](#) put it, “a jumble of content, hosting anything from pictures of cute kittens to wildly disturbing images and language.” It’s also one of the most popular websites ever, with 20 million unique visitors a month, [according to founder Christopher \(‘Moot’\) Poole](#). “We basically mixed Pepe in with Nazi propaganda, etc. We built that association [on 4chan],” a [white nationalist who goes by @JaredTSwift](#) said. Once the connection between got mentioned on Twitter by a journalist, white nationalists scored a victory. The mention of the 4chan meme by a “normie” on Twitter was a prank with a big pay-off: [it got them attention](#).

“In a sense, we’ve managed to push white nationalism into a very mainstream position,” [@JaredTSwift](#) said. “Now, we’ve pushed the Overton window,”

referring to the [range of ideas tolerated in public discourse](#). Twitter is the key platform for shaping that discourse. “People have adopted our rhetoric, sometimes without even realizing it. We’re setting up for a massive cultural shift,” [@JaredTSwift said](#). The thinking goes among white supremacists, if today we can get “normies” talking about Pepe the Frog, then tomorrow we can get them to ask the other questions on our agenda: [“Are Jews people?”](#) or [“What about black on white crime?”](#)

“You can’t underestimate 4chan’s role,” [says Keegan Hankes](#), a research analyst at the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Intelligence Project. Hankes sees the more tech-savvy guys in the white nationalist movement “getting their content from 4chan.” Even with 4chan’s influence, for Hankes, who has been observing white nationalists online for several years now, it’s [Reddit that’s become the go-to venue](#) for those seeking the most violent and explicit racism online. The [typical user at Reddit](#), like [at 4chan](#), is young, white and male. Twitter users, on the other hand, are more likely to be [Black or Latinx](#). For white supremacists that want to make sport out of harassing people of color, Twitter is a “target rich” environment.

These platforms are driven by different economic imperatives. While 4chan is a [low-budget](#), sole proprietor operation with no paid employees, Reddit and Twitter are both companies with an interest in turning a profit. And both [face similar dilemmas](#). Twitter is valued at \$13 billion and Reddit at \$500 million, but both struggle to attract buyers and advertisers because of their toxic, racist, sexist content. For Twitter, the decision to allow white supremacists a place on their platform is one that seems to be good for their bottom line, at least in the short term. And for white supremacists, there are two things Twitter offers that 4chan and Reddit do not: an [outsized influence on the news cycle](#) and [lots of people of color](#) to target.

Today, Richard Spencer, one of the organizers of the lethal tiki-torch rally in Charlottesville, tweets from a [blue-check-verified account](#) with more than 75,000 followers. And he is not alone. Twitter accounts such as [@SageGang_](#) and [@WhiteGenocide](#) post violent racism and anti-Semitism on the platform with impunity. When a promoted tweet appeared from a white supremacist website blaring the headline, “United States founded as a White People’s Republic,” Twitter co-founder [Jack Dorsey apologized](#), claiming it was a “mistake.” But, the apology was meaningless; white supremacists

are [still using the platform](#) to advertise their message in ways both subtle and overt.

[One study](#) by J.M. Berger at George Washington University found that “white nationalist movements on Twitter added about 22,000 followers since 2012, an increase of about 600%.” Reliable data on the overall number or percentage of white supremacists on Twitter are hard to come by. Berger’s study includes a network analysis of 4,000 individual white nationalist accounts, but there’s no way of knowing how much of this universe he’s captured with his analysis. Still, even a small handful of white supremacists can create a lot of noise. One of the white nationalists involved in the memeing of Pepe, for example, said that it only took [ten core people](#) with another 30 or so helping occasionally to make that meme take hold. These are tiny numbers given Twitter’s 328 million monthly active users overall.

Targeted Abuse and “Fake” Accounts

Men’s rights activists had been mad about the all-female reboot of *Ghostbusters* for at least a year before it was released in July 2016. Still, few would have anticipated that it would become the focus of white supremacist invective, but it did. The movie featured a Black woman, Leslie Jones, in a prominent role and it appears that her presence alone was enough to enrage white supremacist instigator [Milo Yiannopoulos](#). He posted a negative review of *Ghostbusters on Breitbart* that dissed Jones’s “flat-as-a-pancake black stylings.”

Then all hell broke loose on Twitter. Taking Milo’s lead, white supremacists began to bombard Jones’s timeline with [sexist and racist comments and hateful memes](#). These tweets threatened rape and death, and hurled vile epithets at her. The abuse escalated when Milo began tweeting at Jones directly, and this amped up his followers into a frenzied mob, driving Jones off of Twitter. It was at this point that public pressure and bad press finally convinced Jack Dorsey to personally intervene and permanently ban Milo from the site, and Jones returned.

It often seems arbitrary how and when Twitter removes someone from the site or locks their account. Most recently, these puzzling standards got applied

to Rose McGowan who [had her account locked](#) after tweeting about Harvey Weinstein's sexual abuse. The reality is that there aren't effective platform-wide solutions for those who are targeted for abuse, especially if they're not celebrities. Users who are targeted can "block" offensive accounts, but as Yonatan Zunger, former Google engineer [pointed out](#) recently: "Twitter chose to optimize for traffic at the expense of user experience. That's why GamerGate, that's why Trump, that's why Nazis."

1 Oct



[\(\(\(Yonatan Zunger\)\)\)](#)@vonatanzunger

[Replying to @vonatanzunger](#)

It is insanely complicated, one of the hardest things I've ever worked on, and I *still* know when I'm being bullshitted.



[\(\(\(Yonatan Zunger\)\)\)](#)@vonatanzunger

Twitter chose to optimize for traffic at the expense of user experience. That's why GamerGate, that's why Trump, that's why Nazis.

[4:44 PM - Oct 1, 2017](#)

•
2525 Replies

•
1,398,398 Retweets

•
3,371,371 likes

[Twitter Ads info and privacy](#)

Because the platform puts the burden on the user who is being harassed to block people (a process that takes several clicks), it creates a differential cost to the Leslie Joneses of the world relative to the white supremacists. For the latter, there's very little cost to using the platform and they get to enjoy one of their

favorite past times: harassing and intimidating others from the safe distance of their keyboard.

Indeed, the kind of harassment Leslie Jones faced is exactly what [Black women have had to deal with on Twitter](#), day-in, and day-out, for years. But without the prominence of being Leslie Jones, one doesn't get the benefit of personal intervention from Jack Dorsey.

“It’s the gamification of hate,” says author Mikki Kendall. “I was going to leave Twitter at one point. It just wasn’t usable for me. I would log on and have 2,500 negative comments. One guy who seemed to have an inexhaustible energy would Photoshop my image on top of lynching pictures and tell me I should be ‘raped by dogs,’ that kind of thing.”

When Kendall was living in Tennessee, she says she received a picture of her and her family in a photo that “looked like it had been sighted through a rifle.” She was also doxxed—that is, had her address posted online. She moved shortly thereafter. “I had two minor children in my home then. I had to do something different.” She lives on the southside of Chicago now and says she feels much safer. “No one’s going to come for me here. If they do, I’d like to watch them try.”

Kendall has been deft at figuring out tech-savvy ways to both document and battle online harassment. She did a [“race swap”](#) experiment with a white guy—they traded Twitter avatars. “For me, it was like, *Oh my God, it’s so quiet!* People told me how smart I was and perceptive,” she says. Kendall has also figured out how to turn the tables on the algorithms by coding her own auto-blockers that sniff out potentially harmful Twitter accounts and blocks them.

When I asked her why she thought Twitter wasn’t more responsive to reports of abuse on the site, she said, “Being a white guy on Twitter is a whole other world. I think that what’s happening with Jack and Biz (Twitter executives) is they’re experiencing a whole other Twitter.”

White supremacists have used Twitter to target Jews, as well, in ways both banal and life-threatening. In June 2016 several highly visible Jewish political [reporters began to report a barrage of online harassment](#) that involved a symbolic gesture: triple parentheses placed around their names, like (((this))). The ADL added the triple parentheses to their catalog of hateful symbols. One report called them [“the digital equivalent of a yellow star,”](#) intended to separate Jews from the rest of the population and pave the way for worse.

Part of what made the symbols effective is that they were hard to track on Twitter. The search tool built into Twitter didn't reveal the parentheses (most search tools omit punctuation). Without a search function, the use of the symbols as slur goes undetected. If it wanted to, Twitter could specifically monitor the (((echoes))) symbol, and shut down accounts that were using it. Twitter could also make the term searchable. But it has done neither.

Reporter Kurt Eichenwald, who has epilepsy, was targeted by a Twitter account that sent him a GIF containing a strobe light. When he clicked on it, the flashing light sent him into [a seizure](#). The FBI began investigating and someone was arrested in the case, but few details have been released. What's clear is that Twitter hasn't made substantive changes to the platform since this happened. Eichenwald says he has received at least [40 more strobe light images](#) since the first attack.

A favorite tactic of propagandists is to [disguise themselves online](#). Twitter is particularly appealing for those who want to hide their identities because, unlike Facebook, it doesn't have a [“real-name” policy](#) (requiring a name that appears on a government-issued ID) and it doesn't prohibit automated accounts (also known as bots). The attacks on Jones and Eichenwald, for instance, involved Twitter accounts that disguised the identity of the perps. And, white supremacists on Twitter have discovered a way to make this an orchestrated campaign of racism through the systematic creation of [“fake Black people” accounts](#).

“When you have time, create a fake black person account,” wrote Andrew Anglin, at his virulently racist website the Daily Stormer in November 2016. “Just go on black Twitter and see what they look like, copy that model. Start filling it with rap videos and booty-shaking or whatever else these blacks post,”

Anglin said. He claimed there were already over 1,000 such accounts at the time.

Love Triangle With An 800-Pound Gorilla

White supremacists [fell in love with Donald J. Trump](#) in early 2016. Until then, they'd been suspicious of him and his run for the presidency, chiefly due to his "globalist" (a.k.a. Jewish) son-in-law Jared Kushner. They quickly set aside those concerns after a few opportune retweets from the Donald.

Bob Whitaker, [a committed white supremacist](#) according to the SPLC, worked for years to promulgate the racist meme "white genocide." Whitaker's two-word tagline conveys a key tenet of contemporary white supremacist ideology: that immigration, multiculturalism, interracial marriage, and feminism are excuses to not only dilute the influence of white culture, but to get rid of white people entirely. (Hence, the Charlottesville rallies' chant, "You will not replace us.") Whitaker began posting the phrase "white genocide" on various forums like 4chan and Reddit in 2015, and then moved to Twitter where he would sometimes tweet directly to [@realDonaldTrump](#).

In late January 2016, Trump recirculated a tweet from Whitaker's ["@WhiteGenocideTM" account that insulted his opponent Jeb Bush](#). The common disclaimer that "RT's are not endorsements" might have held sway, except that he did it again. Within a few days, Trump had retweeted [@WhiteGenocideTM](#) a second time, then a third. Although his campaign tried to dismiss these as "accidents" or "mistakes," those on the far right were convinced that he was acknowledging support for their ideas.

Andrew Anglin of the Daily Stormer read the retweets as endorsements. "Obviously, most people will be like 'obvious accident, no harm done. Meanwhile, we here at the Daily Stormer will be all like 'wink wink wink wink wink,'" [Anglin wrote](#).

Clearly, white supremacist Twitter loves Donald Trump. Following his initial retweets of the Whitaker account, by mid-March 2016 an [analysis of the key](#)

[influencers](#) using the hashtag #WhiteGenocide found that 67.5 percent of them were following @realDonaldTrump.

And, [Trump loves white supremacist Twitter](#). According to social media expert Marshall Kirkpatrick who [analyzed](#) Trump's retweets during early 2016, "It turns out that Donald Trump mostly retweets white supremacists saying nice things about him." Of the 21 people retweeted in one particular week, Kirkpatrick found that six follow major white-nationalist accounts and 13 of them follow multiple accounts that have used the #whitegenocide hashtag.

Unfortunately for everyone of goodwill, candidate Trump became president. He continues to tweet from the White House, the golf course, his residence, anywhere he can. When asked recently about the president's Twitter feed, a panel of three *New York Times* journalists covering the White House, agreed that it offers a "[remarkably transparent window](#)" into his thinking. "Oh, come on," *New York Times* White House correspondent Peter Baker responded when asked if it was possible to ignore the president's tweets. "So, if we didn't write about the tweets, the 40 million people reading them—and the other millions more who would be retweeting—would suddenly not pay attention, or not care?" [Baker said](#). It's not just the *New York Times*, all the cable news networks now routinely report on his tweets. There are occasional calls [to ban Trump](#) for [violating their Terms of Service agreement](#), but it's little more than a thought experiment because Twitter [can't afford to ban him](#).

The minute-by-minute updates create a feedback loop that amplifies both Trump's power and Twitter's influence.

Jemele Hill, an on-air personality for ESPN, recently used her Twitter account to say "Donald Trump is a white supremacist that largely surrounds himself w/ other white supremacists." As Black feminist scholar Brittney Cooper asked about Hill's tweet, "[Where is the lie?](#)", denials came rushing from the White House, along with a call for Hill to be fired from ESPN for the tweet. She has [since been suspended](#) for a tweet about the #TakeAKnee protests, with Trump congratulating the move from the Twitter peanut gallery.

On Twitter, Trump and white supremacists are in a racists-loving-each-other-feedback-loop through retweets while they simultaneously use the platform to

bully, harass and threaten Black women, Jews, and anyone else who opposes them. With each retweet they push the window of acceptable political discourse further along the path from hate speech to violence. Meanwhile, Twitter dithers.

The company's sporadic, impartial effort to systematically deal with white supremacists (and other harassers, including Trump) is revealing. It's rooted in Twitter's decision to prioritize driving traffic and its investors' returns over everything else. For white supremacists, that hands-off approach is all they need to exploit the platform for their own ends. And, it pays dividends for them in attention, in followers, and in entertainment value.

Simply put, white supremacists love Twitter because it loves them back.