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Racism in Modern Information and Communication Technologies

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“Racism in Modern Information and Communication Technologies”

**Keynote for the 10th session of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Elaboration of
Complementary Standards to the International Convention on the Elimination
of All Forms of Racial Discrimination**

Palais des Nations, Room XXI

Geneva, Switzerland

9 April 2019, 3pm

delivered by

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I. Introduction

Good afternoon. I want to thank Ad Hoc Committee on the Elaboration of Complementary Standards to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination for this 10th Session and very timely convening.

I would especially like to thank the Chairperson-Rapporteur, H.E. Taonga Mushayavanhu and Gloria Nwabuogu, for inviting me. I am honored to be here and to be able to share some of my thoughts with you about the pressing issue of racism in modern information and communication technologies.

I would like to take this opportunity to publicly affirm the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination of 2016. I specifically want to call attention to Article 4, which condemns propaganda and organizations based on the idea of racial superiority. Article 4 calls for incitements to racial violence, or hate speech to be criminalized, and for racist organizations to be outlawed. My research over thirty years has primarily focused on this area, with particular attention to racial superiority (what I refer to as “white supremacy” or “white nationalism”). While my work originally focused exclusively on the U.S. manifestations of this phenomenon, the changing forms of information and communication technologies have reshaped the contours of research, requiring a more global and international focus. In addition, the outsized influence of U.S.-based tech companies around the world that operate with little governmental oversight, has facilitated the global spread of white supremacy, and this too is now part of my research.

I first saw the power of white supremacy online first in the 1990s in my classroom at a suburban university on Long Island, when I took the students in my sociology class into a computer lab. At this predominantly white institution, one student typed into a search engine “KKK,” another student typed in “Martin Luther King,” to look up the

American civil rights leader. Both students ended up at white supremacist sites.

It was that experience with my students that launched the research for my second book, [Cyber Racism](#) (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), which examines the globally networked spread of white supremacy, the covert use of racist propaganda online, and the role of US-based tech companies steeped in a peculiar understanding of free speech that facilitate the spread of this hateful ideology. I will say more about the research later in my remarks.

When I began my research into white supremacy in the early 1990s, I had to travel eleven hours by car to an archive of printed publications and newsletters in order to collect and analyze white supremacist rhetoric. That research is still in print in the book, [White Lies](#) (NY: Routledge), published in 1997. It was at about the time, the mid- to late-1990s, that the rise of the popular Internet began to change many social relations, including the way white supremacism spread globally. I began to study the way that the groups I had examined in printed media were, and were not, making their way onto the Internet. For those interested in spreading white supremacist ideology, they no longer needed to access printers, paper or copy machines – the analog tools of a quickly fading era of communication. And, just as important, for those interested in finding such ideology, they could do so easily via the Internet. And, for a whole swath of people online, they were no vulnerable to inadvertent exposure to white supremacist ideology.

White supremacists like David Duke, and like Don Black, who started Stormfront— for decades, the largest portal for white supremacy online—saw the potential of the Internet for spreading their message early on. For example, former KKK Grand Wizard David Duke wrote on his website in 1998, “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.” His words foreshadowed not “racial enlightenment,” but the use of the then emerging information and communication technologies to spread white supremacist ideas and to incite racial hatred and violence.

In the remarks that follow, I will focus on six key points:

1. recent attack in Christchurch, New Zealand as an illustration of this globally networked phenomenon;
2. white supremacists are early adopters of technology and opportunists;
3. an emerging technology and media ecosystem that is facilitating the global spread of white supremacy;
4. the outsized influence globally of US-based tech companies;
5. the economics of the global spread of the far right;
6. some policy recommendations to curb the global spread of white supremacy through information and communication technologies.

II. The Recent Attack in Christchurch, NZ & The Globally Networked Far Right

We are living in a rather remarkable sociopolitical moment as we bear witness to a rapidly spreading of globally networked far right that is increasingly violent. We can see this violence in the horrendous attack in Christchurch, New Zealand in which 50 were killed; in the murder of 11 people at a synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 9 at a church in Charleston, South Carolina, all in the United States; and in recent attacks on political figures in Europe: the murder of British Labor MP Jo Cox in 2016 by a white supremacist; in 2017 Andreas Hollstein, a refugee- and immigrant-welcoming mayor of Altena, Germany was stabbed (but survived the attack); and, in 2018 in Pawel Adamowicz, mayor of Gdansk, Poland, a proponent of human rights for LGBT people, was stabbed to death during a charity event.

According to a recent report in *The New York Times*, the shooter in the Christchurch, New Zealand massacre said that he drew inspiration from white extremist terrorism attacks in Norway, the United States, Italy, Sweden and the United Kingdom. He also made shrewd use of social media to ensure that his actions received maximum attention from broadcast media. His references to those attacks in other parts of the world place him in an informal global network of white extremists whose violent attacks are occurring with greater frequency.

The NYT's analysis of recent terrorist attacks found that at least a third of white extremist killers since 2011 were inspired by others who perpetrated similar attacks, and these killers found such inspiration online. The connections between the killers span continents and highlight how the Internet and social media have facilitated the spread of white supremacist ideology and violence. For example, a school shooter in New Mexico (in the United States) corresponded with a gunman who attacked a mall in Munich, Germany. Altogether, they killed 11 people (New York Times, "Attacks by White Extremists Are Growing. So Are Their Connections," 3 April 2019).

Please note that I said, "found inspiration online," and not "were recruited." Some writers, both scholars and journalists, have voiced concern that white supremacists "recruit" online but there is little empirical evidence for this. Based on my research, the reality of white supremacy online is a good deal more complex than the idea that "recruitment" suggests. The confluence of global linkages facilitated by information and communication technologies means that through true believers in white supremacy can connect around a white identity that is translocal, in other words that crosses national boundaries.

It is more accurate I believe to talk about "radicalization" that happens both online and offline. But the path to radicalization into white supremacist violence is not clear. For those who view the world through what scholar Joe Feagin calls "the white racial frame," (Feagin, Routledge, 2009), seeing a world from a white perspective, then listening to YouTube videos or watching Facebook live videos created with white supremacist messages or even participating at sites like Stormfront may resonate with their pre-existing worldview, and they may never attend a meeting of any group nor engage in violence. They may have their view of the world reinforced, and they may help shift white supremacist ideas into the mainstream of political discourse, and they may be emboldened to elect political leaders who share those same views and make them into policy. In my work, I am equally concerned with the mainstreaming of white supremacy into national politics as I am with extremist white nationalist social movements, but these can be difficult to tease apart, and increasingly more so. I want to be clear that encountering white supremacist content online is a different dynamic

than being recruited into a social movement organization, and different still from being inspired to violent action (See Daniels, *Cyber Racism*, Ch.4).

The greatest predictor of joining a social movement organization is having a close friend or family member join that movement. Sometimes, individuals are cultivated as new members, as Christian Picciolini narrates his experience with Neo-Nazi skinheads (*White American Youth: My Descent Into America's Most Violent Hate Movement--and How I Got Out*, 2017). But the fact is, we simply do not know how to predict who will become violent after encountering white supremacist content online. We only know that some will.

We also know that violent attacks by white supremacists in the U.S. tend to be more lethal, resulting in more deaths. The largest attack to date occurred in 1995, in Oklahoma City, when a white supremacist blew up the Murrah Federal Building, killing 168 people, including 19 children. This event was said to have inspired the bombing and mass shooting by a white supremacist in Oslo, Norway in 2011, that left 77 people dead.

The attack in Oslo, in turn, was an object of fascination for the Christchurch killer and at least four other white extremists.

Thus, the massacre in Christchurch in 2019 is connected to other white supremacist attacks, going back to Oklahoma City in 1995, connections all made possible by the rise of globally connected information and media technologies. According to a 2014 report by Southern Poverty Law Center, more than 100 deaths can be linked directly to Stormfront members (SPLC, "White Homicide"). And, according to a recent report from the ADL, attackers with ties to right-wing extremist movements killed at least 50 people in 2018 alone. A November, 2018 report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies found that "the number of terrorist attacks by far-right perpetrators rose over the past decade, more than quadrupling between 2016 and 2017." Furthermore, the report concluded there has been a rise in far-right attacks in Europe, "jumping 43 percent between 2016 and 2017" (CSIS, "The Rise of Far-Right Extremism in the United States," 2018).

By my estimate, more than 2,500 people have been killed by white supremacist violence worldwide since 1995 and the rise of the popular Internet. This is a rough estimate, to be sure, because there is no global tracking of such violence. The number of people killed and the proliferation of the digital information and communication technologies is a case of correlation, not causation, but it should nevertheless give us pause about the ready availability of white supremacy propaganda online and the very real danger it poses to human life, such as those lost at Christchurch.

III. White Supremacists: Early Adopters & Opportunists

Avowed white supremacists are early adopters of new innovations in media and technology. And, they are expert at finding opportunities to exploit these innovations for their own nefarious ends. This is why I have called them “innovation opportunists” (Daniels, 2018. “The Algorithmic Rise of the ‘Alt-Right,’” *Contexts*, 17(1), pp.60-65). Part of what I observed in the transition of white supremacist rhetoric from the print-only-era to the Internet era is that they were very good at exploiting this paradigm shift. They understood this innovation early on, and saw ways to exploit it to further their ideological goals.

There is historical precedent for the innovation opportunism of white supremacy. When the filmmaker D.W. Griffith launched his signature film, *Birth of a Nation* (1915) - regarded as “disgustingly racist” - white supremacists in the United States seized upon it (and upon emerging film technology) when it was released. At the film’s premiere, members of the Klan paraded outside the theatre, celebrating its depiction of their group’s rise as a sign of southern White society’s recovery from the humiliation of defeat in the Civil War. When Griffith screened the film at the White House for Woodrow Wilson, who is quoted in the film, the president declared *Birth of a Nation* “history writ with lightening.” Capitalizing on this new technology, the KKK created film companies and produced their own feature films with titles like *The Toll of Justice* (1923) and *The Traitor Within* (1924), screening them at outdoor events, churches, and schools. By the middle of the 1920s, the Klan claimed an estimated five million members in the U.S. This growth was aided by white supremacists’ recognition of the opportunity to use the new technology of motion pictures to spread their message, and it also

garnered political power for the Klan, as they operated as an effective political machine in many regions of the country.

Almost a century later, another generation saw the same potential to spread white supremacy in digital technologies.

As Derek Black, son of Don Black (founder of Stormfront), said in a recent interview reflecting on his childhood in the 1990s, they were a family of early tech adopters, always looking for innovations that they could exploit for the cause of racism:

“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. 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. ...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.” (New York Times, “The Daily’ Transcript: Interview with Former White Nationalist Derek Black, 22 August 2017).

For decades, Stormfront provided a hub for connections among white supremacists globally, even for children and teenagers. That one white supremacist portal has now been joined by others, such as The Daily Stormer, run by Andrew Anglin and Andrew Auernheimer, now the biggest neo-Nazi website globally and based on servers in the U.S.

In addition to offering connections, the pre-2008 Internet offered something else. The shift from the “one-to-many” paradigm of broadcast news and print media with its gatekeepers gave way to the “many-to-many” media paradigm of the early Internet, without gatekeepers. The “Guidelines for Posting,” at Stormfont.org, refer to this when they say: “Our mission is to provide information not available in the controlled news media and to build a community of White activists working for the survival of our people.” The low barrier to entry and the absence of gatekeepers on the world wide web was a boon to those who wanted to

create racist propaganda, like those at Stormfront whose motto, “white pride worldwide,” echoes the appeal of the Internet, and for those who wanted to find such content.

To me, one of the most interesting and disturbing things I found in the research for the *Cyber Racism* book was the appearance of what I call cloaked sites, a precursor in many ways to today’s “fake news.” A form of propaganda, cloaked sites are: websites that intentionally disguise authorship in order to conceal a political agenda, such as the one my student discovered. The student who I mentioned earlier searched for “Martin Luther King,” and ended up a white supremacist website. It was cloaked, in the sense that the authorship was disguised and, at first glance it appeared to be a tribute page to Dr. King. But, upon closer inspection and scrolling all the way to the bottom of the page where it clearly says “Hosted by Stormfront,” there is a link connecting to a discussion forum to debate Dr. King’s legacy with white supremacists (and web usability studies tell us that most of us, around 85%, never scroll all the way to the bottom of a page). (Daniels, "Cloaked websites: propaganda, cyber-racism and epistemology in the digital era." *New Media & Society* 11, no. 5, 2009: 659-683).

What is the goal of such racist propaganda, one might ask? The same as it is today: to roll back hard-won moral, social and political victories. In this instance, the goal is to call into question the entire civil rights movement and its political victories by undermining Dr. King’s personal reputation. There are other cloaked sites to call into question the end of slavery by suggesting that slavery “wasn’t that bad.” This strategy, shifting the range of ideas it is acceptable to discuss, is known as moving the “Overton Window.” It is the same strategy the KKK was using when they started film companies in the early 1900s and again in the 1990s.

Shifting the Overton Window is the same strategy that white supremacists used when they would appear on television talk shows, in the 1990s. The format of such television shows was often a kind of debate between the far right and civil rights leaders. The talk show hosts believed they were solving social problems through such programming. As Geraldo Rivera put it, “we’re exposing them to the light, and, just like cockroaches, they will run when the light is turned on.” However, my reading of white supremacist publications at that time

suggests that the groups exploited their appearances on these shows to gain a measure of legitimacy, as they reported receiving hundreds of letters in support of their views after each television appearance. The debate format simultaneously privileged the discourse of white supremacists by raising it to the same level as that of civil rights leaders, and does the work of shifting the Overton Window, shifting the range of ideas it is acceptable to discuss. The shows, for their part, gained ratings. The episode of 'Geraldo' in which white supremacists and their opponents began an on-air brawl, resulting in the host's broken nose, was one of the highest rated talk shows ever. (Daniels, *White Lies*, pp. 24-5).

At every new development in information and communication technologies, these "innovation opportunists" see emerging media paradigms as openings for their ideas.

III. Finding Opportunity in the post-2008 Tech and Media Ecosystem

Today, a new paradigm is emerging and no one is sure what to call it. In about 2008 (when I finished working on the *Cyber Racism* book and when Barack Obama first got elected president of the United States), the Internet began to change in important ways. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube began to emerge and these operated algorithmically. And Google started to become a verb meaning "to search," reflecting its dominance of the search engine business. Amazon was expanding beyond selling books to selling us everything. And, Apple was making sure that every person on the planet had little white earbuds tethered to one of their products. For now, I'm going to refer to all of these changes, and a few more, as "the post-2008 Internet and media ecosystem."

What the post-2008 ecosystem meant for white supremacists who wanted to spread their ideology is that they no longer needed to get booked onto talk shows, nor did they need to create their own platforms (such as Stormfront or The Daily Stormer). Now, they could use social media platforms created for everyone to use, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter and search engines, such as Google, reviews on

Amazon. And, on each of these platforms, white supremacists have seized on these innovations and found opportunistic ways to exploit them.

One crucial development in this post-2008 Internet and media ecosystem was the rise of “algorithms.” Algorithms refer to a process or set of rules to be followed in calculations by a computer. Put another way, algorithms are the mathematical formulas behind why we see advertisements for certain items we’ve searched for online follow us to other websites. Search engines use algorithms to serve up answers to our queries. And social media platforms use algorithms to spread content, including racist content.

Algorithms are a key feature of the currently emerging tech and media ecosystem and a key feature of the way racism spreads online. As scholar Dr. Safiya Noble explains in her important book *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, in searches for “gorillas,” the top image results are pictures of people of African descent. When typing in the phrase “why are black women so,” Google offers autocomplete suggestions such as “angry” and “loud.” Ideas about race, and indeed the racism we bring to search engines, gets embedded into search algorithms because that is the data that those algorithms draw upon (Noble, NYU Press, 2018).

Algorithms also accelerate and amplify memes, like the “Pepe the Frog” a meme that the far right claims helped to elect Trump (this is nonsense, of course, but this is their claim). Pepe the Frog, was an innocuous cartoon character that had 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 moved to Twitter, and then got mentioned in a campaign speech by Hillary Clinton. “Turning Pepe into a white nationalist icon was one of our original goals,” an anonymous white supremacist on Twitter told a reporter (“How Pepe the Frog Became a Nazi Trump Supporter and Alt-Right Symbol,” *The Daily Beast*, 26 May 2016). Whether condemning them as “deplorables” or agreeing with them and calling them “good people on both sides,” the game for white supremacists online is to have

politicians acknowledge them in any way. They then spin this as a victory.

InfoWars, Brietbart & FoxNews

But algorithms that speed up and amplify memes are not the only story in this post-2008 world of the Internet. The far right has made prodigious use of information and communication technologies to spread conspiracy theories, racist propaganda, and to gin up hatred toward immigrants, refugees, and Muslims and, anyone else that opposes them, including me.

I want to share a personal, but relevant story here. The orderly rhythm of my life was thrown into a tsunami of sustained chaos when I was attacked online by the far right in the fall of 2017. And, it was also fascinating to see this right-wing Internet and media ecosystem activated against me, and I tell this story here to trace the pathway of the story about me. I got a text from a friend saying, “damn InfoWars, you ok?” and I knew then that I’d been made a target for some very mild remarks I’d made on Twitter. From Alex Jones’ InfoWars, both a YouTube channel and a website where he hawks vitamin supplements and conspiracy theories, my story then traveled to Brietbart and Tucker Carlson’s show at *FoxNews*. From there, it spread like an invasive plant through dozens and dozens of far-right media and Internet outlets, that then became targeted abuse (more about which in a moment).

One of those sites, Brietbart, the website periodically run by Steve Bannon, has been called the “platform of the alt-right,” and routinely features stories that are white nationalist talking points about “globalism” (a reference to a Jewish cabal), and “economic nationalism,” and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Since leaving the Trump White House, Bannon has been spreading his brand of white nationalism throughout Europe (“The Brink,” documentary film, 2019).

As for Tucker Carlson, in a March, 2019 leaked internal chat logs from Identity Europa, a white supremacist group in the U.S., showed that many members were huge fans of Tucker Carlson and the ideas he

espoused every night on FoxNews to millions of viewers. In one exchange in the chat logs, an Identity Europa user described a “Twitter food chain” where information passes from white supremacist podcasts and YouTube shows, to Rep. Steve King and commentator Ann Coulter, to Tucker Carlson, and on to President Trump. A similar comment was made two months later: “Tucker is basically the only funnel from the base to [Trump] at this point.” (Forward, “Why Do White Supremacists Love Tucker Carlson So Much?” 17 March 2019). Carlson’s show on Fox News is, of course, part of the Murdoch media empire, which some have argued is a key element in fueling the global rise of the far right (New York Times, “How Rupert Murdoch’s Influence Remade the World,” 3 April 2019).

Targeted Abuse Online

I want to return here to the issue of targeted abuse online. For as long as there has been a popular Internet, there has been targeted abuse online. In *Cyber Racism*, I told the story of Bonnie Jouhari who was so harassed online and offline by a white supremacist that she had to quit her job and move to a different state. At UC-Irvine, a student used the online directory of student names and emails to find Asian-sounding names and sent threatening, racist hate mail to them. These are both stories from the 1990s.

When hate-filled messages began pouring through my Twitter account, my website, my Facebook page in 2017 it was unsettling. Eventually, a deluge came through two email accounts, where I got hundreds of repulsive messages every day for over a month with rape threats, death threats and, for those who couldn’t be bothered to commit murder themselves, invitations to kill myself.

This kind of targeted abuse is sport for white supremacists and other online harassers. And, it is made easier by the platforms.

Take for example, Twitter. On this platform, Black and Latinx users are over-indexed, meaning they are more likely to be users. For white supremacists who want to make sport out of harassing minoritized people, the Twitter platform then becomes a “target rich” environment.

This kind of targeted abuse was most infamously played out in the attack on Leslie Jones, an actress of African descent on television and in films. Upon release of the film, “Ghostbusters,” in which Jones had a leading role, white supremacists were enraged by this. Following the suggestions of Milo Yanapolous, white supremacists began to bombard the actress Leslie Jones’ 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, founder and CEO of Twitter, to personally intervene and permanently ban Milo from the site, and Jones returned.

It appears arbitrary how and when Twitter removes someone from the site or locks their account. The reality is that there aren’t effective platform-wide solutions for those who are targeted for abuse, including celebrities. Users who are targeted can “block” offensive accounts, but this is an overly burdensome solution that relies on the effort of the person being attacked.

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 white supremacists who want to attack people for sport, 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 women of African descent have had to deal with on Twitter, day-in, and day-out, for years.

The post-2008 Internet and media ecosystem is no longer just broadcast (or print) news of the “one-to-many” era. And, it is also not the “many-to-many” or peer-to-peer sharing of the early Internet. It is algorithmically accelerated propaganda that is then broadcast out, and re-shared on social media, creating a reverberating feedback loop that systematically spreads white supremacy. We, scholars, may not know what to call this yet, but white nationalists see and understand this emerging tech and media ecosystem as a set of opportunities to exploit.

The spread of white supremacist ideology and harassment through this post-2008 Internet and media ecosystem is at least partly the result of a US-based tech industry with outsized influence.

IV. The Outsized Influence of US-Based Tech Industry

The Big Five

There are currently five undisputed rulers of the consumer technology industry and they are all based in the United States: Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google/Alphabet and Microsoft. The Big Five, or sometimes the “Frightful Five,” came to dominance when there was an ideal confluence of events for their enterprises. There was in the early 2000’s “an incredible decrease in the cost of I.T., much more network connectivity and [a] rise of mobile phones. Those three things came together, and [the Big Five was], perfectly poised to grow and take advantage of the change,” according to Geoffrey Parker, author of Platform Revolution (Norton, 2016).

“These platforms are inescapable; you may opt out of one or two of them, but together, they form a gilded mesh blanketing the entire US economy,” writes Farhad Manjoo (New York Times, 20 January 2016). And, these companies influence the way the Internet is experienced in the rest of the world.

The U.S. holds a disproportionate amount of economic resources and wields an extraordinary amount of cultural and military power in the global context. Therefore, U.S. policies exert an enormous amount of influence over the rest of the world. The prevailing view in the U.S. toward white supremacy online is that typically one of intentional disregard and indifference, in which U.S. policymakers are virtually absent from the international scene. For example, in 2000 the United States failed to send any representatives to an international conference on Internet extremism hosted by the German Justice Minister, and has, ever since to my knowledge, failed to send any official representatives to UN-hosted events on restricting white supremacy online. This disregard on the part of the United States dramatically reduces the likelihood that nations who wish to regulate white supremacy online will be able to do so. The U.S. also undermines international efforts by operating as a “safe haven” for white supremacy online through lax regulation, as well as the primary creator of this content globally.

These ‘Big Five’ emerged from a specific, geographic, social, and cultural context. Here, I want to describe a bit of that context and how it still shapes the U.S.-tech approach to racism online.

Cyberlibertarianism: Information Just Wants to Be Free

Many of the technological advances that gave rise to the Internet were created in Northern California, much of it in and around Palo Alto Research Center (PARC). Following on those technological innovations were a remarkable series of innovations in business that gave rise to a new industrial sector centered in San Jose, California just south of San Francisco in an area dubbed “Silicon Valley.” And the inequalities of race, class, and gender of the social context were reinscribed in this industrial sector, through who got funded by Venture Capitalists (VC), who designed, built and worked in technology.

One of the innovators of the early Internet, John Perry Barlow, the previous year (1996) had, and continues to have, a big influence on the industry. Barlow, a Wyoming cattle rancher, and a former lyricist for the Grateful Dead, went on to co-found the Electronic Frontier Foundation, which still shapes tech policy. Barlow’s manifesto, *A Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace*, conceives of the Internet as a

“place,” much like the imaginary American frontier in a Hollywood western, that should remain free from control by “Governments of the Industrial World,” those “weary giants of flesh and steel.” Barlow goes on to say that “we,” by which he meant those people online in 1996, would “create a civilization of the Mind in Cyberspace. May it be more humane and fair than the world your governments have made before” (Barlow, 1996, p. 2).

Barlow variously described himself as an anarchist or cyberlibertarian and believed that no government should have any power over the Internet and that the “. . . only thing that is dangerous is the one that is designed to stop the free flow of information” (Barlow, 1996).

Barlow’s cyberlibertarian view remains, more than twenty-five years later, foundational for the current tech industry. The cyberlibertarian ethos that “a select number of essential freedoms—including freedom of speech—are understood to be absolute and not negotiable or subject to being balanced” (Nemes, 2002, p. 193), is one that pervades the industry.

The cyberlibertarian view of the Internet is one rooted in a particular American geography imbued with a frontier ethos, tied to both a free-market analysis of the Internet and to a very recent (mis)reading of the First Amendment as an absolute protection of all speech.

Understanding the full meaning of Barlow’s pithy aphorism that the First Amendment is a “local ordinance” in cyberspace takes on new meaning when we consider the specific context of the emergence of an absolutist defense of free speech online. Of course, this is not a view of the First Amendment that is universally shared, not even within the U.S.

Framing of white supremacy online as a free speech issue simultaneously accomplishes several social facts. It enables the formation of a translocal white identity through the Internet and it shifts focus away from any analysis of the human rights of those targeted by violent white supremacy online, people who are members of already marginalized groups. Arguments in favor of an absolutist interpretation of the First Amendment are the product of historically, socially and culturally situated knowledge.

The resistance to restricting white supremacy online reveals a real lack of awareness about both the history and contemporary reality of racial inequality in the U.S. Often, the embrace of restrictions for white supremacy online in other countries is contextualized by reference to specific histories of oppression which presumably the U.S. is free from. For example, in Goldsmith and Wu's *Who Controls the Internet?* the authors briefly offer an explanation for why some countries ban hate speech online. They write:

“Germany bans Nazi speech for yet a different reason, the same reason that Japan’s Constitution outlaws aggressive war: it is a nation still coming to grips with the horrors it committed in its past, and it is terrified that they could happen again.”

Here, Goldsmith and Wu locate aggression, war, and “horrors” within countries outside the U.S. and within a distant “past,” far removed in time, distance and political reality from the contemporary U.S. The authors here also read a kind of neurosis onto these national responses as they describe Germany and Japan as “terrified” this could happen again, rather than, say, “taking reasonable precautions” or “learning the lessons of history.” Thus, while the history of fascism and totalitarianism are seen as relevant for understanding restrictions on white supremacy online in Germany and Japan, there is a tendency to ignore or downplay the formative effect of colonialism, ongoing and systemic racism and the white racial frame on the acceptance of white supremacy online emanating from the U.S. My research suggests that some version of this cyberlibertarian view, combined with an absolutist view of free speech, are core values of the technology industry and reflected in writing by key figures writing about technology, such as Wu and Goldsmith.

Colorblindness

Alongside cyberlibertarianism, is a belief in colorblindness. This is the desire to believe that there is no racism operating in algorithms, platforms or tech companies. This is an ardently held belief among

many in technology because it helps sustain a fiction about tech industry leaders' own innocence and blamelessness in a racially unequal society. When this core value is set in relief against the statistics about the industry, there is a notable contrast between the fantasy of colorblindness and the reality of racial inequality. Among tech startups, the vast majority are White men (only [about 1%](#) of entrepreneurs who receive venture capital are Black, between [2-5% are women](#)). The overwhelming Whiteness of those who secure venture capital and then go on to become industry leaders calls into question the notion of a level playing field in the tech industry. Such evidence of systemic bias makes many people in the tech industry angry because it calls into question the supposed meritocratic basis for their achievements, and thereby, their complicity in a biased system. Despite the prevailing belief that race does not affect technology, research shows that it does.

Race Built into the Infrastructure & Design of the Internet

There are a myriad ways race is built into technology that may go unremarked upon, but that nevertheless shape the experience, the affordances, and the constraints of these technologies. These are just a few of the available examples. The DOS commands of “master” disk and “slave” disk prompt, as Anna Everett has pointed out, returns us to the master/slave narrative into the level of code (Everett, 2002). Racial categories are coded into the drop-down menus of nearly every site that collects data from users (Nakamura, 2002). The algorithms of search engines, and their autocomplete features, often suggest racism to users and bring them to racist sites (Noble, 2018). And, the work of Simone Browne (2015) and Ruha Benjamin (2019), point us toward the technological underpinnings of a racialized surveillance state that benefits capitalism.

Despite all of this evidence that race is coded into the design of these platforms, the ideology of color-blindness -- both in the tech industry and in popular understandings of technology -- serves a key mechanism that enables white nationalists to exploit technological innovations.

V. Economics of the Global Spread of the Far Right

The economics of the global spread of the far right is important, but receives far too little attention from journalists and from scholars. This is my meager attempt at correcting this, and what follows is necessarily partial and incomplete, but allow me to sketch out some of what we know.

Dark Money

Journalist Jane Mayer has documented the role of “dark money,” that is, the difficult to trace funds raised for the purpose of influencing elections by non-profit organizations that are not required to disclose the identities of their donors. Much of her focus is on the billionaire Koch brothers who have dedicated much of their fortunes to push forward a far-right agenda. She notes the Koch family ties to the far-right John Birch Society in the U.S.

Others in the billionaire class have also dedicated part of their fortune to promote a far-right agenda. For example, Rebekah Mercer, daughter of hedge-fund billionaire and libertarian Robert Mercer, has been called the “First Lady of the Alt-Right” for her \$10 million underwriting of Brietbart News, (sometimes) helmed by Steve Bannon who called it the “platform of the alt-right.”

Cryptocurrency

There is also the issue of cryptocurrency and the far right. Richard Spencer has called “Bitcoin the currency of the alt right.” John Bambenek of @NeoNaziWallets has been tracking payments in bitcoin to the far right. He says “it’s not clear what they are spending this money on.”

Large Media Conglomerates

But, it’s not all dark money or cryptocurrency. Some of it is quite out in the open. For example, Rupert Murdoch’s influence through his global media empire is huge, and some have suggested, a leading contributor, if not cause, of the rise of the far right.

Social Media Platforms are (Mostly) Companies Seeking Profit

Different 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 Reddit and Twitter 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 outsize influence on the news cycle and lots of people of color to target.

Twitter is a company, and its sporadic, impartial effort to systematically deal with white supremacists (and other harassers) is revealing. This reluctance is 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.

Yonatan Zunger, former Google engineer told me 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," (personal exchange).

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 anyone else who opposes them. With each retweet they push the Overton window of acceptable political discourse further along the path from hate speech to violence. Meanwhile, Twitter dithers on this as it tries to increase its revenue and attract a buyer.

VI. Moving Toward Transformation: Policy Recommendations

Witnessing the global spread of white supremacy online is very distressing and can, at times, appear to be an insurmountable problem, but I don't believe that it is. There are concrete steps that we can take to curb the global spread of white supremacy online, if we want to. These include five main areas: a) agreement that white supremacy is a violent threat to human life, dignity and rights; b) establish a global database to document white supremacist violence; c) create international regulation that holds tech companies accountable for contributing to the spread of white supremacy; d) develop racial literacy for those working in the tech industry, to be able to recognize and impede white supremacy online when they see it; e) create de-radicalization protocols for those who have been exposed to white supremacist content and are vulnerable to its influence.

a. White Supremacy is a Threat to Human Life, Dignity and Rights

Here, I return to Article 4, which condemns propaganda and organizations based on the idea of racial supremacism. Article 4 calls for incitements to racial violence, or hate speech to be criminalized, and for racist organizations to be outlawed. An additional iteration of this article would be to specifically name white supremacy, a form of racial supremacism, as an imminent threat to human life, dignity and rights.

White supremacy is a belief systems central to which are one or more of the following key tenets: whites should have dominance over people of other backgrounds, especially where they may co- exist; whites should live by themselves in a whites-only society; white people have their own "culture" that is superior to other cultures; white people are genetically superior to other people. As a full-fledged ideology, white supremacy is far more encompassing than simple racism or bigotry. We must affirm that this is an ideology that is antithetical to human life, dignity and rights.

b. Establish a Global Database to Track White Supremacist Violence

There is no agency, body or NGO that I'm aware of that keeps track of white supremacist violence internationally. This makes it difficult to know the specific numbers of lives lost to this kind of violence, and harder still to be able to chart trends of increasing, or decreasing, levels of violence. Establishing a global database to track white supremacist violence would be an important advance in understanding the scope of this problem.

c. International Regulation for Tech Companies

To combat the spread of white supremacy online, we need regulation of tech companies that reaches beyond the borders of individual nation-states. This is already happening.

After the attack in Christchurch, New Zealand in March, calls have increased globally for internet regulation. The gunman distributed a racist manifesto online before using Facebook to live-stream the shooting. In response, Australia passed a law last week that threatens fines for social media companies and jail for their executives if they fail to rapidly remove "abhorrent violent material" from their platforms. New Zealand is also considering new restrictions. And, Britain proposed sweeping new government powers to regulate the internet to combat the spread of violent and extremist content, false information and harmful material aimed at children..

In Singapore, legislation was introduced last week that would restrict the spread of false and misleading information. India has also proposed broad new powers to regulate internet content. The European Union is debating a new terrorism content measure that some have warned is overly broad and will harm free expression. And Germany last year began prohibiting hate speech.

Previously, this has been done on a case-by-case basis. For example, one instance of white supremacy online was eventually stopped through the *France v. Yahoo! Inc.* case, but created a protracted legal battle over

many years. Significantly, the Cupertino, California-based company eventually relented to the demands of the French government.

But international regulations, with accompanying fines, stand a good chance of having an impact on U.S.-based Internet companies that operate globally

d. Advancing Racial Literacy in Tech

We need to develop literacies of racism, antiracism and social justice. Most people from the dominant culture in the United States have very little understanding of the historical context of racial oppression, and very few have a depth of understanding that might fairly be termed racial literacy. These issues are particularly relevant for youth. Part of the empirical investigation in my *Cyber Racism* book focused on interviews with young people, some of whom were taken in by cloaked white supremacist websites. Young people, who often seen as holding the promise of the transforming the intergenerational transmission of white supremacy, are not immune to these ideas. (See, Daniels, *Cyber Racism*, 2009, p.192)

Disrupting white supremacy does not happen on its own, inevitably nor automatically; it requires thoughtful, engaged, and ethically informed education joined with political action to transform structured inequality. I do not think that the policy recommendations I'm putting forward today will dismantle structural racism, but I do think that we can find ways to do less harm with the information and communication technologies we have today.

One way to do less harm is to move toward "racial literacy." And, this is some of the more recent work that I've been doing, trying to advance racial literacy in the tech industry.

Racial literacy is a deep understanding of systemic racism and the ability to address racial issues face-to-face encounters. In the tech world, that means considering race in the initial phase of product development and recognizing the way the broader social world seeps into technological design, infrastructure, implementation to unintentionally reproduce racism. While some argue that the highest

ethical standard in technology is to be color-blind, neither research nor experience bear this out.

To be sure, the tech industry has made attempts at addressing bias. This has mostly been through implicit bias trainings. These trainings use a computer-assisted “implicit association test,” that measures the strength of associations between groups of people (e.g., Black people) and evaluations (e.g., good, bad) or stereotypes (e.g., athletic, clumsy). The IAT consistently demonstrates that we are all more biased than we’re comfortable acknowledging, but after two decades, the promise of implicit bias as a solution to racial bias has not paid off. Quite simply, the notion that our brains are “hard-wired” for bias leaves us in a kind of cul-de-sac, unable to escape the programming in our minds. If we want a truly ethical AI, we need a different approach, one that looks to ways we can build the skills we need in order to address racial bias in tech.

But is there a way to teach people who create technological innovation to anticipate how white supremacy spreads online? I believe there is. If people at levels in the tech industry were to ask basic racial literacy questions, then these unanticipated outcomes might be more predictable. Such questions include: How might racial bias influence the technology we are developing? What are the already existing racial structures that might be affecting the design process? How does the racial composition of our team shape the way we think about how the technology gets used?

e. Protocol for De-Radicalization for Those Who May Be Vulnerable to White Supremacist Content

To the extent that tech companies are addressing white supremacy online, they are most often doing this by hiring subcontractors to sweep and eliminate this content. Those workers are vulnerable to such content, both in terms of trauma and resulting PTSD, as well as to potential radicalization (The Verge, “The Trauma Floor: Facebook Moderators in America,” 25 February 2019). There are some protocols in place for dealing with workers who have been traumatized on the job, such as offering psychological counseling. However, there are no established protocols for those who may be radicalized by white

supremacist content while on the job. Establishing a process for de-radicalization for tech workers exposed to extremist content online is a necessary step forward.

VIII. CONCLUSION

To conclude, we now have a situation in which translocal whiteness, identifying as ‘white’ across geographic and national boundaries, is facilitated and globally networked through the Internet. This happens not only among avowed racists on 4chan, but among politicians on social media, as in a recent Twitter exchange between Dutch far-right politician Geert Wilders and US far-right politician Steve King about “demography as destiny.” The global connectedness of white supremacists has been happening from the earliest days of the popular Internet, the mid-1990s through the 2000’s. Now, in the post-2008 Internet and media ecosystem, information is algorithmically amplified and sped up through social media. This amplified, sped-up network is made possible by the cyberlibertarian and free speech ethos of the tech industry joined with the influence of dark-money billionaires like the Kochs and the Mercers.

The fantasies of a “race-less” Internet, such as in Barlow’s manifesto, is a legitimating ideology that obscures our understanding of our embodied selves and an emerging media ecosystem that systematically elevates racism and white supremacy.

What the idea that “information wants to be free” misunderstands is that “information” is not neutral, and that some ideas are dangerous, just as absolutist views of free speech misreads all speech as the same. It is not. Some speech leads to genocide.

The broadly held view in the U.S. of “free speech absolutism,” is an additional hindrance to addressing white supremacy online. The sooner that we in the U.S. come to understand that free expression is an important human right that can be balanced with other human rights, the sooner we can begin to deal with the growing problem of white

supremacy online. The outsized influence of the U.S.-based tech companies, along with these two ideas (cyberlibertarianism and free speech absolutism), are significant barriers to any attempts to curb the global spread of white supremacy.

The 50 people murdered in Christchurch, New Zealand, lost their lives because a white supremacist, who found inspiration from another massacre in Norway. The 77 people who died in that massacre in Norway lost their lives because a different white supremacist took inspiration a violent white supremacist attack in Oklahoma City. The connections between Oklahoma City and Oslo, Norway and Christchurch, New Zealand, have all been made possible by the information and communication technologies we use today, and by an industry that has so far, been unwilling or inept at dealing with the global spread of white supremacy. I believe that if we can summon the will to act, that it is possible to do less harm with these information and communication technologies.

I thank you for your time and attention today, and for this opportunity to speak to the Ad Hoc Committee.