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The Role of Social Media in the January 6th Insurrection

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Abstract

On January 6th, 2021, thousands of supporters of former President Donald Trump infiltrated the Capitol Building in hopes of stopping the certification of an election that they believed to have been stolen via voter fraud. This paper analyzes the role of social media in the insurrection via a comprehensive timeline of the planning, execution, and aftermath of the attack as it was represented in online discourse and journalistic reporting. Through this quantitative research, this paper aimed to identify the warning signs present on social media prior to the insurrection and hypothesize on how an event like this may be prevented in the future. The research is inconclusive due to the ongoing societal and legal discourse that occurred at the time of its authorship, but provides valuable insight regarding the need for content moderation in online communities. Further research may be conducted through the critical lens presented and defended in this paper as the battle for and against social media censorship continues.

Keywords: Social Media, Donald Trump, January 6th, Censorship, Twitter

Table of Contents

Chapter I: Introduction.....	3-5
Chapter II:Literature Review.....	6-17
Chapter III: Before the Insurrection.....	18-25
Chapter IV: During the Insurrection.....	26-29
Chapter V: After the Insurrection.....	30-37
Chapter VI: Conclusion.....	38-39
Chapter VII: References	40-49
Chapter VIII: Appendix	50-59

Chapter I: Introduction

On January 6, 2021, thousands of supporters of President Donald Trump stormed the Capitol building in order to halt the certification of an election that they believed to be stolen and fraudulent. I believe that the actions of Donald Trump and his supporters on January 6th could have been prevented, had the warning signs available on social media been paid closer attention by government officials and social media policy makers. About a year has passed since the attack on the Capitol and more than 820 people¹ have been charged with federal crimes, all of whom gained information and intent to riot via Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and other online forums.

In this paper, I analyzed real time tweets from Donald Trump on and leading up to January 6th, as well as official news coverage and analysis done by credible journalists before, during, and after the attack. By doing this, I created a timeline of key real-world events that incited an increase of online discourse amongst individuals who became key players in the violence of the insurrection. Additionally, I reviewed academic journals and essays that discuss online political discourse and how misinformation is spread. Based on this research, I then suggested a violent event of this magnitude might be avoided in the future.

My study added and built upon existing knowledge of this particular event and topic by identifying key discourse, including coded and uncoded language on social media that assisted in the event's planning process. The insurrection of the Capitol is a dark period in America's history, but it is crucial that scholars, lawmakers, and civilians alike pay critical attention to both the planning stages of this event and the consequences that have unfolded.

¹ Hall, Madison, et al. "At Least 820 People Have Been Charged in the Capitol Insurrection so Far. This Searchable Table Shows Them All." *Insider*, Insider, 26 Apr. 2022.

This violation of America's freedoms affected global citizens and policies in the political sphere as well as the online world of Twitter and Facebook. The state of online discourse has changed exponentially since the insurrection, due to an attempted increase in moderation as social media officials will continue to combat the spread of misinformation and the incitement of real-world violence.

The methods of research utilized in this study are majority qualitative with the careful addition of quantitative research confirmation for the findings. I studied the political, worldly events prior to the attack of January 6th and how they affected the planning and conversation surrounding the insurrection. Additionally, I analyzed the actions of the protestors during the event and journalists' response to them at different stages. Finally, I presented the social and political implications and changes to social media policies that have occurred in the months following the insurrection as participants continue to be brought to justice. This data has been analyzed and supported with social media discourse from a variety of platforms, such as Twitter, Reddit, and Facebook. Additionally, the data has been connected to reports from sources such as the New York Times and the Washington Post. This data has been organized in three different sections, in chronological order.

It is important to acknowledge my own political biases when reading and understanding my evaluation of the research. While it is my purest intention to present the information in as much detail and with as little bias as possible, it is impossible for me to completely remove my own beliefs from my reading and therefore affect my findings and conclusions. Perhaps if someone with different political views were to read the same research, they could come up with different conclusions regarding social media's role in the insurrection of January 6, 2021. However, it is the goal of this timeline of real-world events and social media discourse to suggest

and identify where social media policy makers could further implement moderation tactics on their platforms through a better understanding of the types of language and online communities that are capable of inciting violence.

Chapter II: Literature Review

I. Summary

Social media is a powerful tool for communication and community building in the modern world. Websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Tik Tok, YouTube, and Reddit present the unique advantage *and* disadvantage of instantaneous media sharing due to automatic credibility and lack of fact checking.

Social media acts as an information distribution equalizer in modern society, and gives anyone the opportunity to become a news source the moment an individual hits “send”. In a world where anyone can be a published author, it can feel impossible to distinguish which stories are true and which are false, which images have been altered, and which news stories are factual.

The dangers of such an equalizer are far greater than a communal misunderstanding, due to the potential for large scale information distribution². Social media has a unique ability to amplify any voice regardless of the individual’s consumption of untrustworthy information or malicious intent³. On January 6, 2021, social media brought insurrectionists inside the Capitol building to protect an election that was believed to be fraudulent and stolen, all due to widespread misinformation via online platforms.

Among these individuals were members of violent hate groups such as the Proud Boys, believers of the outlandish conspiracy theories published by Qanon, and those who

² See Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard, especially pages 23-25, to gain a better understanding of social media disinformation campaigns and “computational propaganda”.

³ For more historical context surrounding social media and the cultural shift from social connection to “psychological warfare”, please reference Beata Biały’s, “Social Media—From Social Exchange to Battlefield.”

self-identified as “normal, concerned citizens” who supported Donald Trump and his presidential policies.

How did social media and its ability to spread disinformation impact the planning, prosecution, and aftermath of the January 6th insurrection? How were normal individuals persuaded into committing a federal crime, alongside thousands of other people whom they had never met? Most importantly, what were the warning signs in the online discourse and what must academics, lawmakers, and concerned citizens watch out for in order to avoid this type of violent occurrence in the future?

In order to answer these questions, one must first pay attention to the way Donald Trump communicated with his supporters prior to the insurrection and how his words were represented by the right wing news media. Donald Trump’s communication style has been identified in academic discourse as irrational⁴ and his ability to make ethical decisions, unfit. Trump continually used Twitter⁵ as a platform during his presidency to communicate with his supporters and created violent, irresponsible action plans for them to execute on his behalf. Prior to Trump’s removal from the platform in 2021, his tweets were heavily criticized⁶ for their use of

⁴ See the first paragraph of Panayota Gounari’s piece, “Authoritarianism, Discourse and Social Media: Trump as the ‘American Agitator,’” in which she describes Trump as a “demagogue” who “exudes effortless ignorance and effortless narcissism in every context”.

⁵ Please reference Roger F. Cook’s description of Donald Trump’s “exploitation of Twitter as a political tool” , “alter[ation] [of] human interaction, “[a] hybrid mode of tribalism”, and comparison to Nazi propaganda.

⁶ See Matthew Crain and Anthony Nadler for their analysis of “antidemocratic communication” and social media “manipulation campaigns” used in modern advertising.

manipulative language that evoked pathos and ethos from his audience by way of fear-mongering and spread of misinformation.

In an article written by Greta Olson, titled “Love and Hate Online Affective Politics in the Era of Trump ”; Olson explained affect theory and how his supporters may have become so infatuated with Trump’s politics and personality. Olson defined affect theory in the first few pages of her article by relating it to affective experiences, such as one’s body becoming warm when embarrassed. Olson also stated that affective experiences, though they can feel significant, have nothing to do with rational argumentation and everything to do with irrational, unfiltered emotion.

Due to Trump’s reliance on misinformation and his personal distaste for fact-checked journalism, Trump relied on the production of affective experiences to gain traction with his supporters throughout his entire presidency, and specifically when leading up to the insurrection of January 6th. Olson related this use of manipulative pathos to a general determination of one’s political affiliations by way of one’s moral compass rather than rationality. Olson supported this claim with a quote from Chantal Mouffe, a prominent political thinker, who said “it is impossible to understand democratic politics without acknowledging passion as the driving force.”⁷

Therefore, it can be reasonably determined that Trump’s use of affective language directly manipulated⁸ his supporters, instilled fear and fed an innate desire for belonging. His style of

⁷ Olson, Greta. “Love and Hate Online Affective Politics in the Era of Trump.” *Violence and Trolling on Social Media*, Amsterdam University Press, 2020, pp. 155.

⁸ See Scott C. Paine, specifically pages 38-40 and 46-47 for further information about manipulation of decision through rhetoric and perceived positivity through selected audiences.

communication, both on and offline, created a sense of community among his supporters. This enforced their political passions⁹ fueled by each individual's sense of right and wrong.

As Olson's article title suggested, Trump's initial campaign was not fueled entirely by hateful speech and intent. Instead, he utilized excessively positive rhetoric to convince people to rally in support of him and his policies.

In a speech from August of 2017, Donald Trump led a crowd in a recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, before he asserted that his "[presidential campaign] movement [was] a movement based on love".¹⁰ Interestingly, this speech followed shortly after Donald Trump had made public comments blatantly in support of white supremacists, a group whose values are the antithesis of love or acceptance.

Trump's positive and welcoming rhetoric towards his supporters created a sense of community, in which individuals became defensive of Trump's policies and personal motivations. His supporters were convinced that if they supported Trump, they supported a set of morals that aligned with their own. It is this false narrative of acceptance that forced his supporters to defend his many heinous acts, such as the support of white supremacy, as nothing more than human error as opposed to a calculated political tactic.

⁹ Please reference Robin Thompson's, "Radicalization and the Use of Social Media", for broader context surrounding radicalization of individuals on social media and manipulated feelings of belonging.

¹⁰ PBS NewsHour, *WATCH: President Trump Holds Rally in Phoenix*. YouTube, 22 Aug. 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Y-iM9sDrAk>. 30:74-31:05

As the effects of January 6, 2021 are discussed in academic and social spaces, the acknowledgement of the importance of community and belonging is crucial. These feelings, as seen in the insurrection, can motivate thousands of people to excuse consistent hateful actions¹¹.

A majority of individuals who have been identified as leaders in the planning and execution of the January 6th insurrection were members of far-right, extremist, militia groups. However, several of the insurrectionists identified themselves as average citizens who “felt that their country was in grave danger of being overrun by corrupt individuals”. These individuals are the direct victims of affective political online discourse defined and encouraged by Donald Trump’s tweets and his command of social media attention.

While Trump and his own tweets may have been at the helm of the pre-insurrection media frenzy, Trump alone was unable to incite violence on such a massive scale. However, his words were considered “a call to action”¹² by millions of individuals online, and a select few would eventually become insurrectionists. Trump’s written and spoken words were trend-creating catalysts, popularized mainly on Facebook and Twitter. By capturing social media’s attention, Trump was able to dominate the global conversation¹³ of supporters, journalists, and adversaries alike.

¹¹ See Paul D. Hoyt, pages 776-780 for more information regarding American politics and the manipulation of the group decision.

¹² See Jonathan A. Obar, et al. for information about social advocacy groups and the way they have historically leveraged social media to promote real-world action.

¹³ See pages 20-21 of Aviva Cuyler’s. “SOCIAL NETWORKING: Leveraging Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook”, for a more basic description of how one might utilize Twitter for immediate social connection and information distribution on a smaller scale.

In an article titled “Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare”¹⁴, author Jarred Prier discussed the power of a Twitter trending topic and how automated twitter accounts and teams of internet “trolls”¹⁵ can command an online space and change narratives according to their programmer’s political agenda.

Additionally, Prier asserted that “with enough shares [on any] social network, [a] propaganda storyline [can be accepted] as fact”, (p. 56) because “trending items produce the illusion of reality”. This statement has had great significance as the internet and its predominant use has grown and evolved over the past several decades. Websites such as Twitter have dominated public attention because of their potential to facilitate discourse between individuals who would not otherwise interact.

Twitter, in particular, has provided a platform for its users that acts as a sort of equalizer, due to the website’s algorithm and character limit. These limitations have allowed for any individual to voice their opinions and have created the possibility for their thoughts to become trending topics. The power of this equal-opportunity platform was utilized by Trump throughout his presidency, especially when it sparked calculated controversies meant to later benefit his campaign or build community amongst his supporters.

¹⁴ Prier, Jarred. “Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare.” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2017, pp. 59.

¹⁵ See Kris Fallon’s “PRINCIPLES OF EXCHANGE: FREE SPEECH IN THE ERA OF FAKE NEWS”, for an investigation of manipulation of visual media in the era of fake news, and how international bots’ flood social media with misinformation.

Online troll communities have also taken advantage of Twitter's trending topics and spread misinformation¹⁶ that painted Trump and his actions in a flattering light and overpowered the voices of opposition.

Interestingly, the social media commendation of Trump and his political agenda was done and led, in some cases, by individuals who did not reside in the United States. Prier's study connected the actions of a Russian Twitter user by the pseudonym @Fanfan1911 to multiple inflammatory cases and tweets that sparked violence across the United States over the course of several years. Through this research, Prier concluded that the sole intention of accounts like @Fanfan1911 are "to spread fear [and] to discredit institutions", (p.68).

Prier's first indirect interaction with @Fanfan1911 happened in 2015, after a Twitter campaign that dealt with racial issues and protests on the University of Missouri campus. At that time, @Fanfan1911 changed their account name to "Jermaine" and sent out a photo of a battered black child, and claimed it was a photo of his brother who had been "beat up [by] the cops [and] the KKK," (p.68). This photo attracted social media and journalists' attention; enough that the student body president warned fellow students to stay off of the streets due to the "confirmed" KKK activity. Later, it would be revealed that every story that involved KKK, shootings, stabbings, and cross burnings from that evening were entirely false.

One year later, the same group of Russian online trolls, including @Fanfan1911, took to Twitter and involved themselves in online discourse surrounding the 2016 presidential election. This time, a statement by Hillary Clinton was at the top of Twitter's trending topic list. Clinton

¹⁶ See Michael Jensen's use of Russia's Internet Research Agency to study the depth of which Russian social media trolls influenced the results of the 2016 presidential election in "RUSSIAN TROLLS AND FAKE NEWS: INFORMATION OR IDENTITY LOGICS?".

referred to Trump's supporters as "deplorable", which then succinctly became an inside joke among Trump supporters and gained the attention of @Fanfan1911 and his network.

@Fanfan1911 changed their profile picture to that of a middle-aged white female adorned with a Trump logo and changed their displayed name to "Deplorable Lucy". Within a few hours, @Fanfan1911's follower-count increased by about 10,000 users. @Fanfan1911's reach was no longer limited to a network of like minded Russian bots, instead, their tweets could reach real, disgruntled American citizens.

This Twitter network of real American citizens accelerated the Russian bots' mission to spread fear to new levels when Hillary Clinton's emails leaked to the public and sparked Qanon controversies and conspiracy theories. Photoshopped and manipulated email screenshots were spread across social media and sparked popular debate amongst right-wing social media users, starting with accounts on Reddit, and then into false-news articles that circulated around Facebook and Twitter. Most popular of the outlandish conspiracy theories was that of "#PizzaGate"¹⁷. Dinner plans made between Clinton's campaign manager, John Podesta, and his brother, Tony Podesta were theorized to be coded messages about child pornography, due to cheese pizza sharing an acronym, "c.p".¹⁸ This conspiracy theory continued to evolve and increase in levels of popularity, and eventually came to a head when a man drove from North Carolina to Washington D.C. to seek justice and truth from the stories he had read online. The man arrived at the supposed pedophilic restaurant, Comet Ping Pong, and threatened the

¹⁷ Aisch, Gregor, et al. "Dissecting the #PizzaGate Conspiracy Theories." *The New York Times*, 10 Dec. 2016.

¹⁸ Please turn to Figure A in the Appendix.

employees with an AR-15 as he searched through the storefront for evidence of a child sex trafficking ring he believed to exist in the basement.

Without social media users that possess values consistent with @Fanfan1911 and their original network of Russian Twitter trolls, that man would have never stormed the unassuming pizza parlor in Washington D.C.. The effects of #PizzaGate has reached far past the results of the 2016 election and can be connected directly with the insurrection of January 6th. This social media sensationalized scandal following the release of Hillary Clinton's email into the formation of #PizzaGate marks the true beginning of the untruthful belief of the right wing that the United States' high powered democratic officials were corrupt and cannot be trusted.

Social media, as a tool, has revolutionized the idea of political movements and the ability of the public to engage in efficient and effective communication. However, this increased societal mobilization in the political sphere as a result of increased technological access is not necessarily unique to social media. Clay Shirky's article from 2011, "The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change", placed social media born revolutions within a historical landscape of protests and political change that have been accelerated by widespread technological access.

In January of 2001, during the impeachment trial of Philippine President Joseph Estrada, crucial evidence was voted to be cast aside by the court. This decision was met with widespread disapproval by many Filipino people and within a week, over a million people gathered in protest all due to a text message campaign composed of over 7,000,000 individual messages sent. This case is instrumental to Shirky's argument however that "access to information is far less important, politically, than access to conversation," (p. 35). Whether change is sparked from a

text campaign or a string of social media born rumors, it is far more crucial in organizing demonstrations of political outcry for individuals to feel heard, seen, and part of a community.

This concept is what makes social media truly unique from early forms of technological gathering. Social media can be generally related to the child's game "Telephone", in which a message is shared in whispers between a large group of kids and is comically different by the time the original messenger has relayed the message once more. The information that is originally put out for conversation on social media is not as important as its equalizing abilities for individuals of all different educational levels and experiences to voice their opinions and connect with others.

Often, online activism and the platform that hosts the conversations can be applied to the "cute cat theory". This theory, as Shirky explains it, is the reason political conversation on social media is so challenging to regulate. While there are certain platforms made for the responsible dissemination of information regarding politics, far more conversations and action plans are formed on platforms such as Facebook, a website made popular by "sharing images of cute cats". It is for this reason that action is so easily coordinated with social media, and events like the insurrection have terrifying potential to become more pervasive in modern society. The "cute cat" platforms make political plans feel approachable¹⁹ and eliminate many of the previous "roadblocks" that action-based organizations have faced in the past.

A commonality that presented contradiction in this research is that of a community formed through social media and evolved into real-world action. All of these articles describe the importance of careful word choice and how online discourse can be manipulated through

¹⁹ See Damien M. Sánchez, pages 241-242, for sample tweets from individuals' in support and opposition of Donald Trump and an in depth analysis of their sentiments and logistics.

presentation of intention²⁰ in online forums. Donald Trump used specific language to evoke positive feelings among his supporters that manipulate them into engaging in violent actions. It is through his leadership that rumors spread online and turned into action such as the insurrection or the storming of D.C. pizza parlor, Comet Ping Pong. These rumors were encouraged by teams of online trolls who aim to command social media's trending topics and incite violence.

Contradiction and limitation of this research becomes present when positive or nonviolent real-world political action is incited by digitally formed communities. Additionally, contradiction is presented due to the disagreement amongst researchers on the importance of information distribution versus conversation between parties of different backgrounds. While Olson asserted that it is through widespread blatant and manipulative misinformation from Donald Trump was the main reason for his supporters' violent behavior. However, it is the belief of Prier and Shirky that violence is incited mainly due to conversation that social media encourages. Additionally, it is believed by Shirky that this is a fault of accessible online discourse due to the ease in which information can be manipulated, rather than the fault of individuals in leadership positions online for producing inflammatory content.

The research presented in this article can assist in the conversation of social media as a tool to incite political change, with a specific focus on the insurrection of January 6th. Through the study of various tweets from Trump and his supporters, I will analyze and identify the specific types of language and rumors that led to the insurrection. Through this analysis, my research will act as a continuation of the conversation surrounding censorship, both in my literature review and in a larger worldly context.

²⁰ Reference Glyn Brennan for an in depth comparison of more and less respectful online political discourse and their correlation to lower/higher real-world political action.

It is through an understanding of the discourse that has taken place on social media that lawmakers and social media officials can combat the planning of violent acts through their online forums and events like this can be prevented.

Chapter III: Before the Insurrection

When social media and its role in the planning, execution, and repercussion of the insurrection is referenced, it can be inferred that the violence on January 6th was largely incited by Donald Trump's tweets and the online responses that followed them. Trump's untruthful belief that the 2020 election voting process had been corrupted was regularly and fervently distributed through his social media channels. These online messages were then spread through alternative right-wing extremist online platforms and interpreted through a lens of fear and misinformation. Many of these chatrooms have remained active post-attack and their messages of intent to storm the Capitol remain public.

According to a lengthy investigation²¹ published by the Washington Post in October of 2021, the first warning signs of the incitement of the insurrection by President Trump began 102 days prior to the insurrection.

In a speech given on September 26th, 2020 in Pennsylvania, President Trump stated that he believed voter fraud would be what prevented him from securing his second presidential term. He then attempted to support this claim with a reference to a constitutional process in which Congress is forced to play a role in the determination of election results, one that has not been utilized since the election of Rutherford B. Hayes in 1877.

Regardless of the evident unlikelihood of this falsely orchestrated narrative of voter fraud, Trump continued this narrative to his audience of supporters on Twitter, which maximized his impact beyond the rally's speech. Trump's online decorum regarding election fraud was

²¹ Allam, Hannah, and Devlin Barrett. "Warnings of Jan. 6 Violence Preceded the Capitol Riot."

The Washington Post, WP Company, 31 Oct. 2021,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/interactive/2021/warnings-jan-6-insurrection/>.

largely based on the inaccurate counting of votes²² and the authoritative prevention of “poll-watching”²³. In both of these examples, Trump used antagonistic language that searched for a scapegoat, including declarations of “corruption”, claims that the election was going “very wrong”, and that “a fair election” was being put into jeopardy.

Trump encouraged his supporters’ contestation of the upcoming election results in his first presidential debate on September 29, 2020. The most conversationally intriguing moment of the debate occurred when Trump was asked by the event’s moderator to condemn the actions of the Proud Boys, as a way of easing adversaries’ concerns that Trump supported white-supremacist, extremist beliefs.

Trump refused to adhere to the moderator’s requests and instead asked the Proud Boys to “stand down and stand by”. This acknowledgement sparked a flurry of online conversation on Parler,²⁴ a social media network utilized by many conservative organizations. Members of the Proud Boys, many of whom became notable insurrectionists, took this acknowledgment from the president as “permission” to “deal with” the corrupted election. Trump’s orders for the Proud Boys to “stand down and stand by” was one of many solidifications that stemmed from Trump’s leadership and caused the violence that occurred on January 6th.

²² Trump, Donald, @realDonaldTrump, “The Ballots being returned to States cannot be accurately counted. Many things are already going very wrong!” *Twitter*, Sept 28, 2020.

²³ Trump, Donald, @realDonaldTrump, “Wow. Won’t let Poll Watchers & Security into Philadelphia Voting Places. There is only one reason why. Corruption!!! Must have a fair Election.” *Twitter*, Sept 29, 2020.

²⁴ See Figures B & C in the Appendix.

On October 31, 2020, a group of about a half-dozen Trump supporters from Texas attempted to run a Biden campaign bus off the road. Once Donald Trump's attention was gained, he shared the video of the violent occurrence via his Twitter account²⁵. A day later, after being subject to some controversy and online discussion, Trump took to his Twitter account again and defended his supporters, praised their actions, called them "patriots" and insisted that they had done "nothing wrong". Trump's supporters responded to this praise with love and support²⁶, in a way that heavily supported the claims made in Greta Olson's article about Trump's affective online political discourse strategy referenced in the literature review section of this paper. Trump's acknowledgement, acceptance, and celebration of the violent acts of his supporters created an online equalizer in regards to communication among his community. It gave power and validity to their actions and created actionable intent among his supporters to continue the incitement of politically charged violence. This permission, acknowledgement, and feeling of community contributed exponentially to the planning and execution of the insurrection.

Between September 2020 and February 2021, 8,200 online news articles that contained the keywords "Stop the Steal" were posted. Out of 70,000,000 engagements that these articles received across different platforms, 43,500,000 of those impressions were made in December of 2020. Social media mentions of "Stop the Steal" peaked four separate times prior to January 6th; on November 5th, November 14th, November 21st, and December 12th. These dates are known now to be significant in terms of political happenings or gatherings of protest. "Stop the Steal" peaked on November 5th in an attempt to stop the presidential elections' vote-counting process.

²⁵Trump, Donald, @realDonaldTrump, "I LOVE TEXAS! <https://t.co/EP7P3AvE8L>" *Twitter*, Oct 31, 2020.

²⁶ See Figure D & E in the Appendix.

Then on November 14th & 21st and December 12th, engagements peaked in response to the “Million MAGA Marches” in Washington D.C. and the first “Stop the Steal” rally in Georgia.

YouTube videos that included “Stop the Steal” as one of their keywords or hashtags received over 21 million views and 58.5 million engagements when mentioned on other platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit.²⁷

The first “Million MAGA March” on November 14th can be attributed to a causation of an increase in social media engagement and incitement of violent actions as a precursor to the insurrection of January 6th. During this protest, the Proud Boys descended upon the streets of Washington D.C. with firearms in tow; their actions resulted in 20 arrests for crimes including assault and the injury of at least two police officers.²⁸

Although strong evidence of violence between Trump supporters and counter protesters was reported on and spread via social media, the narrative of the right-wing persisted that none of the pro-Trump insurrectionists were identified as instigators of violence. To support this claim, Donald Trump himself retweeted an edited video²⁹ of one altercation between his supporters and

²⁷10, Atlantic Council's DFRLab February, et al. “#Stopthesteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection.” *Just Security*, 18 May 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/74622/stopthesteal-timeline-of-social-media-and-extremist-activities-leading-to-1-6-insurrection/>.

²⁸ “Million Maga March: Thousands of pro-Trump Protesters Rally in Washington DC.” *BBC News*, BBC, 15 Nov. 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54945154>.

²⁹Ngô, Andy, @MrAndyNgo. “Graphic: A close-up angle of BLM rioters knocking a man unconscious who was leaving the #MillionMAGAMarch in DC earlier today. They also steal his

the counter protesters, and implied that all of the march's instances of violence were to the fault of "human radical left garbage"³⁰. In the replies of Ngô's tweet that Trump shared onto his own timeline, a longer version of the video³¹ was shared, which revealed the beginning of this specific altercation to be the fault of a pro-Trump protester.

Online discourse³² prior to and as a result of this event can be analyzed through the same lens as that of January 6th, due to the similarities in its language, sentiments, and crowd organization capabilities.

With Donald Trump's approval and wrongful assignment of blame for the violence on November 14th, his supporters felt validated in planning a second protest on December 12th. In early December, conversations that surrounded Donald Trump's denial of the rightful 2020 election results had escalated to his supporters threatening a civil war³³ on behalf and in support

phone when he's on the ground. Video by @FromKalen.

<https://twitter.com/FromKalen/status/1327759618437689344/video/1...>. Twitter, November 14, 2020, 7:08pm.

³⁰Trump, Donald, @realDonaldTrump. "Human Radical Left garbage did this. Being arrested now! <https://t.co/fXSsXXp5yc>". Twitter, November 14, 2020, 11:49pm

³¹ TurtleScratch, DJ, @DJTurtleScratch. "Washington DC BLM March. Kid with megaphone gets attacked by Trump supporter and stomped on. But wait for it... karma sneaks up on his attacker and..." *Twitter*, November 14, 2020, <https://twitter.com/DJTurtleScratch/status/1327762320068493312>.

³² Please turn to Figures F,G,& H in the Appendix

³³Please turn to Figures I & J in the Appendix

of Trump. Twitter user, @ali, stated on December 7, 2020³⁴ that he is “willing to give his life for this fight”.

On December 12th, several members of the Proud Boys took to the Asbury United Methodist Church in D.C., ripped a Black Lives Matter sign from the building, and set it on fire³⁵. By the end of the day, four individuals were stabbed, eight individuals were hospitalized, and dozens were arrested and charged for assaulting officers, carrying illegal weapons, and rioting. One Twitter user, @CathyHeymans, compared Donald Trump to a God-like figure³⁶, and claimed that “together [Trump and his supporters] are unstoppable”.

Following the failure of dozens of election fraud based lawsuits spearheaded by Trump and his legal team, demonstrations of protest became the final focus of Trump’s social media campaign to “Stop the Steal”. On December 19th, Peter Navarro, assistant to Donald Trump during his presidency, released a lengthy report that Trump cited as proof that his loss of the election was “statistically impossible”. Trump concluded with his supporters that in order to prevent this fraudulent loss of the election, they had to attend the “big protest in D.C. on January 6th”, because it “would be wild³⁷”. Many online chat groups, including the MeWe chat group

³⁴Please turn to Figure K in the Appendix

³⁵ Klein, Allison. “Historic D.C. Black Churches Attacked during pro-Trump Rallies Saturday.” The Washington Post, WP Company, 14 Dec. 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/historic-black-churches-attacked-during-pro-trump-rallies-saturday/2020/12/13/d897bfb0-3d54-11eb-8bc0-ae155bee4aff_story.html.

³⁶Please turn to Figure L in the Appendix.

³⁷Trump, Donald, @realDonaldTrump, *Twitter*, “Peter Navarro releases 36-page report alleging election fraud 'more than sufficient' to swing victory to Trump <https://t.co/D8KrMHnFdK>. A

called “American Patriots III% Recruiting”, viewed this post from Trump as a “call gone out from [the] President” and confirmation that January 6th would be “[their] last opportunity...for a disputed election”.

On January 5th, Donald Trump put pressure on Vice President Mike Pence to prevent President Biden’s presidential confirmation.³⁸ When Pence declined, Trump took to Twitter in an attempt to convince his followers that “the Vice President [had] the power to reject fraudulently chosen electors³⁹,” despite there being no Constitutional evidence to support that claim.

Trump continually posted his frustrations on Twitter and stated that Washington D.C. was “being inundated with people who [didn’t] want to see an election victory stolen by emboldened Radical Left Democrats”. Additionally, Trump assured his supporters that “[he saw his supporters] and [he loved them]”.⁴⁰ In another tweet, Trump turned his attention to his colleagues and asked them to “look at the thousands of people [that] pour[ed] into D.C. [who great report by Peter. Statistically impossible to have lost the 2020 Election. Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!].” December 19, 2020, 1:42 am

³⁸Gangel, Jamie, and Jeremy Herb. “Memo Shows Trump Lawyer's Six-Step Plan for Pence to Overturn the Election.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 21 Sept. 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/20/politics/trump-pence-election-memo/index.html>.

³⁹ Trump, Donald, @realDonaldTrump. “The Vice President has the power to reject fraudulently chosen electors.”. *Twitter*, January 5 2021, 11:06 am.

⁴⁰Trump, Donald, @realDonaldTrump. “Washington is being inundated with people who don’t want to see an election victory stolen by emboldened Radical Left Democrats. Our Country has had enough, they won’t take it anymore! We hear you (and love you) from the Oval Office. MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!”. *Twitter*, January 5 2021, 5:05pm

didn't] stand for a landslide election victory [that had been] stolen".⁴¹ Finally, he warned Antifa, a left-wing political group, to "stay out of Washington," and claimed that "law enforcement [was] watching [them] very closely".⁴² Finally Trump tweeted and confirmed the time and location of his speech at the "Save America Rally" and cited the "big crowds"⁴³ that would be in attendance.

⁴¹Trump, Donald, @realDonaldTrump. "I hope the Democrats, and even more importantly, the weak and ineffective RINO section of the Republican Party, are looking at the thousands of people pouring into D.C. They won't stand for a landslide election victory to be stolen. @senatemajldr @JohnCornyn @SenJohnThune". *Twitter*, January 5 2021, 5:12pm

⁴²Trump, Donald, @realDonaldTrump. "Antifa is a Terrorist Organization, stay out of Washington. Law enforcement is watching you very closely! @DeptofDefense @TheJusticeDept @DHSgov @DHS_Wolf @SecBernhardt @SecretService @FBI". *Twitter*, January 5 2021, 5:25pm

⁴³Trump, Donald, @realDonaldTrump. "I will be speaking at the SAVE AMERICA RALLY tomorrow on the Ellipse at 11AM Eastern. Arrive early — doors open at 7AM Eastern. BIG CROWDS! <https://t.co/k4blXESc0c>". *Twitter*, January 5 2021, 5:43pm

Chapter IV: During the Insurrection

In a short documentary film⁴⁴ produced by the New York Times, thousands of videos of the insurrection that were filmed from the perspective of the insurrectionists were analyzed by a team of journalists in an effort to piece together a minute-by-minute timeline of the days' events. In addition to protester-taped footage, internal radio traffic from Capitol security, prominent social media mentions and accounts used for planning the insurrection, and previously unseen police body camera footage are viewed and edited into the timeline. Finally, the New York Times' journalists and forensic analysts are able to identify key individual instigators of violence, leading hate-groups who participated in the insurrection, and exact time stamps of the eight breaches of entry and one death that occurred in the Capitol building on January 6, 2021.

Due to a cavalier lack of secrecy on part of January 6th planners and participants, the New York Times was able to confirm over one million social media mentions about storming the Capitol prior to the insurrection. On January 6th, 2021 there were less than 2 dozen officers stationed at the eight breached points of entry into the Capitol building, due to a "lack" of credible threat as determined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

There were thousands of protesters present on January 6th, most of whom were average, Trump-supporting citizens who had gotten word of the insurrection from social media. However, the primary instigators of violence included members of the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, and Qanon conspiracy theorists.

⁴⁴ Khavin, Dmitriy, et al., directors. *Day of Rage: How Trump Supporters Took the U.S. Capitol*, The New York Times, 30 June 2021,

<https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/politics/100000007606996/capitol-riot-trump-supporters.html>

The Proud Boys are a well known, far-right, all-male, anti-immigrant organization who were committed to defending the values upheld by President Trump.⁴⁵ The Oath Keepers are of similar right-wing extremist beliefs to the Proud Boys, though they identify as more an anti-government patriot militia movement.⁴⁶ Qanon conspiracy theorists are individuals who believe that the “world is run by [a group of] Satan-worshipping pedophiles” that include the likes of several high-ranking Democratic officials, well-known Hollywood personalities, and religious figures. Qanon conspirators believe it is their responsibility to bring people like Joe Biden, Oprah Winfrey, and the Pope to justice for their crimes which include; the consumption of children, the insider United States government planning of the 9/11 tragedy, and the stolen reelection of President Trump.⁴⁷

Members of these three groups were identified and were concluded to be among the first people inside the Capitol during the insurrection. In particular, the documentary done by the New York Times identifies Ethan Nordean, Joe Biggs, Ryan Samsel, Dominic Pezzola, and Billy Chrestman of the Proud Boys as the individuals who jump-started the first entry into the

⁴⁵ Wendling, Mike. “US Election 2020: Who Are the Proud Boys - and Who Are Antifa?” *BBC News*, BBC, 30 Sept. 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2020-54352635>.

⁴⁶ Lucas, Ryan. “Who Are the Oath Keepers? Militia Group, Founder Scrutinized in Capitol Riot Probe.” *NPR*, NPR, 10 Apr. 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/10/985428402/who-are-the-oath-keepers-militia-group-founder-scrutinized-in-capitol-riot-probe>.

⁴⁷ Roose, Kevin. “What Is Qanon, the Viral pro-Trump Conspiracy Theory?” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 18 Aug. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-qanon.html>.

building. The documentary also identified Ashli Babbitt, a known Qanon supporter as the first person to arrive at the rear entrance of the House of Representatives. Upon her entry, she was fatally shot in the upper chest by official government security personnel.

The day began with a hour-long speech from Donald Trump, where he spoke on a variety of topics which included the slander of Joe Biden, the “fake news media”, and the alleged voter fraud that caused the “stolen” election. Trump concluded his speech by encouraging his crowd of supporters to “fight like hell”, because if they “[didn’t] fight, they [wouldn’t] have a country anymore”.

Social media discourse during the insurrection was dominated by three categories of conversation; journalists⁴⁸ posted real time photos and videos, Trump supporters⁴⁹ tried to prove that the violence was to the fault of Antifa and other opposing political forces, and the aforementioned opposing political forces⁵⁰ provided fact-checks to these falsehoods. While the evidence of the insurrection’s violence flooded the social media space, Donald Trump remained silent on social media until nearly two hours into the insurrection, only stating that his “stay peaceful⁵¹”.

At 4:17pm, Trump tweeted a video in which he states that he “love[s] [his supporters who are rioting]” and that he “understand[s] [their] hurt”, but “urge[s] [them to] go home in

⁴⁸Please Turn to Figures M & N in the Appendix.

⁴⁹Please turn to Figure O in the Appendix.

⁵⁰Please turn to Figure P in the Appendix

⁵¹Trump, Donald, @realDonaldTrump. “Please support our Capitol Police and Law Enforcement. They are truly on the side of our Country. Stay peaceful!”. *Twitter*, January 6 2021, 2:38pm.

peace⁵². This video has since been removed by Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, which foreshadows the lasting effects of the insurrection.

Trump, much like his supporters, refused to take responsibility and sent out one final tweet for the day in which he stated, “these are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory [has been] so unceremoniously & viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long. Go home with love & in peace. Remember this day forever!⁵³”.

⁵²Trump, Donald, @realDonaldTrump. “<https://t.co/Pm2PKV0Fp3>”. *Twitter*, January 6 2021, 4:17pm.

⁵³Trump, Donald, @realDonaldTrump. “These are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory is so unceremoniously & viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long. Go home with love & in peace. Remember this day forever!”. *Twitter*, January 6 2021, 6:01pm.

Chapter V: After the Insurrection

On January 8th, 2021, Twitter permanently suspended Donald Trump from their platform, an unprecedented and revolutionary action. The official Twitter company blog⁵⁴ cites their own “public interest framework”, as well as their in-house analysis of President Trump’s rhetoric against their “Glorification of Violence” policy and they determined that banning him from the platform was the appropriate repercussion.

While several of Donald Trump’s tweets could be analyzed and ruled against Twitter’s policies, the company decided to focus on two tweets in particular, both made on January 8th, 2021. First, Trump assured⁵⁵ “the 75,000,000 great American Patriots who voted for [him, that] AMERICA FIRST, and MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN, [would] have a GIANT VOICE long into the future”, and that his supporters “[would] not be disrespected or treated unfairly in any way, shape or form!!!”. His final tweet on the platform was also subjected to Twitter’s review, due to Trump’s statement “to all those who...asked”⁵⁶ and his confirmation that “[he would] not be going to the Inauguration on January 20th.

⁵⁴ Twitter Inc. “Permanent Suspension of @realDonaldTrump.” *Twitter*, Twitter, 8 Jan. 2021, https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/suspension.

⁵⁵ Trump, Donald, @realDonaldTrump, “The 75,000,000 great American Patriots who voted for me, AMERICA FIRST, and MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN, will have a GIANT VOICE long into the future. They will not be disrespected or treated unfairly in any way, shape or form!!!”. *Twitter*, January 8, 2021, 9:46am.

⁵⁶ Trump, Donald, @realDonaldTrump. “To all of those who have asked, I will not be going to the Inauguration on January 20th.”. *Twitter*, January 8, 2021, 10:44am.

Twitter defended their decision to focus on these two tweets not because of their content alone, but because of the inflammatory messages that were present in the “replies” section below Trump’s tweets. It was confirmed by Twitter’s in-house analysis of these final messages that Trump’s tweets inspired “future armed protests” and put the inauguration at risk, due to the event’s identification as a “safe target” for violence. By Trump confirming that he would not be an attendee to the inauguration of Joe Biden, it was feared by Twitter’s officials that if Trump had continued as an active user on their platform, his messages would “inspire others to replicate the violent acts that took place on January 6 and [the] multiple indicators that [Trump’s tweets] are being received and understood [by his supporters] as encouragement to do so.”

Donald Trump’s removal from Twitter marked a crucial point in media history, especially when regarding the conversation surrounding censorship on social media. In an event as large and complicated as the insurrection of January 6th, it is up to lawmakers and social media platform officials to make groundbreaking decisions. Social media officials must determine what is and is not admissible to post on any given platform and lawmakers must decide how one’s online actions may turn into real-life consequences.

In the case of lawmakers and the prosecution of insurrectionists, the harshest sentences⁵⁷ have been given to those identified as “public faces of the insurrection”, such as Jacob Chansley

⁵⁷ Reilly, Ryan J. “‘Qanon Shaman’ Jacob Chansley, a Capitol Riot ‘Flag-Bearer,’ Sentenced to Prison.” *HuffPost*, HuffPost, 17 Nov. 2021, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/qanon-shaman-sentenced-trump-capitol-riot_n_618d4779e4b04e5bdfccfadcf?fbclid=IwAR3bHyfclMLkpKIF3bjwqI4zbWQyu2lsaH5Plwr5S3HuMQw7b4Eyg0Ir17Y.

the ‘Qanon Shaman’. On January 6, 2021, Chansley marched into the Capitol whilst wearing a horned headdress and face paint, and held a spear that was attached to an American flag.

Due to the ease in which Chansley can be identified due to his outlandish appearance and well-documented actions of violence, the insurrection has nearly become synonymous with his name⁵⁸ and likeness. Upon the date of his trial, Chansley appeared remorseful and had a “desire to be held accountable [for his actions]” and wished to “repudiate his association with Qanon”. However, because of the violent nature of his crimes and his status as the “face” of the insurrection, Chansley was sentenced to 51 months in federal prison.

To put the severity of Chansley’s sentence into perspective, one might look to the 30 day sentence of Russell Peterson, a Pennsylvania man also charged for his role in the insurrection. Chansley and Peterson shared 4 charges, which included “entering and remaining in a restricted building, disorderly and disruptive conduct in a restricted Building, violent entry and disorderly conduct in a Capitol building, parading, demonstrating, [and] picketing in a Capitol building.” Chansley was also charged with “civil disorder and obstruction of an official proceeding.”

Russell Peterson’s case commanded a variety of news outlets because of his blatant disregard and lack of remorse, displayed by his social media posts that directly followed the insurrection. Sometime after returning from Washington D.C.: Peterson posted to his Facebook account that “overall [he] had fun”, and included the text abbreviation LOL, which symbolizes the phrase “laugh out loud”. In the finalization of Peterson’s punishment, the judge of his case specifically referenced this post and her distaste for it, and stated that “no one locked in [the

⁵⁸Jacobs, Alan. “Something Happened By Us: A Demonology.” *The New Atlantis*, no. 68, 2022, pp. 80–89, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27115547>.

Capitol], cower[ed] under a table for hours, was laughing.” The judge also stated that Peterson’s social media posts made it “extraordinarily difficult for her to show him leniency”. Similarly in the completion of Chansley’s trial and the finalization of his sentence, the Department of Justice “argued [that]...’the damage of January 6th...would last far longer than the hours of delay’ in the certification process of the 2020 election”. These statements regarding social media and accountability in government punishment have powerful implications, especially as social media officials and lawmakers continue to bring insurrectionists to justice and reform platform policies.

On January 2nd, 2022, Twitter permanently banned⁵⁹ Republican lawmaker Marjorie Taylor Greene and Qanon conspiracy theorist from the platform due to her rampant spread of misinformation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. One could speculate that without the precedent that Twitter set with Donald Trump nearly a year earlier, that Greene may have been allowed to continue to spread harmful misinformation without fear of permanent repercussions. In an effort to improve their platform’s guidelines, Twitter introduced a policy via their company blog in December of 2021. This new policy stated that “[one] may not use Twitter’s services to share false or misleading information about COVID-19 which may lead to harm”.⁶⁰

Twitter is not the only social media platform being held responsible for their role in the insurrection, in January of 2022, the House committee subpoenaed four of the largest social media companies for their allowance of the spread of extremism on their platforms. The

⁵⁹Alba, Davey. “Twitter Permanently Suspends Marjorie Taylor Greene’s Account.” *The New York Times*, 3 Jan. 2022, p. 1.

⁶⁰ “Covid-19 Misleading Information Policy.” Twitter, Twitter, Dec. 2021, <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/medical-misinformation-policy>.

companies involved in this case so far include Twitter, Reddit, Alphabet — the owner of YouTube, and Meta — the owner of Facebook. The goal of this investigation has been identified as an exploration of the policies and preventative action plans each of these platforms possessed at the time of the insurrection that combated the misuse of these platforms for the purpose of spreading misinformation and inciting violence. The House committee stated that the aforementioned companies, along with almost a dozen others, were all originally contacted in August of 2021. Meta, Alphabet, Reddit, and Twitter have since been subpoenaed due to their unwillingness to cooperate with the committee.

Facebook has been accused of eliminating its precautionary measures too soon after the presidential election and failure to reinstate them once their platform was actively being utilized to organize violence to take place on January 6th.

Twitter has been scrutinized for the allowance of Donald Trump himself and a significant number of his supporters to spread fictitious claims of election fraud. Whereas Reddit has been criticized for removing popular discussion forums dedicated to the support of Donald Trump, only after the attack had already taken place. Prior to the attack, this forum, as well as many others, remained largely unmonitored by Reddit officials.

Finally, it has been alleged that YouTube officials had not edited their platform's policies as a result of the attack and that the platform has continued to allow misinformation to be spread through the website by its users.

The attack of the Capitol and the months that led up to it sparked a widespread, continued conversation regarding social media's responsibility for violent real-world occurrences. However, not all digital citizens have been pleased by the proposed increase in responsible content monitoring and appropriate censorship.

Elon Musk, American businessman and billionaire, has famously expressed his opposition to censorship. He has also expressed his intent to become a primary stakeholder for platforms such as Twitter in an effort to revoke community guidelines that enforce these values. Elon Musk claimed his motive behind acquiring Twitter was to provide an “inclusive arena for free speech”, but prominent journalists have argued that this view is both dangerous and unrealistic for the needs of the modern world ⁶¹. By April of 2022 it had been confirmed that Musk’s 44 billion dollar offer for the acquisition of Twitter had been approved. In an analysis piece done by CNN Business⁶², Brian Fung states that Musk’s purchase of Twitter “sits at the confluence of multiple ongoing societal debates, including about the power and influence of billionaires; the impact of misinformation; and the responsibilities tech platforms owe to their users and society, and what new regulations should back them up”.

Musk’s purchase of Twitter has positioned him at the helm of modern society’s most impactful conversations with the alarming intention of removing the policies that prevent dangerous real-world action, such as the insurrection.

⁶¹More on this perspective is available in this piece—Dwoskin, Elizabeth. “Elon Musk Wants a Free Speech Utopia. Technologists Clap Back.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 18 Apr. 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/04/18/musk-twitter-free-speech/>.

⁶² For further analysis, please reference: Fung, Brian. “Why Elon Musk Buying Twitter Is Such a Big Deal.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 26 Apr. 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/26/tech/importance-of-musk-buying-twitter/index.html>.

Given Twitter's commitment to the removal of dangerous messaging following the insurrection, Musk's purchase of the platform has been seen as a contradictory and dangerous decision.

The connecting theme of all of the examples presented in this chapter is that of accountability for online action and the real-world consequences of irresponsible online behavior. This idea of online accountability placed social media policy makers in an interesting and seemingly unprecedented position in the days that followed the insurrection. Twitter's removal of Donald Trump from their platform removed his ability to incite violence and communicate with his supporters and set a unique precedent for other problematic public figures and all social media users.

Social media is deeply intertwined with modern life and the things people say and support on websites like Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and YouTube have caused serious harm to individuals and institutions alike. When high powered individuals, such as Donald Trump or Marjorie Taylor Greene are allowed to freely spread misinformation on their large online platforms, their words are often interpreted and used as motivation for violent acts. It is the responsibility of social media policy makers to moderate their platforms in order to ensure safety to all their websites' users and every individual they interact with outside of social media.

Beyond societal pressures applied to social media policy makers are the political pressures and ramifications that have been displayed in the trials that have followed the insurrection. Social media platforms and the individuals responsible for their policies, have ultimately been held partly accountable for their users' actions, as soon in the case against Alphabet, Meta, Reddit, and Twitter. The policies responsible for the prevention of widespread misinformation, or in some cases the lack of policies, put into place by these social media

platforms have all proven to be not enough. Even Twitter, who set the precedent with Trump's removal from their platform, did too little too late. Trump's posts demonstrated evidence for the incitement of violence for months prior to the insurrection, yet the platform and its policy makers did little to stop his irresponsible widespread use of dangerous misinformation.

Behind every powerful person who has created these irresponsible messages, is an even more powerful person with the money to support their irresponsible and dangerous beliefs. This is demonstrated by Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter and the concerning morals he is approaching the platform with.

It is evident that all social media platforms need some level of moderation, especially when it comes to the prevention of events like the insurrection. However, Musk purchased Twitter with the intent to roll back important safety policies and further encourage free speech on the platform. He has failed to recognize that the real world consequences of largely unregulated online discourse will only increase in severity as safety enforcement policies are removed.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

Social media, while an incredible tool for communication, comes with many advantages and disadvantages, many of which have remained unexplored and unidentified. It is through events such as the insurrection of January 6th that the true power of social media is uncovered. As a modern society, it is imperative that we challenge these unique tools and establish rules with which we govern ourselves and our behavior. It is my belief that content moderation, at some level, is necessary on all social media platforms, in order to stop the spread of potentially harmful discourse and misinformation.

Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Reddit provide an insurmountable global stage that allow us as citizens to engage in conversation, build community, and put forth real-world action plans. This ability to share information is all too often abused and results in violence, the likes of which were displayed in Washington D.C. at the Capitol building. In order to allow ourselves to continue using these platforms for their good qualities, it is imperative that we are able to identify and put a stop to any discourse that amounts to violence or the spread of dangerous misinformation.

The insurrection of January 6th is an excellent example of how political disinformation can turn ugly when spread in an unregulated digital space. It is my hope that as the real-world repercussions of the actions of these rioters come to fruition, the path towards responsible social media supervision will become more clear. A largely unregulated social media platform, as we have seen through the events of January 6th, is unrealistic and unwise. Therefore, it is the responsibility of social media policy makers to implement a system for their platforms that stops the spread of misinformation and identifies both coded and uncoded language used to plan violent protests such as the one on January 6th.

In future research, I am hopeful that other media scholars can take the information presented here and apply it to other online discourse communities in order to identify potentially dangerous rhetoric. With this information, social media policy makers can further implement responsible moderation tactics to keep information spread through social media truthful, productive, and nonviolent in hopes of preventing a violent event like the insurrection from happening in the future.

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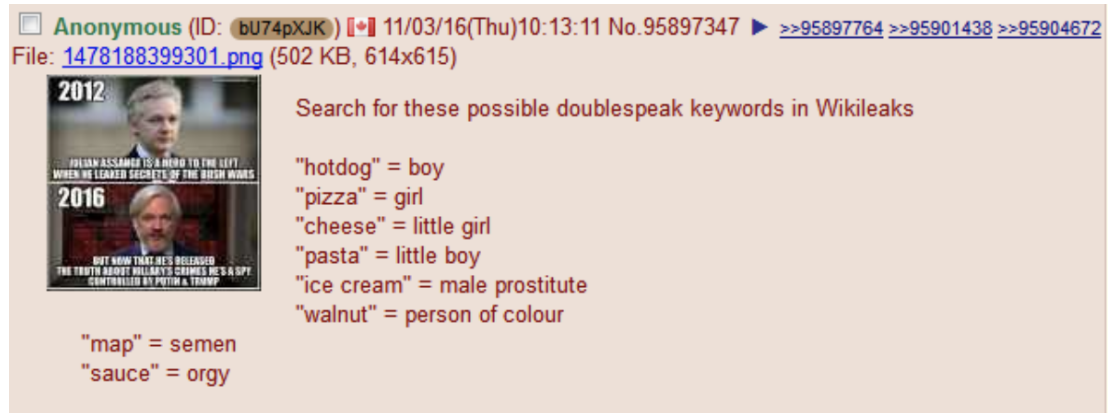
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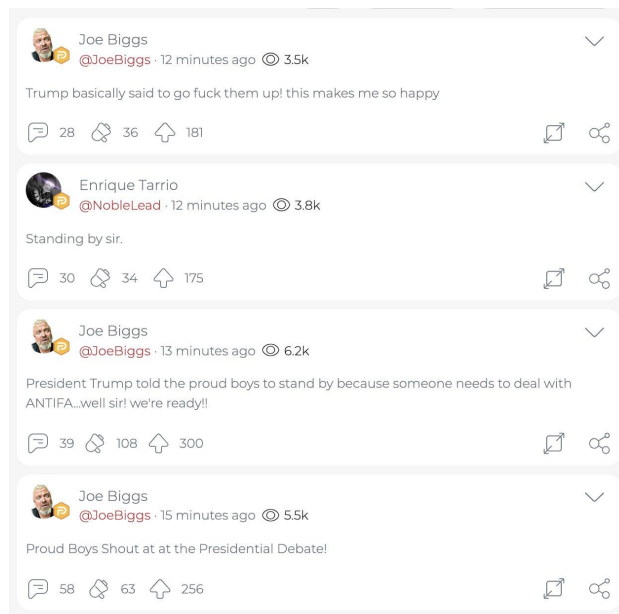
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Chapter VIII: Appendix



A.

An anonymous post on 4chan's "so-called alt-right" discussion board provides the "key" to #PizzaGate conspiracy language. Sourced from The New York Times article, "Dissecting the #PizzaGate Conspiracy Theories".



B.

Screenshot of Parler chat between Joe Biggs and Enrique Tarrio on a larger Proud Boys chat thread confirming the analysis of Trump's statement as permission to the Proud Boys to "go fuck them up".



C.

The Proud Boys create a new organization logo, presenting Trump's quote as if it is a slogan.



In my opinion, these patriots did nothing wrong. Instead, the FBI & Justice should be investigating the terrorists, anarchists, and agitators of ANTIFA, who run around burning down our Democrat run cities and hurting our people!



Tony Plohetski [@tplohetski](#) · 3h

NEW: Very short statement from the FBI confirming that they are investigating incident Friday involving Biden bus.

D.

Donald Trump celebrated his supporters who attempted to run a Biden campaign bus off the road in this Tweet from November 1, 2020.



Amie Whatserface
[@AmieWohrer](#)

Replying to [@realDonaldTrump](#)

And Texas loves you!!! None of Biden's supporters love him enough to do this!

8:42 PM · Oct 31, 2020 · Twitter Web App

15 Retweets 37 Quote Tweets 709 Likes



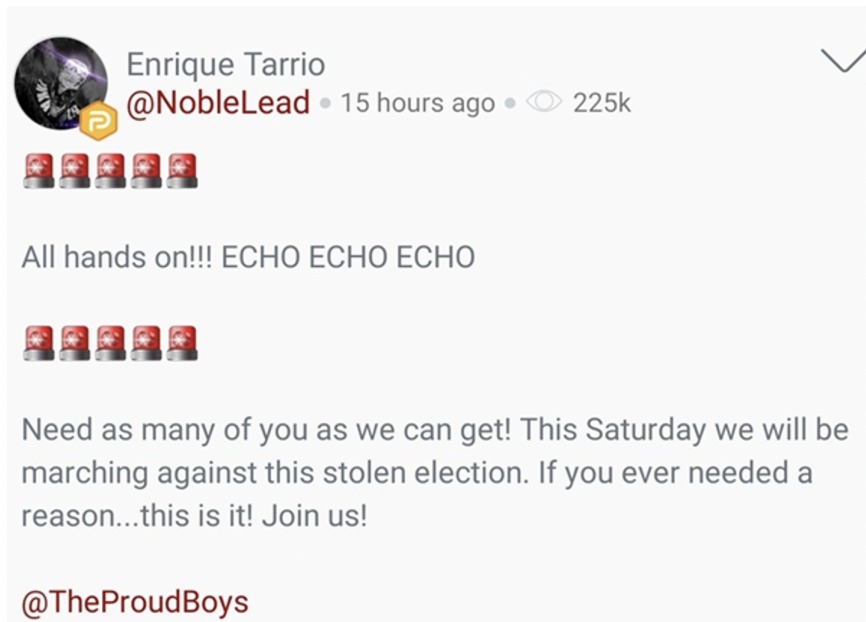
E.

Trump supporting Texan, [@AmieWohrer](#) replies to Donald Trump affirming that he has her support and dismissing Biden's supporters as less passionate.



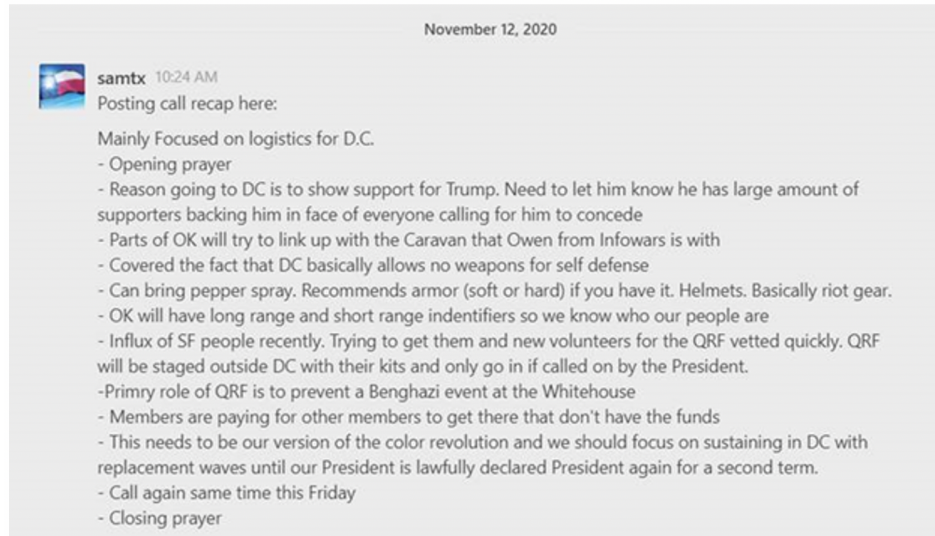
F. 10:09 PM · 07 Nov 20 · Twitter for iPhone

Nicholas Fuentes, a prominent far right social media commentator spreads digital fliers with details of the Million MAGA March on his Twitter account.



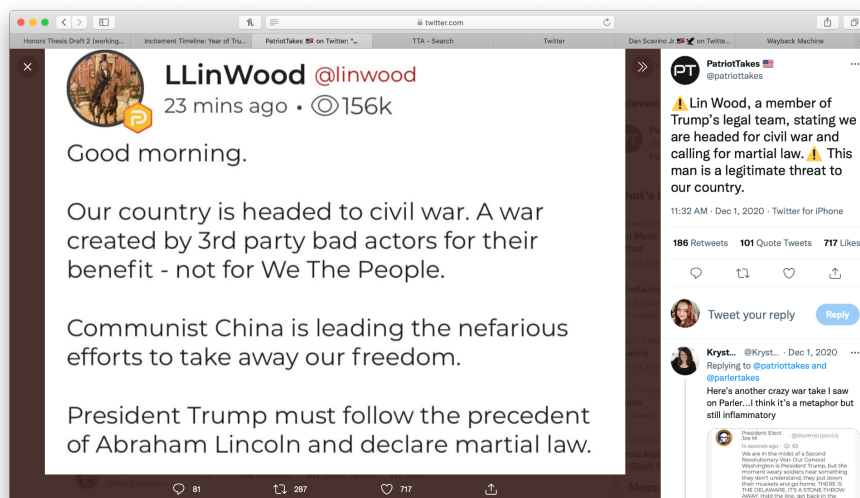
G. @TheProudBoys

Proud Boys leader Enrique Tarrio uses Parler to invoke a feeling of community amongst the 225,000 viewers of his post.



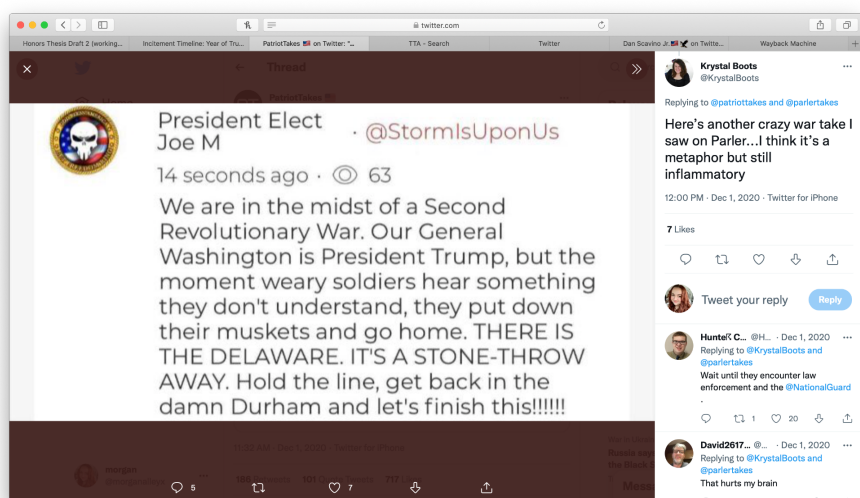
H.

Oath Keepers conspiracy theorist “samtx” shares Million MAGA March itinerary, emphasizing the presence of prayer.



I.

Lin Wood, prominent Qanon conspiracy theorist posts to Parler encouraging Donald Trump to declare martial law as a way of suspending typical legal procedures.



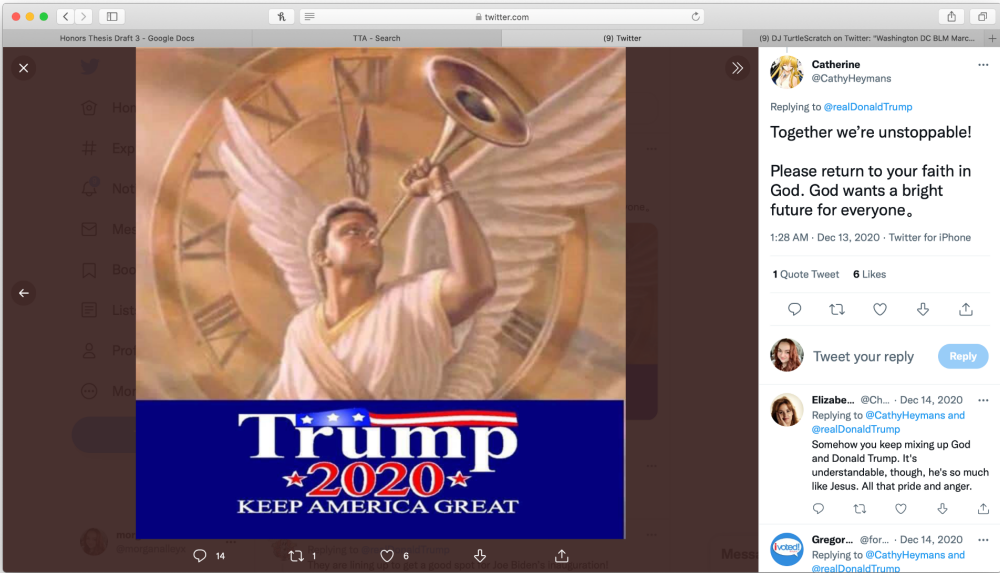
J.

Parler user “@StormIsUponUs” uses a metaphor comparing Donald Trump to George Washington during the Revolutionary War.



K.

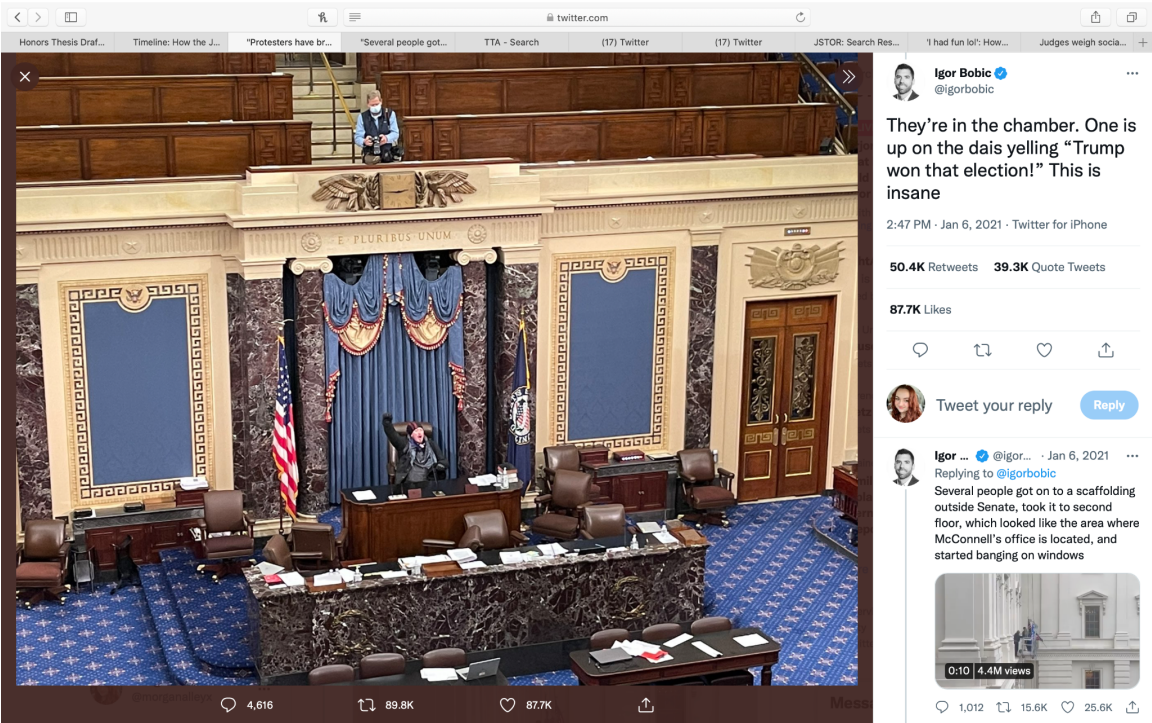
Screenshot of @ali’s Twitter account captured by the Wayback Machine.



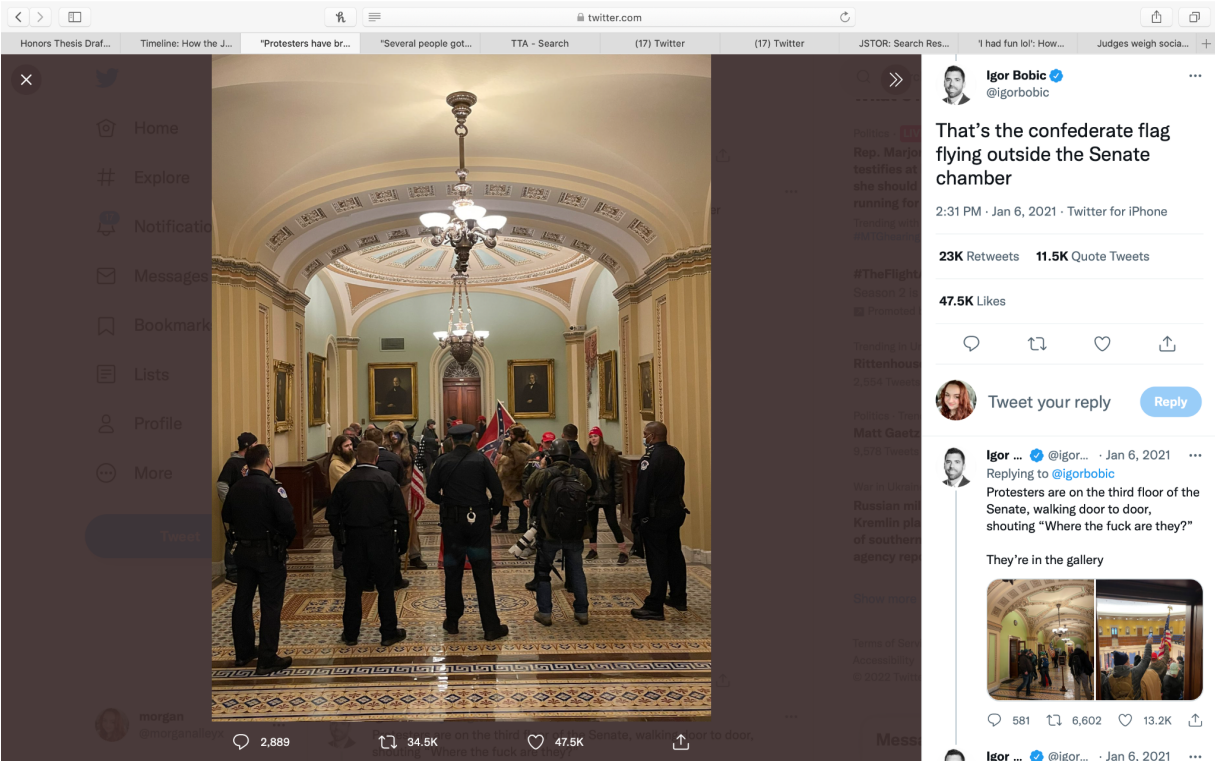
L.

Trump is pictured in an artistic rendering of an angel.

M.



N.





Maureen Jacobson
@MamaMoJacobson

...

Replying to [@realDonaldTrump](#)

True Patriots would not act in disrespect. These are Antifa in Patriots clothes!
Look closely:



Stay informed

Manipulated media [Find out more](#)

4:17 PM · Jan 6, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

172 Retweets **66** Quote Tweets **1,002** Likes



O.



a**s**
@anderswu



Replying to [@MamaMoJacobson](#) and [@realDonaldTrump](#)

"The valknut is a symbol consisting of three interlocked triangles. [...] The symbol, like many others associated with Germanic paganism, has been appropriated by some white nationalist groups to represent their heritage."



4:33 PM · Jan 6, 2021 · Twitter Web App

7 Retweets **7** Quote Tweets **274** Likes

P.