Nazis vs. ISIS on Twitter:
A Comparative Study of White Nationalist and ISIS Online Social Media Networks

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About the Author

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Program on Extremism or the George Washington University.
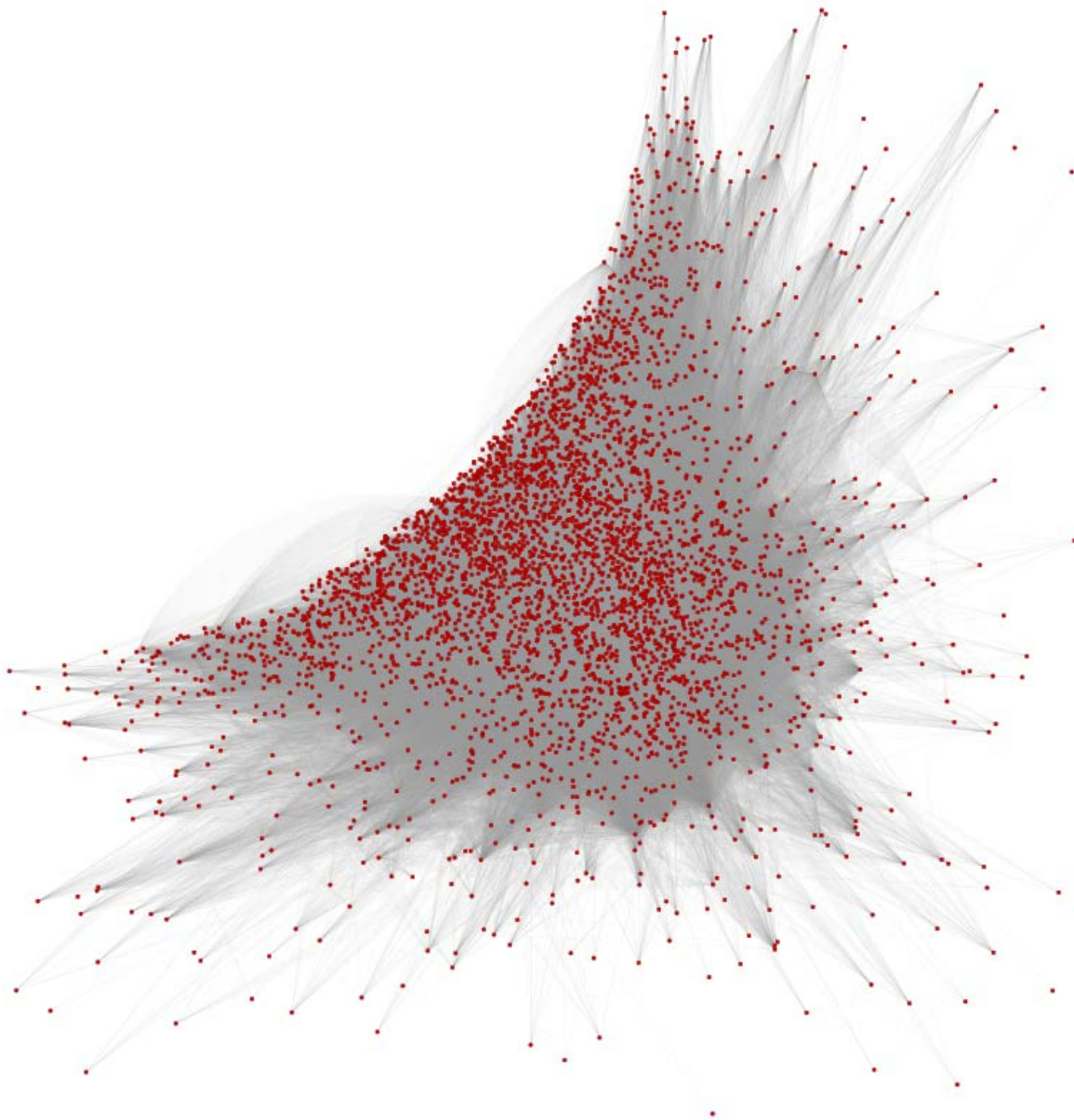
Figure 1: Interactions among 4,000 known white nationalist Twitter accounts

Introduction
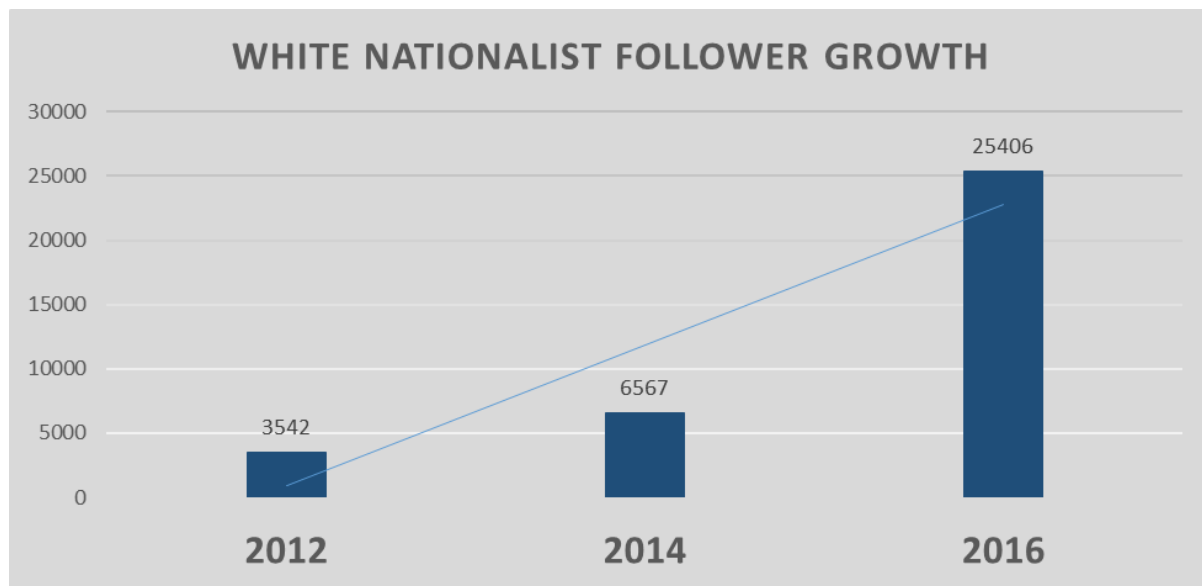
Figure 2: Growth in the followers of major white nationalist movement and organization accounts

The Islamic State, also known as ISIS, has distinguished itself as a pioneer in the use of social media for recruitment. But, while ISIS continues to be one of the most influential terrorist groups in the material world, other extremists are closing the gap in the virtual realm.

On Twitter, ISIS's preferred social platform, American white nationalist movements have seen their followers grow by more than 600% since 2012. Today, they outperform ISIS in nearly every social metric, from follower counts to tweets per day.

This study examines and compares the use of Twitter by white nationalists, Nazi sympathizers, and ISIS supporters respectively, providing some preliminary comparisons of how each movement uses the platform. Major findings include:

1. Major American white nationalist movements on Twitter added about 22,000 followers since 2012, an increase of about 600%. The increase was driven in part by organized social media activism, organic growth in the adoption of social media by people interested in white nationalism, and, to some extent, the rise of organized trolling communities seeking to flood social media platforms with negative content, regardless of participants' actual beliefs.

2. The most popular theme among white nationalists on Twitter was the concept of "white genocide," the notion that the "white race" is directly endangered by the increasing diversity of society. Social media activists tweeted hundreds of times per day using repetitive hashtags and slogans associated with this trope.

3. Followers of white nationalists on Twitter were heavily invested in Donald Trump's presidential campaign. White nationalist users referenced Trump more than almost any other topic, and Trump-related hashtags outperformed every white nationalist hashtag except for #whitegenocide within the sets of users examined.

4. White nationalism is highly factionalized, and includes a number of competing movements. On Twitter, accounts focused on Nazi sympathies were more prevalent than any other white nationalist movement, and pro-Nazi propaganda was tweeted more often than any other content.

5. Within the broader community of white nationalists, organized recruitment, proselytization, and social media activism were primarily carried out by a highly interconnected network of users drawing on common themes/ Activity with a Nazi slant was more organic and less organized. Recruitment focused on the theme of white genocide and used terminology drawn from popular entertainment.

6. The white nationalist datasets examined outperformed ISIS in most current metrics and many historical metrics. White nationalists and Nazis had substantially higher follower counts than ISIS supporters, and tweeted more often. ISIS supporters had better discipline regarding consistent use of the movement's hashtags, but trailed in virtually every other respect. The clear advantage enjoyed by white nationalists was attributable in part to the effects of aggressive suspensions of accounts associated with ISIS networks.

7. Small groups of users tweeting in concert at high volumes can amplify their effect, causing hashtags and content to trend in numbers significant enough to prompt mainstream media coverage. White nationalist sympathizers used this strategy in October 2015 with calls to boycott *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* as "anti-white."[1] Media coverage can lead to increased curiosity about extremist groups, feeding their social media success.

8. In general, these findings suggest that the battle against ISIS on social media is only the first of many challenges to mainstream, normative values, some of which are ongoing, but most of which lie ahead.

While the extreme violence of ISIS has understandably elevated concerns about the threat the organization presents, other extremist groups are able to watch its success and learn from its tactics, both on social media and offline. Studies of ISIS activity, while useful, examine only a fraction of the violent extremist landscape. White nationalist terrorism has increasingly been tied to online activity, as seen in cases such as Dylann Roof, a white nationalist who is charged with killing nine people at the Emanuel AME Church in South Carolina in June 2015,[2] and Anders Breivik, the Norwegian terrorist who promoted an anti-Muslim manifesto on Twitter and Facebook.[3]

White nationalist communities online are less cohesive than ISIS networks, and less concentrated on Twitter. Additional research is needed to capture the full scope of the violent extremist online

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1 Graeme McMillan, "'Boycott 'Star Wars VII' Movement Launched; Movie Called 'Anti-White'," *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 19, 2015.
2 Frances Robles, "Dylann Roof Photos and a Manifesto Are Posted on Website," New York Times, June 20, 2015; Catherine Thompson, "Dylann Roof: Everything We Know About The Charleston Shooting Suspect," Talking Points Memo, June 18, 2015.
3 Mark Townsend and Ian Traynor, "Norway attacks: How far right views created Anders Behring Breivik," The Guardian, July 30, 2011; "Profile: Anders Behring Breivik," BBC News, April 12, 2012.

landscape. Ideally, this should be done across multiple social platforms, countries, languages and ideologies, with tailored metrics and analytical approaches. Nevertheless, this study provides an important starting point.

White Nationalists vs. Nazis

Methodology Overview

A dataset of white nationalist accounts was created from the followers of accounts for the most prominent white nationalist organizations and movement leaders who were present on Twitter and who clearly represented an offline constituency. In other words, none of the accounts used to "seed" data collection represented a pseudonymous online personality.

Collecting all the followers of these seed accounts resulted in a dataset of 25,406 accounts, for which the last 200 tweets were collected and analyzed (a list of seed accounts can be found in Appendix A). This data was compared to similarly structured analyses carried out by the author in 2012 and 2014, although the seed accounts varied due to new players joining the scene.[4] Additionally, a 2012 Twitter account for the white nationalist figurehead David Duke was suspended and a new account was subsequently created.

Seed accounts were identified subjectively through manual selection. This was informed by the author's research and data on hate groups published by the Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center,[5] with an eye toward making a valid comparison to data collected by the author in 2012 and 2014. The total number of users analyzed is only a fraction of the total white nationalist presence on Twitter. The data collected was inadequate to create an accurate estimate of the overall size of the movement. Additional caveats regarding data and methodology can be found in Appendix C.

Analysis of this network pointed to significant growth in users identifying with white nationalism broadly, and among users who indicated some form of Nazi sympathy specifically. Users were coded as displaying Nazi sympathies by posting content pertaining to neo-Nazi or historical Nazi ideology or through the use of a Nazi identity marker (such as the image of a swastika as a Twitter avatar) without clear indications of a neo-Nazi ideological or organizational affiliation.

Followers of the Twitter handle @anp14, the American Nazi Party, increased more than 400% from 2012 to 2016, and users who provided a URL in their Twitter profile linked to Nazi-themed websites more than any other type of content. The sites included historical (or pseudohistorical) Nazi concepts, references, and iconography, as well as neo-Nazi content.

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4 J.M. Berger and Bill Strathearn. "Who Matters Online: Measuring Influence, Evaluating Content and Countering Violent Extremism in Online Social Networks," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2013. A dataset from the same seeds was analyzed by the author in 2014. The results were not published.
5 "Combating Hate," Anti-Defamation League, http://www.adl.org/combating-hate/; "Hate Map," Southern Poverty Law Center, https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map

Based on these findings, a second dataset was generated from the followers of 182 accounts coded as Nazi-sympathetic using the criteria above, resulting in a dataset of 32,846 accounts. Because many of the accounts identified did not specify an identifiable strain of neo-Nazi ideology (such as affiliation with the American Nazi Party or the National Socialist Movement), the dataset is referred to herein as Nazi or Nazi-sympathetic rather than as neo-Nazi.

For each dataset, accounts were coded based on the use of keywords used to self-identify as a white nationalist or Nazi sympathizer. A metric was developed to sort the dataset according to the likelihood that a user openly identified with white nationalism or Nazism. The metric relied on the ratio of interactions with other users in the dataset versus interactions with users outside the dataset, as well as the number of seed accounts followed relative to all accounts followed.

Ranking the datasets according to this metric produced two "demographics datasets," each containing 4,000 highly relevant accounts. The first demographics dataset represented white nationalists broadly, while the second is more focused on Nazi sympathies. These datasets form the basis for the analysis that follows.[6]
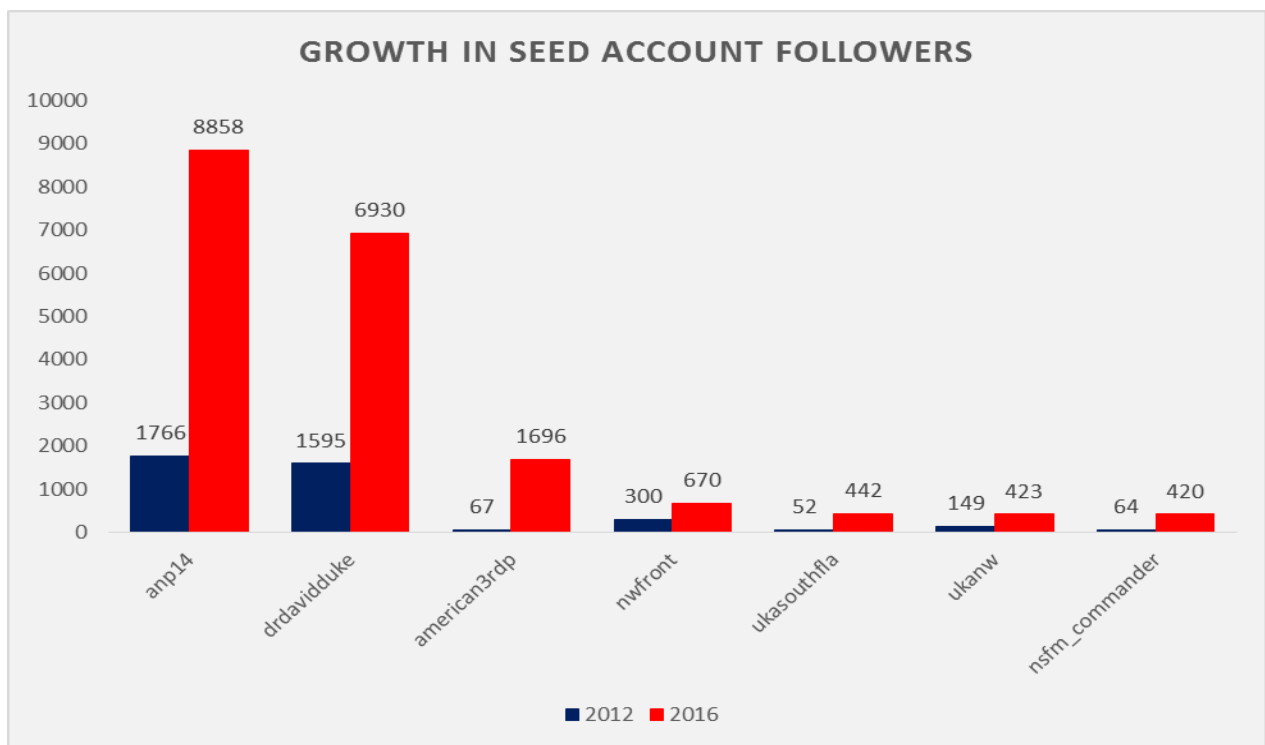

Figure 3: Growth in followers of seed accounts, 2012 to 2016.

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[6] Seventeen outlier accounts were removed from the Nazi dataset which had more than 150,000 followers and were not clearly relevant to white nationalism. One outlier, also included in the Nazi dataset, was removed from the white nationalist dataset. Most of these accounts appeared on the list because they follow back people who follow them.
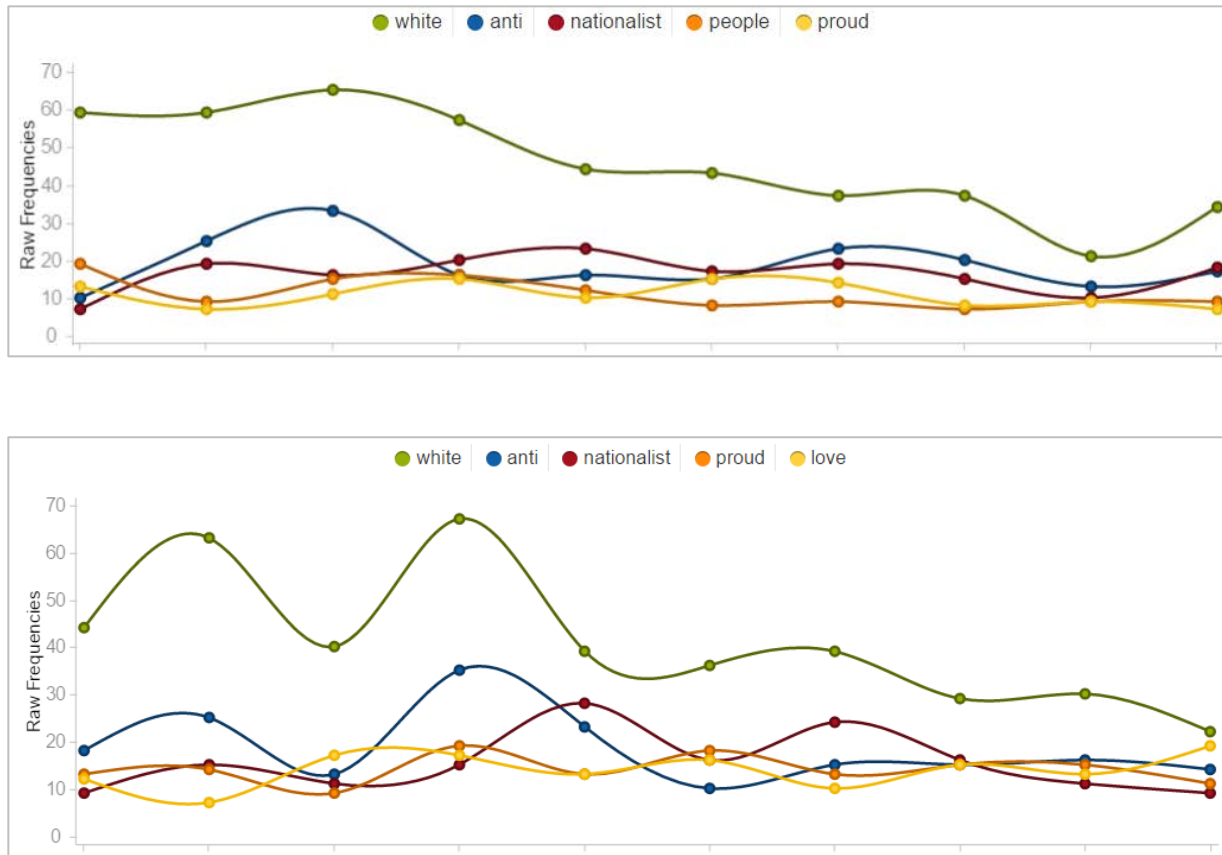
Figure 4: Frequency of most-common words in white nationalist Twitter profiles (top) and Nazi Twitter profiles (bottom), ranked using the sorting metric from left (most relevant) to right (least relevant). The trend line indicates that the word "white" was more often used in profiles that ranked as more relevant according to the sorting metric.

Competing and Complementary Movements

The history of white nationalism in the United States is long and complex. A variety of rifts between ideological strains have long plagued adherents, and splits around Nazi sympathies have often exacerbated such differences.

Going back as far as the 1970s, splits emerged between the American Nazi Party and neo-Nazi groups such as the National Alliance over the use of symbols and language (such as the overt display of swastikas and dressing in Nazi uniforms) that complicated efforts to recruit "normal" people.[7] Recently, some adherents have pushed for more collaboration and reconciliation among Nazi-sympathetic and other white nationalist strains.[8] The data in this study suggests that while white nationalists have been more aggressive about adopting new technologies to spread their message, Nazi-sympathetic users saw more meaningful gains.

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[7] Robert S. Griffin, *Fame of a Dead Man's Deeds*, self-published, 2001. Authorized biography of William Pierce, head of the National Alliance.

[8] Sarah Viets, "White Supremacists and Neo-Nazi Converge In Georgia This Weekend," Southern Poverty Law Center, April 19, 2016.

As noted above, followers of the American Nazi Party (ANP) on Twitter grew faster than any other seed account. The ANP is a neo-Nazi organization related to but distinct from the original American Nazi Party founded by George Lincoln Rockwell in 1959. While some non-Nazi seed accounts saw higher percentage growth relative to 2012, their initial follower counts were extremely small.

Nazi sympathizers represented the largest distinct movement within the white nationalist dataset - about 19% - based on analysis of a random sample of users and the URLs provided in an account's Twitter profile, when applicable.

About 600 profile URLs were coded, out of about 850 identifiable links provided. Not all URLs were checked, as some pointed to sites containing malware. A significant number of URLs, 16%, contained relevant words but pointed to inactive websites, including sites that did not load and sites whose original domain registration had expired. General white nationalism, without reference to a specific movement or ideology, represented about 11%, and 6% made reference to "white genocide," a thematic element discussed in more detail below.
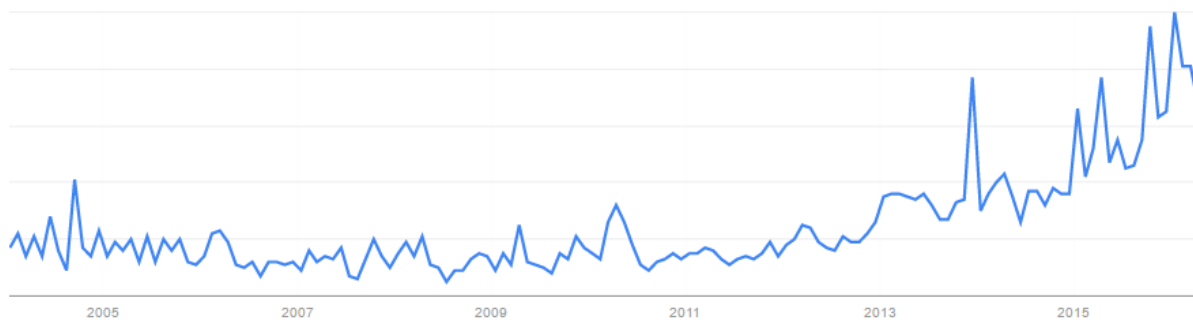

Figure 5: Frequency of Google searches for "white genocide."

Four percent of user URLs were identified with European right-wing movements such as the British National Party (BNP), the UK Independence Party (UKIP), and Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West (PEGIDA). Three percent identified with the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). No other single movement registered more than 2%, and about 20% of all URLs were associated with some specific movement that represented 1% or less of the total. Eight percent linked their profiles to sites that were not overtly concerned with white nationalism.

Four percent of white nationalist profile URLs identified with Spanish-language fascist movements in Europe and South America, and 5.5% of users chose to interact with Twitter in Spanish. In contrast, 11.4% of the Nazi demographics dataset used Spanish, with concentrations of users claiming to be based in Venezuela, Argentina, and Spain.
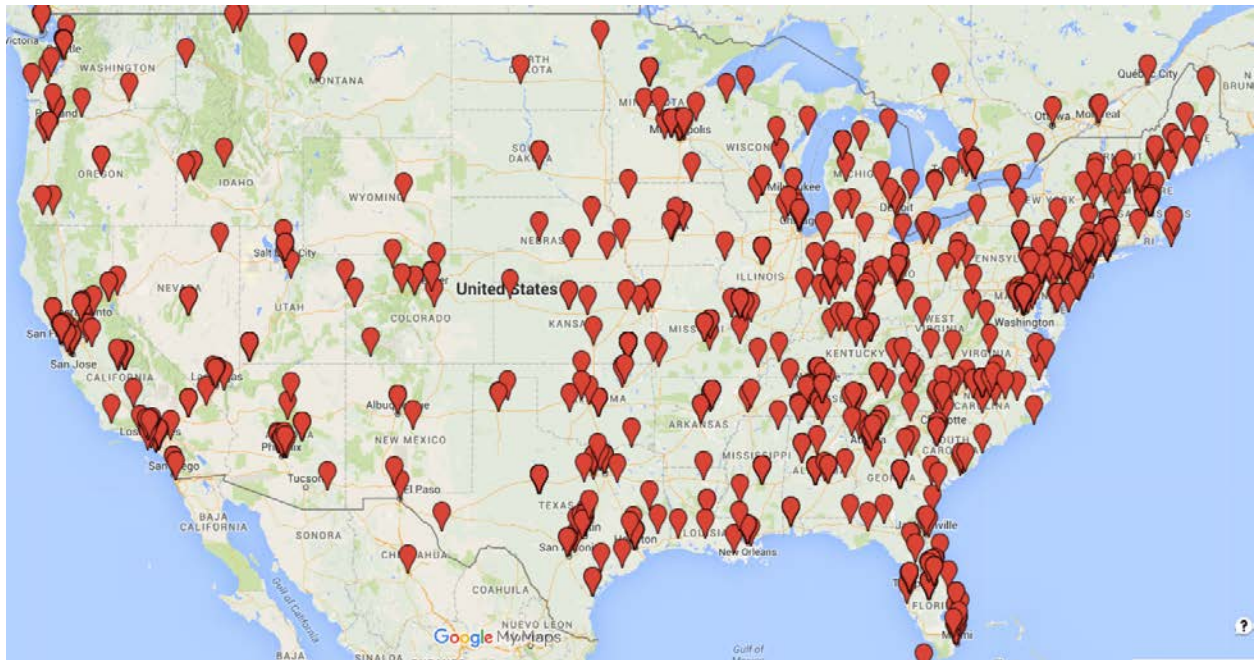
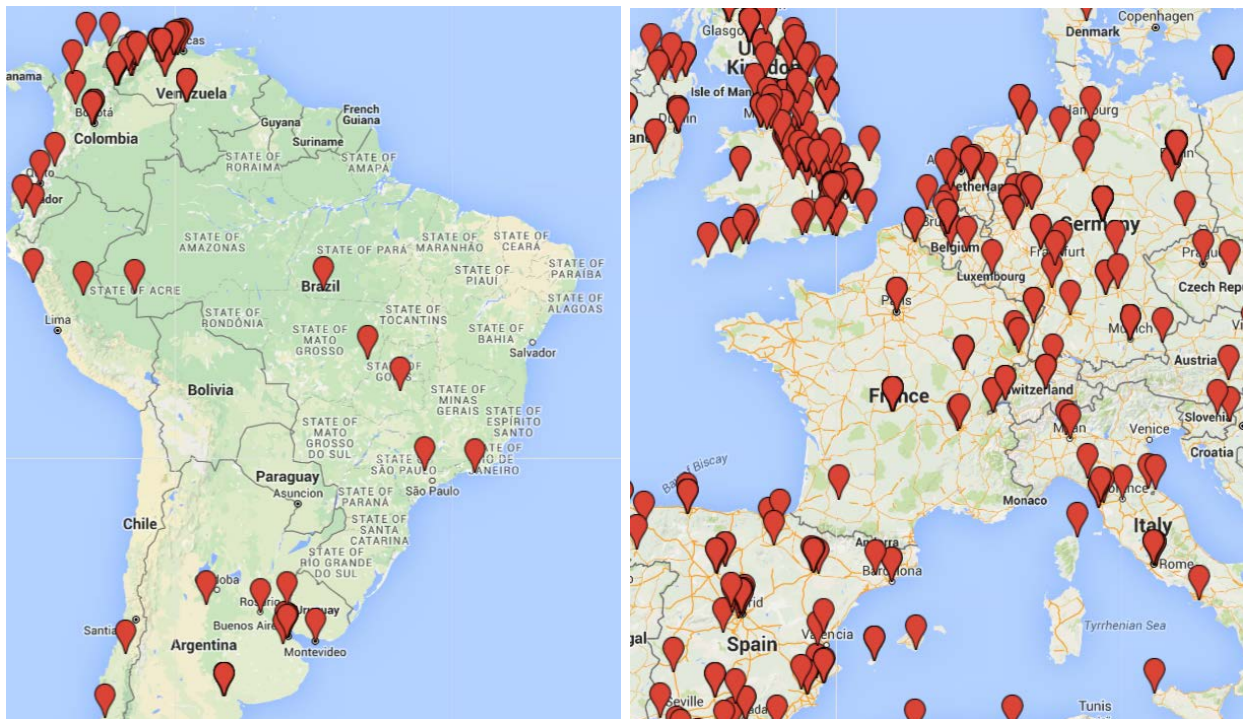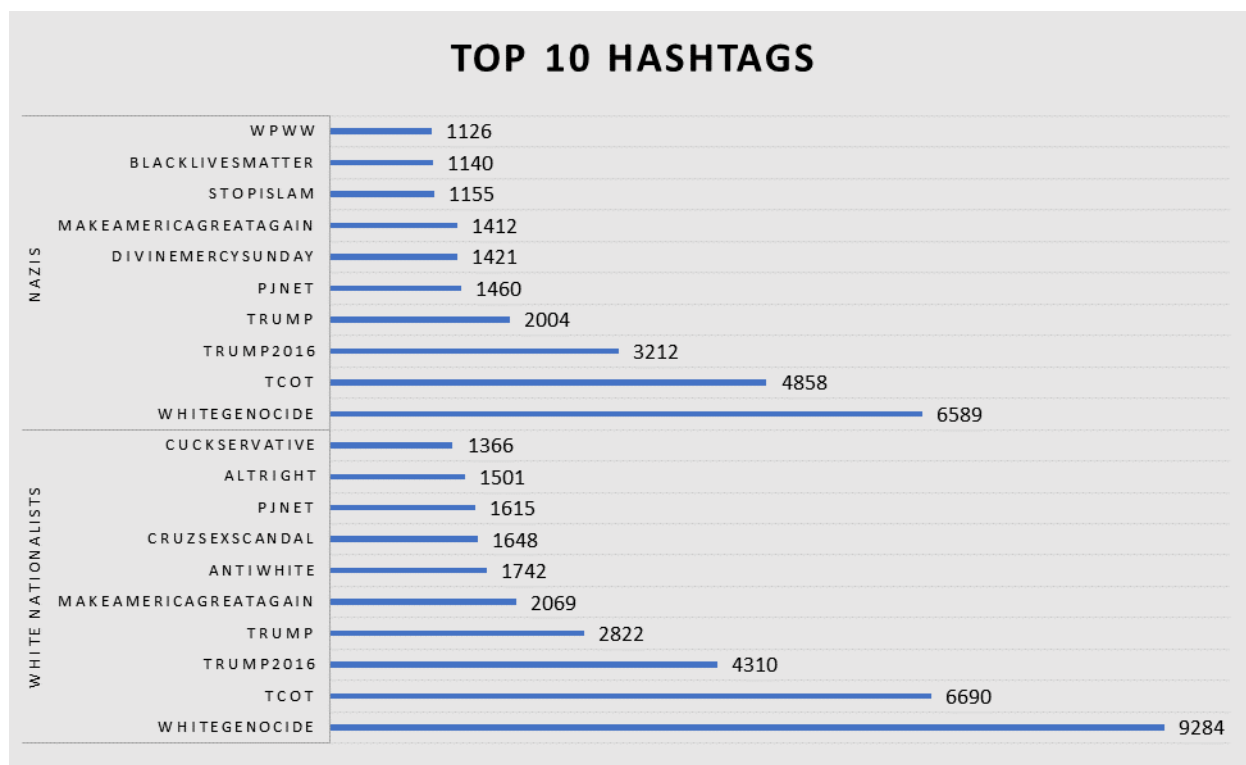*Figure 6: Users' claimed locations, white nationalist demographics dataset*

Figure 7: Users' claimed locations, Nazi demographics dataset

TOP 10 HASHTAGS

NAZIS

Hashtag	Count
WPWW	1126
BLACKLIVESMATTER	1140
STOPISLAM	1155
MAKEAMERICAGREATAGAIN	1412
DIVINEMERCYSUNDAY	1421
PJNET	1460
TRUMP	2004
TRUMP2016	3212
TCOT	4858
WHITEGENOCIDE	6589

WHITE NATIONALISTS

Hashtag	Count
CUCKSERVATIVE	1366
ALTRIGHT	1501
PJNET	1615
CRUZSEXSCANDAL	1648
ANTIWHITE	1742
MAKEAMERICAGREATAGAIN	2069
TRUMP	2822
TRUMP2016	4310
TCOT	6690
WHITEGENOCIDE	9284

Content

Members of the Nazi dataset tweeted fewer hashtags than members of the white nationalist dataset, in part because of organized white nationalist campaigns around the theme of #whitegenocide, the top-ranked hashtag in both sets. White nationalists used more hashtags despite posting fewer tweets.

Members of the broad white nationalist dataset were more likely to use organized social media activism to aggressively push their agenda, while members of the Nazi set took a more organic approach to social media, more akin to ordinary Twitter users who share an interest.

Mainstream political hashtags were strongly represented in both white nationalist and Nazi datasets. But the nature of these links changed significantly since a similar survey in 2012.[9] Although 2012 was a presidential election year, the top 10 white nationalist hashtags included only broad references to the mainstream political right, including #gop, #tcot (top conservatives on Twitter), and #teaparty. The top 10 hashtags did not include any specific mention of the Republican presidential candidate, Mitt Romney. The sample was collected in August 2012, after Romney secured the nomination.

In April 2016, three of the top 10 hashtags for both white nationalist and Nazi datasets were related to Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump: #trump, #trump2016, and #makeamericagreatagain (Trump's campaign slogan). Trump hashtags ranked third, fourth, and

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9 Op. cit.

fifth in the white nationalist dataset, and third, fourth and seventh in the Nazi dataset. As documented extensively in the media, white nationalists have for months expressed enthusiasm for Trump's candidacy.[10]

#tcot continued to rank prominently, as did #pjnet, a hashtag affiliated with an organized social media campaign and a politically conservative website that claimed to coordinate activity among 4,383 participating Twitter users (as of April 19, 2016).

#whitegenocide was the most tweeted hashtag in both datasets, and users within the white nationalist set frequently tweeted an associated slogan: "Anti-Racist is a code word for Anti-White." Known as "the mantra," it and the "white genocide" phrasing both originated with a white nationalist named Bob Whitaker, who is also nominally running for president.

While Whitaker's language has become overwhelmingly popular among white nationalists irrespective of their specific ideology or group preference, its popularity has not transferred to Whitaker himself. Among hashtags tweeted by followers of @BobWhitaker2016, an account devoted to his campaign, pro-Trump hashtags ranked third, fourth, fifth, 10th, 11th, 15th, and 21st. In contrast, #whitakerbowie2016 ranked 1,009th, #whitaker2016 ranked 1,067th, and #bobwhitaker2016 was tweeted only once in the collected data.

A six-and-a-half-hour video titled "Adolf Hitler: The Greatest Story Never Told" was the most-tweeted relevant content in the white nationalist dataset. Spikes in the creation of Nazi accounts began shortly after the video was uploaded to YouTube in a series of short installments starting in 2013, which were later combined into a single video. Limitations on data collection and analysis within the scope of this study made it difficult to fully assess the video's impact on recruitment, except in noting its prominence. The video itself is not especially exciting or groundbreaking, relying heavily on archival footage and imagery. The presentation imitates the format of cable television documentaries such as those presented on The History Channel, but with a significant pro-Nazi revisionist spin.

More broadly, it was not clear if trending Nazi content and identity markers reflected a renewed interest in Nazi ideology, or simply in the trappings of the Nazi Party as identity markers and/or for signaling purposes, absent an ideological framework. It is possible, for instance, that some users adopt Nazi identity markers as an advanced form of trolling or online harassment. This question is discussed further below.

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10 Candace Smith. "The White Nationalists Who Support Donald Trump." ABC News. March 10, 2016. http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/white-nationalists-support-donald-trump/story?id=37524610; "Trump 2016: White Nationalists Throw Their Support Behind The Donald." Southern Poverty Law Center. August 5, 2015.

Figure 8: A six-and-a-half hour biographical video on Adolf Hitler was one of the most popular pieces of content among white nationalists.

While the Hitler documentary was the most tweeted content relevant to white nationalism, it was not the most tweeted link. Apps, spam and social media marketing tactics dominated the links tweeted by white nationalist users, also reflected in user metrics (below). The presence of these links was sufficiently widespread to suggest social media tactics are specific to the movement, rather than noise in the system.

The most tweeted link in the set pointed to the Crowdfire app, a social media tool designed to grow follower counts using tactics such as mass-following of accounts similar to that of the user or following by keyword. Statusbrew, the second-most tweeted link, provided similar functionality. Social media apps, tools, and spam messages accounted for the top 11 URLs tweeted by users. These apps can be used in social media campaigns to disseminate specific pieces content through automated or schedule tweets. The prominence of these apps in the network also strongly suggests that users' follower counts may be artificially inflated.

The fourth-most tweeted link pointed to a European adult webcam chat site. A notable number of users in the white nationalist dataset followed, or were followed by, accounts related to pornography, including bots.

Figure 9: Most tweeted links, left to right: Crowdfire, StatusBrew, Camsympa
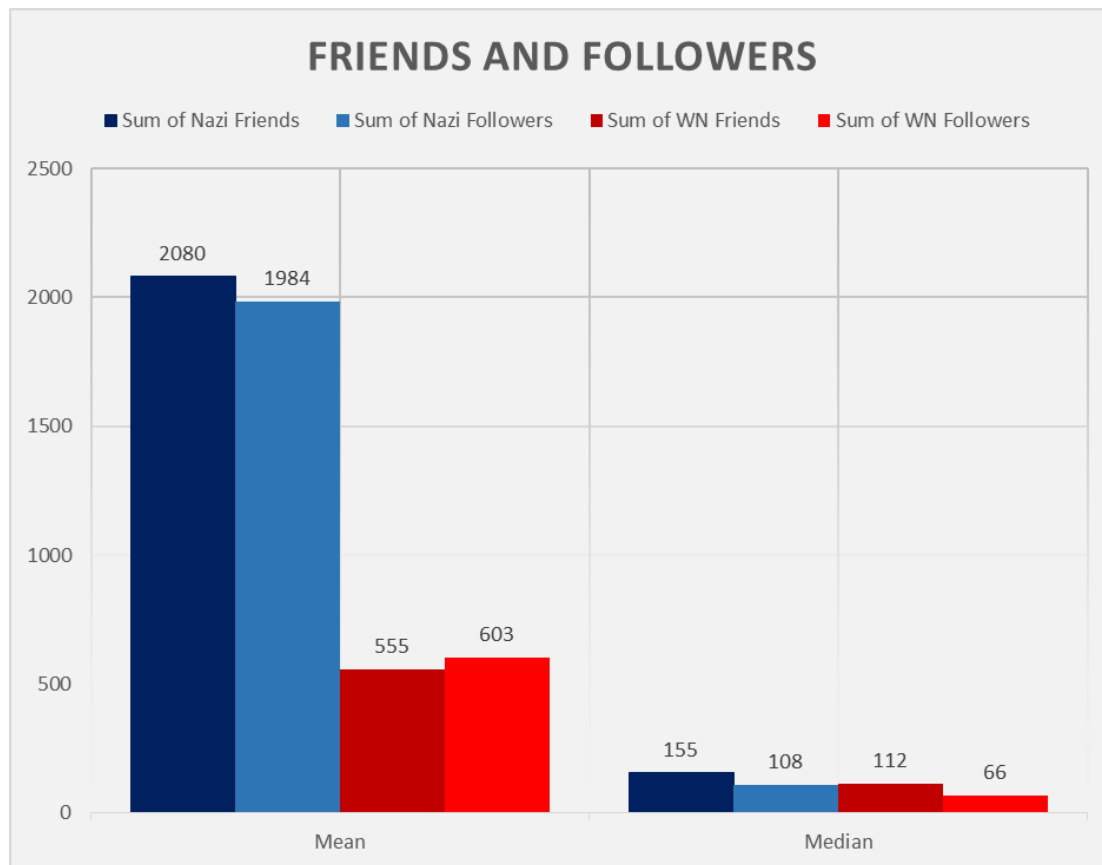
Metrics

Nazis outperformed white nationalists in both "friends" (accounts followed by a user) and followers (accounts that follow a user), as measured by both mean and median friend and follower counts. The averages were inflated by a relatively small number of accounts that follow a massive number of accounts in pursuit of users who will follow them back. The tactic is also used by trolls in an effort to avoid suspension. Such tactics produced noise in both datasets. Because more Nazi accounts were collected than white nationalists prior to sorting, the amount of high-follower noise may have been amplified.

The median figures represented more typical accounts. Here too, Nazis outperformed the broader white nationalist set by a narrower, yet substantial, margin. Both Nazis and white nationalists had more friends than followers, a metric sometimes used as a proxy for influence given that very influential accounts tend to have more followers than friends.

On average, white nationalist accounts tweeted 11.8 times per day and Nazi accounts tweeted 12.1 times per day. Tweet types were meaningfully identical for both datasets. Based on median values, about 11% of tweets were retweets, while 8% were direct replies. White nationalists sent slightly more replies and slightly fewer retweets than Nazis.

For white nationalist users whose location could be estimated algorithmically (less than half of the total set), 43% claimed to be in the United States, 9% claimed to be in the UK, and 5% claimed to be located in Canada. No other country accounted for more than 3% of the total. Among Nazi users, only 33% claimed to be in the United States. 16% claimed that they were located in the UK, 6% in Spain, 4% in Germany, and 4% in Canada. No other country accounted for more than 2% of the total.

The seed accounts for the white nationalist analysis were all American, accounting for the North American bias to a significant degree. The difference between Nazis and white nationalists may be partly driven by the strength of European right-wing movements, but because the Nazi dataset was derived from the white nationalist set, it could also be attributed to the collection of accounts that were two steps removed from the original American seeds.

TWEETS PER DAY
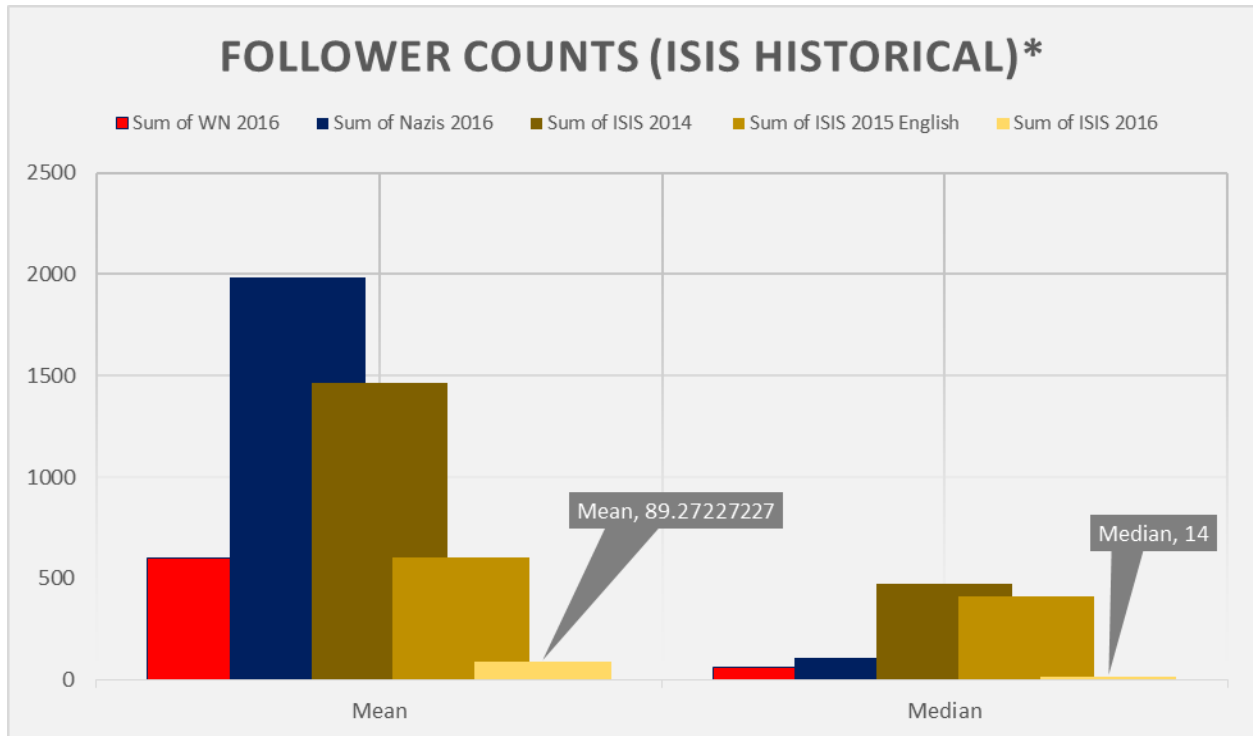
TWEET TYPE

TOP CLAIMED LOCATIONS
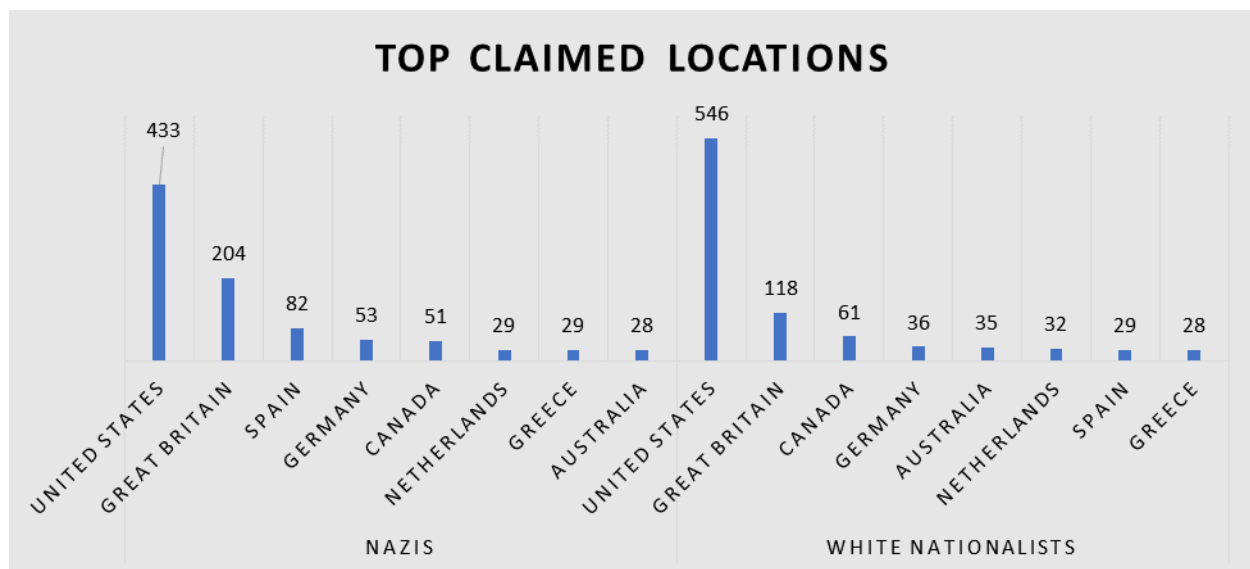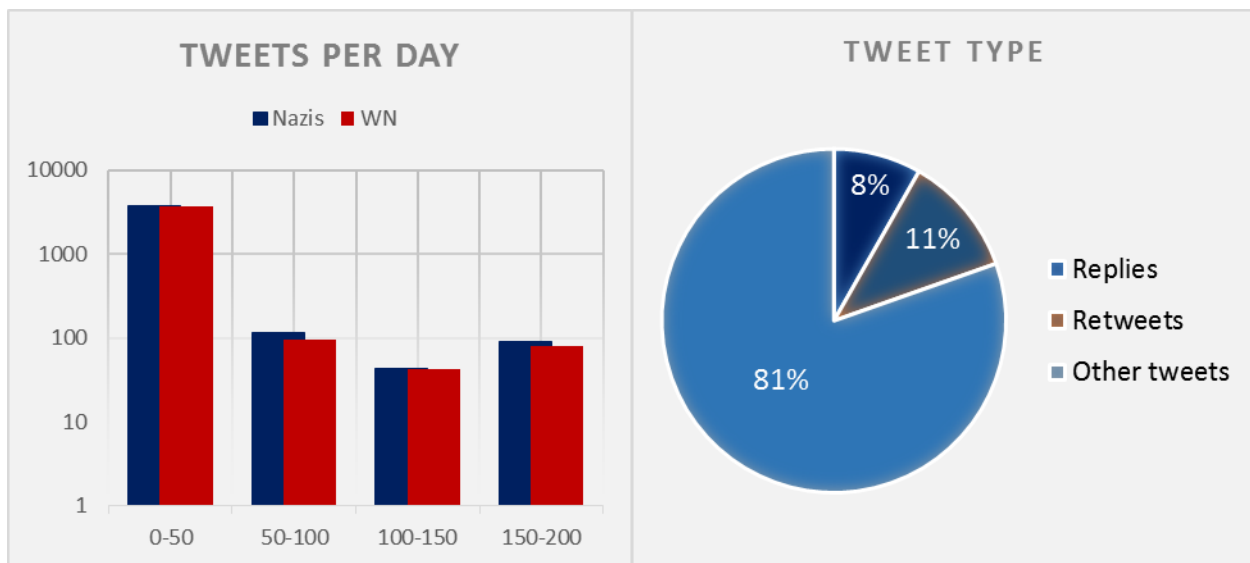
Figure 10: Current and historical follower averages for ISIS, Nazi and white nationalist datasets. *Please read the text for important caveats regarding the size of the change in ISIS network size.

White Nationalists and Nazis vs. ISIS

A demographics dataset of 4,000 ISIS accounts was generated in April using the same methodology. The account was seeded with a mix of prominent and less prominent ISIS accounts that the author was previously monitoring. Four outliers were removed.

ISIS operates under dramatically different conditions than white nationalists and Nazi sympathizers on Twitter. First, ISIS social media strategies are more centralized, providing significant guidelines to users who make a meaningful attempt to follow them. Second, ISIS accounts are subjected to heavy pressure from suspensions due to large-scale efforts to report their content and drive their supporters off the platform. It should be noted that the performance of the ISIS network varies dramatically from day to day because of these factors, and these results represent only a snapshot of a given moment.

White nationalist accounts suffered relatively little suspension pressure. Three white nationalist accounts and four Nazi accounts were observed to be suspended during the course of data collection, and a handful of additional accounts were seen to be suspended in the days that followed. Around 1,100 ISIS accounts were suspended during and immediately after collection.[11]

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[11] In August, after Twitter instituted additional procedures for reporting abuse, the white nationalist demographics dataset was checked for an updated suspension figure. No more than 288 accounts of the 4,000 examined were suspended between the time of the initial collection in April and August 23, 2016.

Comparative Metrics

White nationalists and Nazis outperformed ISIS in average friend and follower counts by a substantial margin. Nazis had a median follower count almost eight times greater than ISIS supporters, and a mean count more than 22 times greater.

Given the outsize impact of ISIS, the number of adherents it claims, and its organized approach to social media, this disparity is almost certainly driven by an aggressive campaign of account suspensions targeting ISIS users on Twitter, driven at least in significant part by user reporting. In contrast, white nationalists and Nazis operate with relative impunity.

Additionally, it's likely there are simply more white nationalists and Nazi sympathizers online and offline than there are ISIS supporters in the world. ISIS dominates policy discussions of violent extremism online thanks to its military adventurism and rampant violence, but other extremist groups may be enjoying more success in building a large, sympathetic audience.
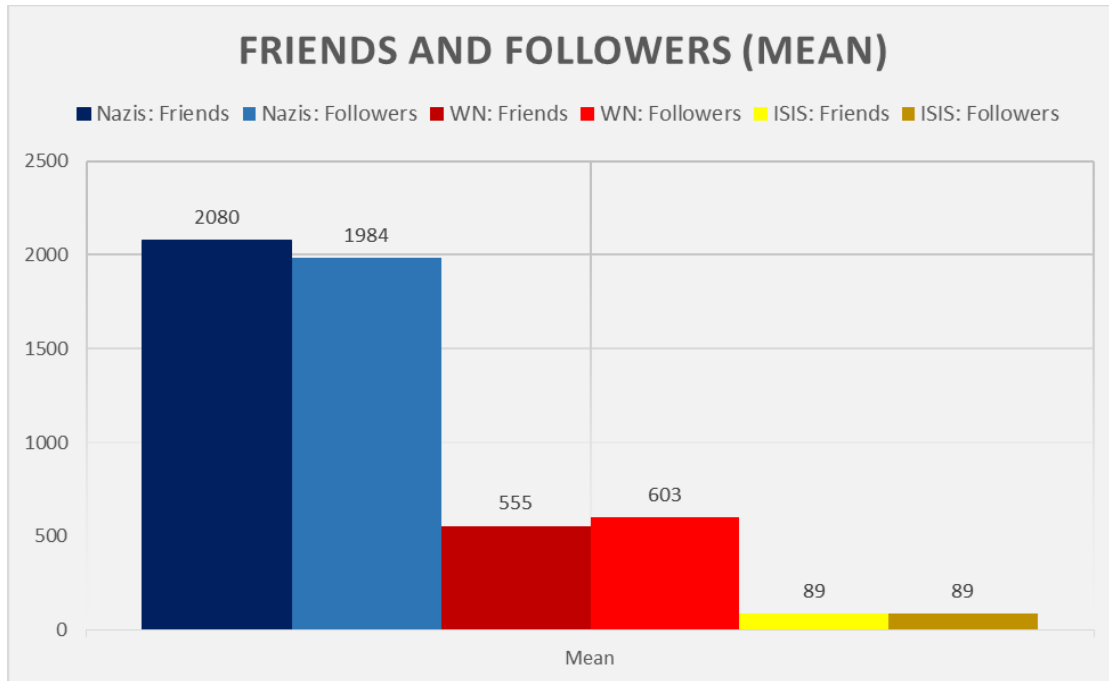
ISIS network performance has plunged since its peak in 2014. Datasets sampled in 2014 and 2015 show huge declines in virtually every social media success metric, though it should be noted that the historical datasets were developed using slightly different metrics and are not perfectly comparable to the 2016 data.[12]

Manipulative techniques, such as the social media apps discussed above, inflated follower counts to varying extents for the white nationalist, Nazi and 2014 ISIS networks. It was not possible to estimate the exact size of this effect. There was little evidence of manipulation in the 2016 ISIS data, which is least partially responsible for the extent to which ISIS underperformed in this area.

Nazis and white nationalists tweeted more than ISIS supporters, with significantly more users tweeting 150 times per day or more. While ISIS accounts tweeted an average of 15.6 times per day in 2014, by 2016 they tweeted only 5.7 times per day, less than half the pace of Nazi tweeters. About 5% of ISIS user tweets were retweets, considerably lower than the 11% registered by white nationalists.

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12 The current metrics could not be applied to the older sets due to changes in the software used to perform the analysis. When a version of the original ISIS-specific metric (used in 2014 and 2015) was applied to the 2016 set, the 2016 follower counts were lower than those cited here.

FRIENDS AND FOLLOWERS (MEAN)

Legend: Nazis: Friends | Nazis: Followers | WN: Friends | WN: Followers | ISIS: Friends | ISIS: Followers

Value
2080
1984
555
603
89
89

Mean

Hashtag Discipline

Across all three sets, users employed a hashtag approximately once for every two tweets, with Nazis and white nationalists using hashtags slightly more often than ISIS supporters. Individual tweets can contain multiple hashtags.

While hashtag adoption was relatively consistent, ISIS users were more disciplined. The top 10 hashtags used by ISIS supporters comprised 14.4% of all hashtags used. White nationalists came in second with 13.8%, but Nazis were substantially lower at 9.9%. Put simply, ISIS users and white nationalists were more likely to tweet the same hashtags over and over again, while Nazi users were likely to use a wider variety of hashtags.

In each set, the top hashtag was disproportionately important relative to the rest of the top 10. For ISIS, the top hashtag ("Islamic State") represented 2.5% of all tags used, while #whitegenocide was 1.9% of white nationalist tweets and 1.4% of Nazi tweets, mirroring the other hashtag trends.

These statistics reinforce the earlier inference that white nationalists are executing a broad social media propaganda campaign, similar in some ways to ISIS campaigns, while Nazi sympathizers are experiencing higher levels of growth without such organized efforts.

Table 1: Top 10 ISIS Hashtags

Hashtag	Translation	Count
الدولة_الإسلامية	Islamic State	4690
syria		2273
isis		1291
عاجل	Urgent	999
داعش	Daesh[13]	869
سوريا	Syria	755
الدولة_الإسلامية_في_العراق_والشام	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant	722
aleppo		631
أخبار_الخلافة	Caliphate news	617
وكالة_أعماق	Amaq Agency (ISIS media outlet)	590
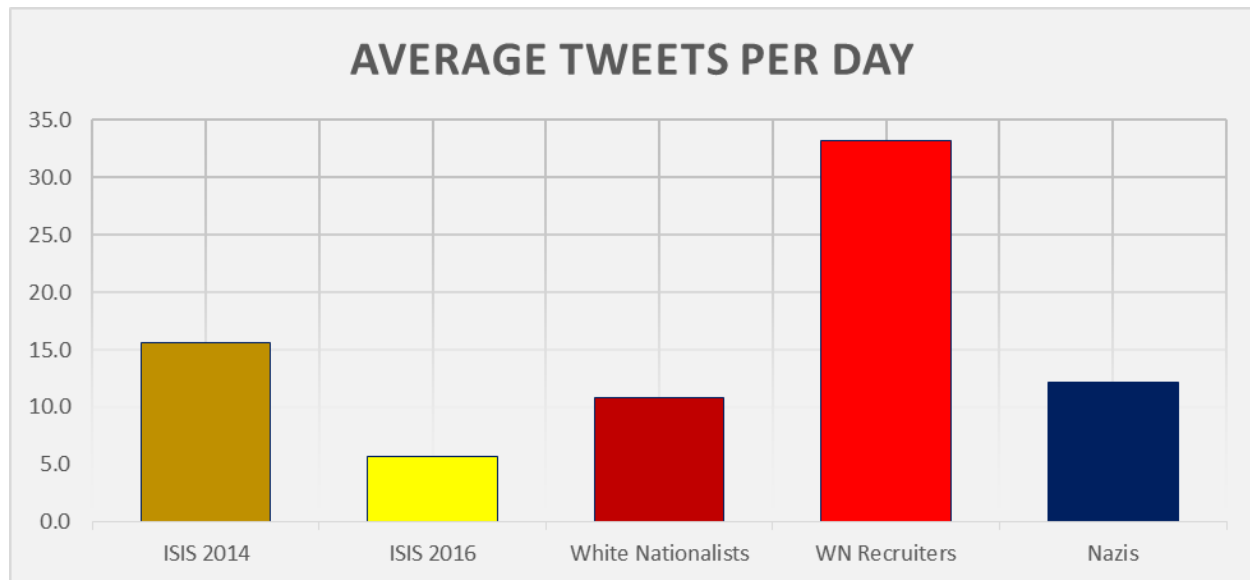
13 The presence of "Daash" (a pejorative term for ISIS) as the fifth most-used hashtag was fairly consistent with findings from the 2014 ISIS dataset in the ISIS Twitter Census (op. cit.). That study found "the hashtag's presence reflected negative content about ISIS from non-responsive accounts in the dataset, retweets of content critical of ISIS that supporters wished to respond to, and a relatively small but notable group of users using the hashtag to send pro-ISIS messages to ISIS critics, or to reclaim the term in a positive light."

ISIS Recruiters vs. Red Pills and White Rabbits

ISIS recruitment practices follow a programmatic model. ISIS supporters, including formal members of the organization, first promote content that purports to educate users about the movement. Next, members of the recruiter social network flock around prospective recruits to provide a sense of supportive community; recruiters then isolate users from their pre-existing communities. This activity culminates in an effort to prompt recruits to take material steps in support of ISIS, such as becoming a foreign fighter or carrying out a terrorist attack.[14]

In contrast, white nationalist recruitment is more diffuse. The movement does not have a clearly dominant institution or authority guiding its activities, and this more closely resembles grassroots organizing. The network's most significant activity is promoting "awareness" or "awakening," an activity common to many terrorist and extremist movements.

In the awakening paradigm, adherents of an extremist movement primarily seek to replace potential recruits' mainstream worldview with an alternative worldview—typically that society is conspiring against a specific identity group, and that a cataclysmic event will soon lead to more aggressive action against that identity group. Extremist groups may be content to watch and wait for this eventuality, whereas terrorist and violent extremist groups seek to precipitate the cataclysm and awaken people on a massive scale through violent actions.

Within white nationalist communities (and other extremist movements), this activity is commonly described in the context of science fiction film, *The Matrix*, in which protagonist Neo is offered the choice between taking a blue pill that will allow him to continue living in a comfortable illusion, or a red pill that will awaken him to an uncomfortable realization that his understanding of the world has been based on a lie. The irony that the pill is offered to Neo by a black character, Morpheus, has not slowed the adoption of the terminology by white nationalists.

White nationalist proselytizers claim to be offering the "red pill" to the un-awakened, which in this context means alerting them to the ongoing "genocide" against the "white race." Related terminology in the network draws on the "through the looking glass" and "down the rabbit hole" themes from *Alice in Wonderland*, which *The Matrix* explicitly references. Usernames and profiles frequently referenced the White Rabbit from *Alice*: Whitest Rabbit, EuroRabbit, RedPill Rabbit, and so forth. The activity itself is sometimes referred to as "redpilling."

One popular content source promoted by this network is WhiteRabbitRadio.net, which offers memes and videos on the topic of "white genocide." The videos are fairly well produced, although they lack the much-discussed quality of ISIS content. Many users in this network identify with "the mantra" and other content created by Bob Whitaker. In keeping with the mantra, non-racists are referred to as "anti-whites" in hundreds of repetitive tweets, constantly referencing the mantra and white genocide.

Not everyone citing "red pill" language in the dataset was a white nationalist. Some were associated with related movements, such as men's rights activism. There were more "red pill"

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[14] J.M. Berger, "Tailored Online Interventions: The Islamic State's Recruitment Strategy," CTC Sentinel, October 2015.

accounts in the white nationalist dataset than in the Nazi dataset, consistent with other data points suggesting that most online activism takes place within non-Nazi communities.

Key accounts within the Nazi dataset and a comparable set collected from accounts self-identifying with red pill and/or white rabbit themes were identified using an analysis of multiple cliques within each dataset.[15] The Red Pill network outperformed the Nazi network across all network metrics. Red-pill tweeters logged a mean average of 33.2 tweets per day, even higher than ISIS at its 2014 peak.

The Red Pill clique groupings were twice as dense as those in the Nazi network, pointing again to the fact that systematic social media activism by non-Nazi white nationalists occurs at a much greater level than that of Nazis. It also featured more reciprocal relationships, with users following each other.

Importantly, key accounts in the Nazi network were also part of the Red Pill network, including five of the 10 most connected users. Removing the Red Pill accounts from the Nazi network further reduced the relative density of the latter.

In context with other data in this study, these findings suggest that non-Nazi white nationalists are working to promote messages and themes within Nazi-sympathetic networks, rather than the other way around. Users who are drawn in by Red Pill accounts may then gravitate toward Nazi content, but they do not engage in the same robust proselytization of specifically Nazi-related themes.

Based on this overall picture, the sharp rise in Nazi-related accounts on Twitter since 2013 is likely due to factors external to Twitter. These may include recruitment on other online platforms, an organic increase in interest in the movement, or an increase in non-ideological trolling with a white nationalist or Nazi themes.

Within the last couple of years, significant amounts of white nationalist content on social media has been generated by members of online forums. The most popular of these are 4chan and 8chan, as well as users active on white nationalist boards hosted by Reddit, and members of the "Alt Right" movement, which is dominated by white identity politics but is somewhat distinct from historical white nationalism.

One identity marker related to these networks, "Pepe the Frog," was used by multiple accounts in the Red Pill network, including some of the most active and central users.[16] Many users in all of the datasets examined self-identified as "Alt Right" and #altright was the ninth most-used hashtag in the white nationalist demographics dataset.

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15 Clique criteria detailed in "The ISIS Twitter Census," op. cit., p. 46.
16 Olivia Nuzzi, "How Pepe the Frog Became a Nazi Trump Supporter and Alt-Right Symbol," *The Daily Beast*, May 26, 2016. http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/05/26/how-pepe-the-frog-became-a-nazi-trump-supporter-and-alt-right-symbol.html

Some white nationalist activity on social media is arguably intended as general harassment or ugly pranking, as opposed to sincere ideological commitment.[17] Other activity may be related, directly or indirectly, to well-documented Russian propaganda efforts to aggravate racial tensions in the West.[18]

Ultimately, these questions fell outside the scope of this study, but they are far from insignificant. Additional study focusing on these issues would be a fruitful and important avenue for future research. Regardless of motivation, this online activity is one of several factors energizing and emboldening sincere white nationalists in the United States, with serious consequences in the offline world.[19]

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17 Kelly Weill, "Racist Trolls Are Behind NYU's 'White Student Union' Hoax," *The Daily Beast*, November 23, 2016. http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/11/23/racist-trolls-are-behind-nyu-s-white-student-union-hoax.html

18 Max Seddon, "Racists, Neo-Nazis, Far Right Flock to Russia for Joint Conference," *Buzzfeed*, March 22, 2016. https://www.buzzfeed.com/maxseddon/europes-far-right-comes-to-russia-in-search-of-shared-values?utm_term=.aoWWv6VV#.dwWeDoWW; Max Seddon, "Russia Is Trolling The U.S. Over Ferguson Yet Again," *Buzzfeed*, November 25, 2014. https://www.buzzfeed.com/maxseddon/russia-is-trolling-the-us-over-ferguson-yet-again?utm_term=.tiK0RPzz#.rfRLn8gg; Carl Schreck, "Russian Trolls' Vast Library Of Insulting Images," *RFE/RL*, July 12, 2016. http://www.rferl.org/content/russian-trolls-vast-insult-cartoon-database/26938435.html

19 Rosie Gray, "Inside A White Nationalist Conference Energized By Trump's Rise," *Buzzfeed*, May 26, 2016. https://www.buzzfeed.com/rosiegray/inside-a-white-nationalist-conference-energized-by-trumps-ri?utm_term=.ii1l4LYY#.mi1jpmbb; Alan Yuhas and Nicky Woolf, "Multiple people stabbed at Sacramento white nationalist rally," *The Guardian*, June 26, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jun/26/white-nationalist-rally-stabbings-california
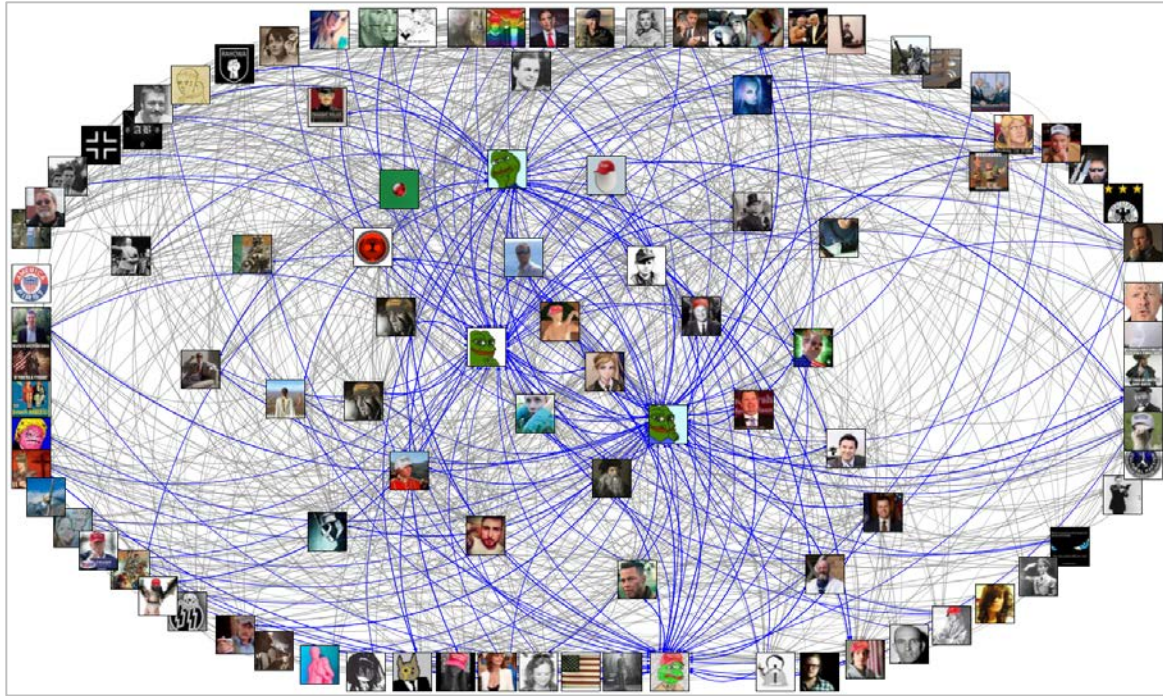
Figure 11: Following relationships within a cluster of white nationalist users connected to a "Red Pill" network; some central users displayed profile pictures of "Pepe the Frog," an image that has come to be associated with racist trolling. Other users displayed related avatars. Links to the Pepe users are highlighted in blue.

Conclusions

ISIS was the first group to enjoy notable success promoting its cause and message on social media. Other extremist groups and movements are poised to follow in its footsteps, partly due to organic political factors as well as the structural nature of social media. The latter allows for relatively marginalized communities to enjoy disproportionate visibility as a result of synchronized activities. However, there is substantial and growing evidence that white nationalism is enjoying a meaningful resurgence within the United States.[20]

White nationalists are part of the second generation of extremist social media activism, and they have already enjoyed substantial gains as a result. While white nationalist recruiting behaviors are similar to some used by ISIS, there are a few important distinctions.

1. While ISIS networks promote propaganda and talking points, its recruiting practices are more grounded in community-building and creating a welcoming environment for potential adherents.[21] In contrast, "Red Pill" white nationalists tend to be antagonistic, with a significant amount of content consisting of negative feedback (trolling) directed at users considered "anti-white." Efforts to bond with potential recruits often focus on shared

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[20] Peter Holley, "Top Nazi leader: Trump will be a 'real opportunity' for white nationalists," Washington Post, August 7, 2016
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2016/08/07/top-nazi-leader-trump-will-be-a-real-opportunity-for-white-nationalists/?utm_term=.f6512b03af23
[21] Ibid.

negative emotions, such as feelings of disenfranchisement or dislike of minorities. ISIS supporters do engage in trolling, but they have been more effective and persistent in their efforts to create a warm environment for potential recruits and highlight positive emotions regarding the Islamic State.

2. ISIS recruiters can depend on high levels of curiosity about the organization and movement to attract engagement, while white nationalists generally do not provoke the same level of organic interest and do not offer a single organization or movement that can be the beneficiary of such curiosity.

3. New developments and new propaganda items are a constant part of the ISIS landscape, whereas content in white nationalist networks tends to be repetitive, with few meaningful changes to the movement's message, landscape, or political prospects. A notable exception to this is Donald Trump's presidential candidacy, which has energized white nationalists and provided new talking points and opportunities for engagement. Trump's candidacy is likely driving some portion of movement's recent gains on Twitter.

4. In general, white nationalists have not found an effective way to advance to a post-awakening phase, in which new adherents would be directed toward some kind of material support for the movement. While such efforts exist, they are markedly ineffective. For instance, an effort to stage rallies around the United States in March 2016 resulted in groups of two to four people turning out in half a dozen locations. The fragmentation of white nationalism as both a movement and a collection of organizations is a major factor limiting turnout, especially compared to the singular organization and movement of ISIS, which offers a clear path to meaningful material participation. White nationalists online do appear to inspire violence, a form of material participation, but not in a highly organized manner visible in open sources.

5. Similar to ISIS recruitment networks prior to the rise of aggressive suspensions, many "Red Pill" users are strongly connected through following one another or by interacting with each other (see Figure 15). During the coding of random samples from the white nationalist and Nazi datasets, patterns in avatar choice and naming conventions were also observed. All of this suggests a relatively cohesive effort by a specific group of users working together to promote the movement's themes. Nevertheless, the lack of a unified end point (in the form of joining a distinct movement or organization) left content in the overall network confused in terms of goals, beliefs, and affiliations.

6. To some extent, the rise of an anti-social "trolling culture" is amplifying the presence of white nationalist content on social media. There is a growing overlap between people engaged with white nationalism and online forums (including 4chan and 8chan) where mostly anonymous participants seek to outdo each other with obnoxious or harassing content. It is unclear in many cases whether these users are committed white nationalists, committed trolls, or something in between.

Additional research is required to fully understand the dynamics seen in these networks. Future research could include more robust data collection and analysis on Twitter, and explore social

networks on other platforms, including Facebook, Reddit, 4chan, 8chan, blogs and message boards, all of which are widely used by white nationalists. Developing metrics to distinguish between different movements within white nationalism and to evaluate the impact of organized trolling on networks should be a high priority for future studies.

Appendix A: White Nationalist Seed Accounts

Klu Klux Klan
@ukanw
@ukasouthfla
@kkkofficial311

Ideologies
@nationsaryan
@tcmchurch
@creatoralliance

Nazi
@nsm88
@anp14
@nsfm_commander
@natall_adv

Significant Leaders
@drdavidduke
@whitakeronline

Neo-Confederate
@dixienetdotorg
@cofcc76
@occdissent

Other Institutions
@nwfront
@stormfrontwpww
@american3rdp

Appendix B: Brief Methodology Discussion

For each dataset, seeds were identified manually. All of the followers of the seeds were identified, and the last 200 tweets of both seeds and their followers were downloaded. Tweets were analyzed to identify interactions among the accounts with various levels of specificity. The white nationalist and Nazi datasets were coded according to their use of ideologically relevant keywords.

The results were analyzed to find the most suitable metric to distinguish relevant accounts (those openly supportive of the ideology) from irrelevant accounts (those not openly supportive of the ideology). A metric that compared the ratio of interactions with other users in the dataset to interactions with users outside the dataset proved to be most successful, combined with a weighted measure of how many seed accounts the user followed. The 4,000 top-ranked accounts from each set were used to create a demographics dataset.

The same metric was applied to generate the ISIS demographics dataset, for consistency. The weighting relative to seed accounts was increased to improve accuracy relative to the white nationalist and Nazi datasets, given the fragmented nature of the ISIS network under suspension pressure.

The author has access to more accurate metrics tailored exclusively to ISIS networks, but because the sorting metrics are directly relevant to the performance metrics discussed in the paper, it was better to sacrifice some accuracy (in the form of non-relevant accounts) in order to make a more legitimate comparison. The sorting metric necessarily introduces some biases (for instance, it emphasizes users who interact over those who do not, but favors certain users with low numbers of interactions over users with high interactions). In order to preserve the validity of comparisons across different sets, the sorting metrics had to be fundamentally similar.

Random Samples

A random sample of 200 accounts each from the white nationalist and Nazi databases were coded to judge the accuracy of the sorting metrics. Accounts were coded as follows:

1. If a user clearly self-identified in their profile with a specific, identifiable movement, it was coded as such.

2. Accounts that relied overwhelmingly on Nazi imagery and language were coded as Nazis, unless they offered an alternative self-identification.

3. If the user did not clearly self-identify with one or the other group, their tweets were examined for an expressed preference.

4. If the users' tweets were ambiguous or the user did not tweet enough to draw a conclusion, the list of accounts they followed was examined and evaluated based on the number of relevant accounts relative to the total number of accounts followed. For example, if a user followed only six accounts and five were Nazis, it was coded as Nazi. If a user followed 500
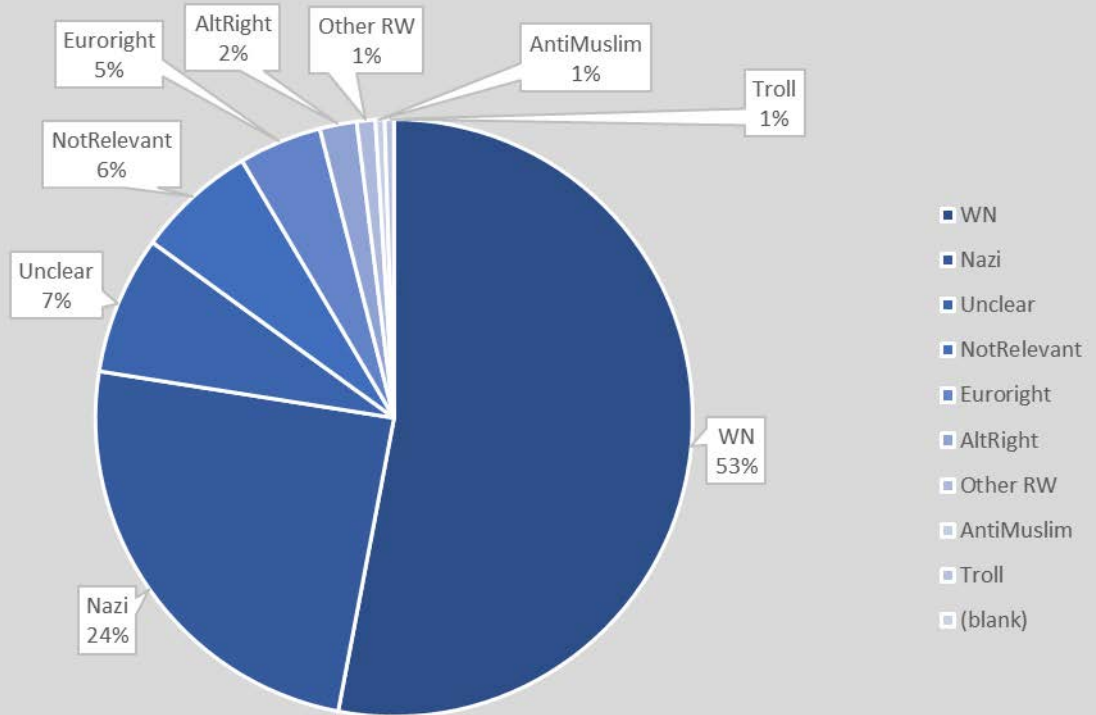
accounts and only three were white nationalists, it was coded as unclear or irrelevant based on the total context.

5. No distinction was drawn between neo-Nazis and Nazis for purposes of this analysis, but anecdotally, there were a significant number of accounts that referenced the Nazi Party in its historical context or self-identified as National Socialists relative to those who endorsed movements or organizations more clearly understood as neo-Nazi, such as the American Nazi Party or the National Socialist Movement.
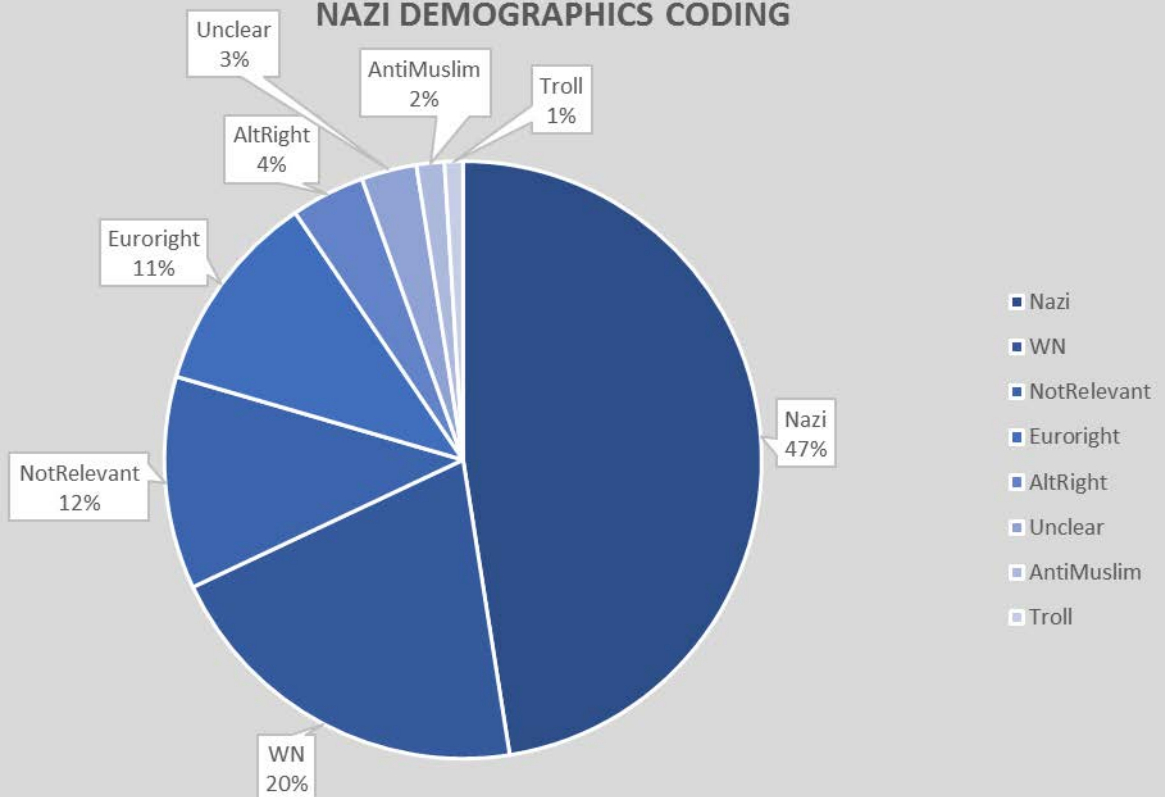
The white nationalist sample group was coded 53% white nationalist, 24% Nazi, 7% unclear, 6% not relevant, 5% European right-wing movements, 2% Alt-Right, 1% other right-wing movement (preppers and Patriot movement), 1% troll accounts and 1% anti-Muslim.

The Nazi sample group was coded 47% Nazi, 20% white nationalist, 12% not relevant, 11% European right-wing movements, 4% Alt-Right, 3% unclear, 2% anti-Muslim, and 1% troll. There were many instances in which subjective judgments had to be brought to bear. For instance, some users identified both as white nationalists and Alt-Right. These were coded as white nationalists. Several European movements overlap with Nazi interests. The Greek political party Golden Dawn was coded as Nazi, but it appeared relatively infrequently. Additionally, some users showed a robust mix of interests, dividing their activity evenly between white nationalism and Nazism, requiring subjective judgment. Most users in the set expressed some sort of anti-Muslim sentiment, but only accounts that exclusively focused on Muslim or Muslim refugee issues were coded as such. Less than 1% of white nationalist accounts tweeted exclusively about Donald Trump. Those who also followed a high ratio of white nationalist users were classified as white nationalists, and those who followed hundreds of accounts, but only one or two white nationalists, were coded as not relevant.

WHITE NATIONALIST DEMOGRAPHICS CODING

Euroright 5%
AltRight 2%
Other RW 1%
AntiMuslim 1%
Troll 1%
NotRelevant 6%
Unclear 7%
WN 53%
Nazi 24%

- WN
- Nazi
- Unclear
- NotRelevant
- Euroright
- AltRight
- Other RW
- AntiMuslim
- Troll
- (blank)

NAZI DEMOGRAPHICS CODING

Unclear 3%
AntiMuslim 2%
Troll 1%
AltRight 4%
Euroright 11%
NotRelevant 12%
Nazi 47%
WN 20%

- Nazi
- WN
- NotRelevant
- Euroright
- AltRight
- Unclear
- AntiMuslim
- Troll

Appendix C: Caveats

The fidelity of these datasets is lower than in the author's previous Twitter study, "The ISIS Twitter Census."[22] This is partly due to the fractured nature of the white nationalist movement compared to ISIS, but it is also due to the smaller scope of this project. In the demographics dataset developed for "The ISIS Twitter Census," between 4% and 7% of accounts analyzed consisted of people who did not overtly support ISIS.

Within the white nationalist demographics dataset, 6% of a random sample of accounts was coded "not relevant," meaning they showed no overt support of or identification with white nationalism except for following at least one of the seed accounts. About 12% of a random sample from the Nazi demographics dataset was coded "not relevant," defined as accounts showing no overt sympathy with Nazism, white nationalism, or related ideologies, aside from following at least one of the seed accounts. The difference in the not relevant results between the two datasets is due primarily to the different structure of the seed accounts in the Nazi set, which were more numerous but less prominent than the white nationalist seeds.

Additionally, 7% of accounts were coded as "unclear" in the white nationalist dataset, compared to 3% in the Nazi dataset. Accounts were coded as unclear when a user posted ambiguous content (see Appendix B for a detailed discussion). One possible explanation for this is that it may be easier to discreetly entertain a casual interest in white nationalism relative to Nazism. Nazism is associated with direct, violent, and genocidal intentions that lie far outside the mainstream, whereas white nationalism is notionally defensible as being less extreme or even nominally nonviolent.

None of the "not relevant" accounts in the Nazi dataset clearly opposed Nazism or white nationalism, while between 1 and 2% of the "not relevant" white nationalist accounts belonged to users who showed some signs of opposition to white nationalism.

Because of the overlapping interests of the ideologies in question, the distinct datasets are not exclusively focused on general white nationalism or Nazism; rather, they skew toward one ideology or the other. About 53% of the white nationalist demographics database identified as non-Nazi white nationalists, compared to 20% of the Nazi database. About 24% of the accounts in the white nationalist demographics dataset identified as Nazis, compared to 47% of the Nazi dataset.

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22 Berger, J. M., and Jonathon Morgan. "The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on Twitter." The Brookings Project on US Relations with the Islamic World 3.20 (2015).

<u>Notes</u>

Data collection and analysis for this paper was performed using proprietary software. Visualizations were created using:
1. Microsoft Excel
2. Google Maps
3. Cytoscape
4. NodeXL
5. Voyant Tools
6. https://www.jasondavies.com