<u>MAPPING DISCOURSE IN THE INTELLECTUAL DARK WEB:</u>
<u>A CRITICAL COMPUTATIONAL SOCIOLOGY</u>

by

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A Dissertation
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Date: _____ Summer Semester 2022
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

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Doctor of Philosophy at George Mason University

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Dedication

To my wife, Jordan, whose patience, unconditional love, and support have made this dissertation, and all else that I do, possible. And to my daughter, Reese, the light of my life: may you and your generation reopen the future.

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Abstract

MAPPING DISCOURSE IN THE INTELLECTUAL DARK WEB: A CRITICAL COMPUTATIONAL SOCIOLOGY

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This dissertation studies an online community ("subreddit") related to the so-called "Intellectual Dark Web" (IDW) on the social media platform Reddit to understand the social and epistemological significance of the IDW within the social setting of what Jodi Dean calls "communicative capitalism." Using deep neural language models, a novel topic modeling algorithm (BERTopic), and qualitative content analysis, this research offers a discursive mapping of the social, cultural, and political issues structuring discourse on the IDW subreddit. Across a sample of more than 400,000 Reddit comments, my exploratory topic model discovers 114 topics nested within 10 topical categories: Culture Wars; Governance & Political Institutions; IDW-Related; Platforms, Media & Information; Political Economy; Political Ideologies; Race & Ethnicity; Science, Knowledge & Epistemology; and Sex & Gender. Emergent from these ten categories are three overarching meta-themes: Sensemaking in Communicative

Capitalism; Identity, Ideologies, and Social Justice; and Crises of Civilization. Through my mixed methods analysis, I argue that the chief social significance of the IDW is based in how, through its discourses, criticisms, and "sensemaking" practices, it provides a sense of reality to its constituents amidst the profound epistemic pessimism and social distrust foundational to communicative capitalism.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In May of 2018, former *New York Times* writer Bari Weiss introduced the world to a

group of "renegade" intellectuals calling themselves the Intellectual Dark Web (IDW).

The moniker, teasing about the cryptic underworld lurking beneath the public internet (cf.

Gehl 2018), is meant to prime the reader's imagination with innuendo about secret,

forbidden, or even illicit knowledge networks. It may come as a surprise, then, that the

"web" of the IDW refers not to message boards nested away in the Tor network, but to

mainstream platforms like YouTube, Twitter, Apple Podcasts, and Spotify. Nevertheless,

Weiss (2018)—a sympathetic observer of the IDW—is happy to indulge the metaphor,

provocatively opening her profile of the group this way:

> Here are some things that you will hear when you sit down to dinner with the vanguard of the Intellectual Dark Web: There are fundamental differences between men and women. Free speech is under siege. Identity politics is a toxic ideology that is tearing American society apart. And we're in a dangerous place if these ideas are considered 'dark'…Today, people like them who dare venture into this 'There Be Dragons' territory on the intellectual map have met with outrage and derision…It's a pattern that has become common in our new era of That Which Cannot Be Said. And it is the reason the Intellectual Dark Web…came to exist (n.p.).

Hence, what truly makes the Intellectual Dark Web "dark" is *not* its location in some

hard-to-reach cavern of the deep web, but instead the willingness of its constituents to

speak disconcerting "truths" despite a social and political context that purportedly stifles,

even prohibits, intellectual freedom and the disclosure of basic scientific facts.

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But what such social force has supposedly shackled society within an iron cage of intellectual unfreedom? Eric Weinstein—the podcasting mathematician who coined the phrase "Intellectual Dark Web"—proffers an answer: it is the authoritarian cultural hegemony of the modern progressive "left." Indeed, the term Intellectual Dark Web was always meant to be tongue-in-cheek, according to Weinstein, because the IDW is only "dark" when measured against the new wave of social justice activism that has become a prominent sociocultural force. As Weinstein argues in a series of interviews with the YouTuber David Fuller, who produces content under the moniker Rebel Wisdom, we are living in a period of "left-Carthyism"—or what has also been variously described as a turn towards "woke ideology," "identity politics," "critical social justice," "critical race theory", "regressive leftism," "postmodern neo-Marxism," "cultural Marxism," and so on in both IDW and conservative spheres—where "the left" has become so culturally hegemonic and "has gone so completely insane that people are starved for normal conversation as if it was *samizdat* in the former Soviet Union" (Rebel Wisdom 2019b).

It is certainly true that a new lexicon and set of social practices grounded in progressive social justice activism—boosted by digital technologies (Castells 2015; Jackson, Bailey, and Welles 2020)—has burst out of activist subcultures and diffused through mainstream culture. Ours is an era where everyone from celebrities to CEOs, clothing brands to oil companies, union-busting firms to HR departments, and the former manufacturer of napalm to the CIA have radicalized their vocabulary, adopted an aesthetics of youthful progressivism, and project commitments to a representational

politics of identity (Borger 2021; Green 2019; Kanai and Gill 2020; Sobande 2020; Stern 2021). Along with this discursive-cultural trend, a new activist politics of "radical impatience" (Keller 2020) has flourished—particularly online—that amplifies do-it-yourself direct actions against, and call outs of, bigoted, abusive, or otherwise problematic behavior through social media networks to hold accused offenders publicly accountable. Positively referred to as "accountability politics" (Russo 2018), negatively as "cancel culture" (Burgis 2021), or sympathetically but critically as "digilantism" (Jane 2016), this style of politics centers the voices of victims and survivors of oppressive violence while directing networked condemnation at the accused. Often operating outside of formal institutions like the law, "digilantist" tactics are defended on the grounds that such formal institutions have failed to serve the interests and needs of the marginalized and oppressed, thereby compelling them to devise their own means of seeking justice against those who cause them harm (Clark 2020; Ibrahim 2019). These ideas and practices are heavily rooted in a contemporary derivative of political leftism that Mark Fisher (2013) calls "neo-anarchism," which is characterized by its focus on immediate and decentralized direct actions instead of more long-term organizational practices like party-formation or institution-building.[1]

    However we register this profound cultural shift—as "fourth wave feminism" or

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[1] Throughout the text, I will use terms like "leftist," "the left," "leftism," and "progressive" in a general way to refer to: (1) ideas related broadly to issues of social justice and equity, anti-racism, feminism, and anti-capitalism; and (2) actors who aim to overcome the forms of oppression and exploitation made visible through those ideas. I treat leftism, then, as a broad set of sentiments aimed at critically evaluating and opposing existing forms of oppression and exploitation and tied to a plurality of, often contentious and contradictory, practices aimed at struggling against those dominations.

something else (Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller 2019; Munro 2013)—it is precisely this diffusion of progressive rhetoric, ideas, and practices that the IDW interprets as nothing short of a threat to liberal civilization and its Enlightenment principles. According to the IDW, this is because implementing the agenda of contemporary progressives necessarily means silencing dissent and controversial opinions, forbidding debate about the causes of the various social inequalities that are targeted by progressive activists, and subordinating scientific objectivity, intellectual freedom, individual liberty, and reason itself to the ever-shifting demands of social justice activism.

As Eric Weinstein argues, in the era of so-called "left-Carthyism," when "it is dangerous to say the obvious," "when you're attacking reason [as a tool of oppression], or one of two genders, or concepts as abstract [as] patriarchy or anything like that, you've probably made a fairly significant wrong turn somewhere in your thinking" (Rebel Wisdom 2019b). At the same time, Weinstein warns, reasonable people have been "terrorized into a sort of hibernating state," too cautious to contest the new compulsory "leftist" common sense, lest they find themselves publicly scolded and exiled (Rebel Wisdom 2019b). For Weinstein, this is precisely why the IDW had to come to be: when most of society is too afraid to "speak truth" in opposition to the new progressivism, the IDW steps in to supply a desperate "need for reality" (Rebel Wisdom 2019a). This band of "free thinkers" seemingly put everything at risk to rescue freedom, science, and the rationalist pillars of Western liberalism from the illiberal encroachments of the contemporary left, ostensibly using the "power of conversation" and "long-form

podcasting" to pull civilization back from the precipice of collapse.

In this dissertation, I critically scrutinize the rise of the Intellectual Dark Web to understand its social and epistemological significance in the historical present. Ours is a period characterized by what Nancy Fraser (2016) describes as a general social crisis that leaves no social field unscathed. Importantly, this research is not a piece of activist scholarship that sets out to "expose" the IDW as a cover for the alt-right, mainline conservatism, or some other nefarious or bigoted group. As existing scholarship has already shown (Doody 2020; Lewis 2018, 2020; Lewis, Marwick, and Partin 2021; Mondon and Winter 2020; Hong 2020; Hughes 2018; Ribeiro et al. 2020; Sikka 2019; Smith 2019), the utility of IDW discourse to the rationalization of conservative, and even extremist right-wing, beliefs about controversial social issues—whether or not individual members of the IDW themselves agree with the beliefs—is well understood. Rather, it is my aim to come to terms with how the IDW matters for consumers of IDW content who have embraced the IDW identity.

This is important because the IDW has emerged in a period of profound epistemic pessimism following from the de-differentiation and rapid circulation of information that dissolves our sense of reality in the acid of digital abundance and the quickening pace of cultural change propelled by contemporary information and communications technologies (Agger 2004). In this context, the amorphous category of "the left" becomes a stand-in for the diffusion of a host of anti-essentialist understandings of categories like race, sex, and gender that challenge the fixed objectivity of biologically reductionist

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accounts of human nature by contesting so-called "scientistic" knowledge about human differences with interpretivist versions that emphasize the social construction, and hierarchical ordering, of stated differences. As Marwick and Lewis (2017) argue, the growing social awareness and sensitivity towards marginalized identities can cause a sense of anomie as older norms and cultural understandings about identity and human difference are quickly pushed aside, leaving those without a marginal status, especially the white men who overwhelmingly constitute the IDW and its audience, "unable to adopt an empowered minority subject position in the way that a white woman feeling alienated by sexist culture might become a feminist or a black man might embrace anti-racist activism" (p. 29). Caught in the anomic drift of rapid cultural change, people's previous sense of community, order, and reality is dislodged. At the same time, a further feeling of untruth sweeps in due to the "malign velocities" of the circuits of communication, media, and information that seem to accelerate ever more with each technological innovation (Noys 2014). In the era of disinformation, "alternative facts," "citizen journalism," and "prosumption," we are endlessly blasted by the cacophony of *everyone's* opinion, *everyone's* experiences, *everyone's* evidence, and *everyone's* counterevidence. Access to anything resembling truth appears to be revoked. Epistemic despair settles in.

Such epistemic despair is the hallmark of what Jodi Dean (2019a) calls "communicative capitalism," a category that aims to register the contradictions that follow when reflexive communication becomes integral to the accumulation of capital.

Conceptually, communicative capitalism refers to "the materialization of ideals of inclusion and participation in information, entertainment, and communication technologies in ways that capture resistance and intensify global capitalism" (Dean 2009:2). In communicative capitalism, we are all invited online to speak our own truths, seek our own information, and opine endlessly on anything and everything, ceaselessly. On the social internet, anything resembling expertise appears antiquated and authoritarian: *I can do my own research; I can find my own answers; I can form my own opinions; I can do it all myself.* Consequently, as Dean (2010) describes—building on Žižek (2000)—we experience a radical decline in *symbolic efficiency.* That is, the efficacy of symbols is purely contingent and non-generalizable. Epistemically, our capacity to falsify, our capacity for disbelief, and, inversely, our inability to reach mutual understanding, therefore, become unlimited. Politically, this results in us being captured by the exploitative and oppressive relations of contemporary capitalism, as our attention, symbols, and political energies are fragmented in ways that incentivize division instead of the solidarity necessary to overcome our crisis conditions.

Appeals to scientific or institutional authority offer no respite. As Ulrich Beck (1992) understood, as society becomes reflexive and self-critical, science is not spared: "[the sciences] are targeted as a source of solutions to problems, but also as a cause of problems. In practice and in the public sphere, the sciences increasingly face not just the balance of their defeats but also that of their victories…the reflection of their unkept promises" (p. 156). A cynicism towards scientific expertise takes root, extending to the

various institutions of science spread throughout the fields of industry, academia, politics, and advocacy:

> …a movement is set into motion, in the course of which the scientists will be forced more and more emphatically to display before the whole public their awkwardness, all their limitations, and their 'birth defects,' all of which have long been well known internally. Forms of 'alternative' and 'advocacy science' come into being that relate the entire 'hocus-pocus of science' to different principles and different interests—and therefore reach exactly the opposite conclusions…In this way, science not only experiences a rapid diminution of its own public credibility, but also opens *new fields of activity and applications for itself* (Beck 1992:161, original emphasis).

On the one hand, scientific expertise is discredited and undermined everywhere; on the other hand, scientific expertise is diffused and applied everywhere—but in increasingly specialized and motivated forms. Far from resulting in a utopia of information—the coveted "accumulation of knowledge" in academic parlance—the dialectic of scientific cynicism/scientific specialization tends towards an epistemic crisis. The world is now abounded with instantaneously accessible information. And yet, the lack of our "capacity to know is the other side of the abundance of knowledge" (Dean 2010:111). Or as Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) put it: "The flood of precise information and brand-new amusements make people smarter and more stupid at once" (p. xvii).

In this dissertation, I explore the ways the IDW attempts to solve the problem of epistemic decline that has emerged from the social relations constitutive of communicative capitalism. I do so by centering my analysis on consumers of IDW media, content, and ideas. My research is based in a digital field site located on the social media platform Reddit, specifically, the user managed IDW social forum ("subreddit"), r/IntellectualDarkWeb. I ask the following research questions:

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1. What social, cultural, and political topics are most popular in r/IntellectualDarkWeb discussions?

2. How do the topics discussed in r/IntellectualDarkWeb relate to current events, conflicts, and discussions happening in society?

3. Given the answers to questions 1 and 2, how can we theorize the social and epistemological significance of the IDW in the present historical context of communicative capitalism?

To answer these questions, I deploy computational social science tools to collect all comments and posts in r/IntellectualDarkWeb from the subreddit's creation in January of 2018 through December of 2021. I use a novel topic model algorithm, BERTopic, that leverages deep neural language models and density-based clustering to group similar comments posted in r/IntellectualDarkWeb into coherent topical clusters. I subject the topics to qualitative scrutiny, taking a focused look at the comments assigned to the various topics to understand the nuances, debates, and points of agreement and disagreement animating users' discussions. Throughout my analysis, I relate my observations back to the broader universe of IDW discourse.

I argue that the chief social significance of the IDW is to be understood in how, for users of the r/IntellectualDarkWeb subreddit—and by extension, the broader IDW audience—participation in IDW-related discussions restores a sense of reality within communicative capitalism's climate of severe epistemic pessimism. Importantly, subreddit users need not agree with each other on any specific issues. Debates and

disagreements do happen, and they provide a means of evaluating different perspectives and instilling a sense of "truth" for their respective subjects. Moreover, my findings do not imply that the resultant sense of truth is *factually* or *objectively* true: often, it is bound up with obvious untruths (such as conspiracies and misinformation; c.f., Lewis 2018, 2020; Marwick and Lewis 2017) and other times partial truths (e.g., dysfunctional practices among specific segments of the activist left and problems of symbolic efficiency under conditions of informational surplus; cf. Burgis 2021; Doody 2020; Brooks 2020). Given the descent of leading IDW public intellectuals into conspiracism (e.g., Bret and Eric Weinstein, Heather Heying, Joe Rogan), far-right activism (e.g., James Lindsay, Dave Rubin, Ben Shapiro), and influential culture war politicking (e.g., anti-critical race theory legislation, anti-trans "groomer" discourse), I argue, that opposition to the IDW ought to be both an intellectual and political priority. However, from my position as sociologist with a democratic socialist political orientation, this will require that we address what I believe to be destructive practices amongst certain leftist tendencies—notably, anti-solidaristic, carceral and alienating practices, and a preference for spontaneous micro-politics over durable institution-building—to adequately orient ourselves towards such a task. Since the problems with both the IDW and communicative capitalism are deeply epistemic, I argue for a critical realist scientific paradigm that grounds both critical sociology and leftist knowledge and politics on more secure ontological footing.

There is an inherent tension in my use of social science to study and understand the

IDW under conditions of epistemic decline. This tension is directly related to the two goals of this project: (1) coming to terms with the significance of the IDW within communicative capitalism and (2) critiquing social practices that contribute to the decline of symbolic efficiency while also trying to find some basis(es) for restoring symbolic coherence in ways conducive to supporting an organized democratic socialist left capable of charting a path out our crisis conditions and towards a better, postcapitalist, future. Because of my leftist commitments, this entails significant criticism of what I interpret to be destructive practices within my own normative camp that I see as weakening the left, both epistemically and politically, due to the way: (1) these practices hinder solidarity and the possibility of durable collective struggle; and (2) these practices are feasted on by the IDW and the partisan right for the purposes of anti-left propaganda. This is why I ultimately turn to critical realism at the conclusion of this dissertation, though many of my critiques and observations are prefigured throughout the text. This is the normative subtext of this dissertation.

Chapter 2: Comments on the Society of Platforms

> "In a world which really is topsy-turvy, the true is a part of the false."
> — Guy Debord

2.1 Welcome to the Internet!

In his 2021 Netflix special, *Bo Burnham: Inside*, the comedian Bo Burnham performs a set of satirical songs that mock various aspects of digital culture, from the trite aesthetics of trendy social media self-expression in "White Woman's Instagram," to the minimalist verses ridiculing the absurd wealth of tech billionaires like Jeffrey Bezos in the viral hits "Bezos I" and "Bezos II." However, Burnham's smartest performance is delivered by "Welcome to the Internet," where he zeros in on the psychically exhausting abundance of information deluging us in the digital age. Chaotically grasping then releasing our attention, these digital media might lift us to an extreme high in one moment and plummet us into despair in the next.

"Welcome to the Internet" explores these extreme rhythms through a series of narrative steps. The song begins with the naive optimism undergirding Silicon Valley's techno-utopianism:

> Welcome to the internet! Have a look around. Anything that brain of yours can think of can be found. We've got mountains of content—some better, some worse. If none of it's of interest to you, you'd be the first.

Moving at an upbeat pace, the song matches the excitement and anticipation of "going

online." Yet, unease sets in quickly, not the least because Burnham is addressing the

viewer from behind his keyboard in a blackened room lit only by an abstract galactic

projection, all the while wearing sunglasses and grinning suspiciously. With each verse,

the tempo quickens, and it soon becomes obvious that our sketchy tour guide to the

internet has duped us into walking directly into his trap. "Welcome to the internet! Which

would you prefer? Would you like to fight for civil rights or tweet a racial slur? Be

happy! Be horny! Be bursting with rage! We've got a million different ways to engage,"

Burnham chants, the rhythm now racing:

> Welcome to the internet! Put your cares aside
> Here's a tip for straining pasta, here's a nine-year old who died
> …
> See a man beheaded, get offended, see a shrink
> Show us pictures of your children, tell us every thought you think
> Start a rumor, buy a broom or send a death threat to a boomer
> Or DM a girl and groom her, do a Zoom or find a tumor
> And here's a healthy breakfast option, you should kill your mom
> Here's why women never fuck you, here's how you can build a bomb
> Which Power Ranger are you? Take this quirky quiz!
> Obama sent the immigrants to vaccinate your kids

Unrelenting, Burnham now taunts: "Could I interest you in everything, all of the time? A

little bit of everything, all of the time." As the song ends, Burnham cackles like a

Hollywood villain and we descend into our digitally induced psychosis.

   This chapter reviews the literature on how technological change has affected politics

in the historical present. First, I review the literature on how digital technologies have

been interpreted by progressive scholars. Here, considerable emphasis is placed on how

digital technology enables the proliferation of subaltern "counter-publics" that form

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outside of the "mainstream" due to their marginal status. Subaltern marginality becomes the impetus for forging alternative avenues of consciousness raising to struggle for progressive social change. Within these counter-publics, the oppressed find dignity, voice, and empowerment.

However, the optimistic reading tends to be peculiarly one-sided, downplaying—or even omitting—a dialectical analysis of digitization and networked sociality. I therefore turn to the literature that criticizes this progressive reading. Central to this literature are the problems posed by the de-differentiation of information and the collapsing distinctions between various media and institutional fields. Additionally, the naive assumption that the "flattening" of hierarchies enabled by digital networks are automatically democratic and equalizing is a dangerous one with weak empirical supports. This raises serious questions about how to best effect progressive social change, for, under present conditions, when the world changes, it is hardly in the ways that progressives desire. Much of this correlates with a default hostility to institutions and organizations within certain leftists tendencies made hyper-visible by the networks of communicative capitalism, where social bodies like "parties," which have the function of speaking on behalf of individuals as a collectivity through representation, are shrouded in suspicion precisely because of their representative functions.

The optimistic literature also obscures the fact that one of the most successful networked mobilizations in recent years came not from the left, but from the alt-right. I review the literature on the rise of the alt-right, its contradictory ideological foundations,

and its relationship to wider conservative politics within communicative capitalism. Moreover, a deeper reality is revealed here as well: while the left was enthralled by the possibilities for democratic digital expansion, the political right was getting organized and effecting significant institutional and structural changes over and against the horizontalist and participatory ambitions of networked leftists. While the alt-right is not representative of the majority opinion of the United States, let alone the world, the influence the alt-right exerted beyond its toxic image boards, even as we see signs of rapid progressive cultural change all around us, signals a profound contradiction at the heart of communicative capitalism.

That is, the avenues for material political change seem completely closed off by established political institutions and the dominance of capital even as "culture" seems to be "progressing." This manifests as capital and its agents cynically incorporating a radical vocabulary rooted in feminist and anti-racist lexicons while always evading class analysis. There now exists a deep social torsion between cultural progressivism on the one hand, and material deprivation on the other, which manifests as a "culture war" between the "woke" and the "anti-woke." Those facing declining social status—notably, white men (Marwick and Lewis 2017)—claim a dual injury. First, their sense of material security is jeopardized by the vagaries and precarity of the global capitalist economy, which is said to be governed by a globalist liberal elite. Second, their sense of social reality is disrupted as society increasingly adopts new cultural attitudes and norms towards race, gender, sexuality, and other elements of identity. Misdirected bigotry and

hatred towards historically oppressed groups who are becoming more visible becomes the official policy, while the genuine mechanisms of exploitation and dispossession structurally necessary for capitalist economies are obscured (cf. Bonefeld 2016).

It is in this context that the Intellectual Dark Web (IDW) emerges. In the final section of the literature review, I chart how the IDW came to be, what social problems it aims to solve, and why the group has generated so much controversy. Put plainly, the IDW aims to install a neo-Enlightenment and rationalist symbolic order within existing society. In so doing, the IDW aspires to restore a sense of reality and objectivity amidst profound levels of epistemic despair and untruth integral to communicative capitalism. This is the crucial point to emphasize when coming to terms with consumers of IDW content who have swarmed into the IDW media-sphere and rallied behind the IDW identity. For these individuals, the IDW identity provides them with the symbolic resources necessary to resolve their epistemic despair in the era of communicative capitalism.

2.2 Digital Activism and its Discontents

In recent years, it has become something of a truism that digital technologies, social media, and online networks have enabled a host of progressive practices, opened new avenues for social justice activism, and unlocked profound opportunities to struggle for emancipatory social change. Sociologists are eager to point out prominent examples such as the #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) movement, which has made effective use of social media to amplify experiences of racial oppression, circulate viral videos of racist police violence, foster broad support for the movement, and facilitate mass demonstrations

within and beyond the United States (Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Cox 2017; Haddad 2020; Ince, Rojas, and Davis 2017); the #MeToo movement, which exposed the scale and scope of sexual abuse in a variety of social fields by encouraging survivors to publicly share their stories on Twitter via the hashtag #MeToo, leading to a major social reckoning epitomized by the arrest and conviction of media mogul and serial sex offender, Harvey Weinstein (North et al. 2019; Quan-Haase et al. 2021); and earlier movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that captivated progressives' imaginations, such as the Zapatistas, Occupy Wall Street, Spain's *indignados*, and the Arab Spring—all of which famously utilized social media and online networks to vocalize grievances, disseminate information, and organize protests and direct actions (Martinez-Torres 2001; Papacharissi 2014, 2014; Tufekci and Wilson 2012). Dale and Kyle (2016) further draw our attention to an emerging set of practices they term "smart humanitarianism" that envisions using information and communications technologies (ICTs), often delivered through interactive apps and services provided by social enterprises, to directly solve pressing human rights struggles in innovative and technically sophisticated ways. While the long-term efficacy of many digital-powered movements in causing sustained progressive social change is hotly contested (Schradie 2018, 2019), the fact that ICTs are able to stimulate broad discussion about the grievances of social justice movements and garner public attention for their causes is well documented (Anduiza, Cristancho, and Sabucedo 2014; Brantner, Lobinger, and Stehling 2020; Breuer, Landman, and Farquhar 2015; Brown et al. 2017; Chen, Oh, and Chen 2021; Kuo 2018; Mendes et al. 2019).

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Earlier scholarship used the concept of "alternative media" to grasp the felt democratic and progressive potential of digital networks and activist forms of information production (Clark-Parsons 2017; Fuchs 2010; Sandoval and Fuchs 2010). As Atton (2007) explains, alternative media are those that are "produced outside mainstream media institutions and networks" and assembled by "amateurs who typically have little or no training or professional qualifications" (p. 18). In the early days of "Web 2.0"—the euphemism that preceded "social media"—this was epitomized by blogging. Now, however, it is the diverse field of social media—YouTube channels, podcasts, and platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit—that dominate. While each platform has its own unique set of affordances and rules, consistent across all is the self-production of media content by amateurs and non-experts. Often, alternative media fulfill a felt need for the exploration of topics that are marginalized in both mainstream media coverage and popular culture, such as the experiences of people of color or LGBTQ+ people. Further, these alternative media spaces are presumed to be non-hierarchical and inclusive, supplanting the gatekeeping role of the expert commentator with a participatory back-and-forth between creators and users of content in a reflexive loop, a phenomenon that some sociologists have operationalized as "prosumption" to signify how users are simultaneously *producers* and *consumers* of digital content (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010).

This is generally understood to be a democratizing process that enables discursive and editorial contributions from ordinary people "outside the elite groups that usually form the pool for opinion and comment" (Atton 2007:21). Writing on the potential for the

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emergence of a genuine and progressive standard for journalistic practice, Haak, Parks,

and Castells (2012) explain how in the contemporary digital environment,

> new facts are being unearthed daily; more audience feedback is being integrated; more
> voices are being heard; more diverse perspectives on the same new stories are being
> presented; more stories are available, archived and searchable for longer periods of time;
> more men and women of power are being watched more closely; and more people are
> engaged more actively with the changes in the world—by taking photos or making videos
> of key moments, by commenting on blogs, or by sharing the stories that matter to them (P.
> 2923).

In a similar vein, Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012) describe new modes of

"affective" activist-journalistic practice, signaling the incorporation of subjectivity,

emotion, and on-the-ground reporting from the sites of protest or social struggle into the

production of public information. Social media platforms provide the resources for

participants in a struggle to broadcast in real-time—"from the scene"—without any

mediation by a third-party, combining fact finding with individual editorials and

emotional filters. Rather than being passively fed reporting from an elite corps of

journalists and experts, ICTs are seen to redefine ordinary people as active agents in the

production, dissemination, and uncovering of information, facts, and political sentiment.

Social movement scholars are well attuned to these dynamics and have considered the

ways they may affect traditional social movement organizations and complicate

traditional collective action frameworks (Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl 2005; Earl and

Kimport 2011). A key theme in this literature is a "post-organizational" ethos in which

traditional organizations, like parties or social movement organizations, are being

displaced or circumvented by spontaneous and direct engagement with social movements

through ICTs. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) describe a new logic of "connective action" that accounts for how digital networks and social media enable new forms of mass participation in social movements by mobilizing weak ties in lieu of "strong organizational control or the symbolic construction of a united 'we'" (p. 748). According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012), the traditional "collective action" model describes a situation where hierarchical social movement institutions with clear leadership structures and group membership must overcome the free rider problem in order to effectively mobilize collective actions. While they can use coercion and selective incentives to get around free rider dilemmas, social movement organizations tend to focus on forging collective action frames that sustain emotional investment in a movement by identifying (1) a public good that can only be reasonably obtained through concentrated collective action and (2) a strong sense of a "we"—those of us who share a common interest in obtaining that public good through collective action, despite our individual differences.

In the connective action model, by contrast, digital media are the key organizing agents. Barriers to entry and the costs of communication approach zero, obviating the need for experts and leaders, and participation is its own reward: by publicly expressing our values, we obtain positive recognition and esteem from others. As Bennett and Segerberg (2012) explain, virtue is the currency that pays in digital networks: "In this connective logic, taking public action or contributing to a common good becomes an act of personal expression or self-validation achieved by sharing ideas and actions in trusted relationships" (p. 752-753). We may hear about a protest from our friends on Twitter,

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upload photos and video of our participation on Instagram, and post messages of support and solidarity on Facebook. In this way, we signal to our allies both our personal virtue and our commitment to the cause, all the while encouraging others to do the same.

This logic of connective action moves hand-in-glove with the ascendancy of what Bennett (2012) describes as an ethos of "personalized politics," where diversity of opinion, inclusiveness, and tolerance for difference is emphasized. Maximizing participation in collective action is key—everyone is invited to engage with everyone else in their own unique way—and "the pervasive use of social technology enables individuals to become important catalysts of collective action processes as they activate their own social networks" (Bennett 2012:22).

Importantly, though, the sorts of collective action frames that emerge through the lens of personalized politics are ambiguous and imprecise—and this is by design. Inclusive frames like "We are the 99%" lower the barriers to identification and can be personalized by those who don the identity (Bennett 2012). For example, unlike "proletariat" and "bourgeoisie," the "99%" does not imply a specific class relationship with clear boundaries and coherent structural antagonisms, but instead communicates that the overwhelming majority of the human population are injured by the "1%" without having to make any specific claim about how. One "99 percenter" might be a downwardly-mobile millennial shackled by student loan debt; another might be a radical college student fantasizing about revolution; and another might simply be a New Deal liberal who thinks inequality is too high and that we need higher taxes on the rich. In any case,

we each have our own reasons for adopting the identity—reasons that may or may not align with others in the movement.

This emphasis on the personalization of our politics has also been described as a shift towards "lifestyle politics," registering the fact that everything from our grocery consumption (i.e., we consume "ethical," "green," or "fair trade" brands), to our charity habits (e.g., donating one's money directly to social justice activists as a form of "reparations" [cf. King 2021]), has taken on a political valence (Earl, Copeland, and Bimber 2017; Lee 2021; Willis and Schor 2012). Our daily routines are now opportunities for us to not only signal our political values but put them into practice. Social networks and digital technologies remain vital to this process, allowing us to constantly stay up to date with political trends, color our social media feeds with our curated political aesthetics, and network with others through public displays of virtue.

Feminist and critical race scholars have focused on the ways that the logic of connective action has become essential for amplifying the voices, experiences, and political interests of the most marginalized members of society. Mink and Miller (2014) call attention to how trans, nonbinary, and genderqueer communities have thrived on Tumblr, with the platform providing the tools for trans and queer users to explore their identities, sexuality, and gender in poly-vocal networks that challenge heteronormativity. Hill (2018) and Gunn (2015) argue for the importance of "Black Twitter" in contemporary anti-racist and feminist political struggles, both as a pedagogical space and a living archive of documented instances of violence and oppression, such as the sharing

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of videos of police brutality. Similarly, Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault Welles (2020) locate Twitter as a critical site of social justice practice with reference to the mechanism of "hashtag activism." For Jackson et al. (2020), hashtag activism refers to the "strategic ways counterpublic groups and their allies on Twitter employ this shortcut"—i.e., the "hashtag"—"to make political contentions about identity politics that advocate for social change, identity redefinition, and political inclusion" (p. xxviii). The concept of the counterpublic is largely attributed to Nancy Fraser's (Fraser 1990) use of the term to describe "subaltern" counterpublics as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and need" (p. 67).

As a grouping device on Twitter, hashtags allow users to topically categorize the content of their tweets with descriptive tokens like "#BlackLivesMatter." When large quantities of users attach these hashtags to their tweets, the tags may "trend" on the platform and capture public attention. In the most successful of cases, this mechanism can generate profound practical effects. For example, the viral video of George Floyd's murder under the knee of Derek Chauvin, filmed by then 17-year-old Darnella Frazier on her phone, trended across social media and became the focal piece of evidence in the conviction of Chauvin (Knowles 2021). Similarly, the #MeToo movement ejected hundreds of men from their powerful posts after allegations of sexual misconduct were made public (Carlsen et al. 2018). This attests how social media can compel the

mainstream press, ordinary people, and even political leaders to listen, observe, and respond to forms of oppression that go largely unreported and unknown, forcing a shift in political discourse (Clark-Parsons 2021:369; Jackson and Foucault Welles 2016).

Perhaps no observer of the digital transformation of collective action is more enthusiastic about the revolutionary potential of ICTs than Manuel Castells. His study of the most famous networked social movements of the 2010s—*Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*—is the seminal embodiment of what I call "left-optimism" with respect to digital technology and digital activism. Central to Castells' (2015) optimism is his identification of a shared "culture of freedom" that characterizes both the internet and the networked social movements. Celebrating how the internet was "deliberately designed by scientists and hackers as a decentered, computer communication network able to withstand control from any command center," Castells (2015:259) extols the internet's inherent anti-authoritarian structure that prevents any organizational form—be it a corporation or state—from ever fully enclosing its sprawling global networks. Here, Castells repeats, almost verbatim, Silicon Valley's most utopian self-descriptions of how its communicative technologies are revolutionizing social relations and spreading democracy. Fantasies of access to, and participation within, virtual networks, which always presume that intensifying information flows, ever-more connectedness, and more communication could only ever be a liberating force, is the ideological residue of what Barbrook and Cameron (1996) famously conceived of as the "Californian Ideology."

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As Silicon Valley's founding myth, the Californian Ideology creatively blends the anti-establishment, anti-corporate, and anti-government intuitions of the new social movements with an individualist and libertarian orientation towards rights, self-expression, and markets. While computing was initially associated with dehumanizing mechanization due to its development within the military and university bureaucracies (Bridle 2018; Turner 2008), the Californian Ideology masterfully inverted this characterization by reconceptualizing computer networks as an "electronic frontier" on which individuals were free to "recreate themselves" through unregulated and self-directed "connections with one another" (Turner 2008:162). It is precisely such digital mechanisms that, according to Castells (2015) "autonomous social networks" can create new discursive arenas and forge new political practices directed and regulated by the users—i.e., "the people"—themselves. Yet, as Hanrahan (2021) observers in the context of contemporary digital platforms, such "formal" democratic conceptualizations of networks obfuscate all the *un*democratic features of our platform society, in which "participation in decisions about technical design and the ends towards which technology is developed" remains highly centralized, and we are instead asked to celebrate all the ways individuals and groups "use technologies in creative ways once they are made available" (p. 4).

There are strong and problematic affinities between the Californian Ideology and prevailing practices of digital activism shaped by a set of ideals that Srnicek and Williams (2015) term "folk politics." The central intuition of folk politics is that

"immediacy is always better and often more authentic, with the corollary being a deep suspicion of abstraction and mediation" (Srnicek and Williams 2015:10). Immediacy here encompasses both temporal and spatial domains. Temporally, folk politics commands we act *now*. In the struggle against oppression, there is no time to stop and strategize. We must be ready to get in the streets, participate in a call out on Twitter, or otherwise be prepared to enact whatever political ritual the situation demands. Spatially, folk politics privileges that which is perceived as locally accessible. Democracy, autonomy, and authenticity become synonymous with "small-scale," crystallizing in seemingly contradictory forms as different as small businesses and activist general assemblies. Structural analysis is evaded due to the necessity for abstraction that it entails.

Indeed, abstraction is antithetical to the concreteness of folk politics, which insists on scaling down to the "human-level" of affect, contingency, and the specificity of each person's unique experiences:

> …there is a preference for the everyday over the structural…personal experience over systematic thinking…emphasizing individual suffering, or the sensation of enthusiasm and anger experienced during political actions; for the particular over the universal, seeing the latter as intrinsically totalitarian; and for the ethical over the political…universal emancipation and global change has been transformed into a prioritization of the suffering of the particular and the authenticity of the local. As a result, any process of constructing a universal politics is rejected from the outset (Srnicek and Williams 2015:11).

Folk politics is saturated by "individuation," or a social process of individual distinction that "emphasizes the projects of the individual as the paramount principle orientating [their] behavior" (Castells 2015:258). Universalism, especially universalist progressive projects, therefore resemble "totalitarianism" due to universalism's abstracting

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representations, which, by design, simplify the details of our individuated differences and nuances in the pursuit of universal human emancipation. Differences and differentiation give way to unity and uniformity, and this is impermissible. As folk politics instructs us, our experiences are, like each of us, "specific rather than general" (Dean 2019c:173).

The concept of folk politics helps account for the form that progressive digital activism increasingly takes as discursive chains of individual disclosures and deconstructions of particular experiences of individual injuries. Instead of aiming for generalizability, emphasis is placed on uncovering the nuances of how our distinct, individual positions result in a patchwork of injustices that cannot be remedied nor understood with universal solutions. Online activist spaces are deliberate in their recognition of multiple, personalized, varieties of overlapping and mutually reinforcing "marginalizations and oppressions" (Nagle 2017:69). This multifactorial yet individualist focus forms the basis for the fundamental axiom orienting both theory and praxis in contemporary leftist networks: power is ubiquitous and constitutes an immense web of subjugation, abuse, victimization, and exploitation. This concept of power creates conditions for the wide-scale proliferation of social relations of oppression that may be unknown and unexperienced by most people, and even for those experiencing the same species of oppression, individual experiences could, and will, vary wildly. Therefore, according to this line of reasoning, we ought to amplify the voices of those who articulate their particular experiences of oppression in order to become aware of each way power and oppression materialize, however idiosyncratic.

While intersectionality and standpoint epistemology are distinct (Bohrer 2020), the distinction between the two often collapses in practice, as reference to the intersectional nature of domination is used to ground individualist analyses of subjugation and victimization (Liu 2021). An intersectionally-informed "standpoint epistemology" therefore dominates, asserting that "knowledge is constructed within a social location and historical context, that knowledge is always partial, and that certain social locations—when politically activated—enable a fuller view of reality" (Sweet 2018:225). In this view, realist theories of truth, which maintain that "true things" have an objective "external validity in a hard, ontological sense," are rejected in favor of an epistemic approach that centers subjectivity, positionality, and experience "as key to any truth claim" (Sweet 2018:226). Furthermore, those with marginal statuses and oppressed identities are said to possess a unique critical insight that allows them to grasp reality in a truer way due to the fact of their subjugation, which compels them to both understand the logic of their oppressor and the logic of their oppression to survive. Those with privilege are understood to have distorted perceptions of reality due to an ideological blockage that comes with their privileged position.

The ascendancy of standpoint epistemology within digitally connected activist networks has led to an increasing number of leftists to lament how an excessive focus on "individual behavior" now prevails even while, in theory, activist applications of standpoint epistemology are meant to be "in favor of structural critique" (Fisher 2013:np). In such a context, critical theorist Catharine Liu (2021) argues that

intersectionality is now wielded as a "deadly term" by leftists in order to brand structural

and impersonal sociological analysis as always already "reductionist" and hopelessly

deficient due to its focus on abstract and generic social forces over differentiation (p. 9).

Similarly, the much maligned and controversial term "identity politics" is used by critics

of the left from within the left itself to denote the way that an introspective

identitarianism, focused on individual particularity, has been cynically "incorporated into

the branding logic of the consumer society, which is interested less in multiculturalism

and diversity, or intersectionality, than with maintaining a steady base of diverse

consumers" (Flisfeder 2018:9). In its radical form, embedded within the sexual liberation,

feminist, and anti-racist movements of the twentieth century, the concept of "identity

politics" was used by the new social movements to communicate the limitations of

traditional class analysis by articulating how non-class inequalities operate within

capitalist society (Moran 2018). Insofar as the category "class" was conceptually

stretched to either encompass or downplay all non-class forms of suffering and injustice,

from racism and sexism to homophobia and transphobia, it became a reductive concept

failing to distinguish between class as a social relation of production rooted in

exploitation and distinctive forms of social oppression (Camfield 2016; Foley 2018).

　　Yet, the politics of identity that prevails in the present is far removed from its legacy

versions, as Moran (2018) argues:

> the intensifications of market processes and rationales under neoliberalism has exaggerated
> the personal use of identity over the social to such an extent that we have now reached a
> point in time where identity operates primarily to facilitate consumption on a global scale,

> while at the same time informing a version of representation politics that remains compatible with the political-economic architecture of neoliberalism (P. 40).

Detached from a systematic concept of capitalist political economy, the critique of identity has been recuperated by capital in ways that further strengthen our subjugation to capital's laws of motion and all the social crises that come with it: environmental devastation; austerity, dispossession, and precarity; and crises of care and social reproduction (Fraser 2016). This is inextricably tied to the disappearance of class analysis, which, as Wendy Brown (2015) explains, has destroyed the "analytic basis for alienation, exploitation, and association among labors" while also undermining "the very rationale for unions, consumer groups, and other forms of economic solidarity apart from cartels among capitals" (p. 38). As Liu (2021) argues, among leftists, "talking about class or class consciousness before other forms of difference is not just controversial; it is heretical," and activists and academics alike are always ready to expose and discipline "class reductionists" (p. 9).

Long attuned to this dynamic, Nancy Fraser (2017) invokes the concept of "progressive neoliberalism" to describe how an opportunistic politics of recognition based on a diluted liberal ideal of diversity and inclusion has been institutionalized in such a way that the capitalist class structure and the imperative of the unlimited accumulation of capital remain wholly in-tact. Capitalist firms now eagerly advertise their progressive bona fides by employing the $8 billion diversity, equity, and inclusion industry to signal their awareness of the intersecting nature of racial, sexual, and gendered inequalities—regardless of how the firm's own industry may produce and

reproduce inequalities within and between those very same categories (Tran 2021). Much of this can be tied to the ruthless and incessant criticisms of Marxism—the most dominant school of class analysis—by the left for all of its purported deficiencies, as Martha Gimenez (2001) argues. Indeed, Marxism suffered criticisms for its economism, its sex-blindness, its neglect of race, its neglect of ethnicity, its neglect of the environment—in short, its neglect of "practically everything that mattered to the 'new social movements' in the West" (Gimenez 2001:24). Following Barbara Foley (2018), this turn against Marxism was nearly complete after the disastrous collapse of socialist governments the world-over, where struggles to "set up and consolidate worker-run egalitarian societies" failed in dramatic fashion, seemingly falsifying Marxist hypotheses about class struggle and political economy (p. 273).

In the post-communist neoliberal period, the disappearance of class has moved hand-in-glove with processes of individualization and differentiation that characterize what Fredric Jameson (1992) has described as our postmodern condition, a sense that present living history is nothing more than "sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable" (p. 6). Washed from our consciousness is any conception of a common collective position from which to organize a coherent political struggle against the onslaught of capitalist accumulation and its ensuing crises, which, despite the proliferation of difference and dawn of a new era of cultural tolerance and permissiveness, persists unabated.

Without a collective position from which to orient ourselves in opposition to the

vagaries of contemporary capitalist society, we are invited to set aside "merely" economic concerns, indulge our differences, and bask in the individuating liberalism of contemporary capitalist culture, which celebrates and emphasizes our uniqueness and, hence, our separateness. This indulgence of difference progresses along with a pessimistic attitude Jodi Dean (2016) describes as "left realism," one that arises from two deeply held suspicions: (1) that "collectivity is undesirable" and (2) that "collectivity is impossible" (p. 67). Left realism does not reflect new planes of emancipation opened by communicative capitalism, but, rather, the collapse of belief in anything resembling a common interest that could form the basis for generalizable political struggle. This propels an individualist and individualizing turn inwards to ourselves, and our identity becomes the "crucial site of politics, one that must be defended and asserted against multiple violations and harms" (Dean 2019c:173). Political energies are displaced upon the activities of our everyday lives, which are supposedly overflowing with "conflicts, negotiations, interpretations, resistances, collusions, cabals, transgressions and resignifications" (Dean 2005:64). Individual survivability now appears as a "crucial achievement," and the subject of the survivor—the one who perseveres, alone, despite the matrix of intersecting forces that dominates them—arises as a "key figure for the contemporary subject of politics" (Dean 2019c:174). Simply taking care of oneself now "appears as a politically significant act, rather than as a symptom of the dismantled social welfare net and obscenely competitive [labor] market wherein we have no choice but to care for ourselves if we are going to keep up" (Dean 2019c:174). Each individual, as

different in their lived experiences as they are unique in their means of surviving, is free to justify any politics and any praxis—whatever it takes to survive. Communicative capitalism supplies the infrastructure for survivors to "validate what they've accomplished," to be heard by others, to "share their stories," and be seen as resourceful political subjects by the "crowd of many who might view, like, or share" (Dean 2016:49). In a context of "commanded individuality" where we are instructed to "insist on our differences" (Dean 2016:31), coupled with generalized material insecurity and cascading social crises that we feel powerless to prevent, possessive attachment to our identities and our survivorship appears as the last form of political agency we have left.

The individualist mood of left realism actively hinders solidarity, enabling conditions where attempts to forge a collective political agency are preemptively derailed for "excluding possibilities, effacing difference, and enforcing discipline" before they can even be set in motion (Dean 2016:67). This refusal to name a collective political agent, "an unwillingness to say 'we' out of a reluctance to speak for another" (Dean 2009:16), is heralded as an ethical and political victory—a recognition that our individual differences and particular standpoints disable us from speaking from any perspective other than that of the "I." Thus, on the one hand, each individual is compelled to share their stories and disclose their troubles "in all their particularity;" on the other hand, they are denied the ability to treat their stories as constituent elements of "larger signifying chains or political formations" (Dean 2005:56). For some, this refusal is the ultimate democratic embrace of "all possible demands from citizens avid about deciding the conditions of their own

lives" (Castells 2015:255). For others, it represents the crumbling of politics "into countless individual opinions and matters of personal preference" (Han 2017:65). As Byung-Chul Han argues (2017), this ushers in the end of political representation: "everyone wants to be present personally and directly—to present his or her opinion without a middleman" (p. 16). For Han (2017), this has severe depoliticizing effects. People no longer organize into parties and unions, to which they surrender degrees of their individual agency, autonomy, and individuality through the vehicle of representation that holds the constituency together as a "we" with a shared struggle, but insist on their right to always, and exclusively, represent themselves and their standpoint. This situation is more *libertarian* than *democratic*, as Hanrahan (2021) notes, for, if freedom is understood as "purely individual," then "democratic norms of universality, equality and openness, and the political and social mechanisms that might seek to ensure them, are cast as forms of coercion" (p. 15).

Empirically, this has had devastating effects on progressive social movements. Many recent left struggles that first inspired millions collapsed into nothingness for failing to represent what they and their constituents stood for. Occupy famously refused to name any demands—on the state, on society, on the economy—so as not to undemocratically speak for others, and therefore failed to register any policy or structural victories (Srnicek and Williams 2015). Similarly, as Jen Schradie's (2019) refreshing work shows, a lack of organized representation within leftist social movements—notably, the absence of a hierarchical division of labor and a unified ideological message— results in political

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paralysis and policy failures as "horizontal" formations succumb to "the messiness and distraction of constantly changing multiple points of view" (p. 221). Recent progressive movements that did manage to sustain political engagement, such as certain factions of the 2018 teacher strike or the Moral Monday movement in North Carolina, were well organized, had clear leadership structures, and were able to bridge group differences through coalition formation behind a common ideological cause (Blanc 2021; Schradie 2018). Zeynep Tufekci's (2017) research on networked social movements further corroborate these findings, finding that horizontalist and leaderless digital movements, while maximizing participation, also undermine their efficacy and durability due to their "ad-hoc" strategies that routinely collapse into "tactical freezes" due a lack of leadership and an inability to "quickly respond to changing conditions" and "negotiate and delegate when necessary" (Tufekci 2017:270).

Especially with digital movements, the mechanism of what Eric Blanc (2021) calls "mobilization without organization" is likely to occur. That is, ICTs enable protest activity and dissident discourses to rapidly scale up, permeate public conversations, and even inspire offline direct actions without any organizational leadership. However, these actions, while perhaps involving tens of thousands (or even millions) of people, are most likely to quickly dissipate without generating any lasting structural effects due to their organizational weaknesses and inability to sustain engagement and strategy over the long-term. And herein lies the central problem of the most optimistic readings of the progressive potentiality of ICTs: they risk elevating action itself to the level of a fetish,

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taking the empirical fact of activity and participation to be evidence of the effectiveness of ICTs for allowing post-organizational social movements to prosper.

Massive bursts of digital action are routinely mistaken for viable political formations instead of what they almost always amount to: ephemeral flare-ups that burn "hotly" but "briefly" (Frost 2020:237). As computational social scientists have shown, digital mobilizations are precarious affairs. They tend to be short-lived, allocate disproportionate attention to a small number of actors, fail to cause social change, and tend to be incendiary and vitriolic (Datta and Adar 2019; S. Kim et al. 2021; Kumar et al. 2018; Lamba, Malik, and Pfeffer 2015). Moreover, digital political engagements are riddled with self-selection biases. The most polarized, ideologically committed, and aggressive users dominate online political discussions, all the while alienating those with looser political identities due to the level of toxicity that prevails in these contexts (J. W. Kim et al. 2021). Similarly, the most optimistic studies about digital activism risk wildly overestimating the social import of the activist networks under study due to bias arising from the unrepresentative samples drawn from digital platforms (Scarborough 2018; Tufekci 2014). For example, Twitter, which is frequently exalted by progressive scholars for the novel forms of digital activism it has fostered, is used by only 23% of the U.S. population (Pew Research Center 2021). Of the small proportion of U.S. residents who do use Twitter, less than a third have ever engaged in political discussions (31%), and of that group, only the top 6% most "politically prolific tweeters" account for nearly all political tweets (Hughes 2019). These politically prolific tweeters are more likely to have

strong ideological identities, to perceive their political opponents far more negatively than non-politically prolific tweeters, and to engage in political activities including attending rallies or contacting elected officials (Hughes 2019). Put another way, political discussion on Twitter is dominated by partisans who already have high rates of political engagement. Thus, while activist energies do incontestably diffuse through digital networks and garner significant public and media attention, there is no guarantee that these networks are (1) representative of political opinions held by those beyond the networks or (2) capable of building politically significant coalitions that translate to real material and policy outcomes over and beyond attention victories online.

When digital action is fetishized, these considerations are obscured. The left's fetishization of action is a feature that Adorno (2005) already observed emerging in the new social movements, where a focus on immediate "means"—not contemplated "ends"—raised spontaneous activity to a privileged position. In the present, speedy, immediate communicative action in digital networks is seen as necessary to prevent "spin" by "those with power" (Jackson et al. 2020:xxix). By taking immediate direct action, we do not have to wait for experts or elites to analyze a situation:

> While the public waits for print journalists to narrativize national crises and controversies, ordinary people on the scene are able to tweet firsthand accounts. While politicians embed particular issues in opaque language and meaningless euphemisms in their public discourse, ordinary people are able to explicitly advocate using unrepentant and concise rhetoric on these same issues (Jackson et al. 2020:xxx).

In the fight against oppression, there is no time for "thought to catch its breath" (Adorno 2005:274). Moreover, the demand to act radically reduces our attention spans. With each

new action, we are compelled to redirect our focus. But the sheer quantity of actions

demanding our attention inevitably means our focus is always divided in so many

individual ways that "we never feel the same way" as others in the same moment—or at

least not for too long (Pettman 2015:29).

Action itself, now observable and measurable on a heretofore unimaginable scale in

the digital realm, becomes self-justifying: look how many millions of people tweeted

with this hashtag; look how many photos were shared and tagged from this protest; look

how many people occupied Wall Street. This quickly becomes treated as irrefutable

evidence that viable political collectivities are being formed. However, this poses

methodological and theoretical problems for sociologists. Notably, social media is

simultaneously an explanatory variable and a data source, bringing "efficiency in

[analysis]" but also the risk that non-digital factors may be entirely missed while digital

factors are overextended (Schradie 2018:2). Likewise, by overemphasizing the actuality

of the political collectivity said to be emergent through networks of hashtags and digital

ties, we miss all the ways these networks individuate and encourage each of us to define

individually, for ourselves, our personal reasons for participating (Bennett 2012; Bennett

and Segerberg 2012a, 2012b). Nowhere is this division and individuation more fully

apparent than in the rise of so-called "allyship," a substitute for the collective "we" that

Jodi Dean (2019b) theorizes through a conceptual antagonism between "comrades" and

"allies."

The distinction between "comrades" and "allies" is not just a discursive one, and the

two are not interchangeable. Comrade indexes a political relation and "set of expectations toward a common goal" (Dean 2019b:2). Camaraderie is an "imposition of discipline," a reminder that "something is expected" of us (Dean 2019b:2). This is not the same as friendship, and individual comrades do not even have to like each other. Comradeship is a political relation that binds us in collective struggle and allows us to speak of a we— "the sameness that comes from being on the same side" (Dean 2019b:68). Historically, comrades were united in organizations like unions and political parties that formalized camaraderie as a political relation with a binding solidarity. Comrades have mutual and reciprocal obligations to one another, whatever their individual differences and personal preferences. Allyship, by contrast, is informal, non-reciprocal, and unbinding. Allies bear witness to suffering and oppression as it flashes across their screens and feel compelled to support the oppressed. However, allies—usually "privileged people who want to do something about oppression" (Dean 2019b:16)—can never know in any sufficient way the reality of the oppressed, which is always more nuanced than their own. Furthermore, allies are instructed to never "burden the oppressed" with questions about the latter's experiences, and instead told to "Google it" and "educate themselves" (Dean 2019b:19).

Being a good ally is about mastering "techniques for navigating the neoliberal environment of privilege and oppression," about learning "what not to say and what not to do" all by oneself, spurring a feeling of being engaged in politics "without any organized political struggle at all" (Dean 2019b:17). The process of becoming an ally matches the individuating and anti-collectivist processes of communicative capitalism, as

Dean (2019b) explains:

> The process of educating oneself is isolating, individuating. Learning is modeled as consuming information, not as discussion; coming to a common understanding; or studying the texts and documents of a political tradition. Educating oneself is disconnected from a collective practice, detached from political positions or goals. Criteria for which one might evaluate books, blogs, speakers, and videos are absent. It's up to the individual ally to figure it out on their own (P. 20).

There is no political program or common identity uniting allies and the oppressed together in collective struggle, and the oppressed have no obligation to forge reciprocal relations with would be allies who may be privileged in any number of ways. Further, allies can be "scolded and shamed" for their failure to sufficiently educate themselves, or by saying the wrong word or sharing the wrong media, even as "the scolder is relieved to provide concrete guidance and training" (Dean 2019b:20). Hence, the threads linking allies to the oppressed are precarious, weak, and can be cleaved at any time. Rather than designating solidarity, allyship designates a limit, a suggestion that "you will never be one of us," a permanent reminder that allies and the oppressed are forever balkanized by "separate interests, experiences, and practices" (Dean 2019b:20).

At stake in this discussion is not simply political paralysis or an inability to form effective coalitions capable of producing and sustaining urgently forms of collective political struggle. Indeed, the problem is much deeper than mere political strategy, encompassing profound epistemic dimensions: our capacity to know, with confidence, anything true about the material and social conditions of the world irrespective of our positionality and contingency. In communicative capitalism, each of us is empowered to plug in to the circuits of participatory communication, discriminate against the cacophony

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of content circulating in our feeds, and decide for ourselves what is true, good, just, real, fake, and so on. In this setting, politics devolves into the heterogeneity of personal preferences, a "post-politics," as Jodi Dean (2005) writes:

> Instead of engaging in debates, instead of contestations employing common terms, points of reference or demarcated frontiers, we confront a multiplication of resistances so extensive that it hinders the formation of strong counterhegemonies. The proliferation, distribution, acceleration and intensification of communicative access and opportunity, far from enhancing democratic governance or resistance, results in precisely the opposite— the post-political formation of communicative capitalism (P. 53).

For Dean (2016), this directly reflects the breakdown of organizations, comradeship, and mutual and reciprocal obligations among the left that she theorizes through the disintegration of the political party. While Dean (2016) has in mind mass democratic socialist parties, I take the "party" to be another name for organized collectivity in general, encompassing not just parties, but also labor unions and other institutions that may constitute an "ecology of organizations" bound together in common struggle, with a common language and coherent political strategy, that play up each organization's "comparative strengths" (Srnicek and Williams 2015:163). Historically, the party has served crucial epistemic functions for the collective body it represents. The party archives "knowledge important for political struggle" far exceeding "what any one person can know" and then takes a position on that knowledge, forging a platform that transforms "contradictory and individual preferences [into] a broader vision for which [the party] will fight" (Dean 2016:26). In the absence of the party, "there is no body capable of remembering, learning, and responding," just dispersed individuals circulating in communicative capitalism who offers "multitudes of opinions, suggestions, strategies,

and critiques" to ambiguous addressees (Dean 2016:260). Certainly, the party has an obligation to be mindful of real-world differences between its subjects and implement democratic procedures for attending to and mediating these differences. However, the decisions emergent from the process must be binding for the party to operate. These decisions must become a platform, a summation of our interests as a collective "we" that represents all of us by abstracting from our individuality. Perhaps most significantly of all, the party and the platform orient us towards a shared symbolic order, a shared understanding of the social world, and a shared future vision.

We can now summarize the fundamental epistemic problem nurtured by communicative capitalism, the "decline in symbolic efficiency" (Žižek 2000), which arises from the dual processes of individuation and informational surplus. The decline in symbolic efficiency registers "the loss of shared symbols, of general ideas and norms, of a sense that we know what another means when they appeal to home, the common good, citizenship, the university, etc.," and is most clearly expressed "in everyday language when people say, 'everyone has their own definition'" (Dean 2019:332). On the one hand, it captures the positional relativism that follows from communicative capitalism's insistence that we indulge our differences through participatory media that invite us to like, post, comment, share in our own, unique, way (Dean 2010:110). On the other hand, the decline in symbolic efficiency captures our felt incapacity to know, with confidence, anything exceeding our own anecdotes, partial knowledge, and lived experiences, facilitated not only by the democratization of media, but also by the overwhelming

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multiplication, hybridization, and mixing of informational sources.

When we go online, we are not simply hounded by the differentiated political commitments of our friends, funny memes, and boring advertisements. We are also hounded by news stories, reports, facts, and counter-facts. Indeed, an "excess of polls, surveys, and assessments circulates, undercutting not only the efficacy of any particular [datum] but the conditions of possibility for knowledge and credibility as such" (Dean 2010:103). After all, there is always "another survey, done by whatever group or association with whatever bias and whatever methodology, displacing whatever information one thought one hand" (Dean 2010:103). Thus, data from the CATO Institute circulate online, providing irrefutable evidence in one social network; contrary data from the Economic Policy Institute will do the same in another network; and on-a-whim analysis from an amateur podcaster in yet one more. However, these data do not engage in "debates" where truth will arise through the "dialectic," the ideal model of positive science. For, as Ulrich Beck (1992) has shown, the academy and scientific expertise were not spared from reflexive modernization and individualization, but directly subsumed by, and implicated in, both.

Science has long since succumbed to disparate and motivated applications such as "advocacy science," which serves any number of "different principles and different interests" that therefore reach exactly "opposite conclusions" (Beck 1992:161). This has led to nothing other than an epistemic crisis, as Dean (2010) explains:

> How do we know whom to believe or trust? Suspicion or even uncertainty toward expertise

> goes all the way down: skepticism toward politicians and the media, scientists and academics, extends to local knowledges, knowledges rooted in experience, and anything at all happening on the internet. Not only has gut-level or street knowledge supplanted what was previously considered expertise, but even amateur and everyday knowledge is now rejected as nothing more than opinion, and opinion which is necessarily limited, biased, and countered by others. The ability to falsify is unlimited. The lack of a capacity to know is the other side of the abundance of knowledge (p. 111).

There is no limit to falsification, for disproving, debunking, or discrediting one other. On the level of expertise, any particular academic study or particular think-tank report can be falsified by any other. On the level of individual experience, one's particular standpoint can be discredited by someone else's. For the left, the decline in symbolic efficiency manifests in all the ways explored above—the refusal of collectivity, the refusal of organization, the refusal of representation, and consequently, the refusal of mass politics. In a world of infinite difference, with billions of standpoints, and infinite manifestations of complex injustice, "it becomes impossible to speak from any general position at all— you can only speak for yourself" (Moran 2020:273).

Speaking exclusively for ourselves—never as a collective and representative "we"— means we are bracketed to only disclosing the unique ways in which we are "harmed and vulnerable" (Dean 2009:5). Those who feel the political impulse to transcend difference and forge collective are therefore "not injured enough to speak," for they aspire to speak from a position of strength —the strength of the "we" (Dean 2009:5). The subject-position of the individual survivor now intersects with that of the victim, the latter of whom is "always morally correct—for who can deny the suffering of a victim?—and never politically responsible—for victims are too weak and injured to govern" (Dean 2009:6). In communicative capitalism, this nurtures an anti-solidaristic atmosphere of

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cruelty and recriminations against would-be comrades—a phenomenon Mark Fisher

explicated through his infamous essay, "Exiting the Vampires' Castle." As Fisher (2013)

writes,

> The Vampires' Castle specializes in propagating guilt. It is driven by a *priest's desire* to excommunicate and condemn, and *academic-pedant's* desire to be the first seen to spot a mistake, and a *hipster's desire* to be one of the in-crowd. The danger in attacking the Vampires' Castle is that it can look as if—and it will do everything it can to reinforce this thought—that one is also attacking the struggles against racism, sexism, heterosexism…What holds [those in the Vampires' Castle] together is not solidarity, but mutual fear—the fear that they will be the next one to be outed, exposed, condemned (n.p., original emphasis).

The Vampires' Castle emerges from a defeated left resigned to defeat. With no

alternative in sight, the only form of politics available to the left is one of individualized

recognition of our marginalized identities by a "bourgeois big Other" (Fisher 2013).

When we speak from our standpoint, we expect validation for speaking our truth.

Efforts to generalize individual claims into more general, and therefore abstract, group

claims are met with suspicion due to the necessary simplification of our differences and

particularities. And since the only felt political agency operative in communicative

capitalism is that of our own individuality, a possessive attachment to our identities

incentivizes us to lash out defensively at those who try to speak for us. This is why Dean

(2010) describes how communication within communicative capitalism works as a

regime of control

> in which the people happily report on their views and activities and stalk their friends. Networked whatever beings don't need spectacles to be staged by politicians and the mass media. We can make our own spectacles—and this is much more entertaining. There is always something entertaining on the internet (P. 111).

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Our feeds, posts, and language are under constant surveillance by friends, "allies," and strangers, any which of whom are ready to enforce discipline, publicly scolding us when we act in the wrong way, say the wrong thing, or take the wrong position. However, since action is now elevated to the level of a fetish, a failure to act can be itself interpreted as enabling oppression, revealing one's privilege, and failing one's duties as an activist (Morrigan 2020:7). This schizophrenic state of affairs imbues the left with a neurotic energy that directly results from its own ambiguous expectations and lack of institutional authorities. It also undermines solidarity and obstructs efforts to forge a generalizable symbolic order to orient our action. As the late Michael Brooks (2020) observed, the left's individualist and symbolic deficiencies "feed a project of endless fragmentation and standpoint epistemology" that, if used as a basis for political action, "destroys any possibility for collective liberatory endeavors" (p. 12). So much of the left's internal problems correspond to the epistemic conditions of communicative capitalism, and these conditions have been internalized by the left and become wedded to individualist programs of personal liberation at the expense of collective movement building. Such a state of affairs can only result in a despairing political conclusion: our movements can never be inclusive and specific enough to speak on anyone's behalf, and perhaps we shouldn't even try.

Society is paying dearly for our organizational failures. Ours is a time when extremist forces actively exploit a widespread perception of the left as disorganized and "humorless scolds" (Burgis 2021:17) to advance a far-right political program. Against this, the left

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cannot claim that public perceptions of its behavior stem exclusively from deceptions by anti-left outside forces. In creating its own public "spectacles," callouts, and anti-solidaristic purity purges (Dean 2010), the left really does make itself an easy target for mockery by opportunistic right-wing zealots (Brooks 2020). An anti-SJW ("social justice warrior") attitude was one of the key ingredients tying the fragmented, and oftentimes incoherent, factions of the alt-right together around common disdain for "fragile" leftists associated with "out-of-touch" college students, liberal elites, and punitive activist subcultures.

While the alt-right deployed these anti-left sentiments to advance an agenda of white nationalism that found a distilled articulation in Trumpism, others deployed parallel criticisms cloaked in a rhetoric of civilizational rescue. Herein steps the Intellectual Dark Web (IDW), determined, from its point of view, to save the West and its Enlightenment principles from the irrational excesses of a left dangerously on the rise. Fundamentally, the IDW is an ideological project of "liberal civilizationalism" (cf. Mann 2017 on "Keynesianism") that seeks to restore a symbolic order predicated on classical liberalism, rationalism, and scientific authority by transcending extreme ideological divisions through civil but rigorous debates between good faith heterodox thinkers. This is central to the IDW, for not only does truth emerge through discussion and reasoned debate in the "marketplace of ideas," but also because treating certain topics as taboo—such as whether or not there are only two sexes, or if genetic differences can explain racial or economic inequalities—is illiberal in and of itself, prohibiting not only the discovery of

objective truth, but offending the individual rights and liberties associated with Enlightenment liberalism.

I will argue that the IDW strives to solve the problem of the decline in symbolic efficiency grounding communicative capitalism's epistemic crisis. The IDW provides a group identity and shared symbolic order through which we can reason collectively with reference to shared and definable concepts, even if we disagree on any specific idea or policy. In so doing, the IDW aspires to leave behind the "tribalism" of both leftist identitarianism—associated with a standpoint epistemology of incommunicable difference—and that of the radical right—who are locked into an alternative media ecosystem that encourages radicalization and is plagued by disinformation and misinformation. These themes will be elaborated in the final section of this chapter. First, however, we must take a detour through the online right-wing media sphere in order to adequately situate the IDW within the historical present.

2.3 Right-Wing Technopolitics

On November 22, 2015, a few months into his 2016 campaign, then Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump made headlines for tweeting a white supremacist meme. Featuring a spattering of fabricated and logically incoherent crime statistics, the meme read: "Blacks killed by whites—2%;" "Blacks killed by police—1%;" "Whites killed by police—3%;" "Whites killed by whites—16%;" "Whites killed by blacks—

81%;" "Blacks killed by blacks—97%."[2] These fictional numbers are stacked next to a graphic of a bandanna-clad man aiming a pistol. The headline reads "USA CRIME STATISTICS—2015," and the source cited is the "Crime Statistics Bureau—San Francisco." The problem is, all of the numbers are made up—government crime statistics for the year 2015 had not even been released at the time the meme was shared, considering the year was not over (Greenberg 2015), and the Crime Statistics Bureau does not exist. Moreover, anyone who bothered to sum up the proportion would quickly realize their necessary unreality: both figures—those on "blacks killed" and those on "whites killed"—sum to 100%, leading us to conclude that both black and white people exclusively kill or are killed by (1) other white people, (2) other black people, or (3) police, and never any other racial or ethnic groups. Later in the campaign, on July 2, 2016, Trump tweeted an anti-Semitic meme denigrating Hillary Clinton. The meme features a black and white cutout of Clinton placed in front of a tiled background of 100 dollar bills. Plastered to the top layer of the meme is a red Star of David containing the text "Most Corrupt Candidate Ever!" Annotating the meme, Trump wrote, "Crooked Hillary — Makes History!" Originally posted on a subterranean alt-right forum, within two weeks, the meme had traveled all the way to the Twitter timeline of a soon-to-be Republican president (Wendling 2018).

Dog whistling white supremacy to incite white racial anxieties is hardly new. Ronald

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[2] See snapshot from the Internet Archive:
https://web.archive.org/web/20151122200803/https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/668520614697820160

Reagan, for example, famously delivered his "states' rights" speech at the Neshoba County Fair in Mississippi during his 1980 presidential campaign, just miles from where three civil rights activists had been murdered by the KKK for their desegregation advocacy (Renton 2019). Similarly, in the post-civil rights era, the political right and political center alike have used controlling images like "welfare queens," "thugs," and "disorderly families" to racialize and pathologize urban poverty (Collins 2008). What did feel new with Donald Trump, however, was his flamboyance and lack of subtlety. Trump is irreverent and has a passion for spectacle. He is explicit in his promulgation of white supremacist tropes, whether describing Mexican migrants as "criminals and rapists" or referring the Global South as "shit hole countries." It is no wonder, then, that Trump notoriously won endorsements from actual white supremacists. One such endorsement came from Richard Spencer, a key architect of the alt-right. Spencer and his acolytes were famously recorded chanting "Hail Trump, hail our people, hail victory!" and adorning Nazi-salutes while celebrating Trump's presidential victory (Lombroso and Appelbaum 2016). Trump even managed to gain the support of a gang of street warriors—the Proud Boys—mostly known for their violent clashes with leftist protesters and their self-described "Western chauvinist" ideology (SPLC n.d.). Most significant to this discussion, however, is how far-right extremists, white supremacists, and neo-Nazis were able to engage in a distributed form of information warfare using the same tools and networked logics that had become celebrated by progressive technologists for their democratic affordances.

Nowhere is this more obvious than with the ascendancy of the alt-right. In August of 2016, Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton named and warned about a dangerous "alt-right" fringe that had once festered in online marginality, but which had found a popular ally in Trump (Rappeport 2016). By 2016, that alt-right had come to be associated with what Massanari (2017) characterizes as the "toxic technocultures" propagated on image boards like 4chan and communities on Reddit, which coordinate "implicit or explicit harassment" of ideological opponents through decentralized digital networks (p. 333). Especially pronounced are racist and misogynistic barrages against people of color and women with a public audience, both of whom are routinely attacked for their "liberalism," "feminism," and assumed "political correctness" (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016; Lawson 2018; Massanari 2017; Matamoros-Fernández 2017). Because of this, the alt-right became functionally identified with a cruel and fluid "trolling style" (Nagle 2017:19) that has made neatly defining the alt-right's official politics somewhat ambiguous.

Generally, the alt-right is defined negatively, by what it hates, rather than positively, in terms of what it stands for. In Mike Wendling's (2018) formulation, the alt-right is "an incredibly loose set of ideologies held together by what they oppose: feminism, Islam, the Black Lives Matter movement, political correctness, a fuzzy idea they call 'globalism,' and establishment politics of both the left and right" (p. 3). Similarly, Marwick and Lewis (2017) define the alt-right as a network of far-right internet subcultures consisting of "conspiracy theorists, techno-libertarians, white nationalists, Men's Rights advocates,

trolls, anti-feminists, anti-immigration activists, and bored young people" who package themselves as "anti-establishment in their reaction against multiculturalism and globalism" (p. 3). Nagle (2017) understands the alt-right to be a "collection of lots of separate tendencies that grew independently but which were joined under the banner of a bursting forth of anti-PC [i.e., politically correct] cultural politics" (p. 19), and Flisfeder (2018) distinguishes the alt-right from mainline conservatism by its "blatant crassness" and "image-based culture of online-meme production" (p. 4). Yet, there is more to the alt-right than sheer opposition and spectacle, and the concept of the alt-right, or "alternative right," predates its popular association with the vicious trolling culture that propelled it into public view.

As Hawley (2017) shows, the term itself—"alt-right" —was coined by the white nationalist Richard Spencer in 2008, who took inspiration from Paul Gottfried's longing for the formation of a youthful, "alternative" conservatism to take the place of the waned "paleoconservative" tendency in American politics. Epitomized in the figure of Pat Buchanan, paleoconservatism is characterized by its opposition to interventionism, globalization, and support for protective tariffs to shield domestic industry from global markets—policy positions that put it starkly at odds with mainline conservatism and the neoliberal GOP party line (Kiely 2019; Worrell 1999). However, this protectionism serves decidedly nationalist, not egalitarian, purposes. Indeed, paleoconservatism opposed policies designed to mitigate domestic inequality, such as affirmative action, and is deeply patriarchal, Christian, and xenophobic, opposing the "decadence" of gender

equality, homosexuality, and multiculturalism (Hawley 2017).

The "paleo" in paleoconservative operates on two registers: one temporal, the other "organic." In the temporal register, "paleo" signals the possibility of "returning to an original way of life conforming with America's true republican tradition" (Doody 2020:149). Organically, "paleo" signals a social order that is more natural, uncorrupted by "social engineering" projects that try to ameliorate inequalities between cultures, races, and the sexes through social welfare policies. Fundamentally, paleoconservatism concerns itself with securing the American family against the ravages of global capitalism, which threatened to dissolve the heteronormative family, Christian morality, and "American Exceptionalism" in the acids of multiculturalism and globalization. Paleoconservatism thus explicitly defined itself in opposition to hegemonic neoconservatism, the latter of which paid lip service to American values while nevertheless shepherding the neoliberalization of global political economy and military interventionism as a means to advance the United States' geopolitical interests (Harvey 2007). Because of its open hostility to neoconservatism, especially under Reagan, paleoconservatism was actively warred against within the GOP. While Pat Buchanan did run for president on a paleoconservative agenda twice in 1992 and 1996, his defeats largely collapsed paleoconservatism as a viable political force in American politics (Hawley 2017).

Inspired by Gottfried, Spencer embarked on a mission to forge a savvy youthful alternative right that would relate antagonistically to mainline conservatism and fill the

void left by paleoconservatism. Spencer's first attempt came in the form of the webzine AlternativeRight.com, which he worked on from 2010 to 2012. The site was ultimately shuttered in 2013, though, as Hawley (2017:67) observes, the site's content and spirit lived on within a network of subreddits, fringe sites, and image boards. In 2011, Spencer became the president of the National Policy Institute (NPI), a white supremacist pseudo-think tank. NPI structured itself along the lines of what Hawley (2017) calls "highbrow white nationalism" to simulate intellectual credibility. This includes publishing "quasi-scholarly journals, books, and websites" to present the alt-right as a "movement of serious scholars and social observers," while also maintaining a "civil tone" that avoids "the racial slurs, threatening language, and vitriol for which groups like the KKK and skinhead gangs are known" (Hawley 2017:26). A lexicon of pseudo-scientific terms were promulgated in place of vulgar epithets, such as "human biodiversity" (HBD) or "race realism"—i.e., the notion that race is an biological fact, that racial and ethnic differences, as well as social disparities between racial and ethnic groups, are rooted in immutable biological characteristics stemming from evolutionary diversity, and that social reforms cannot mitigate these disparities—and "sex realism," or the notion that men and women are biologically distinct and therefore naturally predisposed to particular, hierarchical, social roles. From the premise of HBD, the alt-right deduces that "racial differences should be calmly accepted as a reality, with the corollary belief that different racial groups should separate from one another—ideally into separate ethnostates" (Hawley 2017:27). Instead of advocating explicit genocidal violence or racial terrorism, then, the

highbrow white nationalist aspires for a "peaceful," "voluntary," and orderly exodus of people of color from the white "homeland."

A key venue in which Spencer published these ideas is the *Radix Journal,* founded in 2012. An online publication, *Radix* is designed to mimic open access critical theory journals and describes itself as publishing "original writings on culture, mankind, geo-politics, meta-politics, and critical theory."[3] *Radix* continues a long history of extremist groups strategically using what Jessie Daniels (2009) calls "cloaked websites" to disguise their political agenda (p. 661). On these sites, long-form essays deploying bigoted, but impressive-sounding, theoretical frames like "race realism" or "human biodiversity" proliferate, as do references to esoteric scholarship and intimidating philosophical texts, which position the authors as expert authorities on the subjects at hand. Similarly, as Sakki and Petterson (2016) show, quantification, or the use of "numbers and statistics" (p. 161), even official government statistics, in media content of this sort further works to add an additional layer of perceived scientific depth. Especially popular are the use of government crime statistics, statistics on sexual violence, and statistics on social welfare services to cast the non-white other as a deviant, violent, and decadent social presence (Sakki and Petterson 2016:162).

Ideologically, these pseudo-scientific devices are meant to legitimize and garner support for a white nationalist political program: the establishment of a white ethnostate;

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[3] See archived snapshot of *Radix* website:
http://web.archive.org/web/20211110144531/https://radixjournal.com/about/

an end to immigration; increasing the population and fertility rate of white people; a patriarchal sexual order informed by sex realism; and an anti-globalist nationalism that places the protection of the domestic white nation front and center (Hawley 2017). On the question of organizing the political economy of the white ethnostate, there is no coherent agreement. One reason may be that, for the alt-right, "identity politics is everything," as the alt-right "views the world as being fundamentally divided into competing groups, and the success of their group (whites) is their primary concern" (Hawley 2017:18). Hence, white identitarianism remains ideologically dominant and the preservation of the white race the chief political objective.

One of the most peculiar features of that alt-right is the way that those longing for the establishment of a white ethnostate cross paths with a sect of radical libertarians with a specific anti-democratic reading of Austrian School political economy. This is especially true for those steeped in the work of Ludwig von Mises, particularly as it has been filtered through the minds of Murray Rothbard, Lew Rockwell, and Hans Hermann Hoppe. At first glance, forging coalitional ties between white nationalists and radical libertarians (more accurately, anti-state "anarcho-capitalists") appears hopeless, as the former are statists while the latter view the state as an immoral parasite that only exists through theft (i.e., taxation) and coercion. Yet, there remain strong affinities between each.

As Quinn Slobodian (2019) shows, Rothbard's anarcho-capitalism can clearly be read as a countermovement against the "egalitarianism" arising out of the student movements

of the 1960s. Initially, Rothbard had sympathies for the anti-state sentiments of the new

social movements, particularly their opposition to the Vietnam War and the coercive

"draft slavery" of mandatory conscription, and he even supported the separatism

advocated by Malcolm X (Slobodian 2019). However, Rothbard's ambitions to

"infiltrate" and make allies of the New Left collapsed quickly, as the latter's socialist

commitments led Rothbard to lament how the movement failed to "transcend its belief in

the benevolent state" (Slobodian 2019:376). Rothbard went further still, decrying the

New Left's "deluded" belief in equality among peoples, which represses the fact of

immutable differences arising from our human nature and biological differences.

From this point of view, as Sandifer and Graham (2017) point out, Rothbard could

easily move to the conclusion that redistributive social programs, state-enforced

egalitarian measures, and anti-discrimination policies amounted to nothing more than

immoral and coercive trespasses against a morally responsible propertied class who

rightly acquired their wealth and property on merit alone. Patterns of extreme inequality

between the propertied and propertyless, as well as those between men and women or

racial and ethnic groups, were understood by Rothbard to reflect the nature of humankind

itself, and trying to "force" society to correct these naturally-derived inequalities through

social policy would always fail. It is hardly any wonder, then, that Rothbard praised

Richard Hernstein's and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve*, which he took as affirming,

irrevocably, the fact of "natural, immutable, inequalities between the races and people's

abilities," which, in Rothbard's view, struck a "decisive blow to the welfare state"

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(Cooper 2021:8).

The reification of socially observed differences into real and natural differences between peoples provides an obvious opening for Rothbardian anarcho-capitalists to find common ground with white nationalists. In 1982, Rothbard, along with Lew Rockwell Jr., founded the Ludwig von Mises Institute (LvMI), another "highbrow" institution dedicated to promoting the libertarian politics and ethical theories of Mises. Yet, as the historian of the Austrian School, Janek Wasserman (Wasserman 2019), observes, LvMI became a far-right networking hub that brings together "marginal right-wing groups, such as states'-rights organizations, historical revisionists, and neo-Confederates" (p. 280). This was partly a consequence of Rothbard's own intensifying right-wing radicalization but was also part of his deliberate political strategy to forge a "paleolibertarian" coalition that could unify divergent sects on the political right behind a populist, anti-egalitarian, message. As a populist force, paleolibertarianism was meant both to provide a means of synthesizing laissez-faire economics with the social conservatism that Rothbard knew prevailed in the United States, while also differentiating itself from so-called "Cato Institute" elites whose theory of libertarian change focused on "experts" disseminating the right "facts" and "ideas" to a passive public (Cooper 2021).

The latter attitude is born out of a fissure amongst Austrian-inspired economists in the aftermath of the so-called "cultural turn" of the 1980s. On the one hand, cultural analysis of the "life-world of human experience" was embraced by some researchers who "increased their emphasis on the role of institutions in shaping social and economic

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orders, offering an alternative economics approach to prevailing models built on utility-maximizing, rational *homo economicus* living in a world of perfect information, competition, and efficient markets" (Wasserman 2019:278-279). On the other were Misesian radicals who saw the embrace of culture, coupled with a "long-term" agenda of libertarian reformism, as fundamentally inimical to any serious libertarian project. For one, the cultural turn was interpreted by the Rothbardian wing as a descent into "moral relativism" that abandons the objectively true principles of libertarian ethics as articulated by Mises' system of praxeology (Wasserman 2019). For another, Rothbard vehemently disagreed with elite-led libertarian reformism, and advocated instead for a right-wing populism rooted in anti-elite, racist, and sexist prejudices (Sandifer and Graham 2017). In many ways, this populist strategy is a logical continuation of the actual approach the political right has taken to strike a balance between its libertarian and traditionalist conservative wings through the adoption of an accommodative anti-government message based around "freedom, rights, and individual liberty" (Blee and Creasap 2010:273). For example, an economic libertarian can chastise the government for stealing their wealth by raising taxes and thus violating their property rights; white supremacist groups can rally against affirmative action by accusing the government of violating their rights of equal protection under the law; and conservative parents can accuse school boards of violating their rights of free speech by excluding parent input on curriculum development.

Nevertheless, paleolibertarianism's bizarre populism remained fringe within mainline conservatism, thought its ideas did reach, and metastasize within, what Wendling (2018)

calls the "proto-institutions" of the alt-right—the /pol/ board on 4chan, a now mostly

banned network of communities on Reddit, YouTube channels, podcasts, and

disreputable news sources like *Breitbart*. Along the way, the alt-right's highbrow

aesthetic gave way to a colorful but vicious meme culture that embraced vulgarity,

offensiveness, and harassment. The use of memes, trolling, irony, and humor is

strategically adopted to represent the alt-right as a "fun movement, one using internet

jargon familiar to tech-savvy millennials" that makes the alt-right come across "as

youthful, light-hearted and jovial—even as it says the most abhorrent things" (Hawley

2017:20). Indeed, the alt-right relished in the opportunity to present itself as

transgressive, edgy, and cool—a contemporary counter-culture distinguishing itself from

the stale, "normie," and politically correct mainstream (Nagle 2017).

Alt-right meme culture is situated within the logics of what de Zeeuw and Tuters

(2020) describe as the "deep vernacular web," or a "loosely knit network of forums and

sites that exist at the margins of the platformized web" and deploy a "group-based

discourse" of "innovative forms of expression that are often intentionally obscure to those

outside the in-group" (p. 216). Its practices and arcane grammar helped the alt-right

appear, to some, as if it is "intellectual and cultured" (Flisfeder 2018:2), brimming with

esoteric references and self-conscious irony. Furthermore, its initial emergence on fringe

online communities existing outside the orbit of the "normie" web implicitly associate the

alt-right with technological expertise, bringing to mind the longstanding popularity of

cyber-libertarian ideals and a culture of trolling and flaming amongst the earliest users of

the internet (Bartlett 2016; Golumbia 2016). Here, it is worth mentioning the now infamous Silicon Valley software engineer and entrepreneur Curtis Yarvin, who scribed essays under the pseudonym Mencius Moldbug on his blog *Unqualified Reservations*. Moldbug became a key thinker of the alt-right, ingesting Rothbardian ideas and then re-transcribing them for his readers. He is especially known for developing the "neoreactionary movement" (NRx), which aspires to conceive "a superior alternative to democracy" based on Misesian microeconomics and the total privatization of polity, society, and economy (Tait 2019:188). Most significant is Moldbug's theorization of The Cathedral—an "intellectual political machine" that dictates "acceptable and unacceptable thought" (Tait 2019:193).

Functionally, according to Moldbug, The Cathedral operates as a "priesthood of culture" that enforces compulsory "progressivism" on matters of social justice and social equality (Woods 2019:53). The Cathedral is represented as all encompassing, a domineering force that controls institutions spanning from governments and universities to civil society groups and popular culture. A coercive force, The Cathedral compels its subordinates to accept, or pay lip service to, the supposed phony idea of the equality between peoples and the democratic impulses presumed to follow from that idea. Due to The Cathedral's social hegemony, publicly opposing The Cathedral comes with extreme risks. Nevertheless, forging an "Anti-Cathedral" remains a possibility. This is chiefly obtained through the mechanism of publicly discussing ideas deemed heretical by The Cathedral in order to force a shift in the "Overton Window" of acceptable discourse. Put

another way, by simply speaking the unspeakable, we weaken the authority and credibility of The Cathedral and move ideas that were once deemed radical and dangerous "towards the mainstream" (Wendling 2018:33).

For the alt-right, the use of memes, trolling, and digital media became an innovative means of shifting the Overton Window. This meant distilling "highbrow" alt-right philosophy into digestible bits for the masses that were able to reach farther than a journal like *Radix*, a blog like *Unqualified Reservations*, and even deep vernacular spaces like 4chan. Hence, as Hawley (2017) notes, the alt-right produces memes and trolls for a purpose:

> By leaving sites specifically aimed at a radical right-wing audience and joining discussions at other message boards, in, for example, the comment sections of major news venues, YouTube, and especially on Twitter, the alt-right is able to circulate its message widely. Alt-right trolls help disperse the movement's views far beyond what would be possible if the movement could only be found on its own platforms (P. 20).

One important node in this network was *The Right Stuff* (*TRS*), an alt-right site that disbanded the highbrow aesthetic of the Spencer-wing and instead published essays openly flouting white supremacy and using racial slurs. Hawley (2017) suspects that much alt-right jargon either originated on *TRS* or was popularized on *TRS*, and *TRS* also helped lead the way in promoting trolling as a political strategy, publishing "multiple articles providing advice on how to be a more effective troll and explaining what trolling is supposed to accomplish" (p. 73). Specifically, for *TRS*, trolling is never about convincing your ideological opponents that you are right. Rather, it is about persuading *anonymous* people—i.e., consumers of YouTube videos, readers of news articles, podcast

listeners—that alt-right positions have merit. One such strategy is "brigading" a forum, like a subreddit, by directing hoards of trolls to swarm the forum with offensive content and posts in such large volumes that those offended simply leave, thereby ceding the control of the territory to the alt-right.

Through these devices, the alt-right hopes to "red pill" the public, especially the white masses. The concept of the "red pill" or "red pilling" is a reference to science-fiction film *The Matrix*, specifically the scene when the protagonist, Neo, is offered the opportunity of taking a red or blue pill. For Neo, taking the "red pill" will allow him to see that the world he inhabits is a lie—it is a simulation that keeps him and his fellow humans enslaved in a dream-state while malevolent machines harvest their bodies for energy. Contrarily, by taking the blue pill, Neo can remain blissfully ignorant and continue living within the simulation. In alt-right discourse, "taking the red pill," being "red pilled," or "red pilling" operates as a metaphor for seeing beyond the "myths propagated by progressives" by becoming suddenly aware of, for example, "biological racial differences, problems associated with racial diversity, and various conspiracy theories about Jewish subversion" (Hawley 2017:83). The necessity of red pilling is meant to signal that leftism/liberalism/progressivism has obtained the status of cultural hegemony. Feminism, egalitarianism, anti-racism, and any other *ism* associated with the left are seen as ruling ideologies, pushed by elites and mass culture alike, that do nothing but lie about the possibilities for multicultural democracy, injure the white race, emasculate men, and stow social dysfunction (Flisfeder 2018; Kelly 2017; Ma n.d.). These

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leftist/liberal/progressive ruling ideologies are fetters that, for the alt-right, must be burst

asunder so that a rational social order predicated on the "truths" of race realism, sex

realism, and white nationalism can come into being.

While the premise of progressive hegemony obscures basic facts about the

distribution of power in U.S. political institutions,[4] properly understood, the alt-right can

be seen as lashing out against the discourses and cultural products informed by the

"business ontology" undergirding contemporary capitalist society. As Mark Fisher (2009)

explains, business ontology is the reality principle of "capitalist realism"—the

"widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic

system, but also that is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (p.

2)—that proclaims that "it is *simply obvious* that everything in society, including health

care and education, should be run as a business" (Fisher 2009:17, original emphasis).

Business ontology is epitomized by the ubiquitous progressive lexicon of insipid

marketized phraseology—"impact," "targets," "goals," "entrepreneurship," etc.—that re-

describe contemporary capitalism as "socially responsible and caring" even as capital

wreaks havoc on society, workers, and the planet (Fisher 2009:46). This is accomplished

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[4] While a detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this research, suffice it to say the political right exercises inordinate control over political institutions. At the time of this writing, the GOP controls a super-majority of state legislative chambers (62%), 23 of 50 states' legislatures *and* executives (with 11 states having divided powers), and is the party of choice for 54% of individual state legislators (NCSL 2021). This pattern holds over federal courts, as well, where federal judges appointed by Donald Trump alone constitute 28% of all currently active federal judges, and judges appointed by the past four GOP presidents account for over half of all active federal judges (Gramlich 2021). Similarly, the Democratic Party has been warring against its left-flank since Bernie Sanders first challenged Hillary Clinton in the 2016 primary, and the Democrats' fragile "majority" in the Senate and House is held hostage by right-wing Democratic senators Kyrsten Sinema and Joe Manchin, both of whose votes are necessary for *any* Democratic legislation to pass and both of whom severely oppose progressive policies (Sirota 2021).

through capital's recuperation of criticisms against its worst injustices and consequences in ways that constantly rescue capital accumulation from the threat of class struggle, as Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) explain:

> Capitalism attracts actors, who realize they have hitherto been oppressed, by offering them a certain form of liberation that masks new types of oppression. It may then be said that capitalism 'recuperates' the autonomy it extends, by implementing new modes of control. However, these new forms of oppression are gradually unmasked and become the target of critique, to the point where capitalism is led to transform its *modus operandi* to offer a liberation that is redefined under the influence of critique. But, in its turn, the 'liberation' thus obtained [harbors] new oppressive mechanisms that allow control over the process of accumulation to be restored to the capitalist framework (P. 425).

Capitalism, as a mode of production that "demands the mobilization of a very large number of people whose prospects for profit are low" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007:7), has no inherent justification for its sole aim: the unlimited accumulation of capital. Therefore, capitalism must have a "spirit," widely shared beliefs that justify voluntary participation in a system that offers very little reward to most of its subjects. To accomplish this, "capitalism is obliged to offer forms of engagement that are compatible with the state of the social world it is integrated into, and with the aspirations of those of its members who are able to express themselves most forcefully" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007:168-169).

In the aftermath of the new social movements and the demands of the New Left, as well as a growing population of younger, more progressive, customers, capital began extending opportunities for diversified representation on all the axes of difference of concern to progressives. Initially, this appeared as the commodification of difference, as Dean (2009) writes:

commodities are no longer marketed to broad types—housewives, teenagers—but are individualized such that consumers can specify the features they desire in a product: *I'll take a grande half-caf skinny latte with extra foam; I'll design and order my own sports shoes; I'll save television shows, edit out the commercials, and watch them when it's convenient for me*" (p. 4, original emphasis).

Now, this logic fully extends to the new multiplicity of social justice causes struggling for recognition. Capitalist firms are eager to tie the circuits of production and consumption directly to ethics: save the environment by buying fresh organic produce from your local farmers' market; support racial justice by shopping at BIPOC-owned small businesses; become "social entrepreneurs" who balance profitability with "social impact," and so on—a phenomenon that has been described as "woke washing" (Kanai and Gill 2020; Sobande 2020). Culturally and ideologically, the recuperation of critique allows capitalism to successfully modify its spirit by extending concessions and recognition to its critics, thereby giving them a reason to participate in the production process, and thus legitimizing our subordination to capital's internal law of unlimited accumulation.

In an era of massive social inequality, wage stagnation, and environmental destruction, where it is increasingly difficult to imagine a desirable social future and our place in it, the alt-right can be read as a hostile reaction against not an actual progressive hegemony, but, rather, against the contradictions inherent in the productive relations constituting capitalism, which now use the language of social justice but always remain detached from any actual materialist progressive politics. In other words, the alt-right displaces class struggle onto cultural antagonism, taking the "woke washed" culture of contemporary capitalism at face value instead of interrogating this culture to discover that

it is a marketing scheme intended to secure the production of surplus-value by appealing to social justice ideals that inspire consumers (Flisfeder 2018). In the alt-right's distorted representation, the agents propagating contemporary capitalist culture are imagined as a cabal of elites who control both culture and capital at the same time and aspire to center and improve the lives of everyone else except white people—especially white men. Sensing the dimness of their own future prospects—a reality prefigured in contemporary patterns of inequality, wage stagnation, permanent unemployment and underemployment, and deaths of despair (Case and Deaton 2021; Howell and Kalleberg 2019; Mishel, Gould, and Bivens 2015; Piketty, Saez, and Zucman 2018)—a feeling of anomie sets in as the gulf between "what society claims individuals can achieve and what is actually achievable" widens, leading to "weakened group ties, a lack of adherence to social norms, fragmentation of identity and purposelessness" (Marwick and Lewis 2017:29).

The alt-right's white identity politics completely obfuscates the real basis of material conflicts in capitalist societies, and, necessarily, precludes the formation of a legitimate collective struggle to address those conflicts, as such a struggle would be multicultural, multi-racial, and multi-gendered. Moreover, the alt-right's intuition that whiteness, and white masculinity in particular, is at risk of extinction constitutes the paranoid substance of a key alt-right concept, "cultural Marxism." Functionally, the idea of cultural Marxism is meant to represent social justice causes—feminism, anti-racism, socialism, etc.—as "foreign to the American way of life" (Woods 2019:40). The concept itself is tied to a conspiracy theory about the Frankfurt School of critical theorists that proclaims that the

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project of Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and their allies was to deploy "critical theory"

as a weapon that would transform class struggle into a "culture war" capable of paving

the way for a Marxist regime and the end of Western civilization (Doody 2020). Now, as

Wendling (2018) shows, the concept is used to dismiss any and all left-wing political

causes tout court. It is common to see usages of "critical theory"—sometimes stylized as

"Critical Theory" or just "Theory"—as a means of raising alarm about youthful social

justice activism, especially campus activism, and its intellectual foundations: gender

studies, postcolonial theory, queer theory, critical race theory, and so on (Pluckrose and

Lindsay 2020). Social struggles by oppressed individuals, and the increased opportunities

for oppressed individuals to be seen and heard as they engage in a "politics of visibility"

empowered by ICTs (Clark-Parsons 2021), are summarily rejected as illegitimate and

authoritarian, aspiring for the political disenfranchisement of the white majority in order

to empower aggrieved minorities. This is one reason why campus "free speech" battles

have become a focal point in alt-right discourse, as it is seen as an effective way to

associate progressive opposition to social inequalities as fundamentally illiberal, therefore

providing an on-ramp for concerned citizens into right-wing politics (Kidder and Binder

2021; Marwick and Lewis 2017; Nash, Gorman-Murray, and Browne 2019; Pan 2017).

As the alt-right engaged in its culture war against the left, it turned progressive

assumptions about digital technology on their head. With the alt-right, decentralized,

leaderless, and autonomous social networks did flourish, yet contra writers "like Manuel

Castells and numerous commentators in the *Wired* magazine milieu," the digital political

revolution turned out not to be "the utopian vision they were hoping for" (Nagle 2017:3).

Just a few years after digital networks sustained Occupy Wall Street, those same

technologies enabled spectacles like #Gamergate.[5] As Marwick and Lewis (2017) argue,

#Gamergate was a dress rehearsal for the alt-right, a proof of concept about the power of

decentralized trolling campaigns that can be quickly, and flexibly, organized and

distributed through digital networks. Image boards, IRC chatrooms, and obscure websites

became informal gathering places in which discussions of political targets could be had,

memes could be shared and refined, and strikes planned. By staging digital spectacles, the

alt-right garnered attention and reach. First, this came in the form of sympathetic

coverage by right-wing media, especially those affiliated with the so-called "alt-lite,"

such as Milo Yiannopoulos *(Yiannopoulos 2016)*. In his piece titled "An Establishment

Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right," Yiannopoulos represents the alt-right as young,

secular, and cool—everything that mainline conservatism, with its "soft Christian

passivity" (Nagle 2017:12), was not. Indeed, the alt-right despises establishment

conservatism equally as much as it despises leftism and feminism, primarily because, as

Hawley (2017) observes, "white people are the predominant constituents of conservative

politics, but conservatives in power rarely promote white interests" (p. 94). Put

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[5] Briefly, #Gamergate was a harassment campaign organized by a distributed mob of mostly anonymous anti-feminist members of the "gaming community" against female gamer, Zoe Quinn. The hate campaign began after Quinn's ex-boyfriend wrote a long blog post accusing Quinn of cheating on him and trading sex with game reviewers for positive reviews of her game, *Depression Quest*. Under the banner of "ethics in game journalism," Quinn was repeatedly attacked and threatened by a swarm of misogynistic gamers for her accused "crimes," including the spreading of revenge porn. Also caught up in the hate storm was Anita Sarkeesian, a feminist game critic who created a video series deconstructing sexist stereotypes in video games. For this, Sarkeesian was accosted and harassed for her "political correctness" and "feminist" encroachments into gaming culture.

differently, establishment conservatives are too concerned with political correctness and trying to appear non-bigoted, thereby surrendering white interests.

The alt-right's hate for mainstream conservatism is a major reason why many of them came to rally behind Donald Trump: he created chaos within the Republican Party, viciously attacking leading GOP members for their weaknesses and refusal to put America first (Hawley 2017). However, the alt-right understood that Trump did not represent an authentically white nationalist movement, but he was still attractive due to his severe anti-establishment stances. This presented a problem for journalists and the media when covering Trump, for not only did he disregard the basic norms of civil discussion and political communication, but he constantly lied and purposefully stirred controversy, gaining media attention in response. The press thus found itself in a predicament, trying to balance objective coverage of both Trump and the cruelty of his alt-right supporters with the concern that by extensively covering Trump and the alt-right, the press itself might inadvertently *amplify* their messages (Phillips 2018). This is precisely what the alt-right wanted: to be named in the mainstream press, spoken about by political leaders, to have its memes displayed on the evening news, and to have the public debate whether or not the alt-right is "sincerely" white supremacist or just engaging in ironic trolling (Phillips 2016). The alt-right relished in the ambiguity ascribed to it by the mainstream and the amount of energy that went into trying to decipher the "truth" in its messages.

Yet while the concerns about the mainstream press inadvertently boosting the alt-

right and Trumpism are legitimate, both enjoyed access to a sprawling right-wing media ecosystem whose roots were placed decades earlier. In their pathbreaking research studying informational diffusion in digital social networks, Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018) show that right-wing media outlets and right-wing media consumers have pulled away from legacy and mainstream news sources to form their own, insulated, information ecosystem. This pattern is asymmetrical. That is, the political left does not experience the same degree of ideologically motivated media isolation. As Benkler et al. (2018) explain, in left-wing networks, people do not exclusively emphasize "media that draw only left attention, but frequently instead read, share, and quote the mainstream media, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, or *CNN*" (p. 56). The same cannot be said of the political right, which is dominated by hyper-partisan media. Importantly, while this media ecosystem is deeply embedded in online social networks, it stretches beyond them, incorporating crucial "offline" media like conservative talk radio, which continues to boost misinformation and disinformation to its listeners (Thompson 2022). Given its partisan shape, this right-wing ecosystem is highly susceptible to disinformation and propaganda, and operates as "an internally coherent, relatively insulated knowledge community, reinforcing the shared worldview of readers and shielding them from journalism that challenged it" (Benkler et al. 2017:np).

The existent right-wing media sphere is the culmination of a decades-long informational offensive organized by a heterogeneous cadre of conservative and right-wing actors. The neoliberals excelled at forging a network of think-tanks and university-

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sponsored research centers that generate data, reports, white papers, books, and public-facing information that routinely reaches the ears of policymakers and laypeople alike (MacLean 2017; Mirowski 2014; Srnicek and Williams 2015). American conservatives, further, tactfully exploited a crisis in journalism and public media conjured by the bankruptcy and closures of unprofitable local papers at the tail-end of the twentieth century, filling this void with partisan publications and broadcasters owned by large corporate conglomerates (Nelson 2019). At the same time, conservative political entrepreneurs took advantage of the deregulated media landscape of the 1980s and 1990s to venture into talk radio, internet journalism, and hyper-partisan cable news (Meagher 2012). Whatever their differences may be, the heterogeneous factions of the political right were able to unify into a, more or less, coherent political coalition, one prepared to set aside their differences, and fully equipped, to engage in information warfare against its political opponents and the public at large (Hertel-Fernandez, Skocpol, and Sclar 2018; Renton 2019). When the alt-right finally entered the political scene, it found an isolated and integrated network of conservative media that was primed for its content.

Analyzing the alt-right and the broader conservative turn towards conspiratorial thinking and self-sourced information on news and current affairs, Matthew Hannah (2021) argues that we have entered an "information dark age" characterized by a "synthesis of distrust in news media and mainstream politics, ubiquity of information access, and public inability to parse online truth from fiction" (n.p.). While the political right has long lashed out against the "establishment" or "mainstream" media for its

supposed liberal biases and forged its own alternative sources (Major 2015)—presently, 65% of conservatives report distrusting national news organizations (Gottfried and Liedke 2021)—this skepticism has transformed into the full-blown construction of alternative realities brought to life by a universe of "alternative facts" and crowd-sourced anecdotal knowledge (Neiwert 2017). Nowhere was this made clearer than in the January 6, 2021 riot on the United States Capitol. Here, a Trumpist mob, consisting of militia members, QAnon conspiracy theorists, and individual citizens, were compelled to violence based on a lie—that the 2020 election was "stolen" from Trump—which was circulating in their information feeds and legitimized by the broader conservative media ecosystem (Allam et al. 2021). The Capitol riot joins a growing list of violent right-wing atrocities, from the August 2019 rampage in El Paso, TX by a Trump-supporting eco-fascist (Goldstein 2019; Hafez 2019), to the March 2019 attack against Christchurch, New Zealand's Muslim community by an alt-right terrorist (Kirkpatrick 2019; Martin 2019), to the political right's use of armed and vehicular violence as countermeasures against social justice protests and demonstrations (Bouie 2020; Wendling 2018).

As for the participatory networks of untruth undergirding the right's violent radicalization, these are an indictment to the naivety of Silicon Valley's techno-utopianism—the idea that "setting information free" and granting everyone access to an always-expanding universe of content could only ever generate positive social benefits (Marantz 2019)—and an oversight in the literature on digital politics that has been biased towards studying progressive deployments of ICT (Waisbord 2018). To this point, we

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must situate the radicalized and radicalizing political right in the historical context of communicative capitalism, characterized by the decline in symbolic efficiency. Along with the decline in symbolic efficiency, however, which primarily affects *how we know*, there is the closely related problem of *whom do we trust* to know beyond ourselves—a problem of authority. Practically, this manifests as distrust in conventional institutional authorities—universities, the press, government institutions, and organizations in general. As an agency existing beyond our own, one that threatens to call into question the credibility of our anecdotes, lived experiences, and situated knowledge, authority as a concept is now treated as functionally equivalent to *authoritarianism*. This is a neoliberal impulse rooted in an individualist, anti-social, ethos, as Wendy Brown's (2019) analysis of neoliberalism helps clarify.

As Brown (2019) argues, neoliberalism is both antidemocratic and anti-social, rejecting that an object called "society" exists at all. What's left is nothing but "individuals and families oriented by markets and morals," and to speak of "social power generating hierarchies, exclusion, and violence," let alone subjectivizing categories like "class, gender, or race," makes no sense (Brown 2019:40). On matters of epistemology, when it comes to questions of *who has the authority to determine that which is true*, the metaphor of the "marketplace of ideas" is deployed, treating "all viewpoints as equivalent" where "no competitor should be required to advertise"—i.e., rigorously represent other positions in good faith—"for another" (Brown 2019:158). Information is a commodity like any other, and we relate to truth as consumers with our own unique

preferences.

Informational and epistemic relativism are therefore key principles of neoliberalism. There is no greater power than the individual, and no authority outside the individual has any basis to declare, "you are wrong." The folk politics of the left, with its distrust towards institutional authority thus appears as the mirror image of the libertarian right that lashes out against the state and any demand that the liberty of the individual be regulated by the will of the people. To oppose authority therefore does not automatically result in a more democratic politics. Indeed, democracy, rooted in the "political equality" of the people to rule themselves (Brown 2019:23), even entails obeisance to authority, for there is no political equality without a regime of social justice that ensures that we all are, as political subjects, truly equal in practice. Democracy needs social structures and enforcement mechanisms to exercise authority over antidemocratic and anti-social agents—racist politicians drafting voter suppression laws, corporations recklessly polluting and destroying our shared environment, discriminatory statutes that withhold social benefits based on gender or sexuality, and so on. Without authoritative democratic institutions, emancipatory political projects cannot operate on a scale of social import that reaches beyond prefigurative subcultures. And tied to a politics of individualist immediacy, it swims dangerously close to a neoliberal rationality that, in denying the reality of society and therefore of social injustice, casts democratic values, laws, and enforcement mechanisms based on principles of "equality and inclusion" as nothing other than tyranny—a coercive imposition (Brown 2019:41).

Without authority, writes Mark Worrell (2019), "we are left with nothing more than power politics, rebellion, rationalizations, propaganda" and the pursuit of "I-rights and personal entitlements," leaving us with little more than a "flat ontological plane of social atoms jostling for position and seeking status attention because 'authority' is swept away" (p. 9-10). "If we wish to avoid complete social chaos," Worrell (2019) continues, "if we wish to actually live in a society, authority has to be embodied and respected" (p. 11). But this authority must be rational, based in critical reason, and not on domination. It is the task of a critical realist sociology to constantly probe "the lines of authority" and discover "what is rational and what is bunkum" (Worrell 2019:6). But this is predicated on rescuing the assumption that we can use reason to obtain objective knowledge that is true irrespective of subjective attitudes and reflexive interpretivism. While reason as such was once used "to liquidate unjust domination," within communicative capitalism, "the authority of reason is itself melting away" (Worrell 2019:4).

The disembodiment of, specifically, *epistemic* authority is integral to communicative capitalism, as this review of the political right and the earlier review of the political left show. In both cases, decentralized communications networks are deployed for "anti-authoritarian" political ends, though with wildly different ideological motivations. Moreover, it appears that the right has been more effective than the left in this regard, but it also had access to a well-resourced media ecosystem that weaves between legacy and "new" media alike.

The right is clearly radicalizing, forging a symbolic order in opposition to an

ambiguous liberal "mainstream" and is increasingly connected to political violence. The left, however, has no institutional basis from which to oppose a radicalizing right through a sustained engagement with both it and the wider public. With the left ill-positioned to offer solutions to the dilemmas of communicative capitalism and provide a coherent political vision to contrast with the political right, the space remains open for other actors to fill that void. This is precisely where the Intellectual Dark Web steps in, offering the promise of rescuing reality and society from the forces of ideological "tribalism" that, if left unattended, will inevitably destroy Western civilization. Distinguishing itself from the political right (though, as we will soon see, for many of its leading figures, this is a distinction without a difference) and the political left, the IDW aims to transcend our ideological psychosis by opposing "captured" mainstream institutions through a network of rogue "sense-making" rooted in a decentralized form of "heterodox science" that is more "rational" than both alt-right reaction and left-wing anti-realism (Aupers and de Wildt 2021). The next section introduces the Intellectual Dark Web, its key motifs, and the trajectory it has taken since it was first introduced in 2018 before turning to the empirical substance of this dissertation.

2.4 The Intellectual Dark Web

The IDW emerged to fill the voids in meaning opened by communicative capitalism. It therefore cannot be understood without placing it in the context of the online antagonisms between left and right, which reached a boiling point by 2016 with the election of Trump. As was shown in Chapter 1, most of the public likely became

acquainted with the IDW after they were profiled by Bari Weiss in May of 2018 for the *New York Times*. Therein, a representation of the IDW emerged that anchored it around a "vanguard" of public intellectuals with direct or loose attachments to a network of podcasts, YouTube channels, and online magazines (Weiss 2018).

In addition to the IDW "founder" Eric Weinstein, who hosts the podcast *The Portal* and works as the capital manager at far-right Silicon Valley venture capitalist Peter Thiel's investment firm, this vanguard included public intellectuals with varied ideological and professional pedigrees, such as: the neuroscientist and atheist author, Sam Harris; the conservative pundits, Ben Shapiro and Douglas Murray; the estranged academics, Bret Weinstein (Eric's brother), Heather Heying (Bret's spouse), and Jordan Peterson; right-wing YouTube talk show host, Dave Rubin; the founder of the heterodox digital magazine *Quillette*, Claire Lehman; Joe Rogan, whose podcast attracts an estimated 11 million listeners per episode (Rouhandeh 2022), thereby outperforming cable news outlets like CNN by a factor of over 13, MSNBC by a factor of almost 9, and Fox News by a factor of nearly 5 even during primetime hours (Johnson 2021); the ex-Muslims turned critics of Islam, Maajid Nawaz and Ayaan Hirsi Ali; and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) fellow and critic of feminism, Christina Hoff Sommers. This is to name but a few central personas featured in the Weiss (2018) profile. The IDW has also come to possess allies in the form of "IDW-adjacent" or "heterodox" academics—such as Harvard cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker and New York University business ethics professor Jonathan Haidt—who engage in cultural and political criticisms similar

to that of the IDW, while also appearing on, and engaging with, IDW programs and media (Lukianoff and Haidt 2018; cf. McKinnon 2005; Wesołowski 2020).

The IDW's orbit also came to encompass the "grievance studies" hoaxers—James Lindsay, Helen Pluckrose, and Peter Boghossian—who successfully published fake peer reviewed papers in fringe cultural studies journals in an effort to expose "grievance studies" disciplines—e.g., sex and gender studies, racial and ethnic studies, disability studies, etc.—to be nothing but leftist ideology masquerading as scholarship (Lindsay, Boghossian, and Pluckrose 2018). The hoax was celebrated by the IDW, and the trio— but especially James Lindsay—have been instrumental in stirring the current cultural panic around "critical race theory," "wokeness," and bigoted trans "groomer" discourse that have now become watchwords structuring the agendas of the Republican Party, the Southern Baptist Convention, and other conservative organizations (Bailey 2021; Harris 2021).[6]

The response to the IDW has been swift and come from all ideological directions. Early supporters of the group praised the IDW for carving out a space for the free exchange of ideas, uncensored rational debate, and the reaffirming of Enlightenment values against an onslaught of leftist activism (Brandt 2018). Indeed, this is precisely how the IDW prefers to be understood: as serious intellectuals willing "to disagree

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[6] See: Sam Harris' positive sentiment (https://web.archive.org/web/20181003024632if_/https://twitter.com/SamHarrisOrg/status/1047301474974224385); Heather Heying's take (https://medium.com/@heyingh/grievance-studies-goes-after-the-scientific-method-63b6cfd9c913); and Steven Pinker's praise (https://web.archive.org/web/20210616124432/https://twitter.com/sapinker/status/1047446850008219649?lang=en)

ferociously, but talk civilly, about nearly every meaningful subject," all the while setting

aside their biases and feelings in order to adopt the standpoint of objective observers

capable of discussing the *reality of things* regardless of how disconcerting or politically

incorrect that reality may be (Weiss 2018). By being broadly committed to the classical

liberal principles of free speech, individualism, and rationalism, the IDW aspires to

project an outward image of post-ideological pure reason that transcends political

cleavages and approaches truth through the power of conversation. Arguments are

therefore evaluated on their "merits," not the attributes and "identities" of their

articulators. Critics, however, advanced on several fronts. Doubts were cast about the

IDW's self-anointed "outsider" status, considering that many of its members rake in huge

sums of money selling podcast subscriptions, books, and public appearances in sold-out

arenas—to say nothing of the millions of listeners who tune into IDW programs to

consume "heterodox" thought (Drezner 2018). Others questioned if the IDW offers

anything new at all, as the group coheres around themes very similar to the earlier culture

wars in the 1980s and 1990s over political correctness and postmodernism (Hamburger

2018).

    Most significantly, however—and most exasperating for the IDW's chief personae—

were the parallels drawn between the IDW's intense attacks against progressive identity

politics and the surge in right-wing anti-feminist, racist, and otherwise bigoted vitriol that

has metastasized online (Farrell 2018; Minkowitz 2019). Indeed, *The Guardian* editorial

board dismissed the IDW as the "thinking wing" of the alt-right (The Guardian 2018),

and an influential study about radicalization on YouTube found that, over time, users

consuming IDW content may go on to consume more extreme alt-right content (Ribeiro

et al. 2020). On a now defunct, unofficial website for the IDW, created by an unknown

author, these links to the radical right were drawn directly. Alt-right adjacent figures like

Carl Benjamin (who goes by "Sargon of Akkad" online), Steven Crowder, and Tim Pool

were honored with "membership" to the group[7], much to the chagrin of some segments

of the IDW sphere who worried about the co-opting of the group's namespace, and its

public legitimacy as a heterodox movement, by opportunistic extremists.[8]

The IDW is self-conscious about being labeled alt-right and is ostensibly concerned

about both left-wing and right-wing ideological isolation that makes cross-partisan

discussions impossible. They therefore point to, for example, Sam Harris' deep disdain

for Donald Trump, or Bret Weinstein's support for Occupy Wall Street, as evidence for

the presence of liberal, even progressive, ideas amongst its cadre (Miessler 2019;

Shermer, Saide, and McCaffree 2019). Yet, this belies the fact that, in practice, the IDW

is almost exclusively focused on going after the activist left. To this point, Jacob

Falkovich (2018) argues that the social, cultural, and political conflicts the IDW finds

itself in with the left stem directly from the fact that the IDW emerged from within the

"traditional bastions of progressive thought," particularly academia (most members of the

IDW have postgraduate degrees). And while the IDW "are often educated and live in

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[7] https://web.archive.org/web/20191101191955/http://intellectualdark.website/
[8] https://web.archive.org/web/20210610144705/https://www.reddit.com/r/IntellectualDarkWeb/comments/ak4ksz/dont_send_anyone_to_intellectualdarkwebsite/

coastal cities," they have "no love for progressives or their ideology"—a "lack of love"

that seems to be "the main thing uniting liberal atheists like Sam Harris with conservative

monotheists like Ben Shapiro" (Falkovich 2018). For this reason, parallels have been

drawn to the rise of neoconservatism amongst disillusioned left-wing radicals in the

1970s (Goldberg 2018). While the analogy is imperfect, this point finds some

corroboration in Weiss's (2018) initial profile of the group, where she stresses how for

most members of the IDW vanguard, there was some key triggering event—akin to red-

pilling amongst the alt-right—when they smashed headfirst into the common sense of

their own political "tribe," compelling them to finally take a stand. For almost all, it was

the ascendancy of assertive identity politics within the political left. For far less, it was

the ascendancy of Trumpism within the political right. In any case, the shifting terrain of

cultural politics in the 2010s was central in catalyzing the IDW into existence.

Recent activities within and around the IDW, however, have hindered efforts at brand

rehabilitation. Eric Weinstein's podcast is frequently criticized for promoting

conspiracies on everything from academic peer review to the alleged censorship of Eric's

own revolutionary "theory of everything"—geometric unity—by a nefarious "distributed

idea suppression complex" (Kavanagh and Browne 2020a, 2021b). Bret Weinstein's and

Heather Heying's podcast, *The Dark Horse*, has descended into spreading misinformation

about COVID-19 (Kavanagh and Browne 2021a) and excoriating trans struggles for

equity and social acceptance (Harper and Graham 2021a, 2021b). Sam Harris—one of the

most popular members of the IDW—explicitly renounced his association with the group

after the 2020 U.S. presidential election due to some IDW members boosting Donald Trump's lies about election fraud (Harris 2020). For his part, Dave Rubin has established a financial partnership with Learn Liberty—a digital media initiative launched by the Koch-funded Institute for Humane Studies—for his YouTube series, *The Rubin Report* (Lewis 2018:18), and has partnered with Glenn Beck's far-right media group, *Blaze Media* (Garcia 2019). At all levels of government, too, the Republican Party is retooling IDW discourse on topics like critical race theory, "woke ideology," and intersectionality into a far-right agenda aimed at censoring the teaching and acknowledgment of racial, gendered, and other forms of historical oppression in public education and public institutions (Adams 2021; Flaherty 2021; Iati 2021; Richman and Donaldson 2021; Stanley 2021).

Recently, the IDW has begun a process of formalized institution building. A new "civil liberties" organization calling itself FAIR—the Foundation Against Intolerance & Racism—features prominent IDW and IDW-adjacent figures on its advisory board, such as Bari Weiss, Steven Pinker, Michael Shermer, Douglas Murray, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and Peter Boghossian. FAIR (2021) proclaims to be a nonpartisan group aimed at advocating for the "civil rights and liberties of all Americans" against an encroaching social justice orthodoxy that represses free speech and holds individuals "to a different set of rules for language or conduct based on their skin color, ancestry, or other immutable characteristics." In a much-ridiculed endeavor, influential actors in the IDW-sphere even announced the founding of a new unaccredited university, the University of Austin

(UATX). Believing that actual universities have been seized by "illiberalism and censoriousness," specifically of the "leftist" and "social justice" sort, UATX feels compelled to intervene, offering a "Forbidden Courses" module that is supposed to kick off in June 2022 (Hartocollis 2021). It is not clear whether the university will survive, as it was met with brutal and severe mockery upon its announcement in November of 2021, which seemingly compelled heavyweight Steven Pinker to disaffiliate. Nevertheless, these examples are suggestive that the IDW and its sympathizers have a long-term vision to challenge leftists and progressives, which includes establishing institutions.

One of the most concerning developments within the IDW space is the well-documented reactionary turn some of its most influential affiliates have taken. First, however, I feel compelled to deal with the term "reactionary," which some may see as a slur rather than a legitimate sociological category. In my usage, I build on the work of Corey Robin in *The Reactionary Mind*. For Robin (2017), "reactionary" and "conservative" are inextricably bound concepts. Conservatism, as Robin (2017) defines it, is "a meditation on—and the theoretical rendition of—the felt experience of having power, seeing it threatened, and trying to win it back" (p. 4). Reaction, for its part, is not a reflex, but begins from a position of principle: "that some are fit, and thus ought, to rule others," and then calibrates that principle "in light of a democratic challenge from below" (Robin 2017:18). It is for this reason that those who oppose, in total, contemporary social justice struggles are labeled as "reactionaries" by progressive scholars (Lewis 2018:8). It is important to note that criticism of social justice activism, including its tactical

deficiencies, distracting excesses, and overwrought moralism, should not be confused with *opposing*, *on principle*, those struggles. Legitimate criticism of social justice activism is necessary and warranted, and I have engaged in some of it myself in preceding sections (and will again at the end of this dissertation).

What *is* reactionary is a politics that, as Robin (Robin 2017) describes, aspires for the liberty of particular groups and opposes extensions of freedom for those outside those groups who are empirically dominated by the existing structure of social relations. For those with the privileges of social esteem and material power, such extensions of freedom are perceived as a loss of one's own individual freedom. It is, indeed, true that extensions of freedom *do* accumulate losses for the privileged: when workers form unions, bosses are not as free to fire or pay workers as they please; when feminists win social and policy victories, men have less freedom to sexually harass or assault women with impunity; and when anti-racist legislation is enacted and enforced, neither firms nor states have the freedom to discriminate on the basis of racial differences, and so on. Politics really does have a "zero-sum nature" where the gains of one "necessarily entail the losses of another" (Robin 2017:56). Yet, the question then becomes: are such rebalances of power *just*? A critical sociologist would answer in affirmative, combining empirical insights on the production and reproduction of inequality in society with a normative demand to ameliorate that inequality. The reactionary would answer negatively, seeing such imbalances as teleologically self-justifying: they exist as the way they do because they *ought* to exist the way they do.

With this in mind, it is troubling to see that the IDW is saturated with reactionary

impulses. James Lindsay is a helpful case in point. Lindsay began his IDW journey as an

"anti-critical theory" public figure, raising the alarm about "wokeness, "critical social

justice," queer theory, critical race theory, and cultural Marxism. As mentioned above,

Lindsay, along with his compatriots Helen Pluckrose and Peter Boghossian, obtained

notoriety when the trio published several absurd peer reviewed articles in "grievance

studies" journals, which many took as a legitimate discrediting of the intellectual merits

of disciplines like gender studies (Beauchamp 2018). Afterwards, Lindsay penned a book

on the subject matter, co-authored with Helen Pluckrose, called *Cynical Theories*, where

he and Pluckrose craft a genealogy of critical theory as it supposedly weaved its way

through the Frankfurt School, French poststructuralism, and finally to its "reified

postmodern" form, which dogmatically presumes that "patriarchy, white supremacy,

imperialism, cisnormativity, heteronormativity, ableism, and fatphobia are literally

structuring society and infecting everything" (Pluckrose and Lindsay 2020:182). Along

with Pluckrose, Lindsay attempts, in the final pages of *Cynical Theories*, to chart a

defense of Enlightenment and liberal civilization, drawing on Steven Pinker's tome,

Enlightenment Now (Pluckrose and Lindsay 2020:243). Lindsay thus appears, in his

defense of liberal civilization against an irrational leftist onslaught, to fit firmly within the

IDW.

Over the years, Lindsay has radicalized very publicly into the far-right. He has

dedicated hours to podcasting about the "grooming" of children through sexual education

in public schools, which plays directly into the contemporary anti-trans and anti-queer cultural panic sweeping the GOP and the (re)mainstreaming of ideas about the dangers of LGBTQ+ people that echo of Evangelical Christian opposition to gay marriage (New Discourses 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). Lindsay has produced uncharitable content about critical race theory in videos for PragerU, testified before legislative bodies about the dangers of critical theory in public education (Hoadley-Brill 2021), appeared on a Dr. Phil roundtable to discuss critical race theory (Joyce 2022), and has collaborated with Christian nationalist Michael O'Fallon (Kavanagh, Browne, and Rabinowitz 2021, 2022*).* James' rhetoric and personae have been critical to legitimizing the surge of anti-trans, *anti*-anti-racist, anti-woman, and anti-free speech bills sweeping the country, all of which aspire to purge any discussion of historical racism, the realities of trans and queer people, and the very freedom and security of the most vulnerable, and often despised, groups in this country. Lindsay's arc, from anti-woke (classical) liberal critic to far-right activist, is a cautionary tale about the dangerous directions "anti-SJW" contrarianism can lead. And it provides good reason to be skeptical of the IDW's stated goals and self-representations as an essentially liberal, rationalist, and pro-Enlightenment band of free-thinking renegades.

With this context in mind, this dissertation is primarily interested in evaluating the epistemic functions of the IDW in the social setting of communicative capitalism. I conjecture that the key cultural and social significance of the IDW resides in the way it appears to construct symbolic order amidst the decline in symbolic efficiency driving

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from communicative capitalism's epistemic deficiencies. Ultimately, the IDW appears as an alternative "sense-making" apparatus that seeks to restore rational order to an unordered and epistemologically fragmented world (Parks 2020). The symbolic authority the IDW constructs stems from a "positioning strategy" where IDW members cast themselves in opposition to mainstream, ideologically captured, and therefore untrustworthy social institutions (Johansen 2021:29). Fundamentally, the IDW is motivated by a civilization-preserving struggle against "a radical leftist ideology" that must be overcome as part of a "quest for the greater good" that will, if the IDW succeeds, "bring more liberty and intellectual freedom to public and political discourse" (Kelsey 2020:180-181).

Importantly, the symbolic order the IDW constructs is not predicated on total agreement between any combination of IDW members on any specific policy or opinion. There is real disagreement. Rather, the symbolic order they construct is abstract and generic, as Wesołowski (2020) explains:

> Rather than a consistent ideology, the IDW shares an audience, but many thinkers seen as its members allude to similar themes, including the opposition between the 'Enlightenment ideals' of science, objectivity, free speech, and rational discussion and the 'radical leftist' notions permeated by relativism, Marxism, and postmodernism (P. 93).

Hence, it is not the harmonizing of specific opinions on which the IDW's symbolic order is predicated. Rather, it constructs a symbolic order based on the salvation of modernity itself from "epistemic relativism, identity politics, and cultural pluralism" (LeDrew 2016:2). Rather than enforcing a symbolic order bound to a tightly regulated policy platform, it pursues its civilizational-political goals *culturally* by creating a supply of

contrarian "truths" that will circulate in a "marketplace of ideas" and instigate "broad transformation in beliefs" (LeDrew 2016:8). Disagreement and debate, then, are not avoided in the pursuit of symbolic order; rather, they are embraced. What is essential, though, is that such discussions are operative within a concept of civilizational renewal. A neo-Enlightenment rationalism is the master signifier.

In this dissertation, I turn my attention to an online community of the IDW to understand what sorts of topics they discuss, how these discussions correspond with current events and political conflicts, and how this can help us understand the IDW's significance within communicative capitalism. Here, I am primarily concerned about the IDW's symbolic use-value for its audience as users of the community discuss and debate contentious social issues. Rather than focusing solely on the supply of IDW media by its leading personae, I turn my attention to the *user-side* to examine how the IDW-identity works as a rubric for engaging in discussion on the leading cultural, social, and political issues of the day. This has the strength of revealing users' self-understandings about the IDW and their own perspectives on various topics as opposed to assuming a strict homology between what is produced by IDW figures its reception by their audiences. In the next chapter, I introduce my study design, which makes use of computational text analysis, deep neural language modeling, and qualitative content analysis to study an online IDW community on the platform Reddit, r/IntellectualDarkWeb.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter provides a detailed summary of the methodology deployed in this dissertation, an overview of the dataset used, and a summary of the Reddit platform and the r/IntellectualDarkWeb subreddit. Specifically, this research is concerned with the following three research questions:

RQ1: What social, cultural, and political topics are most popular in r/IntellectualDarkWeb discussions?

RQ2: How do the topics discussed in r/IntellectualDarkWeb relate to current events, conflicts, and discussions happening in society?

RQ3: Given the answers to questions 1 and 2, how can we understand the social and epistemological significance of the IDW in the present historical context of communicative capitalism?

To answer RQ1, I deploy computational text analysis, specifically topic modeling, using a novel algorithm that utilizes deep neural language models and state of the art clustering techniques. RQ2 is answered through qualitative analysis of the comments clustered within each topic. Finally, RQ3 is primarily theoretical, though deeply steeped in the empirical results derived from answering RQ1 and RQ3.

Methodologically, my study design relates to the "computational grounded theory" approach proposed by Nelson (2020). In this model, computational exploratory text analysis through natural language algorithms, including topic models, empower researchers to see their corpora in new "and perhaps surprising ways," even leading to the

discovery of empirical and theoretical categories "not immediately apparent to human readers" (Nelson 2020:19). In the computational grounded theory model, the researcher remains an active analytical agent, validating their models through qualitative and quantitative inspection. Rather than manually crafting codes and categories, however, the researcher's natural language processing (NLP) algorithms automatically discover lexical patterns that provide the structure for subsequent qualitative interpretation. Nevertheless, these models are not ready to go "out of the box" but require optimization through parameter tuning, as I describe in the next section.

My method relies heavily on the findings from my topic model to guide my qualitative analysis. The only subsequent qualitative coding I perform is grouping the topics from my model into common topical themes, as I describe in Chapter 4. Due to the outputs from my topic model, I can retrieve the comments that are most similar to each topic by comparing the cosine similarities of comment vectors to topic vectors. The technical details of this procedure are provided in the next section. By focusing my qualitative insights on those comments with the highest similarity to the topic vector, I can center my analysis on the comments most computationally representative of each topic.

Starbird et al.'s (2019) description of "systematic content analysis" captures the methodological essence of the qualitative component of this dissertation, as I "repeatedly shift across perspectives," from high-level views of topics and descriptive statistics, to "close-up engagement with the content," such as intimate readings of topic keywords and

topic comments (p. 6). Within this methodological movement, I also refer to external sources, including podcast episodes, newspaper articles, YouTube videos, and other miscellaneous media that relate my observations to the social context structuring IDW discourses.

Finally, the answer to RQ3 is primarily a theoretical exercise that relates my empirical findings to the social setting of communicative capitalism. At this juncture, computational grounded theory engages with the theoretical architecture structuring this dissertation—notably, Jodi Dean's dual concepts of the decline of symbolic efficiency and communicative capitalism. Put differently, I approach this *inductive* analysis *deductively*, assenting that Dean's theoretical insights about epistemology and political struggle under present social conditions are correct and provide a starting point for exploratory data analysis. My inductive approach, then, is not aimed at evaluating the falsifiability of Dean's concepts but using them as the basis for making sense of social formations like the IDW who concern themselves so much with questions of epistemology and social crisis under conditions of profound epistemic and political despair. This allows for novel and counterintuitive insights that are not prescribed by the theoretical frame itself while nevertheless having a logical point of departure.[9]

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[9] It is therefore similar to the extended case method, insofar as the theory provides a structural and deductive point of departure that comes to bare on the specific case (Burawoy 1998). However, it is not identical with the extended case method, for this study design does not directly involve dialogic engagements with the users of the subreddit.

3.1 Data

The data are sourced from the Reddit community, or "subreddit,"
r/IntellectualDarkWeb. These data were obtained using the Pushshift Reddit Application

Programming Interface (API), a living dataset containing nearly every single Reddit

submission and Reddit comment going as far back as 2005 (Baumgartner et al. 2020).

Pushshift was chosen over the official Reddit API due to the latter's rate-limits, which

make building a complete historical archive of subreddit records prohibitive. By contrast,

Pushshift contains a near-complete historical record of subreddit activity, even for

controversial subreddits that have been banned, such as r/The_Donald (an alt-right

Donald Trump fan community) and r/incels (a subreddit for the misogynistic and violent

"involuntary celibate" community). For this study, the observation period is January 22,

2018 (the date the subreddit was founded) through December 31, 2021. I collected all

comments and posts available through the Pushshift API to recreate as complete a record

of the r/IntellectualDarkWeb subreddit as possible. In total, the sample consists of

433,478 comments and 15,029 posts.

There are some limitations to the Pushshift API. While the API is designed to ingest

Reddit content perpetually in as close to real-time as possible, the API has been shown to

have missing data (Gaffney and Matias 2018). There are several reasons why missing

data might appear in the API. First, Pushshift has experienced multiple server outages,

mostly due to the load placed on the API by consumers of the open-source database, that

have interrupted the data ingestion pipeline. While the API does work to backfill data it

missed during these outages, it is not guaranteed to collect all missing values. Second, researchers who source data may not get complete results from Pushshift when the API is experiencing high traffic, as this puts a significant load on the Elastic Search shards across which the data is distributed, leading to some shards going offline. In other words, while the data may exist in the Pushshift dataset, when shards go offline due to a traffic overload, the results delivered to users may be incomplete because Pushshift could not source a complete record of data from every shard. Third, users can delete their comments and posts before Pushshift has ingested them into its dataset, leading to missing values. Reddit users can also request that their data be removed from the public facing Pushshift API itself, again creating the possibility for missing values. Finally, moderators of subreddits can delete comments and posts made by users for any number of reasons, once more resulting in missing data. Additionally, moderators can turn subreddits into private communities, meaning Pushshift cannot scrape the data. However, this is extremely uncommon, as nearly every subreddit is public (and even for subreddits that have gone private, much of their previously public data is accessible in Pushshift).

Nevertheless, despite these caveats, Pushshift remains an essential tool for social science researchers and has been widely used by scholars from a range of disciplines to study online socialization, disinformation, radical political communities, and other topics (Baumgartner et al. 2020a, 2020b). Additionally, as hinted at above, Pushshift has three chief advantages over the standard Reddit API: first, Pushshift has near-complete historical records of every public subreddit on the platform; second, Pushshift has

archives of historical data no longer available on Reddit (e.g., comments and posts from banned alt-right, racist, and misogynistic subreddits); and third, Pushshift has access to comments and posts that have been deleted by users or moderators and appear as "[deleted]" or "[removed]" on the public site but whose original contents are available to researchers who access the Pushshift API, thereby providing a more accurate historical record.

While this research only focuses on a single platform—Reddit—I do believe my findings will have broader implications relevant to other social media platforms and digital contexts. Existing scholarship has shown that the boundaries between platforms are blurry, and the networked nature of the platforms means information origination on one platform may travel to many others, and even to the mainstream press (Benkler et al. 2018; Krafft and Donovan 2020; Marwick and Lewis 2017). Additionally, while Reddit has specific platform affordances (discussed below), its user-led and participatory elements are not unique but consistent with the broader turn towards "prosumption" (Dean 2010b; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010). While we should be aware of the idiosyncrasies of Reddit's culture (cf. de Zeeuw and Tuters 2020), the conclusions gleaned from this dissertation's use of Reddit data can inform sociological knowledge of digital cultures and platformed sociality more generally.

3.1.1 Ethics

These data are collected from a public forum hosted on a free public social media platform accessible to anyone with or without a Reddit account through a conventional

web browser. These data are therefore unequivocally within the public domain.

Moreover, Pushshift is a free, open-source API usable by anyone familiar with REST

APIs. Additionally, users on Reddit are not publicly known. Instead, they create

screennames that provide anonymity or pseudoanonymity, and, as de Zeeuw and Tuters

(2020) show, such anonymity is a core historical principle of Reddit's techno-culture.

Nevertheless, as Wilson et al. (2018) note, users may not be fully aware that their content

is "public and persistent" (p. 7). Some of the topics in the model contain impassioned

comments on a variety of contentious issues. Additionally, Pushshift contains comments

and posts that have been deleted by users or moderators, but which were collected by the

API prior to the deletions. Given these considerations, to respect the privacy of the users

of the r/IntellectualDarkWeb subreddit, I do not divulge the usernames of any of the users

in my analysis. If it is necessary to refer to a user by name, I use pseudonyms (except

when referring to bots, which are automated non-human accounts). Any publicly released

datasets following from this research will similarly not include usernames. As is common

practice in research involving other social media data, such as tweets, I will only provide

the ids associated with comments and posts, which will require researchers interested in

replicating any of my results to "rehydrate" the full comment and post data by making

API calls themselves (Twitter 2022).

3.1.2 Reddit as a Digital Field Site

Reddit was founded in 2005 as a "social news" aggregation platform—i.e., a platform

based around user-submitted posts, content, and stories—whose ethos is enshrined in its

slogan, "the front page of the internet." At the time of this writing, Amazon's Alexa web rankings lists Reddit as the 22nd most trafficked website on the internet, sitting just behind Netflix (ranked 21st) and seven spots ahead of Twitter (Alexa 2022). Fueling Reddit are user-created communities called "subreddits" that specialize in a wide array of interest areas. Each subreddit is managed by moderators and have their own rules (or lack thereof) for engagement.

Reddit has a few key affordances. First, users have the power to **post** original content to subreddits. Such posts are called "submissions," and they can take a variety of forms, including text posts, images, videos, and links to a variety of external sources like websites or other social media platforms. Users also have the power to **comment** on submissions. When a user comments on a submission, it creates a thread that invites other users to respond in a hierarchical branching manner. At the beginning of a comment thread is the **top-level** comment (i.e., the comment directly responding to the submission) that sits atop **nested** comment trees of varying depths. Finally, users have the power to **vote** on submissions and comments as part of Reddit's karma system. When users like a post or comment, they "upvote" it, i.e., give it a point. When users do not like a post or comment, they "downvote" it, i.e., subtract a point. The karma, or score, of a post or comment is the net balance of upvotes and downvotes. Importantly, Reddit does not put a limit on downvotes or upvotes. This means that severely disliked posts or comments have *negative* karma scores while very popular posts or comments have high extremely high karma scores. Users can also "gift" awards to submissions and comments by spending

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Reddit coins that are purchasable with real money. When a submission or comment receives an award, an emblem of the gifted award will appear atop the post or comment along with an integer value indicating the number of Reddit users that gave the submission or comment that same award.

Reddit's landing page contains the most popular and best performing content from all subreddits and all topic areas across the platform using a sorting algorithm. When users make Reddit accounts and begin subscribing to subreddits of interest, their landing page defaults to a curated feed streaming content from their subscribed communities. Users can also sort their content feeds, subreddit submissions, and subreddit comments using the following filters: "Best" (i.e., content with the highest upvote to downvote ratio); "Top" (content with the most upvotes); "Hot" (i.e., content with the most upvotes over timespans chosen by Reddit's algorithm); "New" (i.e., the most recent content); and "Rising" (i.e., new content that is trending upwards). Comment threads can further be sorted with the "Controversial" filter, which highlights comments with lots of vote activity but where upvotes and downvotes tend to neutralize one another, as well as an "Old" filter to obtain older comments and a "Q&A" filter where users can see threads where the original poster (OP) responds to a top-level comment. Reddit's algorithm, curated user feeds, and user-selected manual filters thus have powerful effects on what content users see and interact with on the platform.

As de Zeeuw and Tuters (2020) note, Reddit operates as a sort of in-between space between the "deep vernacular web" of sites like 4chan and mainstream platforms like

Twitter and Facebook. Reddit users have usernames and minimalist profiles, but they have the option of remaining anonymous or pseudononymous by using screennames, not divulging personally identifiable information, and even operating multiple accounts for different purposes (unlike most platforms, Reddit does not require an email address to sign up). Additionally, Reddit's subreddit naming convention mirrors the "channel" format of earlier internet technologies: all subreddits follow the format *r/<subreddit-name>*. For example, the popular news subreddit, r/news, is accessible as a subdomain at *reddit.com/r/news*. Such a convention is similar to Usenet hierarchies from the early years of the social internet that groups discussion boards by topic area (e.g. such as the *alt.** Usenet hierachies *alt.atheism*, *alt.sex*, *alt.tv.simpsons*).

Reddit has also served as a key site for the rise of meme culture by providing a user-friendly layer atop the more obscure regions of the deep vernacular web to which users could post memes originating on sites like 4chan. The platform also has a long history of supporting free speech, uncensored content, and community autonomy. While this has historically allowed for a multitude of voices to be heard on the platform and a wide variety of content, ranging from breaking news stories to political debate subreddits to pornography, it has also embroiled the platform in controversy for its hands-off approach. For example, a subreddit called r/jailbait allowed users to post provocative but non-nude images of underage girls until it was removed in 2011 following public outcry after Anderson Cooper covered the subreddit for CNN (Morris 2011). Another subreddit, r/WatchPeopleDie, allowed users to post gory videos and images of people being killed,

from terrorist beheadings to gory accidents, until it was taken down by Reddit after the

2019 Christchurch white supremacist terrorist attack, video of which was livestreamed by

the terrorist and re-posted to the subreddit (Stephen 2019).

In more recent years, Reddit has come to be associated as a mobilizing site for the alt-

right and a target of disinformation and influence operations by foreign governments.

During the 2010s, bigoted and hateful subreddits proliferated, including: the infamous

and misogynistic r/incels "involuntary celibate" community; a fan community of Donald

Trump, r/The_Donald, that was littered with racist and sexist content; and mix of hate

and "politically incorrect" meme communities like r/altright, r/TheNewRight,

r/FatPeopleHate, r/Pizzagate, r/TheRedpill, r/MensRights, r/CringeAnarchy, and

r/FrenWorld, to name only a few (Gaudette et al. 2020; Kumar et al. 2018; Mamié,

Ribeiro, and West 2021; Massanari 2017). Additionally, it was revealed in 2018 that

Reddit had been the target of a multi-year Russian influence operation that aimed to

interfere with the 2016 American election and the ensuing social and political climate

(Lukito 2020).

The influx of hateful and deceitful actors into the platform during the 2010s

compelled Reddit to take further action on content regulation. In the past couple of years,

Reddit revised its rules to become stricter, leading to the banning of more than 2,000

subreddits in 2020 alone along with the quarantining (i.e., providing content warnings

before allowing users to access subreddits) of large volumes of communities (Newton

2020). This included the banning of the major alt-right subreddit, r/The_Donald, which

has since set up a new Reddit clone of itself at Patriots.win.

This tightening of rules and the purging of unwanted toxicity is part of Reddit's long-term vision to grow and fully enter the mainstream. In February 2021, for example, Reddit ran a five-second Super Bowl advertisement, targeting an audience of millions, that was regarded as one of the most successful of the evening (Hsu 2021). Around the same time, Reddit—still incorporated as a private company—began pursuing plans to take the company public (Isaac 2021). At the time of this writing, Reddit has not yet officially opened its IPO, but it is on track to do so soon. Reddit has also added more playful features for users to customize their profiles, including dressing up their own version of the Reddit avatar—a cartoon robot—with hairdos, clothing, and accessories. Users can now also earn "trophies" for completing different activities on the platform that will be displayed on their profile. Additionally, users can pin their favorite posts to their public profile, add a banner image, write an about description, choose a display name that is different from their username, and add links to their other social media accounts. Augmenting the social features of Reddit user profiles is a departure from the platform's historic bare-bones and minimalist approach that tied the platform to the cultural ethos of the deep vernacular web. Clearly, Reddit wants to distance itself from such an association and all its innuendos about anonymous trolls and alt-right bigots by transforming the platform into a fun, inclusive, and safe ecosystem of communities.

This raises interesting questions about Reddit's future trajectory as a social media platform. Part of the appeal of Reddit for those associated with the alt-right, as well as

those attracted to the ideals of the IDW, is the platform's historic tolerance of controversial speech coupled with the affordance of anonymity. Of all social media platforms with a large user-base, Reddit has long been viewed as the most "principled" due to its lax content policies, commitment to free speech, and respect for user privacy. In addition to administrator-led platform reforms that have resulted in the purging of hateful content from Reddit, user-led initiatives have also taken hold, such as the community r/AgainstHateSubreddits, which monitors subreddits for activity that, as the subreddit description reads, contributes to "the growing problem of radicalization on social media." Such user demands to control hate on the platform, along with Reddit's ambitions to expand deeper into the mainstream—which includes an IPO that will surely bring scrutiny over questions of liability for hateful content on subreddits—the platform appears to be entering an important period of transition that, in the long run, will redefine the types of users who flock to Reddit.

What these developments mean for the long-term vitality of subreddits like r/IntellectualDarkWeb that want to preserve a space for the discussion of controversial social issues on the platform, some of which could incite users to take up and defend positions that could be perceived as bigoted or hateful, is uncertain. With tightening content controls, those attracted to the IDW's neo-Enlightenment ethos might choose instead to exit Reddit for "alternative" platforms—i.e., "alt-tech"—that are perceived to provide genuine free speech protections for all users, regardless of how extreme, fringe, or hateful their ideas may be (Donovan, Lewis, and Friedberg 2019; Jasser et al. 2021;

Zuckerman and Rajendra-Nicolucci 2021).

3.1.3 The r/IntellectualDarkWeb Subreddit

   r/IntellectualDarkWeb first appeared on the Reddit platform on January 22, 2018. At

the time of this writing, the subreddit has 74,223 subscribers. However, as a public

subreddit, it is possible for users who are not subscribers to participate in the community.

Like nearly every community on the platform, the subreddit was user-generated, meaning

it was created, and is moderated, by fans of the IDW. The community's "About" section

describes itself this way:

> The term Intellectual Dark Web refers to the growing community of those interested in
> space for free dialogue held in good faith. It's a collection of people willing to open rational
> dialogue spanning a variety of issues from politics to philosophy. So the IDW does not
> name a unified group, much less a tribe in any normal sense. If we have anything in
> common is [sic] we have a willingness to have civil conversations (r/IntellectualDarkWeb
> n.d.).

A governance structure consisting of 9 subreddit rules sets the standards for user behavior

and engagement on the subreddit. These rules, summarized in Table 1, are enforced by a

team of moderators who have the power to delete content and ban users who violate the

rules from the community.

   The subreddit's rules are intended to elevate serious discussion, debate, and critical

interrogations of divisive cultural, social, and political issues. Reasoned argumentation,

good faith disagreements, and logic are the key values enshrined in the subreddit's

governance structure. Trolls, brigaders (i.e., users from outside subreddits who aim to

disrupt the community through spam), and bad-faith actors are warned to stay away.

Table 3.1: r/IntellectualDarkWeb Subreddit Rules

Rule	Meaning
No Personal Attacks	This can include insults, ad hominem arguments, or threats. Debates are highly encouraged here, not personal attacks. Civility is the ability to disagree productively with others. By civility, we do NOT mean agreement. As Christopher Hitchens used to say, "Tackle the ball, not the player."
Apply the Principle of Charity	Even if someone is bizarrely disagreeable, start from assumptions of good intentions and intelligence on the other person's part. Try to interpret their words and wishes well, just as you would want for yourself. If someone does not return the favor, then do not engage.
Do Not Willfully Mischaracterize	Criticism of ideas that circulate the community is fine, but mischaracterizing the ideas (or people) you want to criticize is unfair, makes serious discussion impossible, and wastes time in this sub.
No Trolling/Brigading/Bad-Faith Content	You must discuss topics seriously and with some actual interest in conversation. Using the sub to manipulate conversation or with an ulterior, malicious motive is not allowed.
No Merchandising	Sharing your own content is fine, but do not actively try to sell things here. Exceptions can be made when relevant and with moderator approval
Reposts Should Be Older Than One Month	In order to keep new content coming in, and minimize content duplication, any repost that is submitted within one month of the last posting can be removed.
Contribution Standards	Users must make a good faith attempt to create or further civil discussion. If a user's contribution is not adding substance, it is subject to removal. Any content that is deemed low quality by the moderators will be removed.
Submission Statements	Submission statements are required, on all non-text posts. They should be a top-level comment from OP that starts with the text "Submission statement.", should be at least 70 characters long (excluding "Submission statement") and should explain why the post is relevant to r/IntellectualDarkWeb. Posts that do not have a submission statement within 20 minutes of creation will be removed until a statement is provided.
Follow the Rules of Reddit	We do not own this site and are bound by the rules that apply to all subs. We can and will enforce them if needed.

Source: https://reddit.com/r/IntellectualDarkWeb subreddit rules sidebar.

These rules are consistent with the broader rhetoric of rationality and Enlightenment promulgated by IDW's chief personae.

On the subreddit is a "Meet the IDW" page designed to house brief introductions to public thinkers associated with the IDW public thinkers associated with the IDW. Currently, the page only features introductions for Eric Weinstein, Sam Harris, and Jordan Peterson. However, it does contain a running list of additional public intellectuals that the community associates with the IDW, including academics critical of contemporary social justice movements (Jonathan Haidt, Steven Pinker, and Glenn Loury), the individuals identified in the original *New York Times* profile, and the independent left-leaning podcaster David Pakman. Notably absent from the list is Dave Rubin, host of the long-form interview series *The Rubin Report*. Rubin was very enthusiastic about being associated with the IDW, producing multiple videos on his YouTube channel interviewing members of the group, and extolling the IDW's virtues. However, over time, Rubin fell out of favor with the IDW crowd due to his hyper-partisan right-wing turn.

Specifically, Rubin is widely criticized for his non-confrontational interview style that leaves far-right and bigoted talking points unchallenged on his show (Brooks 2020; Lewis 2018), thereby providing a bullhorn for the radical right to broadcast its ideology to an audience of millions. After the 2020 election, Rubin took seriously Trump's farcical claims about election fraud. Outside of far-right circles, Rubin has largely lost his credibility as a "heterodox intellectual," and this appears to hold true for the subreddit—

or at least its moderators, who manage the list of individuals on the "Meet the IDW" subsection.

Like many communities on Reddit, r/IntellectualDarkWeb has struggled with content moderation, rule enforcement, and group identity policing. In early 2022, one of the lead moderators of the subreddit, who I'll refer to with the pseudonym LeadMod, posted a submission titled "Executing Order 66"—a reference to the clandestine operation to assassinate the Jedi Order from the *Star Wars* films—outlining a new direction in content moderation for the community. The message includes an extended preamble where LeadMod reflects on the community's history, writing that two "phenomena of growth" have affected the subreddit: "1. Growth in population of the community" and "2. Growth in intensity of intra-communal conflicts." Observing these phenomena, LeadMod writes that

> Number 1 is simple. As the IDW movement/brand continues to spread among the many content creators that are associated with it, their followers come here. If this subreddit were a business, it would be a model of steady growth. As Reddit mods (sometimes even the site admins) ban people from other communities, refugees come here. Using the same metaphor, other communities getting banned is like us buying their business (only we acquire whether we like it or not).

As LeadMod explains, the subreddit has experienced significant population growth driven by widespread adoption of the IDW identity by political content creators, as well as due to the platform politics of Reddit itself. The latter primarily concern efforts by Reddit administrators and subreddit moderators to ban communities and users perceived as toxic or bigoted. This has led to affected users migrating to r/IntelletualDarkWeb as one of the last free speech "refuges" on Reddit.

The second dynamic is more contentious, as LeadMod writes:

> Obviously people who come here as refugees are going to have bitter feelings about their past treatment…Moreover, when the subreddit was formed, the IDW was in a honeymoon phase… people thought something might be done to curtail wokeness, political correctness, cancel culture, and corrupt partisanship. After some speaking tours, a…doomer mentality then began to spread…To compound all this, the Coronavirus also hit…If all that wasn't enough, then there was the 2020 Election, which only stoked flames even further. You had Trump up for re-election, who said he would drain the swamp but clearly didn't even try. Then you'd hope the Democrats would have done some soul-searching after 2016, but they nominated Biden-Harris instead.

From the point of view of LeadMod, recent developments in the IDW sphere have caused disturbances to the subreddit and the IDW itself. As they explained in the quote excerpted above, when the subreddit first came online, the IDW was emerging as a social force meant to offer a rationalist counter to the excesses of "wokeness" and leftist "political correctness." However, after a brief "honeymoon" period, according to LeadMod, many within the IDW came to be subsumed by a "doomer" mentality that, seemingly, sapped them of the optimism they once projected towards their followers. Making matters worse for the IDW, LeadMod argues, these developments intersected with the tumultuous political climate, which saw Trump fighting for re-election and the Democrats nominating two disappointing candidates for President and Vice President, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, instead of engaging in "soul-searching" after Democratic defeat in 2016.

Together, LeadMod observes, these forces have unsettled the tone and quality of interactions on the subreddit. "If my summary of events is meant to communicate one thing," it's that "I understand why several of you feel the way you do and why it leads to a record number of rule violations and reports," LeadMod writes. Nevertheless, LeadMod notes that a major contributor to the negativity

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are those long-time users that aggravate without actually breaking the rules…strategically provoke people into breaking the rules, report them on sight, and leave us to clean up the mess…Even if they aren't consciously doing this, some folks here just plain suck at "being IDW." They are implicitly rude, nitpick stupid details, only seem to want to reply to argue, and don't have any cool ideas of their own.

Rather than fostering principled debate and reasoned disagreements, LeadMod expresses frustration about the sinking quality of engagements on the subreddit. Failing to live up to their own principles, LeadMod laments that users routinely "suck" at "being IDW." To counter this negative drift and to seemingly raise the quality of contributions, the moderator informs users that new ad hoc bans will be instituted to purge negative actors.

The response from users to this message was mixed. One user proclaims that they "don't like it" and that the "last thing the internet needs right now is another echo chamber, and these measures sound like they might contribute to that." In a similar vein, another concerned user writes that "I've become convinced that a bigger threat (or at least equal) is the ease at which people can isolate themselves into echo chambers," and that the moderator's announcement "could easily cut the heart out [of the] IDW—and ultimately turn it into the very thing it fights against." Another user with a more ambiguous response writes that they'll "always be conflicted between the necessity of freedom of speech and necessary constraints to speech to be actually free and productive," while still another writes that "I liked reading this update as it reinforced my thoughts on how I felt about this group and it is protecting the values that I enjoy about this sub."

Despite the unfolding drama about the subreddit's content moderation, r/IntellectualDarkWeb continues to be active, receiving posts and comments daily.

Nevertheless, I believe that the long-term future of r/IntellectualDarkWeb is somewhat precarious. LeadMod feeling compelled to take severe action on rule enforcement within the subreddit to raise the quality of discussion already signals difficulty in putting into practice the IDW principles of vigorous but civilized debate in a freely accessible online community that allows anyone in. Moreover, with the culture of Reddit becoming increasingly "normie" and further removed from its roots in the deep vernacular web, it is not obvious to me that users attracted to the IDW will continue to believe that it makes sense for a subreddit like r/IntellectualDarkWeb to exist on Reddit in the long-term. I suspect that as conflicts over content moderation—which are re-described as "big tech censorship" by the political right (Jasser et al. 2021)—intensify, along with Reddit's push into the mainstream, the perception of Reddit as a free speech haven will weaken. Along with this "disenchantment" of Reddit, it is likely those looking for uncensored debate and discussion communities will look for them in the enlarging alt-tech space.

I suspect that the research contained herein is historically bounded in important ways, capturing snapshots of a digital community struggling for a space of uncensored (if respectful) dialogue against the momentum of a platform in transition—one that wants to embrace the mainstream and rid itself of the popular prejudice that its historical absolutist stance on free speech was a boon for hate groups. As Rogers (2013) writes, one of the chief methodological issues facing internet researches is that we inherently deal with "unstable objects of study" (p. 24). Web archives, for example, are "faced with the dilemma of capturing websites on the one hand, and maintaining their liveliness on the

other" (Rogers 2013:24). Hence, while r/IntelelctualDarkWeb is "lively" and active now as a space for putting the IDW into practice, the structural and cultural dynamics on Reddit may, eventually, lead to users of the IDW community no longer feeling like they belong on the platform.

3.2 Topic Modeling

Topic modeling is a text analysis procedure that aims to summarize the contents of a large body of texts (a "corpus") computationally. It does so by grouping similar documents together according to their shared thematic contents—i.e., "topics." As a matter of practice, topics are indicated by the top N (usually 10) words most representative of each cluster and the documents contained therein. Sociologists across a variety of subfields have found topic modeling useful for identifying key themes in diverse corpora, from political press releases (Wetts 2020), to academic research papers (Bohr and Dunlap 2018), to transcripts of Federal Reserve meetings (Fligstein, Stuart Brundage, and Schultz 2017), to newspaper articles (DiMaggio, Nag, and Blei 2013), to the texts of militant and radical groups (Karell and Freedman 2019), and beyond (Light and Odden 2017; Scarborough and Helmuth 2021). The sociological utility of topic modeling stems from a few important advantages it has over traditional qualitative text analysis, principally: scalability to massive, digital-age text corpora (i.e. "Big Data"); reproducibility of results through code in place of individualized "virtuoso" interpretations of texts (DiMaggio et al. 2013:577); allowing for textual categorization to flow from the data itself instead of categories being presupposed by researchers'

"assumed knowledge" about a corpus (Nelson 2020:7); and increased efficiency of analysis that allows for the consideration of much larger sample sizes.

The most popular topic model used by sociologists is that based on the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) algorithm developed by Blei, Ng, and Jordan (2003) and expanded on by others (Roberts, Stewart, and Tingley 2019). Formally, LDA is a probabilistic model that assumes that topics are distributions over a set of words. LDA also assumes that documents are a probabilistic mixture of topics. Importantly, the actual topical structure of the documents is not observed—only the documents *themselves* are observed. LDA thus uses a generative probabilistic process, based on the observations of the documents and the terms within the documents, to infer the hidden topical structure (Blei 2012). As DiMaggio et al. (2013) explain, LDA takes a "relational approach to meaning, in the sense that co-occurrences are important to the assignment of words to topics" (p. 578). In other words, LDA tries to assign high probabilities to words that co-occur frequently and uniquely across the documents and are therefore likely to constitute a discrete topic. This "bag of words" approach to term co-occurrence means that LDA does not consider either the order of words in a document or their contextual usage (e.g., the word "arm" means two different things in the contexts of "I broke my *arm*" and "The nation must *arm* itself"). The assumption LDA makes is that, with enough observations of term co-occurrences, such ordering and context can be ignored (Wetts 2020).

While LDA works well on long documents containing lots of words, for short texts— like social media posts—LDA performs poorly. The key problem for short texts is an

insufficient number of observations of word co-occurrences, as these texts tend to contain only a few words (and often uninformative words like *the*, *it*, *and*, *but*, etc. that, once removed, leave only a sparse document behind). For short texts, the sparsity of co-occurrences means that LDA often fails to generate meaningful topics (Cheng et al. 2014; Yan et al. 2013). More recently, there is a growing field of practice that leverages deep learning, document embeddings, and clustering techniques to discover groups of highly similar documents—methods that work particularly well for short-text documents (Angelov 2020; Curiskis et al. 2020; Lenz and Winker 2020). Instead of the naive bag of words approach, the use of document embeddings preserves the order of terms in a document, grammar, and the differential contexts in which words can be used, thereby preserving meaning and enabling the discovery of rich topic clusters. This is the approach taken in this dissertation, which uses a promising new algorithm—BERTopic—for topic discovery.

3.2.1 Topic Modeling with BERTopic

To perform topic modeling, I deploy the BERTopic algorithm developed by Maarten Grootendorst (2020). BERTopic builds on the Top2Vec algorithm introduced by Dimo Angelov (2020) but expands it important ways. Notably, BERTopic enlarges support for pre-trained text models and was specifically designed to leverage the state-of-the-art BERT (Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers) framework originally developed by Google AI (Devlin et al. 2018). The components constituting the BERTopic algorithm are explained below.

The corpus. In the topic model, only *comments* from r/IntellectualDarkWeb during the observation period are included (it should also be noted that, when referring to the topic model and the topic model's results, "documents" and "comments" will be used interchangeably). Posts are excluded from analysis. This is done for two reasons. First, there are far more comments than posts. For example, in the observation period of this study, there are nearly 29 times more comments (N=433,478) than posts (N=15,029) in the dataset. This holds true generally across Reddit, where those who respond to posts far outnumber those who post submissions. Second, there is insufficient textual data in the posts to develop robust language models. While many posts *do* contain long textual submissions, most posts (61.32%) simply link to external content or media, and therefore contain little if any text.

Computing document embeddings. To perform computational text analysis of the sort undertaken by BERTopic, the raw text documents must be transformed into a numerical vector called a document embedding. Document embeddings are n-dimensional arrays where each element in the array is an abstract representation of certain textual features (e.g., words, punctuation) in the document.[10] Importantly, the values of the arrays are not meaningful to humans. However, computationally, they represent substantive information about the documents, including how the meanings of words change situationally. Document embeddings, therefore, preserve context and are

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[10] The dimensions are chosen either by researchers or predefined by the algorithm and are unrelated to the size of the input text (e.g., a document with 500 words does not need to have a 500-dimensional embedding array).

capable of being compared to other document embeddings to discover contextually similar pairs.

There are a variety of methods available to compute document embeddings. BERTopic leverages the Sentence Transformers Python package to access a library of pre-trained BERT models that have been benchmarked and obtained high-performance on a variety of tasks, including sentence similarity (Reimers and Gurevych 2019). This access to robust pre-trained BERT models is critical for this research. For deep learning algorithms to perform well, they must be trained on very large quantities of diverse data. This requires significant computational resources, time, and money—factors that often make such training prohibitive for social scientists. Using pre-trained models—or "transfer learning"—enables researchers to make use of the information the model has learned during training by applying those insights to their own, often much smaller, data. In practice, pre-trained models have been shown to dramatically improve the performance and accuracy of computational text analyses (Minaee et al. 2021; Qiu et al. 2020; Turian, Ratinov, and Bengio 2010).

In this research, I use the ***all-distilroberta-v1*** pre-trained Sentence Transformers model to embed my sample of Reddit comments.[11] This results in a 768-dimension vector representation of each comment. The model was fine-tuned on more than 1 billion observations. For fine tuning, a diverse corpus was compiled from a variety of sources, including more than 726 million Reddit comments made from 2015 to 2018. The ***all-***

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[11] See the model card on Hugging Face: https://huggingface.co/sentence-transformers/all-distilroberta-v1

distilroberta-v1 model was chosen given its high evaluation score for document

embeddings, its generality, its large training data, and its speed improvement over the

most computationally complex Sentence Transformers model, ***all-mpnet-base-v2***.[12]

There are limitations to document embeddings, even state of the art embeddings

produced with BERT models. For one, no model is 100% accurate: incorrect predictions

do occur. Second, these embedding representations are produced through complex deep

neural networks that, once designed, operate as "black boxes" where it becomes difficult

for humans to interpret how the model selects parameters or chooses which features to

emphasize during training and prediction (Davidson 2019; Molina and Garip 2019).

Finally, and of significant concern to sociologists, because document embeddings are

produced through deep neural networks trained on massive quantities of human-produced

text, they reproduce the social biases found in these texts. This is a problem for all

machine learning applications, and sociologists have empirically demonstrated that

artificial intelligence systems, text-based and non-text-based, absorb racist and sexist

artifacts that saturate our social world (Benjamin 2019; Noble 2018; Schwemmer et al.

2020). For text embeddings, this means that, for example, a word like "father" is similar

to "doctor" while "mother" is similar to "nurse" (Bolukbasi et al. 2016). Biases like these

always risk affecting how text embeddings are constructed, and, consequently, which text

embeddings are considered similar to one another.

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[12] For information on how the Sentence Transformers models are evaluated and their comparisons to one another, see: https://www.sbert.net/docs/pretrained_models.html

The BERTopic algorithm. BERTopic works by ingesting a corpus of text documents, transforming the documents into high-dimensional embeddings with a pre-trained model, and then clustering similar document embeddings together into topical groups. The assumption that BERTopic makes is that documents that are highly similar to one another will be positioned closely together in *n-dimensional* space, and that if such a dense cluster of documents exists, then it is evidence of a shared underlying topic. To find these clusters of documents, BERTopic first reduces the dimensionality of the document embeddings using the UMAP algorithm and then clusters on the resultant lower-dimensional UMAP embedding with HDBSCAN. Reducing the high-dimensional document embeddings is necessary to avoid the so-called "curse of dimensionality." This refers to the problem that, in very high-dimensional spaces, the distances between data points can grow very large, thereby creating sparsity. In the present context, this means that the document embeddings, represented in their native 768-dimensions, will be far apart from one another, making clustering difficult. Reducing their dimensionality will pack them closer together, situate them in closer proximity with other similar documents, and enable clustering.

UMAP (Uniform Manifold Approximation and Projection) is chosen as the dimensionality reduction technique due to its ability to preserve the global structure of the high-dimensional space in its low-dimensional representations (McInnes, Healy, and Melville 2020). Formally, UMAP is a graph-based dimensionality reduction algorithm that represents data *topographically.* Intuitively, UMAP works by learning the structure

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of the high-dimensional space by constructing a weighted graph (analogous to a social network in sociology) where the edges between the data points represent the likelihood the data points should be connected to one another based on their distances, with the goal of *only* connecting those data points that most probably belong to the same region or "neighborhood" (Coenen and Pearce 2021). After learning the data's topographical structure, the high-dimensional representation can then be projected into a lower-dimensional embedding that accurately preserves the global structure of the original graph—a fact made evident by UMAP's strong performance in empirical applications (Allaoui, Kherfi, and Cheriet 2020; Hozumi et al. 2021).

Importantly, UMAP is a stochastic algorithm, using randomization to both improve approximation and optimization (McInnes 2018b). In practice, this means UMAP can generate slightly different results on different runs, though the variance will be marginal. One way to make UMAP reproducible is to set a random state at initialization, which will allow for the reproduction of identical results. In this study, I set the random state to 42 (though the selection of a random state is arbitrary). However, while setting the random state will make the results deterministic on the same machine, the random state has been shown to *not* be identically reproducible when re-initializing UMAP on *different* computers or operating systems using the UMAP Python implementation.[13] Since BERTopic performs clustering on the UMAP embedding, this means that even with the same parameters selected, on different machines or operating systems, the number and

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[13] See the following GitHub issue on the UMAP repository: https://github.com/lmcinnes/umap/issues/153.

shape of clusters may be different. Nevertheless, the resultant UMAP embeddings

derived from the same input data on different machines or operating systems will only

contain minuscule differences that should not have an impact on the fundamental

interpretation of their outputs—though this is certainly a limitation with respect to

replication.

For clustering, the HDBSCAN (Hierarchical Density-Based Spatial Clustering of

Applications with Noise) algorithm is used (Campello, Moulavi, and Sander 2013;

McInnes and Healy 2017). HDBSCAN is a density-based clustering algorithm, meaning

it works by discovering "clumpy" regions within the input data where similar data points

concentrate. Importantly, HDBSCAN has the major benefit of being able to separate

dense regions of probable clusters from sparser regions of likely noise. This means that

HDBSCAN does *not* assume every data point belongs to a cluster: those data points that

are in sparse regions far from other data points will be excluded from clusters and

classified as noise by the algorithm. This tolerance for noise is highly desirable when

dealing with text data, as text—especially short social media text—is notoriously noisy.

This noise can come in several forms, including incorrect punctuation, slang,

misspellings, and documents that do not contain any coherent topical content—all of

which affect the quality of the document embeddings. On the other hand, HDBSCAN's

assumption of noise comes with the downside that the algorithm is conservative when

performing clustering, potentially excluding data points from clusters that might belong

in cluster.

After reducing the dimensionality with UMAP and clustering the UMAP embedding with HDBSCAN, a class-based (here, "class" is equivalent to "cluster") term frequency/inverse document frequency (c-TF-IDF) algorithm is used to extract the most unique words for each cluster. For each unique term t in the corpus, we can define the c-TF-IDF score W for term t in cluster c as

$$W_{t,c} = tf_{t,c} \cdot \log\left(1 + \frac{A}{tf_t}\right)$$

Equation 1: c-TF-IDF

where $tf_{t,c}$ is the frequency of word t in cluster c, tf_t is the frequency of word t across the entire corpus, and A is the average number of words per cluster (Grootendorst 2020). The log is taken to compress the range of c-TF-IDF values and 1 is added to the fraction to prevent negative values from occurring in the c-TF-IDF matrix. Essentially, this is a weighting scheme that shrinks weights for very frequent words and increases weights for unique words.

In practice, this means that for each cluster, the words most distinctive to that cluster will have a higher c-TF-IDF score while words that are frequently found in many or all clusters will have lower c-TF-IDF scores, allowing for the extraction of the most unique terms for each cluster. The full BERTopic algorithm is visualized in Figure 3.1.

Text preprocessing. BERTopic does not require significant text cleaning or preprocessing to prepare the documents for embedding and topical analysis—a benefit it has over traditional topic modeling techniques. LDA models, for example, require the removal of stop words (i.e., extremely common but uninformative words like "the", "is",

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BERTopic

1.) Feature-Engineer Text

Minimal Pre-processing

Encode into Document Embeddings

2.) Cluster

UMAP

- Dimensionality Reduction

HDBSCAN

3.) Extract Topic Words
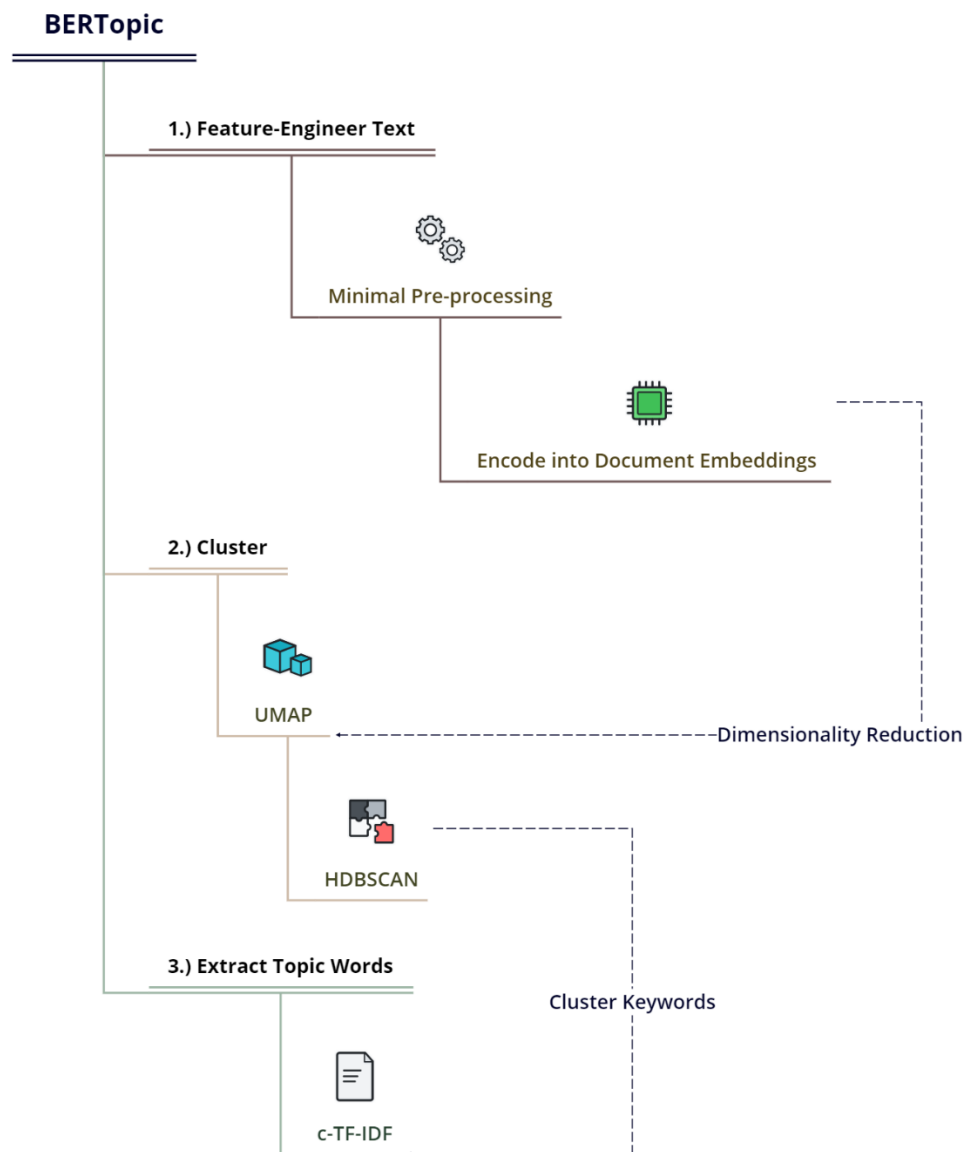
Cluster Keywords

c-TF-IDF

Figure 3.1:BERTopic Algorithm

"it" etc.) to prevent topically insignificant words from being assigned to topics, and it is also generally advised to stem or lemmatize words to minimize vocabulary size both for computational efficiency and topical coherence (e.g., "run", "runs", and "running" are all represented as "run"). By contrast, stop words, grammar, and punctuation all provide important information about the meaning of sentences and the structure of language when creating document embeddings. For this reason, the only preprocessing steps taken are (1) the removal of HTML tags and (2) the removal of URLs. I remove HTML tags because these elements are topically insignificant artifacts of text formatting on Reddit that risk being identified as meaningful features of the texts when represented as embeddings. I remove all URLs from the text, as I want to avoid clusters where the top words are, for example, "https", "www" and so on. If there is text nested between the hyperlink tags, this text is extracted and kept as part of the comment.

After preprocessing, only comments that contain at least 5 tokens are included in the topic model.[14] This cutoff is chosen to ensure that comments are long enough to plausibly contain topical content. It also ensures that topically meaningless comments—such as "lol" or "thank you!"—are removed from the sample and do not add unnecessary noise to the model. After preprocessing, the sample contains 404,303 comments with at least 5 tokens, constituting 93.27% of the original sample of comments (N=433,478).

Parameter selection. UMAP and HDBSCAN are each governed by a few key

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[14] Tokens are all the individual words, word-like elements (e.g. numbers), and punctuation constituting a document. For example, the sentence "I love to go to the movies!" can be decomposed into the following list of 8 tokens: ["I", "love", "to", "go", "to", "the", "movies", "!"].

parameters that affect the algorithms' respective behaviors. For UMAP, the key

parameters are *n_neighbors*; *n_components*; *metric*; and *min_dist* (McInnes 2018a). The

n_neighbors parameter controls how much emphasis UMAP places on local detail versus

general structure. Higher values will force UMAP to emphasize global patterns at the

expense of fine-grained local variation, while lower values will emphasize local variation

at the expense of more general representations of the data. For clustering, higher values

are desirable, as small values place too much emphasize on local variance that risks

misidentifying local noise as a meaningful pattern (McInnes 2018c). Here, I set

n_neighbors to 30, a doubling of the default value of 15. The *n_components* parameter

controls the dimensionality of the reduced UMAP embedding. I set this parameter to the

default value of 5 chosen by BERTopic, as it strikes a good balance between retaining

information represented in the high-dimensional space and reducing the distances

between the embedding vectors to facilitate clustering. The *metric* parameter tells UMAP

how to compute the distances between the data points when learning the structure of the

data. BERTopic uses cosine distance, an angular metric widely used in natural language

processing (and which is closely related to cosine similarity, defined below in Equation

2). Finally, the *min_dist* parameter controls how closely the data points can be placed

together in the low-dimensional space—i.e., the minimum distance allowed between

points. For clustering—specifically density-based clustering like HDBSCAN—it is

desirable to clump the points together very tightly (McInnes 2018a, 2018c). For this

reason, *min_dist* is set all the way down to 0, allowing for a very dense UMAP

embedding.

HDSBCAN relies primarily on two key parameters: ***min_cluster_size*** and ***min_samples***. The ***min_cluster_size*** parameter, as the name implies, sets the value for the minimum number of data points required to be considered a cluster. All clusters will be *at least* as large as the ***min_cluster_size*** value. In practice, setting ***min_cluster_size*** to a low value can yield many very similar micro clusters that should really constitute a smaller number of larger clusters. Increasing ***min_cluster_size*** can alleviate this issue by reducing the number of clusters discovered, but at the risk of classifying a significant number of points as noise. To address this issue, we can change the values of the ***min_samples*** parameter. The ***min_samples*** parameter controls how conservative HDBSCAN's clustering is. By default, ***min_samples*** is set equal to ***min_cluster_size***. By reducing the value of ***min_samples***, the algorithm is more liberal in its clustering, meaning that less data points will be classified as noise (McInnes 2016). In order to optimize the ***min_cluster_size*** and ***min_samples*** parameters, I ran 139 trials with varying combinations of values with the objectives of (1.) minimizing the proportion of documents classified as noise by HDBSCAN and (2.) finding a plausible number of "core" topical clusters instead of many overlapping micro-clusters (see Appendix B). Guided by this optimization process, I choose a ***min_cluster_size*** of 350 and set the ***min_samples*** parameter to 25.

With these parameters chosen for UMAP and HDBSCAN, 55.73% (N=225,326) of the sub-sample of 404,215 documents containing at least 5 tokens were assigned to

clusters. The remaining 44.27% (N=178,977) of comments were classified as noise.

Manual inspection of the data points classified as noise, however, revealed that highly

coherent documents were being labeled as noise due to their low probabilities of

belonging to any cluster even though they have a clear human interpretable meaning and

should be classified in one of the discovered topics. This is a known issue with clustering

of this sort. To address this limitation, I follow Angelov's (2020) solution from the

Top2Vec algorithm, which assigns noise documents to their most similar topic clusters.

First, I create "topic vectors" of each cluster by computing the average of the document

embeddings from all the non-noise documents assigned to each cluster. Next, I compute

the cosine similarity for each noise document embedding and each topic vector and

assign the noise documents to the cluster with the most similar topic vector. Formally, the

cosine similarity between two vectors *a* and *b* can be defined as

$$Cos(a, b) = \frac{a \cdot b}{\|a\| \|b\|}$$

Equation 2: Cosine Similarity

where the numerator is the dot product of the vectors, and the denominator is the product

of the normalized vectors. Cosine similarity is an angular metric, specifically the cosine

of the angle between two vectors with possible values ranging from -1 to +1. Values

close to 1 imply the angle between the vectors is small, meaning the vectors are pointing

in the same general direction and are therefore similar. A value of 0 implies the vectors

are orthogonal (90 degrees) and values below zero imply the vectors are trending in

opposite directions. Put differently, cosine similarity values close to or below 0 indicate

the vectors are dissimilar. After reassigning the noise documents to topics, I also calculate the cosine similarities of each non-noise topic and their respective topic vectors. This results in cosine similarity estimates for each document/topic pair in the dataset and for the efficient extraction of the most representative documents for each topic during analysis.

Consider an example that demonstrates the effect of this procedure. The following comment, which is easily human interpretable, was classified as noise:

> *"An association is not causation."* This really is a dumb take. As dumb as the public health advice during this pandemic.

This comment captures a user accusing another of having a "dumb take" about public health issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which is confirmed when observing the comment in its original context on the subreddit. While the comment clearly refers to the COVID-19 pandemic, even if vaguely, it was classified as noise. After reclassifying the comment based on the similarity of its document vector to all the topic vectors, however, the comment was accurately reassigned to Topic 0, represented by the following key words (top five): *vaccine*, *covid*, *vaccines, vaccinated, virus*.

Consider another example:

> Why do you believe I should be convinced by you bringing up that there is apparently data out there that agrees with your current conclusions without providing any of it?

In this comment, the user is criticizing another user for the latter's failure to adequately evidence their claims in an argument. Important topical threads running through this comment include issues of epistemology and standards of evidence. While this is clear

upon reading the comment, for the clustering algorithm, this comment appeared as noise. However, after cosine similarity-based reclassification, it was accurately assigned to Topic 13 with the following key words (top five): *evidence*, *proof*, *source, facts*, *sources*.

More examples could be provided but suffice it to say that these two examples indicate both the limitations of HDBSCAN's conservative clustering procedure and the benefits of cosine similarity-based reclassification. Although HDBSCAN does a good job classifying the points it does classify correctly, by design, it leaves many data points out of clusters that otherwise should, from a human point-of-view, be clustered. While the cosine similarity reclassification procedure may allow for misclassifications (i.e., the erroneous assignment of genuinely noisy or incoherent comments to topics), given the large volume of data treated as noise by HDBSCAN (44.27% of comments), this is a worthwhile trade-off—one made by others dealing with the same issue (Angelov 2020).

Parameter limitations. It is important to note that while these parameters are reasonable and work well for this application, there is not a purely mathematical or scientific procedure for determining the optimal value of the parameters for either UMAP or HDBSCAN. One might reasonably set these parameters to different values and obtain different results. Ultimately, the parameters reflect the judgment and goals of the researcher. This lack of certainty is the motivating factor for the 139 parameter optimization trials described above.

Here, I aim to emphasize global structure at the expense of local structure, finding discursive patterns indicative of general themes rather than very specific topics. Other

researchers might prioritize very local structure and choose different parameters as a

result. Importantly, while this is a limitation of BERTopic, such an issue is not unique to

my use case. Sociologists using the very popular LDA algorithm face an analogous issue,

for, in practice, "researchers do not know the number of topics in a corpus" and are thus

tasked with determining a reasonable estimate using their judgment based on "the

usefulness of the output" (Nelson 2020:18). Along the way, researchers using LDA must

make decisions about stop words, stemming or lemmatization, and how many topics to

model. Fundamentally, it is important to remember that topic modeling is an "exploratory

technique" that is useful for "imposing order upon large bodies of textual data"

(DiMaggio et al. 2013). The rules guiding such order operate at the discretion of the

researcher.

Chapter 4: Descriptive Statistics

In analyzing these data, it is important to keep in mind the differences between two types of content: posts and comments. Posts are original submissions to the subreddit that contain elements consisting of user-written text, URLs to videos, media or websites, or some combination of these elements. A post is the beginning of a new thread. Comments are responses to posts. Comments can either be top-level (i.e., a direct response to a post) or nested (i.e., a response to a top-level comment or a response to a comment situated within a thread of other comments). The comment being responded to is the *parent* comment and the comment doing the responding is the *child* comment (however, if a comment is a top-level comment, then its parent is the post itself). All comments, regardless of their location in the comment hierarchy, will share a common link ID that connects them to the same post.

In the aggregate user-level statistics presented below, I exclude four usernames from analysis: [deleted]; AutoModerator; IntellectualDarkBot; and a spam account that blasted the subreddit with the same single submission multiple times and is therefore likely a bot.[15] [deleted] is the username placeholder automatically generated by Reddit after a user has removed their account from the platform (though a user's comments and

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[15] For privacy concerns, I do not print the account name in the text.

submissions are not deleted by Reddit, i.e., it is possible for original comments and

submissions to still be present in the dataset even without proper username attribution

unless a user also deleted all of their content before deleting their account). It therefore

covers *multiple* users: *every* account that has been deleted will register as [deleted].

Statistics calculated for [deleted] will thus span multiple users and generate inaccurate

estimates. AutoModerator and IntellectualDarkBot are removed from user-level statistics

because they are bots designed to automate the subreddit's content moderation.

4.1 User-Level Features

Networks produce and reproduce inequalities (Witte, Kiss and Lynn 2013).

Specifically, the social networks constituting digital platforms and online communities

are prone to "network effects" that generate scale-free/power-law-like distributions where

a small number of nodes receive a disproportionate amount of connections or resources

(Barabási 2014; Barabási and Albert 1999). In the context of the present study, this

means that a small number of users are likely to be responsible for a disproportionate

number of comments and posts. An efficient way to quantify this inequality is the Gini

coefficient. Let *y* be a sorted vector containing the number of comments for each unique

each user aggregated over the entire observation period. Then, we can formally define the

Gini coefficient of this vector as

$$G = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n} \sum_{j=1}^{n} |y_i - y_j|}{2n^2 \mu}$$

Equation 3: Gini Coefficient

where $|y_i - y_j|$ is the absolute value of the pairwise differences between observations at

indexes i and j in vector y, n is the number of observations in the vector, and μ is the vector's average.[16] The resulting Gini coefficient will be a value ranging from 0 to 1 where values closer to 1 imply higher-levels of inequality and values closer to 0 imply lower-levels of inequality. Put differently, values closer to 1 indicate that few users contribute most of the comments or posts in the subreddit while values closer to 0 suggest that the comments or posts are more evenly distributed among all users.
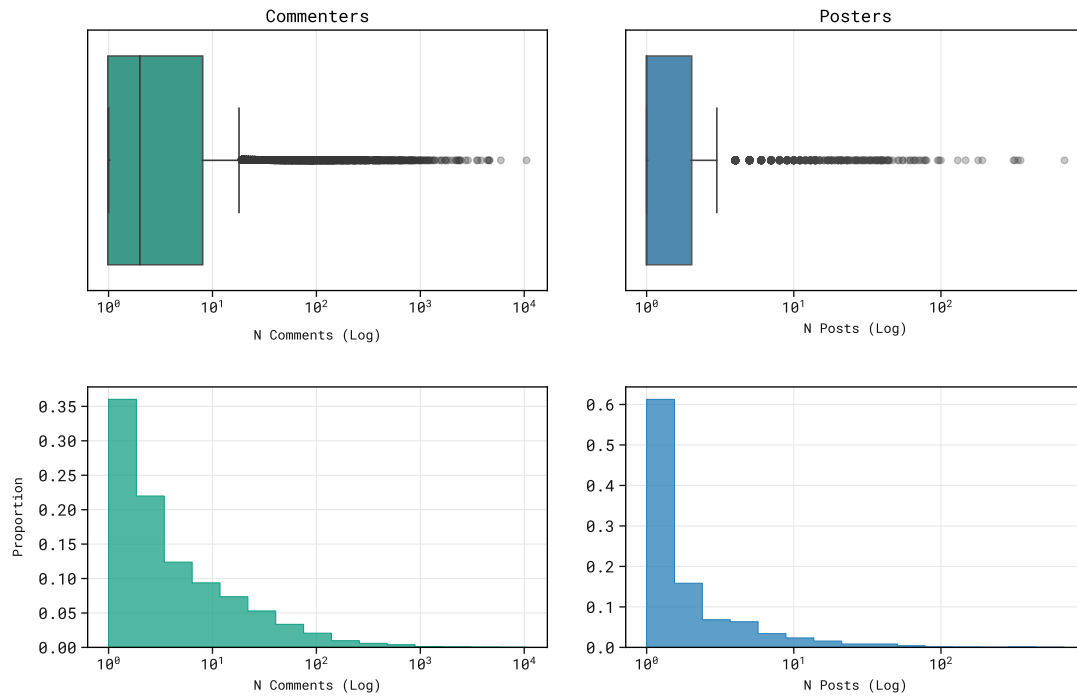

Figure 4.1: Comment and Post Frequency Distributions

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[16] I adapt the formula for the Gini Coefficient from Liao (2006).

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As Table 4.1 shows, the Gini coefficients for both commenters and posters are very high at .85 and .69 respectively. The top 1% of commenters (those with 307 or more comments) alone are responsible for 44.84% of all comments, and the top 50% of commenters have contributed virtually all comments at 96.87%. A similar pattern is observed for posters, where the top 1% have contributed 37.50% of all posts and the top 50% have contributed 85.15% of all posts. This results in comment and post frequency distributions with long right-tails, as the boxplots and histograms in Figure 4.1 show. For this reason, I follow Kleinberg et al. (2020) and split the commenters and posters into two groups: super users (the top 1%) and standard users (the bottom 99%).

Table 4.1: Summary Statistics for r/IntellectualDarkWeb Users

Commenter Summary Statistics	
Number of Unique Commenters	20484
Gini Coefficient	.85
Average Number of Comments Per User (SD)	20.47 (145)
Median Number of Comments Per User	2.0
Modal Number of Comments	1
Minimum Number of Comments	1
Maximum Number of Comments	10502
Poster Summary Statistics	
Number of Unique Posters	3599
Gini Coefficient	.66
Average Number of Posts Per User (SD)	3.8 (18)
Median Number of Posts	1.0
Modal Number of Posts	1
Minimum Number of Posts	1
Maximum Number of Posts	691

There are important statistical differences between super users and standard users, as

Table 4.2 shows. Looking first at commenters, we observe that super users have an

average of 912.78 comments compared to an average of just 11.41 for standard users.

Comments left by super users have an average of 35.69 characters more than those of

standard users (403.23 to 367.54, respectively). Super users have been active on the

subreddit for significantly more time, with an average activity period of 643.07 days

compared to 107.23 for standard users. The most recent comment left by super users,

measured as the difference between the end of the observation period (December 31,

2021) and the most recent date a user left a comment, is lower on average (156.35 days)

than that of standard users (377.92), and super users also average a larger oldest comment

date (799.87 days) compared to standard users (485.41).

One interesting and counterintuitive finding for the commenters is that super users

have a lower average karma score than standard users. On Reddit, karma is a point

system that invites users to "upvote" or "downvote" a comment or post. The more users

who upvote a post or comment, the larger the karma value grows. Inversely, the more

users who downvote a comment, the lower the karma level grows—even into negative

integers. In these data, super users have an average karma of 2.61 compared to a higher

average karma of 3.44 for standard users. Given their domineering presence on the

subreddit, one might reasonably expect super users to have a higher average karma score.

However, this should not be the case for one key reason: the sheer frequency of super

user comment activity increases the likelihood that their comments will be nested deep in

Table 4.2: Independent Sample t-tests of Commenter and Poster Activity

Commenters

	Super Users	Standard Users	t[†]
Total Comments	912.78	11.41	11.73***
Karma	2.61	3.44	-36.35***
Nested Comments	783.56	8.89	11.03***
Comments with 1 Karma	354.60	3.94	10.34***
Comment Length	403.23	367.54	5.04***
Activity Length (Days)	643.07	107.23	4.44***
Newest Post (Days)	156.35	377.92	-13.34***
Oldest Post (Days)	799.87	485.41	8.66***

Posters

	Super Users	Standard Users	t[†]
N Posts	118.32	2.61	5.40***
Karma	24.87	26.30	-1.16
Post Length	369.72	526.34	2.61***
Responses to Post	25.99	23.12	-5.50***
Posts with External URLs	90.38	1.42	4.40***
Activity Length (Days)	610.54	64.70	9.91***
Newest Post (Days)	313.08	538.45	-4.26***
Oldest Post (Days)	923.89	603.31	5.04***

*** $p < .001$
[†]Welch t-tests.

discussion threads where, the deeper one goes, the less frequent the readership. Often, deep threads occur when two users are engaged in rigorous debate or conversation, leading to hyper-focused one-on-one engagements. There is evidence to suspect this is the case by again looking at Table 4.2. Here we observe that, on average, super users contribute 783.56 nested comments compared to an average of just 8.89 nested comments for standard users. Similarly, the number of posts by super users with a karma score exactly equal to 1 (the default score when no voting activity has taken place) averages to 354.60, a significantly larger value than the 3.94 average for standard users. There is also

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an extremely strong correlation between the number of nested comments made by a user and the number of comments a user has with a karma score of exactly 1 (r=.99, p<.001), providing additional evidence that high rates of nested comment activity likely contributes to the lower karma values for super users.

Similar patterns are observed for the posters data. For posters, super users average 118.32 posts compared to the much smaller average of 2.61 posts for standard users. Again, we see that super users have been active with the subreddit for a longer period (610.54 days on average) compared to standard posters (64.70 days on average), have posted more recently (313.08 days ago on average) compared to standard posters (538.45 days ago on average), and have an average oldest post date of 923.89 days ago compared to the average of 603.31 days for standard users. Unlike for commenters, there is no statistically significant difference between the average karma of posts made by the top 1% of posters (24.87) and the bottom 99% of posters (26.30). Super posters average a far higher number of posts linking to external URLs (90.38) compared to standard posters (1.42), and super posters also post, on average, statistically significantly shorter posts (369.72 characters) than standard posters (526.34 characters). This is likely driven the former's more frequent use of external URLs in place of longer text-based posts.

4.2 Community Similarity

Another important descriptive metric to consider is the similarity of the subreddit's user-base over time—i.e., how stable is the subreddit community structure? An effective way to measure the similarity of the user population over time is the Jaccard similarity

coefficient. Formally, we define the Jaccard similarity as

$$J(A, B) = \frac{|A \cap B|}{|A \cup B|}$$

Equation 4: Jaccard Similarity Coefficient

where both A and B are sets, $|A \cap B|$ is the intersection of sets A and B, and $|A \cup B|$ is the union of sets A and B. What the Jaccard similarity returns, then, is the ratio of the common elements of both sets. I apply the Jaccard similarity coefficient to the set of users at time t_i and t_i - 1 for all time periods in time vector T, where each t_i is a month. This will provide the proportion of overlap between users who were present in the preceding month t_i - 1 and all users who are present in the current month t_i.

There is, however, one key drawback of the Jaccard similarity coefficient: it is highly sensitive to the size of each set. We can adjust for this problem by slightly modifying the Jaccard similarity coefficient with the overlap coefficient. Formally, the overlap coefficient is defined as

$$O(A, B) = \frac{|A \cap B|}{\min (|A|, |B|)}$$

Equation 5: Overlap Coefficient

where $|A \cap B|$ is the intersection of sets A and B and $\min(|A|, |B|)$ is the smaller of the sets A or B. As can be seen, the overlap coefficient is very similar to the Jaccard coefficient and will also yield values ranging from 0 to 1. But now the denominator represents the size of the smaller set out of the pair rather than the union of the sets. This modification to the denominator makes the overlap coefficient well-suited to analyzing sets of different sizes. For example, if set A is a subset of larger set B, then the Jaccard similarity

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coefficient of the pair may return a low-value due to A's small size relative to B.
However, the overlap coefficient will necessarily return a value of 1, since the entirety of set A is encompassed by set B (Ribeiro et al. 2020). Given the potential for the sizes of unique user sets to vary at each time slice t_i, the overlap coefficient could help correct for the risk of underestimated similarity provided by the Jaccard coefficient.

Figure 4.2 plots the Jaccard similarity and overlap coefficients for four observational groups across each month in the observation period: the top 1% of commenters; the bottom 99% of commenters; the top 1% of posters; and the bottom 99% of posters. Immediately we observe that both the Jaccard similarity and overlap coefficients are much higher for the top 1% of commenters and the top 1% of posters than for the entire samples of commenters and posters—a trend that seems to have held steady over the duration of the observation period. The top 1% of commenters especially appear to be a consistent group of users, averaging a Jaccard similarity coefficient of .69 and an overlap coefficient of .85 over the series. The bottom 99% of commenters had much lower values of .21 and .34 for their average Jaccard and overlap coefficients, respectively, over the same period. Both coefficients show the same general trend, with the similarity scores for both groups rising through the first few months and then stabilizing thereafter, though at differently leveled plateaus, with the top 1% of users appearing to be much more consistent across time than the sample of all commenters.

These trends are similar for the posters, though with some caveats. The average The average Jaccard and overlap coefficients are .63 and .76, respectively, for the top 1% of
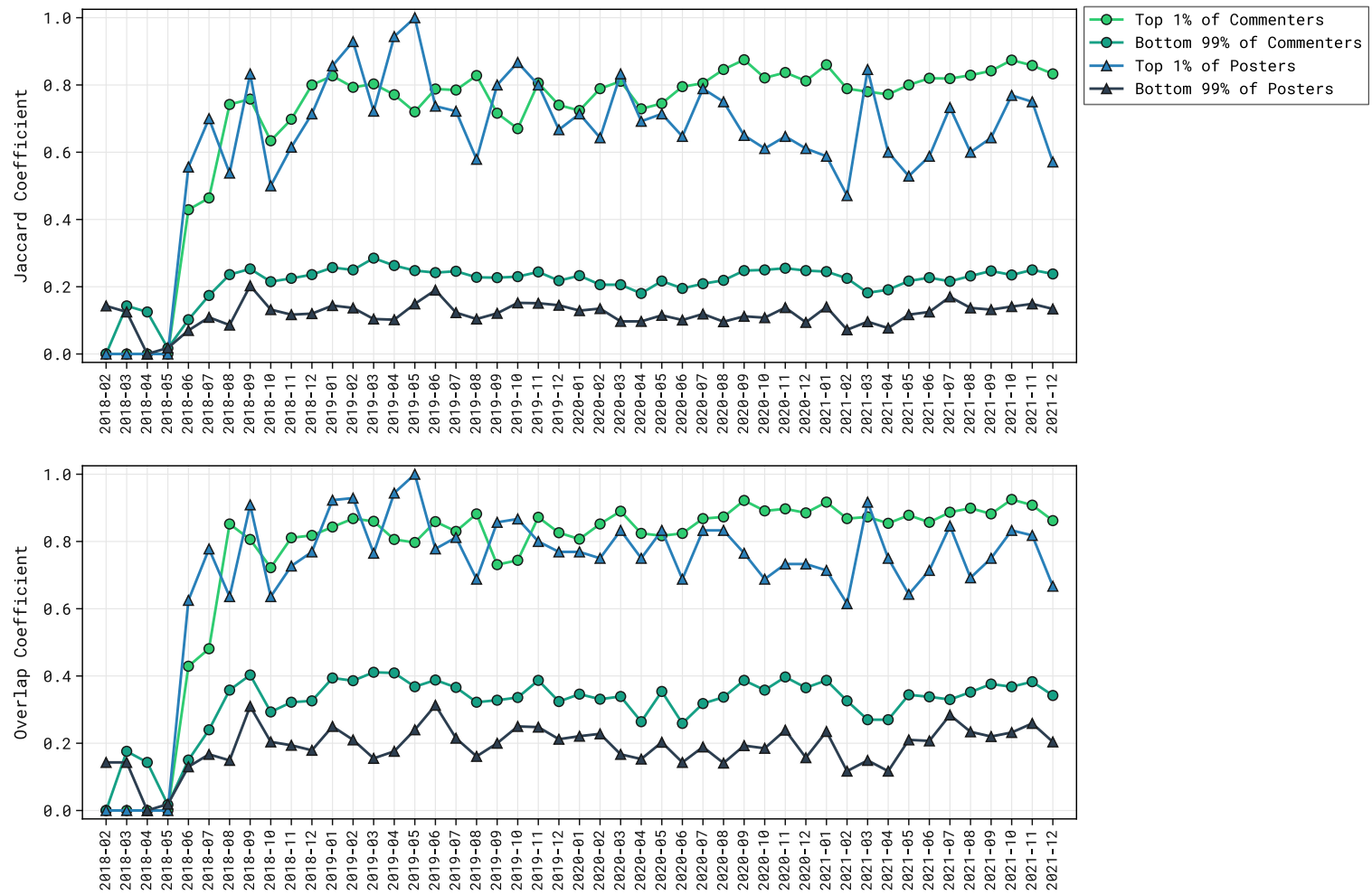
Figure 4.2: r/IntellectualDarkWeb User Similarity Over Time

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posters compared to the lower values of .12 and .20 for the bottom 99% of posters. While

the top 1% of posters have much higher Jaccard and overlap coefficients than the entire

sample of posters, the observed variance appears larger for the top 1% of posters than it

does for the top 1% of commenters. This is also true for the entire sample of posters,

which appears to experience more variance over the time series than the entire sample of

commenters. This is most likely caused by shifts in the set of users who are contributing

posts to the subreddit at different points in time.

Table 4.3: Average Similarities of r/IntellectualDarkWeb Users Over All Periods

	Mean Jaccard Coefficient	Mean Overlap Coefficient
Top 1% of Commenters	.69	.85
Bottom 99% of Commenters	.21	.34
Top 1% of Posters	.63	.76
Bottom 99% of Posters	.12	.20

Interestingly, posters and commenters do not appear to be very similar to one another,

as Figure 4.3 shows. Here, we see a downwards trend in the similarity between posters

and commenters—even for the top 1% of each group—on both metrics. Very early in the

subreddit's life, there are two months—February 2018 and May 2018—where there are

sharp increases in the similarity between commenters and posters. This corresponds with

the early days of the IDW as a named entity, as the Bari Weiss article introducing the

group to the world came out in May of 2018, and the earliest months of the subreddit

itself. It appears that initially in the subreddit's life, there was overlap between

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commenters and posters. After May of 2018, however, there is consistent decline between the similarities of posters and commenters—a trend that persists through the end of the observation period.

Accounting for this pattern is challenging. Some of this is likely attributable to the fact that there are far more commenters than there are posters, and thus far more comments than posts. While 75.73% of users in the top 1% of commenters have made at least one post, only 12.07% of all commenters have done so. Another factor seems to be that a large majority of posters only make a small number of posts, with a modal value of 1. Only 38.73% of posters have made more than 1 submission and less than a quarter have made more than 2 submissions. These observations, coupled with the relative dissimilarity of posters to commenters, indicate that commenters and posters exhibit different social behaviors on Reddit and are drawn from distinct statistical populations

4.3 Submission URL Analysis

When users create posts on subreddits, they have the option of submitting links, media, or text posts. If a user submits a URL, then the URL's parent domain will be accessible via the API. Similarly, if someone submits an original text post, the domain will appear as "self" followed by the subreddit's name (e.g., self.IntellectualDarkWeb). This allows for analysis of external media posted to r/IntellectualDarkWeb. Since the IDW represents itself as an "alternative sensemaking collective" that touts the power of digital media in sustaining oppositional heterodox thought (Parks 2020), observing which types of external content users of the IDW subreddit link to offers insights into the
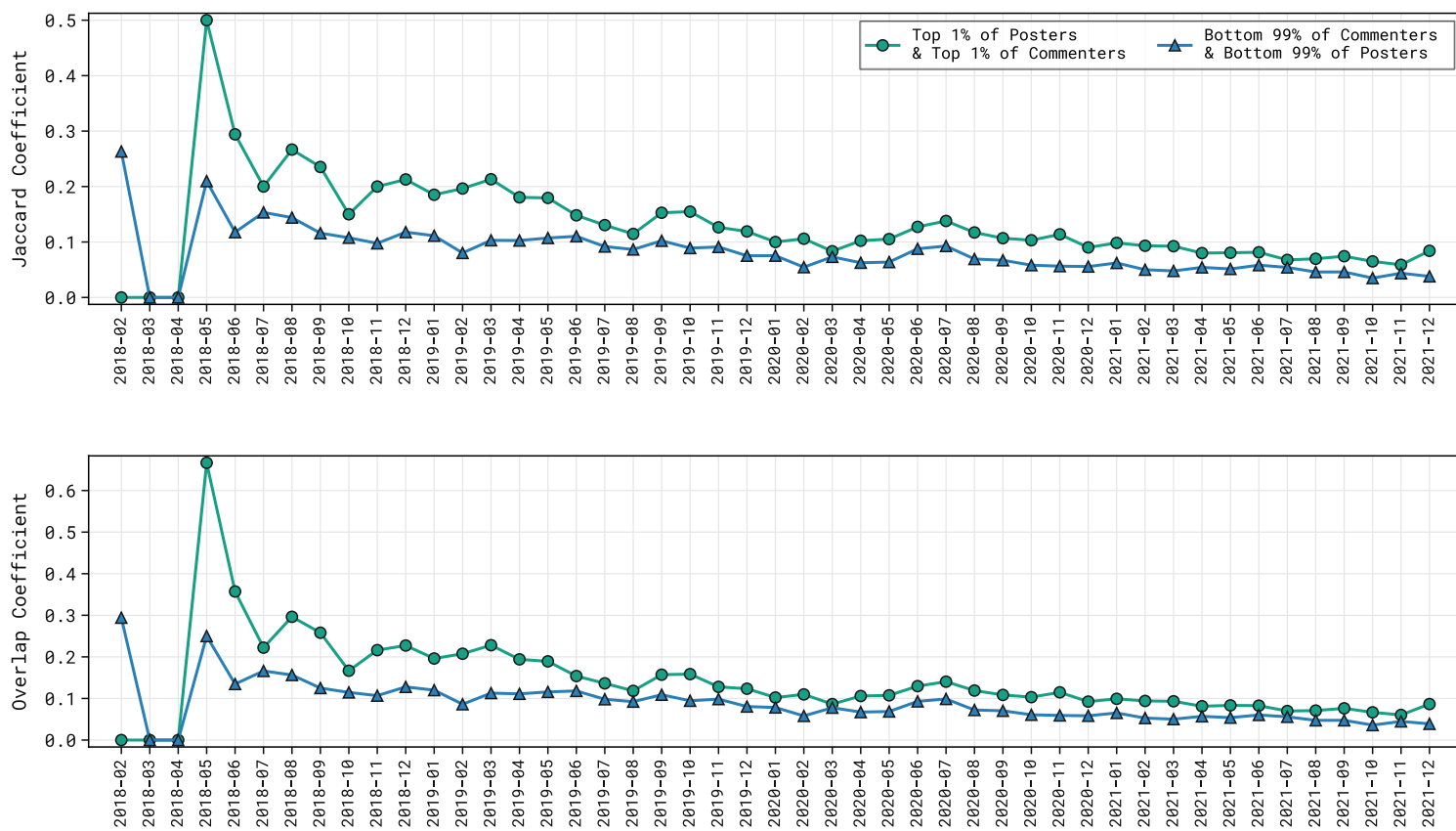
Figure 4.3: Commenter & Poster Similarity

information sources of the IDW.

As Figure 4.4 shows, within the r/IntellectualDarkWeb subreddit, original text posts constitute a sizable plurality of all submissions at 38.68%, although inversely, this means that 61.32% of posts link to outside sources. Of these other sources, YouTube dominates, comprising 28.23% of all non-text-based posts. After YouTube, the next four most frequent domains constitute dramatically smaller shares of all posts. Links to other Reddit content account for 5.12% of all posts, links to Twitter an additional 2.55%, links to *Quillette* 1.50%, and links to Medium blogs 1.24%. The remaining 22.68% of other domains are distributed across a pool of 1077 unique domains, each with small shares.

The large share of YouTube content on r/IntellectualDarkWeb is consistent with expectations from the literature. YouTube has come under scrutiny for the ways the platform has enabled alternative and heterodox actors to amplify disinformation, misinformation, and extremism (Lewis 2020; Lewis et al. 2021). Becca Lewis's (2018) Data & Society report shows how an "alternative influence network"—including members of the IDW—flourishes on YouTube, broadcasting an eclectic mix of political positions and information while also forging strong relational ties between creators and their audiences through the social and interactive features of the platform that fosters processes of mutual radicalization (see also Lewis 2020; Lewis et al. 2021). IDW YouTube channels have also been studied by Ribeiro et al. (2019), who found that the IDW YouTube cluster might function as a gateway into more extreme alt-lite and alt-right content (see also Mamié et al. 2021). Finally, much IDW content is produced for, or
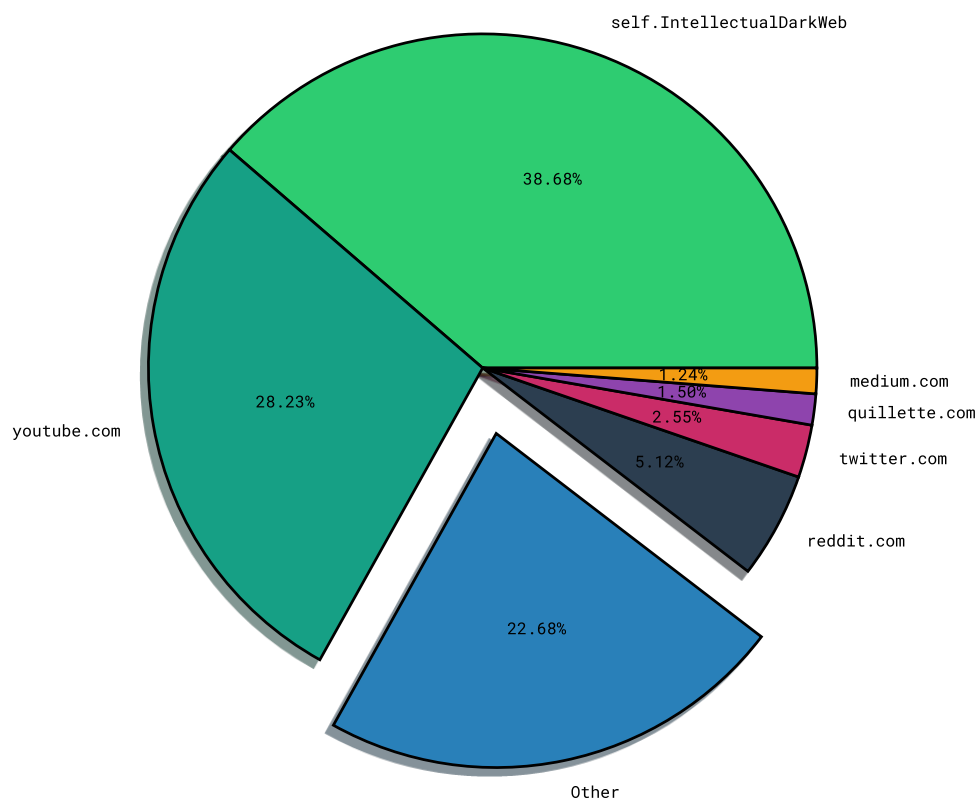
Figure 4.4: Top Domains in r/IntellectualDarkWeb Submissions

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reposted to, YouTube, such as Dave Rubin's long-form interviews, Bret Weinstein's

podcast episodes, and other miscellaneous media like debates or clips cut from hours-

long discussions, attesting to the ways the platform allows for the "re-transmitting" of

multimedia content (cf. Kim 2012).

Using the official Reddit API, I attempted to extract the metadata of the submissions

containing links to YouTube videos to determine which YouTube channels are most

frequently linked to. However, metadata was not available for all posts. If metadata was

not available, I used a custom Python script to scrape the information from YouTube

directly. Following this procedure, I was able to obtain metadata for 91.35% (N=3,568)

of the posts linking to YouTube content. The remaining 8.65% (N=338) of posts are

missing, most likely because the video or channel was deleted, made private, or banned

by YouTube.

Table 4.4 shows the top 15 most frequently shared YouTube channels during the

observation period. Interestingly, the most popular YouTube channel is the David

Pakman Show, a political talk show hosted by progressive commentator David Pakman.

From within the IDW, Eric Weinstein has described David Pakman as between "woke

and the IDW" for Pakman's willingness to critique both the activist left from within the

left itself while also engaging in what Weinstein seemingly perceived to be good faith

critiques of those with different coordinates on the ideological axis (Pakman 2020). For

his part, Pakman has made several videos criticizing the IDW directly for variously

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Table 4.4: Top 15 Most Frequently Linked YouTube Channels

Channel	Number of Posts	% Of Sampled YouTube Posts
David Pakman Show	93	2.60%
Rebel Wisdom	88	2.47%
The Rubin Report	86	2.41%
Freedom Pact	86	2.41%
Jordan B Peterson	69	1.93%
Bret Weinstein	67	1.88%
Bloggingheads.tv	61	1.70%
The Daily Wire	57	1.60%
Recharge Freedom	43	1.21%
Scott Veritas	40	1.12%
JRE Clips	40	1.12%
Rationality Rules	34	0.95%
Pangburn	32	0.90%
Skeptic	32	0.90%
Cotto-Gottfried	30	0.84%
Total	**858**	**24.04%**

"rebranding bad ideas" in a pseudo-intellectual fashion, promoting "fake intellectualism," and platforming "dangerous" concepts (Pakman 2018, 2018, 2018, 2021).

How Pakman's content is received by the subreddit, however, seems to vary by the subject matter of the video. The most highly received Pakman video (152 positive karma) is from a video titled "Andrew Yang Exposes Debates as 100% Rigged," a critique of the ways that the mainstream press deliberately aims to inject "storylines" into televised political debates while also "colluding" with some campaigns ahead of debates to plan for "attacks" on other candidates. Another well-received Pakman video is titled "Progressive Admits to Self-Censorship" (109 positive karma) where Pakman himself admits to self-censoring when covering certain social issues in fear of "blowback" from activists on the left. In another positively received video (88 positive karma) titled "This

Image is DEVASTATING to YouTube," Pakman critiques how YouTube's algorithm boosts corporate media channels on the platform at the expense of independent content creators.

While Pakman is rewarded on the subreddit for critiques of mainstream institutions and the left, his content critical of the political right is not always well received. A video by Pakman shared to the subreddit titled "Cancel Culture is a Right-Wing Lie to Attack the Left" has a net karma of 0 and was widely criticized by subreddit users. The top-rated comment reads that

> This is a ridiculous bit. Cancel culture affects as many progressives and leftists as it does right-wingers. Often cancel culture is cynically weaponized by corporate management and neoliberal institutions to target progressives…Quite frankly the only reason the right appears to be more animated by cancel culture is that many on the left, even those who are affected by it, prefer not to overly vocalize their criticism because of their aversion to expressing public agreement with their sworn enemies. But there are several who do, who in turn are drowned by a much larger chorus of neoliberals and centrists engaged in progressivism as a performative aesthetic but devoid of any real commitment to the values. Pakman is a great examplar of this.

Here, the author critiques the "downplaying" of the significance of cancel culture by Pakman and outlines a position that attempts to show that, even for leftists, the phenomenon is a considerable problem. In another video posted to the subreddit titled "Let's Debate Whether Kids in Cages Deserve Soap" where Pakman criticizes the Trump administration policy of separating families and imprisoning children at the southern border, the post has a net karma of 0. The top comment questions whether the "kids in cages thing" is even "real:"

> Because my immediate reaction is that it sounds like propaganda. When I google for it, I see images of what I would describe as "chain-link enclosures," not cages. While I feel strongly that children should not be separated from their parents, I also think border-security is doing their job

In this instance, we can reasonably infer that the user is attempting to represent the "kids in cages" discourse as a propagandistic instance of politically correct left-excess, one that obscures the apparently less abhorrent reality of "chain-link fences"—not cages—while also affirming that "obviously" prisoners ought to be provided with basic necessities. Pakman, then, appears to do well on the subreddit when his content is contrarian and critical of the mainstream and less well when his content is critical of the political right and topics such as "cancel culture."

The second most shared YouTube channel is Rebel Wisdom, a channel hosted by former BBC journalist David Fuller, himself a long-time observer of the IDW who has hosted long-form interviews with IDW mainstays and produced documentary content on the group's emergence. Dave Rubin's Rubin Report also comprises a large portion of total YouTube shares despite the injuries to his reputation in recent years. Content from Freedom Pact—a channel that has posted a significant amount of content related to the IDW figures like Douglas Murray, Bret Weinstein, Niall Ferguson, Dave Rubin, and others—is the fourth most shared channel followed by content from Jordan Peterson's and Bret Weinstein's YouTube channels.

There is also a considerable amount of IDW-adjacent content, including posts from the Bloggingheads.tv channel (a philosophy video platform started by Robert Wright and Mickey Kaus in 2005), Pangburn (a channel run by Travis Pangburn, founder of theWarofIdeas.org, "A 100% Free Speech Publication"), and Skeptic (the YouTube

channel of *Skeptic Magazine*, whose editor is the science writer and social justice critic Michael Shermer). As expected, clips from the IDW-affiliated podcaster Joe Rogan are popular, as the JREClips (i.e., Joe Rogan Experience Clips) channel is the 10th most shared YouTube domain while full-length episodes from the PowerfulJRE channel (sometimes 3 or more hours long) is the 16th most shared.

There is a considerable amount of content from right-wing YouTube channels (some not shown in the table, for brevity), including The Daily Wire—a far-right media company founded by Ben Shapiro—and Recharge Freedom, which produces an abundance of "anti-woke" and "anti-SJW" content. Media from Scott Veritas—the leader of far-right activist group Project Veritas that is infamous for its pseudo-investigative journalism and fraudulent "undercover operations"—also appears frequently. On his personal YouTube channel, Veritas has published a plethora of content on the dangers of "gender ideology," "forced diversity," the "hidden meanings of woke language," cancel culture, and feminism. Other notable channels include the Cotto-Gottfried long-form interview YouTube channel hosted by Joseph Cotto and Paul Gottfried, the latter of whom is a paleoconservative philosopher largely seen as the intellectual forbearer of the alt-right and a mentor to Richard Spencer (Hawley 2019; Wasserman 2019; Wendling 2019).

The anti-SJW YouTube channel Triggernometry—mockingly named after trigger warnings—has had its videos posted to the subreddit frequently (N=26), as has content from conservative activist Dennis Prager's right-wing propaganda channel PragerU

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(N=20). Other notable mentions include content from alt-right YouTuber Sargon of

Akkad (N=18); clips from Sowell Explains, a fan-run account of videos featuring the

conservative economist Thomas Sowell (N=18); alt-lite content creator Tim Pool's

Timcast (N=18); and evolutionary psychologist and critic of postmodernism, Gad Saad

(N=17). While there is content shared from some progressive or leftist channels—e.g.,

The Majority Report w/ Sam Seder (N=26), Jonas Čeika - CCK Philosophy (N=14), The

Progressive Voice (N=17), Zero Books (N=13), and The Young Turks (N=12)—by and

large, the most frequently posted YouTube channels come from the IDW orbit, IDW-

adjacent creators, right-wing producers, or otherwise contrarian, anti-SJW, and anti-woke

channels.

However, just because content is posted from these channels does not automatically

mean such media is well received by the subreddit. For example, a video shared from

Tim Pool's Timcast channel with the provocative title, "Journalist Accidentally PROVES

'Suitcasegate,' Votes Illegally Counted After Watches Told to Leave," promoting a

conspiracy theory about election fraud during the 2020 presidential election has a net

karma of 0 and was widely ridiculed by the subreddit. The top comment reads "Tim

Pools [sic] titles are always such clickbait. I guess that's how he's the highest earning

political youtuber." For this user, Pool appears as an untrustworthy grifter who exploits

conspiracy theories for monetary gain. Another user writes "This the same Tim Pool who

said 'Trump might with a 49 state majority (even California)'? Lol Very suspicious

behavior from Tim. Wonder what his end goal is," a reference to Pool's severely

implausible prediction that Trump would win in a landslide in 2020. Finally, a different user writes simply that, "This guy has turned into such a pandering idiot."

Such negative sentiment diverges from a positively received video from Tim Pool titled "Google Just Lost a Major Battle in Conservative Bias Lawsuit." This video covers James Damore's lawsuit against Google after Damore was fired by the tech giant for authoring a memo, "Google's Ideological Echo Chamber: How Bias Clouds Our Thinking About Diversity and Inclusion," criticizing the company's diversity, equity, and inclusion practices while also arguing that gender discrepancies in tech are inextricably, even if partly, attributable to biology. One highly upvoted comment reads "The discovery process should prove mightily interesting," while another user asks others to provide tips on how to "avoid using google [sic]."

We see a similar pattern with, for example, content from Scott Veritas's channel. One (now deleted) video posted to the subreddit titled "Journalist Gives Shocking Confession About Media Bias and Corruption" received one top-level comment reply that simply reads "Fake and dumb." In another submission from Veritas's channel titled "Promising New Podcast Covering Very 'IDW' Topics," a subreddit user suspected manipulation from Veritas or someone affiliated with him, writing "If you're plugging your own content then be honest about it. The only thing you've ever done on this account is post videos from this Youtube [sic] channel to right leaning subs." At the same time, other content posted to the subreddit from Veritas's channel has been positively received by the subreddit, such as a video titled "How Feminism Ruins Movies" with a net positive

karma score of 139, as well as a video titled "Why We Should Not Believe All Women: The Excesses and Injustices of the MeToo Movement," with a net score of 120.

Submissions from other right-wing channels, such as the alt-right related Cotto-Gottfried, are quite negatively received (if they receive any attention at all). For example, on one submission from the Cotto-Gottfried channel, a user responded with considerable hostility, stating that

> Fuck off with your bullshit spam. You've done nothing on reddit [sic] other than post every video on this youtube [sic] channel to 17 different subs

while another writes

> I recently tried asking OP [original poster] why they keep posting these vids and they never responded. They don't appear to be on Reddit for any other reason besides spamming these vids so they don't care that their spam isn't welcome here.

Given these considerations, the fact that right-wing YouTube content is frequently posted to the subreddit does not automatically mean that it is endorsed by the subreddit. Users of r/IntellectualDarkWeb are suspicious of certain Reddit accounts they suspect of being "spammy," promoting clickbait, or otherwise attempting to propagandize right-wing content. There is a level of perceived intellectual rigor, merit, and honesty that the subreddit community expects from posters, and the evidence presented suggests that, at least for some users, there is a skeptical attitude towards content intended to root out which media content is genuine and contributes to IDW discourse and which is not. Such boundary policing is important for the IDW to distinguish itself from both mainline conservatism and the alt-right.

In other words, the frequency of YouTube channel submissions can be misleading, and

it is not a reliable indicator of the partisan and ideological commitments of the subreddit's user base. It does, however, suggest that right-wing elements might be "testing the waters" of the IDW to gauge what openings there are for ideological infiltration, as these actors can be reasonably assumed to be posting right-wing content to the subreddit due to a *perception* that it might be well-received. However, as the foregoing qualitative analysis of a few small cases of YouTube content showed, there is nothing automatic about this process, and we should not assume that the presence of such content is equivalent to an endorsement by the subreddit's users. Quality control, content moderation, and discursive policing does occur, most likely to draw clear demarcations between the IDW's style of political and cultural criticism and that affiliated with the partisan right.

Additionally, in more recent observation periods, YouTube is playing a decreasing role in subreddit submissions. As Figure 4.5 shows, while YouTube content has historically contributed a large proportion of subreddit submissions, since August of 2019, it has experienced considerable decline, below 20% of all submissions in many months. Additionally, 62% of all submissions directly linking to YouTube content took place before 2020. On the other hand, text-based posts have seen a steep increase over the same period, peaking at over 60% of all submissions in August of 2021. With text-based posts constituting such a high proportion of submissions in recent observation intervals, and with other non-YouTube associated domains constituting a small proportion of overall submissions, it is reasonable to conclude that from the latter end of 2019 into the

present, the subreddit has seen a shift from media content to more discursive and textual content.

This dramatic shift is most likely attributable to a rule change implemented by moderators of the r/IntellectualDarkWeb subreddit in January 2020, which is reflected in the time series in Figure 6, in which moderators declared that any multimedia posts (e.g., YouTube videos and similar) not directly related to IDW members listed on the subreddit's "Meet the IDW" page would be prohibited. On the other hand, text posts on any topic, even if not directly relevant to specific IDW members, will be allowed so long as they are "provided in good faith."
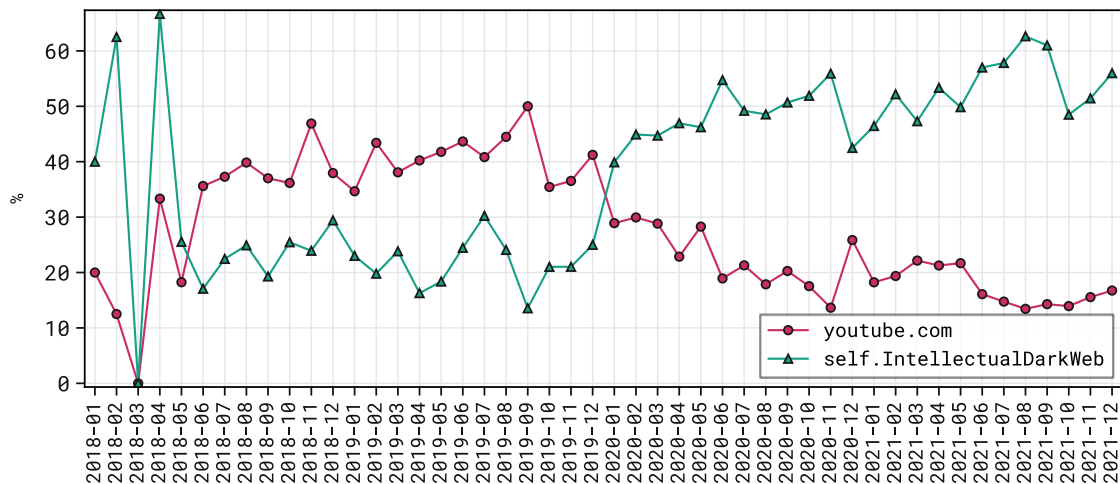

Figure 4.5: Proportion of YouTube and Text Posts Over Time

As one moderator wrote explaining the rule change, "We're trying to encourage more text posts." In a different post, an r/IntellectualDarkWeb subreddit moderator explains the positive impact the rule change has had on the subreddit:

> After feedback from users and much mod discussion we have agreed to continue onward with the January rule. We are going to open the floor to you guys in regards to who you think should be added to the list for a 3 month period and as always anything else is fine as a text post. We feel this has done an admirable job at cutting down on outrage posts and are happy with everything you guys have done to help.

From this moderator provided post, it is clear that the rule was designed to enhance the quality of content and inter-user engagements on the subreddit, with media content being perceived as incentivizing "outrage posts" instead of discussion. This explains the dramatic plunge in YouTube posts and the corresponding increases in text-based posts while also revealing content moderation conundrums within the IDW subreddit: even in a space committed to "rational" inquiry and "civilized debate," emotive "outrage posts" proliferated.

4.4 Topic Model Overview

The final BERTopic model contains a total of 114 HDBSCAN clusters—i.e., unique topics. Each topic is summarized by the top 20 most relevant words for each cluster as determined by the c-TF-IDF algorithm, though for brevity in the written analysis, I will reference the topics by their top five most significant terms. Qualitative inspection of the topics and the comments assigned to each topic revealed that the individual topics could be grouped together into topical themes with related concepts. In total, I manually assigned each topic to one of 10 possible topical themes through an iterative manual

coding process:

1. ***Culture Wars.*** Topics concentrating on divisive social and cultural issues, especially with respect to contemporary social justice activism (e.g., wokeness, cancel culture, equity vs. equality, critical race theory, etc.).

2. ***Governance & Political Institutions.*** Topics concerned with democratic institutions, elections, political parties, and politicians.

3. ***IDW-Related.*** Topics pertaining to the IDW, IDW members, IDW-adjacent figures, and IDW critics.

4. ***Platforms, Media & Information.*** Topics related to digital media, social media platforms, digital content moderation, journalism, and information sources.

5. ***Political Economy.*** Topics focusing on economics, economic policy, and competing economic systems.

6. ***Political Ideologies.*** Topics exploring different political orientations and the real-world applications of different political ideologies (e.g., "actually existing communism" and historical fascism).

7. ***Race & Ethnicity.*** Topics that discuss racism and ethnic prejudices, the reality or unreality of racial injustice (including racist police violence), and the nature of racial differences (e.g., biological versus social conceptions of race).

8. ***Science, Knowledge & Epistemology.*** Topics dealing with scientific and medical issues (e.g., vaccines, mental health, climate change), the nature of truth, standards of evidence, and principles of debate and logical reasoning.

9. ***Sex & Gender.*** Topics focusing on the nature of sexual and gendered difference, LGBTQ+ politics, and sex and gender roles.

10. ***Sociopolitical Conflict.*** Topics focusing on social unrest (e.g., riots and protests) political violence, and geopolitical conflicts.

To visualize the topographical structure of the UMAP embedding, I project the document embeddings into 2D space as seen in Figure 4.6.[17] Each point on the plot represents an individual comment. I shade points according to which of the 10 topic themes they belong to. As can be seen, documents that belong to the same topic theme tend to be clustered near one another in lower-dimensional space based on the similarities of their document embeddings. The full topic specification is provided in the table in Appendix A.

Figure 4.7 plots summary statistics for the topic themes (temporal distributions of the topic themes are available in Appendix C). Panel A shows how many topics belong to each topic group (N=114). Panel B shows the distribution of comments across each topic theme measured by the proportion of comments assigned to a topic in each group (N=404,303). The Platforms, Media & Information topic group contains the most topics (N=18) and the second highest proportion of comments (19.93%), the latter of which is second only to the Science, Knowledge & Epistemology topic group's holding of 22.34% of the comments across its 17 topics. Another 16 topics are situated within the

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[17] The 2D projection is used just for visualization. The topical analysis is based on a 5D UMAP embedding.
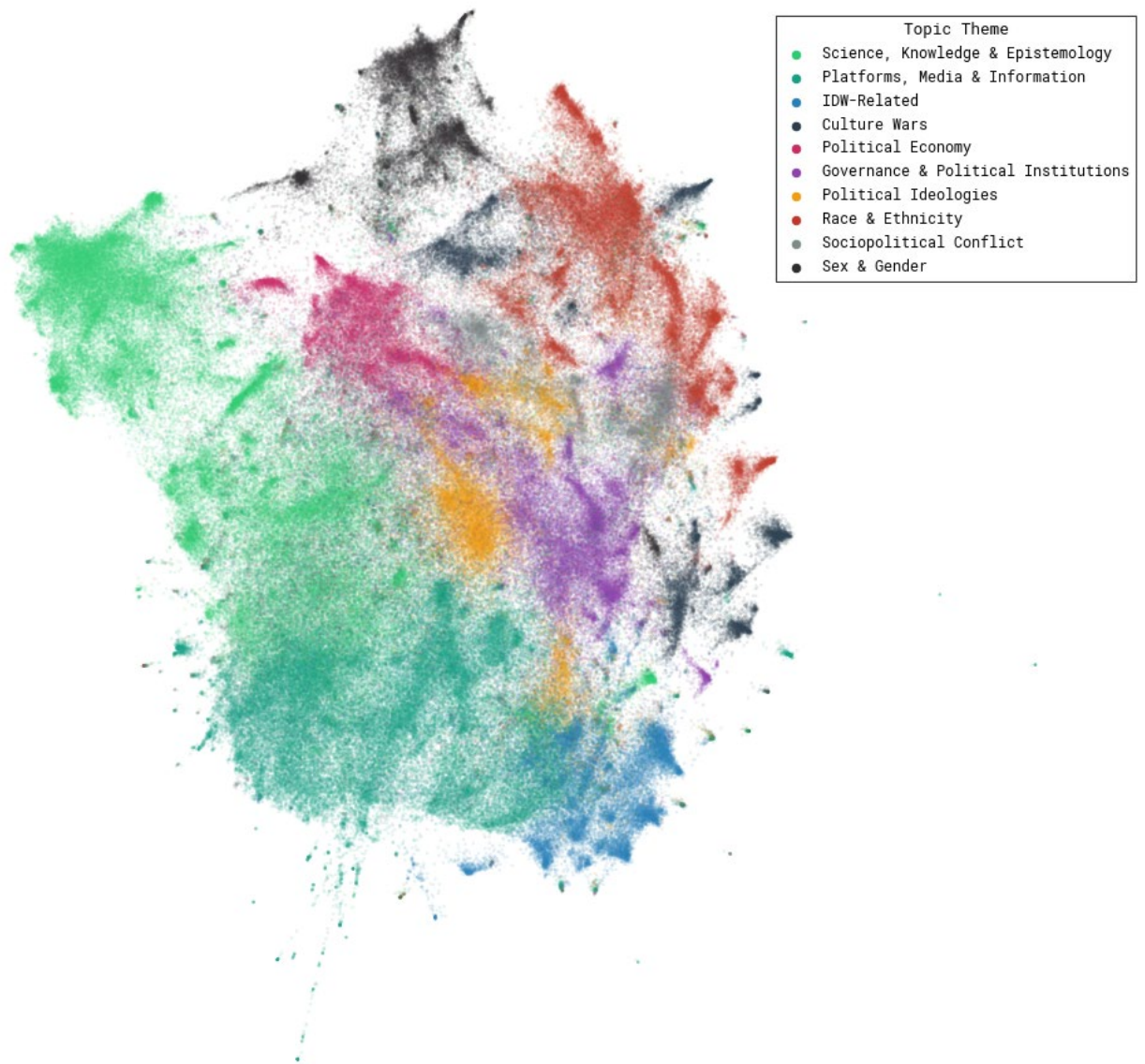
Figure 4.6: 2D UMAP Embedding

Governance & Political Institutions topic group along with 10.11% of the comments.

The IDW-Related topic group houses a sizable chunk of topics (N=14) though a relatively small proportion of comments (6.98%). There are 10 topics each contained in the Sociopolitical Conflict and Culture Wars topic themes distributed across 6.58% and 6.25% of comments, respectively. Interestingly, the Culture Wars topic group contains just a relatively small fraction of total comments, a somewhat unexpected finding given how frequently identity politics, political correctness, and "wokeness" are critiqued by the IDW. However, as will be shown, these sentiments are expressed across other themes as well. The Race & Ethnicity topic group contains 9 topics and a relatively sizable 10.72% of all comments. The remaining topics each contain smaller distributions of both topics and comments, with the Political Ideologies topic theme having 7 topics and 6.48% of all comments, the Political Economy topic group an additional 7 topics and 4.95% of all comments, and the Sex & Gender topic group 6 comments and 5.66% of all comments.

As can be seen in Figure 4.8, while the model contains 114 total topics, the distribution of the comments across the topics is heavily skewed. The top quintile (quintile 5) alone contains 53.58% of all comments (N=216,635). The fourth quintile contains an additional 19.17% of all comments (N=77,522), meaning that between the top two quintiles, almost three-quarters (72.75%) of the comments are accounted for even though both deciles contain only 46 of the 114 total topics (40.35%). The bottom deciles each contain increasingly smaller shares of comments, with the third decile accounting

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**A: Number of Topics in Each Topic Theme
(N=114)**

Platforms, Media & Information
Science, Knowledge & Epistemology
Governance & Political Institutions
IDW-Related
Sociopolitical Conflict
Culture Wars
Race & Ethnicity
Political Ideologies
Political Economy
Sex & Gender

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18

B: Proportion of Comments in Each Topic Theme

Science, Knowledge & Epistemology
Platforms, Media & Information
Race & Ethnicity
Governance & Political Institutions
IDW-Related
Sociopolitical Conflict
Political Ideologies
Culture Wars
Sex & Gender
Political Economy
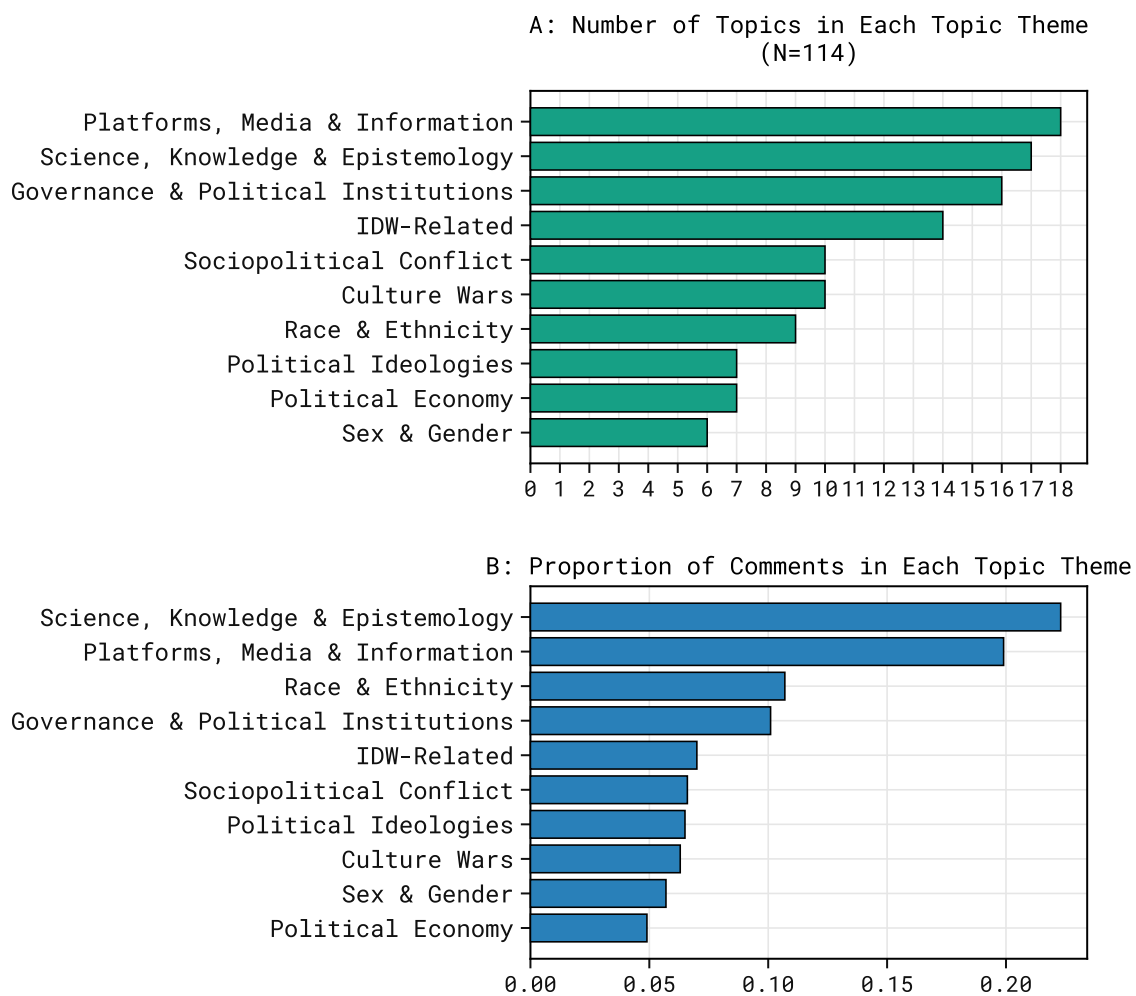
0.00 0.05 0.10 0.15 0.20

Figure 4.7: Topic Theme Frequencies

for 12.0% (N=48,609), the second decile 9.57% (N=38,643), and the first decile just 5.66% (N=22,894). It appears, then, that within r/IntellectualDarkWeb, a large majority of the comments can be represented by a small proportion of dominant topics.

Over the next several chapter, I turn to an evaluation of each topic group, homing in the top five individual topics within each theme, which, as the analysis will show, cover a majority of comments in each topic group. I arrange the analysis of each topic across three chapters which aggregate the 10 topic themes into three overarching "meta-themes" running through the topics nested in each topic theme. These are: (1) ***Sensemaking in Communicative Capitalism***, which houses the *IDW-Related*, *Platforms, Media & Information*, and *Science, Knowledge & Epistemology* topic themes; (2) ***Identity, Ideology and Social Justice***, which houses the *Culture Wars*, *Political Ideologies*, *Race & Ethnicity*, and *Sex & Gender* topic themes; and (3) ***Crises of Civilization***, which houses the *Governance & Political Institutions*, *Political Economy*, and *Sociopolitical Conflict* topic themes. The meaning of each of these meta-themes, and the relations between the topics nested within, will be explored over the next several chapters, all of which are rooted in exhaustive qualitative analysis of my sample of comments.

Importantly, these meta-themes are not meant to serve as rigid categories: the boundaries between my meta-themes are fuzzy and porous. Rather, my use of meta-themes is primarily an analytical strategy that is meant to facilitate the presentation of my qualitative inspection of individual topics. I provide detailed examples from my topical
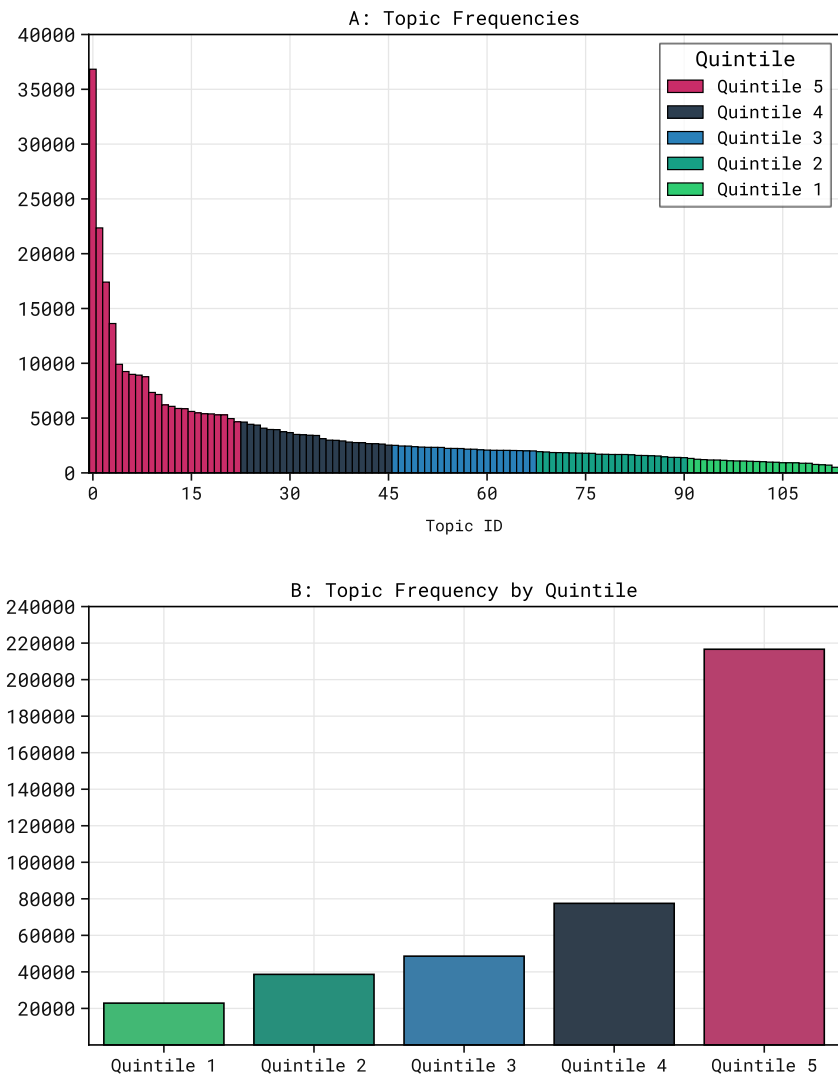
Figure 4.8: Distribution of Topics

analysis to present the data in what I believe to be a nuanced and fair manner, focusing on the complexities, contradictions, and surprises I discovered on the subreddit through my topic model. My rich descriptions can be verbose, but they are, nevertheless, important for adequately describing the data and social dynamics upon which this dissertation is based. With these considerations in mind, I make use of meta-themes as a further grouping device in an effort to ease the reader's engagement with my findings and keep the dissertation's key arguments in the reader's mind as they weave through the dense brush of subreddit comments.

Chapter 5: Sensemaking in Communicative Capitalism

Topics in the Sensemaking in Communicative Capitalism meta-theme are related to one another through their focus on various aspects of epistemology, information access, and reasoning about truth, evidence, and fact—or what is broadly referred to as "sensemaking" within the IDW. To this point, the IDW has been described as an "alternative sensemaking network" that competes with "conventional sensemaking" agents such as journalists, academics, and public officials (Parks 2020). Under the epistemically fractured conditions of communicative capitalism, the sensemaking the IDW engages in is meant to satisfy why Eric Weinstein has called a "need for reality" (Rebel Wisdom 2019a). Throughout the analysis of the topics explored in the following sections, I will illustrate how users of the IDW subreddit engage in sensemaking across diverse topical domains.

The topics below touch on a number of specific issue areas, from the COVID-19 pandemic to free speech on social media platforms, to the meaning of the IDW itself. The epistemological thread running through these topics concerns how we can reason effectively under present social conditions. Central to this process appears to be the capacity to reason in a decentralized way on the subreddit itself, which puts users into direct conversation with one another, meaning their sensemaking is both enabled and

shaped by a technology specific to communicative capitalism—the social media platform. Across these topics, it will be shown how users of the subreddit balance a posture of epistemic skepticism against mainstream institutions, struggle over standards of evidence and logical reasoning, debate matters of information access and speech rights, and evaluate who can be considered reliable authorities of information and analysis.

5.1 Science, Knowledge & Epistemology

Looking first at the Science, Knowledge & Epistemology category, while this topic group has had a relatively sizable presence on the subreddit, averaging 17.44% of all comments across all months, there is a steep rise in this topic group's frequency near the second half of 2021 (see Figures 4.9 and 4.10). The Science, Knowledge & Epistemology topic group reached its apex in August of 2021 when 13,678 comments—52.37% of all comments in that month's sample—were assigned to topics nested within this topic theme. As the bar chart in Figure 5.1 helps illustrate, the domineering presence of the Science, Knowledge & Epistemology category is largely driven by the disproportionate share of comments assigned to Topic 0, which deals overwhelmingly with the COVID-19 pandemic, dwarfing all other topics in this category.

Topic 0 alone contains 9.11% of the entire comment sample. While it is reasonable to expect a large share of comments to focus on COVID-19 given the impact the years-long
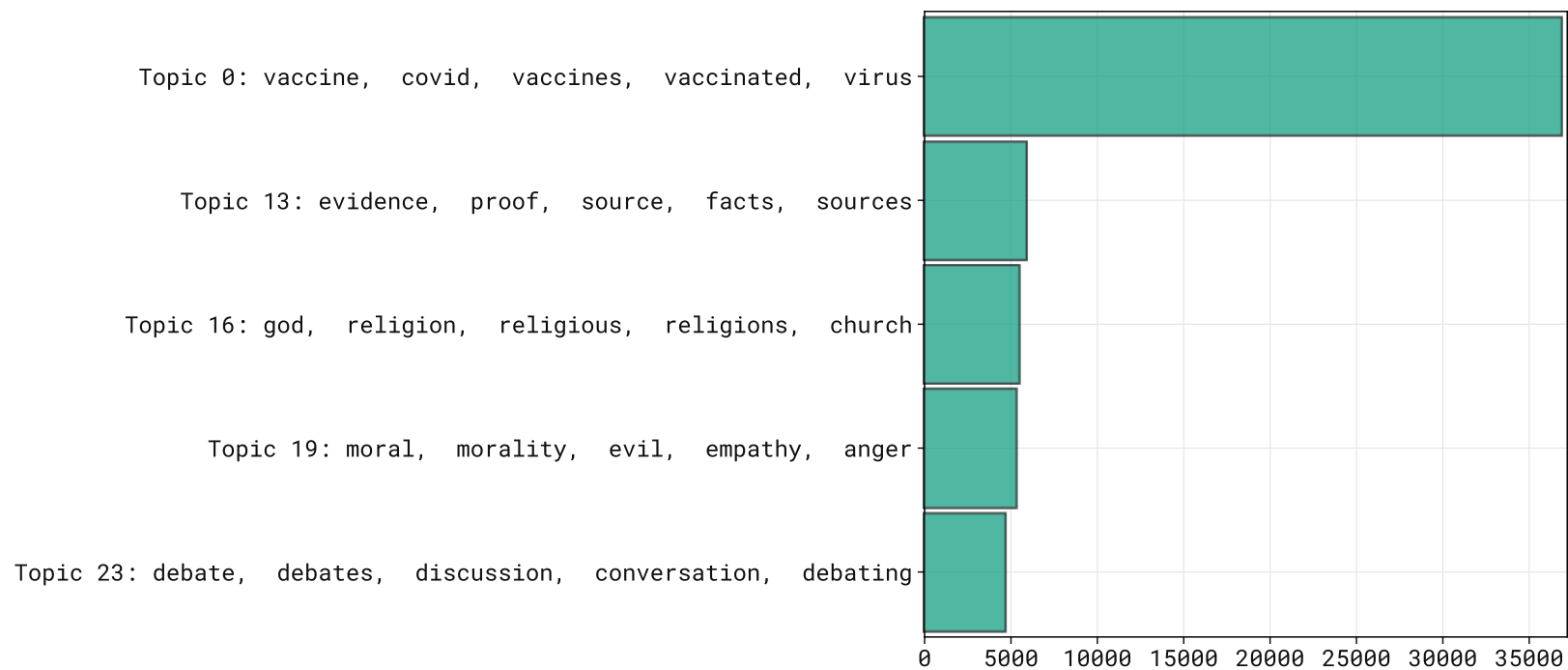
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Figure 5.1: Top 5 Topics in Science, Knowledge & Epistemology

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pandemic has had on social life, within the IDW-sphere, COVID-19 has become a

severely politicized wedge issue for "public intellectuals" to show off their contrarianism,

heterodox thinking, and "skepticism" of mainstream knowledge and institutional

narratives (Browne and Kavanagh 2021).[18]

Contrarian posturing about COVID-19 is justified by the IDW as a virtue of skeptical

and rational inquiry. As Heather Heying (2021) writes in an *Areo* editorial,

> Regardless of what is most needed in the world at any given moment—regardless of
> whether the conditions call for more orthodoxy or more heterodoxy—there always needs
> to be an avenue for discussion. Both orthodox and heterodox ideas always need to be
> publicly discussable. Otherwise, whoever holds the most power when censorship
> begins—at the point at which people begin hiding their thoughts and conversations—will
> gain ever more power. The powerful will shape the governing orthodoxy—and it will
> always be an orthodoxy, even if its central ideas were heterodox just yesterday—and will
> crack down ever harder on those who dissent.

Orthodoxy—here, a proxy for the logics, assumptions, and governing power of

mainstream knowledge as it is embedded in social institutions—tends towards

authoritarianism, to the foreclosure of skeptical dialogue. And, Heying (2021) warns, we

are observing this tendency at play with respect to the discourses surrounding COVID-

19:

> What if SARS-CoV2 leaked from a lab? What if there are long-term effects of mRNA
> vaccines? What if Ivermectin is a safe and effective prophylaxis against, and treatment
> for, COVID-19?… Those of us who asked them, throughout 2020 and well into 2021,
> have been called conspiracy theorists, and worse. Our intentions have been questioned.

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[18] IDW mainstays Bret Weinstein and Heather Heying have committed a growing list of episodes of
their Dark Horse Podcast to casting doubt on the legitimacy of the medical establishment, public health
policy, and the safety of COVID-19 vaccines (e.g., Weinstein 2021, 2021). Joe Rogan, too, has
broadcast COVID-19 misinformation to his audience of millions (Qiu 2022), prompting high-profile
musicians like Neil Young to pull their music from Spotify—the platform with which Rogan has a
multi-million-dollar exclusivity deal to publish his podcast—in protest (Sisario 2022).

> We have been told to keep quiet. Some have self-censored, and others have been brought to heel by Big Tech…When scientific thinking and a careful analysis of the scientific literature leads to a different conclusion than the declarations of the authorities, what path does *#followthescience* suggest? Science does not operate by authority, but *#followthescience* is being used as a bludgeon to silence people into compliance.

COVID-19 skepticism, then, amounts to nothing less than a virtuous defense of the scientific method itself. The authorities telling us to "follow the science" (in the excerpt above, Heying is mocking the use of the hashtag #followthescience in social media) are compelling us to be *un*scientific, to remove skeptical hypotheses from the table, and to accept the decrees of experts and authorities with docility.

Such a dynamic of COVID-19 contrarianism is also at play in r/IntellectualDarkWeb. The comment in Topic 0 with the highest karma in the sample—a score of 389—is a lengthy contribution that reads:

> Let me preface by saying I'm generally a libertarian leaning conservative, who got the vaccine after having COVID. I had some rare side effects from COVID…and didn't want to risk getting COVID again and possibly more side effects…But these were risk calculations done by me based on the opinions of people much smarter than me…The moral problem I run into is telling other people what medical decisions they should make for themselves, based on risk calculations they aren't participating in…COVID is not smallpox, or [E]bola, or bubonic plague, or polio. It has an extraordinary survival rate, which makes the problem of forcing people to make uncalculated medical decisions problematic…COVID-19 was used as a political cudgel against President Trump…as a means to undermine the perceived effectiveness of the vaccine developed during his presidency…But this is the very same vaccine that President Biden is now urging Americans to take…How many people am I willing to kill by outsourcing violence to the state to fulfill my moral imperative of maintaining public health? While this sounds hyperbolic…any mandate from government comes from the end of a gun barrel…If you mandate a medical procedure, and a person refuses to participate, what is your answer to that person?…Violence. If they resist hard enough, death. So, by my calculations, mandating vaccines for COVID-19 means that you are willing to put some members of society to death in order to prevent a disease that has a 98%+ survival rate. This is bad.

Here, this user expresses opposition to COVID-19 vaccine mandates on a variety of grounds, both ethical and scientific. This user proclaims that they are vaccinated but

came to that decision based on "individual risk calculations." Compelling society at large

to be vaccinated is inevitably coercive and unethical, forcing upon individuals "risk

calculations" they are incapable of making. Moreover, such compulsion is seen as both

excessive considering COVID-19's perceived survivability ("98%+") and an immoral

extension of state power. Inevitably, to enforce its will, at least some members of society

will be put "to death" by the state for resisting its sovereign power. Combined with the

fact that the vaccines have become "politicized" and are aimed at treating a virus seen to

be far less serious than other illnesses, this user believes there is compelling reason to

oppose COVID-19 vaccination mandates to preserve individual liberty.

On the other extreme, the comment with the lowest karma (a score of -69) criticizes

users on the subreddit for entertaining the idea that "natural immunity" by way of

COVID-19 infection is superior to vaccination, writing that, "What about all the dead

people, natural immunity didn't help them." Another comment with a negative karma

score (-62) questions whether there is a censorship campaign being waged against those

promoting unproven treatments to COVID-19, such as ivermectin, in lieu of vaccination:

> There is no "suppression of ivermectin". We have a vaccine that's proven effective. YouTube has a
> valid reason to suppress videos convincing people to avoid the vaccine in favor of an unproven
> drug.

The user is specifically responding to a post on the subreddit linking to a Tweet by Bret

Weinstein thanking Joe Rogan for hosting him on an "emergency podcast" episode

discussing ivermectin. The "emergency" was Weinstein having received official strikes

against his DarkHorse Podcast YouTube channel for violating YouTube's medical

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misinformation policies. On the subreddit, the post appears with the title "After being

censored and defamed Bret Weinstein has 'emergency' JRE podcast." For opposing the

contrarian IDW line on COVID-19, this user was penalized by the community, receiving

a slew of downvotes and negative responses, including:

Example A:

You should really familiarize yourself with the topic (at least listen to the damned episode under discussion) before trying to make an argument against it. They're saying that the effectiveness of ivermectin against covid has been known (edit: strong evidence of its effectiveness) since early 2020 and has been systematically suppressed for unknown reasons (but possibly related to the fact that there are untold billions to be made on covid vaccines).

Example B:

There was suppression of Ivermectin. If valid therapeutics were available, the experimental vaccine would have never gotten emergency approval. It was known early in the pandemic that Ivermectin worked, far before the vaccine was released and that info was suppressed to ensure that the experimental vaccine got approval. It was a big payday for big pharma.

Example C:

You're either an idiot or a shill.

In Example A, we see a user casting doubt on the original commenter's knowledge of the

supposed efficacy of ivermectin and the reality of the "systematic suppression" of that

knowledge, which the user speculates is a nefarious plot to boost the profits of COVID-

19 vaccine makers. The user in Example B refers to the COVID-19 vaccines as the

experimental vaccine, immediately delegitimizing the vaccines and asserting that "it was

known early in the pandemic" that ivermectin worked but was suppressed to give a "big

payday" to "big pharma." Finally, Example C is simply ad hominem, insulting the

original commenter for being either an "idiot" or a "shill." Breaking ranks with the

IDW's contrarian line on COVID-19 can lead to censure on the subreddit, risking one being labeled as too mainstream, naive, or insufficiently skeptical.

The next most frequent topic in the group is Topic 13, which overwhelmingly contains comments where users demand evidence from one another in argumentative contexts. For example, the comment with the highest similarity to the topic vector (c=.75) is a comment by a user demanding another to "Pick your strongest evidence then. Waiting." Other comments with high similarity to the topic vector follow a similar syntax, such as: "Show me the evidence. Don't just make empty claims" (c=.75); "Bullshit. You make the claim, you supply the proof or you shut up. That's how it works" (c=.74); and "Well do you have the evidence that backs it up? If so, I'll withdraw my claim" (c=.73).

In each of these examples, users on the forum attempt to hold others accountable when they are perceived as operating with low standards of evidence. This accountability process spans across issue areas. For example, on a submission focusing on Trump's attempt to overturn the 2020 election, a debate ensued between users over the veracity of Trump's voter fraud claims. In response to a user demanding evidence of actual fraud, a commenter responds, "Here is a crowd sourced list of evidence. I'll let you take it how you want, but there is evidence" and links to a website—hereistheevidence.com—that has compiled data on the "irregularity" of the 2020 election. Featured on the site is an interactive dashboard that allows users to explore what the site claims is aggregated "publicly available items of evidence that would be admissible in court." The site features

similar dashboards for the COVID-19 pandemic due to "scientific inconsistencies and legal issues" and the January 6th Capitol riot due to the "highly irregular decisions made by government agencies surrounding the January 6th Capitol Protest." [19]

This is illustrative of the ways that the contrarian posturing can spread like an "oil spill" across topical fields through the medium of a "skeptic" identity and its ideological supports (cf. DellaPosta 2020) and is also indicative of how a general anti-mainstream attitude can fuel a conspiratorial epistemology that sees mainstream authorities as untrustworthy co-conspirators in secret plots (Starbird, Arif, and Wilson 2019). In the latter case, mainstream information sources from institutions such as the press or government agencies lose their legitimacy due their closeness to power. Instead, we must rely on our own intuitions, vigilance, and capacity to sift through open-source data *ourselves* so as not to be duped by elite narratives.

As the top keywords in Topic 16 indicate, this topic focuses on religion—specifically, debates about the utility and purpose of religion as a social practice. The comment most similar to the topic vector (c=.73) is a post by a user arguing for an approach to religion that sounds as if it could be grounded in the pragmatist tradition of sociology, writing "We don't live in some world of stagnant ideas. I'm really more interested in how people interpret these ideas (and what motivates those interpretations) and how they impact the world." Other users comment on their appreciation for how IDW figures have used

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[19] I archived the dashboard with the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, available here: https://web.archive.org/web/20220305155142/https://hereistheevidence.com/

religious cosmology as a metaphorical device in their social analyses, such as Jordan

Peterson: "As an ex Christian [sic] evangelist (now agnostic [C]hristian), I for one find

[Jordan] Peterson's interpretation of the Logos and its Religious underpinnings

spellbinding." In other contexts, users evaluate the truth content of religious doctrine

itself, such as in this comment:

> Religion with outlandish claims about reality is impossible for educated smart people; one cannot 'decide to believe' in an irrational concept. Therefore, I refute the western idea of a 'creator god' (an idea thoroughly refuted by ancient [G]reek philosophers and in [B]uddhist philosophical works). This refutation is not a choice either: I am interested in the truth, not in a quick nonsensical explanation.

This user takes the position that smart and educated people simply *cannot* hold certain

types of religious beliefs, such as a personal creator God, for they are wholly irrational

concepts. Moreover, the user indicates that Greek and Buddhist philosophers have

already debunked Western, presumably Christian, religious notions. Such refutation is

not a choice but follows automatically from reason itself.

Interestingly, this user's position on religion directly ties into their perceived societal

threat of Islam, as they continue in their comment:

> In the face of islamisation [sic], because I care for mankind as such and think that islamisation will lead us into the abyss of hell on earth, I am indeed much less against [C]hristian movements. But I will never be a member of such groups.

Here, Islam is represented as uniquely problematic in contrast to Christian movements,

which may be irrational but nonviolent. Islamophobic rhetoric of this sort is not

uncommon in the IDW and IDW-adjacent spheres, in which public thinkers routinely

argue that Islam is particularly barbaric, backwards, and culturally incompatible with the

Enlightenment traditions of the Western world (Mondon and Winter 2020). Online, "rational Islamophobia" manifests itself in a number of ways, such as the bigoted meme of "*rape*fugees"—a racist slur against Muslim refugees seeking asylum in the Western (particularly European)—that presumes Muslims immigrants to be sexually violent and threatening to white Western women (Dafaure 2020).

This comment thread also feeds into a topic from the Race & Ethnicity topic group, specifically Topic 60 (*islam, muslims, muslim, islamic, france*) focusing on Islam and the West. One comment with a high similarity to the topic vector (c=.77) makes the connection explicit:

> Islamic dogma is inherently incompatible with western ideals. Talking about freedom of speech, separation of church and state, tolerance of gays, equal rights for women. And so on. Politicians really need to quit listening to the wokesters and the Islamic foundations. Can't imagine it'll ever happen in places like Sweden and Germany, but It's reassuring to finally see some pushback in France.

As the user argues, Islam is dogmatic and "inherently incompatible" with Western values. A series of liberal virtues—such as freedom of speech, separation of church and state, tolerance for LGBTQ+ people, and women's rights—are positioned as irrelevant to Muslims. The user blames "wokesters"—i.e., progressives—for making it taboo to speak candidly about Islam, Similar reasoning is deployed by a user in a different comment thread where they challenge the notion that Muslims are marginalized in the West:

> Marginalised in the Western world is an extreme view and wrong. Firstly, most people in the west have no issue with Muslims. It's only a few far right idiots who have an issue with them. In Muslim countries, being gay, Christian, atheist, Jewish or transgender puts your life at serious risk. Being Muslim in a western country does no such thing. Furthermore, as I said, Christianity is the most persecuted religion in the world.

In this comment, Islamophobia is minimized to "a few far right idiots" instead of a general social attitude. Once more, Western tolerance for difference is contrasted with perceived Islamic intolerance—indeed in "Muslim countries" such differences put "your life at serious risk." In the West, by contrast, being Muslim does "no such thing," and, in actuality, "Christianity is the most persecuted religion in the world." As scholars have shown, the strategic deployment of women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and the expressive rights of liberal individuals is a common trope used to rationalize Western prejudices about Islam (Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010; Mondon and Winter 2020).

Turning to the final two topics in Figure 5.1, Topic 19 and Topic 23, the former focuses on comments discussing issues related to ethics and the latter focuses on the principles of debate and argument.

Looking at Topic 19, debates about moral realism and applied ethics feed back into defenses of the Western world's "superior" moral progress with respect to non-Western societies. One user, for example, insists upon the need for objective moral codes to fend off the creeping threat of moral relativism:

> When the definitions of Good and Evil are relative, they can be changed an manipulated easily. Bad things can be made good easily, and good things called Evil. Moral relativism never works, long-term.

This sentiment echoes that of Sam Harris, one of the original public intellectuals and podcasters tied to the IDW. In his book *The Moral Landscape*, Harris argues that we can devise objectively true moral knowledge through the scientific study of values. He summarizes his thesis thusly: "when talking about values, we are actually talking about

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an interdependent world of facts" (Harris 2010:4). Anticipating objections that point to the variance of moral systems across time and cultures, Harris (2010) argues that, as with "all matters of fact, differences of opinion on moral questions merely reveal the incompleteness of our knowledge; they do not oblige us to respect a diversity of views indefinitely" (p. 10). Similarly, Harris (2010) argues that the epistemic position of moral relativism is nothing more than "an attempt to pay intellectual reparations for the crimes of Western colonialism, ethnocentrism, and racism" (p. 45). Here, Harris is targeting Western liberals and progressives who, because they do not want to appear as bigoted, racist, and Eurocentric, apologize for non-Western moral systems, such as that of which Harris (2010) calls the "especially low-hanging fruit of conservative Islam," which permits "demonizing homosexuals, stoning adulterers, veiling women, soliciting the murder of artists and intellectuals, and celebrating the exploits of suicide bombers" (p. 74). Again, we see the specter of Islam arise as the penultimate threat to Western Enlightenment virtues—in this case, liberal morality. Rather than fleeing from a concept of Western ethical superiority, we must come to terms with the moral realist position that "some cultures will tend to produce lives that are more worth living than others" (Harris 2010:191).

Finally, turning our attention to Topic 23, we see how debate is conceptualized by users on the subreddit:

> **Example A:**
>
> Honestly, a debate is a discussion. If you're incapable of talking to someone outside of your echo

chamber, then just say so instead of trying to look intellectually superior. And if your response to people challenging your beliefs is to run away, I wouldn't hold my breath on anyone changing their mind.

Example B:

But even in a discussion of person A vs. person B, it is helpful to steel man your opponent's views after each side has had a chance to state their position. So many bad faith debates occur because one or both sides strips out all the nuance from their opponent and argues against the worst version of their argument…it is helpful to first start out by stating your position, and letting your "opponent" try to articulate your argument to a point where you are satisfied that they fully understand it…Otherwise you keep talking past each other and no progress is made. A few IDW members have advocated for this approach (and I believe they used it in the Sam Harris vs. Jordan Peterson debates with Bret, at least in the beginning).

Example C:

There are two reasons I engage in protracted debates with people online. The main one is if there is the potential to learn something from the exchange…Defending one's position against a strong interlocutor is the best way to strengthen it…The other reason I engage is when the issue is important enough, or the comment has enough visibility, that leaving a bad argument uncontested is itself harmful. There's also the occasion when someone is just demonstrably wrong and I feel the urge to correct it for its own sake. But I'm trying to cut back on this last one.

In the first example, the commenter is criticizing other users for lacking the intellectual rigor to debate someone outside of their own echo chamber, and then "running away" when challenged from the outside. In Example B, this user lays out the principle of "steel manning" in debates —i.e., accurately representing your opponent's viewpoint by making the strongest case possible for their position—to facilitate a productive conversation, a cornerstone of IDW discourse Finally, Example C is a comment from a user justifying why they engage in online debates at all. The user defends this decision on the grounds of (1.) debate as dialectic—i.e., an opportunity for new knowledge to be gleaned through disagreement—and (2.) harm reduction. In the latter case, the user explains, if a bad argument has gained traction in an online community, it risks spreading further and, presumably, shaping people's knowledge in a negative way by imbuing them

with incorrect knowledge. They also mention that if they come across a user whose position is simply "wrong," they feel the urge "to correct it for its own sake."

5.2 Platforms, Media & Information

Turning next to the Platforms, Media & Information topic group, we see that in absolute terms, the number of comments classified in this thematic group have been rising steadily over time (see Figure A.C.1 in Appendix C). As a proportion of overall comments, however, the group has been relatively stable at just above 20% of all comments ($\overline{X}$=24.12%) across all time intervals (see Figure A.C.2 in Appendix C). In terms of absolute frequency, this topic group peaked in October of 2020 when it contained 4,229 of all comments (20.12%). Figure 5.2 shows the top five topics in this topic group.

Looking first at the most frequent topic in the group, Topic 1, it appears to be summarized by generic words like "thanks," "answer," and "comment." Upon closer inspection, however, these terms do accurately summarize the comments in the topic. This topic classifies comments where users evaluate one another's communicative encounters on the r/IntellectualDarkWeb subreddit specifically. For example, this comment criticizes a different user over the latter's poor quality of engagement on the subreddit:

> I'm sorry I appear confused to you. Your statements lead me to conclude that our frames are too out of alignment for a constructive conversation. Good luck.

Another expresses irritation at the insufficient level of rigor in one of their opponent's
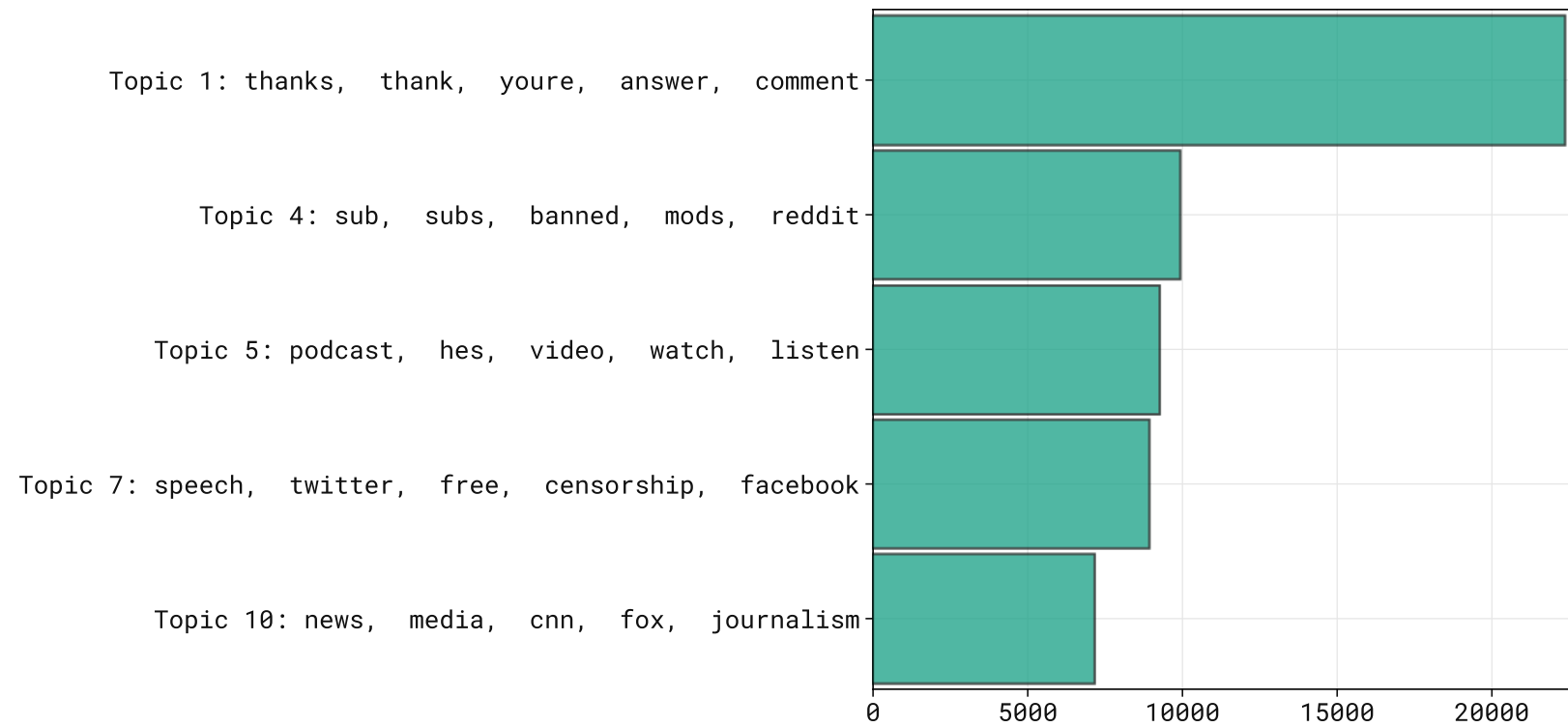
Figure 5.2: Top 5 Topics in Platforms, Media & Information

arguments:

> You really haven't replied to the content of what I've said yet. You've just tried to discredit its relevance. I'll let that speak for itself this deep in the thread. Have a good night.

Additionally, "thanks" and "thank" are often used sarcastically in this topic, helping explain why they are weighted as highly relevant words:

Example A:

> Look how much effort you put into the least significant part of what I'm saying. I was just making sure you're aware of a fallacy, my main point was that "you don't understand perspective" and you ignored that…Anyways thanks for the biggest waste of time I've had in while…

Example B:

> So you read my 4 paragraphs, took out a minor philosophical point I threw in, and your analysis is "this is total garbage". Thanks for your wisdom.

On the other hand, some users express actual appreciation towards others for appearing to be good faith and constructive:

> I wish you and others had this kind of tone in your initial retort—we'd learn a lot more from one another. I appreciate your articulated candor and I'll look into it more so I can better understand what I initially discovered.

Communicative successes or failures on the Reddit platform, then, constitute the thematic substance in Topic 1.

Due to the interrelatedness of topics 4, 7, and 10, I will first explore Topic 5 alone, which focuses on comments from users discussing their opinions about podcasts and media. For example, the comment with the highest similarity to the topic vector (c=.80) comes from a user explaining why they like Ben Shapiro's podcast even though he is largely seen as a right-wing partisan:

> I listen to his podcast daily and his perspective is usually pretty on point in my opinion. I think you'd get a better idea of who he is by listening to his podcasts rather than his short "college liberal destroyer" videos.

The second most similar comment to the topic vector (c=.79) offers similar sentiments in response to a post sharing a Joe Rogan podcast episode featuring the leftist YouTuber, Kyle Kulinski:

> He's the kind of guy I could sit down and disagree with on a large swath of stances, but things would remain entirely civil and off of nonsense scapegoats to race or gender apologist tropes. He's great to listen to if for nothing but an opposing viewpoint to my own, which is by nature stimulating. Great podcast.

Topics 4, 7, and 10 are all interrelated in important ways, each addressing dimensions of censorship, content moderation, and information access. Topic 4 tends to focus on the platform politics of Reddit specifically, including the difficulties that come with policing subreddit boundaries and enforcing rules and moderation:

> These subs [i.e. subreddits] are experiments. The bigger it gets that harder they are to manage. Any kind of remotely political sub that is trying to be non-partisan and unbiased is going to have a very tuff [sic] time. It's a hard balance to figure out how much and what kind of gatekeepong is best.

Another user criticizes Reddit moderators for abusing their authority, censoring opposing opinions, and creating ideological echo chambers:

> Reddit mods are notorious for making their subs into echo chambers. There is literally a "cult" of Reddit mods that control the majority of the most popular subs and they will go as far as to ban you if you post in a sub they don't like. I've been banned from a dozen or more regional and political subs just for presenting a different point of view. I have a few posted if you want to take a look.

In a similar vein, a comment made in response to a post by a user complaining about being banned from a different subreddit urges Reddit users to keep in mind the specific

platform affordances of Reddit itself when engaging in political discussions:

> As someone banned from a number of subs for having (not even expressing) opinions a mod didn't like, my advice is this. Remember Reddit is a free, pseudonymous message board. Keep your expectations for civility low and you won't be disappointed when this happens. Is the discourse on this site manipulated? Yes, of course. Always has been.

As a free platform that allows users to engage with each other in a pseudononymous fashion, users should have low expectations for the quality of behavior on Reddit in order to avoid being "disappointed" at moderator overreach.

The discussion of digital censorship is expanded to social media platforms more generally in Topic 7. As is evident by the comments in this topic, there is considerable debate over what counts as censorship in the context of social media. According to one user's perspective,

> …Twitter and FB [i.e., Facebook] are the new public square. It is where 95% of the internet go to exchange ideas. Our first amendment protects our right to express our ideas, and to have at least some potential equal access to said public square where our ideas can be heard. IF the public square is now FB and Twitter, which many many many people believe it is, is denying access to it not a form of free speech denial? That is the central assertion here.

Another user takes a different approach, arguing that the private property rights of social media platforms mean they have a right to censor content:

> …Again, THERE ARE NO FREE SPEECH RIGHTS IN PRIVATE ENTERPRISE, PRIVATE SOCIAL STRUCTURES, OR PRIVATE RELATIONSHIPS. A private entity/person can not violate the free speech rights of an individual, only government can violate those rights. These rights do not exist between people/private entities, they exist only between the government and the governed. If the government prevents businesses from censoring then that is a form of socialism (which I may or may not support).

This perspective, however, does not seem to gain significant traction in the subreddit. As one comment expresses:

> Thats a problem right? I mean, at some point how is it acceptable that a private company can arbitrate the speech of millions of Americans. The internet has become public and social media (like it or not) has become the town square for many folks. How is there no application of the principles of constitutionally protected speech[?] I dont [sic] trust that Twitter or Facebook are willing to be non biased. They have not demonstrated they are neutral at all. In fact, they have taken the opposite stance by publicly stating they support a particular ideology and being blatantly partisan in their choices of whom to ban off their platform. It seems to me that without some kind of fairness doctrine or legal structure to govern them, this problem could get worse, not better over time.

Here, the commenter expresses their lack of trust in social media companies to fairly regulate content from across the ideological spectrum, as they are felt to be biased against certain ideologies (notably, conservative ideologies). Still another user laments the felt diversion from American speech norms on big social media platforms:

> Twitter (and other social media companies for that matter) are breaking from American historical behavior in their penchant for censorship. It being legal or not is secondary to the principle of free speech that has been a bedrock of American civic life for the entire existence of this country. However, the fact that courts have interpreted way more protection for internet companies than they were supposed to have from section 230 [i.e., the section of the Communications Decency Act protecting digital companies from legal liability with respect to the content posted by users of their platforms] when they exercise this much editorial discretion is also very troubling and will be resolved either by the legislature or the supreme court [sic] eventually. You don't get to act like you are a completely public platform but then get to decide what can be said (that isn't illegal) and by whom.

These concerns about social media content moderation have become trenchant online, especially among conservatives who feel that "Big Tech" unfairly targets right-wing content for censorship (Jasser et al. 2021). Such criticisms of Big Tech censorship have received boosts from IDW figures like Sam Harris, Jordan Peterson, and Dave Rubin, all of whom publicly disavowed the crowdfunding site Patreon after it banned the alt-right YouTuber Sargon of Akkad from its platform in a perceived show of left-wing political bias (Bowles 2018b). Moreover, the IDW mastermind Eric Weinstein has introduced the notions of the "gated institutional narrative" (the GIN) and the "distributed idea

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suppression complex" (the DISC) as concepts for identifying how certain types of speech, discourses, and narratives are discredited, distorted, or prohibited by the existing societal hegemony to protect the power of that hegemony from popular contestation and a legitimacy crisis (Weinstein 2020). Such concerns about the left-wing ideological biases of social media and the platforms' impulse towards censorship is inspiring many users to flee to alt-tech platforms free from content moderation and speech controls (Donovan et al. 2019).

Topic 10 from Figure 5.2 focuses squarely on the mainstream press and cable news, as its most representative keywords show (*news*, *media*, *cnn*, *fox*, *journalism*), with a focus on the credibility and biases in journalism. As the comment most similar to the topic vector writes (c=.83),

> …I sometimes find that if all I'm reading is crap reporting all around it only helps me to recognize bias, not really understand what might have happened. I think that a lot of new media that is steadily becoming more popular (mostly in the form of podcasts, and most of the really good ones belonging to members of the IDW) does a much better job of both providing facts *and* making it clear where their biases are. While most of the larger media outlets, like the ones you mentioned, would claim to be objective (which I find to be quite dangerous when it's so obviously untrue), outlets like The Daily Wire skew quite conservatively and make no secret of it.

Here, this user expresses that consuming "junk news" is helpful for sniffing out latent biases in journalism. Against the mainstream press, which claims to "be objective" but is not, the user notes how new media—such as podcasts hosted by IDW members—has more legitimacy than mainstream news for the way podcast hosts combine explications of objective facts with honest disclosures of ideological orientation. This user also seemingly sees partisan publications, such as the far-right *Daily Wire*, as more authentic

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because they make "no secret" of their biases unlike the mainstream press, which

represents itself as nonpartisan and objective.

In a similar vein, another commenter explains that

> …If you get all of your news source [sic] from any one of the outlets listed you're taking in a significant amount of bias. NYT, Fox, WaPo all have good journalists but the editorial programs are designed to continuously feed what their target audience is looking for which is where I see the majority of blatantly wrong or at least misconstrued headlines[.] What I've tried to do is follow individuals instead of publications. A lot of the good journalists have newsletters or podcasts these days.

Instead of sourcing one's information from *publications* as a whole, such as a newspaper,

this user advocates following *individuals* instead, including some of the "good

journalists" who have their own newsletters and podcasts. Again, we see a suspicion

towards the motives of the mainstream press, whose editorial contents mirrors what their

"target audiences" want to see .The stakes of trusting the mainstream press as a whole are

spelled out bluntly by a different user:

> It's not enough to just ignore the opinions and focus on the facts; There are also things like narrative framing and lies of omission that can make their reporting of the news completely useless if not outright harmful. Frankly, the difficult truth is that corporate media is completely untrustworthy. Full stop, no caveats.

Without any caveats, the corporate media is completely untrustworthy and therefore

cannot be relied upon as an accurate source of information.

However, these are not the only opinions expressed in relation to the mainstream

press and journalism. For example, while another commenter argues against sourcing

one's news from "24-hour [cable] networks," which are seen as having a structural

disincentive to "inform and educate" due to their need to "fill air time to sell

commercials," they note that print journalism is "in a better place." Nevertheless, they

prefer "reporting from sources that aren't for-profit companies, like NPR, BBC and

PBS." This user concludes their long comment by cautioning others against the pitfalls of

a maximalist anti-mainstream view:

> I would say what is equally dangerous as the race-to-the-bottom in cable news, is the reactionary stance of writing off everything mainstream merely because it's mainstream, and "I get real news. I watch insert fringe thing online." Just because CNN and Fox prefer sensationalism over substance doesn't automatically mean that InfoWars or Natural News are reliable sources. Just because "the lamestream media won't tell you about this miracle cure for Ebola" doesn't automatically mean that it gets some level of credibility.

To this user, while there are severe problems with certain species of mainstream news

providers and their subjugation to the profit motive (notably, cable news), print

journalism and non-profit broadcasters are seen as less dependent on economic interests

and therefore more reliable. Importantly, for this user, non-mainstream sources are *not*

presumed to be credible simply on account of their marginality.

Nevertheless, even in the more forgiving comment quoted above, there remains a

suspicion towards the mainstream press and mainstream journalism. Interestingly,

suspicion about how the profit motive distorts the incentive structure of media companies

underpins many users' criticisms, whether it be advertiser-dependent corporate networks

or subscription dependent papers, both of which are seemingly compelled by market

forces to supply the ideological material that their consumers demand. Such criticisms are

not at all far removed from those raised by critical theorists who similarly lament the

malign influence of market forces on mass media, and therefore argue for de-

commodifying news consumption by forging "alternative" and "critical" information

networks (Fuchs 2010). Once more, the fantasies of informational democratization and

access are shown to be impure, as informational surplus and consumer choice never

automatically lead to the liberatory ends imagined (Dean 2005). Indeed, progressive

media critics would certainly object to the types of non-mainstream, critical content

sourced by many IDW listeners through their preferred alternative information feeds.

5.3 IDW-Related

Comments related to the IDW rose steadily through the beginning of 2019 before

dipping in 2020 (see Figure A.C.1 in Appendix C). However, a rebound is observed in

the middle of 2020 before another downward trend. Interestingly, however, the

proportion of comments belonging to the IDW-Related topic group has been falling

steadily over the observation period (see Figure A.C.2 in Appendix C). Over time, then, it

appears that topics dealing directly with the IDW have constituted a decreasing share of

all comments, and interesting trend.

Figure 5.3 shows the most frequent topics in the IDW-Related category. As can be

seen, these topics focus on discussions of membership of the IDW, the IDW's ideas, and

individual members of the group such as Eric Weinstein, Bret Weinstein, Ben Shapiro,

Dave Rubin, and Jordan Peterson. Comments in Topic 12 (*idw, members, sub, left, ideas*)

are primarily concerned with identifying the purpose of the IDW, its core ideas, and

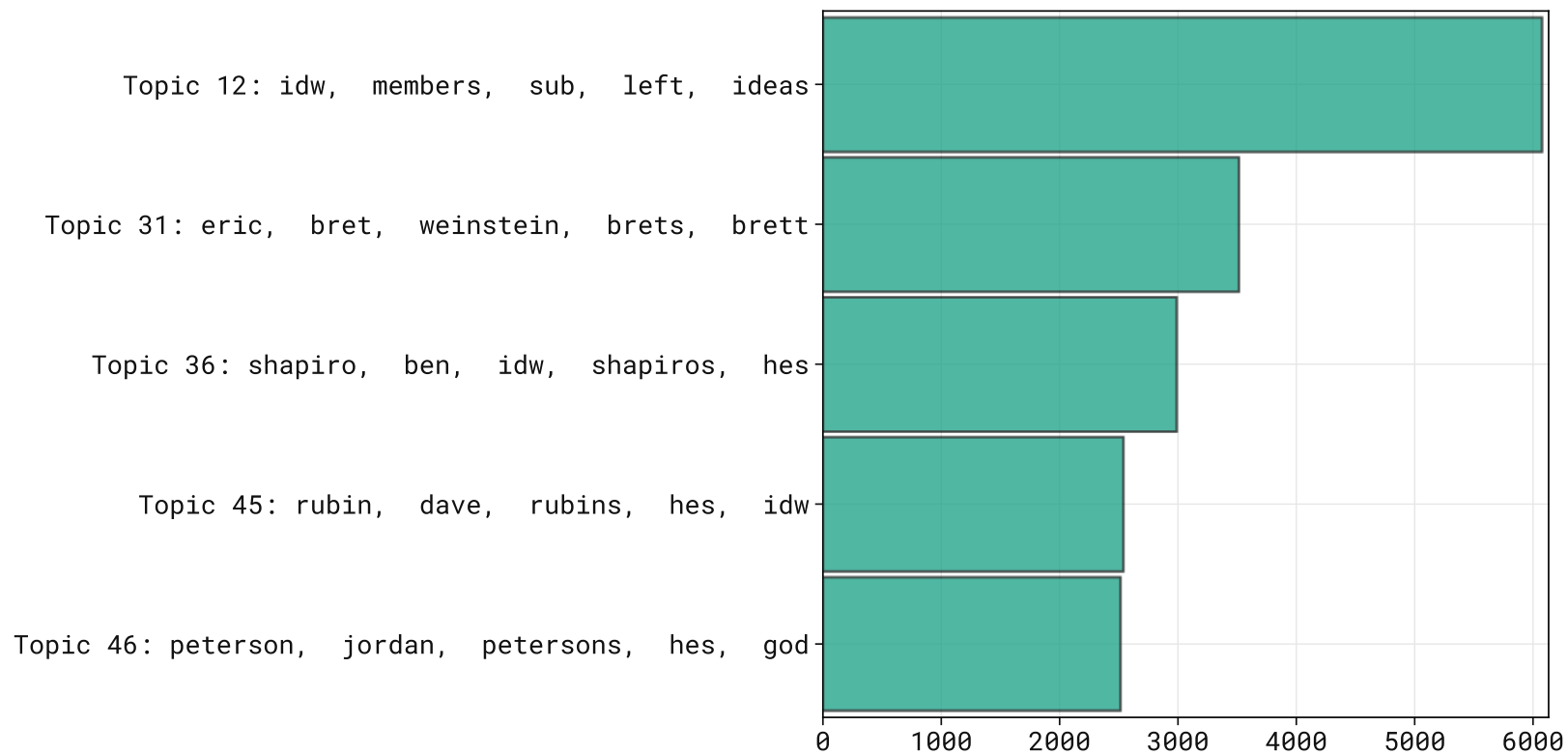reason for coming into being, as these comments show:

Figure 5.3: Top 5 Topics in IDW-Related

Example A:

The IDW is a very loose collection of people across the political spectrum who are willing to ask questions and earnestly explore topics the mainstream is not. The IDW doesn't feel one way about anything.

Example B:

Honestly, if there's any one thing that characterizes the IDW, it's a willingness to have civil discussions with people you disagree with. It's a tiny bit ironic that this itself has been so demonized.

Example C:

The "founding members" have talked about this in different occasions. Their main point is "pursuing objective truth through respectful discussion without resorting to hate and attack are worth doing," so anyone who is willing to participate in this way could be counted as engaging in the IDW.

Reflecting on *why* the IDW had to come to be, one user writes:

…The reason the IDW came into existence is because of the aggressive dogmatism and anti-free-speech stance of the PC [politically correct] left or intersectional left or whatever you want to call it. This ideology now dominates places where serious thought is supposed to happen—such as academia—and leaves no room either for dissent within the fold or for any conversation with those outside the fold…The IDW was formed by people representing a broad spectrum of political opinion, united only by their desire to be able to think and speak freely, and by their willingness to converse in good faith with people of different view. Does the IDW include people who can be considered conservative? Yes. Does it include people who are quite liberal, who would once (like a few years ago) been considered progressive? Yes. Does it include the sort of people who are called "progressive" now? Of course not, since these people aren't willing to converse with anyone outside their own tribe. They see free expression and exposure to different viewpoints…as something fundamentally bad instead of the key to genuine progress.

Hence, we see how the IDW is perceived to be a broad network with no specific ideological commitments. Rather, the IDW is united around general rationalist principles, notably good faith dialogue, the pursuit of objective knowledge, and freedom of thought, and *anyone* who adheres to these principles could be considered part of the IDW. As the comment above expresses, while liberals and conservatives can be found among the

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ranks of the IDW, progressives will not, for they are attached to a dogmatic "PC" or

"intersectional" world view that sees free expression and exposure to competing opinions

as a social problem, not a social benefit.

Further echoing this point, another user notes:

> IDWers have strong agreement on what's wrong with current politics, especially on the left; but they also have strong disagreement on matters of public policy. We've got leftists (Bret Weinstein, [Jonathan] Haidt), liberals ([Tim] Pool), meatheads ([Joe] Rogan), neoconservatives ([Douglas] Murray), feminists ([Christina] Hoff Sommers), skeptics ([Michael] Shermer, cultural conservatives ([Ben] Shapiro), airheads ([Dave] Rubin), libertarian conservatives ([Steven] Crowder), traditionalists ([Jordan] Peterson), rationalists ([Sam] Harris), sociobiologists ([Steven] Pinker), and whatever Camille Paglia is (wonderful)…Unlike other tribes…the impulse to conform to a set of standards here is very, very low. It's about as low bar as it gets: don't censor others, listen charitably, be respectful, and engage in good faith…The fact that a small and very loud segment of society is currently not represented in the IDW [i.e., progressives] says nothing about our tribe— we're open to everyone—and everything about them: they refuse to seriously engage with their critics. So long as the enemies of reason are on the march, the exogenous threats to liberal society will keep this tribe together, no matter how widely they may disagree…

Here, this user notes how key people associated with the IDW span the political

spectrum, and irrespective of whether this user's ideological classifications of these

thinkers are accurate, these public figures are seen as loosely united around the principles

of anti-censorship, charitable discussion, and respect. Progressives are absent from the

IDW, according to this user, only because they refuse to engage in any serious capacity

with those who disagree with them and are enemies of reason who must be opposed in

the defense of liberal civilization.

Interestingly, my topic model also found comments critical of the IDW. One

commenter bemoans the fact that the IDW is united against a phantom—a "mainly

invented" leftist bogeyman:

> Aka they have made this huge strawman group they rally against and attract followers, go to each others shows and cherry pick the issues to support their vision…Because they are so focused on this strawman they also mis[s] most actual [problems] in society or always have to bend it [to] fit in the narrative they have made.

Others criticize the IDW for trying to represent itself as ideologically independent while cozying up to right-wing rhetoric:

> The "IDW" is the collection of podcasters/social media people who pander to "reasonable" conservative[s] almost exclusively about cultural grievances. It's adjacent to the alt-right youtube rabbit hole which is why that's all getting recommended. The movement is ostensibly about open mindedness and intellectual freedom but in actuality it's just a bunch of podcasters allowing people to bash crazy SJWs while wearing a monocle.

Interestingly, this comment seems to be referring to a very popular study that showed that consumers of IDW content on YouTube tended to migrate to the consumption of alt-lite and alt-right content over time, which renewed criticisms that the IDW is a gateway to the far-right (Ribeiro et al. 2020), a study that largely corroborated Becca Lewis's (2018) study of the right-wing influence network on YouTube. To this point, specific figures associated with the IDW are perceived as especially problematic:

> I will continue to point out Dave Rubin, Steve Crowder, Ben Shapiro are all grifters…Eric's Twitter tantrums aren't helping either. Brett, Heather, and Sam seem to be the only sane people removed from all this. People are not just trolling, IDW has pretty much morphed into the new conservatism. Ben is the new Rush Limbaugh as far as I can tell. If they brought actual libertarians or actual leftists on instead of these lame brain Prager U types, I might be more interested in listening…The IDW was a spark between 2016-2018. After that nothing more than a brand…

For this user, the most partisan right-wing people affilaited with the IDW—Dave Rubin, Steven Crowder, and Ben Shapiro—are "grifters" looking to cash in on the culture war. Eric Weinstein's conspiratorial Twitter rants are also called out for injuring the credibility of the group, leaving only a few "reasonable" members left—Bret Weinstein, Heather Heying, and Sam Harris.

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This thread runs through the other topics in the IDW-Related category, such as Topic 45 (*rubin, dave, rubins, hes, idw*), which focuses on Dave Rubin. As many commenters make clear, Rubin is largely perceived as the least intellectually rigorous figure in the IDW:

Example A:

Dave Rubin is just one of those run-of-the-mill regular gays. Not fantastic intellect and not really a scholar, but he kind of represents the regular person who has questions and is on a learning journey…He's not really the guy you go to learn new ideas, but the people he invites on are immensely interesting…People attacking Rubin are just going for low-hanging fruit…Rubin is just a regular guy who asks questions, so anyone feeling big about going after Rubin is just rather pathetic, really.

Example B:

Rubin positioned himself for years as a liberal who became disillusioned by illiberal progressives…[his] show was mainly a forum to bash progressives and make a caricature out of them. He would allow controversial right-leaning guests to make wildly outrageous statements, and would treat those statements with complete credulity, often welcoming those guests into "the new center"…It reached the point where even people sympathetic to him like Joe Rogan or the Quillette crowd had to disaffiliate themselves

Example C:

…For all Rubin has to offer he is certainly not the world's best thought leader—he provides a platform for conversation but himself doesn't give much of substance—his lack of push back on his guests is a valid criticism…he himself isn't bringing the ideas to the table…there is a good faith argument to make that Dave Rubin isn't the brightest of the IDW folk…

Similarly, his partisanship and muted intellect is seen by some to platform extreme right-wing content:

…Rubin also concerns me. He transparently does not challenge the fringe of the right in the same way he rails against the extremes of the left…Rubin is not an honest interlocutor and I think is suffering from audience capture.

Such sentiments are also shared by some users towards Ben Shapiro, as comments in Topic 36 (*shapiro, ben, idw, shapiros, hes*) show:

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Example A:

Ben Shapiro in my opinion is an ideologue. Doesn't approach complex issues with the nuance they deserve, and certainly doesn't use a scientific approach. He's a rhetorician more than anything…It was obvious when Eric Weinstein, Jordan Peterson, and Ben Shapiro were on [Dave] Rubin's show and he was severely outclassed. He looked like an amateur next to heavyweights.

Example B:

It honestly beggars belief that people find Ben Shapiro to be a voice of reason and intellect, and then claim leftist commentators are false and naive…He makes the facts fit his narrative more than any intellectual ever should. Not only that he so often takes hypocritical stances…He's got a Fox News segment for goodness sake. How much more evidence does one need for ideological bias…

Example C:

Don't be obtuse. Ben Shapiro's entire career is partisan right-wing politics. He runs a partisan right-wing business and [employs] other right-wing partisan talking heads like himself…No one in the IDW is like this at all. Most of the rest are academics and are broad based in what they talk about…This is in stark comparison to Jordan Peterson and Sam Harris who do occasionally have debates/discussion with professional opposition…

For these users, Ben Shapiro's far-right partisanship undermines his credibility within the IDW. In distinction from "legitimate" IDW figures like Eric Weinstein, Jordan Peterson, or Sam Harris, Shapiro lacks a "scientific approach," intellectual honestly, and ideological independence. These opinions are not universally shared, of course, with other users noting that they find value in Shapiro's content even though they are aware of his career as a right-wing pundit. Nevertheless, this examination reveals a tension at the heart of the IDW in its struggle against the progressive left: how can it legitimize itself as an intellectual movement when a vocal segment of its membership are devout right-wing partisans?

Topic 31 is interesting because it centers discussion on the Weinstein brothers, Eric and Bret. Since their debut with the IDW, both brothers have attracted severe criticism

from the scientific community. A summary of those controversies is warranted. In Eric's

case, he has generally been critiqued for his conspiratorial rhetoric that refers to sinister

cabals, like a "distributed idea suppression complex" (the DISC), that are said to police

acceptable discourse and censor innovative, dangerous, or otherwise "counter-narrative"

ideas in so that the DISC can maintain cultural and economic hegemony. Rhetorically, he

is prone to using colorful language, dense metaphors, and idiosyncratic terminology that

gives the allure of intellectual grandeur but has little substance. Eric's rhetorical

techniques have been featured prominently on the academic podcast *Decoding the Gurus*,

hosted by anthropology professor Chris Kavanagh and psychology professor Matthew

Browne, where the hosts scrutinize and deconstruct Eric's grandiose claims and ornate

grammar (Kavanagh and Browne 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2021). Additionally, Eric claims

to have developed a unified theory of physics, "Geometric Unity," which attracted

attention in 2013 when he delivered a lecture on his theory at Oxford University (Sautoy

2013). However, Eric came under scrutiny almost immediately by other scientists,

particularly because he did not publish any equations to support his theory at the time of

the 2013 lecture and, as a non-academic, he was unknown to academic physicists despite

having a PhD from Harvard in the subject (Aron 2013; Pontzen 2013). In February of

2021, Google machine learning engineer Timothy Nguyen, who also has a PhD in

physics, co-authored a self-published rebuttal to Weinstein's Geometric Unity based on

the available evidentiary fragments (Nguyen and Polya 2021). Finally, in April 2021,

Eric offered his own self-published manuscript outlining his theory of Geometric Unity

(Weinstein 2021). Eric's manuscript failed to satisfy his critics (Nguyen 2021; Ongweso Jr. 2021).

Prior to the IDW, Bret was a little-known biology professor at Evergreen State College, where we taught along with his wife, Heather Heying. In 2017, Bret obtained notoriety for opposing the "Day of Absence" protests at Evergreen. Historically, the Day of Absence protests were an annual event in which students, faculty, and staff of color would leave Evergreen to attend "workshops and seminars" while those "who identify as white have remained on campus to attend workshops and seminars" in a symbolic display of the importance of people of color to the college community (Manchester 2017). In 2017, however, the protest changed shape, asking white students, faculty, and staff to leave campus while people of color stayed on campus. Bret opposed this change to the Day of Absence, resulting in him being targeted by student activists for his "complicity" in sustaining racism and demanding he be fired or resign. Viral videos show Bret flanked by crowds of incensed student activists cursing at and yelling over him, as well as other college officials (Hartocollis 2017). Consequently, Bret and Heying both resigned their posts at Evergreen, sued the college for failing to protect them from verbal abuse and physical threats, and received a $500,000 settlement (Spegman 2017). The controversy was widely shared through conservative media networks as the epitomal example of all that is wrong with progressive campus culture, especially after Bret received a significant public boost from an interview with Tucker Carlson on Fox News (Fox News 2017). A year after the controversy, Bret was invited to testify before Congress about the "free

speech" crisis on college and university campuses (Weinstein 2018),

Bret and his wife Heather now co-host the controversial *DarkHorse Podcast* where they opine on scientific topics, politics, and claim to bring an "evolutionary approach" to the study of current affairs. Most recently, they have obtained notoriety for their COVID-19 contrarianism, touched on above, where they cast doubt on the safety and efficacy of vaccines, promote unproven treatments like ivermectin, and host discredited "experts" who disagree with the public health response to the pandemic. In another case, Bret invited controversy by accusing the scientific establishment of suppressing his supposedly revolutionary research on telomere length in lab mice, which has significant implications for how we test the safety of drugs and medical treatments. Specifically, Bret claims that the biologist Carol Reider essentially stole his hypotheses, applied them in her research without citing or crediting him, and used her findings to obtain an undeserved Nobel Prize in 2009. Bret infamously broadcast his conspiracy theory as a guest on his brother Eric's podcast, *The Portal* (Weinstein 2020), and numerous misrepresentations and errors were discovered in Bret's story that led to fierce criticism (Browne and Kavanagh 2021; Deigin 2021; Kavanagh and Browne 2020a).

Given this context, it will be interesting to see how the discourses surrounding Eric and Bret differ, if at all, in the earlier months of the subreddit compared to the more recent months, the latter of which will contain comments made about Eric and Bret after these controversies. In the month (June 2018) after the IDW's *New York Time's* profile of the group, sentiment on the subreddit was quite positive towards both Eric and Bret, as

these comments show:

Example A:

…I was worried [Dave] Rubin might take the lead [for the IDW] (and Peterson to a lesser extent), dumb it down, and keep it right leaning in appeal or make it even more so. With the Weinsteins in the lead it will be much better for the IDW and keep it broad based and intelligent…

Example B:

…Bret really shouldn't be overlooked. He lays out the connection between evolutionary biology and modern behavior in humans and animal groups so eloquently and I find it so fascinating and surprisingly easy to follow. Anyway, I think they're all incredibly intelligent and diligent thinkers…

Example C:

I'm gonna have to listen to this conversation several times. Fan fucking tastic. There's something about the way Eric thinks that compliments and holds more accountable the way [Jordan] Peterson thinks in a way they are both better for it. I can't wait to figure out what it is yet, but this was amazing. God damn am I glad for the IDW.

A year later, in June 2019, sentiment remained quite positive towards the Weinsteins. In this month, the comment with the highest cosine similarity to the topic vector (c=.70) expresses the author's appreciation towards Bret specifically:

I wouldn't be so certain that nobody on the far left is paying attention to what Bret says. I was very far left just a few years ago. I'm here now and I'm here because I value Bret's perspective in particular, not to argue or dunk on anybody…

Similarly, another user notes how Bret is "definitely my favourite also alongside Eric," as both brothers can make "similar points to others who are spikier in their approach" but in a "calm, reasoned manner." The user credits Bret with pulling them away from "a lot of far left ideals that I held on to for some time." Critics of the Weinsteins also appeared to be censured on the subreddit at this time, such as a user claiming that "Bret is a bad faith actor" who "started in good faith but decided to embrace the free speech grift" and

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subsequently received downvotes and negative net karma (a score of -1).

Turning attention to February 2020, though, when Eric's and Bret's podcast episode aired accusing Carol Greider of stealing Bret's insights about telomeres, some in the subreddit began expressing criticism. For example, the comment with the highest cosine similarity for this month (c=.81) takes issue with the insufficient level of evidence presented in the allegations:

> …I would say that both of these guys are clearly brilliant, but I agree that to extent, alleging things and just letting these allegations stand in the room is not productive in any way, and if they want to drive their respective fields forward, they need to substantiate their claims…

Another user calls attention to the fact that they perceive Eric as antagonizing Bret in the podcast, essentially egging him on to directly name and shame Greider:

> Thanks, really glad to see people steelmanning Greider…Notice also, as has been said in this thread, that Bret is quite reluctant to be so assertive and Eric is spurring him on…

Over time, it appeared the subreddit came to be more critical of Eric over Bret, with the latter maintaining an aura of credibility and respect. For example, looking at comments three years removed from the IDW *New York Times* profile, i.e., comments made in June 2021 after Bret and Heather Heying had embraced COVID-19 contrarianism, there is still observable affection towards Bret:

> **Example A:**
>
> No one is right about every single thing. He has been right about major issues that were [somewhat] obvious if you were an expert in that domain. Anyway if you think the guy is such a conspiracy theorist stop listening and make your own podcast. As other[s] have said Bret and his wife are super careful about what they say…Brets [sic] reputation, expertise, and being spot on about major issues gives him a lot of credibility…If people think Bret is a conspiracy theorist and he is a grifter who the hell do you actually trust?

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Example B:

I agree kinda about [never liking] Eric, I think he's the theorist from hell ;) But Bret is unorthodox liberal [sic] I love to hate…and his intellectual integrity is exemplary!

Example C:

…Is that not his career right now? He's as rational and politically independent as it gets…I really don't agree with the picture of Bret as a grifter that takes contrarian points for popularity that you are painting. If popularity is what he wants then the popular opinions is what he'd be spouting out.

Other users, however, have begun to criticize Bret with various success. For example, this critical comment ended up with -3 net karma:

Bret's trying very hard to be contrarian or he is really just anti-vaxx. I haven't figured it out yet. I do know one thing though, he will do anything to be more famous. Used to like the guy and agreed with him on the whole Evergreen stuff but he comes off as unhinged now.

However, in other cases, criticism of Bret is better received, such as in this comment with positive 8 karma:

My take is that Bret is a smart guy who was railroaded at [Evergreen] in a disgusting way. But he's not quite smart enough to make a career out of rational politically independent talk. I realized this in the middle of his talk with Richard Dawkins when he was trying out some "new" idea on evolution and Dawkins kind of shut down because he realized Bret was kind of a hack. So to stay relevant and make money, Bret plays around with ideas and theories that are counter to the norm but not correct or believable. Question is whether he really believes them himself or, as others have said here, is just trying to pay the bills.

A comment from the final month in the observation period, December 2021, focuses criticism on Eric and his performative rhetorical style, paired with a critique of Bret:

…I never understood the appeal of Eric Weinstein. I have listened to him and he uses unnecessary complex jargon like DISC. These ideas can be explained in simpler fashion…[his] brother [Bret] has crossed several lines and imo [in my opinion] is now beyond [redemption]. I am for having difficult conversation whether IQ differences between racial group [sic] or anything else. But Bret so far has only invited people who do make questionable remarks and he never challenges them…

Even so, others continue to defend Bret and Eric, such as in this example:

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> Given what [Bret] dealt with at Evergreen and got wrapped up in at Penn, I don't see it as a complex at all. He's been involved in 2 serious controversies that earned him enemies on either side of the political spectrum. If I was Eric, someone with serious clout and academic pedigree [note: Eric has a PhD, but he is not an academic], I would certainly feel the need to make the case that [Bret] had been treated unfairly…Bret is obviously someone who refuses to play the political game in academia so the notion that his ideas aren't getting the bandwidth they might ordinarily makes perfect sense.

Criticisms of the Weinsteins therefore seem to experience mixed responses, with some obtaining upvotes and others censure. Fans of the Weinsteins appear to continue populating the subreddit alongside their critics.

The last topic explored in Figure 5.3, Topic 46, focuses on Jordan Peterson (*peterson, jordan, petersons, hes, god*). Interestingly, the comment with the highest cosine similarity to the topic vector (c=.88) is a very critical commentary on Jordan Peterson that was nonetheless well-received by the subreddit (a score of 10 positive karma):

> I don't think Peterson is an exceptionally qualified person to talk about a solid 60% of the stuff he writes/speaks about. In fact, I disagree with most of his opinions, and fundamentally disagree with his theoretical frame. Even the ideas I agree with, which is much of the self-help stuff, seem simplistic, and can probably be found in a basic motivational poster at Walmart. But the idea that he's [somehow] an insidious threat to society is severely naïve. Just because some misguided and overconfident professor doesn't want to refer to you how you want to be referred to, does not mean he's Hitler or even close to Hitler…Deplatforming and cancelling, empirically, fail. They just create antithetic echo chambers that polarize further and incentivize risky shift behaviour.

Importantly, this comment was made in response to a post about staff at the Penguin Random House book publisher in Canada protesting the publisher's decision to publish another Jordan Peterson book, with some demanding the book deal be canceled due to Peterson's popularity with the far-right. While the user who made the comment above does not seem to like Peterson, they come to his defense on free speech grounds and oppose the effort to censor Peterson.

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In other comments, users express their positive experiences with Peterson's ideas and his unfair characterizations by his critics:

Example A:

This is unbelievable and it is why I am genuinely terrified to ever mention [Peterson's] name in public. And as someone who has listened to dozens of his lectures, I fail to see anything remotely offensive in them. The disconnect between what people think of Peterson and how I experience him is frightening to me.

Example B:

I think Peterson has a few shonky ideas (mostly around Jungian archetypes) but no-one could claim he isn't an elite intellectual, and very sincere and honest. For people to wish him ill because they disagree with him shows that society has taken a dreadful turn.

Example C:

Jordan is a brilliant and a great thinker on myths on the human condition. He is, on some level however, drinking a bit too much of his own koolaid when it comes to mapping those insights onto the real world. When he stays in his lane has some amazing things to say...I like Jordan and don't mean to shit on him, he just seems to get in his own way sometimes. I do think he is getting better at this though.

In these examples, we see one user express fear to admit that they listen to Peterson for concern about the public response despite the positive experiences this user has had with Peterson's material. In other examples, users acknowledge that while they do not agree with all of Peterson's ideas, they do see him as someone who is intellectually honest, intelligent, and although he may occasionally "get in his own way," is capable of great insights.

Nevertheless, the far-right associations hang over discussions of Peterson, and some users address this head on:

...Peterson seems to [attract] a lot of young conservatives and far rightwingers [sic] with a low resolution [framework] and thought patterns...It's like a lot of crazy people find his arguments and

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> thoughts and use as a shield to perpetuate their own political and sometimes bigoted viewpoints…He is a classical liberal and a former professor of [Harvard University], not a right wing bigot as a few of his very vocal followers are. Those that actually [pay] [attention] to his points in lectures and books are not vocal, so those that follow him with this low resolution mindset and political agenda are the ones you hear of…

In this example, this user openly acknowledges that Peterson *has* become a magnet for a certain right-wing contingent. However, this user asserts that right-wing partisans attracted to Peterson have "low resolution" frameworks, implying they are intellectually shallow and are only interested in Peterson insofar has his ideas can be instrumentalized to further their ideological goals. As the most vocal subgroup of Peterson's followers, they receive a disproportionate amount of attention at the expense of those who are more intellectually invested in Peterson.

This sentiment is echoed by another user who credits Peterson for advancing their own intellectual growth and even moderating their partisan friend:

> Peterson's teachings are what set me on a path to agnosticism. Completely agree. He's also made my [Republican] friend more centrist. Yeah sure, many right wingers take Peterson and use him to confirm their pre-existing beliefs, but those people aren't actually listening to him. That's less of a critique of Peterson and more of that crowd [of] listeners.

Once more, we see a critique of those who only wish to use Peterson as a prop for the political right. Looking at the comment with the highest score in the topic group (291 positive karma), a user explicitly ties these "misrepresentations" of Peterson to the irrational political impulses of the contemporary left:

> The mischaracterization and treatment and sometimes cruelty towards Jordan Peterson by the left was one of the biggest reasons I felt more and more alienated by them and felt even more convinced that I could no longer have respect or align myself with them. They have done a huge disservice to themselves…being so irrational about Peterson, scaring more and more people away from them and towards him and others like him. The left's incredible stupidity about how to handle simple things like this continues to blow my mind. (For the record, I believe they should

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handle it with integrity and like adults, acknowledge they have different opinions from Peterson but wish him no ill will and champion his right to say what he thinks. Instead I see glee at his illness [presumably his struggle with addiction], celebration of the protests against him, and endless lies.)

Here, this user expresses ire at leftists for being disingenuous in their engagements with Peterson, even insinuating that leftist excesses push people away from the left and *towards* Peterson and the broader IDW nexus. Rather than acknowledge their differences with Peterson intellectually, the left resorts to "irrationality" and "stupidity," aspiring only to protest and censor Peterson rather than defeat his ideas with their own, on the merits.

Ultimately, the topics in the IDW-Related topic group contain discussions aimed at defining the IDW, delineating its boundaries, and calibrating its identity in response to controversies and criticisms surrounding its key personnel. While some affiliates, such as Ben Shapiro and Dave Rubin, tend to attract the most scrutiny due to their partisanship and perceived intellectual shallowness, there does not appear to be an overwhelming consensus on who *is* or *is not* IDW. Opposition to the leftist social justice activism is a unifying point along with stated commitments to generic Enlightenment principles, free thought, and (classical) liberal values. Operationalizing these abstractions in practice, however, is a discursive struggle between users of the subreddit with divergent understandings, interpretations, and personal experiences with IDW content, though common points of reference do cut across disagreements.

Chapter 6: Identity, Ideology, and Social Justice

The topics in the Identity, Ideology, and Social Justice meta-theme are related to one another by their focus on matters relevant to identity politics, political identities, the definitions of ideologies and "real-world" practices, race and racism, and sex and gender. Often, these topics are related to issues with, or about, contemporary social justice activism and so-called "wokeness." These are fundamentally matters of *identity*, and even though the IDW opposes the "identity politics" of the left, *identification* remains a central feature of discourse on the IDW subreddit. This is illustrated, for example, in users attempting to plot the ideological coordinates of different individuals and evaluating their intellectual merit after considering their ideological commitments or political affiliations. Even though the specific topics cover wide territory, from police violence to Canadian anti-discrimination statutes, to debates about "critical race theory" in public schools, they correspond to one another through the concept of identity and how identity and identification are used to inform discussion of divisive social issues.

6.1 Race & Ethnicity

The Race & Ethnicity topic group has experienced interesting structural patterns over time as Figures 10 and 11 above show. Initially, the Race & Ethnicity topic group had relatively stable monthly frequency, usually accounting for less than 500 total comments

each month through the first half of 2020. However, beginning in May of 2020, we see a sharp rise in the absolute frequency of comments classified in the Race & Ethnicity topic group, peaking in June of 2020 at 2,814 comments (21.61% of that month's sample, more than double the average proportion of 8.41% across the entire time series). Importantly, this trend correlates with the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin in May of 2020 and the ensuing wave of protest, demonstrations, and public condemnation of racist police violence that followed.

The top five topics in the Race & Ethnicity topic group are shown in Figure 6.1. Given the proximity of this topic group's peak frequency—June 2020—to George Floyd's murder, I initially focus my analysis of Topic 6 (*police, black, cops, crime, officers*) and Topic 37 (*blm, lives, black, matter, movement*) specifically within the month of June 2020, as these topics deal directly with race and police violence and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement—the latter of which received renewed public attention as waves of anti-racist protests exploded in the wake of Floyd's killing.

Looking first at Topic 6 in the month of June 2020, we observe that George Floyd's murder became the impetus for discussing statistics on crime and police use of force. For example, this user expresses their opinion on why there is a racial discrepancy in police killings:

> ...Black people are disproportionately killed by the Police [sic] because they have a disproportionate amount of encounters with the police. The police go where the crime is. Most cities have 911 systems that track calls for help and place police resources in those areas. Ever hear of the Ferguson affect [sic]? Cops stop patrolling communities and crime goes through the
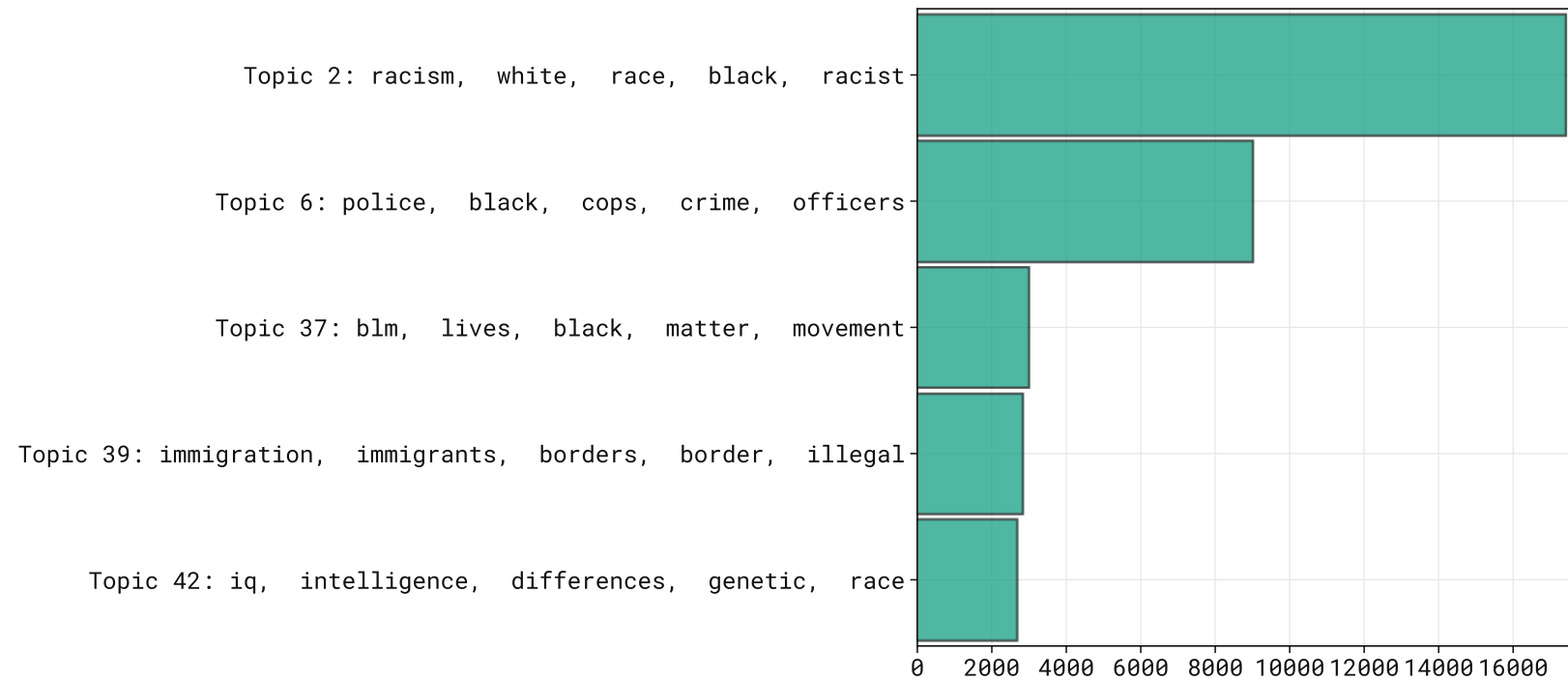
Figure 6.1: Top 5 Topics in Race & Ethnicity

roof. Know who suffers? Law abiding black folks.

Here, this user suggests that black Americans are killed by police because they have a disproportionate number of encounters with police, which is not a reflection of racial prejudice but, rather, the basic reality of racial discrepancies in criminality. "The police go where the crime is," and according to this user, this just *so happens* to be in black communities. Furthermore, this user refers to the "Ferguson effect," the thesis advanced by Heather Mac Donald that public scrutiny of police brutality leads to less proactive policing and therefore increases in crime as police officers abdicate their responsibilities for fear that they will be censured if they are involved in a controversial policing event (Mac Donald 2016). The problems with this thesis are considerable, though significantly, it depends purely on the correlation between increased crime and decreases in proactive policing with the *presumed* mechanism being that less police activity is *causing* criminality. However, correlation is not causation, and as a team of sociologists demonstrated in an article for the *American Sociological Review*, a crucial mechanism explaining this association is the fact that public displays of police brutality in black neighborhoods results in black residents of those neighborhoods being more reluctant to call the police and report crime due to their fears of police violence (Desmond, Papachristos, and Kirk 2016). As a consequence of decreased civilian reporting, police are less involved in subsequent crime prevention, leading to increases in criminality. Regardless of the empirical problems with the "Ferguson effect" thesis, in the context of this user's comment, its invocation serves to reinforce the fact that black neighborhoods

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are havens of criminality in need of a strong police presence.

Similarly, in response to a user criticizing r/IntellectualDarkWeb discussions of police violence for failing to consider the hypothesis that "police might have a racism problem," a different commenter writes that

> The hypothesis is not generally considered because it's not supported by fact. The redditors in this sub respect facts over opinions which is probably why you feel they're not taking your point of view seriously.
>
> —For every 10,000 black people arrested for violent crime, 3 are killed.
> —For every 10,000 white people arrested for violent crime, 4 are killed.
>
> This is of course a very basic like for like comparison; I could go into detail around how African Americans are disproportionately represented in the crime stats (~30%), despite accounting for a minority of the total US population (~13%).

The hypothesis that policing might be a racist institution is not considered by the subreddit, according to this user, because such a hypothesis contradicts "facts," and the appreciation of "facts over opinion" is foundational to the IDW. This commenter then lists a series of sources from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program for the years 2017 and 2018 as evidence of their claims, and then concludes their comment by noting

> In 2016, an identical incident to the Floyd / Chauvin debacle happened to a white guy. Unfortunately, it was pretty much a non-story. [link to story provided]

The story this commenter is referring to is the 2016 killing of Tony Timpa at the hands of Dallas, TX police officers. Brutal body cam footage from Timpa's murder shows him repeatedly shouting to the officers "You're going to kill me!" and begging for help (Thebault 2019). Officers failed to check for a pulse after Timpa became unconscious

from their use of force, and first responders waited several minutes upon arriving before beginning CPR.

Timpa's killing was aa disturbing use of police force, made worse by the officers' mocking and joking about Timpa as he laid unresponsive on the ground. However, in this case, this commenter uses Timpa as a tool to discredit those who insist on the racial dimension of police violence by highlighting the fact that Timpa was white and therefore did not receive the same level of media coverage and public outrage as Floyd. Left unsaid by this commenter is that Timpa's killing reveals additional dimensions of abuse within American policing with respect to mental health that should expand our conception of police brutality without competing against other dimensions of police violence. Timpa suffered from schizophrenia, depression, bipolar, and anxiety. On the day he died, *Timpa himself* had called police for help, as he was off his medication and had taken cocaine—facts that the responding officers knew because Timpa directly communicated this (Binion 2022). The officers were unprepared to respond to Timpa's mental health crisis. This lack of preparedness is a documented pattern among police that leads to excessive force. For example, in another case involving a mental health crisis, Colorado police officers broke the arm and dislocated the shoulder of 73-year-old Karen Garner, a woman suffering dementia, during a violent arrest after she exited a Walmart without paying for $13.88 worth of merchandise (Marcos 2021). Rather than viewing the killing of Timpa as emblematic of the ways social biases and prejudices become institutionalized in policing (in Timpa's case, discriminatory ableism), this user deploys Timpa's violent death

instrumentally to undermine accusations of racist policing, a common rhetorical device

routinely exploited by conservative pundits (e.g. Mills 2021).

Some users do, however, take a more nuanced approach on the topic of racist

policing, such as a detailed comment left by one subreddit author, quoted at length here:

> …The way I personally react to police kill stats [sic] is usually something like: isn't it terrible that we have [such a high] rate of homicide by police in general?…Regardless of color it seems that cops in this country are generally way too quick to use force, not prioritizing deescalation as their true main weapon, and more generally seem to lack the ideal empathetic relation to the people they are policing that you would want from someone who has a gun…Now to cover the racial component…do you think this country has done enough to repair the inequities against the black community caused by slavery and the doctrine of white supremacy?…These people STILL [sic] live in the environment they were brought to as free labor…do these memories, these self-images, these survival techniques, these pains, do they just go away? A lot of this stuff was not that long ago…It doesn't seem like the crimes of slavery and white supremacy were ever totally rectified…if more work was done to rectify those historical injustices, then maybe we wouldn't be viewing these modern events with such a racial lens…

For this user, police violence is a problem irrespective of its racial dimensions. However,

they go on to argue that the historical legacies of slavery and white supremacy continue

to structure social relations, leading to a unique black American experience with respect

to policing that differs from that of whites due to society's failure to adequately address

the inequities of America's racist past. In another example, the comment with highest

cosine similarity (c=.83) to the topic vector comes from a user arguing George Floyd's

death was an egregious example of excessive police force:

> [George Floyd] died because two cops held him down while a third deliberately choked him, knowing full well how dangerous that choke hold was, and a fourth stood by and watched. He died because Derek Chauvin continued to apply a deadly choke hold even when George had no pulse…George Floyd did not resist arrest, and he wasn't high on meth or fentanyl. *But even if he had* there is no death penalty for resisting arrest in the USA. In civilized countries where the cops aren't vicious, power-tripping, badly-trained and incompetent thugs, he would still be alive.

Importantly, this comment was made in rebuke to another user who argued that Floyd

was threatening and dangerous and therefore deserving of his fate:

> Maybe if George Floyd wasn't a lifetime felon who robbed a pregnant woman at gunpoint and resisted arrested [sic] while high on meth and fentanyl he wouldn't have died. If Breonna Taylor wasn't in an apartment with her drug dealer boyfriend who shoots at police, she wouldn't have died. If Rayshard Brooks wasn't driving drunk, and assaulting officers when he was being detained, he wouldn't have died. There seems to be a pattern in the massive majority of these uses of force by police.

While the first comment defending Floyd has a net positive karma score of 4, the second comment above attacking Floyd's moral character has 8 times as many karma points—32—indicating that it was received far more positively by the subreddit. Indeed, in the latter comment, the user represents Floyd as a dangerous criminal with a patterned criminal record whom police had every right to fear. The user then goes on to insinuate that Breonna Taylor and Rayshard Brooks—two other people of color killed by police—deserved to be killed given their behaviors at the time of the police encounters as well as their irresponsible life choices. Another user responding to this attack on Floyd's character writes that "It's utterly insane that most people don't recognize this" (31 karma) while a follow up to that comment reads "It's utterly insane that people *don't want* to recognize this" (28 karma). A dissenting comment in the thread stating that "it's utterly insane you guys are justifying someone's death by over zealous HORRIBLE [sic] cops because of their past or who they were with" has a karma score of 0.

Dissent of this sort is penalized on the subreddit for being irrational, out of tune with facts, and propagandistic, as this user writes:

> Floyd died of a massive opiate overdose. The police didn't have anything to do with his death.
>
> [Breonna] Taylor's boyfriend started shooting at police as they were clearly and loudly identifying

According to this user, the "narrative being pushed"—i.e., that Floyd was murdered by Derek Chauvin due to the latter's racially motivated excessive use of force—is based on "lies" and "propaganda." An honest review of the facts, according to this user, would point to Floyd dying of a "massive opiate overdose." This exact argument was made by Chauvin's defense attorney and rejected by expert witnesses, Floyd's autopsy, and the jury in Chauvin's trial (BBC 2021; Crawford-Roberts et al. 2020). As this and similar examples show, taking racism seriously in respect to policing can generate intense pushback on r/IntellectualDarkWeb, resulting in censure, karma penalties, and accusations that users have been duped by propagandistic media narrative apparently adhering to a social justice agenda instead of factual accuracy.

Turning to analysis of Topic 37 in June 2020, which focuses on BLM, the comment with the highest cosine similarity to the topic vector in this period (c=.87) speaks directly to a number of issues immediately relevant to the matter of declined symbolic efficiency in communicative capitalism:

[The conversation on BLM] often happens at a crossroads; one side picks a story, and then other side presents a conflicting story. One side states a fact, and then the other side presents a

conflicting fact. One side presents a study, the other side then presents a conflicting study. But a fair examination of the sources of information tend to reveal with a pattern of results which when viewed over time tends to show which side is grossly skewing the facts or not representing the issues fairly and honestly…[BLM] are cherry picking data and highlighting individual stories to suit their narrative. [Many] well meaning people tend [to] become overwhelmed by the conflicting sources of information and the tonality of certainty in dialogue and don't really know how to make sense of what's happening…In the case of BLM, I don't think these groups and various chapters are engaged in any kind of meaningful or substantively informative and honest rhetoric. They're radicalizing and uniting people under rhetoric of fear and monopolizing and constantly recontextualizing the space in which conversations are happening and information is being presented, resulting in a constantly moving target…The people at the figurative helm are not interested in a fair examination of the facts; they just want to win…I question that agenda with sincere concern for how they are impacting the lives of the very people whose interests they claim to defend and the long-term consequences movements like this one will have on future movements.

Here, this user ties the decline in symbolic efficiency characteristic of communicative capitalism to the polarizing discourses surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement and anti-racist social justice activism. They spell out the profound difficulties of determining what is true or false in a politically charged environment of information surplus where each side of a contested social issue can infinitely contradict one another with disparate truth-claims and evidence. However, this user maintains that something approximating an objective analysis of the competing evidence remains possible and is in fact necessary to determine "which side is grossly skewing the facts." In this case, the user concludes that Black Lives Matter activists are the offenders, exploiting the weak epistemic conditions of communicative capitalism to evade being decisively rebuked by their critics even as they distort information to support their preferred narratives and political goals, and radicalize people through appeals to fear. Behind the rhetoric, this user concludes, is nothing but political cynicism: these activists "just want to win," regardless of the effects the success of their movement will have on our social future.

What is interesting here is how this user connects a true claim about the devolved

epistemic conditions of communicative capitalism to serve ideologically motivated

conclusions about BLM. Importantly, this user's criticism is not explicitly targeted at the

official BLM organization—the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation

(BLMGNF)—which has recently come under scrutiny by local chapters for a lack of

transparency surrounding BLMGNF's finances (Campbell 2022; Morrison 2021). Rather,

this user is focusing on the political and epistemic claims of BLM, which exist over and

beyond the confines of the official organization. Fundamentally, the user takes issue with

the presentation of *facts* and *information* about black oppression as communicated

through the discourses of BLM. Here, Žižek is helpful to conceptualize the ideological

mechanism operative in this user's comment, specifically his notion of "lying in the guise

of truth." As Žižek (1994) writes on the workings on contemporary ideology,

> An ideology is…not necessarily "false": as to its positive content, it can be "true," quite
> accurate, since what really matters is not the asserted content as such *but the way this
> content is related to the subjective position implied by its own process of enunciation*. We
> are within ideological space proper the moment this content—"true" or "false" (if true, so
> much the better for the ideological effect)—is functional with regard to some relation of
> social domination ("power," "exploitation") in an inherently non-transparent way: *the
> very logic of legitimizing the relations of domination must remain concealed if it's to be
> effective*. In other words, the starting point of the critique of ideology has to be full
> acknowledgment of the fact that it is easily possible to *lie in the guise of truth* (P. 8).

Put simply, to lie in the guise of truth is to begin with a premise that is "literally true" but

is used to service "a lie" or a false conclusion (Žižek 2020:4). Here, this user begins with

the truthful claim about the problematic epistemic conditions of communicative

capitalism, which allows for unlimited falsification and the overproduction of

incompatible facts and narratives that confuse and exhaust us. However, this accurate

assessment, paired with an equally true realist claim that pursuing objective knowledge

remains possible through a robust evaluation of evidence (I return to the question of

realism and truth in the Discussion section below), serves the *false* conclusion that BLM

"grossly" skews facts, misrepresents data, does not engage in "informative" rhetoric, and

only cares about their own political power, not a "fair examination of facts." Yet, if the

user followed their own realist premise to its proper conclusion, they would find that the

anti-racist discourses surrounding police violence (in a follow up comment, this user

makes clear that they see BLM's most important agenda item to be police brutality) are

supported by a now overwhelming corpus of scholarly research documenting the veracity

of their grievances (Balko 2020; Braga, Brunson, and Drakulich 2019; Pierson et al.

2020).

Looking at comments in Topic 37 across the entire observation period, BLM is often

represented as a scientifically uninformed Marxist movement that threatens society on

several levels, as expressed by this comment:

> The movement itself is entirely distinct from the idea the black lives matter (lowercase)…The number-one killer of black males through age 44 — homicide, which is overwhelmingly intra-racial, not inter-racial — is discussed nowhere on the BLM website or by its leaders…BLM promulgated the "defund the police movement"…BLM takes stances on issues that have nothing to do with black lives — see its stances on the Israel-Palestine conflict, the 5 separate bullets on its "About" [i.e. on the BLMGFN website] section on trans and queer people (dismantling the cisgender hierarchy, apparently), its stance against the nuclear family structure, and so on. As it moves beyond the scope of black lives and into Marxist/woke territory, it loses credibility as an organization devoted to defending black lives…

Such rhetoric is used to counter comments in which users attempt to defend BLM, such

as this one:

> BLM exists because of instances like Breonna Taylor being murdered in her bed by police, and nothing being done about it…If you think "Black people bring it on themselves, because of crime rates!" Then you admit that police are racist, because they are shooting people based on their racial group, so you and BLM agree. And yet this sub is cavalcade of "the Left Exaggerates; BLM is the real villain"…I just don't (good faith) understand it. If you can understand Jordan Peterson standing up to the thought police for his pronoun use, how can you not understand the opposition of actual tyranny and corruption? Is there any chance there's some, [dare] I say…privilege involved?

In addition to receiving downvotes (the comment has a karma score of -2) on the subreddit, the comment received responses like this one, which reasserts the latent Marxism of the BLM movement and its presumed threat to civil society:

> …BLM is completely engrossed in the black narrative. I can't remember many instances of them talking about police brutality on white people, but they sure can remember all the black names…And, well, I'm not entirely convinced BLM is really about fighting police brutality in some cases insomuch as it's become a Marxist movement utilizing race and BLM as its skinsuit. It's hard to view this the same as the Civil Rights Movement. And BLM riots have killed more people than police have killed shot [sic] unarmed black people in two years. Congratulations, you played yourselves…We are against actual tyranny and corruption. That's why this idea of defunding the police is absolutely bonkers retarded. If there's going to be a catalyst of the justice system becoming more corrupt it's giving them an incentive to not give two shits about their job, i.e. cutting their paycheck or making financial redistributions with no idea what the consequences might be. There needs to be better training and incentives for good evaluations and talent. That takes MORE funding, not less…

In these examples, we see attempts to both (1.) undermine the credibility of BLM's political complaints by, for example, invoking "intra-racial" crime as the "number one killer of black men" or representing BLM as violent and riotous, and (2.) paint BLM as a nefarious Marxist plot—a line of reasoning that has been popularized by IDW-adjacent figures such as James Lindsay.

Turning focus to Topic 2, these comments focus on debates over the meaning and reality of racism in contemporary society. Surprisingly, considering the results from

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above, my topic model uncovers an effort by some users to argue for the utility of a

concept of structural racism and white privilege, as illustrated by these three examples:

Example A:

…society is biased towards white people generally. Does this mean that all white people are equally racist as Hitler himself? Obviously not. The degree to which all white people are racist is tiny. This is totally unrelated to any action, speech, or even thought of the particular white person. Nothing to do with them individually whatsoever. Not acknowledging this privilege and instead pretending to act colorblind is reinforcing racist biases, which is racist…

Example B:

There's no collective intention by white people to oppress black people, no. The barriers black people face today are largely a function of bureaucratic inertia (from historical intentional discrimination) and unconscious bias, as well as the simple fact that white people are a population and wealth majority and thus are more likely to pass that wealth/skills/education/etc on to their children. None of that requires any oppressive intent on the part of white people in order for black people to have measurable barriers to success…

Example C:

…It's not like a metal detector or something, where anyone non-White passing through automatically gets saddled with hardship because of their color. It's manufactured disparity in the accumulation of generational wealth, it's how towns and cities were built with race demographics in mind, it's discriminatory laws in housing and lending…it's Jim Crow and the effects of Jim Crow…you're talking about a whole history and the evolution of a societal structure, not just some blanket assertion that everyone in America is racist because America has a racist past or that non-White people cannot achieve success here…

This proves contentious, as other users see such analyses of racial inequity as facilitating

a regressive politics, as these three comments show:

Example A:

…What I'm talking about is the institutionalized racism that is a result of trying to be "antiracist" [sic]. Forcing employers and employees to think race is more important than skills or abilities or whatever. Dumbing down culture and reason and everything else because "black people don't respect the written word or the nuclear family" or whatever insane shit the left wants to force on society to right all wrongs…

Example B:

…I can't think of any time in history where focusing on classifying who is what and how their "people" historically benefited from these mostly arbitrary classifications hasn't resulted in a rise of racial hatred…

Example C:

…I don't disagree that historical factors have some input [in racial discrepancies] but they are becoming less and less significant as time goes on…It certainly hasn't existed in law for a few generations. There are a lot of working "white privileged" people who are also at the bad end of the socioeconomic scale who have also been dealt a bad hand through no fault of their own. They are in the exact same boat as the people who are suffering from supposed systemic racism…But to call it systemic racism on its own implies it's still occurring, which it isn't…there is no policy that can be implemented that isn't inherently racist to combat it. Time is the only healer in this case.

In these comments, we see users arguing that attempts to redress systemic racial disadvantages will lead to (reverse) racist effects by tipping the scales in favor of people of color at the expense of whites. This would only lead to new injustices, new indignities, and heightened racial resentment.

The comments in Topic 39 focus on the polarizing issue of immigration. In this topic, the comment with the highest cosine similarity to the topic vector ($c=.74$) is an attempt to grapple with the various perspectives that different ideological camps may have on immigration:

I think the people concerned about immigration are concerned about a variety of things. I think there is a big difference in feelings people have about legal and illegal immigration. And also refugees versus non refugees…You have working class people worried about wage suppression and competition for jobs…Fiscal conservatives worrying about the increased stress on the states [sic] financial resources and addition to the ranks of the poor. You will see people on the left bending over backwards to make it seem like immigrants are never a net drag on the economy, but that is just beyond false and involves making a lot of highly convenient assumptions…You have educated people who probably don't give two shits about someone here who is a Pakistani engineer fleeing religious strictures, but aren't psyched about bringing in large numbers of Somalis coming from one of the most dysfunctional places on the planet and trying to acclimate them to our country…it is crazy to me that we don't have control of the border, and don't really have a firm delineation between citizens and non-citizens. All so housing developers and large agribusiness can chisel out a few more dollars, and Democrats a few more votes?

Here, this user argues that our views on immigration are inextricably colored by political

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ideology, but also the legality of the immigration, whether the immigrants are refugees (with refugees presumed to be less desirable), and the effect of immigration on the existing class structure. This user then criticizes the left for "bending over backwards" to always paint immigration as a net benefit to society even though this is a lie, and laments that there is no clear distinction between citizens and non-citizens, seemingly to the benefit of corporations and the Democratic Party.

In other contexts, however, my topic model found that users defend immigration, such as in this comment:

> I'm curious why you see them [immigrants] as invaders and not as people fleeing a shitty life looking for a better one? Invaders makes it seem like a coordinated effort, rather than, again, a person with a shitty life who wants a better one. I'm all for strong border and I don't think people should be able to just come here and take welfare, but legal immigration status is required for every form of welfare I'm aware of. I don't like the idea of cultural shifts either, some cultures are worse than others, but culture is always shifting and there's nothing anyone can do about that, so fighting it is a waste.

Interestingly, this user opposes the right-wing talking point that immigrants are "invading" our country by arguing that in fact, immigrants are simply people out to pursue a better life. Even so, this user is clear to articulate that they support strong borders and worry about cultural change, even noting that some cultures are superior to others, but nevertheless maintain that opposing cultural change is a futile effort.

In one final example from Topic 39, my topic model found a comment from a user that led me to a thread discussing "ethonstates." The thread begins with a top-level comment (currently at 30 positive karma) from a now suspended account that reads, "Low IQ is the biggest problem in America today. Period. But that has implications that

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most people would rather not get into so we conveniently ignore it." Asked to answer

what those implications are, the user states, "Ethnic nationalism." While that comment

has a low karma score of -7, follow up comments in the thread by the same author have

positive karma scores ranging from 2 to 5, such as this one:

> The United States was at one time the most peaceful, prosperous and unified nations in the entire world. Was it perfect? Of course not. But it sure was a hell of a lot better than what we have now.
>
> You don't think diversity causes harm? Look at the level of conflict in the U.S. that is based on racial/ethnic lines. Look at the history of Israel and Palestine. The Hutus vs the Tutsi. Yugoslavia. These are just a few examples where diversity has failed and continues to fail.
>
> Wherever you have diversity, you will have inherent conflict. People are tribal and have an in-group bias to those who are most similar to themselves. That just how it is.

The comments in Topic 37 reveal a tension in the IDW around the permissible points of

view with respect to ethnic differences and the politics of immigration. The user

advocating for ethnostates was attempting to inject rhetoric of "human biodiversity"

(HBD)—an alt-right concept that sees hierarchical ethnic differences and cultural

incompatibilities as rooted in biological racial differences (Hawley 2018)—into the

subreddit. When the user explicitly states that they are an ethnic nationalist, they are

censured by the subreddit. However, when their comments do not explicitly use the

language of ethnic nationalism, they receive positive karma, consistent with a "high-brow

white nationalism" of pseudo-scientific and rational "othering" (Hawley 2018; Sakki and

Pettersson 2016).

Finally, as the top keywords for Topic 42 in Figure 6.1 show (*iq, intelligence,*

differences, genetic, race), this topic contains comments focusing on the genetic basis of

racial differences and inequalities, primarily through the medium of IQ. The comment with the highest cosine similarity to the topic vector (c=.89) is a lengthy post that has since been deleted by subreddit moderators containing a multitude of links under various headers (e.g., "Race and IQ," "The Heritability of IQ," "Racial Differences in IQ Related to Genes," etc.) all pointing to the website TheAlternativeHypothesis.org, whose mission is to "prove" the biological reality of race, racial intelligence differences, and how genetic factors determine racialized social outcomes.

This connects in important ways to scholarship on the alt-right, which has shown how IQ has re-emerged as a rhetorical device in which to couch white supremacy in pseudoscientific rhetoric (Hawley 2018; Nagle 2017; Wendling 2018). This reached the IDW directly when Sam Harris hosted Charles Murray, the infamous co-author of *The Bell Curve*, on his podcast in 2017 to discuss the "forbidden knowledge" of racial genetics and intelligence (Harris 2017). This led to a very public feud between Harris and *Vox* co-founder Ezra Klein, with the latter accusing the former of boosting discredited race science (Klein 2018). Additionally, a team of three psychologists who specialize in the study of intelligence were compelled to publish an op-ed criticizing the Harris/Murray podcast episode with a pointed rebuke of Murray's assessment of the scholarly consensus on the subject (Turkheimer et al. 2017a, 2017b).

Commenting on Harris's coverage of the genetics of IQ, one user writes:

> Sam Harris drops the red pill on IQ [link to YouTube video with an excerpt from the Murray podacst]:
>
> "I*n fact, there is almost nothing in psychological science, for which there is more evidence, than*

these claims - about IQ, about the validity of testing for it, about its importance in the real world, about its heritability, and about its different expression in different populations. Again, this is what a dispassionate look at decades of research suggests." [user's quote of Sam Harris]

People aren't actually convinced by stats, despite what they pretend, but if you're the rare person who is, here's a handful of studies:

Black-white IQ gap is almost certainly genetic [link to a Medium blog]

Minnesota Transracial Adoption study: black babies were adopted by middle-class white families, their adult IQs regress to those of their biological parents [link to journal article from 1983]

Meta-analysis: 30 years of research on race differences in cognitive ability. (UC Berkeley) [link to journal article from 2005]

So if it's "pseudo-scientific horseshit," then you need to explain why you're smarter than Sam Harris. :/

In this example, the user invokes the alt-right meme of "taking the red pill" to summarize Sam Harris's coming to terms with the inescapable reality of genetic differences in intelligence and heritability, and then immediately folds in external URLs meant to legitimize this point with respect to race specifically. In other cases, users try to strike a balance, conceding that genetic variation in human intelligence is almost certainly true, but that this does not have to be automatically conjoined to racist conclusions:

> …The discussion of race, and the discussion of IQ, can be separate discussions. One doesn't need to accept both, one can accept one or the other…I've ended up concluding there's something there as far as heritability of IQ goes. That's it. It doesn't need to have anything to do with race, and frankly I'm getting a little bit tired of constantly having to jump in to defend the academic literature on IQ. IQ being a thing doesn't mean that race is a thing…Stop associating real science (IQ, heritability, genetics) with pseudo-science [sic] (phrenology, race-realism). If you are going to associate them, at least cite your sources so I can refute them please.

Here, this user argues that we do not need to disregard the determinate effects of genetics on intelligence IQ, which is "real science," because of its association with racial pseudoscience. Nevertheless, there remains a deliberate and concerted effort to force this

association to pursue racist ends. And however frustrating for this user and others in the IDW orbit, that is *precisely* what makes the discussion of race and genetics so fraught. What such discussions "threaten to become," writes Smith (2019), are justifications for *indirect* discrimination by linking unequal social outcomes to genetic variation, thereby discrediting social policies designed to "mitigate historical barriers that continue to affect the life chances of disadvantaged groups" (p. 107). Whether or not any individual member of the IDW desires that outcome may be true or false, but the "radical right certainly do," and "framing debates about IQ as if they can ever be apolitical and 'merely scientific' hands them the justification" (Smith 2019:107).

6.2 Political Ideologies

The Political Ideologies topic group experiences similar patterns to other topics explored above, experiencing a sharp increase in the number of comments counted in this group around the middle of 2020 but then tapering off, as Figure A.C.1 in Appendix C illustrates. However, Figure A.C.2 in Appendix C provides further context, showing that there has been a slight downwards trajectory in the overall proportion of comments belonging to the Political Ideologies topic group. Figure 6.2 shows the top five topics in this topic group.

As can be seen, the Political Ideologies topic group is dominated by Topic 3 (*left, right, liberal, conservative, conservatives*), which contains a disproportionate number of comments in the group and focuses discussion on the traditional left-liberal/right-conservative political binary. Comments in this topic are primarily concerned with
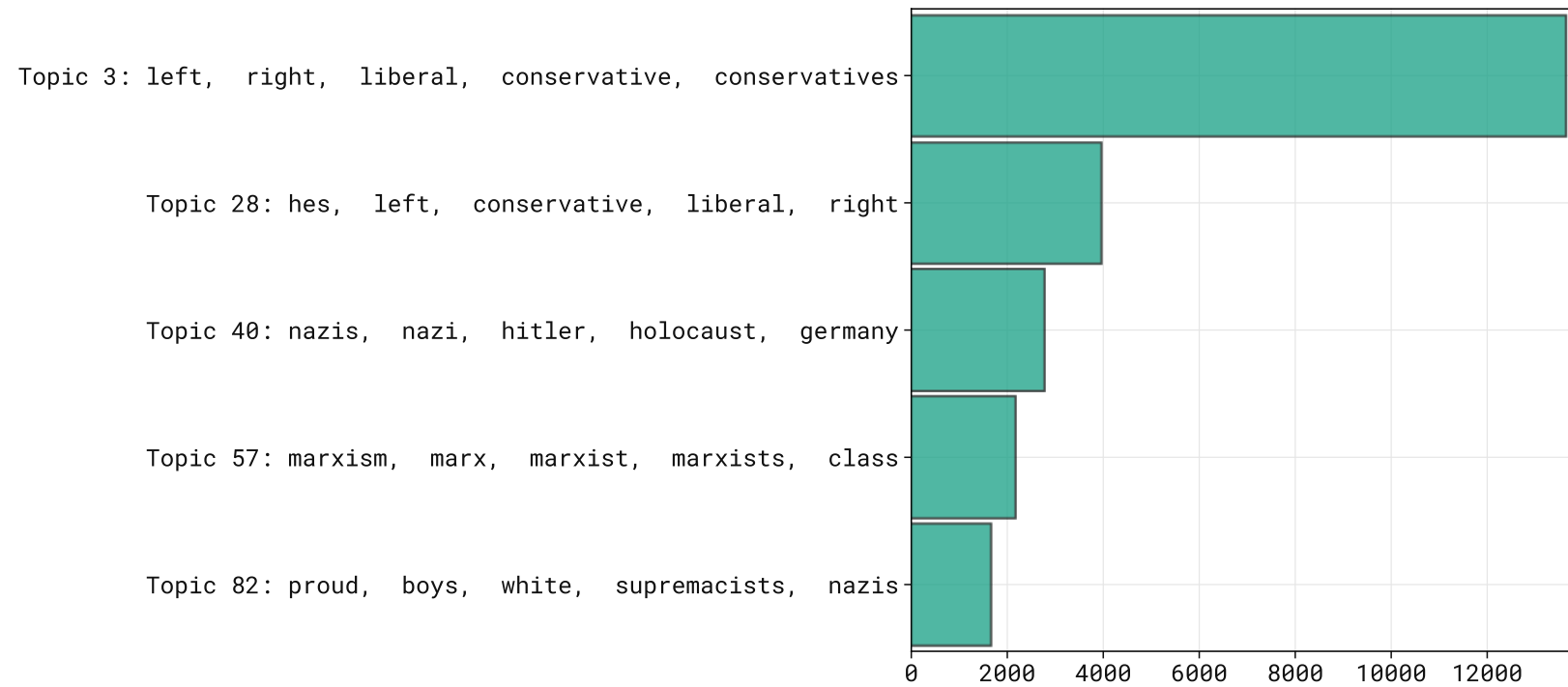
Figure 6.2: Top 5 Topics in Political Ideologies

plotting ideological coordinates on the political compass. A very lengthy comment with the highest cosine similarity to the topic vector (c=.82) epitomizes this observation:

> You are doing a great deal of confusing liberalism with illiberal leftists. You have to correct this. It is basic political science and political history…Ben Shapiro and the rest of the IDW agrees with me on this. You are worried about leftists not liberals…first off in political science American political liberalism includes both left-of-center liberals and right-of-center liberals. Around 90% of Americans are some kind of liberal per political science. The tenets of political liberalism is [sic] the same as the tenets of liberal democracy. The liberal rights of freedom of speech and property rights are tenets of liberalism. The founding fathers were all technically liberals.

Here, the user distinguishes *liberalism* from illiberal *leftists*, which they proclaim is basic "political science." They then note that Ben Shapiro and the IDW has a similar conception of liberalism, one that can disentangle the liberal philosophical tradition, rooted around "liberal democracy," "freedom of speech," and "rights," from colloquial usages of the term in American culture which equates liberal with left. This analysis is similar to the concept of the "regressive left," a term that has long been used by IDW figurehead Dave Rubin to explain how the left is no longer "progressive"—i.e., committed to social progress, individual liberty, and liberal democracy—but "regressive," collapsing into authoritarian, often "Marxist," collectivism (Rubin 2020). What is important to emphasize, for this user, is that the IDW does not oppose liberalism, for it itself is liberal. Rather, it wars against illiberal currents on both the left and right, but especially the left, which are incompatible with liberal civilization.

Similarly, Topic 28 (*hes, left, conservative, liberal, right*) contains comments classifying different individuals, public thinkers, and content creators by ideology. The comment with the highest cosine similarity to the topic vector, for example, is by a user

trying to orient the YouTuber David Pakman on the political spectrum:

> Maybe further left was the wrong word. Just more partisan. He seems to spend a lot of time just baiting conservatives and saying things like "it's unbelievable anyone thinks (insert strawman here)" and just generally shits on conservative voters.

Other commenters offer their perspective on, e.g., Jordan Peterson's partisan leanings:

Example A:

He's quite conservative not on the left.

Example B:

Politically he seems like a centrist if you really read and listen to him. I also have never heard him label himself liberal or conservative [except] that he was part of a socialist group briefly when he was younger. You seem to be claiming that his political leanings permeate all of his ideas, research, etc. I simply don't think that's true.

Example C:

Nah, I would say he's a center-right conservative. Big on tradition, big on personal responsibility, big on the importance of hierarchy, gained prominence for criticizing the left. I don't think he's some hardline ideologue, but he pretty obviously leans right.

Overall, comments within Topic 28 are similar to the themes in Topic 3 but extended to specific individuals. As they consume content by different creators and are exposed to other public thinkers and heterodox figures, users of r/IntellectualDarkWeb collaborate with one another to crowd-source the ideological makeup of different individuals.

In other cases, these discussions of the partisan leanings of content creators serves to deflect criticisms that they are too focused on critiquing the left instead of the right, as a thread between two different users debating the merits of Tim Pool—a far-right "citizen journalist" who poses as a "center-left" critic of contemporary leftism while nevertheless posting sensationalist anti-left clickbait to his YouTube channel (Lewis 2020)—

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illustrates:

Comment 1 by User A:

He's pretty open about it. He defines himself as center-left. He voted for Bernie and recently donated to Yang and Gabbard…I enjoy his content but it's a bit irritating that he constantly defines himself as "left leaning" while obviously cashing in on the SJW hysteria. His content is almost entirely critical of the left.

Comment 2 by User A:

…based on the fact that he is very very rarely critical of the right, I would say he's worried about losing $$$ if he did so.

Response by User B:

It's the lunacy of the people behind the stories he covers that gets him views. It's not his fault it's the left which has come unhinged, and not the right…White antifa members attacking Jewish and Latino people, yelling racial slurs, while claiming they are anti-racists fighting against the racists. What's the right-leaning equivalent? Don't say NZ, that guy was plain nuts with many left and far-left views. The green new deal [sic] is something an imaginative 8 year old would write. What's the equivalent on the right?

In this example, User A expresses general support for Tim Pool, but frustration at his self-branding as a "left leaning" individual even though he makes a living cashing in on "SJW hysteria." User A hypothesizes that Pool is too scared to critique the right, as his audience is almost certainly right-wing, which would pose a problem for his income. This led to censure by the subreddit (a negative karma score of -10 for User A's second comment) and the response by User B, who argues that Pool's coverage accurately mirrors political reality. That is, the left is preoccupied with "imaginative" policies like a Green New Deal and extremist anti-fascist activism that is itself, ironically, quite racist. Pool's disproportionate coverage of the left matches the left's own "lunacy" and no such equivalent exists on the right. Overall, what the examples drawn from Topic 28 make

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clear is that being able to accurately classify individuals in terms of their political and ideological proclivities, and the implications this has on the legitimacy of the content produced by these individuals, is important to users of r/IntellectualDarkWeb.

Topic 40 (*nazis, nazi, hitler, holocaust, germany*) and Topic 82 (*proud, boys, white, supremacists, nazis*) both focus on far-right, fascist, and white supremacist ideologies, political practices, and groups. In Topic 40, there is an effort to make sense of the rise of Nazism and whether it has any bearing on contemporary political events, such as in this comment with a high score (11 karma):

> Surely you realize that the holocaust [sic] did not happen overnight. Rather, that it was the result of decades of slowly increasing animus towards groups of people deemed unacceptable in their respective societies. Lest we forget, National Socialism was not some external threat that conquered Germany. It was popular. It began as a grass roots [sic] movement. By the time it was addressed, it had already been awarded power by the people. It did so by lies and deceit, of course, but the populace went along with it, whether out of support or fear. The treatment of conservatives is not on par with how Jews were treated in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The mindset underscoring such treatment, though, is alive and well in the West, and you're a fool or a damned coward if you can't see that.

This comment was made on a thread about the firing of actress Gina Carano from the cast of *The Mandalorian*, a Disney show that takes place in the Star Wars universe, after Carano made a post to her Instagram profile claiming that the persecution of conservatives is equivalent to that of the Jews in Nazi Germany. More specifically, this comment was made in response to a different comment by an author who ridiculed Carano's analogy as "beyond hyperbolic." Taking a different opinion, the user in the comment quoted at length above notes that the Holocaust was a social process of steadily increasing animus. Nazism was a popular, grassroots movement in Germany anointed by

the people. While the user agrees that the literal treatment of conservatives is not akin to that of the Jews in Nazi Germany, they nevertheless maintain that such a "mindset" is, in fact, operative in the West—something only "fools" or "cowards" fail to grasp.

Understanding the ideological and social dynamics of Nazism and its implications for the historical present remains the dominant organizing principle of Topic 40. However, my topic model also captures other themes, such as a comment by a user promoting anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and Holocaust revisionism:

> …if the Holocaust was the most shocking atrocity of World War II, why was there no mention of it for nearly 20 years after the war ended? And why did Anne Frank only die after six months in a "death camp"?…Unz…exhumes Jacob Schiff to show how this Wall Street banker jump started the Bolshevik Revolution, so it was really a deep hatred of Russia, and not any idealism, that triggered the bloodiest chapter in human history. Though only 4% of Russia's population, Jews made up 80-85% of the early Soviet government, Unz points out, and they dominated the Gulag administration and the terrifying NKVD. Since this Jewish-dominated regime killed tens of millions during its first two decades, Unz concludes that "in per capita terms Jews were the greatest mass-murderers of the twentieth century, holding that unfortunate distinction by an enormous margin and with no other nationality coming even remotely close. And yet, by the astonishing alchemy of Hollywood, the greatest killers of the last one hundred years have somehow been transmuted into being seen as the greatest victims, a transformation so seemingly implausible that future generations will surely be left gasping in awe." To too many, though, this Jewish role in genocide is only a cause for celebration, not shame or remorse…

While this comment did not appear to get much traction (it only has a score of 2), it weaves together several anti-Semitic themes. Astonishingly, this user casts doubt on the Holocaust being the most "shocking atrocity of World War II," claiming that Jews constituted nearly all of the Soviet government and therefore committed far more mass murders than the Nazis under communist regimes. They then blame Hollywood for transforming the Jews—"the greatest killers of the last one hundred years"—into history's greatest victims. To support their claims, the user cites Unz, an extremist

website founded by Ron Unz, which promotes anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and has been condemned by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL 2018). Moreover, this comment reveals the risks that come with creating open-access contrarian online political communities: they extend invitations to nearly anyone with a variety of "heterodox" views, however absurd, the censoring of which can undermine the credibility of the community's stated commitments to free speech, free inquiry, and the free flow of information.

Topic 82 focuses on the Proud Boys, an all-male, masculinist, and so-called "American chauvinist" group founded by the alt-right podcaster, Gavin McInnes. The Proud Boys have frequently engaged in violent street brawls with left-wing activists and enthusiastically support Donald Trump. While the Proud Boys have been on the radar of extremist researchers, activists, and journalists since they began in 2016, they obtained notoriety in September of 2020 when Donald Trump was asked to condemn militias and violent extremist groups supporting him during a televised presidential debate. Trump infamously responded, "Proud Boys, stand back and stand by," which the Proud Boys took as marching orders, celebrating their public naming by the President of the United States in their social media channels (Frenkel and Karni 2020). Moreover, in March of 2022, the leader of the Proud Boys, Henry "Enrique" Tarrio, was arrested for his participation in the January 6th assault on the Capitol building, along with the founder of another extremist group, Stewart Rhodes of the Oath Keepers (Hsu and Barrett 2022).

Given this context, the Proud Boys' associations with Trump informs the discussions

in Topic 82. A comment critical of the Proud Boys provides one user's interpretation of

what the group represents:

> All you have to do is read the wiki and follow the links/sources to see who the Proud Boys are…They associate with white supremacists, but issue statements that they aren't about that. They provoke, then say "hey I'm just asking questions…." They have an air of silliness that belies an actual agenda, ideology and action. They are more coy, more media savvy, and waaayyyy [sic] more organized than any group that can be called 'antifa'. And that savvy manifests in the plausible deniability that they always have for all of the ugliness they're involved in. They have "it's justa prank bro!"-ed their way into being a small militia. In an amoral sense, it's remarkable and pretty unique. In a "I have to live in this country" kinda way, it's scary, because I can absolutely see how seductive it is, to seduce lost young men with brotherhood and humor, and then "hey, did you know that white men are the real victims, and Our western values are under attack? And women are lazy and Muslims are bad and we built this country and Richard Spencer is misunderstood and MEMES lololololol"…

This user picks up on the alt-right threads running through the Proud Boys' aesthetics and

discursive strategies, which include using memes and jokes to appear lighthearted, fun,

and exciting (Nagle 2017). Other users challenge those who are too condemnatory of the

Proud Boys and tie them to Trump too strongly:

> …The Proud Boys are against white supremacy, **have an Afro-Cuban chairman**, and a minority of them vote Democrats (which supposedly fights white supremacy according to the woke left). Trump doesn't even know who they are…which is why he denounced them… "I condemn all white supremacists, I condemn the Proud Boys. I don't know much about the Proud Boys but I condemn that," Trump said in an interview with Fox News on Thursday [*link to Al Jazeera article*].

Interestingly, this commenter seeks to challenge the notion that the Proud Boys are a

white supremacist organization while also distancing the group from Trump. The user

points out that the leader of the Proud Boys, Henry "Enrique" Tarrio, is Afro-Cuban, and

therefore the Proud Boys cannot, by definition, be white supremacist. This point is

emphasized in another comment, where a user writes that:

> …Afaik [as far as I know] the PB [Proud Boys] are extremely right wing "Western" supremacists and gender essentialists, but many of their members aren't white and they openly reject white

supremacy. I'm not saying they're a good fun group of temperate people, but cultural supremacy and racial supremacy are not the same thing.

Hence, for this user, cultural supremacy (i.e., "Western chauvinism") is distinct from racial supremacy and allows for multi-ethnic polities. That is, one does not necessarily have to be a white Westerner to be a Western chauvinist who advocates for the supremacy of Western culture.

Regardless, fascistic threads run deep in the Proud Boys' worldview. As the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) explains, the Proud Boys' Western chauvinism is oriented around an anti-egalitarian, anti-feminist, and anti-leftist set of principles that it sees as undermining the supremacy of Western culture (SPLC n.d.). Like the fascist movements before it, which, as Marcuse (- Marcuse 2009) shows, "indiscriminately [brought] together everything against which it [fought] under the title of *liberalism*" (p. 4), Western chauvinism analogously categorizes everything it opposes as being "politically correct," "anti-West," "anti-male," and "anti-white." Within IDW discourses, as shown especially through the analysis of the topics in the Sociopolitical Conflict topic group, similar sentiments about the superiority of Western civilization are expressed, particularly in relation to an out of control "left" that threatens to unravel the West's greatest achievements. The closeness that many in the IDW get to Western chauvinism in their defense of Western civilization may be uncomfortable in light of the Proud Boys, who lack the intellectual aesthetics of the IDW and choose instead to state their chauvinistic principles in a plain and bigoted language. Such a recognition may be motivating at least some members of the IDW to come to a defense of the Proud Boys, even if mutedly, to

distinguish a concept of Western superiority from racial superiority.

Finally, Topic 57 (*marxism, marx, marxist, marxists, classs*) from Figure 6.2 focuses

discussion on Marxist theory and praxis. Interestingly, the comment with the highest

similarity to the topic vector (c=.87) is one by an author critiquing a different user for

failing to engage with Marxism in an intellectually rigorous way:

> You sound like a censorous [sic] SJW when you say stuff like this. Marxism has had a large impact on history and remains a living ideology that can be rigorously dealt with. If your impulse is to take it off the table from discussion, then that says more about you than anything else.

The comment was directed at a user who opined that a video posted to the subreddit by

left-wing philosophy YouTuber Jonas Čeika, wherein Čeika critiques Jordan Peterson's

representation of Marxism, "isn't IDW and doesn't belong here." Interestingly, my topic

model found multiple instances of users critiquing others for failing to adequately

consider the intellectual merits of Marxism, as these examples show:

Example A:

You seem like you dont [sic] have a good grasp of Marxism because its focus is really more on critique of capitalism rather than [prescriptions] for how to advance to the next stage of social development.

Example B:

If you're wholly anti-Marxist then give a listen to that Richard Wolff guy [i.e., a Marxist economist and advocate of economic democracy]. You'll likely disagree with absolutely everything he says. But he will lay out a drastically different perspective than yours that it'll make you think hmmm, that's an interesting viewpoint.

Example C:

Honestly it kinda sounds like you haven't looked into what marxism [sic] is actually about. A good intro is the marx [sic] video on School of life Yt [YouTube] channel. You will see what we (as in many including bret [sic], peterson [sic], me etc) are saying. Marxisms moral prescriptions are limited.

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Like Example A above, a lengthy comment from another user argues that Marxism is primarily a *methodology* of economic, historical, and sociological analysis distinguishable from the violence of actually existing communism:

> …Marxist [Revolutions] have happen [sic] in societies not in response to reasonable capitalism, but in response to awful applications of capitalism, feudalism, and/or colonialism. But as social democracy, liberal democracy, and capitalism have improved and spread Marxism and communism have become that less reasonable. "Marx is dead" as the saying goes. It is good for historical analysis. it has a part in better and modern forms of class conflict and socialism. I don't support any communism or anarchism either…It is wrong to just dismiss Marx and [Marxism] as absurd and dangerous. People sometimes act like it is dangerous to discuss it. Like it's an addictive drug or something. It is a strawman to argue that Marxism inherently kills millions of people. It is wrong to mix it up with postmodernism…Real [Marxists] and [postmodernists] are at odds with each other…It's frustrating because I expect more of Peterson. It is like instead of critiquing Marxism in the best way he is using it, as a recognizable but vague boogeyman [sic] man, in a simple way to tie other vague leftist stuff [together].

As this user argues, communist revolutions have occurred in societies where material conditions truly were "awful." Over time, however, the advances of social democracy, liberal democracy, and (presumably reformed) capitalism have addressed these historical limitations, meaning that Marxism and communism are now "less reasonable." Nevertheless, the methodological essence of Marxism remains important for historical analysis. Interestingly, this user also distinguishes Marxism from postmodernism and notes that there is mutual animosity between these competing epistemologies. This ties directly into the user's frustrations with Jordan Peterson, the latter of whom rails against so-called "postmodern neo-Marxism," or the supposed synthesis of postmodernism and Marxism through, variously, the Frankfurt School, French poststructuralism, and humanities disciplines that adopted Derrida's method of deconstruction (Peterson 2018:306), all the while failing to critique Marxism on its intellectual merits.

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However, these criticisms of the IDW's weak intellectual treatments of Marxism does not mean that Marxism is positively received by the subreddit. In a highly upvoted comment (27 karma), this user offers their take on evaluating Marxism's intellectual and social contributions, and it is worth quoting them at length:

> …Marx did a good job identifying some capitalism's problems, and then proposed a solution that can never work…Given that people want more than they can acquire, there must be some way of handling scarcity. Capitalism's answer, is to let people freely trade, such that the prices of goods react to market forces…Marx's answer, is to violently collectivize all the ownership of everything, and then something magic happens and there's no more scarcity…The problem with Marx's system, is that people differ in ability. You want the most competent people to be in charge; otherwise everything gets worse…you end up with IQ 130 people plowing fields, and then everything gets more scarce, because you've prevented people from naturally sorting themselves by ability… So that begs the question: what are Marx's theories useful for?…the short answer is, as a means of overthrowing existing hierarchies…the low-competents will always outnumber the high-status aristocracy. Communism/Marxism takes advantage of this…because there are more peasants than aristocrats, an enterprising dictator can rile up the peasants with Equality Rhetoric, and lead a pitchfork mob to oust the government…Communist systems work by inverting the natural status hierarchies, and giving status to people who don't deserve it…Communism, in practice, is [intelligent] sociopaths using the left side of the Pareto distribution to kill/enslave the other smart people…yes, capitalism sucks, and if you put capitalists in charge of your political system (as we have done in the West), they'll just exploit everybody. But Communism utterly fails, as a theory, to address individual differences and scarcity in a way that makes any sense…

There are several significant observations to be gleaned from this user's analysis. First, the user reduces all questions of Marxist social analysis to (1.) scarcity and (2.) immutable human hierarchies. On economic grounds, Marx's "system" (which remains undefined) fails because it has no answer to the ingenuity of the price mechanism, which automatically allocates goods in an efficient and rational way by communicating complex social signals about consumer demand and scarcity. Contrarily, all Marx has to offer is the "violent" seizure of property and the collective ownership of "everything." Most importantly, however, Marx's "system" defies human nature, as human beings are

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hierarchically stratified by innate ability that, we must assume, society has no capacity to change. Communism irrationally allocates high-IQ people to low-IQ work and vice-versa. Born out of the resentments the "low-competents" have towards to the high-IQ elite, communism already emerges from violent premises, and as it tries to invert the naturally ordained status hierarchy, it necessarily devolves into further violence due to its irrational allocation of talent and goods. Capitalism indeed "sucks," but Marx's alternative is unworkable, a troubling conclusion that, when coupled with the user's view of natural human hierarchy, bears a striking resemblance to fascistic opposition to both liberal capitalism and communism.

Indeed, to this point, we see an "organic" view of authority operative in this user's analysis that only requires a few modifications to become a fully fascist theory, as Marcuse (2008) explains in *An Essay on Authority*:

> Authority as a power over voluntary recognition and over the voluntary subordination to the will and insight of the bearer of authority, is a "quality" which certain people have by "birth"…Its prerequisite is that the bearer of authority should belong to a given "people" (*Volkstum*) or a given "race": his authority rests on the genuine "identity of origin" of the leader and the led. This very broad biological basis makes it possible to extend charismatic authority at will to any number of people throughout all social groups (P. 102).

Hence, the authority the "high-IQ aristocrats" have over the "low-IQ proles" is a *birthright*, a status they do not have to earn or justify, but rather are ascribed on account of their belonging to a given people, in this case, the cognitive elite. Moreover, authority thus defined can be "charismatically" extended to a cognitive elite positioned variously throughout society—i.e., to high-IQ individuals who may not necessarily occupy

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positions of power. In fact, this is a crucial dimension of the fluid ideologies circulating amongst the alt-right, manosphere, and incel communities, which largely see themselves as intelligent, high-IQ, and deserving of authority on account of their cognitive, masculine, and ethnic features regardless of their actual social status or marginality (Chang 2020; Flisfeder 2018; Massanari 2017; Nagle 2017). Thus, the above user's reasoning is only a few steps removed from adding an ethnic layer that fully racializes the cognitive elite as a *Volkstum* that is naturally superior to subordinate "low-competent" races, a conclusion that has already been reached within the alt-right. And it is the reason that IDW-style contrarian "truth-seeking," which is "driven by reason to reject the heart's plea for equality" (Stanley 2018:83), risks slipping into a scientistic alibi for oppressive politics.

6.3 Culture Wars

The Culture Wars topic group followed the pattern seen by other themes, spiking in comment frequency around the summer of 2020 before tapering off (see Figure A.C.1 in Appendix C). However, in relative terms, the Culture Wars topic group has been remarkably stable as proportion of comments across the observation period (see Figure A.C.2 in Appendix C), averaging 6.0% of comments per month (though with a slight downwards trend towards the end of the time series). It is somewhat surprising that the Culture Wars topic group does not have a higher proportion given the IDW's strong presence in the online culture wars, though culture war-style rhetoric is inflected in comments distributed across topic groups as previous analysis showed. The top five
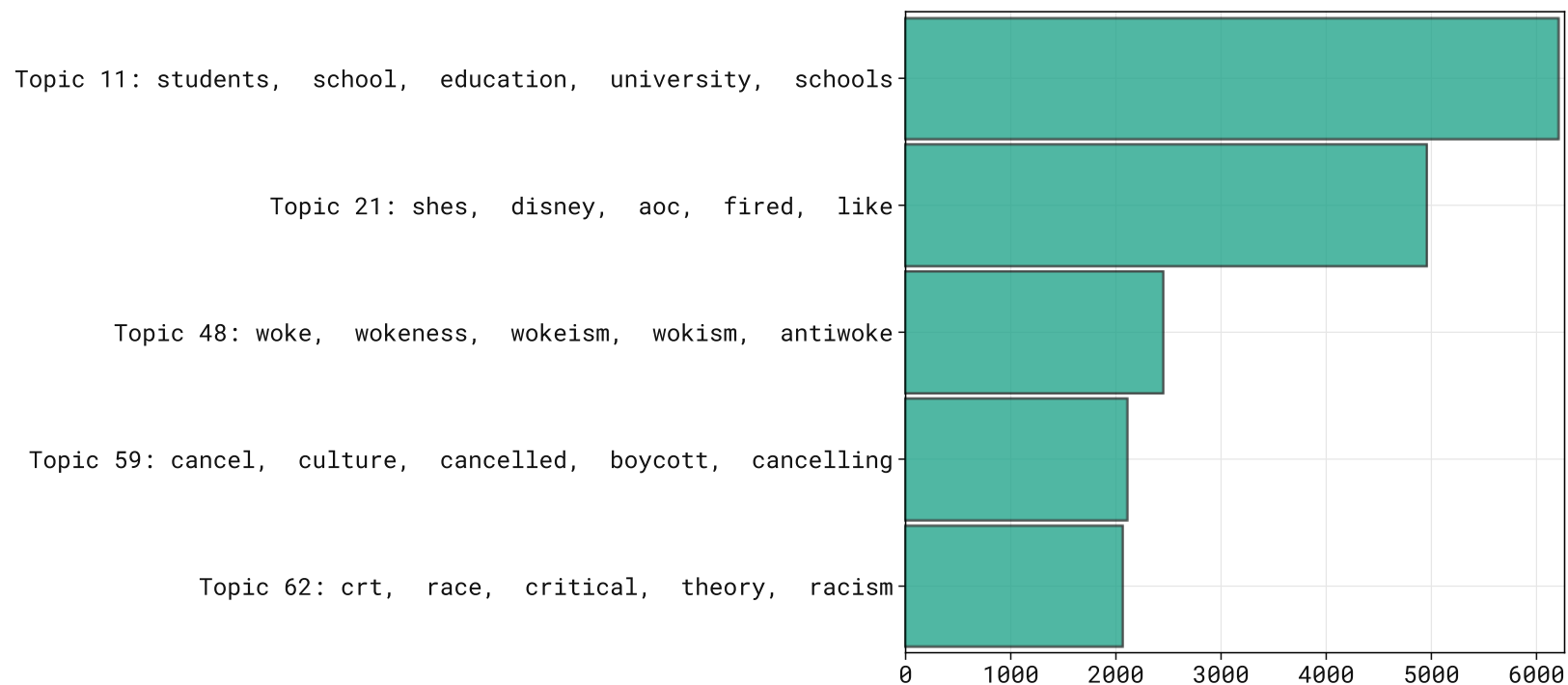
Figure 6.3: Top 5 Topics in Culture Wars

topics in the Culture Wars topic group are shown in Figure 6.3.

The most frequent topic is Topic 11 (*students, school, education, university, schools*), focusing on issues about schooling, campus culture, and campus activism. Results from my topic model show that the effects of progressive activism on the academy features prominently in many comments. In this example, this user expresses concerns about their perceived degraded quality of college students as a function of "leftist" and "woke" influence over college curricula and institutional policies:

> …It is a bad time for higher order intellectuals right now. I recently had a chance to serve as [a] visiting judge at a national debate tournament and I was flabbergasted at the quality of argumentation I was hearing…Claim, claim, emote, claim claim. I talked with my former professor…and she echoed my sentiments and said even her hands in instruction had been tied by extreme leftism having run amok in academia…Faculty members were having complaints lodged against them for raising hot button issues or even attempting to raise the very subject matter. That faculty [chairs] had grown fearful of losing their position…I am so fearful for where we are headed as a society if [the] current generation of youth cannot be trusted to manage their emotions and to cultivate higher orders of thinking…Wokeism is truly a cancer to higher education in a way that I have never seen in my life before…

Another user examines how the rise of issue-specific studies—e.g., gender studies, ethnic studies, fat studies, etc.—have had a detrimental effect on university education and administration, even if these disciplines initially emerged with good intentions:

> …as it spun off into post-modernism and Marxism, it was just seen as this laughable little backwater…But Jin Li the fucking math professor, or Sally Adams the biology professor isn't about to go tangle with the "African studies" department regarding "racism". They are the experts, and they can have their toxic little intellectual backwater if they want. But then they started getting traction with students, and getting traction with the administration. Students love a program where their work is graded on regurgitating right-think, instead of actual intellectual rigor. Administrators are just scared…no one wants to be accused of racism or sexism…So they say "ok you don't want to be a racist, here is what you do". And they win that battle again and again…Pretty soon statements they don't like aren't a question of "offensiveness" because it is too easy to say free speech or free thought shouldn't be curtailed by mere questions of "offensiveness". Nope now we are going to use the language of "safety". Because safety is one of those things we will restrain speech or thought over, and does mandate immediate change…

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As these two comments illustrate, there is a sense among users that higher education has been hijacked by radical left-wing students and activist-oriented academic disciplines that are corrupting both universities and the pursuit of knowledge. Fears about "wokeness" and not wanting to be perceived as "racist" or bigoted are said to be coercing university staff to self-censor so that they do not become targeted by leftist students, faculty, and administrators. These sentiments are epitomized by another user who's highly upvoted comment (160 positive score) bemoans how colleges are "turning out large numbers of ideologues who are incapable of understanding dialogue and speech"—by far the most worrying thing they "have seen in a while."

Topic 21 (*shes, disney, aoc, fired, like*) has low specificity, consisting of comments evaluating content produced by, or involving, female figures without a clear discernible pattern, as these examples show:

Example A:

It seems like borderline child abuse to use her like that for political means. Quite sad, even more, because they terrified her and filled her with pessimistic world views that have little bearing on reality.

Example B:

You're right, she was pretty good. I think she went the standard activist route of using controversial claims as a sword and the norms of politeness as a shield. If you stop to examine the controversial claims, she gets to flesh out her talking points. If you dismiss them out of hand, you run the danger of disrespecting her. Obviously, you thread the needle by dismissing them out of hand in a respectful way, but that's hard, especially when you're encountering them for the first time.

Example C:

I really respect her for speaking out against Smith - I have been following her for [a while]. Honestly most of her complaints are fairly reasonable. I personally think this article sensationalizes

it a bit but I would recommend checking out some of her [YouTube] videos. I imagine [it's] hard to speak up to things like this at a place like Smith.

Example A is a highly upvoted comment (22 score) referring to teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg. Specifically, the commenter is complaining that her parents abusively imbued her with fear and pessimism about the apocalyptic implications of the climate crisis. Example B is aimed at Eunice Olumide, referring to a debate she had with IDW-affiliated Douglas Murray on *Good Morning Britain* regarding the concept of "wokeness," with the user arguing that she uses a manipulative and difficult to rebuke debate strategy. Finally, Example C is targeted at Jodi Shaw, a former employee at Smith College who was featured on Bari Weiss's *Common Sense* blog in an article highlighting Shaw's resignation from Smith and her "whistle-blowing" about the college's "anti-white" policies implemented to fight systemic racism.

These are just a few examples to illustrate that the topical content of comments in Topic 21 varies considerably, refers to different women, and are seemingly only unified by their focus on female subjects. However, I chose to classify Topic 21 in the Culture Wars topic group because, when the comments are qualitatively inspected, they do tend to focus on women's commentary on public debates orbiting around culture war topics.

Topics 48 (*woke, wokeness, wokeism, wokism, antiwoke*), 59 (*cancel, culture, cancelled, boycott, cancelling*), and 62 (*crt, race, critical, theory, racism*) each home in on specific issues animating the contemporary culture war. Topic 48 focuses on "wokeness" discourse, which loosely means to be aware of social injustices and systems of oppression that permeate our social relations. Historically, the language to "stay woke"

has been tied to black liberation and anti-racist movements, which insist on the need for black people to be politically and socially "awake" in a racist society (Richardson and Ragland 2018). More recently, the term has been mainstreamed, evacuated of its radical substance, and appropriated by the culture industries, opportunistic capitalist firms, and even the state, who all desire to appear symbolically "woke" regardless of their actual practices (Kanai and Gill 2020; Sobande 2020). "Wokeness" now occupies a central space in social and political battles, with "anti-woke" hysteria becoming a rallying cry for the Republican Party (Smith and Kapur 2021).

Topic 59 is rooted around "cancel culture," which usually refers to an activist practice of publicly calling out individuals who have been accused of causing harm, abuse, or engaged in otherwise "problematic" behavior with the intent of "holding them accountable" outside of traditional venues of justice. The use of informal activist networks and the public square as an accountability mechanism begins from the premise that existing institutions of justice are unreliable and unfair due to the racist, sexist, and inequitable biases they inherit from an oppressive society.

Finally, Topic 62 zeroes in on "critical race theory," which is usually stylized as CRT. In recent years, paranoia about CRT has reached a fever pitch, with conservatives and IDW figures alike insisting that this academic framework, which focuses on understanding how racist outcomes are produced through ostensibly color-blind institutional mechanisms, is being taught in K-12 public education. Opponents to CRT argue it is anti-white and anti-American propaganda aimed only at indoctrinating and

radicalizing children with far-left ideas. Nowhere are such sentiments better expressed than in IDW figure James Lindsay's (2022) absurd concept of "Race Marxism," which the political scientist Matt McManus (2022) shows is confounded by misunderstandings, misrepresentations, and ideologically motivated distortions. CRT is now fully politicized, with efforts to restrict, prohibit, or censor education "based on racism" taking root in 36 states at the time of this writing (Stout and Wilburn 2022).

Looking first at Topic 48, we observe that within the IDW subreddit, there is a significant effort to define precisely what wokeness is. The comment with the highest similarity to the topic vector (c=.87) puts it this way:

> …The woke want to avoid offending protected classes but are happy to offend whites, males, cisgendereds, and heterosexuals. They don't want to just create equality of access to resources, they want to force equality of outcome for protected classes. The method of doing this is completely Marxist - revolution and overthrowing of dominant classes. Wokeism is not as benign as you seem to think it is.

As this user explains, wokeness is not "benign," but stands in hostile opposition to whiteness, men, cisgendered people, and heterosexuality. "The woke" aspire for revolutionary destruction of these normative categories, ambitions that "are completely Marxist." Another user offers this definition, focusing on preoccupation with identity politics among the woke and their rejection of scientific method and objective truth:

> I think the term woke better encompasses the group of people who normally are criticized here. My definition: people who are consumed by identity politics, deny objective truth and are generally anti-scientific (though, may live under the delusion that they are scientific).

In another comment, a different user argues that wokeness is less about its ideas and stated politics, which are inconsistent, but more about its actions, which are alienating

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and unappealing:

> Perhaps "wokeness" is a series of behaviors as opposed to merely a series of viewpoints, because the viewpoints which constitute "wokeness" seem to change constantly. Lots of things which were the height of woke in 2010 are horribly problematic now. What a lot of people oppose when they say they are "anti-woke" isn't necessarily stuff that wokes claim to support (such as being against racism), but specific woke methods, such as thought policing, the culture of Young Adult novelists, cancel culture, etc.

For this user, the ideas that preoccupy "the woke" are constantly changing, suggesting that the woke lack conceptual precision and a coherent political program. Rather, what is most problematic people about "the woke" is their abrasive forms of activism, such as "thought policing" and "cancel culture."

Interestingly, for other subreddit users, wokeness and its regressive cultural politics can be disentangled from legitimate left-wing causes, like a "$15 minimum wage," "free universal health care," "free education," and "public housing," as this user argues:

> Woke people aren't really fighting for any of [those things]. Those are normal left wing concepts and all pretty decent ideas. The woke mostly [focus] on making every single thing based on race. It is more about reversing the Civil Rights era and MLK style liberal anti racism. They want Woke anti racism which is just racism rebranded, being applied to law. Complete judging of all people based on race, regression to what humanity used to be like before liberal anti racism…

Similarly, in a different comment, a user argues that we can disentangle legitimate anti-racism, feminism, and queer politics from illiberal woke variations:

> I think woke encompasses any aspect of feminism, non white advocacy, gay and trans advocacy that is anti-liberal. In other words, a feminist or black activist who believes in freedom of speech, equality under the law, the rule of law, and due process is not woke. Woke people tend to believe that the US is fundamentally racist, sexist, transphobic, etc. and the system is so broken that it must be completely transformed, and therefore they reject the aforementioned liberal values.

Finally, others are concerned about the obsession the anti-woke have with wokeness and how this feeds low-quality and imprecise partisan aggression within the IDW milieu:

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"Wokeism" is not a specific thing. It's an umbrella term that refers to whatever leftists are doing that rightists don't like. As such, criticizing wokeism is generally meaningless. It amounts to "the left are doing things I don't like and that's bad!" Instead, people should criticize specific aspects of wokeism, i.e. specific things the left is doing that they don't like.

Wokeness is thus a contested term within the r/IntellectualDarkWeb subreddit, though, overall, it is opposed. However, this opposition take several forms. In the first example, culture war discourses directly structure that user's definition, who ties wokeness to Marxism in the ways that James Lindsay does. Others seek to disambiguate legitimate social justice activism that adheres to liberal principles from illegitimate versions that are destructive to liberal principles. Most surprisingly, however, my topic model found that some users argue that social critics ought to separate woke cultural politics from genuinely good left-wing politics, such as increasing the minimum wage and enhancing the welfare state, and sharpen their critiques about what, specifically, they oppose about wokeness to avoid entrapping themselves in reactionary culture war politics.

Topic 59 is largely constituted by comments in the subreddit where users contest the meaning of cancel culture. One interesting theme that emerged in this topic was a distinction between "boycotts" and "canceling," as these examples show:

Example A:

No lmao. Cancel culture is when you use public shame and humiliation as a means to get a particular person fired. Boycotts are not cancel culture. Never have been. Refusing to fund an organization that enforces policies you disagree with (and in this case discriminates against the people you agree with), is not the same as shaming someone. By your logic, a Republican not donating to a Democratic superPAC is cancel culture.

Example B:

…Cancel culture is an end-run around the free market. It's not a bunch of people individually deciding to boycott someone. It's a small number of people mobbing and harassing people into

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changing their behaviors. Those actions make it no longer a free market. If the next time you go to Wendy's we got two dozen people to call your home, call your boss, post nasty things on your Facebook, etc, how "free" do you really feel to visit Wendy's?

Example C:

I think the situation here is a little more nuanced than "right-wing cancel culture" (not that I ever expected to use the word "nuanced" referring to anything relating to Trump). This seems closer to a boycott - refusing to do business because of something with which you disagree. Cancel culture is about shutting down an individual's speech because you disagree. Boycotts are the market in action. Cancel culture is malicious bullying.

These comments are meant to address opinion that "canceling" is little more than a boycott—i.e., voluntarily refusing to associate with an individual or brand whom you disagree with. However, consistent across these examples is a sense that cancellation implies a level of personal, and severe, public humiliation that boycotts do not. Example C draws a distinction between right-wingers choosing to boycott a business—in this case, Goodyear Tires, which Trump urged supporters to cease engagements with due to Goodyear's banning of MAGA hats—and left-wing activists attempting to assassinate the character and material livelihood of individuals.

Ultimately, opposition to cancel culture rests on a concern for the toxicity and destruction it brings upon individuals and the corrosive effects it has on public debate and civil discourse, as this user makes clear:

… The idea that you should be able to 'cancel' somebody or something is downright wrong and it's the opposite of what our world needs right now. You shouldn't be able to cancel somebody for having a bad opinion or being misinformed on a topic. If you are a true proponent for a cause and genuinely want others to see things from your perspective, you're far more likely to make an impact by engaging in civil discussion and using empathy to try and understand your opponent. Cancelling them effectively takes away their voice and eliminates any possibility of that person changing others minds. So yes, cancel culture "works". If I go on twitter and talk enough shit about you, others will catch on and your reputation will be tarnished from it. It can be used for good purposes, but the entire construct itself is damaging to productive conversation as a whole. We need to start trying to change minds instead of silence voices.

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The internet only makes cancel culture worse, as another user argues, due to its amplification mechanisms and the scale of information transmission in digital networks:

> ...The unique thing about cancel culture today is the massive scale at which it can be done via the Internet, particularly through large companies who act like quasi-states...When people talk about cancel culture like it's a novel or peculiar thing, it's because this is a feature that previous boycotts did not quite have. A lie can be tweeted about you, and you can have an entire planet turn on you before verification happens, and even the request for verification can be taken as not taking some kind of social woe seriously. That's a step toward dystopia that we never needed to take.

Indeed, in this last example, this user pushes back against the notion that "cancel culture" is not new and that, throughout history, "cancellations" can be observed, such as during McCarthyism. However, for this user, such comparisons are empirically naïve, for they fail to account for the historic role the internet plays under present social conditions. Rumors and accusations may spread rapidly and obtain a status of truth without any verification having taken place. Attempts to "slow down" and ask for evidence can themselves be indicative of individuals' abdication of their ethical duties to take accusations seriously. This is a "dystopian" state of affairs necessitating that we distinguish contemporary cancel culture from historical bouts of hysteria and mob aggression.

Lastly, Topic 62 from Figure 6.3 is composed of comments arguing about the meanings and cultural significance of critical race theory (CRT). The comment with the highest cosine similarity to the topic vector (c=.89) is a rebuttal by the author to another user for the latter's sympathetic portrayal of CRT:

> You're supposing that CRT's take is inherently correct. It's very easy to see how a bad lens of evaluating laws and systems could very easily divide people, and not just because it hurt white people's feelings. Imagine for example if instead of Critical Race Theory, we have Racist Critical

> Theory, a lens of evaluating laws and systems through racial narrative, but that racial narrative is "blacks are inherently inferior, both genetically and culturally"…[CRT] divides us and undermines us because it's a bullshit way of viewing things.

For this author, CRT is problematic for the ways it forces us to view everything through a "racial" lens. They give the hypothetical example of "Racist Critical Theory" to illustrate their point, noting that we would never accept a white supremacist "critical theory of race." For this user, CRT can be dismissed through analogy alone, an idealist impulse. Only at the level of pure thought is it possible to draw homologies between a hypothesized "Racist Critical Theory" and CRT. Here, CRT and RCT appear as two sides of the same coin—racist thought structures that are incorrect for the same logical reasons, even if they have opposite conclusions. Empirical investigation of the claims advanced by CRT is therefore unnecessary: abstract reasoning becomes a substitute for scientifically determining the truthfulness of CRT's propositions.

In a highly-upvoted comment (29 score), another user laments how CRT wars against the Enlightenment through its "communistic" pseudo-intellectualism:

> CRT is the opposite of colour blindness, consciously and deliberately…it is the belief that everyone should be judged on the basis of race, first and foremost…it is both promoted and believed in, by university brainwashed, Communist pseudo-intellectuals, who if they were only honest, hold the same level of reverence for lies and obfuscation, that Enlightenment authors claimed to for the truth…CRT wants to destroy the Enlightenment…It is an initiative to eliminate popular awareness, of the concept of verifiable truth. It is therefore not only racism in sheep's clothing, but an attack on the very foundation of science.

CRT, for this user, aspires for nothing less than the destruction of the Enlightenment and the destruction of any concept of verifiable truth. Its associations with "university brainwashed communist pseudo-intellectuals" is meant to discredit CRT intellectually, meaning it never has to be dealt with scientifically—indeed, for this user, CRT may even

be anti-science. Fundamentally, CRT is seen as the inverse of white supremacy, a notion shared among several comments, as this example shows:

> The entire ideology of CRT feels like it should be a simple 3 panel pamphlet. It shouldn't be something so congested with contradictory ideas and irrelevant politics attached to its sole reason for existing. It only exists because black people were treated unfairly in the past and therefore we are now seeing the effects of how dehumanization can create a massively unstable sociopolitical environment. Instead today CRT is doing the exact opposite of what it was meant to do. I'm black and even I feel that CRT is so inadvertently racist.

While this user offers a less dismissive assessment CRT, conceding that it has a legitimate basis in the dehumanization of black people throughout history, CRT is no longer advancing the cause of anti-racist social justice but the "exact opposite," presumably reproducing racism itself.

In more charitable contexts, users argue that we can separate CRT's academic meaning from its activist meaning, but even when we do, the concept still results in problems:

> …It takes about 60 minutes or less of honest research to figure out that academic CRT (the version usually held up by people who say "you don't really know what CRT means") and political CRT (the version which created "defund the police" which was so dumb even Obama disowned the slogan) are two different beasts. Even the CRT academics themselves will admit that…But it also begs the question of why academic CRT doesn't publicly disown the people using it for political agendas. The question unfortunately is quite easy to answer: because CRT being mainstream is good for the academics' careers…It's not exclusive to CRT scholars, of course; it's a thing that most humans would do given the same choice.

This user is suggesting that CRT has a level of intellectual rigor not adequately recognized in the culture wars. This is because discussion of CRT in popular culture is structured by "political CRT," epitomized by unpopular activist demands, such as anti-police activism. Nevertheless, this user also notes that CRT scholars have little incentive to publicly oppose political CRT, for the mainstreaming of CRT is good for their careers.

Overall, this analysis reveals that there does appear to be a largely negative assessment of CRT within the subreddit. While there is variation in criticisms, with some offering more muted critiques, this conclusion is consistent with what we would expect given CRT's focal position in the culture wars.

6.4 Sex & Gender

As Figure A.C.1 in Appendix C shows, the frequency of comments classified in the Sex & Gender topic group have been growing steadily over the entire observation period. But as Figure A.C.2 in Appendix C shows, as a proportion of comments, the Sex & Gender topic group has experienced important fluctuation and even appears to have fallen and stabilized as a share of comments beginning around the summer of 2020. Across the entire observation period the Sex & Gender topic group averages 5.67% of all comments. The top five topics in the topic group are shown in Figure 6.4.

As can be seen in Figure 6.4, the top two topics in the Sex & Gender category, Topic 8 (*gender, trans, sex, woman, biological*) and Topic 9 (*women, men, feminism, sex, male*), dominate the category. Topic 8 focuses on trans issues and the definitions of sex and gender, as its keywords indicate. Surprisingly, the two comments with the highest cosine similarities to the topic vector (c=.84 and c=.83, respectively) contest, in different ways, anti-trans rhetoric that has become popular in the IDW sphere:

Example A:

I've not once heard a single real report of men using [trans identity] as perv cover [e.g. to enter women's locker rooms]…If you spend a little time researching it there are all sorts of biological things that pop up that [sum] up this ambiguity in nature. For instance. a full blown male can
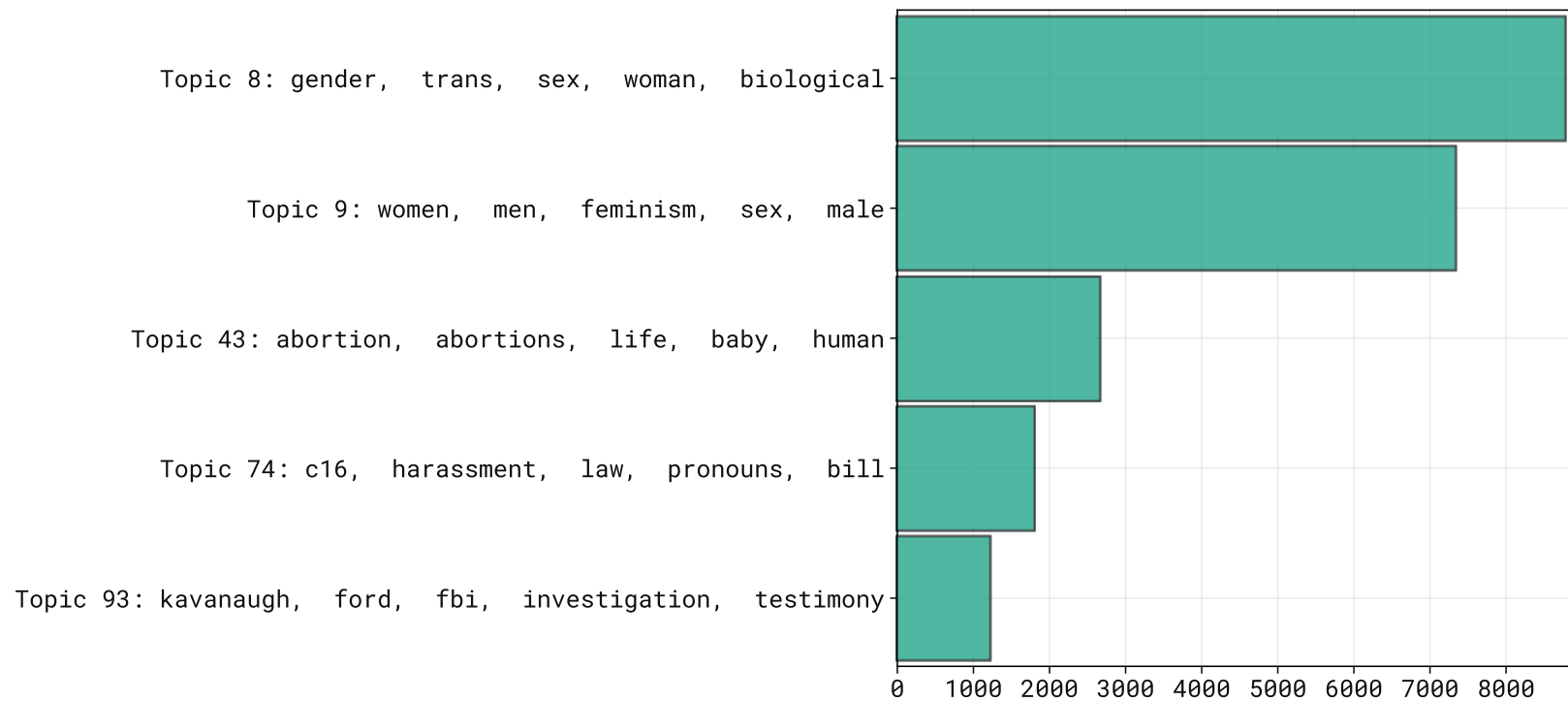
Figure 6.4: Top 5 Topics in Sex and Gender

genetically be 100% female. It just takes one chromosome flip. It's usually caught during puberty when a female for instance fails to ever ovulate…All I would ask for is letting a person decide for them selves [sic]…Maximize choice and Liberty is all that is really being asked by the logical people in the middle…yes there is an over encouragement to make children think they are trans thats ticking up. With many different issues inside of that. But if we really want to protect our kids normalizing some of this is important but we also need to advocate for actual real [psychologists] addressing a person with their gender…

Example B:

A big part of why scientists try to avoid calling cisgender identities normal and transgender identities abnormal is because that introduces a tremendous amount of bias into the analysis of data and the resulting discussions/conclusions…The majority of "trans folks aren't normal" arguments I've heard don't stem from a place of science or good faith, but rather from a place of misunderstanding, a place of fear, and/or bad faith. To go into any study with the presupposition that there is a normal against which to compare the data requires a tremendous amount of data, both in breadth (worldwide demographics) and depth (historical). There have been so many cultures whose concepts of gender, gender roles, gender expression, and sex have contradicted or been incompatible with the modern, conservative (from a scientific standpoint) concepts of sex and gender. Much of that data doesn't get acknowledged by much of the population…But it's galling to be a researcher and told that statistically sound, carefully controlled data analysis and research isn't valid, while someone's uninformed conjecture or fear-based opinion is treated as science…

In Example A, the user challenges the conservative talking point about men pretending to be women to enter female segregated spaces like locker rooms for sexual ends. Moreover, they go on to argue that biology itself is complex and challenges binary notions of sex and gender. They concede there is a risk that too much emphasis is being placed on allowing kids to "think they are trans," but nevertheless, it is important to normalize "some of this" while also involving psychologists, presumably to help "real" trans kids transition healthily and effectively. Example B contests notions of gender normativity, arguing that scientific investigation prohibits the normalization of sex and gender categories due to the biases this inscribes into our data. Additionally, they argue that gender and gender roles vary significantly across time and space, meaning that social

forces play a critical role in producing our understandings and practices of sex and gender. Such insights are not adequately acknowledged by the population, and instead are subsumed to "uninformed conjecture" and "fear-based opinion."

While these examples are interesting and counterintuitive, showing that opposition to anti-trans discourse does take place in the r/IntellectualDarkWeb subreddit, this does not mean that these sentiments are widely shared. Moreover, neither comment has high karma: Example A has 1 point and Example B has 2 points. In other comments, such as this one that has a high level of karma (44 score), trans people and non-trans advocates are represented as dogmatic and intellectually confused activists:

> …Truth is transgender ideologues / activists (whether trans people themselves or not) confound sex and gender themselves often enough on their own. First they often confuse gender stereotypes with gender…Second some say sex doesn't exist or sex is a spectrum. Third they use intersex people as examples of how sex is [a] spectrum when sexual developmental disorders 1) don't prove a spectrum and 2) intersex people still have one sex and not both…Fourth many of them have no qualms about dismantling women's rights, as…they confound sex with gender badly enough that they can't even see women's rights for what they are, much less give a crap about them. Fifth even when they do acknowledge sex and understand that transition is about gender and not sex, they expect people to cater to the gender of someone over their sex…Sixth they often use brain differences between those who are trans versus not as proof of inherent biological gender identity - when the brain is very plastic and flexible and therefore such brain differences are not automatic proof of innate neurological differences, but could also be neurological differences developed environmentally and conditionally. Seventh - gender is the result of expectations and conditioning placed on a human based on the human's sex. Gender inherently involves sex, because gender is the expectations (re: gender stereotypes) placed upon a human from birth and the conditioning, demands, raising and rearing of the offspring to conform to those expectations based on their sex…

For this user, trans rights advocates confound sex and gender. Attempts to place biology on a spectrum, such as by pointing to the reality of intersex people or neurological differences between trans and cis people, fail, for each can be explained away as developmental disorders or environmental conditioning. Moreover, this user ties gender

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stereotypes, particularly around child rearing, to sexual facts about men and women. With an essentialist view of sex adopted, subordinating women to their role as mothers, this user nevertheless argues that trans people stomp on the rights of biological women, a common trope in gender panics about trans women specifically (Westbrook and Schilt 2014).

These concerns about trans rights having anti-women implications are repeated in other comments in the subreddit as well, such as in this example:

> …There's an issue between the trans movement and women because of all this gender ideology and either denying sex or acting like gender should trump sex. Males are participating in women's sports, winning all their competitions, setting new world records…Males are now accessing women's domestic violence and rape shelters…despite how their presence traumatizes already badly traumatized women…Males are using women's locker rooms, including showering with high school girls…Men are demanding to be placed in women's prisons if they identity as a woman-even if they are a sex offender convicted of sex offenses against women…Trans activists appear more concerned that rape victims respect the pronoun of their rapists than they are about the rape committed by the trans woman and her lady penis…Something like around 70% of trans people do not surgically transition and many of them do not hormonally transition either…If you are not aware of these conflicts of interest and how gender self ID conflicts with women's rights which are sex based in nature, or if it doesn't matter to you because it will not affect you, then it would be much easier to hold the view of "live and let live, not my problem not my business." That's less likely to be the case for female people.

Epitomized in this comment is what Westbrook and Schilt (2014) describe as the "penile threat" to women-only spaces within our heteronormative sex/gender/sexuality system:

> This emphasis on the sexual threat of penises in women-only spaces shows that gender panics are not just about gender, but also about sexuality. In the sex/gender/sexuality system, all bodies are presumed heterosexual. This assumption makes gender-segregated spaces seem safe because they are then 'sexuality-free zones' (P. 49).

However, when a trans woman enters a (cis)women-only space, their assumed possession of a penis means the space becomes sexualized and dangerous due to the power penises have "to destroy the sanctity of women's spaces through their (presumed natural)

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propensity to rape" (Westbrook and Schilt 2014:48). Women, because they are "weaker than men," are always at "(hetero)sexual risk" (Westbrook and Schilt 2014:46). They therefore must be defended against sexualized intrusions into their asexual segregated spaces from trans women, who, because they are men who can "self-ID" as a woman, are now free to enter and dominate such women-only segregated spaces and are always at risk of committing a sexual assault.

Topic 9 (*women, men, feminism, sex, male*) homes in on gender equality, feminism, and sexual and gender differences between men and women specifically. One interesting comment refers to a discussion between Jordan Peterson and Camille Paglia on sex differences:

> …Jordan Peterson and Camille Paglia had an extended conversation about the influence of sex differences on society…Peterson states in that discussion that he believes we are dealing with a tyranny characterized by feminine forms of aggression and Paglia agrees. They decry the general ignorance about the different ways in which men and women interact (men: competence hierarchies, women: social status/desirability hierarchies) and how this creates trouble with the introduction of women into labour markets and high level decision making. There's a lot of research on men and women showing that women tend to be more left wing. And it's not surprising that leftism is more feminine: concerned with care/harm, less concerned with proportionality and fairness, concerned with reputational attacks, shaming, and social bullying, things like that. We've got feminized grade schools, feminized cultural values, feminized consumer cultures, it's all over the place…the taboos are strongly against acknowledging that significant differences exist between men and women…This is deeply unjust to men and to women because it prevents us from accepting those differences and structuring our values and societies on that basis. Instead, leftism invents alternate explanations to explain outcomes ("sexism! patriarchy! rape culture!") and uses gaslighting to manipulate anyone who begins to ask the wrong questions ("women are the victims! men who complain are incels!") etc…

For this user, Peterson and Paglia provide an entryway to express their beliefs about the immutable natural differences between men and women. More pointedly, these natural sex differences map onto social differences as well, with men competing in

"competence" hierarchies while women compete in "status" and "desirability" hierarchies. When the sexes integrate in institutions like labor markets, these two sexual status hierarchies come into conflict with one another. Moreover, this user ascribes "feminine" attributes to the political left, which includes a concern for care and harm, reputational attacks, and bullying. Rather than agreeing to rationally structure our society in conformity with our sexed nature, leftists invent "fictions" like "sexism," "patriarchy," and "rape culture" rather than acknowledging that these perceived injustices stem logically from the social integration of the sexes and the feminization of society.

This user appears to be highly influenced by Jordan Peterson's Jungian cosmology of "chaos" and "order." For Peterson, order is necessary for human *Being*—without it, society is impossible. Order, for Peterson, is *masculine*, attributable to when we "act according to well-understood social norms" in a "predictable and cooperative" way (Peterson 2018:xxviii) Chaos, on the other hand, is the "imaginatively feminine," the "antithesis of the symbolically masculine order" (Peterson 2018:xxviii). Each can be positive and negative. When order is beneficial, it is akin to a "Wise King;" when it is malignant, it is akin to a tyrant. When chaos is beneficial, it is akin to creativity and creation; when it is malignant, it is akin to death and destruction.

Yet, the feminine and the masculine appear to be hierarchically related, for Peterson (2018), and map on functionally to our unequal sexed nature:

> The personalities we have evolved to perceive have been around, in predictable form, and in typical, hierarchical configurations, forever, for all intents and purposes. They have been male or female, for example, for a billion years...The division of life into its twin

sexes occurred before the evolution of multi-cellular animals...the category of 'parent' and/or 'child' has been around for 200 million years...It's plenty long enough for male and female and parent and child to serve as vital and fundamental parts of the environment to which we have adapted. This means that male and female and parent and child are categories for us—natural categories, deeply embedded in our perceptual, emotional and motivational structures (P. 39).

Women, while physically subordinate to men in the natural human hierarchy are nevertheless more emotionally and socially savvy than men, and are therefore capable of exercising significant influence over the "stronger" sex:

> Chaos, the eternal feminine, is also the crushing force of sexual selection. Women are choosey maters (unlike female chimps, their closest animal counterparts). Most men do not meet female human standards...It is Woman as Nature who looks at half of all men and says, 'No!' For the men, that's a direct encounter with chaos, and it occurs with devastating force every time they are turned down for a date...Women's proclivity to say no, more than any other force, has shaped our evolution in to the creative, industrious, upright, large-brained (competitive, aggressive, domineering) creatures that we are. It is Nature as Woman who says, 'Well, bucko, you're good enough for a friend, but my experience of you so far has not indicated the suitability of your genetic material for continued propagation' (P. 41).

Unlike chimps, "their closest animal counterparts," women are picky about who they have sex with, and this primal power of sexual selection renders men susceptible to the chaotic influences of the feminine. For esteemed men, this is fine—they will be entitled to profound sexual choice. However, for most men, this is not fine: they will be denied access to female sexuality. Feminism only makes things worse, for it flags boys as "privileged beneficiaries of the patriarchy" who are always "sexually suspect" due to their propensity to commit rape (Peterson 2018:297). Yet, these very same boys are "suffering" in the modern world, which extolls women, resents men, and denies how "biological factors" naturally order sexual-social differences (Peterson 2018:298). For Peterson (2018), this connects logically to contemporary social justice activism, given

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that the edifice of "postmodern/neo-Marxism" has birthed university disciplines "hostile towards men" and insistent on the fact that the West is inherently oppressive and patriarchal (p. 302). As the chaotic force of nature, then, women appear in Peterson's work as sirens—physically weak, but sexually and socially manipulative. This leads to delusions about gender equality and the oppression of men, compelling Peterson to argue at one point for "enforced monogamy" to ensure all men are entitled to a female mate (Bowles 2018a).

Topic 42 (*abortion, abortions, life, baby, human*) is focused on the right to an abortion and whether abortion is ethically just. There is interesting disagreement on the subject in the subreddit, with some users being enthusiastically pro-choice, some reluctantly pro-choice, and others anti-choice. For example, this pro-choice comment, which was well received by the subreddit (10 positive karma), argues that there are distinctions between persons and embryos:

> If you're going to equate "affecting the safety and lives" of people with that of embryos, then you can just stop at "it's illegal to murder another person". The whole disagreement is over the human rights of a "pre-human". It's not a person, yet. So what rights do we give to this fertilized egg, embryo, fetus… etc. Your "my body my choice" argument is based on equating the deaths of people with the "deaths" (how alive is a fertilized egg?) of the unborn, which I think is just a fancier way of calling abortion murder…

In this comment, the user argues that the abortion debate is not about the competing interests of two persons—a mother and a baby—but the rights of a person (the mother) over a "pre-human" (an embryo) and her own body. Equating abortion with murder collapses the distinction between person (woman) and non-yet-a-person (embryo). In another pro-choice comment, a user concedes that pro-choice arguments, though likely

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"correct," are ethically unsatisfying:

> …I'm pro choice, but I actually think the anti abortion folks have some reasonable positions. After all, we all love babies, and we hold that parents have an obligation to protect their children even as they "own" them, and while I'm not religious, I understand that most are and have been steeped in the idea that life begins at conception and soul and God and etc. Whereas my framework (zygotes and embryos and cells aren't life, but they are on their way, and at a certain point the embryo becomes a fetus and the fetus becomes viable and THEN it's life, and prior to that, it should be the woman's choice) is unsatisfying. I think it's true and rigorous and scientific but I accept that it's unsatisfying. Most won't like it, and it's a horrible position to have to argue for, strategically. And it's so much easier to argue for "her body, her choice", BUT…. That's not true. We don't let people sell their kidneys or kill themselves. It's pithy, but man it's incoherent…

Here, this user feels that although the pro-choice side has a scientifically informed conception that draws distinctions between embryos and people, this is an unsatisfying response to anti-choice arguments rooted in faith and spiritual morality. It is so unsatisfying, in fact, that it is "horrible" to argue for, strategically. Reducing it to a question of women's choice is also insufficient for, in other examples such as organ sales or suicide, we do not allow individuals to make such choices.

Topics 74 (*c16, harassment, law, pronouns, bill*) and 93 (*kavanaugh, ford, fbi, investigation, testimony*) focus on two high-profile political events in Canada and the United States, respectively. Topic 74 contains comments focusing on Canada's Bill C-16, which added gender expression and gender identity as protected categories under Canadian human rights law. Topic 93 focuses on the sexual assault controversy surrounding Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court nomination during the Trump administration, which involved accusations from Christine Blasey Ford that Kavanaugh had sexually assaulted her when they were teenagers.

Looking first at Topic 74, Bill C-16 became a major wedge issue for the political

right. In fact, in 2016, Jordan Peterson rose to fame, well before the IDW was "officially" formed, due to his very public opposition to the law. Peterson argued that the bill was a "compelled speech law" that would coerce individuals to use others' preferred pronouns at risk of fines or jail time (Beauchamp 2018). Peterson said that the bill would classify incorrect pronoun usage as a hate crime—a claim disputed by legal experts who argued that the bill only aims to protect trans people from violent threats (Cumming 2016). On his YouTube channel, Peterson broadcast his opposition to Bill C-16 and other social justice initiatives, as is evident by his "Professor Against Political Correctness" video playlist.[20]

Many commenters espouse concerns about Bill C-16 that echo those of Jordan Peterson. In the comment with the highest cosine similarity to the topic vector (c=.86), a user argues that evidence is mounting that the law may criminalize incorrect pronoun usage:

> …"serious legal minds" do see how this law might be used to punish someone for refusing to use someone's preferred pronoun which extends beyond the basic wording of the bill. It is not simply applying the current definition of harassment to gender identity (this is the reasonable part of the bill). By enacting C-16 and deferring to the OHCR [sic; Ontario Human Rights Commission], the definition of harassment is extended to include "Refusing to refer to a person by their self-identified name and proper personal pronoun". This is a passage from the document that I linked you earlier…it is now not just harassment to say "he" when the person requests something else. You actually have to DO something, use the pronoun they request, or be in violation of this policy. Simply not using the incorrect pronoun is not enough under this policy. This [is] why Peterson said speech was compelled and not merely restricted.

This commenter interprets Bill C-16 and other documentation from Canada's Human

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Rights Commission as *compelling* individuals to proactively use others' correct pronouns to avoid harassment charges just as Jordan Peterson argued. Similarly, another user argues in a highly upvoted comment (15 score) that even if the wording of Bill C-16 appears innocuous, it nevertheless provides a path towards definitional expansion by administrative authorities:

> Believe it or not, we are aware of the text of the law. Yes, it looks innocuous. I've also read arguments from Canadian legal scholars that argue that its [sic] innocuous…What Peterson pointed out was that this law would be interpreted and enforced by the Human Rights Commission and the Human Rights Tribunal, and that they had already published materials that showed that they would interpret not complying with someone's declared pronouns as discrimination…their site stated things like "gender is a spectrum, and your gender identity can be anywhere on that spectrum or not on it at all," whatever that means…by bringing those little, sloppily defined and ideologically loaded words into the law, you're basically writing a lot of transgender ideology into the law, and would make it legally precarious to dissent from it…

Thus, the fact that Bill C-16 must be executed through the Canadian Human Rights Commission and the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, and that these agencies had already published material indicating their punitive perspective on incorrect pronoun usage, leads to a legally coercive situation where people can be compelled, by state agencies, to use pronouns in ways they do not agree. Similarly, the user laments that the law uses "sloppy" and imprecise terminology like "gender spectrum" that slips "transgender ideology" into legal institutions. Hence, in the case of Bill C-16, a defense of free speech and individual liberty is paired with opposition to "transgender ideology" and queer politics generally, which emphasize the fluidity of gender as a concept.

Finally, Topic 93 from Figure 6.4, which focuses on Christine Blasey Ford's sexual assault accusations against Brett Kavanaugh during his nomination hearings in the fall of

2018, concentrates on evaluating the veracity of Ford's claims against Kavanaugh and the

supporting evidence. These examples illustrate this point:

Example A:

…not a single witness or person in her life stood by her or could corroborate her claims…People came to his defense of who he was then, which does make Ford's accusations less credible. So does the fact that she walked out of this with close to a million dollars, that she waited for the perfect moment to screw him, that nobody could back her up, that the claims changed multiple times, that the FBI investigation came up with nothing, that she was an older girl partying with high school kids, yet couldn't remember how she got there or back despite allegedly being raped, and that he led a high-achieving successful life with a nice family and a clean record…

Example B:

…I think the bottom line is that there's no definitive evidence either way, and for a 30 year old supposed event, it's going to be nigh impossible to find any. Personally, I believe the truth is a somewhat middle ground. Do I think Kavanaugh assaulted anyone? No. Do I think he's a liar? Yep. Especially because it was so long ago, and solid evidence is so difficult to come by, anything that points him in the direction of being a blackout drunk is going to work against him…As far as the woman goes, it was so long ago it's hard to tell. I haven't seen Ford's testimony but I believe she was assaulted. However, I don't think she is correct in who it was…Maybe she is lying and made it up because politics. I personally believe the event is [real] but the timing is politics. Here's the scary thing: he could be guilty. He may even remember it. He may be thinking it was a different girl. If she was pretending to enjoy it, it may not have even clicked in his brain and he didn't log it into his memory and 100% forgot…Unfortunately, without any conclusive evidence, we're not going to get any answers…

Example C:

I believe Ford, but there's such a lack of evidence. I can't advocate innocent till proven guilty while [simultaneously] suggesting [Kavanaugh] shouldn't be voted [in]…It's not a job interview, that's a dishonest way of putting it. How many job interviews do you get your reputation destroyed and lose your job (and makes it very hard to get another job, and that job is likely a major pay decrease and if the twitter mob hears of them hiring you, that company gets a ton of angry tweets)…Suggesting he shouldn't sit on the supreme court [sic] is ridiculous. Every justice has emotions (we assume). If I was falsely accused of rape (or at least I thought the accusation was false) I would be pissed…

As these comments show, there is a wide sense that the evidence against Kavanaugh is

far too insufficient to result in a definitive ruling of guilt. The user in Example A argues

against Ford's credibility as a victim, noting a lack of corroborating witnesses. They also

question Ford's motives and character, arguing that she intentionally waited for the "perfect moment" to sabotage Kavanaugh, changed her claims to suit her narrative, and cashed out on her accusations. In Example B, we see the user note that while they think Ford is telling truth about being sexually assaulted and even that they believe Kavanaugh is a liar, they are unsure that Kavanaugh was the one who assaulted Ford. They do leave room, however, for the possibility she invented the whole thing for political purposes. In Example C, the lack of evidence comes into conflict with the principle of innocent until proven guilty, even if Ford is likely telling the truth, meaning Kavanaugh should not be barred from the Supreme Court. An accusation of this sort is seen as devastating to one's reputation, and the user sympathizes with Kavanaugh's outrage at the accusations, noting they too would be "pissed."

A final comment to explore in Topic 93 is a highly upvoted (an extremely large score of 1260) and very verbose text that uses the Kavanaugh case to illustrate the pitfalls of "motivated reasoning." It is worth quoting this comment at length:

> The Kavanaugh situation is probably the greatest object lesson in motivated reasoning that we've encountered since Trayvon Martin/George Zimmerman…Motivated reasoning involves applying different standards of evidence to a proposition depending on whether or not you want the proposition to be true. If you want something to be true, you ask "CAN I believe it?" If you DON'T want something to be true, you ask "MUST I believe it?"…In the absence of extreme intention and self-discipline, we are all guilty of motivated reasoning, in areas both big and small…If you went into that hearing wanting to believe that Kavanaugh was guilty, you certainly came out of it believing that he was. Looking at the evidence that was presented, CAN you believe he's guilty? Of course. Dr. Ford apparently came across as a very credible witness, told a compelling story, and was completely convinced of its veracity. Judge Kavanaugh's angry display was exactly what you'd expect from a rich, spoiled, jock who is having the thing he's felt entitled to his whole life ripped away from him over what, to him, was a harmless romp…He probably perjured himself multiple times, and hid the one person whose testimony would have been potentially most damning (Mark Judge) from the committee and behind a lame "rehab" excuse…Now, if you went into it NOT wanting to believe him to be guilty, did anything in the hearing COMPEL you to believe that he

was? Nope. As he pointed out, it's an accusation from 35 years ago, about which no details are offered except the few that serve to implicate him (and nothing that could be proven false). Every person Dr. Ford said was at the party has no recollection of it, or outright denied that it happened – in sworn statements under penalty of perjury…Judge Kavanaugh's anger was exactly what you'd expect from a man who had lived his entire life in a circumspect manner, carefully following the rules (a few brewskis aside) and building a stellar career and reputation, and was now being accused of something horrific – something he would never do – for pure partisan gain…And Dr. Ford, however sympathetic she may have appeared, had multiple holes in her story…

Having outlined the two opposing sides of the issue, this user continues:

The odds are that one of those last two paragraphs made you very mad…How we FEEL about this case is based on a whole host of ideas and experiences that we're often powerless to overcome. If you're a woman who has been subject to sexual assault, and has watched men exactly like Kavanaugh get away with it time after time over the years, you're probably traumatized by the very sight of him…If you're a man who has been falsely accused of a crime by a vindictive ex, and been unable to prove your innocence, you're furious at everyone involved in this process…when we throw facts back and forth at each other, on this and a whole host of other issues, we're not accomplishing anything…[Jonathan] Haidt's solution to this seeming intractable problem is moral humility. Don't be so sure that your perspective on an issue represents Good and any other represents Evil. Don't talk about these issues in ways that preclude the possibility that someone else's perspective might have merit. And empathize with the people who disagree with you…we can all control how we express those feelings, and how we try to find common ground.

Thus, for this user, whose comment received overwhelming acclaim from the subreddit, the Kavanaugh hearing epitomizes the logical pitfalls that befall us when we approach divisive social debates through a partisan perspective that results in motivated reasoning. Each side has supporting evidence and supporting facts, but these are largely irrelevant. Intimate personal experiences and intuitions compel all of us towards confirmation bias. Inspired by IDW-adjacent intellectual Jonathan Haidt, this user argues that we must have "moral humility." Rather than showering our opponents with accusations of immoral ill-will, we ought to recognize that our experiences and points-of-view are limited and partial. Others will have credible things to say, however uncomfortable or disconcerting it may be for us to admit. By toning down our moralizing impulses and engaging with our

opponents in good faith, it becomes possible to find common ground. Thus, for this user, the Kavanaugh case serves as an illustrative example of a common epistemic failing. The reflection on motivated reasoning also servers as a lesson in how to reason logically, putting IDW principles into practice and learning how to watch out for our intuitive emotional responses that distract us from rational analysis.

Chapter 7: Crises of Civilization

Topics in the Crises of Civilization meta-theme are related to one another by their focus on topics relevant to the destabilization of key social institutions. This includes topics focusing on to the ineptitudes and deficiencies of the existing democratic political process in the United States, domestic ideological divisions and political "tribalisms" that "threaten" liberal civil society, and global issues such as a looming Western confrontation with China. Also included are topics related to capitalist political economy, which tend to focus on contradictions within capitalist markets, the long-term societal threat of wealth and income inequality, and the most rational way to organize an economy. Consistent with previous chapters, the specific topic areas are wide ranging, though they find unity in difference through their rootedness in civilizational concerns—specifically, concerns about civilization's contemporary crises and dysfunctions.

7.1 Governance & Political Institutions

The Governance & Political Institutions topic group has averaged 8.56% of all comments in each month in the observation period, peaking in October of 2020 when the topic group contained 19.19% (4,035) comments in the sample. Observing the charts in Figures 11 and 12 above, a sharp rise in commenting activity in this topic group is seen in the months leading up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election followed by a decline over

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the course of 2021. This trend corresponds with the top five topics in this group, which are focused on American politics, as shown in Figure 7.1.

Topic 15 is dominated by comments discussing the major party candidates, Joe Biden and Donald Trump, seeking the presidency in 2020. The comment with the highest cosine similarity (c=.84) to the topic vector, for example, offers an opinion on how the 2020 political landscape differs from that of 2016, when Donald Trump upset Hillary Clinton:

> It's a very different landscape, this time. People won't [be] voting for Biden so much as they'll be voting against Trump, who is a known quantity now, and has thoroughly demonstrated the answer to the question he asked on the 2016 campaign trail, "What the [hell] do you have to lose??"

Other users are more enthusiastic about Biden, including one who argues that Biden could be the major party candidate "most aligned with the IDW:"

> …The short of it is that Biden is the closest thing to a true "unity candidate" to achieve the nomination in some time and, for all the emphases in the IDW of distaste for partisan politics, I'm surprised more has not been made of the fact that the Democrats' standard-bearer ran an entire primary campaign bemoaning pro-progressive media bias while rejecting populism, assumption of opposition motive, divisive language, blame-casting, and coastal cultural nearsightedness that characterized about every other candidate at one point or another…he is a return to politicians being politicians, and nothing more. Not the vessel of your hopes and dreams or the representative of your race, sex, or sexual orientation…

For this user, Biden epitomizes moderate, grounded, political leadership that resists the allure of "woke" politics, which have captivated the Democratic base, and opposition to progressive agenda items, elements that should be attractive to the IDW. However, disappointment towards Biden seems to be more common, as these examples illustrate:
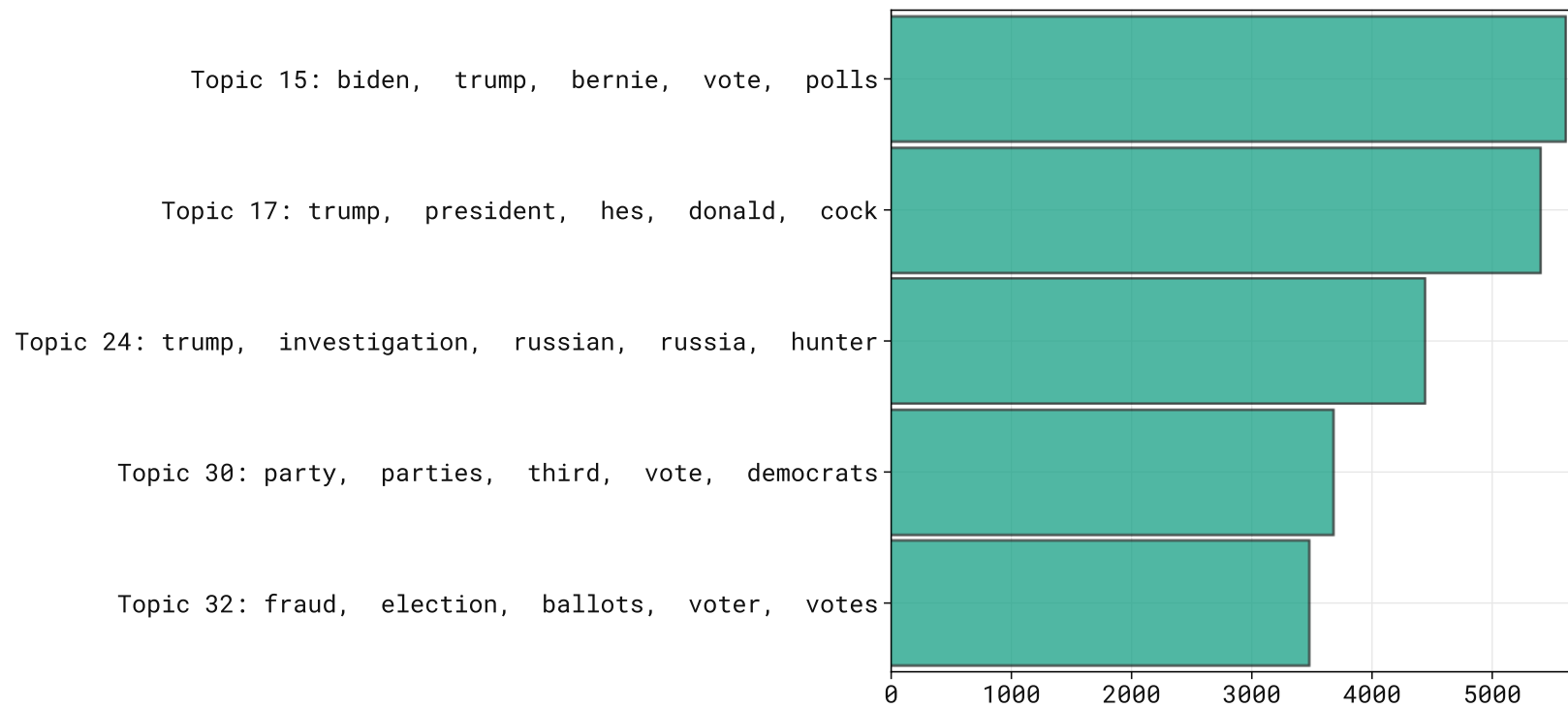
Figure 7.1: Top 5 Topics in Governance & Political Institutions

Example A:

…I personally don't like Biden at all and wish they could give us an actually viable candidate…. it's like the DNC thinks that since we dislike Trump so much that it doesn't matter who they put up to bat. It's borderline patronizing.

Example B:

Biden was my last choice of every nominee who ran for the D nomination. We shouldn't be choosing between people who are nearly 80 years old and completely out of touch with where the world is going…Voting for Biden is choosing to get shot in the leg instead of the heart. Because we can't keep gambling on an pathological liar/inept game show host with bad character. We're already 200k dead Americans deep in the consequences [i.e., COVID-19 deaths].

Example C:

…The idea that a Biden victory could end up waking up more people on the left to the bankrupt nature of the Democratic establishment actually gives me hope. As unhappy as [I] am about Biden as a nominee, if I'm honest I would prefer him over [T]rump. I just have not wanted to send a signal to the Democratic establishment that they can keep pushing out terrible candidates and get my vote. However, the idea that there is a strategic benefit to having Biden in office in terms of revealing how empty the left has become, perhaps in a sort of mirror image way to how [T]rump has revealed to many on the right how far off track the GOP has gotten, is intriguing…

Discussions of Biden's candidacy tend to reveal two things: (1.) a reluctant "lesser-evil" decision making driven by opposition to Trump; and (2.) frustration at the Democratic Party and its National Committee for pushing uninspiring establishment candidates onto the electorate.

Turning to Topic 17, the top keywords in this topic indicate that these comments focus decisively on Donald Trump (*trump, president, hes, donald, cock*). Interestingly, the word "cock" appears in the top keywords as an artifact of the c-TF-IDF calculation that discovers the most unique words for each topic cluster. A troll comment that repeatedly spams "DONALD DRUMPF COCK SUCKER" is responsible for this anomaly. Observing the comments most similar to the topic vector reveals Trump to be a

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complicated figure. One user complains that, even though they did not vote for Trump,

they find themselves constantly defending him:

> I didn't even vote for [T]rump, but [I] find myself defending him all the time. To be honest I don't really think he's done that bad of a job as [president]…Their [i.e. Trump's opponents] attitude towards him is entirely emotional because of his complete lack of shame and his crude way he goes about things. But if there is one thing they all got wrong about him, it's that he is no dummy [sic]. He acts the part, but no man could achieve what he has achieved without having facets of brilliance locked in there somewhere.

Here, this user ties opposition to Trump to "emotional" offenses at Trump's candid style,

not legitimate policy complaints. Similarly, another user comes to Trump's defense by

invoking his triumphs during the 2016 election:

> …facts are facts…Trump won the Presidency, defeating 17 much more qualified Republicans who threw the kitchen sink at him. Then, he survived the Access Hollywood tapes and numerous other controversies to beat reasonably handily "The Most Qualified Candidate In History," Hillary Clinton, with all her establishment backers and far more campaign money…The guy has basically created a cult of personality and the entire news cycle revolves around him and what he says. I honestly think there's not a whole lot that can be revealed about him that would make a lick of difference…in a historical sense he's doing pretty well. Economy is doing fine. We are reigning in some long-term very stupid wars, enacting criminal justice reform, and several other positive things. Reasonable people simply don't care about the sensational clickbait news stories that portray him 99% of the time extremely negatively…

Trump's routing of Hillary Clinton, his perseverance through scandal, his effective

governance, and his support from "reasonable people" who are not duped by "clickbait"

are rallied to defend Trump, which stands in stark opposition to other users. One

commenter writes that Trump is a "chaos agent" and "of the charts narcissist" who

"makes everything worse." Another user sees a silver lining in Trump's presidency,

opining that "Trump is a political diuretic" who is "incompetent and probably not a very

good person," but nevertheless "represents a low point in American politics and have

opened up the public's eyes to potentially new ideas and non-traditional candidates." In

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this example, Trump, while objectionable and worthy of opposition, may nonetheless have been a net benefit to society, showing that "outside" candidates can win: we just need to support better ones.

Looking next at Topic 24, the top-loading keywords (*trump, investigation, russian, russia, hunter*) focus on recent political scandals, including Russian interference in the 2016 election and the Hunter Biden/Burisma conspiracy theory. Comments in this topic vary widely, and there is considerable disagreement between users about the significance of the issues discussed. Many of the comments with the highest cosine similarities to the topic vector capture lengthy feuds between users where each directly quote their opponent to rebuke them, line by line, such as in this example highlighting a debate over whether or not Hunter Biden's connections to Burisma indicate suspicious activity:

> *"Guiliani and his crew went hunting for dirt without any crime having been reported. Even the affidavit Guiliani waved around on TV was not filed until long after his clandestine investigation into the Bidens began."*
>
> It's simply false that there was no reason for suspicion about Bidens [sic] dealing with Ukrainian [sic]. It was reported on when it happened as suspicious.
>
> *"By that reasoning Trump should be allowing investigations of his own emoluments clause violations to proceed rather than tie them up in court with his team of lawyers."*
>
> There are 2 things here 1) the protection of due process rights is in the public interest. But more importantly 2) dont [sic] you think that's what should be happening?
>
> *"Also, if Trump had a legitimate case why all the cloak and dagger?"*
>
> This seems like a mischaracterization. Why would you call it cloak and dagger?
>
> *"Nothing about Trump's actions appear to be on the level and even if Biden is dirty as sin the precedent being set by Trump right now is dangerous to democracy."*
>
> What precedent? That we should investigate poltical [sic] campaigns if we think they have dirty ties to foreign powers.......

> Your entire arguement [sic] hinges on the premise you think trumps [sic] actions look more suspicious than bidens [sic]. That's my point. Trump is once again being treated like a unicorn.

In a different thread about the Hunter Biden Burisma conspiracy, two users come into conflict over the trustworthiness of independent "fact checkers" like FactCheck.org or PolitiFact when evaluating statements by public officials about the scandal. Initially in response to a post about BLM's financial ties to the DNC, a user (User A) writes a well-received comment (32 positive karma) condemning fact checkers as ideologically motivated:

> All the factchecking sites are run by the left, just like most of the press and almost all social platforms. The fact that factchecking sites say it is misinformation is just showing they are trying to suppress evidence.

In response, User B accuses User A of disingenuously labeling fact checkers as partisan, prompting other subreddit users to downvote User B's comment (currently, it has -10 karma) and User A to respond with an example tied to the Biden-Burisma scandal (15 positive karma):

> See Joe Biden asking the Ukrainian Ambassador to fire a prosecutor who was investigating Burisma. All factchecking sites label it as false, despite the video clearly showing him say that.

User B follows up by linking and quoting sources from FactCheck.org that seemingly contradicts User A's assessment, inviting additional downvotes (-6 karma) and another response from User A that was positively received (13 karma):

> …So the factchecking websites intentionally put a detail which is not necessary [i.e. the Ukrainian prosecutor was explicitly investigating Biden's son, Hunter, not just Burisima] to make the statement false, leading many people believing Joe Biden didn't say that in the first place. Without that specific detail it would have been a simple statement: Did Joe Biden threaten to withhold money from Ukraine if the prosecutor was not fired? Answer: True. The video clearly shows that. So the factchecking sites are FACTUAL but they are not TRUTHFUL. They add a lot of small details

> to modify the validity of the statements misleading the people who don't read the full article (a majority of the people). I'm saying that these sites are in the same pot with the media, defenders of the left.

Here, User A retorts User B's appeal to the authority of external fact checkers by arguing that these fact checkers *themselves* cannot be trusted, as they are agents of the political left who misleadingly sprinkle in additional qualifiers that influence the verdict of their fact check, even if these factual additions render the verdict untruthful. This user explicitly draws a distinction between *fact* and *truth*, and such conceptual separation is seen as necessary for getting to the *real* truth, one free from partisan distortions. It also is demonstrative of how a desire to protect oneself from being "duped" by partisan "experts" sustains a lack of trust in external epistemic authorities, particularly in the context of polarizing political controversies.

Topic 30 (*party, parties, third, vote, democrats*) tends to capture comments describing r/IntellectualDarkWeb users' disenchantment with establishment political parties, assessments of the partisan landscape, and the limitations of existing electoral institutions. For example, as the comment with the highest cosine similarity to the topic vector (c=.78) expresses:

> …paying attention to the GOP, there is actually a small but still real chance that they (as a party) might actually die…At least to the point that centrist leaning people who really went GOP because of their opposition to the "Woke Left" might end up taking over (the party). This really wouldn't be a bad thing, as the most vocal elements of either party are blathering idiots…One of the reasons people hate on either party is that they have been so polarized that they are voting for one extreme or another, which essentially gives us the worst part of either side. If we are on the brink of a civil war very election, you can't blame either party for it. You have to blame both…

Here, this user suggests that "centrists" who are alienated by the "Woke Left" might flock to the GOP to escape progressive Democrats, with the latent function of positively

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transforming the Republican Party in a moderate direction. Fundamentally, this user sees

both major parties as beholden to the most extreme fringes of their bases, leading to

polarization and disorderly political conduct.

In other comments, users express frustration at the lack of alternatives, particularly

with respect to third parties, as both Democrats and Republicans lock out third party

contenders through their bipartisan control over electoral institutions:

Example A:

…The way our system was created inevitably leads to a two party system. No amount of idealism…will ever change that. The only way to make a third party viable is to change the system. As it stands, a third party will at most act as a spoiler to whoever splits off the most votes either of the two main candidates. Third parties will always be on the fringe unless one of the dominant parties significantly splinters and then a new dominant second party will coalesce.

Example B:

It has nothing to do with policy. 3rd parties are an inherent failure from the jump, and that will continue to be the case until we get ranked choice voting.

Example C:

…Unless a critical mass of people left of center reject SI [i.e. "successor ideology"], or unless various democracy reforms like ranked choice voting are instituted at every level across the country and thereby massively increase potential viability for third parties, people like us have very little political power collectively. As it currently stands, we end up voting for Dems because we can't vote GOP, or (the less intelligent among us who are single issue culture-war voters) vote GOP, or we don't vote. We get swallowed into the two dominant sides, and we are drowned out…

In each of these examples, significant structural changes to political institutions are seen

as necessary to breaking the grip of the two major parties. An air of fatalism hangs over

the comments as none seem particularly optimistic that such reforms are obtainable.

What's also interesting about comments in this topic is their focus on the Democratic

Party, i.e., many users appear to be disillusioned Democrats offended by contemporary

progressivism. Take the comment in Example C above, which refers to the alienating effect of "successor ideology"—a term coined by Wesley Yang to describe the "illiberal" progressive successor to traditional "liberalism" that replaces liberal ideals of free speech, free thought, and individual merit with identity politics and aggressive social justice activism (Jeong 2020)—on Democratic voters. Other users share this sentiment, such as one who comments about the #WalkAway campaign, which advocates for leftists to "walk away" from the "woke" Democratic Party:

> …People are confusing the [#WalkAway] movement with support for Trump or even the Republican Party as a whole. The majority of people I know are walking away from Progressive/Leftist ideas about identity politics and victimization. They want nothing to do with Trump and disagree with what most of the Republicans they speak with….

Although the #WalkAway campaign is a well-known right-wing movement, with its founder Brandon Straka even being arrested for his involvement in the January 6th Capitol riot (Avery 2021), for this commenter, it's supposed attractiveness to former liberals provides evidence of the alienation people now have towards the Democratic Party.

Even so, what is ultimately expressed by the comments in this topic is exasperation towards the major political parties, concern about the polarized partisan landscape, and frustration that our political institutions are structurally designed to preclude the possibility of any alternative, such as third parties or ranked choice voting. While we do observe a sense of political anomie inflecting former Democrats disillusioned by the Party's acquiescence to social justice rhetoric, which is seen to come at the expense of a commitment to genuinely liberal values, others' anomie is party agnostic, as this

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comment illustrates:

> In my opinion, both parties suck. For the most part, they are two-sides of the same coin. They lie, distort facts, and are corporate controlled. They're both shit with different labels, a red and a blue sticker…We will never fix the system until we have massive reforms to shake the nuts out of the tree and get people who genuinely [want] to help their neighbors…

Political disaffection runs deep within the subreddit.

The last topic in Figure 7.1, Topic 32, focuses on election fraud and voter suppression (*fraud, election, ballots, voters, votes*). Notably, Trump's fraudulent claims of systemic fraud in the 2020 election looms large in these comments. Within the IDW itself, Trump's claims of election fraud became a pivotal issue. As mentioned earlier, lamenting the "principle of charity" being extended to Trump by individuals associated with the IDW, Sam Harris publicly criticized and disavowed the group, stating in a podcast episode titled "Republic of Lies" that, "insofar as I've noticed what others in the so-called Intellectual Dark Web have been saying [about election fraud], it's generally not something I want to be associated with…allow me to take this moment to turn in my imaginary membership card to this imaginary organization" (Harris 2020).

On the subreddit, some users did attempt to inject claims about election fraud into comment threads. For example, a lengthy comment highly similar to the topic vector (c=.84) outlines one user's interpretation of events:

> Do I think Trump genuinely believes it was stolen? Yes. As a Trump supporter, do I genuinely believe it was stolen? Yes. For the comments calling the President a "narcissist"…these comments don't actually refute the evidence of voter fraud presented by Rudy [Giuliani], Lin [Wood], or Sydney Powell…The problem is that people don't like it when the sources come from a Republican, OANN [One America News Network], or The Epoch times. I had one person who wanted something "reputable" like The New York Times…except they barely report on fraud claims. The other problem is that fact checkers are doing a very poor job at simply presenting the facts…The

list of half-assed fact checking is also very long…

Interspersed throughout this comment are references to supposed "anomalies," such as unusual "spikes" of Biden votes or audits of voting machines revealing "high rates of error." Additionally, for this user, the mainstream press and fact checkers are implicitly assumed to have a liberal anti-Trump agenda, failing to adequately represent the facts or even report on fraud claims. This leaves only the right-wing press to cover the issue, which, to the user's chagrin, reduces the claims' credibility.

Nevertheless, many users of the subreddit shot down these claims as conspiratorial and unfounded. For example, in response to a user who argues that it doesn't "take a genius collective to basically manipulate ballots that have two candidates on them across counties if desired," another user responds sarcastically:

> I'll give you this one. It's pretty simple. You just:
>
> 1. Register thousands of fake voters using actual addresses. Make sure to do it in every county in your state.
>
> 2. Make sure you don't double register addresses that fellow [lone]-wolf operatives use.
>
> 3. Hang around a thousand mailboxes in a 300 mile radius [for] a week.
>
> 4. Quickly pick the lock, snag the ballot without anyone notice you're there. Fill it in, and mail it in.
>
> DONE! Easy!

Others engage in point-by-point rebuttals of users trying to advance election fraud conspiracies, such as in this thread:

> *"Software 'glitches' happening in multiple locations amounting to over 50,000 votes being flipped to one side. One of which brought Wisconsin within 1,500 votes and another cause a house republican to win."*
>
> This has been debunked [links to *New York Times article*].
>
> *"Hundreds if not thousands of testimonies of fraud from pollsters and post office workers."*

Anyone can make testimony and hearsay.

"Dead voters in swing states amounting to thousands if not tens of thousands."

Source?

"1.8 million more voters than eligible registered voters (no way to spin this, it's blatant fraud)."

False. Many states have same day registration and the numbers weren't updated.

"Disregarding a Supreme Court order to allow Trump's poll watchers to stand closer."

They had to admit to the court they were in fact watching. So far everything you've said has been debunked.

"Ballot dumps that all went one direction at 4 AM when no one is watching and after they said they were going to pause counting and pick it up in the morning. Republican poll watchers likely weren't present."

Because Trump told me people not to vote by Mail on those states. You reap what you sow.

"500,000 ballots in Virginia labeled with wrong return address."

Source?

"I can go on."

Please do, by all means.

"There are truck loads of voter fraud cases and the trucks haven't stopped coming yet. Regardless of whether people think it will make a difference, or swing enough votes in enough states to elect Trump, it's important that voters get a fair and accurate count and gain confidence in their voting system."

These will all be dismissed. What will you say then?

Hence, we see how on the subreddit, much like in the "official" IDW sphere, Trump's election fraud claims became a divisive issue inciting antagonism and debate within the community. Akin to IDW-personalities like Dave Rubin, some subreddit users took the election fraud claims, along with Trump's evidence—widely circulated in the right-wing press—seriously. Others, following the path taken by Sam Harris, battle with users in a

struggle to discredit election fraud conspiracies before the subreddit's public audience. On this issue, the subreddit does not reach consensus, and engagements between users tend to devolve to hostile arguments.

7.2 Sociopolitical Conflict

The Sociopolitical Conflict topic group has been experiencing steady proportional growth over time (see Figure A.C.2 in Appendix C). Figure A.C.1 in Appendix C provides interesting context, however, as we observe that around the summer of 2020, the topic group saw a significant jump in absolute frequency, peaking in January 2021 when it accounted for 2,104 (12.56%) of all comments made in that month. This peak in January 2021 is driven by a disproportionate share of comments being clustered in Topic 20 (*riots, protests, peaceful protest, capitol*), which corresponds with the January 6th Capitol riot. As Figure 7.2 shows, Topic 20 is the second most discussed topic in the model. Given the topic's social significance, however, I begin my analysis in this section with Topic 20.

Looking at the comments assigned to Topic 20 in January 2021, the January 6th riot features prominently as a contentious point of discussion. A common thread running through many of these comments is criticisms about "mob mentality" present in social protests of *all* ideological stripes, as this comment expresses:

> This framing of the widespread unrest this summer makes me feel like I'm going nuts. Did violent rioters not lay siege to a federal building? Were there not shootings of civilians and police over the summer? Clearly violent sedition aimed at stopping our election certification is a direct threat to
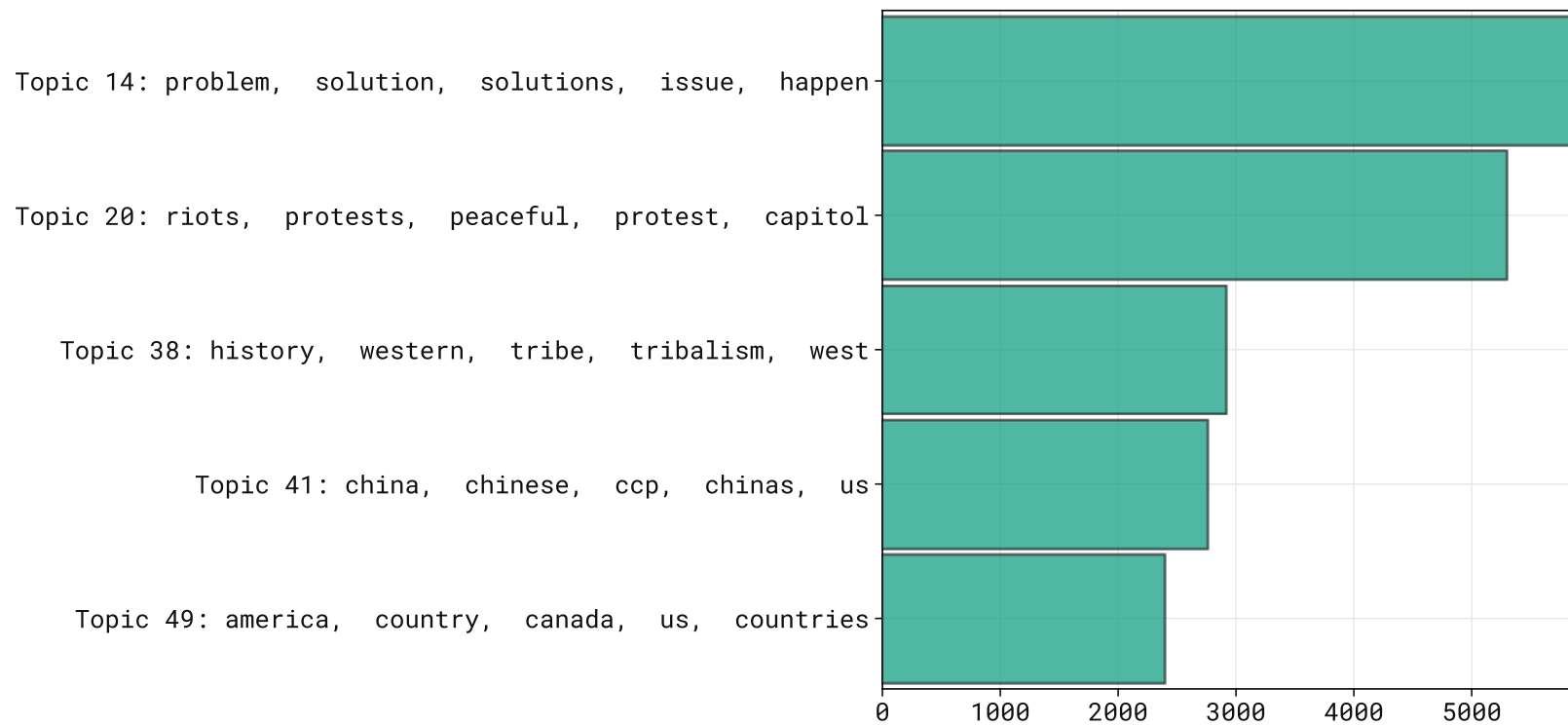
Figure 7.2: Top 5 Topics in Sociopolitical Conflict

democracy, but can we condemn that without condoning other violent mobs?

In this comment, the user is referring to anti-racist protests that swept the country after the police killing of George Floyd. Specifically, they note that, like the January 6th assailants, "violent rioters" associated with the anti-racist protests laid siege to a federal building (it is not clear which the user means, but buildings like the Hatfield Federal, Courthouse in Oregon were frequent targets of activists), and engaged in violent acts, including "shootings" of civilians and police officers. While the user maintains that the January 6th rioters are a "direct threat to democracy," they also want to condemn *all* violent "mobs," which includes progressive ones as well.

These sentiments are expressed even more pointedly in comments from other users, who downplay the threat of January 6th while redirecting attention to the violence associated with left-wing social movements:

Example A:

…it's apparently ok to loot, vandalize, and burn, repeatedly [for] days at a time, for a year, kill 20 some odd people, and cause $2B in damages…This is only 'peaceful protest'. Those who take part in it are just social justice warriors. But, if 200 people, the majority of whom just walk around like they are on tour, stage a riot through the capital building, kill no one, cause a few thousand dollars [in] damages, mostly to windows, and the riot only lasts for 5 hours…it's an insurrection…I don't care who you are or which side you're on, the minute it becomes violent and destructive, it's not a peaceful protest. Then, it's a riot. And, that's all that 1/6 was, too: a riot…

Example B:

Sure, as were the green lasers that blinded law enforcement employees in Portland [scary], and the fireworks, the bricks, etc. This went on nightly for weeks. Then you had the "protests" in D.C. during Trump's presidency…The point is what happened at the Capitol isn't some new thing, what is new is that media corporations and politicians can point at Republicans…those frightened politicians weren't in immediate danger. Certainly far less than the Hoi Polloi who live in various cities over the past year or peaceful protests™ …I see what the corporate media and newly in power Democrats are doing/saying and that should scare you, not the hand full [sic] of people

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who were violent at the Capitol.

In the first example, the user deflects attention away from the January 6th rioters by arguing there is double-standard in how Trump-supporting rioters were represented relative to anti-racist protesters. In reality, this user argues, BLM protesters were violent looters engaged in criminal activity, including property damage and theft, causing far more damage that Trumpian rioters on January 6th, who mostly only damaged "windows." Example B above offers similar sentiment, too, noting that there is nothing novel about the January 6th riot other than it being tied to Republicans, with the implication being that most rioters are leftists. The real threat, according to this user, is not from the January 6th rioters but the "corporate media" and "in power Democrats" who are trying to manipulate the citizenry into a state of fear.

Exploring comments in Topic 20 across all time periods, comments with high-similarity to the topic vector tend to target progressive social justice activism and protests for being violent, unruly, and irrational, especially during the summer of 2020, as these examples illustrate:

Example A:

Well "protests" [shouldn't] turn violent and right now they have a track record. So we [shouldn't] be allowing them to run [rampant] and do as they please. If they are out burning down the city wtf did they expect to happen? Welcome the brownshirts

Example B:

No, they're just lighting buildings on fire and beating people in front of their businesses and homes before robbing them. But it's alright guys, it's only some of them. Carry on…The second that started happening in large numbers is the second I lost sympathy. Police are a state monopoly on violence and largely ineffective when you actually need them, and the protests have been dangerous in that they are peaceful by day but degenerate into mob violence by night…Do

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not be surprised when the results of this are not in the favor of the [protesters] due to the actions of these alleged few.

Even months removed from January 6th, comparisons of BLM protesters to the January 6th rioters continue to structure discussions about protests and riots:

> The clear and obvious lack of weaponry, organization, and strategy would show that it was not their intent to overthrow the government. Rather, it shows what happens when mobs with perceived injustice reach a fever pitch. They start smashing things, attacking people, and stealing things. It's the exact same group psychology that the BLM riots had, only on a microscale compared to the destruction waged during the summer. It was just symbolically more powerful since it was the Capitol.

In this comment with a high karma (a score of 32), the author argues that the January 6th rioters had no genuine intention to overthrow the government, evidenced by their lack of weaponry and a coherent strategy. Instead, it was an incidence of mob mentality leading to property damage and outbursts of outrage, the same group psychology that "the BLM riots had," only this time with far less destruction than BLM inflicted over the summer of 2020.

Topic 14 (*problem, solution, solutions, issue, happen*) is dominated by short, generic comments related to problem solving and problem identification, such as these:

Example A:

What do you see as the solution to that?

Example B:

So then what's the solution?

Example C:

They are part of the problem. Not the solution.

Example D:

I agree with you that this is a big problem.

Topic 38 (*history, western, tribe, tribalism, west*) is far more interesting, focusing on contentious discussions about human civilization, "tribalism," and social conflict.[21] The comment in the topic with the highest cosine similarity to the topic vector (c=.74) captures a thread where the author quotes and responds to another user who defended black identity politics:

> "*People are embracing that history [of white supremacy] right now.*"
>
> What does that even mean?
>
> "*[You cannot possibly come to any useful conclusion] without considering context*"
>
> Conclusion about what? That one tribe is better than another?

The above comment was made in response to a different comment nested in a discussion thread that began with a highly-downvoted (-12 score) comment distinguishing white identity politics from black identity politics:

> …The problematic thing about "white power" is not being proud of ones appearance. Its [sic] the almost inherent implications in opinion about others, especially looking back at hundreds of years of terrible history. With "black excellence" do not come inherent racist opinions.

Given the karma censure and negative response the comment above received, the identity politics of "black excellence" is seen as indistinguishable from white racial identity politics, with both promoting divisive politics that places one human "tribe" above another. A comment that received a large amount of positive karma (score of 61) emphasizes the importance of shared norms and values for multicultural civilizations to

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[21] Words like "tribalism" and "tribes" have become ubiquitous within the IDW-sphere to describe political, social, and cultural divisions (Mungai 2019).

proser:

> It's also why, for a multi-cultural nation like the US to succeed, shared values need to be more important than tribal values, and especially when those tribal values focus on a resentment of the past.

This comment was made in response to another highly upvoted comment (160 score) castigating "racial hypocrisy" in contemporary diversity discourse:

> Not missing anything other than the obvious hypocrisy. For example, people [say] the NHL is too white but no one says the NBA is too black. It's a complete double standard. The idea is that anything predominately white = bad but predominately any other ethnicity is fine. By the way, studies have shown that diversity in communities actually weakens trust and community bonds, which is why you will see a lot more kinship between people in rural Appalachia than you will downtown nyc [sic]. Its's not necessarily skin color that matters, it's values and culture. [*link to academic paper on Wiley*]

Expressed across both comments is the notion that shared social values, norms, and cultural practices that transcend group boundaries are essential to a functional civilization. Moreover, these comments are suggestive that social justice discourses drive division through an "anti-white" bias that fetishizes minority ethnic and racial groups and clings too strongly to resentments of the "past," which I interpret to mean historical systems of racist oppression. This division makes multicultural integration problematic, as it emphasizes our differences and pushes us apart, a problem that the user in the latter comment seems to suggest is endemic to diversity itself.

Division and "tribalism" are seen as corrosive to Western civilization, as this user expresses:

> No, the loss of nuance and promotion of tribalism is an incredibly divisive force that is being employed against Western democracies. It is extremely important that it be pointed out, especially with the rampant posting of polarizing threads in this very sub.

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For this commenter, division and tribalism are thought terminating processes that evacuate "nuance" from contentious sociopolitical discussions, threatening Western democracies and even posing risk to the quality of discussion in the r/IntellectualDarkWeb subreddit itself, which is being bombarded by "polarizing threads."

Unsurprisingly, many users attribute this division to contemporary progressive activists, such as this comment:

> You don't think many on the left are asking us to see history primarily as a competition between competing identity groups? That's nonsensical to you?

Others argue that focusing on historical injustices, particularly those committed by Western nations, is a frivolous process that results in hypocritical analysis and an infinite regress:

> How far back should we go? When mongolia [sic] invaded Europe and most of Asia? When Africans sold their own people as slaves (still do)? When Italy invaded europe [sic], the Middle East and Africa? When the Russians invaded Eastern Europe? When China invaded Mongolia? When Japan invaded the South China Sea or Korea or China? When the Aztecs created a network of slavery and tribute through the creation of city states and participated in human sacrifice? When the Persians subjugated most of the Middle East? When the Jews were slaves in Egypt? When the Turks and the Russians committed mass genocide against the Armenians?...it's irrelevant after you consider that there isn't a society that exists historically that didn't participate in warfare, subjugation and invasion of other peoples. You have some that were more successful than others and they won the right to rule the land. When do you start counting and caring about the people that suffered? Why are you focused on western civilization? They are just the most recent winners. Prior to them others did the same thing?

This comment was made in response to a post asking why the IDW does not discuss issues related to decolonization. In response, this user enumerates an array of historical conquests meant to normalize Western colonialism as part of a general human pattern of violence, warfare, and subjugation that transcends geography, ethnicity, and culture. The

implication is that signaling out the West for its crimes is illogical and trying to rationally determine "how far back" we go in time to demand a redress for past grievances is arbitrary. For this user, Western powers are only the most "recent" historical winners, and, for all its limitations, Western civilization remains one of humanity's greatest achievements. This is an achievement that must be rescued from the corrosive forces of societal division, as this comment expresses:

> That is the west [sic] though. Free thought and inquiry. Identifying and assimilating the best ideas…The West has lost its way and needs to return to its roots.

The remaining two topics reviewed in this section, Topic 41 (*china, chinese, ccp, china, us*) and Topic 49 (*america, country, canada, us, countries*), contain comments focused on geopolitical conflicts and anxieties involving world powers. For example, the comment with the highest cosine similarity to Topic 41's topic vector expresses a user's concern about "Chinese world domination:"

> I'm sorry, have you never heard of China? What's hard to believe? China is pretty open about their ambitions of world domination and lack of ethical boundaries. This has been reported in the US but originally broke through Sky News Australia which is about as mainstream credible as it gets outside the US.

In general, Topic 41 tends to contain a large proportion of anti-China comments, such as this example, which takes issue with a comment made by a pro-Chinese user who drew comparisons between the deaths caused by the Maoist Cultural Revolution and those caused by American slavery:

> Wait, wait, wait. Did you really just compare a man that killed 45 million people, led multiple purges, and led the cultural revolution to Thomas Jefferson? What planet do you live on? In another comment you attempted to state the Tiananmen Square Massacre wasn't a massacre? You realize that even the lower bound of estimates for the death toll is 1,000 people, right? Today,

> China is literally stopping people from fleeing Hong Kong and putting them on Trial for "subversion." They have barred all pro-democracy candidates in Hong Kong from taking office, after a Democratic [sic] election in accordance with the Basic Law. They claim the new National Security Law they passed applies to people of every country no matter where they are in the world. They threatened to arrest the employees of an Australian company (living in China) if they didn't take down the website of a Hong Kong expats pro-democracy website. It is outlandish that anyone could support the CCP or communism more broadly. Every single "good" thing that China has been able to do in the last 30 years (increasing their GDP and nominal standard of living) is by implementing western liberal policies.

This user is offended by analogies between the violent history of communist China and that of the United States, both of which resulted in mass deaths and human barbarism, but the former of which executed atrocities on a scale far greater than the latter. Moreover, China's interference in Hong Kong supplies evidence of its authoritarian governance and that of communism more generally. As another comment with a high positive karma score (38) puts it, China is "parasitic" to the world order, unable to make useful "advances on their own:"

> The vast majority of their technology is stolen from foreign countries…Their academic system is a joke…the vast majority of people within the CCP are racist bigots who are intolerant of anybody who doesn't look like them and think like them…China is also an environmental disaster…opening new coal plants at an alarming rate…Finally…when China suffered an outbreak of a deadly lab-manufactured disease—an illegal bioweapon that they were manufacturing in defiance of all international agreements…they chose to deliberately spread the virus throughout the rest of the world so that China would not suffer a huge economic disadvantage…So basically you have a corrupt culture of racist bigots who steal technology from their neighbors while spreading suffering and death in return, either in the form of environmental pollution or bioengineering plagues…The idea that America can coexist with a society like that is very, very low. Ultimately China will have to make some big changes, and the only real question is whether they will adopt these changes voluntarily or whether they will need to be forced to do so.

For this user, China is essentially a fraudulent nation based on theft and global deception. Unable to innovate on its own, it must steal from the rest of the world. Tied into this user's comment is the unfounded claim that China manufactured the COVID-19 virus as a "bioweapon" and then purposefully distributed it across the world. This is part and

parcel of China's destructive behavior, according to this user, and it is unlikely that the United States will be able to coexist with China in the long-run, meaning a kinetic conflict is likely on the horizon.

Finally, Topic 49 from Figure 7.2 captures a mixture of comments primarily referring to the United States, though there is no consistent thread connecting the comments together other than their mentions of the US. For example, the comment with the highest cosine similarity (c=.71) expresses a user's anti-American frustrations towards a different user:

> *"Also, I'm not American!"*
>
> What are you then? You sure have the total ignorance of what happens outside of your country that is typical of Americans. To debunk your ridiculous claim, I only had to point out a single example of the contrary, and that's what I did. You really don't have to look very hard to find others (i.e. all Western European countries).

In other contexts, users maintain that the United States is a uniquely good country, such as in these comments imbued with an aura of American exceptionalism:

> **Example A:**
>
> I've been all around the world and I can unequivocally say there is no better country than the USA.
>
> **Example B:**
>
> Sometimes I get really annoyed about things in the US… then I remember that the rest of the world sucks even more.
>
> **Example C:**
>
> Ok I'm glad that your country, whatever it is, is more enlightened than us meager Americans with all our power, wealth and cultural capital.

Irritated by a user who wrote, in reference to the vigilante killing of Ahmaud Arbery, that

"only in America could two people hunt down someone who is going for a run" and "not even have charges laid for months," this author writes:

> oNlY iN AmEriCA. Check the Middle East bud. Or Russia. A slew of South American countries. Mexico. African countries. Just a few countries and regions where murders go uninterrupted on a daily basis. People like you love shitting on America but the fact it's a great country to live in. Sure it's not Sweden, New Zealand, or Denmark. But name one country with over 100 million people better than the United States?

In comparison to other, seemingly undesirable, regions of the world (mostly in the Global South), where violence is rampant and unaccountable, the United States *is* an exceptional place to live. It may have weaknesses compared to countries in Western Europe, but for a country with a population over 100 million people, it is perhaps optimal. Hence, while Topic 49 has low specificity, capturing a mixture of themes that make reference to America in a variety of different contexts, common threads relevant to the topic group were able to be observed, especially with respect to America's "civilizational prestige" in relation to other countries.

7.3 Political Economy

The final theme to explore in this chapter is the Political Economy topic group, which is trending upwards in terms of overall comment frequency (see Figure A.C.1 in Appendix C). However, as Figure A.C.2 in Appendix C shows, it has been largely stable as an overall proportion of comments, averaging 5.55% of all comments per month during the observation period. Unlike other topic groups, Political Economy does not see obvious large spikes in its frequency and instead has seen relatively linear absolute growth. The top five topics in the Political Economy topic group are shown in Figure 7.3.
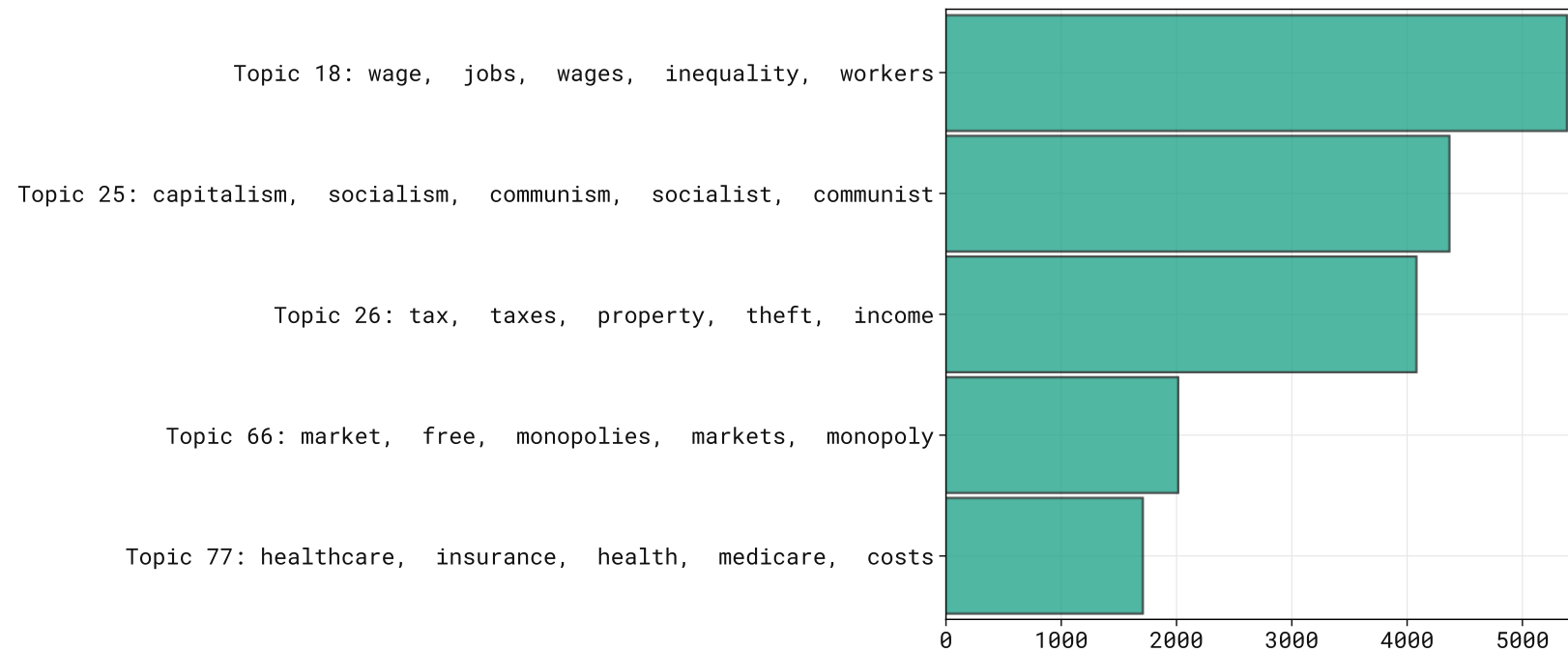
Figure 7.3: Top 5 Topics in Political Economy

Looking first at Topic 18 (*wage, jobs, wages, inequality, workers*), we see that these terms map onto a lexicon related to the labor market, workers' wages, and economic inequality. The comments in this topic offer far-ranging perspectives on wages and inequality. The comment with the highest cosine similarity to the topic vector, for example, captures a debate between a libertarian-minded user and a social democratic oriented user from the point of view of the libertarian's rebuke to social democratic arguments about the legitimacy or desirability of minimum wage laws and redistributive policies:

> …Well, if you prefer people earning nothing (unemployed) rather than earning at least something [i.e., starvation wages] but not the "ethical" minimum it's up to you. I just don't agree with this stance. People earning meager salaries is indeed bad, but not as bad as all those people having no job, at least in terms of a civil society…

Earlier on in the thread, this user also argued that minimum wage laws make matters worse for workers and consumers alike, with employers raising prices in response to minimum wage demands and workers being laid off for being too costly. Moreover, they argue against a concept of "starvation wages," for being unemployed is worse than earning pittances. Similar opinions are shared by other users, such as a comment by this user who sees competitive free markets as the most functional form for raising the standards of living of workers:

> …I don't see how raising the minimum wage provides a net benefit to the poor, when you take into account the entire economy…In a purely free market, employers can pay their employees as little or as much as they wish. Likewise, prospective employees can choose to work at companies that pay better/offer better benefits…In this system, unemployment should be pretty low…The system is not without its faults, however. Monopolies and oligopolies (working in coordination) can set the price of labor (and their products, often)…These are failure modes of the free market, rendering them anti-competitive. Workers in these cases can be underpaid for their labor, since

they have limited choice as to where they can work. Luckily, we've come up with a (decent) solution to this problem: collective bargaining…Now, consider the government making it illegal to pay someone below a minimum wage. Individuals, who had previously been free to offer their labor for whatever amount of money they deemed acceptable, [have] now lost that bargaining chip…I submit that (reasonable) profit plays a crucial role in generating wealth. Profit allows for investment into improvements in technology, into expanding the business, etc. Profit (or surplus) can be saved to hedge against the tough times that inevitably follow in the course of the business cycle…So, when faced with a mandated minimum wage, most companies are forced to lay off workers. Those people, who were getting experience, wages, etc., are now unemployed and searching for work…a mandated minimum wage is not an effective way to alleviate poverty or improve the situation for the lowest earners in our society, unless you are prepared to also mandate that each company not fire any workers or otherwise regulate what the government believes to be an acceptable profit margin…

In this example, this user maintains that free market competition is generally the optimal solution for increasing workers' wages. Employers may be able to offer low wages, but workers can voluntarily refuse those wages, choosing alternative employers who better value their labor-power. There are sometimes failures of competition, such as when monopolies or oligopolies artificially deflate workers' wages. However, a solution to this deficiency largely exists through collective bargaining, which empowers groups of workers, usually through unions, to exert counter-pressure on firms to stabilize their wages. But when the state mandates a minimum wage, this has competitive disadvantages for workers who previously sold their labor-power below the new minimum wage. This is because employers must remain profitable, and the pursuit of profit is a net social benefit leading to generalized increases in wealth. However, with minimum wage mandates, cheap workers will find themselves out of work, therefore increasing poverty. Government intervention of this sort thus have the opposite of intended effects.

Other users express considerably different sentiments, such as this comment, which sees a civilizational crisis brewing due to growing levels of wealth and income inequality

within capitalist democracies:

> ...Economics has been guided by the mantra of "supply and demand" and much of what has driven supply is inadequate supply of labor. Labor supply is [increasingly] irrelevant. Minimum wage was $1.25 in 1963 and a dozen eggs were 45 cents. Minimum wage is now $7.25 and Walmart has eggs for only a buck. If you saw how automated egg production is, and how equally automated commodity grain production is, this would not be surprising. We can either live in an "fair" society of unfettered capitalism where the labor of the uneducated has very little objective value, but tension and strife over increasing inequality will mean that those who do have greater value to society will increasingly live in walled off enclaves, far removed from the riff raff. Note that this will mean that the great unwashed will be required to continue to vote against their own economic interest, or democracy will need to be replaced. Our other alternative is to begin to reduce working hours, increase mandated vacation time, require benefits for part time work, require double time for hours outside those, have guaranteed employment and higher minimum wages... The libertarians and conservatives have the point that this may be "unfair", but I would argue that the alternative is unsustainable.

For this user, the inequalities constitutive of contemporary capitalism are directly tied to a general social crisis. Automation and the cheapening of commodities is obviating the need for low-skill labor. These market processes may be "fair" in the abstract sense of a market competition, but socially, they result in severe destabilizing effects. The wealthy will likely segregate themselves from the poor and democracy will likely have to be abolished, for its sustainability will be premised on the dispossessed voting against their interests. Alternatively, we could reconstruct political economy through social policy that relieves inequality and redistributes wealth—a necessity, in fact, to save civilization.

Similar sentiments are expressed by another user, who ties the contemporary inequalities to contradictions within capitalist markets:

> There are multiple sides to the issue. You are in the economy you are in. There are so many jobs making 100k a year. There are so many jobs making minimum wage. As an individual, your education and training and hard work may make the difference where you land, but if everyone in that economy was 15% better qualified and harder working, it wont eliminate minimum wage jobs, and it wont eliminate the poor as a class...Even as an entrepreneur, there are only so many new startups that an economy can support...Obviously yes, if you go 200k in debt to get a

graduate degree in trombone, then you're not exactly setting yourself up to be competitive in the workforce. But for the society as a group, the economy is still largely a zero-sum game, and the only way you get that 100k job is to push someone else out of it…to a large degree, the rules are set by the wealthy, and the working class are just playing the game. To take an uncontroversial example, workplace rules that forbid employees from discussing their salaries should be illegal. It discourages fair competitiveness, and allows employers to pay disparate wages, even to equally qualified employees in the exact same job. But it just kind of caught on with employers that this reduction in fair competitiveness works to their advantage, and so its become the new norm. And that's without even getting into the morass that is the undue influence that monied interests have on politicians.

For this user, the structure of American capitalism means there is always a tension between what is good for the individual worker and what is good for the entire workforce. Credentialing and education may improve the outcomes for an individual, but if every worker received the same credentials, then this would reduce value of *all* workers' relative labor-power. Entrepreneurial activity will work for some people, but the economy structurally cannot absorb an infinite number of new businesses. While some workers make poor decisions and investments, such as pursuing degrees in fields with little economic value, on average, the economy is a zero-sum game of cut-throat competition. Moreover, the wealthy and business owners work to disrupt class consciousness among workers by, for example, compelling workers not to discuss their earnings with one another, to say nothing of the corrupt influence business interests have on politicians and social policy.

This user is not wrong. Research by Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2012) show that globalization has made the competition for high-quality, credentialed employment a world-historic race to the bottom between well-educated workers across Global North and Global South alike, reducing the relative value of education and credentials for all

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workers. Marx (1992), too, was aware of capital's tendency to devalue labor through technological innovations that allow for "simple labor" to increasingly replace technical specialized labor, which reduces the scarcity and wages of credentialed workers (see especially Chapter 15). Indeed, such devaluing is central to the capitalism's internal contradictions, where each increase in the *social* capacity of workers is accompanied by the *economic* incapacitation of workers, as Werner Bonefeld (2016) explains:

> Every increase in labour productivity shortens the hours of labour but in its capitalist form, it lengthens them. The introduction of sophisticated machinery lightens labour but in its capitalist form, heightens the intensity of labour. Every increase in the productivity of labour increases the material wealth of producers but in its capitalist form makes them paupers. Most important of all, greater labour productivity sets labour free, makes labour redundant. But rather than shortening the hours of work...freeing life-time from the 'realm of necessity', those in employment are exploited more intensively, while those made redundant find themselves on the scrap heap of a mode of production that sacrifices 'human machines' on the 'pyramids of accumulation' (P. 113).

These contradictions are tied to the historically specific form that wealth takes in capitalism as *value*, which shackles all technological and social progress to the production of surplus-value rather than the setting free of social forces from economic ones. So, to return to the commenter's example, while expanding education has the social use-value of improving the intelligence of the world population, as well as humanistic virtues that are good in and of itself, within capitalism, these social benefits come into immediate contradiction with the law of value, which *must* measure all social use-values in terms of their exchange-values. Because workers are dispossessed of their own means of production and are compelled to constantly alienate their own labor-power through sale in the market, the expansion of skills and education for workers at scale only

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undermines their material position in capitalist economies.

Topic 25 (*capitalism, socialism, communism, socialist, communist*) focuses attention on debates about capitalism and its alternatives, notably socialism and communism. Sometimes socialist or communist alternatives are dismissed for their logical failings, as in this comment:

> My point was mainly that when any claimed version of pure socialism meets the reality of the human condition, it goes poorly…it sounds nice, but the reality of people is that it won't ever work. People that want power will always get it and abuse it, to the detriment of others. There will always be winners and losers, the state just chooses them instead of the market. I hear people hold up Northern Europe as a "socialist utopia" but those countries are certainly socialist/capitalist mixes, not pure one direction or the other, which IMO [in my opinion] is what we should strive for…China is also held up as a model but again, [are] certainly beneficiaries of state capitalism and in many cases pure capitalism. And they have their own issues with privacy and personal property rights…Anyone looking for more pure versions can certainly look to Cuba, Venezuela, DPRK, and a few others for guidance though. I'm sure they could point you to what the future might look like without capitalism…

For this user, any "pure" socialist society will always come into conflict with the human condition, presumably our inherent selfishness as a species and definitely our corrupting desire for power. Socialism also does not do away with "losers" in society, but only empowers the state to arbitrarily allocate winners and losers instead of markets. Northern European countries (presumably the Scandinavian states) are not socialist socities, but mixed economies whose models we should seek to emulate instead of chasing "pure" socialism. Examples ranging from China to Cuba show the limits of the latter.

What is interesting is that this user both writes off socialist alternatives to capitalism while nevertheless falling on the side of capitalist social democracy, which appears to be a relatively common opinion on the subreddit. For example, as this user argues:

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Well, socialism and communism are distinct concepts and to call them both pure evil makes me question your ability to look at this objectively. You could also flip socialism and communism with capitalism and you'd have the same propaganda from Soviet Russia. Alternative economic systems begin to look very attractive when people's current economic situation is a direct result of the economic policies of their parents and grandparents. You know, the ones that gutted regulations, strangled the middle class, and allowed corporations to essentially buy our government in an attempt to hoard wealth…I personally believe capitalism to be superior, but only when certain behaviors, behaviors that are natural to capitalism, are accounted for via regulations. It's difficult to address these issues when any attempts to do so are called socialism/communism and more. The irony is that the paralysis this rhetoric and policy causes drives more people to support authoritarian types who use the "fear of the other" to place blame for current economic circumstances or those who advocate for alternatives. Without regulating the worst aspects of capitalism, it's inevitable that there will be justifiable strife.

Here, this user criticizes those in the subreddit who dismiss socialism and communism as "evil" without objective analysis. This user further incorporates a sociological insight that economic alternatives to the existing capitalist world system are attractive given the material deprivation that the current generation of workers are experiencing because of the social policies unleashed by previous generations. While capitalism is superior to both socialism and communism on balance, it nevertheless needs regulations to mitigate its worst social consequences. Failure to do so, coupled with the moralizing rhetoric surrounding economic debates, results in support for "authoritarian types" who use "fear of the other" to transform economic anxieties into cultural ones. Capitalism's "natural behaviors" result in bad outcomes that must be countered, not only to mitigate inequality, but also to prevent authoritarian drift.

Of course, even though there appears to be a social democratic or at least welfarist tendency within the subreddit, this does not mean other perspectives are not present. For example, this user, promulgating what seems to be a hardline libertarian/anarcho-capitalist interpretation of capitalism, notes:

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...Capitalism is not "based on profit-maximalization"; Capitalism is based on private property and private enterprise. That's it. You belong to you, your labor belongs to you, the product of your labor belongs to you, and what you do with those things is your choice...The fundamental reason systems like slavery, feudalism, theocracy, monarchy, and communism are not capitalist is because in some way or another the individual is not free from coercion and some or all of their labor and its product does not belong to them...Capitalism is a voluntary, reciprocal, cooperative activity...When the state shows up...that's no longer capitalism; It's basically Feudalism...It's extortion...In order for a business to be successful, it needs a peaceful, healthy market in which to operate and it needs prosperous, healthy customers to buy its goods or services...Inversely, the business needs to be honest because customers will not voluntarily transact with a company that's swindling them...or offloading externalized costs onto them...In a proper free market, people have the freedom of choice to do things like boycott polluters and scammers and monopolizers...Just like we mature beyond the need to be told how to behave by parents and kings and deities, so too must we learn to live without the [state's] law...When every person is free to live their lives as they choose, when their body and their actions and the results of those actions belong to them, when they can voluntarily associate with whomever they choose without unwanted coercion from others, that's a capitalist free market.

As this user explains, the maximization of profit is not the defining feature of capitalism. Rather, capitalism's defining feature is private property. Within a pure capitalist society, all activities are voluntary: workers voluntarily sell their labor-power, firms voluntarily contract with customers and workers, and no coercion, exploitation, or force occurs. Whenever the state arrives, it effectively "extorts" voluntary agents through coercive measures like taxation and regulation that mutate the capitalist economy into a "feudal" derivative. Without the state, we do not need to worry about scams, monopolies, or externalities, for consumers have the power to simply boycott unethical firms. Rather than relying on the state and its coercive legal apparatus to intervene in voluntary market processes, we must learn to live "without the law" to obtain a peaceful existence predicated on private property, individual liberty, and mutual exchange.

This style of libertarian and anarcho-capitalist reasoning has become increasingly prevalent in recent years, especially in online political communities (cf. Golumbia 2016).

In many ways, it is hardly distinct from the arguments promulgated by the early political economists who Marx took to task in his critique of political economy. In place of a materialist analysis of the social relations constitutive of capitalism and the system's historical genealogy, this user provides an accounting of a hypothesized social system and its imagined relations and seeks to defend that system based on logic alone. In so doing, this user can equalize all relations: workers, business owners, and customers are all equal—each is free to voluntarily exchange with, or refuse to exchange with, whomever they please. The worker's labor-power appears to them as private property no different than the means of production the capitalist owns, the consumer's money appears as private property they can dispose with at will in exchange, and none is more exploitative or coercive than any another.

This understanding, however, does not describe a real state of affairs. True, workers experience the freedom of private property insofar as their labor-power appears to them as a commodity they can sell in market. But it is also true that they are free from any means of production of their own, meaning that, at the level of practice, they do not sell their labor-power from a position of free will but are *structurally compelled* to do so by the "silent compulsion" of market forces (Marx 1992:899). The worker's freedom in capitalism is thus quite distinct from that of the capitalist. In actual fact, the worker experiences a contradictory double-freedom where their freedom to sell their labor-power as a commodity is paired with their unfreedom of being dispossessed from the means of production:

> For the transformation of money into capital…the owner of money must find the free worker available on the commodity-market; and this worker must be free in the double sense that as a free individual he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale…he is free of all the objects needed for the realization of his labour-power (Marx 1992:272-273).

For the capitalist to exist as an economic subject, they must, as a structural necessity of capitalist economy, find dispossessed workers in the marketplace who have no means of production of their own and simply have to sell their labor-power just to live. This is the meaning of class. Class is not about "classism" or prejudice towards the poor and their cultural tastes. Such prejudices may be part of class society, but they are inessential to class as a social relation constitutive of capitalist societies. Instead, class refers specifically to the social relations of production. On one the hand are workers who have no access to "any income-generating assets" other than their labor power and "no means of production;" on the other hand are capitalists who own means of production, employ workers, and engage in competition for sale on the capitalist market (Chibber 2017:35-38). Denying the structural reality of class and equalizing the actors in capitalist society is a consequence of the fetish character that commodities assume in capitalist society, where exchange "takes the form of a relationship between coins, in which the manner of its coinage disappears" leaving to the senses nothing but "more money, more commerce, greater national wealth, more civilization" and the obfuscation of class exploitation (Bonefeld 2016:137).

Topic 26 (*tax, taxes, property, theft, income*) and Topic 66 (*market, free monopolies, markets, monopoly*) are quite similar to Topics 18 and 25, focusing on the balance

between market intervention, the state's role in redistribution and economic policy, and the promise and perils of free markets. Like above, some libertarian threads are present across these topics, such as this comment from Topic 26 that laments how taxation nullifies true freedom, as one has no right to "unplug" from government-controlled society:

> …To me property tax removed then option of true freedom. You can't unplug from the system in America because either way, you must produce and you must give…After I got out of thy military and really started disapproving of what we were doing, I started thinking if there was any way to truly stop funding my gov? At the end of the day, you can never stop paying taxes or they will throw you out into the streets.

In other cases, users argue that taxation serves legitimate civilizational functions, such as in this comment in Topic 26:

> Taxation is the price you pay for civilization. Feel free to go visit places on our planet where you have ineffective tax policies. However, make sure you wear body armor and get yourself military grade weaponry, because you'll need it. Every single country that is worth living in has a large liberal government that has both property taxes and income taxes. There's literally not one place on the planet that safe or worth living in that has a small tax free state of affairs. Local governments need property taxes to pay for police, fire, infrastructure, and education.

For this user, taxation is necessary to fund a stable government cable of providing security and infrastructure, a precondition of civil society. Without taxation, civil society becomes impossible: barbarism is the rule in those societies with ineffective taxation and public financing of police and infrastructure. In other cases, libertarian users insist that taxation is akin to theft and coercion, as in these examples:

> **Example A:**
> But taxes take your property away, I don't see how you can satisfy absolute property rights and a useful government at the same time.

Example B:

> Exactly, There's too many other ways for then to collect taxes to justify exerting ownership by force over people's property.

Other users directly refute the taxation is theft line of reasoning by arguing that taxation by government entities is hardly any different than fees and rents charged by capitalist firms:

> Taxation is not theft. Considering it from a market perspective, taxation is the "price" of the goods and services provided by the government…if you live on privately owned land not served by government-maintained roads, do not use the postal service, do not collect welfare or social security, and do not use goods or services accessed via government-maintained services (eg no grid power or goods purchased from stores), that the government has no realistic way, let alone the inclination, to attempt to tax you…that in most developed countries the above described situation is nearly impossible to implement, does not invalidate the point. If you live in a place serviced by a private entity, you pay rent and utilities costs for the use of that land and services. If you live in a place serviced by a public entity or government, you pay tax for the use of that land and services. If you don't like the prices or management of the system you're in, you are free to move to a more preferable system, or attempt to renegotiate your contract legally or through voting.

For this user, taxation is nothing more than the price of goods and services offered by the state. Regardless of how difficult it may be to "go off the grid" in contemporary society, it is at least conceivable and illustrates the point: private entities would provide the same or similar services for a fee. The user appeals to freedom of movement and invites those who oppose government policies to leave for somewhere else.

In general, it appears that users of the IDW subreddit see a role for the state in intervening in the capitalist economy, and while they seem to oppose socialism, they also are unpersuaded by free market fundamentalism. As comments in Topic 66 show, many users see free markets as mostly good but still ridden with internal contradictions that must be mediated by the state:

> Yes, this is the problem. Free markets are fantastic, but it seems likely that if one created a truly free market and left it completely to its own devices for long enough it would devolve into an anti-competitive oligopoly. A truly free market would be self-terminating; the companies spawned within it would garner immense power and inevitably start infringing on liberty in ways similar to a heavy-handed super state that libertarians justifiably fear so much.

For this user, the sorts of tyranny spawned from unregulated capitalist markets that result in oligopolistic control is analogous to the offenses to liberty committed by governments. Other users cannot even conceive of a free market without the state:

> Bingo bango. There is no free market without an overarching, governmental structure. It's not one or the other, and as soon as we can make peace with that fact and accept what must occur in the nexus of the market and the state, we are going to continue to aim low.

Like Polanyi's (Polanyi 2001) insistence that the "free market was planned," for this user, the state and market are not opposed concepts but rather integral to one another.

Similarly, Topic 77 (*healthcare, insurance, health, medicare, costs*) is largely driven by comments discussing failures of the US health care system as a proxy for a more general discussion about the role of government in provisioning welfare in capitalist societies. Two upvoted comments (6 and 5 karma respectively) illustrate this point:

Example A:

> …my first principle on the matter is that healthcare in a basic form is more or less necessary to live a long and healthy life. The difference in lifestyle between someone with healthcare and without is palpable. But unlike other economic issues, the current structure of the insurance industry means someone can be successful yet still struggle for access, particularly with costs. As a result, I would like to see a world where everyone has access at least for extreme cases…I used to be on board with full single-payer, but having done more casual policy analysis, I've found that there are a lot of systems in which you can guarantee universal access while keeping prices down and innovation up. In particular, the Netherlands and Switzerland both have some of the highest average quality of care in the world and ensure all of their citizens have insurance in some form…If I had it my way, I'd scrap all of the current rules (including Medicare, Medicaid, VA) and start over with a system like in Switzerland where a combination of smaller taxes and subsidized marketplaces support the bottom rungs of society with basic emergency coverage and veterans with a more comprehensive version of that. Meanwhile, anyone who wishes to acquire a more

normal plan is free to engage in the open marketplace with much less bizarre regulations. Doctors and providers remain independent, research remains vibrant, and consumers remain free to shop around. Not to mention overall prices could drop to anywhere from a two-thirds to a half of what they are now…Bernie's complete single-payer plan seemed to go way too far and incorporated little understanding of the economics at work…

Example B:

The US healthcare system has major flaws that are inherent to private health care systems in general…You lose your job and you lose your health care…You lose your job and your children lose their health insurance. This happened to a friend of mine…He was able to get his child on Medicaid but it took two months to do so and his child had to go without medication…If you need daily medication you are screwed. And if you have children who need medication your doubly screwed. There are lots of other problems with American health care…But those examples [I] listed don't have a solution that doesn't include some kind of government intervention.

In both cases, the U.S. health care system is understood to be problematic and requiring reforms. While the user in Example A opposes single-payer health care, they nevertheless see a market-based model with government subsidies and rules, such as those in Switzerland, as a desirable policy alternative. In Example B, the user illustrates a variety of issues with the U.S. health care system that bounds individuals to health care coverage through their employer. This creates problems when losing or switching jobs, and the only solution to these deficiencies is government regulation. As in the other topics examined here, there are certainly libertarian and free market voices present in the comments, insisting on the benefits of unregulated markets in efficient health care provisioning. Nevertheless, it does appear that in general, many users see a role for the state to intervene in health care markets even if they disagree on the specifics.

Overall, what these topics reveal about political economy within the IDW subreddit is that a "Keynesian" sentiment dominates, but I do not mean "Keynesian" in the colloquial sense of generic "government regulation of economy." Rather, I mean it in the much

more expanded sense conceptualized by Geoff Mann in his study of John Maynard

Keynes and Keynesianism's techno-social legacy. As Mann (2017) argues, Keynesian

critique is

> a distinctively postrevolutionary political economy, assembled and reassembled again and
> again to address an existential anxiety at the heart of liberal modernity...it is always, at its
> core, a reluctantly radical but immanent critique of liberalism, a science and sensibility that
> allows us to name 'the crisis'—poverty, unemployment, inequality—when everything
> hangs in the balance and 'something must be done'. For Keynesians...it is always ultimately
> civilization itself that is at stake (P. 6-7).

Keynesianism is a *civilization preserving* response to the internal contradictions of liberal

capitalism, which it must reluctantly reckon with. However, unlike Marxism,

Keynesianism is wedded to liberalism and therefore must operate as liberalism's savior.

The risk of Keynesianism failing to save liberalism from itself is not simply that, in its

void, the "proletariat or the 99 percent or the multitude will rise," but, rather, that if

bourgeois civil society fails, "so will everyone and everything else"—the "entire social

order will go with it" (Mann 2017:22-23). What liberal capitalist societies require, then,

is technocratic stewardship of state and economy to fortify civil society:

> Keynesians tell us that, with proper stewardship and appropriate institutions, 'human
> nature' is basically good enough and that, in conditions of reasonable social justice, it will
> do reasonably good things. The question of political agency—outside the 'universal class'
> of enlightened technocrats managing the state apparatus, at least—never arises and need
> not concern us...the answers are ultimately not political but technical. The right science can
> manage the community so that we never have to turn to politics...Right or wrong, [the
> Keynesian] fear is lynch mobs, Kristallnacht, neighbor informers, religious
> fundamentalists, the Tea Party, and Donald Trump. This is what many progressives in the
> capitalist global north fear too, because they have absorbed the same lessons as those they
> claim to oppose: it is unwise to trust the masses. The twentieth century taught them what
> the rabble can do (Mann 2017:364)

With the technocratic guidance of state and economy, including reasonable social justice

interventions, civil society can generate sustained net benefits. This need not, and indeed, ought not, require participation from the "rabble," the poor and working masses whose mob-like indignations haunt liberal society. The rabble may suffer the inequalities of generated by liberal society's internal contradictions, and this suffering may be corrosive to civilization, but they are in no position to govern themselves and remedy their misery: this is the task of Keynesian technocrats.

As a closing point, this sort of Keynesian perspective constitutes the core of IDW founder Eric Weinstein's analysis of inequality in capitalist society. In an episode of his *Portal* podcast with Peter Thiel, Weinstein (2019a) argues that society must prepare to deal with "median individuals" as economic and technological progress renders increasing volumes of people superfluous to the production process:

> I want deregulated capitalism. I want the people who have the rare skill sets to be able to integrate across many different areas…the problem that I have is we are going to have to take care of the *median individual*, and I less think that the median individual is going to be reachable by the market over time… [emphasis added].

What Weinstein has in mind specifically is automation, especially automation driven by AI, which will obviate the need for human labor in the production process. On the one hand, this empowers the innovators and entrepreneurs with rare talents to propel society into the future. On the other hand, however, this disrupts the civilizational preconditions that such innovation is dependent upon by eliminating the basis for market participation for a large segment of the population. This raises problems for human dignity, aggregate demand, and the stability of market society, as Weinstein (2019b) argues in an interview

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with Andrew Yang:

> What happens [to the dignity of work] when machines replace you?…We make this error, I think, when we talk about workers. We say this person *is* a worker: they *are* a bricklayer or a Teamster. What we need to do is readjust our model of an economic agent to a "has a" model [instead of a "is a" model]. So the idea is that you may *have* a breadwinner, and you also *have* a contributor, and you also *have* a consumer. Therefore, what it is we do all day long in the face of the automation…[needs] a model of humans that recognizes a need to be active in the economy whether or not the marginal product of our labor is sufficient enough to take care of our family [emphasis added].

While in the long run we may no longer need workers, we will still need individuals both able and motivated to consume commodities. Elsewhere, in an interview for the Institute for New Economic Thinking (2016), Weinstein lays out the future implications of capitalist techno-social tendencies clearly:

> We have to start formalizing some of what we've learned through the heterodoxy. So I think some of the elements are going to be, potentially, a guaranteed minimum income for the most vulnerable, and therefore it's going to have elements that are very socialistic. I think recognition that there are going to be a small number of players capable of really moving things forward, the Elon Musk's of the world, so you're going to see power laws that are quite uncomfortable, socially, for many people. So there's going to be probably greater inequality but there's probably going to have to be a stronger safety net.

In this formulation, social welfare programs like a universal basic income (UBI) serve as technical fixes to the inescapable developmental path that capitalist society will take as entrepreneurs like Elon Musk progress human civilization while, unfortunately, eliminating the traditional basis of social reproduction through wage labor.

We cannot, and ought not, according to Weinstein, abandon this technological horizon. Rather, we must rely on techno-social fixes that rescue civilization from collapse by recreating a new foundation upon which the "rabble" can meek out an existence by subsidizing their redundancy. The question of whether political economy could ever look

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different, whether innovation could be unshackled from an "insular vanguard" of technocrats through democratization and socialist experimentation (Unger 2019), is never raised. Perhaps it is too dangerous to raise, arising panic about pitchforks and indignant mobs coming for our wealth. But perhaps, for the IDW, it is fundamentally undesirable: after all, do we not *want* to reap the technological scraps and distractions that will trickle down to all of us obviated by AI under a Muskian aristocracy?

Chapter 8: Discussion

As the preceding analysis shows, the results of this study allow me to answer all three research questions. In the following sections, I return to each question in turn.

8.1 What topics are most popular in subreddit discussions?

Topics in the r/IntellectuallDarkWeb subreddit are wide-ranging. As shown above, each topic could reasonably be classified into one of ten possible topic themes. By far, the largest share of comments on r/IntellectualDarkWeb fall into two categories: (1) Science, Knowledge & Epistemology and (2) Platforms, Media & Information. Together, these two topic groups account for 42.27% of all comments. As the topical analysis above shows, these topic themes cover a diverse mix of topics relevant to issues of epistemology, including matters of scientific truth, sources of information, free speech and censorship, and collective "sensemaking" through debate and "logical" discussion. The dominance of these two topic groups is indicative of the IDW's concern for questions of truth under conditions of epistemic crisis.

An interesting finding was the relatively low proportion of comments being classified in the Culture Wars topic theme, which contains individual topics about "wokeness," cancel culture, and critical race theory—all of which are hot button issues in the heterodox online community and IDW sphere. However, as analysis of other topic

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themes showed, many culture war concerns were inflected across topic themes, suggesting that culture war discourses are distributed.

Moreover, this could reflect a temporal bias. As concern about critical race theory (CRT), wokeness, and cancel culture continues growing and being adopted by the GOP as cultural wedge issues, resulting in a slew of anti-CRT, anti-LGTBQ+, and "anti-woke" legislation at all levels of government, it is possible that these topics will grow as a proportion of comments on the subreddit. This may be especially the case moving into the 2022 midterms, with the GOP hoping to capitalize on culture war politics, including by promulgating rhetoric that trans people are trying to sexually "groom" children, a mode of reasoning that is structurally analogous to earlier right-wing fabrications about the imagined "threat" of homosexuals (Lewis 2022). Such rhetoric is integral to the IDW sphere, with high-profile figures such as James Lindsay tweeting about the new sexual threats facing our children at a neurotic pace (Raz and Renfro 2022).

The Race & Ethnicity topic group accounted for a relatively large proportion of topics at 10.72% overall, as did the Governance & Political Institutions topic group (10.11%). Interestingly, IDW-Related topics were less than 7.0% of the comment sample and, as we saw above, have experienced a linear decline as an overall proportion of comments in the sample, indicating that users concentrate comments on specific issue areas as opposed to the IDW itself. Political Economy was the least discussed topic group (4.95%), and Sex & Gender was also relatively infrequent (5.66%), a somewhat counterintuitive finding given the culture war considerations discussed above. The Sociopolitical Conflict topic

group was on parity with many other topics at 6.58% of all comments. Outside of epistemic topics, then, Race & Ethnicity and Governance & Political Institutions are the most frequently discussed topic themes.

8.2 How do the topics discussed in r/IntellectualDarkWeb relate to current events, conflicts, and discussions happening in society?

Many of the topics correspond to "offline" events happening outside the subreddit. This is most obviously the case with the dominance of Topic 0 (*vaccine, covid, vaccines, vaccinated, virus)* in my topic model, which alone accounts for more than 9% of the sample (a share larger than some entire topic themes). As was shown, the dominance of Topic 0 is not simply tied to the disruptive effects COVID-19 has had on society but corresponds to the contrarian attitude many IDW figures have taken towards the public health response to the pandemic. This includes Bret Weinstein, Heather Heying, and Joe Rogan boosting misinformation about the virus, its vaccines, and support for unproven treatments like Ivermectin, as well as a generalized distrust towards public health officials given their associations with "mainstream" governmental institutions and proximity to pharmaceutical companies.

Similarly, temporal analyses of topic theme frequencies shows that trends in frequency correlate with significant current events (see Appendix C). For example, the Race & Ethnicity topic group saw a steep climb in frequency after George Floyd's murder and the summer of anti-racist protests that followed. A similar trend was observed for the Governance & Political Institutions topic group, which saw increases in frequency

leading up to the 2020 presidential election and the January 6th Capitol riot, followed by a relative decrease in overall frequency after these events. Concrete issues often structured discussion of what can sometimes be abstract concepts, such as in the case of Sex & Gender. For example, Canadian Bill C-16 framed discussions of gender equality and fear of "compelled" speech, providing a basis for users to debate whether anti-discrimination statutes conflict with the political liberties of individuals. Similarly, the Brett Kavanaugh confirmation hearing and Christine Blasey Ford's allegations of sexual assault against him provided a basis for exploring the relationship between standards of evidence and accusations of gendered violence, with many users finding the supplied evidence to be too ambiguous to be arrive at a decisive conclusion, as explored in Chapter 6 above.

Interestingly, events within the IDW itself had effects on how the users of the subreddit interpreted and related to IDW public thinkers. This included negative sentiments expressed towards those perceived being too partisan, such as Ben Shapiro, or incapable of engaging in rigorous interviews and debates, such as Dave Rubin. It also included debates about key IDW figures, such as Eric and Bret Weinstein, given the former's tendency towards conspiracy theorizing and the latter's embrace of COVID-19 contrarianism. Moreover, there is an observable effort by users to define the essence of the IDW because, as an informal network, it is possible to forge associations with individuals whom users of the subreddit may not agree "are IDW."

In other cases, discussions tend to be far more abstract or tied to some as of yet

reached social horizon, such as comments within the Political Economy topic group speculating about the future consequences of present inequalities in capitalist democracies. Nevertheless, when topics are rooted in concrete events, these events serve to facilitate a sort of crowd-source case study that users can subject to analysis, scrutiny, and post their "takes" about. In this sense, then, the debates conjured around these topics in the subreddit do exercise some sort of "collective sensemaking" (Parks 2020)—though this does not mean that either objectively true "sense" or broad consensus is derived from this process of sensemaking. It is to this point that I turn to next.

8.3 What is the social and epistemological significance of the IDW?

Why does the IDW matter? And why should we care? Fundamentally, as the foregoing analysis illustrates, for users of the IDW subreddit, the IDW identity does provide them with what Eric Weinstein has called a "need for reality" (Rebel Wisdom 2019a). This "need" is satisfied in a few ways. First, as the topic analysis reveals, the problems facing contemporary society can be named, analyzed, and discussed. This does not necessitate that users agree decisively with one another. In fact, as my analysis shows, there is disagreement, debate, and argument on the subreddit. Such disagreement is in fact the premise of the IDW itself, enshrined in the subreddit's self-description as providing a digital haven for rigorous, but civil, debate, and reflected in IDW thought leaders' insistence that cross-ideological conversations are necessary to resolve our irrational, "tribal" psychoses.

An interesting finding, and one that is contrary to what many observers might expect

given evidence showing the closeness of IDW consumers to far-right media (Lewis 2018; Ribeiro et al. 2020), my topic model revealed that there is a contingent of users on the subreddit who do challenge "anti-woke" and even right-wing to far-right viewpoints within the community. For example, in the Race & Ethnicity topic group, I showed a sample of comments arguing *in favor* of a concept of institutionalized racism against other users who insist such a concept is either analytically flawed or itself racist against whites. Elsewhere, in the Governance & Political Institutions topic group, it was shown that there is considerable hostility to Trump. Moreover, evidence was presented that several users appear to be disaffected Democrats or liberals, irritated with their party and its embrace of social justice rhetoric, and fed up with a lack of desirable political alternatives. Additionally, I showed that there is significant concern for economic inequality within the Political Economy topic group, and while opposition to leftist alternatives like socialism is well documented, and while libertarian and anti-statist perspectives were also present, there does appear to be something like a welfare capitalist or even social democratic preference among subreddit users.

To be sure, in other cases, libertarian to right-wing perspectives reigned supreme. For example, in the Race & Ethnicity topic group, we saw examples of commenters blaming black Americans for the violence they suffer at the hands of police due to the disproportionate criminality within black communities—something that was naturalized and detached from historical and sociological analysis. Similarly, I showed an example of a comment thread in which a user advocated for ethnostates as a solution to racial, ethnic,

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and multicultural conflicts, deploying reasoning and rhetoric directly from the alt-right theory of human biodiversity (HBD). I also showed an example of a user celebrating how Sam Harris had "taken the red pill" on race and IQ, seemingly accepting a eugenic explanation for racial inequalities. Moreover, topics in the Sex & Gender topic group shined light on commenters lamenting "gender ideology" and "trans ideologues"— terminology meant to re-naturalize the gender binary and insult feminist and queer activists. When discussing social justice protests, it was not uncommon for users to represent the protesters as violent and irrational looters to discredit their grievances. Likewise, in the Culture Wars topic group, rhetoric and talking points that have become integral to mainline conservatism on issues ranging from CRT to wokeness and cancel culture were present.

Given these contrasting sets of examples, we can say that some level of ideological differences are represented on the subreddit. My findings therefore suggest that simply concluding that "r/IntellectualDarkWeb is another alt-right subreddit" would be reductive. Instead, there is some truth to the claim that the subreddit pulls users from various ideological backgrounds who share a common disillusionment with the present state of social and political conditions and aspire for something better and more rational. There is a (classical) "liberal" imaginary of sorts threaded through discussion on the subreddit, as we saw in examples from the Political Ideologies and IDW-Related topic themes. Here, comments suggest that the IDW is understood to be a neo-Enlightenment project that aspires to cut through the dogmatism, division, and unreason characteristic of

the present state of things and create a new social order premised on individual freedom and rationalism. There is a role for a reasonable government to play in various aspects of society to secure this neo-Enlightenment order and to remedy suboptimal social outcomes, but this should look more like a "Keynesian" technocratic tuning (Mann 2017) than a post-capitalist, post-liberal transformation of state and society. In short, the IDW aims to assert a rationalist symbolic order in a symbolically "unordered world" (Doody 2020:157), a non-trivial pitch amidst our ongoing epistemic crisis.

As I see it, the chief social significance of the IDW is the epistemic coherence it provides for its audience. The IDW offers its constituents the promise that truth is not an antiquated concept. With a shared symbolic frame, one grounded in rationalist principles and standards of evidence, something like objective reasoning appears possible. In fact, for the IDW, it is only because rationalist values have been so degraded in contemporary society that we feel as if truth eludes us. Given how ideologically captured and irrational our social institutions appear to be from the point of view of the IDW, our pursuits of truth must therefore take place in informal "sensemaking" networks where a new symbolic order can be built. Within the IDW, a common reference to a shared symbolic order does not automatically harmonize opinions on any specific issue or policy, but, rather, enables those within the IDW milieu to engage with one another under a common rubric of rationalist dialogue and principled action. The platform affordances of Reddit facilitate symbolic ordering by empowering subreddit users to downvote contributions that deviate from the IDW rubric, censure users who stretch IDW symbolic boundaries

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too far, and upvote users who epitomize IDW symbolism and practices. Irrespective of whether "true" truth emerges from IDW-style decentralized sensemaking, a *sense* of reality certainly does.

It is impossible to conclude this discussion without relating the IDW back to the political left, for it is against its concept of "the left"—however broad, ambiguous, imprecise, or imaginary a category—that the IDW defines itself. In fact, the epistemological significance of the IDW *must* be placed in immediate relation to an analysis of the left, for the IDW's own concept is that of an epistemological counter to left-wing scholarship and social theory that has, according to the IDW, provided the intellectual basis for the sorts of "regressive" activist practices its key personae and supporters abhor (cf. LeDrew 2016; Wesołowski 2020). To this last point, I maintain that what is so uncomfortable for leftist observers of the IDW, who are rightly worried about how the IDW legitimizes the partisan right, spreads misinformation and conspiracy theories, and engages in cultural crusades against the "woke" in ways often indistinguishable from mainline conservativism, is the fact that the IDW begins from *true premises* about the epistemic crisis in communicative capitalism, sprinkled with *partial truths* about certain dysfunctional practices among particular tendencies within the left. Yet, the IDW then slides from these premises into *false conclusions* about causality and the necessary political solutions, leading IDW mainstays to ally with right-wing partisans.

The IDW, like the partisan right, wants to equate "the left" with a set of specific

activist tendencies that are highly visible online: callouts, "cancel culture," standpoint epistemology, and identitarianism. However, this approach to the left is reductive, belying an understanding of internal conflicts within the left itself that challenge this conceptualization.

As early as 2013, the very sorts of disruptive online activist practices the IDW and partisan right focus on had come under harsh criticism from the socialist left, epitomized by Mark Fisher's (2013) infamous essay, "Exiting the Vampire's Castle." Long before Weiss (2018) debuted the IDW and its "anti-woke" crusade to the world, feminists were critiquing how an individualist liberal identitarianism comports with neoliberalism, which "celebrates 'diversity,' meritocracy, and 'emancipation' while dismantling social protections and re-externalizing social reproduction" (Fraser 2009:113). Alongside this feminist scholarship were critical political economists, who have shown how capitalist culture can be widely accommodating of difference, diversity, and an ethos of social justice, even as precarity, insecurity, and inequality continue to accumulate (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). More recently and intervening directly in the contemporary culture wars of which the IDW is engulfed in, Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò (2022) criticizes the capture of identity politics by political, social, and economic elites, which strips it of its radical substance and repurposes it in ways unsuited for an emancipatory left politics but highly functional for reproducing elite power.

There are multitudes of similar examples from within the left, where identitarian essentialist, individualist, and anti-solidaristic activist practices and scholarship have

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been subjected to significant critical scrutiny (e.g., Burgis 2021, 2022; brown 2020; DSA Communist Caucus 2022; DSA Mass 2022; Frost 2020; Morrigan 2020; Sanchez 2022; Shure 2022). And, of course, Jodi Dean's theory of communicative capitalism, which has strongly influenced this dissertation, is severely critical, from a socialist perspective, of the divisive and disorganizing tendencies within (especially online) left-wing spaces (Dean 2005, 2014, 2016, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). To state it plainly, the notion that "the left" is ideologically and politically equivalent to the specific online activist practices that the IDW finds so corrosive to civilization is false, for its members are either unaware of, or purposely ignore, actual leftist scholarship and criticisms of the left from leftists themselves.

However, even if it is inappropriate to equate "the left" with the activist behaviors the IDW laments, the IDW, like the leftist critics discussed above, does latch onto a real tendency within predominantly online leftist spaces that is genuinely destructive. But because the IDW drifts into the terrain of concerning alliances with the partisan right, leftists understandably want to dismiss the IDW without the risk of legitimizing its ideas or thinkers by conceding that the IDW's point of departure contains partial truths about the state of the world. While from a *political* standpoint this is understandable, given the reactionary culture war being waged by the political right and the (re)mainstreaming of racial and gendered bigotries, *epistemically* this is a significant problem for the left that must be remedied. Otherwise, destructive tendencies within the left do risk undermining solidarity and our capacity to forge coalitions capable of sustaining organized political

struggles, coherently countering reactionary forces, and struggling collectively to build a better future.

Following Žižek (2020), we might say that the IDW "addresses what many of us somehow feels go wrong in the PC [politically correct] universe of obsessive regulation," with the problem lying not primarily in the IDW's "lies" or faulty conclusions, but "in the partial truths" that *sustain* those lies (p. 5). There are real destructive tendencies in the (especially online) left that produce tactical, epistemological, and political weaknesses that are corrosive to effectual community-building. Fisher (2013) has called this tendency "neo-anarchism," signaling its aversion to institutional politics and its embrace of a politics of immediacy, protest, and online activism. Within this "neo-anarchist" tendency, it is true that a carceral logic of "callouts" or "cancellation" prevails as a legitimate activist strategy—i.e., those efforts to publicly name, shame, and exile "problematic" people from movement spaces by broadcasting their misdeeds, abuses, and past harms to massive, networked, audiences. Often, those sympathetic to the neo-anarchist tendency deny that anything like a "cancel culture" even exists, insisting that in our highly unequal and mediated world, this is merely a novel form of "accountability" and a redress of grievances on behalf of the oppressed. Actions should have consequences, and digital technology means that those historically denied the power to be heard in an oppressive society now have the tools to center their voices and seek justice.

To this point, real social justice victories have been wrought through these mechanisms. Powerful men like Harvey Weinstein and Bill Cosby were successfully

toppled through highly mediated accusations that revealed the egregious scale of their sexual crimes. Networked solidarity was essential, empowering more and more women to come forward and speak their truth. Other cases, such as that of comedian Louis C.K., are used to show that no one is ever *really* canceled, for, after several instances of sexual misconduct were made public in 2017, C.K. returned to comedy, releasing multiple comedy specials, and embarking on a comedy tour.

Yet, if activists only concerned themselves with "canceling" powerful, unrepentant, abusive men, then there would be little to critique. But that is not the case. Neo-anarchist-oriented activists do not reserve their wrath for an abusive elite but also inflict it upon their should-be comrades for even the most minor offenses. Whomever the target, the fact that if the targeted somehow continue to have a career or a community, we conclude they have not *really* been canceled, reveals the antisocial cruelty at the heart of this form of leftist activism, as queer activist Clementine Morrigan (Morrigan 2020) states plainly: "This means that we understand successful cancellation as the end of a person's professional and community life" (p. 16). Frustrated by this self-destructive carceral turn within left movement spaces, the black feminist author adrienne maree brown [sic] (2020) laments how call outs are not just being used as "a necessary consequence for those wielding power to cause harm or enact abuse," but to "shame and humiliate people in the wake of misunderstandings, contradictions, conflicts, and mistakes" (p. 41).

Online, there are demands to call out and condemn people for any number of behaviors, as brown (2020) reflects:

In the past week I have seen people and organizations called out for embodying white supremacy in the workplace, for causing repeated or one-time sexual harm, for physical, emotional, or digital abuse or harm, for appropriation of ideas and images, for patriarchy, for ableism, for being dishonest, for saying harmful things a decade ago, for doing things that were later understood as harm or abuse…These call outs generally share *one* side of what's happened and then call for *immediate consequences*. And within a day, the call out is everywhere, the cycle of blame and shame activated, and whoever was called out has begun being publicly punished. Sometimes, there are consequences—loss of job, community, reputation, platform. Sometimes there is just derision, and calls for disappearance. *The details of the offense blur or compound as others add their own opinions and experiences to the story* (P. 41, emphasis added).

Here, brown (2020) succinctly summarizes the frenzied nature of online call outs. Individual activists or groups of activists communicate to their allies that a harm has been committed, rooted in any number of oppressive logics, and with varying levels of harm or intensity. Sometimes, leftist call outs can target newly surfaced evidence of harms committed in the distant past, such as through the sleuthing tactic of unearthing old tweets. The perspective of the subject(s) initiating the call out are represented, but not the perspective of the accused: in fact, the accused are expected to be promptly held accountable. The call out then rolls through leftist communication networks like a snowball, growing as it accumulates more opinions, rumors, and outrage, heightening the precarity of the accused along the way.

The idiosyncratic nature of each call out, coupled with the leftist aspiration to root out oppression in all its forms, risks leading to the collapse of distinctions between harms and abuses: *every* instance of oppression demands swift and consistent justice. As such, "not liking someone, social media offenses, power misuse in work settings, movement conflict, and sexual assault are all getting the same level of public response" (brown 2020:18). Consequently, brown (2020) notes, "every kind of dissonance in movements is

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understood through a lens of violence, abuse, and victimization" (p. 26-27). A key part of the problem is the use of imprecise terminology like "harm" to describe offenses and the re-framing of call outs and expulsions as a form of "harm reduction" by holding "harmful" people accountable and isolating them. Given the appeals to "lived experience" that are often coupled with accusations of harm (Burgis 2021:8), asking accusers to provide too much detail and background on the precise harms suffered could be seen as invalidating their trauma or victim blaming. As such, "with no questions or process or time or breath," we are compelled to join the spectacle of collective punishment lest we, ourselves, fall under suspicion (brown 2020:45).

This logic of the punitive call out, which is meant to prefigure practices of transformative justice, far more resembles a panopticon than it does a desirable alternative system of conflict resolution. It may even be actively "counter-abolitionist," as brown (2020:75) intuits, and, in fact, is sustained by networks of surveillance and informal policing where mutual fear between "allies" coerces a pseudo-consensus and incentivizes participation in pile-ons (Morrigan 2020). Instead of admitting and dealing with the unfortunate fact that in an oppressive society, no one is innocent —we are "all survivors," even "most people who cause harm" (brown 2020:55), scarred and bruised by the social conditions in which we must live but did not ourselves create—a fundamentalist morality of eternal damnation takes hold. What we say to those who have made mistakes, caused harm, and abused others is that they "cannot change and cannot belong. They must be eradicated. The bad things in the world cannot change, we must

disappear the bad until there is only good left" (brown 2020:57). Ad hoc purges of

"badness" therefore become of penultimate importance. We must purify social spaces to

secure the "good" that resides therein.

While carceral punishments and purges are a destructive tendency within the left,

these practices have nothing to do with the truthfulness or falsity of the left's core claims

about social oppression. As brown (2020) and Morrigan (2020)—both of whom are leftist

activists embedded within, and critiquing from the point of view of, movement spaces—

make clear in their analyses of the left, we *really do* live in a society premised on

institutional racism, sexism, bigotry and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people, and

severe material inequalities internal to the class structure of capitalist economy, among

other things. It is further undeniable that the IDW and the political right alike have

cynically weaponized the language of cancel culture, wokeness, critical race theory, and

anti-trans and anti-queer "groomer" rhetoric that has resulted in, and will continue to

result in, attacks on the most vulnerable and oppressed people in society.

The problems with this specific leftist tendency can be explained materially and

sociologically when placed in the context of communicative capitalism. As Dean (2014)

explains, given the changes in communication and subjectivity ushered in by

communicative capitalism,

> we would expect the expropriated to face real difficulties in organization, in constructing
> clear narratives, and symbols. We would expect images to take primacy over arguments,
> positions and demands. We would expect intense attachment to individuality, difference
> and uniqueness—attachments that would hinder solidarity. We would expect suspicion of
> those deemed to threaten that uniqueness. Micro-politics, issue-politics, anarchism, one-

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off demos, clictivism, and ironic events would, in this setting, seem more compelling (they would definitely be easier) than the sustained work of party-building. And we would expect an increased focus on inequality (P. 9-10).

The structure of networked sociality in communicative capitalism does not supply stable symbolic identities, positions from which we "see ourselves as loci of collective action;" rather,

> they provide opportunities for new ways for me to imagine myself, a variety of lifestyles that I can try and try on. This variety and mutability makes my imaginary identity extremely vulnerable—the frames of reference that give it meaning and value are forever shifting; the others who can rupture it might appear at any moment and their successes and their achievements, call mine into question. This insecurity is not only psychic: it is a reasonable response to struggles to persist in global, reflexive financial and information networks (Dean 2014:7).

Individualizing fragmentation is a real social compulsion, what Dean (2016) elsewhere calls "commanded individuality." We really are individualized and divided by the processes of communicative capitalism that compel us to indulge our uniqueness even as our precarity, on all social levels, intensifies and the world around us slips further into crisis. With leftist institutions largely destroyed and marginalized by the past four decades of capitalist development, there is very little room for the exercise of coherent collective political agency. Moreover, our individualization and social differentiations means "lived experience" accumulates in variegated ways that seemingly lacks any sort of shared reference across subjects. We may be similarly oppressed on one axis, like race, but we are differentially privileged on another, such as class, thereby eschewing solidarity. Here, a language of *inequality*, which can be tailored to the particular inequalities suffered by individuals located in different social spheres, substitutes for a

language of *exploitation*, the latter of which echoes of homogenizing categories like "worker" and "capitalist" that assumes consistency of experience across subjects.

Communicative capitalism also incentivizes and rewards individualist and anti-solidaristic behavior, for public displays of one's individual "virtue" is an invaluable source of social capital in digital spaces (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Liu 2021). And such virtue is accumulated through the attention one receives by injecting their thoughts into the circuits of communication. We find enjoyment in posting, in offering our "takes" on current events and receiving recognition from our peers through the satisfying hits of likes, retweets, and so on, even as we get stuck "doing the same thing over and over again" without any change to our social or political conditions (Dean 2010b:21). At the same time, so does everyone else, and the unending stream of communication leads to distraction and political atrophy, as "incessant and deliberately framed representations are themselves used to obscure and the muffle" knowledge about the "very same events" (Pettman 2015:11). This is why Dean (2009) argues that we are captured by capitalism through our participatory communication: on the one hand, we are incentivized to accumulate virtue in the online attention economy, compelling us to engage in individualist practices that hinder solidarity and the formation of collective representations of the same events that would empower us to act as a collectivity; on the other hand, our fragmented communications is a central ingredient to the accumulation of capital under the conditions of communicative capitalism.

The very social media platforms we inhabit are predicated on the endless flow of

communication as a business model, selling our activity back to us as targeted advertising and algorithmically induced behavioral nudges (Srnicek 2016; Zuboff 2019). The sheer size of the platformed economy, and the free accumulation of our digital trace data therein, has led Wark (2019) to speculate that a "vectoralist class" is emerging, whose power comes from "ownership and control of the vector of information" (p. 13). Platformed accumulation is predicated on network effects, i.e., the value that derives from critical masses of individuals using a platform *as individuals*, for deliberate collective action within these networks risks creating blockages to otherwise frictionless networked accumulation (cf. Srnicek 2016). That is, platformed accumulation is based on the *refusal of solidarity*. Atomized individuals and their atomized trace data are central components to the accumulation of capital on digital platforms. This is why our communications, however radical or insightful, risk always being captured as just one more post, one more take, that dissipates as quickly as it appeared, until the next one, all the while nothing around us changes (except the worsening of crises).

Because the IDW is so focused on its progressive enemies, it fails to consider how its key personnel and audiences are equally subsumed within the same processes of communicative capitalism that they see as underlying the so-called "regressive" left. We see these processes manifest themselves in the IDW in multiple ways. For one, the data upon which this dissertation is based are sourced from a social media platform where individual users participate in the same posting behavior that its antagonists do: these users chime in on various issues, offer their takes, and engage in debates with one another

without any guarantee of a clear resolution. User engagements can become hostile, as several examples illustrated throughout this dissertation show, resulting in various forms of censure ranging from karma downvoting, to pile-ons, to insults, and even to censorship from subreddit moderators. Moreover, the sheer plurality of opinion expressed on the subreddit reflects the enumeration of individual orientations and perspectives that circulate freely and multiply in communicative capitalism and hinder the formation of a collectivity united *positively* by what it is for rather than *negatively* by what it opposes. That is, the neo-Enlightenment ideals inspiring the IDW seem to be primarily oppositional, i.e., functioning as the antithesis of what they are not (i.e., the IDW is not "woke," is not "tribalist," is not "Trumpist," and so on; cf. Wesołowski 2020:93).

Moreover, even though my topic model found evidence of a diversity of political opinion on the subreddit, it is not obvious that such diversity opinion, particularly when it comes from the political left, is desired by subreddit users. For example, a recent submission to the subreddit (not included in the observation period of my dataset) by a user asking, "Why do Leftists who hate this sub come here," currently sits at 130 positive karma. In the submission text, the user complains how

> A substantial percentage of the people who come here are Leftists who actually hate the sub and [its] target demographic. They are apparently really threatened and insecure about the fact that anyone who disagrees with them exists, and seem to want to bully anyone who does, into ideological compliance…The Left are determined to utterly destroy anyone who they perceive as being ideologically non-compliant…I don't expect the Left's perpetual, pathological lying and gaslighting to stop forever, but I would like it to for the necessary amount of time to answer this question.

While some users argue that, for example, it is okay for the subreddit to have "left-

leaning opinions" present, they concede that usually leftists come to the subreddit not to "engage in dialogue but to block meaningful dialogue as much as they can and to disparage the sub. They resent that this space exists and would like to shut it down."

Additionally, there is evidence that the r/IntellectualDarkWeb has had trouble living up to its own standards and following its own rules. The moderating team, for example, felt compelled to introduce a strict media regulation rule in January 2020 that demanded users who submit video or audio posts to the subreddit ensure the content relates directly to those perceived to be "really" IDW by the subreddit to enhance the quality of both (1) content received by the subreddit and (2) the ensuing discussions. Specifically, subreddit moderators were responding to what they saw as the accumulation of "outrage posts" that fueled users' affect and disdain towards their ideological opponents but failed to live up to the intellectual rigor subreddit moderators see as central to the IDW identity (see Chapter 3 above). Similarly, in the early months of 2022, a lead moderator's decision to take a harsh approach to moderating and removing content on the subreddit in the wake of injections of toxicity corresponding with the subreddit's growth exposes the challenge the subreddit has experienced in crafting a genuinely civil, neo-Enlightenment "public sphere" on the Reddit platform, in which the barriers to entry are effectively zero and almost anyone is free to enter the community.

Outside the subreddit, and within the broader IDW social milieu, we have seen similar challenges. The IDW "vanguard" from the Weiss (2018) article has largely fractured as its internal divisions and ideological conflicts drove it apart. This is

epitomized by Sam Harris' very public disavowal of the IDW after the 2020 presidential

elections, in which Harris distanced himself from the group due to unnamed members

affiliated with the IDW (most probably Dave Rubin) signal-boosting Donald Trump's

election fraud conspiracies (Harris 2020). Additionally, many IDW associates have

suffered reputational injuries that have defamed their stature as intellectuals, such as Eric

Weinstein who, as discussed in Chapter 5, has been severely critiqued by academics and

other public intellectuals on topics ranging from his theory of geometric unity to his

metatheoretical musings about the "distributed idea suppression complex" (DISC).

Moreover, the process of "sensemaking" the IDW was supposed to spearhead has lost

significant credibility due the embrace of anti-mainstream contrarianism and conspiracy

theories, epitomized by COVID-19 misinformation that has become a content staple for

the likes of Bret Weinstein, Heather Heying, and Joe Rogan. The right-wing partisan

commitments of public thinkers like James Lindsay, Ben Shapiro, and Dave Rubin have

overtaken any competing commitments they may have had to intellectual honesty, good

faith debate, and cross-ideological engagement, as they have fully embraced conservative

culture war politicking and refuse to engage with anything other than caricaturized

representations of their left-wing opponents (Brooks 2020:65; Hong 2020; McManus

2022).

Contradictorily, then, even as the IDW and the audiences it attracts attempt to create a

symbolic order rooted in neo-Enlightenment rationalist principles, their practices seem to

hinder the stabilization of such a symbolic order. The IDW is at home in communicative

capitalism's informational chaos and communicative circuits, functioning as an open source "heterodox science" that asks individuals to turn away from conventional experts and institutions while working to undermine "the authority of established science" (Aupers and de Wildt 2021:72). Eric Weinstein makes this point explicitly, proclaiming that we have "entered a period in which we cannot trust our experts" (Rebel Wisdom 2019a). Indeed, according to Weinstein, "The doctors are compromised, the professors are compromised, the journalists are compromised, the politicians are compromised. About the only thing that isn't badly compromised are people with an independent source of sustenance" (Rebel Wisdom 2019a). Writing on Twitter, Weinstein reiterates this point while emphasizing the civilizational-preserving import of IDW podcasters:

> Try to shut down independent long-form podcasting & watch what happens to your civilization.
>
> Why? Because as insane as it sounds, it's about all we have left of reality that isn't socially engineered by institutions. Crazy, but that's where we are. Podcasting IS [sic] the "loophole".[22]

The IDW's opposition to mainstream social institutions and the corollary urgency its key personae attach to independent content creators matches the individualist epistemic practices it abhors among its "leftist" enemies. Those who continue to don the IDW banner operate essentially as "gurus" (cf. Browne and Kavanagh 2021; Kavanagh and Browne 2020a, 2020b) with purported special access to reality on account of their unique intellectual "standpoint," which enables them to navigate their followers through our

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[22]https://web.archive.org/web/20220331182944/https://twitter.com/EricRWeinstein/status/1350907286500229121

murky epistemic waters.

Moreover, the IDW is subsumed by the destructive incentives of communicative capitalism that rewards spectacle, outrage, simplifications, and misrepresentations. As Lewis (2018) illustrates, independent content creators are incentivized to shift to more extreme positions as they interact directly with their audiences on social media, which can take the form of users paying for subscriptions to content creators they prefer, users commenting on and sharing creators' content, and users facilitating processes whereby creators can "trade up the chain" (cf. Krafft and Donovan 2020) by attracting attention from more influential actors in ways that can grow creators' audiences and influence. In this context, misinformation, exaggeration, and context-collapse are all rewarded due to their spectacular nature and ability to exploit audience affect (cf. Mawick and Lewis 2017). It therefore pays to be contrarian, rendering the IDW with little incentive to challenge the mechanisms of capital accumulation underlying communicative capitalism (Finlayson 2021).

To summarize, for all its positive rhetorical content about the need to create a neo-Enlightenment symbolic order predicated upon rationalist principle, the actual symbolic order the IDW conjures in practice is one rooted in negativity and opposition, i.e., defined against all that is not rather than what it is coherently for. Its foundational mythos, that the IDW is a network of ideologically diverse public thinkers willing to engage in rigorous though civil debate about the most pressing issues of our time, oriented towards a civilizational preserving mission that rescues society from the precipice of collapse,

was burst asunder by the fragmentation of the group and the right-wing partisan commitments of its leading figures. The IDW's prescriptive neo-Enlightenment values could not withstand the temptation to take up arms in the "anti-woke" culture war, and its negativity, therefore, has come to define it. In the final analysis, while the IDW may provide a sense of reality for its audience, this is primarily based on the capacity of the IDW to *name* (1) social problems and (2) those responsible to articulate their *opposition* without devising a coherent program for overcoming those problems. However, they are increasingly willing to join hands with the GOP in its cultural crusades against "wokeness," "the left," trans people, critical race theory, and COVID-19 public health policies, perhaps prefiguring the political trajectory the IDW will take.

The problem of the decline in symbolic efficiency endemic to communicative capitalism has not been resolved by the IDW, and I maintain that symbolic inefficiency continues to be a crucial problem under contemporary social conditions and one that critical sociology should take seriously. Even so, it is reasonable to worry that symbolic orders, and the obligations to sustain them, are coercive and potentially oppressive. This concern is present in Mackenzie Wark's (2015) critique of Jodi Dean's concept of communicative capitalism, where she conjectures that perhaps "the stability of meaning is only ever secured by force" (Wark 2015). Wark (2015) asks us to consider, for example, the repression of communists during the red scare or the state-directed violence against the Black power movement as illustrations of how the capitalist state seeks to impose *its* symbolic order through brute coercion. This underscores the point that any

symbolic order is tied up with power in complicated ways, as that order's efficacy is related to the willingness of people to put the symbolic order into practice. While this could occur voluntarily, in the cases Wark (2015) reviews, the symbolic orders are more hegemonic than legitimate, secured through force instead of consent. It profoundly matters, then, whose symbolic orders we assent to and our reasons for doing so.

Even so, Wark (2015) concedes that it remains true that there are instances where "the function of the Master signifier is suspended, when there is no outside authority to tell us what to do, what to desire, what to believe" which results not in freedom but in "a kind of suffocation." We thus need a basis for discriminating against symbolic orders. As Wark (2015) herself observes, in the absence of symbolic order, "there's no reason to stay with anything. Bonds can be dissolved at no cost. There's a dissolution of the link between fantasy and reality, and a foreclosure of the symbolic." Immediacy and short-sightedness prevail, and we have no binding obligations to anything or anyone outside of ourselves. There is no basis for group politics, collectivity, or democracy (which entails institutional and interpersonal obligations, as I discussed in the literature review above).

It is the unease that knowledge is always and inevitably bound up with power, that there is no truth without power, or that humans cannot actualize truth without exerting power, that has led certain segments of the left to abandon a concept of ontological realism (cf. Sweet 2018). To this point, it is, to use a word, *true* that truth cannot be established as a practical social force unless it is put into effect by human activity through exertions of power—a point that the young Marx (Marx 2010) understood well:

> The question [of] whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. Man must prove the truth, i.e., the reality and power, the this-worldliness of this thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question (P. 26).

But whether something becomes a socially true and effectual force is distinct from the ontological status of the truth itself. Objective truthfulness does not depend on human consciousness. But since it is impossible for humans to access knowledge without using language and socially situated reasoning, it is easy to slide into an idealist trap that the process of coming to understand reality, especially social reality, is also always the process of *constructing* that reality.

Such a line of reasoning is present in Jan Fuhse's (2022) argument against realist theories of social science (and critical realism in particular). As Fuhse (2022) argues, theories in the social sciences play an essential role in sociology by equipping us with concepts and constructing "orderly patterns to make sense of a world we know nothing about without them" (p. 100). However, our theories and our concepts can never be *objectively true* in the sense that "any scientific approach with the right tools would have to observe the same features of the social world as relevant and would have to conclude that these things are real and they have to be represented by a theoretical concept" (Fuhse 2022:111). Rather, for Fuhse (2022), our theories, and the social science they enable, are only capable of generating truths that are "*true to the theory* at hand," but only "*true of the world* in a very limited sense," i.e., insofar as they must "represent relations between features of the social world" (Fuhse 2022:100). However, these features of the social world "cannot be objectively identified, only constructed from [a] particular theoretical

perspective" (Fuhse 2022:100). The validity of a theory rests, therefore, on its own (1) internal logical consistency ("coherence") and (2) an isomorphism, or "correspondence," between theoretical concepts and empirical observations (Fuhse 2022:109).

Fuhse's (2022) observations lead to two significant conclusions. First, on the level of theoretical coherence, "many sentences from one theory will be 'false' from the standpoint of a rivaling theory," though attempting to therefore dismiss the rival theory for failing to cohere with the preferred theory is "trivial, unsurprising, and uninformative" (Fuhse 2022:110). This is because competing theories group things differently, and there is therefore "no way of establishing that one [theory] or another is correct" (Fuhse 2022:116). Different theories, different concepts, and even different methodologies only capture delimited viewpoints of a social reality that is not knowable in an objective sense. All theories, concepts, and methods highlight certain features "at the expense of others" (Fuhse 2022:117). As long as theories are logically coherent within the terms of the theory itself and "empirically adequate"—i.e., capable of holding up to some form of empirical observation (Fuhse 2022:110)—we have no legitimate basis for delineating which theories are true and which are false (or even *less* true, for all theories are merely one viewpoint among many others—a specific angle for seeing the social world and ascertaining its relations *conceptually*, but not *objectively*). This leads to the second key conclusion with respect to empirical correspondence: if two or more theories deploying different concepts and premises in ways that accurately "describe the empirical observations," then we have no choice but to "accept the propositions from both

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theoretical frameworks as equally true" (Fuhse 2022:118).[23]

Fuhse's (2022) meta-theoretical perspective is compelling, though ultimately unsatisfactory. Specifically, Fuhse's (2022) arguments are hindered by a key fallacy delineated by critical realists: the *epistemic fallacy*. The epistemic fallacy is a form of reasoning that maintains that "statements about being can always be transposed into statements about our knowledge of being" (Bhaskar 2008a:16). The epistemic fallacy is present in Fuhse's (2022) argument through his refusal to distinguish theoretical concepts from their correspondence with empirical observations. Here, the theoretical concept is not actually accessing a real object in the social world and gleaning objective, even if delimited, insights about its truths, but, rather, constructing that object by weaving concepts and observations together in a way that is logically coherent to the theory at hand. Empirically, our selected methods, guided by theory as they are, are not allowing us to get a glimpse of the object as it really is, but, rather, enabling us to translate otherwise objectively meaningless data into a coherent set of *theoretically* meaningful observations. Fuhse (2022) forecloses the possibility that there is a distance between object and (theoretical) concept because the object is irrevocably constructed through the

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[23] Importantly, Fuhse's (2022) formulation does not rescue standpoint epistemology from realist, or even other competing constructivist, arguments, for, according to Fuhse's (2022) own constructivist account, no specific standpoint can ever offer a more "true" and "full" account of reality than any other: they can only offer different ways of seeing and describing the world where any standpoint is equally at risk for incompleteness and theoretical circumscription. As Sweet (2018) argues in her defense of standpoint epistemology against critical realism, standpoint epistemology asserts that "certain social locations—when politically activated—enable a fuller view of reality" (p. 225). While standpoint epistemology shares a constructivist lens with Fuhse (2022), the former's presumptions about *truer standpoints* is at odds with the latter's consistent constructivism that refuses epistemic privilege to any theoretical position.

concept. So long as theories' concepts can be mapped adequately with otherwise meaningless empirical data, there is no way to weigh whether or not one theory is better than another.

For example, Marxist theories of class (which define class as a social relation of production where the working class is understood by its dispossession from the means of production and the corresponding compulsion to sell its labor-power for a wage to survive while capitalist class is defined by its ownership of the means of production and its enrichment through the extraction of worker-produced surplus-value) and what Erik Olin Wright (2015) has called the Weberian theory of class (with its focus on opportunity hoarding through various aspects of social closure) offer concepts of class that are not in agreement. However, both seem to be grasping a social object—class—that is very real. It does not take any theoretical work to come to the basic understanding that capitalist economies are highly stratified. What does take theoretical work is adequately ascertaining the object (class) and its properties, and therefore accurately delineating its meaning. Thus, there is an object common to both theories—class—that exists independently of the theories, and it is the truthful description of class as feature of social reality that pits Marxists and Weberians in opposition to one another. The object's *actual being* is not constructed by the concepts assigned to it by the theories: its being arises from an actual social relation rooted in human practice that both theories attempt to ascertain. A Marxist dialectician and a Weberian interpretivist may uncover "empirically adequate" observations that suffice to prove the truthfulness of their theories viz-a-viz

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Fuhse (2022), but in either case, there remains a gap between the object itself and the object as described by the theory. The object itself is *not* constructed by the theory or what we come "to know" it via that construction.

From my view as a critical sociologist, anti-realist tendencies are a core feature of our epistemic crisis that must be remedied with a return to some sort of scientific realism. What I have in mind, specifically, is the embrace of *critical realism* as a scientific paradigm suitable for founding a robust critical sociology and establishing a sound ontological framework for orienting leftist political action. Critical realism opposes both positivism and interpretivism, and is based on several important assumptions, as Wynn and Williams (2012:790) articulate: an independent reality of things and objects that exists regardless of human comprehension of those entities; a stratified ontology composed of the *real* (i.e., ontological structures that have causal powers); the *actual* (i.e., the domain of *events* where the causal powers of the structures located in the real have effects even if humans do not observe them); and the *empirical* (i.e., the domain of conscious human experience, perception, and measurement). Critical realism maintains that

> general elements of independent reality (e.g., some structures and [causal] mechanisms) exist, but our knowledge of specific structures and mechanisms is limited because of the difficulty of accessing them directly through levels of stratification. [Critical realism] attempts to use our knowledge of the experiences in a given situation to analyze inferentially what the world must be like in terms of the structure and mechanisms that must constitute this reality for some accepted outcome to have occurred (Wynn and Williams 2012:790).

Transcendental reasoning is thus essential to critical realism, though it takes the form of a

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transcendental realism that aims to reveal the fundamental mechanisms that must exist for observed phenomena to be possible (Collier 1994:26).

However, knowledge of reality can never be total, according to critical realism, due to its stratified concept of ontology and the methodological challenges posed by attempting to access that reality. Hence, Bhaskar (2008a:16) draws a distinction between the *intransitive dimension*—i.e., the dimension in which real objects and structures exist and act "quite independently of [people] and the conditions which allow [people] to access it" (p. 17)—and the *transitive dimension*—i.e., the dimension in which "new knowledge" is actually discovered by humans through experiments and scientific study (p. 17). Since human knowledge is relegated to the transitive dimension, it can only access the intransitive dimension *partially* through scientific research and transcendental reasoning. And since such transcendental reasoning remains central to explaining the necessary causal mechanisms, this means that theory is an essential component of critical realist scientific method (McCall 2005). This is because while critical realism allows us to begin to regain confidence about the possibilities for extracting truth from the world, these truths still must be explained with reference to the fundamental causal mechanisms that must exist for them to have occurred—a thoroughly theoretical exercise.

However, even though transcendental and theoretical elucidation is necessary, this does not mean that such theoretical elucidations therefore produce the object itself— theoretical concepts "need not be imaginary but may be (and come to be known as) real. Without such an interpretation it is impossible to sustain the rationality of scientific

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growth and change" (Bhaskar 2008a:15). This is especially trenchant when it comes to the study of societies, which differ from natural objects. First, social structures "do not exist independently of the activities they govern;" second, social structures "do not exist independently of the agents' conceptions of what they are doing with their activity;" and third, social structures "may be only relatively enduring" such that the causal effects they have in societies "may not be universal in the sense of space-time invariant" (Bhaskar 2015:2015). Societies are also "open systems" that can never be experimentally closed (Bhaskar 2015:45), and, while the epistemic fallacy remains true, it *is* possible that, in the social sciences, "knowledge-production may be causally, and internally, related to the process of the production of the objects concerned" (Bhaskar 2015:47).

By proclaiming something to be deserving of social scientific study, we are initiating the causal process of producing it as an object of study. After identifying the object, it then must be measured, and the process of constructing such measures is causally related to making that object empirically discernible to us. This much is true. But this process of producing an object as scientifically knowable is quite distinct from *producing the object itself*, as Bhaskar (2015) argues:

> Once some [social object] exists, if it exists, however it has been produced, it constitutes a possible object of scientific investigation. And its existence (or not), and properties, are quite independent of the act or process of investigation of which it is the putative object…'being' means the same thing in the human and the natural world, even though the modes of being may radically differ…The human sciences, then, take intransitive objects like any other. But the categorical properties of such objects differ…[the human sciences] themselves are an aspect of, and a causal agent in, what they seek to explain (P. 47).

If a social object is real, then it must have intransitive properties make it a candidate for

social scientific study. The act of studying and scientifically obtaining transitive knowledge about the object remains distinct from the object itself, even as social scientists must construct methods that make that object empirically discernible to them. Crucially, though, social scientific theory will always, and necessarily, be "incomplete," for societies have a "historical (transformational) character" in which "qualitatively new developments" occur that existing "social scientific theory cannot be expected to anticipate," meaning that the *nature* of societies, and therefore their ontological properties, are always subject to change (Bhaskar 2015:48). This is at least part of what Bourdieu (1999) means when he says that sociology must be comfortable with the "partial and temporary truths that it can conquer against the common perception and intellectual doxa" (p. 629). However, these limitations do not preclude us from ever obtaining truthful knowledge about society, or for coherently articulating the relationship between epistemology and ontology, for any social object based in reality must, if we are to say it is real at all, have properties that make it such.

In my view, critical realism offers a promising concept of social ontology and a scientific paradigm that can allow us to begin defragmenting knowledge in communicative capitalism and move us into more general and collective conceptual and political frames that empower us to begin thinking more structurally about the fundamental mechanisms necessary for observable social outcomes to have even been possible to occur. We can therefore (re)learn that others are affected by the same structural mechanisms and located within the same "signifying chains" (Dean 2005:56),

and our individual variances may have the same underlying cause. Critical realism also resupplies a much-needed relation of empathy under contemporary social conditions. Instead of "incommunicable struggles" that can only be known from the position of lived experience (Dean 2016), critical realism's scientific paradigm means that we can come to know truths about causal mechanisms that we, individually, may be unaffected by. Practically, for those of us on the left, this means that those unaffected by certain oppressive social structures can nevertheless come to know the mechanisms operative in those structures even though they have never "lived" the latter's consequences.

Kompridis (2006), in assessing the pessimism that haunts the historical present, argues that we are faced with "the problem of how to trust again," which is inextricably bound up with the problem of how "to reopen the future" (Kompridis 2006:250-251). For Kopmridis (2006) the shattering of trust—in ourselves and one another, in the future itself—is tied to the "contracting space of possibilities" and resignation to the thought that "our possibilities might be exhausted" (p. 245). While Kompridis (2006) may find the critical realist paradigm I argue in favor of here to be too concerned with the question of truth (see, e.g., p. 255 on "disclosure"), his concept of "intimate critique"—a practice of "critical dialogue that aims to preserve and renew trust, and to facilitate commitment to ongoing processes of cooperative problem solving" (p. 262)—is insightful. Intimate critique is a social practice aimed at reopening the future, rescuing us from despair, and asking us to cooperate with one another to discover alternative possibilities. As a practice, it says that "we are the facilitators and guarantors of one another's fragile

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freedom," a critical responsibility in a pluralistic world (Kompridis 2006:262). It is also a practice that, in my view, demands patience and empathy of all parties, as well as a willingness to have one's own experiences and presuppositions challenged. This necessitates that we allow ourselves to be "decentered" (Kompridis 2006:255) through intimate critique as our sense of what is possible is enlarged through our interactions with others. For Kompridis (Kompridis 2006), what emerges through this process of cooperative intimate critique is not "truth" per se but "truth-candidates" (p. 255). What intimate critique discloses are possibilities, and the test of these possibilities will be "pragmatic," measured by the "degree to which they can initiate self-decentering learning that makes a cooperative new beginning possible" (Kompridis 2006:255).

Nevertheless, I do think that critical realism provides a means of evaluating different "disclosures" and explanations more directly, as the real world "puts limits on knowledge so that not all interpretations are equally plausible" (McCall 2005:1793). Following an example from Bhaskar (2015:59), all the following statements about Nazi Germany are true: (1) the country was depopulated; (2) millions of people died; (3) millions of people were killed; (4) millions of people were massacred. However, they are not *equally* true: only (4) is the most precise, accurate, and therefore best "description of what actually happened." The fact that some explanations will be deficient descriptions of reality underpins the critical realist concept of "judgmental rationality," which asserts that "there are criteria for explanatory accounts of social phenomena and that not all are equal with some more plausible than others," requiring social scientists to both theoretically and

empirically "adjudicate between competing accounts" (Quraishi et al. 2022:26).

Judgmental rationality is inseparable from the problem of authority in epistemology. The necessity that social scientific realists adjudicate between competing, and often incompatible, explanations requires that they create a critical distance between their objects of study and themselves that is not automatically available to them: there is no "special viewpoint" conferred on anyone in society, not even scientists; rather, this conceptual and scientific distance must be struggled for by through a refined critical practice that is learned. The need for judgmental rationality therefore presumes a concept of expertise. It also provides us, on the one hand, good reason to yield to the authority of experts, but, on the other hand, a scientific basis for evaluating, and therefore doing away with, poorly evidenced expert claims. Put differently, judgmental rationality allows for the possibility that there are better and worse descriptions of reality, and that weighing these descriptions almost certainly involves a refined expertise to which we yield authority. As Mutter (2022) writes, because judgment "is the personal dimension of thinking and evaluating," judgment is also "the aptitude by which the thought of others can become authoritative for me."

Even so, assessing intimate critique practically and politically, and agreeing that we need to learn how to trust one another again, to be willing to let ourselves and our experiences be decentered, I find myself sympathetic to Kompridis' (2006) hesitation about the discovery of final, determinate, "truth." Perhaps we must first relearn how to even communicate and empathize with one another effectively under the hostile social

conditions of communicative capitalism. Nevertheless, as we are inundated by crises, the task of reopening the future has an urgency that seems to intensify with each passing moment. If we are unable to build something better, something durable and collective that resists the spectacular, individualizing, and entrapping compulsions of communicative capitalism, we risk ceding this terrain to groups like the IDW and the partisan right. The downsides to such deference are considerable, as we are already witnessing.

Producing an empathetic, democratic, and, indeed, *rational* symbolic order will take considerable epistemological and political work. But together, we must find new avenues for forging, sustaining, and institutionalizing practices of solidarity that can enable us to act and live collectively in and against the corrosive social contexts we inhabit. Our future truly does, I believe, depend on it.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

This dissertation studied an online community of the Intellectual Dark Web (IDW) on the social media platform Reddit. I sought to understand what topics dominate r/IntellectualDarkWeb discussions, how the topics relate to broader events and conflicts in society, and critically assess the social and epistemological significance of the IDW under the social condition of what Jodi Dean calls communicative capitalism. I found that subreddit topics could be classified as belonging to one of 10 topical categories—Culture Wars; Governance & Political Institutions; IDW-Related; Platforms, Media & Information; Political Economy; Political Ideologies; Race & Ethnicity; Science, Knowledge & Epistemology; Sex & Gender; and Sociopolitical Conflict—nested within three meta-themes—Sensemaking in Communicative Capitalism; Identity, Ideology and Social Justice; and Crises of Civilization.

Often, comments within individual topics referred to major offline events, such as police killings or protests, as a "sensemaking" practice. Interestingly, I found that dissenting opinions were not uncommon, and debates, sometimes severe ones, do take place between users. Ultimately, I argued that the IDW is, on the one hand, a response to the decline in symbolic efficiency endemic to communicative capitalism and, on the other, a contributory factor to the decline in symbolic efficiency. Participation in the IDW subreddit is a way for users to access a sense of reality amidst profound epistemic

pessimism. However, as I argued above, in practice, the prescriptive content of the blueprints is subsumed by negativity—i.e., as basis for allowing the IDW audience to identify and identify social problems and oppose those responsible for them.

There is evidence of a "contrarian" bent, and censorious behaviors—such as downvoting opponents—do occur on the subreddit. Overall, I do not find that the subreddit is identical with the alt-right even as many IDW figures, such as James Lindsay, have transformed into far-right activists. On some topics, the subreddit seems to be biased towards disillusioned liberals, such as the apparent preference towards welfare capitalism in the Political Economy topics, or in the anti-Trump sentiments expressed in the Political Ideologies topics. In others, there appears to be a strong right-wing element, such in the Race & Ethnicity topics discussing police violence and hereditary racial differences or in the Sex & Gender topics where far-right language like "transgender ideology" is invoked. Even so, these seemingly contradictory expressions appear "logical" when grasped through the IDW's "rationalist frame," which may have some users arguing for a welfare state capitalism administered by "Keynesian" technocrats (Mann 2017) to stave off the collapse of liberal civilization, on the one hand, and for the natural basis of an immutable male/female gender binary, on the other, as both conclusions can be conceived to follow from supposedly sound "scientific" premises.

While the bulk of this research focuses on the Reddit platform specifically, I believe my insights have applicability beyond Reddit itself. The fundamental epistemic processes—i.e., user-submitted content, user-directed information flows, user-directed

debates—are not unique to the platform but are a feature of virtually all social media platforms. Even the censorious behaviors enabled by the subreddit's affordances (e.g., downvoting, pile-ons) have analogues on other platforms. For example, on Twitter, one may be harassed through compounding adversarial quote tweets. Likewise, highly-upvoted and visible posts on Reddit are analogous to viral tweets on Twitter that obtain networked fame by accumulating likes and retweets. Additionally, it is difficult to draw neat boundaries between any major social media platforms, as my analysis shows. For example, YouTube videos and Twitter threads are often points of departure for discussion on the subreddit, revealing the interconnectivity of social media platforms.

Finally, my dissertation demonstrates the utility of using deep neural models to study large-scale social media text data. The high-quality, human-interpretable topics generated by the BERTopic algorithm show the value of using pre-trained language models to topically summarize corpora. Qualitative analysis of the comments in each topic validated the efficacy of the model, as well as the computational grounded theory approach to sociological text analysis (Nelson 2020). The tolerance these models have for short text documents can also be reasonably expanded into even sparser domains, such as Twitter, which caps tweets at 280 characters. Nevertheless, as with any research project, there are limitations to this study design.

9.1 Limitations

The first limitation of this dissertation concerns tuning the topic model itself. Importantly, no topic model is "ready to go" right of the box, and parameters must be

carefully selected for both UMAP and HDBSCAN in order optimize the results in

BERTopic. "Optimal" has different meanings in different contexts. Here, I defined it as

minimizing the proportion of documents classified as noise by HDBSCAN to minimize

the number of comments that would need to be reassigned to their closest topic vector

through similarity analysis. This resulted in large, general topical clusters. Other

parameters would allow researchers to extract many smaller and very specific topics that

would offer a different perspective on the data, though likely increase the proportion of

noise. Given the exploratory and descriptive nature of this study, I opted for a more

macro-level approach which I then validated with qualitative examples, though this is

purely an analytical decision. The results presented in this dissertation are therefore

heavily influenced by the parameters chosen in the topic model and are necessarily

limited.

Additionally, BERTopic assumes that every Reddit comment consists of only one

topic. This is reasonable when dealing with shorter comments, but as many of the

examples above illustrated, many of the comments are longer than one might expect on

the platform. Therefore, in the future, researchers should consider devising a way to

model multiple topics in longer documents with neural-based topic model algorithms.

One way to do so is to break the text down by paragraph or chunks of specific character

lengths. Topic modeling can therefore be performed on the paragraph or chunk level, and

the proportion of paragraphs or chunks falling into each topic can be estimated. This

would match one of LDA's core strengths—modeling documents as a probabilistic

mixture of topics—while still leveraging all the benefits that deep neural document embeddings have over bag-of-words approaches.

Finally, this research does not model explicit relations between topics or users. For example, do comments classified as a certain topic prompt responses by comments with the same, a similar, or a different topic? Similarly, what do relations between users look like when modeled as a network? Are there discernible "cliques?" Do specific users drive discussion in particular ways? Given the Gini coefficients and descriptive statistics from Chapter 4, this is a reasonable conjecture. While this issue is tangential to the research questions herein, future research should examine the response and engagement networks between users and whether they are associated with any topical patterns or other behaviors, like downvoting or upvoting trends. This also means that other platform dynamics, such as potential user sub-networks or internal subreddit conflicts and dramas between different cliques of users, was not emphasized (though I did touch on issues relevant to this concern in Chapter 3 when describing content moderation dynamics on the subreddit).

In terms of topic relations, modeling the relations between topics in a networked way was encumbered in this research by the data itself. Because I exclude submissions from my model due to a low supply of text posts, the topical network would be incomplete. This is because many comments are "top level," made in direct response to a submission. This means that these comments will be missing an edge to their parent, resulting in an incomplete graph. However, my descriptive statistics also show that subreddit

submissions are increasingly moving towards text-based posts instead of media posts. This means that it is probable that future research could reasonably include submissions in the topic model and subsequently model the networked relations between topics, though comments continue to far outnumber posts.

Despite these limitations, this dissertation contributes to the literature on digital sociology, computational sociology, and critical media and information studies in important ways. Based on a critical computational approach, I demonstrate the utility of natural language processing in aiding the sociological study of online communities. As my qualitative analysis and references to critical theory show, computational tools can be responsibly used to enhance critical scholarship by revealing relations latent in a corpus that researchers may not themselves be aware of. Of course, computational tools are not a panacea, but they should also not be rejected due to their complexities and limitations. When guided by specific research questions, a coherent theoretical frame, and a critical eye, deep learning models provide sociologists with exciting possibilities for studying social relations in our hyper-mediated, platformed, society.

Appendix A: Full Topic Specification

Topic ID	Topic Words	Topic Theme
0	vaccine, covid, vaccines, vaccinated, virus, ivermectin, risk, immunity, people, get, vaccination, deaths, data, effects, health, medical, infection, disease, pandemic, dont	Science, Knowledge & Epistemology
1	thanks, thank, youre, answer, comment, question, point, im, argument, said, lol, good, thats, read, dont, post, well, sorry, ill, wrong	Platforms, Media & Information
2	racism, white, race, black, racist, systemic, privilege, people, racial, skin, discrimination, color, whites, groups, races, diversity, think, group, blacks, would	Race & Ethnicity
3	left, right, liberal, conservative, conservatives, progressive, liberals, libertarian, progressives, wing, political, far, liberalism, leftist, libertarians, leftists, think, conservatism, party, im	Political Ideologies
4	sub, subs, banned, mods, reddit, post, ban, mod, posts, subreddit, rules, echo, comments, rpolitics, subreddits, chamber, users, removed, rule, downvoted	Platforms, Media & Information
5	podcast, hes, video, watch, listen, episode, interview, podcasts, youtube, show, listening, great, like, good, guy, episodes, videos, listened, interesting, guests	Platforms, Media & Information
6	police, black, cops, crime, officers, gun, floyd, shot, killed, officer, cop, people, arrest, white, blacks, kyle, crimes, violent, racism, force	Race & Ethnicity
7	speech, twitter, free, censorship, facebook, freedom, platform, platforms, media, social, companies, content, private, censor, government, right, company, public, people, internet	Platforms, Media & Information
8	gender, trans, sex, woman, biological, women, transgender, gay, pronouns, female, male, people, man, men, social, identity, person, construct, dont, born	Sex & Gender

9	women, men, feminism, sex, male, sexual, feminists, woman, masculinity, female, rape, gender, feminist, toxic, man, patriarchy, dont, think, society, children	Sex & Gender
10	news, media, cnn, fox, journalism, bias, propaganda, sources, biased, nyt, outlets, reporting, msm, journalists, source, information, mainstream, npr, msnbc, stories	Platforms, Media & Information
11	students, school, education, university, schools, universities, college, teachers, student, campus, kids, academia, professors, professor, teacher, teaching, teach, academic, public, faculty	Culture Wars
12	idw, members, sub, left, ideas, right, think, harris, weinstein, like, people, rubin, sam, group, discussion, eric, dont, member, political, conversations	IDW-Related
13	evidence, proof, source, facts, sources, claim, claims, lie, prove, burden, lying, provide, feelings, citation, citations, youre, fact, dont, narrative, im	Science, Knowledge & Epistemology
14	problem, solution, solutions, issue, happen, solve, happens, problems, alternative, yes, whats, concern, think, fix, dont, thats, wicked, issues, would, yeah	Sociopolitical Conflict
15	biden, trump, bernie, vote, polls, candidate, sanders, win, joe, hes, 2016, voters, election, president, bidens, dnc, party, voting, candidates, polling	Governance & Political Institutions
16	god, religion, religious, religions, church, christianity, christian, atheist, believe, supernatural, faith, atheists, belief, atheism, catholic, gods, christians, claim, bible, one	Science, Knowledge & Epistemology
17	trump, president, hes, donald, cock, obama, trumps, vote, supporters, like, done, think, voted, bush, voting, country, worse, people, presidency, good	Governance & Political Institutions
18	wage, jobs, wages, inequality, workers, minimum, wealth, work, labor, automation, income, job, poverty, money, pay, unions, people, poor, working, business	Political Economy
19	moral, morality, evil, empathy, anger, good, happiness, objective, suffering, narcissism, wellbeing, morals, others, think, values, subjective, relativism, human, would, world	Science, Knowledge & Epistemology

20	riots, protests, peaceful, protest, capitol, police, rioters, rioting, insurrection, riot, portland, violence, protesters, looting, protestors, violent, federal, people, protesting, trump	Sociopolitical Conflict
21	shes, disney, aoc, fired, like, weiss, said, think, dont, people, im, bari, really, one, didnt, would, twitter, know, doesnt, thats	Culture Wars
22	book, read, books, jung, reading, recommend, great, mind, ive, havent, good, interesting, fiction, one, written, really, check, coddling, thanks, recommendations	Platforms, Media & Information
23	debate, debates, discussion, conversation, debating, arguments, someone, person, argument, point, engage, mind, arguing, truth, people, way, ideas, opponent, good, dont	Science, Knowledge & Epistemology
24	trump, investigation, russian, russia, hunter, biden, impeachment, ukraine, campaign, mueller, president, election, evidence, fbi, emails, collusion, report, laptop, clinton, trumps	Governance & Political Institutions
25	capitalism, socialism, communism, socialist, communist, capitalist, system, market, production, economic, government, state, ownership, private, ussr, means, economy, markets, property, society	Political Economy
26	tax, taxes, property, theft, income, money, pay, taxation, land, rich, homeless, wealth, housing, government, ownership, welfare, rent, people, wealthy, paying	Political Economy
27	climate, change, carbon, warming, energy, global, nuclear, science, emissions, green, scientists, fossil, solar, years, scientific, environmental, temperature, wind, fuels, planet	Science, Knowledge & Epistemology
28	hes, left, conservative, liberal, right, wing, conservatives, far, views, doesnt, leftist, policy, political, trump, think, leaning, democrats, positions, like, pretty	Political Ideologies
29	language, words, word, definition, definitions, dictionary, english, meaning, use, term, used, terms, using, meanings, semantics, mean, pedantic, usage, youre, way	Science, Knowledge & Epistemology
30	party, parties, third, vote, democrats, voting, republicans, republican, two, system, gop, democratic, candidate, democrat, candidates, dems, 3rd, election, major, political	Governance & Political Institutions
31	eric, bret, weinstein, brets, brett, thiel, podcast, erics, hes, heather, like, think, weinsteins, peter, sam, really, dont, evergreen, episode, would	IDW-Related

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32	fraud, election, ballots, voter, votes, voting, mail, ballot, evidence, trump, vote, elections, counting, claims, states, voters, counted, rigged, georgia, machines	Governance & Political Institutions
33	truth, reality, objective, subjective, true, perception, theory, experience, knowledge, science, observations, shared, truths, illusion, useful, scientific, things, conjecture, one, believe	Science, Knowledge & Epistemology
34	science, scientific, scientists, consensus, scientist, experts, trust, antiscience, method, research, evidence, field, data, wrong, sciences, process, pseudoscience, academia, people, papers	Science, Knowledge & Epistemology
35	data, statistics, numbers, stats, number, sample, anecdotal, statistical, estimates, accurate, size, statistic, graph, graphs, population, youre, dont, anecdotes, im, source	Science, Knowledge & Epistemology
36	shapiro, ben, idw, shapiros, hes, partisan, conservative, marriage, rubin, neil, trump, bens, like, politcal, interview, rightwing, right, think, political, show	IDW-Related
37	blm, lives, black, matter, movement, police, protests, organization, support, riots, marxist, violence, people, white, protest, dont, rioting, peaceful, looting, brutality	Race & Ethnicity
38	history, western, tribe, tribalism, west, tribal, civilization, rome, tribes, roman, values, empire, historical, culture, romans, east, world, past, eastern, ancient	Sociopolitical Conflict
39	immigration, immigrants, borders, border, illegal, culture, open, country, asylum, us, ice, countries, land, people, cultures, migrants, jurisdiction, immigrant, children, would	Race & Ethnicity
40	nazis, nazi, hitler, holocaust, germany, german, nazism, stalin, jews, churchill, gulag, germans, gulags, million, soviet, war, socialism, communism, camps, socialist	Political Ideologies
41	china, chinese, ccp, chinas, us, hong, kong, genocide, world, government, western, war, west, countries, communist, xi, camps, would, country, like	Sociopolitical Conflict
42	iq, intelligence, differences, genetic, race, average, genetics, test, cognitive, tests, murray, scores, gap, factors, ability, environmental, iqs, racial, measure, populations	Race & Ethnicity

43	abortion, abortions, life, baby, human, body, prochoice, child, autonomy, rights, woman, birth, bodily, murder, person, mother, prolife, women, argument, pregnant	Sex & Gender
44	conspiracy, theories, theory, conspiracies, theorist, theorists, evidence, 911, rconspiracy, believe, conspiratorial, nonsense, building, true, know, like, collapse, people, dont, narrative	Science, Knowledge & Epistemology
45	rubin, dave, rubins, hes, idw, guests, show, rogan, ideas, left, interview, seder, intellectual, like, sam, think, joe, doesnt, right, shapiro	IDW-Related
46	peterson, jordan, petersons, hes, god, religion, think, like, christian, religious, dont, says, said, people, atheist, believe, would, harris, ideas, fan	IDW-Related
47	court, supreme, courts, judges, justices, case, scotus, lawsuits, democrats, judicial, legal, gop, senate, judge, cases, trump, evidence, president, constitution, conservative	Governance & Political Institutions
48	woke, wokeness, wokeism, wokism, antiwoke, people, religion, like, ideology, culture, left, think, white, racism, dont, movement, social, term, thats, things	Culture Wars
49	america, country, canada, us, countries, american, canadian, world, uk, usa, europe, canadians, live, americans, im, identity, european, better, like, dutch	Sociopolitical Conflict
50	article, wikipedia, read, articles, sources, wiki, source, link, headline, title, didnt, page, pages, comment, links, linked, quote, biased, editors, information	Platforms, Media & Information
51	israel, jews, jewish, palestinians, israeli, palestine, antisemitism, antisemitic, land, arab, state, peace, apartheid, occupation, jew, egypt, conflict, bank, west, would	Race & Ethnicity
52	submission, statement, moderators, posted, post, excluding, length, characters, performed, creation, 70, contact, approved, bot, automatically, text, minutes, appears, concerns, missing	Platforms, Media & Information
53	peer, study, review, studies, journals, papers, published, research, paper, reviewed, data, journal, scientific, science, publish, article, peerreviewed, academic, publication, meta	Science, Knowledge & Epistemology
54	racist, trump, obama, black, democrats, racism, voters, republicans, white, racists, republican, party, vote, southern, president, votes, hes, civil, support, born	Race & Ethnicity

55	sam, harris, sams, trump, hes, podcast, islam, harriss, like, think, listen, views, really, tds, even, im, dont, trumps, doesnt, would	IDW-Related
56	vote, voting, electoral, states, college, votes, senate, democracy, olds, system, state, ranked, 16, gerrymandering, majority, power, elections, representation, year, popular	Governance & Political Institutions
57	marxism, marx, marxist, marxists, class, capitalism, theory, cultural, communism, ideology, proletariat, read, revolution, labor, communist, production, capitalist, economic, critique, society	Political Ideologies
58	antifa, violence, terrorism, wing, rightwing, left, violent, terrorist, organization, right, attacks, extremists, group, groups, fascists, organized, farright, extremism, threat, fascist	Sociopolitical Conflict
59	cancel, culture, cancelled, boycott, cancelling, boycotts, canceled, fired, cancellation, people, canceling, someone, right, left, company, like, dont, think, speech, mob	Culture Wars
60	islam, muslims, muslim, islamic, france, religion, french, christians, christianity, religious, christian, sharia, india, cartoons, europe, countries, law, religions, terrorism, west	Race & Ethnicity
61	rights, freedom, right, liberty, natural, human, freedoms, free, government, innate, state, security, ability, property, law, dont, believe, laws, negative, others	Governance & Political Institutions
62	crt, race, critical, theory, racism, white, racial, taught, racist, schools, people, black, legal, color, teaching, lens, school, history, academic, training	Culture Wars
63	consciousness, free, universe, materialism, material, physics, determinism, brain, conscious, exist, mind, reality, cause, world, science, physical, nature, premise, argument, exists	Science, Knowledge & Epistemology
64	satire, sarcasm, joke, sarcastic, joking, serious, tell, parody, satirical, humor, cant, facetious, funny, jokes, sorry, lol, comment, law, im, obvious	Platforms, Media & Information
65	mental, illness, autistic, autism, health, depression, disorder, disorders, stigma, diagnosis, therapy, trauma, people, feel, mentally, think, spectrum, diagnosed, life, anxiety	Science, Knowledge & Epistemology

66	market, free, monopolies, markets, monopoly, competition, government, regulation, regulations, state, regulated, companies, capitalism, intervention, corporations, regulatory, company, private, think, power	Political Economy
67	analogy, difference, comparison, equivalence, analogies, false, distinction, equivalency, two, equivalent, similarities, mutually, exclusive, similar, different, comparing, differences, theyre, comparable, thing	Science, Knowledge & Epistemology
68	democracy, majority, democratic, tyranny, vote, system, direct, government, republic, minority, representative, rule, power, voting, people, representatives, democracies, decisions, form, elected	Governance & Political Institutions
69	authoritarian, authoritarianism, tyranny, monarchy, government, oligarchy, power, democracy, dictator, king, authority, dictatorship, dont, tyrant, thats, think, totalitarian, control, people, society	Governance & Political Institutions
70	gun, guns, amendment, weapons, firearms, shootings, assault, mass, ownership, arms, 2nd, ban, shooting, violence, control, laws, rights, us, government, right	Governance & Political Institutions
71	rogan, joe, podcast, guests, rogans, hes, joes, bernie, like, think, guest, jre, trump, mma, podcasts, listen, guy, would, rubin, biden	IDW-Related
72	equality, opportunity, outcome, equity, meritocracy, equal, merit, outcomes, inequality, opportunities, unequal, fair, meritocratic, everyone, fairness, mean, goal, people, means, society	Culture Wars
73	slavery, slaves, slave, reparations, 1619, black, enslaved, history, project, white, trade, war, american, colonies, africans, people, owners, would, us, civil	Race & Ethnicity
74	c16, harassment, law, pronouns, bill, speech, pronoun, peterson, canadian, compelled, gender, use, hate, discrimination, legal, code, jail, rights, someone, canada	Sex & Gender
75	postmodernism, postmodern, zizek, peterson, marxism, postmodernist, marxist, postmodernists, modernism, philosophy, truth, debate, marxists, marx, theory, modernist, critical, ideology, ideas, post	Science, Knowledge & Epistemology
76	war, civil, military, wars, us, would, army, conflict, armed, nukes, could, think, happen,	Sociopolitical Conflict

	fighting, going, side, weapons, iraq, nuclear, vietnam	
77	healthcare, insurance, health, medicare, costs, care, system, cost, pay, market, private, government, socialized, doctors, medical, us, universal, companies, money, countries	Political Economy
78	states, texas, state, rural, california, federal, cities, blue, areas, red, austin, city, government, urban, moving, local, ca, live, power, move	Governance & Political Institutions
79	masks, mask, wearing, wear, cloth, spread, virus, mandates, covid, infection, effective, cdc, face, transmission, effectiveness, studies, medical, pandemic, use, work	Science, Knowledge & Epistemology
80	movies, movie, films, film, woke, characters, disney, hollywood, character, star, story, marvel, female, wars, black, like, women, plot, white, cast	Culture Wars
81	intellectual, intellectuals, intellectualism, sub, antiintellectual, antiintellectualism, pseudointellectual, word, subreddit, title, thought, name, ideas, place, like, think, debate, doesnt, people, stupid	Platforms, Media & Information
82	proud, boys, white, supremacists, nazis, supremacy, antifa, trump, condemn, wallace, stand, neonazis, denounce, rally, fine, nationalists, said, group, condemned, groups	Political Ideologies
83	murder, penalty, death, felony, degree, killing, kill, intent, charge, minnesota, 2nd, life, someone, person, guilty, unintentional, state, convicted, committing, murderers	Governance & Political Institutions
84	identity, politics, class, political, group, groups, left, based, identities, christian, people, black, right, race, think, dont, gender, see, working, example	Culture Wars
85	youtube, videos, content, video, algorithm, platform, google, company, censoring, censorship, yt, platforms, information, channel, channels, misinformation, prageru, censor, creators, like	Platforms, Media & Information
86	troll, trolling, trolls, removed, bye, youre, feed, rule, calling, im, lol, post, blocked, sub, personal, attacks, dont, insults, violation, comment	Platforms, Media & Information
87	faith, bad, good, actor, arguing, youre, discussion, acting, engage, actors, someone, sub, comment, argument, dont, conversation, badfaith, op, evidence, arguments	Platforms, Media & Information

88	inflation, currency, money, crypto, dollar, reserve, fed, printing, bank, value, gold, supply, debt, banks, print, monetary, economy, cash, digital, dollars	Political Economy
89	iran, iraq, war, isis, syria, trump, us, nuclear, iranian, obama, saudi, military, arabia, deal, sanctions, weapons, regime, region, oil, east	Sociopolitical Conflict
90	google, search, results, algorithm, apple, algorithms, image, engine, use, searches, images, company, knife, jacob, bias, damore, privacy, different, picture, content	Platforms, Media & Information
91	sjw, sjws, justice, social, antisjw, people, movement, left, term, think, like, idw, right, white, dont, see, many, good, im, woke	Culture Wars
92	strawman, straw, steelman, man, steel, steelmanning, argument, strawmanning, manning, position, arguments, strawmen, said, thats, youre, im, strawmanned, arguing, dont, opposing	Platforms, Media & Information
93	kavanaugh, ford, fbi, investigation, testimony, allegations, court, judge, lying, oath, sexual, democrats, lied, assault, senate, evidence, guilty, would, accusations, supreme	Sex & Gender
94	strike, ban, strikes, removed, result, attack, future, personal, consider, permanent, may, charity, applying, principle, insults, third, day, warning, attacks, week	Platforms, Media & Information
95	fascism, fascist, fascists, trump, socialism, state, dictator, definition, power, authoritarian, military, right, ideology, political, government, violence, enemy, one, narrative, society	Political Ideologies
96	unity, bret, 2020, kanye, ballot, candidates, plan, ticket, candidate, 2024, party, biden, access, campaign, crenshaw, idea, brets, trump, election, would	IDW-Related
97	sports, trans, women, athletes, womens, compete, sport, men, female, biological, advantage, male, mma, competitive, gender, muscle, team, competing, mens, competition	Sex & Gender
98	flag, statues, confederate, statue, symbol, burning, symbols, flags, fly, history, confederacy, slavery, sickle, people, racist, represents, american, meaning, think, nazi	Culture Wars
99	murray, lindsay, douglas, james, murrays, debate, crowds, madness, woke, charles, twitter, book, hes, submission, pluckrose, statement, interviews, europe, critical, lindsey	IDW-Related

100	genocide, camps, destruction, genocidal, con-centration, national, groups, camp, nation, reeducation, plan, follows, genocides, group, objectives, aiming, belonging, mass, intended, coordinated	Sociopolitical Conflict
101	ubi, welfare, yang, income, money, tax, yangs, would, automation, programs, 1000, jobs, program, pay, inflation, people, work, month, government, economy	Political Economy
102	book, books, publish, publisher, publishers, library, amazon, publishing, burning, libraries, published, target, banning, sell, banned, marketplace, company, censorship, disclaimer, cancel	Platforms, Media & Information
103	web, dark, intellectual, dialogue, rintellectualdarkweb, idw, refers, space, term, spanning, community, growing, faith, held, sub, interested, collection, variety, open, free	IDW-Related
104	taliban, afghanistan, military, biden, us, withdrawal, troops, war, equipment, country, leaving, leave, army, american, government, civilians, would, years, americans, soldiers	Sociopolitical Conflict
105	id, voter, ids, voting, vote, laws, fraud, ballot, elections, election, voters, get, need, water, free, license, polling, requiring, people, states	Governance & Political Institutions
106	crowder, youtube, gay, queer, hes, faith, debate, homophobic, videos, video, steven, fun, seder, guy, shirt, bad, vox, harassment, comedian, someone	IDW-Related
107	jp, jbp, fans, jbps, jps, hes, think, lectures, lot, fan, like, selfhelp, dont, im, people, agree, really, say, find, things	IDW-Related
108	anarchism, anarchist, anarchists, anarchy, state, society, system, property, hierarchies, ancap, x200b, capitalism, power, government, demand, private, would, democracy, form, systems	Political Ideologies
109	assange, documents, russia, classified, julian, manning, us, traitor, information, secrets, surveillance, government, whistleblowers, hero, trial, intelligence, prosecuted, crack, russian, journalists	Governance & Political Institutions
110	pakman, idw, david, shapiro, rubin, hes, progressive, left, partisan, show, pool, like, seder, political, video, sub, think, listen, tim, really	IDW-Related
111	yang, andrew, yangs, bernie, candidate, hes, candidates, tulsi, vote, ubi, party, biden, gabbard, would, like, think, trump, support, idw, running	Governance & Political Institutions

112	tim, pool, hes, left, pools, wing, liberal, trump, right, grifter, dave, journalism, videos, winger, progressive, audience, watch, rubin, maga, political	IDW-Related
113	qanon, conspiracy, trump, believe, theory, theories, republicans, cult, supporters, people, know, crazy, right, followers, like, heard, pedophiles, media, true, capitol	Platforms, Media & Information

Appendix B: Parameter Selection for HDBSCAN

min_cluster_size	min_samples	Noise Proportion	N Clusters
350	**25**	**0.442680366**	**114**
200	25	0.454443821	175
450	25	0.466543657	97
500	10	0.473293545	93
500	25	0.474807261	90
400	25	0.475959862	105
400	10	0.480107741	110
450	10	0.486283802	100
300	45	0.486597923	138
450	20	0.486612763	101
250	45	0.487075288	153
400	20	0.487560073	108
450	50	0.488529642	101
350	20	0.488888284	122
200	20	0.490073039	187
250	25	0.490362426	155
500	20	0.49067902	93
500	50	0.492012179	88
500	5	0.492346087	94
400	50	0.494235759	109
450	45	0.494626555	102
150	150	0.496142744	176
500	45	0.496741305	91
300	25	0.497300292	143
400	45	0.49875712	110
150	35	0.501042535	223
250	20	0.501190938	156
250	50	0.502291598	155
350	5	0.502417741	123
350	50	0.502976728	119

200	35	0.503446672	189
450	5	0.504930708	104
300	50	0.505539162	136
450	30	0.506058575	103
350	45	0.506612615	118
300	20	0.507725641	141
400	5	0.508598749	114
200	40	0.509184943	192
250	10	0.509573266	160
150	20	0.509820605	233
450	40	0.509892333	105
400	30	0.510149566	114
200	10	0.510357331	200
150	30	0.510599723	232
500	40	0.510906424	94
150	25	0.510941052	232
300	15	0.510985573	145
150	40	0.511138923	231
200	45	0.51214312	188
500	15	0.512692214	96
300	10	0.512749102	145
400	15	0.513285828	117
450	35	0.513686517	105
500	35	0.514797071	92
350	15	0.5151755	135
250	40	0.516251425	161
500	30	0.516701583	93
250	30	0.517166581	160
450	15	0.518148517	107
350	10	0.519365426	125
150	10	0.519560824	248
300	40	0.52022122	145
350	40	0.521247678	127
400	40	0.521398555	116
200	30	0.521999589	194
250	15	0.522323604	164
100	30	0.523003787	319
300	30	0.524361679	147

350	30	0.524507609	130
100	40	0.525437605	306
200	200	0.52664462	151
60	60	0.528185544	382
150	15	0.52829932	250
200	15	0.529340618	207
400	35	0.529466761	117
150	45	0.530619362	229
100	100	0.531002738	257
300	300	0.531707655	108
150	50	0.531774436	232
350	35	0.532212227	127
75	30	0.53232353	382
60	20	0.532415045	468
75	20	0.533278259	403
250	35	0.534092005	168
100	45	0.534477854	305
60	50	0.534690566	402
200	50	0.53555378	188
100	15	0.535986624	346
75	15	0.536486249	421
75	50	0.536975981	356
75	75	0.537304942	323
100	25	0.538514431	336
300	35	0.538791451	148
100	20	0.538826078	328
100	50	0.539328177	298
75	45	0.541010084	365
100	5	0.542311088	380
200	5	0.543322706	214
150	5	0.543468636	260
60	45	0.543503264	416
250	5	0.543854485	176
100	35	0.548576192	325
100	10	0.548618239	362
350	350	0.550418869	101
75	10	0.551385965	448
60	15	0.553057979	511

75	35	0.553228643	381
250	250	0.55380989	129
75	5	0.554067123	478
60	10	0.55437877	527
75	25	0.55491797	410
300	5	0.555536318	159
45	15	0.556575143	618
75	40	0.556671605	376
45	25	0.556980779	589
60	25	0.558487075	474
30	5	0.559864755	985
15	5	0.56065624	1751
45	10	0.560742809	647
45	20	0.562276313	598
60	40	0.563409126	442
45	5	0.56468045	732
60	5	0.565044039	590
45	45	0.56651076	515
60	30	0.569795426	469
45	30	0.572093207	584
60	35	0.573077618	461
45	35	0.574999443	564
30	10	0.575034071	902
30	15	0.575350665	822
30	25	0.57708204	744
30	30	0.577502517	707
15	15	0.579209157	1222
15	10	0.580084738	1435
30	20	0.582466615	786
45	40	0.584878173	555

Appendix C: Temporal Distributions of Topics

The topics experience important variation across time as the panels in Figures A.C.1 and A.C.2 show. In both figures, the regression lines are fitted using locally weighted smoothing (LOWESS) with a bandwidth of .33.[24] Given that the topic frequencies contain a lot of temporal variance, LOWESS provides an effective way to disambiguate the overall trend for each group. The figures present the topic groups in descending order of total comment frequency—i.e., the largest topic groups over the entire observation period (see Figure 4.7, Panel B above) are plotted first. I plot both the absolute counts of the topic groups (Figure A.C.1) and the relative frequency of the topic groups (Figure A.C.2) at each monthly interval, as these contrasting points of view provide different insights about topical behavior in r/IntellectualDarkWeb.

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[24] That is, one-third of the data was used at each step to fit the curve. I use the Python LOWESS package (https://github.com/CCGE-Cambridge/lowess) to compute the estimates.
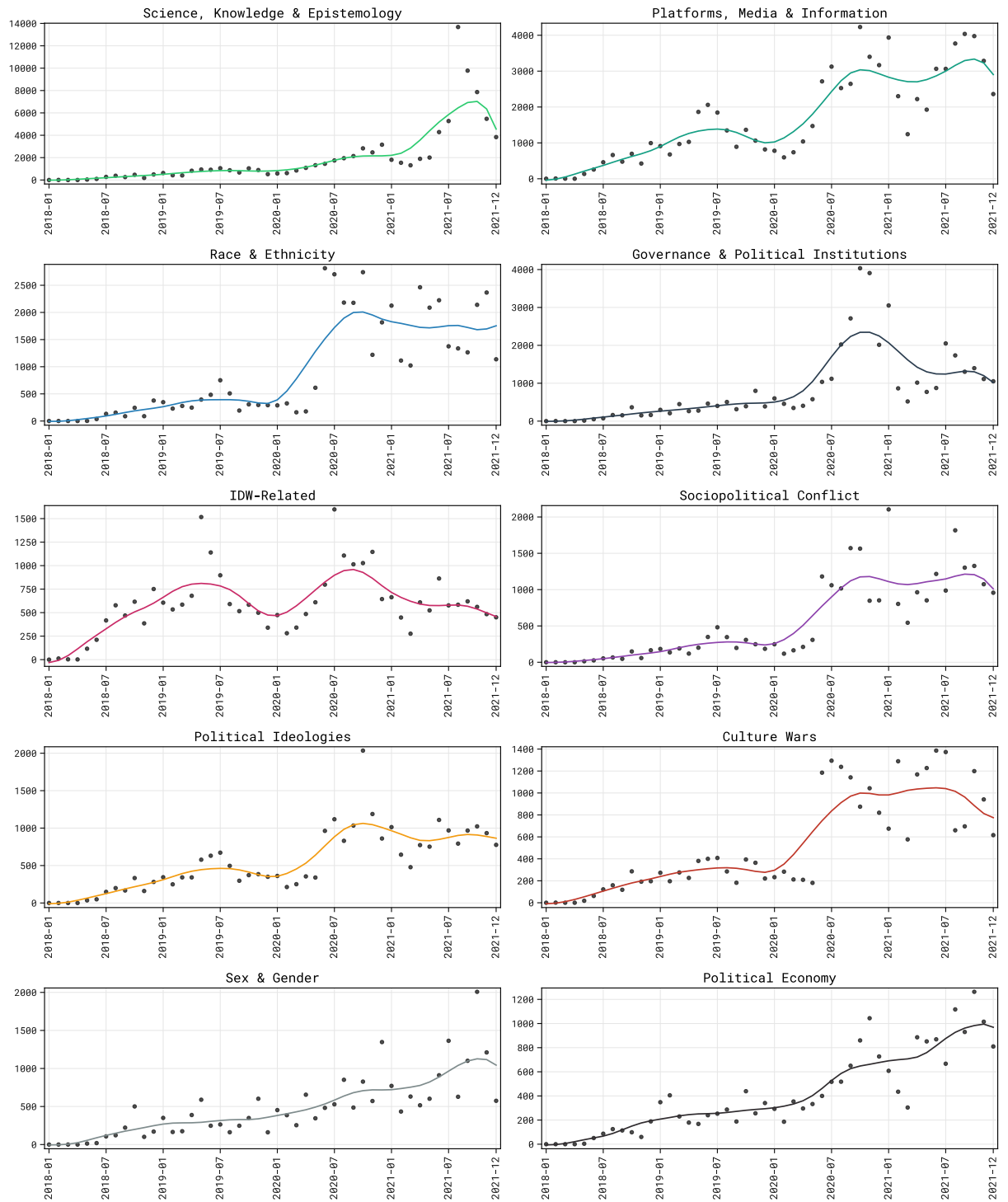
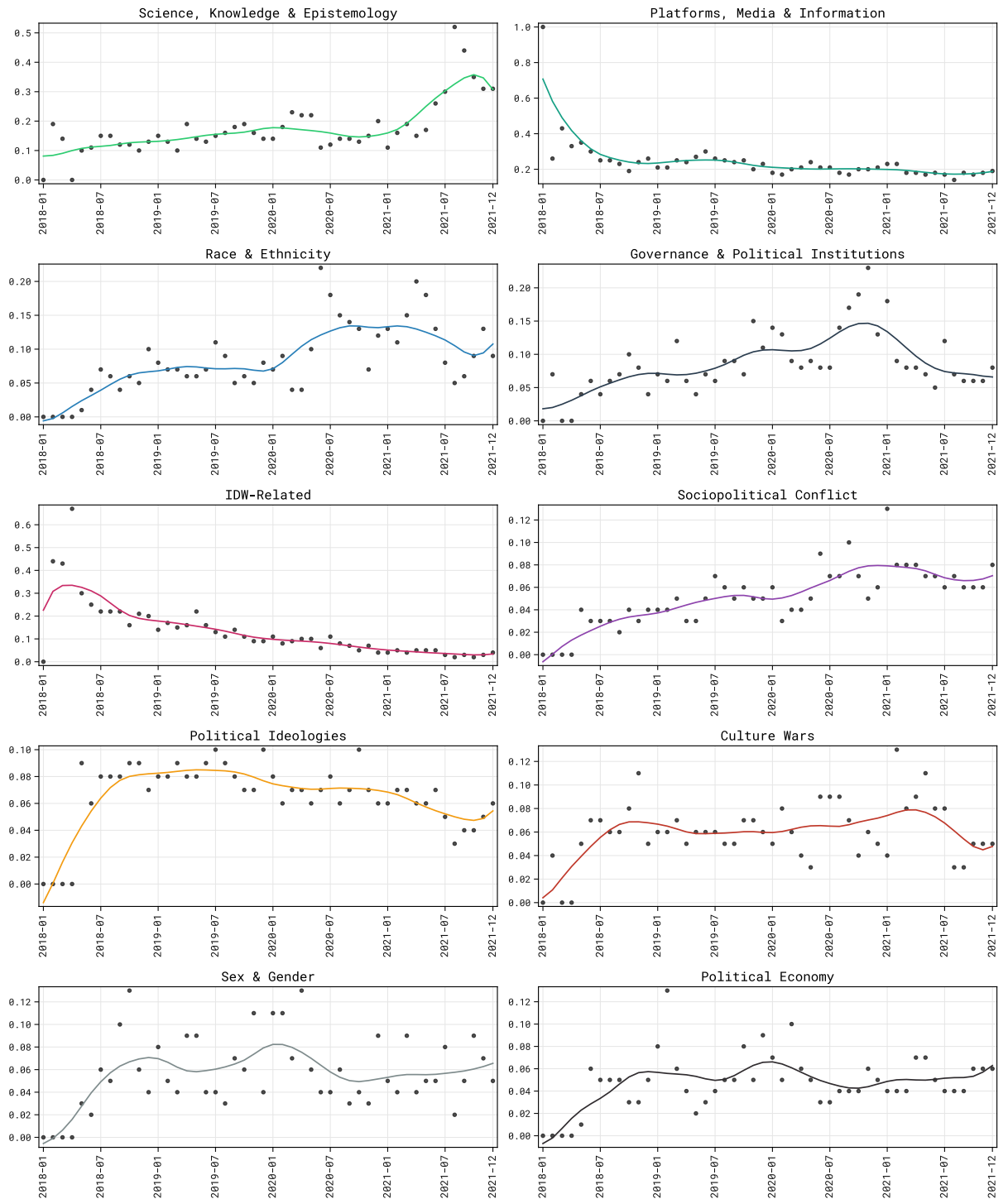**Figure A.C.1: Absolute Frequency of Topic Groups Over Time**

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Figure A.C.2: Relative Frequency of Topic Groups Over Time

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