CHAPTER 7

Covert Hate Speech: White Nationalists and Dog Whistle Communication on Twitter

Prashanth Bhat and Ofra Klein

INTRODUCTION

White supremacists have long invested their resources in using the Internet to communicate. Through websites such as Stormfront.org as well as online discussion groups, bulletin boards and forums, they have connected to other supporters and formed online communities in support of their ideology (Daniels, 2018). Before social media emerged, individuals had to actively seek out such platforms. Therefore, the reach of these online platforms was limited and mostly confined to isolated corners of the web. Conversely, Twitter, as a mainstream social networking site, offers white supremacists a platform to reach out to a wider set of audiences (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019). Moreover, unlike other social media platforms such

P. Bhat (✉)
Philip Merrill College of Journalism, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

O. Klein
Department of Political and Social Sciences, European University Institute, Fiesole, Italy
e-mail: ofra.klein@cui.eu

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as Facebook, Twitter does not have a real-name policy, a feature particularly appealing to white supremacists who regularly disguise themselves (Crosset, Tanner, & Campana, 2018).

In recent years, machine learning technology such as Google’s Perspective has been developed to detect online hateful speech (cf., Siapera, Moreo, & Zhou, 2018). Tools such as these allow users to filter out harmful tweets from personal Twitter feeds and can help platforms in their moderation efforts. As a result, automated moderation—where content is taken down before it is flagged—is becoming more and more common on Twitter (Singh, 2018). In part due to this moderation, mainstream social media platforms are—compared to forums or spaces such as Gab, a “free-speech” platform with a primarily far-right user base—perceived to be used by hateful groups primarily for outward-oriented communication, aimed at influencing the political agenda and reaching the mainstream (Fraser, 1990, as cited in Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Inward-oriented communication, consisting of creating a group-identity and identifying common enemies is also common on these platforms, albeit less visible. This can, at least in part, be attributed by these machine-learning detection tools as these could pick up on these forms of inward-oriented communication which are often offensive in nature. Therefore, white supremacists are forced to adapt their online behavior, using coded language and symbols, as to circumvent censorship.

This chapter examines covert hate speech in the form of dog whistling and cryptic messaging, as employed by white supremacist groups on Twitter during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The study considers tweets and the bios of white supremacist users. Studies examining online discursive practices of white supremacist groups on social media have primarily focused on detecting white supremacist groups (Sutton & Wright, 2009), how groups are linked to each other (Chau & Xu, 2007), and to the mainstream far-right (Eddington, 2018). Other studies address the salience of issues discussed by these groups (Gerstenfeld, Grant, & Chiang, 2003), or how their discourse relates to mainstream political discourse (Graham, 2016). More technical studies are aimed at improving the detection of hateful speech primarily focus on keyword detection (cf., Burnap & Williams, 2015). No study to date has looked at how these groups create their own language, culture and symbols to use Twitter for communicating coded hateful speech.

Our study fits the ongoing debate on Twitter’s democratizing potential (Rosenbaum, 2018). Twitter offers a space for marginalized voices
(Dreher, McCallum, & Waller, 2016) as well as those who feel that they are being disproportionately treated like strangers in their own land (Hochschild, 2018). As a result, the platform is, by some scholars, viewed as a more inclusive and egalitarian space than the mainstream media. This chapter, however, puts into question this optimistic view. Online discontent can manifest itself in hateful ways, using communication strategies that are often difficult to effectively moderate.

The chapter first describes how the Internet has been employed by white supremacists in the United States over the years, and the breakout of these groups into mainstream platforms such as Twitter. While Twitter’s open architecture and the possibility to forward and retweet messages enables reaching broader audiences (Daniels, 2017; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Murthy, 2013), it has also forced white supremacist groups into using practices like dog whistling. After detailing our data-gathering procedure and the methods used to examine tweets by white supremacists, we present how dog whistles were used on this platform during the 2016 presidential election. The chapter finishes with a discussion of the implications of our findings.

‘Dog Whistle’ as a Discursive Strategy

In the past few years, the use of dog whistles has become a salient feature of the American political rhetoric (McCutcheon & Mark, 2014). A relatively new term, dog whistles, or dog whistling, is first said to have been used by Washington Post pollster Richard Morin in an article back in 1988. Describing what he referred to as the “dog whistle effect” in opinion polling, Morin (1988) wrote that small changes in question-wording sometimes led to strongly different outcomes. He argued that: “respondents hear something in the question that researchers do not” (Morin, 1988, quoted in Saul, 2018, p. 361).

In other words, dog whistling refers to the use of words, phrases, and terminology that mean one thing to the public at large, but that carry an additional, implicit meaning only recognized by a specific subset of the audience. Also known as multivocal communication (Albertson, 2015), dog whistling is typically employed as a communication strategy by individuals or organizations who stand to gain from conveying certain messages implicitly, rather than stating them explicitly. In this regard, Kanner (2000) provides the example of Subaru advertisements in which the car’s license plates read “XENA LVR” and “P TOWN” along with taglines
such as “ Entirely comfortable with its orientation,” which were meant to appeal to gay and lesbian customers without alienating others who were unaware of the relevance of these license plates. In fact, its potential to convey tailored messages to a subset of the population makes dog whistle appeals an extensively used communication strategy in the field of advertising (Brumbaugh, 2002).

Politicians, who look for shrouded ways to address divergent audiences, often find dog whistling to be a suitable strategy, mainly because of its potential for deniability. Political dog whistling is so widely prevalent that scholars like López (2015) have called it the “central feature of American democracy.” As Mendelberg (2001) points out, it allows the speaker and their audiences to violate certain social norms while plausibly denying doing so. She argues that American society is characterized by prevailing norms of social equality and as a result, people resent being called racist. Given this national revulsion toward racism and the significant social, political, and economic costs associated with being perceived as a racist, politicians use dog whistling in order to surreptitiously communicate support to “small groups of impassioned voters whose commitments are not broadly embraced by the body politic” (López, 2015, p. 4). In other words, dog whistling allows political figures to speak in code to a target audience on topics that might be considered too controversial, less popular, or undesirable by others and provides them with the space to deny the charge of racism. The use of dog whistling achieves what could not be achieved by explicitly stating its coded message (Mendelberg, 2001). For example, consider the following quote of Republican politician Paul Ryan:

We have got this tailspin of culture, in our inner cities in particular, of men not working and just generations of men not even thinking about working or learning the value and the culture of work, and so there is a real culture problem here that has to be dealt with. (Whitaker, 2014)¹

It is evident from this quote that Mr. Ryan’s message is targeted at an audience that believes that welfare programs are encouraging a culture of dependency among African-Americans (Hurwitz & Peffley, 2005). When criticized for making racist remarks against African-Americans using code words such as “inner city” and “culture,” Ryan responded saying:

¹http://www.msnbc.com/politicsnation/ryan-generations-men-not-working
This isn’t a race-based comment it’s a breakdown of families, its rural poverty in rural areas, and talking about where poverty exists—there are no jobs and we have a breakdown of the family. This has nothing to do with race. (Lowery, 2014)²

He positions the problem as one of poverty and not of race. Likewise, crime, forced busing, affirmative action, immigration, terrorism are some of the words that are used as dog whistles by politicians. As is typical to this form of coded communication, these words have distinct meanings to different audiences. While the words appear innocuous to a general audience, the target audience may understand the implicit messages they carry. In this regard, Khoo (2017) argues that words by themselves are not a code for anything but are simply used to exploit the audience’s stereotypical beliefs about what they are talking about. Citing the example of “inner-city,” which could either mean a “densely populated, high crime, urban area” or “African-American,” Khoo maintains that its inference depends on the preexisting beliefs of the audiences. Further, he claims that a specific code word may be effective regardless of what the speaker intended and what she foresaw as effects of her speech because the inference goes through thanks to the preexisting stereotypical beliefs held by the audience. He suggests that it is important to distinguish between the speaker using the code word with certain intentions and whether the use of this code word may succeed in priming racial resentment.

Recent scholarship has focused on the effects of dog whistling on public attitudes toward politicians, political parties, as well as government policies. For instance, White (2007), in his study on the effects of racial priming of the opinions of white Americans, found that the words “inner city” evoked greater racial prejudice among white American toward African-Americans. Further, these words caused white participants to base their support for increased spending on food stamps on outgroup resentment. In a different context, Albertson (2015) conducted an experimental study to test the effectiveness of coded religious appeals. In this study, subjects were asked to watch a brief video of a congressional candidate. The speeches in each condition were identical except for the last sentence, which was manipulated to include either multivocal religious language, obvious religious language, or no religious language. This study found

that coded religious entreaties were persuasive for the ingroup while obvious religious appeals tend to trigger a negative reaction from a religiously more diverse group. Her research concluded that religious meanings, when carefully embedded in a dog whistle, elude religiously diverse groups. Similarly, Calfano and Djupe (2009) examined the use of religious dog whistles in the speeches delivered by Republicans and found that it proved to be an effective code for white evangelical Protestants but that it had no effect on mainline Protestants and Catholics. In this context, the authors concluded that dog whistles enabled Republicans to cue the support of religiously conservative voters without alienating others who may not share the same social issue agenda.

The use of coded language by white supremacists is not a new phenomenon, as Sanchez (2018) finds in his analysis of key terms used by groups including the Ku Klux Klan. What is novel, however, is the ease with which such coded words can be disseminated more widely using Web 2.0. It is no surprise then that dog whistling has also become a popular online strategy, especially after the introduction of Google’s Perspective tool aimed at detecting insults and online toxicity. The automated removal of explicit insults forces hate groups to use symbols and keywords so as to circumvent these forms of detection. Subsequently, a group of users on 4chan began a loosely organized effort called Operation Google, with the idea of creating a coded language that would circumvent such A.I. systems. As a result, users came up with a list of words, where seemingly innocent terms, most of which were names of computer-related tech companies, were used in lieu of racial slurs. For instance, this movement involved referring to Black people as “Googles,” Jewish people as “Skypes,” Muslims as “Skittles,” people who identify as LBGTQ+ as “butterflies,” Chinese people as “Bing,” Mexicans as “Yahoo,” and establishment conservatives as “Reagans.” In essence, the trolls were seeking to take revenge on Google by compelling it to censor itself and by turning its brand name into a racist slur.

Situated the scholarship that examines the use of dog whistles in a variety of settings, this chapter addresses the question: how have dog whistling strategies been employed by white supremacists on Twitter during the 2016 US presidential election?
DATA AND METHODS

To analyze how dog whistling tactics were used as a practice during the 2016 US presidential election, we analyzed tweets and bios of white supremacist users. Using the R package rtweet (Kearney, 2018), we extracted a list of all the Twitter followers of Ann Coulter, Pamela Geller, and Richard Spencer, three figures who are considered prominent anti-Islam activists by the mainstream media (Schreckinger, 2018; Walsh, 2016). As of August 2016, these three Twitter accounts collectively had 760,000 followers. Two criteria were then used to select accounts from those 760,000 followers that could be considered as white supremacist.

First, we had to determine if the profiles belonged to individuals who subscribed to the broader white supremacist ideology. Therefore, we selected accounts that, in their Twitter bio, used terms such as “white nationalist,” “alt-right,” “white race,” “anti-multiculturalism,” and “white-genocide” to describe themselves and their ideology. We also looked at the images, logos, and symbols used in the Twitter profile, such as the confederate flag, Nazi-symbols, or memes celebrating whiteness, which indicated their association with the white supremacist movement. Crosset et al. (2018, p. 8) consider these as indicators of online identity, arguing that such information provides “an occasion for users to define their aspirations and enemies.”

Second, in our sample we selected the accounts that had the most followers. Accounts with a large number of followers typically act as important vehicles for disseminating information (Bakshy, Hofman, Mason, & Watts, 2011). These individuals are known as “superspreaders,” “influentials,” or “influencers” (Bakshy et al., 2011; Watts & Dodds, 2007). Only publicly available accounts were included. After selecting the publicly available accounts that contained keywords in their biographies, we selected the 250 accounts with the most followers.

After identifying 250 accounts, we selected the 20 most recent tweets from each of the accounts, creating a corpus of 5000 tweets. Data was gathered between July 2016 and January 2017. Links to tweets were manually selected, leading to the difficulty that much of the data, especially in the case of tweets or accounts posting infringing content, were removed and could not be found retrospectively. If a tweet was no longer available, it was removed from the corpus.

Our research employed an ethnographic content analysis. As is the case with offline ethnography, our study aims to describe the “systems of
meanings” of a certain cultural group (Geertz, 1973). Kozinets (2010) describes this virtual form of ethnography as netnography, wherein people’s online communication becomes the research setting (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012). In our case, an ethnographic content analysis entailed carrying out a qualitative content analysis using an inductive and iterative approach on tweets that were identified as containing dog whistles. In a first step, we read through all tweets in order to identify those tweets that contained dog whistles. When identifying dog whistles, we specifically looked for code words, symbols, keywords, or images that were not clear to us from the outset and for words or symbols that occurred in multiple tweets. We also relied on information from Operation Google to identify dog whistles. Dog whistles can often be identified by looking at the broader linguistic constructions in which these coded words are used. For example, when a tweet portrays denigrating, offensive, or conflicting language in combination with an unknown keyword, this was a strong indication to mark this keyword as a dog whistle. For example, in tweets that would say that “googles” are criminals or “skittles” should be deported, the linguistic context of the words googles and skittles made it clear that these were coded words. In addition to language, visual symbols and emoticons that occurred in multiple Twitter bios or in tweets were included in the analysis. Not all tweets contained dog whistles, and the tweets that did not were excluded from further analysis. This was the case for slightly more than half of the tweets, which were political in nature and only addressed issues such as: who won a television debate or who was running ahead in polls?

In a second step, we read through all the tweets that we had identified as containing dog whistles to understand the “deeper meaning of the message,” or the dog whistles (Hijmans, 1996, p. 99). As we had limited prior knowledge of what themes or codes to apply, we used an inductive approach, deriving the codes from the data itself (Hijmans, 1996; Krippendorff, 2018), and relying on information gained from Operation Google as sensitizing concepts. To gain a clearer grasp of the meaning of these and other dog whistles, we relied on an iterative approach to put the dog whistles into context to understand their meaning (Olasov, 2006). By looking at how users responded to the same coded language, we could better comprehend the meaning and usage of these dog whistles. In this sense, in addition to relying on outside concepts as sensitizing concepts, we considered the dog whistles we identified during the analysis as sensitizing concepts themselves, further refining them during the process of analysis (Hijmans, 1996, p. 94).
While reading through the tweets, we took a large amount of “field” notes on the nature of the tweet and the dog whistles as well as the responses to these tweets. This generated rich data including information regarding the myriad contexts in which dog whistles were used and various forms in which they were expressed, such as text, image, symbols, memes, and the plausible hidden meanings of these as understood by the target audience. Furthermore, the iterative approach allowed us, after identifying several dog whistles, to create broader categories of how these symbols and signals are used by white supremacists. The findings below present examples and phrases from the tweets under analysis but, considering the sensitivity of the topic and the need to protect the identity of the Twitter users, does not cite entire tweets.

**White Supremacist Dog Whistles on Twitter**

This section of the chapter outlines how dog whistling tactics were used on Twitter during the 2016 US presidential election. Our analysis showed that certain dog whistles served specific purposes, but that dog whistles were primarily used (1) to signal hate for outgroups without employing visibly incendiary language, and (2) as identity markers, signaling belonging to the white supremacist community. Distinguishing between these purposes of dog whistling can help us gain an insight into how dog whistling is applied in the online environment of Twitter. We discuss our findings in more detail below.

**Signaling Hate**

Findings show that Operation Google, briefly discussed above, was continued on Twitter. For instance, one tweet used the #OperationGoogle hashtag to tell an African-American Twitter user they were born and would die a Google, while another talked about the need to kill all “stinking google.” This illustrates how use of the word “google” makes it undetectable for the A.I. systems looking for hate speech. While most of the code words and their implicit meanings were generated by users on 4Chan and other Internet sites, some of them made it on to white supremacists’ dog whistle lists by taking cues from speeches and social media content posted by Donald Trump and his campaign. For example, Donald Trump Jr. tweeted an image with a bowl full of skittles with a caption that read:
If I had a bowl full of skittles and told you just three would kill you. Would you take a handful? That’s our Syrian refugee problem. (@DonaldTrumpJR)

This particular tweet was widely circulated on Twitter and turned “skittles” into a euphemism for Muslims. Likewise, when Donald Trump began using the word “globalism” as a synonym for globalization, the phrase entered the white supremacist lexicon. Frequently in tweets, for the far-right, “globalism” has come to signify a group of people who promote diversity at the cost of undermining Christian values and traditions of their country (Stack, 2016). Sometimes, users combined several code words to express their hate toward immigrants and religious minorities, using phrases such as Skypes, googles, yahoos, and skittles in a single tweet to argue how diversity needed to stop.

Along the same lines, white supremacist tweets used “Dindu Nuffins” a portmanteau of the sentence “didn’t do nothing” to refer to African-Americans (Caffier, 2017). During our analysis, we found that this term was typically accompanied with “he wuz a good boy,” which implied that the tweets connected this dog whistle to their belief that the Black population used these phrases to escape punishment from their violent crimes. We found that this dog whistle was used to criticize both activists from the Black Lives Matter movement as well as sympathizers of the black community for being sympathetic to African-American youth killed in police shootings. By using the sentence “he wuz a good boy,” white supremacist tweets not only mocked the dialect and culture of Black people but also trivialized the community’s claims to injustice. Similarly, “Goy” a Hebrew word, which literally means “nation” (Shafran, 2018) was widely used in the white supremacist tweets to refer to non-Jews whom they consider tools of the so-called global Jewish conspiracy to control the US government in collaboration with Israel. This anti-Semitic canard is commonly used in white supremacist tropes to reinforce “Jews run the world” tropes (Perry, 2003, p. 325).

Our analysis also identified several symbols that were used as forms of dog whistling. A dog whistle symbol that was widely prevalent in the white supremacist tweets was the use of multiple parentheses. The typographical practice of utilizing three pairs of brackets, for instance, was used to identify someone as Jewish (Daniels, 2017). Several tweets included multiple parentheses ((( ))) around individuals’ names to indicate to other white supremacists that the person being referred to is Jewish. A significant
number of accounts in our sample used this symbol when discussing Jewish journalists, academics, and public figures.

In addition to code words and symbols, numbers and percentages symbolizing certain groups of people were also used to subtly direct hate toward them without being detected. For example, we found numerous tweets using “13%” as a code word for African-Americans originating from the fact that they make up about 13% of America’s population. A prominent example of this trend was the use of numbers “1488” or “14/88,” which forms a combination of two symbols: “14” is the shorthand for the white supremacist slogan “we must secure the existence of our people and a future for our white children” and “88” was a reference to “Heil Hitler” originating from “H” being the eighth letter in the alphabet (ADL, n.d.). These terms act as codes for white supremacists to reinforce anti-Semitic tropes. Very often, these tweets were accompanied with phrases like “Zionist-occupied government,” and “an international conspiracy to undermine white civilization” to convey white supremacist propaganda that echoes Nazi-era condemnations of Jews.

Not only were dog whistles used for expressing racial and cultural slurs, they were also used to mock and criticize those with divergent political views. The words “cuckold,” “cuck,” and “cuckservative” prominently featured among white supremacist tweets. These were used to refer to men who were considered liberal or belonging to the establishment Republican group. The pejorative term “cuckold” has typically been used to refer to a man (mostly white) who was cheated on by his wife by having an affair with another (typically African-American) man (Romo, 2017). This slur with racist connotations was used to elicit humiliation by projecting white men from liberal as well as the establishment Republican group as weak, feminine, emasculated, and sexually inadequate. In our corpus of tweets, it served as a code for referring to conservative politicians including Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, John McCain, and Paul Ryan as well as writers belonging to conservative magazines such as the National Review. “Soy boy” was another term that was widely used to insult and humiliate along the lines of “cuck.” A code word for males who lacked masculine qualities (Henderson, 2018), the phrase originated from the idea that those who consume dairy-free milk were weak and effeminate (Varis, 2018). Relatedly, men with liberal ideas and political values were also referred to as “Beta male” as they were perceived by white supremacists as lacking the confidence and self-esteem of the alpha male. “Snowflake” is another popular dog whistle within the white supremacist lexicon, which
while it has more recently made it into mainstream discourse, in our sample of tweets was used to derisively refer to liberal students on college campuses. These included students from the LGBTQ community and minorities whom the white supremacists viewed as being anti-Trump, anti-Republican, sulky, and juvenile individuals (Roy, 2016).

Another dog whistle that was prominently seen was “Social-justice warriors” or “SJWs.” While the term has recently made it into the mainstream lexicon, during the 2016 presidential election its usage was far less widespread. The term was utilized to refer to individuals who are generally liberal and are interested in engaging in arguments on social-justice-related topics on the Internet. According to the white supremacist ideology, such individuals use political correctness and virtue signaling to tarnish others with allegations of racism, sexism, and hate speech (Roy, 2016). Sometimes this dog whistle was accompanied with “Gender studies,” which was essentially a shorthand for academics, the field of humanities and feminist studies in particular, which white supremacists consider to be anti-conservative (Apperly, 2019; Heikkilä, 2017).

While such usage enables white nationalists to stereotype subordinate groups and express aversion toward them, they do so with the impunity provided to them by the use of seemingly innocuous terms. Since the cloaked meanings associated with them were discernible only to fellow white supremacists and others in the know, they were able to dodge technology that filters out racist terms and freely spread hate speech, albeit in a covert manner. While most forms of dog whistling can be considered as covert hate speech, some examples of dog whistles we encountered were not solely meant to express hate, but also to indicate pride about heritage, and signal belonging to the white supremacist community.

**Dog Whistles as Identity Markers**

In addition to dog whistles aimed primarily at expressing hatred, we found several coded messages whose main objective was to express feelings of identity and belonging. We identified dog whistles aimed to (1) signal belonging to a political group; (2) identify as a strong male; (3) express identification with and pride in one’s (supposed) cultural heritage. Through the use of words and symbols that eulogize white identity and allude to their cultural and racial superiority, these dog whistles served as subtle reminders of the community’s glorious past.
First, dog whistles enabled white supremacists to identify themselves as part of the far-right movement. Instead of explicitly including more overt phrases such as “white genocide” “MAGA” (Trump’s Make America Great Again campaign), and “white nationalism” in their Twitter bios, several Twitter users who showed white supremacist tendencies in their tweets, simply included “OK” emoji signs with—index and thumb in a circle, and other fingers pointing up—to their profiles. The symbol was popularized within the white supremacist discourse because it mimics Donald Trump’s most famous hand gesture (Bishop, 2017). In addition, a meme of Pepe the Frog (another famous example of dog whistling—see our discussion below) mimicking Trump’s hand gesture went viral on the Internet, bringing more traction to the symbol from the white supremacists. Its use in Twitter bios and discussions functioned as a giveaway of the users’ subscription to the far-right ideology.

Second, the use of hashtags such as “#Milk” or “#MilkTwitter” also worked as an indicator of a white supremacist identity. As mentioned earlier, for members of the far-right, dairy milk represents strength of body and ties into their ideas of masculinity. Conversely, soy and other forms of milk have come to symbolize weakness and effeminacy. In our analysis, we found that milk has been used as a thinly veiled allegory for racial purity. Several prominent figures from the white supremacist movement including Richard Spencer added milk bottle emojis to their Twitter profiles. The hashtags #MilkTwitter embraced and celebrated traditional gender norms and white-dominated patriarchy, while making fun of multiculturalism and feminism. Scholars such as Freeman (2013) contend that the contemporary white supremacist movement appropriated the long association of milk with the intellect. She points out that since the consumption of liberal amounts of milk and its products are associated with having a scientific mind and excelling in other intellectual activities, white supremacists appropriated it to convey their superiority among the racial groups. Therefore, inclusion of these hashtags and/or emojis in user profiles also worked as declarations of users’ support for the white supremacist movement.

Finally, alongside symbols, emojis, and hashtags, a large number of white supremacist accounts utilized insignia of ancient Rome and imagery from medieval ages to tie their current movements to the past. These images included leaders of the French Revolution to the architects of US monuments who symbolized their bygone power and legitimacy. Little (2018) shows how by using letters from the medieval alphabet as symbols
in uniforms or flags, white supremacist emphasize that Europe is the “ancestral homeland” of white people like them and no one else. These symbols or flags often reappeared in memes, while images representing medieval events were often tweeted by the accounts we studied. Despite ample evidence that medieval Europe was in fact diverse and multicultural, historical accounts have been criticized for underrepresenting this diversity (cf., Kim, 2019; Little, 2018). Consequently, historical accounts, imagery, and symbols from that time are used to emphasize the supposed whiteness of Europe during these times and the idea that contemporary white supremacists must fight to reclaim this “ancestral homeland.”

Similarly, the crusades were often the subject of these images. As Little (2018) shows, the use of imagery referencing the crusades is meant to show how white Christians again have to defend themselves against Muslims in a clash between civilizations, one that is seen as inevitable and whose violence is viewed as justified. How real this connection is to some became apparent in March 2019 when the gunman, who killed 50 people at two mosques in New Zealand, was found to have had the names of Christian Serbian military leaders, who battled the Ottoman Muslims centuries ago, written on his ammunition (Arsenault, 2019).

By taking these medieval symbols out of context and creating their own narrative around it, white supremacists are inventing their own tradition. This invented tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) is used to create an imagined community (Anderson, 1983), of which right-wing individuals perceive themselves to belong to. Billig (1995), in his book Banal Nationalism, referred to symbols and everyday representations that were meant to create a shared sense of national belonging. In this sense, memes and imagery using the symbolism of flags, medieval letters, and representations of the crusades are used to create this sense of belonging to a tradition of a European Christian white race that has been fighting an age-old war against the invasions of Islam.

Along similar lines, we found several white supremacist Twitter users mention “Vinland” in their Twitter bio. “Vinland” is essentially a name given to a grapevine-rich island off the coast of North America. The notion of “Vinland” asserts white supremacists’ historical claim over North America (most likely Eastern Canada), and helps to position themselves as defenders in the battles of race, religion, and civilization (Weber, 2018). References to this short-lived Viking settlement appear to have provided them a chance to reenact the imagined glory of their presumed ancestors. We found several tweets make references involving medieval Vikings,
which were accompanied with messages calling for the defense of the Christian West against Islam and Muslims. Such words served as powerful dog whistles because for an outsider, these references may appear benign and harmless even though they have racial connotations and elicit ethnic pride for the white supremacists.

Yet another medieval term that was widely visible in the white supremacist tweets and that qualifies as a dog whistle is “Deus Vult,” Latin for “God will it.” Used as a battle cry by Christian crusaders in the early middle ages, the phrase came to symbolize pride in the Christian state and Western culture. Originally used by Pope Urban II in his eleventh-century speech asking Christians to reclaim their holy land from its Muslim occupants, the far-right hijacked the term and adopted it to covertly spread Islamophobia. In our sample, we commonly saw this dog whistle used in Twitter bios along with images of crusaders’ crosses, implying that another crusade was necessary to protect the white population. White supremacists imagine that the West was at one time, pure, white, and Christian, which was organized around military resistance to non-Christian forces (Perry, 2017). In their tweets, they frequently express a belief that immigration and globalization have endangered the composition of Western society and pledge to resist these forces in order to protect the white population. Using these symbols therefore implies that another crusade is necessary to protect the white population. These dog whistles evoke sentiments of patriotism and ethnic unity among the white nationalists in an indirect manner.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This chapter described the uses of dog whistles in tweets and in the bios of white supremacists on Twitter during the 2016 US presidential election. We found that dog whistles were aimed at insulting, as well as signaling belonging. The examination of the use of dog whistles by white supremacists highlights the innovativeness with which such groups reinvent their discursive strategies. The use of imagery, memes, euphemisms, symbols, and cloaked language illustrates how the white supremacist movement organizes and mobilizes its resources to normalize hate directed toward minorities. By using such discrete means and avoiding an overt display of hate, they not only seek to circumvent speech policies designed by social media platforms, but also repackage their ideas in a manner that would make them look less extreme.
Ingenious ways of appropriating symbols are, however, a necessity, as
dog whistles can become too well known and publicly recognized over
time. Pepe the Frog is such an example. The comic character Pepe had
originally nothing to do with racism or anti-Semitism. Pepe gradually
became part of niche Internet subcultures, where white supremacists
appropriated it to communicate their messages in a visually compelling
manner. In fact, among the Twitter accounts we analyzed, Pepe the Frog
was quite ubiquitous. In some instances, Pepe was found wearing a Nazi
uniform, dressed in a Ku Klux Klan hood, or saying the words “Kill Jews,
man” instead of Pepe’s “Feels good, man.” In this sense, these images
contributed to trivializing hate. Organizations such as the Anti-defamation
League (ADL) eventually declared Pepe a hate symbol, rendering this dog
whistle useless. The same applies to the “OK” hand symbol and use of
phrases such as “snowflakes” and “SJWs.” Examples such as these show
the white supremacists’ skillful use of imagery and popular culture to dif-
fuse their messages, and how they constantly need to keep reinventing
these to stay undetected.

As mentioned above, the use of dog whistles by white supremacists is
nothing new. But the combination of such tactics with the communicative
potential offered by platforms such as Twitter has perhaps made this prac-
tice more common. Twitter’s features such as retweets, forwards, and
hashtags creates an enabling environment for white supremacists to redis-
tribute their tweets outside their own immediate network to broader audi-
cences (Daniels, 2017; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Murthy, 2013). As this
might be useful for placing white supremacist issues more prominently on
the political agenda (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019), dog whistles form a
useful strategy to hide their more violent nature by repackaging their ideas
in a way that their hateful nature is only understandable to a subset of the
audience.

Despite restrictions of platforms’ designs and policies on what type of
posts can be shared (cf Bossetta, 2018; Massanari, 2017), our findings
suggest these rules and regulations are tweaked by users in innovative
ways. Users are not passive agents, but “choose how they use the technol-
ogical affordances available to them and actively tweak extant narratives
to inform their oppositional ideas” (Rosenbaum, 2019, p. 9). Dog whis-
tles in the form of coded language and symbols that only speak to a subset
of Twitter users are an example of how users tweak their narratives.

The findings of this study question the hyper-optimistic view about the
democratic potential of social media as sites for meaningful public
deliberation (Morris, 2009; Pfeifle, 2009). Our work puts a critical note (cf., Morozov, 2012) to this cyber utopian view. While research has shown that overt hate speech is prevalent on platforms such as Twitter (cf., Burnap & Williams, 2015), our research reveals that less obvious and more covert hate speech, often reflecting seemingly innocent discourse, is also commonly used. The use of tactics such as dog whistles by white supremacists shows how the medium continues to be an important avenue for forming a larger white supremacist community, denigrating subordinate groups, and promoting an exclusivist ideology. By using symbols and code words, users attempt to extract themselves from the mainstream discourse while still injecting ideas into that same discourse. The use of these keywords can be considered an example of the growing political insurrection against perceived censorship of social media platforms, “politically correct” journalists, and the political elites.

Future research on far-right online mobilization, and their use of dog whistles as a means of communication should address how some platform architectures and policies hamper or help mobilization by these hate groups. Furthermore, due to privacy limitations, we focused only on publicly available profiles, therefore neglecting the ways in which hateful speech was expressed in closed-off settings. This is of critical importance when shootings such as those in Christchurch and Pittsburgh show that radical right-wing violence related to online radicalization in more closed-off platforms such as 8chan and Gab.ia is on the rise (cf., Amend, 2018; Beirich, 2019; Roose, 2018). Nevertheless, our study provides an insight into how openly visible accounts of white nationalists’ use the Internet to amplify a shift in the “boundaries of what is permissible in popular discourse” (Feshami, 2018, p. 1).

This chapter reflects on how open platforms, which could potentially serve as a public sphere and deliberate dialogue, also form a stage for forms of radical speech. The covert nature of these dog whistles limits this possibility of deliberate dialogue, as it excludes those who do not understand its actual meaning. Twitter has accounted for this in its recent change in regulations, as in July 2019, the platform argued to put a stronger focus on “protect[ing] the health of public conversation.” Nevertheless, as Mac (2019) argues, it was never the regulation that was problematic, but rather the way in which Twitter enforced those rules, taking a rather inconsistent approach toward hateful content on the platform. As we have shown in this chapter, this clear enforcement is made more difficult by the fast-changing and hidden nature of covert hate speech. In short, research
aiming to understand how white supremacists communicate in online spaces needs to continually monitor their use of dog whistles to understand how this community utilizes the various platforms’ affordances to convey their ideas and stay under the radar.

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