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# **Political fandom and the myth of the establishment:**

**How a politically partisan online  
network engaged with dissonant  
media texts**

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School of Law, Politics and Sociology  
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## **Declarations**

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Sam Bernard  
December 17 2021

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# Abstract

This thesis engages with the question of how participants in politically partisan online networks engage with events that disrupt consensus expectations. My research asks how participants in one such network engaged with political subjects through sharing and interpreting media texts, maintaining consensus and coherency even if these texts initially appeared to be dissonant with established framings of events.

Focusing on a large and impactful network of supporters of former US President Donald Trump as a case study, this research uses netnographic tools to analyse the field site, engaging in qualitative content analysis of both a large-scale ‘overview’ dataset and an in-depth analysis of two specific events that disrupted consensus. This research builds on existing literature relating to online ‘echo chambers’ and political fan subcultures, providing an in-depth analysis not just of which media texts were shared to a politically partisan online network, but also what participants *did with* these texts through the participatory practices of political fandom. I identify three broad strategies used to engage with ostensibly dissonant texts: the interpretation of all events through a dynamic of knowledgeable insiders and an imagined ‘establishment’ mainstream; the use of reliable framing devices such as ‘media bias’ to articulate an ‘establishment’ position to oppose; and the development of a carnivalesque ‘content world’ of familiar reference points, in-jokes and narratives in which an implied consensus was an assumed part of insider status.

My research demonstrates that online political networks do not necessarily exclude ‘dissonant’ texts, such as those produced by opponents or those that disprove the claims of allies, from their media consumption. Instead, they can engage omnivorously with whatever texts are available, engaging with the media field surrounding political events as a stock of potential resources to be used in the creation of content to share in a range of participatory practices.

# Introduction

## Background and Context

This thesis investigates how the Internet and the functionality of particular online platforms impact the way in which people engage with political events that disrupt their established views. My research focuses on an in-depth analysis of a case study representative of many emerging concerns relating to online political engagement, especially the idea of the ‘echo chamber’: r/The\_Donald, a large network of Donald Trump supporters hosted on Reddit.com. When I began work on this thesis, r/The\_Donald was an obscure online community on an under-researched online platform dedicated to the support of an unlikely US presidential candidate. By the time this thesis was nearing completion, that candidate, Donald Trump, had since been elected President, faced impeachment twice, failed to secure a second term in office and inspired a mob of supporters to storm the US Capitol building in an attempt to prevent the swearing in of his successor, Joe Biden (Barry and Frenkel 2021). The first year of the Trump presidency saw 34% of his staff sacked, resign or be reassigned - double that of Ronald Reagan’s previous record 17% turnover rate in 1981 (Bach 2017). Trump as both candidate and President misled, lied and otherwise made false claims to an “unprecedented” degree (McGranahan 2017:43). These falsehoods were well-publicised by the media and fact-checking organisations, with the *Washington Post* even maintaining a meticulously detailed, interactive database of each false statement made by the President (Washington Post 2017).

Despite all this, however, r/The\_Donald’s membership only grew. Its members remained loyal and its self-described role as a “never ending Trump rally” (r/The\_Donald 2017) continued through impeachments, well-publicised scandals and even decisions made by the President that appeared to go against his supporters’ expectations of what a Trump presidency would entail. Throughout the 2016 election campaign and Trump presidential administration, r/The\_Donald grew from a community of 200,000 subscribers to over 790,000, received significant mainstream media attention and was ‘quarantined’, ‘restricted’ and eventually banned from the platform that hosted it, Reddit.com. The initial goal of this thesis was to understand how r/The\_Donald’s users, who had forged particular expectations of the Trump campaign before the election, would react to the realities of a Trump presidency. However, the community appeared largely immune to negative media reports surrounding the Trump administration. Fact checking organisations appeared to have no impact. Even significant U-turns by the administration,



such as the decision to bomb Syria in 2017 or the selection of ‘establishment’ politician Mike Pence as Trump’s 2016 running mate did little to dent the enthusiasm of the “never ending Trump rally” (The\_Donald 2017).

None of this, of course, should read as particularly surprising. The notion of political engagement as conducted through polarised ‘echo chambers’ is so ingrained in contemporary political discussion that it almost seems unnecessary to mention that a group of online Trump supporters were not shaken by mainstream media reports of the President’s false statements and indiscretions. Reddit is a social news web site - a platform for the consumption and curation of external media content within like-minded communities. It is news to no one that a network of Trump supporters on such a platform engaged with the media in a way that maintained their existing consensus and loyalty to the Trump administration.

However, recent research has troubled the notion that politically partisan online communities are indeed the ‘echo chambers’ they are assumed to be. As will be discussed in the literature review chapter of this thesis, a growing body of empirical work suggests that politically partisan online networks do not necessarily avoid interaction with media texts that disrupt their consensus (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2011; Flaxman, Goel and Rao 2016; Blank 2018) and, crucially, that exposure to these texts may not have a moderating influence on this consensus (Karlsen et al 2017; Bail et al 2018). With this in mind, my research aims to provide an in-depth analysis not just of the kinds of media that an online political network consumes, but what participants in such a network *do with* these media texts. r/The\_Donald, an online community of unwaveringly-loyal Trump supporters entirely orientated around the sharing of external media texts, engaged with a wide range of material from both political allies and political opponents. Media texts critical of Trump were actively sought out and willingly engaged with, the statements of political opponents were shared in their entirety and even official announcements made by the Trump administration itself were subject to the same processes of filtering and re-framing as any other content. In this way, r/The\_Donald engaged in a range of participatory practices of media consumption, sharing a surprisingly diverse range of texts in creative and pragmatic ways to support a remarkably consistent, often-idiosyncratic framings of events.

Much of this was underpinned by a shared identity as a distinctive subculture operating within an ostensibly hostile platform. r/The\_Donald was somewhat politically isolated on Reddit (Guest 2018), and had an openly antagonistic relationship with administrators and other users of the site that hosted it (Shepherd 2020). However, r/The\_Donald was also a

prolific producer of distinctive, often humorous political content and was largely defined by its capability in proliferating this content to a wider audience using Reddit's functionality and large user base (Zannettou et al 2018; Shepherd 2020). r/The\_Donald's engagement with media texts was therefore simultaneously one of consumption and productivity, sharing and re-framing external media texts in line with established practices, reference points and expectations. To analyse these dynamics in depth, I engage with r/The\_Donald using the framework of a political fan subculture – a network of highly engaged consumers of texts surrounding a particular political topic (Sandvoss 2012), defined by practices that “trouble the production consumption divide” (Dean 2017:411).

In sum, this research seeks to understand how r/The\_Donald, a politically partisan online network orientated around the consumption of external news media, was able to maintain an apparent consensus, coherency of frame and clear ‘insider’ identity in spite of frequent exposure to information that would appear to disrupt and trouble established consensus. Whilst r/The\_Donald was somewhat unique in terms of specific tone and content, the findings discussed in this thesis identify several strategies usable to online partisan networks more broadly. These findings suggest that events that disrupt the expectations of political supporters can be engaged with through pragmatic and creative engagement with the available media texts – regardless of their original intention, or whether they are produced by allies or opponents.

### **Research Goal and Research Questions:**

My broad research goal was to understand how an ideologically homogenous online network engaged with texts that disrupted consensus. Focusing on r/The\_Donald as a case study exemplifying this apparent contradiction, I focused on the following three research questions:

1. What content did participants share to r/The\_Donald?
2. How did they frame this content using Reddit's functionality?
3. How was group identity maintained?

The first research question – “what content did participants share to r/The\_Donald?” – considers a core assumption of the ‘echo chambers’ account of online politically partisan communities. This account assumes that the Internet facilitates the emergence and maintenance of politically homogenous networks because participants in these networks have the capability to choose which content they share with one another (Sunstein 2001, 2009). Because of this, users are assumed to be more likely to share content that confirms

existing consensus and to avoid sharing content that might moderate or question existing consensus. As will be discussed in a review of the echo chambers literature in the following chapter, the extent to which this is true has been called into question by empirical research suggesting that ideologically homogenous communities and their participants may not exclusively limit their consumption of news to content that confirms their existing viewpoints. I aim to add further detail and nuance to this account, understanding media texts as a stock of resources that can be used to participate in familiar practices of sharing and framing – rather than simply as texts that confirm or disrupt consensus in their entirety.

The second research question expands on this and asks how participants framed the content that they share through Reddit's functionality. Reddit is an online 'social news' platform that launched in 2005. The site allows users to share external media content to subject-specific communities called 'subreddits', which are typically orientated around a common interest. Participants can then vote this content 'up', which makes it more visible, or 'down', which makes it less visible. Through this functionality, Reddit enables its users to share and curate content in a way that is ostensibly democratic and decentralised, with each 'subreddit' having its own rules and moderators. Various features of the platform also empower users to frame the content that they share in ways that assert that it is relevant and interesting to the subreddit that it is shared to - most prominently by allowing users to give an original title to anything they post. r/The\_Donald (hereafter referred to as either 'The\_Donald' or simply 'the subreddit') was a particularly active, impactful subreddit that made effective use of this functionality to proliferate content (Shepherd 2020). Whereas the first research question considers what participants shared to The\_Donald, this question effectively asks what they *did* with this content. If participants in ideologically homogenous communities are indeed engaging with content that is dissonant with their established consensus, why are they sharing it? How are they framing it? How might consensus be reinforced through the creative use of content that appears, if read at face value, to disrupt it? My analysis in response to these questions explores how The\_Donald's users framed content in relation to an established stock of reference points, in-jokes and narratives that asserted the post's relevance and coherence with an existing 'content world' of familiar subjects and themes.

Finally, my third research question considers how a group identity that was meaningful to participants could be maintained in an online environment with few clear markers of insider status. The\_Donald could be fully participated in by anyone with a Reddit account, which could be created in seconds without need for email verification. Reddit accounts are pseudonymous, easy to create and the practice of creating temporary 'throwaway'

usernames to use for a specific purpose and then abandon is common (Leavitt 2015; Ammari et al 2019). This means that conventional markers of membership of a given community are not obviously apparent. This is particularly the case in large, fast moving subreddits like The\_Donald and was further complicated by The\_Donald's antagonistic relationship with the wider Reddit platform. The fact that most communities on the platform can be accessed by a single, effectively anonymous Reddit account means that in large communities like The\_Donald, the difference between a member and non-member is visible only through the content of their contributions, rather than any explicit marker of identity. In this way, the content that users shared acted as a stock of subcultural capital, indicative of specific knowledge and competencies acquired through reading, participating and otherwise engaging with the subreddit in ways that marked a participant as distinct from outsiders.

## **Thesis Overview**

### **Literature Review**

Following this introduction, the next chapter provides a review of the key literature that grounds this thesis. My literature review therefore focuses on three key areas. I begin with a discussion of the 'echo chambers' framework, particularly the influential account provided by Cass Sunstein (2001, 2009, 2018). Sunstein's account has shaped both academic and mainstream media discussions of the alleged problem of online 'echo chambers', yet subsequent empirical research has complicated this account. These complications will be analysed critically, establishing a more nuanced picture of the problems presented by ideologically homogenous online networks. The 'echo chambers' account relies on certain assumptions about how people engage with online spaces that have been troubled somewhat by empirical research throughout the 2010s. Most prominently, I consider the implications of the fact that existing research suggests that politically partisan web users may not actively work to avoid dissonant texts, and indeed may be more likely than average to be exposed to opposing viewpoints when communicating online (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2011; Flaxman, Goel and Rao 2016; Bail et al 2018). This troubling of the 'echo chambers' thesis will then be answered with a critical introduction to Cornell Sandvoss' (2005, 2012, 2013) account of political fandom. I will here relate Sandvoss' account specifically to the questions raised by the 'echo chambers' literature discussed above. A more detailed account of political fandom as a theoretical framework will then follow in chapter 3. Finally, I will focus specifically on the field site, critically analysing existing research on The\_Donald. This analysis will unpack key themes in the existing literature on The\_Donald, focusing specifically on how existing empirical

analysis of the subreddit informed my own analysis presented in this thesis.

## **Theory**

The literature review will be followed by an in-depth discussion of the theoretical framework used to conduct this research. In this chapter, I will set out my understanding of The\_Donald as a political fan subculture, defined by participatory consumption of media surrounding Donald Trump and opposition to an imagined 'mainstream'. I begin with an overview of the Reddit platform itself, analysing how the functionality of the platform facilitates the emergence of online subcultures. Understanding partisan online political communities as distinctive subcultures provides a framework for understanding how participants in such a community were able to engage with a media field that was ostensibly hostile, dominated by political opponents and texts that appeared to be dissonant with a partisan consensus. Sarah Thornton's (1995) account of subcultural capital and the 'useful myth' of the mainstream provide theoretical grounding for my analysis of The\_Donald as a subcultural space defined by a continually-reasserted distinction from an imagined 'establishment'. This discussion will focus on applying Thornton's account of youth subcultures to online political networks, drawing on more recent literature into the role of (sub)cultural capital in maintaining online networks. Following this, I will expand on the discussion of political fandom introduced in the literature review, focusing on unpacking this as a framework for identifying and understanding practices through which an online political subculture could engage with a wide range of media texts in ways that conformed to established narratives and consensuses.

## **Methodology and Research Ethics**

The next chapter, Methodology and Research Ethics, will outline the specific methods and overall approach used in this research. This research is grounded in the principles of 'netnography' outlined by Robert Kozinets (2015) and further informed by Christine Hine's account of 'ethnography for the internet' (2015). This is a primarily qualitative approach based on the principle of "*experiencing* masses of data, but only capturing and then focusing in on small amounts of high-quality data" (Kozinets 2015: 174, emphasis in original). Following Kozinets (2015), my research is based on the 'holistic' analysis of The\_Donald as a field site both through a large scale 'survey' used to map out the field site, which was then used to inform the selection of a small number of high-quality case studies for further analysis of specific themes identified in the mapping

process.

This discussion is followed by an in-depth account of the specific methods used to collect and analyse data from The\_Donald. My research relied on both a large scale dataset of 1200 posts collected over 12 months and several case studies focusing on specific topics or short time periods surrounding a particularly impactful event. I discuss the methods used to collect each type of data, relating this to the specific functionality of Reddit itself and the tools available in the collection and analysis of large amounts of online research data. Following this, I discuss the strategies used in the selection of specific case studies for further analysis, including a discussion of why certain case studies were selected and others excluded.

This research was also complicated by the fast-moving, volatile nature of both the field site itself and the broader political context within which it was situated. Over time, The\_Donald became an infamous political community that was eventually banned for harassment and threats of violence against political figures (Wong 2020). The\_Donald was also defined by antagonism with the mainstream media and indeed Reddit itself, the very platform on which it was hosted (Shepherd 2020). Because of this, I also include an in-depth discussion of both the ethical and pragmatic considerations surrounding researching this particular subject. This focuses on the ethics of covertly collecting data from an ostensibly 'public' platform, the risks of the subreddit being shut down and how the changing context surrounding The\_Donald would inform these questions as it moved from a relatively marginal network in support of an unlikely political candidate to a large and active group of supporters of (and tacitly endorsed by) the sitting US President (Alfonso III 2018; Wong 2020).

## **Empirical Chapters**

Following this discussion of research methodology, I present the core empirical findings of my research. This discussion is divided into four chapters. The first of these chapters provides a 'zoomed out', large-scale analysis of a total of 1200 posts made to The\_Donald over the course of 12 months, providing an overview of the subreddit's functionality and core dynamics. This is followed by two chapters that each focus on a specific case study. Finally, I conclude with a discussion chapter that brings together the empirical findings with reference to my research goals and reflects on the research as a whole.

### **Empirical Chapter 1) Participation Through a Dynamic of Insiders and Outsiders: The Useful Myth of the Establishment Mainstream**

The first empirical chapter is grounded in a thematic analysis of 1200 popular posts shared to The\_Donald between July 2016 and June 2017. This analysis is used to provide an overview of The\_Donald's core framing device: a distinction between a knowledgeable in-group and an imagined 'establishment' mainstream. This frame enabled The\_Donald's users to engage with texts taken from the external media field whilst simultaneously framing this external media field as hostile and unreliable. Participants framed the texts that they shared as relevant and significant precisely because they contained information ostensibly ignored or actively suppressed by mainstream media and political actors as well as much of the general public. I begin by setting out how The\_Donald's users framed the 'establishment' and defined themselves as part of an in-group in opposition to this establishment. I then analyse how the 'establishment' acted as a 'useful myth' (Thornton 1995), which evolved and shifted to accommodate changes to the political landscape. Finally, I analyse how The\_Donald's users linked opposition to the establishment to the forms of participation facilitated by Reddit as a social news platform. In articulating the 'establishment' and their own opposition to it, The\_Donald's users did not attempt to provide an account of two fixed and well-defined groups with clear ideological positions. Rather, the 'establishment' and the in-group of knowledgeable insiders who were claimed to oppose them worked primarily as a framing device for all forms of participation in the subreddit itself. All contributions to the subreddit were defined in terms of this dynamic, making the in-group of knowledgeable insiders defined somewhat circularly through their assertions that the content that they shared was something that the 'establishment' did not want others to know. In sum, this chapter found that by establishing a core framework of distinction from an imagined 'establishment', The\_Donald's users were able to engage with a wide range of content in terms that were consistently familiar and meaningful. This finding grounds much of the discussion in the two subsequent empirical chapters, which investigate how The\_Donald engaged with two key events that appeared to disrupt initial consensus.

### **Empirical Chapter 2) Engaging with a dissonant event: maintaining distinction from the 'establishment'**

The second empirical chapter presents the results of the first of two primary case studies: the subreddit's reaction to a US airstrike against a Syrian military airfield. The airstrike was highly controversial amongst Trump supporters on The\_Donald, troubling expectations that the Trump administration would adhere to an isolationist foreign policy and not

succumb to alleged ‘establishment’ pressure to engage in unilateral military intervention in Syria. This case study therefore acts as an analysis of the subreddit’s reaction to an event that had the potential to disrupt their established consensus. The strike against Syria’s Shayrat airbase appeared to trouble the core dynamic of sharing external texts framed as ignored or covered up by the ‘establishment’ mainstream set out in the previous chapter. In the days before the airstrike, The\_Donald’s users reached a consensus that a chemical attack that provoked calls for US retaliation was a hoax, and defined ‘insider’ status as working to expose this hoax. However, once the Trump administration did indeed retaliate by authorising a missile strike against Shayrat airbase, this position became unsustainable. In response, the subreddit’s users re-defined the apparent ‘insider’ and ‘establishment’ positions through creative and pragmatic sharing of the texts available in the media field surrounding the airstrike.

The analysis presented here focuses on my first two research questions: “what content do participants share to the subreddit?” and “how do they frame this content using Reddit’s functionality?” The Shayrat airstrike meant that the media field was saturated with texts that had the potential to disrupt the subreddit’s core dynamic of knowledgeable insiders working against an ‘establishment’, providing the opportunity to understand how The\_Donald’s users made creative and pragmatic use of the limited resources available to maintain consensus and coherency. The findings in this chapter identify several strategies that could be used to re-frame the airstrike in familiar terms of insiders working against the ‘establishment’, facilitating creative and pragmatic use of seemingly ‘dissonant’ texts produced by mainstream media sources and political opponents.

### **Empirical Chapter 3) ‘Maverick Pence’: Engaging with the Media through a Familiar Content World**

This chapter explores the way in which The\_Donald’s users engaged with media texts surrounding Vice President Mike Pence, a figure who appeared to contrast significantly with Trump himself and disrupt The\_Donald’s core framing of distinction from the ‘establishment’. On The\_Donald, Pence was initially an unpopular choice for Trump’s Vice President. His status as a long-serving, career politician associated with the Republican establishment, his opposition to several key Trump campaign promises and his orthodox, soft spoken approach to politics meant that he was difficult to frame as an ‘insider’ working against the ‘establishment’ and ostensibly a poor source of relevant content to share to the subreddit. However, Pence’s position as Trump’s Vice President meant that he would be a constant presence in the textual field surrounding Trump, and would therefore be difficult to ignore. This chapter explores how The\_Donald’s users engaged with Mike



Pence in spite of the fact that he was a potential source of dissonance with established consensus. This analysis identified three core ways that The\_Donald's users engaged with Pence: The use of reliable 'media bias' and 'establishment criticism' frames to position Pence as in conflict with the 'establishment' in spite of his own passivity; pragmatic engagement with mundane 'official' content produced by Pence himself and the Trump administration; and the creative use of humorous content to frame Pence in a manner more in line with The\_Donald's expectations of what an ideal Vice President should be. This chapter demonstrates how all contributions to the subreddit contributed to a carnivalesque 'content world' of familiar reference points that, in turn, could be used to make sense of other content.

## **Discussion**

These three empirical chapters will be followed by a concluding chapter that summarises my findings and relates them back to the research questions and theoretical debates discussed throughout the thesis. I will begin with a summary of key findings before directly addressing the research questions. This will be followed by a discussion of the core contributions of this thesis to the broad theoretical debates discussed, and to an understanding of The\_Donald and online spaces like it as an increasingly common form of political engagement with undeniable impact. I will then engage with a discussion of the questions invited by my research findings as avenues for future research and a reflection on the thesis as a whole.

## Online ‘echo chambers’ and The\_Donald: a review of the literature

In this chapter, I will provide a review of the literature that grounds the debates discussed in this thesis. I will begin with an overview of the major formulations of the problem of ideologically homogenous online networks, focusing on the influential ‘echo chamber’ account most closely associated with Cass Sunstein (2001, 2009, 2018). I will then set out some of the objections to this account, most notably the growing empirical evidence that participants in apparent ‘echo chambers’ do not have the predicted homogenous media diet and may in fact be *more* likely to engage with external networks and other media they disagree with than the average web user (Flaxman et al 2016). Following this, I will engage with some attempts to respond to this troubling of the ‘echo chamber’ account, particularly Karlsen et al’s (2017) description of online debate as “trench warfare”. This will be followed by an introduction to the literature on political fandoms, which I position - particularly as formulated by Cornell Sandvoss (2012, 2013) - as both analogous to the problem of political ‘echo chambers’ and a potential framework for engaging with some of the contradictions discussed above. A full account of how this literature informs my own theoretical approach will be provided in the following chapter, ‘Subcultural Capital and Political Fandom: a framework for understanding partisan media engagement’.

I will conclude this chapter with an overview of the literature surrounding the field site for this thesis – Reddit’s The\_Donald - and situate The\_Donald within the debates discussed above. Reddit remains an under-researched online platform relative to its popularity and influence, yet an emergent body of literature on the platform’s functionality has developed over the past decade (Massanari 2015). In more recent years, much of this research has focused on The\_Donald itself, which acquired a degree of influence and indeed infamy during the Trump 2016 presidential candidacy and eventual White House administration (Roozenbeek and Salvador Palau 2017, Guest 2018, Gaudette et al 2020, Jungherr et al 2021). This section will give an overview of existing research into The\_Donald and identify why this community is of particular relevance for an analysis of politically partisan, homogenous online networks.

### Online ‘echo chambers’, ‘filter bubbles’ and ‘cocoons’

Ideologically homogenous online networks are, in both media and academic discussions,

often portrayed as ‘echo chambers’ that exclude dissonant texts and opinions. I will begin this section with a brief overview of the development of the ‘echo chambers’ account, focusing on the influential framework provided by Cass Sunstein (2001, 2009). Sunstein’s framework has proven particularly influential, and grounds much of the subsequent research surrounding the existence and effects of online echo chambers. This will be followed by a discussion of the empirical basis for the existence of echo chambers, and the contemporary debates that my own research aims to respond to.

The ‘echo chamber’ argument, and indeed the specific terminology, is typically traced back to a prediction made by Cass Sunstein in his 2001 book *Republic.com*. Sunstein warned that the seemingly “utopian” potential of individuals to personalise their consumption of news and entertainment media risked people “mainly listening to louder echoes of their own voices.” (Sunstein 2001:16). This contrasts significantly with other, far more optimistic predictions made in the late 1990s and early 2000s of the Internet’s potential to empower the breaking of geographic boundaries and subversion of entrenched power structures (Street 1997, Papacharissi 2002). Sunstein is primarily concerned with two ideas he describes as “preconditions for a well-functioning democracy” (2007:6). Firstly, Sunstein argues that exposing people to ideas that they would not have sought out themselves avoids “fragmentation and extremism” which “are predictable outcomes of any situation in which like-minded people speak only with themselves”. Secondly, Sunstein (2009:6) asserts the importance of “a range of common experiences”, particularly “common experiences made possible by the media” as a “form of social glue” and suggests that without this “social glue”, society will fragment due to a lack of mutual understanding or the potential for collaborative problem solving.

Sunstein (2009:9) draws particular attention to the rise of the Internet as a source for news and the relative decline of the “general interest intermediaries” provided by the mass media of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Giving the example of the magazines *Time* and *Newsweek*, Sunstein (2009:9) compares these “intermediaries” to the public street - as both are “systems where individuals lack control over the particular content that they see” and “provided both shared experiences for millions and exposure to diverse topics and ideas”. Sunstein (2009:4) directly contrasts this mediated public forum with the “utopian” future promised by the Internet and its potential for “complete personalization of the system of communications”.

### **Empirical backing for the existence of online ‘echo chambers’**

Since the first publication of *Republic.com* in 2001, there has been significant academic

attention paid to the echo chambers thesis. Sunstein's formulation of the apparent 'problem' has proven influential and set the tone for much subsequent discussion around the existence and impact of online echo chambers (Garrett 2009a). Empirical investigations into the potential existence of online echo chambers have focused on Sunstein's claim that the personalisable nature of online media consumption prevents people from encountering information that they did not intend to, preventing individuals from finding information or having discussions with those that would challenge or moderate their existing views (Garrett 2009a; Flaxman et al 2016; Karlsen et al 2017; Guest 2018). However, despite his strong association with the concept in subsequent discussions, Sunstein (2001, 2009) does not provide a precise definition of the echo chambers he warns against in *Republic.com*. Indeed, the 'echo chambers' terminology itself is not the focus of Sunstein's account, which is grounded primarily in discussions of the public sphere and the personalised 'Daily Me' of online news consumption described by Nicholas Negroponte (1996). However, a lack of clear definition has come to characterise much of the subsequent discussion of online echo chambers in both the media and academia.

In a highly critical review of the discourse surrounding 'echo chambers' and the related concept of 'filter bubbles' (Pariser 2011), Axel Bruns (2019:8) warns that the "persistent use of these concepts" in mainstream media and political discourse has distracted from the fact that they lack clear definitions or robust empirical backing. Bruns is primarily focused on Pariser's (2011) account of 'filter bubbles' rather than Sunstein's echo chambers terminology, yet argues that these related but ostensibly distinct concepts have come to be used largely interchangeably in both academic and mainstream media discussions (Brunns 2019:3). In a systematic review of the literature on echo chambers, Terren and Borge-Bravo (2021) also highlight the fact that different conceptualisations of what 'echo chambers' actually are and how they should be measured has had a significant impact on research into their existence and effects. This review identified two key categories of research into echo chambers: those focusing on exposure to heterogeneous content and those which considered echo chambers as a lack of interactions between media users that cut across existing social networks (Terren and Borge-Bravo 2021:105). Highlighting the significance of the definitional concerns discussed above, studies which focused on interactions that cut across existing social networks were drastically more likely to support the existence of echo chambers than those that focused on exposure to heterogeneous content. Of the 24 studies reviewed that found clear evidence of echo chambers, 16 of these focused exclusively on interactions but only 2 focused exclusively on content exposure (Terren and Borge-Bravo 2021: 109). In sum, when echo chambers are conceived of as the arrangement of web users into isolated yet like-minded clusters of

activity, there is significant empirical backing that they do indeed exist. However, when considering the potential negative effects of echo chambers or the extent to which online users are indeed shielded from heterogeneous content, the results are less clear (see also Garrett 2009b; Flaxman et al 2016).

Furthermore, the fact that many of these studies are limited to mapping users over a single platform may fail to account for the full media diet of a given user, which may in fact be far more diverse than would be discovered by tracking use of a single platform in isolation (Dubois and Blank 2018). Indeed, there exists a growing body of evidence that the Internet actually *increases* the potential for encounters with heterogeneous viewpoints. Lee et al (2014) found social media use to be a positive predictor of a heterogeneous social network. Lu et al (2018) found Facebook to be a site of potential exposure to heterogeneous political views and Brundidge (2010) found a link between consumption of online news and heterogeneity of online networks. Garrett (2009a, 2009b) found that whilst the Internet did provide web users the tools to control the sorts of information that they engaged with, they did not use these tools to isolate themselves from opposing viewpoints and tended to spend more time than average engaging with information sources that challenged their opinion when they did encounter them. Further supporting this, Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) found that ostensibly apolitical online spaces were a common site of political discussion and disagreement. However, explicitly political groups were unsurprisingly more likely to be a site of reinforcement for existing political views. Both Brundidge (2010) and Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) also highlight the potential for “accidental” exposure to heterogeneous information and opinions that participants did not seek out in more “general interest” online spaces. This suggests that ‘echo chambers’ may exist alongside opportunities for more diverse discussion - an idea that will be further explored in the below discussion of online political discussion as “trench warfare”. This is consistent with findings that whilst people are likely to search for information that confirms their existing viewpoints (Stroud 2008, 2010), the notion that they actively avoid dissonant viewpoints does not appear to have strong empirical backing (Garrett 2009b; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010).

Furthermore, research suggests that online encounters with individuals or texts expressing ‘opposing’ views may in fact confirm existing biases, rather than moderate them. Karlsen et al (2017) found that participants’ exposure to online discussion content that expressed views strongly opposed to their own actually reinforced their existing viewpoints. Bail et al (2018:23) found that a sample of Republican Twitter users became “substantially more conservative” after a month of following a bot account that shared liberal political messages. Flaxman Goel and Rao (2016) found that a high level of social

network and internet search-engine based news consumption is associated with an increase in the mean ideological distance between individuals, but also with increased exposure to material from sources with ideological leanings that differ from their own. Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011:20) drew similar conclusions, finding that participants in more ideologically polarised news websites also tended to “consume more of everything[...] preventing their overall news diet from becoming too skewed”. Dubois and Blank (2018) also found that those with a stronger interest in politics were more likely to consume an ideologically diverse range of online media. The authors argue that whilst ‘echo chambers’ may appear to exist on specific online social networks, this was not the case when considering “the entire multi-media environment” and suggest that the risk of online echo chambers to be “overstated” (Dubois and Blank 2018:740).

### **Echo chambers or ‘Trench Warfare’?**

The research discussed above complicates the ‘echo chamber’ account by highlighting the fact that participation in ideologically homogenous online networks can occur alongside participation in a wider range of online spaces. Furthermore, this research also suggests that participation in an echo chamber may not be the cause of polarisation, as exposure to conflicting viewpoints may in fact both be actively sought out by political partisans and reinforce, rather than moderate, their existing views. This is coherent with Karlsen et al’s (2017:257) description of online partisan discussion as a site of “reinforcement through contradiction as well as confirmation”. The authors contrast an explicitly Sunstein-derived account of online echo chambers with this “logic of ‘trench warfare’.” The authors found that “both confirming and contradicting arguments have similar effects on attitude reinforcement” and argue that “the architecture of the Internet creates a particularly good environment for reinforcement through contradiction” (Karlsen et al 2017:258-260):

“...when people are presented with opposing arguments in online debates, these arguments may not make debaters question and alter their initial opinion, but instead lead to a stronger belief in the previously held opinion. We call this trench warfare dynamics”

Karlsen et al (2017) dispute both the premise that people seek out ‘echo chambers’ and that the structure of online networks has a tendency towards creating them. They draw particular attention to the fact that whilst it has been demonstrated that people tend to seek perspectives that reinforce their own views, the notion that they avoid dissonant ones has less empirical backing (Karlsen et al:259). They also draw on Henry Jenkins’ (2006) notion of convergence, which emphasises the participatory nature of an

online culture built on links between different kinds of online and offline media engagement. As also demonstrated by Dubois and Blank (2018), the integration of a diverse range of media into daily life troubles an 'echo chamber' account, revealing the potential for individuals to shield themselves from information to be overstated:

"Whatever may be happening on any single social media platform, when we look at the entire media environment, there is little apparent echo chamber" (Dubois and Blank 2018:740)

Karlsen et al (2017:270) found that a proportion of their respondents (25%) with "extreme" attitudes towards a particular political topic became more confident in their initial opinion when encountering an argument that confirmed these views. However, a similar proportion of these respondents (22%) also became more confident when exposed to an argument that *contradicted* their initial opinion. In contrast, when respondents with extreme views were exposed to an argument expressing a mixed opinion, only 13% reported being more convinced of their initial opinion. This suggests that "trench warfare is a more fitting description than echo chambers" as "people are frequently met with opposing arguments, but the result is reinforcement of their original opinions and beliefs" (Karlsen et al 2017:270).

The 'echo chamber' account has therefore been troubled by doubts that increased consumption of news through mediated technologies does indeed shield people from heterogeneous views. Furthermore, there is a growing evidence base that participants in ostensibly ideologically homogenous online networks do not avoid encounters with contradictory viewpoints, and may even actively seek them out. To summarise, the 'echo chamber' account is complicated by the fact that whilst individual web users may indeed search for content that confirms their existing viewpoints, this does not appear to be matched by either the desire or the capacity for outright avoidance of content that would conflict with existing ideological persuasions. Furthermore, if exposure to heterogeneous viewpoints may in fact reinforce polarisation, this invites further investigation into the ways that people engage with online content that challenges their established viewpoints. This then invites the question of what participants in ideologically homogenous communities are doing with ostensibly dissonant texts produced by political outsiders and even opponents.

### **Political Fandom**

Sandvoss (2013:277, emphasis in original) offers a nuanced take on Sunstein's 'echo chamber' account in the context of political fandom, suggesting that "it is not the community aspect, but

the *interpretative* element of ‘interpretative communities’ that ought to concern us and that is in need of further analysis”. In other words, Sandvoss suggests that it is not the fact that groups of online political fans are ideologically homogeneous communities that risks polarisation in and of itself, but rather the fact that these communities are empowered to engage with the texts they consume on their own terms. This is entirely coherent with the empirical research discussed above, shifting the focus from the existence of ideologically homogeneous networks to the way in which these networks engage with texts surrounding their preferred political figure or movement. To that end, Sandvoss highlights the fact that political fan communities are engaged not only in the selection of texts, but also in their collaborative interpretation:

“Fans construct and create their objects of fandom[...] through a dual strategy of *interpretation* and *selection*” (Sandvoss 2013:277, emphasis in original)

Sandvoss’ account provides much of the grounding for the theoretical framework used in this thesis, which will be outlined in depth in the following chapter, “Subcultural capital and Political Fandom: a Framework for Understanding Partisan Media Engagement”. Before I outline this framework, however, I will provide a brief introduction to The\_Donald as a field site. A more in-depth analysis of the functionality and culture of both The\_Donald itself and Reddit as a platform will be discussed in subsequent chapters and throughout the empirical sections of this thesis. However, this section will focus on presenting the existing academic literature on The\_Donald, identifying key themes and linking back to the research questions discussed earlier in this chapter. Almost all of the research I discuss here was published during the process of conducting the research presented in this thesis, and much of it after significant parts of the data collection and analysis had been completed. However, this was typical of the research process as a whole, due to the evolving nature of the subject matter. The\_Donald itself, the political context in which it sat and the way in which it was represented and understood in academic and media reports changed over the course of the research process and I therefore had to be mindful of new developments as they emerged. This is discussed in greater depth in the ‘Methodology’ chapter of this thesis, yet it is worth acknowledging at this stage the challenge of keeping up with the changing and emerging context and literature base surrounding the subreddit.

### **The\_Donald as a field site**

The\_Donald exhibited many of the features of an apparent ‘echo chamber’ discussed above, as a community entirely orientated around the support of a political candidate that



banned non-supporters. Much of the existing literature into the subreddit has explored themes relevant to this discussion, including the following, which I will now explore in detail:

1. The\_Donald exhibited characteristics of an echo chamber in its users' reaction to external content, but its users did not avoid interaction with outsiders.
2. The\_Donald defined itself as an in-group in opposition to an apparently unified out-group.
3. The\_Donald had a distinct (sub)culture that was defined by a distinctive vernacular and focussed on humour and entertainment value over sober political discussion
4. The\_Donald effectively utilised Reddit's functionality and this shaped the identity of the subreddit

**1. The\_Donald exhibited characteristics of an echo chamber in its users' reaction to external content, but its users did not avoid interaction with outsiders or dissonant external content. This content also appeared to have little moderating impact.**

The\_Donald's position as a large, explicitly politically partisan network has made it an attractive case study for research investigating the existence and potential effects of online 'echo chambers'. However, the extent to which The\_Donald does indeed exhibit the qualities of an 'echo chamber' has been questioned in a manner coherent with the wider literature discussed above. In an early example of research into Trump supporters on Reddit, Guest (2018) found that participants in The\_Donald – understood here as a self-identified 'echo chamber' due to its rules against posts criticising Donald Trump - were in fact *more* likely to participate in a wider range of subreddits than the average Reddit user. Guest suggests that this may be explained by The\_Donald's users participating in other communities with similar views to their own, as part of a wider 'echo chamber' cluster of like-minded communities. Addressing similar questions, De Francis Morales et al. (2021) questioned the notion of The\_Donald as an 'echo chamber' through analysis of the interactions between users on r/The\_Donald and two Clinton supporting subreddits, r/HillaryClinton and r/HillaryForAmerica. The study found that Trump and Clinton supporters, identified as such by their affiliation with those candidates' subreddits, were more likely to interact with those from the opposing group rather than amongst themselves when commenting on posts on r/Politics. The authors suggest therefore that political polarisation on Reddit does not have the same 'echo chamber' effect that may exist on other social media platforms, and was in fact a "tool for political discussion between opposing points of view during the 2016 elections" (De Francis Morales et al

2021:10). This analysis is somewhat unique in its focus on interaction between Trump and Hillary supporters in a third subreddit, r/politics. The authors conclude that the interaction between Trump and Clinton supporters offers evidence that Reddit is not an “echo chamber”. However, whilst supporters of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton on Reddit may have interacted with one another on r/Politics, this analysis does not explore the nature of these interactions. Elsewhere, research has indicated that depictions of ‘outsiders’ on The\_Donald is wholly negative and focused on insults and hate speech, rather than constructive political discussion (Gaudette et al 2020; Roozenbeek and Salvador Palau 2017). Indeed, this analysis indicates that participants in these politically partisan networks do encounter heterogeneous users and content, but does not consider what they do with this content and what role these interactions might play.

Engaging with this question, Roozenbeek and Salvador Palau (2017) studied the impact of positive and negative news events on the popularity of The\_Donald, r/SandersForPresident and r/HillaryClinton. This indicated that r/The\_Donald’s subscriber count was not adversely impacted by negative news events, whereas r/SandersForPresident and r/HillaryClinton were. The authors suggest this indicates that Trump’s supporters on The\_Donald “simply did not care about news events perceived as negative to Trump’s campaign by what they saw as the “mainstream media” and that this was grounded in the fact that the “perception that many media outlets were biased against Trump may have led to a sense that whatever report came out about his candidacy either did not matter, was either taken out of context or just as bad as other candidates’ campaign hiccups”. The authors conclude that The\_Donald therefore had an “immunity against negative news” that other political subreddits did not possess (Roozenbeek and Salvador Palau 2017:12).

This suggests that, on The\_Donald, exposure to heterogenous content may not have had a moderating impact. Such an assessment is further supported by Zimmer et al (2019), who explored the reaction of participants in two subreddits and a weblog to a fake news story. The study thematically coded the response to the story by users commenting on r/the\_donald, r/worldpolitics and the *Political Insider* blog to which it was originally posted. This case study indicated that The\_Donald had the strongest indication of an “echo chamber”, with 90% of comments either agreeing with the information contained within the false story or making a contribution that was either “non-argumentative”, unrelated to the discussion or a “broad generalization” (Zimmer et al 2019:47).

In a similar vein, Parekh et al (2020) examined the response of three political subreddits to posts sharing links to “fact checking” web sites. They found evidence that fact-checking

sites were not always shared simply to correct misinformation, but that the act of sharing a fact checking site played a wide range of social functions that were not always appreciated by the communities to which they were shared. Fact checking sites were less likely to be used on partisan subreddits, such as r/hillaryclinton and The\_Donald, than on the ostensibly more neutral r/politics. The authors suggest that this could be explained by taking a social action orientated approach to understand the sharing of fact checking sites as “social acts” which may serve purposes other than simply finding the truth. These findings indicate that in partisan communities such as The\_Donald, the impact of fact checking misinformation may be mitigated by the fact that these interventions are not assessed for their truth value, but rather a more complex set of social meanings specific to the context of the subreddit. Parekh et al (2020) found evidence that The\_Donald’s users engaged with fact checking content as a form of competition. Fact-checking content provided in response to a request for evidence of a controversial claim typically received a higher number of up-votes than the requesting post. However, content that requested proof of a claim and then did receive a fact-checking response on average received a higher upvote score than comments in the same thread that did not receive any fact checking. The authors suggest that this may indicate that on The\_Donald, attempts to “correct” or “fact check” may be seen as “competitive acts” rather than genuine attempts to reach the truth.

This research indicates that despite The\_Donald’s users’ engagement with a range of heterogeneous content, this exposure did not appear to moderate their established political views. This therefore invites the question of how The\_Donald’s users were able to engage with heterogeneous content in a way that built what Roozenbeek and Salvador-Palau (2017:12) describe as an “immunity against negative news”. This is one of the key questions that will be explored throughout this thesis, and throughout my empirical chapters I will analyse the strategies used by The\_Donald’s users to engage with contentious and dissonant media texts that were shared to the subreddit.

## **2. The\_Donald defined itself as an in-group in opposition to an apparently unified out-group**

A core part of The\_Donald’s place on Reddit was the subreddit’s contentious relationship with the rest of the platform, characterised by antagonism with the site’s other users and administrators. This conflict was both a prominent theme in the academic literature and a core part of the subreddit’s infamy to a more general media audience (Shepherd 2020). Within the academic literature, analysis of The\_Donald’s conflict with outsiders typically focused on the role this conflict played in establishing a group identity for the subreddit’s users. For example, Gaudette et al (2020) used social movement theory to examine the relationship between

Reddit's upvote algorithm and the 'othering' discourse that facilitates group identity formation on The\_Donald. The authors compared a thematic analysis of a sample of 1000 highly upvoted comments with that of 1000 comments sampled randomly. This analysis drew comparisons between the 'othering' discourse deployed by The\_Donald's users against Muslims and The Left with that of the radical right more broadly. Gaudette et al (2020:13) concluded that this was facilitated by Reddit's voting system, which "functioned to promote and normalise otherwise unacceptable views against the out-groups to produce a one-sided narrative that serves to reinforce members' extremist views, thereby strengthening bonds between members of the in-group".

McLamore and Ulug (2020:57) drew similar conclusions in an analysis of the representations of in-groups and out-groups on The\_Donald. Through analysis of posts discussing political opponents and political allies, the authors found that The\_Donald's users typically depicted a range of diverse opposition groups as "a singular, unified front in opposition to the in-group" which was deployed to distinguish a recognisable 'us' from 'them' through conflict narratives. Jungherr et al (2021) also emphasised the significance of othering discourse in defining a group identity, describing The\_Donald as an example of a 'populist public'. The authors compared several subreddits including /r/The\_Donald and /r/HillaryClinton, testing multiple aspects of populism such as exclusionary discourse and claims to represent "the people". This analysis indicated that The\_Donald's users "engaged more strongly in communicative behavior associated with community building" (Jungherr et al 2021:13).

In a more general sense Massachs et al (2020) analysed data on Reddit users from 2012 to identify predictors for participation in The\_Donald in 2016. The study analysed the subreddits these users contributed to, the response their contributions received by others and their interactions with other users. The authors find that negative feedback from a "wide-ranging, mainstream Reddit communities" was linked to eventual participation in The\_Donald in 2016. This supports the findings of Guest (2018) that The\_Donald is somewhat isolated from a wider Reddit consensus. Massachs et al conclude with a typical "profile" of a Trump supporter on Reddit based on the measures described above, which is contrasted with that of the typical Reddit user:

"The typical Trump supporter has conservative and libertarian views, is ill-received by the mainstream political tribe, is religious and in conflict with atheism, and has interests in guns, conspiracies, entrepreneurship, and politically incorrect content. Conversely, the typical Reddit user who does not support Trump is atheist, LGBT-friendly, and has interests in cooking, literature, and technology." (Massachs et al

2020:9)

A common theme amongst this research is that The\_Donald was somewhat isolated on Reddit, and defined itself to some extent through conflict with and opposition to both Reddit as a platform and 'mainstream' political culture more broadly. This suggests at an interesting paradox, whereby The\_Donald's users maligned the Reddit platform whilst relying on its functionality and the potential audience afforded by interactions with users outside The\_Donald itself. The significance of this apparent contradiction will be one of the key themes of my own analysis presented in the empirical chapters of this thesis.

### **3. The\_Donald had a distinct (sub)culture that was defined by a distinctive vernacular and a focus on humour and entertainment value**

Another aspect of community building on The\_Donald was also highlighted in the academic literature - the use of a distinctive vernacular and "shared idiom" (Jungherr et al 2021:15) as indicative of both populism and community building. Jungherr et al found that The\_Donald employed a distinctive vernacular by comparing the vocabularies used on the subreddit with a range of political subreddits. The similarities in words used by the centre-left subreddit r/HillaryClinton with other left-leaning subreddits was not mirrored by a similar alignment of vocabularies between The\_Donald and the more mainstream conservative subreddit r/Conservative. The authors conclude that The\_Donald's use of Reddit differed significantly from both the more mainstream conservatism of r/Conservative and the centre-left r/HillaryClinton, and that its users engaged with the platform "in order to establish a space to develop and maintain a challenge to a political mainstream perceived by them as hostile" (Jungherr et al 2021:15). This corroborates much of the literature discussed above, indicating that The\_Donald's participation on Reddit was to some extent one of defiance, defined by an awareness that they were unwelcome both on Reddit itself and ostensibly isolated from the mainstream media and political spheres. Adding to this account, however, Jungherr et al (2021) demonstrate that the political isolation of The\_Donald was matched by a distinctive vernacular that played an important role in community building that was not matched by (and perhaps not as necessary in) more 'mainstream' subreddits such as r/HillaryClinton.

The significance of such distinctive subcultural styles was also identified by Roozenbeek and Salvador Palau (2017), highlighting differences in Reddit use between supporters of Donald Trump and other major 2016 US presidential candidates. This analysis of subscriber activity over time and in reference to significant media events found that activity on Reddit was in many ways idiosyncratic with regards to the 'offline' election

cycle. The authors highlight the fact that subscribers to r/SandersForPresident did not transfer their allegiance to r/HillaryClinton after the latter's confirmation of the Democratic presidential nominee, despite the fact that polling data indicated a "typical" level of support for Clinton amongst Sanders supporters after the nomination. Additionally, both r/SandersForPresident and r/The\_Donald were disproportionately popular amongst Reddit users compared to r/HillaryClinton. The authors indicate that this may be influenced by Reddit's disproportionately white, male and younger demographic. However, Roozenbeek and Salvador Palau (2017:11) also suggest that differences in "subreddit culture" may be a more significant factor in this skew, highlighting the importance of "entertainment value" over "policy and political ideology" in building group identity, concluding as a possible explanation that:

"The content of the posts in these subreddits was simply considered funnier or better quality than in /HillaryClinton, and therefore was more successful in constructing a group identity and group cohesion." (Roozenbeek and Salvador Palau 2017:10)

Flores-Saviaga et al (2018) also identified that The\_Donald's users built a collective identity through references to familiar slang, Trump-related music videos and other shared reference points. They also identified the prominence and popularity of automated 'bot' accounts, which gamified the adoption of subreddit-specific slang by responding in amusing ways when certain slang words were used. In this way, The\_Donald's users simultaneously developed a shared identity as an in-group and encouraged users to participate in ways that made effective use of Reddit's platform functionality.

#### **4. The\_Donald effectively utilised Reddit's functionality and this shaped the identity of the subreddit**

The way in which The\_Donald's users were able to build a shared 'insider' identity was also strongly facilitated by Reddit's platform functionality. Prakasam and Huxtable-Thomas (2020:723) analysed how a distinctive group identity grounded on a shared and familiar vernacular was facilitated by the functionality of Reddit as a platform, focusing on how this functionality enabled users to "utilise particular features and settings of the platform in order to construct membership" of a given community. The authors find that membership of The\_Donald was implied through the personalisation of the subreddit environment. For example, this research highlights the way in which the subreddit's moderators had changed the button used to report a rule-breaking post to say 'deport' rather than 'report' - "reflecting Trump's campaign promise to reduce the number of illegal immigrants in the USA" (Prakasam and Huxtable-Thomas 2020:732). Affiliation with

both the Trump administration and specific policies associated with that administration was therefore integrated into the subreddit environment itself, meaning that the “creators and authors of the subreddit are able to show their affiliation as soon as the visitor reaches the site” (731). Prakasam and Huxtable-Thomas (2020) also find that Reddit’s platform functionality is conducive to the maintenance of ideologically homogenous communities due to the self-moderating nature of subreddits facilitating the creation of explicit rules against dissent, personalisation tools that relate political affiliation to the basic functionality of the platform and more implicit markers of membership, such as the voting system and creation of subreddit-specific language and reference points. The authors conclude that the affordances of the Reddit platform facilitate the maintenance of ideologically homogenous spaces and an in-group identity tied to these spaces yet also the capability for individual to ‘switch’ loyalties from one political affiliation to another. This is largely due to the fact that users are identified by pseudonyms that can be created without requiring more permanent credentials such as an email address, but also the way in which the voting system prioritises popular content - such as the statements of an alleged defector from the campaign of a political opponent.

Carman et al (2018) found that an initial injection of ‘up’ votes had a significant impact on the success of a Reddit thread, measured in terms of user comments and total vote score over a period 24 hours. This research found that the impact of these early ‘up’ votes was less on The\_Donald than on the popular /r/askreddit subreddit. The authors conclude that this may have been due to “cultural” differences between the two subreddits, with participants in The\_Donald “more likely to interact with threads by upvoting content[...] rather than commenting”, a behaviour encouraged by the fact that The\_Donald hides the ‘down’ vote button and encourages participants to up vote all content shared to it (Carman et al 2018:187). Again, this research indicates that much of The\_Donald’s distinctive political engagement was strongly shaped by its position on Reddit as a platform.

Mills (2018) found that voting activity on /r/The\_Donald was distinct from other subreddits in that posts were still receiving a high rate of upvotes after being pushed off the ‘front page’ by newer posts. Mills suggests that this indicated that The\_Donald’s users were not using Reddit’s voting system to promote ‘high quality’ content, but rather “quickly upvoting almost everything” as part of “a strategy that isn’t concerned with whether the best posts are up-voted to the top of /r/the\_donald, , but instead with having as many posts as possible from /r/the\_donald appearing on site-wide pages like /r/all” (Mills 2018:45). This research also found that users on The\_Donald were more likely than those on r/SandersForPresident to make posts linking to external content, rather than

'self' posts that did not link to external content. 'Self' posts accounted for only 25% of contributions to The\_Donald but a much higher 49% of contributions to r/SandersForPresident (Mills 2018:42, 48). Alongside the finding that The\_Donald's users may have been 'up' voting on all posts to the subreddit indiscriminate of quality, the favouring of "low-effort" shares over user-created content suggests that The\_Donald's users prioritised the overall visibility of the subreddit *in general* rather than the quality of content that becomes visible to a wider audience. Mills (2018:51) concludes that this was impacted by The\_Donald's support of a candidate ideologically isolated from the majority of Reddit users and that compared to /r/SandersForPresident, "/r/the\_donald's aims appeared much more reddit-centric, carving out some territory for Trump on a platform where there had previously been little sign of support for his candidacy". Shepherd (2020) drew similar conclusions through an analysis of the relationship between Reddit's content sorting algorithm and The\_Donald's dominant presence on Reddit's front page. Shepherd highlights the interplay between sorting algorithms and those who use them to persuade and disproportionately amplify certain content. Shepherd (2020:12) describes The\_Donald's "takeover" of Reddit as "an extreme example of how sorting algorithms influence the content we see on social media - and how taking advantage of those algorithms [is] rhetorical".

A concern with the use of Reddit's platform functionality to amplify fringe viewpoints also runs throughout this literature. Zannettou et al (2018) found that The\_Donald was particularly effective in promoting Internet memes to other online communities, and existed as part of a broader ecosystem of 'fringe' web communities that created and shared humorous visual content, including that which was identifiable as political or racist in tone or intent. The\_Donald itself therefore appeared to play significant role in promoting such content from less well-known parts of the Internet to a 'mainstream' audience, including political and racist content. Shepherd (2020:12) also demonstrated the impact of The\_Donald's 'rhetorical' use of Reddit's sorting algorithms, arguing that:

"...amplification does not happen through the quality of the content but through taking advantage of the algorithms - and how it sorts content"

In this way, The\_Donald has been recognised for its disruptive – yet undeniably effective – use of Reddit's platform functionality and has therefore also analysed in terms of the impact of Reddit's attempts to contain and manage the subreddit's influence through restrictions and sanctions. The way in which The\_Donald's users engaged with the texts they shared was evidently shaped significantly by their effective use of Reddit functionality, making good use of the platform's voting system to promote particular



content. This is supported by evidence that The\_Donald was significantly impacted by interventions by Reddit's administrators that restricted its ability to use Reddit functionality. Much of this focuses on the 2019 'quarantine' imposed on The\_Donald by Reddit's administrators that significantly restricted the visibility of the subreddit, and the later 2020 removal of The\_Donald from the platform for frequent rules violations. However, the analysis of moderation, banning and community migration on Reddit predates the rise of The\_Donald, focusing on an earlier wave of bans of hateful subreddits in 2015. Saleem and Ruths (2018:8) analysed the effects of banning one of these subreddits, r/fatpeoplehate - a subreddit dedicated to harassment and body shaming, and found that the ban led to a significant number of users to "completely cease commenting on Reddit in any way".

Chandrasekharan et al (2020) investigated the impact of Reddit's 'quarantine' of two subreddits, r/TheRedPill and r/The\_Donald. Their analysis indicated that quarantine was effective in reducing flow of new users to both subreddits. After quarantine, The\_Donald saw a slight increase in post activity. Use of racist terms on The\_Donald did not change after the quarantine, indicating that the measure failed in "one of the primary goals of quarantining": to cause subreddit users to "rethink their behaviour" (Chandrasekharan 2020:11). Ribeiro et al (2020:13) drew similar conclusions, finding that moderation and restriction measures worked to "significantly hamper activity and growth" on subreddit communities that attempted to migrate their entire community to other platforms following intervention by Reddit's administrators. Not only did the communities studied see a reduction in their ability to attract new members, but the members that did remain both "were more active on Reddit before the migration" and "*reduced* their overall activity after they went to the new platform" (Ribeiro et al 2020:13, emphasis in original).

This strand of research suggests that outright banning a subreddit is an effective way of preventing the behaviour that occurs within it. Users may attempt to migrate to other parts of Reddit or to alternative platforms, yet this is rarely successful and leads to a reduction in user numbers and diminishing activity from those that do migrate. Overall, this suggests that the user base of a subreddit is not easily separable from the context and functionality of the specific online space in which it was formed, giving further weight to the notion of subreddits as distinctive publics grounded in a particular platform context.

## Summary

Existing research into The\_Donald has found that the subreddit's significance came largely from its participants' successful use of Reddit functionality in a way that was often antagonistic and disruptive to other users of the platform (Carman et al 2018; Mills 2018; Shepherd et al 2020). The\_Donald was something of an outlier on Reddit in its support for Donald Trump and its attacks on othered outsiders – including Reddit itself. However, in other respects The\_Donald was a good fit on Reddit, defined by a distinctive vernacular (Jungherr et al 2021), and attracting users with a focus on humour and entertainment value that may have transcended its users political loyalties (Roozenbeek and Salvador Palau 2017). The\_Donald also clearly exhibited characteristics of an echo chamber in its users' reaction to external content (Zimmer et al 2019), but, as expected, its users did not avoid interaction with outsiders (de Francisci Morales et al 2021, Guest et al 2018) or dissonant external content (Parekh et al 2020). The next chapter of this thesis will set out the core theoretical framework used for my own research into The\_Donald, which is informed by the literature discussed above and throughout this chapter. I will continue to focus on the notion of The\_Donald as an apparent 'echo chamber', yet one that may be defined more by homogeneous *responses* to shared content than the outright avoidance of dissonant texts.

## Subcultural capital and political fandom: a framework for understanding partisan media engagement

In this chapter, I will unpack the core theoretical concepts used throughout the rest of this thesis. My research seeks to understand how an ideologically homogeneous ‘echo chamber’ engaged with content that ostensibly disrupts consensus. My theoretical approach acknowledges that online platforms such as Reddit are fundamentally orientated around the sharing of external media content. The\_Donald was a partisan community of Trump supporters, but also more specifically a platform where Trump supporters could collectively consume external media content. A network defined by shared interest in a specific political candidate that primarily engages in sharing external media content in explicit support of that candidate is, almost by self-imposed definition, an ‘echo chamber’. However, I aim to unpack what this means by considering how The\_Donald’s users defined their relationship with those who were *not* participants in the subculture. If The\_Donald, as is characteristic of other political echo chambers as discussed in the previous chapter, did not avoid sharing content from hostile sources or interactions with ideological opponents, how did its users manage ostensibly ‘dissonant’ interactions with external media? What might this tell us about the strategies available to apparent ‘echo chambers’ when dealing with ostensibly dissonant content and interactions in a more general sense? Answering these questions requires a framework for analysing how participants in partisan networks engage with external content, and how they are able to do so in a way that reinforces established consensus - even when the content engaged with would appear to disrupt this consensus.

To answer these questions, I draw on Sarah Thornton’s (1995) account of the UK dance club subculture, particularly the interrelated concepts of the mainstream as a ‘useful myth’ and of subcultural capital - the acquired knowledges and proficiencies that mark insiders as distinct from this mainstream. Thornton’s definition of the mainstream differs from other analyses of subculture (notably Hebdige 1979) in that the ‘mainstream’ is acknowledged to not be an objective, definable social phenomenon, but rather something imagined by subcultural insiders as a “perpetually absent, denigrated *other*” (Thornton 1996:5) against which insiders can then define themselves. The mainstream is, in this way, a “useful myth” that is used by insiders in pragmatic ways to identify “a homogeneous crowd to which they don’t belong” (Thornton 1995:99). Analysing how subcultural

participants define the ‘mainstream’ from which they are ostensibly distinct can therefore reveal much about insider status is maintained through negative depictions of outsiders, rather than clear definitions of what it means to be an insider. This account of the mainstream will then be considered in relation to Reddit’s ‘subreddit’ system, which I will explain as highly conducive to the creation of distinct subcultures on the platform that are understood by Reddit users as indicative of particular tastes and values.

This discussion of the mainstream will be followed by an analysis of the related concept of subcultural capital, the accumulation of which confers insider status within communities that define themselves in opposition to a mythologised ‘mainstream’ as described above. I will discuss the relevance of this framework to ‘disembodied’ online communities with few clear markers of identity, low barriers to entry and pseudo-anonymous participants. In such an environment, the accumulated knowledges and competencies required to engage meaningfully with the *functionality* of a given platform are analogous to more evidently ‘embodied’ forms of subcultural capital, such as fashion sense, slang or dance styles. Subcultural capital provides a framework for analysing how the accumulation of this specialist knowledge relates to membership and insider status through distinction from those who lack such knowledge, making a shared stock of familiar reference points, practices and conventions of format and style markers of who ‘insiders’ are in relation to everybody else.

Finally, this chapter will engage with the literature on political fandoms, a particular kind of subculture dedicated to the support of a particular cause or candidate through selective consumption of media texts (Sandvoss 2012). This provides a valuable framework for engaging with an online network that is defined fundamentally by sharing content taken from external media fields. I will engage with the notion that fandom is a “tactic of the disempowered” (Jenkins 1992: 24) due to the fact that media fandoms typically have little control over the content that is produced by the creators of the media that they follow, yet are empowered to re-frame and re-contextualise his content by selective engagement with *parts* of the text. I assert, following Van Zoonen (2005) and especially Sandvoss (2012, 2013) and Dean (2017), that the relationship that a niche political fandom has with the mainstream media can be seen to operate in a similar way. Just as fans of a particular media franchise may be disappointed in the content produced by creators and authors, so too are political supporters likely to be disappointed by mainstream media representations of their chosen cause or candidate. Understanding The\_Donald as a political fan subculture, defined by recognition of a stock of subcultural capital that asserts opposition to an imagined mainstream grounds the analysis presented in the empirical chapters of this thesis. Throughout the rest of this chapter, I will unpack

this framework in specific relation to Reddit's functionality.

### **Context: Reddit as a platform for content sharing**

Reddit is a social media platform orientated around the sharing and curation of content either taken from external media fields or created by participants themselves. At its peak in 2018, Reddit was the 4<sup>th</sup> most-visited website in the USA, second only to Google, YouTube and FaceBook, yet has consistently attracted far less academic and media attention than this popularity would suggest (Marantz 2018). Reddit is made up of smaller networks called subreddits: distinct, somewhat isolated communities created by Reddit users to share, discuss and curate content relating to a specific common interest. Subreddits range from large and general in scope, such as r/news or r/gaming, to far smaller networks catering to niche hobbies, small towns and local sports teams. A single, site-wide Reddit account typically allows full access to all subreddits and, at the time of data collection, could be created in seconds with no email verification. This means that there are few formal barriers to full participation in any specific subreddit. However, subreddits are largely self-moderating and created by Reddit users themselves with minimal oversight from site administrators. This means that whilst individual communities are subject to Reddit-wide rules and established norms, practices distinct to each subreddit typically emerge and define the bounds of meaningful participation (Massanari 2015; Massanari 2017b; Chandrasekharan et al 2017).

Practices of participation on Reddit are shaped by the platform's focus on the sharing and curation of content, which creates a link between the popularity of a contribution and its visibility to other users. The primary and most impactful form of participation on Reddit is the 'post'. Posts can simply be a few lines of text written by an individual author, but are more typically links to material hosted elsewhere on the web, framed with a short explanatory title. Post titles are displayed as a list, by default ordered by an algorithm that prioritises posts that quickly receive positive attention from other users via Reddit's voting system. Posts that receive a high number of 'up' votes, and proportionally fewer 'down' votes, are made more visible, appearing higher up the list. This means that voting a post 'up' directly impacts its visibility, enabling all users to play a part in curating the content shared to a subreddit. In this way, all participants have a small degree of agency in shaping the subreddits that they participate in. As will be explored below, this also gives users an implicit stake in the identity of any subreddits they participate in, which are largely defined by the content shared to them and the way in which other users interact with this content through the voting system.

By default, only the 25 most popular posts are displayed when visiting a subreddit, and reaching this 'front page' is therefore both an indicator of interest and approval from the community as well as a gateway to further attention from more casual observers. Posts that are extremely popular may even reach Reddit's 'r/all' section, a page that amalgamates extremely popular content from across the various subreddits, acting as the 'front page' of a site that has itself been described as the "front page of the Internet" (Marantz 2018). On the other hand, unpopular posts that receive few 'up' votes or comments are rendered largely invisible, buried several pages deep in a sea of other contributions that have failed to receive significant interaction from other participants. This is particularly true on large and fast moving subreddits, such as The\_Donald. Whereas smaller subreddits are slow moving enough that posts typically remain on a single page for some time, the speed and size of The\_Donald meant that anything that did not quickly receive attention and interaction from its participants was pushed further and further into obscurity, replaced by more immediately popular content.

These features of Reddit as a platform orientated around economies of attention and visibility shaped the practices that characterised The\_Donald and made it impactful (Carman et al 2018; Mills 2018; Prakasam and Huxtable-Thomas 2020; Shepherd 2020). Reddit functionality facilitates the coordination of individual interactions with shared content into a form of the loosely defined, decentralised networks of collective action described by Bennet and Segerberg (2012) as *connective* action. Individual acts of participation in the form of posting, commenting and voting are coordinated through Reddit's platform functionality and the implicit subcultural practices that make these individual contributions meaningful to other participants. In this way, individual contributions reference and maintain established consensuses through their repetition. Posts typically share textual or visual content from the external media and cultural fields. However, this content is rarely shared 'as is'. In addition to the content shared, posts also require a title and can be accompanied by additional explanatory text by the author. This gives participants agency to frame the content that they share in ways that may depart significantly from its original context.

The combination of a high volume of users, high rate of posting and relative anonymity afforded by a platform that prioritises the content users share over individual user profiles and allows new accounts to be created with no verification means that posting 'successful' content by metric of 'up' votes and attention is one of the few markers of insider status within a given subreddit. Like other fast moving, pseudo-anonymous communities that have similarly low barriers to entry, posting content that is meaningful

to other users reflects an accumulation of knowledge of often-implicit conventions of style and content and the competence to adhere to these conventions correctly (see McArthur 2008; Milner 2013; Miltner 2014; Miltner and Highfield 2017; Katz and Shifman 2017; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017; Phillips and Milner 2017). The size, speed and open nature of a large subreddit (as The\_Donald was) means that recognition of fellow insiders by reputation or username is likely impossible. Instead, in a manner consistent with other fast moving, pseudo-anonymous communities (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017), insider status can only be communicated through contributions that reflect an accumulation of subcultural capital in the form of the insider knowledge and competencies required to participate meaningfully in the subreddit.

To participate in Reddit is to participate in an economy of attention and, like other social media platforms that operate under similar principles, this economy is shaped by the platform's functionality (boyd and Ellison 2007; Tufekci 2013). The\_Donald's impact on Reddit - and the wider political and media spheres - was largely due to its participants' success in harnessing this attention economy through effective use of Reddit functionality (Carman 2018; Mills 2018; Shepherd 2020). The subreddit's user base was large - growing to over 400,000 in the main period of data collection and reaching nearly 800,000 before it was banned from Reddit in 2020. Using Reddit's voting functionality, this large and active network could quickly elevate a story from an obscure news source or social media post to an audience of potentially hundreds of thousands of Trump devotees (Zannettou et al. 2018). This granted The\_Donald significance both within Reddit itself and in broader discourses surrounding the Trump administration. The\_Donald became significant due to its potency in elevating content from the depths of Internet obscurity to a more mainstream audience (Carman et al 2018; Zannettou et al 2018; Shepherd 2020). The Trump administration itself even shared content likely originating from The\_Donald's front page and popularised - or even created - by its users (Gabbat 2017). However, this also meant that The\_Donald's users were constantly engaging with outsiders both in the external media and political fields, as well as within Reddit itself. Below, I will discuss how The\_Donald was situated as a distinctive *subculture within a subculture*, as a niche community operating on a platform that itself borders the mainstream and subcultural or 'weird' Internets (Massanari et al 2015; Phillips 2015; Massanari 2017b; Phillips and Milner 2017).

### **Subreddit subcultures**

The vast size of Reddit and the rapid rate at which new content is added to the platform

across its hundreds of thousands of subreddits means that, at every stage of participation, Reddit users are required to engage with systems of classification and distinction that structure both content and the users that engage with it. Subreddits act as the primary form of categorisation of content and participants on Reddit, yet the fact that they are largely self-moderating and decentralised means that the way in which this unifying interest is defined is not fixed, and dependent the content that users share and how they choose to share it. Because of this, subreddits often have subtle distinctions and hierarchies that may be unclear to the uninitiated.

For example, there are two subreddits with over one million subscribers dedicated to the discussion of video and computer games: *r/gaming* and *r/games*. At a glance, these communities appear very similar, yet each has expectations of its users that set it apart from other ostensibly comparable groups. These distinctions largely relate to which content users choose to share, and the format they choose to share it in. With a notably stricter set of rules, *r/games* explicitly bans contributions containing “memes, comics, funny screenshots [and] arts-and-crafts” (*r/games* 2021). In contrast, *r/gaming* allows “(almost) anything relating to games” (*r/gaming* 2021), and the more humorous content banned by *r/games* is commonplace. Indeed, the rules of *r/games* explicitly encourage users to instead visit *r/gaming* if they want content that is ‘entertaining’ rather than informative or thought provoking. This dynamic is further emphasised by the fact that *r/gaming* is a ‘default’ subreddit, meaning that all new Reddit accounts are automatically subscribed to it, whereas *r/games* must be intentionally searched for and joined by clicking a ‘subscribe’ button before a user can fully participate. In this way, participation *r/games* is explicitly positioned as a marker of taste and distinction from the average Reddit user. By electing to participate in *r/games* rather than *r/gaming*, a subset of Reddit users classify themselves in a way that marks them as separate from the average video game enthusiast on the platform. In turn, the fact that particular users seek out *r/games* specifically over the ‘default’ *r/gaming* maintains the subreddit’s role as indicative of particular tastes and status. The slightly less accessible nature of *r/games* means that participating in it is a choice indicative of certain, ostensibly more refined preferences, in a way that makes both *r/games* itself and the people who participate in it distinct from everyone else.

The structure and functionality of the Reddit platform is therefore highly conducive to the creation of communities that can be best understood as *subcultures*. Reddit has an enduring reputation as a space dominated by online “nerd” subcultures (Massanari 2015), and this is coupled with the platform’s association with misogynistic ‘toxic technocultures’ (Massanari 2017b) that the site’s administrators have struggled to shed as the platform



has gained popularity (Marantz 2018). The platform also goes largely ignored in mainstream discourse, at least when compared to other social media spaces such as Twitter - despite the fact that Reddit outranks Twitter in web traffic both globally and in the US (Alexa 2021). Politicians, corporations and other public figures routinely maintain presences on Twitter and Facebook, yet make far more intermittent appearances on Reddit. Despite his presidential campaign's pioneering use of social media (Anderson 2015), Barack Obama's single visit to Reddit in 2012 was brief and never repeated. Even Donald Trump himself, a prolific user of Twitter and Facebook, only made three posts to the *The\_Donald*, which throughout his presidency was one of the largest networks of Trump supporters on the Internet. Only Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders maintained anything like a sustained presence on the platform as part of a US presidential campaign, yet still posted only eight times in the 2016 election cycle (although this increased to a more impressive 26 in the run up to 2020).

Reddit's 'outsider' status can also be seen in the way in which its users interact with the political sphere themselves. In the run up to the 2016 election, subreddits supporting the candidacies of Donald Trump (*r/The\_Donald*) and Bernie Sanders (*r/SandersForPresident*) were far more popular than those of more 'mainstream' candidates such as Hillary Clinton (*r/HillaryClinton*). By the end of 2016, the most popular Hillary Clinton subreddit had approximately 40,000 subscribers, yet the most popular subreddits for Sanders and Trump had more than 215,000 and 366,000 respectively. (Roozenbeek and Salvador Palau, 2017). Roozenbeek and Salvador Palau (2017:10) suggest that the culture of Reddit as a platform may have been a factor in the relative unpopularity of Hillary Clinton when compared to candidates perceived as more "anti-establishment", such as Sanders or Trump. The knowledges and competencies required to participate in Reddit - particularly on maligned or niche subreddits - are shaped by the platform's demographics and position within the wider media sphere, and this may have been reflected at least partially in the relative popularity of male, 'outsider' candidates Trump and Sanders when compared to female, 'establishment' candidate Hillary Clinton during the 2016 election campaign.

As discussed above, the subreddit system means that participants in one subreddit are necessarily defining themselves in opposition to *other*, similar subreddits. The choice to participate in *r/games* is also an implicit rejection of the 'default' video game subreddit *r/gaming*. By choosing to participate in one from a range of choices, Reddit users are defining themselves as a particular *kind* of Reddit user - one who participates in *r/games* rather than *r/gaming*, for example - which says something about that user, as well as about *r/games*, *r/gaming* and anyone who chooses to participate in one over the other. In the case of political subreddits, the choices available range from the ostensibly very

general r/politics to a diverse set of communities of increasing specificity - from r/conservative to r/republican to r/The\_Donald. Whilst all politically interested Reddit users might participate in r/politics, those who participate in r/conservative are unlikely to participate in r/socialism. However, other distinctions exist that are less obvious to an outside observer. The need for both r/republican and r/democrats makes intuitive sense, but the distinctions between r/conservative (which is almost entirely US-centric), r/republican and r/The\_Donald are less clear until one becomes acclimatised to the unwritten rules and norms that distinguish each one. In choosing to participate in r/The\_Donald, rather than r/politics or even r/republican or r/conservative, Reddit users are making a choice that renders both themselves and the subreddit they choose to post in as distinct from other subreddits.

Despite this, it is important to note that subreddits are not entirely isolated from one another, and the Reddit platform has several features that promote content posted to a specific subreddit to a wider audience. To that end, The\_Donald became known largely due to its users' ability to take over Reddit's shared 'front page' with posts directly addressing the rest of the Reddit community (Shepherd 2020). This 'front page', r/all, collates the most popular content from across the vast range of subreddits. This means that if a post on *any* subreddit quickly received a particularly high number of 'up' votes, it could potentially be seen by a far wider range of Reddit users than it would if it were confined to the subreddit it was originally shared to. The\_Donald's users became extremely efficient at manipulating Reddit's functionality to elevate posts to this 'front page', and used this both to proliferate political messages and - infamously - to antagonise other Reddit users and administrators for alleged unfair treatment of the subreddit (Lecher 2016). In this way, The\_Donald's users were clearly very aware of the rest of Reddit and their own relation to a platform on which they were a rare pro-Trump outpost (Guest 2018), yet this appeared to be an antagonistic relationship that the subreddit's users fully embraced. In this way, an active relationship with outsiders was clearly explicitly understood by The\_Donald's users and significant to the subreddit's understanding of what it was and what it was for.

## **The Mainstream**

This relationship with the 'mainstream' of Reddit and of the wider political and media spheres was clearly significant to The\_Donald's participants. The 'mainstream' is, however, a difficult concept to define. Huber (2013:4) suggests that whilst the mainstream has been "deployed regularly" and plays an "integral" role in scholarly work on youth and

popular music subcultures, this role has been largely “unacknowledged” and “has remained largely undefined and under-theorised”. In these accounts, Huber (2013:4) argues, the mainstream plays a role as the “undefined, multi-purpose centre to the periphery, the ‘other’ to subcultural, alternative, underground, outsider, folk and art cultures”. Thornton (1995:93) offers a similar critique, highlighting the “inconsistent fantasies of the mainstream” that are “rampant in sub-cultural studies”, offering particular critique of Hebdige’s (1979) highly influential book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* as representative of works deploying the mainstream as a “yardstick” against which an inherently-subversive youth culture is defined, whilst remaining itself “abstract and ahistorical”. In many of these accounts, the mainstream is deployed to make sense of subcultural processes like ‘selling out’ or ‘going commercial’, imagined as exchanging subcultural authenticity for mainstream recognition and the financial rewards this may entail – but leave the “mainstream” itself remains either assumed and undefined or uncritically explained in the terms of subcultural insiders themselves (Huber 2013).

In contrast to this, Thornton’s (1995) account of 1990s UK dance music subcultures acknowledges the often inconsistent way that participants in these subcultures depicted ‘the mainstream’. Thornton focuses on these discrepancies as a core part of her analysis, engaging with participant accounts of ‘the mainstream’ in terms of what these accounts what say about how subcultures define *themselves*:

“...although most clubbers and ravers characterise their own crowd as mixed or difficult to classify, they are generally happy to identify a homogeneous crowd to which they don’t belong” (Thornton 1995:99)

In this way, the mainstream allows subcultural in-groups to define themselves in terms of distinction and opposition whilst maintaining a guise of independence and heterogeneity. In response to how it is imagined by her informants, Thornton’s analysis largely rejects the idea of the ‘mainstream’ as an empirically identifiable social group, but rather as a rhetorical tool used by subcultural insiders to define themselves in apparent opposition to everyone else:

“...whether these ‘mainstreams’ reflect empirical social groups or not, they exhibit the burlesque exaggerations of an imagined other. Teds and Tracys, like lager louts, sloans, preppies and yuppies, are more than euphemisms of social class and status, they demonstrate ‘how we create groups with words’ (Bourdieu 1990:139) ” (Thornton 1995:101)

These “burlesque exaggerations” are not intended to be genuine representations of specific individuals or groups, but rather an embodiment of inauthenticity and ignorance on behalf of the other, which can be used to make distinctions between authentic in-group affiliation and an outside interloper. Thornton (1995:99) describes the role of “techno Tracy”, a mythologised personification of inauthentic performance of subcultural practices associated with more mainstream edges of the UK club scene and an “almost universally accepted stereotype” of mainstream clubs as “a place where ‘Sharon and Tracy dance around their handbags’”, characterised by insiders as “drunken cattle markets” full of “tacky men drinking pints of best bitter pull girls in white high heels and Miss Selfridge’s miniskirts”. These exaggerated mainstream depictions serve as the ‘useful myth’ against which ‘insider’ status can be understood as meaningful to subcultural participants without needing to be clearly defined. Thornton highlights that ‘Sharon and Tracy’ are ascribed with connotations of both gender and class that serve to place them outside of the classless, universalist ideal of the ‘authentic’ club subculture:

“...the activities attributed to ‘Sharon and Tracy’ should by no means be confused with the actual dance culture of working-class girls. The distinction reveals more about the social world of hardcore clubbers because, to quote Bourdieu again, ‘nothing classifies somebody more than the way he or she classifies (Bourdieu 1990: 132)” (Thornton 1995: 101)

The loose way in which the ‘mainstream’ is defined works to obscure the demographic factors barely hidden below the surface of these personifications of inauthenticity, in turn obscuring the way in which broader structural hierarchies and power dynamics are reproduced within subcultures that purport to be outside or even in direct opposition to them. This allows insider status to be defined in terms of knowledge and competencies, a group of individuals ‘in the know’ and united because of this insider knowledge. The ‘myth’ of the mainstream is that it is homogeneous, presented in opposition to subcultural insiders who are defined by an apparent individualism. This distinction between the homogeneity of the ‘mainstream’ and the apparently “difficult to classify” crowd of insiders underpins a range of other binary distinctions between the subcultural ‘us’ and the mainstream ‘them’:

US	THEM
Alternative	Mainstream
Hip/cool	Straight/square/naff
Independent	Commercial
Authentic	False/phoney
Rebellious/radical	Conformist/conservative
Specialist genres	Pop
Insider knowledge	Easily accessible information
Minority	Majority
Heterogeneous	Homogeneous
Youth	Family
Classless	Classed
Masculine culture	Feminine culture

(Adapted from Thornton 1995:115)

Focusing on the mainstream as it is understood by subcultural participants - and applying a critical eye to this understanding - facilitates an analysis of the mainstream for its “ideological functions and social ramifications” (Thornton 1995:98) rather than a search for a singular all-encompassing social group that likely does not exist. The mainstream can therefore be analysed not for what it is, but for how it is articulated and used rhetorically by a subculture that defines itself in relation to this “useful myth”. Distinction from the mainstream is not maintained through explicit reference to demographic factors - even if these play a role in structuring a subculture predicated, in the case of Thornton’s own case study, on the tastes of usually white, usually male young people of similar class background. Instead, insiders recognise in others (and simultaneously assert for themselves) distinction from the mainstream through the accumulation of *subcultural capital* in the form of the specialist knowledge and distinctive competencies required to participate meaningfully in the practices that define the subculture.

### **Subcultural capital on Reddit**

Thornton’s (1995) account of ‘subcultural capital’ modifies Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of ‘cultural capital’ in the context of a community defined by its ostensibly wilful abstention from mainstream systems of status and hierarchy. Subcultural capital is in many ways analogous to Bourdieu’s cultural capital - defined largely by artistic and culinary tastes,

but is distinct in that it is specifically “defined against the supposed obscene accessibility of mass culture” (Thornton 1995: 121). For Bourdieu (1984), cultural capital is a marker of ‘good taste’, accumulated largely through childhood in the form of experiences that are usually only accessible to those with a pre-existing stock of *economic* capital, such as visiting the opera or dining at an expensive restaurant. In this way, economic capital grounds the accumulation of other, more discreet markers of status that act as cultural capital. In essence, economic capital grants access to life experiences through which particular tastes are acquired and developed that then act as markers of a privileged social status to those also in the know. Like Bourdieu’s cultural capital, *subcultural* capital too is a marker of ‘good taste’, but this taste is defined in relation to an explicit rejection of ‘mainstream’ tastes and perceived values. Distinction from the ‘mainstream’, however it is imagined or mythologized as described above, therefore acts as another form of value judgement. In this way, subcultural capital is not valued in its potential exchange for economic capital or as a marker of social standing resulting from existing wealth and privilege, but rather in the access to status and space within subcultural niches that are claimed by those who inhabit them to be built on a rejection of existing social hierarchies.

Thornton’s adaptation of Bourdieu’s account of social interaction as exchanges of capital that confer distinction from others therefore provides a highly effective framework for analysing subcultures on Reddit. As discussed above, the platform’s many subreddits have few explicit barriers to entry yet retain a distinctive character and culture of their own, grounded in both formal and unwritten rules and – typically – through a distinction from other, similar subreddits. For more niche subreddits, this distinction both works to guide the kind of content that is permissible to share, but also confers insider status on those who are able to recognise these distinctions and participate in ways that others could not. Just as participants in *r/games* might assert that their ‘serious’ contributions would not be recognised as valuable by participants in the more ‘mainstream’ *r/gaming*, so too do participants in *The\_Donald* simultaneously complain of *and celebrate* that the content that they share is ignored or forbidden by an apparent political establishment (Flores-Saviaga et al 2018).

### **Subcultural Capital in online environments**

Thornton’s account of subcultural capital ties insider status to the knowledge and competencies embodied in fashion choices, record collections and subcultural knowledge. However on Reddit, a disembodied, largely anonymous setting that de-emphasises user profiles in favour of content, users are defined only by how they participate in the practices of sharing and curation that define the platform. Just as subcultural capital in a

dance club is embodied in “using (but not over-using) current slang and looking as if you were born to perform the latest dance styles” (Thornton 1995:11-12), subcultural capital in an online setting is defined by the knowledge and competencies reflected in the way in which participants engage with one another through the functionality of their chosen platform. Whilst some conventional markers of (sub)cultural capital relating to visual appearance, fashion and music taste may be diminished or erased in a disembodied online setting, these are replaced by markers of social standing and approval that are dependent on platform functionality. In the case of Reddit, the platform is orientated around the content that users share, rather than a focus on user profiles common to traditional social media platforms such as FaceBook or Twitter. During the period this research was conducted, Reddit lacked features such as customisable user profiles, forum avatars or signatures - reducing individual participants to the username attached to the content that they shared or discussed. However, in such a pseudo-anonymous setting, subcultural capital can be objectified in subtle ways that are distinctive of the platform functionality that does exist.

The\_Donald’s use of a distinctive vernacular and manipulation of Reddit functionality to entertain insiders and exclude outsiders has already been discussed earlier in this thesis. These features worked to promote a collective identity and separated long-term members from newcomers (Flores-Saviaga et al 2018). As demonstrated by Prakasam and Huxtable-Thomas (2020), The\_Donald’s users were able to customise the layout of the subreddit in a way that invested insider status in every interaction and replaced basic Reddit functionality with alternatives that referenced in-jokes familiar to insiders but obfuscating to outsiders - such as replacing the ‘report’ function on posts to a Trump-inspired ‘deport’ button. These tactics are not unique to The\_Donald, and indicative of the way in which subcultural capital can be accumulated through learning how to use the functionality of online platforms in ways distinctive to particular networks. For example, Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017) demonstrate the way in which shared in-jokes such as internet memes can be used as a form of subcultural capital, marking insider status as defined by the ability to both create *and recognise* authentic memes. Miltner (2014) similarly emphasises the role of humorous texts as “part of a complex, interconnected, and esoterically self-referential body of texts that are inextricably bound to the context of their creation and consumption”. Milner’s (2013) analysis of memes created by web users affiliated with the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement demonstrated that whilst much of the visual content produced by these networks often appeared to have little meaning when read by outsiders outside of their wider subcultural context, they actually formed part of a broad discourse centred around a diverse array of political and popular culture references. In this way, humorous texts such as memes produced by web communities may only make

sense when understood in relation to other memes, or meme formats, or even popular culture more broadly. In this way, the competency to both create and engage with these texts is a form of taste, acquired over time through participation and exposure to particular niche communities. To that end, Seiffert-Brockman et al (2017) found that as 'spreadable' content migrates across multiple online platforms, it is typically subject to practices that creatively remix the 'original' media in both content and format in ways that reflect the values, tastes and practices of particular online communities.

This means that participants in these spaces are invested in preserving the shared meaning of these practices as a recognisable marker of insider status. As Miltner (2014) notes, "the more referential knowledge needed to get the joke, the higher the barriers to entry, and the more exclusive the group feels". The meaning of such practices is dependent on fellow participants recognising this meaning, and allows participants to engage with others under the assumption of a shared body of knowledge that facilitates "generating a group identity as sophisticated critical fans" (Baym 2005:28). This incentivises participants in these networks to correct and chastise those who use familiar reference points 'incorrectly', for fear that this could dilute their meaning and therefore disrupt the insider status and status amongst insiders afforded by their correct use (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017). In this way, the textual content produced by niche online communities and the ability to recognise, interact with, create and enjoy this content can be understood as highly analogous to the music tastes, fashion styles, slang and dance moves of an 'offline' subculture. These markers of subcultural identity define insiders in opposition to an imagined homogenous other, conferring status "in the eye of the relevant beholder" (Thornton 1995:11) and facilitating mutual recognition and collective identity in a space that lacks conventional markers of identity.

### **Subcultural capital in political subcultures**

Thornton's account of subcultural capital is built on a notion of authenticity and status that is disrupted if its associated styles and tastes become more accessible to a wider audience. However, political subcultures ostensibly differ in that in trying to proliferate a political message they ostensibly *actively want* their reference points, ideas and practices to reach a mass audience. In the case of The\_Donald, the entire subreddit appeared to be built around the proliferation of media texts, with attempts to reach a wider audience through Reddit's shared front page being a core practice as detailed above. However, as will be explored in the empirical chapters of this thesis, support for Trump and maintenance of a boundary between insiders and outsiders was not always the same thing on The\_Donald, and this framework facilitates a nuanced analysis of that apparent



contradiction. As the existing literature on The\_Donald has identified, the subreddit's distinction from the rest of Reddit and a wider mainstream political establishment was a key part of the way in which its participants built a collective identity (Roozenbeek and Salvador Palau 2017, Gaudette et al 2020). If The\_Donald's distinctive practices, ideas and media texts were not able to be framed as something ignored or suppressed by outsiders, then they would lose their function as a marker of 'insider' status. In this way, whilst The\_Donald's users were ostensibly dedicated to the furthering of their own political cause, gaining attention and promoting a message of electoral success, they were also concerned about maintaining the distinction between themselves and the political and media establishments against which they were defined. This dynamic will be discussed in depth in the second and third empirical chapters of this thesis, which explore what happened when the two goals of Trump support and maintaining a boundary between insiders and the 'establishment' appeared to contradict one another.

### **Political Subcultures as Fandoms**

The\_Donald's users therefore appeared to be in a difficult position: situated on a platform orientated around the sharing and proliferation of external media content, yet defined by opposition to and distinction from the potential audience that this functionality granted its users. The subreddit's users clearly made effective use of this functionality, both in sharing mainstream texts and, most visibly, in promoting its own content so that the wider Reddit audience could see it (Shepherd 2020). However, this is complicated by other data indicating the important role played by conflict with outsiders (Flores-Saviaga et al 2018; Gaudette et al 2020). The subreddit's frequent interactions with the rest of Reddit and external media field more broadly invites the question of how they interacted with seemingly dissonant media texts in a way that maintained the directive of continual Trump support.

The\_Donald was in this way defined by practices of sharing content from external media sources, but from a position of self-identified exclusion and distinction from the mainstream media sphere. In his 1992 text *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins made a similar observation about the position of subcultures of media fans. Jenkins identified fans of popular media as subcultures defined by their consumption of texts produced by powerful television networks and publishers, yet afforded significant agency in how they consumed these texts, often interpreting them in ways that resisted the assumed or hegemonic reading invested in them by their creators. In this way, fan subcultures are defined by "cultural marginality and social weakness" (Jenkins 1992:26) and explicitly disenfranchised from wider logics of media

consumption and production. In contrast, television networks and other producers of media are depicted as vast empires, from which fans can only wrest a small degree of control over the media that defines their identity as fans. In this way, Jenkins describes fans as “textual poachers”:

“Like the poachers of old, fans operate from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness... Fans must beg with the networks to keep their favourite shows on the air, must lobby producers to provide desired plot developments or to protect the integrity of favourite characters” (Jenkins 1992:26-27)

Jenkins’ draws on de Certeau’s claim of reading as a series of “advances and retreats, tactics and games played with the text” (de Certeau 1984:175, cited in Jenkins 1992:26) to argue that readers “fragment texts and reassemble the broken shards according to their own blueprints, salvaging bits and pieces of the found material in making sense of their own social experience” (Jenkins 1992:26). A vast media landscape requires this kind of selective engagement, of ‘salvaging’ or ‘poaching’ texts in ways that reflect readers’ own lives and experiences. All consumers are therefore “selective users of a vast media culture whose treasures, though corrupt, hold wealth that can be mined and refined for alternative uses”. Once again, Jenkins’ here depicts this ‘textual poaching’ as inherently an act of the marginalised. If the production of any kind of popular media is inherently reflective of hegemonic power relations, a popular reading that defies authorial intent is inherently an act of resistance (See also Hall et al 1980).

The poaching metaphor therefore rests on an assumption of an imbalance of media power between fans and the producers of the media texts that fans consume. This is indicative of a common criticism (McGuigan 2002; Gray 2017) of Jenkins’ early work - that fans are depicted as inherently progressive, inherently a form of resistance to hegemonic cultural norms. This assumption of power imbalance is of course disrupted by fandoms that are not made up of the disempowered, or are engaging with media texts in ways that reinforce hegemony, rather than subvert it (Gray 2017). However, even if this notion of asymmetric power and resistance is, like the ‘mainstream’ described above, a ‘useful myth’ of its own, it can therefore be analysed for its role as an important rhetorical device in participants’ accounts of who they are, what they are doing and why they do it.

The notion of self-identified disempowerment and asymmetric conflict with a powerful media sphere is highly appealing in the context of researching The\_Donald. The subreddit was largely known for its ability to make successful use of the Reddit platform to proliferate information that would otherwise be obscure. The subreddit’s influence on

mainstream media discourse was almost entirely dependent on taking content from elsewhere, subverting it, and using the functionality of the Reddit platform to proliferate it once more. Jenkins' account of fandom as inherently a "tactic of the disempowered" (Jenkins 1992: 24) is certainly not reflective of a community advocating for a billionaire US President and an administration defined by policies and rhetoric hostile to marginalised groups (Abramowitz and McCoy 2018). However, Thornton's notion of 'the mainstream' as a 'useful myth' demonstrates how an assertion of exclusion or disempowerment relative to dominant forces of cultural production can be a powerful rhetorical device in articulating insider status. The extent to which certain groups are indeed excluded from a 'mainstream' media does not necessarily align with how these groups perceive their own role in the media sphere. Rather, the coherency of this narrative depends on how groups define the 'mainstream'. In this way, even if a particular subculture is not socially excluded or subordinated, these narratives remain useful and powerful. In essence, any group can engage with the media in terms that assume a hostile or ignorant establishment against which it can define itself, as this 'mainstream' is often defined in terms that reflect the subculture's own values rather than any inherent property or goal that unites those that ostensibly comprise it.

### **Political fandom as a mode of engagement with media texts**

The analogous way in which political supporters and conventional pop-culture fandoms engage with media texts has been increasingly recognised (see Street 1997; Van Zoonen 2005; Jenkins 2012), but is often limited to recognition of a *similarity* rather than a recognition that political support could be thought of as a kind of fandom in and of itself (Dean 2017). Cornell Sandvoss' account of political fandom (2012, 2013) instead understands political fandom as simply another kind of fandom, due to the distinctive way in which political supporters engage with the media texts surrounding their chosen politician, party or cause.

Due to the mediated way in which individuals in highly networked societies interact with political parties, institutions and politicians, these figures are engaged with through '*paratexts*' that circulate around them. *Paratexts* are texts that comment on a given popular text and 'invade the meaning-making process' (Gray 2010:42). In the context of a media fandom, reviews, trailers, adaptations and discussion amongst fans themselves all act as *paratexts*, supplementing and modifying the process by which the 'original' or *urtext* comes to be understood. In the context of a political subject, *paratexts* can be found in the form of official press releases, sympathetic and critical media reports, photo ops, speeches, policy documents, political cartoons and all other media purporting to represent some glimpse of the 'real' figure being depicted whilst offering some inherent commentary or perspective of their own.

However, whilst the texts surrounding a figure like Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton may claim to offer an authentic picture of the individual in question, the sheer multitude of available texts - from news reports, editorials and official statements to humorous social media postings made by other fans - affords fans significant agency in selecting which to consume and which to ignore. In this way, fan texts emerge around political figures that are *neutrosemic* - open to so many interpretations that they effectively lack any inherent meaning (Sandvoss 2005, 2012). Fan readings of political figures therefore reflect a process of curation and interpretation, as fans engage with a diverse range of media texts in a way that reflects their own expectations and values. Political fan objects are therefore subject to the a shifting balance between *urtext* and *paratext* as supporters engage with texts that support their expectations and ignore those that do not:

“Possibly more than any other audience group, supporters of political parties therefore not only construct the boundaries of their fan text, but they alongside fellow audience members take a particularly active role in contributing to the textual field from which the text is selected – contributing to a degree of polysemy that borders the absence of intersubjective meaning which I describe as ‘neutrosemic’” (Sandvoss 2012:72).

Political supporters are therefore not typically engaging with political parties directly, but through mediated texts produced by parties themselves, journalists, political opponents and members of the public. When viewed through this framework, politicians as engaged with by fans are really just a collection of media texts (or *paratexts*) that come to be considered canonical by fans. Fans have significant agency in choosing which texts to engage with and which to ignore, and therefore “construct textual boundaries” in a way that results in “loss of inherent meaning of fan texts” (Sandvoss 2005:828).

This has implications for situations when political subjects act in a way that is seen as disappointing or unexpected by their supporters. Through engaging with media texts surrounding a particular politician or party ways that are often transformative and highly creative, political supporters’ selective readings may “become unsustainable over time”, and erode “affective bond” of fandom (Sandvoss 2012:67). In other words, political supporters may come to have an understanding of their favoured politician or cause that is highly idiosyncratic and largely reflective of their own expectations rather than any inherent property of the political figure itself. When this idiosyncratic framing comes to clash with actions taken by the favoured political figure, fans are inevitably disappointed and support is lost. Sandvoss’ account therefore suggests that political fandom is predicated on the continued ability of fans to engage with the texts surrounding the fan object in ways that are coherent with their

established expectations of how the fan object should be read, which is itself built from earlier, selective engagements with texts in the media field.

For example, Sandvoss (2012) argues that the disillusionment faced by supporters of the Liberal Democrats in the UK was largely due to the fact that the actions of party leader Nick Clegg had become incompatible with the established ways in which his supporters engaged with media texts surrounding his party. The ‘meaning’ of being a Liberal Democrat supporter before their rise to power in 2010 had been built through fans’ interactions with media texts surrounding the party. However, these readings were incompatible with the Party’s decision to enter into a coalition government with the Conservative Party and support an increase in University tuition fees – something that Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg had specifically promised his party would not endorse. Earlier readings of the Liberal Democrats that had been built around engaging with texts that emphasised the party’s distinction from the Conservatives and, in particular, Nick Clegg’s specific appeals to students, had now become incompatible with the actions taken by Clegg and his party. In this way, supporters of the Liberal Democrats who had not been swayed by negative or critical media reports about the party prior to the tuition fee announcement due to the exclusion of dissonant texts now struggled to engage with actions that were incompatible with their understanding of what it meant to be a Liberal Democrat supporter.

Sandvoss (2012:71) describes this engagement as a “partisan habitus”, a means of navigating the vast multitude of competing texts – and possible interpretations of these text - surrounding a political subject and constructing meaning through this engagement with these texts. This account emphasises the exclusion of dissonant media texts - particularly those produced by political opponents. This affords fans significant resilience in maintaining trust and support of a fan object, as it allows them to exclude media texts that would disrupt their understanding of what it means to be a supporter of, for example, the Liberal Democrats. This trust is only disrupted when the actions of the fan object themselves become incompatible with the established way of reading texts surrounding the fan object. In other words, fans of the Liberal Democrats before the 2010 election could maintain a reading of the party as progressive and supportive of young people through engaging only with media texts that confirmed this reading and ignoring those that would disrupt it. However, following the party’s decision to enter into coalition with the Conservative Party and its support for a rise in University tuition fees, this reading became unsustainable.

This reading rests on two assumptions the way in which political fans engage with the media that are challenged by more recent work on online political ‘echo chambers’. Firstly, it suggests that fans will actively avoid interactions with media that is critical of their chosen candidate

and, secondly, that these interactions would likely disrupt their established reading of the fan text. However, as discussed in the above analysis of the 'echo chambers' literature, this may not be the case. If political fans are indeed engaging with texts produced by political opponents, what are they doing with these texts? Are they engaging with them in a way that actually reinforces established readings? Furthermore, Sandvoss (2012) suggests that disappointment occurs when the actions of the fan object become incompatible with the established way in which fans read texts surrounding them. However, what does this mean in the case of political fandoms that appear to be remarkably resilient to this kind of disappointment, as *The\_Donald* appeared to be? How might political fandoms engage with these moments of disappointment in a way that maintains the overall coherency of the established fan text?

This notion of fan expectations and fan agency therefore provides a useful framework for understanding how fans might react to situations where their favoured politician does something that they do not agree with. If fans are already engaging with the external media field as a hostile 'mainstream' that is inevitably biased and disappointing, how might this framework be deployed when their favoured politician does something that subverts or disappoints their expectations? Taken together, Thornton's (1995) account of the mainstream as 'useful myth' and Sandvoss' notion of fan expectations that are usually met due to the agency of fans in defining the 'boundaries' of the texts they consume provide a nuanced framework for engaging with situations where the media field is saturated with texts that attest to some undeniable disappointment, U-turn, failure or scandal surrounding the figure around which a political fandom orientates itself.

My research seeks to further analyse this picture, focusing on case studies that highlight moments where the established fan reading of Donald Trump clashed directly with the actions taken by the former President. Why is it that the fan text was not disrupted significantly by these events? How did fans engage with the texts surrounding these events in a way that was coherent with the established fan text? How do fans engage with a media field saturated with texts that are ostensibly dissonant with established fan readings and consensus understandings of the meaning of being a fan? How do fans navigate the media field in moments of disappointment? In the following chapter, 'Methodology', I will set out the research design used to answer some of these questions.

# Methodology

In this chapter, I will outline the methodology used to conduct the research presented in this thesis. My research is concerned with how meaning is made from a range of available sources of information, how these narratives come to be meaningful and coherent for large groups of loosely-connected participants and how this narrative coherence is maintained in a network that defined itself in opposition to the ‘mainstream’ media sources that dominate the textual field. Because of this, I adopted a qualitative approach grounded in the literature on ‘netnography’ and online ethnography more broadly, particularly that of Robert Kozinets (2015) and Christine Hine (2005, 2012). I will begin by outlining the broad research methodology, setting out the basic principles of netnography as they were used in my own research design and approach. This will be followed by a discussion of why Reddit and The\_Donald were selected as a field site, and how specific case studies were identified for further analysis. The chapter will conclude with an in-depth discussion of the pragmatic and ethical considerations of researching in a fast moving research field and a volatile field site, as well as some of the limitations of this approach and how I sought to respond to these.

## **Broad approach: Netnography/virtual ethnography**

The research presented in this thesis is concerned with how meaning is constructed through engagement with media texts surrounding an event, personality or idea. I am concerned with how coherent narratives of purpose and identity were maintained by a large group of loosely-connected participants in a network defined by clear and often niche political viewpoints that defined itself in opposition to the ‘mainstream’ media sources that it was frequently engaging with. With this focus on how practices emerge within a wider social and technological context, the literature on ‘netnography’ (Kozinets 2015), or ‘ethnography for the internet’ (Hine 2012) provides a highly suitable methodological approach. As described by Robert Kozinets (2015), an ethnographic approach to online research is suitable due to its status as a “holistic” approach, facilitating an engagement with large amounts of data without losing the “human” aspect of immersive, qualitative research. Due to the intimidating scale of online networks with hundreds of thousands of users, in addition to the ease of access to large datasets through easily available scraping software, there is a temptation when researching online phenomena for large-scale quantitative analyses. Kozinets’ (1998, 2002, 2015) ‘netnography’ has proven highly influential (see Costello et al 2017 and Tuncalp and Le

2014 for a critical review of the wide range of studies purporting to follow this methodology) as an alternative methodological approach to the analysis of online data grounded in “experiencing” of large amounts of data to contextualise a close, rigorous analysis of key case studies identified through an initial process of mapping the characteristically fluid boundaries of an online field site. Kozinets defines the essence of netnography as:

“*experiencing* masses of data, but only capturing and then focusing in on small amounts of high-quality data in our search [...] to focus on interpretations of the particular, in context, using our full insight and intelligence in the process” (Kozinets, 2015: 174)

Kozinets’ original (1998) formulation of netnography as a research methodology is distinctive for its more structured method than similarly immersive approaches to online ethnography, depicting distinct set of steps to follow. Following this initial, somewhat rigid formulation, Costello, McDermott and Wallace (2017) describe a “broadening” of the term netnography to incorporate an increasingly wide range of qualitative approaches to research of online phenomena that move beyond Kozinets’ initial formulation. However, in later works, Kozinets (2010, 2015) expands his more formalised approach to a wider set of guidelines and principles, offering a balance between academic rigour and the humanistic approach to procuring qualitative data and thick description inherent to ethnography in any setting. Many authors describing their work as a piece of netnography do indeed follow the steps outlined in Kozinets’ original formulation, but many others only follow some or none at all (Costello et al 2017). This has led to questions about whether these works should be considered ‘true’ netnographies (Kozinets 2010; Costello et al 2017), or the need for a categorisation of different approaches to netnography as described by Kozinets’ (2015) comprehensively revised account of the methodology in light of rapid advances in communications technology and its place in society.

A related approach, set out in Christine Hine’s (2015) *Ethnography for the Internet*, builds on her earlier pioneering work on the subject of ‘virtual ethnography’ (Hine 2000, 2005, 2008) and is somewhat looser than that of Kozinets. Hine’s approach does not set out a prescriptive set of steps to follow, but engages particularly deeply with the epistemological assumptions at the core of ethnography as a research methodology, inviting questions of presence, immersion and participation that invoke broader debates surrounding the nature of the ‘field site’ as a clearly definable space. Most obviously, online communities are not bound to a single or collection of discrete geographical locations. An early exploration of this issue is provided by Hine (2000: 64), recommending



that “the object of ethnographic enquiry can easily be reshaped by focusing on flow and connectivity rather than location and boundary as the organising principle”. This focusing on flows of information and seeing a particular online space, event or topic as a “starting point” allows for a process of mapping a field site as an important form of data collection throughout the work of Hine (2005, 2015) and in later guidance by Kozinets (2015). Hine in particular is clear that a critical approach to what Gupta and Ferguson (1997:2) identify as the “taken-for-granted” nature of the field site is only emphasised by, rather than unique to, ethnography for the Internet:

“Although we routinely speak of “the field site” in the singular, the object of study in ethnographic tradition has, in practice, rarely been a tightly bounded geographic space or cultural unit. Even where the original guiding focus might be specified as a particular place, for purposes of convenient shorthand, this is in practice only a provisional specification.” (Hine 2015: 58)

Discussing the salience of ‘virtual’ ethnography to wider debates within anthropology, Hine (2015: 61) notes that “ethnographers have also increasingly explored field sites that are defined in non-spatial terms”, invoking research into field sites that are international (Hannerz 2003) or migratory (Olwig 2003). Such forms of ethnography challenge the notion of the field site as a place ‘out there’, waiting to be discovered, and emphasises the role of the ethnographer in defining the field site through fieldwork. In essence, much of the work of an ethnographer is often in identifying the flows and dynamics that make the demarcation of a particular ‘field site’ a meaningful endeavour. As Hine (2015:61) puts succinctly, “the object of the ethnography emerges through fieldwork, as the significant identities and locations unfold.” In an online context, mapping out the boundaries of a field site is therefore a particularly necessary part of the research process and a key source of data in and of itself, building understanding of the communication and flows of information that constitute an online community as defined by *practice*, rather than a specific location, group or cause. In the context of my own research, this focus on the practices that define a particular online network (and the wider context in which these practices occur) helped shape an understanding of the field site - ostensibly a network of political supporters - as defined by dynamics that are characteristic of both a subculture and a fandom, more so than those of a conventional social movement or political campaign group. Focusing on cultural practices as the core unit of analysis facilitated the collection of rich data indicating how these practices were produced as a function of platform functionality, the individuals and groups communicating through this functionality and the internal and external textual resources that participants utilised to make their participation meaningful to others. In essence an ethnographic approach to

defining and ‘mapping’ the field site facilitated a deeper understanding of the practices, flows of information and distinctly subcultural dynamics that defined The\_Donald as an example of an online political fandom at a time where similar forms of political engagement are increasingly ubiquitous and impactful (Dean 2017).

### **Why Reddit and why The\_Donald?**

Hine describes the identification of a particular online phenomenon as a “starting point” (Hine 2015) for an online ethnography, rather than a clearly identifiable “field site” with fixed boundaries. This then invites a search for the specific *practices* pertinent to the research questions, and working from there to identify the social dynamics, platform functionality and flows of information that produce these practices. As encouraged by Hine (2015: 59):

“The focus of the ethnography, provisional though it may be, is often chosen because it appears on the face of it to offer the chance to explore a theoretically interesting point or significant issue for the ethnographer’s home discipline.”

Guided by my research focus on how online, ideologically-homogenous networks engage with dissonant information, initial site selection was guided by the aim of identifying an online space that held niche, ideologically homogenous views yet had some mainstream visibility and engagement with outsiders. This meant that the online network in question would be more likely to engage with dissonant information, counter-narratives and external media that would have the potential to disrupt consensus and therefore have distinctive practices and strategies for doing so. Reddit’s The\_Donald provided a highly-suitable ‘starting point’ for multiple reasons - the size and significance of Reddit as a platform, its reputation for high profile, somewhat stigmatised and undeniably niche or self-described ‘anti-establishment’ online communities (Massanari 2015, 2017b; Flores-Saviaga 2018) and the site’s primary design features orientated around the aggregation and sharing of external news articles meant that encounters with dissonant information - and the need to engage with potentially dissonant event - were likely. Reddit also was a pragmatic choice for several reasons, such as the ease with which data could be collected, features of the platform’s design that would make rich data relevant to the core research questions more likely to occur and the relative openness, large size and existing public profile of The\_Donald itself making ethical questions surrounding privacy and consent somewhat more straightforward than they would be for less well-known, tighter-knit communities on less visible platforms. Rather than having to identify and hope for

discussion of dissonant information within an apparent echo chamber, Reddit's status as a news aggregator, the relative ease of access and the opportunity for large amounts of data meant that discussion of external happenings that were potentially dissonant with consensus seemed very likely to be easy to identify. These features also meant that any case studies could also be contextualised within the context wider media coverage. Events during the campaign and administration that saw Donald Trump lose support or receive criticism from mainstream media outlets provided opportunities for case studies to show how The\_Donald reacted to information that was both dissonant with existing framing but also so ubiquitous in the media landscape that it would be difficult not to engage with.

## **Data Collection**

The primary data for this project was collected from The\_Donald using three methods of data collection. Firstly, a large corpus of posts to the subreddit were downloaded from a publicly available dataset that collates all public posts and comments made on the Reddit platform. This dataset was initially engaged with to gain an overview of the subreddit, with a focus on following the subreddit's response to major announcements, developments or news stories surrounding the Trump campaign and presidency that had received significant mainstream attention. This constituted the process of netnographic "mapping" described above, and was supplemented by observational data collected through participant observation in the subreddit, which constituted learning the platform's functionality and building familiarity with the subreddit's practices and distinctive vernacular through the collection of field notes and archiving of key posts for later analysis. Through this initial analysis, I identified several key case studies for further analysis. These case studies informed a third round of data collection. Posts from the large dataset were collected that focused around a specific topic, subcultural practice or event. Altogether, the 'large dataset' and supplementary observation provided an overview of the subreddit's basic functions, core narratives, subcultural dynamics and tone. The third main data source, orientated around specific case studies, came to provide particularly rich data regarding the practices of sharing and framing that defined The\_Donald's engagement with dissonant texts, and as a result forms the core of the analysis presented in the second and third empirical chapters of this thesis.

### **The large 'overview' dataset of 1200 posts**

The 'large dataset' provided an overview of The\_Donald's core narratives and practices,

the analysis of which is presented in the first empirical chapter, 'Participation Through a Dynamic of Insiders and Outsiders: The myth of the establishment mainstream'. This dataset was collected from a publicly available archive of all Reddit submissions and comments known as the 'Pushshift' or Baumgartner dataset (Baumgartner et al 2020). Many studies of Reddit, and indeed many studies utilising this particular dataset, have been broadly quantitative in approach, and have engaged in the sort of large-scale analysis afforded by a dataset of this size (see Gafney and Matias 2018). Indeed, with some notable exceptions (particularly Massanari's 2015 in-depth ethnography), qualitative analysis of Reddit data is somewhat uncommon. However, my research aims meant that such a 'zoomed out', quantitative approach would risk missing the nuances in communication and subtle practices that I deemed likely to characterise engagement with seemingly 'dissonant' texts.

However, there are undeniably practical limitations when performing a qualitative analysis on a dataset of several millions of subreddit posts. Because of this, acquiring a more workable sample of posts was necessary. Taking a selection of the most popular posts was also consistent with the overall research design - these are the posts that become the most visible and therefore enter into the collective repertoire of subcultural norms and reference points, and represent how these practices work to maintain subcultural identity.

The publicly available archive of Reddit posts was accessible as monthly 'slices', dating back to 2005. I chose to sample a year's worth of posts from The\_Donald, from July 2016 to June 2017. This time frame was chosen to capture ample data from the subreddit both before and after the inauguration of Donald Trump as US President in January 2017. I anticipated that a comparison between data collected in the run up to the election would contrast significantly with data collected after Trump became President, facilitating analysis contrasting the period of campaigning and anticipation with a reaction to the reality of government. As Sandvoss (2015) notes, the polysemic nature of political campaigning, which intends to reach as broad a range of potential voters as possible, entails inevitable compromise and disappointment as diverse interpretations of polysemic political promises contrast with the reality of what a given politician or political party does once in government. This therefore provided a significant opportunity to identify and analyse whether consensuses built before Trump became President would be disrupted by his actions in office, and what strategies the subreddit's users might use to manage this disruption.

### **Preparing and analysing the 'large dataset'**

The initial sample of posts that I refer to as the 'large dataset' were collected from the larger Pushshift archive and then loaded into Microsoft Excel to clean up and organise the data into workable headings. This left me with a large sample of posts shared to The\_Donald for each month in separate, monthly spreadsheets. The total number of posts from each month ranged from 115,000 to just over 300,000. From this, I took a smaller sample of the one hundred most popular posts for each month. This was collected using Excel to order posts by Reddit's 'score' functionality, which is a function of the site's user voting system. The detail and significance of the 'score' functionality will be discussed in Empirical Chapter 1, yet it is understood by both Reddit users and researchers to approximate how popular a given post is with the users of the subreddit to which it was posted (Massanari 2015). The text of these 'popular' posts was then copied into a single spread sheet collating the 100 highest-scoring posts for each month, which was then imported into NVivo data analysis software and coded by topic. Each post title was analysed and assigned a code based on the topic of discussion, such as Hillary Clinton or the Democratic Party. Alongside the titles, posts were opened in a web browser to be viewed as they would be displayed on Reddit itself. This enabled relevant contextual information, such as attempts to manipulate how posts were displayed on the page through utilisation of Reddit's platform functionality to aid understanding of what a particular post means. A discussion of this coding informs the analysis detailed in Empirical Chapter 1.

The corpus of data for the initial survey of the top 100 posts from each month comprised 1200 total posts. A "post" is typically a short title of one or two sentences, which when clicked may lead to additional text written by the post author, but more commonly links off-site to an external article, social media post or media item such as an image or a video. Post text tends to be fairly descriptive, encouraging the audience to read it, explaining why the information it links to is important or suggesting what other topics, events or narratives the shared item is related to. This reflects Reddit's initial conception as a platform for the aggregation of links to external sites, as site functionality is almost entirely orientated around user functions that facilitate the curation, discussion and sharing of content largely drawn from elsewhere on the internet. The text of a 'post' then reflects how a given Reddit user wishes to present a resource found elsewhere to a particular community. As will be discussed in more detail throughout this thesis, the creative use of content from other sites is a characteristic practice of The\_Donald as a subculture, with the text of a post acting as a key resource for understanding how users linked this external content to broader narratives, norms and practices that defined the

subreddit.

Alongside the text of the post itself, each spreadsheet of posts included a range of relevant metadata, including how many comments or votes a post had received, the author's username and an active link to view the post in its original form in a web browser. I quickly found in my initial analysis of the dataset that titles taken 'as is' were often insufficient to understand the meaning of the post. Many of the practices that guided participation on The\_Donald - and indeed Reddit as a whole (Massanari 2015, Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017) - relied on an assumption of familiarity with obscure reference points, in jokes and functionality that is distinct to a particular subreddit. Many of these were references to in-jokes and nicknames that only became clear after a critical mass of posts had been analysed and others were quite specific to Reddit's functionality. Examples of these that were found in the dataset included 'bait and switch' style posts, such as one post title dramatically claiming: "I'm done with Trump", only to reveal additional text once clicked on that completed the sentence to "I'm done with Trump...s excellent book, *Art of the Deal*". Other examples include 'combo' posts, in which several short, seemingly meaningless posts were made in quick succession, encouraging users to manipulate the link between a post's vote score and the order in which posts are displayed to spell out a sentence like "You're fired!", a catchphrase used by Trump during his time as host of *The Apprentice*.

This provided samples of extremely valuable data that would have otherwise been difficult to identify. For example, the 'Cartoon Pence' meme, which became a key case study and is detailed in Empirical Chapter 3, was not particularly associated with any key words other than Pence's own name, with post titles typically being a simple and straightforward description of Pence performing some kind of mundane activity, contrasted with the absurdity of the image ostensibly depicting it. The meme was consistently popular, with regular appearances across the dataset, but spread out across several months, rather than appearing as a noticeable 'spike' of activity, or being associated with any particular major event. However, this case study proved significant as representative of The\_Donald's users' creative and pragmatic engagement with texts that initially appeared to be dissonant with established subcultural norms and reference points. The Cartoon Pence meme was only identifiable through this process of mapping, observation, and manual coding and would likely have been lost in a computer-aided analysis of large datasets:



“Mike Pence taking down Antifa” (2017, 14081 vote score, 164 comments. An example of a ‘Cartoon Pence’ meme)

Because of the importance of such contextual information, as well as the playfulness with which The\_Donald’s users, Redditors as a whole (Massanari 2015, 2017a, 2017b) and other online spaces subculturally adjacent to Reddit (Burgess 2008; Miltner 2013; Phillips 2015; Katz and Shifman 2017) treat language, their own subcultural norms and the functionality of the sites they use to communicate, I opted to analyse a smaller number of posts manually, rather than perform a large-scale analysis of many thousands of posts using quantitative techniques. As discussed above, the loose boundaries inherent to many online social networks means that virtual ethnography is often best situated at the site of practice. In online spaces like Reddit, a distinctively subcultural dynamic and assumption of familiarity and competence with platform functionality and history means that many of the practices through which meaningful participation is made possible are defined by working in the margins of subtext, implications of juxtaposing seemingly unrelated content and deliberate inversions of what the text of a post says and how it is presented on the screen. Quantitative analyses of large amounts of text data would therefore likely miss out on the very subtleties of communication and play that define the subcultural practices that are the core unit of analysis.

### **Selection of case studies**

This initial period of analysis and observation led to the identification of three core themes that defined The\_Donald as a subculture: opposition to an imagined ‘mainstream’, the maintenance of a coherent yet carnivalesque ‘content world’, and systems of

subcultural capital that defined insider status through coherent contributions to this fan text and the specialist knowledge required to do so. This analysis was then used to identify relevant case studies to explore these themes further. Case studies were selected with an intention to identify events or themes that represented the subreddit's interaction with potentially dissonant external texts. From the many prospective case studies that were identified, I selected four for further analysis. Selection criteria for case studies was defined primarily by the significance of the event both on The\_Donald and within the wider media and political spheres, as well as the quality of available data. The four case studies selected for further data collection and analysis are listed below. Of these four, the Shayrat Airstrike and the 'Cartoon Pence' meme format were further expanded upon and are analysed in depth in empirical chapters 2 and 3.

### **The Shayrat Airstrike**

This case study examined the subreddit's reaction to President Trump's authorisation of an airstrike against Shayrat Airfield, a Syrian Government military base and alleged source of a chemical weapon attack against the town of Khan Shaykhun by the Syrian military. The attack was controversial and drew criticism in ways that did not necessarily follow partisan political lines (Fowler 2017; Labott and Gaouette 2017). Furthermore, in the days before the airstrike, The\_Donald's users had made clear their shared opposition to military intervention in Syria. This context made the Shayrat airstrike a highly suitable case study for understanding how a politically homogenous community orientated around practices of sharing external media content engaged with a media field saturated with texts that were ostensibly incompatible with established consensus. The significance of the airstrike as the first major 'disappointment' of the Trump campaign was reflected in the subreddit's response, yet appeared to have minimal lasting impact. A discussion of the findings of this case study can be found in Empirical Chapter 2.

Analysis of case studies was undertaken using a combination of data from both the initial large dataset described above, and manual collection of popular posts using Reddit's own search function. Data for case studies focusing on a single event, such as the Shayrat Airstrike, was collected first from the large dataset by manually reading through the 100 most popular posts for the day of the event and for the week after the event. From this initial analysis, a list of key words was drawn up for each case study. A Python script was then used to build a new spreadsheet of posts containing references to any of the words on the list, which were then coded in *NVivo*. Key words lists were drawn up manually to capture the often-idiosyncratic way in which the subreddit discusses events. For example, the list drawn up for the Shayrat airstrike consisted of obvious words like 'Syria', 'Airstrike'



and 'Shayrat', but also less obvious words like 'helmets' – referring to a claim popular on The\_Donald that the White Helmets relief organisation had staged the chemical attacks attributed to the Syrian military. This highlights the importance of a combination of both manual and computer-aided data collection in the analysis of an online subculture. Keywords lists were created through multiple iterations of searching, reading and analysing the results to find new relevant key words and to ensure that as much relevant data was captured as possible. Data collection for case studies was therefore a multi-stage process, ensuring that all relevant data was captured through a combination of manual analysis of popular posts for relevant days to identify initial search terms, using these search terms as key words for a more in-depth analysis of the entire sample of posts for the relevant day, re-analysing this new sample and identifying any emergent themes or potential keywords until a version of the keywords list had been produced that returned no further relevant data beyond that of the previous iteration:

First iteration: Shayrat, Assad, Airstrike, Syria

Second iteration: Shayrat, Assad, Airstrike, Syria, *Missiles, Helmets*

Third iteration: Shayrat, Assad, Airstrike, Syria, Missiles, Helmets, *Tomahawk*

This facilitated the identification of framing practices that would otherwise not have been clear. The aforementioned 'helmets' narrative was prominent, but also an unexpected focus on the name of the missiles used, 'Tomahawk', which was used in a number of memes depicting racist caricatures of Democratic Senator and prominent Trump critic Elizabeth Warren who otherwise had little to do with the airstrike. Some of these posts used no keywords indicating a link to the airstrike other than a reference to 'tomahawks'. Again, this highlights the value of an iterative approach to data collection that draws on multiple methods of analysis of the same dataset to build up a sample that captures the idiosyncrasies of online communication, with post titles often being brief, using nonstandard or truncated English as well as ubiquitous references to established in-jokes, consensuses and conversations that are made meaningful through an assumption of shared subcultural knowledge and competencies.

Such an approach is also pivotal in gathering topic-based data. The case study here was broadly conceived of as 'The\_Donald's reaction to the Shayrat airstrike', but drawing out the boundaries of what constituted 'reaction to the Shayrat airstrike' was a core part of the analysis. Unlike in more bounded forms of data collection, such as a structured interview or survey, the netnographic approach facilitates the mapping out of what the research object is as part of the data collection. This is particularly crucial in understanding how seemingly unrelated discussions, such as Elizabeth Warren's contested

claim to Cherokee ancestry (Reid 2020), became parts of a process of engaging with an event that disrupted expectations.

## **Mike Pence**

The second primary case study focused on posts discussing Vice President Mike Pence. In contrast to the Shayrat airstrike case study, which focused on the subreddit's reaction to a single event, the Mike Pence case study was chosen to analyse the subreddit's engagement with a figure that was omnipresent throughout Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and eventual presidency. Mike Pence was chosen specifically as a prominent figure in the Trump administration that was initially controversial and unpopular amongst Trump supporters - largely due to his mundane political style and association with the Republican 'establishment' that Trump was ostensibly disrupting (Cilizza 2016). This case study focused on analysing how the subreddit's users engaged with texts surrounding Mike Pence to frame the Vice President in a manner coherent with broader anti-establishment themes identified in the initial analysis of the large dataset.

Data for the Mike Pence case study was again collected using two methods. Firstly, a spreadsheet of all posts discussing Pence in July 2016 was collected by using a Python script to find posts mentioning specific key words, such as 'Pence', 'vice' and 'VP'. This was used for an overview of the initial reaction to Pence and to develop an understanding of why Pence was initially an unpopular choice on The\_Donald. This was combined with a sample of the 100 most popular posts mentioning Mike Pence made to the subreddit during 2016 and 2017. This second sample was collected using Reddit's own search function, saving relevant posts as PDF files. This method of data collection was done to account for the fact that the data for Mike Pence posts was somewhat different to that of the Shayrat airstrike case study. Firstly, these posts did not focus on a single event, but were distributed over several months and referred to Pence in a wide range of contexts. Secondly, these posts were often announcements of Pence's appearances at rallies, or statements made by the Vice President - making it difficult to interpret how these posts were understood by The\_Donald's users. This meant that a method of data collection that preserved the comments left by users under posts, rather than just the post titles gathered from the spreadsheet dataset, was necessary. As with the Shayrat Airstrike case study, posts in the Mike Pence sample were then coded for the source of the content shared and the frame used to present this content through the post's title.

### **Overcoming sampling issues:**

The initial sample of 'Mike Pence' posts collected the top 100 most popular Mike Pence posts shared to the subreddit as of May 2019. In this way, the 'Mike Pence' sample was a slight outlier with regards to the overall timeframe that the dataset otherwise covered. The 'overview' dataset of 1200 posts covered July 2016 to June 2017, and the Shayrat Airstrike case study collected data from five days in April 2017. However, the 'Mike Pence' dataset extended over a further two years, causing some concerns for the consistency of my analysis due to the rapidly-changing nature of the political circumstances surrounding Trump administration and The\_Donald itself. Because of this, I opted while writing up the chapter to limit my analysis of the Mike Pence dataset to posts collected between July 2016 and the end of 2017. This decision was made shortly after The\_Donald had been 'quarantined' and 'restricted', making the collection of further data somewhat difficult. As the initial sample had been collected using Reddit's own search and ranking function, collecting more data by the same method would also have been impossible due to the restrictions. However, only 15 of the 100 posts in the sample were from outside of the 2016-2017 data range and these were largely distributed towards the less popular end of the sample, leaving 85 posts for analysis. Because of this, I resolved to proceed with the analysis of the 85 remaining posts.

### **Other case studies**

At earlier stages of this research, I began work on two additional case studies that were not pursued further. However, as these case studies both in some way informed the analysis of the rest of the data, I will discuss them briefly below and explain why they were not analysed further.

#### **The Mother of All Bombs**

The 'Mother of All Bombs' case study focused on the subreddit's response to the US military's deployment of the GBU-43/B 'MOAB' ordnance against the Islamic State group in Afghanistan (BBC 2017b). This case study was initially selected to due to the persistent presence of the 'MOAB bot', a humorous automated bot account that was created in the event's aftermath and continued to post for several months after. This case study was selected as a potential example of how the subreddit's initial contentious response to an

unpopular event could shift over time to a more favourable consensus. The subreddit's initial response to the MOAB deployment was, however, less contentious than expected. In contrast to the response to the Shayrat airstrike, there was little controversy surrounding the deployment of the MOAB. Furthermore, discussion surrounding it at all was fairly limited - despite its persistence as a later reference point through the 'MOAB bot'. Further analysis of the subreddit's response to the MOAB case study may have revealed information about how the initial response to an event can inform interpretations of later events. However, my analysis of the subreddit's response to the selection of Mike Pence had already provided similar data. Due to the fact that Pence's presence on the subreddit and in wider media and political discourse surrounding the Trump administration was far more ubiquitous and persistent than that of the MOAB, I prioritised analysis of the subreddit's engagement with Mike Pence over this case study.

### **Bot accounts**

At an early stage of data collection and analysis, I collected data indicating that three of the ten most prolific posters to the subreddit were automated 'bot' accounts. As noted in the above discussion of the 'MOAB bot', the use of humorous 'bot' accounts was common on The\_Donald and they were found throughout the dataset. These bot accounts were significant due to their prolific posting, but also due to both their popularity with subreddit users and the fact that they explicitly identified themselves as automated bot accounts – rather than disguising themselves as 'real' participants. However, the analysis of these bot accounts and user responses to them led to data that was interesting, but ultimately largely irrelevant to my research questions. Bots were used as a means for individual users to interact with one another and likely had some role in building a shared group identity (as also identified by Flores-Saviaga et al 2018), yet had little relevance to questions of how participants interacted with external media texts – which was the primary focus of this thesis. Ultimately, the data collected from the analysis of bot accounts provided some context regarding how users interacted with one another, but I concluded that further analysis did not fall within the scope of my research questions.

### **Limitations and Risks**

#### **Risk of the subreddit being shut down**

The nature of The\_Donald's contentious place within the wider Reddit community was

quickly apparent from the earliest stages of data collection. On multiple occasions, Reddit administrators had acknowledged the subreddit as a source of antagonism and rule breaking (Lee 2016). Throughout the period of data collection, various steps were taken by Reddit administrators to curtail The\_Donald's influence on the platform. In June 2016, the algorithm through which Reddit's r/all front page is amalgamated from the platform's many subreddits was altered so as to prevent a single subreddit from having a disproportionate presence there (Huffman 2016). This was largely seen as a response to The\_Donald's success in manipulating Reddit's voting system to overwhelm r/all with their own content – evident in the fact that any relation between this change and The\_Donald was explicitly denied by Reddit's administrators (Huffman 2016). Later, the introduction of r/popular as the new default Reddit front-page, with far more stringent content-filtering guidelines than r/all, was seen as another attempt to curtail The\_Donald's influence without resorting to a ban (Menegus 2017). In July 2019, The\_Donald was 'quarantined', barring the subreddit from r/all and limiting any capability to customise the subreddit's appearance (a feature which The\_Donald's moderators had previously made significant use of). A Reddit 'quarantine' represents a probationary period and is part of a process that may lead to an outright ban of the subreddit from the platform (Wong 2019). Following these measures, The\_Donald was ultimately banned from the Reddit platform in June 2020 (Wong 2020).

The threat of the subreddit's removal from the platform was present throughout this completion of this thesis. I therefore made sure to mitigate the potential impact of the seemingly inevitable ban at all stages of data collection. Concerns around the removal of research data from the Internet was mitigated somewhat due to the existence of significant, up-to-date archives of Reddit posts on external sites, of which I maintained an offline backup. However, these archived datasets contained post titles and any additional text, but did not include images or site formatting or any manipulation of the quirks of the Reddit platform discussed above. Because of this, I also maintained backups of posts saved as PDF files, which retain much of the original formatting as well as any images. These backups were stored on secure University servers and an encrypted external hard drive, meaning that any data loss due to the removal of the subreddit from the Internet would be largely averted. When The\_Donald was indeed taken offline in 2020, I was able to rely on a combination of backup datasets and saved PDF files. However, these backups were not entirely perfect and the deletion of the site created two notable, albeit minor issues in the completion of this thesis. Firstly, images in the posts saved as PDF files were occasionally slightly obscured or distorted – typically reduced in size or overlapping with text. This was not a significant issue with regards to analysis, as the deletion of the subreddit came well into the 'writing up' phase of the thesis when all data analysis had

been effectively completed. However, the distortion of these images meant that I could not share certain posts in their entirety. For example, some of the posts discussed in my empirical chapters contained images that were distorted when saved as PDFs. Because of this, I provide a text description of any images that are relevant to understanding a given post but were unfortunately distorted enough to make them unusable. This is an imperfect solution, but preferable to leaving out key posts from the discussion entirely.

The second issue was that sometimes, posts would link to external social media posts (or entire websites) that also had subsequently been deleted. This was less an issue with the removal of The\_Donald itself, but more an unforeseen risk that I had not accounted for. For example, when discussing Vice President Mike Pence, the subreddit's users linked multiple times to a fake, parody 'Mike Pence' Twitter account. It was not immediately obvious that this parody account was a fake, as evidenced by the fact that even President Trump himself (seemingly unknowingly) interacted with a Tweet made by his parody Vice President. This meant that in my own analysis, it was initially difficult to ascertain whether this account was indeed a handle used by Pence or simply a parody. The account had been deleted along with all of its Twitter posts, meaning that I only had access to the specific Tweets shared to The\_Donald, which, thankfully, had been quoted in their entirety. I was able to confirm that the account was indeed a parody due to the aforementioned interaction between Trump and the parody account, which received some media attention (Daily Beast 2018). However, this attests to the limitations of attempts to back up data when dealing with a somewhat volatile online network that itself links to many other, potentially contentious online spaces.

## **Ethical considerations**

Due to the rapidly evolving nature of communications technology, Internet research remains an emerging field and this is reflected in the continually evolving consensus with regards to ethical guidelines specific to online-based methodologies. Recommendations from the Association of Internet Researchers (franzke et al 2020, Markham and Buchannan 2012, Ess and AoIR 2002), British Sociological Association (BSA 2017) and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC 2016) all emphasise that such guidelines remain contingent on the ever-changing nature of communications technology and its relationship with human society. The ESRC acknowledges that those engaged in the production of research at all levels, from participants to researchers and ethics boards, are likely to encounter "new or unfamiliar ethics questions and dilemmas" (ESRC 2016) when conducting internet-based research. Similarly, the AoIR document 'Ethical Decision-

Making and Internet Research' (Markham and Buchannan 2012) emphasises that "no set of guidelines or rules is static; the fields of Internet research are dynamic and heterogeneous" and that "no official guidance or 'answers' regarding internet research ethics have been adopted at any national or international level." (Markham and Buchannan 2012: 2) A further document produced by the AoIR in 2020 (franzke et al 2020), which expands upon and complements the widely-used 2012 and 2002 guidance, reasserts the intention that such guidelines operate as a "living document", and encourages "open and dynamic documents and resources" as "the requisite response to a research and ethical landscape that continues to change and transform, often in dramatic ways, over a very short period of time" (franzke et al 2020: 3).

With relevance to this research project in particular are issues of consent and privacy. My research object, a large and well-known online political community, is ostensibly a public space. My research data consists entirely of publicly available contributions to Reddit that were, at the time they were posted, viewable to any web-user without any sort of account, password or other form of entry requirement. However, as noted by the AoIR (franzke et al 2020; Markham and Buchannan 2012) ethical guidelines, notions of privacy and consent are not as straightforward as a question of space being either public or private, but rather contingent on what Helen Nissenbaum (2004, 2011) refers to as "contextual integrity". This approach highlights privacy, particularly in an online world defined by the flow of information in ways that are often invisible and likely unintelligibly complex, as defined more by "informational norms" than a clear distinction between public and private space. Nissenbaum (2011: 33) suggests as a general principle that "when the flow of information adheres to entrenched norms, all is well; violations of these norms, however, often result in protest and complaint".

The academic literature on online research ethics has seen a recent shift away from conceiving of a clear divide between public and private settings and towards a greater focus on harm and sensitivity to context. Whilst a given communication may appear to be ostensibly public, appearing in an accessible forum or publicly visible social media account, the author may perceive what they are saying as far more private, and subsequently have expectations far more in line with a private communication with regards to what an acceptable use of their statements may be (See Lewis et al 2008 and Marwick and boyd 2011 for relevant case studies). Hine (2008: 16) provides a clear summation of this problem:

"...whilst many Internet environments are publicly accessible and the researcher could access them as easily as they might a newspaper article, for those involved the

interactions in question might be deeply intimate and be experienced as if they were private”

The notion of “perceived privacy” has proven particularly prominent when weighing up the permissible uses of online interactions that adhere to established ethical principles (King 1996; Hine 2008; Markham and Buchanan 2012). Researchers are therefore encouraged to consider factors such as how far users of a particular online network may likely expect their conversations to be read by outsiders, how ‘intimate’ their conversational topics may be and what the consequences may be if these conversations are seen by a wider audience. Building on this, a more ‘contextual approach’ to privacy (Nissenbaum 2011) emphasises the importance of considering how privacy depends particularly on the fact that users may consider a certain interaction to be appropriate in a particular setting. Similar concerns are expressed by Marwick and boyd (2011), who emphasise the nuance inherent in how web users perceive the likely audience of their postings. For example, whilst teenage social media users may ostensibly make information ‘public’ in sharing it to a network of Twitter followers, this is foregrounded by a negotiation of subculture-specific norms that determines the context in which certain information can be shared and in what form. These concerns have led to an increasing focus on a sensitivity to the ‘contextual integrity’ (Nissenbaum 2011) of online postings and an understanding of privacy as not merely in terms of consent, but of the potential impacts of sharing, collating and re-framing content posted to a different context and audience.

This point is further complicated in contemporary social media environments that often have a wide array of users, are particularly fast moving and often have weaker boundaries between who is a participant or member of the community and who is not. Users may drop in and out of conversation before consent can be requested (Hine 2008). Additionally, it is difficult to take into account presence of ‘lurkers’, passive participants who may consider themselves wholly part of a particular community yet may fail to make their presence known to the researcher (Nonnecke and Preece 2000). In such situations when obtaining informed consent is pragmatically difficult, existing studies have typically argued in favour of waiving the ethical requirement for informed consent due to the minimal harm that is likely to come to participants (Langer and Beckman 2005; Hine 2008). Hine (2008) rightly contends that this is only true of research that is ‘passive’, in that the researcher is strictly observing and not participating in the forum and directly interacting with the community. In situations where informed consent may be impractical or otherwise difficult to obtain, then the subsequent issue to be navigated is how best to minimise the potential harm done to individual research subjects and indeed the



community as a whole. This focus on assessment of potential harms weighted against the benefits of undertaking a piece of research that cannot be completed without such data collection runs throughout the AoIR (franzke et al 2020, Markham and Buchanan 2012), BSA (2017) and ESRC (2016) guidelines.

With this in mind, certain features of a given online community can be looked at to discern the level of privacy or intrusion anticipated by its participants. With regards to The\_Donald, I judged that the overall expectation of privacy could reasonably be understood to be low, particularly in the case of the sample of popular posts that formed the basis for my analysis. The subreddit is fast moving, has a large and open membership and likely many more casual readers without a declared subscription. Making my status and affiliations as a researcher known to all participants involved in the production of the subreddit's content would both have been pragmatically difficult, if not impossible, and may also likely have jeopardised the flow and tone of discussion between regular participants that is a fundamental aspect of the data I wished to collect. Earlier studies of online forums that set the standard of announcing one's presence as a researcher typically engaged with communities far smaller than The\_Donald, often those with which the researcher has a pre-existing relationship (see e.g. Baym 2005). Yet more recent studies and those looking at far larger communities with less clear boundaries have acknowledged that obtaining informed consent is both impractical and unnecessary due to the size and fluidity of community membership and the nature of the data collection (Hine 2008).

Despite this, my research design presented minimal risk to participants. Firstly, the research does not focus on individual participants in any way, such as by collating multiple posts by specific users, but rather only on post titles. User names are also not listed in the data analysis section. Secondly, the sampling methods used meant that only the most popular and therefore most visible posts have been used for my analysis. Posts have been sampled based on their high 'up' vote scores, with an intention of capturing only the most visible posts that likely reached The\_Donald's front page. Aside from the subreddit's hundreds of thousands of registered subscribers, these posts had already likely been seen by many more passive 'lurkers' and otherwise more casual users. Additionally, the high level of interaction with the wider Reddit community, the for a time ubiquitous presence Reddit's shared 'front page', and fairly consistent media coverage that The\_Donald received throughout the data collection period meant that participants in the subreddit could reasonably be understood to have had an awareness that their posts could potentially reach a very wide audience of both fellow participants and, crucially, outsiders. Indeed, in the initial 'survey' of the subreddit before the main data collection

period began, The\_Donald was receiving significant attention both on Reddit and in the news media more broadly due to deliberate efforts to gain attention from outsiders through flooding Reddit's shared front page with images of the then candidate Trump, or critical posts about his opponents. Posts directly addressing 'the rest of Reddit', CNN or Hillary Clinton supporters were already a prominent feature of the subreddit at the beginning of this research and remained ubiquitous throughout the main data collection period.

This complicates the distinction between 'covert' research and that which has secured the informed consent of its participants. The suggestion that online forums could be considered effectively a form of public document is well established (Hine 2008; Markham and Buchanan 2012; Sugiura et al 2017; Franzke et al 2020), and it was extremely clear from the outset that The\_Donald's users considered their own participation in the subreddit to be an unambiguously 'public' form of political engagement that would likely - even hopefully - be engaged with by outsiders and political opponents. The potential for covert research in online spaces is attractive precisely because the researcher's presence does not need to be made known, and the ethical concerns surrounding this can be answered by the more nuanced understanding of privacy as contextual discussed above. In any case, The\_Donald's keen, constant and explicit awareness of its 'public facing' role made answering this question less ambiguous than it might otherwise have been.

### **Pragmatic concerns**

There were also pragmatic concerns with regards to gaining informed consent. The subreddit's user base is so large and fast moving that any announcement of my own presence would likely have been ignored or gone unseen by the majority of participants. This is compounded further by Reddit's 'upvote' system, which would have meant that any introductory post would have to have received a significant number of positive 'up' votes to gain sufficient visibility to have the desired effect. Moderators were able to 'sticky' certain posts at their discretion, but the anarchic nature of the subreddit and general distrust of outsiders meant that this endorsement would have been extremely unlikely to have been granted. Repeated postings of researcher introductory threads are more likely to be seen by a greater number of users than a single announcement, yet risk irritation and rejection from participants due to the disruptive nature of such contributions (Sugiura et al 2017:190). Furthermore, such pronouncements may have the risk of causing participants in public forums to act as if they *were* private (Sugiura et al 2017:191). The glee that The\_Donald's users evidently took in misleading and disrupting the perceptions of mainstream observers further compounded this issue. I considered

that if my attempts to make my presence as a researcher known were not completely ignored - the most likely outcome, given the subreddit's size and high rate of content turnover - there was a risk that the subreddit's users would deliberately attempt to behave in misleading and uncharacteristic ways for their own amusement. This concern was not without precedent. For example, throughout the conduct of the research I found multiple posters humorously identifying themselves as 'Russian spies' and making humorous yet nonsensical use of Cyrillic characters - an ironic nod to reports that Russian propaganda agents were active on the subreddit (Lee 2018) and the subsequent media attention that this brought.

### **Changing political context over the course of competing a PhD**

*"Scholars face a unique challenge in trying to investigate this rapidly moving phenomenon [of online communication], as they struggle to understand people's practices while the very systems through which they are enacted shift"* (Ellison and boyd 2013: 3)

When I began this research project in late 2016, Trump had won the Republican primary but was still considered extremely unlikely to win the upcoming presidential election. Throughout the course of the completion of this research project, Trump went from an outsider political candidate considered something of a gimmick, to President, to ultimately failing to secure a second term after losing the 2020 presidential election to Democrat Joe Biden. The\_Donald subreddit too underwent many changes throughout the completion of this research. When I began my research, The\_Donald was a comparatively niche online network supporting an unlikely candidate for the US presidency. By the time the majority of the research and writing up had been completed, The\_Donald had been 'quarantined', 'restricted' and then banned from Reddit, Trump had been impeached twice, had ultimately failed to secure re-election and had inspired an attack on the US Capitol building by supporters motivated by conspiracy theories largely spread through 'alternative' online platforms that had risen to popularity in the aftermath of sites like Reddit taking a more active stance to moderating their platforms (Munn 2021).

This has implications for the ethical considerations regarding the 'perceived privacy' of sharing to the subreddit described above. The changing significance of posting to The\_Donald as the subreddit became more well known has implications for the expectation of privacy that users might have. Following Nissenbaum's (2011) contextual approach described above, users posting to The\_Donald before the site became

particularly prominent might have a higher expectation of privacy than those contributing after Trump had become the President and the subreddit had received attention from major news organisations. The notion of a 'contextual approach' to privacy is complicated by the changing context surrounding The\_Donald itself. This is particularly significant given the eventual banning of the subreddit and its removal from Reddit. However, with regards to this thesis, these concerns are mitigated somewhat. Firstly, the earliest data collected from the subreddit was from July 2016. At this point, Donald Trump had already been chosen as the Republican Party's nominee for the Presidency. The\_Donald too was also already large and well known. The subreddit had over 170,000 subscribers at the start of July 2016, and had already received significant mainstream news coverage from outlets including *The Washington Post*, *Forbes* and *NBC News* (Ohlheiser 2016, Alfonso III 2016; Sarlin 2016). As early as April 2016, the *New York Times* profiled The\_Donald as "a sort of proving ground, where an extreme, Internet-amped version of Mr. Trump's message is shared and refined" (Herrman 2016). These early reports all highlight the subreddit's attempts to gain attention and recognition from both the Trump campaign and a more mainstream audience. It is therefore clear that even from the very beginning, The\_Donald's users had a low perception of privacy, expecting - and even encouraging - attention from a wider audience. The 'infamous' reputation of the subreddit was also clearly established. Users posting to the subreddit in July 2016 were under no illusions that doing so was to participate in something controversial and to associate oneself with a community that was, at the very least, considered "extreme" and "Internet-amped" (Herrman 2016).

The other major change impacting the 'perceived privacy' of those participating in the subreddit was the 'quarantining' and eventual deletion of the subreddit discussed above. After the quarantine in July 2019, posts on The\_Donald were no longer indexed on Reddit's search engine or visible on the platform's shared 'front page'. After the subreddit was banned in 2020, all content posted to it was effectively removed from the Internet. Those posting to The\_Donald during the period of data collection - July 2016 to June 2017 - could reasonably expect their contributions to be easily found by journalists, political opponents and indeed any internet user, making the 'public' nature of posting to the subreddit difficult to argue. However, these posts now exist only in datasets such as the one used to conduct the research presented in this thesis, or on incomplete archives of since-deleted web content. Posts shared to The\_Donald during the period of data collection could therefore be reasonably argued to have been made with a *lower* expectation of privacy than exists now, as anonymised posts can no longer easily be traced back to their original authors.

## Personal standpoint and reflections

The case study selected for this research was a highly contentious online space situated within an emerging and unpredictable political context. The association of The\_Donald with volatile and xenophobic politics had implications for my own standpoint as a researcher - which was something I was mindful of throughout the conduct of this research. As a UK-based researcher, I was afforded a degree of distance from the politics of the Trump administration and the US in general. Furthermore, this research was not primarily concerned with an assessment of the Trump administration, the US political situation or the ethics of participating in The\_Donald as a Trump supporter. Rather, the focus of this research was to understand how participation in an ideologically homogeneous community *in general* could be maintained in an environment of media convergence (Jenkins 2006) where avoidance of dissonant narratives and texts is largely impossible. I also began this research with a broad familiarity with the wider online political and cultural context, but was less familiar with Reddit itself at the start of the research (although this has, of course, changed significantly throughout the completion of this thesis). I became increasingly familiar with both the Reddit platform and The\_Donald itself, which was facilitated by - and in turn, facilitated - the ethnographic approach of mapping the 'field site' and learning the functionality of a platform as it is used by the subculture itself as a deliberate form of analysis. In other words, figuring out how the functionality of the Reddit platform facilitated certain practices and flows of information was an important part of the research process in 'mapping out' (Kozinets 2015) the field site.

# Empirical Chapter 1: Participation through a dynamic of insiders and outsiders: The useful myth of the establishment mainstream

This chapter presents and analyses critically the core dynamic that underpinned all participation in the The\_Donald - the distinction between a knowledgeable in-group and the 'establishment' mainstream against which this in-group was defined. As this dynamic was so central to The\_Donald's engagement with the external media field, this chapter also serves as something of an overview of The\_Donald as a subculture. The\_Donald's users framed all the content that they shared in relation to a continually reasserted distinction between themselves as part of a knowledgeable in-group of Trump supporters and the wide-ranging 'establishment' against which this in-group was defined. The establishment was depicted as homogeneous, ignorant and unwilling or unable to see the truth. In opposition to this - and often by direct and explicit contrast - insiders were defined by the knowledge, competency and willingness to uncover and share information that could be framed as 'covered up' or ignored by the establishment. Despite its stable presence as the core framing device through which all other content was engaged with, the establishment itself was defined somewhat flexibly and in ways that responded to the texts that were available in the external media field. What the establishment was in any given moment was adapted to the current political context and the media texts available to share and re-frame as evidence of its existence and – by extension - The\_Donald's users' opposition to it.

This chapter will unpack this frame through presenting the findings of my analysis of the 'large dataset' of 1200 popular posts shared to The\_Donald over a 12-month period in 2016 and 2017. The first section of this chapter will present the finding that The\_Donald's users typically engaged with all events, ideas and themes in terms of *actions* taken by *subjects*: groups, individuals and institutions working towards particular goals. These subjects were coded clearly as either insiders or outsiders, defined as such by collaboration with or opposition to the establishment. In this way, what 'insiders' were doing was consistently only defined in terms of opposition to the establishment. This allowed insiders to be framed as a heterogeneous group of individuals in opposition to a homogeneous, ignorant 'other' - making the establishment as imagined by The\_Donald analogous to the ignorant and inauthentic 'mainstream' prominent in studies of media subcultures (particularly Thornton (1995), which will provide the main theoretical grounding for this discussion). This dynamic will be analysed alongside a broad overview of the different subjects discussed by The\_Donald and how events,

political conflicts and broad themes were consistently translated in to a framework of knowledgeable insiders working to share information suppressed or ignored by the establishment.

I then will focus on unpacking the way in which the establishment played the role of a 'useful myth' (Thornton 1995) that could be defined in whatever way was necessary to engage with the available texts in the external media sphere. This section of the chapter will focus on analysis of the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election. Before the election, the 2016 Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton was comfortably the most prominent subject in the sample, appearing in 37% of all posts. However, Clinton's significance declined significantly following this and she was only mentioned in 4% of posts sampled after the election. I will discuss Clinton's apparent role as a definitional anchor for the establishment, used to make sense of an otherwise amorphous and undefined group as united and identifiable through support of her presidential ambitions. This role was, however, found to be entirely dependent on context. The\_Donald's core framing device of insiders defined against the establishment went largely unhindered by Clinton's declining relevance after the election. Its users continued to discuss events in terms of exposing 'truths' ostensibly suppressed by the establishment, but what the establishment was and what it wanted was defined pragmatically depending on context. In this way, the establishment served as a 'useful myth', a rhetorical device that could be invoked when participating in the subreddit by sharing external media content to assert insider status through apparent opposition to the establishment. As sharing of content was the primary form of participation in the subreddit, the establishment played an important role in finding meaning in external texts that appeared to disrupt consensus. This final point will form the grounding for much of the subsequent discussion of this thesis, which will analyse how The\_Donald responded to events that appeared to disrupt consensus by invoking this framework of insiders and the establishment in creative and pragmatic ways.

### **Finding 1: Defining 'us' in opposition to 'them'**

The findings discussed in this chapter are the results of a thematic analysis of a sample of 1200 popular posts shared to The\_Donald between July 2016 and July 2017. A post to The\_Donald typically linked to content hosted externally elsewhere on the Internet, framed with a short explanatory title. In this way, to contribute to The\_Donald was usually an act of sharing a particular text in a way that asserted its apparent relevance to the subreddit's other users. The way in which The\_Donald's users shared texts was primarily to engage with them as evidence of particular actions taken by particular subjects: individuals, groups and institutions that wanted and did things. This focus on subjects and their activities superseded more abstract

engagement with things like policy, ideology and electoral strategy. Such things were discussed, but almost always in terms of things people or groups were doing, wanting or - frequently - ignoring or covering up.

This last point underpinned the core distinction through which all these groups were understood. To share something to The\_Donald was to assert that it was something worth paying attention to - typically because it was something that was being suppressed, ignored or actively covered up by the mainstream media and political figures, in addition to a homogeneous, subordinate mass of outsiders who were not aware of or unwilling to resist this 'establishment'. The establishment therefore played a hugely significant role in The\_Donald's framing of events. To share content to the subreddit was to share something that the establishment did not want to be shared. In a manner coherent with Thornton's (1995: 99) account of the mainstream, The\_Donald's users dedicated significantly more time and attention to defining the "homogeneous crowd" to which they did not belong than they did articulating what it meant to be an insider, and a significantly larger proportion of popular posts engaged with establishment subjects than with insiders. Subjects framed as part of the establishment were mentioned in 935 (77.92%) of the 1200 posts sampled, whereas those framed as 'insiders' appeared only in 547 (45.58%). In this way, The\_Donald's users dedicated more time articulating the 'everybody else' against whom they were ostensibly defined than they did articulating who they and their allies were and what they wanted, affording them significant flexibility when reacting to events that disrupted consensus or fell outside their expectations of how the Trump campaign or administration would or should behave (Sandvoss 2012).

### **Defining "the establishment"**

The way in which subjects were framed as either 'establishment' or 'insiders' typically - but not always - mapped onto expected political divisions. Unsurprisingly, Trump himself, his family and officials in his presidential administration were all coded as insiders by The\_Donald's users. Posts referring to Trump supporters also featured prominently, either together as a collective group or through posts that identified specific individuals as noteworthy of praise or other discussion. This included posts that addressed The\_Donald itself as a collective, which was typically framed by the subreddit interchangeably with references to Trump supporters as a whole. Overall, those framed by The\_Donald as insiders made up a fairly narrow range of subjects. In contrast, establishment subjects came from a broad range of political (40.43%), social (31.66%) and media (27.81%) institutions. These included six establishment subject groups that appeared in more than



100 posts each: Hillary Clinton, the Mainstream Media, The Democratic Party, 'the left', Islam and Muslims, and other Reddit users. In contrast, only two insider subject groups appeared in more than 100 posts each: Donald Trump (including the Trump family and the Trump organisation) and Trump supporters. Trump himself was mentioned in 176 posts or 14.67% of the total, and Trump supporters were mentioned in 146 or 12.17% of posts. However, other insider groups featured proportionately far less often. Alternative media, the next most prominent insider category after Trump supporters, appeared in only 62 posts or 5.17% of the total - less than half as often as the second most popular category.

An overview of all subjects mentioned in the 1200 post sample is presented in the table below. Subjects framed as part of the 'establishment' are highlighted in blue, with 'insiders' highlighted in red. Subject groups that were sometimes framed as insiders and other times as establishment, such as 'celebrities', were split into two categories and labelled accordingly:

*Subjects of sampled posts, framed as part of the establishment (blue) or as insiders (red)*

The establishment, which ignores or suppresses information		Insiders, who work to expose and proliferate information	
Subject	Number of posts	Subject	Number of posts
Hillary Clinton (Includes Clinton family, Clinton Foundation and 2016 Presidential campaign team)	189	Donald Trump (Includes Trump family and Trump organisation)	176
Mainstream Media (when framed as establishment)	158	Trump supporters (includes references to The_Donald)	146
Democratic Party	140	Alternative media	62
Non-specific 'left' or 'liberals'	121	Politicians (not Trump admin)	51
Islam or Muslims	108	Celebrities (insiders)	45
Reddit (admins and other subreddits)	102	Mainstream media	30
Celebrities (establishment)	40	Trump Administration	18
Immigrants, migrants and refugees	28	US State or Federal Institution	14
'Political system' or specific reference to 'establishment'	26	Other (mostly businesses or private citizens)	5
Politicians (other than Democratic Party)	23		
All 'establishment'	935	All 'insiders'	547

### Establishment politics: Clinton, Trump and Republicans

Contrasting framings of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton played a significant role in defining The\_Donald's overall framing of events. The distinctions between Clinton and Trump worked as a sort of shorthand for wider distinctions between the establishment and the in-group that The\_Donald's users asserted themselves to be a part of through their participation in the subreddit. The role played by Hillary Clinton in defining the establishment will be examined in detail in the second half of this chapter, but a clear pattern of focusing primarily on defining a homogenous 'establishment' and understanding 'insiders' only in relation to this establishment was present throughout all groups discussed.

With regards to politicians beyond Trump and Clinton, whilst the Democratic Party as a whole was framed as a key establishment group, discussions of specific politicians beyond the most prominent Democrats generally ignored party affiliation. This is also true of the way in which The\_Donald's users discussed individuals associated with the Republican Party. Whilst The\_Donald's framing of Trump and Clinton as representative of a political binary largely mirrored that of wider media discourse surrounding the election, their discussion of other politicians was often idiosyncratic and highly dependent on context. Party affiliation – or even established policy positions or voting record – did not consistently determine whether a politician was considered to be an insider or part of the establishment in any given post. Rather, content shared relating to less well-known political figures was typically framed in pragmatic and creative ways that depended on the context of a particular discussion. To that end, the way in which a political figure was portrayed in any given post depended largely on the extent to which a given quote or action could be framed in line with established narratives.

This could be seen quite prominently in the lack of discussion of the Republican Party as an entity in and of itself. Individual Republican politicians were indeed discussed, but the extent to which their status *as Republicans* was mentioned depended on how relevant this was to the broader point being made. For example, whilst it is unsurprising that Ted Cruz, Trump's main opposition for the Republican presidential nomination in 2016, was criticised on The\_Donald, this was done in a way that framed him as part of the establishment through an alleged association with 'Correct the Record', a political action committee established to support Democrat Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign:

HERE'S A STEAMING HOT PHOTO OF TED CRUZ WITH CORRECT THE RECORD OFFICIALS. ITS FUCKING HAPPENING! (August 2016, 3220 vote score, 106 comments)

Similarly, Republican Senator John McCain was typically depicted as representative of the political establishment that Trump was ostensibly fighting against. This is demonstrated in the below post, which asserts McCain's establishment status - again through comparisons with the Clintons:

[...] John McCain is running a massive "Pay2Play" operation much like the "Clinton

Foundation". It is called the "McCain Institute" He accepts money from foreign<sup>1</sup> countries like Saudi Arabia, and other people like the Rothschilds & some of his 2008 campaign \$\$ (February 2017, 17865 vote score, 692 comments)

More broadly, posts that mentioned specific Republicans did so only to compare or contrast them with the establishment. These comparisons could be positive or negative, but demonstrate the relational nature of insider status. Republicans like Ted Cruz and John McCain were framed as establishment figures largely through their association with *other* establishment figures. In contrast, posts that framed specific Republicans as insiders did so by highlighting their alleged contrasts and conflicts with Democrats and other political opponents:

Here's Tim Scott, a black Republican, reading tweets of Democrat Leftist Liberals calling him a house negro/Uncle tom/Race Traitor, etc. (Even admits the ones he couldn't read had the N word in them) (This is around the 13:30 mark). Be ashamed if r/all sees that Democrats are the true racists. (February 2017, 18771 vote score, 748 comments)

Karen Handel, the Republican candidate in the Georgia House special election, received a suspicious package and threatening letter in the mail Thursday. At least five homes in the neighborhood received an envelope with a white powdery substance! (June 2017, 8499 vote score, 298 comments)

The mentioning of Tim Scott and Karen Handel's party affiliations in the above posts were two of the only eight times that the Republican Party was mentioned in all the 1200 posts sampled. Aside from the two above, four of these discussed Republicans in the context of alleged bias against them by the Obama or Clinton administrations, such as the below criticism of Bill Clinton:

Remember when Bill Clinton ordered Janet Reno to fire ALL republican US Attorneys, 93 in total, in 1993? (February 2017, 17146 vote score, 638 comments)

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<sup>1</sup> A high number of posts analysed throughout the research process contained spelling errors such as this one. Care has been taken to ensure that quoted posts are reproduced accurately, including apparent mistakes and typographical errors. However, the line between accidental misspellings, intentional stylistic choices and obscure reference points was often difficult to draw. Due both to this and concerns about the readability of quotes with many such apparent errors, I have chosen not to identify all spelling deviations as such – unless there was some identifiable meaning in the alternative spelling choice. I have provided minor clarifications through in-text citations and longer explanations as footnotes where appropriate.

The final two posts that referred to Republicans criticised the Party's lack of early support for Trump, such as the below post made shortly before the 2016 Presidential election:

Laura Ingraham on Twitter: All the Republicans who backed away from @realDonaldTrump look really really stupid right now. (October 2016, 3655 vote score, 112 comments)

Throughout all posts that discussed them, Republicans identified as such were rarely the primary subject of a post, brought up only to compare or contrast with other individuals or groups. The Republican Party as an institution was also never framed as an insider group in the same way that the Democratic Party was ostensibly largely *representative of* the establishment. Furthermore, these posts consistently framed the Republican Party in an entirely passive manner. Neither the party as an institution nor Republicans explicitly identified as such were ever framed as instigators or primary subjects of those posts in which they were mentioned, but rather only discussed either as acquiescent to their own victimisation or to contrast Trump's success with the mediocrity of the rest of the party:

Trump beat 16 lame Republicans, battled the media and establishment, and took on Crooked Hillary. He is now fighting the Deep State. Words cannot express how greatful we should be for what he is doing for us. (March 2017, 9519 vote score, 271 comments)

This highlights the distance created by The\_Donald's users between Trump and the Republican Party he ostensibly represented. This distance reflects the contingent nature of insider status, defined not by consistency of ideological stance or party affiliation but rather a looser coherency to a dynamic of distinction from (and opposition to) an imagined establishment. In this context, the Republican Party could be framed as both part of the establishment and as the victims of it as required. Individual Republican politicians were also not framed as insiders or outsiders by virtue of their membership of the party. Indeed, affiliation with the party is rarely mentioned. When it was, it was typically secondary or illustrative of some other trait or category of the subject.

## **The Left**

The role of 'the left' in The\_Donald's framing of events was broad and flexible. Left-wing ideological bias was asserted to be present across all establishment institutions, yet this was rarely defined beyond accusations of bias against conservatives or other insider

subjects. Beyond this, however, The\_Donald's users frequently discussed 'liberals' or 'the left' as a broad category, making broad assertions about the apparent opinions of liberal or left wing Americans. These were typically unflattering caricatures, presented to mock the ostensibly irrational or inconsistent views of an imagined opponent. By framing 'the left' as a monolithic force, disparate anecdotes, social media posts and completely un-referenced assertions about what 'liberals' or 'libs' were allegedly doing or saying contributed to a seemingly coherent account defined by wilful ignorance and hypocrisy:

Gay Couple Gets Death Threats for Supporting Trump. LIBS WORSE THEN SAUDI ARABIA (October 2016, 3828 vote score, 200 comments)

Liberals are so 'tolerant' that Caitlyn/Bruce Jenner said it was easier to come out as trans than Republican! (July 2016, 3008 vote score, 194 comments)

Trump doesn't even have to try anymore to trigger liberals, they are conditioned to his tweets like Pavlov's dogs (December 2016, 3464 vote score, 151 comments)

A wide range of individuals and groups were framed by The\_Donald as representative of 'the left'. Posts relating to billionaire George Soros, Antifa activists, feminists, college students and the Black Lives Matter movement were all framed as evidence of an ostensibly coordinated and monolithic left-wing ideological establishment. Whilst these groups and individuals were diverse – and not necessarily aligned in their aims and goals – they were engaged with by The\_Donald's users as largely interchangeable. This was particularly evident in their discussion of activist movements and associated demonstrations held throughout 2016 and 2017, which were varyingly framed as the work of highly organised establishment forces and the hypocritical frenzy of an ignorant mass of those unaware of the truth of the situation:

Billionaire George Soros has ties to more than 50 'partners' of the Women's March on Washington (January 2017, 10307 vote score, 340 comments)

Now that Antif-Fa attacked the police and started THROWING USED TAMPONS, they got BTFO by the based Portland PD with flash bangs, tear gas, and pepper balls. ANTI-FA ARE UNORINICALLY RETARDED. (June 2017, 10154 vote score, 408 comments)

The way in which they framed 'the left' was therefore emblematic of the way The\_Donald framed the establishment as a whole: homogenous, defined by ignorance, yet vague and

monolithic in its actual goals or intentions. This, in turn, facilitated a framing of insiders as defined by the knowledge and competencies that set them apart from ‘everyone else’. In this way, The\_Donald’s users could frame the content that they posted as evidence of a form of insider knowledge, sharing the very ‘truths’ that outsiders were in turn framed as ignorant of or actively covering up.

## **Islam and Muslims**

Whilst much of The\_Donald’s distinction between knowledgeable insiders and the ‘establishment’ mapped onto broader framings surrounding the 2016 US Presidential election, the assertion of a political and media establishment also drew on wider discourse of both mainstream US conservatism and the international far right. This was particularly apparent in the way that the subreddit’s participants discussed subjects relating to Islam and Muslim people. Throughout the sample, The\_Donald’s users generally avoided overt hate speech. However, their engagement with Islam as a religion and Muslim people either individually or as an imagined monolithic group was far more overtly offensive and direct than was otherwise typical for the subreddit. This was also reflected in the fact that whilst the subreddit’s rules explicitly forbade racism and anti-Semitism, this was with the caveat that “Muslim and illegal immigrant are not races” (The\_Donald wiki July 2017). The framing of Muslim people as an ‘other’ in relation to which insider status was defined was the most visible alignment between The\_Donald’s rhetoric and that of more explicitly far right spaces – particularly in their designation of Islamophobia as what Hafez (2014) describes as an “accepted racism”.

However, The\_Donald’s engagement with Islam and Muslims was also distinctive of the subreddit’s own core dynamic of insiders working to expose alleged truths suppressed by the establishment. Posts that mentioned Islam or Muslims typically did so in a way that appeared primarily intended to reassert the alleged distinction between insiders and the establishment. To that end, establishment status was frequently asserted as defined through ‘support’ for Islam as an apparent political entity. In turn, ‘insider’ status was then defined by opposition to this alleged ‘support’. In this way, The\_Donald’s users typically expressed their engagement with Islam and Muslims as drawing attention to and opposing alleged establishment ‘support’ of Islam as an imagined political monolith or specific Muslim individuals or institutions:

CNN’s Sally Kohn, a lesbian, defends Sharia Law. When told she would be killed, she uses the liberal favourite insult, “go read a book,” and links a page that says

Sharia Law isn't bad. Cucked is too nice of a word for these people. (August 2016, 3550 vote score, 320 comments)

Muslim bakeries in Michigan refuse to make cake for gay wedding. WHERE'S THE FRONT PAGE HEADLINES? #AmericaFirst (February 2017, 21219 vote score, 1051 comments)

Did you hear about this? Muslim driver mows down five pedestrians in Spain. I didn't even. Media is covering up Islamic Jihad in Europe on a daily basis! (April 2017, 8032 vote score, 130 comments)

This also facilitated the noticeably more explicitly discriminatory way in which The\_Donald's users engaged with Islam. Rather than focusing on attacking Islam directly or making hateful comments about specific Muslim people, The\_Donald's users instead discussed Islam in terms of the *reaction* of other actors to events involving Muslims or 'Islam' as a vaguely defined political entity. Overall, then, The\_Donald's engagement with Islam and Muslims was often consistent with that of the wider far right (Hafez 2014), yet framed in distinctive terms of the subreddit's binary of insiders and the establishment. The establishment position was firmly defined as an ignorance or deliberate cover up regarding the 'truth' surrounding Islam, which was continually referred to but never clearly or consistently defined. The consequences of this will be discussed in relation to a specific media event in the second half of this chapter.

## Celebrities

The way in which The\_Donald's users discussed celebrities was also consistent with broader framings of the 'establishment' as defined in relation to *other* establishment figures. Both insider and outsider status were similarly defined in relation to an alleged 'celebrity' establishment. To that end, celebrities who were critical of Trump were framed as representative of a broader category, a hypocritical Hollywood elite:

Samantha Bee's Family opposed integration of their local school. Liberal only wants minorities at other schools and not with their kids. (December 2016, 3777 vote score, 93 comments)

Madonna (who offered to perform sex favors in exchange for Hillary votes) is complaining about sexism in music industry... (December 2016, 5635 vote score,



37 comments)

This is the fucking bully from SNL that tweeted (and deleted) about Barron. Don't let this go, tweet back at her, NBC and every news organization. Enough of this liberal hypocrisy shit! (January 2017, 7890 vote score, 402 comments)

Conversely, celebrities framed as working against the establishment were typically framed in terms of this alleged opposition and willingness to speak out against mainstream opinion – framing them as individuals rather than representative of a particular social group. In this way, the insider status of these celebrities was largely defined in their difference from and apparent opposition to an otherwise monolithic media culture:

His name is Kanye , he is currently held in a psych ward for speaking out against the MSM machine . (November 2016, 9582 vote score, 520 comments)

Show some love for based Stephen Baldwin,the alpha male of the Baldwin brothers who supports Trump (October 2016, 3870 vote score, 88 comments. Baldwin is here implicitly contrasted with his actor brother actor Alec Baldwin, an outspoken supporter of the Democratic Party who frequently parodied Trump on comedy show *Saturday Night Live*)

Tolerant liberals are slut-shaming Jenna Jameson for daring to speak her mind: "Look at the world... look at the majority of terrorist attacks, open your eyes to the fact that islam is waging war on the world." (December 2016, 7215 vote score, 246 comments)

This is reminiscent of the framing of insider and establishment politicians. Members of the Republican Party, when depicted favourably, were typically discussed in terms of their opposition to the ostensibly Democrat-dominated political establishment, rather than their party affiliation. In a similar vein, celebrities critical of Trump or his policies were framed as part of a Hollywood elite against which insider celebrities were defined in their opposition and, crucially, willingness to speak the 'truth' that would otherwise apparently have been suppressed or ignored.

## Reddit

This twin dynamic of a homogeneous establishment that ignored or suppressed the 'truth'

and knowledgeable insiders who opposed them through their apparent willingness and competency to speak out was a consistent pattern throughout the sample, yet was made particularly explicit in the way in which The\_Donald framed its own position in opposition to an alleged Reddit establishment. The\_Donald's relationship with Reddit as a platform was notably defined by explicit and deliberate antagonism, despite the fact that the subreddit's significance stemmed almost entirely from its successful use of Reddit's functionality (Prakasam and Huxtable-Thomas 2020; Shepherd 2020). Contradictions such as this were, however, at the heart of The\_Donald's framing of the establishment and its apparent opposition to it. Both the mainstream media and the political system were consistently framed as establishment outsiders, yet The\_Donald's core practices were entirely orientated around gaining mainstream media attention in aid of securing electoral success. The subreddit's antagonism towards other Reddit users and the platform's administrators acted as a microcosm of this broader framing. Just as winning the presidential election was seen as necessary despite the failings of the mainstream political system, The\_Donald's users fully embraced Reddit's functionality whilst simultaneously framing the site's administrators, other subreddits and wider user base as complicit in the very same cover-ups and censorship that they were ostensibly using the platform to expose:

Isn't it insane that it's The Donald vs. ALL OF REDDIT, and we're still destroying the cucks (January 2017, 9043 vote score, 318 comments)

These contradictions were even tacitly acknowledged in posts that addressed Reddit directly. For The\_Donald's users, their subreddit stood alone in its willingness to tell the truth and engage with topics that the rest of Reddit were either ignorant of or unwilling to discuss. Many posts referenced this, calling on participants to 'up' vote content that other Reddit users would not see or would choose to ignore were it not for The\_Donald's collective efforts to elevate content to the site's shared front page:

Trump supporter wearing MAGA hat picking up litter after the Women's March in Washington. It would be a shame if this hit the front page, wouldn't it? (January 2017, 8013 vote score, 34 comments)

Reminder that PRESIDENT-ELECT DONALD J. TRUMP WON 3,084 of the country's 3,141 counties. Let that sink into the frontpage. (November 2016, 14634 vote score, 684 comments)

Hey r/all... we know you don't really like Hillary. You may not be very fond of

Trump, but he is COMPETENT, HEALTHY, and a big “FUCK YOU” to government corruption! VOTE TRUMP! (November 2016, 10164 vote score, 87 comments)

Reddit’s administrators were also singled out as complicit with the establishment and, at times, as directly responsible for alleged censorship of The\_Donald itself. Several posts repeated accusations that the site’s functionality was being altered and unfairly used to suppress content from The\_Donald:

Reddit shamelessly implementing policies which are specifically against this one Sub (November 2016, 22630 vote score, 406 comments)

IT WOULD BE A SHAME IF THIS PICTURE OF A LYING LITTLE BITCH MADE IT TO THE FRONT PAGE. FUCK /U/SPEZ<sup>2</sup> (November 2016, 11505 vote score, 294 comments)

Despite this antagonism, The\_Donald’s users were also explicit in their awareness of the utility of using Reddit and the apparent significance of their place on the platform (see also Roozenbeek and Salvador-Palau 2017 for findings that corroborate this). This was alluded to in posts that acknowledged either the potency of Reddit in promoting information or the need to reveal the truth to Reddit’s wider user base. The apparent ignorance and hostility of the rest of Reddit was seen as an opportunity to proliferate information and, at the very least, antagonise opponents for entertainment. To that end, a common theme in posts directly calling on users to vote content ‘to the top’ was to acknowledge that extra effort was required to counteract the ‘biased’ treatment the subreddit ostensibly received:

Libtards are Triggered. Third time posting. 50% downvote in less then 5 secs. TRIGGERED You can’t stop us (January 2017, 8411 vote score, 32 comments. The post suggests that Reddit’s ‘down’ vote functionality is being manipulated to suppress content from The\_Donald)

CTR DOWNVOTING HARD AFTER TRUMP’S ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT. UPVOTE TO TRIGGER THE TOLERANT LEFT (November 2016, 16427 vote score, 222 comments)

Posts about Reddit functionality also mentioned Correct the Record or ‘CTR’, a political

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<sup>2</sup> “Spez” is the alias of Steve Huffman, Reddit CEO and administrator. This post was made shortly after Huffman admitted to editing the text of several comments made by users of The\_Donald, replacing his own name in several insulting posts with those of the subreddit’s moderators. (Olheiser and Tsukayama 2017)

action committee that supported Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign through various online activities. To The\_Donald, CTR was a potentially ever-present interloper on the subreddit, likely manipulating the vote functionality to suppress the subreddit's own efforts to raise the visibility of the content shared by its users. CTR was representative of the broader issues caused by the ease with which new users could participate in the subreddit, and was indicative of the importance of subcultural capital in distinguishing between insiders and establishment infiltrators (or genuine but less experienced participants deemed more likely to be swayed by the arguments of political opponents). As anyone could theoretically post to The\_Donald, the only thing that marked a participant as a genuine insider were references to the shared stock of familiar reference points, framing devices and format conventions that coalesced into familiar practices recognisable to other users. As will be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters, this afforded The\_Donald's users significant flexibility in how they engaged with external content in a way that nonetheless maintained the core distinction between insider and outsiders.

To that end, negative comments, unexpected 'down' votes or posts expressing doubt surrounding the Trump administration's actions were frequently accused of being authored by 'CTR', associated media platform 'Shareblue' or more general references to 'brigaders' - Reddit slang for outsiders to a subreddit attempting to manipulate the voting system for their own ends. As the below post indicates, The\_Donald's users were well aware of the fact that the identity of the subreddit was almost entirely defined by the content its participants shared and how this content was engaged with by other users:

REMINDER! Since Berkeley, there has been a sudden (and slightly suspicious) influx of posts here calling for retaliatory violence. DO NOT CONDONE THIS! All eyes are on us at the moment, do not give them any fuel to use to further the narrative that we are the violent ones! (February 2017, 24612 vote score, 1367 comments)

In this way, The\_Donald's conflict with the wider Reddit user base demonstrated the significance of subcultural knowledge and engagement in recognisable practices in defining insider status. Particularly in pseudonymous and anonymous communities with few formal barriers to entry, a shared stock of reference points and the ability to engage with these in ways that are read as authentic and correct mark insiders as distinct from those who are not regular or genuine participants (Miltner 2014; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017; Katz and Shifman 2017). In the case of The\_Donald, the threat of inauthentic posters being read as genuine was evident both in fears that outsiders were suppressing posts through voting them 'down' or that they were posting content – such as

the threats of violence mentioned in the post above – that would damage the subreddit’s reputation and lead to potential sanctions. In this way, insider status was not simply a case of subscribing to The\_Donald and posting or ‘up’ voting, but rather through contributions to the subreddit that demonstrated the specialist knowledge and competencies required to engage with content that the ‘establishment’ - which included Reddit itself - was ostensibly suppressing. Both Reddit’s administrators and the average, ‘mainstream’ Reddit user were similarly defined by homogeneity and ignorance of these very practices that marked a contributor to The\_Donald as an insider.

### **Trump supporters and The\_Donald itself**

The significance of The\_Donald’s relationship with Reddit identified here is consistent with findings by Roozenbeek and Salvador Palau (2020:51) that, compared to other political communities on Reddit, “The\_Donald’s aims appeared much more reddit-centric, carving out some territory for Trump on a platform where there had previously been little sign of support for his candidacy”. This notion of “carving out” space on an otherwise hostile platform was consistently apparent throughout The\_Donald’s engagement with Reddit, but the findings I present here indicate that this was understood largely in terms of information and knowledge that marked insiders as distinct from the rest of the platform, framed in terms of alleged ignorance and suppression of the ‘truth’.

This relationship with Reddit shaped not just The\_Donald’s view of itself, but also the very nature of what insider status meant as a form of participation in the subculture. In this section, I will analyse how The\_Donald asserted the distinction between insiders and outsiders as one of relationship to ‘the truth’. This meant that any contribution to the subreddit, any text shared, any potential resource in the media field, could be presented as something relevant to the subreddit if it could be convincingly framed as something that the establishment did not want to be proliferated.

This dynamic of truth and exposure was well facilitated by the functionality of Reddit as a platform. By sharing something to The\_Donald, the subreddit’s users asserted that it was something worth seeing - often by direct reference to the fact that it would otherwise have been ignored or covered up by the establishment. The framing of events in terms of both visibility and a conflict between those seeking to reveal the truth and those who would suppress it asserted an importance in participating in The\_Donald that extended beyond the subreddit itself. ‘Up’ voting content on the subreddit does not just act as an indication of approval, but also in itself an important political act - playing a part in a

conflict of information between clearly defined allies and opponents. Often, the implication was that The\_Donald was bringing to light information that would otherwise have been suppressed by the mainstream media ('MSM'), Reddit's administrators or other implicitly powerful but vaguely forces that made up the establishment:

NOPE! MSM WILL NOT SWEEP THIS UNDER THE RUG. BACK TO THE TOP! (October 2016, 4559 vote score, 116 comments)

CNN is refusing to publish this image. To the front page! (July 2016, 3572 vote score, 275 comments)

HILLARY CLINTON IS PAYING ONE MILLION DOLLARS TO REMOVE THIS PICTURE FROM THE INTERNET (July 2016, 3453 vote score, 93 comments)

In this way, participation in the subreddit was almost inherently framed as a marker of insider status. As posting something to the subreddit was to assert that it was information covered up by the establishment, to share it, vote it 'up' or comment on it was to act in opposition to – and mark one's own distinction from – the establishment. This focus on the truth and its exposure was therefore directly facilitated by the affordances of Reddit as a platform in ways that were often made explicit. Participants in The\_Donald were incentivised to find new information and encourage other users to 'up' vote it for visibility, participating in a microcosm of the broader conflict that defined the subreddit's core framing of events:

I'm a simple man. I see a gray arrow, I make it orange. (June 2017, 13273 vote score, 137 comments. This post references the grey 'up' vote button that becomes orange once pressed)

Has The\_Donald fallen asleep at the wheel? #TermLimits!!!! WHY ISN'T THIS AT THE TOP?!?!? For how many decades have guys like Ron Paul been preaching about term limits? Why is nobody talking about this?!?!? (October 2016, 4351 vote score, 332 comments)

320,000 Centipedes:<sup>3</sup> We Will Soon Surpass the Daily Circulation of the Washington Post (December 2016, 2732 vote score, 42 comments)

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<sup>3</sup> 'Centipede', sometimes shortened to 'pede', was a popular slang term used on The\_Donald to refer to the subreddit's users. This post celebrates the fact that the subreddit had reached 320,000 total subscribers.

The framing of events in terms of visibility is indicative of the way Reddit as a platform shaped the practices that defined both participation and insider status on The\_Donald. The subreddit's influence was dependent on its ability to draw attention towards content and convert this attention to increased visibility through the Reddit upvote system. This facilitated the development of practices and subcultural norms that were predicated on the potential of exploiting the relationship between visibility and popularity that is central to Reddit's functionality. Individual participants may have been incentivised by the rewards of fleeting attention and influence afforded by a successful Reddit post, but the consistent application of these themes of attention, exposure and revelation formed an overarching framing device through which The\_Donald's users built collaborative responses to events, significant or otherwise, grounded in and reaffirming the distinction between the in-group and the 'establishment'.

Through this dynamic, insider status was defined through practices that reinforced distinctions between an in-group and the imagined establishment. Subcultural capital was embodied in the knowledge and competencies required to find and share ostensibly relevant information in ways that reference established narratives, in-jokes and adhered to familiar stylistic conventions. Insider status and meaningful participation were therefore linked to broader narratives of information and suppression, which in turn relied on framing The\_Donald's opponents as ignorant of, or actively suppressing this same knowledge. In this way, The\_Donald's users could assert that the content that they were sharing was relevant through claims that it was something that was being suppressed or covered up. In turn, this marked whoever shared that content or interacted with it as an insider through the acquired knowledges and competencies required to recognise, understand and promote something that the 'establishment' was either ignorant of or suppressing. The narrative of participation as proliferation of the truth was made sense of by a framing of Trump's opponents as a monolithic 'establishment', defined by ignorance of the systems of subcultural capital that made participation in The\_Donald seemingly meaningful acts of political engagement and knowledge dissemination. In this way, The\_Donald was very much shaped by the functionality of the Reddit platform. To be an insider was to successfully engage in the very practices that The\_Donald's situation on Reddit facilitated: finding, sharing and promoting content that could be *convincingly framed as* something the establishment 'does not want you to see'.

## **Finding 2: The establishment as a “useful myth” and the declining relevance of Hillary Clinton**

### **Shifting definitions of the establishment**

The role of the ‘establishment’ on The\_Donald was as a pragmatic, useful framing device that made sense of content posted to the subreddit - rather than an attempt to accurately depict a real social group. This is evidenced by the way in which the framing of the establishment shifted pragmatically from post to post, changing over time to accommodate the evolving political situation and the texts in the media field from which content could be shared. This was most prominent in the changing role of Hillary Clinton in the subreddit’s framing of the establishment.

The ‘establishment’ as framed by The\_Donald’s users spanned a wide range of social groups, individuals and institutions and was defined pragmatically in a way that responded to wider political contexts. However, before the 2016 Presidential Election, the establishment was largely framed in relation to Trump’s Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton. Clinton acted as a clear definitional anchor, personifying the otherwise amorphous ‘establishment’ and providing a clear goal for participants to work towards in defeating her presidential ambitions through a Trump victory. To that end, framing Clinton in this way worked to explicitly define both the establishment itself and the forms of participation that marked The\_Donald’s users as a distinctive subculture in their opposition to Clinton and her alleged allies.

Hillary Clinton was comfortably the most popular subject discussed in this sample overall, appearing in 189 of the 1200 sampled posts. However, an overwhelming majority of posts discussing Clinton were made before the 2016 election. Between the start of data collection in July 2016 and Election Day on November 8th 2016, Clinton appeared in 37% of all posts. This is significantly higher than even Trump himself, who was only explicitly the subject of 16% during this period, as well as other prominent subjects like the Democratic Party (12% of posts) and the Media (11% of posts).



*A comparison of subjects discussed before and after the election*

Subject	Mentions before election as a proportion of total posts	Mentions after election as a proportion of total posts	Relative change before and after election
Clinton	37	4	-33
Trump	16	13	-3
Democrats	12	12	0
Mainstream Media	11	14	+3
Trump Supporters	9	14	+5
Reddit	6	10	+4
Alt Media	6	5	-1
The Left	5	13	+8
Islam	4	12	+8
Celebrities (allies)	3	4	1

The ‘establishment’ as it was framed by The\_Donald in the lead up to the 2016 election was largely defined by a clear binary between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Many posts focused on fairly conventional criticisms of Clinton’s campaign and political history or alluded to longstanding conspiracy theories surrounding the Clinton family (Zadrozny 2019):

Hey /r/all, when Hillary Clinton was serving as your Secretary of State, the majority of her non-governmental meetings were exclusively with people who personally gave money to her foundation. Is that really who you want as President? (August 2016, 3586 vote score, 44 comments)

Your daily reminder that Hillary Clinton wanted to preemptively assassinate a non-combatant citizen in a sovereign embassy before he revealed her massive corruption. The same woman who claims Trump does not have the temperament to hold the office of POTUS (October 2016, 4488 vote score, 45 comments)

Reminder: The Clintons made at least \$153 million off of speeches. Who else gets paid that much to speak? They were paid that much because the payments were really bribes. Who would own the Clinton White House? (November 2016, 13165 vote score, 184 comments)

However, these contributions also consistently framed Hillary Clinton, former President Bill Clinton and their philanthropic Clinton Foundation as embedded within - and largely representative of - a wider establishment. Clinton acted as a tangible symbol of an establishment that was otherwise defined in far vaguer terms, and any association with her or her campaign was enough to imply collusion with the establishment in and of itself:

Hillary says "We will work to get money out of politics!" on the same day she accepts a \$25 million donation from George Soros (July 2016, 4316 vote score, 118 comments)

Clinton supporters right now after latest leaks showing direct pay for play for political appointments while she was Secretary of State under Obama's "most transparent administration" (September 2016, 3600 vote score, 80 comments)

My new favorite thing: when I encounter a ridiculously biased article, I look up the journalist's name on wikileaks to see if they are part of the Clinton Machine. (They are) (October 2016, 4076 vote score, 173 comments)

Within the 161 posts in which Clinton herself, her immediate family or institutions such as her 2016 campaign team or Foundation were discussed, 65 (40.37%) of these also mentioned another 'establishment' subject. This indicates the high proportion of posts discussing Clinton that used association with her as an indication of a wider establishment, ostensibly defined by this co-affiliation. Hillary Clinton, as well as the Clinton family and Foundation, therefore served an important role in framing the establishment against which The\_Donald defined itself. In the pre-election sample, any link to Hillary Clinton and her presidential campaign made the establishment label meaningful when applied to others. In simple terms, a group, individual or institution could convincingly be asserted to be part of the establishment if it could be linked to Hillary Clinton:

"...Social Justice Warriors, pundits, celebrities, DNC, cuckservatives,<sup>4</sup> mainstream media (propoganda), Crooked Hillary and her campaign, President Obama & administration, Saudi Arabia, Clinton Foundation, CTR, & wealthy elite - collectively freaking out because Donald J. Trump is WINNING!" (November 2016, 9185 vote score, 378 comments)

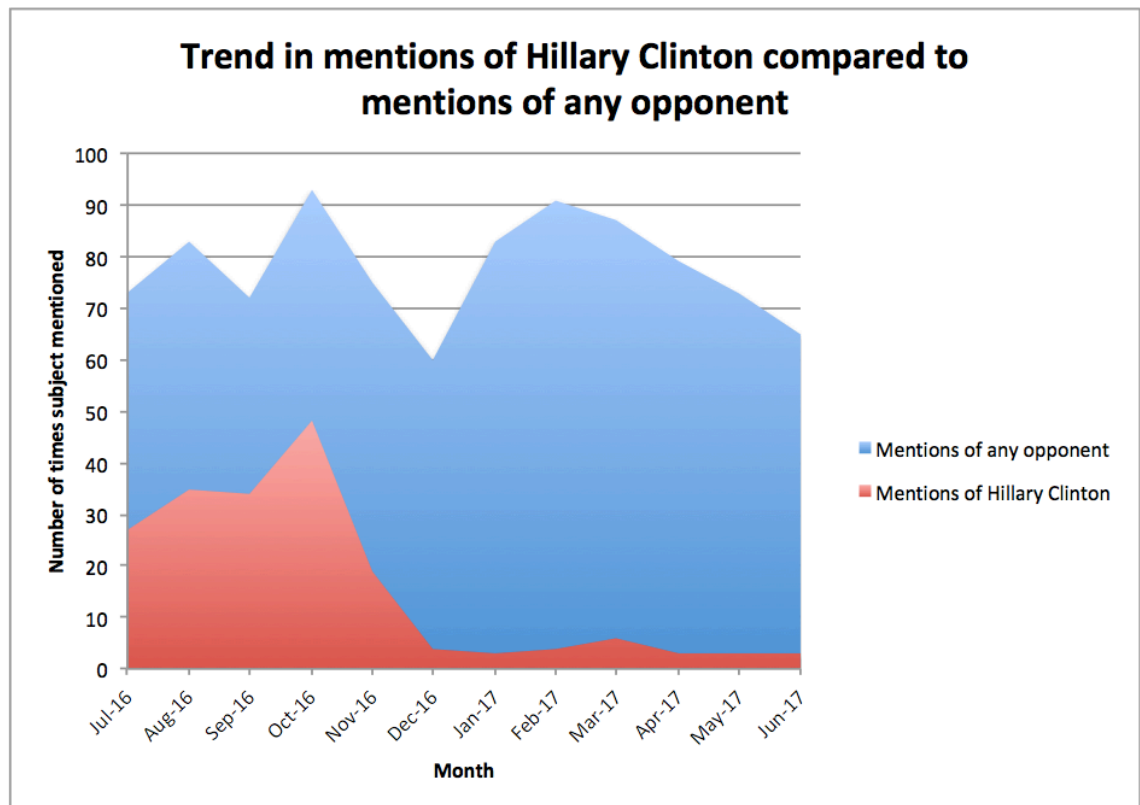
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<sup>4</sup> 'Cuckservatives' is a slang term referring to the alleged weakness of mainstream conservatives and their failure to stand up to the 'establishment'.

In sum, the ‘establishment’ as framed by The\_Donald was a monolithic bloc of diverse constituents with vaguely defined goals, who were understood in relation to each other. ‘Establishment’ status was conferred on individuals and groups largely through their role in suppressing or ignoring the truth, but also through association with *other* establishment groups. At the core of this, Hillary Clinton and her 2016 electoral campaign acted as a definitional anchor, tying various establishment groups together through their association and alleged endorsement of her campaign. Republican politicians, left-wing activist movements, billionaires, college students, multinational tech companies and corporate media entities were all understood as part of a coherent ‘establishment’ force in a manner that was ostensibly made meaningful through their alleged support of Hillary Clinton and opposition to Donald Trump.

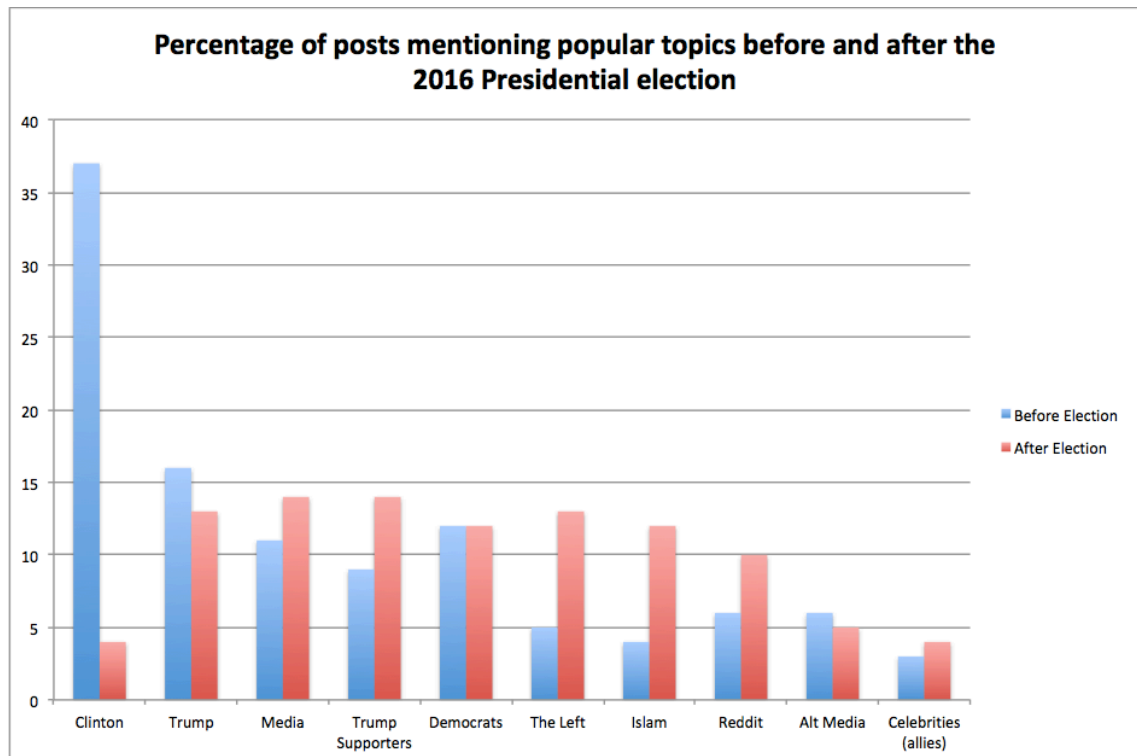
### **Clinton’s declining relevance and the shifting nature of the establishment**

With the above in mind, it was initially surprising to find that following Trump’s victory in the 2016 Presidential election, Hillary Clinton declined from the most commonly mentioned subject to almost total irrelevance. Before the election, Clinton appeared in 37% of all popular posts sampled, but this declined drastically to only 4% after Election Day. However, aside from the lack of posts discussing Clinton, the overall number of ‘establishment’ subjects mentioned as a proportion of total posts declined only slightly from 81.65% to 76.05%. In the months following the election, the core framing of knowledgeable insiders defined against an imagined ‘establishment’ remained intact. This is in spite of the fact that Hillary Clinton made up 45% of all mentions of ‘establishment’ figures prior to the election.



*Graph 1: Trend in mentions of Hillary Clinton compared to mentions of any opponent*

The declining relevance of Clinton, the election and associated loss of a media environment dominated by binary distinctions between the two candidates appeared to have minimal impact on The\_Donald's overall framing of events as defined by knowledgeable insiders and the establishment against which they are working to expose the truth. Furthermore, all other 'establishment' groups showed a modest yet consistent increase in the proportion of posts that they appeared in, effectively filling the gap left by Hillary Clinton's absence:

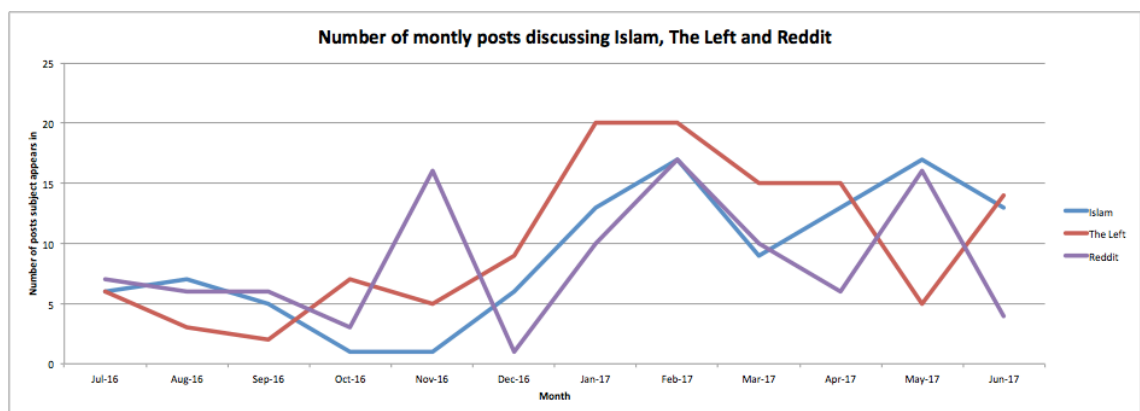


*Graph 2: Percentage of posts mentioning popular topics before and after the 2016 presidential election*

This is indicative of the relational, shifting nature of the ‘establishment’ as defined by The\_Donald and suggests a pragmatic approach in maintaining the distinction between insiders and outsiders. Even outside of the confines of a two-candidate Presidential race, discussions of events were still framed in terms of a clear binary between knowledgeable insiders and the ‘establishment’ other. The lack of a clear, unifying opponent against whom the in-group could be defined created space that was readily filled on a pragmatic basis by other opponents such as the media, Reddit, Islam or generic references to liberal or left wing Americans. Rather than destabilising the distinction between insiders and outsiders, the declining relevance of Hillary Clinton after the 2016 election revealed the pragmatic way in which the ‘establishment’ was framed by The\_Donald’s participants. Initial fixed definitions of ‘establishment’ status that were related to association with the Clinton presidential campaign were swiftly abandoned with seemingly minimal impact on the role played by the establishment in defining the subreddit as an in group in its opposition to and distinction from it.

### The pragmatic and reactive framing of the ‘establishment’: engaging with current events

The dramatic decline of Hillary Clinton’s relevance in the subreddit’s framing of the establishment resulted in several pragmatic shifts in the proportion of posts discussing other ‘establishment’ groups. The way in which different groups filled the gap left by Clinton was not arbitrary, and the prominence of subjects often reflected events discussed in the broader media field. The decline of posts discussing Hillary Clinton following the 2016 election was mirrored by shifts in the number of posts discussing other subjects in a way that appeared to respond to the media and political landscape external to The\_Donald. This is indicative of the pragmatic way in which The\_Donald’s users engaged with external media fields as a source of texts to share and discuss. Once discussions of the establishment were less served by an abundance of external media texts circulating around the 2016 election, texts surrounding other subjects were engaged with more frequently as a source of content for contributions to the subreddit.



*Graph 3: Number of monthly posts discussing Islam, The Left and Reddit*

Regardless of the specific subject, posts discussing those ostensibly aligned with the ‘establishment’ did so in familiar terms of information and its suppression. Just as posts before the election focused on exposing allegedly suppressed or ignored truths surrounding Hillary Clinton, discussions of subjects such as Islam, the left and Reddit itself all focused on their role in an apparently unified effort to suppress the same knowledge that was shared in any given post. As can be seen in graph 3 above, these other groups were engaged with on a much more inconsistent and pragmatic basis that appeared to be somewhat responsive to major events discussed in the external media and political fields.

For example, the number of posts mentioning activist groups or left-wing Americans rose significantly in February 2017, following high-profile student protests against far-right speakers at the University of California, Berkeley:

I was at UC Berkeley last night. Here is a pic I got after the speech cancelation of nearly 100 SWAT and campus police sitting inside the student union building doing NOTHING while people were getting beaten outside. WHO told them to stand down? (February 2017, 22082 vote score, 1455 comments)

UC Berkeley Thug Who Beat Conservative And Bragged About It Online Is University Staff Member! (February 2017, 18882 vote score, 699 comments)

ANTIFA is a Terrorist Organisation - It's Time for Federal Investigations (February 2017, 15442 vote score, 513 comments)

These posts engaged with familiar themes discussed throughout this chapter. Protesters here are alluded to be linked to some kind of vaguely powerful force, capable of controlling law enforcement and present within higher education institutions. In turn, The\_Donald's users framed themselves as working to expose the ignored 'truth' of this situation. The information shared within posts surrounding these emerging events was consistently framed as important, revelatory information that The\_Donald had an important role in proliferating. Often, this framing included familiar calls to use Reddit's functionality to gain the post greater visibility in response to this apparent cover up:

WOMAN IN A MAGA HAT WAS PEPPER SPRAYED BY ANTIFA WHILE GIVING AN INTERVIEW ON CAMERA AT UC BERKELEY. GET THIS VIDEO OUT THERE PEDES (18095 vote score, 997 comments)

Here is an image of an already unconscious Trump supporter being brutally beaten @ UC Berkeley. Not that anyone on Reddit cares. (February 2017, 23507 vote score, 1492 comments)

Less than 24 hours after Americans were assaulted in the streets, /all of reddit has gone silent. WE WILL NOT LET YOU PRETEND THESE TERRORISTS DON'T EXIST (February 2017, 18083 vote score, 328 comments)

In this way, The\_Donald's users engaged with the texts produced in response to an emerging event, including images, news articles, videos and anecdotes through a familiar

lens of insiders working to expose the truth suppressed by the establishment.

This facilitated continual reinforcement of the distinction between the subcultural in-group defined by practices of information sharing, and an establishment that was either ignorant of or actively obscuring this information. Regardless of whether posts engaged with Hillary Clinton, student protests or any other topic, individual contributions were presented as part of a broader effort to proliferate the truth. This narrative allowed contributions to be framed as significant and important, reflecting their author's accumulated stock of subculture-specific knowledge and the competency to find new information and share it in ways that are meaningful to other participants. Through framing the content they shared in this way, individual participants could demonstrate insider affiliation whilst also maintaining the distinction between insiders and outsiders that made this affiliation meaningful. Furthermore, the flexibility of the 'establishment' framing meant that almost any event could be engaged with by framing it in these terms, as will be discussed below.

### **The pragmatic and reactive framing of the "establishment": engaging with a "fake news" event**

In another prominent example of how The\_Donald's framing of the establishment responded to the availability of external media texts, posts discussing immigrants - typically implied to be Muslim or discussed interchangeably with Islam and Muslims - were particularly popular in February 2017. Of the 20 posts discussing Islam or immigrants in February 2017, half asserted an alleged negative impact of immigration to European countries, six of these specifically mentioning Sweden. Whilst these posts did not explicitly reference a particular event, comments made by President Trump at a rally in Florida on February 18th falsely referring to an entirely non-existent incident in Sweden were widely reported and criticised in US and international media (Bradner 2017; BBC 2017c; Chan 2017; Topping 2017):

"We've got to keep our country safe," he said. "You look at what's happening in Germany. You look at what's happening last night in Sweden. Sweden, who would believe this? Sweden. They took in large numbers. They're having problems like they never thought possible. You look at what's happening in Brussels. You look at what's happening all over the world. Take a look at Nice. Take a look at Paris." (Trump 2017, quoted in Bradner 2017)



Following this, many of the posts discussing Sweden had a distinctively justificatory tone, some of which explicitly defended Trump's comments, such as the below from February 19th, 2017:

80% of Rapes in Sweden are committed by non-Swedish Immigrants; Malmö is the rape capital of Europe and has a part of the city called 'little Mogadishu'. Tell me again where President Trump went wrong with his statement? (February 2017: 15296 vote score, 735 comments)

Last night Donald Trump referenced Tucker Carlson's story on Sweden. Sweden took in 200k refugees, the most per capita of any European nation. The result has been a huge increase in violent crime. It would be terrible if this reached r/all and burst their echo chamber! (February 2017. 18755 vote score, 1160 comments)

This attests to the way in which contentious narratives were sustained through both explicit and implicit references to broader themes and familiar reference points, even when there was a lack of media texts that could be used as evidence of the claims being made. Despite the fact that Trump's comments regarding Sweden did not refer to an event that had actually taken place, these comments were discussed on The\_Donald in an environment rich with other posts alleging problems relating to immigration in Sweden and in Europe more generally. Whilst no significant incident involving immigrant or Muslim communities occurred in Sweden in February 2017, the suggestion that it had was made within, and in turn sustained, a repertoire of framing devices through which otherwise irrelevant information could be made meaningful. In this instance, the mere suggestion of an attack was enough to provoke a flurry of posts attacking Muslim and immigrant communities in Sweden, in spite of no directly relevant information shared within them. In this way, framing devices that made externally shared information meaningful could be sustained and made prominent in a given moment in a manner that was, however tangentially, related to the wider media context.

In February 2017, Islam, immigration and Europe were particularly prominent topics, coalescing around an event that had not actually taken place. Trump's false comments alluding to a non-existent event in Sweden served as a catalyst for posts reasserting the core distinction between insiders looking to spread 'truth' and an establishment defined by wilful ignorance and censorship of whatever it is currently being framed as 'the truth'. In this way, broad narratives could be repeated and reinforced despite the obscurity, inaccuracy or irrelevance of the actual content shared to support them. In turn, overarching framings of media bias and establishment cover-up could be used to make

sense of overtly false claims. Even if no particular event had occurred in this instance, the significance of the media bias frame meant that discussions surrounding media bias in this situation and others could be continually reinforced regardless of context. Trump's statements, whether mistaken, unclear or intentionally misleading, made sense in a context where media cover-up and misinformation was assumed.

### **The “establishment” as a flexible framing device**

The frame through which The\_Donald's users engaged with all events was defined by a distinction between two clear groups - the 'establishment' and their followers, who were ignorant of or actively suppressing the 'truth', and knowledgeable insiders who were willing to proliferate the information that would expose the truth. However, the way in which all of these things were defined was relational and shifted depending on context. During the 2016 presidential election, Hillary Clinton played a central role in how The\_Donald's users framed the establishment against which they defined themselves. Following Trump's election as president, the role played by Hillary Clinton diminished significantly - yet the utility of the 'establishment' as a framing device remained largely unchanged, with new subjects filling the gaps left by Clinton's absence on a pragmatic basis.

Association with the 'establishment' also worked to define which information was relevant to share to the subreddit. Regardless of context, the relevance of a given text was always asserted to reside in its capacity to disrupt or otherwise undermine the goals of the 'establishment'. This was true whether the text was an unflattering picture of Hillary Clinton, a formal policy announcement or a humorous Internet meme. This meant that participants in the subreddit were able to engage with the external media field with significant creativity and pragmatism. As long as a given text could be reasonably asserted to be something that the 'establishment' was either ignorant of or actively trying to cover up, it could be understood in terms coherent with the core framing device of the subreddit.

The framing of all content in terms of knowledgeable insiders working to expose information ostensibly ignored or suppressed by the establishment mainstream defined participation in the subreddit. However, the findings of the analysis presented in this chapter indicate that this establishment was defined in pragmatic, relational terms that changed depending on the wider political and media context and the resulting availability of texts in the media field to share to the subreddit and therefore participate. Insider

status was therefore conferred by the accumulation of subcultural capital reflected in the knowledges and competencies to find ostensibly relevant texts and, perhaps more importantly *assert this relevance* through references to established framing devices that made content meaningful to other participants. This afforded the subreddit's users significant scope for pragmatism and creativity when engaging with events through the media texts surrounding them. The implications of this flexibility will be the focus of the case studies presented throughout the rest of this thesis. Through engaging with events by assigning the texts produced in response to them to either an alleged establishment or insider position, the subreddit's users were able to engage with events and texts that ostensibly disrupted established consensus in a manner entirely coherent with familiar themes and broad dynamics.

## **Empirical Chapter 2) Engaging with a dissonant event: maintaining distinction from the establishment**

As discussed in the previous chapter, participation in The\_Donald was consistently grounded in a dynamic of insiders defined against an imagined 'establishment'. Insider status was claimed - often explicitly - through the sharing of ostensibly relevant information, presented in ways that engaged with familiar subcultural reference points and framing devices. This dynamic of insiders working to expose the truth obscured or ignored by the 'establishment' was that which made any act of participation in the subreddit meaningful. To The\_Donald's users, information was only worth sharing if it was something that the establishment 'does not want you to see', yet this claim only made sense if the distinction between the in-group and the establishment was meaningful and coherent to all that were participating. In this way, The\_Donald's users were all invested in maintaining the distinction between insiders and the establishment, as this made participation in the subreddit - entirely orientated around sharing ostensibly suppressed information - meaningful. By participating in ways that reinforced this distinction, The\_Donald's users marked themselves as insiders, yet also reasserted the significance of being an insider as something opposed to an imagined establishment. In essence, insider status was only worth anything if what it meant to be an 'insider' was clearly distinct from being a part of the 'establishment' with which non-insiders were complicit in their ignorance.

The subreddit's users' fundamental (yet typically implicit) goal of maintaining the distinction between insiders and the establishment was usually entirely coherent with the far more explicit goal of supporting Donald Trump. The Trump campaign and administration's appeal to anti-establishment sentiment, attacks on mainstream media and political opponents and the outlandish, wilfully-offensive nature of Trump's political persona (Hall et al 2016) meant that contributions to The\_Donald could easily mine the textual field surrounding Trump for content that could be framed as evidence of distinction from the establishment. The twin goals of 'supporting Trump' and maintaining the distinction between The\_Donald as a subculture and the establishment against which it was defined usually overlapped to the extent that they appeared to be effectively the same thing. However, in situations where Trump's actions went against the consensus expectations of the subreddit's users, the potential tension between these two goals

became apparent. As will be discussed throughout this chapter, when the goal of supporting Trump contradicted the need to maintain distinction from the 'establishment', The\_Donald's users worked to creatively and pragmatically redefine *both* the meaning of 'supporting Trump' and the positions associated with either side of the insider/establishment binary. In such situations, the subreddit's definition of Trump support had a pragmatic relationship with 'official' texts produced by the Trump administration, revealing the goal of support for Trump to actually be somewhat *subordinate* to maintaining the core frame of distinction between participants in the subreddit and outsiders. In situations where unquestioning support for Trump and the maintenance of the insider/establishment distinction appeared to conflict with one another, The\_Donald's users appeared far more invested in maintaining the distinction - even if this meant implicitly criticising, doubting or ignoring Trump's actions or statements.

In this chapter, I will explore how this broad dynamic facilitated engagement with a specific chain of events in April 2017 that appeared to disrupt consensus and trouble the core distinction between insiders and the 'establishment'. This analysis presents the results of case-study research data, collected from The\_Donald in April 2017. This case study focused on the subreddit's reaction to President Trump's authorisation of an airstrike against Shayrat Airfield, a Syrian Government military base and alleged source of a chemical attack against the town of Khan Shaykhun that had occurred three days earlier. The\_Donald's users quickly reached a clear consensus surrounding the 2017 Khan Shaykhun chemical attack, with almost all posts in the first two days of the sample framing it as a hoax intended to provoke the US into military intervention. However, this consensus was broken once President Trump did indeed authorise a retaliatory airstrike against a Syrian military airfield. This breaking of consensus did not, however, discourage The\_Donald's users from engaging with events in Syria, nor did it cause lasting disappointment or disillusionment. Rather, the subreddit continued to engage with the media texts surrounding the airstrike in ways that maintained the distinction between insiders and outsiders as one defined by specific knowledges and practices of information sharing. Before the strike against Shayrat Airfield, insider status on The\_Donald was defined by its users' knowledge of the apparent 'truth' of the event - that the attack was a hoax and therefore retaliation unjustifiable - and the willingness to share and proliferate this truth by participating in the subreddit through familiar practices of sharing and voting on content. However, within a few days of the retaliatory airstrike, the very opposite eventually became the consensus. The\_Donald's users continued to claim to be sharing truths suppressed or ignored by the establishment. However, the nature of these truths had changed. The establishment were no longer framed as covering up an alleged hoax chemical attack. Instead, they were criticised for unfair media coverage of Trump's

reaction and attempts to divide his supporters by stoking overreaction to what was now framed as an entirely justified and proportionate act of US military intervention. In turn, insider knowledge was re-framed as knowledge of the attack's justifiability, of evidence that the Syrian government did indeed have chemical weapons stockpiles and of the claim that *this* was in fact what had been 'covered up' by the establishment.

In this way, two seemingly contradictory stances on the Khan Shaykhun chemical attack and retaliatory US airstrike could both be framed as a form of specialist knowledge proliferated in opposition to the establishment. However, the specifics of what the knowledge was that was valued by the subreddit changed to reflect both the availability of texts in the media field from which The\_Donald's users shared content, and the need to ensure that these texts were shared in a way that was coherent with the over-arching framing of insiders working to expose the truth. In this way, the core finding of the analysis presented in this chapter is that this framing was highly flexible, dependent less on the specifics of what was being framed as the 'truth' in a given situation, but rather the extent to which familiar reference points, themes and conventions of style and format could be engaged with to frame *any* content in a manner coherent with the distinction between insiders and the 'establishment'. This core distinction grounded all forms of participation in the subreddit, and required participants to make creative and pragmatic use of both external media texts and subculture-specific resources to contribute in ways that were coherent with this boundary to discuss an event that appeared to disrupt it.

### **Case Study and Context: The Shayrat Airstrike**

On April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2017, the northern Syrian town of Khan Shaykhun was struck by a chemical weapons attack. The town was held by rebels opposed to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, whose government-led forces were widely deemed responsible for the attack (Chulov and Shaheen 2017). The attack killed at least 80 people, sparking calls for international retaliation against the Syrian government (BBC 2017). Three days later, on April 7<sup>th</sup>, a US airstrike authorised by President Trump struck the airbase with 59 Tomahawk missiles. The US strike was significant as the first unilateral military action taken by the US against Syrian government forces, potentially signifying the start of further US intervention in the Syrian Civil War (Lamothe et al 2017; Ackerman et al 2017; Starr and Diamond 2017).

In the US, Trump's authorisation of the retaliatory strike was divisive in a way that appeared to confuse The\_Donald's core framing of knowledgeable insiders defined against

an establishment other. Many high-profile 'establishment' figures, including a range of prominent critics of the president, conspicuously supported the decision to authorise the strike. In contrast, many long-time Trump media allies criticised his apparent succumbing to pressure from this political establishment (Fowler 2017; Labott and Gaouette, 2017). However, this response did not follow neatly along conventional partisan political lines, with mixed responses coming from the supposedly homogeneous 'establishment' particularly troubling.

In a prominent example, high profile Republican Senator John McCain – depicted throughout this incident as representative of the Republican establishment that Trump was ostensibly disrupting – issued a joint statement with fellow senior Republican Lindsey Graham in support of the US airstrike. The statement praised Trump and the US military for “sending a strong message that the US will no longer stand idly by” and described the attack a “credible first step” whilst directly calling for further military intervention in Syria (Graham and McCain 2017). Further still, Hillary Clinton – continually framed as the most prominent figurehead of the 'establishment' on *The\_Donald* – directly called for US intervention to “take out” Syrian government airfields only hours before the strike on Shayrat airbase did indeed occur (Lee and Merica, 2017).

However, further complicating the situation was the fact that several other 'establishment' figures – most prominently Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren – also *criticised* the military intervention for its potential to escalate the situation and draw the US into on-going military action in Syria. In a series of Twitter posts, Warren described Trump's response as “erratic” and criticised the attack as lacking a “compelling strategic justification” (Warren 2017). These comments had the potential to be particularly disruptive. The 'establishment' was consistently framed by *The\_Donald* as monolithic in its goals and in this instance, the subreddit had reached a clear consensus that the establishment was seeking to encourage war and may even have been involved in orchestrating the chemical attack that led to the retaliatory airstrike. However, the fact that prominent Democrats such as Elizabeth Warren had expressed caution against further action had the potential to significantly disrupt this framing.

For *The\_Donald*'s users, this mixed response from both insiders and, in particular, establishment figures therefore disrupted the core practices that defined participation in the subreddit. The response to the airstrike, as presented through texts circulating in the media and political fields, did not fit within established framings of the establishment and those working to expose them. This therefore potentially complicated the ability of *The\_Donald*'s users to select media texts to share in ways that were coherent with the

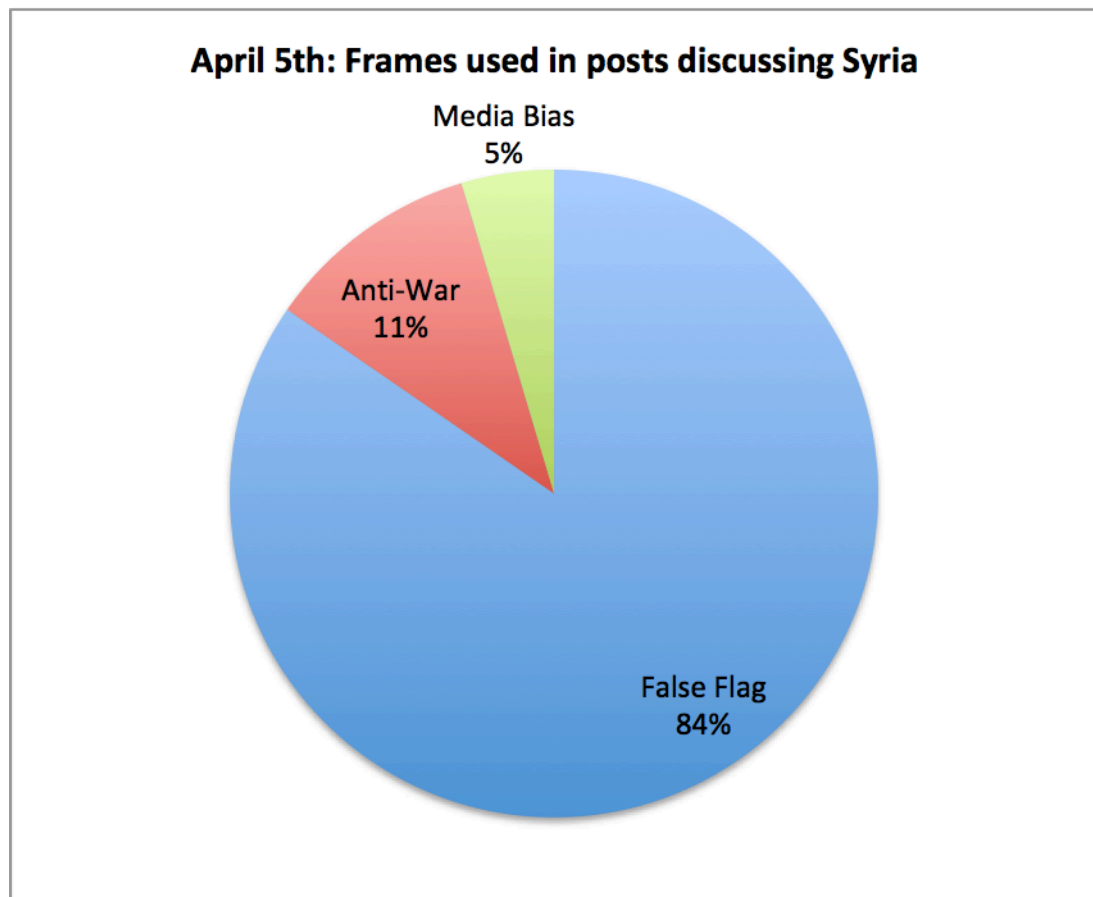
established stock of reference points and framing devices that asserted whatever they were posting to be relevant as something allegedly suppressed or ignored by the establishment. Trump's authorisation of the strike - and the reaction that followed - therefore appeared to fundamentally contradict the dynamics that underpinned participation in the subreddit. As a result of this, the airstrike appeared likely to complicate The\_Donald's users' engagement with the resulting media field in a manner coherent with the established practice of sharing ostensibly relevant external content within a familiar framing device.

The analysis that follows finds that rather than excluding dissonant information from the discussion, The\_Donald's users continued to participate actively with a media field that was saturated with seemingly dissonant information. By prioritising coherency with broad dynamics of insiders and the establishment over the veracity of specific claims, The\_Donald's users were able to engage creatively and pragmatically with the resources available to them whilst maintaining core distinctions between insiders and outsiders. Crucially, the subreddit's engagement with the texts in the media field did not exclude sources that would have seemed to disrupt their own consensus. Ostensibly dissonant information was actively engaged with when it could be framed as coherent with broad narratives of knowledgeable insiders and establishment cover-ups by making pragmatic and creative use of the available resources. Regardless of whether the source was an official White House press release or a highly-critical *New York Times* article, The\_Donald's users engaged with all texts as potential resources could be made coherent with established frames - producing meaningful content to share and therefore participate in the subreddit.

### **Core finding: The 'false flag' frame and the disruption of consensus**

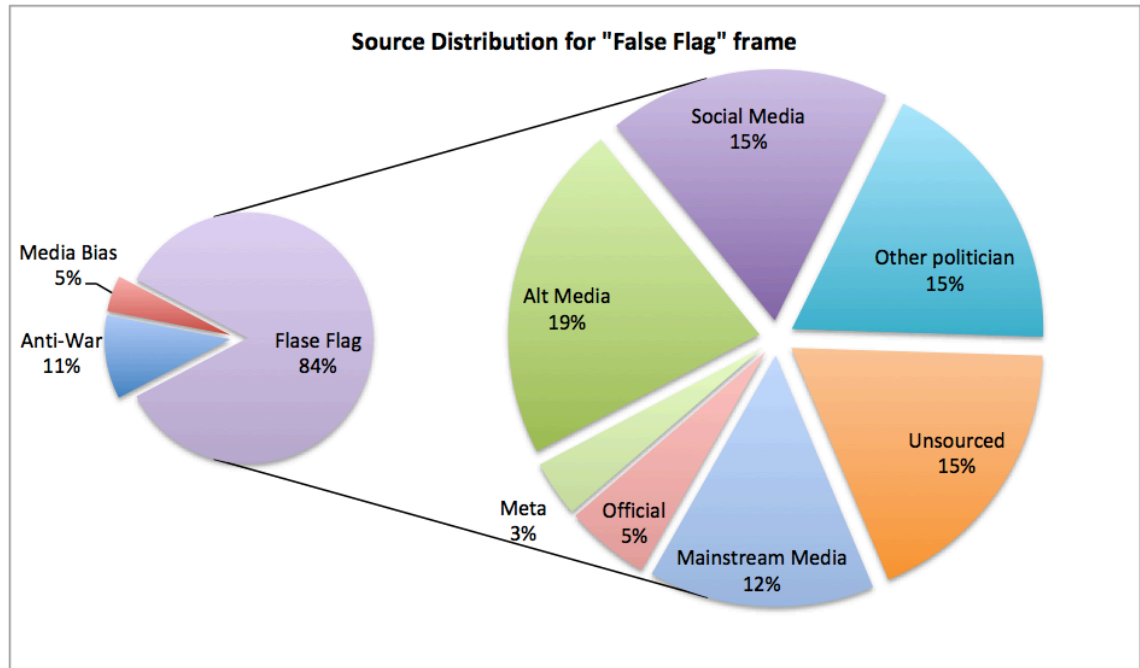
In the two days between the first reports of the Khan Shaykhun chemical attack on April 5<sup>th</sup> and the announcement of a retaliatory strike against Syria's Shayrat airfield on April 7<sup>th</sup>, The\_Donald's users reached a clear consensus in their framing of the attack. This consensus was coherent with the broader framing of knowledgeable insiders defined against an establishment that is either ignorant of or seeking to suppress the truth.





*Graph 4: April 5th: Frames used in posts discussing Syria*

Of the sixty posts sampled for April 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>, 84% of these asserted that the chemical attack was a ‘false flag’. This framed the attack on Khan Shaykhun as a hoax - orchestrated by Syrian opposition groups, US politicians or the wider ‘establishment’ to provoke US military intervention. These posts drew on a wide range of textual resources to make these claims, including both alternative and mainstream media as well as official statements made by a range of politicians. This frame was therefore seemingly well supported. Texts from the external media field that could be framed in ways coherent with this framing appeared to be abundant, suggesting that the frame had significant resonance due to its apparent compatibility with a wide range of media sources that could be posted to the subreddit. Of course, this resonance does not mean that the framing was accurate, simply that textual information from the media field could be found to support it. Indeed, the “false flag” account was quickly dismissed by mainstream media sources and even the White House itself (Shaheen 2017, Davis and Cooper 2017). However, The\_Donald’s users engaged pragmatically with the media field - even the mainstream media - to find textual information that was coherent with the ‘false flag’ frame.



*Graph 5: Source distribution for the 'false flag' frame*

In this way, knowledge of the 'false flag' frame stood as a marker of insider status and distinction from the 'establishment', framed in terms of the subreddit's core distinction between a subcultural in-group defined by specialist knowledge and an imagined 'establishment' that sought to suppress this knowledge. Many contributions explicitly called on other users to realise the 'truth', closely associating an apparent drive towards war with the 'establishment' against which the subreddit ostensibly defined itself:

Don't fall for the false flag! Ask yourself - why would Assad pull off a chemical attack after pushing ISIS and the rebels back and about to get US support? (April 2017, 6328 vote score, 194 comments)

Guys, listen to me. The Syrian Chemical attack was a false flag carried out by White Helmets. The evidence is overwhelming. Tweets about the attack a day before it took place. Let the world know! (April 2017, 5943 vote score, 165 comments)

Anti-Assad "reporter" tweeted about the sarin attack in Syria 24 hours before it happened (April 2017, 6815 vote score, 272 comments)

Other posts also made clear that non-interventionism was one of the core promises of the Trump campaign as it was understood by The\_Donald:

PRESIDENT TRUMP: We elected you in order to prevent Hillary's war with Syria! Please do not engage there; a war with Syria will weaken us here, and work only in the globalists' favor. (April 2017, 3441 vote score, 96 comments)

However, like everything else, this appeal was reframed in terms of subjects and their activities and goals. Military intervention was framed not just one potential course of action, but entirely in terms of the establishment and its alleged push towards war. In turn, insider status was then framed in terms of opposition to these alleged establishment activities. In the case of the chemical attack, the call for military intervention was framed primarily as something planned for by the establishment. This then meant that insider status was necessarily tied to opposition to this alleged drive towards war in Syria:

ISIS is FINALLY on the ropes, Aleppo freed from them after years of war, the world's eyes are on Assad as he finally sees the light at the end of the tunnel...and he chooses NOW to gas some babies. Utter BULLSHIT. The Deep State CREATES THE NEWS to control people. Dangerous times ahead... (April 2017, 9337 vote score, 266 comments)

In a prominent example, Republican Senator Ron Paul was quoted in nine separate posts in the two days following the attack. These quotes were framed by The\_Donald's users explicitly in terms of their opposition to the goals of the establishment.

'FALSE FLAG' Ron Paul Says Syrian Chemical Attack 'Makes No Sense' (April 2017, 3661 vote score, 34 comments)

Based<sup>5</sup> Ron Paul: Syrian Attack Likely False Flag by Deep State (April 2017, 2072 vote score, 30 comments)

Similarly, Senator John McCain was repeatedly invoked as representative of the establishment's push towards war:

How come very time McCain visits Syria there's a gas attack one month later. We demand a investigation into John McCains Syria visits. (April 2017, 5740 vote score, 116 comments)

Well well well....John McCain is on Fox News right now with a full blown war plan

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<sup>5</sup> "Based", a term popularised by California rap artist Lil B, is a term of approval that typically refers to someone who is true to their principles and not swayed by the opinions of others.

to attack Syria. (April 2017, 7064 vote score, 458 comments)

The role each Senator played as representative of ‘insider’ and ‘establishment’ status was made even more explicit in posts that directly contrasted the two politicians. In the below post, Ron Paul was celebrated both for his support of the ‘false flag’ framing and his attacks on McCain, making clear the re-framing of the chemical attack in terms of knowledgeable insiders working to expose a truth suppressed by the ‘establishment’:

Based Ron Paul Says Syria Gas Attack Could Be False Flag And Then Proceeds To Shit All Over John McCain (April 2017, 6772 vote score, 198 comments)

The ‘false flag’ frame was therefore asserted as a form of insider knowledge, with insider status conferred upon those who demonstrated the awareness, competency and willingness to proliferate this knowledge. Conversely, ‘establishment’ status was associated with those ostensibly working to suppress the ‘truth’ of the alleged hoax. In this way, The\_Donald’s users framed the response to the chemical attack as representative of the wider dynamic of knowledgeable insiders and the establishment against which they were defined. For The\_Donald, ‘insiders’ were defined by their knowledge of the ‘false flag’ and opposition to intervention in Syria, whereas anyone seen to be working towards military intervention in Syria was framed as part of the ‘establishment’. Amongst the subreddit’s users, insider status was in turn asserted in posts demonstrating a willingness and ability to find new information ostensibly proving this false flag. Subjects external to the subreddit were framed varying as insiders or establishment to the extent that texts relating to them could be understood in terms of support or opposition to the ‘false flag’ frame.

### **Re-framing the situation following the breaking of consensus**

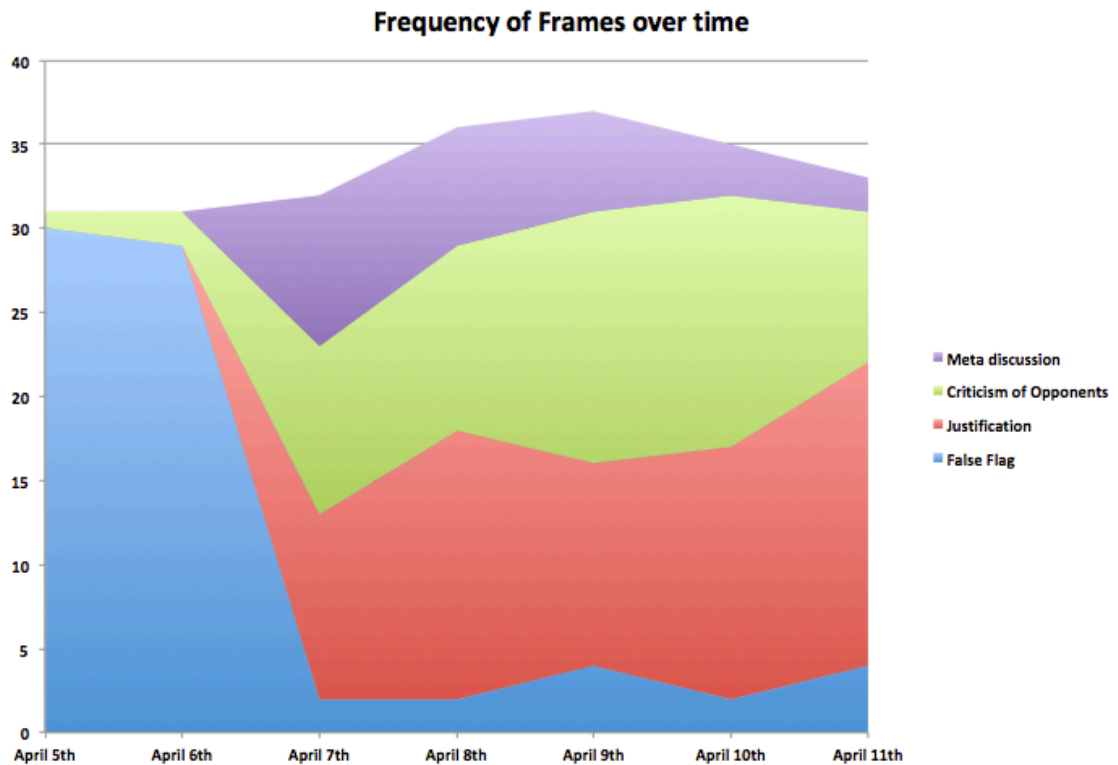
The\_Donald’s users therefore established a clear consensus around the Khan Shaykhun attack. This consensus reflected the subreddit’s expectations of an alignment between the twin goals of support for Trump and opposition to the ‘establishment’. This expectation was based on three claims that, at the time, were supported by the available texts in the media field:

1. Trump will go against the establishment’s wishes
2. The establishment wants military intervention
3. Therefore, Trump will not authorise military intervention in Syria

However, these three claims became unsustainable when Trump did indeed authorise an airstrike against the Syrian military's Shayrat airbase - allegedly the airbase from which the chemical attack was launched. This created a complication for anyone wishing to participate in the subreddit: sharing ostensibly suppressed or ignored texts from the external media field was the primary form of participation in the subreddit, yet Trump's authorisation of the airstrike meant that the media field was saturated with texts that were seemingly disruptive to The\_Donald's expectations of the then-President as outlined above. These texts included mainstream media articles about the event, social media posts from alternative news personalities, official materials published by the Trump administration and a diverse range of others. This diversity of available texts meant that The\_Donald's users had significant scope to engage with the media field in ways that were both *creative* and *pragmatic*, facilitating the navigation of a media field that, at first glance, appeared to be saturated with texts that were wholly disruptive to The\_Donald's expectations of the Trump administration. However, The\_Donald's users continued to engage with the media field, often sharing texts from sources directly critical of Trump's actions yet framed in a way that made them consistent with a broad dynamic of insiders working against the 'establishment' - even if these contributions appeared to disrupt more specific claims and expectations.

### **Responding to the Airstrike: The Decline of the 'False Flag' frame**

In the days following the chemical attack on Khan Shaykhun, the dominance of the 'false flag' frame meant that the attack had come to be understood entirely in terms that associated any kind of military intervention with the 'establishment'. This meant that President Trump's eventual authorisation of military action on April 7<sup>th</sup> presented a significant problem for participants wishing to share content from media and political fields now saturated with texts that disrupted the existing consensus. It is therefore not surprising that the 'false flag' frame dropped significantly in popularity following the announcement of the US airstrike against Shayrat airbase. Posts framing the content they shared in terms of the 'false flag' appeared 52 times in the 60 posts collected before the airstrike, but only 12 times in the 120 posts afterwards:



*Graph 6: Framing US intervention in Syria over time, April 5<sup>th</sup>-April 11<sup>th</sup>*

### **Responding to the Airstrike and the changing of consensus**

The fact that Trump's actions in authorising the airstrike were no longer readily compatible with the established narrative of the 'false flag' chemical attack meant that the most obvious framing of the attack could no longer be easily used to make meaningful content. This is reflected in the significant shift in frames used to discuss the situation in Syria before and after the airstrike, as the 'false flag' consensus framing was abandoned almost completely in favour of a shifting collection of alternative framings built on a range of content that subsequently populated the external media field. However, despite the clear disruption to the 'false flag' frame, The\_Donald's engagement with the media field following the airstrike remained entirely consistent and coherent with the broader insider/'establishment' framing. After the retaliatory airstrike, the 'false flag' frame was largely abandoned. However, the frames that took its place served the same function - conferring insider status upon certain subjects through marking others as part of the 'establishment'.

### **Response 1: Justify the attack**

Overall, the most popular response to the retaliatory airstrike was to frame it as in some

way a positive - or at least justifiable - response to the chemical attack and wider international situation. This was obviously directly contradictory with the 'false flag' consensus that preceded it. However, through framing these justifications as a form of insider knowledge, The\_Donald's users were able to make ostensibly contradictory claims in a way that was coherent with an overall narrative of establishment coverup. These posts pragmatically shifted in what they framed as the suppressed or ignored information that constituted 'insider knowledge'. It had been an accepted consensus on The\_Donald only days before that the 'establishment' was working to cover up the claim that the chemical attack was fraudulent. However, days later, many popular posts now asserted the directly contradictory claim that the 'establishment' had covered up the continuous stockpiling and even use of chemical weapons by the Syrian military:

BOMBSHELL From H.R. & T-Rex Presser: Assad Has Launched >50 Chemical Attacks Since 2013 & Obama Turned Blind Eye! (April 2017, 4322 vote score, 250 comments. The post references the then-National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster and Secretary of State Rex 'T-Rex' Tillerson)

Ex-Obama official: "We always knew" Assad kept some chemical weapons (April 2017, 2537 vote score, 24 comments)

BOMBSHELL: Top Obama administration officials admitted deal to remove chemical weapons from Syria failed!! (April 2017, 1031 vote score, 4 comments)

This pragmatic shift meant that the broad framing of 'establishment cover-up' could be maintained, even if the specifics of what was alleged to have been covered up had changed entirely. These posts typically presented their content as new and surprising, a 'bombshell' find that implicitly acknowledged the change in framing without referencing it directly. Other posts tacitly justified the new framing of events through references to a deception dating back to the Obama administration that had only now been uncovered. However, these apparent acknowledgements of potential contradictions are subtle and never the focus of the post.

Other "justification" posts did not focus directly on the military justification for the missile strike itself, but rather on other, related outcomes that were ostensibly disruptive to the establishment. Common examples were posts that focused on the then on-going investigation into the Trump campaign's alleged collusion with Russia during the 2016 Presidential election. These posts suggested that by attacking Syria against Russia's wishes, the allegations against the Trump campaign had been exposed to be false:

Trump really fucked up (April 2017, 5445 vote score, 127 comments. Additional text completing the sentence to “Trump really fucked up... the Russia narrative” is revealed if the post is clicked on.)

In case you didn’t notice. The #RussiaInvestigation just died (April 2017, 6544 vote score, 119 comments)

Today: Gorsuch IN, Assads balls shrunk, Russian narrative BTFO, Wiretap investigation to go to phase 2 (expose more people involved), Kim peed his pants, the world respects Trump and no body killed. Could go on but this is 10D Ballistic Chess!<sup>6</sup> (April 2017, 9343 vote score, 1083 comments)

These posts avoided dealing with the contradictions caused by the abandonment of the ‘false flag’ frame, instead highlighting other reasons to celebrate the attack as a positive outcome in its disruption of wider establishment goals. In a similar vein, other posts invoked popular yet only tangentially related frames to further associate opposition to the airstrike with the ‘establishment’. In a particularly prominent example, several posts suggested that establishment figures could not see the justification in the attack due to a vaguely defined but implicitly ‘soft’ stance on refugees from Syria:

Funny liberals just assume Syrians hate their own land. They can't wrap their heads around someone wanting to live in their own country evidently. Thank you President Trump! (April 2017, 2382 vote score, 66 comments)

Watch this CNN reporters jaw hit the floor: "We don't want to come to the US, we want to stay in Syria" "Thank you President Trump" (April 2017, 9032 vote score, 791 comments)

On Fox & Friends this morning, another Syrian refugee expressed his Delight in Trump's support. He is looking forward to going home soon. "I miss my home. I miss my friends. I miss my family." Very encouraging. And very maddening for liberals. (April 2017, 1618 vote score, 23 comments)

Again, these posts mapped responses to the airstrike onto a binary of insiders and the establishment. In the above examples, this was reinforced through references to already-

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<sup>6</sup> “10D Ballistic Chess” refers to an in-joke on The\_Donald that Trump was continually out-playing his opponents through the metaphor of increasingly complex fictional ‘chess’ variants



established aspects of the ‘establishment’ frame, such as an association with a ‘soft’ stance on immigration. Throughout all these posts, attempts to justify the attack were framed in terms of opposition to the *establishment’s* apparent objections to it. This opposition was then used to assert the relevance of the content being posted as a form of insider knowledge.

Overall, The\_Donald’s users continued to frame texts with reference to established frames, even if what was asserted to be the suppressed ‘truth’ had itself changed. The dramatic shift in the definition of the relevant insider knowledge from suppressed evidence that the attack was a ‘false flag’ to suppressed evidence that it was at least somewhat justified highlights the flexibility of the broad dynamic of insiders and the ‘establishment’, which facilitated the continual engagement with events even after a more specific consensus expectation appeared to have been dramatically subverted.

## **Response 2: Criticise Opponents and allege media bias**

The familiar tactic of asserting media bias and criticism of ‘establishment’ figures was also prominent in the response to the Shayrat airstrike. Throughout the dataset and across all case studies looked at for this thesis, ‘media bias’ provided a consistent way of framing almost any event in terms of knowledgeable insiders and establishment outsiders. In the context of the Shayrat airstrike, posts focussing on alleged biases in how the airstrike was reported were able to frame the airstrike in terms of insiders and the establishment without engaging with the controversial nature of the airstrike itself. Many of these accusations of bias focused on alleged differences in how the media had responded to similar attacks under the Obama administration:

Welcome to Bipolar News. First Russia was evil, now Trump "putting our relationship at risk." NYT not sending their best. (April 2017, 7861 vote score, 130 comments)

Mark Dice on Twitter: When Obama launched air strikes into Syria did it get this kind of nonstop coverage? Oh, you forgot he did that. Well, there's your answer. (April 2017, 8378 vote score, 186 comments)

Someone jog my memory. Was Obama accused of trying to start WW3 when he was constantly bombing Syrian civilians? (April 2017, 8204 vote score, 274 comments)

Other posts focused on a CNN interview with a survivor of a 2013 chemical weapons

attack in Syria, who praised both the US airstrike and President Trump himself. The interview was shared to the subreddit multiple times, framed as an example of the “truth” being revealed to an establishment looking to suppress it. These posts celebrated the apparent frustration of both CNN and ‘liberals’ more broadly, and whilst they did not engage directly with specific justifications for the attack, they contributed to the framing of attempts to justify the attack as insider knowledge suppressed by the establishment:

HAHA CNN TOTALLY BTFO by Syrian chemical attack victim on live TV when they tried to make him criticize Trump and support Clinton! "Immigration ban marchers are hypocrites, if you really care, help us stay in our country!" (April 2017, 712 vote score, 4 comments)

Syrian refugee red pills the forty five people watching CNN and calls out liberal hypocrisy! (April 2017, 4961 vote score, 127 comments)

A third category of bias and criticism posts focused on highlighting alleged inaccuracies, exaggerations and attempts to divert from the success of the airstrike in both the media and by political opponents:

ShariaBlue is now trying to fool people Trump has invaded Syria "The US has just invaded #Syria from #Jordan" (April 2017, 951 vote score, 31 comments)

Suddenly the left is now concerned with the cost of Tomahawk missiles. (April 2017, 943 vote score, 20 comments)

CNN anchor Jake Tapper has now deleted a tweet where he advised his followers to seek expertise on Syria from a 7-year-old living in Turkey (April 2017, 3539 vote score, 49 comments)

Again, these posts avoided directly addressing the airstrike itself and instead highlighted instances where the ‘establishment’ criticised the airstrike in ways that were framed as illegitimate. Throughout, the ‘media bias’ and ‘criticism of opponents’ frames provided a reliable means to engage with texts surrounding the airstrike in ways that were coherent with the broad dynamic of insiders and the establishment.

Several specific subjects featured particularly prominently in posts focusing on criticising opponents and the media. The prominence of John McCain as a figurehead of the ‘establishment’ remained consistent throughout the case study. However, the framing of

McCain shifted somewhat after the airstrike. McCain was initially positioned as representative of the establishment's intent to provoke intervention in Syria, yet once this intervention had occurred, McCain appeared in a wide variety of representations of the 'establishment' position:

Okay, I understand the reasons for bombing Syria. But it creeps me out to see McCain so gleeful. (April 2017, 1421 vote score, 43 comments)

Shut the hell up McCain! -----Sunday on CBS's "Face the Nation," Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) said the administration of President Donald Trump was "probably was partially to blame,"

Sorry, McCain. "we not going ino syria", Trump said (April 2017, 2782 vote score, 20 comments)

In this way, McCain continued to serve as representative of the 'establishment', highlighting the way in which the apparent goals of the establishment shifted in relation to the actions taken by President Trump. Whereas McCain had previously been associated with military intervention *in general*, Trump's authorisation of the airstrike meant that McCain had to be instead associated with more specific claims, such as blaming Trump for the Khan Shaykhun chemical attack itself or a drive for continued military intervention in Syria beyond the initial airstrike. By contrasting McCain's position with that of Trump, The\_Donald's users could continue to link military intervention to the 'establishment' whilst avoiding associating Trump's authorisation of the airstrike with this apparent call for further US military action.

Posts discussing figures like John McCain typically acted to critique or discredit the positions expressed in the texts they shared, even if this was only by implication through associating them with a figure already clearly defined as part of the 'establishment'. However, posts mentioning Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren were somewhat distinct in that they were predominantly personal attacks, often referencing obscure in-jokes that had little obvious relevance to the situation in Syria. One post shared a picture of Warren's face haphazardly edited onto a 'Tomahawk' cruise missile with the following caption:

Photo of first Tomahawk cruise missile sent to Syria (April 8<sup>th</sup> 2017, 2066 vote score, 22 comments. Image depicts a photograph of a cruise missile edited to have Warren's

face<sup>7)</sup>

Another post drew the same link between 'Tomahawk' missiles and Trump's racist mocking of Warren's contested claim to Cherokee ancestry by referencing the 'Pocahontas' epithet<sup>8</sup> commonly used by the former President to attack the Senator:

I thought she'd be ECSTATIC that we attacked with tomahawks. Disappointing.  
Fauxcahontas: "We need a plan to hold Assad accountable. But so far I've seen no compelling strategic justification for Trump's missile strike." (April 9<sup>th</sup> 2017, 405 vote score, 25 comments)

These posts blurred the line between humour and commentary in a manner indicative of the way in which memes and humour can facilitate engagement with 'difficult' or complex information (Miltner 2013). The second post above even directly quoted Warren's criticism of the missile strike, the mundanity of which contrasts significantly with the exaggerated, knowingly offensive comments with which the post author introduced it. Despite presenting them in full, the post did not directly engage with the substance of Warren's comments at all, instead attacking her with reference to a longstanding in-joke amongst The\_Donald's users.

It is particularly significant that Warren's criticism was remarkably similar to the same objections The\_Donald's own posters had expressed in the days between the initial chemical attack and retaliatory US airstrike:

PRESIDENT TRUMP: We elected you in order to prevent Hillary's war with Syria! Please do not engage there; a war with Syria will weaken us here, and work only in the globalists' favor. (April 5<sup>th</sup> 2017, 3441 vote score, 96 comments)

I hope Trump doesn't go with the neocons in toppling Assad. They're slobbering over this atm. (April 5<sup>th</sup> 2017, 917 vote score, 39 comments)

Warmongers, neocons, McCain, Graham, MSM, the Deep State, are coming out in full force, demanding for military intervention in Syria. the current syria situation is reminiscent of the lead-up to the Iraq War. We DO NOT WANT IRAQ 2.0 (April 6<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> As discussed in the Methodology section of this thesis, this image was distorted when archived as a PDF file and therefore cannot be correctly reproduced here

<sup>8</sup> See Reid 2020 for an in-depth discussion of the complexities of both Warren and Trump's engagement with Cherokee and Native American identity

2017, 9462 vote score, 572 comments)

These earlier posts clearly framed intervention in Syria as both unjustifiable, and desired by the mainstream against which The\_Donald defines itself. Elizabeth Warren's comments therefore presented a particularly complex problem to the subreddit's users in that they represented a prominent 'establishment' figure criticising the same action The\_Donald's users had themselves associated with the 'establishment' only days before. In this instance, Warren's criticism was unavoidably dissonant and difficult to engage with in terms of The\_Donald's core dynamic of 'insiders' and the 'establishment', precisely because it represented a clear 'establishment' figure agreeing with the 'insider' consensus that military intervention was unjustifiable. Warren's agreement with The\_Donald's initial consensus framing simultaneously positioned Trump as having succumbed to 'establishment' pressure to intervene in Syria, whilst also acting as an example of an 'establishment' figure *criticising* this military intervention. In this way, this statement both confused and contradicted the core dynamic upon which participation in The\_Donald is grounded.

It is therefore initially surprising that The\_Donald's users engaged with these statements at all. The subreddit's users could have simply ignored Warren's Twitter posts and left them out of the emerging consensus surrounding the retaliatory airstrike in a manner coherent with the 'partisan' media engagement discussed by Sandvoss (2012, 2013). The\_Donald's users had significant scope in selecting which texts surrounding the Shayrat airstrike to engage with, yet opted to share some particularly problematic criticism and collectively 'up' vote it sufficiently as to become part of their collective framing of the event. In effect, The\_Donald's users appeared to intentionally breach their own 'echo chamber' by sharing a salient criticism of the very actions Trump had taken. However, the overtly humorous nature of both of these posts - referencing the 'Pocahontas' slur and sharing an intentionally ridiculous image - simultaneously discredits Warren and reasserts the distinction between insiders and outsiders through the use of offensive, subculture-specific memes that implicitly reassert the distinction between insiders - who are united by the specialist knowledge required to create, understand and engage with them - and the establishment, who would not understand why Warren's contested claim to Cherokee ancestry was relevant here at all. Memes such as this one referenced long-established pieces of insider knowledge, acting as a 'phatic nod' of mutual recognition of a shared stock of reference points (Papacharissi 2015; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017), facilitating forms of participation that loosely engaged with the unavoidable fact of Trump's authorisation of an unpopular airstrike yet reasserting the very distinctions that were complicated and potentially disrupted by this event and the wider reaction to it. In this

way, Warren's comments could be acknowledged and dismissed in terms of 'insiders' and the 'establishment' without having to engage with the validity of her comments, or the dissonance of their alignment with the subreddit's own initial consensus.

Overall, posts criticising opponents' response to the attack all served a similar purpose. They engaged with media texts surrounding the airstrike in a way that reinforced the distinction between insiders and the establishment whilst avoiding dealing with the potentially disruptive implications of the airstrike itself. 'Media bias' therefore acted as a reliable framing device that reasserted this distinction in a way that was universally relevant in any given situation. Regardless of the specifics of the event in question, the nature of the Trump presidency meant that media texts critical of the administration were reliably abundant. The subreddit's participants made good use of these texts as sources of potential content for posts that referenced the 'media bias' frame.

### **Response 3: Meta-discussion and explicitly re-asserting the distinction between 'insiders' and the 'establishment'**

The third most prominent response to the airstrike consisted of posts that spoke directly to fellow participants and openly discussed or debated the subreddit's collective reaction to the event. These posts were notably direct in their explicit reassertion of the distinction between insiders and the establishment through direct appeals for unity:

ARE WE GETTING FUCKING SOFT? THIS WAS THE BEST WEEK OF TRUMP'S PRESIDENCY. SUPREME COURT JUSTICE CONFIRMED! DIRTY RICE EXPOSED! CHYNA CHARMED! RUSSIAN COLLUSION NARRATIVE DESTROYED. STOP WHINING AND START CELEBRATING #MAGA (April 2017, 9791 vote score, 442 comments)

Supporters of President Donald J Trump (YES, HE IS YOUR PRESIDENT) agree that disagreeing makes us stronger. This is not a subreddit full of sheep. Together, we have a message for divisive trolls. (April 2017, 5624 vote score, 162 comments. Post links to an image of a popular meme character making a rude gesture)

You guys are making me sick how quick you throw your MAGA hats away and sound like shitlibs, buckle the fuck down and weaponize your autism a little better. (April 2017, 5304 vote score, 364 comments)

These posts were a rare acknowledgment of the disruption to the established consensus

caused by the airstrike. This acknowledgement can also be inferred from posts suggesting that any apparent disruption had been caused by outsiders, referred to as 'shills' (paid interlopers looking to sway the crowd), "cucks" (weak men who surrender to outside pressure) or 'Shareblue' (a news organisation associated with Hillary Clinton's 2016 Presidential campaign and often referred to by The\_Donald as 'ShariaBlue'):

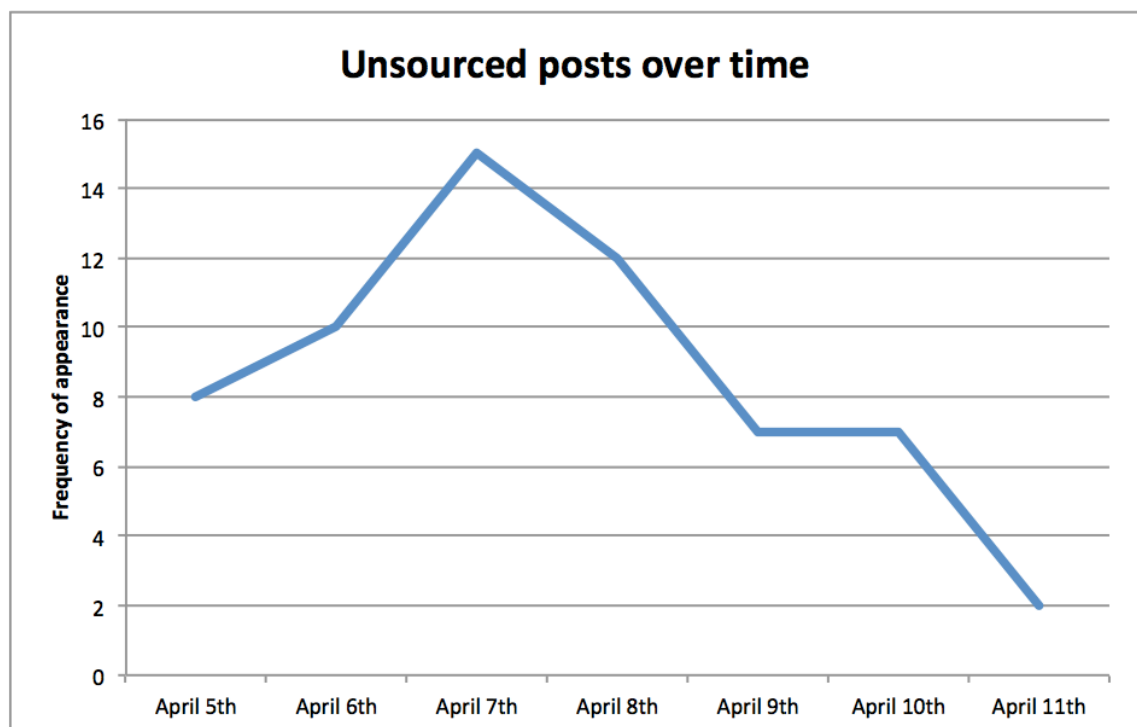
We don't all have to agree about Syria but don't forget who the real enemies are!  
Jumping off the TRUMP TRAIN early is a CUCK REACTION. Don't let ShariaBlue divide us over an airport!!! (April 2017, 1293 vote score, 61 comments)

Read [Secretary of State] Tillerson's statements on Syria carefully before being suckered by Sharia blue to cuck out (April 2017, 2371 vote score, 136 comments)

By calling direct attention to the existence of apparent doubters, these posts suggested that there was some dissent and discomfort on The\_Donald that mirrored the response of Trump supporters more broadly, as discussed at the beginning of this section. However, Reddit's voting system and subreddit rules against posting content that did not support Trump, means that any such posts did not appear to have received a sufficient number of 'up' votes so as to be represented in the sample and may have simply been deleted by moderators before they received significant attention. This is an important recognition, as it suggests that the seemingly smooth transition of consensus may not have been universal across the subreddit and also not entirely organic, with moderators potentially removing posts that expressed too strong a criticism. With this in mind, the data presented in this chapter should not suggest that *all* users of The\_Donald were happy with the situation – rather that, collectively, the subreddit's users found ways of engaging with this new situation in ways that were coherent with established rules, practices and reference points. In any case, the incident appeared to have no lasting impact on the subreddit's subscriber count or posting activity, suggesting that, overall, any dissent was minimal and did not significantly disrupt the subreddit beyond the acknowledgements of disappointment stated here. Furthermore, these posts are also indicative of the way in which insider status was deployed as a rhetorical tool – suggesting that any doubt or dissent was fomented by 'ShareBlue' or other outsiders, or indeed low-status insiders who lacked the competency and knowledge required to engage with the media field in ways that were not influenced by 'establishment' narratives.

These sorts of posts did, however, reflect the apparent difficulty of engaging with the texts in the media field surrounding the airstrike that were produced by the usual mainstream, alternative and political sources from which The\_Donald's users drew

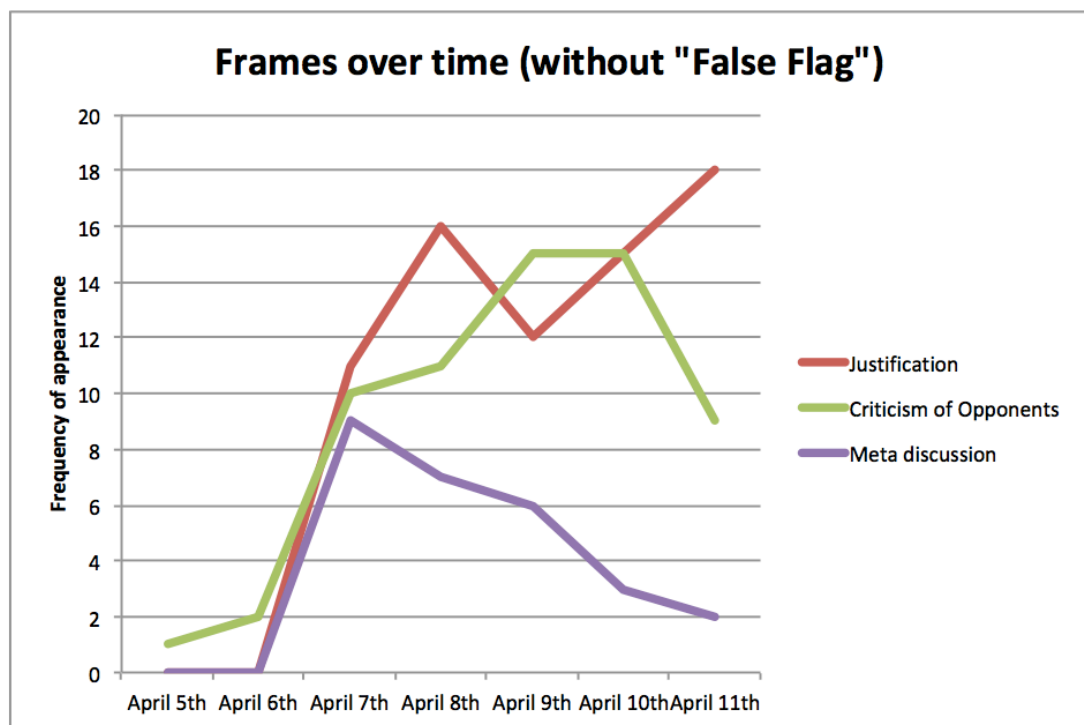
content to share. Whereas the ‘media bias’ posts discussed above made pragmatic and creative use even of media texts that were often directly critical of Trump’s actions, these ‘meta’ posts – discussing The\_Donald’s reaction explicitly rather than making claims about what outsiders were doing – often avoided sharing any content at all. This further demonstrates the way in which the subreddit’s engagement with events was responsive to the texts available in the media field. ‘Meta’ posts appeared to be a reaction to the difficulty in finding suitable content to share to the subreddit following the disruption to expectations caused by Trump’s authorisation of military intervention in Syria. The ‘meta’ frame was more likely than any other to not link to external content, making claims that lacked attribution and subverting the conventional practice of sharing an external text within a familiar frame. Overall, the number of posts that did not share external content (or ‘unsourced’ posts) discussing Syria peaked on April 7<sup>th</sup> - the day of the airstrike - and made up half of all posts sampled for that day. However, this quickly and steadily declined in the days that followed:



*Graph 7: Unsourced posts over time*

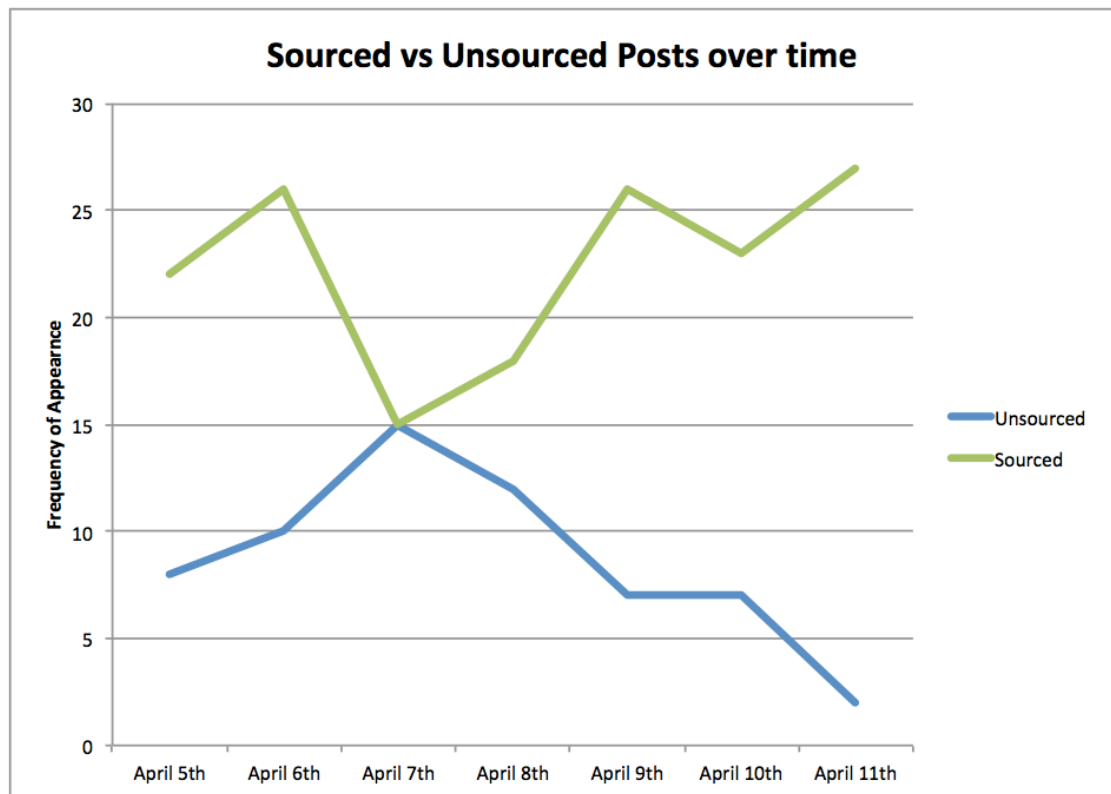
On the day following the airstrike’s announcement and the sudden disruption of the ‘false flag’ consensus, posts sharing no external content and engaging in ‘meta’ discussion about the subreddit itself were at their most popular. However, such ‘meta’ discussion quickly and steadily declined over the next few days. This decline was matched by a comparative rise in other framings of the airstrike, such as criticism of opponents and the eventually dominant ‘justification’ frame:





Graph 8: Frames over time (without 'False Flag')

The sudden rise in 'unsourced' and 'meta' posts likely reflects the initial difficulty that The\_Donald's users had in engaging with an external media field saturated with texts that disrupted their core framing of 'insiders' working against an imagined 'establishment' and contradicted the position of Trump as a figurehead of this anti-establishment goal. However, this difficulty appears to have been short lived. As discussion in the media field shifted to a range of reactions to the airstrike, such as the CNN interview with a chemical attack survivor discussed above or the McCain-Graham joint statement, The\_Donald's users engaged with these texts as evidence that the attack was either justified, or that opponents' criticism of Trump's actions proved that it was coherent with the broader goal of working against the establishment. To that end, posts that did indeed share some kind of external content quickly outpaced those that did not as a proportion of total posts:



Graph 9: Sourced vs Unsourced posts over time

### Selective use of available media texts: the significance of 'official' content before and after the airstrike

Whilst 'unsourced' posts and the 'meta' discussion often contained within them were prominent in the immediate response to Trump's authorisation of the airstrike, they were steadily displaced by other posts engaging with frames that were indeed supported by external media content. This suggests that whilst a disruptive event may have caused The\_Donald's users some hesitation, engaging with the external media field and sharing texts in support of claims made was ultimately the preferred way of participating in the subreddit. Despite this, however, The\_Donald's users were not entirely beholden to the availability of media texts and demonstrated significant agency in the selection of which texts to share and what to do with these texts. This is particularly evident in how the subreddit's users made use of 'official' texts produced by the Trump administration. Rather than uncritically follow the White House line, the subreddit instead engaged with 'official' texts in the same way as any other source of potential resources to share - as opportunities for the creation of content that could be framed as coherent with established frames.

Before the retaliatory airstrike, only three posts shared content from ‘official’ sources - defined here as any official statement, speech, policy or social media post by Trump himself, a member of Trump’s administration or published by an official US government channel. This also includes posts made from Trump’s personal Twitter account. Despite the fact that Trump himself did not mention the attack in any Twitter post until after the retaliatory airstrike on April 7<sup>th</sup>, a Twitter post made by Trump in 2013, long before he was running for president, in which he criticises a trip (see BBC 2013) John McCain made to Syria to meet with members of the Free Syrian Army rebel group, was shared to the subreddit:

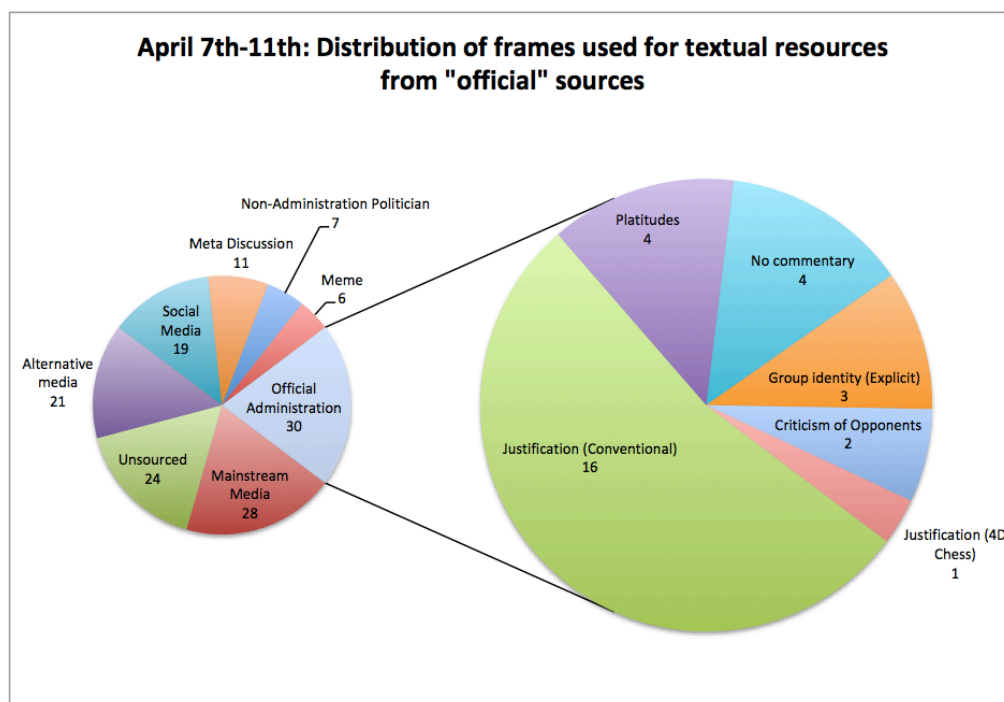
“Trump: Why is Senator John McCain in Syria visiting with the rebels- MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!” (April 6<sup>th</sup> 2017, 5667 vote score, 116 comments)

This Tweet was shared with reference to the ‘false flag’ frame through the implication that Trump had long been aware of the allegedly suspicious involvement of ‘establishment’ figures like John McCain in Syria. Sharing a Tweet like “Why is Senator John McCain in Syria” therefore had a dual role. Sharing this content in this way reflected a highly pragmatic engagement with the media field, finding a text authored by Trump himself that appeared to support the notion that he was aware of the ‘false flag’, despite the fact that he had made no recent statement indicating that this was indeed the case.

The way in which participants engaged with “official” resources before the retaliatory airstrike demonstrated the creative scope of fan engagement, but also its limitations. The ‘false flag’ frame was ostensibly unsupported by evidence from official sources, directly contradictory to official statements made by the White House regarding the attack and unsupported even by less-formal statements from Trump himself, who did not mention the event on Twitter until after the retaliatory airstrike. This likely accounts for the relatively small number of posts engaging with content from these official sources. If the textual resources available from ‘official’ sources were incompatible with established framings, then they appeared to have been largely passed over in favour of content from less official sources that was indeed compatible with these frames. However, the small number of posts that did engage with external content in these early stages were a testament to the creativity and pragmatism with which The\_Donald’s users engaged with a media field that was seemingly lacking in content to share that did not contradict established framings.

This is further demonstrated by the use of ‘official’ texts *after* the airstrike. Whereas a lack of official texts compatible with established frames before the airstrike caused

The\_Donald's users to engage with an obscure text that *was* available, the 2013 Tweet, in a creative and pragmatic way, 'official' texts played a seemingly more conventional role following the airstrike, albeit one that was dependent on the capacity to frame them in ways coherent with the core dynamic of insiders and outsiders. Following the retaliatory airstrike, content shared from official administration sources – largely ignored in the days before – was proportionately more prominent than any other source. A significant number of these posts, 17 of 30, framed the content they shared as evidence that the airstrike was a justified course of action in response to the alleged use of chemical weaponry:



*Graph 10: April 7<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup>: Distribution of frames used for textual resources from 'official' sources*

The initial posting of Trump's statement confirming that no further military action would be taken was the most popular post in the entire case study dataset by a significant margin, with both the highest vote score and number of comments:

President Trump: 'We Are Not Going Into Syria' (April 2017, 14269 vote score, 926 comments)

What is also significant is that this official confirmation of no further military intervention was presented as a final, authoritative statement on the matter – proving doubters wrong and ending the fear that Trump had fallen for the 'false flag'. This re-emergence of official

sources into The\_Donald's engagement with the airstrike is in this way indicative of the place that ostensibly 'official' sources have in the logic of fan engagement. Official statements by Trump and his administration did have some authoritative status, but this authority was not absolute. Indeed, statements by Trump and his administration were only presented as authoritative to the extent that this was compatible with established frames. Once official statements could be engaged with in ways coherent with the broad framing of insiders fighting against the establishment, they were deployed readily as proof that Trump was indeed working against the 'establishment' goals:

Sorry, McCain. "we not going ino syria", Trump said (April 2017, 2782 vote score, 20 comments)

Trump's confirmation that no more intervention in Syria would occur was therefore used contingently and pragmatically, with the authority of an official Trump statement giving weight to the claim, but not absolute weight. This statement was asserted to be something authoritative, the 'final word' on the issue and confirmation of Trump's working against the establishment goals which had, now, come to be framed varyingly as seeking *further* military intervention, as unfairly criticising Trump for not having a plan or as covering up the fact that the attack had indeed been justified all along. The confirmation that no further military intervention would occur had therefore only become a marker of insider status after the position of the 'establishment' had been re-framed in light of Trump's actions. In this way, Trump's official statements were engaged to the extent that they were compatible with existing frames and understood in terms of these frames - rather than at face value as something that had to be followed uncritically.

### **Summary**

Throughout, participants demonstrated creativity and pragmatism in their engagement with both external media resources and the internal stock of framing devices that make contributions to The\_Donald meaningful. When viable textual content was not available in the media field, participants resorted to unsourced content or frames that are 'reliable' regardless of context such as media bias, criticism of opponents and in-jokes. However, once content did become available following a disastrous CNN interview with a pro-Trump survivor of an earlier gas attack, various media appearances by Defence Secretary James Mattis and Trump's eventual "we are not going into Syria" statement, participants quickly moved towards more conventional and fairly mundane contributions that simply replicated official narratives. Throughout all this, however, participation continued. Regardless of the apparent difficulty caused by a lack of usable content in the media field,

The\_Donald's users consistently engaged with the emerging situation in Syria. Furthermore, they did so in ways that continually reasserted the core distinction between knowledgeable insiders and an imagined 'establishment' that was either ignorant of or working to actively suppress this knowledge.

In response to Trump's authorisation of a retaliatory airstrike against Syria's Shayrat Airbase, The\_Donald's users had to engage with a media field saturated with texts that appeared dissonant with the core framing of knowledgeable insiders working against an imagined 'establishment'. The subreddit had established a clear consensus that the chemical attack to which the airstrike was a response was a hoax, a 'false flag' designed to provoke Trump into taking the very military action he then did indeed authorise. This was complicated further by the fact that several prominent 'establishment' figures made comments supportive of Trump, whilst many 'insiders' had criticised his actions. However, The\_Donald's users engaged creatively and pragmatically with the media field as it stood, finding ways to engage with texts that were compatible with established framings in support of the core insider/establishment frame. This response appeared to shift and change over time in response to the availability of particular texts and the development of a stable frame for the airstrike built from the way in which users were interacting with the available content in ways compatible with broad framing devices - whilst potentially contradicting more specific contradictions made days earlier.

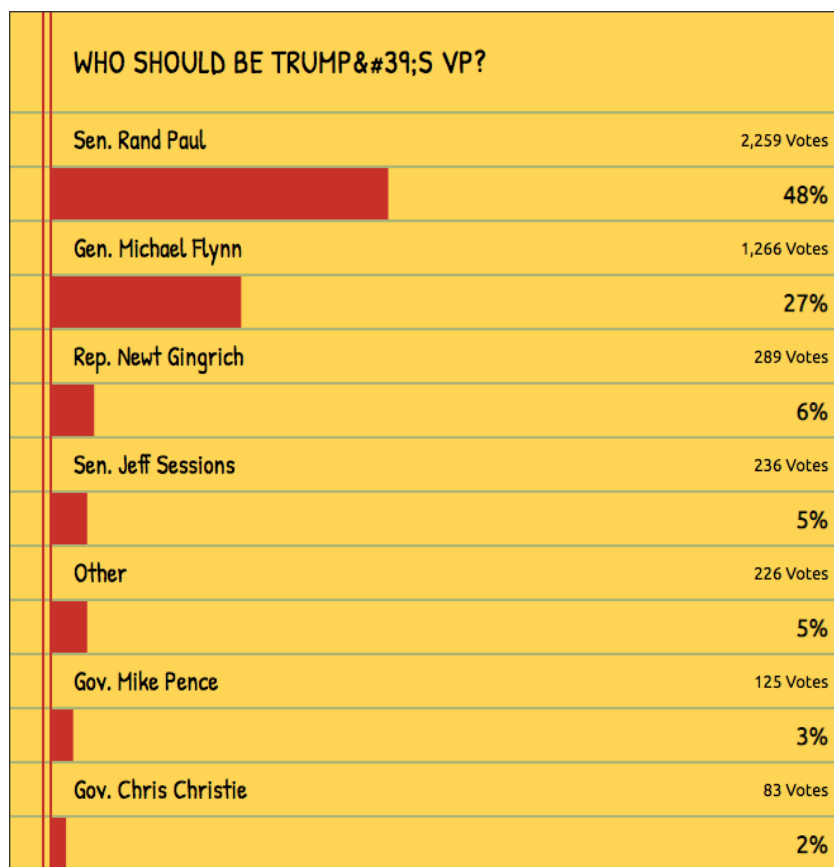
## **Empirical Chapter 3) “Maverick Pence”: engaging with the media through a familiar content world**

In this chapter, I will discuss the way in which The\_Donald’s users interpreted external media content by engaging with a shared ‘content world’ of established reference points, narratives, memes, in-jokes, games and novel uses of the Reddit platform’s functionality. This content world acted as a stock of reliable framing devices through which external media content could be understood, but was itself maintained and contributed to whenever a participant in The\_Donald shared a post that was popular enough to become a reference point itself or reinforce emerging ones. In this chapter, I will unpack how this content world facilitated the pragmatism and creativity with which The\_Donald’s users engaged with external media content. References to familiar practices, narratives, in-jokes and format conventions acted as subtle framing devices, which relied on the assumption of a shared familiarity and tacit agreement with the ideas inherent within them. The analysis presented here will focus on the findings of case study data surrounding the subreddit’s representations of Vice President Mike Pence - a subject that entered into the subreddit’s content world in ways that were highly idiosyncratic but nonetheless very effective in facilitating stable engagement with an otherwise problematic figure. Pence was initially an unpopular choice on The\_Donald and difficult to engage with in terms of the insider/‘establishment’ distinction that grounded all participation in the subreddit. Whereas potential sources of dissonant media content that related to single episodes like the Shayrat airstrike only needed to be navigated once and then moved on from, the selection of Mike Pence as Trump’s running mate was ostensibly a more permanent source of potential dissonance in The\_Donald’s engagement with the media. The selection of Pence as running mate meant that support for Trump in the 2016 presidential election also entailed at least an implicit endorsement of Pence as well. Furthermore, Pence would now forever be a part of the textual “field of gravity” (Sandvoss 2017) surrounding Trump. Media texts discussing Trump would now likely also include references to Pence. Key Trump campaign and administration announcements would now often be made by the Vice President and Pence would often now appear at events alongside or even in place of Trump himself. To engage with the textual field surrounding Donald Trump would now necessarily *also* entail engaging with texts surrounding Mike Pence. The\_Donald’s users would therefore need to develop strategies to engage with Pence - a candidate who

initially appeared largely incompatible with the core insider/establishment dynamic in both style and substance - in a way that was coherent with established forms of participation that sustained the subreddit.

### Context - Pence as running mate

Mike Pence was announced as Trump's candidate for Vice President on July 15th, 2016. Pence, at the time the Governor of Indiana, was not particularly well known (Silver 2016) and was considered something of a surprise choice by the US and international media (Stokols 2016). Pence had also received minimal attention on The\_Donald in the run up to the announcement when compared to other apparent frontrunners like Rand Paul and Michael Flynn. This initial lack of support was made clear in a thread posted to the subreddit on July 13th 2016, two days before the announcement of Pence's nomination, that invited participants to vote in a poll indicating their preferred candidate for Trump's running mate. Of the 4,676 votes cast, Pence received only 125 votes or 3% of the total, falling significantly behind four preferred candidates and even the 'other' option:



/r/The\_Donald POLL: WHO SHOULD BE TRUMP'S VP? (July 2016, 2114 vote score, 418 comments)

This dismissal of Pence turned into a brief moment of surprise and disappointment once



he was indeed formally confirmed as Trump's nominee for Vice President. Outside of the subreddit, early news coverage focused on the clear differences between Pence and Trump in both style and substance. Pence was depicted as something of a compromise pick, a "generic Republican" (Silver 2016) who was inoffensive and palatable to both the Republican establishment and religious conservatives who had previously endorsed Trump's former leadership rival Ted Cruz (Enten 2016). The fact that the nomination was received favourably by the Republican establishment that Trump's own candidacy was ostensibly disrupting (Cilizza 2016), and was seen as likely to bring 'balance' to the presidential ticket (Yokley and Consult 2016) presented a clear dissonance with the subreddit's core distinction between a subcultural in-group and the 'establishment' against which they were defined and purportedly working to disrupt. As effectively summarised the day after the announcement by CNN, the pick set up a "stark clash of styles":

"...a brash presumptive nominee with a tendency to freelance into controversies alongside a cautious former congressional leader who's stuck close to conservative orthodoxy since starting his career in talk radio." (Bradner et al 2016)

More substantively, Pence had also previously opposed Trump on a number of key issues, supporting both the Iraq war and the Trans Pacific Partnership trade deal. Even more troubling was Pence's forthright, explicit criticism of Trump's call for banning Muslims from migrating to the US as both "offensive and "unconstitutional" (Pence 2015). Finally, in stark contrast to Trump's outlandish, carnivalesque (Hall et al 2016) performance on the campaign trail, Pence's "soft-spoken" (Levingstone 2016) style and consistent adherence to "conservative orthodoxy" (Bradner et al 2016) seemed an unlikely fit for both The\_Donald's distinctively playful vernacular and core dynamic of opposition to an imagined establishment.

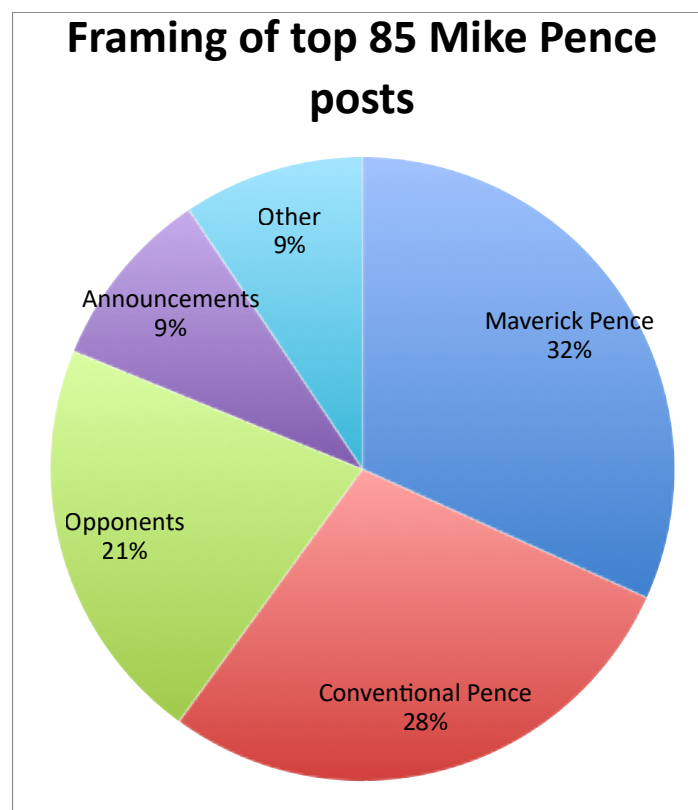
The dissonance caused by Pence's nomination was therefore twofold. The initial consensus that Pence would likely not be selected was disrupted by the eventual announcement that he had indeed been nominated. This was further compounded by the disruption to The\_Donald's core dynamic of knowledgeable insiders defined against an ignorant establishment. Just as in the case of the Shayrat airstrike discussed in the previous chapter, the incident created a media field saturated with texts that were dissonant with The\_Donald's core framing device, as clear 'establishment' figures praised the selection of an uncontroversial Vice Presidential candidate as an apparent sign of moderation and compromise from the Trump campaign. In the case of the Shayrat airstrike, The\_Donald's users re-defined the apparent 'establishment' position (and, to

some extent, even Trump's own) by making creative use of the available texts, even if these initially appeared disruptive to earlier consensus. However, re-drawing the establishment position would prove more difficult here. From now on, as a continuous presence in Trump's textual 'field of gravity' (Sandvoss 2017), Pence *himself* would have to be understood as an insider disruptive to the establishment - despite the obvious approval of his nomination by 'establishment' figures and Pence's own clear contrast with Donald Trump as both an individual and a politician.

However, after Pence had indeed been confirmed as Trump's running mate, he did not remain a source of dissonance on The\_Donald. Rather than causing lasting disappointment and destabilising established consensus, Pence was effectively engaged with in ways coherent with the existing content world, re-framing potentially problematic aspects of his personality in familiar terms that were coherent with the subreddit's established stock of reference points, narratives and other framing devices. Humour, particularly in the format of Internet memes, played a vital role in this process. Through the creation of memes that followed recognisable format conventions and reflected established 'insider' consensus, successful 'Mike Pence'-related contributions made clear to link Pence's nomination to long-established reference points and framing devices and demonstrated how Trump's choice of Vice President was entirely consistent with the existing content world surrounding the campaign. This case study demonstrates how The\_Donald's engagement with the subjects they followed was built from *participatory reactions* to new information. The nomination of Mike Pence was not simply taken at face value by The\_Donald as an event to react to, but rather as *a potential source of new content* to share and participate in the subreddit through existing practices and long-established genre conventions that reflected similar processes of negotiation and incorporation of new information that had occurred previously. This process of engaging with the media field created new reference points to be drawn on later, regardless of the seriousness of these initial depictions. Serious depictions of Pence and obviously humorous, outlandish images blended together into the existing stock of reference points through which subsequent texts surrounding Pence could be understood. In this way, initially disappointing aspects of Pence's character and 'establishment' reputation could be played with and engaged with in ways that were entirely consistent with the existing content world. In turn, a stable framing of Pence as an old-fashioned political 'maverick' entered into The\_Donald's repertoire, facilitating engagement with dissonant aspects of Pence's record and simultaneously reinforcing *other* established frames. This chapter will unpack how The\_Donald's users engaged with Mike Pence by drawing on and, in turn, contributing to an existing content world of familiar reference points, in-jokes and other framing devices.

### The most popular “Mike Pence” posts: sources and frames

The findings in this chapter are the results of a case study analysis of the 85 most popular posts discussing Mike Pence throughout 2016 and 2017. Each post was coded for both the source of the content shared in the post and the way this content was framed. This analysis revealed that a wide range of textual resources were shared in posts discussing Pence, but that these posts were typically grounded in three key framings - two distinct framings of Pence himself, and a third category of posts that framed Pence as in conflict with an often unfair or biased establishment in a manner coherent with the well-established core distinction between ‘insiders’ and the ‘establishment’. Like all discussion on The\_Donald, posts relating to Mike Pence framed events and themes in terms of people and their activities. Popular posts discussing Pence were direct in making particular claims about Pence’s personality and the significance of his actions as they related to his position in the insider/establishment dynamic that defined all contributions to The\_Donald. These posts could be sorted into three major themes - Pence as an effective yet conventional politician, Pence as a disruptive ‘maverick’ and Pence in conflict with establishment opponents.



Graph 11: Framing of top 85 Mike Pence posts

The majority of posts engaging with Mike Pence focused on the activities and persona of the Vice President himself, divided into two somewhat contradictory framings of similar popularity. The slightly more prominent of these - accounting for 27 of the 85 posts analysed - depicted Pence as a cartoonish political 'maverick', unpredictable and disruptive in a manner that contradicted significantly with his reputation for orthodoxy. This framing diverted significantly from more mainstream depictions of Pence's character and record, engaging creatively with the available textual resources both in the external field and from The\_Donald's own stock of reference points. This enabled The\_Donald's users to frame Pence in a manner more reflective of their own exaggerated ideal of what the ideal 'Trump Vice President' should have been. The second most prominent framing of Pence - appearing in 24 of the 85 posts analysed - instead praised him for more 'conventional' qualities such as his loyalty to Trump, his principled adherence to traditional values or his popularity with mainstream voters. These posts typically shared texts from external media sources in their original context, selecting content that portrayed Pence as inoffensive, yet effective as a politician in a way that was coherent with broad goals of electoral success. This type of contribution was consistent with findings discussed earlier in this thesis that subreddit participants were willing to engage pragmatically with the textual resources available in the media field - maintaining broad frames even if this contradicted earlier consensus with regards to specifics. These two framings of Pence demonstrated the creativity and pragmatism with which The\_Donald's participants engage with the media texts surrounding all events - even potentially dissonant ones - and will be discussed below.

A third category of posts - 18 out of the 85 posts analysed - focused not on Pence, but on the way he was ostensibly treated by establishment figures. Posts like this were consistent with the broader 'media bias' frame discussed throughout this thesis, reasserting Pence's place as an 'insider' through a focus on alleged unfair treatment by those framed as part of the establishment. As will be discussed in more detail below, this was a reliable tactic used by The\_Donald's participants to engage with topics that were potentially problematic and incoherent with established framings. The initial consensus that Mike Pence would certainly not be selected as the 2016 Republican Vice Presidential candidate had the potential to cause similar dissonance to the Shayrat airstrike discussed in the previous chapter. In both cases, accusations of media bias and unfair criticism from opponents was used to frame opposition to the current actions of the Trump campaign or administration as a position associated with the 'establishment'. This, in turn, meant that the opposite position - in this case support for Pence - could be understood as that of the knowledgeable insider working against the establishment.

All of these ways of framing Mike Pence as a politician and as an individual worked to reinforce the established distinction between a knowledgeable in-group and the ignorant ‘establishment’ against which this in-group defined itself as a distinct subculture. Through engaging creatively and pragmatically with both external media texts and the subculture-specific framings, practices and reference points that made them meaningful to other users, The\_Donald’s users also dealt with initial anxieties surrounding Pence’s selection as will be explored below.

### **Framing Mike Pence 1: conflict with establishment opponents**

As discussed in previous chapters, framing potentially problematic events and subjects in terms of their conflict with ‘establishment’ was a consistent strategy throughout The\_Donald’s discussion of all events. Regardless of topic, complaints about media bias, unfair treatment and inaccurate reporting were always applicable and could be well supported by texts in the external media field. Posts highlighting criticism of Mike Pence by ‘establishment’ figures were significant in the sample, making up 21% of posts. These were typically framed as the unfair attacks of the biased and monolithic ‘establishment’ that grounded the subreddit’s core distinction between a knowledgeable in-group and outsiders who ignored or suppressed the truth. These posts worked to effectively position Pence on the ‘insider’ side of the binary in ways that were often explicit:

Media: Crowd boos Pence, students walk out. Video: Crowd cheers Pence, boos when students walk out (2017, 9185 vote score, 489 comments)

LIBERAL CUCKS BTFO! NASA says Pence was told he could touch the device!<sup>9</sup>  
 AHAHAHAHA NASA WAS HONORED CUCKS BTFO (2017, 7756 vote score, 131 comments)

Posts focusing on Pence’s conflict with opponents avoided having to frame the Vice President himself, instead reasserting the insider/establishment binary through a focus on apparently unfair treatment of Pence by the ‘establishment’. These posts also commonly referenced other popular narratives on The\_Donald and therefore simultaneously reasserted the establishment status of various groups through allegations of biased

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<sup>9</sup> This post refers to an incident where Pence was mocked for touching a piece of equipment clearly labelled “do not touch”. NASA later confirmed that touching the device was “OK”. This whole incident was fairly light hearted - with Pence himself even participating in the joke (Berenson 2017) - yet is used here as an example of opponents unfairly criticising Pence and being “BTFO” (“blown the fuck out” or aggressively proven wrong).

treatment against the Vice President. In this way, Pence's status as an insider was not directly stated, but rather implied through inserting him into familiar narratives of bias and unfair treatment that 'insiders' ostensibly received from the 'establishment':

Leftists attack Pence for Walking Out Of BLM, er, NFL Game (2017, 9039 vote score, 452 comments)

Joy Behar mocked Mike Pence's faith on The View and said that the way he prayed to Jesus was "mental illness". She didn't apologise until a month later. ABC was silent. (2017, 7086 vote score, 211 comments)

VP PENCE: Last night the @AP published my wife's private email address, violating her privacy and our security... (2016, 13,030 vote score, 374 comments)

Multiple popular posts also drew on media texts surrounding an incident where *Hamilton* actor Victor Dixon addressed Mike Pence directly during a performance of the Broadway musical to express concerns surrounding the policy and rhetoric of the Trump administration (Mele and Healy 2016):

Cast of 'Hamilton', who harassed Pence, says whites need not apply in their casting calls Broadway sucks. (2016, 12,726 vote score, 1205 comments)

Donald J. Trump on Twitter: "Our wonderful future V.P. Mike Pence was harassed last night at the theatre by the cast of Hamilton, cameras blazing. This should not happen!" (2016, 9,683 vote score, 820 comments)

Time to boycott the musical Hamilton (if you weren't already) for publicly disrespecting Mike Pence (2016, 7,580 vote score, 292 comments)

Mike Pence himself played a conspicuously passive role in the framing of these posts, which focused on criticising 'establishment' figures through familiar accusations of bias and hypocrisy. However, as these posts highlighted accusations of alleged bias against Mike Pence, the Vice President was implicitly situated on the 'insider' side of the insider/establishment binary without having to engage with him directly. The claim that Pence was an anti-establishment figure was seemingly difficult to make by focusing on the Vice President's record and public activities. However, by positioning him in opposition to groups and individuals already well defined in The\_Donald's framing of events as representative of the establishment, Pence's own position as an anti-establishment

insider was indirectly yet clearly and consistently asserted.

This tactic of framing Pence in relation to the establishment also facilitated the celebration of parts of Pence's persona and record that would otherwise have been incoherent with The\_Donald's existing stock of reference points and framing devices. Aspects of Pence's character emblematic of his contrast with Trump were instead re-framed as sources of annoyance and disruption to the establishment. For example, Pence's insistence on refusing to meet with female colleagues without a chaperone was engaged with to highlight an alleged double standard in the media treatment of sexual misconduct allegations against liberals and conservatives:

When liberal media criticize you for being loyal to your wife, and all these sexual harassment stories involving liberals come out...apologize to Mr. Pence! (2017, 11,205 vote score, 282 comments)

Just a quick shout out to our VP Mike Pence, who's rule about not being alone with any women other than his wife is looking pretty smart right now. The left made fun of him because they know they couldn't smear him with fake stories. Bravo Mr. VP. You saw all this coming. (November 2017, 7830 vote score, 312 comments)

In this way, posts engaging with Pence in terms of his conflict with political opponents worked to re-assert the boundary between insiders and outsiders whilst largely avoiding having to contend with potentially problematic implications of the very topics these posts appeared to address. Rather than having to engage with, for example, the contrast between Pence's extreme Christian conservatism and Trump's boasts of infidelity (BBC 2016b) and alleged sexual misconduct (Jamieson et al 2016; BBC 2016a), The\_Donald's users instead framed both of these things in terms of the *responses of political opponents*. The implications of Pence's social conservatism could therefore be ignored, whilst the issue itself was still acknowledged - albeit only as yet another example of the media's apparent bias against Trump and his allies.

This reveals the way in which these potentially problematic texts could be engaged with in ways that were coherent with established reference points and familiar framing devices. Pence's conservative orthodoxy was initially seen as dissonant with the wider narratives of anti-establishment disruption that characterised The\_Donald's framing of the Trump campaign as a whole. However, by re-framing these elements of Pence's persona in terms of unfair treatment by the media, potentially problematic textual material could be used

in ways that were both coherent with and reasserted established consensus. There are clear parallels here with the way in which The\_Donald's users engaged with criticism of Trump's authorisation of the Shayrat airstrike as evidence of media bias against Trump. In both instances, highlighting the criticisms made by political opponents was used effectively to frame the thing being criticised as a marker of insider status and opposition to the establishment - regardless of what it was - precisely *because* it was ostensibly being criticised by establishment figures.

### **Framing Pence 2 and 3: Pence the effective politician and Pence the “maverick”**

Posts that focused on Mike Pence himself, rather than on criticism by political opponents, presented two distinct (and ostensibly contradictory) framings of the Vice President. Both of these demonstrated the creativity and pragmatism with which The\_Donald's users engaged with available textual resources. The first and largest set of posts, 32% of the sample, depicted Pence as a cartoonish, anti-establishment political ‘maverick’. The other framing, appearing in 28% of the sample, framed Pence as an effective politician in conventional terms.

The ‘Conventional Pence’ frame represented a *pragmatic* use of the textual resources available in the external media field. In contrast to posts framing Pence in relation to conflict with the establishment, posts using the ‘conventional’ frame did not typically make explicit reference to the core distinction between knowledgeable insiders and the ‘establishment’. Instead, these posts focused on Pence's popularity with voters, his loyalty to and support of Trump, or highlighted areas of success or political alignment in Pence's record and Trump's platform:

THEY JUST SHOWED VICE PRESIDENT PENCE ON THE BIG SCREEN AND HE RECEIVED A HUGE ROAR FROM THE CROWD!!! (2017, 11,203 vote score, 144 comments)

Pence, almost tearing up: “Trump knocks me when he looks at the crowd, and he says Mike you know this isn't about me, this isn't about us, this isn't about our party, this is a movement of the American people and the American people are going to make America great again!” (2016, 9,617 vote score, 203 comments)

The abundance of ‘official’ textual resources circulating around Pence acted as a consistent and relatively uncontroversial way of engaging with the Vice President that did not disrupt the established content world of familiar reference points and framing



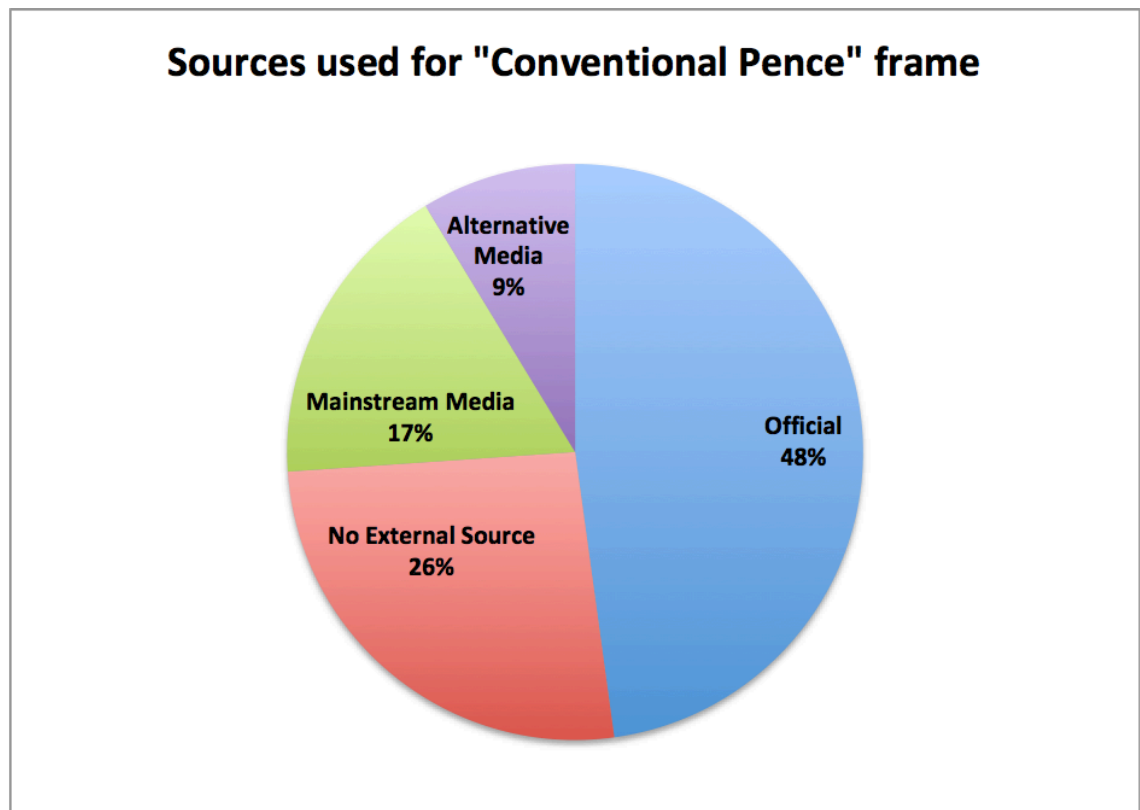
devices, even if it did little to reinforce all but the most general narratives of electoral success. Posts engaging with the 'Conventional Pence' frame were altogether largely straightforward. For the most part, they shared texts from Pence's own official media channels with minimal modification or hyperbole, providing either a simple description of the content shared or the full, unmodified text of the Tweet or headline:

Vice President Mike Pence cleans a portion of the wall at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on Veterans Day. (2017, 8091 vote score, 210 comments)

Mike Pence on Twitter: Congrats to my running mate @realDonaldTrump on a big debate win! Proud to stand with you as we #MAGA (2016, 7157 vote score, 132 comments)

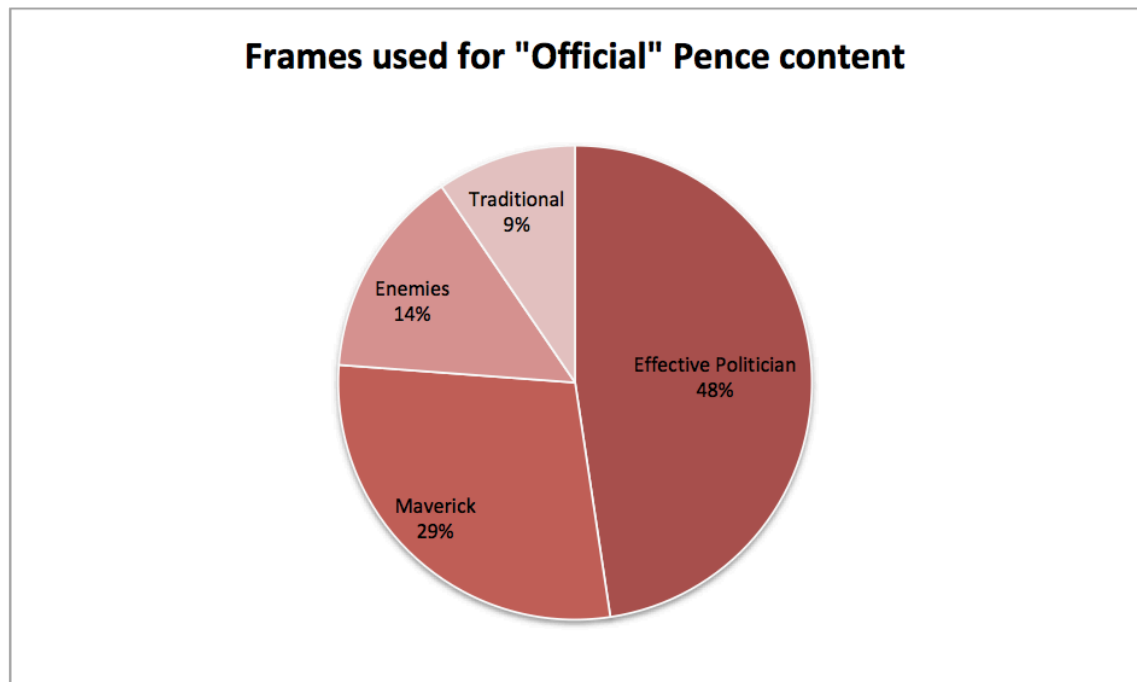
Pence Tweet: Here is hoping you and yours are having a wonderful Christmas Day! #MerryChristmas from Pences! (2017, 10167 vote score, 153 comments)

These posts presented an image of Pence that broadly aligned with his public image as a conventional, orthodox politician and demonstrated the pragmatic way in which The\_Donald's users interacted with the texts available in external media field. Amongst posts that depicted Pence as a 'Conventional' politician, 74% shared some kind of external media content. This content was most commonly sourced from 'official' releases by either the Trump administration or Pence himself, shared in 48% of posts framing Pence as 'Conventional'. A further 26% of posts drew on either mainstream or alternative media outlets. The remaining 26% of posts did not engage with external media content, consisting instead of text-based accounts of alleged interactions between Pence and the post author, posts marking the anniversary of Pence's selection as Trump's running mate and posts urging other users to vote for the Trump/Pence ticket that primarily focused on the Vice President:



*Graph 12: Sources used for 'Conventional Pence' frame*

The prominence of officially released and mainstream media sources reflects the fact that this framing of Pence was well supported by textual resources from the external media sphere, and therefore provided an easy and consistent way of engaging with Mike Pence participating in the subreddit through posting. This was, overall, the most common frame used when sharing content from 'official' sources, highlighting the fact that this frame was simply a pragmatic and straightforward way of engaging with Pence by sharing official texts with minimal need for embellishment.



*Graph 13: Frames used for 'Official' Pence content*

Overall, the 'Conventional Pence' frame therefore provided a straightforward and pragmatic way of engaging with the available texts surrounding Mike Pence. Official campaign materials, formal announcements, political speeches and public appearances provided a wealth of texts to share that were not disruptive to The\_Donald's core dynamic of knowledgeable insiders working against an 'establishment' mainstream - even if they did little to explicitly reinforce it. As described above, accusations of media bias were a creative and pragmatic way of making use of a reliable abundance of mainstream media texts critical of the Trump administration in ways that were coherent with established narratives. This use of officially endorsed texts reflects a similar principle: The\_Donald's users made use of whatever texts were available in the media field. Mundane political statements and official appearances could be used pragmatically in the creation of content to share that required little in the way of remixing or creativity. This may have assisted The\_Donald's users in the rapid and consistent creation of content and is consistent with the findings of Mills (2018) that the subreddit appeared to be more concerned with producing and 'up' voting a large amount of 'low effort' content rather than using Reddit to share and curate only high quality content. Accusations of 'media bias' were similarly reliable, yet required some creativity in re-framing texts critical of the Trump administration as examples of a distinction between knowledgeable insiders and the 'establishment' against which they were defined and from whom they were said to receive unfair treatment.

### **‘Maverick Pence’**

Whilst a significant proportion of posts engaging with Mike Pence framed him in line with his ‘Conventional’ persona as described above, the most prominent framing of Pence in the sample was far more idiosyncratic. This frame, which I have labelled ‘Maverick Pence’, was distinct to the subreddit, yet drew on a range of references from both The\_Donald itself and wider popular culture. The ‘Maverick’ frame emphasised the aspects of Pence’s character that were closest to The\_Donald’s ideal of a Vice President that had largely gone unmet with Pence’s selection. This frame diverged significantly from more mainstream portrayals of Pence and even those endorsed by the ‘official’ platforms of either him or Trump. Posts framing Pence as a ‘Maverick’ depicted the Vice President in hyperbolic, exaggerated terms that prioritised and coherency with the subreddit’s established vernacular over any attempt at accuracy. However, the serious and the humorous blended together in posts framing Pence as a ‘Maverick’, demonstrating the way in which in-jokes and obscure humour was used to both reinforce the subreddit’s sense of community (Baym 1995; Miltner 2014; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017; Katz and Shifman 2017) and engage with topics that may have been difficult to discuss directly (Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman 2014; Marone 2015; Boxman-Shabtai 2018). Maverick Pence posts could be further split into two subcategories, reflecting this blurring of the line between humorous fiction and serious representations of real events:

1. Posts with obvious humorous intent that depicted Pence in absurd, unambiguously fictional scenarios
2. Posts that re-contextualised mundane, ‘real’ events involving Pence as dramatic and exciting

Both of these categories worked to re-frame Mike Pence as something more in line with The\_Donald’s ideal expectations of a Trump Vice President. The first category depicted entirely fictional scenarios that were humorous in their absurdity and obviously not intended to be taken literally, yet directly and explicitly referenced familiar themes and subjects. The second category of posts took ‘real’ events and re-framed them in dramatic ways, describing mundane events involving Pence in ways remarkably similar to the fictional depictions of Pence in the first category. In this way, the extent to which ‘Maverick Pence’ was supposed to be understood as a joke or as a serious representation of the Vice President became difficult to determine. Whilst the most hyperbolic depictions of Pence were typically limited to posts that were obvious jokes, the overall framing of Pence as a militaristic, ‘maverick’ (Anderson 1986) action hero acted as a valid reference point for engaging with *any* text surrounding Pence. The more cartoonish depictions of

Pence meant that mundane events could be meaningfully framed in reference to Pence the 'Maverick', due to a shared familiarity with the established in-joke. In turn, the framing of mundane events in the same exciting, dramatic terms established in obviously outlandish depictions of Pence reified 'Maverick Pence' as a viable, resonant frame for the Vice President.

### **Maverick Pence 1: 'Cartoon Pence'**

The first category of 'Maverick Pence' posts engaged with Pence through an amalgamation of various pop-culture reference points - most prominently the 1960's children's cartoon, *Johnny Quest*. These posts were knowingly absurd and ridiculous, depicting the Vice President in a range of outlandish scenarios that almost always placed him in direct, often physical conflict with 'establishment' figures. Whilst the comedic intent of these posts was obvious, their popularity meant that they played a significant role as familiar reference points for engaging with more 'serious' texts surrounding Pence:



Mike Pence taking down Antifa (2017, 14081 vote score, 164 comments)

These posts relied on framing Pence in terms of a familiar 'maverick' archetype present in US popular culture. This archetype, codified in US media through television programs like *The Lone Ranger* and *The A-Team* (and, indeed, *Johnny Quest*) is a heroic figure that acts outside of 'official' channels but obeys their own moral code (Anderson 1986: 30). The related notion of a 'political maverick' is also prominent in US politics, ascribed to politicians who act independently of the "party line" (Ditto and Mastronarde: 2008). For US voters, 'maverick' political traits such as "independence and personal integrity" were viewed favourably - even if voters were less supportive of candidates who crossed party lines to vote *against* positions held by the respondents themselves (Ditto and

Mastronarde 2008: 298). In other words, the general idea of a candidate being a 'maverick', acting outside of party lines, following their own moral code and willing to bend rules and convention in pursuit of their own convictions was viewed favourably - even if the consequences of this 'maverick' behaviour was more controversial. This archetype was a natural fit for The\_Donald's core dynamic of knowledgeable insiders working against an establishment mainstream. Pence's 'old fashioned' political style and status as a relative unknown meant that elements of his persona - and indeed his amusing visual similarity to the *Johnny Quest* character Race Bannon - could be effectively re-purposed in line with a familiar pop culture narrative that was far more coherent with The\_Donald's established content world than the way Pence was commonly represented in mainstream texts. Formerly Governor of Indiana, Pence was seen to be somewhat transparently selected as Trump's running mate for his political experience and links to the party's conservative establishment (Sanders 2019: 76). Pence also had clear ties to and financial backing from the wealthy Republican donors against whom Trump had defined his own, largely self-funded candidacy as a mark of independence and disruption to political orthodoxy (Mayer 2017). In this way, the case that Pence was an anti-establishment 'maverick' was difficult to make by relying on references to his political record or analysis of his candidacy taken from the wider media field.

However, whilst posts framing Pence as a conventional politician typically reproduced external media content largely in its original context and engaged with real events and verifiable statements, the 'Maverick' framing of Mike Pence frequently depicted cartoonish, obviously fictional events that referenced broader themes, narratives and frames already established on the subreddit. These depictions of Mike Pence as an 'old fashioned' cartoon character were prominent from the earliest stages of his role in the Trump campaign and administration. By July 16th, the day after he had been announced as Trump's running mate, Pence's place on The\_Donald was beginning to emerge as a source for amusing content. In these exaggerated, obviously humorous images, certain aspects of Pence's mainstream persona were ignored, yet others were exaggerated and re-contextualised. Pence's "soft-spoken" nature was largely dropped, but his "old fashioned", "orthodox" approach was emphasised to the point of gleeful absurdity:



Howlin Mad Pence was BORN TO MAGA! (2016, 2407 vote score, 129 comments)

The above post was shared to The\_Donald on July 16<sup>th</sup>, the day after Pence's confirmation as Trump's running mate. The image depicts Pence as Captain 'Howling Mad' Murphy, a character from obscure animated comedy *Sealab 2021*, itself a parody of 1970s cartoon *Sealab 2020* (Tierney 2004). Despite his "incompetence" and "immaturity", Captain Murphy is a popular and well-liked character, a military leader and central character who "absolutely steals each show" (Tierney 2004). The same day, a similar post drew on another decades-old *Hanna-Barbara* cartoon, the 1960s *Jonny Quest* series, depicting Pence as the character Race Bannon:



CAN'T DISPENSE THE PENCE (2016, 1907 vote score, 171 upvotes)

Bannon, a special agent in service of the US Government, serves as a bodyguard and tutor to the titular Jonny Quest. The two travel the world alongside Jonny's father, a US Government scientist, acting in secret to pursue US interests abroad (Trumbore 2012). Facing a range of villains largely mapping onto Cold War stereotypes, Bannon and the rest of the *Jonny Quest* cast can be seen as another example of the 'maverick' archetype discussed above. However, beyond an amusing visual similarity and his vaguely 'old fashioned' public persona, Pence shared little in common with this amalgamation of pop-culture references. Despite this, the 'Cartoon Pence' meme was evidently popular, applicable in a range of situations and developing into a recognisable 'genre' defined by familiar format conventions and the implicit invitation to create new iterations within these format conventions (Wiggins and Bowers 2015:1899):

Mike Pence fighting Elizabeth Warren  
Warren



Mike Pence Fighting Elizabeth Warren (2017, 7756 vote score, 60 comments)



Vice President Mike Pence attacked by Rosie O'Donnell



Vice President Pence Attacked By Rosie O'Donnell (2017, 14934 vote score, 218 comments)

Crucially, these 'Cartoon Pence' memes always referred back to established reference points and framing devices already well established on The\_Donald. In the above posts, "Mike Pence Fighting Elizabeth Warren" and "Vice President Pence Attacked By Rosie O'Donnell", the scenarios depicted are obviously not meant to be taken literally, but nonetheless assert the distinction between Pence, a heroic insider, and the 'establishment' figures he is in conflict with. This reflects Wiggins' (2016: 319, emphasis added) description of memes as "malleable truths" that "*extend from media narratives* and may have little to nothing to do with the "truth"". In this way, memes can work to assert familiar narratives and broad themes even whilst making no claims to be accurate portrayals of a real scenario (See also Milner's 2013 discussion of the use of *Sesame Street* characters in memes produced by the Occupy Wall Street Movement). It is also notable that the humorous nature of 'Cartoon Pence' memes often saw The\_Donald's users mocking opponents in ways that were racist, misogynist or otherwise insulting and offensive to an extent usually avoided in more serious content. This suggests that humour and parody may have provided the subreddit's users opportunities to say things that would otherwise have fallen foul of their own (albeit loosely enforced) rules against posting racist content.

The looseness afforded by the ostensibly humorous nature of these posts and the *polysemy* - or scope for multiple interpretations – afforded by presenting information in the format of a visual meme (Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman 2014) also facilitated the engagement with aspects of Pence's character that were originally contentious to The\_Donald's users. This dynamic is illustrated clearly in the below example of the 'Cartoon Pence' meme, in which Pence personally guards an imagined border wall,

impeding those who would seek to cross it:



Mike Pence and Barron Trump spotting illegal aliens attempting to enter the United States (2017, 5566 vote score, 77 comments)

Pence's initial opposition to elements of Trump's border policy were an early point of contention with his selection as running mate as discussed above, and his presentation here as an overly enthusiastic, frontline enforcer of this same policy successfully sidesteps this fact. However, a literal interpretation would miss the point of the post. This post was evidently intended to amuse, but is made meaningful by references to other established narratives, consensus and broad framings that are inherent in the genre conventions and practices that guided participation in the subreddit. Pence's actual views on border policy fade into the background as largely irrelevant, being no more accurately represented here than the border wall itself. Posts like this did not make any particular claim about Trump's border policy or Pence's endorsement of it. Rather, this sort of contribution represents a "phatic nod" (Papacharissi 2015; Katz and Shifman 2017) of recognition to various narratives, ideas and reference points that must be engaged with, acknowledged and tacitly accepted to 'get' the joke and participate meaningfully with the subcultural practices of sharing and consumption of content (Milner 2013; Wiggins 2016). The extent to which Pence was indeed now supportive of Trump's border wall was not argued or evidenced here, but his enthusiastic support merely assumed as given, part of the format conventions of the familiar 'Cartoon Pence' meme.

Ostensibly humorous, carnivalesque framing devices like the 'Cartoon Pence' meme genre were therefore highly effective in engaging with subjects that would otherwise have been difficult to discuss in terms of the subreddit's established practices. Broad frames like

'media bias' were useful in the fact that they were consistently compatible with available external texts in a manner that reinforced the distinction between knowledgeable insiders and the establishment. Despite its clear popularity and significance as a representation of Pence that appeared in many contexts throughout the dataset, the 'Cartoon Pence' meme format rarely focused on the activities of Pence himself. Not a single 'Cartoon Pence' meme sampled referred to a specific speech, event or even policy position held by Pence beyond the broadest notions of independence, toughness and patriotism. However, engaging with subjects in ways that were knowingly humorous and carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1984), skirting the line between parody and reverence, facilitated the pre-emptive framing of later engagement with those subjects. In this way, 'Cartoon Pence' images relied on the "prospective orientation" of popular image-based Internet meme formats (Shifman 2014: 343). Once the format conventions of the 'Cartoon Pence' memes were established through repetition, the popularity of the format meant that sharing a 'Cartoon Pence' post both inherently referenced earlier iterations yet also enabled future participants to produce their own variations. In this way, initially humorous depictions of Mike Pence as an exaggerated version of the Vice President that The\_Donald's users would have preferred meant that later engagements with Mike Pence could readily frame him in ways that suggested that this 'Maverick' image was not entirely a joke. This dynamic will now be explored in a discussion of posts using the 'Maverick' framing in relation to more serious content.

### **Maverick Pence 2: Exaggerating mundane events**

The humour inherent in the 'Cartoon Pence' memes was implied in the gulf between the obvious absurdity of the scenarios depicted - illustrated with scenes from an action cartoon - and the mundane reality of Mike Pence's actual activities and statements. However, in occasional situations where Mike Pence did indeed act in ways that could reasonably be construed as coherent with this carnivalesque 'Maverick' image, the 'Cartoon Pence' framework was quickly deployed. In these scenarios, the line between the humorous 'Cartoon Pence' and ostensibly more grounded depictions of Pence became difficult to draw. The broader 'Maverick Pence' frame acted as a knowingly exaggerated, absurd depiction of the 'Mike Pence' that The\_Donald would have preferred. However, at times it was also invoked to frame ostensibly 'real' events, such as in the below post that highlighted a mundane interaction between Mike Pence and a CNN reporter in aggressive, hyperbolic terms:

Mike Pence Stares Down CNN Reporter BASED PENCE (2016, 11,197 vote score, 850 comments)

These posts engaged with textual resources from the external media field that depicted 'real' events, yet re-framed them in line with existing reference points surrounding the 'Maverick' frame. Posts such as "Mike Pence Stares Down CNN Reporter" relied on an assumption that their audience was already familiar with both the popular 'media bias' frame and the 'Maverick Pence' frame. When understood in these terms, a somewhat unfriendly yet otherwise extremely mundane media encounter could be readily framed as evidence of both Pence's 'Maverick' persona and the broader conflict between knowledgeable insiders and the 'establishment' that made the 'maverick' frame coherent and appealing. 'Maverick Pence' was similarly referenced when Mike Pence was involved in a minor aircraft accident in 2016. These posts depicted Pence's role in the event as exciting and heroic in a manner coherent with the wider 'Maverick Pence' framing:

MIKE PENCE'S PLANE SKIDS OFF TARMAC IN LAGUARDIA NO BRAKES!!!<sup>10</sup> (2016, 7277 vote score, 684 comments)

After his plane skids off the runway, Governor Pence immediately checked to make sure passengers and reporters were okay (2016, 6622 vote score, 353 comments)

A range of other mundane events were also given heightened descriptions that asserted Pence's alleged toughness and anti-establishment unpredictability, or made implicit reference to his 'Maverick' persona:

Let's take a moment to give our thanks to Mike Pence, the White Wolf. It wasn't too hard to annihilate the Creepy Kaine in the debates, but it was crucial nonetheless<sup>11</sup> (2016, 11379 vote score, 144 comments)

Our VP Mike Pence made an UNANNOUNCED visit to the vandalized Jewish cemetery HIGH ENERGY (2017, 9412 vote score, 364 comments)

"Silverfox" VP PENCE will head the National Space Policy Council, says on twitter; "America must lead the way on the final frontier. " NO BRAKES ON THIS UFO #SAFE SPACE (2017, 9568 vote score, 438 comments)

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<sup>10</sup> This post makes reference to an ongoing meme on The\_Donald that the metaphorical 'Trump Train' of electoral momentum and success had 'no brakes' and would therefore never stop

<sup>11</sup> "Creepy Kaine" refers to Hillary Clinton's 2016 running mate, Virginia senator Tim Kaine. Pence faced Kaine in a televised debate as part of the 2016 presidential election campaign.

These posts framed Pence's activities as exciting and unexpected, re-framing participation in a political debate as an "annihilation" and news of his appointment to a federal body initially created during the George H.W. Bush administration (Vedda 2016) as an absurd science fiction scenario. Pence is also referred to using the nicknames 'Silverfox' and 'White Wolf', evocative of the cartoonish, militaristic portrayal of the Vice President found in the more humorous posts discussed above. Whilst these posts referred to real events, they re-contextualised these otherwise mundane occurrences in way coherent with the broader 'Maverick' framing. The most explicit way that The\_Donald's users engaged with Mike Pence through the 'Maverick' framing was through the creation of absurd, explicitly fictional 'Cartoon Pence' memes. However, when events occurred that could be somewhat reasonably engaged with through the 'Maverick Pence' lens, they were shared to the subreddit with reference to this ostensibly humorous 'Maverick' frame.

This dynamic was particularly noticeable and impactful following a visit by Mike Pence to the Korean Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) in April 2017. Due to escalating tensions between the US and North Korea, security concerns meant that Pence's tour of the facility was scheduled to be more limited than had been the case for previous visits by US officials. However, CNN reported (Bash and Crutchfield, 2017) that Pence broke with established plans to step outside of the secure 'Freedom House' to observe the assembled North Korean security personnel directly. This brief anecdote, described as "not as strange as it sounds" by the Washington Post (Lamothe 2017), was quickly engaged with by The\_Donald's users through the 'Maverick Pence' frame:

VP Mike Pence Breaks Security Plan at Korean DMZ Just to Stare Down Kim JongUn's Soldiers (April 2017, 9959 vote score, 461 comments)

Another post shared a photo of the event that had been edited in reference to the 2015 film *Straight Outta Compton*, a dramatised biography of rap group N.W.A. (Gray et al 2015). The post title refers to Pence as a "crazy motherfucker" - a title used by N.W.A. member Ice Cube in the 1988 song (N.W.A. 1988) after which the film is named- again highlighting this incident as a 'real' example of Pence's 'Maverick' persona:



Crazy motherfucker named Mike Pence (April 2017, 9349 vote score, 172 comments)

In this way, the incident at the Korean DMZ was understood by The\_Donald's users in reference to the broader 'Maverick Pence' frame. These posts drew on months of previously posted, ostensibly humorous content that depicted Pence as the protagonist of absurd, often militaristic scenarios. The DMZ incident could therefore easily be understood as a familiar episode in an established genre of posts surrounding Pence, coherent with the subreddit's expectations of how the Vice President was supposed to act. These expectations were largely grounded in knowingly absurd, explicitly humorous contributions. However, these humorous contributions nonetheless established a clear stock of reference points surrounding Mike Pence as a tough, old-fashioned 'maverick'. Regardless of its original intent, 'Maverick Pence' could readily be used to frame otherwise mundane events in the same hyperbolic terms. In this way, events like Mike Pence's minor breach of protocol on a trip to South Korea could be understood in a way that reified and confirmed an apparently humorous and satirical ideal of the Vice President as a potentially accurate depiction.

### **Discussion: Blending the serious and the humorous in 'Maverick Pence'**

Through ostensibly humorous depictions of Mike Pence, familiar reference points were established which could then be used to engage with more serious claims about his suitability as Trump's Vice President and his alleged conflicts with the establishment. The use of humorous posts, ostensibly intended to amuse rather than make a potentially

falsifiable claim, gave the subreddit's users significant scope to establish a content world of reference points surrounding Mike Pence that reflected their own values and expectations far more than merely pragmatic use of the available external media texts surrounding Pence would have allowed. The 'Maverick Pence' frame, initially humorous in its juxtaposition of outlandish scenarios and Pence's own mundanity, eventually became a viable way of engaging seriously with Pence's role as Vice President.

The 'Maverick Pence' frame was stable enough to act as a familiar reference point through which other, potentially contentious events could be engaged with. The most prominent example - and indeed the most highly up-voted post mentioning Pence in the entire sample - used the familiar format of a *Jonny Quest* screenshot with a caption depicting Pence's apparent role in a highly contentious, largely discredited claim (Schmidt and Shear 2017) that the Obama administration had used illegal wiretapping against the Trump 2016 presidential campaign:

Barack Obama conducts illegal surveillance of Mike Pence (2017, colorized).



Barack Obama conducts illegal surveillance of Mike Pence (2017, colorised) (2017, 16,400 vote score, 246 comments)

This post had all the features of other 'Cartoon Pence' memes discussed above, but made a rare connection to an ostensibly 'real' scenario - Trump's allegation of illegal surveillance against his campaign orchestrated by the Obama administration. Barack Obama was portrayed here as the villainous 'Dr. Zin', hinting at an orientalist caricature of the former President entirely consistent with Trump's own prominent support for the 'birther' conspiracy theory and the "web of racist discourse" that was mobilised to question the

legitimacy of Obama's presidency (Pham 2015:89). Again, Pence himself played a largely passive role, yet was still asserted to be part of a broader conflict between insiders and a powerful establishment - consistent with his 'Maverick' persona. Furthermore, the accusation that the Trump campaign had been subject to illegal surveillance by the Obama administration had been denied by the FBI and has since been considered largely discredited, dismissed by both the FBI and Justice Department (Volz 2017). Whilst these contentious claims and framings of figures surrounding the alleged wiretapping were all asserted within the format of the meme, they were presented here primarily as humorous content designed to amuse, rather than provide evidence. However, as tacit acceptance of all the frames embedded in the meme was required to get the joke, they were, in turn reinforced through repetition as part of a familiar content world meaningful (only) to insiders.

In sum, The\_Donald's users demonstrated both creativity and pragmatism in their engagement with Mike Pence. The 'Cartoon Pence' meme here represented a particularly prominent example of the way in which ostensibly humorous, knowingly-absurd contributions could support otherwise highly contentious framings of potentially dissonant events and subjects. Aspects of Pence's character that were potentially disruptive to fan expectations around what a Trump Vice President should be were not ignored but celebrated, revelled in and amplified. In this way, they became viable textual elements to be utilised in ways coherent with existing fan practices. Pence's old-fashioned orthodoxy was re-framed as amusing and exciting in the form of references to a 1960s cartoon series and his austere, serious persona was reframed as a cartoonishly tough 'maverick' who 'stares down' foes. This reframing was distinctly carnivalesque – an 'ambivalent laughter' (Bakhtin 1984: 12) both mocking and celebratory, not aiming at parody or irony yet still a humorous representation of an otherwise dry character.

### **Framing content in reference to an established content world**

When sharing content surrounding Mike Pence, The\_Donald's users engaged with media texts by framing them in relation to an established stock of reference points. These reference points took the form of individuals, groups, organisations, broad themes, previous discussions and contributions to the subreddit, in-jokes and indeed anything else that the subreddit had previously engaged with. However, all of these earlier contributions had themselves been made through the same process - framed in reference to earlier contributions and the themes, narratives and characters contained within them. As discussed throughout this chapter, this framing process could be highly creative and



transform textual content in both its meaning and context. Characters like ‘Maverick Pence’ were ostensibly built through the framing of texts surrounding Pence in reference to established thematic framing devices of anti-establishment disruption, but over time developed into something idiosyncratic and distinct to The\_Donald. Earlier contributions to the subreddit, particularly those which developed into established in-jokes and narratives through continual iterations of the same format conventions (Wiggins and Bowers 2015), acted as familiar framing devices through which later texts could be interpreted in line with the subreddit’s expectations of a Trump presidency.

In this way, these reference points formed a familiar ‘content world’ - a cast of characters, narratives and broad themes that made up the sum of existing contributions to the subreddit. In a 2015 article, Henry Jenkins described the activities of the ‘Harry Potter Alliance’ (HPA) as an example of real-world activism grounded in the ‘content world’ of a fictional text. The HPA sought to encourage participation in a range of campaigns by re-framing social problems and their solutions in terms familiar to *Harry Potter* fans. The characters, events, themes and morals of the fictional series were used as framing devices for ‘real world’ social problems, making them more accessible to fans. Jenkins (2015: 205-209), borrowing the terminology of HPA leader Andrew Slack, describes the activities of the organisation as an example of “cultural acupuncture” or “mapping fictional content worlds onto real-world concerns”. Jenkins (2015:209) defines this fictional “content world” as “the network of characters, setting, situations and values that forms the basis for the generation of a range of stories”. This network of familiar reference points and their “accumulated meanings” can then be deployed “as metaphors for making sense of contemporary issues”. For example, a HPA campaign drew parallels between support for the legalisation of same-sex marriage in the real world and the values of “acceptance and embrace of diversity” embodied in the character of fictional *Harry Potter* headmaster Albus Dumbledore (Jenkins 2015: 221). The HPA also explicitly frames its engagement with real world events in terms of broader concepts with the *Harry Potter* fictional universe. ‘Muggle’, a term used in the novels to describe people without magical abilities, is used by the HPA as “an all-purpose signifier for those forces that resist social justice” and a means to “link the personal and the political in ways that are inspired by feminist and queer activist groups” (Jenkins 2015: 220). The HPA inspired political participation through what Kligler-Vilenchik (2016: 109) describes as “mechanisms of translation”, applying the practices and social ties already used by a given fan community towards political issues.

In the example of the Harry Potter Alliance, the line between the fictional and the ‘real’ is clear. *Harry Potter* is, of course, made up of explicitly fictional characters inhabiting an explicitly fictional universe. However, the “imaginative and playful” approach to real-

world political issues embodied in the use of “an alternative set of metaphors and analogies” (Jenkins 2015: 223) that are already familiar to participants has clear parallels with the political engagement found on The\_Donald. Whilst the subreddit’s users engaged with ‘real’ subjects, such as Mike Pence or, as discussed in the previous chapter, Senator Elizabeth Warren, they routinely did so through semi-fictionalised figures like ‘Maverick Pence’ or ‘fauxcahontas’. Just as the Harry Potter Alliance “embraces grassroots appropriation” (Jenkins 2015: 223) of the cultural resources found within the *Harry Potter* franchise to encourage engagement with otherwise distant real-world political issues, The\_Donald’s users appropriated the cultural resources surrounding Mike Pence – *whatever these were* – to build their own carnivalesque content world which, in turn, formed the basis for engaging with future episodes surrounding the Vice President (and, indeed, any other figure in the “field of gravity” (Sandvoss 2017:25) of the Trump administration). Just as the Harry Potter Alliance used the fictional character of Albus Dumbledore as a framework to engage with the fight for same-sex marriage in the USA, The\_Donald’s users used the figure of ‘Maverick Pence’ as a framework for engaging with a Vice President that did not initially appear to meet their expectations of the Trump administration.

In this way, new content came to be incorporated into the established ‘content world’ in a way that facilitated the framing of future content. This notion of repeated iterations of the same reference points and format conventions is already recognised in the way in which internet memes develop from initial, singular pieces of content to stable genres (Shifman 2014; Wiggins and Bowers 2015). However, the findings presented in this chapter suggest that the line between humorous memes and serious representations may become increasingly difficult to determine. Whilst depictions of Pence were often knowingly cartoonish and outlandish, they could still act as familiar reference points and therefore became part of the repertoire of framing devices inherent in the content world and applicable to the framing of any individual text or on-going event, whether humorous or serious.

### **Summary of chapter findings**

The\_Donald’s users collaboratively built and maintained a shared ‘content world’ of references, framings and in-jokes surrounding the character of Trump’s Vice President, Mike Pence. This content world was used to make sense of texts in the media field surrounding Pence, facilitating engagement with the Vice President in ways that reflected the subreddit’s own values and expectations as much as they did any empirically verifiable aspect of Pence’s record or character. The ‘content world’ surrounding Mike Pence was

distinctive in its use of knowingly absurd depictions of that at first glance appeared to mock the Vice President yet simultaneously celebrated him. In this way, The\_Donald's engagement with Mike Pence could be considered distinctively carnivalesque, an "ambivalent laughter" that is "gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding" (Bakhtin 1984, 11-12). In this way, the gulf between Mike Pence's 'official' persona and the cartoonish 'maverick' that The\_Donald would have preferred was not a source of dissonance or disappointment, but rather celebrated in its absurdity as an opportunity to make engaging content to share and therefore participate.

Whilst this was most apparent in the subreddit's engagement with Mike Pence, engaging with external texts through the lens of a familiar content world of reference points, in-jokes and earlier contributions to the subreddit enabled The\_Donald's users to share a wide range of texts in ways that were consistent and coherent with established framings of events. Throughout all this, the core framing of insiders defined by distinctions from an imagined establishment was maintained and continually reinforced. To share something to the subreddit in a way that was meaningful to other participants required the knowledge and competency to identify ostensibly 'relevant' texts, and assert this relevance by framing the text in relation to some established part of the content world - regardless of how niche or seemingly irrelevant it appeared to be without this insider knowledge.

## Discussion

The\_Donald was able to remain a politically partisan, ideologically homogenous community in spite of the twists and turns of the Trump administration and a media field that was frequently saturated with texts that effectively and consistently fact-checked untruths and documented scandals, changes in direction and disappointments. These texts were neither entirely avoided, nor were they shared only to critique them. Rather, The\_Donald's users engaged with an omnivorous diet of media texts produced by allies, opponents, mainstream and alternative news outlets and even seemingly unrelated pop culture texts. All of these texts were engaged with through distinctive practices that found meaning in external texts by framing them in relation to an established 'content world' of earlier contributions, established consensuses, narratives, in-jokes and other reference points that were familiar to fellow insiders. In this way, to participate in The\_Donald was to engage with external texts in a way that filtered them through a distinctive repertoire of insider knowledge, a stock of subcultural capital that defined meaningful participation in relation to distinction from the 'useful myth' (Thornton 1995) of the 'establishment' mainstream. The findings presented in this thesis have demonstrated the way in which an apparent 'echo chamber' could engage with a wide range of seemingly dissonant texts in creative and pragmatic ways. Texts produced by opponents or critics needed not to be ignored or even critiqued, but could in fact play a vital role in re-asserting the distinction between 'us' and 'them' that allowed this politically partisan community to maintain consensus and coherency even when the political cause they were ostensibly united around appeared to disappoint or subvert their expectations.

In this final section of the thesis, I will discuss the core findings of my research and relate these to wider debates surrounding the existence of 'echo chambers' and the role of seemingly dissonant texts in a politically partisan community. I will also consider these findings in relation to a range of pragmatic questions surrounding the existence of partisan, radical and disruptive communities on mainstream online platforms and the strategies such platforms might use to manage their existence.

## Key Findings

### **Finding 1: Ostensibly dissonant texts, particularly those produced by opponents and maligned mainstream media outlets, can play an important role in how an apparent 'echo chamber' engages with disruptive events**

My research builds on and expands current understandings of how politically partisan communities engage with media content that is critical of their favoured political candidate or cause. As discussed earlier in this thesis, apparent 'echo chambers' do not always avoid interactions with texts produced by political opponents (Karlsen et al 2017; Bail et al 2018; Dubois and Blank 2018). However, as my research has found, these texts are not always shared simply to criticise or disprove points made by opponents. Rather, seemingly 'dissonant' texts can play an important role in reasserting the boundary between insiders and the 'establishment' by demonstrating the alleged bias, ignorance or antagonistic nature of political opponents. This builds on existing findings that participants in ideologically homogenous online communities are unlikely to be able to avoid interactions with dissonant media texts (Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009; Lee et al 2014; Dubois and Blank 2018) and may in fact seek out interactions with those who disagree with them (De Francisci Morales et al 2021) or engage with texts produced by opponents in ways that appear to confirm, rather than moderate their existing views (Karlsen et al 2017; Bail et al 2018).

My findings demonstrate that seemingly 'dissonant' texts can in fact have a range of useful functions in re-asserting consensus and distinction from opponents. Media texts produced by political opponents were typically not engaged with at face value, but presented as evidence of already-assumed bias, or to assert that outsiders held a particular position which must therefore be criticised. In other cases, seemingly dissonant texts were simply mocked or turned into humorous visual content that reasserted insider status through drawing on reference points and format conventions that were familiar only to fellow insiders. These findings therefore demonstrate that apparently dissonant texts are not only not inherently disruptive to consensus, but can in fact play a range of useful roles in the participatory consumption of media texts that characterises online political fan networks.

Furthermore, these findings indicate that texts produced by political opponents or mainstream media critics may be particularly useful when engaging with potentially disruptive or dissonant actions taken by the figures or groups around which politically

partisan networks are united in their support. When a favoured political figure does something that falls outside the “horizon of fan expectations” (Sandvoss 2012), media reports that highlight inconsistencies, debunk false truths or even simply present the unpalatable reality of an event do not necessarily need to be ignored or even critiqued. Instead, such texts can be actively engaged with as evidence of the existence of a hostile ‘establishment’ media that is, in a way that is unsurprising and perhaps even reassuring to fans, unfairly representing the reality of events. The fact that, for example, *CNN* reported on the inaccuracy of Trump’s February 2017 allusion to a fictional terror attack in Sweden (Bradner 2017) was not engaged with as potentially disruptive evidence that Trump had been incorrect - but rather as entirely expected evidence that the media was unfairly biased against Trump. This is consistent with the findings of Parekh et al (2020:152) that the sharing of texts from ‘fact-checking’ sites “have impact as social acts” – interpreted as welcome corrections in some contexts, but also as antagonistic or competitive in others. My research adds further detail to this picture, suggesting that texts may not necessarily be shared even to engage with the content within them on any substantive level - whether to critique or endorse it. Rather, the act of sharing a particular text may play a part in a complex system of familiar reference points and shared understandings of what the existence of a particular text created by a particular source might mean. In other words, sharing a critical media text produced by an opponent may simply be done to demonstrate that opponents are indeed producing critical media texts - confirming their bias and ignorance of the ‘real’ facts of a particular issue whilst handily avoiding the need to define what these facts actually are.

Ideologically dissonant media texts are therefore not simply things that web users may only encounter by accident, nor are they things that are necessarily only shared to debunk or critique. Rather – somewhat counter-intuitively – sharing critical texts produced by opponents appears to be a useful tactic even when fans themselves are on the back foot and attempting to make sense of an unexpected turn of events or disappointing action taken by their favoured political figures. In the findings of both of my case studies, *The\_Donald*’s users made frequent use of a familiar ‘media bias’ frame and shared a wide range of texts produced both by political opponents and by mainstream media organisations that were highly critical of Trump’s actions or framed them in a way that was seemingly contradictory to the subreddit’s own consensus. Both of these case studies focused on events where Trump had done something that appeared to disrupt *The\_Donald*’s established framing of events. In each of these cases, participants in *The\_Donald* actively sought out media texts that critiqued the *very thing* Trump had done that was itself already contentious on *The\_Donald*. These texts were not only shared to disprove them or even critique the points made within them, as might be expected. Rather, these texts were sought out and shared as evidence of the fact that even if

Trump's actions were seemingly difficult to justify, they were at the very least indicative of insider status by the very fact that opponents had criticised them. For a politically partisan online network predicated on sharing, texts produced by opponents are therefore not necessarily something to be avoided, but instead simply act as yet another potential source of content to share and reassert the distinction between insiders and their political opponents.

In this way, my research indicates that the idea of media texts as either dissonant with or confirming of established consensus may be somewhat simplistic. Due to the creative and pragmatic ways that participants can engage with the texts that they share, these texts are not inherently dissonant or confirming of existing views, but can be *used* in a range of ways that confirm consensus - even if the text itself is produced by an opponent or explicitly contradicts consensus when read at face value. This adds considerable nuance to the 'echo chambers' thesis, and builds on the recognition that avoidance of texts that disrupt consensus is neither possible nor desirable. My research suggests that the line between 'dissonant' and 'consensus confirming' texts may be somewhat more complicated than has been considered previously. Instead, the findings in this thesis suggest that partisan communities may engage with an incredibly diverse range of texts in the media field – either wholly or in part – as potential sources of content to share, framed in relation to established reference points in ways that are often pragmatic, creative and unexpected. To answer a question posed at the beginning of this thesis, these findings suggest that what partisan communities *do* with the content they share is far wider than sharing confirming content and critiquing or avoiding dissonant content, and confirms the importance of a framework that recognises this for future research into such networks.

## **Finding 2: Framing outsiders as part of a vaguely defined, monolithic 'establishment' facilitates a stable insider identity built on distinction from this establishment**

The findings presented in this thesis are consistent with other accounts that group identity is maintained in pseudo-anonymous spaces through the othering of outsiders (Maclamore and Ulug 2020; Gaudette et al 2020; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017). However, my research builds on this through the close analysis of how 'outsiders' were understood using a subcultural framework of insider status as distinction from an imagined mainstream. Using Sarah Thornton's (1995) account of the mainstream as a 'useful myth' facilitated an analysis of how the 'establishment' against which The\_Donald's users defined themselves was understood in flexible terms that shifted to reflect particular contexts or positions that the subreddit's users needed to critique or defend. In this way, my research found that the 'establishment' played a significant and useful role in framing external texts. The dynamic of a subcultural in-group and a mainstream culture from which it considers itself distinct is well-established in the field of

media and youth subcultures (including a range of online youth subcultures (McArthur 2009)), but my research suggests that this dynamic can be a useful rhetorical tool for *political* fan subcultures when engaging with external media texts. As discussed above, texts produced by political opponents played a range of roles in asserting the distinction between insiders and outsiders. However, this dynamic was facilitated by the continual framing of all outsiders as part of a monolithic ‘establishment’ analogous to the ‘myth’ of the ‘mainstream’ imagined by a conventional media or youth subculture (Thornton 1995). Understanding political opponents as part of a shared, homogenous ‘establishment’ meant that what the ‘establishment’ position was and who held it could be defined pragmatically depending on the specifics of any given context. Following events that disrupted consensus about who the ‘establishment’ consisted of and what it was doing, such as the loss of Hillary Clinton as a unifying ‘establishment’ figure or the unexpected decisions by the Trump campaign and administration discussed in the Shayrat Airstrike and Mike Pence case studies, The\_Donald’s users were able to shift the boundaries of the alleged ‘establishment’ position and, in turn, re-orient their own position in relation to this. The loose nature of the ‘establishment’ meant that this change of position could be articulated by sharing whatever content was available in the media field, defining an apparently coherent position from disparate sources that had no obvious relation to one another. In this way, The\_Donald’s users could engage with official statements by political figures, social media posts, news reports and personal anecdotes all as potential evidence of a unified ‘establishment’ position that must therefore be opposed.

The role that the establishment played in The\_Donald’s framing of events was also intrinsically linked to the practices facilitated by their presence on the Reddit platform. As explored in detail throughout this thesis, Reddit is entirely built around the sharing of content, and has several key design features that facilitate the promotion of this content to a wider audience. This was at the heart of The\_Donald’s impact on both Reddit as a platform and beyond it, and the subreddit’s users made very efficient use of Reddit functionality to proliferate content to a far wider audience than it would otherwise have reached (Shepherd 2020; Huxtable-Thomas 2020). The way in which The\_Donald’s users did this was entirely self-aware and, consistently, orientated in terms of needing to share and proliferate information that the ‘establishment’ – of which the wider Reddit community was typically implied to be a part of – did not want them to share. This is indicative of the way in which online platforms can shape not just the way in which the networks that they host use particular functionalities, but also the narratives used by networks to define themselves in relation to the platforms that facilitate their existence. The\_Donald made effective use of Reddit as a platform for content sharing, but Reddit also played an important role in shaping the way The\_Donald framed themselves and the events, personalities and ideas that they discussed.



### **Policy contribution: Banning and moderation**

The relationship between Reddit and The\_Donald, both in terms of functionality and the wider social context that being on Reddit provided, has implications for the question of how social networking sites manage disruptive communities on their platforms. The findings presented in this thesis demonstrate how integral the social context provided by a particular platform is to a network's collective identity, rather than simply the functionality that a given platform provides. In this way, The\_Donald was not simply analogous to a virtual 'location' that a pre-existing group could visit or a tool that they could use, but had a more holistic role as a site where platform functionality, participants and broader social and political contexts coalesced into distinctive practices that had particular meanings to those who engaged with and were impacted by them. Without Reddit, Trump or The\_Donald's users, the specific network of participants and practices that became The\_Donald would not have had either the same impact nor the same meaning to its participants, as evidenced by the fact that it largely dispersed after Reddit banned it - despite attempts to move the whole community to another platform with similar functionality (Ribeiro et al 2020).

This builds on understandings about how antagonistic, radical and disruptive communities can exist on platforms and the role that moderation and conflict may play in the collective identity of such communities. Existing research has demonstrated that outright banning a community from a platform is effective in disrupting it and that attempts to migrate to a new platform are not straightforward (Ribeiro et al 2020; Chandrasekharan 2020). My findings are consistent with this, but suggest also the importance of antagonism and perceived unfair treatment as *rhetorical strategies*. The significance of The\_Donald's place on Reddit depended not just on its users ability to manipulate the functionality of the platform, but also the social context of being an ostensibly 'unwelcome' community on Reddit. This played a vital role in the way in which The\_Donald's users understood their own contributions as meaningful. As discussed throughout this thesis, conflict with the wider Reddit platform was a core part of The\_Donald's collective identity and framing of the 'establishment' against which it was defined. This had a significant role in the meaning that The\_Donald's users ascribed to core practices such as sharing and 'up' voting content so that the rest of Reddit could see it.

This suggests that the significance of banning a community from a platform may be deeper than simply denying access to the functionality or audience that a large platform like Reddit provides. An online platform is a social context in and of itself, with particular meanings that are understood by the communities that inhabit it (boyd and Ellison 2007; boyd 2010; Ellison and boyd 2013; Papacharissi 2016). The\_Donald's impact largely came from the fact that it was present on Reddit, a large platform with functionality that facilitated the proliferation of

content to a wide audience. However, this also provided a specific social context that made sense of the subreddit's use of this functionality as an apparent anti-establishment act. The\_Donald's conflict with Reddit was, perhaps counter-intuitively, a large part of what made its use of the Reddit platform make sense. This is because the subreddit's opposition to Reddit was largely expressed through *sharing content to Reddit*. Without this context, many of the contributions discussed throughout this thesis would not have made sense. The continual assertion that content needed to be shared, 'up' voted and elevated to 'the rest of Reddit' was often only meaningful in the context of 'the rest of Reddit's' apparent ignorance of that content or the platform's administrators alleged suppression of it. Without Reddit, The\_Donald would not have had access to such a wide audience or the functionality to share content with this audience, but would also have lost the framing device of opposition to the 'establishment' that was ostensibly inherent in using an 'establishment' platform. The recognition of this phenomenon suggests an important, additional concern for future research into the effects of banning and moderation of disruptive online communities on 'mainstream' platforms – the role that being 'unwelcome' on such a platform has in making sense of such participants' use of it.

**Finding 3: A familiar content world of established reference points can be used to frame new developments in a way that conforms to expectations, even if there appears to be a lack of texts in the media field that support this framing**

The findings presented in this thesis also presented the important role played by a 'content world' (Jenkins 2015) of familiar reference points and framing devices in how The\_Donald engaged with events. There have been studies that explore how content worlds from explicitly fictional media properties have been used to engage with 'real world' politics (Brough and Shresthova 2012; Jenkins 2015; Betz 2021), but my research is, to my knowledge, the first to identify the creation of a content world of ostensibly 'real' individuals and events which is then used to engage with 'real world' politics. As discussed in the third empirical chapter of this thesis, Henry Jenkins' (2015) and Kliger-Vilenchik's (2016) analysis of the 'Harry Potter Alliance' demonstrated the effective way in which fictional 'content worlds' can be used to galvanise political engagement by re-framing complex and contentious events in terms taken from a familiar media texts. My research suggests that often-humorous contributions and references to 'real world' individuals who have been fictionalised but are not explicitly *fictional* can play the role analogous to these familiar media texts, as a 'content world' through which real world events can be engaged with.

In this way, my research develops a framework for understanding how politically partisan communities engage with external texts - as potential content assessed for its compatibility

with already established content. Regardless of topic of discussion, The\_Donald's users shared media texts that could be framed in relation to established reference points and narratives – whether these were serious, humorous or something in-between. When an event occurred that was of interest to the subreddit's users, they engaged with it largely through sharing external media texts framed in relation to this established 'content world' of references to earlier contributions to the subreddit. Whilst The\_Donald's users did share their own thoughts and opinions, they did so primarily by framing external media content produced by others (see also Mills (2018:48) for confirmation of this). In this way, The\_Donald's users did not engage with Donald Trump or the events, personalities and institutions surrounding him directly, but rather through mediated 'paratexts' (Sandvoss 2017), or texts produced by others that commented on or added meaning to the subjects that they claimed to represent. In this way, The\_Donald's users engaged with events and personalities that had already been translated into texts by others, which could then be engaged with as stocks of potential resources to share to the subreddit.

Whenever an event occurred surrounding Trump or his campaign or administration, The\_Donald's users could rely on a range of media texts being produced by mainstream and alternative media sources. These texts then circulated in Trump's 'field of gravity' (Sandvoss 2005, 2017), forming the texts through which consumers of Trump-related content could engage with him. In the context of The\_Donald, this engagement meant the creation of content to share to the subreddit by combining external texts with relevant framing devices from an internal stock of reference points. In this third stage of mediation, external media texts were turned into 'posts' by The\_Donald's users, which shared ostensibly relevant texts within a familiar framing device drawn from an established 'content world' of reference points. If these posts were successful, receiving enough upvotes to be sufficiently visible to other users, they became part of the subreddit's apparent collective response to an event and contributed to the 'content world' through which later texts could be engaged with.

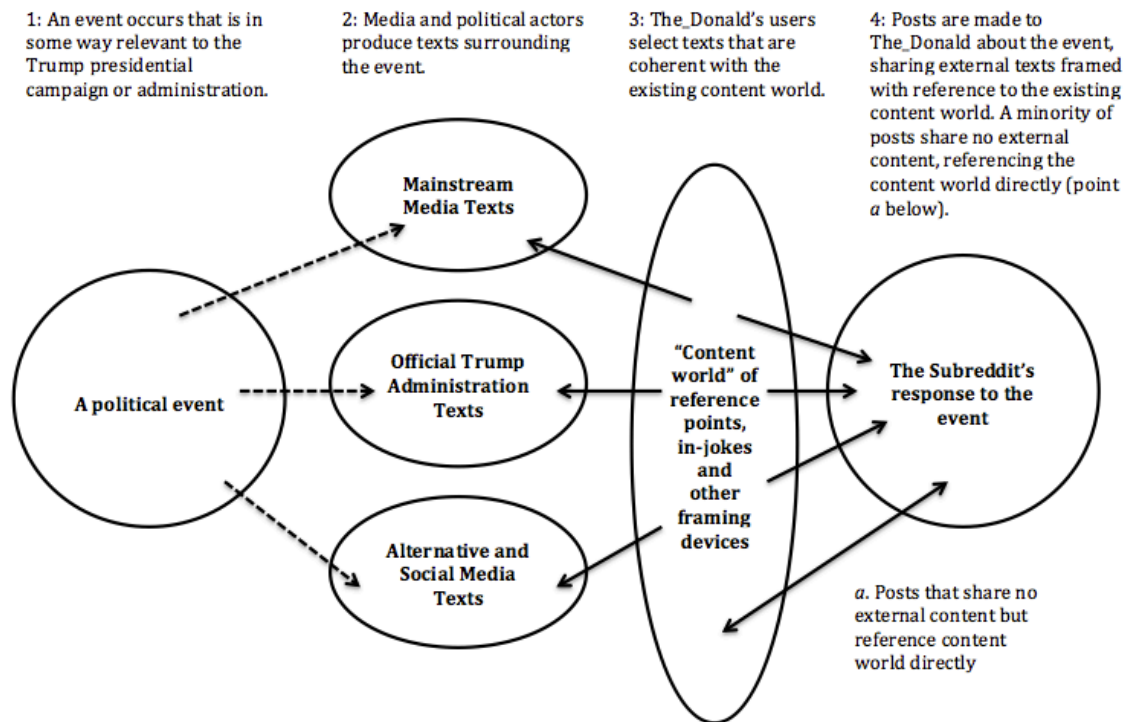


Fig. 1: Engaging with texts in the media field through multiple stages of mediation

Whilst media fans are somewhat beholden to the authors and creators of the franchises that they follow, political fans are similarly responsive to the actions taken by their favoured political figures. In this way, political fans are liable to be disappointed in situations where political figures act in ways that are unexpected or render the existing fan consensus an “unsustainable” (Sandvoss 2012) reading. However, the findings presented in this thesis suggest that just as media fans are empowered to create transformative works, or even ignore or dispute later interventions by creators and publishers (Tosenberger 2008; Mcleod and Holland 2017), so too are political fans engaged in the creation of their own canon of readings and reference points, building a cast of characters that reflect fictionalised versions of ‘real’ political figures and institutions in a way that facilitates resilience in the face of unexpected or disappointing political developments.

The\_Donald’s users may have been surprised by Donald Trump’s selection of Mike Pence as his 2016 running mate, but the fictionalised (and initially humorous) ‘Maverick Pence’ reliably met their expectations and could consistently be used to frame content surrounding the ‘real’ Mike Pence in familiar terms. So too were Elizabeth Warren’s comments on the Shayrat airstrike seemingly disruptive and directly contradictory to the subreddit’s own reading of the situation, but the actions of ‘Fauxcahontas’ - as Warren existed in the carnivalesque of the content world - were always able to be engaged with in predictable terms. In this way, a wide range of texts and contributions could maintain a familiar content world of content that was varying serious

and humorous, mocking and celebratory. However, regardless of the original intent or tone of the content, once it became a familiar reference point it could reliably used in the interpretation of *other* content. In this way, a shared in-joke about Senator Elizabeth Warren could be deployed as a valid framing device to share what would otherwise appear to have been salient and potentially highly disruptive criticism of actions taken by Trump that already disappointed the subreddit's expectations:

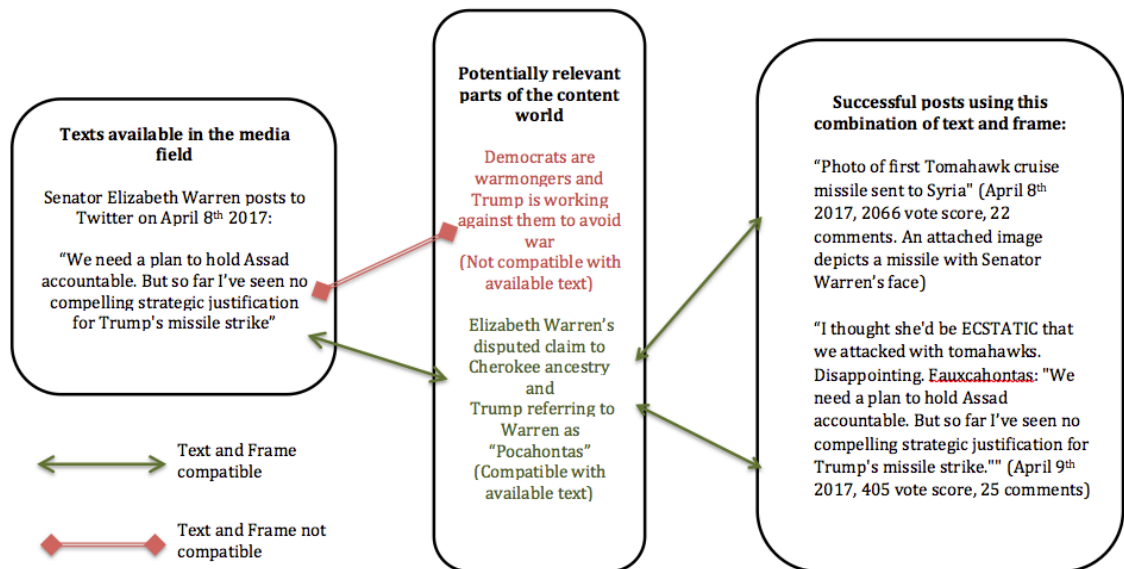


Fig 2. Engaging with Elizabeth Warren's Shayrat Commentary

### Theoretical Contribution: Memes and Humour

In this way, my findings also contribute to the emerging literature on the use of memes and humour by online political communities. Existing research has demonstrated the way in which familiar format conventions can come to be more meaningful than the content of a given iteration of a meme using that format (Milner 2013; Sieffert-Brockman 2017; Katz and Shifman 2017). Katz and Shifman's (2017) analysis of seemingly 'nonsense' memes demonstrates the way in which playing with format conventions can in fact communicate messages that go beyond the seemingly absurd face-value reading of the meme.

My research suggests that particular format conventions can be a useful means of communicating political messages that would be difficult to make directly. The most prominent example of this was in the subreddit's engagement with Mike Pence as a cartoonish 'maverick'. In these posts, the familiar format convention of a screenshot from the *Johnny Quest* cartoon, labeled with a caption suggesting that it depicted a 'real' scenario involving Mike Pence, was deployed in a range of seemingly absurd contexts. However the suggestion that Pence was

tough, combative and anti-establishment was continually reasserted through the very format conventions of the meme, rather than the claims in the image itself. In order to engage with Mike Pence memes, to understand the humour and participate in the community building that such humour - built on an assumption of shared familiarity with obscure reference points - provides, was dependent on the tacit acceptance of the often highly contentious claims presented within them.

In this way, my findings suggest that seemingly non-serious (or even nonsensical) content can play an important role in building consensus by embedding this consensus into reference points required to participate in the humour. Recognition of shared reference points, and contributing in ways that assume this mutual familiarity, have been recognised as an important part of community building in online setting from some of the earliest research into online networks (e.g. Baym 1995). However, my research builds on this by suggesting that shared humorous reference points can also play an important role in relating community identity to a shared consensus, particularly around things that might be contentious or difficult to convince others of through argument or evidence. When negotiating a response to the Shayrat airstrike, The\_Donald's users largely responded in ways that were somewhat grounded in the external texts produced by media and political figures – sharing evidence that Trump's actions were justified or at least disruptive to political opponents through engaging with relevant media texts. However, Mike Pence's 'Maverick' persona was developed almost entirely through the establishment of a familiar in-joke, which – due to its humorous presentation – did not need justification or evidence, yet nonetheless became a consistent and stable way of understanding the Vice President through a consensus embedded in the format itself. When events did then occur that could be understood in terms of the now-familiar 'Maverick' frame, such as Mike Pence's visit to South Korea, ostensibly humorous content could then be reified as a valid interpretation of 'real' events:

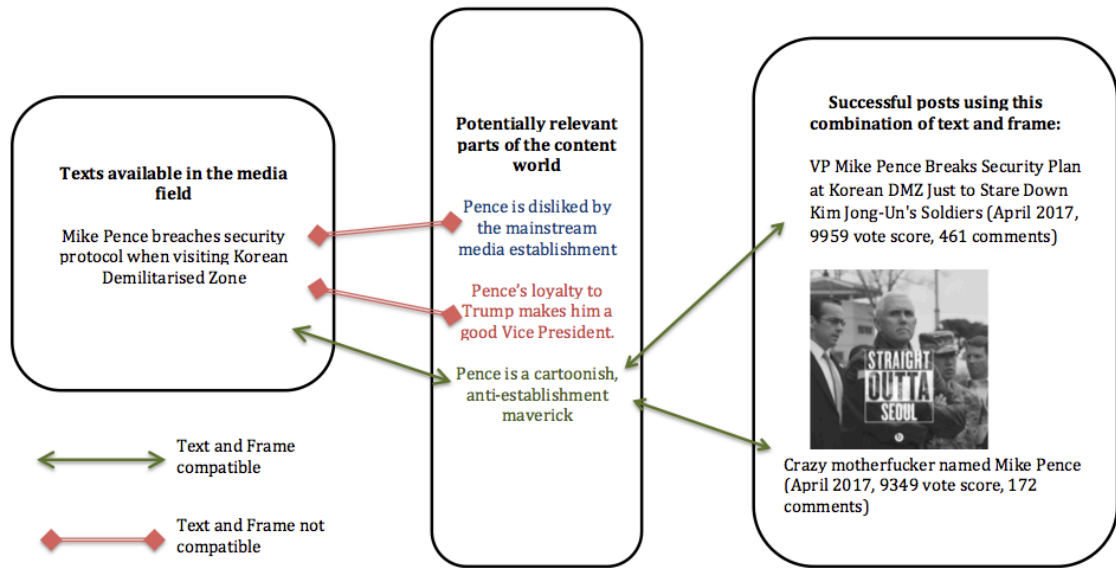


Fig 3. Engaging with the DMZ incident

### The potential impact of online political communities on candidates

On Reddit and beyond, the ubiquitous nature of political engagement as a form of fan consumption has become increasingly recognised. Highfield (2016: 41) notes that “irreverent and playful practices, from memes and image macros to parody and satire, are recurring elements of social media activity in general, including political coverage”. In the context of support for the former leader of the UK Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, Dean (2019: 261) highlights the importance of irreverent visual content in community formation, arguing that humorous visual media are already “an unremarkable part of the everyday vernacular of politics for large numbers of politically engaged citizens” and should not be “underestimated”. Chadwick and Stromer-Galley (2016: 283, 287) highlight the role of online political engagement as “yet another means for personalised political expression”, emphasising the impact on political parties as “digitally enabled citizens breathe new life into an old form by partly remaking it in their own participatory image”. In this way, Dean (2017:417) suggests that the fan response to Jeremy Corbyn was largely built around a “rock star” image that was largely produced by supporters themselves and exceeded “any individual or personal qualities Corbyn himself may possess”.

On The\_Donald itself, such a dynamic was evident in the subreddit’s representations of Mike Pence, as discussed in empirical chapter 3, dominated by images that existed a similarly “ambiguous liminal space between genuine political and personal support[...] and at times ironic replication of the textual and visual tropes of more traditional fandom”

that Dean (2017:418) ascribes to a subset of online support for UK Labour leader Ed Miliband. Whilst this apparently ironic engagement with Ed Miliband's awkward and unassuming persona may have been used by his supporters to counter seemingly unfair personal attacks in the media, The\_Donald similarly used ambivalent humour to engage with potentially contentious aspects of Mike Pence's character. In this way, an obviously humorous post depicting Mike Pence as a cartoon character guarding Trump's border wall avoids a more nuanced discussion of Pence's own initial reluctance to endorse aspects of Trump's border policy (Abramson and de la Cuetara 2016):



Mike Pence and Barron Trump spotting illegal aliens attempting to enter the United States (2017, 5566 vote score, 77 comments)

Of course, Pence himself did come to fully endorse Trump's border policy once he became Vice President:



'Mike Pence visits migrant detention facilities on southern US border' (*The Guardian* 2019)

The striking visual similarity of these images should not be taken to suggest that 'Cartoon Pence' memes directly led to Pence's endorsement (and, by 2019, ascension to minor



figurehead of) Trump's border policy. However, it serves as a reminder that just as political supporters adapt both their expectations *and their interpretations of* their favoured political figures in line with the textual resources available, so to do politicians adapt the way in which they portray themselves to their supporters in line with the expectations directed towards them (Saward 2006). By appearing onstage at the 2017 Glastonbury Festival, Jeremy Corbyn tacitly accepted, endorsed and partially re-made his own political image in response to the fandom that emerged around him (Dean 2017). Much too has been made of Trump's use of the political rally in gauging voter responses to particular slogans and promises (Hall et al 2016). Further research is necessary to determine the extent to which the 'online rally' of supporters across online social media platforms might play an analogous role to these significant 'offline' events.

### **Concluding remarks**

The\_Donald was eventually banned from Reddit due to some of its users sharing threats against elected officials, a clear violation of the platform's content policy that The\_Donald had usually endeavoured to stay broadly within the letter - if not the spirit of (Wong 2020). However, for much of The\_Donald's existence, it was a disruptive presence on Reddit not due to explicit rules violations, but instead due to its gleeful disruption of what its users framed as an 'establishment' consensus on the platform. The\_Donald's users made effective use of the Reddit platform to proliferate their own content whilst continually denigrating other users and administrators. The\_Donald defined itself almost entirely through its distinction from Reddit, from the media and from 'establishment' politics whilst simultaneously engaging with all three through attempts to use Reddit's front page to gain media attention and achieve electoral success. In this way, The\_Donald's entire framing of its own position in relation to this 'establishment' appeared to be entirely at odds with what it was actually doing - attempting to use the very channels it attacked and dismissed to achieve its goals. However, this apparent paradox was also important in making many of the subreddit's interaction with the platform meaningful, as this interaction ostensibly enacted the core framing of insiders working against the establishment within the microcosm of sharing 'ignored' or 'suppressed' content to Reddit.

The\_Donald was a subculture defined by a shared stock of distinctive reference points, in-jokes and familiar practices that were used to make sense of the practices of media consumption that its users engaged in, but also marked those who participated in these practices as insiders through the accumulation of the relevant insider knowledge and

competencies required to do so. Whilst an analysis of the motivations individual users may have had for participating in The\_Donald did not fall within the scope of this thesis, the irreverent, excited and playful tone that characterised contributions to the subreddit suggests that participation was fun and enjoyable for its own sake. To engage with The\_Donald was to support the Trump campaign, to mark oneself as distinct from an ignorant and censorious ‘establishment’, but it was also to engage in a range of clearly enjoyable practices of media consumption.

Dean (2019:256) suggests that, in academic spheres, there may be a degree of “unease, or even squeamishness” with regards to emergent practices of online political engagement. The creation of political memes, or the presence of antagonistic political communities that blur the boundaries of offensive humour and serious political engagement, are no longer “some frivolous activity on the margins of politics”, but an increasingly ubiquitous part of political engagement in a mediated world (Dean 2019:256). As the analysis of The\_Donald presented in this thesis has shown, this form of political activity affords its participants significant scope in re-framing events, individuals and ideas in line with their own expectations, engaging gleefully with an omnivorous range of media texts and maintaining a shared ‘insider’ identity based on a continually reasserted distinction from a mainstream culture that is largely defined by its ignorance of the very practices that ‘insiders’ are participating in. The\_Donald may have been undeniably a product of various contextual factors, such as the emergence of Reddit from a niche to a mainstream platform (Segall and Isidore 2015), or the nature of Trump’s ‘carnavalesque’ political style (Hall et al 2016). However, the practices of media consumption presented in this thesis are not inherently unique to The\_Donald or Reddit, nor to the populist right or Donald Trump. Such forms of political activity may seem irreverent or on the sidelines of ‘real’ political engagement, but the “increasingly central” (Dean 2019) role of forms of online communication that are specific to both the functionality of particular online platforms and the social context and meanings participants associate with these online platforms are evidently important dynamics that need to be engaged with seriously. The research presented in this thesis has shown the importance of forms of political engagement that at first seem irreverent or distracting. Such forms of political engagement, shaped by the functionality of a range of online platforms, are not a departure from ‘serious’ political activity, but increasingly an everyday part of it.

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