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The Alt-right's use of President Donald Trump's Twitter account as a propaganda device

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**THE ALT-RIGHT'S USE OF PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP'S TWITTER ACCOUNT
AS A PROPAGANDA DEVICE**

A thesis submitted to
the Graduate College of
Marshall University
In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

In
Communication Studies

by
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Approved by
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ABSTRACT

The long campaign to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act situated President Donald J. Trump in a context where attacks on President Barack Obama's signature legislation symbolized a broader repudiation of his legacy. Even more than mainstream Republican partisans, the alt-right blogosphere celebrated the demise of the law to symbolically cleanse the nation of Obama's influence. Trump attempted to honor his pledge to end Obamacare in his first year of office with his support of the American Health Care Act (March 2017), Better Care Reconciliation Act (July 2017), and the Graham-Cassidy Bill (September 2017). Members of the alt-right reframed Trump's arguments for these bills in ways that attempted to normalize their overt white supremacy in public life. This analysis examines how Trump and the alt-right co-created ambient intimacy with their audiences on Twitter amid the repeal debates. Trump's digital rhetoric communicated cynicism, lamentation, and anger, which alt-right nodes remixed and recirculated in ways that amplified his cultural presence in uncivil corners of the web and aligned it with white supremacy.

THE ALT-RIGHT, BARACK OBAMA, AND OBAMACARE

On January 20, 2017, Donald J. Trump was sworn in as President of the United States. In the first few minutes of his presidency, he promised improvement to the American healthcare system. He stated, “We stand at the birth of a new millennium, ready to unlock the mysteries of space, to free the Earth from the miseries of disease, and to harness the energies, industries and technologies of tomorrow.”¹ This promise echoed his campaign pledge to fix the healthcare system by repealing and replacing the Affordable Care Act (ACA). In June 2015, President Trump pledged in his campaign announcement, “We have a disaster called the big lie: Obamacare. Obamacare. . . . We have to repeal Obamacare, and it can be— and— and it can be replaced with something much better for everybody.”² In the first year of Trump’s presidency, he could not fulfill his campaign pledge. The House and Senate failed to pass bills to repeal and replace the ACA four times in the span of his first nine months in office. Critics used these defeats to question Trump’s leadership and fitness for office.³ In response, Trump frequently turned to the online social media platform of Twitter to deflect responsibility, attack democratic processes, and scapegoat others.

President Trump’s controversial use of Twitter has long been a locus of scrutiny. He told supporters at an April 2016 campaign event, “You know, I tweeted today, @realDonaldTrump. I tweet. Don’t worry, I’ll give it up after I’m president. We won’t tweet anymore. I don’t know. Not presidential.”⁴ After the election he reneged on his promise and did not give up his use of Twitter. He was questioned by *Fox News*’ Tucker Carlson at the kickoff of the first healthcare vote in March 2017 about this change of course. Trump responded, “I think that maybe I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for Twitter.”⁵ He suggested that much of the news was “not honest. And when I have close to 100 million people watching me on Twitter, including Facebook,

including all of the Instagram . . . I have my own form of media.”⁶ Twitter became a place for the President to connect to a fringe audience and weaponize social media. “Throughout the 2016 election,” Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis observe, “Trump consistently amplified conspiracy theories that would otherwise have been confined to fringe right-wing circles online.”⁷ The use of cynicism and anger in Trump’s tweets connected him to the alt-right, a splinter group of the 2009 Tea Party movement.

The rise of the Tea Party planted a seed that preceded Birtherism, a movement to discredit President Barack Obama’s legitimacy by questioning his nation of origin. In 2009, as the United States was on the verge of fiscal collapse, the United States Federal Government enacted the Troubled Asset Relief Program. The program spent \$700 billion of public money to bail out private banks.⁸ This expenditure sparked a protest movement across the United States that called itself the Tea Party. Their first major action came in April 2009, “with its members appearing at congressional town hall meetings to protest the proposed reforms to the American health care system.”⁹ The movement continued into the 2010 midterm elections, where influence from the Tea Party saw “Republicans gain approximately 60 seats to take control of the House and reduce the Democratic majority in the Senate.”¹⁰ This change in power also brought forward “Birthers.” Birthers were people who believed in “birtherism,” or that President Obama was born outside the United States and therefore could not serve as president. Trump began propagating this theory in the Spring of 2011 while promoting his reality television show *The Apprentice*. In April 2011, Trump went on the popular morning television show *Today* and discussed Obama’s birth certificate. Trump suggested that Obama “doesn’t have a birth certificate or he hasn’t shown it. He has what’s called certificate of live birth. That is something that’s easy to get. When you want a birth certificate it’s very hard to get.”¹¹ When asked by the host, Meredith Vieira, if

he believed that Obama was lying about his origin of birth, Trump replied, “I’m starting to think that he was not born here.”¹² Trump’s promotion of the birther conspiracy gave him the attention of the alt-right.

The alt-right was a term developed in 2008 by Richard B. Spencer, leader of the white nationalist think tank, *The National Policy Institute*. He coined the term to describe “a set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that ‘white identity’ is under attack by multicultural forces using ‘political correctness’ and ‘social justice’ to undermine white people and ‘their’ civilization.”¹³ In the wake of his birtherism, *Politico* observes, Trump’s “consistent push for an anti-immigration platform” cemented his support among white-nationalists who detected “what members called ‘wink-wink-wink’ communications from the candidate.”¹⁴ Housed in fringe corners of the internet, the alt-right cheered Trump’s twitter feed with delight. *Politico* adds together “his retweet of bogus murder statistics that exaggerated black crime; two separate retweets of a racist Twitter feed called @WhiteGenocideTM; and the interview that sealed the deal” when he refused to denounce former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke all as moves in a pattern that lent his support to nationalists.¹⁵

Through codewords and silences, Trump made his social media spaces like Twitter places where the alt-right could gather and feel welcomed by him. Writing about networked rhetoric, Damien Pfister observes that “ambient intimacy produces stranger sociability and global publics, directs attention to underrepresented individuals or groups and their stories, and rearranges attitudes by activating strong affective reactions.”¹⁶ He situates the concept in Laura Gurak’s work on digital rhetoric, which emphasizes speed, reach, anonymity, and interactivity as basic characteristics of the digital age. The speed of the internet encourages casual anonymous interaction between its users. The internet’s fast-paced nature creates an environment of

repetitive postings. These posting circulate across the blogosphere, allowing for engagement from a wide variety of audiences. Such messages can be microtargeted to insular audiences from a wide variety of sources, outside the scrutiny of democratic safeguards like gatekeepers.¹⁷ Through Twitter, Trump circulated unchecked discourse to a wide variety of anonymous users, which affectively linked him to the alt-right. The alt-right interpreted his discourse as a means to scapegoat others and ridicule democratic deliberative practices when they did not work in their favor.

The long campaign to repeal and replace Obamacare situated the alt-right in a context where attacks on President Obama's signature legislation symbolized a broader repudiation of his legacy. Even more than mainstream Republican partisans, the alt-right blogosphere celebrated the demise of the law to symbolically cleanse the nation of Obama's influence. Trump attempted to honor his pledge to end Obamacare in his first year of office with his support of the American Health Care Act of March 2017 (AHCA), Better Care Reconciliation Act of July 2017 (BCRA), and the Graham-Cassidy Bill of September 2017. Members of the alt-right reframed Trump's arguments for these bills in ways that attempted to normalize their overt white supremacy in public life. This analysis examines how Trump and the alt-right co-created ambient intimacy with their audiences on Twitter amid the repeal debates. Trump's digital rhetoric communicated cynicism, lamentation, and anger, which alt-right nodes remixed and recirculated in ways that amplified his cultural presence in uncivil corners of the web and aligned it with white supremacy. In what follows, literature on ambient intimacy and digital rhetoric is examined before the President's tweets about the BCRA, AHCA, and the Graham-Cassidy Bill.

NETWORKED MEDIA, NETWORKED RHETORIC

Scholars have remapped relationships between speakers, rhetoric, and audiences in networked contexts.¹⁸ Critical investigations of the blogosphere, for example, highlight remixing as a strategy to capture attention, expand the reach of a message, and enhance the size of audiences. Margie Borschke observes that remixing is a “digital media practice and expression made by copying, editing and recombining pre-existing digital media.”¹⁹ She adds that remixed rhetoric allows discourse to circulate across digital platforms in ways that constitute interactive audiences that co-create meaning with how they amend and share texts.²⁰ Bloggers remix news stories by linking, excerpting, and interpreting them for their own audiences.²¹ They take fragments from older posts and remix them in new posts to recirculate fragments in ways that fit preferred narratives favored by networked audiences.²² Bloggers remix stories, Pfister observes, “from their own perspectives by appropriating fragments from a wide variety of sources.”²³ Remixing, therefore, brings together co-writers who simultaneously serve as collaborative inventors, agents, and audience members.

Audience members are connected on social media through a web of engagement. Pfister notes that bloggers and audience members become nodes, or connected points, and “each node functions as a potential relay for information, obviating the need for a central node to collect, parse, and distribute messages.”²⁴ These connected points can quickly circulate discourse across networks. As individuals of a collective, nodes are composites of “gender, race, class, religion, sexual orientation, and other identity features.” They send, share, and follow individuals that identify with their own social groups.²⁵

Networked rhetoric remixes different types of content together in ways that create shared meaning and parasocial relationships. Siyoung Chung and Hichang Cho observe that parasocial

relationships are intimate relationships between audiences and celebrities. Parasocial relationships form “when individuals are repeatedly exposed to a media persona, and the individuals develop a sense of intimacy, perceived friendship, and identification with the celebrity.”²⁶ In these relationships “friendship can be defined as a mutual relationship that is characterized by intimacy and liking.”²⁷ On social media, networked groups show kinship by liking and retweeting content. Bloggers gain more online attention as audiences “like” and retweet their content. The more online attention that a blogger receives, the more persuasive they are to audiences. Chung and Cho add that “based on the promotion of genuine values, such parasocial relationships prevent celebrities from being framed as commodities.”²⁸

Social media is a hub for parasocial relationships. Bloggers create and endorse information across social media and share personal information, which helps create feelings of intimacy. Leisa Reichelt coined the term ambient intimacy to identify the ability to maintain affective relationships with network members otherwise unreachable. “Ambient intimacy is about being able to keep in touch with people with a level of regularity and intimacy that you wouldn’t usually have access to, because of how time and space conspire to make it impossible,” she observes.²⁹ Bloggers and their co-writers seek to sustain mutual attention on stories of interest to the networks that circulate them. While remixing is a tactic to capture attention, its goal is to build effective bonds among co-writers. Isolated members can link to each other and create social groups in online forums.³⁰ Audiences may develop deep emotional connections with these networks. The audience treats posts as personal, complex interactions between an intimate social group.

Bloggers can, in some instances, create ambient intimacy with cynicism and lamentation. Pfister states that “cynical tones are a stylistic resource that focuses attention on a particular

issue” and that “cynicism promises to arrange perspectives more fundamentally.”³¹ Attitudes like “snark” are communicated through social media, which are used to “puncture an argument or offer a dismissive aside.”³² Such media and attitudes thus cultivate cynical audiences. Moreover, Pfister adds that lamentation “refers to an often-nostalgic recollection of another time that appears as a catalog of the disappearance of valued people, artifacts, or moments.”³³ The recollection of the past creates a connection between bloggers and audiences who may share in each other’s grief.

Accordingly, remixed rhetoric is scripted by networked audience expectations and often lacks citation. Bloggers create content that is designed to circulate widely. Micro-blogging website like Twitter are available as spaces of invention, where members may remix discourse and its meaning. John Oddo states that in networked media, “people are free to draw from the meaning potential of language— to represent reality in ways that correspond to their perception of context and to their rhetorical objectives.”³⁴ Remixed rhetoric is available to be remixed again and again by networked audiences that negotiate the group’s identity, actions, and motivations. Pfister argues that bloggers disregard citationality in ways that, “harkens back to oral culture. The medium, though, makes a difference.”³⁵ Social media and oral culture both emphasize the nexus between inventor and deliverer to a degree that displaces standards of evidence in written culture for citationality.

Bloggers quickly create and disseminate content that their audiences repost and spread further down network chains. Pfister identifies a forced cascade of information as a strategy to “flood the zone.”³⁶ Networked groups may post and repost arguments in quick succession and thereby saturate the media landscape with aggressive ideological meaning. When bloggers flood the zone, Pfister adds, “they unleash a tide of posting that crash into extant argument pools,

reshaping the horizontal and vertical contours of public argument.”³⁷ Rhetors circulate discourse in ways that dominate search engines, spreading messages to ever-wider audiences. Discourse circulates across media platforms. Members repost content that is then shared with even wider audiences where it will continue to circulate in feedback loops. Flooding the zone quickly circulates large quantities of discourse to overwhelm unaligned discourse.³⁸ Social networking sites create a want and need for the fastest information possible.

Bloggers connect their audience’s attention to new content with hyperlinks. Angela M. Lee observes that the “speed-driven nature of new media technology has significantly changed the way most newspapers conceptualize their role in the larger news media ecology, and more newspapers are paying more attention to speed.”³⁹ The need for fast-paced information is observable in how “most newspapers now update their websites around the clock and disseminate breaking news alerts through their Twitter accounts.”⁴⁰ Newspapers break news stories through Twitter posts, which are hyperlinked to their websites. The fast speed of networked rhetoric is made possible by its ability to link. Avery E. Holton, Kang Baek, Mark Coddington, and Carolyn Yaschur observe that “Hyperlinks provide a primary mechanism for such rapid content engagement, making them a critical component.”⁴¹ Hyperlinks embedded in the text of tweets is a mechanism to deepen and widen argument pools. According to Holton et al., “Twitter users seek out and share content, often posting or reposting hyperlinks to original sources of information.”⁴² Hyperlinks are an essential tool that can “allow users to direct each other in digital spaces while displaying their own interests in specific news and information.”⁴³ Every time hyperlinks encounter the network they are amplified across social networked sites. Holton et al. add that “Twitter users seek out and share content, often posting or reposting hyperlinks to original sources of information.”⁴⁴

Twitter, therefore, was an appropriate vehicle to cultivate a fringe audience. Brian Ott observes that Twitter has three defining features: simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility.⁴⁵ In many ways, Twitter's simplicity helps explain Trump's success. Christian Fuchs observes that Twitter was an appropriate medium for Trump's policy, one based on "feelings, beliefs and irrationality instead of arguments, proofs and knowledge."⁴⁶ Twitter relies on the negative emotions of "outrage, scapegoating, hatred, and attack because its ephemerality, brevity and speed support spectacles and sensationalism." Trump's use of Twitter sparks an emotional reaction from all audiences.⁴⁷

The alt-right's use of the blogosphere

Amid the 2016 election, the alt-right worked to advance its worldview. It used networked rhetoric to spread its message across social media sites. Marwick and Lewis observe that the term "alt-right" was a "neologism that puts a fresh coat of paint on some very long-standing racist and misogynist ideas."⁴⁸ The term alt-right was developed in 2008 by Richard Spencer. He developed the phrase in a way that remixed white supremacy and white nationalism to make it more palatable to wider audiences. Spencer first amplified his message with networked media that reached isolated audiences. The rebranded content made it possible for mainstream media to report on the alt-right, thus giving the group the ability to gain mass media exposure. Publicity amplified their message and expanded their audience to vulnerable white, male populations. Marwick and Lewis observe that the "young men most at risk are those who feel disenfranchised in other areas of their life, especially those who already feel alienated from mainstream culture. It is this alienation and feelings of outsider-ness that radicalization strategically exploits."⁴⁹

Among other ways, ignorant white males were vulnerable to scapegoating and deflective tactics that challenged the foundations of shared reality. Marwick and Lewis observe that "Fake

News” was a contested term, but “generally refers to a wide range of disinformation and misinformation circulating online and in the media.”⁵⁰ Bonnie Brennen observes that fake news is “made-up news, manipulated to look like credible journalistic reports that are designed to deceive us.”⁵¹ The main difference between these sites are that credible news organizations’ mission is to inform their audiences on information vital to the public, while fake news sites spread fake information to misinform the public to believe false stories. She adds that “Once uploaded, fake news is easily spread through social media to large numbers of people who are willing to believe and share the fictional material.”⁵² As the fake news interacts with the audience, the audience spreads the information by retweeting and sharing the information across social networking sites. Brennen also observes that “false information has always existed, and fake news has been a part of online news since it began.”⁵³ Brennen concludes that in the midst of the 2016 election, “fake news reached a tipping point when many of the manufactured reports went viral on Facebook and Twitter and were reinforced by Google searches. For example, during the presidential election campaign, several fake news reports outperformed news articles from respected media outlets.”⁵⁴ Trolls created sensational headlines that the public clicked and shared across social media sites. The alt-right embraced fake news by creating jarring headlines. With these headlines, networked groups spread their radicalized messages. Marwick and Lewis warn that the spread of alt-right content is of deep concern, especially due to how quickly fake news can circulate.⁵⁵ Alt-right websites magnify and promote these headlines. Websites like the *Daily Stormer*, *Breitbart*, and *Infowars* use these headlines to cater to an audience of disaffected white men.

The alt-right’s attraction to Donald Trump is related to the celebrity persona he developed on NBC’s *The Apprentice*. Writing about the 2016 presidential election, Bonnie Dow

observed that Trump's celebrity played a pivotal role and that he used his persona to project the persona of a political outsider.⁵⁶ Trump's character on *The Apprentice*, for example, is a "grim version of work," according to Elizabeth Michelle Franko.⁵⁷ It is "characterized by an authoritarian boss, a ruthless brand of managerial capitalism, and a nasty race amongst fellow employees for a singular prize."⁵⁸ In the show, Trump is king. He "holds all the cards and represents himself as the supreme authority on the candidates and on all business relations."⁵⁹ In the world of *The Apprentice*, "Trump is the central character; he is hero, he is the ultimate captain of industry."⁶⁰ In *The Apprentice*, Trump acts as a leader of industry, the leader of the business world. Franko states that Trump's character "advocates an almost wildly irresponsible individualism, where one man is the center of the universe, where one leader decides who lives and who is fired, and where one individual is the sole bearer of wisdom. Trump is the show. He is the ultimate autocrat."⁶¹ Trump on *The Apprentice* portrays himself as patriotic, but not democratic. Franko, for example, observes that "Trump is far from democratic. The America of Trump is not a liberal democratic state. The American Dream represented by Trump is a mini-monarchy, ruled from a gilded chair and vesting Trump with the supreme authority."⁶² Trump ruled *The Apprentice* with an iron fist. This is noted by his famous catchphrase "You're Fired!" Trump's "decisions often seem arbitrary and capricious, but are based upon a set of unwritten rules known only by Trump, rules that demand success and victory in every interaction."⁶³ Trump's mentality treated leadership in more singular terms. Trump believes that "a leader must at some point shun the advice of others and make decisions based solely on his own individual 'gut.'"⁶⁴ Below, it is argued that Trump used his celebrity persona from *The Apprentice* to create ambient intimacy with alt-right bloggers. Such bloggers mimicked and coopted Trump's

affective tones of cynicism, lamentation, and anger, and operated as nodes that amplified his presence in corners of the web that were invisible to more mainstream audiences.

The Alt-Right, Donald Trump and Network Rhetoric

The alt-right treated and transformed Donald J. Trump into a cynical and angry presence in American culture. Pfister states that “cynical tones are a stylistic resource that focuses attention on a particular issue.”⁶⁵ This tone was introduced to the public attention on Trump’s reality TV show *The Apprentice*. *The Apprentice* honed the idea of Trump’s leadership in the minds of the American electorate. *The New Yorker* observes that Trump was forever praised on the show; “it departs radically from reality: no one criticizes the boss. Instead, the Trump of *The Apprentice* receives endless praise, even behind his back. All scandal and debt are erased; Trump’s combative streak is alchemized into Daddy’s tough love.”⁶⁶ This perception made Trump seem like leadership material. Political adviser Roger Stone argued that “Fifteen seasons of the apprentice not only makes him a smooth television performer, but think of the way he looked in that show. High back chair, perfectly lit, great makeup, great hair, decisive, making decisions, running the show, he looks presidential.” Stone added, “Do you think voters; non-sophisticates make a difference between entertainment and politics? Politics is show business for ugly people.”⁶⁷ The staging of lights, sound, hair, and makeup brought forward the image of a leader.

In 2011, Trump would appear on several television programs to promote *The Apprentice*. While on these programs, Trump turned from a reality television star to a political operator. Trump’s “adoption of a far-right conspiracy theory” launched him from reality television to the reality of politics, observes David Neiwert, in particular, the theory that Barack Obama was not

born in the United States and was thus an illegitimate president.⁶⁸ Trump made national headlines in 2011 when he started appearing on talk shows and urged Obama to release his birth certificate. In March 2011, he stated on *ABC*'s popular daytime program "The View," "I want him to show his birth certificate. . . . If you're going to be president of the United States, it says very profoundly you have to be born in this country. . . . There's something on that birth certificate that he doesn't like."⁶⁹ Trump stated to reporters a few weeks later that Obama's presidency was unconstitutional. Trump faced mainstream media backlash for his comments. *The Washington Post* stated in April 2011 that Trump's comments were "disgusting and dangerous" and that "this might even be good for business. But it is terrible for the nation and public discourse that someone who claims to be so smart is so willing to perpetuate a lie."⁷⁰ While the mainstream media thought that the birther conspiracy was a way for *The Apprentice* to gain viewership, it was also a way for the alt-right to learn about Trump.

Trump began his campaign for the presidency with the Birther conspiracy. In May 2012, Trump gained the attention of many when he retweeted an article from the alt-right blog, *World Net Daily*: "Shocker! Obama Still 'Kenyan-Born' in 2007." He commented, "Let's take a closer look at that birth certificate. @BarackObama was described in 2003 as being "'born in Kenya.'"⁷¹ The blog's editor stated that *World Net Daily* was soon in contact with Trump at the start of the Birther conspiracy. The editor shared that Trump's "people were very quick to respond," and that he was one of Trump's main advisors in 2011 constantly urging Trump to ask, "Where is the birth certificate?"⁷² The use of cynicism in Trump's messages gained Trump the attention of more alt-right groups.

The alt-right blogosphere gravitated towards Trump. Starting in the summer of 2015, the white nationalist blogs of *VDare*, *The Daily Stormer*, *Radix Journal*, *The American Renaissance*,

InfoWars, and *AltRight.com* posted their support of his candidacy. These alt-right sites urged their readers to support Trump. *The Daily Stormer* announced on their website in June 2015, “I urge all readers of this site to do whatever they can to make Donald Trump president” because Trump was “the only candidate who is even talking about anything at all that matters.”⁷³ *Radix Journal* stated in July of 2015 that their supporters should support Trump because he is a disrupter; “He is worth supporting because we need a troll. We need someone who can expose the system that rules us as the malevolent and worthless entity it is. We need someone who can break open public debate.”⁷⁴ In August 2015, *The American Renaissance* stated that Donald Trump is “the last hope for a president who would be good for white people.”⁷⁵ *InfoWars* stated in August 2015 that “Trump is the best candidate... The less a President does, the better. The more Congress is gridlocked, the better. The fewer Lobbyist-written laws are passed by corrupt Washington politicians, the safer our liberty.”⁷⁶ The alt-right gathered around Trump’s demagoguery and his persona as an outsider.

Before and after the election, Trump reminded nationalists of his ambient presence. In November 2015, for example, Trump retweeted a phony crime statistic in the United States that traced back to an alt-right Twitter account. In January 2016, he reached out and made his cynical presence known again as president when he retweeted @WhiteGenocide.⁷⁷ The alt-right audience applauded the recognition. *Vanity Fair* reports that more than ever the members of the white supremacist alt-right members are vocal online; “People who follow white-nationalist accounts on Twitter are “heavily invested” in Trump... His constant call to ‘take America back’ is apparently just the kind of dog-whistle, whether intentional or not, that has made Trump the favored candidate of Twitter racists everywhere.”⁷⁸ The alt-right felt invested in Trump’s campaign because he validated them. These white nationalists felt connected to President Trump

and were very supportive of his policy agenda, especially Trump's campaign promise to repeal and replace the ACA.

Any program that President Obama created, the alt-right was fundamentally against.⁷⁹ The alt-right made it their mission to dismantle any program and any law credited to Obama. Otherwise known as the ACA, Obamacare was a law disliked by most of Trump's base. The alt-right, in particular, allegedly disliked it for how it represented government control over private life. But instead of reasonable disagreements over the policy, they often created propaganda to turn people against the law. They argued, for example, that the bill included "death panels" that would decide the elderly population's fate on Medicare, and that the law required people to be microchipped so that President Obama could create a private army. Trump's tweets about the ACA, unhinged from evidence or other rules of argument, were crafted for an audience that cared less about argument than action against the legacy of the first black president.

The First Failed Vote: The American Health Care Act

Twitter proved to be a medium well suited for the alt-right's messaging about Trump's discourse on healthcare. AHCA was complicated and imperfect, but Trump used the platform to offer unqualified support and attack unsupportive Republicans. Such simplification was evident in his impulsive attacks, as well as in his cynical promises for better healthcare after the promised demise of the ACA. Pfister states that "cynicism is the dominant emotion of the blogosphere and that, as a result, bloggers populate public discourse with critique unmoored from action."⁸⁰ The alt-right recirculated Trump's cynical tweets to marginal corners of the internet. Herein laid a substitution, where he traded his persona as salesman from *The Apprentice* for commitments to nationalists. Providing better healthcare was not essential for these supporters; rather, negating President Obama's signature legislation was proof that he

represented their identity politics. Ambient intimacy suggests a surrounding presence that is affectively experienced. By appealing to cynicism, the alt-right made the bill's defeat representative of Washington's dysfunction rather than Trump's own failure to craft and package effective policy.

Trump's first attempt to repeal and replace the ACA within the first one hundred days of his presidency revealed that he did not have the control that he projected. On March 6, three months into the Trump presidency, the House of Representatives proposed a bill to eliminate the ACA called the AHCA.⁸¹ The president promised in his 2016 campaign, Benjy Sarlin summarized, healthcare reform that would create "affordable coverage for everyone, lower deductibles and health care costs, better care, and zero cuts to Medicaid." This bill instead would raise deductibles and phase out Medicaid expansion.⁸² The bill was unpopular. It faced opposition from both sides of the aisle and was rushed through Congress with little vetting.⁸³ Healthcare experts across the political spectrum argued it would not work, because too few people would receive healthcare coverage, did not reduce insurance cost, and too closely resembled the status quo. Therefore, Sarlin and even members of the alt-right refer to it as "Obamacare 2.0."⁸⁴ Many representatives called the bill "dead on arrival," meaning that as soon as the bill was announced no one believed that it could or should be passed.⁸⁵

Though most Republicans disapproved the bill, House Republicans pushed forward. Speaker Paul Ryan stated on March 9, 2017, "We as Republicans have been waiting seven years to do this. We as Republicans, who fought the creation of [the ACA], and accurately predicted it would not work, ran for office in 2010, in 2012, in 2014, in 2016, on a promise that if given the ability we would repeal and replace this law."⁸⁶ However, the bill was still pulled from consideration without a vote two weeks later. *The New York Times* called the failure the biggest

defeat of Trump's short presidency and stated that this collapse "exposed deep divisions in the Republican Party that the election of a Republican president could not mask. It cast a long shadow over the ambitious agenda that Mr. Trump and Republican leaders had promised to enact once their party assumed power at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue."⁸⁷ This defeat challenged Trump's persona as dealmaker and embarrassed the Republican Party.

Throughout the process of the House healthcare vote, the alt-right reposted Trump's tweets as a platform to defend his persona. Their tweets mocked the ACA and appealed to healthcare cynics with imagery of destruction. Trump tweeted on March 13, for example, "ObamaCare is imploding. It is a disaster and 2017 will be the worst year yet, by far! Republicans will come together and save the day."⁸⁸ He added on the day that the bill was pulled, "After seven horrible years of ObamaCare (skyrocketing premiums & deductibles, bad healthcare), this is finally your chance for a great plan!"⁸⁹ Obviously, the failure caught him by surprise, which he rectified with cynical appeals to the future. He tweeted the next day, March 25, "ObamaCare will explode and we will all get together and piece together a great healthcare plan for THE PEOPLE. Do not worry!"⁹⁰ Trump, therefore, paired the failure of Obama's healthcare program with hope for a better program that he left undefined.

The alt-right used Trump's tweets to scapegoat Republicans in Congress in the six days that enveloped the vote. He tweeted on March 24, for example, "The irony is that the Freedom Caucus, which is very pro-life and against Planned Parenthood, allows P.P. to continue if they stop this plan," and thereby targeted Jim Jordan (R-OH), Raul Labrador (R-ID), Mo Brooks (R-AL), and Justin Amash (R-MI).⁹¹ Trump aimed the anger of his Twitter followers at Republican think tanks and their political action committees. He tweeted on March 26, for example, "Democrats are smiling in D.C. that the Freedom Caucus, with the help of Club For Growth and

Heritage, have saved Planned Parenthood & Ocare!”⁹² He held the Freedom Caucus responsible for the bill’s collapse. The President tweeted on March 27, for example, “The Republican House Freedom Caucus was able to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. After so many bad years they were ready for a win!”⁹³ He added twenty minutes later, “The Freedom Caucus will hurt the entire Republican agenda if they don’t get on the team, & fast. We must fight them, & Dems, in 2018!”⁹⁴ Moreover, impulsivity was on display March 30th when he attacked Republican Congressmen by name. He tweeted, “If @Rep MarkMeadows, @Jim_Jordan and @Raul_Labrador would get on board we would have both great healthcare and massive tax cuts & reform.”⁹⁵ Then, one minute later, he added “Where are @RepMarkMeadows, @Jim_Jordan and @Raul_Labrador? #RepealANDReplace #Obamacare”⁹⁶ Trump used Twitter, therefore, to simplify the complexity of the bill’s failure, and constituted blame in ways that protected his own credibility as a leader.

Trump was bolstered by alt-right and mainstream conservative personalities who located the president within an adversarial Republican Party. *The Daily Stormer* argued on March 18, for example, that “Ryancare has too many expensive entitlements while the budget plan is not expensive enough. Are these people really just fickle women? Or is this an obvious sabotage?”⁹⁷ That month, *AltRight.com* questioned “if Trump actually believes his own words—and if he recognizes the reality that conservatives like Ryan never liked him, never really supported him, and don’t have his back—then why is he adopting their policies? Why not ‘rig the system’ on his people’s behalf?”⁹⁸ The alt-right contextualized the bill on racialized grounds. *AltRight.com* added, for example, “Identity means that we are part of a family, and that we have responsibilities to our people. Unlike Paul Ryan and Rich Lowry, who masturbated to Atlas Shrugged in their college dorms and have no loyalty to their race, Donald Trump is a

nationalist.”⁹⁹ The alt-right challenges Trump to take control and to undermine democratic norms to pass legislation. Moreover, mainstream conservative voices shared this perspective. *Fox News*’ Sean Hannity posted on March 31, for example, “The president is clearly frustrated with this division in the Republican Party. It’s understandable. . . . Republicans should control Washington. And they should have a unified plan to implement their agenda. . . . The legislation put forward by the House leadership was flawed from the beginning. It was created behind closed doors.”¹⁰⁰ Alt-right bloggers and mainstream conservative mouthpieces alike, therefore, inoculated corners of his base and thereby made the success of healthcare legislation irrelevant to the quality of his leadership.

Within the first one hundred days of his presidency, Trump’s persona as the celebrity dealmaker failed. Whereas he was portrayed as a titan of industry and a business savant on *The Apprentice*, in practice, Trump was shown to be politically weak in this context. His image as authoritarian boss was jeopardized, his persona as the heroic character in the story of capitalism who was strong enough to run an undemocratic mini-monocracy was challenged. In short, his brand was damaged because his healthcare product was illusory. Whereas he and Republicans campaigned for years on repeal and replace, his cynical Twitter feed was unmoored from action. This vacuity was showcased in his inability to make a deal on healthcare that he could not even close with Republicans. The alt-right, however, amplified his messages designed to scapegoat and deflect responsibility for such lapse. Therefore, passing legislation in the near future was necessary to bandage the busted illusion of leadership.

July: The Month of Two Failed Votes

The alt-right blogosphere offered a racialized context for deflective strategies that cast American democratic norms as obstructionist rather than guarantees of liberty. Pfister observes

that cynicism can be situated “as a political tone that responds to specific rhetorical situations with the aim of producing an appreciation for individuals fenced in by institutions.”¹⁰¹ White nationalists recirculated Trump’s tweets in ways that attacked the democratic systems that fostered Obama’s legacy. In this section, I argue that Trump’s intimate connections with alt-right supporters helped him cast legislative defeat as the faults of democracy.

The Republican Party’s second attempt to pass healthcare reform revealed that Trump was unequipped to close deals and offer leadership in the legislative process. In May 2017, the United States House of Representatives passed the AHCA, a bill which would fully repeal the ACA.¹⁰² The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimated that if passed, AHCA would leave 23 million Americans without access to health insurance. In June 2017, the Senate introduced its own bill titled the BCRA and was thus referred to as “skinny” repeal.¹⁰³ The Senate bill was defeated on July 25. After this failure, the Senate voted on the House bill. This option would have repealed sections of the ACA and, according to the CBO, would leave 22 million people without access to health insurance.¹⁰⁴ This healthcare bill failed in dramatic fashion with a last minute “no” vote from Senator John McCain (R-AZ) with his famous “thumbs down” gesture, adding to Republican nay votes from Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) and Susan Collins (R-ME), which defeated the bill. Below, I argue that in the span of the votes, Trump used his Twitter account to record his reaction and reach out to his alt-right base. In keeping ambient intimacy, he deflected responsibility for the failure with impulsive and uncivil tweets that stirred cynicism, lamentation, and anger.¹⁰⁵

The alt-right reposted Trump’s attacks on Obama, which racialized healthcare policy. He tweeted on July 17, for example, “Republicans should just REPEAL failing ObamaCare now & work on a new Healthcare Plan that will start from a clean slate. Dems will join in!”¹⁰⁶ Rather

than lend policy assistance that Democratic legislators expected, Trump instead emphasized that Obama's signature legislation would fail without his support. He tweeted again the next day, "As I have always said, let ObamaCare fail and then come together and do a great healthcare plan. Stay tuned!"¹⁰⁷ In a moment of uncertainty about a party line vote, therefore, Trump deflected the perils of defeat with emphasis on Obama's failure.

Trump used affective appeals that linked fear and anger for his alt-right base. He tweeted on July 19, for example, "The Republicans never discuss how good their healthcare bill is, & it will get even better at lunchtime. The Dems scream death as OCare dies!"¹⁰⁸ He continued with death comparisons of healthcare on July 22, "ObamaCare is dead and the Democrats are obstructionists, no ideas or votes, only obstruction. It is solely up to the 52 Republican Senators!"¹⁰⁹ Frightening imagery highlighted urgency in Trump's tweets. He tweeted two days later, for example, "Any senator who votes against starting debate is telling America that you are fine w/ the #OCareNightmare!"¹¹⁰ On the day of the BCRA vote, July 25, he added, "ObamaCare is torturing the American People. The Democrats have fooled the people long enough. Repeal or Repeal & Replace! I have pen in hand."¹¹¹ Comparisons to death, nightmares, and torture, therefore, were a means to portray the ACA as an assault on American culture.

Trump's alt-right base trolled Obama and his legislation with racialized arguments that clarified Trump's innuendo. On July 19, for example, Ann Coulter posted on *VDare*, "Americans will be forced to keep paying through the nose whenever they try to buy actual health insurance—because they aren't buying health insurance; they're paying for other people's welfare."¹¹² As Kenneth J. Newbeck and Noel A. Cazenave observe, American welfare policy has become racialized wherein racial minorities are over represented in news media as welfare recipients, which skews perceptions about white poverty and white dependence on social

services.¹¹³ Moreover, alt-right blogs racialized, sexualized, and religionized healthcare policy in ways that othered Trump's Republican dissenters. *Occidental Dissent* posted on July 19, for example, "Mitchie Boy (who is a textbook definition of a cuck due to his marriage to an Asiatic) is already going forward with a plan to push a straight up vote to repeal Osamacare, but has already hit a wall due to dissenters in his own party guaranteeing that further humiliation is just down the road."¹¹⁴ According to *The New Republic* cuck "has emerged out of the white supremacist movement as a term of abuse for white conservatives deemed race traitors unwilling to forthrightly defend the interests of white America. Borrowing shadings from porn ("cuck" is a genre where husbands, often white, watch their wives have sex with other men, often African-Americans)."¹¹⁵ References to cucks, Asiatics, and bin Laden contextualized the party apparatus that Trump worked within for alt-right audiences.

In the racialized context of welfare, Trump presented the "skinny" repeal of the ACA as a victory for white America. Trump tweeted on July 19, for example, "I will be having lunch at the White House today with Republican Senators concerning healthcare. They MUST keep their promise to America."¹¹⁶ With no viable replacement plans unveiled by Republicans, Trump treated a partisan victory as good public policy. Continuous with his celebrity persona, he conflated an adversarial stance as leadership in healthcare. He tweeted on July 23, for example, "If Republicans don't Repeal and Replace the disastrous ObamaCare, the repercussions will be far greater than any of them understand!"¹¹⁷ He asked his base to judge his quality of leadership in terms of what he could destroy rather than what he could create. He tweeted on July 24, for example, "Republicans have a last chance to do the right thing on Repeal & Replace after years of talking & campaigning on it."¹¹⁸ He added on July 25, "Big day for HealthCare. After 7 years of talking, we will soon see whether or not Republicans are willing to step up to the plate!"¹¹⁹ He

tweeted four hours later, “The American people have waited long enough. There has been enough talk and no action for seven years. Now is the time for action!”¹²⁰ Such references to the “American people” misleadingly imagines a white audience straddled by the debts of other people.

Though Republicans long promised a replacement healthcare system, the American people were constituted as wanting nothing more than to be unbridled by Obama’s legacy. He tweeted on July 27, the day of the AHCA vote, “Come on Republican Senators, you can do it on Healthcare. After 7 years, this is your chance to shine! Don’t let the American people down!”¹²¹ Later that night, after hours of debate with failure in sight, Trump tweeted, “Go Republican Senators, Go! Get there after waiting for 7 years. Give America great healthcare!”¹²² This vision of America and what it wanted was not shared by Republicans in the Senate who ultimately could not gather the votes.

Trump resolved this difference of vision with deflective strategies that blamed Republicans who sought replacement. He tweeted minutes after the vote at 2:25 a.m., “3 Republicans and 48 Democrats let the American people down. As I said from the beginning, let ObamaCare implode, then deal. Watch!”¹²³ Rather than stir anger over a lack of viable replacement plan, he attempted to direct the ire of his supporters at Republicans who wanted more from public policy. Trump posted to Twitter on July 29, for example, “Unless the Republican Senators are total quitters, Repeal & Replace is not dead! Demand another vote before voting on any other bill!”¹²⁴ Once again, his persona as dealmaker was challenged by a major legislative defeat, legislation defined more by what it was not rather than the promise of good public policy. Considering the racialized contexts of his alt-right base and their white

supremacists' presumptions about public policy, these defeats could destabilize a leader who promised easy victories.

Once again, the alt-right networked media offered Trump a context that protected him from responsibility by laying blame on Republicans who expected more from his leadership. Playing off notions of monarchy, *Alt-Right.com* posted on July 18, for example, “The [king’s] court is trapped in their old paradigm, Donald Trump is a new paradigm of right-wing populism.”¹²⁵ Democracy, thus, was at the core of alt-right disaffection and what Trump promised was a political order unconstrained by dissent. Failure to back Trump’s leadership was read by his alt-right supporters as evidence of a broken political system. *Breitbart* observed on August 28, for example, “Republicans in Congress should be humiliated—if politicians were capable of such a thing. They had seven years to come up with an actual plan to repeal Obamacare. Now they have the chance to do just that right this second and they flinch. They cower in darkness, terrified that assuming the leadership that voters have given them, it might just cost them their political careers.”¹²⁶ Similarly, the discourse that circulated between Trump and the alt-right also informed more mainstream conservative voices who expected Republican senators to uncritically support the president. *Fox News*’ Sean Hannity argued on July 14, for example, “You made us a promise, the American people, for seven years. You guaranteed you’d end ObamaCare. You assured all of us you would develop a health care bill that actually worked for the American people. Stop your whining, roll up your sleeves, get to work, put your egos aside, get it done.”¹²⁷ This mediated context imagines a political order where strong leadership is uncontested, which suggests Republican dissent is outside the bounds of acceptability and beyond the responsibility of president.

Trump translated such alt-right support for an undemocratic order into impulsive arguments against American democratic norms invented by the founders. Before the two defeats, for example, he tweeted on July 18, “The Senate must go to a 51 vote majority instead of current 60 votes. Even parts of full Repeal need 60. 8 Dems control Senate. Crazy!”¹²⁸ This castigation of the system made democracy the problem that faced his presidency. He added after the defeats on July 28, “If Republicans are going to pass great future legislation in the Senate, they must immediately go to a 51 vote majority, not senseless 60.”¹²⁹ Trump continued his tweet 14 minutes later, “Even though parts of healthcare could pass at 51, some really good things need 60. So many great future bills & budgets need 60 votes.”¹³⁰ The next day, on July 29, he added, “Republican Senate must get rid of 60 vote NOW! It is killing the R Party, allows 8 Dems to control country. 200 Bills sit in Senate. A JOKE!”¹³¹ He tweeted again eight minutes later, “The very outdated filibuster rule must go. Budget reconciliation is killing R’s in Senate. Mitch M, go to 51 Votes NOW and WIN. IT’S TIME!”¹³² He added four minutes later, “Republicans in the Senate will NEVER win if they don’t go to a 51 vote majority NOW. They look like fools and are just wasting time.”¹³³ And, he continued seven minutes later, “8 Dems totally control the U.S. Senate. Many great Republican bills will never pass, like Kate’s Law and complete Healthcare. Get smart!”¹³⁴ Lastly, the next day he tweeted, “Don’t give up Republican Senators, the World is watching: Repeal & Replace...and go to 51 votes (nuke option), get Cross State Lines & more.”¹³⁵ For Trump and his alt-right base, therefore, politics is a zero-sum competition where power is prized most, despite American democratic norms.

Trump’s dealmaker persona failed for the second time in a span of four months, and worse, he failed to deliver twice in one week. Alt-right bloggers encouraged Trump to erode the democratic institutions that they perceived had fenced them in. Similarly, writing about

nondisclosure agreements within Trump's White House, Heidi Kitrosser, a professor of constitutional law, notes that he operates as through "he can act like a king and take any measures to control the way people talk about him. . . . You can't do that when you're acting with the power of the federal government."¹³⁶ The alt-right obviously disagreed and sought to trade democratic norms for cultural heritage.

With racialized, sexualized, and religionized discourse, Trump and bloggers substituted policy victory for culture war, but even failed at that with the defeat of both votes. Once again, the president did not live up to the promise of his persona. He deflected responsibility on unaligned Republicans like McCain, Collins, and Murkowski. Accordingly, a third vote was rushed to save the image of Trump and the Republican Party, both of which had long campaigned on repeal and replace.

The Third Failed Vote: Graham-Cassidy Bill

Trump relied on alt-right bloggers to pressure Senate Republicans who refused to conform to his leadership on healthcare. Trump's Twitter feed queued the attention of his base to nonaligned Republicans and directed alt-right arguments against them. Trump's dog whistling betrayed rational argumentation. Pfister observes that "ambient intimacy undermines the presumed competition between reason and emotion by suggesting that there is an inescapable, complex, and rich interaction between affect, feeling, emotion, and cognition."¹³⁷ The emotive context of Trump's simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility on Twitter fostered irrational arguments that alt-right bloggers amplified. In particular, these bloggers clarified Trump's innuendos, and highlighted the racist undertones that Trump implied. I argue that Trump's intimate connection with the alt-right helped him transform the healthcare debate into a symbolic erasure of the first black presidency.

Trump's third failed attempt to dismantle the ACA revealed his lack of control over the party he led. In September of 2017, the Senate Republicans devised a new plan to repeal the ACA. Developed by Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) and Bill Cassidy (R-LA), the plan repealed key elements of the ACA such as the insurance mandate and raised insurance premiums for people with pre-existing conditions.¹³⁸ The CBO and the Joint Committee on Taxation estimated that the bill would reduce the "deficit by at least \$133 billion and result in millions fewer people with comprehensive health insurance that covers high-cost medical events."¹³⁹ On September 19, *Politico* reported that the Senate could only lose 3 Republican votes to pass.¹⁴⁰ On September 22, a week before the scheduled vote, *CNN* reported that the bill was in jeopardy. "Everything is moving very quickly on the Graham-Cassidy bill—largely out of necessity. Due to Senate rules, any attempt to repeal and replace Obamacare will need 60 votes after the end of this month. That is an impossibility in the current Senate."¹⁴¹ On September 22, *The Hill* reported, Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) condemned the Graham-Cassidy bill because it failed to "fulfill the GOP's longtime promise to repeal the ACA, and ultimately keeps ObamaCare's taxes and spending."¹⁴² On September 26, Republican leadership decided to pull the bill from consideration when even Trump admitted the outlines of defeat, "When you lose two, you're out. We don't have much of a margin... We don't have any margin."¹⁴³ Though Trump was resigned to the fate of the third and final healthcare vote of that year, he still took to Twitter to scapegoat Senate Republicans for their failure to repeal the ACA. Trump used affective appeals to direct the focus of his base on Congress.

Trump used Twitter to attack those in the Republican Party who challenged his control over the federal government. Trump tweeted on September 20, for example, "Rand Paul is a friend of mine but he is such a negative force when it comes to fixing healthcare. Graham-

Cassidy Bill is GREAT! Ends Ocare!”¹⁴⁴ He continued his tweet seven minutes later, “I hope Republican Senators will vote for Graham-Cassidy and fulfill their promise to Repeal & Replace ObamaCare. Money direct to States!”¹⁴⁵ Trump clarified that any Republican who contested the bill would be seen as an adversary to the party. He tweeted on September 22, for example, “Rand Paul, or whoever votes against Hcare Bill, will forever (future political campaigns) be known as ‘the Republican who saved ObamaCare.’”¹⁴⁶ Specifically, he targeted McCain for his history of independent mindedness. He tweeted on September 23, for example, “John McCain never had any intention of voting for this Bill, which his Governor loves. He campaigned on Repeal & Replace. Let Arizona down!”¹⁴⁷ Impulsively, he added, seven minutes later, “Arizona had a 116% increase in ObamaCare premiums last year, with deductibles very high. Chuck Schumer sold John McCain a bill of goods. Sad”¹⁴⁸ Moreover, he made a broadside against all Republicans who showed signs of independent thought. He tweeted on September 24, for example, “Alaska, Arizona, Maine and Kentucky are big winners in the Healthcare proposal. 7 years of Repeal & Replace and some Senators not there.”¹⁴⁹ Rather than weigh the merits of the bill, Trump used Twitter to inoculate his base for defeat and deflected blame on critical members of the Republican party.

Like the previous Senate vote, Trump blamed procedure for his inability to repeal and replace the ACA. The day after the bill was pulled, for example, Trump tweeted “We will have the votes for Healthcare but not for the reconciliation deadline of Friday, after which we need 60. Get rid of Filibuster Rule!”¹⁵⁰ Trump’s attacks on democratic norms echoed through the alt-right blogosphere and reverberated his frustration to their audiences. *VDare* posted on September 7, for example, “Hard to fault Trump. Over seven months, Congress showed itself incapable of repealing Obamacare, though the GOP promised this as its first priority in three successive

elections.”¹⁵¹ The racialized context that Trump established for healthcare reform proved fertile ground for the alt-right to insist upon conformity to his leadership. *American Renaissance* posted in September 12, for example

Replacing Obama is not enough—Trump has made the negation of Obama’s legacy the foundation of his own. . . . Before Barack Obama, niggers could be manufactured out of Sister Souljahs, Willie Hortons, and Dusky Sallys. But Donald Trump arrived in the wake of something more potent—an entire nigger presidency with nigger health care, nigger climate accords, and nigger justice reform, all of which could be targeted for destruction or redemption, thus reifying the idea of being white. Trump truly is something new—the first president whose entire political existence hinges on the fact of a black president. And so it will not suffice to say that Trump is a white man like all the others who rose to become president. He must be called by his rightful honorific—America’s first white president.¹⁵²

What Trump left to be decoded by alt-right bloggers, they articulated for his supporters who wanted erasure of Obama’s legacy. With Obama’s name attached to the ACA (e.g. “Obamacare”), perpetual attacks and descriptions of welfare, failure, nightmares, and torture made Trump’s persona continuous with what Marwick and Lewis defined as “Ku Klux Klan and Neo- Nazi” trolls.¹⁵³

With the third defeat and no other vote on the horizon, all pretense of healthcare policy was traded for the realities of the racism it presented. The complex and rich interaction between anger and argument produced a rationality that linked the first black presidency with fake healthcare, environmentalism, and police reform. Characteristics of *The Apprentice*, with its cutthroat, mean-spirited, individualistic competition for wealth, was traded for a likeminded competition for racial supremacy among the alt-right.

Trump’s Rhetorical Patterns in Alt-Right Discourse

In August 2017, situated between votes on BCRA and AHCA in July and the Graham-Cassidy Bill in September, the alt-right gathered in Charlottesville, VA at the Unite the Right

rally. Neo-Nazi James Alex Fields Jr. drove from Ohio to Charlottesville to protest the removal of a Confederate monument. White nationalist members carried Nazi flags by day and torches at night, and violently clashed with anti-fascist protesters.¹⁵⁴ Amidst the conflict, Fields drove into the crowd of anti-fascist protestors, killing Heather Heyer and injuring nineteen others. Minutes later, Trump tweeted, “We ALL must be united & condemn all that hate stands for. There is no place for this kind of violence in America. Let’s come together as one!”¹⁵⁵ David Duke, former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, responded on Twitter, “So, after decades of White Americans being targeted for discriminat[ion] & anti-White hatred, we come together as a people, and you attack us? ... I would recommend you take a good look in the mirror & remember it was White Americans who put you in the presidency, not radical leftists.”¹⁵⁶ Duke turned to reporters and pledged, “We are going to fulfill the promises of Donald Trump. That’s what we believe in. That’s why we voted for Donald Trump, because he said he’s going to take our country back.”¹⁵⁷ Hours later, Trump released a video statement that condemned “in the strongest possible terms this egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides—on many sides.”¹⁵⁸ Attorney General Jeff Sessions defended how the president equivocated guilt on NBC’s *Today*. He referenced an anonymous message from the White House that “explicitly called out the Nazis and the KKK.” Savannah Guthrie and Craig Melvin, however, argued that such language belonged to Trump less than discourse sent directly from his personal Twitter account. Guthrie interrupted, “The president did not.” Melvin added that the mentioned statement “was attributed to an unnamed spokesperson, and here’s a president” who had “not been afraid to take to Twitter to chastise a number of folks. . . . He’s not afraid to call out terrorism overseas. But, here’s a president who did not do that.”¹⁵⁹ Trump’s Twitter account thus became a lens to judge his rhetorical action. Likewise, his rhetorical leadership on repeal and

replace was less about healthcare than reminding a radical corner of his base of their mission to erase Obama's cultural imprint.

Donald Trump created ambient intimacy with his alt-right base through Twitter. This ambient connection allowed Trump to create his own form of media. The platform allowed him to establish a continuous connection to his alt-right base. As Trump tweeted, the alt-right circulated and interpreted the content to the fringe corners of public life. These bloggers interpreted Trump's promise to "Make America Great Again" as a pledge to roll back multiculturalism and feminism, "America First" to mean no immigrants allowed, "American people" to mean white people, "repeal and replace" to mean the dismantlement of the first black president's legacy. The alt-right interpreted these messages and circulated them across the blogosphere, remixing Trump's tweets to fit their racist narrative. Trump encouraged the circulation of this content on Twitter and acknowledged those who circulated his message. The alt-right interpreted this acknowledgment as validation that they had correctly interpreted the will of the president.

For the alt-right, the four bills that Congress drafted were less about healthcare policy than racial resentment. Connected by ambient intimacy, the alt-right and Trump trafficked in coded rhetoric. Twitter was a platform where both could scapegoat critics, deflect responsibility, and undermine democratic norms. The healthcare debate fit a broader pattern of these strategies. The alt-right scapegoated past presidents, Hillary Clinton, immigrants, and the media for scandals in his administration. One month after the final vote, former White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta told Anderson Cooper that Trump "constantly looks for other scapegoats whether its Congress, whether its past presidents, whether it is somebody else, he is never responsible for anything that goes wrong."¹⁶⁰ The alt-right interpreted Trump's discourse as a means to deflect

charges that challenged his persona. Twitter is a space that both use to preserve and enhance his ethos from *The Apprentice* and plot a course forward. Life imitated art when he acted as president in ways that mimicked his character from the program. Each week, contestants were “fired” from the program after they completed tasks. Since the start of his presidency, Trump replaced sixteen cabinet members. Anyone who contested his opinion was ousted from the administration. Like a chief executive officer, Trump attempted to maintain complete control over his White House.¹⁶¹ The alt-right confounds these strategies as support for their cause. As the healthcare debate illustrates, President Trump’s leadership as a celebrity businessman left his discourse available to be interpreted by extremists in ways he could not control or predict.

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APPENDIX A: OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY APPROVAL LETTER



Office of Research Integrity

February 2, 2018

Erin Jordan
1010 8th Street, Apt 11
Huntington, WV 25701

Dear Ms. Jordan:

This letter is in response to the submitted thesis abstract entitled "*Donald Trump's Use of Twitter as a Rhetorical Device.*" After assessing the abstract, it has been deemed not to be human subject research and therefore exempt from oversight of the Marshall University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Code of Federal Regulations (45CFR46) has set forth the criteria utilized in making this determination. Since the information in this study does not involve human subjects as defined in the above referenced instruction, it is not considered human subject research. If there are any changes to the abstract you provided then you would need to resubmit that information to the Office of Research Integrity for review and a determination.

I appreciate your willingness to submit the abstract for determination. Please feel free to contact the Office of Research Integrity if you have any questions regarding future protocols that may require IRB review.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Bruce F. Day'.

Bruce F. Day, ThD, CIP
Director