How Right-Wing Alternative News Sites in the U.S. Depict Antifa
Knüpfer, Curd

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Antifa (short for "antifascist" or an abbreviated form of the German term "antifaschistische Aktion") does not consist of any specific set of actors, institutions or organizational structures. In lieu of formalized membership, it can be seen as a loose movement of individuals and organizations practicing forms of activism aimed at counter-acting far-right mobilization. This designation presents a "floating signifier" of sorts and can be easily used to associate, antagonize or even prosecute individuals who are only connected through their respective opposition towards perceived forms or threats of fascist activities.

Case in point: U.S. President Donald Trump recently tweeted out his intention to declare "ANTIFA as a Terrorist Organization," while his Attorney General William Barr blamed Antifa for "inciting violence and sowing discord," without providing any substantial evidence for these claims. In fact, no further evidence was presented by the Trump administration that there exists such an "Organization." Further complicating this matter are reports of "false flag" operations and coordinated online efforts by right-wing activists, seeking to vilify political activism on the left.

In the days leading up to the recent pronouncements by Trump and Barr, right-wing media in particular exhibited spikes in referring to "Antifa," particularly in their coverage of the nationwide protests against police brutality. On May 30 and 31, over 15 percent of all stories featured on such websites mentioned the term.

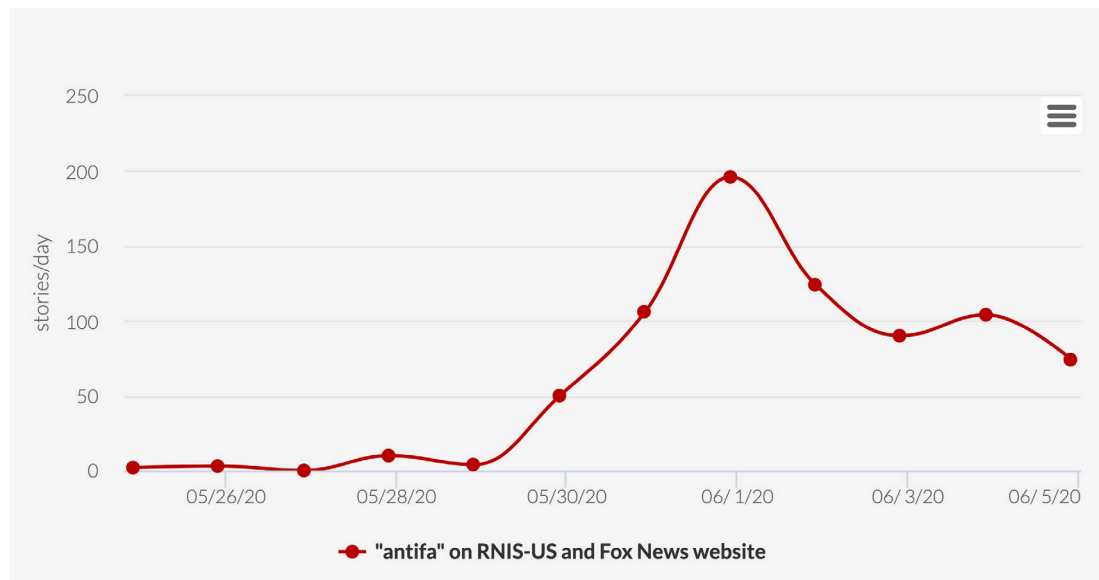This prompts the question: who or what are these articles talking about?

Figure 1. Media Cloud stories for the collection "RNIS US" and Fox News.

Table 1. Sampled websites and article counts.

Website / Medium	N	Website / Medium	N
FOX News	84	conservativedailynews.com	7
Breitbart	70	chicksonright.com	6
GatewayPundit	46	americanmilitarynews.com	6
PJMedia	33	americanthinker.com	6
Daily Caller	26	libertynation.com	5
NewsMax	23	thenewamerican.com	5
thepoliticalinsider.com	18	lifezette.com	4
WND	17	westernjournal.com	3
libertyunyielding.com	12	patriotpost.us	3
Hot Air	12	Daily Signal	3
bigleaguepolitics.com	11	Daily Wire	2
The Blaze	11	Free Beacon	1
townhall.com	11	politichicks.com	1
IJR	10	conservativebase.com	1
Σ = 437			

In the wake of Trump's tweets, many articles on mainstream and legacy media have attempted to address this question and have offered explanatory pieces that describe the term and its history, often pointing to Trump's misleading and flawed definition. But such fact-checking efforts might be missing the mark. Trump does not seem to be pursuing a good-faith line of argumentation. And it should be noted that a review of the actual charges brought against demonstrators active during the analyzed week failed to reveal any "effort by antifa to perpetrate a coordinated campaign of violence."

Instead, recent fundraising and PR campaigns coming out of the White House have indicated that the term is being used somewhat strategically to ramp up support for hard-line policies. As Vox's Zack Beauchamp aptly explained: "'Antifa' as Trump imagines it only exists in the conservative mind — but could end up serving as justification for much more significant state violence down the line."

To address the question of what this image "in the conservative mind" might look like, I collected material from a total of 29 right-wing or far-right websites which typically present themselves as alternative news providers. These were queried via Media Cloud and the collection "RNIS-US," which includes a variety of right-wing alternative news

sites,[1] along with the website for Fox News. Using the Python package newspaper3k,[2] a total of 437 articles could be scraped. These were posted between May 25 and June 4 and featured the term "antifa." Aided by quantitative text analysis software, I then applied a simple coding scheme to text passages that had been marked as containing the term, in order to find out more about who and what the subjects, locations, and actions associated with the term were.[3]

In order to gain insights about how right-wing media portray Antifa, I wanted to know:

1) "Who or what is Antifa?"
2) "What does Antifa do?"
3) "Who or what is associated with or compared to Antifa?"
4) "Where has Antifa been active?"

The underlying question in coding these passages was always: what information and impression would a regular reader obtain, in order to get an impression of who and what Antifa are and do. This means that quotes and citations were taken into account, even if they referred to outside sources that the text themselves might disagree with, as these would still provide information on a probable definition of the term.

I excluded direct quotes referring to a tweet by Donald Trump, in which he designates Antifa a terrorist organization, as this was prominently featured during the analyzed timeframe and would have skewed the results. I did include remarks that explicitly agreed with this categorization or directly endorsed it.

Who or what is Antifa?

The first and most obvious result of my analysis was the striking degree of heterogeneity in how the term was defined. The tables below present the results aggregated into various larger categories. While this might mask the full range of variation, the tables nonetheless show how many different and sometimes contradictory terms were used.

Does this confusion simply stem from the heterogeneity of my sample? It stands to reason that the various websites I included might simply report from different angles and perspectives. But although one might expect terms like "group," "organization," or "movement" to be somewhat mutually exclusive, deeper analysis revealed that these were used across articles stemming from the same websites. Furthermore, there was no

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1 Full list of sources included in this collection: https://sources.mediacloud.org/#/collections/66001672. For a detailed explanation of source selection, see Heft et al 2020.

2 Ou-Yang, Lucas (2013): https://github.com/codelucas/newspaper.git.

3 Source data and full coding results will be made available via email request to curd.knuepfer@fu-berlin.de

statistically significant association between classification as one of these actor types and particular outlets, meaning that they were used interchangeably across the entire sample.

Table 2. Actor types and attributes used to describe Antifa.

Who or what is Antifa? (n =350)	Count	%
Group	108	31%
Far left; Left-wing	82	23%
Terrorist	71	20%
Radical; Extremist	51	15%
Rioters; Hooligans; Thugs; Criminals	31	9%
Violent; Militant	31	9%
Anarchist	24	7%
Movement	21	6%
Organization	21	6%
Leaderless, diffused, loose, etc.	19	5%
Specific name of individuals or institution	18	5%
Anti-fascist	16	5%
Outside, paid, professional	10	3%
Communist; Fascist	8	2%
Children; Kids	6	2%
Masked	6	2%

The classification of "group" is by far the most frequently used. At the same time, this may well be the vaguest term in the list of actor types. In contrast, the sample contained only 18 instances in which the name of an actual person or institution was given. These ranged from an activist in Hamburg, Germany, a social media account, to Willem van Spronsen and included the names of specific local entities like the Portland-based "Rose City Antifa."

The categories listed in table 2 include types of actors as well as specific attributes. Some of these would be terms that pop up in conjunction with actor types and are not mutually exclusive (e.g. far-left, militant organization), which is why the percentages surpass 100. The most common attribute was that of "far-left or "left wing." There were some descriptions of the Antifa as being "leaderless" and diffused as well as references to "Anti-fascist" along

with the explanations for what the term actually stands for – but each of these arguably quite important attributes only comprised 5 % of the coded passages.

The designation of "terrorist" – the second most frequently found, at 20 % – arguably rests on the strongest underlying claim and is therefore one that deserves closer scrutiny. In order to find out which websites applied the term in order to define Antifa and what the impact of Trump's classification may have been, I divided the dataset into articles published before (n = 66) and after (n = 371) Trump tweeted about designating Antifa a terrorist organization. The results show that some of the most prolific of the sampled websites, like Breitbart and GatewayPundit, employed the term before Trump's tweet. It stands to reason that this might be part of the media discourse that may have also led Trump to adopt the topic. The results also show the immediate effect this classification had: After Trump's tweet, all sites in the sample affirmed the designation of "terrorist" at least once (again: this excluded direct quotes from Trump).
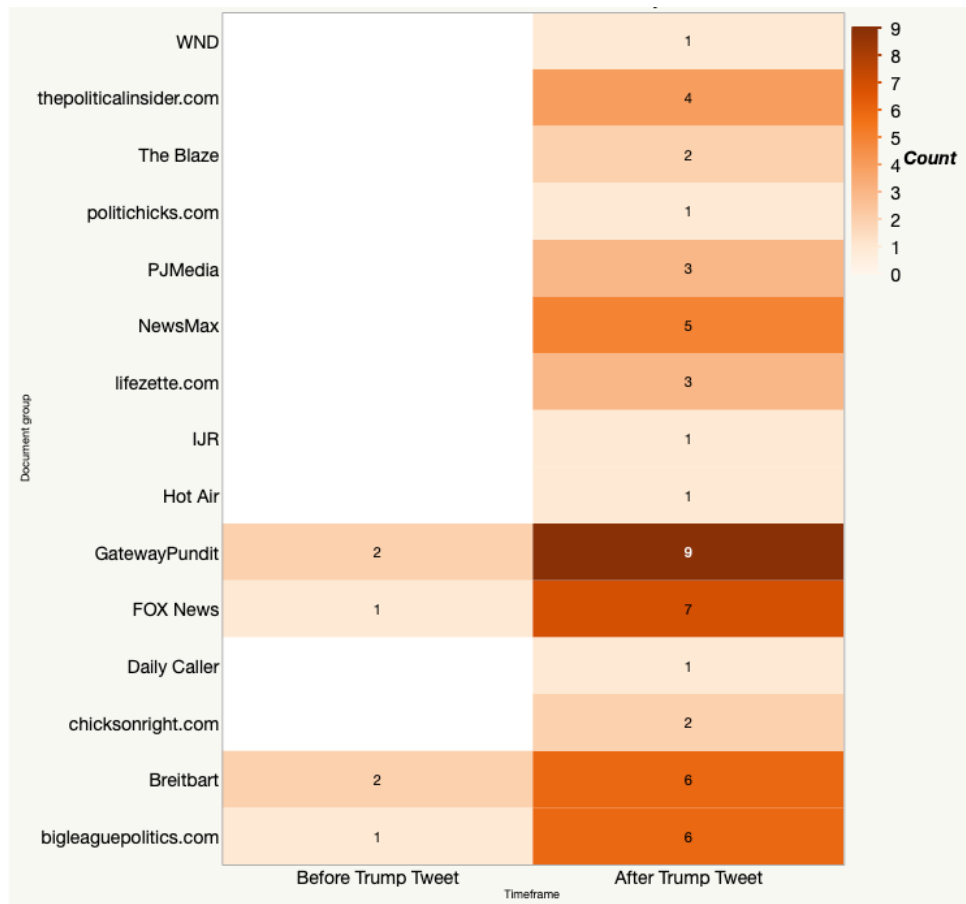

Figure 2. Websites' use of „Terrorist" label before and after Trump's tweet.

Throughout the articles, there was a noticeable absence of further features that identify a group or individual actors as Antifa. There are practically no mentions or descriptions of specific insignia like logos, flags or pins that could lead to the conclusion that these individuals would self-identify or be designated as Antifa. Occasional references are made to black bloc clothing and "flags," but apart from this, any potential readers would be ill-equipped to recognize or identify Antifa members in a real-world situation. Perhaps more importantly, no direct quotes by individuals or groups identifying themselves as Antifa are offered.

What does Antifa do?

The most prominently featured term indicting actions by Antifa is the word "violence." As becomes clear in the terms that follow, this is often associated with the destruction of property, rioting or looting. In many instances, however, these "acts of violence" were not defined further. When it came to actual acts of violence or assault aimed at persons, the only groups that were singled out where "police" and "journalists" – where it should be noted that most of these accounts regarding journalists referred specifically to one particular incident and individual (Andy Ngô). Thus, these websites were engaging frequently in fallacious generalization from a single incident.

Another important theme was the idea of "hijacking" or exploiting the protests surrounding the murder of George Floyd by instigating protests and sowing discord within African American communities. Such claims were significantly correlated with charges of travelling across state lines, specifically for these purposes.

Table 3. Activities associated with the term Antifa.

What does Antifa do? (n = 351)	Count	%
Acts of Violence	58	17%
Destroy; Havoc	39	11%
Burn; Arson	38	11%
Instigate; Incite; Sow discord; Exploit; Use	32	9%
Loot; Steal	32	9%
Travel; Cross state lines	20	6%
Terror	20	6%
Attack	19	5%
Target police	16	5%

Figure 3. Word cloud based on frequency of terms or phrases coded as segments that mention Antifa activities.

Looking at this word cloud helps clarify key attributes of Antifa in the discourse. Since there are so few actual individual or specific institutions associated with the term, it would appear that Antifa is mostly defined through their actions. Arguably, many of the classifications listed above, already contain descriptive elements alluding to their actions (e.g. rioters, criminals, terrorists). This creates some redundancies, if not tautologies in the texts, whereby actions define the individual. These, in turn, are associated with the larger moniker of "Antifa," not by external features but by the very acts they are purportedly committing. By this logic, if Antifa are rioters, then acts of rioting might also make you Antifa.

In order to learn more about how the classification as a particular actor type is associated with which types of action, I looked at correlation patterns between them. Unsurprisingly, the most prominent type of action, "acts of violence," is also the one most closely associated with a variety of different actor types and attributes. Yet these results can also serve to show us the importance of classification, even if there are no concrete actions by actor types mentioned. For example, it seems that while the classification as a "group" or "organization" is closely associated with violence and destruction, the classification

of "movement" has no significant association with these types of acts. Conversely, the terms "group" and "organization", which might be seen to imply more active efforts of coordination, are more closely associated with instigating or perpetrating violence.

Furthermore, we can gain more insights into "who" is purportedly committing acts of terror: there is an association to specific names or institutions, but mostly the association goes hand in hand with attributes like "militant," "radical," "extremist," (and, of course, "terrorist"). These attributes also go hand in hand with "acts of violence," "burning" and "arson."

When Antifa is said to be instigating, inciting or exploiting, which implies a degree of strategic or tactical maneuvering, it is usually connected to organizational structures, as well as ideologically extreme positions.

Table 4. Association between actor types and activities based on Pearson's R correlation (p-value: 2-tailed).

Actor types & attributes / Activites	Travel; Cross state lines	Instigate; Incite; Sow discord; Exploit	Target police	Terror	Acts of Violence	Destroy; Havoc	Burn; Arson	Loot; Steal	Attack
Movement	0,002 (p=0,9684)	0,057 (p=0,2323)	-0,033 (p=0,4977)	0,051 (p=0,2902)	0,031 (p=0,5202)	-0,058 (p=0,2265)	-0,022 (p=0,6428)	-0,020 (p=0,6803)	0,052 (p=0,2817)
Organization	0,100 (p=0,0375)	0,175 (p=0,0002)	0,094 (p=0,0486)	0,051 (p=0,2902)	0,285 (p=0,0000)	0,159 (p=0,0009)	0,085 (p=0,0743)	-0,020 (p=0,6803)	0,147 (p=0,0021)
Group	0,043 (p=0,3646)	0,137 (p=0,0041)	0,019 (p=0,6897)	0,086 (p=0,0733)	0,217 (p=0,0000)	0,125 (p=0,0087)	0,194 (p=0,0000)	0,113 (p=0,0183)	0,109 (p=0,0226)
Leaderless, diffused, loose, etc.	0,104 (p=0,0304)	0,024 (p=0,6207)	-0,029 (p=0,5412)	0,006 (p=0,8949)	0,037 (p=0,4350)	-0,021 (p=0,6550)	-0,017 (p=0,7154)	-0,014 (p=0,7653)	0,008 (p=0,8639)
Rioters; Hooligans; Thugs; Criminals	0,067 (p=0,1593)	0,025 (p=0,6026)	0,069 (p=0,1503)	-0,018 (p=0,7096)	0,020 (p=0,6816)	0,033 (p=0,4870)	0,125 (p=0,0090)	0,088 (p=0,0671)	0,027 (p=0,5727)
Children; Kids	-0,026 (p=0,5901)	-0,033 (p=0,4892)	-0,018 (p=0,7088)	-0,026 (p=0,5901)	-0,039 (p=0,4156)	0,207 (p=0,0000)	-0,027 (p=0,5723)	-0,031 (p=0,5163)	-0,024 (p=0,6187)
Specific name of individuals or institution	0,145 (p=0,0024)	0,098 (p=0,0406)	0,092 (p=0,0536)	0,145 (p=0,0024)	0,157 (p=0,0010)	0,040 (p=0,4016)	-0,039 (p=0,4121)	-0,045 (p=0,3458)	0,098 (p=0,0401)
Far left; Left wing	0,123 (p=0,0098)	0,057 (p=0,2381)	-0,020 (p=0,6700)	0,053 (p=0,2700)	0,124 (p=0,0094)	0,144 (p=0,0025)	0,297 (p=0,0000)	0,283 (p=0,0000)	0,079 (p=0,1007)
Communist; Fascist	0,052 (p=0,2802)	0,158 (p=0,0009)	0,121 (p=0,0115)	-0,030 (p=0,5329)	0,040 (p=0,4051)	0,067 (p=0,1648)	0,194 (p=0,0000)	-0,036 (p=0,4525)	0,131 (p=0,0060)
Anarchist	-0,005 (p=0,9215)	0,009 (p=0,8454)	0,005 (p=0,9161)	-0,005 (p=0,9215)	0,020 (p=0,6706)	0,057 (p=0,2377)	0,024 (p=0,6137)	-0,027 (p=0,5676)	0,045 (p=0,3511)
Anti-fascist	0,074 (p=0,1229)	0,039 (p=0,4191)	0,021 (p=0,6627)	-0,043 (p=0,3733)	0,118 (p=0,0138)	-0,053 (p=0,2711)	0,052 (p=0,2804)	0,036 (p=0,4482)	0,017 (p=0,7190)
Radical; Extremist	0,051 (p=0,2837)	0,229 (p=0,0000)	0,030 (p=0,5278)	0,113 (p=0,0180)	0,181 (p=0,0001)	0,107 (p=0,0260)	0,333 (p=0,0000)	0,192 (p=0,0001)	0,234 (p=0,0000)
Violent; Militant	0,272 (p=0,0000)	0,078 (p=0,1013)	-0,004 (p=0,9304)	0,093 (p=0,0533)	0,259 (p=0,0000)	-0,040 (p=0,4028)	0,184 (p=0,0001)	0,047 (p=0,3302)	0,023 (p=0,6356)
Terrorist	-0,006 (p=0,9010)	0,111 (p=0,0199)	0,050 (p=0,2991)	0,257 (p=0,0000)	0,232 (p=0,0000)	0,086 (p=0,0728)	0,222 (p=0,0000)	0,123 (p=0,0103)	0,021 (p=0,6577)
Outside, paid, professional	-0,034 (p=0,4847)	0,074 (p=0,1201)	0,104 (p=0,0302)	-0,034 (p=0,4847)	0,026 (p=0,5925)	0,144 (p=0,0025)	0,005 (p=0,9125)	0,015 (p=0,7583)	0,111 (p=0,0197)
Masked	0,068 (p=0,1543)	-0,033 (p=0,4892)	0,064 (p=0,1843)	0,162 (p=0,0007)	0,206 (p=0,0000)	0,147 (p=0,0021)	-0,027 (p=0,5723)	-0,031 (p=0,5163)	0,068 (p=0,1580)

Who or what is associated with or compared to Antifa?

Table 5. Actors, groups and organisations associated with Antifa by right-wing websites.

Who is Antifa associated with / compared to?	Count (n = 337)	%
Black Lives Matter	53	16%
Leftists; Far-left groups	48	14%
Anarchists; Extremists; Criminals; Rioters	36	11%
Specific Institutions	30	9%
Specific individuals; George Soros (5)	28	8%
Jeremiah and/or Keith Ellison	26	8%
Right-Wing, far-right, racist groups	17	5%
Democrats	16	5%
Media; Journalists	12	4%

In 337 cases in which Antifa was mentioned, the term was associated with other groups or individuals. This code was applied to names or terms that were likened to or listed in conjunction with Antifa, as well as to names of individuals or institutions who were described as supporting them.

The most prominent of these was the Black Lives Matter movement (16 %), which often appeared in direct conjunction with the term Antifa and was presented as taking part in the same activities described above. Other far-left groups, as well as terms for criminal activities made up the next two most prominent categories.

30 instances make mention of other specific groups or institutions, including Occupy Wallstreet, the Animal Liberation Front, the Minnesota Freedom Fund, Moveon.org, but also ISIS, the Weatherman, or the PKK. Similarly, 5% refer to far-right extremist and explicitly racist groups like "Brown Shirts," the KKK and "white supremacists." In these examples, as well as in references to notorious terror groups, the association seems more akin with a classification of Antifa, in that it establishes that these are equivalent to the extremist ideologues they purport to oppose.

8 % of the recorded instances made mention of specific individuals, including politicians like Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, or Ilhan Omar, but also media personalities like Don Lemon, actor Patton Oswald and Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey. Arguably, this number goes up to 16 %, if it were to include Keith Ellison, the Attorney General of Minnesota, and/or his son Jeremiah Ellison. But this is probably an artifact

of the sample's timeframe and specific media agenda for that week. Nonetheless, the focus on specific individuals shows the power of associating a term like Antifa with all its negative connotations, to specific individuals who are prominently featured within a given news cycle.

Overall, it seems noteworthy that these associations with *specific* names of individuals or organizations were much more common than actually stating who Antifa is. This is perhaps not surprising since Antifa is such a loose and vague collection of individuals and positions: there is no identifiable collective "who," except perhaps in the fevered imagination of the far-right.
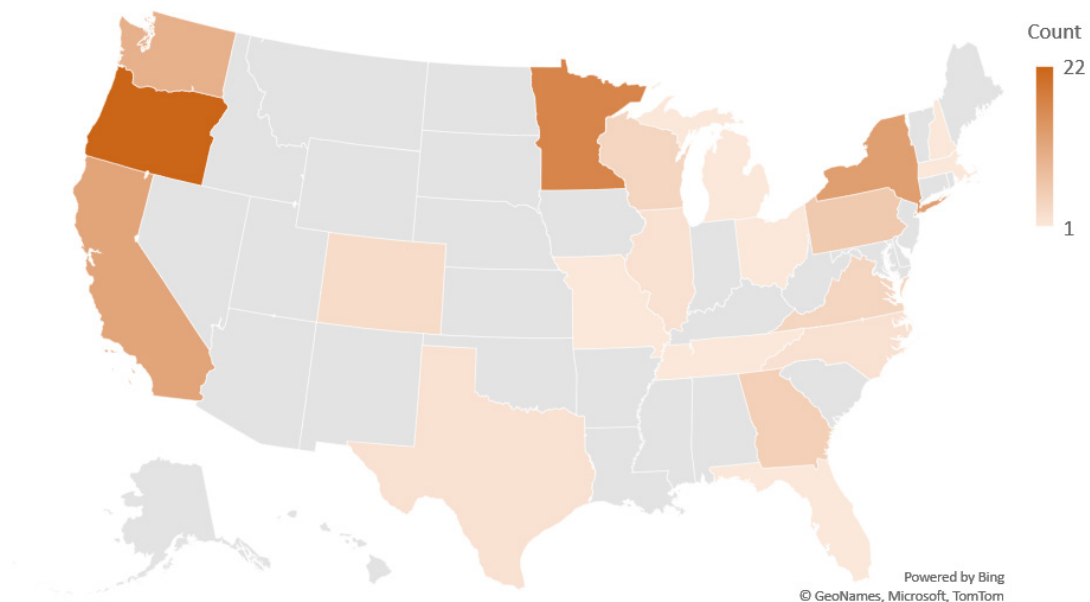
Where has Antifa been active?

Figure 4. Reports of Antifa Activity in Right-Wing Website Articles.

While only 78 articles (18 %, across 18 websites) named specific locations in setting the scene for Antifa activities, 59 articles (10 %, across 17 websites) employed the rather imprecise phrase "our cities." This correlated significantly with the activities of "Travel; Cross state borders" and "Instigating." The combination might suggest that Antifa activists are regarded as somewhat of a foreign entity and thus can be "othered" as not being part of the communities in which they cause conflict.

Another recurrent theme in many of the stories is that Antifa seems to be particularly active in cities and states governed by Democrats. The most frequently named location being Portland, Oregon, while Minneapolis, New York, Seattle and various locations in California are also prominently featured. Additionally, some articles made mention of Antifa activities in other countries such as Germany (8), the UK (5), and France (3).

Canada (2) and Athens, Greece (1) also received mentions. Assuming that these are not places where the majority of these websites' audiences are located, this ultimately creates the impression of a somewhat external scene for these conflicts.

It also makes it less likely that readers are going to have first-hand experience with the types of protest that are being depicted. As political communication scholarship on news coverage of foreign events has pointed out, spatial distance between audiences and events may lead to "information asymmetries that disadvantage average citizens" and provide media and political elites with a considerable amount of leeway in framing and interpreting events. This latter aspect is especially relevant in light of the fact that 72 percent of all sampled articles on Antifa also make explicit mention of Trump, and almost a third (27 %) refer to Attorney General Barr.

Furthermore, most of the articles are sourced solely by either referring to social media posts of prominent politicians or via links to and interpretation of viral videos that purport to show events at protests. The third main genre of articles are essentially opinion or think pieces that editorialize against Antifa sympathizers or for the designation of "domestic terrorism."

Meanwhile, there is a noticeable absence of on-the-ground reporting or even commentary of such pieces by other media organizations. In fact, much of the on-the-scene reports appears to stem from a single source, Andy Ngô, a right-wing provocateur and "media personality," often portrayed as a journalist. Ngô has purportedly been attacked and antagonized by Antifa supporters in the past, as these articles also often note, which make him part of the very story he is being cited on. Across the sample of articles, his Twitter handle is the second most frequently cited (n = 27), after @realDonaldTrump (82), across 18 articles by 10 different websites.

Conclusion

The main takeaway from the analysis of these articles has been how diffuse and confusing the answer to my initial question has become: who or what is Antifa and what do they do? Bearing in mind that my sample was drawn from a very limited timeframe, focused on much the same overall agenda, it seems stunning how many different and often contradictory answers the analyzed articles provided. Apart from the quantification of different definitions, activities, associates, or locales, the general sense that pervades is that there exists a rather loose and broadly dispersed group of far-left militant radicals, who routinely cross state borders in order to strategically cause damage and destruction in the name of a dangerous ideological cause.

Arguably, Antifa and its history is a complex issue that not many Americans are likely to be familiar with. If they should rely primarily on news sites such as the ones analyzed here, this paves the way for more confusion and obfuscation and enables political elites to use the term in any sense pertaining to its many connotations. Indeed, it seems that for Donald Trump and his administration, Antifa might indeed serve as a welcome foil with which to associate political or ideological opponents on the left.

The findings presented here stemmed from a wide spectrum of right-wing websites, ranging from prolific ones like Fox News or Breitbart, to more niche outfits like Patriotpost or Politichicks. The similarities that emerge across this spectrum call to mind classifications of a "right-wing echo chamber" and forms of networked propaganda, in which right-wing media have shown to be tightly interconnected in sharing content and agendas. The sheer scope of misleading information circulating here may also be seen as presenting a problem to social media platforms and their content moderation practices, which tend to classify sites like Breitbart or Fox News as legitimate journalistic outfits and often serve as entry points into this news environment.

Meanwhile, on the ground level of right-wing and far-right activism, the threat of Antifa may indeed be seen as a more legitimate concern. An integral part of the actual Antifa agenda is "to attach professional and social costs to membership in white supremacist, neo-Nazi and similar organizations," as Joshua Holland has pointed out. Holland suggests that contrary to the diffused and unspecific image of a far-left "bogeyman" conjured by right-wing media, many Antifa activities have revolved around the direct involvement of a specific individual or organization with far-right extremism and white supremacist ideology. Such acts of exposing coordinated activities by specific individuals create transparency and accountability within spaces of public deliberation. The same could not be said for right-wing media coverage of Antifa, which is rife with generalizations, obfuscation and unsubstantiated claims. Most importantly, however, it fails to be specific in defining who its subjects actually are. In the hands of authoritarian governments, such "floating signifiers" can serve as convenient catch-all scapegoats and might ultimately serve as useful tools in criminalizing dissent.

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