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REFEREED PAPER

Don't Feed the Trolls? Emerging Journalism Practices for Fighting Anti-Semitism

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Abstract

This study applies the concepts of interpretive communities and conversational interactions to show how investigative journalists initiated a relatively new method of reporting and generated support among their colleagues for becoming anti-Nazi activists and troll hunters. It draws on a sample of journalistic reporting and related media items to examine investigative reporters' self-reflexive acts and the responses of journalism communities in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States from 2015 to 2020. Investigative journalists initiated open conversations to show that they were enthusiastic activists in retweeting, confronting and quoting neo-Nazi trolling by interviewing the perpetrators. Other journalism communities signified they were pursuing activist-like agendas as they magnified this work through informal networks, social media and news commentaries. Journalists reconsidered their professional boundaries to allow for cooperative conversations about their experiences in a fresh effort to denounce hate speech and begin collective initiatives to enhance social cohesion in civil society.

Keywords

Investigative Journalism; Interpretive Communities; Social Media; Neo-Nazism; Trolling

Introduction

'Don't feed the trolls' has become a common theme in social media research. The slogan has often referred to individual journalists' efforts to label offensive online users as trolls and block the perpetrators from their social media accounts ([Binns 2012](#); [MacKinnon and Zuckerman 2012](#); [Malmgren 2017](#)). Their work has quickened in response to the rise of far-right trolls who have targeted journalists with the use of social media, anti-Semitic vitriol and Holocaust denial sites ([Anti-Defamation League 2016](#); [Confronting Holocaust Denial with David Baddiel 2020](#); [Jakubowicz 2017](#)). Journalists often decide and establish the boundaries of their profession through informal conversations. They have been viewed as an 'interpretive community' who may develop conversational networks to agree on new professional boundaries ([Carlson 2016](#); [Zelizer 1993](#)). Using the concepts of interpretive community and conversational interactions, this study sought to answer the research question: How have investigative journalists and journalism communities responded to the recent anti-Semitic trolling threats including Holocaust denial? This article explores the innovations in journalists' relations with audiences within the boundaries of social media. It reveals how investigative reporters have initiated exposés to generate support within the journalism community for confronting trolls and challenging the traditional boundaries.

This study demonstrates that investigative journalists developed new practices of exposing, interviewing and denouncing neo-Nazi trolls including Holocaust deniers. Journalists retold their trolling experiences through their investigative performances of the exposé, satire and eyewitness accounts ([Gorman 2017a, 2017b, 2019](#); [Ioffe 2016a](#); [Katz 2016a, 2016b](#); [Mandel 2018](#); [Weisman 2016a, 2016b, 2018](#)). The media coverage of Holocaust denial has been a particularly extreme example that shows there are occasions when daily reporters' practice of objectivity and balance may interfere with the need to correct a myth. For instance, the media would at times portray the Holocaust as a matter of public debate between pseudo-academic deniers and intellectuals on talk shows by broadcasting such headlines as 'myth or is it truth?' ([Lipstadt 2012, p. 2](#); [Moldavan 2005](#)). In contemporary terms, Holocaust denial has become pervasive on neo-Nazi online sites through the perpetrators' attempts to underestimate and justify genocide. In contrast, investigative reporters are distinguished as an influential Section of the journalism community who do not merely seek to repeat 'both sides' of a debate ([Glasser & Ettema 1989](#)). Investigative journalists aim to reveal hidden truths for the public interest ([Allan 2013](#); [Carson 2020](#)).

This study has found that the investigative journalists openly shared their experiences and new practices in a fresh initiative to challenge the boundaries that separated trolling. They empowered other journalism communities to engage in a cooperative search for solutions to confront hate speech and trolling treats on Facebook and Twitter ([Goldberg 2016a, 2016b](#); [Inside Facebook: Secrets of a Social Network 2018](#); [Knaus et al. 2019](#); [Newton 2019](#); [Rosenberg 2016](#); [Swisher 2018a, 2018b](#); [Victor 2016](#)). Their experiences exemplify the real-world possibilities of collective action to create conversational, public spaces that allow for the promotion of greater social cohesion in civil society.

Journalists' online interactions

Social media have been viewed as an unexplored realm where journalists may freely venture outside their traditional boundaries to experiment with new practices that will involve more audiences. News organisations have encouraged journalists to use self-disclosures and promote their personal views on Twitter to develop an affinity with their audiences ([Holton, Coddington, Lewis & De Zúñiga 2015](#); [Molyneux, Lewis and Holton 2018](#); [Molyneux and Mourão 2019](#); [Neilson 2018](#); [Sacco & Bossio 2017](#)). Jukes observes that 'news organisations are succeeding in drawing on Twitter as a tool to engage audiences' ([2019, p. 256](#)). Boundary work has become a popular concept to examine journalists' use of social media that have challenged traditional boundaries ([Jukes 2019](#)). As [Zelizer notes \(1993\)](#), journalists will collectively interpret and establish the boundaries of their profession. For [Berkowitz and TerKeurst \(1999\)](#), media

spaces can become cultural sites where meanings are constructed by members of the interpretive community. [Lindlof \(2002\)](#) has found that interpretive communities use social networks to create conversations that help to establish their shared identity. Unstructured social media spaces have provided a strong trigger for innovation, particularly for journalists to act as a cooperative community. For instance, political journalists have posted more discussions while trying to evade controversial topics on Twitter. They have experimented with quote tweets, which allow the users to add their comments when retweeting other people's messages ([Jukes 2019](#); [Molyneux & Mourão 2019](#)). Investigative journalists have pioneered more adversarial reporting to perform an activist-like agenda, leading to a new era of collaboration ([Di Salvo 2020](#); [Graves & Konieczna 2015](#)). Some other daily reporters have extended this role to become what [Hedman and Djerf-Pierre \(2013, p. 382\)](#) call enthusiastic activists by living a '*media life extreme*' and being fully connected and tweeting continuously during their work. The cooperative investigative projects have aimed to improve democratic life by departing from the traditional ideal of the solitary, rivalrous watchdog ([Carson & Farhall 2018](#); [Di Salvo 2020](#); [Graves & Konieczna 2015](#); [Price 2017](#)).

Contemporary research has also shown an uneasiness with an uncritical valorising of close journalist-audience interactions due to the rise of abusive online users. Individual journalists have been responsible for expelling menacing online users and maintaining protected online sites ([Binns 2012](#); [Lewis, Zamith & Coddington 2020](#); [Wolfgang 2018](#)). Increasingly, social media have become sites of struggle for journalistic authority in online spaces too often full of trolls ([Molyneux and Mourão 2019](#); [Robinson 2010](#)). As [Lewis and Molyneux \(2019, p. 2584\)](#) opined, 'what if, as increasingly appears to be the case, being on social media has predominantly meant putting oneself at the potential mercies of the "Twitter mob"?' Research has shown that journalists have responded differently to trolling attacks. For example, [Molyneux \(2015\)](#) has found that political journalists would retweet their hate mail to demonstrate a desire for transparency, but they avoided engaging with their critics. The extreme trolling of some female journalists has produced a chilling effect by silencing their voices ([Ferrier & Garud-Patkar 2018](#); [Lewis, Zamith & Coddington 2020](#)). [Charitidis et al. \(2020, p. 1\)](#) have remarked: 'Journalists are multipliers of societal discourse and their relative prominence, and high audience reach makes them vulnerable to hate speech.' The contested spaces indicate that the boundaries are ripe for renegotiation ([Artemas, Vos & Duffy 2018, p. 1004](#)).

Conversational interactions

In uncertain times, journalists will engage in informal conversations about the professional direction they should take ([Alexander 2004](#); [Carlson 2016](#); [Lindlof 2002](#)). The decisions that journalists make about the boundaries of their profession are not simply imitative and formulaic ([Allan 2013](#); [Revers 2014](#)). As [Revers \(2014, p. 40\)](#) explains, 'There are no more or less "actual" constructions of boundaries'. Journalists draw upon shared vocabularies to interpret the boundaries within their profession. According to [Allan \(2013\)](#), investigative journalists often spontaneously improvise with new media techniques and share their experiences to serve the public good. Allan remarks, 'It is much more improvisatory than is typically acknowledged in academic scholarship' (p. 145). This work is self-referential, as journalists openly talk about their experiences, and it is infused by civic ideals ([Lindlof 2002](#); [Revers 2014](#)). Such talks allow journalists to 'make vivid the invisible motives and morals they are trying to represent' ([Alexander 2004, p. 532](#)). Satirists' performances have also been likened to the role of investigative journalism as they develop spontaneous conversations to expose problems affecting society ([Holm 2017](#)). As [Peterson \(2008, p. 8\)](#) states, 'if "speaking truth to power" is part of the journalists' role, it is the satirist's primary mission – a higher calling, in fact, than merely being funny'. News satire has become a journalistic genre that exposes hidden truths and serves the public interest ([Koivukoski & Ödmark 2020](#); [Madison & DeJarnette 2018](#)). The interpretive journalism community may widen the professional boundaries to accept fresh approaches in news reporting ([Allan 2013](#)).

Objectivity debates

Differing from investigative journalists, contemporary daily reporters have grappled with traditional notions of objectivity. According to [Schudson \(2001, p. 150\)](#): ‘Objective reporting is supposed to be cool, rather than emotional, in tone. Objective reporting takes pains to represent fairly each leading side in a political controversy.’ The practice of objectivity has been criticised for the use of a neutral tone that moderates between opposing views and lacks a requirement to check the facts ([Cohen-Almagor 2013](#)). For example, [Rosen \(1993, p. 50\)](#) asserted: ‘objective reporting is a way of getting you to accept my account by saying, “Look, I don’t have any passions. I don’t have any convictions ... I’m just telling you the way it is, you see, so accept it because this is the way it is”’. Many daily reporters initially avoided posting comments on Facebook that might appear to tarnish their objectivity ([Robinson 2010](#)). More recently, journalists have become transparent about how they have performed their work ([Craft 2017](#); [Craft and Heim 2008](#); [Molyneux & Mourão 2019](#); [Mourão 2015](#); [Vos & Craft 2017](#); [Vos & Moore 2020](#)). According to [Vos and Moore \(2020, p. 28\)](#): ‘The principle of transparency acknowledged journalists had opinions and life experiences, and hence owed it to their audiences to be open about their subjectivity’. In contrast, investigative journalists have often tried to expose factual disputes that have been glossed over in the traditional reporting of ‘he said, she said’ accounts ([Graves and Konieczna 2015](#)).

Some journalists have recently reconsidered their practice of objectivity when faced with such hate speech as Holocaust denial ([Whine 2020](#)). Researchers have often cast the media portrayal of Holocaust denial as a battle between authoritative sources over the truth ([Cohen-Almagor 2013](#); [Lipstadt 2012](#); [Moldavan 2005](#); [Zandberg 2010](#)). [Lipstadt has noted \(2012\)](#) that the rise of online Holocaust denial was especially worrisome because some commentators tended to present this as a balanced view and it was attracting younger audiences. Modern anti-Semitism became a template for the current post-truth era with its emphasis on emotive appeals rather than facts, which enabled Holocaust denial to become a full-time industry ([d’Ancona 2017](#)). More recently, journalists have unfavourably reported on online Holocaust denial. By 2020, Whine stated: ‘[T]he sometimes-substantial media coverage of deniers’ convictions acts as a deterrent and reduces the frequency of denial, at least in the form of the justification or glorification of Nazi crimes’ (p. 63). Yet [Sorce \(2020\)](#) has found that German journalists remained reluctant to become anti-Nazi activists on Twitter due to their ideal of objectivity. Even so, social media platforms have been viewed as having a liberating effect by freeing journalists from the shackles of false balance and allowing them to express their views more forthrightly. [Lewis and Molyneux \(2018, p. 15\)](#) assert: ‘It is assumed that journalist-audience interactions are generally positive in part because such interactions contribute to diminishing the much-maligned mask of objectivity, neutrality, and detachedness behind which journalistic work is blackboxed to public view’. This article contributes to research into investigative journalists’ development of innovative practices by showing how they challenged traditional boundaries and confronted trolls, allowing for a cooperative effort to enhance social cohesion in civil society.

Methodology

This study has analysed news articles relating to journalists’ exposure of neo-Nazi trolling with the use of quantitative and qualitative media content analysis techniques. The study conducted a Factiva search of articles during the rapid upsurge of far-right political movements in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States between 2015 and 2020. The initial search centred on the keywords of journalism and Holocaust denial as an extreme form of anti-Semitic hate speech, and this yielded more than 7470 results. The search was refined to an analysis of the keywords of journalism and Holocaust denial on Facebook and Twitter. The two platforms were selected because these have been the most widely used social media sources for journalists and their audiences at the time ([von Nordheim, Boczek & Koppers 2018](#)). The refined search generated 141 unique articles in influential news outlets that publish investigative journalism.

These included the Australian newspapers, *The Age*, *The Canberra Times*, *The Courier Mail* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. The UK publications were the BBC Online, *Financial Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Times* including *The Sunday Times*. The US outlets included *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* as well as the CNN, National Public Radio (NPR) and Verge websites. The news articles were subjected to a close reading and qualitative content analysis to identify the ‘hot moments’ or turning points in the news portrayal of anti-Semitism on social media ([Zelizer 1993, p. 224](#)).

This analysis allowed for identifying investigative journalists who acted as eyewitnesses with first-hand experience in confronting either anti-Semitism, neo-Nazi trolling or Holocaust denial on social media. [Zelizer \(2007, p. 410\)](#) remarks that, ‘Eyewitnessing offers members of the journalistic community a way to reference what journalists do, should do, and ought not do’. The eyewitnesses were selected on the basis that their first-hand accounts were prominently cited by their colleagues. Most journalists seek to be cited authoritatively by other media professionals to promote important stories ([Graves & Konieczna 2015](#)). Most news articles have not been cited, however, and many journalists’ tweets have not been retweeted ([Molyneux & Mourão 2019](#)). Since reporters have rarely cited their rivals, this study selected prominent eyewitnesses whose reporting was cited or included in related articles in other news organisations.

They included investigative journalists Ginger Gorman, Julia Ioffe and Jonathan Weisman who have attracted neo-Nazi trolling during their day-to-day political reporting. This study also focused on reporters who were trolled while investigating anti-Semitism or Holocaust denial. They involved Bethany Mandel and Matt Katz as well as news commentator and comedian David Baddiel, based on [Peterson’s \(2008\)](#) definition that a satirist’s role may comprise investigative journalism techniques by speaking the truth to power. This analysis also included investigative journalist Kara Swisher’s reporting of Holocaust denial and trolling on Facebook. The study examined 25 media items relating to their experiences that appeared in their Twitterfeeds, videos and other publications ([All in with Chris Hayes 2016](#); [Baddiel 2020](#); [Confronting Holocaust Denial with David Baddiel 2020](#); [Gorman 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2019](#); [Gross 2018](#); [Ioffe 2016a, 2016b](#); [Katz 2016a, 2016b, 2016c](#); [Lampert 2020](#); [Mandel 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2018](#); [Swisher 2018a, 2018b, 2020](#); [Valentish 2019](#); [Weisman 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2018](#)). This study examined the self-reflexive messages in the 25 media items by considering the journalists’ position and the reactions within the wider journalism profession, as well as the conditions and context of their creation, sharing and distribution in other publications ([Carlson 2016](#); [Marchi 2019](#)). [Aldridge and Evetts \(2003, p. 560\)](#) state that: ‘journalism is an intensely reflexive occupation which constantly talks to and about itself’. This analysis included news articles citing the eyewitnesses’ experiences from the same range of Australian, UK and US news outlets as well as from *DuJour*, *The Atlantic* and *New Yorker* magazine articles that referred to Holocaust denial. Therefore, this sample involved 221 articles citing the eyewitnesses plus 141 articles relating to the portrayal of Holocaust denial on Facebook and Twitter. Altogether, the final analysis included a total of 362 articles and another 25 eyewitness media items to ascertain how journalists came together to reconsider their traditional boundaries to allow for more activism against Holocaust denial and neo-Nazi trolling.

Expanding journalism’s boundaries

This study has found that journalists quickly formed a supportive network to show their solidarity for investigative reporters being trolled by neo-Nazis ([Victor 2016](#); [Williams 2016](#)). The investigative journalists increasingly acted as performers within a community who interpreted, trialled and refined their strategies to deal with the upsurge of hate speech on social media ([Gross 2017](#); [Gorman 2019](#); [Ioffe 2016a](#); [Katz 2016a, 2016b](#); [Valentish 2019](#)). In retelling the experiences, other journalists signified that the targeted investigative reporters were curators and interpreters of neo-Nazi trolling ([Bixby 2016](#); [Luce 2016](#); [New York Times Editorial Board 2018](#); [Victor 2016](#)). For example, the investigative journalist Julia Ioffe was portrayed as ‘served up on social media in concentration camp garb and worse’ for her magazine profile of Melania

Trump during the US presidential campaign in 2016 ([Ioffe 2016b](#); [Weisman 2016a, p. 3](#)). The future First Lady had criticised Ioffe for intruding into her family background while writing a *GQ* magazine article. [Melania Trump \(2016\)](#) responded to the article by publishing a Facebook post that used familiar keywords from Trump's campaign messages to denounce journalism ([CNN 2016](#)). She posted: 'The article published in *GQ* today is yet another example of the dishonest media and their disingenuous reporting. Julia Ioffe, a journalist who is looking to make a name for herself, clearly had an agenda when going after my family' ([2016a](#)). Afterwards, [Ioffe \(2016a\)](#) initiated the practice of using quote tweets to start conversations that shared the neo-Nazi trolling about her article. Usually, journalists would avoid discussing controversial personal topics on social media ([Jukes 2019](#); [Molyneux and Mourão 2019](#)). Ioffe added and curated satirical comments such as, 'Good morning, from your neighbourhood Trump trolls', in a rare effort to create an online conversation that would confront abusive readers ([2016a](#)). Although Ioffe's magazine article was not an investigative report, she invoked the principles of investigative journalism by using the exposé. The innovative quote tweets departed from the traditional notion of blocking and silencing cyberbullies.

Other journalists and commentators retold Ioffe's story, giving credibility and authority to her practice of exposing trolls. They announced that Melania Trump's Facebook post triggered the neo-Nazi tweets about Ioffe ([Borchers 2016](#); [North 2016](#)). *The Washington Post's* [Eric Wemple \(2017\)](#) reported: 'That cued the anti-Semitism – murderous threats that became so worrisome that Ioffe had to file a police report'. CNN's [Noah Berlatsky \(2019\)](#) recounted: 'The Trumps were unhappy with the profile – as were many of their far-right fans. The latter deluged Ioffe with anti-Semitic slurs and death threats, including recordings of Hitler's speeches left on her phone's voice mail'. As *The Times's* columnist [Daniel Finkelstein \(2016, p. 29\)](#) remarked: 'Twitter, Facebook and YouTube are the common room of the fascists, the water cooler of the racial supremacist, the cocktail party organiser of the Nazis'. [Melania Trump \(2016\)](#) distanced her role from the controversy during an interview with *DuJour* journalist Mickey Rapkin. He jokingly asked her if she would denounce any people who might paint a swastika on a picture of his face after reading his article about their interview. She replied: 'I don't control my fans ... but I don't agree with what they're doing. I understand what you mean, but there are people out there who maybe went too far. She [Ioffe] provoked them' ([Rapkin 2016](#)). The journalists' open conversations indicated a desire for greater activism against neo-Nazi trolls.

CNN news anchor Wolf Blitzer aimed to further the online fight against trolling during Donald Trump's presidential campaign by asking him to respond to the story of a neo-Nazi network that supported him. Blitzer asked:

Some of your supporters have viciously attacked this woman Julia Ioffe with anti-Semitic attacks, death threats. These people get so angry, what's your message to these people when something like that happens? ([CNN 2016](#)).

The interview extended beyond the tone of objectivity by denouncing what [Glasser and Ettema \(1989, p. 17\)](#) have called the 'discreditable' sources that originate outside the traditional news domain. During the interview, Trump replied to Blitzer: 'I don't know about that ... I don't have a message to the fans' ([CNN 2016](#)). Trump also remarked: 'I haven't read the article, but I heard it was very inaccurate article and heard it was a nasty article'. In his response, he used the rhetorical strategy of *tu quoque* to avoid the controversy by blaming media hypocrisy ([Mercieca 2019](#)). Rival commentators were united in their criticisms of Trump's official version when they posted their online curated views about the interview ([Gross 2018](#); [O'Brien 2017](#)). For example, [Wemple \(2017\)](#) opined: 'To this blog's eyes, that looked quite like a 'chance' to denounce anti-Semitism'. CNN commentator [Dean Obeidallah \(2018\)](#) added: 'Here was Trump's opportunity to send a clear, passionate message to his supporters that there was no place for anti-Semitism in American political discourse.' Journalists may become interpreters who, in [Berkowitz's words \(2019\)](#), 'know how the story should go'. After [Ioffe's tweets \(2016a\)](#), commentators acted as interpreters during

a struggle over the political meaning of the trolling attacks ([Berlatsky 2019](#); [Borchers 2016](#); [CNN 2016](#); [Gross 2018](#); [North 2016](#); [O'Brien 2017](#); [Obeidallah 2018](#); [Rapkin 2016](#); [Wemple 2017](#)).

Similarly, *The New York Times* journalist Jonathan Weisman extended the practice of the investigative exposé to mock the trolls who barraged him with neo-Nazi messages ([2016a](#), [2016b](#), [2018](#); [Gross 2018](#)). He had attracted trolling for posting a quote tweet in support of a Washington Post column about the rise of American fascism ([2016c](#)). While his quote tweet was not an investigation, he developed the performance of the exposé to share the online trolling that he had encountered. Journalists sympathetically reported on his decision to retweet the hate messaging of self-identified Trump supporters after he could not persuade Twitter moderators to remove the anti-Semitic posts ([Goldberg 2016a](#); [Lizza 2016](#); [Victor 2016](#); [Weisman 2016b](#)). In an interview, Weisman indicated to National Public Radio (NPR) host Terry Gross that he was trialling a new method:

I thought, I want people to see this. And so I would retweet them. I would send them out into the world. And I think in some ways, I only invited more attacks because, hey, somebody who has 500 followers were – was being rebroadcast by somebody who had 50,000 followers. So in some ways, I was empowering these people. But I also really did want people to see how ugly it was out there. So I may have done a bad thing, may have done a good thing. I still don't know. But I certainly wanted to get the point across. And I think I did ([Gross 2018](#)).

Weisman's self-reflection indicated that he was experimenting with a relatively new practice to combat the concerted Twitter bombing.

Journalists created a shared symbolic vocabulary to reaffirm Weisman's response by mockingly adding the neo-Nazi symbol of triple parentheses to their names on their Twitter accounts to signify their collective support ([Adkins 2016](#); [Goldberg 2016b](#); [Katz 2016a](#); [Mitchell 2016](#); [Obeidallah 2016–2018](#); [Rosenberg 2016](#); [Victor 2016](#); [Weisman 2016b](#); [White 2016](#)). Previously, many alt-right sites had been posting journalists' names inside triple parentheses, which became neo-Nazi code or echoes for identifying Jews. For example, *The New York Times* journalist, [Daniel Victor \(2016\)](#), circulated rival *Tablet* magazine writer Yair Rosenberg's humorous tweet. [Rosenberg \(2016\)](#) appealed to the public by asking: 'Want to raise awareness about anti-Semitism, show solidarity with harassed Jews & mess with the Twitter Nazis? Put ((())) around your name'. *The Atlantic* editor in chief, Jeffrey Goldberg, posted another call to action: 'Thanks to everyone participating in this act of (((cultural appropriation)))' ([2016b](#)). Social media allowed journalists to develop collaborative news initiatives ([Graves & Konieczna 2015](#); [Jukes 2019](#)). After Weisman's tweets, journalists came together to mock neo-Nazi symbolism and confront the trolls' virtual baying ([Goldberg 2016b](#); [Victor 2016](#)). Journalists were engaging on social media in boundary work, which [Zelizer \(1993\)](#), [Vos and Moore \(2020\)](#) explain as the social and cultural interactions to decide appropriate professional practices.

Moreover, investigative journalists became self-designated troll hunters while speaking openly about their experiences ([Gorman 2019](#); [Katz 2016b](#); [Weisman 2018](#); [Washington Post 2019](#)). For example, NPR journalist [Matt Katz \(2016b\)](#) interviewed investigative reporter Bethany Trump about her decision to buy a gun after receiving memes that portrayed her as a Holocaust victim. Both Katz and Mandel were trolled while they were investigating neo-Nazi rhetoric during the US presidential campaign in 2015 and 2016 ([All in with Chris Hayes 2016](#); [Katz 2016c](#); [Mandel 2015, 2016a, 2016b](#)). Katz told listeners that Mandel 'has faced thousands of anti-Semitic messages online, mostly from self-identified white nationalists who are big Trump supporters' ([2016b](#)). Evoking a scene of pathos, Katz portrayed Mandel as a 'full-time mom who works from home' while it was 'naptime' during the broadcast. He also showed his empathy by talking about his experience in interviewing one of the trolls, a Trump supporter and Holocaust denier who was stalking him online ([Katz 2016c](#)). Katz explained, 'I tweeted back to see if he would do an interview, and he gave me his number'. Later, Katz said: 'I just wanted to know, why?' ([2016b](#)). The investigative journalists used the tweets to perform dramatic narratives about themselves and their political reporting for their colleagues and

their audiences ([Mahler 2016](#); [Mandel 2018](#); [Weisman 2016a](#)). The interview served to suggest that they were members of an interpretive community who were uniting to craft a narrative on trialling new practices.

Similarly, *The Age* investigative journalist, Ginger Gorman, invoked the role of an eyewitness as she reflected critically on her decision to seek out and interview a man whom she called a troll for his neo-Nazi online posts ([2016](#), [2019](#)). She recalled her purpose to ‘shine a light under the dark bridges and crevices of the internet’ ([2017a, p. 1](#), [2017b, p. 13](#)). The man began to stalk her online after her interview with him. She reflected: ‘He might be chatty and ask me media advice or rant about free speech. Or he might tell me, the descendent of Jews who fled the Holocaust, that it never occurred’. She concluded about her experience: ‘there’s no longer any demarcation of where the journalism ends and the rest of my life begins’. During an interview, she recounted some activists’ reactions to her decision to confront trolls:

They said, ‘All they want is power. Why are you engaging with them?’ I found that incredible. I’m engaging with them because I want to know what they want. I don’t condone what they do, but you have to ask the question: ‘Why are they doing this?’ ([Valentish 2019](#)).

She explained her aim to act as a voice for the trolls’ victims by remarking: ‘We can’t have marginalised voices driven out of these spaces’ ([Valentish 2019](#)). Such tactics suggested Alexander’s conception of professional practices that ‘make vivid the invisible motives and morals they are trying to represent’ ([Alexander 2004, p. 532](#)). Journalists engaged in open discourses that broadened the definition of an investigative journalist to include enthusiastic activism in confronting trolls ([Fitzsimmons 2020](#); [Hardy 2019](#); [Moody 2019](#)).

The boundaries between journalism and trolling further eroded when British media commentator and comedian David Baddiel generated popular news coverage of his interview of a Holocaust denier for his highly publicised documentary ([Confronting Holocaust Denial with David Baddiel 2020](#); [Ellen 2020](#); [Long 2020](#); [Midgley 2020](#); [Rifkind 2020](#)). Journalists portrayed Baddiel as an eyewitness with first-hand knowledge of Holocaust deniers who were trolling him even before his documentary aired on the BBC. Baddiel reflected that he decided to interview one of the Twitter trolls, Dermot Mulqueen, who had invited him to read a Holocaust denial book. When Baddiel retold his experience, he mocked Mulqueen for boasting about publishing a ‘lovely picture of Adolf Hitler’ on a Holocaust denial page on Facebook ([Feay 2020](#)). [Baddiel \(2020\)](#) recalled a scene in his documentary when he interviewed prosecuting lawyer Anthony Julius, who asked him: ‘Why are you doing this? You’ll just be giving deniers more airtime’. As Baddiel reflected: ‘He may be right, but things have changed ... the gatecrashers, as they always will, now dominate the party: social media is today more defined by antisocial media’. Furthermore, he explained his activist intentions in a news interview by declaring, ‘Holocaust deniers are a very extreme example of trolls and ignoring them has not worked’ ([Lampert 2020](#)). His reflection suggested a growing willingness to overturn the traditional practice of silencing trolls. Journalists applauded Baddiel’s interview, treating him as a colleague ([Feay 2020](#); [Rifkind 2020](#)). As *The Times’s* [Dominic Maxwell \(2020, p. 21\)](#) reported: ‘Baddiel is a words man, a precision man, and a comedy man’. Baddiel used the journalistic technique of the exposé to reveal a hidden truth about Holocaust denial that was in the public interest. The journalists’ reaction suggested that the documentary met [Lindlof’s definition \(2002\)](#) of a successful media practice that is recognised and valued by professional members of the interpretive community.

The expanding investigative journalism communities united with other journalists and commentators to define appropriate practices in confronting the sources of Holocaust denial ([Naughton 2018](#); [Nunberg 2018](#); [New York Times Editorial Board 2018](#); [The New York Times 2018](#); [Zraick 2018](#)). For example, investigative journalist [Kara Swisher \(2018a\)](#) generated widespread news coverage of her interview of Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg. Swisher questioned Zuckerberg’s reasoning to host hate sites on the social media platform. Zuckerberg attempted to use self-disclosure to gain support for allowing Holocaust denial sites on Facebook by saying:

I'm Jewish, and there's a set of people who deny that the Holocaust happened. I find that deeply offensive. But at the end of the day, I don't believe that our platform should take that down because I think there are things that different people get wrong. I don't think that they're intentionally getting it wrong'.

After the interview, Swisher reflected that she tried to stifle an instinct to interrupt Zuckerberg, but she decided to interject briefly to 'stop this runaway train of thought' (2020). Her interruption departed from the traditional notion of professional detachment, and her comment to Zuckerberg was later emphasised in boldface type in her published interview: 'In the case of the Holocaust deniers, they might be [getting it wrong]' (2018a).

Using the journalistic style of reviewing a performance, commentators described that Zuckerberg appeared comically tripped up during the interview because his response was somewhat muddled and weird, provoking a storm of protest (BBC News 2018; Ford 2018; Naughton 2018; Zraick 2018). In a follow-up email, Zuckerberg sought to clarify his apparent ambivalence towards Holocaust denial: 'There's one thing I want to clear up. I personally find Holocaust denial deeply offensive, and I absolutely didn't intend to defend the intent of people who deny that' (Swisher, 2018b). Moreover, news outlets publicised their competitors' investigative journalism projects, including the contentious use of undercover reporting, which exposed a lack of moderating and banning hate sites on Facebook (*Inside Facebook: Secrets of a Social Network* 2018; Kolhatkar 2018; Naughton 2018; Newton 2019; Osnos 2018; *The New York Times* 2018). The news narratives promoted the rhetoric of investigative reporting that 'went undercover' to expose online moderators' secret lives and reveal a so-called covert plot allowing Facebook to host the 'Holohoax', or Holocaust denial, as well as racially abusive content and other neo-Nazi sites (Knaus et al. 2019; Statt 2018).

Other commentators sought to distinguish between Facebook and 'good' journalism that allowed for investigative exposés to denounce hate speech (Bennett 2018; CNN 2018; Finkelstein 2018). *Guardian* columnist John Naughton (2018) opined: 'Facebook is Zuckerberg's monster. Unlike Frankenstein, he is still enamoured of his creation ... But it's becoming increasingly clear that his creature is out of control'. *The Washington Post's* Tracy Jan and Elizabeth Dwoskin (2017) noted that: 'Facebook has long resisted being a gatekeeper for speech'. Later, they added: 'Among the most challenging issues for Facebook is its role as the policeman for the free expression of its two billion users' (Dwoskin & Jan 2018). The commentaries also signified journalists' optimism in filling a void in social media to counter hate speech. For example, journalist Marvin Kalb commented in a CNN interview:

when a lie is a lie, say it is a lie. The words themselves have enormous power in the social media world. And there is an extra responsibility on journalists because we are there for everybody to be very careful. And when you use the word, be absolutely certain that it's right (CNN 2018).

Kalb added, 'when the lies accumulate and the misrepresentations accumulate ... journalists have to stand up' (CNN 2018). Journalists extended the new style of cooperative journalism by agreeing to shine a light on hidden, troll-filled spaces on social media networks.

Conclusion

High-profile investigative journalists openly challenged their traditional boundaries to allow for more open, activist exposés to confront Holocaust hate speech. Their performances resembled enthusiastic activists by being connected and twittering during the 'hot moments' of challenging Holocaust denial. This pursuit was particularly evident during the US presidential campaign in 2016 and its aftermath as investigative journalism became a political act in a struggle over the meaning of neo-Nazis' roles on social media networks.

Other journalism communities responded to the investigative journalists' self-reflexivity by reaffirming and magnifying their performances. These communities were involved in an ongoing process of challenging the social media boundaries of their profession. They discarded their support for the boundaries that separated them from trolling to pursue activist-like agendas that focused on exposing neo-Nazism as well as the myths involving Holocaust denial. Through informal networks, their performances showed their continued experimentation to begin turning back the tide of trolling.

Investigative journalists indicated the liberating potential for more direct, open challenges to anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial in the media. Their roles as anti-Nazi activists and troll hunters marked a turning point in the struggle to start overturning the chilling effect of trolling and online hate speech. The innovative exposés generated other journalism community members' support to engage in a cooperative search for fresh solutions to promote greater social cohesion within the online networks. Their work suggests investigative journalists' crucial leadership in initiating a collective call to action to enhance the inclusive community ideals of civil society on popular social media networks.

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