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“Alt-Lite” Bloggers and the Conservative Ecosystem

By Tyler Bridges

Joan Shorenstein Fellow, Fall 2017

Reporter, *The New Orleans Advocate*

Twitter: @tegbridges



HARVARD Kennedy School

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Introduction

This research paper examines the important role that “alt-lite” bloggers play in promoting, amplifying, and fortifying Donald Trump’s anti-establishment message to his conservative supporters.

Counter-Narratives from the Right

The big news was released early that morning, and it was not favorable for President Donald Trump. By 6:30 a.m., on Monday, October 30, 2017, news outlets were reporting the indictment of Paul Manafort, who chaired Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign, and Rick Gates, a longtime associate of Manafort’s who also had advised the Trump campaign. An hour later, special counsel Robert Mueller III announced that George Papadopoulos, a foreign policy adviser to the Trump campaign, had pleaded guilty to lying to the F.B.I. and was cooperating with investigators.¹ Mueller’s legal moves provided the strongest evidence to that point that the Trump campaign had sought dirt from the Russian government against Hillary Clinton, his opponent in the general election.

By 8:30 a.m., *The New York Times* website contained four different stories reporting the explosive news.² The president could not have been happy to see any of them. “Grand Jury Indicts Former Trump Campaign Chairman,” read one headline. “Months before News of Email Hacking, Trump Aide Knew,” read a second one on Papadopoulos, and the website also posted a video outlining his situation. “Ambition Set Stage for Manafort’s Downfall,” read a third headline; a video of Manafort accompanied the article. The fourth headline, which also led the website, read: “Mueller’s First Indictments Send a Message to the President.”

Trump by then had responded with his own message, and he naturally did so through his favorite medium. At 7:25 a.m., he tweeted: “Sorry, but this is years ago, before Paul Manafort was part of the Trump campaign. But why aren't Crooked Hillary & the Dems the focus?????”³

At 7:28 a.m., he added: “...Also, there is NO COLLUSION!”⁴

Of course, Trump could count on a counter-narrative from Breitbart News, whose executive chairman, Steve Bannon, had replaced Manafort as the Trump campaign chairman and then served during the president’s initial months as his chief strategist. One online Breitbart headline that morning read: “TUCKER: PODESTA LAWYER THREATENED FOX NEWS FOR UKRAINE-MANAFORT REPORT.”⁵ Another read: “GEN. KELLY: MUELLER PROBE ‘VERY DISTRACTING’ TO THE PRESIDENT.” The lead headline on the website read: “REP. NUNES: ‘WE ARE BEING OBSTRUCTED IN THIS INVESTIGATION,’ DOJ IGNORING LEAKS.”

The lead story on Fox News' website did not further Trump's narrative. Its headline referred to comments by Lindsey Graham, a powerful Republican senator from South Carolina. Its headline read: "HOLY HELL TO PAY: Graham threatens consequences should Trump fire Mueller after charges filed in Russia probe."⁶

Trump, could, however find reassuring and generally unwavering support among a group of highly conservative and increasingly important bloggers who espouse the ideology of the hard right, without the overt racism that marks the so-called "alt right." Known as "alt-lite," they are part of a closed system in which writers in the club link to each other's articles, creating a feedback loop of mutual reinforcement that ignores or disdains contradictory facts.

How they handled the Manafort story that day illustrates how these activist writers operate.

One of them, Mike Cernovich, who was identified in a 2016 *New Yorker* profile as a leading pro-Trump troll, sent out this tweet at 2:06 p.m. on Oct. 30: "The Manafort indictment has zero to do with Russia. It's garden variety crime completely unrelated to the election."⁷

Cernovich, 40, is probably the best-known alt-lite blogger, having also been profiled by *The New York Times*, *60 Minutes* and *New York* magazine. In November 2017, he had 367,000 followers on Twitter—many times more than such alt-right leaders as Richard Spencer or David Duke—360,000 followers on Facebook, and 63,000 subscribers on YouTube.⁸ Originally from Illinois, he graduated from Pepperdine law school but never seriously practiced law. Based in Orange County, California, Cernovich began sharing his extremist political views and discovered that it trumped being a lawyer. Calling himself a "white nationalist," he built a following, in part because he mastered the art of trolling famous people into responding to his provocative comments via Twitter. "Conflict is attention" became his mantra. His false statements further won him more followers.

At 2:25 p.m., Cernovich pushed a competing narrative that focused on a prominent Democratic lobbyist: "Know who is most worried about Manafort indictment? It's Tony Podesta, who also failed to register under FARA and laundered money."⁹

Two minutes later, Cernovich retweeted Trump's 7:25 a.m. assertion that Manafort's alleged misdeeds had occurred before he worked for the Trump campaign and that the focus ought to be on "Crooked Hillary."

Another prominent conservative blogger who pushed Trump's storyline was Paul Joseph Watson. At 3:05 p.m. that day, he tweeted: "Let me get this straight, after a

year of vast, expensive investigations into ‘Russian collusion,’ all they've got is Manafort avoided tax?”¹⁰

At 7:58 p.m. on Oct. 30, Watson linked to an article in Gateway Pundit, which had earned a reputation among independent media analysts for publishing false information to advance Trump’s political interests. Gateway Pundit’s headline read: “George Papadopoulos Was a Campaign Volunteer – All Attempts to Get Trump to Meet with Russians Were Rejected.”¹¹

Throughout Oct. 30, Cernovich, Watson and other influential pro-Trump bloggers also pushed an unrelated story, one that erupted following an accusation by actor Anthony Rapp the day before that Kevin Spacey had tried to seduce Rapp years before when Rapp was only 14. This story offered a target-rich environment for the Trump crowd because it zinged both Hollywood liberals and the media. At 11:48 a.m., Watson tweeted: “The media is running defense for Spacey’s alleged molestation of a child by focusing on him coming out. Shameful.”¹² Watson linked to a news article, published by mediaite.com, headlined: “Media Downplays Kevin Spacey Child Molestation Allegation, Focus on Sexuality in Headlines.”¹³ (Mainstream media outlets, in fact, were prominently reporting Rapp’s accusations.)

At 1:07 p.m., Watson tweeted: “Kevin Spacey Flew on ‘Lolita Express’ With Bill Clinton.”¹⁴ The tweet included a photo of Clinton and Spacey together and linked to an article that Watson had written for Infowars, the online site for Alex Jones, who regularly trafficks in misinformation. That night, Stefan Molyneux, yet another pro-Trump blogger, retweeted Watson.

Spacey had a starring role in *House of Cards*, a popular Netflix production. At night on Oct. 30, Jack Posobiec, another pro-Trump blogger, tweeted: “House of Cards crumbles under pedophile claims,”¹⁵ and he linked to a Fox News article which reported that Netflix had decided, despite its success, to end the show after one more year.

The Decline of the Conservative Political Establishment

Activists outside the Republican Party apparatus and outsized media personalities have played a key role in setting the conservative political agenda for years. Rush Limbaugh went national with his conservative talk radio show in 1988, and after the 1994 congressional elections, many analysts credited him with leading the wave that gave Republicans control of the House for the first time since 1955. Fox News launched in 1996, and its news shows and talking heads began determining the issues conservatives would push and the conservatives that would push them.

When Donald Trump announced his candidacy for president in July 2015, the Republican political establishment treated him as a carnival sideshow and expected that the public would quickly grow tired of his act. Traditional conservative media outlets either belittled Trump initially or downplayed him. In the past, this would have been enough to sink Trump.

But he soon established himself as the leading contender, and in the coming months the party stalwarts dropped out of the race, one by one, until he had secured the Republican nomination. Trump had disrupted the conservative movement. What became clear afterward is that conservative political pros underestimated Trump's ability to deliver a message that would speak to the fears and anxieties of white voters who were unhappy with the country's direction. The conservative pros also underestimated the crucial support that non-traditional conservative websites, such as Breitbart News, would play in winning support for Trump.

Ironically, the conservative political establishment aided and abetted the rise of the forces that would shove them to the side—notably when its members failed to forcefully challenge Trump's repeated falsehoods that President Barack Obama had been born outside of the United States. In May 2016, 59 percent of voters with a favorable view of Trump believed that Obama had been born elsewhere. Conservative leaders also stood by or cheered on wild conspiracy theorists who said Obama is a Muslim. The same poll showed that two-thirds of the pro-Trump supporters believed that falsehood.¹⁶

In his book, *How the Right Lost Its Mind*, conservative talk show host Charlie Sykes rued the failure to challenge “the racists, the truthers, and other conspiracy theorists.”¹⁷ As a result, “as we learned in 2016, we had succeeded in convincing our audiences to ignore and discount any information whatsoever from the mainstream media. The cumulative effect of the attacks was to delegitimize those outlets and essentially destroy much of the Right's immunity to false information.”¹⁸

This paved the way for the rise of conservative bloggers, who played a crucial role in spreading and amplifying Trump's anti-establishment message among voters eager to hear it. These bloggers include Mike Cernovich, Stefan Molyneux, Paul Joseph Watson and Jack Posobiec. These men—they are all white men—appeal to younger voters and they act as officers for the ground troops of Trump's army, providing reinforcement and validation throughout the day for Trump. By imitating Trump's attacks on the mainstream media—Fake News!—the bloggers fortify his effort to undermine watchdog reporting that has shown repeatedly that the president frequently lies or misstates the truth to advance his agenda.

The bloggers have not received the credit they deserve in keeping Trump popular with his political base. Each tweet or YouTube video they post ricochets

throughout the conservative ecosystem thanks to retweets, likes, and shares that provide a seal of approval for friends and acquaintances.

And to Trump's benefit, it is a closed ecosystem, thanks to a phenomenon given a name by Eli Pariser in a 2011 TED talk.¹⁹ Pariser outlined how digital media allowed citizens to tailor the news they consumed to their political beliefs. Conservatives seek out conservative websites. Liberals seek out liberal ones. Pariser called it the "filter bubble."

A 2017 report by the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University found that hard-right conservatives especially lived in a filter bubble that reinforced their worldview when Trump faced off against Hillary Clinton, the Democratic presidential candidate, in the 2016 general election.²⁰ The researchers performed an in-depth analysis of where people consumed their news, depending on their political views. "For Trump loyalists and other readers," the authors wrote, "right-wing media offered a steady supply of stories that provided evidence that Trump, despite his many flaws, was a far better choice than Clinton...and portrayed the center-left media's focus on Trump's imperfections as evidence that those sources were unfairly biased against Trump."²¹

An April 2017 article by Jared Holt of People for the American Way, a left-leaning group, put it this way: "This new-media ecosystem exists outside of traditional newspapers and cable news networks, instead taking to social sites like Facebook, Twitter, Periscope, Reddit, and YouTube to promote its far-right nationalist politics and conspiracy-laden worldviews to an audience it has isolated and now dominates as its preferred news source."²²

Those in the center-right, the center, the center-left and the left also exist in the filter bubble to an extent, but nowhere to the degree of the Trump supporters, the Berkman Klein researchers reported. To varying degrees, people other than Trump supporters still seek out mainstream media outlets for their news. The top digital news sources for the left are Huffington Post, PoliticusUSA, and MSNBC.

The insular nature of how Trump supporters get their news has not received widespread attention in the mainstream press, nor has the role of the pro-Trump bloggers. But they help explain why Trump, as a candidate and later as president, has made outlandish statements, uttered falsehoods and engaged in controversies that would sink any other politician—yet his political base has remained solidly behind him, thanks to the counter narratives and disinformation generated by his key supporters on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube.

Sykes was a veteran conservative talk show host in Milwaukee when the blinkered nature of the far right caught his attention at the beginning of 2016. Sykes began receiving a heavy volume of emails from listeners—and also from long-time conservative friends—that parroted Trump's anti-immigrant and

protectionist views while at the same time savaging Hillary Clinton, liberals, and Democrats. These kinds of attacks were not new, but the intensity and the repetition of what they said struck Sykes. Over time, he concluded, the messages “are all self-reinforcing. That’s the important thing.”²³ Referring to the perspective of those who contacted him, Sykes added, “By the third time you hear the same story, it becomes a fact, a reality.”²⁴

During 2016, Sykes became increasingly uneasy as more and more conservatives embraced Trump, who offered what Sykes believes is an inauthentic brand of conservatism. Sykes’ brand consists of an emphasis on small government, free markets, liberty, personal responsibility and strong national defense. In 2017, he authored *How the Right Lost Its Mind*, which lays out his dismay over the shift toward right-wing populism among conservatives.

“As the Right has isolated itself from other sources of information, it has fashioned an alternate universe with its own facts, narratives, and truths,” he wrote. “The “new media ecosystem rewards the loudest, most reckless voices, so the echo chamber gets louder and angrier and increasingly shrill.”²⁵

On Jan. 21, 2016, the *National Review*, a conservative mainstay founded by William F. Buckley Jr., published an extraordinary single-subject issue that attempted to stop the Trump train. It was entitled, “Against Trump.” In all, 24 conservative intellectuals who hadn’t always agreed with each other—or even the magazine over the years—wrote essays that put forth an argument that editor Rich Lowry described in a *Politico Magazine* article as “simple and unassailable: He is a populist, not a conservative. Conservatism has always had a populist element, but it has been tethered to conservatism’s animating causes of liberty, limited government and the Constitution. Trump inveighs against elites and tramples on political pieties, but these causes are afterthoughts to him, at best.”²⁶

Nonetheless, the Trump train ran them over and continued its path to the Republican nomination.

Conservative Bloggers Reinforce Tribal Loyalty for Trump

In an interview, Sykes explained what happened then—and what continues to happen now. “Trump’s base is rock solid in spite of everything,” he said. “They get their information from within this conservative ecosystem, where all this information is reinforced and where the critics are discredited. It gives them the ammunition they need to stay strong. It reinforces their tribal loyalty. If and when they have doubts if it’s happening, there’s always somebody who will come forward with a counter narrative. It becomes the real story that we have to cling to as opposed to the lying mainstream media that’s trying to take down our president.”²⁷

Right-wing extremists have provided important support for Trump through blogs, tweets and other forms of digital media—a development that journalists and authors have chronicled. These extremists are often called “alt-right,” a name coined by Richard Spencer, one of their leaders. The alt-right “is fundamentally concerned with race,” said George Hawley, a University of Alabama professor.²⁸

In his 2017 book, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, Hawley provided this description: “The alt-right rejects the major premises of the conservative movement: the so-called three-legged stool of moral traditionalism, economic liberty, and strong national defense. None of these conservative shibboleths seem to interest the alt-right. If you follow any alt-right accounts on Twitter or visit the major alt-right websites, you will have a hard time finding anything about the Constitution, you will see no demands that liberals ‘support our troops,’ evangelical Christians are more likely to be mocked than defended, and bald eagles and American flags are few and far between. The alt-right is not just a new style of right-wing politics. It is totally distinct from conservatism as we know it.”²⁹

David Duke is the most infamous member of the alt-right. He served as the grand wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1970s, won a special election to the Louisiana House of Representatives in 1989, and garnered over half the white vote when he lost a 1991 race for governor with a message that hammered away at racial grievances and economic loss. During his political campaigns, Duke rarely discussed his true pathology—a belief that Jews exercise undue influence over government, banking and the media to push racial integration and immigration in order to undermine the white race, which he believes is responsible for society’s advances.³⁰ In February 2016, Duke told listeners on his Internet radio show to back Donald Trump over his two main Republican presidential rivals, Texas Sen. Ted Cruz and Florida Sen. Marco Rubio. “Voting for these people, voting against Donald Trump at this point is really treason to your heritage,” Duke said. “I’m not saying I endorse everything about Trump. In fact, I haven’t formally endorsed him. But I do support his candidacy, and I support voting for him as a strategic action. I hope he does everything we hope he will do.”³¹

This statement of support from a noted racist and anti-Semite became national news, and Trump fanned the story by failing to repudiate Duke when asked about him by CNN’s Jake Tapper. Trump, the next day, blamed a “lousy earpiece” and disavowed Duke.³² Duke didn’t mind. “Donald Trump: Do whatever you need to get elected,”³³ he said, and his praise for Trump would continue to generate news throughout the campaign.

By 2015, Richard Spencer, 39, had emerged as perhaps the most prominent leader of the alt-right. A native Texan, he had earned an undergraduate degree from the University of Virginia and a master’s from the University of Chicago in Humanities. By 2011, he had become a dedicated white supremacist with a knack for generating attention for himself. In December 2015, Spencer told Vice News,

“I definitely think I speak for a lot of people on the alt-right and Twitter when I say it’s really about Trump. If he drops out or loses, we’re not all going to become fascinated with Ted Cruz or Ben Carson. Trump is something different.”³⁴

In 2017, David Neiwert authored the book: *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump*, tracing the rise of the alt-right and its kinship with Trump. In it, he described how leaders of the alt-right endorsed Trump’s candidacy and how Trump several times retweeted posts by extremists. “The beating heart of alt-America,” Neiwert wrote, “is the ancient drumbeat of white identity politics, a fear of nonwhite people who speak foreign languages and follow alien creeds.”³⁵

Alt-Lite

What has gotten less attention, however, are the bloggers who have backed Trump but are not as extreme or quite as sensational in their claims. They are generally grouped under the label “alt-lite.” They have many more followers on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube than do Duke, Spencer, and the other leaders of the alt-right.

George Hawley offered this take in his recent book: “Alt-lite is an appropriate description of people whose views on immigration and race relations partially overlap with those on the alt-right yet do not cross the line into open white nationalism.”³⁶

Hawley added that the alt-lite “may believe in biological racial differences but does not necessarily endorse racial separatism. The alt-lite believes in the superiority of Western culture and values (including some values, such as tolerance, that many on the alt-right reject), but it does not necessarily believe nonwhites are incapable of thriving in Western countries.”³⁷ Alt-lite figures generally “support Trump, attack political correctness, and accuse the mainstream media of dishonesty. But they generally avoid anti-Semitism and the open racism of the alt-right.”³⁸

In one notorious instance, Mike Cernovich promoted a falsehood that Hillary Clinton and her then-campaign chief, John Podesta, were running a pedophile ring located in the basement of a pizzeria in Washington, D.C. To anyone outside of the closed conservative ecosystem, it would have seemed like a bizarre claim. But in December 2016, a man from North Carolina drove to the pizzeria and fired multiple shots (without striking anyone) before surrendering to police, having found no evidence of the pedophilia ring.³⁹ The incident earned the nickname “Pizzagate” and became seen as a cautionary tale of how the extremist right’s fanciful conspiracies could have real consequences.

New Yorker reporter Andrew Marantz shadowed Cernovich for several days in September 2016 as Cernovich pushed his narrative via Twitter and Periscope that Hillary Clinton was sick and suffering from Parkinson's. His followers quickly spread the word. Cernovich consulted his fans via Periscope on a potential anti-Hillary hashtag, and once he had tweeted it out, watched with delight as it trended. In September 2016, Marantz reported, Cernovich's tweets were seen more than 100 million times.

“Everyone Has a Voice Now”

“Well, the media still thinks of itself as speaking truth to power,” Cernovich told Marantz. “What they don't realize is that someone like me is perceived as the new Fourth Estate. Maybe they should check their structural privilege.” The “paternalistic” media, he said, was giving way to a more democratic one. “It makes journalists crazy, because they used to be in control,” he said. “They can't control people anymore. Everyone has a voice now.”⁴⁰

Marantz's reporting showed how bloggers such as Cernovich would spend their days hunched before their laptops, searching news outlets and blogs to find new material that would outrage their followers and generate more clicks. Cernovich and the others were self-promoters pitching their brand, just like any politician.

In April 2017, Cernovich wrote a blog post that “unmasked” Susan Rice, the Obama administration's National Security Adviser, alleging that she had requested the identity of Trump associates in raw intelligence reports who were caught up in the federal government's electronic surveillance of foreigners, to leak this information and damage the Trump campaign. Cernovich's accusation spread widely within the conservative ecosystem and broke into the mainstream news. Rice denied it, and no credible evidence emerged to prove her wrong. Donald Trump Jr., however, lauded Cernovich, tweeting, “Congrats to [@Cernovich](#) for breaking the [#SusanRice](#) story. In a long gone time of unbiased journalism he'd win the Pulitzer, but not today!”⁴¹

Kellyanne Conway, a key Trump adviser, tweeted a link to Cernovich's *60 Minutes* interview, writing: “A must-see ratings bonanza.”⁴²

By August 2017, Olivia Nuzzi reported in *New York* magazine, Cernovich had distanced himself from the alt-right and sought to be taken more seriously as a journalist. In a couple of instances, he broke news involving the Trump administration, and he showed a willingness to report information that didn't favor the president. Nuzzi wrote, “He told me his decision to be ‘less pro-Trump than I was’ is about trust, and his realization that although he has a political agenda, being truthful will necessarily mean disagreeing with the president sometimes. This means trust from the public and the rest of the media.”⁴³ (Cernovich also deserves credit for having supplied the affidavits and documents

to BuzzFeed for its November 2017 news story reporting that veteran liberal Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich., had repeatedly sought sex with female staffers and had reached a secret financial settlement with one accuser. “Everyone would call me fake news,” Cernovich told *The Washington Post* in explaining why he shared the story with BuzzFeed rather than break it himself.⁴⁴)

Paul Joseph Watson, a 35-year-old alt-lite blogger, lives in England but takes a keen interest in politics in the United States. Like Cernovich, he relentlessly pushed the notion that Hillary Clinton was seriously ill with syphilis, brain damage, and Parkinson’s disease during the 2016 campaign. Watson also has trafficked in conspiracy theories through the giant extremist platform, Infowars, which frequently defends Trump or diverts attacks on the president by attacking Democrats, liberals, and Hillary Clinton. Watson serves as an editor and co-host on Infowars with Alex Jones, who runs the YouTube channel. Jones has said that the federal government helped plan the 9/11 attacks to justify the creation of a police state and has suggested that the Sandy Hook shootings were a “hoax.” Infowars YouTube channel has roughly two million subscribers.⁴⁵

Watson had a million subscribers to his personal YouTube channel and nearly 250 million views of the videos.⁴⁶ In his videos, Watson speaks directly into the camera with a cheeky tone and splices in video that he mocks or that reinforces his point. Watson employs humor as an ironic weapon, saying in one video, “Please keep calling anyone with a different opinion a Nazi.”

On Nov. 8, 2017, marking the anniversary of Donald Trump’s election, Watson tweeted, “Thank you Hillary for being the worst, most corrupt, most unliked, most dull, pathetic candidate in Democrat history which helped give Trump the easy win 1 year ago today.”⁴⁷ Watson then had 750,000 followers on Twitter and more than 550,000 followers on Facebook.

Stefan Molyneux

Watson’s YouTube channel lists links for his followers to subscribe to several related channels. Topping the list is Freedomain Radio, which is run by Stefan Molyneux. He had 264,000 Twitter followers in November 2017, 48,000 followers on Facebook and 693,000 subscribers to his YouTube channel.⁴⁸ Views of his videos had reached 205 million, including 6.2 million over the preceding 30 days in November 2017. Molyneux, 51, was born in Ireland but has lived most of his life in Canada. Like Watson, he, too, closely follows politics in the United States.

Molyneux has said he developed his social media presence after selling a software company. Initially, he trafficked in theories about family relationships, including his belief that mothers mistreat children during their first five years of life and that this accounts for most of the world’s problems. People are born into what Molyneux called “families of origin,” or FOO, and he encouraged everyone

to be willing to break with their families to overcome dysfunctional relationships. Both Molyneux and his wife “deFOOed” their parents, *The Guardian* newspaper reported in 2008.⁴⁹ “I grew up in a bad household,” Molyneux said during an October 2017 video.⁵⁰

The Guardian article reported how a mother became distraught when her son Tom “deFOOed” his family one day after becoming enamored with Molyneux’s theories. The news account of Tom cutting off his family prompted accusations that Molyneux was promoting a cult, a charge that he dismissed.

Molyneux has been especially animated in warning against government overreach and the dangers of liberals, the news media, and Communists. He spins eugenics theories, including the belief that whites are genetically more intelligent than blacks or recent refugees to Europe, and that blacks are more disposed to commit crime. But unlike David Duke and other members of the alt-right, his primary focus is not race, and he shaves the edges off his rhetoric. Instead, Molyneux, speaking directly into the camera for his YouTube videos in almost a professorial manner, covers a dizzying array of topics, impressing viewers with the seeming depth and breadth of his knowledge. He produces two or three videos a week, each one lasting up to an hour and sometimes even longer. “It has this veneer of being educational and informative while at the time hard-lining a conservative world view,” Jared Holt, who tracks the extremist right for People for the American Way, a liberal site, said in an interview.⁵¹

One of Molyneux’s most popular Facebook posts was a link to a YouTube video of his entitled, “Collapse of Germany/Merkel’s Failure.”⁵² It concerned her decision to admit large numbers of Muslim refugees. “Terrifying how quickly they are changing the culture through massive migration in such a short period,” commented one woman. “That heinous Bitch should be tried for treason.”

In a November 2017 YouTube video, Molyneux said Hillary Clinton grew overconfident during the 2016 campaign because she had the support of Hollywood, the mainstream media, immigrants from the Third World, and academics. He equated their support with cheating. “She pretty much thought she had it in the bag,” he said. “If there’s one thing that cheating does, it makes you lazy. It makes you lazy. Leftists have been cheating for a long time. When they took control of the education facilities and they started programming teachers to program kids on the leftist viewpoint. Half of the millennials want to live in a leftist country. So they programmed kids. They programmed young adults at universities by taking leftist control of faculties. They imported tens of millions of Third World voters who overwhelming voted for the left. They destroyed border controls in order to allow the flood of illegal immigrants into America, for which there is significant evidence that millions of them voted for the left in the last presidential election. They took a lot of foreign money.”⁵³ Some 67,000 people viewed the video.

Operating Outside of the Conservative Political Hierarchy

One distinctive feature of the alt-lite bloggers is that they operate outside of the conservative political hierarchy, unlike Limbaugh and such key Fox News hosts as Sean Hannity. The alt-lite bloggers “seem to be more of free agents, as opposed to being part of something that is more coordinated,” Hawley said in an interview. “Hannity and Limbaugh arrived on the scene when what conservatism stood for was well known. They became another cog in the conservative machine. Even a year after the election, Trumpism is distinct from traditional conservatism, but it doesn’t have internal coherence. Trumpism is still more an instinctive right-wing populism than a well thought-out mutually agreed-upon political philosophy. People like Molyneux—their task is to create some coherence and framework for a movement that got off the ground before it had ideological moorings. As far as I know, there’s no direct coordination between these types of figures and the White House. I suspect that Mitch McConnell [the Senate Majority Leader] has never heard of these people.”⁵⁴

Even though Molyneux typically pushes Trump’s narrative, Jared Taylor, an author and magazine editor who describes himself as an advocate of whites’ rights, warned against putting him in a pro-Trump box. “He’s more than a racial dissident,” Taylor said in an interview. “He’s very uninhibited in talking about sex or race differences. That willingness to break taboos is what makes his message attractive to so many people.”⁵⁵

The Anti-Defamation League, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and others have called Taylor a white supremacist. According to the book *Alt-America*, Taylor wrote in 2005 that “blacks and whites are different,” in describing the lessons from the slow recovery from Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. “When blacks are left entirely to their own devices, Western civilization—any kind of civilization—disappears.”⁵⁶

During a YouTube conversation with Molyneux, Taylor cited studies which purportedly show that whites are genetically smarter and less prone to crime than blacks. Molyneux agreed that racism did not hold back blacks. “If you start to say, ‘ok, it’s not racism in the police, it’s not poverty,’ then we get to two places that make people extremely uncomfortable,” Molyneux said. “And one of them is somewhat uncomfortable, and the other is thermonuclear uncomfortable. The somewhat uncomfortable one is the question of is there something self-destructive in black culture and perhaps its rage against this supposed edifice of white institutionalized racism? Is there something self-destructive in black culture? There’s a lot of data to support that insofar, for instance, as black families were doing much better in the 1950s when we can argue that racism was far higher. A: Is there something self-destructive in the black culture? B: Is there something biologically different between the races? Those two areas are such staggering landmines for people.”

Molyneux went on: “The data seems to be fairly conclusive that sub-Saharan African blacks have an IQ that is an average of 70, which is two standard deviations below the average for white Western Europeans and whites in North America. American blacks, because of a 20-25 percent admixture of European DNA have an IQ between sub-Saharan Africans and Europeans clocking in at about 85. From what I understand of the data, if you normalize by IQ, the vast majority of racial differences disappear.”⁵⁷ Molyneux didn’t follow up with a statement calling for a separation of the races, which reflects the distinction between someone in the alt-lite and the alt-right.

Molyneux’s decision to give Taylor a platform reflects an important finding of the Berkman Klein Center study: the extensive inter-linking of information throughout the conservative ecosystem. “As a function of the hierarchies in conservative media, the connectivity between the more established and less reputable sources runs in both directions, but the connections from the mainstream to the fringe sites are indirect and entail several hops,” the Berkman researchers found. “Fox News links to the Washington Examiner and the Daily Caller, which link to Breitbart. Breitbart links to the Gateway Pundit, which links to the Conservative Tribune and Truthfeed.”⁵⁸ This inter-linking gives followers of Fox News access to Gateway Pundit and vice-versa.

When Molyneux interviewed Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, in September 2017, Molyneux’s extremist followers had the opportunity to hear King’s anti-immigrant views and gave King a platform to reach them and those even further to the right that follow Molyneux.⁵⁹ “Figures like Stefan Molyneux can serve as a bridge between mainstream politics and the more radical alt-right,” Hawley said in an interview.⁶⁰

Alt-lite bloggers typically mimic Trump and accuse the mainstream media of being biased against them. The goal is to undermine or delegitimize news reports by mainstream outlets since many of those reports expose falsehoods, flip-flops, and possible criminal behavior by Trump and his administration. “These attacks have the dual benefit of ‘working the ref’—pushing traditional media to bend over backward to avoid being seen as partisan—while limiting the capacity of traditional journalism to fill its role as a neutral arbiter of the validity of fact-related claims, and inoculating the core target populations against corrective investigation and criticism,” the Berkman researchers wrote.⁶¹

In late 2017, Cernovich told followers on his Facebook page that he was undertaking a project that would help settle an important question. He called it “Hoax: The Media’s War on the Truth,” and said it would expose the difference between “what is real news and what is fake news.” He added, “Fake news created the greatest economic recession since the Great Depression. It causes wars, and it is now causing domestic terrorism in America.”⁶²

Molyneux and Watson made brief appearances in the venture’s trailer, with Watson saying about the mainstream news, “When they say fake news, that includes any reporting that contradicts their leftist narrative.”

Throughout 2017, Molyneux frequently used the #cancelcnn hashtag in his tweets. In one tweet, he wrote of CNN: “They’re not news, they are a blackmailing propaganda network.”⁶³

Molyneux favors linking to articles by Breitbart, which consistently promotes a pro-Trump and anti-Democratic and anti-liberal agenda. On Nov. 12, 2017, for example, Molyneux tweeted, “Alabama Polls: Judge Roy Moore Maintains Double Digit Lead Over Democrat Doug Jones Before, After WaPo Smear,” and he linked to his source, a Breitbart article that cited two polls without identifying who commissioned them.⁶⁴ On Nov. 13, mainstream news outlets reported an independent poll showing that Moore had lost his lead, but Molyneux ignored it.

Molyneux does trumpet breaking news by CNN, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* when these outlets further his narrative, although he’s loath to credit them. So Molyneux vigorously tweeted out the accusations that Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein had sexually abused women—a story first broken by *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*. Molyneux’s approach is consistent with a finding of the Berkman researchers: “The interest in center and center-left media is restricted to coverage there that reinforces the narratives in the Trump-centric media sphere: either stories that are supportive of Trump or critical of his opponents.”⁶⁵

Cernovich, Molyneux, Watson, and other alt-lite bloggers give every indication that they attack the mainstream media because that reflects their world view. But they also have an economic reason to do so: “This is a good business model for these YouTube stars—‘don’t get your news from the NYT, get it from us,’” Hawley said in an interview. “We’ll provide you with the real story.”⁶⁶

Added Jared Holt: “I waver back and forth on whether Molyneux is expressing his heart-felt beliefs or he’s catering to his cult fan base that is overwhelmingly right-wing. Some days I think he’s speaking his truth. Other days I wonder if he’s just figured out his audience and is playing to that.”⁶⁷ (Molyneux didn’t respond to repeated requests through email for an interview.)

Indeed, how Molyneux and the others earn a living is not clear. Cernovich peddles self-help books for men. He called a 2015 book: *Gorilla Mindset: How to Control Your Thoughts and Emotions and Live Life on Your Terms*. Cernovich advertises it at the top of his Twitter account and also on his YouTube account, which also shows a video of him hosting a seminar on the subject for which he presumably charged a fee. He also authored a book in 2017. It features a drawing of Trump on its cover and is entitled: *MAGA Mindset: Making YOU And America Great Again*.

Molyneux has also written a book that he advertises at the top of his Twitter account, *Western Civilization's Last Stand: The Art of the Argument*. He also encourages his listeners to send him donations, as he did in an October 2017 YouTube video in which he repeatedly contrasted his appeal to the news that hedge fund manager George Soros had donated \$18 billion to his Open Society Foundations, which push for human rights, democracy, and other causes in 120 countries, including the United States. Soros' efforts have made him a favorite punching bag of conservatives, including Molyneux, who referred to the foundations when he derisively said, "You know, open, like the open legs of a prostitute or an open-sucking chest wound."⁶⁸

Molyneux went on to make a plea for his own efforts. "I have an ability to conceptualize, verbalize, to stimulate, to provoke, and to get views. And I need your help do that," he said. "I don't need \$18 billion because I have the truth."

Molyneux did need \$10 or \$20 per month, he told his listeners. "I want to shake you and wake you," he said. "At this moment in extremity in the history of the world, we cannot afford to be indifferent. We cannot afford to do little things. We cannot afford to make tiny gestures. Whoever wants the world most gets the world."

The stakes couldn't be higher, Molyneux said, in an apocalyptic appeal designed to scare his followers into opening their wallets. "We're in a war," he said. "We cannot afford to fail."

Conclusion

The support that alt-lite bloggers have provided for Donald Trump has been especially important because, as the Berkman Klein Center study showed, many of his followers shun the mainstream media and get their news instead from the insular world of conservative digital media. This situation helps explain why Trump typically emerges no weaker from controversies that would sink any other politician. The alt-lite bloggers reinforce Trump's anti-establishment message and provide an alternative news source for his supporters. They have received much less attention than the white supremacists and white nationalists who support Trump—often called the "alt-right"—but the alt-lite bloggers have a far more extensive reach.

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