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## “WAKE-UP CALL FOR THE WHITE RACE”: HOW STORMFRONT FRAMED THE ELECTIONS OF OBAMA AND TRUMP\*

Anton Törnberg and Petter Törnberg<sup>†</sup>

*We investigate how users on a prominent forum for white supremacists interpreted and framed two seminal events for the far-right in the U.S., the elections of Obama in 2008 and Trump in 2016. These cases precipitated dramatic shifts in the far-right alliance and conflict structure. We combine computational methods and qualitative analysis on a corpus of over ten million posts on [Stormfront.org](http://Stormfront.org) to show how movement actors framed institutional changes and constructed them as opportunities for action. We highlight grassroots framing, the collective and contested bottom-up processes through which external events are framed and reframed by online activists and thus shaped into opportunities for action. Our research demonstrates how users shifted from framing Obama's election as a threat, to framing it as a “victory in disguise,” creating new opportunities for political action through extraparliamentary methods. Similarly, users framed Trump's election as creating possibilities for radical change through the established political system.*

January 6, 2021 saw the storming of the U.S. Capitol by a far-right mob, mobilized online and incited by the president whom they had four years earlier helped bring to power. This mob was part of a white supremacy movement that had gained its momentum as a counter-reaction to the 2008 election of Barack Obama, which provided the energy for—and was in turn emboldened by—the 2016 victory of Donald Trump. The January insurrection illustrates the importance of the complex interplay between online-mobilized far-right movements and mainstream politics; energized by political losses, and emboldened by victories, these online communities fuel their mainstream political counterparts with ideas, discourses, and energy. This interplay, however, constitutes a challenge for social movement research. Social movement scholars often emphasize that the way movements are influenced by shifts in political institutional reality is mediated by how these movements frame and interpret these shifts. This existing research has focused predominantly on traditional top-down movement organizations, with limited applicability to decentralized and bottom-up digitally mobilized movements.

This article examines the framing processes through which white supremacists on Stormfront.org, a leading forum for the extreme right, turned the 2008 and 2016 elections into opportunities that enabled them to grow into one of the most powerful contemporary political movements. These frames cannot be understood as merely strategic responses from central movement leadership but must be examined as a contentious discursive process. To theorize this, the article introduces the notion of *grassroots framing*, referring to the bottom-up processes of meaning making and collective negotiations that occur inside online movements. This notion describes the chaotic and emergent way in which a multiplicity of actors can produce frames to interpret political events, thus constituting an answer to Snow, Vliegenthart and Ketelaars's

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(2019) call for more theoretical and empirical attention to how framing intersects with the issues and processes accentuated by resource mobilization and political opportunity theories.

Stormfront constitutes a dominant hub for white supremacists across the globe: a space for ideological debate and discussions about strategies and tactics, but also for attracting new members to the movement. In this sense, the forum provides a unique window into a movement arena where the movement-internal process of contention and struggle over meaning occur. By combining computational methods and qualitative analysis on a unique corpus of almost ten million posts, the article traces the collective and contested bottom-up processes through which external events are framed and reframed. We show how the users shift from framing Obama as a tragic loss and a dangerous threat to their cause, to a “victory in disguise” that may increase race awareness, attract new members to the movement, and thus create new opportunities for political action. The election of Trump, on the other hand, led to a shift in the political strategies advocated, and an increasing belief in the possibilities of achieving radical change through the established political system.

We first elaborate on the notion of grassroots frames that captures the bottom-up processes of meaning making and collective negotiations that occur within movements. We then introduce the case of Stormfront.org and discuss how these types of online communities provide researchers with access to the inner life of movements. After describing our methodological approach that was inspired by computational grounded theory (Nelson 2020), we turn to the empirical analysis.

### GRASSROOTS FRAMING

In social movement scholarship, framing indicates a set of interpretative processes through which actors construct, maintain, and contest relevant meanings, beliefs, and ideologies (Alkon, Cortez and Sze 2013; Snow and Benford, 1988). According to this theory, movements do not mobilize against “objective” threats or take advantage of “objective” opportunities; rather, threats and opportunities pass through a process of social construction and attribution (Gamson and Meyer, 1996; Kurzman, 1996; McAdam and Tarrow 2019). Thus, to have any impact on political mobilization, objective social conditions need to be constructed—*framed*—as collectively shared problems.

These processes of interpretation and reality construction occurring within movements are seldom frictionless. Rather, they tend to be contestable, negotiable, and thus open to debate and differential interpretation. There are often disagreements and internal conflicts between individuals and factions regarding how to interpret an issue or social problem and what to do about it (Benford, 1993; Benford and Snow 2000). Such intramovement frame disputes typically concern different interpretations of reality—what is commonly referred to as *diagnostic frames*. This includes defining some event or aspect of social life as problematic, diagnosing the causes of the problem, and assigning blame. But conflicts also derive from disparate visions on prognostic measures. Such *prognostic frames* provide possible solutions to these problems and suggest what must be done. This may include a plan of attack and suitable strategies and tactics for carrying it out. In practice, there is often correspondence between diagnostic and prognostic frames, since defining the problem and suggesting solutions are often parts of the same process (Benford, 1987; Gerhards and Rucht, 1992).

Together, these functions provide a link between consensus mobilization and action mobilization (Klandermans, 1984). While diagnostic frames foster and facilitate agreement, prognostic (and motivational) frames foster action, thereby enabling activists to move from the balcony to the barricades (Benford and Snow 2000). A third important source of intramovement conflict concerns which framing *strategy* is most effective. As Benford (1993) states, this does not concern what *is* or *ought* to be real, but how reality should be presented. What framing strategy is most effective in order to get attention, attract sympathizers, and achieve movement goals? This is often conceptualized as *frame resonance*, and these strategic discussions often include tension or a difficult balance between ideological purity and opportunism.

Despite the widespread academic agreement that collective action frames should be seen as being subject to continuous reconstitution as part of social interaction within movement gatherings and campaigns, most empirical studies on the subject have been characterized by a top-down logic. By analyzing publicly available data such as newsletters, flyers, and pronouncements by leaders and protest organizers, studies have traditionally focused on how movement leadership present the movement to the public: how they frame events to attract sympathizers, convince the public, and motivate activists (Williams 2004). With the exception of Donatella della Porta (2006), who has studied individual activist frames, and Alison Alkon and colleagues (2013), Markus Hadler and Jeffrey McKay (2013) and Pauline Ketelaars (2015), who have studied frame (mis)alignment between movement organizations’ frames and how they are perceived by demonstrators, movement scholars have approached framing mainly from an organizational point of view.

As Oliver and Johnston (2000: 189) have noted, when the notion of a collective action frame is recast as an activity of movement leadership, “the interactive negotiations take a back seat to a one-way, top-down process. The sketch maps are drawn up by the leaders to be passed on to the grassroots.” A risk of treating framing as a top-down activity is that any potential cleavages between various actors within the movement are thereby neglected. Accordingly, what gets studied is a reconstructed image for the legitimization of political leaders, rather than the lived experiences of the movement and its participants. At best, this results in a unilateral focus on frame resonance, frame alignment, and the strategic aspects of frames, and at worst, what is studied is merely a misrepresentation of the movement by their leaders. This has led a number of scholars to call for more empirical studies on the collective negotiations and intramovement frame disputes inherent to the development of collective action frames (Castells 2015; Earl 2019; Johnston 2002; Lindekilde 2014; Snow et al. 2019; Steinberg, 1999). For instance, Schneider (2005: 164) has argued, “We need further study of intermediate processes, in particular those that explain how shifts in opportunity enter into the strategic calculations of individuals and/or organizations.”

In this article, we focus on *grassroots framing*, referring to the bottom-up process through which movement actors try to make sense of what is happening and decide what to do about it. In this sense, we do not see movement organizations as the “frame senders” and participants as “frame receivers.” Conventional frames, as typically presented by movement organizations, tend to be relatively consistent and integrated packages, polished to avoid contradictions and strategically designed to garner the support of politicians or to convince laypeople to become activists. In stark contrast, grassroots frames are not purposely designed for movement external purposes, but are part of an ongoing process that occur before frame crystallization. As such, grassroots frames are typically “frame embryos” or “half-cooked” frames that may contain fragments of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational elements, but seldom all of them at the same time. They tend to be fragmented and hesitant, even contradictory and provocative. They can be related to the distinction between internal and external frames (Benford, 1993), in the sense that they capture a process *by* and *for* movement actors, rather than products that are designed specifically to be disseminated to the media and broader public. They can also be related to the notion of individualist activist frames, with the potential difference that grassroots frames are collective and emergent processes, emerging through interaction and movement discussions, rather than being (necessarily) constructs by specific individuals. These unique characteristics of grassroots frames make them notoriously difficult to study as they are seldom delivered in single texts, as opposed to more conventional frames that can often be analyzed in speeches and movement texts.

Social media and Internet communities have emerged as arenas par excellence for these bottom-up processes of grassroots framing. Digital platforms have proven to be highly important for the growing far-right movement and now constitute important arenas for the dissemination of racist and extremist messages, as well as community building, recruitment, and mobilization (Wahlström and Törnberg 2019). This development has also opened up unique possibilities for empirical inquiry.

### STUDYING MOVEMENTS FROM WITHIN: THE CASE OF STORMFRONT

The examination of the contested, intramovement processes through which grassroots frames are developed and disputed requires access to the “inner life” of movements. While this historically has been a difficult task, often confined to time-consuming ethnographic studies, the advent of social media and digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and various Internet forums in recent decades has opened up unique possibilities for empirical inquiry. Stormfront.org, the focus of this study, is one of the longest-running online communities for the extreme right movement, particularly in the US. At the time of writing, Stormfront has, according to their own statistics, over 360,000 registered members and thirteen million posts. Guests to the forum typically outnumber registered users by a factor of fifty.

Stormfront began as a dial-up bulletin board founded by the former Ku Klux Klan leader Don Black in the mid-1990s. Black took classes in computer programming while serving a prison sentence for attempting to invade the Caribbean island of Dominica to oust its Black-run government and establish a “White state” (Bell 2009). By March 1995, that service evolved into Stormfront. Stormfront grew rapidly and parts of its success was that it was one of the first white supremacist sites based on web 2.0 technology, allowing member participation and content creation. The forum was early in implementing various social functions, such as smileys, possibility to see members birthdays, essay contests with \$2000 awards. This created a sense of community and motivated members to stay active on the forum. The forum grew rapidly in the early 2000s and has, over the years, hosted several notable White supremacists, such as Thom Robb, National States Rights Party founder, Edward Fields, and former KKK leader David Duke.

While several other extremist online platforms are constantly springing up, including Gab, 8kun, and Parler, Stormfront remains one of the most important and long-lived platforms for white supremacists across the globe: a space for ideological debate, planning upcoming activities, and holding open discussions about strategies and tactics. The forum consists of many subforums including News, Ideology and customs, Events, Strategy and tactics, Stormfront summits, and also specific subforums for international members.

In theoretical terms, Stormfront can be conceptualized as a digitally enabled *alternative space* (Cassegård 2014) or an online *movement community* (Buechler 1990) for the extreme right, comprising a “safe space” where white supremacists may preserve racist and anti-Semitic narratives and build virtual social solidarity and a sense of community, shielded from what they perceive as the hegemonic ideologies of mainstream society (Simi and Futrell 2015). As such, Stormfront makes up a particularly suitable case for accessing and studying the “submerged” or “latent” phases of movements: the inner workings and processes where alternative values, discourses, and practices are generated, negotiated, and enacted (Melucci, 1996). This enables a systematic and method-based empirical analysis of framing processes as collective phenomena. We thus contribute by counterbalancing the predominant bias in the literature that paints framing as a meso-level phenomenon and general neglects the microlevel of individual constituents.

### METHODS AND DATA

We acquired the research data by scraping Stormfront.org, using custom-made web crawlers. The full corpus consists of 360,122 members, 10,172,069 posts, and 936,740 threads from 2000 to 2020. Inspired by computational grounded theory (Nelson 2020), we analyze these vast amounts of data through two main methodological steps. The aspiration is to combine human knowledge and hermeneutic skills with the processing power and pattern recognition of computers, thus constituting a methodologically rigorous interpretive approach to content analysis.

The first step focuses on pattern detection and involves inductive exploratory analysis. Computer-assisted text analysis is useful to deal with large quantities of texts, and to find linguistic patterns that can only be detected when studying text at a scale. Many documents only contain bits and pieces of arguments and discourses small but systematic tendencies that may not be

visible to the naked eye (Törnberg and Törnberg 2016). These methods also help researchers avoid potential biases and the natural volatility that comes with reading large bodies of text.

To explore variations in the emotions expressed among the members after each election, we employed comparative sentiment analysis to uncover distinctive emotional words. Based on log-likelihood, we calculated the most overrepresented emotionally charged words to comparatively distinguish one subcorpus from the other (e.g., Liu, Hu and Cheng 2005). In addition, we used word embedding (word2vec) to study variations in the construction of out-groups on the forum. Word embedding is a set of language modeling techniques where words are mapped to vectors of real numbers in such a way that words with similar meaning have a similar representation (Goldberg and Levy 2014). In other words, it aims to quantify and categorize semantic similarities between linguistic items based on their distributional properties in large samples of language data. These computational methods were run on the full corpus, unless otherwise stated.

As a second step, we supplemented the quantitative analysis with interpretative engagement and qualitative deep reading. The purpose is to confirm the plausibility of the patterns that were identified in the quantitative analysis, add interpretation to the analysis, and potentially reach toward explaining some of the discovered patterns. This step can be conceptualized as a type of computationally guided deep reading.

As discussed, grassroots frames are typically fragmented, amorphous, and prone to change over time. Since they typically do not comprise coherent packages that can be easily quantified and measured, this makes them notoriously difficult to operationalize quantitatively. This makes qualitative analysis necessary, but it also puts certain demands on the analytical procedure. For instance, we cannot expect to find explicit and coherent diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational elements of frames in single posts. Instead, this may require a more deliberate search effort.

Inspired by Ketelaars and colleagues (2017), we therefore examined the congruence of the content of the posts—the underlying idea or argument—of what is said. As a first step of the qualitative analysis, we created a subcorpus by selecting all posts containing the terms “Obama” or “Trump” over a two-week period following each election. These periods were selected because they contained the most relevant and topical discussions and made the corpus more manageable. This resulted in a subcorpus of 2,759 posts after the election of Obama and 2,186 after the election of Trump. The posts were chronologically ordered to facilitate temporal analyses.

Aided by the software Nvivo, we analyzed the posts using an inductive approach with open coding, followed by a process of categorization and comparison of the established codes (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Narrowing the analysis entailed identifying frames and frame components. Each frame component is an argument, a meaningful bit of text or statement about an event, problem, solution, and who is to blame. These frame components may be more or less coherent and developed. Posts containing multiple frame components were double-coded, meaning that we included their immediate discursive context, thus creating a relationship between these frame components.

We then used social network analysis to illustrate the relationship between frame components. This generated a discursive network that illustrated how frame components are connected to each other, forming clusters. Analyzing these clusters allowed us to identify the underlying logic uniting them, which we conceptualize as a type of frame. Accordingly, the analysis below focuses both on analyzing frame components and looking at the underlying frames that permeate these components. This relational approach using social network analysis is in itself a methodological contribution to framing analysis.

To study shifts in movement strategies (prognostic frames) following the election, we constructed another subcorpus by selecting all posts within these two subcorpora containing “we should/must/need.” We then divided this subcorpus into two periods: (1) within three days after each election (Obama: 126 posts, Trump: 135 posts), (2) within three months (Obama: 669 posts, Trump: 769). This provides us with a more dynamic account of framing, enabling us to capture both immediate reactions but also more strategic reflections developing over time.

The article follows the ethical guidelines recommended by Internet Research Ethics 3.0. To ensure both anonymity for the users and safety for the researchers, usernames and other highly

identifiable information were removed in the process of constructing the corpus. Furthermore, the focus of the analysis lies on broader discursive patterns, and individual quotes were slightly modified to prevent tracing to any individual user.

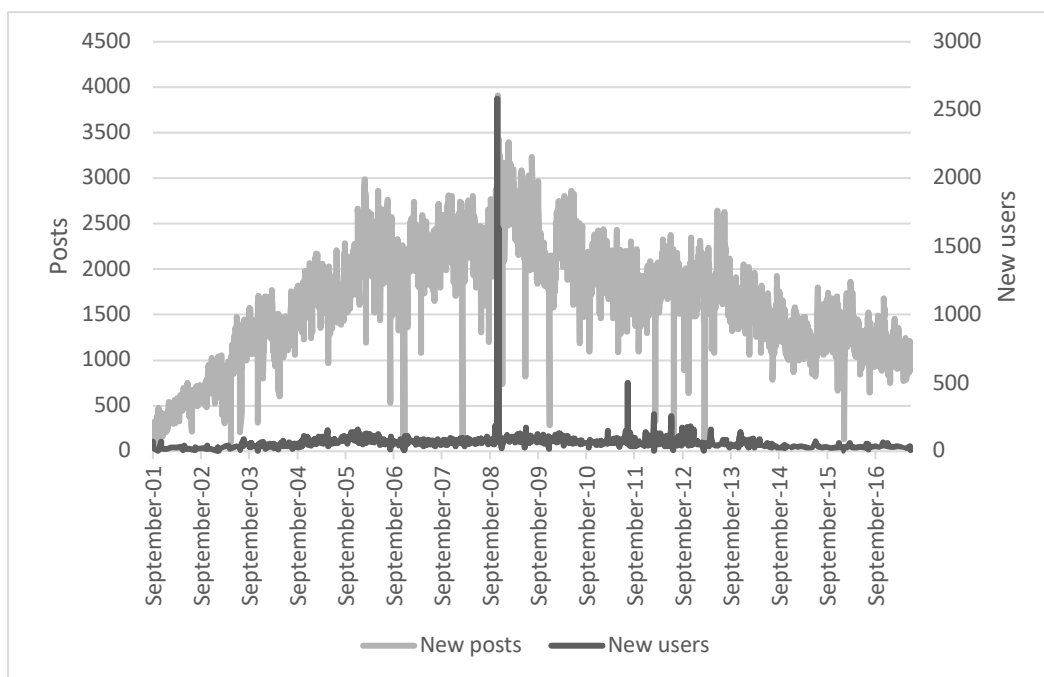
## FINDINGS

Stormfront is largely based in the U.S. and has many users from the American South. There are also specific subforums dedicated to users from other countries, such as South Africa, Russia, and Hungary. While English is by far the dominant language, representing 88.6% of the posts, there are a relatively large number of posts in other languages, such as Dutch (2.8%), Italian (1.8%), and Spanish (1.3%). The forum is moderated and has certain behavioral guidelines against the use of profanity, racial slurs, or personal attacks, with the aim that the forum should “give off an air of general respectability.” As a result, the forum contains comparably few blatant and explicit racist expressions, compared to other platforms (Kaati et al. 2019). It is also noted that the average age of users is relatively high and has increased from thirty-one in 2001 to forty-two in 2016.

We start with a statistical overview of user activity on Stormfront over time. Figure 1 shows that the Obama election sparked a remarkable increase in the number of posts and newly registered users on the forum. The day after the election alone saw the single highest number of new users in the history of the forum (2581 new users on November 5, 2008). In line with this, Google Trends shows a dramatic increase in Google searches on “Stormfront forum” in November 2008—of which, most activity occurred the day of the election. Most domestic Google searches originated from West Virginia, Arkansas, Oregon, New Mexico, and various other southern states, while most international searches originated from Serbia, Croatia, Great Britain, and Macedonia.

Statistical analysis shows that the increase in user activity after Obama in 2008 was driven partly by newly registered members, but the election also incited previously registered members to post for the first time. By contrast, the reelection of Obama in 2012 and the election of Trump 2016 had a limited impact on user activity. The numbers of new members and posts remained relatively stable during these periods, and for all previous presidential elections since 2001.

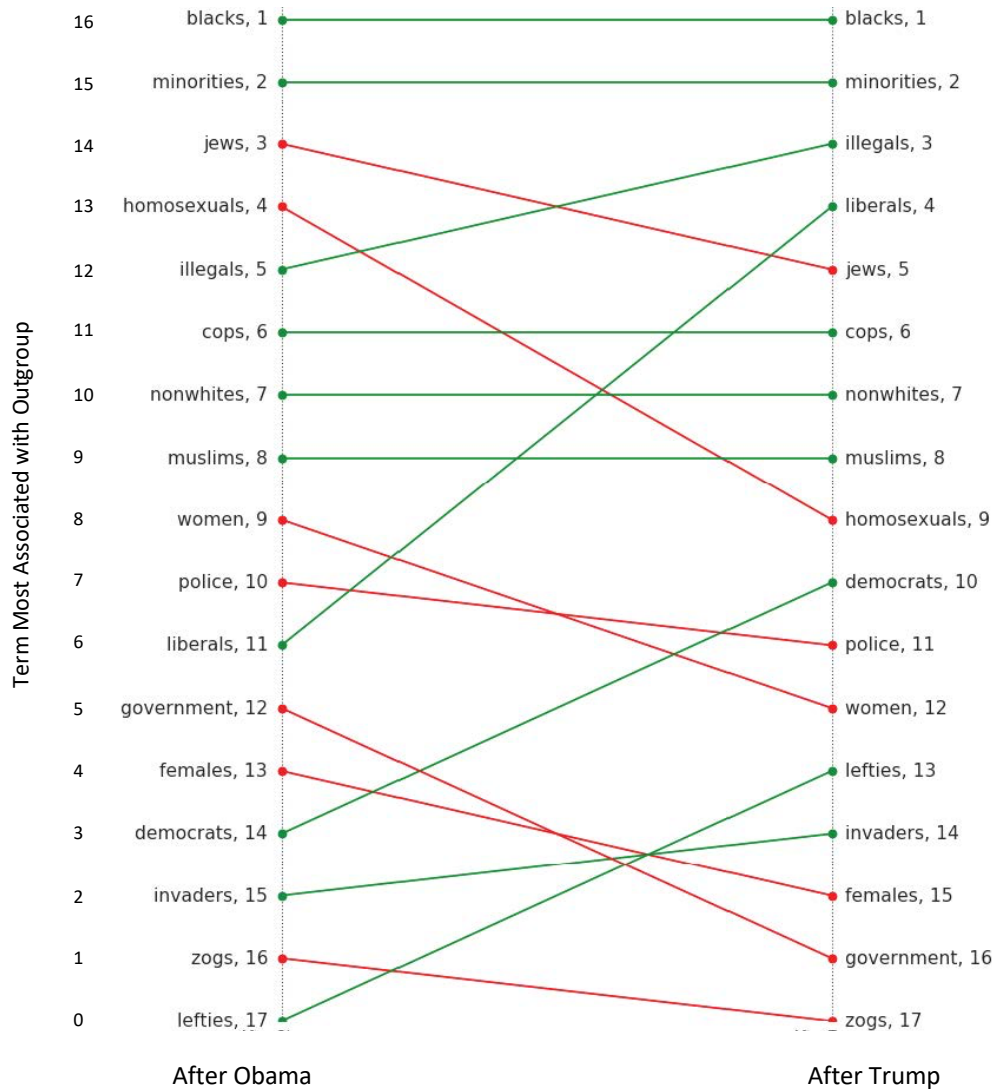
**Figure 1.** User Activity on Stormfront: Number of Posts and Newly Registered Users.







**Figure 3.** “The Other” Six Months after the Elections of Obama in 2008 and Trump in 2016: Out-Groups Illustrated by Using Word2vec on a Corpus of Posts

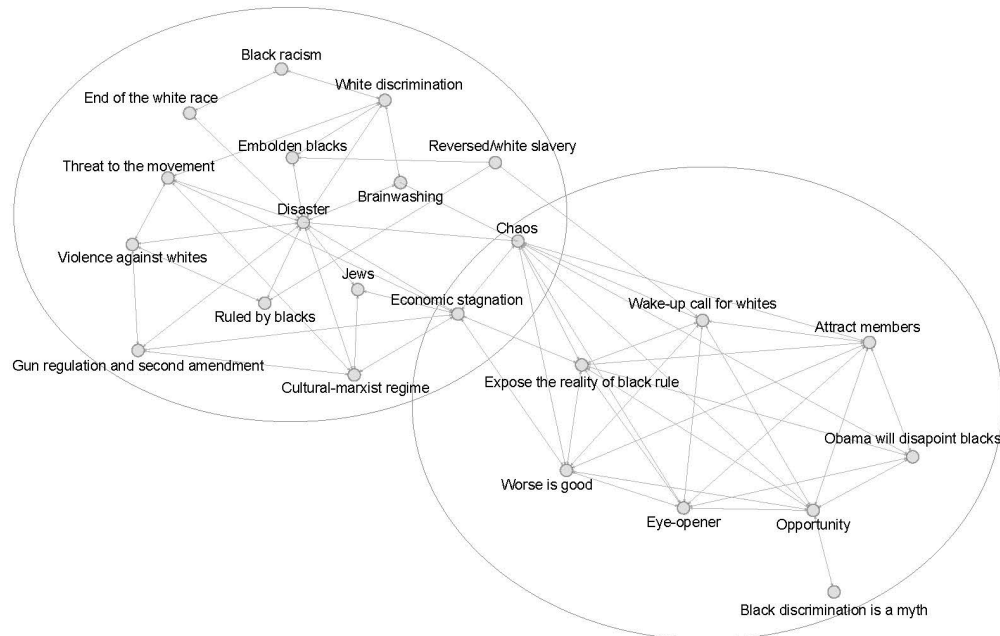


*Note:* To analyze the conception of “them” in these materials, the word-embedding space was projected on a line spanned between the average of a selection of words associated with “us” (“we,” “us,” “our,” “ours,” “ourself,” “ourselves,” “ally,” “allies,” “hero,” “heroes”) and “them” (“they,” “them,” “their,” “theirs,” “themselves”) (see e.g., Kozlowski et al. 2019). This essentially positions words on a line between “us” and “them,” thereby revealing who is conceived of as the in-group and out-group, respectively. The first 200 words most closely associated with “them” were manually filtered for nouns describing groups.

**DIAGNOSTIC FRAMES AFTER THE ELECTION OF OBAMA IN 2008**

Figure 4 shows a network of frame components within two weeks after the election. As we will see in the analysis below, there are two main, overarching and contrasting clusters of components that each represent a broader, underlying frame. The first cluster depicts President Obama as a highly destructive development in the country, a national disaster that will lead to chaos, whereas the second takes a different approach by framing the election as a unique opportunity for the movement.

**Figure 4.** Network of Frame Components in Posts within Two Weeks after Obama’s Election 2008



Note: The nodes represent frame components, and the ties represent overlaps of the frame components within posts. The posts were manually coded in Nvivo, and the network visualization was created using Gephi.

*Obama as a Structural Threat*

Qualitative analysis confirms that discussions were dominated by strong emotional reactions, particularly in the first few days following the election. Many users expressed frustration, desperation, and hopelessness. As one user concisely put it, “This country is finished. This empire, this civilization, this culture. . . . I don’t honestly believe there are nearly enough people who are, or ever will be willing to fight for its survival.” This depiction of the Obama presidency as a threat is then further elaborated in the following days and weeks. Many users argue that *chaos* will ensue, as “negro rule” will drive American cities to become “crime-ridden, bankrupt slums.” One user predicts “Black violence going totally unpunished, rampant miscegenation, and Whites being put into subservient position. These things were already occurring before, but they will probably reach unprecedented levels.” There is even a discussion thread for “doomsday prepping,” consisting of a long list of various “necessary” items and preparations “in case of disaster,” including food, water, and rifles.

The framing of President Obama as a threat is expressed in both racial and economic terms—both of which are dimensions of structural threats that tend to be prominent in social movement discourse (Almeida 2019). In the former category are various posts describing the election as a victory for Blacks. Obama’s presidency is thus argued to further *embolden Blacks* and to contribute to spurring Black violence against Whites. As one user states:

Power is slipping away more and more from good, honest, hardworking people. An undeclared war on Whites across the country has started. Negro pride is soaring, along with gay pride. It’s only a matter of time before they start burning churches until the gov. gives in to their demands.

As evident in this post, there are also traces of a closely related and common frame component describing the election as a historical turning point, representing the start of *white slavery*. Word frequency analysis confirms that the terms “slave” and “slavery” spikes during the day of the election (a 50% increase compared to the average during the two prior weeks), and indignant and

ironic posts describe how Blacks once came as slaves, but have now progressed to having the most powerful position in the world: “You didn’t hear? Whites are expected to report to the cotton fields at 8:00 sharp tomorrow morning.” The fact that white men are now being ruled by a Black man awakened feelings of indignation and fury among these users: “For years, we’ve suffered the existence of Blacks, living among us as humans. Now, we’ll suffer the indignity of being ruled by one of them; being ruled by an inferior being.” Many users take this one step further, framing the election as the *end of the White race*—either through “race mixing” or through replacement and suppression/subjugation.

The framing of Obama as a threat is also expressed in economic terms, often as representing the establishment of a *Marxist-socialist regime*. Obama is thus alternately portrayed as a “Jewish socialist,” a “liberal socialist Muslim,” and perhaps most commonly, a “cultural Marxist.” Along these lines, users describe how Obama’s “Semitic communism” with “socialized medicine,” “redistributed wealth,” “taxation of the rich,” and increased governmental regulation will lead to *economic stagnation*.

### *Obama as an Opportunity*

As the immediate affections started to settle on the forum, a competing narrative emerged describing the election in more positive terms—as providing a “window of opportunity” or “wake-up call” for Whites. The notion of Obama as a structural threat is thus transformed and reconstructed as a unique opportunity for the movement to mobilize.

Activists promoting this narrative agreed that the Obama presidency will lead to chaos (as shown in figure 4, this frame component links to both clusters), but frame this as an emerging opportunity for the movement.

I think we should see this as more of an opportunity to change the world in which we live for the better. Maybe this is a new chance to recruit and spread our message faster and further than ever before. Remember, things will get much worse before they begin to get better and Obama might speed this process for us.

Some users even go as far as hoping for *more* radical liberal reforms, and that Obama will be reelected for a second term:

There will be a comeuppance and I am telling you that WORSE is better. Pray that it falls apart—so we can rebuild! May Obama rule the nation for 2 terms and not just 1! May Obama get every law passed that he wants to pass. May he get his way in EVERYTHING that he wants to do! Long live Obama!

The framing of Obama as an opportunity is manifested and expressed in various ways. One example is that it will reveal that *Black discrimination is a myth* and that the notion of White guilt is based on false premises. “That argument is now null and void. A Black(half) man has proved that a Black(half) man can become President of the USA and now they can’t blame ‘Whitey’ for everything that goes wrong in America in the next four years. . . . I might like this Black President thing after all.” A closely related notion is that Obama’s presidency will *expose the consequences of Black rule*. His failure will thus illustrate the “inferiority of the Black race.” As one user puts it: “I’m not in the least bit angry that Obama was elected. I want to see him disappoint all of his believers and live up to everyone’s worst fears. I don’t want the happy illusion of a White President, I want the disastrous reality of Black rule and open racial conflict.”

The underlying idea consolidating this cluster of frame components is that the threat of Obama will serve as a *wake-up call* or an *eye-opener* for White people, increasing racial awareness and contributing to racial polarization, thereby serving as a catalyst for radical change. This will, it is argued, ultimately serve to *attract more people to the cause* and to Stormfront. Along these lines, users frequently draw parallels to the *Turner Diaries*, a novel that describes how liberal and gun reforms sparked a resistance movement in the US that eventually led to a violent revolution and race war.

This may be a true wakeup call for the White race. White people who might have voted for a negro in the past, now are saying they WILL now vote along racial lines. The very fact that the Stormfront server was overwhelmed since the election bodes well for this movement. I've never seen it do that before!

### PROGNOSTIC FRAMES AFTER THE ELECTION OF OBAMA

The election of Obama in 2008 also affected the prominent solutions—prognostic frames—promoted by activists on the forum. Looking specifically at the posts containing “we should/must/need,” there are two main categories of prognostic frames emerging after the election—both of which represent typical reactions to an imminent threat. Driven by hopelessness and frustration, one response is to *emigrate*. As one user puts it: “Many of us believe there is no political solution to the question of White survival, therefore leaving America is a logical option for young Whites.” Another reaction is calling for the need to unite as a movement: to “keep strong,” “not be discouraged,” “stay together,” “unite as a people,” “get organized,” and “don’t give up.” “Our race is dying by the day. It’s not the time to play stupid games. We need each other now more than ever and we need to put petty differences aside.” Many activists also encourage each other to brace for increasing political repression and “prepare for that pro-Caucasian sites like this might be shut down.” Some users even call for arming themselves and to “get your gun out of storage.”

However, as the Obama presidency becomes reframed as an opportunity rather than a threat, the focus shifts to emphasizing the need to adapt movement strategies to make the best of the situation. Consequently, we may discern an emerging theme composed of more reflexive and self-critical posts calling to reconsider established strategies and methods within the movement. As one user expresses: “We need to get organized because we cannot just react to situations. We need to organize, plan, act and react. We need to lead or race to the forefront and get back what is ours.” Looking at the long-term discussions during the three months after the election, two main conflicting frames emerge concerning how the movement should reassess its political strategies during the Obama presidency: either to *fight against the system* or to *fight within the system*.

#### *Fight the System*

This frame conveys widespread skepticism against the idea of achieving radical change within the established political system: “We cannot win by the ballot box.” Some users have completely given up hope in the established political system after Obama and instead advocate more dramatic changes in terms of “turning the system on its head”: “We need a war, and we need it NOW.” While a political revolution is indeed an end goal many users on the forum subscribe to, there is broad consensus on the forum that this is not realistic for the time being. A more common strategy is therefore to advocate for the creation of autonomous communities, i.e., some kind of free spaces that “depart from old social rules” and prefigure the types of structures they wish to see. In other words, “a model community,” or a “Stormfront of the streets.” This is often discussed in terms of creating autonomous geographical territories by buying up land. Some activists advocate the creation of cultural or discursive spaces (e.g., book clubs, White schools). These types of free spaces are portrayed as vital not only to preserve and develop their own culture and race identity, but also to spread their values outside of these protected communities and attract the support of, for example, former Republican white voters. This recalls how the social movement literature often emphasize the role of “free social spaces” and “cultural havens” in fostering the development of collective identity and oppositional culture in progressive movements (e.g., Evans 1979; Fraser 1990).

#### *Fight Within the System*

The second main prognostic frame takes a radically different approach, advocating instead to fight within the system. This idea often co-occurs with the diagnostic frame that presents Obama as a wake-up call that will radicalize the Republican grassroots and enforce White identity within

the Republican Party. “The atmosphere in the grass roots is getting to a point where our people are choking and grasping for fresh air. Time to present it.” In a much-discussed post on the forum, former KKK leader David Duke presents two alternative political routes within this frame that came to define the subsequent discussions: “We will either take the Republican Party back over the next four years or we will say, ‘To Hell With the Republican Party!’ And we will take 90 percent of Republicans with us into a New Party that will take its current place!” This issue divides many users and sparks intense debate regarding whether to create a new White nationalist party or rebuild the Republican party and radicalize it from below.

Along these lines, there is a broadly shared realization among many users that, to “attract average White folks” and channel existing public discontent against Obama into the movement, they must polish their public image. This represents a type of *frame alignment* in the sense that activists argue for changing their appearance in accordance to the mainstream, play down the most radical aspects of their ideology, and avoid explicit references to Stormfront and other racist organizations, a process that resembles the strategy used by the KKK in the 1970–80s: “We need to make WNs [White nationalists] respectable and attractive to the moderate middle class White America, we need to wear coats and ties instead of military uniforms.”

To sum up thus far, the analysis has revealed a tension between two contrasting diagnostic frames on how to interpret and make sense of the election of Obama in 2008, each based on a converse logic that can be expressed as “worse is worse” versus “worse is better.” These are in turn connected with two corresponding prognostic frames advocating to either “fight within the system” or “fight outside or against the system.” As we will see in the next section, these frames reappear in discussions after the election of Trump in 2016, although an interesting shift occurs.

### DIAGNOSTIC FRAMES AFTER THE ELECTION OF TRUMP IN 2016

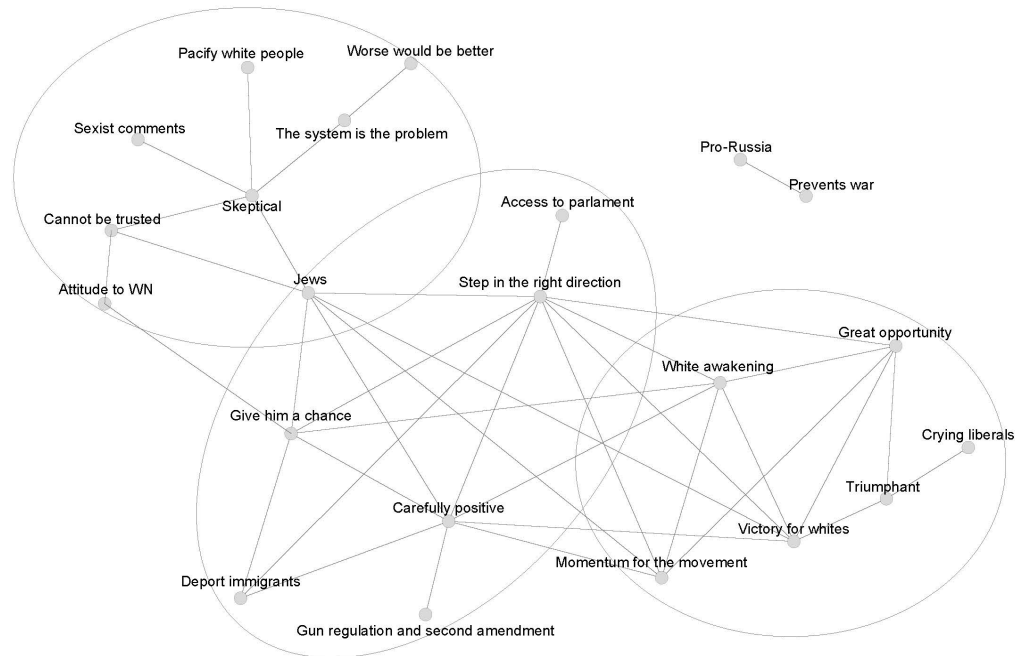
While Obama was, at least initially, framed as a threat creating a sense of urgency and outrage among white supremacists, the election of Trump in 2016 was initially framed as an opening in the political institutional system. Although this election, as previously noted, did not have any significant effects in terms of user activity, it is clear that optimism and anticipation prevailed during the first few days after the election (see figure 2b above).

Looking closer at the discussions during the first few days, there are an abundance of *triumphant and celebratory* posts framing the election as an important victory for the white race and white nationalist movement. These posts are combined with malicious comments about *snowflakes and crying liberals* and ironic calls to the celebrities that took a public stance against Trump to do as promised and emigrate from the USA. In the discussions during the two weeks to come, we may discern three prominent approaches to Trump on the forum (See figure 5). While the first two are mainly positive, framing the election as a “turn around” or at least as a “step in the right direction,” the third takes a more critical stance.

#### *Trump Presidency as a Great Victory*

In the more optimistic camp, Trump’s presidency is framed as a *great opportunity* and turnaround for the movement: “It will be a major deterrent and a symbol that they are not as welcome as they thought they once were. The illegals will roam streets and be reported and arrested. The wall will inspire patriotism in several Whites. This election has been a turnaround for us.” There is a broadly shared belief that the Trump presidency will lead to radical and large-scale changes regarding a range of issues like immigration policies, taxes, gun regulation, and education. Similar to the election of Obama in 2008, the Trump presidency is framed in racial terms, but this time as a *victory for whites*. “TRUMP WON! Just goes to show you that when the White Working Class turns out to vote they can still swing an election!” While Obama was argued to incite racial awareness among Whites, the election of Trump is thus framed as the result of such a *white awakening*. In other words, according to this narrative, white people were

**Figure 5.** Network of Frame Components in Posts within Two Weeks After Trump’s Election 2016.



empowered by Obama, but emboldened by Trump. As one user expressed it, Trump is seen as “essentially the voice of disempowered, disenfranchised, displaced, ignored White Americans who are rapidly losing the civilization and nation White Americans created.”

#### *A Step in the Right Direction*

A second cluster of frame components expresses slightly more cautious and guarded—but nonetheless *carefully positive*—attitudes. While Trump is not seen as “one of us,” he nonetheless represents a “tiny ray of light in the filthy blackness of liberalism.” This is expressed in various calls to “bide our time and sit tight” and to “see what he does.” This is often accompanied with doubts about whether he will actually deliver on his promises and calls for the movement to remain vigilant. “I really want to believe he is legit. To believe the rare off chance that he isn’t a puppet, is hard but it would be great. We as citizens must remain vigilant.” Thus, while Trump is not seen as a permanent solution or as representing any dramatic change, he is nonetheless framed as one small *step in the right direction*. By providing the movement some respite, he offers “breathing room” that makes it easier to organize and show what is possible.

We all went into this election knowing that Trump is not, nor ever will be a WN let alone the 21<sup>st</sup> century Hitler. Trump is far from what the ideal WN candidate could ever be. . . . But I do believe he can accomplish most of what we want, but it will be very difficult. We have to wait and see.

With this reasoning, many activists emphasize that Trump will, at minimum, pursue a number of practical policy actions in line with the interests of the movement, such as *deporting immigrants* and thwarting any attempts of *gun regulation*. While he may not be seen as the answer to all problems, “he is at least better than the alternative.” As one user aptly expresses, “I say support him but keep your guns loaded.”

### *Trump Cannot Be Trusted*

A third cluster expresses more critical attitudes to the Trump presidency, claiming that the election constitutes a “double-edged sword” that risks contributing to *pacifying White people*. Interestingly, this represents a return of the “worse is better” narrative in the claim that the *system is the problem*, and therefore, the Trump presidency is at best a “bump in the road” or, at worst, “part of the cancer, but more subtle.” As one user expresses:

I don't put much stock on Trump delivering all his promises. The System itself is the problem. It has to go, and be rebuilt from the ground up to suit the needs of the White majority not Jewish [sic] globalist political crime syndicates. . . . I've always said that we aren't going to win this thing by voting.

Following this reasoning, some users call for others to stop supporting Trump or encouraging people from believing that the system can be reformed from within. In this sense, Trump is framed as a larger threat than Obama, since he is merely a “mediocre civic nationalist who will plunge in deeper sleep our awakening siblings!” What is needed is, as one user claims: “extreme polarization in every aspect of our lives to awaken the majority of the White people.”

Overall, the discussions that take place during the two weeks after the election can be described as a struggle between positive and skeptical users. As illustrated in the overlap of frame components in figure 5, there are two main reasons for this division. The first concerns Trump's alleged connections to *Jews*, where critical users frame him as a Jewish puppet based on his positive stance toward Israel, having selected Jews for central positions in the administration, and having Jews in his family. While acknowledging this, more positive users accentuate that it “could be worse,” and that “he is at least independent.” A second source of conflict concerns Trump's public *attitudes toward white nationalists*. The discussions go back and forth between those arguing that since he is not a white nationalist, he “cannot be trusted,” and others defending his position by arguing that public support for white nationalists would be political suicide.

Altogether, the friction between the “worse is better” and “better is better” frames is still prominent on the forum after Trump, but the latter frame seems to have now gained traction. By framing Trump as an opportunity that provides momentum for the movement, both positive and more cautious users adhere to this underlying frame. Accordingly, the “worse is better” frame that dominated the discussions after Obama is now less common, and in fact, many activists now appear explicitly critical to this strategy, pointing to its potential risks:

America has no nationalist party and has a rapidly increasing non-White population. I don't think there's enough time to employ the ‘worse is better’ strategy there. As such I can't see the harm Trump being elected can really bring in this situation.

### **PROGNOSTIC FRAMES: TOWARD INSTITUTIONALIZATION**

As the “better is better” frame dominates the discourse after Trump, users also tend to be more positive toward the idea of achieving change through the means of the political system. This explains the shift we saw in figure 3 indicating that users overall seem to become less skeptical toward the government and established political institutions after Trump. When looking closer at posts containing “we should/must/need,” there is a broadly shared view among the users that Trump's presidency has served to legitimize the movement and open (discursive) space within the established political system to air ideas that were previously banned and stigmatized: “We should be peaceful and solve our problems through the ‘system,’ abiding by all the laws, and setting examples such that we become role models for everyone to emulate.” Thus, as the crisis in political representation settles, the idea of creating a third political party also wanes.

The election of Trump has legitimized many of our ideas and thoughts within the Republican Party. It is now possible for WN’s, pro-Whites to express themselves politically under the umbrella of the Republican Party without being automatically tarred as an outsider/nut. Just be smart and careful with the language you use. The name of the game is power, and now is the perfect time to get involved in the political struggle for the future of Whites in the US.

Both the quantitative and qualitative analysis thus suggest that users on the forum now seem increasingly geared toward institutionalization, and the idea of achieving change outside the system is now less often expressed. As part of this trend toward institutionalization, the main task and role of the movement thus appears to shift, as Trump is seen as an entrance to political power. The general political strategy now is to “connect ourselves to as many centers of power as possible while excluding our enemies from those same centers.” This is also evident in that activists start to reformulate the goals of the movements, increasingly defining their role and function in relation to the government—their tasks are to “influence Trump,” to “push him to the right,” and—commonly—to be “fire to his feet.” Interestingly, these comments are often interwoven with an implicit or explicit skepticism against Trump, claiming that “he cannot be fully trusted” and that “he is not one of us.” Therefore, the movement must remain “constantly vigilant” and “make sure he delivers.” For instance, as two users express: “We must make certain he carries out his two MOST important campaign promises. Build The Wall and round up millions of illegals. Otherwise all hell will break loose,” and “We must keep Trumps feet to the fire. When not if but when he turns on us. We must be ready.”

By embedding a system-positive approach in critical terms in this way, it can be interpreted as a type of counterframing—a way of neutralizing the arguments from the “worse is better” frame regarding the potential risks associated with institutionalization. A related and common strategy is to accentuate the agency of the movement. In other words, the opportunity provided by Trump lies not in the fact that he himself will contribute to radical change, but rather, that he will contribute by creating a space for the movement to mobilize and pursue its own agenda. Accordingly, there are frequent calls to “use the momentum,” “step up,” “take a leading role,” and “not trust that the government will do it for us.”

My dear fellow Stormfront members, Trump won, now what? Do we go back to sleep as we did during the Reagan years allowing him to give amnesty to 3 million illegal invaders? . . . No! Do we take a back seat and reach out an olive branch to the traitorous cucks who have worked to destroy our country and our very existence? No! The time to be aggressive and proactive is NOW. We may never have another chance like this in our lifetimes! This is only the beginning of a new bright and glorious future for our people!

## CONCLUSION

Social media not only brings about a shift in the lives of social movements, but the data produced by social media platforms also affords researchers a new view into these lives. By making use of these data, this article contributes an empirical examination of the negotiated and contentious construction of threats and opportunities among users on Stormfront.org. This inside perspective reveals the collective negotiations around competing versions of reality that precede frame crystallization—what we here have referred to as “grassroots frames.” This refers to the bottom-up processes through which movement actors themselves attempt to make sense of dramatic events and unravel what implications these have for the movement.

We found that the discursive creation of opportunity was a consistent key driver of the framing process, that is, the process was aimed at the identification of an optimistic interpretation. The framings that gained traction in the discussions were those that constituted effective responses to questions such as, “How can we frame this event as positive and empowering for our movement?” and “What openings for political action can we find here?” This provides empirical support for Gamson and Meyer’s observation (1996) that activists tend to favor frames that are positive for the cause, in the sense that they create a role for the move-



ment and opportunities for action. Movement actors thus bend, reformulate, recontextualize, and narrativize events to make them appear beneficial for the movement's opportunities; they try to create ways forward. For instance, the presidential election of Obama in 2008 was by many users initially described as a disaster—but over time, users on the community increasingly converted on a framing in which this disaster was a good thing: it was transformed into a great opportunity that may increase race awareness, attract activists, and serve as a wake-up call for whites that could trigger further mobilization; in other words, a diagnostic framing based on a “worse is better” logic.

The election of Trump in 2016, on the other hand, was described as a good thing for the movement. Accordingly, the “worse is better” frame was increasingly replaced by a “better is better” frame, describing Trump as providing an important opening for the movement by bringing hope, increasing momentum, and showing what is possible. In a similar vein, the election of Trump led to a shift in political strategies: from advocating the extraparliamentary methods that dominated after Obama to an increasing belief in the possibilities of achieving radical change through the established political system. This means that what is sometimes presented as a contradiction in the literature on political opportunities is in fact coherent: *both* openings and closures of political opportunities can be empowering to movements, given that the movements invest the necessary discursive labor. When *bad is good*, and *good is good*, everything can become empowering. Rather than harmonious and consensual, this takes place through a dialectical process, fraught with conflict, hazards, and fragility, as different movement actors are fighting it out over how to frame and understand the opportunities and challenges of a changing reality.

It was this empowered and emboldened movement that reacted to Trump's 2020 election loss, driving a militant response that led all the way to the U.S. Capitol. In a thread from January 2, named “What will happen on January 6<sup>th</sup>,” users planned and discussed the events of the coming date. This new closure of opportunities, as represented by the lost election, seems to have created an explosive brew, as one user puts it, “Enough talk. I love stormfront but the time for talk is over. Time to fight.”

To conclude, this article has introduced the notion of grassroots frames and presented a methodological approach for their study. These types of collective and decentralized processes of meaning making are arguably central to understanding the process of coordinating and organizing protest mobilization on digital platform, an issue that is likely to be of continued significance. But the article has also revealed certain limitations that may constitute directions for further research. One interesting topic for future studies concerns the relationship between a movement's grassroots and leadership: how do movement leaders who are public with their identity on Stormfront, such as Don Black, influence the discussions? Their influence can also be compared with informal or “backstage leaders” on the forum, e.g., members with “high reputation”: a measure based on how much the user participate in the discussions. A second topic relates to the relationship between social media and radicalization. While the current article has revealed significant changes in the formation of outgroups on the forum over time, future studies should look specifically at how individuals adapt to and conform to emerging discourses and norms on digital communities, and how social membership on these forums is expressed through shifting jargon, emotional expressions, and moral standards. This could offer important insights into how these communities sustain, grow, and recruit new members.

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