This ground-breaking collection of essays examines the scope and consequences of digital vigilance— a phenomenon emerging on a global scale, which sees digital audiences using social platforms to shape social and political life. Longstanding forms of moral scrutiny and justice seeking are disseminated through our contemporary media landscape, and researchers are increasingly recognising the significance of societal impacts effected by digital media.

The authors engage with a range of cross-disciplinary perspectives in order to explore the actions of a vigilant digital audience — denunciation, shaming, doxing — and to consider the role of the press and other public figures in supporting or contesting these activities. In turn, the volume illuminates several tensions underlying these justice seeking activities — from their capacity to reproduce categorical forms of discrimination, to the diverse motivations of the wider audiences who participate in vigilant denunciations.

This timely volume presents thoughtful case studies drawn both from high-profile Anglo-American contexts, and from developments in regions that have received less coverage in English-language scholarship. It is distinctive in its focus on the contested boundary between policing and entertainment, and on the various contexts in which the desire to seek retribution converges with the desire to consume entertainment.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher’s website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com.
Introduction

“If you recognize any of the Nazis marching...send me their names/profiles and I’ll make them famous” (@YesYoureRacist). These words helped to propel an effective—if somewhat controversial—social media campaign in August 2017, when members of the public were sought to help identify participants who were filmed and photographed during a widely publicised and violent white supremacist rally that transpired in the streets of Charlottesville, USA. Following their identification, otherwise anonymous rally participants were broadly exposed (‘outed’) within their broader communities and across their social networks. This opened them up to adverse effects that extended beyond the symbolic realm of the digital-media-sphere. Operating as both informal punishment and public pedagogy, this grassroots campaign of “digital vigilantism” (Trottier, 2017) carried a tacit warning to possible future participants at similar public events: appear at your peril.

This chapter explores the socio-moral complexities of digital vigilantism (DV) through an interpretive and visual sociological case study of this campaign. Broadly, DV may be defined as “a process where...
citizens are collectively offended by other citizen activity, and coordinate retaliation on mobile devices and social platforms” (Trottier, 2017, p. 55). While they are not equivalent, one possible and often prominent component of DV is “doxing”, which involves the excavation and online circulation of otherwise personal information about subjects, released non-consensually by a third party. This tactic is generally deployed to publicly shame or otherwise harm identified subjects by virtue of such intractable exposure. In the case at hand, DV work was primarily focused upon a type of “deanonymizing doxing” (Douglas, 2016). Doxing practices are morally controversial due to the disproportionate harms they can open people up to (e.g. harassment, threats, violence), their privacy-violating dimensions and the affront they may represent to the “sacredness” of the modern person (Joas, 2013). However, the public nature of the events that materialised in Charlottesville in August 2017, and their perceived significance — as marking a dangerous moment in contemporary US history — created fertile conditions for what one commentator called a “shame pass” (Teitel, 2017, para. 4) to apply. In the prolific public discourse these events generated, some commentators questioned whether or not it was reasonable for a participant in such a high-profile event to expect to remain anonymous afterwards, anyway, and so, could “outing” rally-goers even be considered a violation?

This chapter begins with some contextualising of the original event — the Charlottesville rally — to highlight the broader constellation of circumstances that empowered the social media call and response to identify and expose participants, far and wide. Following this, I formulate the creative, rhetorical and moral dimensions of this social media campaign, focusing on the nature of its call to action, and analyzing specific demonstrations of its putative success. Approaching DV as a complex “member’s method” for creating and maintaining a sense of order from below (cf Garfinkel, 1967), I analyze the complex interplay of images and words found in prominent social media postings, foregrounding the tacitly shared understandings that energised this campaign, and which rendered its call to action meaningful.

Doxing, or as it is sometimes spelled “doxxing”, originated in hacking culture and was made globally famous by the Internet group “Anonymous” (see Coleman, 2015). For an in-depth conceptual elaboration on doxing, and its variants, see Douglas, 2016; this volume).
Throughout, I attend to the imagined audience of strangers that was given presence through the Twitter account “YesYou’reRacist”; dispersed allies united by a shared definition of urgency, and willing to suspend moral reservations over its DV tactics by participating in, or otherwise supporting, a campaign to make Charlottesville rally-goers ‘famous’. Finally, I formulate what this social media campaign arguably achieved and what, specifically, it contributed to the collective conversation and aftermath of Charlottesville 2017. Drawing inferences from a doomed anniversary rally that occurred one year later, I speculate on its broader societal implications.

Above all, I argue that it helped to crystallise a broadly felt and unified refusal of the terrain that was being sought by organisers, participants and supporters of the Charlottesville rallies, namely, to legitimate the articulation of violent white supremacy in contemporary American public life as but one kind of ‘expression’ amongst others. Utilising the tools of digital media, it worked to deny the possibility that participants — present and future — could attend a rally associated with such sought-after legitimisation anonymously, and thus without risk or consequence to their future selves. This went beyond the condemnation of a disturbing event. By getting personal, this DV campaign introduced a dangerous type of “fatefulness” into rally participation, by creating conditions in which later exposure amounted to a loss of control for the pictured participant (Goffman, 1967). This included reputational harm and exclusion from full social participation. In doing so, it helped to constitute opposition to what the rally represented on deeply socio-moral grounds, irreducible to legalistic definitions of protected forms of speech and assembly. Positive participation in the rally could not be represented as one’s mere alignment with one controversial ‘side’ or position amongst others, within a pluralistic social landscape. Rather, it amounted to becoming morally tainted through one’s association with a deplorable and destructive force against a pluralistic social world.

Throughout the study, I highlight the mixed nature of visibility (cf. Brighenti, 2007). I emphasise what this case reveals about its simultaneously emboldening and dis-empowering possibilities in a digital-media-infused public culture, where expressive conduct undertaken in one setting and time may come back to haunt actors later and elsewhere, especially when representations are placed before
different and unanticipated audiences. As a heuristic strategy to understand the significance of DV within today’s digital-media-infused landscape, I ask the reader to consider this question: what would have been different about Charlottesville 2017 without the social media campaign aimed at identifying and outing participants before a broader public?

The materials I draw from are widely available in the public sphere: social media postings, news media reports, public comments, audio-video materials found on the Internet in the form of posted footage, and a short news documentary. In keeping with my primary analytic interests, and out of an ethical commitment to not reproducing the phenomenon under investigation — whether in the form of unwanted or sought-after notoriety on the part of participants previously unheard of — I have opted to anonymise these materials in my re-presentation of them.³

A Potent Constellation of Circumstances: Contextualising a Social Media Campaign

To understand the social media campaign aimed at ‘outing’ Charlottesville rally participants, specifically how it worked, what it did, and what it reveals about DV and the complexities of public visibility in contemporary society, it is important to understand the exceptional circumstances in which it took shape, gained traction and became — for the most part — defined as morally acceptable, and even virtuous citizen activity.

A Contentious Rally: Charlottesville, 2017

On 12 August 2017 a “Unite the Right” rally was held in Charlottesville, USA in the city’s recently re-named Emancipation Park.⁴ Hundreds of

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³ This does not include individuals who were already high-profile and/or recognisable public figures prior to the events being considered.

⁴ The park’s name has been a source of significant recent controversy. In under two years it moved from being called “Robert E. Lee Park” after Confederate general Robert E. Lee (until May 2017), to “Emancipation Park”, standing for a social ideal (June 2017-July 2018). In July 2018 it was re-named again, this time with the conspicuously politically neutral name of “Market Street Park”, which is its current name (at the time of writing).
participants converged at a pre-rally march the night before on the University of Virginia grounds. This was catalyzed by a controversial municipal decision (3:2) to remove Confederate monuments from two city parks, and in particular a statue of Robert E. Lee, who was a Confederate States Army soldier and commander (between 1862–1865) during the American Civil War. This statue, like Lee’s legacy, is a site of significant ongoing controversy. Its immanent removal was the stated impetus for the rally in Charlottesville, whose organisers equated the removal to a problematic rewriting of history.

While the social issue of how to address historical monuments is complex, it is important to be clear that the version of American history being defended here was tied indisputably to groups and sentiments associated with violent white supremacy, including anti-Semitism, and advocates for a white ethnostate. The August events followed smaller rallies held that same summer. One in May was organised by a high-profile white supremacist speaker in the US, who offered a Nazi-style salute and shout of “Hail Trump, hail our people, hail our victory” during a speech following the US election result announcement of Donald Trump’s presidency in 2016 (Global News, 2016). The second, in July, was organised by a branch of the Ku Klux Klan called the Loyal White Knights.

Not coincidentally, a poster promoting the August rally (Fig. 9.1) contained symbolism reminiscent of fascist propaganda films such as Leni Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will (1935), along with a listing of the names of several known (in the US) and “proud white nationalists” (MSNBC News, 2017b). A mythical and militaristically ordered image

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5 After the violence in Charlottesville in August 2017, the family descendants of Robert E. Lee, as well as Jefferson Davis and Stonewall Jackson, called for the Confederate statues to be removed from the park, suggesting that they would be more appropriately exhibited in a museum. For further background and detail on the controversy over Confederate monuments in Charlottesville, see “Blue Ribbon Commission on Race, Memorials, and Public Spaces Report to Charlottesville City Council”, December 19, 2016. This committee was formed in 2016 and was tasked with addressing recent controversies pertaining to historic monuments in Charlottesville, Virginia.

6 Regardless of the complex factors (economic, cultural, biographical) that might have ‘motivated’ different people to attend and participate in such an event, there is an indisputable violation of modern social justice ideals at work. Such groups and sentiments are premised on a racist hierarchy that presumes essential differences in value and ‘rightful’ social position amongst different categories of people.
of a victorious future is implied, with soldiers standing guard, ready to sacrifice themselves for a glorious cause; there is a “hailing” (Althusser, 1970) of the imagined participant who is willing to play a part in such an endeavor, who may be emotionally stirred by an idea of restoring ‘greatness’. In light of the above, the presence of overtly racist and anti-Semitic symbolism during the rally would have come as no surprise to attendees in August, thereby invalidating the possibility for anyone to later claim ignorance or innocence.

Fig. 9.1 Unknown creator, “Unite the Right” Charlottesville rally poster, August 2017, published under fair use.

An Inter-Tribal Assembly of the “Far-Right”

The stated intention of the August 2017 rally was “to unify the white nationalist movement” across the US, according to one prominent organiser.7 Also dubbed an event in support of “freedom of speech”, it

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7 This organiser, Damigo, is founder of “Identity Evropa”, which is an American neo-Nazi and white-supremacist organisation founded in March 2016, which was
drew together approximately five hundred supporters, many of whom were affiliated with different groups and organisations, including members of various white-nationalist and white-supremacist groups — including chapters of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), neo-Confederates, neo-Nazis and members of organised militia groups. Participants came together as a single ‘we’ in shared physical spaces, marching and moving through these spaces, shouting and chanting slogans in unison.

The sights and sounds of participants openly and enthusiastically engaging with globally condemned symbols associated with some of modern humanity’s most deplorable events circulated widely in the streets of Charlottesville, as seen in the prolific mainstream news reports and videos posted online by media workers, photographers, spectators and participants. Many attendees were seen giving Nazi salutes, and heard chanting phrases such as “white lives matter”, “white power”, “you will not replace us”, “Jews will not replace us” and Nazi-associated slogans, such as “blood and soil” (CNN, 11 August 2017). Several participants held KKK paraphernalia, Confederate flags and objects featuring potent symbols of global injustice such as swastikas (see Olesen, 2016). Many carried torches, producing visually dramatic effects in global media representations of the gathering (Fig. 9.2). Joined with such slogans and signage, the use of flaming torches rebranded three years later as “American Identity Movement”.

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torches was visually potent, as it is a well-known symbol of anti-black intimidation used by the KKK in the US post-Civil war period, and of anti-Semitic intimidation in Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 1940s (Bond, 2017). While positive engagement with such sights and signs may violate global ideals associated with a diverse and viable modern society — including human dignity, equality and inclusion — their public display and articulation in the US are constitutionally protected as “expressive” activity.

“Extreme” and “violent” manifestations of “white nationalism” have become a significant and “growing concern around the world” in recent years, not just in the US (Carranco & Milton, 2019, para. 8). Supporters of far-right, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant groups, and those advocating for a white ethno-state, have been self-consciously working to move away from the cultural and political margins, infiltrating mainstream institutions in parts of Europe, as well as within the US and Canada. A key finding by a Swedish researcher who infiltrated the alt-right movement in Europe for a year, and marched with white supremacists in Charlottesville in 2017, is that participants in such groups are seeking ultimately to “change the culture” by “making their ideas mainstream”. Working to shift the limits of acceptable speech further and further to the political right, this includes a sought-after ability to freely give expression to “their racist ideas in the public square” (Hermansson, quoted in Illing, 2017, para. 9).

In the language of French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1995[1912]), the Charlottesville rally can be considered an inter-tribal assembly of the far-right in America. It was symbolically connected with similar collective formations across the broader Western world at this time, especially in parts of Europe. In his classic study of religion, Durkheim emphasised the significance of “reunions, assemblies and meetings” for members of groups to “uphold and reaffirm... the collective sentiments and the collective ideas which makes [their] unity and personality”. Such concentrated events can be potent occasions of

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9 These include Europe’s Generation Identity, Scandinavia’s Nordic Resistance Movement, Canada’s Aryan Guard, and the UK-based neo-Nazi group Combat 18, as well as the increasingly influential far-right, anti-immigrant and populist political parties such as Greece’s Golden Dawn, Hungary’s Jobbik, Germany’s AfD and Italy’s Lega Norda (now called Lega), to name but a selection.
moral remaking; through being “closely united to one another”, group members “reaffirm in common their common sentiments” (Durkheim, 1995[1912], pp. 474–5). Qualitatively unlike online spaces, events involving physical co-presence are uniquely powerful as they provide concrete occasions for participants to shore up shared beliefs and sentiments through enacted social practices, such as marching, cheering and chanting together (Rawls, 2001). Icons and symbols that express group sentiments are thereby “evoked and revitalized” (Inglis, 2017, p. 308). If this is what made the Charlottesville events exciting for the organisers, attendees and supporters of “uniting the right”, for the concerned moral majority, it was what made them frightening.

Counter-Rally

The events in Charlottesville drew forth a broad range of groups and individuals from civil society who passionately opposed virtually everything that the “Unite the Right” assemblages represented. In audio-visual footage, anti-racist counter-protestors can be heard shouting down the voices of “Unite the Righters” with slogans such as, “...No Nazis, no KKK, no fascist USA...”. The significant counter-rally that the Charlottesville assembly inspired was composed of members of diverse groups from local residents and businesses; students and faculty; members of faith-based, labour and socialist groups; civil rights organisations; and members of anti-racist and anti-fascist social movements, some of whom support the use of direct action, most notably under the banners of Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Antifa.

This counter-rally represented a different vision of society, associated with modern social justice ideals and animated by a shared need to gather, demonstrate, struggle for, and in diverse ways, enact shared opposition to what “Unite the Right” represented here. It was in general alignment with these ideals, the belief that what was on display should be afforded no legitimate place in contemporary society, and the perception that this occurrence signified a moment of real and present danger in the US, that the social media call to “make [rally participants] famous” took shape and gained traction.
State of Emergency: Danger and Violence

Following several physically violent exchanges and incidents involving white-supremacy-affiliated rallygoers and anti-racist counter-protesters, on the morning of 12 August a state of emergency was declared. The assembly was defined as unlawful, and the State Governor announced that without additional powers, public safety could not be safeguarded. Most tragically, four hours after the social media call to “make them famous” was issued, a man associated with one of the white supremacist groups drove his car into a crowd of counter-protestors, killing civil-rights activist Heather Heyer and seriously injuring several others. In addition to the violence on the streets, numerous accounts and documentary representations from that day suggested that law enforcement was not effectively protecting people, especially members of targeted groups, from threat and violence. This included a disturbing video that circulated online showing an African American man being savagely beaten by six white men, as well as urgent calls for police protection, left unaddressed, by Jewish members inside a synagogue threatened with violence outside. Reflecting the tumultuous nature of the entire event, two state police officers also died in a helicopter crash while monitoring the streets below. There was much fear, violence and carnage, as early opponents to the rally had predicted.

VICE News Documentary: Potent Symbolism, Public Visibility, Dangerous Legitimacy

Dramatic images from the rally, publicised extensively around the digital-media-connected world, circulated on the 24/7 news cycle. A particularly influential representation took the form of a twenty-minute documentary called Charlottesville: Race and Terror, made on the scene by VICE News. It aired the next night, generating over 50 million views across multiple viewing platforms. The film was itself treated as a news story within international media, “lay[ing] bare [the] horror of neo-Nazis in America” (Gabbatt, 2017). Three prominent themes can be distilled from this documentary, which form an important cultural

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10 The man was charged with assaulting a white supremacist, but was later acquitted (Shapira, 2018).
backdrop for understanding the significance of the events and most importantly, for present purposes, to understand the nature of the social media response and DV campaign they elicited.

One striking feature was how brazenly participants and organisers interviewed by Elle Reeve of VICE News expressed racist and specifically white supremacist sentiments that are normally prohibited — at least
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informally — from public expression in American public life. Anti-black and anti-Semitic statements were made repeatedly, with confidence, and without shame. For example, one participant explained, “We’re showing this class of anti-white vermin that this is our country” (VICE News, 2017). Some of the participants spoke openly about their willingness to use violence, if deemed “necessary”, particularly the high-profile alt-right activist Christopher Cantwell, who revealed a cache of guns to the reporter.

A second striking theme was the emphasis on being public; showing America that they were not an “Internet meme” but were, rather, “a big real presence that can organise in physical space” (Reeve, in VICE News, 2017). Vocal participants articulated the belief that these rallies marked a turning point for the far right, making reference to anticipated future events and guided by a hierarchical vision that this is “our” country (and so, not “theirs”).

A third theme was participants’ focus on being law-abiding citizens whose expressive activities were protected by the US First Amendment. Speakers noted their proper use of bureaucratic procedures, e.g. in obtaining a legal march permit in advance. Participants framed the rally as formally legitimate, i.e. compliant within the current legal-rational order (Weber, 1978). A couple of participants from Quebec, who were later “outed” as recruiters on an anti-racist website based in Canada, mocked the Canadian legal-moral context, stating that in Canada you can “get arrested for hurting somebody’s feelings” (VICE News, 2017).

As condensed in this news documentary, the rally was performatively announcing, to America and beyond, that what can be seen and heard on the streets of Charlottesville has a legitimate and growing place in contemporary society. It sought to constitute the cultural legitimacy of such expression, by giving it manifestation in the camera-filled public realm of co-present persons and to the gaze of local, national and global

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12 The Canadian contingent implied that what took place was part of a trans-national social movement, not something only relevant or meaningful to residents of Charlottesville, Virginians or Americans who feel that they have something to lose by the removal of Lee’s statue from the park.
news media. It was performative, in that it sought to “realize” what it was claiming already existed (Butler, 2015, pp. 28–29); its “successful” enactment implied the possibility of future re-enactment (Blitefield, 2006).

The perceived significance of the rally was effectively summed up in an article written by Matt Thompson and published in *The Atlantic* on day two of the Charlottesville events. Drawing attention to the conspicuous absence of participant concealment, the journalist likened the rally to a “pride march” for violent white supremacy:

> [T]he images we saw in Charlottesville today and yesterday [...] draw their menace not from what is there — mostly, young white men in polos and T-shirts goofily brandishing tiki torches — but from what isn’t: the masks, the hoods, the secrecy that could at least imply a sort of shame [...] *We used to whisper these thoughts*, the new white supremacists suggest. *But now we can say them out loud.* The ‘Unite the Right’ rally wasn’t intended to be a Klan rally at all. It was a pride march [...] The shameless return of white supremacy into America’s public spaces seems to be happening by degrees, and quickly... (Thompson, 2017, para. 4–5, emphasis in original).

Highlighting the strikingly blatant nature of what could be seen, the concerned reader is left with the frighteningly unanswerable question: what is next...? The ensuing DV campaign can be understood in response to this concern, as a concerted attempt to deny the participants the cover of remaining anonymous in the days that followed.

**Moral Equivalence as Implied Affinity:**
**A Presidential Response**

Now infamously, US President Trump did not initially denounce white supremacists by name. In his first public statements on 13 August, Trump condemned what he called “this egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides; [brief pause], on many sides” (CNN, 2017). He also noted on 15 August that “you had people, that were very fine people, *on both sides.*” (CNBC News, 2017, emphasis added). Critics — including members of the Republican Party — widely condemned Trump for implying moral equivalence, which was widely taken to imply his ideological affinity with white supremacy. Prominent
members of the ‘alt-right’, including former KKK leader David Duke, certainly interpreted it that way, identifying Trump as an heroic ally in a much-reported-upon Tweet: “Thank you President Trump for your honesty & courage to tell the truth about #Charlottesville & condemn the leftist terrorists in BLM/Antifa” (Duke, cited in Price, 2017).

The ominous spectacle of violent white nationalism and white supremacy in twenty-first-century public culture was given an additional layer of urgency by a populist President’s refusal to name or condemn it as such. Offering a stark contrast, in a country grappling with similar formations including the rise of the far-right AfD political party, and speaking to the global significance of the events in Charlottesville, German Chancellor Angela Merkel offered this comment, “It is racist, far-right violence, and clear, forceful action must be taken against it, regardless of where in the world it happens” (Merkel, quoted in Wildman, 2017, para. 1).

“Make Them Famous”: Understanding a Campaign of Digital Vigilantism

As and after the events transpired in Charlottesville, multiple online sites and feeds were created and/or used to identify and subsequently expose otherwise anonymous rally participants as such, to people within their home communities and institutional affiliations. The popular Twitter account “@YesYoureRacist” (YYR), which I primarily focus on, was the highest profile and most coordinated example of this. Its creator called upon others — online allies, far and wide, members of the public who shared concern and outrage for what was occurring in Charlottesville’s public realm — to help him “make them [rally participants] famous”. Some celebrities used their status to supplement and amplify such efforts, including American actress Jennifer Lawrence, who posted this note on her Facebook profile, addressed to her sixteen-million-plus Facebook followers, above four images from the rally: “These are the faces of hate. Look closely and post anyone you find. You can’t hide with the Internet you pathetic cowards!” (Lawrence, quoted in Wiest, 2017, para. 4). As this comment implies, the Internet creates new conditions for otherwise anonymous individuals to become “unmasked” when they participate in socially maligned events in the
public sphere, as long as there are willing and able collaborators, and platforms accessible for such work.

YYR was created in 2012 by a young anti-racist activist from North Carolina. Essentially, it is an online space in which participants ‘call out’ instances of everyday racism, mostly occurring within the United States, including offensive statements made by President Trump and his supporters, by celebrities and public figures, as well as ordinary people who claim to be ‘not racist, but...’. Screenshots of later deleted social media posts are often re-posted, along with brief ripostes. Rooted in a type of digital accountability, where people’s fleeting words and deeds “live on” in ways that cannot be un-said or un-done, such a space creates a type of “mediated solidarity” (Dant, 2012, p. 50–1) within a structurally unequal and highly fractured society. Here, manifestations of racism and white supremacy — whether obvious or subtle — are identified, reproduced and denounced by a vigilant association of like-minded others who are similarly keeping watch, however geographically dispersed they may be.

Building on this existing feed, and in response to its founder’s call-to-action, YYR gained over 300,000 followers the weekend after the
Charlottesville rally, reaching close to 350,000 by 15 August 2017. Throughout the summer and into late autumn of 2017 YYR garnered 392,000 followers, morphing for a concentrated period of time into a space primarily focused on DV activities related specifically to identifying and exposing Charlottesville rally-goers.

Although neither the activist behind this campaign nor YYR supporters utilise such terminology, conceptually, this social media campaign fits several criteria for “digital vigilantism”, as developed by media scholar and sociologist Daniel Trottier. Galvanising members of the digitally connected public to participate in the denunciation of rally participants, it worked as a form of “weaponized visibility” by creating — or threatening to create — forms of visibility through the posting of digital materials. Its public manifestations and effects were “unwanted”, “intense” and “enduring” (Trottier, 2017, p. 55) for subjects. In response to deeply felt offence over what was occurring in Charlottesville, and using the threat of infamy, digital media activists disrupted any expectation of anonymity or temporal boundedness that may have been presumed by rally-goers. Physical and digital spaces were creatively connected through these efforts to identify and expose the rally’s attendees, and presumed temporal boundaries were broken. The social consequences of past activities during a tumultuous weekend spilled into the future for correctly identified participants. New kinds of risks and possibilities were thereby introduced into their lives, outside of the temporal, spatial and social boundaries of the original events. While the use of such tactics may appear exceptional at first glance, they mirror practices of online communication that have become commonplace amongst social media users around the world. As Trottier puts it, “an increase in online sharing of personal information — as evidenced from the growth of services like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram — contributes to DV, as they provide both a platform and a set of practices that render DV meaningful and practical” (ibid., p. 61). Such practices contribute to a blurring of the border between private and public domains, and also between spectating audience member and citizen-activist.

Let us next explore this campaign and its consequences in more empirical detail. How was it put forth and taken up? What were the members of its intended audience, recipients who were sympathetic to
the call to “make [rally-goers] famous”, presumed to know and assume about the social world (cf. Schutz, 1953), as applied to the example at hand? How was subject identification given moral justification, and how was “success” being tacitly defined through this DV campaign? What was actually accomplished and what, overall, has this DV campaign contributed to the Charlottesville story and beyond? While it has become common to skim over posted content in our speedy and reactive digital-media-saturated culture, in order to generate critical insight into the subtle workings of contemporary culture, it is important to slow down in our interpretive work of socially impactful texts and images, to understand how things mean (Rose, 2016).

A Digital Call to Action and its Anticipated Audience

“If you recognize any of the Nazis marching in #Charlottesville, send me their names/profiles and I’ll make them famous #GoodNightAltRight” (YesYoureRacist). This digital media call to action was made on day two of the “Unite the Right” rallies in Charlottesville, which indicated an emergent — not pre-planned — understanding that the marchers ‘should’ be publicly identified. Four photos were assembled beneath these words, which depicted mostly clean-cut
young white men — framed as “Nazis marching” — carrying bamboo torches while congregating during a night-time demonstration against the backdrop of a prominent university building. A socially complex argument is made through this compilation of words and images, which we shall consider in some detail.

Words: The textual call is addressed to a general “you”. “If you recognize any of the Nazis marching in #Charlottesville…” (Fig. 9.5). Members of its intended audience are presumed to understand that “Nazis marching” refers to persons associated with violent racism, extreme, and potentially fascistic beliefs and practices, including but not limited to anti-Semitism. They are also assumed to be social-media literate, for instance, to know that images from the rally can be found that other people have posted online, which depict still-anonymous participants (#Charlottesville and #GoodNightAltRight). This open call invites any connected reader to take (digital) action by engaging in such identification work, to move from a passively concerned member of the public to one who is actively engaged in “Internet sleuthing”.

A digital division of labour is established, with the curator at the other end, promising to utilise the platform and his cultural resources to make once-identified subjects “famous”. The receptive audience member (the “you”) is presumed to know and assume that such infamy will be consequential for the pictured rally-goer in a negative way and that this is a good thing. The question of what it will mean to subject rally participants to negative infamy within an expansive social sphere, unable to conceal such participation after the dust settles in Charlottesville, and what could be “good” about such public visibility, is left implicit. Whereas in countries such as Germany, where the display of Nazi symbolism is legally prohibited as hate speech, and such exposure can lead to formal charges, in the current American context the consequences of such DV tactics lie primarily within the socio-moral sphere.

Images: The four assembled images reinforce the textual message at the same time as the words help to explain the significance of what can be seen there. The words and the images are thus mutually reinforcing.

For two recent studies that explore facets of “Internet sleuthing” see Myles et al. (2017) and Yardley et al. (2016).
 Appearing as otherwise ordinary college students, the pictured participants depart from stereotypical images of a neo-Nazi, such as the armed men interviewed for the VICE news documentary, at the same time as they are described as “Nazis marching”. Their conventional, clean-cut and more or less middle-class appearance is reinforced against the backdrop of a socially respectable institution — the University of Virginia. Participants appear casually oblivious to being photographed; nobody is masking his face or appears reticent about his visibility here. In the prominent image, the torch-bearing men appear as if they are moving towards their social media audience, whose receptive members are being explicitly called upon to take action.

Responding to a Social Media Call to ‘Name and Shame’

Dozens of images of primarily white male participants were posted onto YYR, with words implying that the pictured subjects needed to be identified, that doing so was morally justified and that readers should re-tweet (RT) such images (Fig. 9.6). Images typically focused on individual participants. This had the effect of stripping each of the anonymising cover of the crowd. If, in the crowded streets and parks, like-minded others offered kinship and strength in numbers, this protective cover was dissolved in the individualising spaces that were created online. Organisationally, these compilations resembled police ‘wanted’ posters. Often appearing in mid-chant, evidence of the social ‘crime’ was contained in the image: the pictured subjects could be seen as self-incriminating, as willing and enthusiastic agents, through their visible participation in a maligned event and implied association with symbolic expressions of violence, hatred and racism.14

What happens between the posted image and the positive identification is left opaque. The invisible work of doing Internet sleuthing — here, of connecting faces in pictures with names of verifiable people — creates an asymmetrical relation of visibility. Such work, revealed by its effects, seems both magical and inevitable. Once a picture is posted, it seems as if it is an omniscient Internet that is doing

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14 Such visualising tactics are comparable to how Michel Foucault (1977) described and formulated the “art of punishing” in modern schools, factories and prisons through disciplinary processes of individuation.
such work, and that it is merely a matter of time before anonymous faces are rendered identifiable.

Next let us formulate what ‘success’ meant in this context by exploring some prominent examples of positive identification. Success in this DV context involved two dimensions: correct identification and evidence of offline effects, i.e. practical intervention into the lives of others.

The Meanings of Successful Identification

A former employee: The first posted instance of successful identification involved a young man from California, who reportedly lost his job as a result of being correctly identified as a Charlottesville rally participant. Framed for its audience as an update, and demonstrating the efficacy of the social media campaign and Internet sleuthing work that was invisibly taking place, the post noted that the now exposed individual “no longer has a job” (Fig. 9.7).
Sociologically, it is important to consider what is presumed to be self-evidently positive about such a development. A clue can be found in the former employer’s note that was included in the social media post, next to a photograph from the rally with an identifiable man — presumably the former employee — holding a torch and positioned in the center. After expressing its thanks for “bringing this to our attention”, an apology is offered for a “delayed response”. By noting it was “inundated with inquiries” regarding its (now former) employee’s attendance at the rally, the business makes known to the reader that this “incident” is considered significant by a multitude of unseen members of the public. It is stated that, “We feel it is imperative to let you know that [he] is no longer employed [here]” (Fig. 7).

A sense of perceived urgency and civic duty is suggested in this communication; the business is hereby publicising to the wider world that they no longer have a formal association with the man seen in the picture. The note is more than factual information; it carries moral overtones that imply responsibility on the part of this organisation (a
local business) to a broader public, to announce that its contractual relationship with the man who attended the rally has been terminated. Signs also appeared in the shop window, and inserts were placed in menus at all three of its Berkeley, California locations. “Effective Saturday 12th August [name of man] no longer works [here]. The actions of those in Charlottesville are not supported by [name of business]” (Pershán, 2017). In making such announcements, the former employer helps to amplify the public shaming effects for the now exposed individual by naming him and creating further exposure of the perceived significance of his rally participation.

As this example demonstrates, the type of visibility that is produced by DV carries with it the capacity to intervene into a subject’s life in materially consequential ways. In this case, correct identification and exposure within the subject’s local environment affects his social status and “life chances” (Weber 1978; Giddens 1973, pp. 130–1), namely the ability to maintain employment following the significant publicity received by his (now former) employer concerning his off-work activities, which led to his obligatory resignation.

Fig. 9.8 Unicorn Riot, posted to YesYoureRacist Twitter screengrab, “Some of them responded violently”, August 13, 2017.
A son is publicly “disowned”: Different versions of public dis-association can be found in other examples, including the case of a young man who was publicly “disowned” by his family of origin after having been correctly identified on YYR as a vocal rally participant. He appears in a short video that was taken during the rally, and embedded into a YYR post, where he is sarcastically named as a “charming Nazi” (Fig. 9.8). In this video he can be heard making statements about so-called “white genocide” while looking into a stranger’s camera. While he appears naively indifferent to being captured on film in this moment, an unseen person knocks the camera out of the photographer’s grasp, suggesting hostility between the presence of some participants wishing not to be “caught” on film and those who are digitally documenting what is taking place in the streets.

Letter: Family denounces Tefft’s racist rhetoric and actions

By Kristin Tefft on August 14, 2017 10:51 a.m.

My name is Kristin Tefft, and I am writing to all, with regards to my youngest son, Peter Tefft, an avowed white nationalist who has been featured in a number of local news stories over the last several months.

We have been silent up until now, but now we see that this was a mistake. It was the silence of good people that allowed the Nazis to flourish the first time around, and it is the silence of good people that is allowing them to flourish now.

Peter Tefft, my son, is not welcome at our family gatherings any longer. I pray my prodigal son will renounce his hateful beliefs and return home. Then and only then will I lay out the feast.

Other relatives of Pete Tefft are also publicly disavowing him.

Fig. 9.9 Inforum, “Public letter”, August 14, 2017, https://www.inforum.com/opinion/letters/4311880-letter-family-denounces-teffts-racist-rhetoric-and-actions
Two days after this identification, his father published a “heartbreak­ing” letter to the editor, addressed both to his son and to a wider audience, in a local community newspaper (Suerth, 2017, para. 1). The father dis­avows his son, until he “renounce[s] his hateful beliefs”, and states his wish to “loudly repudiate my son’s vile, hateful and racist rhetoric and actions” ([name of father], quoted in Twin Cities Pioneer Press, 2017).

In this letter, the father identifies his son as “an avowed white nationalist”, and connects what is happening (“now”) with the “silence of good people that allowed the Nazis to flourish the first time around” (Fig. 9.9). As in the case of the former employer, the articulation of moral responsibility within the context of a broader socio-political world is made evident. It may be surmised that the man’s father, and family at large, experienced — or feared experiencing — blame (possibly threats) for conduct and statements made by the young man bearing their (family) name, as they made a point of articulating in public statements that he “didn’t grow up with [hateful beliefs]”. “Why must we be guilty by association?”, the father asks (rhetorically) in this letter.15 This public letter was widely reported upon as part of the story of Charlottes­ville, offering an emotionally poignant side of its digital shaming aftermath. It is not merely that the young man was symbolically disowned by his family but that this was done so publicly.

“Angry torch guy”: The most prominent example of successful identification was of so-called “angry torch guy”, a young man whose image appeared in the first call to action and has since become iconic of the rally and its digital-shaming aftermath. Mouth agape, the man in the center appears to be in mid-shout. He looks intoxicated by the scene around him, a night-time gathering filled with other white men holding flaming torches. Such an image connotes fascist rallies and dangerous mob behavior, where fanatical and naive followers stand ready to act as parts of a larger group, stirred by a charismatic speaker (Fig. 10).16

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15 In news media interviews, members of the young man’s extended family have said that some of them have been “targeted by death threats” over the actions of their identified family member (Suerth, 2017, para. 15).

16 The photographer behind this now famous image shared this view. In an interview about it, Samuel Corum, of Anadula Agency in Turkey, described the "energy in his face", surmising that when we saw the man yelling, his interpretation was that “He had a purpose and his face showed it”. (McAndrew, 2017b).
Following the man’s correct identification and public exposure as the person behind the picture, calls were made for Nevada University, where he is a student, to expel him. Over ten thousand people signed an online petition (through Change.org), and calls were made to “flood” the university student office with phone calls demanding the student’s expulsion. In addition to the worldwide circulation of this image, his identification elicited significant controversy and debate on his home campus. The image, paired with his name, was widely circulated across social media by fellow students, including a note drawing attention to his membership in a campus fraternity, and the statement “DO NOT LET HIM GO UNSHAMED” (Toppo, 2018, para. 8). His campus fraternity revoked his membership, stating that the Charlottesville rally was “disturbing, disheartening and contrary to our values” (ibid.). He subsequently quit his part-time job, explaining during a radio interview that he did not wish to “pick at the scab of Charlottesville”. The potency of association and implication of “moral taint” (Rosati, 2008) was made visible in other ways. For example, images found online from his social media posts appeared to connect him to a US Republican Senator Dean Heller; this created an additional linkage between the current US government and sentiments that were given expression during the Charlottesville rally. The cycle of attempted dis-association continued; in a Twitter response the Senator attempted to distance himself from
this, stating “I don’t know this person & condemn the outrageous racism, hatred and violence. It’s unacceptable & shameful. No room for it in this country” (Heller, on Twitter, 12 August 2017).

The President of the public university responded in a statement “denouncing all forms of bigotry and racism” stating that these “have no place in a free and equal society”. It was also emphasised that, “peaceful assembly and exchange of ideas is part of the bedrock of any free society” (Johnson, in Toppo, 2018). The man behind the picture was not expelled, as doing so would have infringed upon his First Amendment right to expression, since “...you can’t discipline someone for looking angry...” (para. 17). While he was not formally punished, the attention and public scrutiny that ensued from the DV campaign certainly gave him unwanted notoriety (“fame”). In public interviews he has stated that his life, as a result of being correctly identified as the person behind the picture, is now “spiraling out of control” (McAndrew, 2017a, para. 1).

Talking to media in interviews, he has expressed concern that he may be unable to secure employment upon graduation, in light of his unexpected global infamy. He also defended his participation at Charlottesville, describing himself as proud of his white European heritage, and referring to his trip to Virginia as a moment in which he “dabbled in alt.right ideology” (Toppo, 2018). Regarding the iconic photo he explains that, “I got caught in the heat of the moment”, but insists he is “not the angry young man” seen in the photo, i.e. that he is not reducible to the image of this moment.

As is typical in cases of online shaming (cf. Ronson, 2015), attempts at visibility management backfired and drew significant ridicule and consternation on social media. This example highlights how, once identified, the participant lives with a type of public scrutiny. Following an attempt to explain and defend his presence at Charlottesville, on a subsequent YYR post a comparison was drawn between the image of “Angry Torch Guy” and the iconic photo showing Hazel Bryan, who became a poster-girl for anti-black racism during a delicate moment...
during the US Civil Rights era, after being seen and photographed shouting down African American student Elizabeth Eckford. Like the image captured with Bryan shouting at Eckford — a split second in time — the now fateful photo of “Angry Torch Guy” has come to function as both an artifact of collective memory and site for public-sphere engagement (Lucaites & Hariman, 2001). While both subjects — Bryan in 1957 and the rally participant of 2017 — have become subject to infamy and negative iconicity due to a single, captured photo in which they come to represent a larger social issue and historical moment, the digital difference is that in addition to being “unwanted” and “enduring” (Trottier 2017, p. 55), there is a scrutinising intensity for the identified subject today. This difference illustrates the potency of a 24/7 news cycle, paired with the pervasiveness of social media in public culture today.

Moral Taint and the Power of Association

As these examples dramatise, and the social media campaign of identifying and outing rally participants in Charlottesville helped to establish, to participate in such an event at this time was to endanger one’s reputation, existing social ties, institutional affiliations and life chances. An important — if under-recognised — dimension here is that others become (potentially) tainted through their connection with the participating individual by virtue of an implicit vicarious responsibility (Rosati, 2008). It is against this subtle backdrop that the campaign to make participants “famous” worked. Even the Tiki brand, whose bamboo torches were prominent during the rally, sought to distance itself symbolically from further association with the Charlottesville events. Using the platform Facebook, the company issued the following statement: “We do not support their message or the use of our products in this way [...] Our products are designed to enhance backyard gatherings and to help family and friends connect with each other...” (“Tiki” brand public statement, in Ortutay, 2017). Along similar lines,

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18 Eckford was one of nine African American girls arriving for her first day of school at Central High in Arkansas, and was shouted at by an angry white mob of segregationists, which included young Bryan, and was ultimately prevented entry into the school by the National Guard. For further background see “Little Rock Nine”, https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/central-high-school-integration
and as but one of many examples of online platforms banning the participation of white supremacist groups and individuals, the popular online dating app OkCupid permanently banned Christopher Cantwell — the committed participant who appeared prominently in the Vice video, stating that “There is no room for hate in a place where you’re looking for love” (OkCupid posting, cited in Bonos, 2017).

Such expressions of “moral taint” and formal dis-association challenge the image of society as a mere aggregate of rights-bearing individuals. While on the surface, this DV campaign may appear individualistic in its orientation and politics, its efficacy clearly depended on the collaboration of others — individuals and organisations — who shared the basic judgment that animated the campaign, namely, that violent white supremacy must be unequivocally denounced and afforded no legitimate place in contemporary society. To participants, present and future, and to the broader social world, its moral lesson is that while a person might be ‘free’ as an individual to attend what they wish, to say what they like and to associate with whom they please within the formal bounds of law, no one is free from being held to account for this in terms of its broader social meaning and significance. A high-profile DV campaign, such as the case under consideration, contributes to a general re-thinking of what it means to openly participate in any socially controversial public event.

A Case of Mis-identification

There was at least one high profile case of outright mis-identification causing harm. A University of Arkansas professor was mistakenly identified as having been one of the rally participants, based on his physical resemblance to one of the rally participants who was seen and photographed wearing an Arkansas Engineering t-shirt. As was widely reported, the man wrongfully identified “was flooded with vulgar messages on social media and accused of racism, and his home address was posted on social networks” (Victor, 2017). Offering insight into the effects of doxing in relation to the Charlottesville events, on National
Public Radio (NPR) he reported that he and his family contacted police and left their home for the weekend out of fear of misplaced aggression.

Additionally, a de-contextualised photo of an American YouTube personality wearing a swastika on his armband, that came from a “prank” video he had made during a Trump rally which he had posted months prior to the Charlottesville events, was given circulation on the same Twitter thread. While it was removed, with apology for the “confusion” its posting generated, it had negative consequences for the person it featured, who was pressured to respond to backlash over the error.

Such incidents were used as the basis for many media commentators and members of the public to question or criticise the DV campaign altogether, and highlight its intrinsic risks and dangers. While the activist who first issued the call to make rally participants “famous” sought to rectify instances of mistaken identification, some drew upon such incidents to argue that such campaigns are indefensible forms of “mistake-prone mob vigilantism” (Gass, 2017), inhabit a “swampy low ground” on the Internet (Ellis, 2017) and contribute in socially negative ways to a surveillance society. In effect such criticisms render distinctions of intention irrelevant. According to such criticism, the end cannot justify this means. Following the incident with the University of Arkansas professor, and taking a stand against doxing, irrespective of political motivation, the crowdfunding platform Patreon suspended the activist’s account (YYR) on the grounds that it was in violation of “Patreon Community Guidelines”. Patreon’s decision serves as an important reminder that DV activism always and necessarily depends upon the continued accessibility of public or social media platforms, and that use can be revoked at any time. This raises important questions about how platform decisions about content moderation are made, and how such curation shapes public discourse (see Gillespie 2018).  

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19 While this subject exceeds the scope of this study, I will note that into 2019, social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram have begun publicly to ban the accounts of known white supremacist groups and speakers, defined in its community guidelines as dangerous individuals, even if their speech does not formally break a law.
Virtuous Denunciation

Arguing that their denunciation was virtuous, and demonstrating the ongoing negotiation and interpretive work involved in legitimating their methods, media activists occasionally posted notes on the feed, indicating that people should “keep up the good work” in the ongoing effort to identify and expose participants to their broader communities. In response to occasional criticism that was expressed in some of the posted comments concerning the ethics of naming names, it was periodically pointed out that rally participants could not reasonably have expected to remain anonymous, and that the significance of the events demanded such a response.

The unlikely voices of some prominent writers and activists who had previously and influentially cautioned against “online shaming” and “call out culture” were given a voice in different news media articles, following posted comments about the events. Two such examples are British journalist Jon Ronson, author of So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed (2015) and Toronto community organiser and poet Asam Ahmad, whose influential article published in Briarpatch in 2015 criticised “call-out” culture among progressive activists, pointing to what he called its “mild totalitarian undercurrents” (Ahmad, 2015, para. 4).20 As Ronson posted, in Twitter comments that were further circulated in various news media articles, “[The Charlottesville white supremacists] were undisguised in a massively contentious rally surrounded by the media... There’s a big difference between being a white power activist [or] white supremacist and being, say, [name redacted]” (Ronson, cited in Blum, 2017; Chappell, 2017; Pringle, 2017).21 Along similar lines, Ahmad asserted that “Every single white supremacist deserves to be publicly

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20 Also addressed to left-leaning readers, in late August of 2017, Ahmed published a follow up piece in Briarpatch titled “When Calling Out Makes Sense”, https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/when-calling-out-makes-sense

21 The case referenced here is often cited as an iconic example of the excesses of social media shaming and ‘trial by Twitter.’ The target became a trending social media story after sending an offensive, racist comment (‘tweet’) on Twitter prior to boarding a plane. As she slept on the flight, her comment was reposted tens of thousands of times, where it generated significant denunciation around the digitally connected world, including a hashtag asking if she had landed. By the time she exited the plane, she had become the recipient of significant online vitriol, including threats of violence. She was fired from her job as a communication director the next day.
shamed and face the consequences of their actions” (Ahmad, cited in Gass, 2017). In light of the exceptional nature of the events to which they were responding, readers familiar with, and sympathetic to such criticisms about the excesses of online shaming were hereby offered a tacit pass to “shame away”.

Additionally, postings often reinforced a sense of the present as an urgent time for moral clarity and judgment, sometimes quite self-consciously, especially following the death of the counter-protestor, and injuries to others, when they were violently struck by a car driven by a rally-goer. “Nazis are marching without fear. Counter-protestors are getting mowed down in the street” (Fig. 9.11). Addressed to an audience presumed to be concerned by what can be seen in the two images — marchers holding flags bearing swastikas and the moment a car “mows down” counter-protesters — the reader is called upon to pass judgement on what is occurring. Here the symbol of violence (a flag bearing a swastika) and the actualisation of violence (a car driving through bodies of people) are joined together in meaning. “Whether you like it or not, it’s time to pick a side” (ibid.). Later referred to as “the photo from Charlottesville that will define this moment in American history” (Rosenberg, 2017),
the second image subsequently won a Pulitzer Prize for “Breaking News Photography”.\textsuperscript{22} Haunted by symbols of what should be in the past, the present was interpreted as a potentially defining moment of American history-in-the-making, and characterised as a time in which there is no spectator position. The audience member who was presumed to be both ambivalent about DV tactics, and morally attuned to political dangers on the horizon, is asked the implicit question: which side are you on?

\section*{News Media as Reportage and Collaboration}

From the beginning, news media articles and interviews with the activist behind the original call to action helped to amplify and widen the audience scope of the DV campaign, by reporting on it as newsworthy and recirculating images and examples from it. While my primary focus has been on digital media audience activism in this case, and the co-ordinating work of ordinary citizens in response to this call, it is important to emphasise that by reporting on this campaign as part of the story of Charlottesville 2017, news media reportage and popular commentary — on air, in print and online — very actively, if inadvertently, contributed to both its publicity and efficacy, even when it was expressly critical of the methods of doxing and shaming (for an example of this, see Ellis, 2017). Regardless of the discursive context in which they were placed, by recirculating images and names of ‘outed’ rally participants from social media postings, with very few exceptions, and by reporting on this campaign as something interesting and controversial, news media contributed to the infamy of the pictured and identified participants. While not unique to this case, news media actors functioned as important co-collaborators in the creation of digital naming and shaming effects (see Hess & Waller, 2014, pp. 103–4).

In most of the prolific news stories found online, on television and in print, different opinions from various experts and commentators who were asked to ‘weigh in’ on the DV campaign were included, from media scholars and civil libertarians, to anti-violence educators and public

\textsuperscript{22} Ryan Kelly of The Daily Progress was the photographer behind this image, called ‘Charlottesville Car Attack’, which later won a Pulitzer Prize for “Breaking News Photography”.

intellectuals. Serving as proxy for the ambivalence that was present within the wider public concerning the ‘outing’ of rally participants, on-air news commentators occasionally voiced their own reservations concerning DV tactics. For example, following an interview with the activist behind the prominent social media call, in which he was asked to explain what he was “trying to accomplish”, two MSNBC newscasters are heard briefly struggling over its ethical implications. One mused on what she considered the absurdity of anybody expecting “privacy” after having participated in such a public event:

> to those who participated in the rally over the weekend who’ve been complaining for the last twenty-four hours that they don’t deserve to have their names and faces out there, I say, you’ve got to be kidding me, you were a part of this.

In the next moment she adds, “But it is dangerous business, right? People have families, and extended families. Now that we live in this world of social media [shakes her head], I don’t know. This is a very complicated issue”. “It is”, reiterated her on-air co-worker (MSNBC News, 2017a). Moral ambivalence over the use of such tactics was often made part and parcel to the story. By framing it in this way, and not merely reporting upon its factual elements, news media thus contributed to making the DV campaign topical, inviting the audience to weigh in on it as a complicated socio-moral issue of the times.

Those who argued that the DV campaign was morally justified, in spite of its risks and limitations, typically drew attention to the exceptional nature of the events to which the ‘call’ to name and shame were addressed, exacerbated by the inadequacy of the US President’s response. A columnist for the *Toronto Star* summed this position up as follows, “In light of the horrific events in Charlottesville, VA., this weekend, I firmly believe that a shame-pass is in order....It’s nothing but necessary in a nation whose leader refuses to condemn voices of hate...” Speaking to its relevance beyond the borders of the US, she went on to urge her audience of newspaper readers to “shame away”, arguing that to have participated in the Charlottesville rallies could not be dismissed as a “lapse in judgment” as it is to participate in something that is “a direct threat to the way of life of every decent person on this earth” (Teital, 2017, para. 4-5). As this example reveals, the line between
commentating on the campaign and actively contributing to it was exceedingly thin.

Clearly, the effectiveness of ‘naming and shaming’ becomes intensified through the news media reportage and the commentary it elicits, whether the emphasis is more critical, supportive or mixed. Beyond the specificities of the case at hand, this highlights the importance of reflexivity in all manner of reportage and commentary; since public shaming and other related dimensions of DV initiatives depend upon significant collaboration to be effective, it becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible, not to be implicated in some manner and thus it is important to take this into account in any such re-presentation.  

Aftermath, One Year Later

One year later, under heavy police presence, a coalition of individuals associated with the far-right in America organised a rally in Washington after being denied a permit for such an event in Charlottesville. Framed by its organisers as a second “Unite the Right” event, this would-be anniversary event — doomed before it began — brought together a couple of dozen supporters. In addition to the heavy police presence in Washington, a state of emergency was declared in Virginia by the state Governor in advance of the Charlottesville anniversary. In notable contrast with the five hundred or so persons who had congregated the previous August, formally permitted to do so, and buoyed by the belief that this moment represented a positive “turning point” in their movement, the sparse assembly of participants was massively outnumbered by thousands of counter-demonstrators. In a country with a population exceeding 327 million people, from the vantage point

23 Of course, this also includes scholarly writing. In the case of this study, and in keeping with the ethical protocols put forth by the editors of this collection and agreed upon by contributors, I have sought to maintain the anonymity of rally participants who were not public figures prior to the Charlottesville events. At the same time, I must recognise the limitations of this approach, since the ample news stories that have circulated about previously unknown, and subsequently identified individuals have typically included their names alongside their images. Minimally, by not embedding names of such participants into the writing of this chapter, Internet searches of such names will not pull up this particular text.
of uniting the right, this event was nothing short of a spectacular and demoralising failure.

Mirroring the tactics used during the previous year, local activists engaged in pre-emptive naming and shaming tactics, aimed at discouraging participation, by publicising names of known organisers in advance. As reported in the *New York Times*

activists posted personal information of organizers online, and encouraged people to alert employers of their affiliations, put up fliers outing them in their neighbourhoods, and uncovered their “ties to more ‘respectable’ right-wing organizations that help them hide their true intentions (Fausset et al., 2018).

Connections were made in news reports between this conspicuously sparse turnout and the previous year’s outing “by both online activists and mainstream media outlets” (Fausset et al., 2018, para. 3). Organiser Jason Kessler attributed the small numbers to an “atmosphere of intimidation” (ibid., para. 4). In a sense, as both the organiser’s remarks and the news reports implied, the social media activists had taken the enjoyment out of the event for participants. Specifically, the consequences of the ‘outing’ tactics the previous year seemed to have successfully diminished participants’ capacity to feel powerful and effervescent one year later, while physically surrounded by like-minded others in the public realm.

It would be unwise to infer from this conspicuously meagre anniversary rally that the white supremacist movement is withering in the US, that the 2017 social media campaign was alone responsible for what happened the next year, or that any complex social formation can be diminished through such means alone. As critical race scholars and anti-racist educators importantly highlight, it is relatively easy to condemn overt manifestations of racism, while its invisible institutional structures remain intact (see Paradkar, 2017). Since this time, there has been much concerned discussion about the overall rise of the alt-right, and violent manifestations of explicitly racist, white supremacist, anti-immigrant, anti-Black, anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic sentiments in numerous countries around the world, at the cultural and formal political level. At the cultural level, the successful failure of the 2018 “Charlottesville anniversary” rally, however, suggests some efficacy on the part of the vigilant social media campaign, in dissuading all but the
fully committed participant from taking the gamble of marching in the streets, facing the cameras, and living with the kind of infamy that was generated following Charlottesville 2017. In so doing, it helped to accentuate the urgency of the moment, a time in which actors and groups bearing symbols and expressions of violent white nationalism and white supremacy are seeking legitimate presence in the mainstream. The hope is that this will also contribute to making a difference at the formal political level, in delegitimating political actors who seek or draw support from groups or individuals associated with such manifestations.

Discussion and Conclusion: Solidifying Meaning, Refusing Moral Equivalency, Getting Personal

Let us revisit the question posed at the outset: what would have been different about Charlottesville 2017 without the social media campaign aimed at outing participants as such? In other words, what did this campaign produce and achieve, and what are some of its significant social implications?

The DV campaign helped to crystallise the meaning of what kind of event the “Unite the Right” rally was within the broader public culture: an ominously exceptional, socially dangerous and potentially historically significant moment within contemporary US society.

It contributed to a united refusal within civil society to normalise and thereby legitimate the expression of violent white nationalism and white supremacy, legitimation that was being sought by rally organisers, vocal participants and event supporters who assembled in Charlottesville in August 2017 under the banner “Unite the Right”. Thus, it can be understood as an attempt to socially refuse the public manifestation of violent white supremacy in twenty-first-century public life as but one controversial orientation amongst others, a refusal maintained even when symbolising this expression through signage and space is granted constitutional protection. “Nazis marching”, argued YYR, can be afforded no socially comfortable place within the contemporary public landscape. The current laws in the US may permit such manifestations in the name of the First Amendment — freedom of expression — as well as the right to assemble, if done lawfully; however, this campaign performatively argued that the violation such manifestations represent
to individuals, groups and the society at large, demands their immediate and targeted denunciation.\footnote{Indeed, it can also be said that one of those same principles, namely ‘freedom of expression’, is also in part what empowered the DV campaign to engage in its tactics of naming and outing participants as it did.}

If we understand DV as rooted in conduct that some consider ‘offensive’, it must be noted that the kind of offense at stake in this case goes beyond interactional conflict or norm violation. Affective support for this social media campaign, even if it was tinged with some reservation concerning tactics, revealed a shared sense that what was seen and heard in Charlottesville was socially criminal even if it was formally permitted. It violated strongly held sentiments “deeply written” into the collective consciousness, to use the language of Durkheim; its manifestations threaten and harm individuals — especially those who are members of particular minority groups, fomenting destructive forces within society. In this sense they threaten everybody’s well-being.

The DV campaign, including the ambivalence it evoked, helped to create conditions to articulate a clear rejection of the trappings of moral equivalency, on the grounds that it is a moral outrage to consider violent manifestations of racism and anti-racist responses to such manifestations as mere differences in content. As suggested earlier, the first response by President Trump, in which he referred to “violence on many sides” and “very fine people” on both sides, could have only intensified the felt necessity of such a refusal for the moral majority of concerned and outraged spectators to the events that transpired in Charlottesville. In this respect, the DV campaign also posed a challenge to those who were critical of its method, as this, too, might inadvertently reproduce such a political (‘neutral’) position.

The refusal to legitimate the terrain of violent white nationalism and white supremacy was largely achieved by making participation in such events particular, personal, risky and potentially fateful for the previously unknown and presumed anonymous participant. This was the unique aspect that the DV campaign added to Charlottesville 2017, and as I have argued here, its power lay primarily in the socio-moral domain. Whereas the vigorous public opposition, including the counter-rallies, was largely articulated in relation to social justice principles, the targeting
of individuals and the naming of names, encouraged and coordinated through contemporary tools of social media, created the conditions for a type of accountability and consequence for the otherwise unremarkable individual rally participant. The DV campaign took things beyond the level of general condemnation of a disturbing and reprehensible event, by making anyone’s positive association with and during such an event live on in ways that were socially consequential.

The prolific circulation of particular instances of correct identification and exposure, we can surmise, constituted a public pedagogy of sorts, whose primary lesson to anyone who participates in such an event, now and into the foreseeable future, is to expect significant visibility and not to imagine that it will be possible to remain anonymous after the dust has settled. Participation at any level — organiser, speaker, marcher, bearer of sign, holder of torch, chanter of slogan — was thereby constituted as socially risky and even dangerous for the individual, in that it promised to make such participation matter afterwards and outside of the original event. In Goffman’s sense, “fatefulness” refers to “the mark of the threshold between retaining some control over the consequences of one’s actions and their going out of control” (Goffman, 1967, p. 27). This is precisely what the “angry torch man” alluded to when he referred to his post-identification life as now “spiralling out of control”. This is the unique, potent and indeed morally controversial aspect that the DV campaign, led by YYR, ‘added’ to the Charlottesville events and their aftermath.

For the individual, says this campaign, there can be nothing casual about participation in a rally tainted by the threat or actuality of violent white supremacy. The possibility of dabbling or casually playing at being a ‘weekend white supremacist’, without facing worldly consequences in the days after, was powerfully challenged. We can speculate that such a lesson would be most effective for the participant for whom attendance was likened to a type of thrill-seeking or weekend adventure, and less so for the ideologically “true believer” (cf. Hoffer, 1951), since the former — if not the latter — is more likely to have affiliations with those to whom such participation would be considered repugnant, and which his (or her) subsequently exposed participation may jeopardise. The most powerful, if also invisible, force that enabled this DV campaign to have the effects that it did was the unspoken moral
force of a shared vision of a world in which racially motivated hatred and violence must be made to have no legitimate place.

Campaigns of digital vigilantism can, of course, be inspired and undertaken from a variety of possible interests — political, socio-cultural, personal and otherwise. Making a case for the importance of detailed and socially contextualised scholarly investigation into such manifestations and their consequences within a complex and pluralistic social world, the example we have explored here offers insight into how such methods can be mobilised on behalf of social-justice interests.

References (scholarly texts)


References (media sources)


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story-behind-viral-photo-unr-student-yelling-white-nationalist-rally/573805001


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