

## **‘Welcome to #GabFam’: Far-Right Virtual Community on Gab**

### **Abstract**

With large social media platforms coming under increasing pressure to deplatform far-right users, the Alternative Technology movement (Alt-Tech) emerged as a new digital support infrastructure for the far right. We conduct a qualitative analysis of the prominent Alt-Tech platform Gab, a social networking service primarily modelled on Twitter, to assess the far-right virtual community on the platform. We find Gab’s technological affordances – including its lack of content moderation, culture of anonymity, microblogging architecture, and funding model – have fostered an ideologically eclectic far-right community united by fears of persecution at the hands of “Big Tech”. We argue that this points to the emergence of a novel techno-social victimology as an axis of far-right virtual community, wherein shared experiences or fears of being deplatformed facilitate a coalescing of assorted far-right tendencies online.

### **Key words**

Virtual Community, Platform Affordances, Far Right, Gab, Alt-Tech, Alt-Right, Social Media

### **Introduction**

Following events like the deadly 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, efforts by platforms including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to crack down on hate speech and extremist content resulted in a significant number of far-right organisations and activists being removed from their platforms. In response, an ecosystem of alternative platforms – “Alt-Tech” – emerged as a new digital support infrastructure for the far right<sup>1</sup> (Donovan et al., 2019). After the events in Charlottesville, Gab, a social networking platform modelled primarily on the microblogging form of Twitter, ‘became an important hub for the far right’ (Donovan et al., 2019: 57). Since then, Gab has survived several attempts to take it offline. Following the January 2021 storming of the US Capitol and the deplatforming of Alt-Tech competitor Parler, Gab has undergone unprecedented growth, with claims of more than ten-thousand new users an hour (Brandt and Dean, 2021).

Gab differs from other social media as it affords the familiarity of “mainstream” platforms like Facebook and Twitter but with minimal content moderation. This lax moderation has made Gab popular among the far right, with hateful and extremist material proliferating on the platform (Lima et al., 2018; Zannettou et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2019). Given its centrality to the “Alt-Tech,” or Alternative Technology movement, Gab is important not only for understanding the adaptability of the far right to new social media, but also the viability of Alt-Tech as a far-right techno-social project more broadly. In this paper, we provide – to the best of our knowledge – the first qualitative analysis of the far-right virtual community on Gab. Previous research on far-right virtual communities emphasises the role of a sense of *offline* stigmatisation in producing this sense of community on the internet (De Koster and Houtman, 2008). Building on this, we argue that on Gab there is a specifically *online* sense of persecution or victimhood at the hands of “Big Tech” that unifies the far-right community on the platform. In this respect, the far-right community on Gab differs from other far-right virtual communities in that it is a product not only of perceived white racial or heterosexual male victimhood,

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<sup>1</sup>Along with the nativism and authoritarianism with which the far right is conventionally identified (Mudde, 2007), we note that political misogyny also forms a distinct element within the contemporary far right (Blee 2018; DiBranco 2017). As such, we treat the ‘far right’ as a heterogeneous group of political actors involved in the most trenchant defences of both these (and potentially other) forms of social hierarchy.

but also a perceived techno-social victimhood. Taking an affordance-based approach, we argue that the technological features of Gab, in particular its minimal content moderation, are central to the formation of this virtual community.

The article is structured as follows. First, we provide an overview of our theoretical approach, drawing on the literatures on technological affordances and virtual communities. This is followed by a discussion of Gab and Alt-Tech, in which we outline Gab's platform features and its relationship to the far right. We then outline our data and methods, noting study limitations, and present and discuss our findings. Here we analyse the relationship between Gab's affordances and the platform's far-right virtual community, which we argue is unified by a novel sense of techno-social victimhood. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of our findings for new configurations of the far right online.

### **Technological Affordances and Virtual Community**

Technological affordances describe the possibilities embedded in a particular technology, in this case a social media platform. In this context, it includes not only those specific platform features, such as "like" or search functions, but also the 'the kinds of communicative practices and habits they enable or constrain' (Bucher and Helmond, 2017: 240). Because affordances are relational (i.e., the relationship between users and the material features of the technology), different users may experience different affordances from the same technologies (Treem and Leonardi, 2013). Affordances matter because they help explain the shared practices of platform users, by enabling or constraining the ability to undertake certain actions via the platform (Treem and Leonardi, 2013: 146). An affordance-based approach therefore asks what features or combinations of features allow users to undertake or engage in particular behaviour (Leonardi, 2011). This is because a platform's particular set of features make 'some courses of action more obvious, easier, less effortful or costly, more likely to be successful, or some combination' (Bimber and Gil de Zúñiga, 2020: 705).

As platforms have different technological features affording different kinds of interaction and communication, we need to explore how these are utilised by the far right in different ways (Conway, 2017). These affordances can, for example, foster the development of a shared sense of identity among users (Gaudette et al., 2020). The formation of in- and out-group binaries in this process of identity construction demarcates the social boundaries between those who are members of a community and those who are not (Perry and Scrivens, 2016). Such a virtual community is not a social movement as such. Rather it is characterised by individual users that have voluntarily come together sharing a degree of like-mindedness in worldview, in order to discuss and exchange ideas (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Ridings and Gefen, 2004; Simi and Futrell, 2006). These processes of interaction and exchange among members reinforce a sense of belonging, as shared ideas and feelings are affirmed by members of the in-group (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; De Koster and Houtman, 2008; Perry and Scrivens 2016). What matters is whether the members 'experience their online interactions as a community' (De Koster and Houtman, 2008: 1157). Hence, virtual communities function as 'real social spaces' in which 'processes of identity negotiation that lead to the acceptance of ideologies' are navigated (Bowman-Grieve, 2009: 990), and where political action can be secondary to 'sustaining a network of like-minded individuals' (Caren et al., 2012: 165). For the far right, what unites their communities online are 'forms of intimacy, sense, and feeling that are maligned or considered unacceptable in mainstream society' (Ganesh, 2018: 33-4). These communities provide a possible 'refuge' for the extreme or socially marginalised views shared by users there (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; De Koster and Houtman, 2008).

Therefore, understanding the interaction and communication afforded by different platforms is vital to understanding how far-right communities develop in particular online spaces. Early internet

technologies like email and bulletin boards afforded new forms of participation and interaction across spatial barriers (Burris et al., 2000). The popularisation of social networking platforms has provided greater opportunities for the far right, with access to larger audiences than ever before. The platform features of Facebook for example, afford engagement through “like” and “share” features (McSwiney, 2021; Mercea, 2013), while its connective architecture encourages users to seek out those with similar interests (Stier et al., 2017). Similarly, the recommendation features of YouTube afford the far-right a vital tool to disseminate their ideology and build a community (Hermansson et al., 2020; O’Callaghan et al., 2015). Likewise, the up and downvoting function of Reddit has been found to promote one-sided narratives, ‘reinforcing members’ extremist views,’ making far-right channels like the pro-Trump subreddit r/The\_Donald ‘an echo chamber for hate’ (Gaudette et al., 2020: 13). However, this voting feature was found to hinder collective identity formation in the case of the anti-feminist Gamergate community (Buyukozturk et al., 2018).

### **Gab, Alt-Tech and the Far Right**

Gab was founded in 2016, and publicly launched in May 2017. Established as an alternative to what founder Andrew Torba labels the ‘left-leaning Big Social monopoly’ of Facebook and Twitter (cited in Kantrowitz, 2016), the platform has sought to profit from what it sees as bias against right-wing users on major social networking sites. Though Gab does not explicitly position itself as a far-right platform, instead describing itself as ‘a social network that champions free speech, individual liberty and the free flow of information online’ (gab.com), the platform has nevertheless actively courted such a user-base. In 2018, Gab described its target market as ‘conservative, liberal, libertarian, nationalist, and populist [...] who are seeking alternative news media platforms like Breitbart.com, DrudgeReport.com, Infowars.com’ (Gab AI Inc., 2018). Additionally, Gab’s initial logo, a green frog, was a ‘transparent appropriation’ of the Pepe the Frog meme adopted as an icon of the “alt-right” (Donovan et al., 2018). Though the platform has since dropped the green frog, it currently uses the NPC (Non-Player Character) meme, also popular with the “alt-right” (Hermanssen et al., 2020), as its default image for user profiles.

The first version of Gab was closely modelled on the microblogging format of Twitter, but also incorporated a voting system akin to that of Reddit. Like Twitter, it enabled users to broadcast 300-character messages called “Gabs” to their followers. These posts could be up- or down-voted, and the number of up- and down-votes they received determined both the visibility of posts on the platform and the “score” of the individual user. Both features have subsequently been modified. The microblogging format remains, but Gabs now have an increased limit of 3,000 characters. The voting system went through a number of changes between 2017 and 2019, supposedly due to concerns that it was being exploited by ‘trolls’ and ‘far left’ infiltrators (Ehrenkranz, 2017), and is no longer a feature of the platform. Instead, users can now “like”, “comment” or “repost” content in the same way as users can “like”, “comment” or “retweet” content on Twitter. They also have the option to join “groups” based on shared interests, similar to the “groups” feature on Facebook. Users who take out a paid “Gab PRO” subscription gain access to additional features such as the ability to apply for verification, schedule posts, get their own Gab TV channel and set posts to automatically delete after a specified period of time. As of early 2021, Gab’s user interface most closely resembles that of Twitter, with a scrolling vertical timeline in the centre of the page, a navigation panel on the left and trending content displayed on the right.

Gab prides itself on its lax moderation policy, allowing nearly all online behaviour except illegal activities, spam, doxing (revealing private or identifying information about other users) or other activity that causes offline harm (GAB AI Inc., 2020a). As a result of the low level of moderation, the Gab application was removed from both the Apple and Google Play stores in 2017. Nevertheless, this

minimalist approach to moderation has won the platform the favour of the far right. Gab experienced an increase in users after large social media companies banned far-right accounts from their platforms in the wake of events like the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017 (Donovan et al., 2018; Zannettou et al., 2018). Most recently, Gab has sought to attract users banned from Twitter and Facebook for spreading the far-right QAnon conspiracy theory (Jasser, 2020).

Previous research on Gab, which is primarily quantitative in methodology, has found that the platform attracts users ranging from ‘alt-right supporters and conspiracy theorists to trolls’ (Zannettou et al., 2018: 1013), with a majority of users being white, male and politically right-leaning (Lima et al., 2018). Use of the platform typically centres on political discussion and the sharing of politically orientated news media (Zannettou et al., 2018), with an emphasis on media catering to the predominant right-wing outlook of users (Lima et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2019). Analysis suggests that discourse on Gab is largely driven by a core of elite ‘superparticipants’ (Graham and Wright, 2014) who shape the far-right discourse (Zhou et al., 2019). Though the existence of platform elites is unsurprising, the extent of their power in the attention economy on Gab is significantly greater than other platforms like Twitter helping ensure a narrow scope of deliberation, with few oppositional views detected (Zhou et al., 2019). Unsurprisingly, high levels of hate speech have been found on the platform (Lima et al., 2018; Zannettou et al., 2018).

As one of the most successful and durable platforms of the Alt-Tech movement, Gab has been at the forefront of this new digital support infrastructure for the far right (Donovan et al., 2019). At its core, Alt-Tech is a ‘replacement infrastructure for the internet as we know it’ (Letson and Squire, 2019). It includes browsers, payment processors, domain registration, web hosting, and social media sites like Gab. Alt-Tech is seen as ‘building a copycat version’ of the aforementioned internet services ‘where they can say and do what they like’ (Letson and Squire, 2019). Within the Alt-Tech movement, Gab highlights the way in which ‘the greater Alt-Tech space integrates and modifies the pre-existing models of interaction their user base has come to expect from their social media experiences elsewhere’ (Donovan et al., 2019: 59). Since the announcement of the “Alt-Tech Alliance” in August 2017, the movement and its platforms have changed. While after Charlottesville, a somewhat closed ecosystem emerged, several years later, Alt-Tech has branched out. Gab in particular is broadening its range. It now hosts a news-hub, a web browser (“Dissenter”) designed to circumvent content moderation by allowing users to post comments on any website in an overlay visible only to other Dissenter users, and an encrypted chat platform, as well as merchandising and an online store.

### **Data and Methods**

We collected data from Gab’s API using a snowball methodology identical to that employed by Zannettou et al. (2018). We first obtained data for the most popular users as returned by Gab’s API, then iteratively collected data from their followers as well as the accounts they were following. The resultant dataset includes the following information: 1) general metadata related to each account like username, bio, date of account creation, etc; 2) all posts made by the user; 3) the user’s follower network. Data were collected between November 2017 and November 2018, resulting in a dataset of 47,266,670 posts made between August 2016 and November 2018 by a total of 295,166 users.

Because we were specifically interested in how the technological affordances of Gab enabled or constrained far-right community building, we first tried to map the boundaries of the far-right community on Gab as perceived by its members. Scott (2013) describes this as a ‘realist’ approach to defining a social network, contrasting it with a ‘nominalist’ one where the boundaries are defined using a formal criterion pre-determined by the researcher. To ensure as best as possible that our sample

contained members of the far-right community on Gab, we started with an initial ‘seed set’ of 55 known or self-identified far-right users within the most popular accounts by follower count. These included prominent far-right activists such as former *Breitbart* columnist Milo Yiannopoulos, conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, and neo-Nazi Andrew Anglin, founder of the notorious *Daily Stormer* website. We then identified other accounts within our dataset that had interacted with one or more of these far-right seed accounts (Berger and Strathearn, 2013), for example by mentioning them or reposting their content. We consider these kinds of interactions between accounts to be stronger indicators of ideological affinity than follower/following relationships, as users often follow other users out of interest or curiosity rather than because they necessarily share their views.

We were interested in how Gab was being used by regular members (Zhou et al., 2019) of the far right as well as by far-right platform elites, so we constructed separate samples of posts by a) our 55 seed accounts of prominent far-right users, and b) the wider network of ordinary users that had interacted with them. We randomly sampled 1200 posts from the seed accounts and 1200 from the wider network. This may seem a large sample size in the context of studies of virtual communities. However, given the exploratory nature of the study and the heterogeneity of the far-right community on Gab – encompassing such diverse ideological tendencies as white supremacism, men’s rights activism, the Christian Right and various conspiracy theory subcultures – we anticipated that a larger-than-typical sample size may be needed to achieve thematic saturation. After manually removing posts by locked, private, or deleted accounts, non-English-language accounts, and those who identified as under 18-years of age, the final sample sizes are 1170 posts from the seed accounts and 1145 from the wider network.

We analysed the posts contained in each of our samples using qualitative content analysis, ‘a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns’ (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1278). Each post was coded for its key topic(s) (e.g., immigration, religion, technology); its key communicative function(s) (e.g., commentary, content sharing, call to action); and other attributes of the post such as its emotional valence, whether it made use of humour, and whether it contained hate speech.<sup>2</sup> All coders first analysed a sub-sample of posts collectively in order to generate a provisional set of codes, before independently coding the broader samples. Borderline or ambiguous cases were discussed by all coders, and the coding scheme was revised on an iterative basis as coding progressed.

### **Limitations**

There are four main limitations to our study. First, we relied on publicly observable interactions with known far-right accounts on Gab in order to build our sample. While our snowball sampling methodology gives confidence that the users in our sample are actively involved in the far-right community on the platform, it excludes any far-right sympathisers on the platform who had not interacted with one of the seed accounts, or who had only interacted with them through private channels such as direct messages or closed discussion groups. Second, while we attempted to extract data on the sociodemographic characteristics and ideological orientation of the users in our samples, in practice Gab’s strong culture of anonymity made this almost impossible. Third, due to limitations of the Gab platform architecture, we were only able to retrieve textual data from posts and not visual data. This limits our capacity to contextualise some post content (in that the text may be a caption to an unavailable

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<sup>2</sup> Hate speech is a contentious and subjective term, but for the purposes of this article we adopt a definition along similar lines to previous literature (e.g., ElSherief et al., 2018; Mathew et al., 2019), where it refers to threats or abuse directed at specific categories of people based on their race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sex, sexuality, disability or other sociodemographic characteristics.

image), and more generally, limits our ability to analyse the visual culture of the far-right community on Gab, which plays an important role in community building (De Koster and Houtman, 2008; Miller-Idriss, 2018). It is possible that some posts may have been coded differently had the full context including visual data been available to us. Finally, we were unable to analyse the effects of Gab's original up- and down-voting system as this feature was modified several times during the period covered by our data, then subsequently removed, making it difficult to assess its effects.

## **Findings**

Our data reveal an ideologically heterogeneous far-right community united by a shared sense of techno-social persecution at the hands of "Big Tech", a commitment to the ultra-libertarian values of the platform, and in many cases a material investment in Gab as an Alt-Tech project. Very few of the account profiles in our sample contained a name, recognisable profile picture, description of the user's ideological sympathies, or verifiable sociodemographic data. Nonetheless, qualitative analysis of these profiles generally confirms the picture presented in previous quantitative research, that Gab users are predominantly American, male, and sympathetic to one or more ideological currents within the US far right, such as the "alt-right", right-libertarianism, Trumpism and white supremacy. Many users were also part of far-right conspiracy theory subcultures, most prominently 'QAnon', the deep-state conspiracy theory popular among Trump supporters and tied to events like the January 6th, 2021 storming of the US Capitol.

Significantly, many users had a direct, material stake in Gab, most commonly in the form of a paid Gab PRO account. Fifteen percent of the network accounts we analysed were Gab PRO subscribers, rising to 31% of our seed accounts, indicating a strong financial commitment to Gab as an Alt-Tech project among the far-right platform elites. The other main ways that users contributed financially to the platform were through donations (15% of network accounts and 20% of seed accounts), and investments (3% of network accounts and 5% of seed accounts).

### **[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE - POST PURPOSE]**

Interestingly, our qualitative analysis uncovered very few examples of Gab being used to organise specific real-world political actions, suggesting that it is more a social and cultural space for the far right than it is an organisational platform. Table 1 gives an overview of the communicative function of the posts in our samples. As can be seen, just 2% of posts by network accounts and 3% of posts by seed accounts contained calls to action, for instance to attend a demonstration or sign a petition. Most commonly, posts took the form of commentary on topical issues and news, typically presenting these in a partisan way. After issuing topical commentary, the next most common way of using the platform was to share content, most often links to right-wing blogs and news sites, with platform elites encouraging users to 'Support Media that supports you' (Seed Account 1, February 2017). Reflecting Gab's role as a virtual community rather than an organisational platform, far more time is devoted to establishing a collective identity through the construction of in-groups and out-groups than is devoted to the discussion of specific political actions.

### **[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE - POST TOPIC]**

In terms of the content of communications on the platform, we found Gab users most frequently discussed American politics and events from a right-wing angle, which corresponds with previous quantitative research on the platform (Lima, et al, 2018; Zannettou, et al., 2018). Many posts focused on US electoral politics, which is unsurprising given the period covered by our data includes both the

2016 US presidential election and the 2018 midterm elections. As can be seen from the breakdown of topics in Table 1, the discourse on Gab is highly personalistic with many posts being about named individuals such as Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Topics are broadly consistent across our two datasets, though some important divergences do emerge. Namely, while the network accounts are more likely to talk about institutional politics (primarily American party politics), the platform elites of the seed sample more frequently discussed race, ethnicity and/or culture, indicative of a stronger commitment to white nationalism among these users. Platform elites were also more likely to discuss technology, and in particular, Alt-Tech and Gab itself.

### **[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE - HATE SPEECH]**

Finally, we found a higher incidence of hate speech in our sample using our manual, qualitative coding than that reported by Zannettou et al. (2018) or Lima et al. (2018) in their automated approaches (Table 3). With a combined total of 9.9% of all coded posts containing hate speech, we confirm that ‘hate speech is extensively present on the platform’ (Zannettou et al., 2018: 1008), proliferating in greater volume in the targeted far-right community we identify. Across both seed and network samples, anti-Semitism was particularly prevalent (McIlroy-Young and Anderson, 2019; Zannettou et al., 2020), along with anti-Black racism, highlighting a consistency between platform elites and other users in our data in terms of hate speech (Zhou et al., 2019). This is followed by misogyny, reflecting the importance of male supremacism as a distinct strand within the Anglophone far right.

### **Discussion**

Our findings reflect the affordances of Gab as an Alt-Tech platform in several ways. Firstly, limited content moderation contributes to the chaotic and often hateful discourse, while providing a safe space for right-wing users banned from other social media platforms. While the almost total absence of moderation made Gab attractive to leaders of the “alt-right” such as the white supremacist Richard Spencer and neo-Nazi Andrew Anglin, it has also drawn in a wider group of users who may have fallen foul of the terms of service on other platforms. These include people with ultra-conservative attitudes on issues such as sex and gender, gun enthusiasts, self-described “free speech extremists”, conspiracy theorists and social media trolls, among others. What unites them and draws them to Gab is a feeling of persecution by mainstream social media platforms, and the knowledge that they can “speak freely” there, with little fear of being banned or even critiqued regardless of how extreme their views are. This sense of persecution was often invoked by users in both our network and seed samples when explaining their reasons for joining Gab: ‘Got suspended indefinitely from Twitter nine days ago, two days later I signed up for Gab, couldn't be happier. Finally on a platform that doesn't restrict free speech to fit narratives’ (Network Account 1, February 2018).

Users described the lack of moderation, its ‘zero censorship’ (Seed Account 2, March 2017) as the key attraction: ‘At least everyone on Gab is still free to say what they think without being victims of a purge’ (Network Account 2, May 2018). It is this sense of “Big Tech” persecution – the ‘purge’ – that draws people to Gab, as Anglin claims: ‘Everyone is getting banned from everything. They started with me, now they're moving on down the line’ (Seed Account 3, August 2017). While some users in our sample were clearly unhappy about the presence of ‘Nazis... and other assorted nuts’ (Network Account 3, May 2018), we did not observe any serious calls to remove such users from the platform. One user summed up this ethos as follows: ‘I want people to have Freedom of Association on GAB. You stay over there, I stay over here’ (Network Account 4, May 2018). This ‘freedom of association’ is supported by the Gab groups feature, which allows users to coalesce around specific interests as a distinct subsection of the platform. These groups have ‘tons of potential’ for the far right, because:

‘They're gonna let ppl [people] build communities inside of Gab. Look at the Ace of Spades group. [Gab user] Ace is right wing and edgy - but he also bans racial slurs... They're too edgy for Twitter, but don't really want a bunch of slurs thrown in their face. [A] Gab Group is a happy medium.’ – Seed Account 1, May 2018.

What unites the ‘GabFam’ is more a shared sense of online persecution than a singular commitment to a specific far-right ideology. In this respect, Gab serves as something of a ‘refuge’ for those who feel themselves persecuted and stigmatised as a result of their views (De Koster and Houtman, 2008). But unlike previous research highlighting the importance of *offline* stigmatization in experiences of community on the white supremacist forum Stormfront (De Koster and Houtman, 2008), the sense of persecution uniting far-right users on Gab is specifically *online*, derived from their negative experiences and perceptions of the “left-leaning Big Social monopoly” of Facebook and Twitter (Torba cited in Kantrowitz, 2016). For this community, several narratives of victimisation intertwine. Some join for their racist and anti-Semitic politics, which had resulted in them being banned from other platforms. These users anticipate they will find a community of like-minded users on Gab and use the platform as a means to an end. For others the project of Alt-Tech comes first, and their victimisation narrative is primarily focused on “Big Tech” and the perceived unjust persecution (Jasser, 2021).

This is best illustrated by the construction and maintenance of social boundaries among Gab users. The identification of a common enemy is an important tactic for community building (Futrell and Simi, 2004). In the case of Gab, this common enemy is techno-social: “Big Tech”. The narrative of persecution at the hands of platforms like Facebook and Twitter among Gab users helps to unify the most hardcore neo-Nazi and white supremacists with the less socially maligned Trumpian Republican users, as the below examples illustrate:

‘[F]acebook is owned by a friggen jew what do you expect.’ – Network Account 5, March 2018.

‘Twitter probably wont suspend that account. But say #MAGA and you are toast’ – Network Account 6, March 2017.

‘Next to the gentrifier, the Silicon Valley oligarch is the worst kind of human being imo [in my opinion].’ – Network Account 7, December 2017.

Secondly, the structure of user profiles on Gab affords a greater degree of anonymity than mainstream platforms like Facebook and Twitter, and even Alt-Tech competitors like Parler. In order to sign up for Gab, prospective users have only to provide a username and an email address. It does not require users to provide their first or last name, a date of birth, or phone number. Though providing greater affordances for anonymity than its social media competitors, Gab does not go as far as 4chan or 8chan (now 8kun) in providing total anonymity through the absence of stable user identities (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017). Gab therefore comes to occupy something of a middle ground between the anonymity of the chans, and the persistent personalisation of Facebook. The result of these platform features (minimal details for sign up combined with persistent profiles) affords stable, if anonymous user personas with which to formulate a persistent community and sense of shared experience (De Koster and Houtman, 2009), yet protecting the user’s identity. While a user’s identity or ideological allegiance may not always be visible, their activity nevertheless contributes to the building of a far-right



community on Gab by increasing the visibility and circulation of these ideas (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Crosset et al., 2018).

The combination of Gab's lack of content moderation and culture of anonymity helps to account for the prevalence of hate speech, violent fantasies and, more rarely, direct incitements to violence within our samples. Violent postings in our samples are directed at those seen as criminal, (sexually) deviant, or otherwise inferior, with a particular focus on punishment for these perceived transgressions, while racism is endemic on the platform. Examples of this violent and frequently hateful discourse ranged from fantasizing about government sanctioned aggressions, murder and punishment fantasies and discussions of the qualities of particular methods for executions:

'Sterilise them, all of them, and ban all welfare. Problem solved.' – Seed Account 2, May 2018, on non-white residents in the US.

'I am 100% for Make Suspension Hangings Great Again'. – Seed Account 4, June 2018.

'These people are terrorists. They'll latch on to any "cause" so that they can protest and commit violence. Police need to just start shooting these dogs.' – Network Account 9, February 2017, on Black Lives Matter protests in the US.

'N\*\*\*\*\*s aren't stupid. That would be giving them a promotion. They are feral, non-thinking, evil fucking subhumans. Who all deseve to die. You, too, Wakanda Boy. N\*\*\*\*\*s, Jews, SJWs & illegals will fill the streets as piles of dead bodies. It's the only way.' – Network Account 10, May 2018.

Much of the violence present in the sample appears to possess a fantasy-driven quality and helps facilitate a socialisation process by communicating values and norms around violence (Simi and Windisch, 2020). The establishment of these norms, as well as identification of out-groups as targets of violence, adds to the sense of community among users. Further, the use of, or at least indifference toward hate speech by most users, reinforces the techno-social nature of the community, emphasising their right to completely unmoderated speech. Given Gab's links to acts of far-right violence and terrorism – most explicitly in the Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooting in 2018, whose perpetrator used the platform to signal his intentions – this violent talk online can serve as a legitimising framework for "offline" violence (Wahlström et al., 2020), 'supporting and justifying' its use by providing validation as a community (Bowman-Grieve, 2009: 990; Jones et al., 2019).

Thirdly, Gab's platform architecture, which draws heavily on the microblogging functionality of Twitter, is geared towards the distribution of content to a dispersed audience, making it quite different to more "closed" social networks like Facebook. Like Twitter, there is no requirement for visitors to Gab to register for an account in order to view content on the site. Early versions of the Gab homepage allowed visitors to browse almost the entirety of the website using an "explore" function. While this feature had been removed, as of summer 2020, the website's front page features a timeline with 'Popular posts across Gab,' a search function and an overview of the other features (e.g., "groups") and links to the other commodities the company offers (the Dissenter browser, as well as a news-hub, shop, and blog). This affords Gab content far greater accessibility and visibility compared to more closed online communities, like the white supremacist forum Stormfront (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; De Koster and Houtman, 2008) or closed far-right Discord servers with a vetting process (Ebner, 2020). The platform architecture is therefore more conducive to sharing and commenting on content, both of which allow individual users to build connections with the broader community.

While microblogging features like hashtags are, as on Twitter, used to show contribution to discussion topics, and mentions are used to illustrate reuse of content or direct communication (Treem and Leonardi 2013), they are also used to build a sense of community. This is best illustrated by the commonly used #GabFam (“Gab Family”). Importantly, the hashtag GabFam points to a sense of community structured around the particular values of the platform itself, as opposed to a political identity signified by hashtags such as #MAGA (“Make America Great Again”), which was also prevalent in our dataset. The hashtag constructs the community as a kind of extended family around being a Gab user, and for users invested in ethnic nationalism, no doubt these terms will have specific connotations of kinship and consanguinity. Users frequently welcome new members to the “family” and offer guidance, thereby ensuring a transition from new member to part of the family: ‘Welcome to #Gabfam and #SpeakFreely. If You need Help: @support (Network Account 11, December 2017); ‘Welcome to gab, the home of free speech, at least for now!’ (Network Account 12, September 2017). Understanding a virtual community as a form of family, joining it to make new contacts (Ridings and Gefen, 2004) or as a supportive ‘second home’ (De Koster and Houtman, 2008), highlights the sense of belonging and bonding cultivated on Gab as a space for unmoderated speech. Additionally, there are related hashtags using the same structure, for users in different geographies, such as #AmerFam (“American family”), #CanFam (“Canadian family”) and #BritFam (“British family”), pointing to efforts to form subcommunities around national identity: ‘Thanks for the follow if you are a Brit join #BritFam’ (Network Account 13, September 2018).

Lastly, Gab’s funding model is crucial for understanding how a sense of community is created. Many of the users across both our network and seed samples have a material stake in Gab, having purchased a Gab PRO account, or having otherwise made a donation to Gab as indicated by the relevant “badges” displayed on their user profiles. Not only do users gain access to these “badges” through their financial commitment, but they can also in the case of Gab PRO users unlock additional features like the option to apply for verification, create groups or send self-destructing posts. Not only are there ideological as well as affective ties contributing to the sense of a far-right community on Gab, but there are also concrete, material ties as well. Furthermore, the monetisation is marketed in a decidedly political way, which reinforces the sense of victimisation which binds the community. Users are urged to ‘Help Defend Liberty with Gab PRO’ and ‘Fight Against Silicon Valley Tyranny’, while those who make a donation of US\$500 or more to the company have the honour of becoming a ‘Lifelong Patriot’ (GAB AI Inc., 2020b).

## **Conclusions**

Gab functions mainly as a space for a heterogeneous far-right to coalesce as a community of grievance in the face of perceived techno-social persecution by “Big Tech”. While victimhood claims have been elsewhere identified as part of a powerful affective bond in white supremacist and broader far-right communities (Berbrier, 2000; Marcks and Pawelz, 2020; Oaten, 2014), we find that alongside “white victimhood,” there is a platform-specific sense of persecution underpinning far-right community formation on Gab. Further, in contrast to previous work on far-right virtual communities, which emphasise the importance of offline stigmatization to community formation (De Koster and Houtman, 2008), we find that it is a particularly online sense of stigma which unifies users. This practice of community building around the axis of techno-social persecution serves as a new potential vector for radicalisation and recruitment into extremist milieus, and one that is further facilitated by the technological affordances of Gab, particularly its lax content moderation. As the platform continues to market to communities running afoul of other platforms’ terms of service, most recently QAnon supporters and COVID-19 conspiracists, the platform provides a mixing pot for new far-right configurations as new users are welcomed to the ‘GabFam’.

This sense of community on Gab matters as it provides validation for members' views and encourages ideological uptake (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; De Koster and Houtman, 2008; Gaudette et al., 2020; Simi and Futrell, 2006). The question of validation is especially pressing in the context of Alt-Tech, as 'perceptions of validation may be achieved from the very fact that these individuals see themselves as utilising the same "cutting edge technology" used by other intelligent and creative people in society' (Bowman-Grieve, 2009: 990). While Gab's technological architecture may not be especially novel or sophisticated – borrowing as explicitly as it does from existing platforms (Donovan et al. 2019) – it is nevertheless technology tailor made for (and to some extent by) this particular community of users. However, though Gab's architecture makes it relatively easier to access and participate in compared to other niche communities, it is not conducive to the kind of sustained cooperation necessary to build a political movement. The character limit endemic to the microblogging format and culture of semi-anonymity, produces brief and fluid interactions with frequent off-topic digressions. Additionally, while leading figures of the Anglophone far right joined the platform early, many left or became inactive soon after. This points to a fundamental problem for Gab, and Alt-Tech more broadly, in terms of its viability as an alternative internet infrastructure for the far right. For though the platform will actively facilitate the distribution of hateful content, with a userbase significantly smaller than Facebook or Twitter, its reach (and hence appeal) is seriously curtailed.

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