

# Swiping Right: The Allure of Hyper Masculinity and Cryptofascism for Men Who Join the Proud Boys

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This qualitative, interdisciplinary study explores the narratives of Proud Boys members. The Proud Boys are a right-wing extremist organization with chapters in America and Europe. Since the group's inception in 2016, several members—including Jason Kessler, Austin Gillespie, and Kyle Chapman, Jovi Val, Tim Gionet, and Jason Lee Van Dyke—have joined or attempted to join more violent, more openly antisemitic right-wing movements. In the Pacific Northwest, Proud Boys have marched with Patriot Prayer—an extremist group created by former Proud Boy Joey Gibson. This and other evidence suggest the group functions as a radicalisation vector. Members deny this possibility, which leaves much to be explored. Asynchronous, semi-structured ethnographic interviews with Proud Boy members (n =17), were conducted in private online messaging systems. A Rogerian interviewing approach was used to diffuse hostility towards outsiders and facilitate dialogue. Self-categorization theory informed the interview question structure. Primary source data explored pull factors of becoming a member, shared precarity, the group's ties between radical movements, and the core ideology behind Proud Boys' libertarian ethos. Because little is known about the group, a grounded theory approach was used to explore themes surrounding joining.

Keywords: Proud Boys, Self-Categorization Theory, Precarity, Extremism, Fascism, Crypto fascism, Alt Right, Alt Light, Redpill, Swiping Right

*“For where personal conflict is solved by the kill, what do you have ultimately but the man who is at peace with himself only on the battlefield, in the midst of slaughter?”*

— Kenneth Burke

## Introduction

The Proud Boys are an extremist organization with semi-autonomous US and international chapters. There are approximately 3,000 members since the group formed in 2016.<sup>1</sup> The leader of the group recently estimated the numbers are closer to 8,000 but—given the age of the group, the waning membership of comparable groups present at Charlottesville, and the public displays of infighting and frequent defections—this number is likely inflated.<sup>2</sup> Proud Boys are mindful of optics and framing and resort to varying tactics to obscure their ideology and encourage potential recruits to join.

Proud Boys refer to news outside of their closed media ecosystems as “hit pieces”, and have targeted journalists who have attempted to report on them. They are a group that has not received scholarly attention, leaving much to be explored from an interdisciplinary communication studies perspective. Primarily, this lack of scholarly attention stems from academics’ lack of access to members. As the group’s activity and threat level rises during this election year, this access will become even more restricted. Primary source data from academics who have been granted access can better illuminate the motivation of members who join, the rhetorical space they operate in, and the policy implications for their offline actions. This study can be an invaluable resource for researchers, media figures, law enforcement, journalists, and anyone seeking to understand what drives some men to become Proud Boys.

### McInnes: the auto(lite)tarian leader

To understand the Proud Boys, it is imperative to understand their founder, Gavin McInnes. McInnes has been described as, “more or less the Men’s Rights subreddit manifested in human form”.<sup>3</sup> In 1994, McInnes co-founded Voice of Montreal with Suroosh Alvi and Shane Smith. This would later become Vice News.<sup>4</sup> As the company sought mainstream investors, McInnes maintained his unapologetic stance on social issues, something that would lead to creative differences between McInnes and Smith.<sup>5</sup>

When Vice news expanded and merged with Viacom, McInnes was considered “a liability,” and was bought out of Vice in 2008.<sup>6</sup> In 2010, he founded the ad agency Rooster New York. Years later, he published “The Death of Cool,” a memoir endorsed by comedian Nikki Glasser and actor Justin Theroux.<sup>7</sup>

In his 2013 memoir, McInnes evidences his ethnonationalist and racist views. Here, he portrays Islam as intolerant and violent:

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<sup>1</sup> "Proud Boys", Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>.

<sup>2</sup> Correspondence with author, 2020

<sup>3</sup> Aleks Eror, "Gavin McInnes: From 'VICE' Co-Founder To Fox News Troll", Highsnobity, 2017, <https://www.highsnobity.com/2017/02/17/gavin-mcinnis-vice-cofounder/>.

<sup>4</sup> Lizzie Widdicombe, "The Bad-Boy Brand", *The New Yorker*, 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/04/08/the-bad-boy-brand>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Gavin McInnes, *The Death Of Cool: From Teenage Rebellion To The Hangover Of Adulthood* (New York: Scribner, 2013).

*"Every time I think about [my friend] Sprague, [who was traumatized assisting in the cleanup of ground zero]", McInnes writes, "I think of what many call a "religion of peace" where a good 25 percent think suicide bombing is sometimes or often justified. Twenty-five percent of the 1.5 billion Muslims in the world is 375 million. Holy shit."<sup>8</sup>*

In 2016, when McInnes formed the Proud Boys, he was on an indefinite leave of absence at Rooster for a transphobic article he published through Thought Catalog.<sup>9</sup> Through appearances on Fox News Red Eye (2013) and the subscription based streaming platform, The Anthony Cumia Network, (later Compound media) (2013), McInnes curated an audience receptive to his views. He has stated that "xenophobe is an accurate criticism" of himself, characterized housewives as, "heroes", and women who work as "just wasting their time".<sup>10</sup> Despite the racism, misogyny, and violence in his comments, many Proud Boys stated they were already fans of his work before joining. Members viewed and continue to view McInnes as a comedian rather than an actual ideologue, despite his calls for violence and his disappointment in Trump supporters "for not punching enough" (2018).

On September 15th, 2016, Gavin McInnes introduced the Proud Boys to the larger public. In his announcement, he stated that "being Proud of Western culture today," was like "being a crippled, black, lesbian communist in 1953".<sup>11</sup> To understand the worldview of the group, it is imperative that countering violent extremism researchers, citizen activists, and government officials demystify the language surrounding Proud Boys recruitment narratives. It is also crucial for media to report without normalizing the Proud Boys behaviour, something the author has assisted with to ensure accurate, responsible coverage of the group.<sup>12</sup>

## Degrees of Membership

The four levels of Proud Boy membership are but one example of their violent nature.<sup>13</sup> The group's official bylaws list four degrees of membership:

- the first degree requires an initiate to state the Proud Boys' fraternity creed;
- the second degree requires the initiate to be punched until he can name five breakfast cereals. Once the initiate succeeds, he is an official member;

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pg. 161.

<sup>9</sup> Widdicome, "The Bad Boy Brand", 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Trudy Ring, "Right-Winger: Can't Trust Author Of Trump Exposé Because He Has 'Gay Face'", Advocate.Com, 2020, <https://www.advocate.com/media/2018/1/04/right-winger-cant-trust-author-trump-expose-because-he-has-gay-face>.

<sup>11</sup> Gavin McInnes, "Introducing: The Proud Boys", Taki's Magazine, 2016, Available at: <http://archive.is/9Xs2K>.

<sup>12</sup> Meg O'Connor, "Hate Goes Mainstream With The Miami Proud Boys", *Miami New Times*, 2018, <https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/inside-miami-alt-right-and-proud-boys-chapter-10945821>; Kelly Weill, "How The Proud Boys Became Roger Stone'S Personal Army", *The Daily Beast*, 2019, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-the-proud-boys-became-roger-stones-personal-army-6>; Caroline Orr, "Hate Groups Mix With Yellow Vests On 'Front Line' Of Extremism In Canada", *National Observer (Canada)*, 2019, <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2019/06/11/news/hate-groups-mix-yellow-vests-front-line-extremism-canada>; EJ Dickson, "Are The Proud Boys Done Or Are They Just Getting Started?", *Rolling Stone*, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/proud-boys-antifa-attack-trump-rally-2020-election-862538/>.

<sup>13</sup> "Announcing The New Proud Boys Bylaws, And Our Chairman", Officialproudboys.Com, 2018, <https://officialproudboys.com/uncategorized/announcing-the-new-proud-boys-bylaws-and-our-chairman/>.

- the third degree involves the new member getting a tattoo with Proud Boys phrases or symbols;
- the fourth degree requires the member to engage in violence on the group's behalf. Some members have chosen to earn their fourth degree by targeting members of the Muslim community, as Proud Boy Geoff Young did at an Anti-Sharia rally on June 10th, 2017.<sup>14</sup>

## Charlottesville, the Alt Right, and the Alt Light

Proud Boys made national headlines when several members were caught attending the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August of 2017. The rally was advertised as a protest to the removal of confederate statues.<sup>15</sup> Later, it was proven to be a pretext for a violent show of force.<sup>16</sup> After one woman was killed and 19 others were seriously injured in a vehicular attack, McInnes 'disavowed' Proud Boys who attended.<sup>17</sup> The next year, in 2018, the group was temporarily classified as an extremist organization by the FBI.<sup>18</sup>

After Charlottesville, McInnes attempted to assert that the Proud Boys were *Alt Light* and not *Alt Right*. In 2018, shortly after the Proud Boys were temporarily classified as an extremist organization, McInnes stepped down from his role as the Proud Boys founder, stating he would no longer be involved with the group in any capacity.<sup>19</sup> In 2019, McInnes reneged on his statements, and sued the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) for defamation on the Proud Boys' behalf. The Southern Poverty Law Center, in response, stated that McInnes, "plays a duplicitous rhetorical game: rejecting white nationalism and, in particular, the term 'alt-right' while espousing some of its central tenets." The SPLC also stated the group's "rank-and-file [members] and leaders regularly spout white nationalist memes and maintain affiliations with known extremists".<sup>20</sup>

The term Alt Right was adopted by Richard Spencer as part of a broader overarching strategy to manipulate the public into believing Neo-Nazism and White Supremacy are legitimate choices in the political spectrum.<sup>21</sup> Nazis are ethnonationalists who believe in

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<sup>14</sup> Jake Offenhartz, "[UPDATE] Second Proud Boy Arrested, McInnes Says More Will Turn Themselves In", Gothamist, 2018, <https://gothamist.com/news/update-second-proud-boy-arrested-mcinnes-says-more-will-turn-themselves-in>.

<sup>15</sup> Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Brian M. Rosenthal, "Man Charged After White Nationalist Rally In Charlottesville Ends In Deadly Violence", *The New York Times*, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/12/us/charlottesville-protest-white-nationalist.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Aaron Sankin and Scott Pham, "In Chat Rooms, Unite The Right Organizers Planned To Obscure Their Racism | Reveal", Reveal, 2017, <https://www.revealnews.org/article/in-chat-rooms-unite-the-right-organizers-planned-to-obscure-their-racism/>.

<sup>17</sup> Luke Barnes, "Proud Boys Founder Disavows Violence At Charlottesville But One Of Its Members Organized The Event", ThinkProgress, 2017, <https://archive.thinkprogress.org/proud-boys-founder-tries-and-fails-to-distance-itself-from-charlottesville-6862fb8b3ae9/>.

<sup>18</sup> Keith McMillan and Eli Rosenberg, "The FBI Says The Proud Boys Are Not An Extremist Group After All", *The Washington Post*, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2018/12/08/fbi-says-proud-boys-are-not-an-extremist-group-after-all/>.

<sup>19</sup> Jason Wilson, "FBI Now Classifies Far-Right Proud Boys As 'Extremist Group', Documents Say", *The Guardian*, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/19/proud-boys-fbi-classification-extremist-group-white-nationalism-report>.

<sup>20</sup> Merrit Kennedy, "Proud Boys Founder Files Defamation Lawsuit Against Southern Poverty Law Center", Npr.Org, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/05/691643824/proud-boys-founder-files-defamation-lawsuit-against-southern-poverty-law-center>.

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin Wallace-Wells, "Is The Alt-Right For Real?", *The New Yorker*, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/benjamin-wallace-wells/is-the-alt-right-for-real>.

ethnic cleansing, subscribe to the idea of White genocide, holocaust denial, and superiority of the White race.

Members of the Proud Boys self-identify as “not alt right”.<sup>22</sup> More specifically, after Charlottesville, the movement’s website—officialproudboys.com—released a manifesto of sorts, where they distanced themselves from Spencer’s definition. The article ‘We are not Alt-Right’ stated that Proud Boys did not concur with the Alt Right regarding the Jewish Question (JQ) and racial identity politics.<sup>23</sup> The group self-identified as “Western chauvinists who refuse to apologize for creating the modern world”.<sup>24</sup> *Alt Light* groups, are defined as, “right-wing organizations that some Alt Right circles consider insufficiently racist to qualify as fully Alt Right”.<sup>25</sup> Yet the attempt at a distinction, the group’s creed is laden with cryptofascist symbols and White supremacist imagery. The next section will cover instances where the content they consume has had material effects.

## Collateral Damage and Tipping Points

Proud Boys’ commitment ranges from passive online consumption to overt offline action. A 2017 incident in Islamburg—a small Muslim town in upstate New York—provides insight into how some Proud Boys moved from passive consumers of in group content to active, operational agents. Two years prior, Islamburg had been targeted when former congressional candidate Robert Duggart was arrested by the Federal Bureau of Investigation for a plot to bomb this same community. In a statement later released, Duggart said, “I don’t want to have to kill children, but there’s always collateral damage”.<sup>26</sup> On July 8, 2017, Proud Boys acted on conspiratorial content from the Canadian Free Press and the Clarion Project—two outlets criticized for spreading disinformation and anti-Muslim rhetoric.<sup>27</sup> Proud Boys used these sources to justify their descent into Islamburg, believing it to be an Islamic training ground.<sup>28</sup> Prior to this incident, their leader Gavin McInnes urged members not to travel to Islamburg, but continued sharing conspiratorial narratives about it.<sup>29</sup> In 2018, Robert Bowers, a man acting on conspiratorial content about the Jewish community, convinced that Jews were behind white genocide, walked into the Tree of Life Synagogue, killing 11 and injuring 7.<sup>30</sup> Unlike Duggart, who’s plan was intercepted by law enforcement, or Bowers, who

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<sup>22</sup> Gavin McInnes, “WE ARE NOT ALT-RIGHT”, Proud Boy Magazine, 2017, <https://officialproudboys.com/proud-boys/we-are-not-alt-right/>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Announcing The New Proud Boys Bylaws, And Our Chairman”, Officialproudboys.Com, 2018, <https://officialproudboys.com/uncategorized/announcing-the-new-proud-boys-bylaws-and-our-chairman/>.

<sup>25</sup> Emily Gorcenski, “The Proud Boys: A Republican Party Street Gang”, Atavist, 2019, <http://feature.politicalresearch.org/the-proud-boys>.

<sup>26</sup> Tim Ghianni, “Tennessee Man Sentenced Over Plot To Attack Muslim Community”, *Reuters*, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-tennessee-muslim-crime/tennessee-man-sentenced-over-plot-to-attack-muslim-community-idUSKBN1962R7>.

<sup>27</sup> Tom Robbins, “NYPD Cops’ Training Included An Anti-Muslim Horror Flick”, *The Village Voice*, 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110121234302/https://www.villagevoice.com/2011-01-19/columns/nypd-cops-training-included-an-anti-muslim-horror-flick/>;

<sup>28</sup> Dean Obeidallah, “Trump-Supporting Bigots To Target Upstate New York Muslims”, *The Daily Beast*, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-supporting-bigots-to-target-upstate-new-york-muslims>.

<sup>29</sup> PawL BaZiLe, “Proud Boys Visiting Islamic Training Ground In NY This Saturday – Proud Boy Magazine”, Officialproudboys.Com, 2017, <https://officialproudboys.com/columns/proud-boys-visiting-islamic-training-ground-in-ny-this-saturday/>.

<sup>30</sup> Saeed Ahmed and Paul P Murphy, “Here’s What We Know So Far About Robert Bowers, The Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooting Suspect”, *CNN*, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/10/27/us/synagogue-attack-suspect-robert-bowers-profile/index.html>.

made international headlines, Proud Boys executed their intimidation campaign against this Muslim community with virtually no push back. The “Ride Along Caravan” in Islamberg is one of 130 known incidents attributed to Proud Boys and highlights extremism both espoused and acted upon.<sup>31</sup>

Proud Boys justify violence behind their outwardly apolitical motto, “We don’t start fights, but we finish them.” The violence Young and other members enacted is not representative of the entire group. However, the tipping point between ideological adherence to Proud Boys’ tenants and mobilization into violence is unknown. What is known is the group’s affinity for racist, misogynist, and homophobic standpoints. In this way, Proud Boys’ violence is a manifestation of the group’s underlying political motivations. To explain why some Proud Boys increase their commitment to violence, it is important to understand the grievances that make involvement appealing to new recruits.

## Precarity, Uncertainty, and Social Exclusion: Precursors to Swiping Right

The author defines precarity as the immutable feeling of instability, uncertainty, or the sense that one is at risk of losing something. Precarity can be positive, broadly connecting us to humanity in the sense that we are all vulnerable as human beings; neutral, as in highlighting structural oppression that makes some more precarious than others; or negative, as in fear that a way of life will never return. Negative precarity and the need to fight to prevent the perceived extinction of western culture was a central pull factor in Proud Boys’ recruitment.

Perceived social exclusion stemming from changing demographics and a shirking of traditional values has left many conservative-leaning students on campus vulnerable to recruitment from more extreme groups, groups operating outside of universities. Once students feel a sense of belonging or acceptance in an off-campus group (typically in online communities tied to men’s rights activism), it becomes more difficult for them to return to a less extreme ideological stance, or maintain a sense of self distinct from the off-campus group.<sup>32</sup>

Allusions to the concept of negative precarity are found in repeated images Proud Boys disseminate in their groups. These images construct a new perception of reality based on precarity as a white, working-class American male at risk of losing his place in society amidst changing demographics and issues surrounding immigration.<sup>33</sup> This fear was also found in those who endorsed Trump. Johnson<sup>34</sup> highlights how Trump’s campaign rhetoric summoned a new audience of men who identified with national security issues

<sup>31</sup> Samantha Kutner, "Proud Boys Incident Map 2016-2019", *Arcgis.Com*, 2018, <https://www.arcgis.com/home/webmap/viewer.html?webmap=46c5dd159e984d59b636229a55561807&extent=-146.5001,22.4863,-45.4259,57.7828>.

<sup>32</sup> Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps The Score: Brain, Mind, And Body In The Healing Of Trauma Paperback* (New York: Penguin, 2015), p.111.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Elliott Johnson, "The Art Of Masculine Victimhood: Donald Trump’s Demagoguery", *Women’s Studies In Communication* 40, no. 3 (2017): 229-250, doi:10.1080/07491409.2017.1346533; Alexandra Hall, ""Proud Boys" Founder Gavin McInnes: You’d Be Happier As A Housewife", *To The Best Of Our Knowledge*, 2018, <https://www.ttbook.org/interview/proud-boys-founder-gavin-mcinnis-you-d-be-happier-housewife/>; Adela C Licona, "The Non/Image Of The Regime Of Distortion", in *Precarious Rhetorics* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2020).

<sup>34</sup> Johnson, "The Art Of Masculine Victimhood", *Women’s Studies In Communication* 40, no. 3 (2017): 229-250

from a precarious standpoint. Among this audience were Proud Boys who felt Trump's leadership style held a solution. This idea was embodied by Proud Boys founder Gavin McInnes, who, in 2003, told a journalist at The Times, "I love being White and I think it's something to be very proud of. I don't want our culture diluted. We need to close the borders now and let everyone assimilate to a Western, white, English-Speaking way of life".<sup>35</sup>

## Swiping Right on Extremism

Ideology is constructed through a mosaic of cognition and behaviour.<sup>36</sup> The term *swipe right* is used by the author to describe the low effort way ideology is constructed online. To *swipe right* was a term first popularized by the dating app Tinder. To swipe right on that platform is to indicate a potential interest in a mate. The more generalizable definition is to accept, agree with, or show enthusiasm for something.<sup>37</sup> As member transcripts reveal, an individual with no connection to the group may see an event like the Berkeley protests shared online, be driven to Proud Boys out of curiosity, and later *swipe right*. For many Proud Boys, entertaining content (from McInnes and others) acted as the gateway to a new reality constructed of race preservation, conspiracy theories, and male self-awareness through victimhood. These grievances are found in a *manosphere*, which the author defines as an ecosystem of disparate male grievance groups that emerged as a reaction to feminism. The *manosphere* may contain entertaining content, but this content may not always act as a pull factor. Some men may be driven to self-help spaces within the *manosphere*, in an effort to improve their lives, and not realize the form of self-help they are receiving is a cloaked *redpill*.

## The Redpill and Male Grievances

*"This is your last chance (...) You take the red pill - you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes".<sup>38</sup>*

Like Neo's journey in The Matrix, *taking the red pill* or *getting redpilled* is used to describe an awakening. Depending on the context, the concept can imply awakening to holocaust denial, and other more hardline Neo-Nazi ideologies. It can also imply awakening to the reality of immigrant invasion—something espoused by prominent White Nationalist propagandist Pat Buchanan<sup>39</sup> and acted upon by Robert Bowers.<sup>40</sup> In the context of this paper, *getting redpilled* will refer to the antifeminist ideology within the *manosphere*. The term *taking the red pill* refers to men opening their eyes to the reality of male subjugation by women. After facing romantic rejection, loss, or breakups, men in redpill communities drift away from alternative coping mechanisms. From these transitional states they can *swipe right* on male thought leaders, media figures who project their insecurities on women. As a perceived antidote to being seen as effeminate, members maintain their *redpilled* status through aggressively over-performing masculinity and adopting rigid gender roles. This fear of being seen as effeminate makes men susceptible

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<sup>35</sup> Widdicombe, "The Bad Boy Brand", 2013

<sup>36</sup> Jacquelin van Stekelenburg, "Going All The Way: Politicizing, Polarizing, And Radicalizing Identity Offline And Online", *Sociology Compass* 8, no. 5 (2014): 540-555, doi:10.1111/soc4.12157.

<sup>37</sup> "Swipe Right", Thefreedictionary.Com, 2015, <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/swipe+right>.

<sup>38</sup> Lilly Wachowski and Lana Wachowski, *The Matrix*, film (The Village Roadshow, 1999).

<sup>39</sup> "Proud Boys", Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>.

<sup>40</sup> Ahmed and Murphy, "Here's What We Know So Far About Robert Bowers, The Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooting Suspect", *CNN*, 2018.

to messaging that relies on negative precarity, i.e. Trump evoking the image of America as “weak, vulnerable and effeminate”.<sup>41</sup>

Though the *redpill* is built on cognitive distortions, *taking the redpill*, much like joining a cult, is an agentic process.<sup>42</sup> Within *Redpill* communities are “Thought Leaders” like Jordan Peterson, Gavin McInnes, Stefan Molyneux, and others, who embed Islamophobic, misogynistic, antisemitic, and anti-LGBTQAI narratives with male empowerment or self-improvement. Rather than outlining responsibility for things within one’s control, the *redpill* provides a template for developing new narratives of precarity. As described above, a man can initially *swipe right* on self-empowerment without realizing the *redpill* that accompanies it. After taking it, members can turn any issue or criticism against them into evidence of their own oppression, while discounting the humanity of others.<sup>43</sup>

Johnson writes, “[G]enerally, demagoguery figures audiences as risk averse subjects by converting the shared vulnerability characteristics of public life into a feeling of precariousness. Demagogues encourage audiences to self-identify as victims based on *felt* precarity, encouraging the well-off and privileged to adopt the mantle of victimhood at the expense of those who occupy objectively more fraught positions”.<sup>44</sup> The solution to felt or imagined precarity is linked with securitization efforts, which can take the form of endorsing authoritarian leaders, justifying enhanced interrogation, calls for building a wall, or campaigning by stoking fears of immigrants, terrorists, and gang members.<sup>45</sup> Many far-right talking points in the United States stem from a fear that free speech is being policed. These narratives are disseminated through far-right speakers such as Charlie Kirk, Ben Shapiro, and Ann Coulter. Far-right silencing tactics, antithetical to free speech values, are seen in authoritarian leaders, who cultivate ignorance among their followers and demonize the opposition to control their narrative.<sup>46</sup> In this way, calls for inclusive policies are believed to ostracize conservative-leaning individuals and are deemed part of an ‘insidious’ liberal agenda.

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<sup>41</sup> Johnson, “The Art of Masculine Victimhood”, *Women’s Studies In Communication* 40, no. 3 (2017): 229-250

<sup>42</sup> James T. Richardson, “Brainwashing’ As Forensic Evidence”, in *Handbook Of Forensic Sociology And Psychology* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 2014), 77-85.

<sup>43</sup> Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps The Score: Brain, Mind, And Body In The Healing Of Trauma Paperback* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 83

<sup>44</sup> Johnson, “The Art of Masculine Victimhood”, *Women’s Studies in Communication* 40, no. 3 (2017): 229-250

<sup>45</sup> Wendy S Hesford, Adela C Licona and Christa Teston, *Precarious Rhetorics* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2018); CV Vitolo-Haddad, “The Blood Of Patriots: Symbolic Violence And “The West””, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (2019): 280-296, doi:10.1080/02773945.2019.1610641.

<sup>46</sup> David Filipov, “Here Are 10 Critics Of Vladimir Putin Who Died Violently Or In Suspicious Ways”, *The Washington Post*, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/03/23/here-are-ten-critics-of-vladimir-putin-who-died-violently-or-in-suspicious-ways/>; Trump, D. J. [realDonaldTrump]. (2017, May 29). The Fake News Media works hard at disparaging & demeaning my use of social media because they don't want America to hear the real story! [Tweet]. Available at:

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/868985285207629825>; Trump, D. J. [realDonaldTrump]. (2017, Jun 06). Sorry folks, but if I would have relied on the Fake News of CNN, NBC, ABC, CBS, washpost or nytimes, I would have had ZERO chance winning WH [Tweet]. Available at: <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/872064426568036353>; Trump, D. J. [realDonaldTrump]. (2017, Jun 13). The Fake News Media has never been so wrong or so dirty. Purposely incorrect stories and phony sources to meet their agenda of hate. Sad! [Tweet]. Available at:

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/874576057579565056>; Trump, D. J. [realDonaldTrump]. (2017, Jun 13). Fake News is at an all-time high. Where is their apology to me for all the incorrect stories???

[Tweet]. Available at: <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/874609480301936640>



## Precarious Masculinity, Fundamentalism and Authoritarianism

Instead of examining neoliberal policies, which disproportionately affect working-class males, Proud Boys attribute their plight to women, women who have defied what they believe to be the natural order of things.<sup>47</sup> This desire to return to the natural order of things and re-exert control is referred to by members as radical traditionalism.<sup>48</sup> In the academic space, this is classified more generally as a component of fundamentalism, in which traditional gender roles are enforced.<sup>49</sup> Under fundamentalism, gender equality is suppressed by anti-feminist rhetoric and coded terms e.g. western chauvinism as code for white, multiculturalism reinterpreted as White genocide, and caustic labels given to feminists and civil rights activists to mark them as opposition.

When Brad Galloway was recruited to Volksfront, members joined for the camaraderie, the drinking, and the ability to be openly racist.<sup>50</sup> Gender was another component of Volksfront, which provided “a place for otherwise socially awkward males to operate and bond away from “scumbag women,” who dated non-whites.<sup>51</sup> Male grievances and animus towards women are further supported by Forscher and Kteily’s findings on the dehumanization scale<sup>52</sup>, in which Alt, or alternative right<sup>53</sup> members ranked Hillary Clinton as “least human”.<sup>54</sup> Following this line of thought, some activists have taken to calling the individuals who comprise the new wave of far-right recruitment “Gender Supremacists.”<sup>55</sup> For this reason, the gender dynamics of far-right radicalization merit further exploration.

Proud Boys exist at the intersection of libertarianism, anti-feminism, and misogyny. Members obscure their core fascist values by appropriating a libertarian ethos based on limited government and maximal freedom. The libertarian philosophy Proud Boys espouse belies members’ misogyny and desire to control women. Beneath their libertarian exterior lies the *redpill*. Proud Boys don’t want freedom in the libertarian sense they have co-opted. They want the freedom to subjugate women in order to invert the *redpill* paradigm. This makes the Proud Boys authoritarian at their core. It may also

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<sup>47</sup> Kevin Michael DeLuca and Jennifer Peebles, "From Public Sphere To Public Screen: Democracy, Activism, And The "Violence" Of Seattle", *Critical Studies In Media Communication* 19, no. 2 (2002): 125-151, doi:10.1080/07393180216559.

<sup>48</sup> Mary Meisenzahl, "Inside The World Of Weird Catholic Twitter — And The 'Rad Trads' Keeping The Old Traditions Alive", MEL Magazine, 2019, <https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/rad-trad-weird-catholic-twitter>.

<sup>49</sup> Jennifer K. Bosson and Joseph A. Vandello, "Precarious Manhood And Its Links To Action And Aggression", *Current Directions In Psychological Science* 20, no. 2 (2011): 82-86, doi:10.1177/0963721411402669.

<sup>50</sup> B. Galloway. Correspondence with author, September 2019

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Patrick S. Forscher and Nour S. Kteily, "A Psychological Profile Of The Alt-Right", *Perspectives On Psychological Science* 15, no. 1 (2019): 90-116, doi:10.1177/1745691619868208; Nour Kteily et al., "The Ascent Of Man: Theoretical And Empirical Evidence For Blatant Dehumanization.", *Journal Of Personality And Social Psychology* 109, no. 5 (2015): 901-931, doi:10.1037/pspp0000048.

<sup>53</sup> John Bryden and Eric Silverman, "Underlying Socio-Political Processes Behind The 2016 US Election", *PLOS ONE* 14, no. 4 (2019): e0214854, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0214854; van Stekelenburg, "Going All The Way: Politicizing, Polarizing, And Radicalizing Identity Offline And Online", *Sociology Compass* 8, no. 5 (2014).

<sup>54</sup> Forscher and Kteily, "A Psychological Profile of The Alt-Right", *Perspectives On Psychological Science*, 2019.

<sup>55</sup> "This Week In Fascism #7: Alt-Right As Gender Supremacists - It's Going Down", It's Going Down, 2019, <https://itsgoingdown.org/this-week-in-fascism-7-alt-right-hates-women/>.

explain the discrepancies between the rhetorical space they operate in and their observable behaviour.

## Proud Boys as a Fascist Organisation

Before continuing, it is important to provide a few working definitions of fascism in the context of this group.<sup>56</sup>

Fascism may be defined as a form of political behaviour marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy, but effective collaboration with traditional beliefs, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal constraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion.

Political Scientist Lawrence Britt conducted a comparative analysis of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, Franco's Spain, Salazar's Portugal, Papa Dopoulos's Greece, Pinochet's Chile, and Suharto's Indonesia. He identified 14 characteristics of fascism present in all above aforementioned regimes: (1) Powerful and continuing nationalism; (2) Disdain for the recognition of human rights; (3) Identification of enemies or scapegoats as a unifying cause; (4) Supremacy of the military; (5) Rampant sexism; (6) Controlled mass media; (7) Obsession with national security; (8) Religion and government are intertwined; (9) Corporate Power is protected; (10) Labor power is suppressed; (11) Disdain for intellectuals and the arts; (12) Obsession with crime and punishment; (13) Rampant cronyism and corruption; and (14) Fraudulent elections. These 14 characteristics of fascism when applied to Proud Boys can be condensed into three broader categories: (1) Self-Awareness; (2) Precarity and Fundamentalism; and (3) Deliberate provocation.<sup>57</sup>

### Self-Awareness: Self-Categorisation Theory

A major strength of social identity theory is that it provides an understanding of us-versus-them dynamics. It states that individuals may have multiple identities. Within each identity contains ownership in a shared ideology or set of cultural practices. Identity provides a way to recognize one's self as similar to some and different from others.<sup>58</sup> Self-Categorization Theory explains how an individual can begin to restructure their identity and distinguish themselves from other ideologies and social practices. This restructuring process will be shown in the transcript excerpts. In extremist groups, the development of an in-group ideology is commonly associated with magnified hostilities and anxieties towards an outgroup.<sup>59</sup>

### Deliberate Provocation

The Proud Boys' style choices are all crafted to evoke strong reactions in others. Members enjoy wearing clothes with antagonistic slogans like "Female Tears," or

<sup>56</sup> Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy Of Fascism* (London: Vintage, 2005), 218; Laurence W. Britt, "Fascism Anyone?", *Secularhumanism.org*, 2003, <https://secularhumanism.org/2003/03/fascism-anyone/>.

<sup>57</sup> Laurence W. Britt, "Fascism Anyone?", *Secularhumanism.org*, 2003.

<sup>58</sup> John C. Turner et al., *Rediscovering The Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

<sup>59</sup> J. M Berger, *Extremism* (MIT Press, 2018).

“Leftists get the Chopper.” The latter is a reference to the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, whose regime executed political enemies by throwing them from helicopters.<sup>60</sup>

A bartender involved in a Proud Boys incident where they targeted an event to benefit women against violence against women stated, “They are known for ‘triggering behavior,’ and that provocation is part of their charter”.<sup>61</sup> Provocation is a central component of the Proud Boys recruitment strategy;<sup>62</sup> a strategy also used by conservative groups on college campuses in the United States and Canada.<sup>63</sup> Online, Proud Boys insert themselves into conversations, deliberately provoke others, and then leave, celebrating another liberal they’ve “owned” or “triggered” in their group channels.<sup>64</sup> The strong in group out group dynamics are fostered through memes with varying levels of desensitizing content against marginalized groups.<sup>65</sup> When their tactics or unsanitized ideology are exposed, members capitalize on their perceived victimhood status. They often organize in an attempt to mass report, threaten, or intimidate individuals who reveal their tactics.<sup>66</sup>

Members are also known for a provocative practice called *cultural hijacking*, in which the symbols and language of civil rights leaders are repurposed to advance far-right narratives. The intent is not to appropriate civil rights symbolism, but to weaken the communicative power of groups from which the symbols originated. By subsuming civil rights terms into their Western male movement, the Proud Boys hijack narratives of marginalization and gain a new narrative to shape their sense of precarity. After hijacking these terms, they ascribe new labels to the groups they have hijacked them from. Civil rights activists become social justice warriors, snowflakes, or the intolerant left. Of the culturally hijacked terms, the most commonly used is *Uhuru*—Swahili for African solidarity. Proud Boys have repurposed *Uhuru* as a rallying cry, in a manner similar to the military use of *Oohrah* used in the US Navy. The following section will utilize 3 cases of Proud Boys incidents which correlate to the 14 characteristics of fascism.

## Proud Boys Incidents and their Fascist Characteristics

The fourteen characteristics of fascism mentioned above are present in the incident map dataset.<sup>67</sup> The Islamberg Incident,<sup>68</sup> The Astoria incident,<sup>69</sup> and the Hijab Hoax

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<sup>60</sup> Carlos Huneeus and Lake Sagaris, *The Pinochet Regime* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010).

<sup>61</sup> Nick Eagland, "Staff Threatened After Member Of Controversial Proud Boys Club Assaulted Inside Vancouver Bar", *Vancouver Sun*, 2017, <https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/vancouver-bar-receives-death-threats-from-proud-boys-supporters-after-altercation>.

<sup>62</sup> Arun Gupta, "Portland's Andy Ngo Is The Most Dangerous Grifter In America", *Jacobin*, 2019, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/08/andy-ngo-right-wing-antifa-protest-portland-bigotry>.

<sup>63</sup> Adina Heisler, "Why Is Students In Support Of Free Speech Defending The Proud Boys?", *The Varsity*, 2017, <https://thevarsity.ca/2017/07/25/why-is-students-in-support-of-free-speech-defending-the-proud-boys/>.

<sup>64</sup> Correspondence with author, 2018.

<sup>65</sup> Authors' correspondence with Participant 15, May 2018

<sup>66</sup> Andy Campbell, "Portland Cops Knew The Fascists Had A Weapons Cache. They Kept Silent And Attacked Protesters.", *Huffpost.Com*, 2018, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/portland-oregon-cops-knew-fascists-had-weapons-cache\\_n\\_5bc5e853e4b0d38b5871be1b](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/portland-oregon-cops-knew-fascists-had-weapons-cache_n_5bc5e853e4b0d38b5871be1b).

<sup>67</sup> Samantha Kutner, "Proud Boys Incident Map 2016-2019", 2018, <https://www.arcgis.com/home/webmap/viewer.html?webmap=46c5dd159e984d59b636229a55561807&extent=-146.5001,22.4863,-45.4259,57.7828>.

<sup>68</sup> Obeidallah, "Trump-Supporting Bigots To Target Upstate New York Muslims", *The Daily Beast*, 2017.

<sup>69</sup> Eagland, "Staff Threatened After Member Of Controversial Proud Boys Club Assaulted Inside Vancouver Bar", *Vancouver Sun*, 2017.

incident<sup>70</sup> were chosen because they highlight the broader categories of (1) self-categorization, (2) precarious masculinity and fundamentalism, and (3) deliberate provocation.

### Case 1: Self-Categorisation: the Islamberg Incident

On July 15th, 2017, Proud Boys descended on the town of Islamberg to intimidate members of the Muslim community.<sup>71</sup> This incident reflected both rigid in group out group dynamics and the conspiratorial content from the Clarion Project.<sup>72</sup> They again defied their libertarian ethos and labelled their act a ride for Homeland Security.<sup>73</sup> They positioned themselves as concerned citizens and patriots—and all residents of Islamberg as potential terrorists. This incident attests to the harms of rigid in-group out-group identification and insular media ecosystems.

### Case 2: Deliberate Provocation and Precarious Masculinity: The Astoria Incident

Proud Boys were told not to go to the Astoria, a bar in Vancouver, British Columbia. Staff had had prior encounters with the group and did not want them being disruptive with their patrons. The Proud Boys ignored their concerns and showed up the night of a fundraiser where proceeds benefitted Women Against Violence Against Women. When two of their members were assaulted at this event, Proud Boys used the incident to recruit more members.<sup>74</sup> After this event, any public attempt on Twitter (to call attention to the choice the two individuals made) received a barrage of replies from Proud Boys. In their replies, Proud Boys claimed their critics were the real aggressors. This set the tone to uncharitably interpret online community efforts to provide more context. Anyone who called attention to Proud Boys defying the bar's right to refuse service was quickly condemned for celebrating violence against the Proud Boys. The Proud Boys who were framed as the victims of the situation. This unique framing tactic will be explored further.

### Case 3: Deliberate Provocation of Hijab Hoax Day

On January 29th, 2018—the anniversary of the Quebec mosque massacre where six were killed and nineteen were injured—PEGIDA Canada, III% militia, and the Proud Boys protested a memorial at both Mel Lastman and Nathan Phillips Square in effort they claimed would, “debunk the myth of systematic Islamophobia”.<sup>75</sup> Their choice to demonstrate on the anniversary of the mosque massacre was an attempt to evoke a response from—and maximize the suffering of—Muslim communities affected by this tragedy.

<sup>70</sup> ARC, "Anti-Muslim Protesters Outnumbered In Toronto At Mel Lastman And Nathan Phillips Squares; Islamophobes Possessed Weapons", *Anti-Racistcanada.Blogspot.Com*, 2018, <https://anti-racistcanada.blogspot.com/2018/01/anti-muslim-protesters-outnumbered-in.html>; Samantha Kutner, "Proud Boys Incident Map 2016-2019", 2018.

<sup>71</sup> Obeidallah, "Trump-Supporting Bigots to Target Upstate New York Muslims", *The Daily Beast*, 2017.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> PawL BaZiLe, "Proud Boys Visiting Islamic Training Ground In NY This Saturday – Proud Boy Magazine", *Officialproudboys.Com*, 2017, <https://officialproudboys.com/columns/proud-boys-visiting-islamic-training-ground-in-ny-this-saturday/>.

<sup>74</sup> Eagland, "Staff Threatened After Member of Controversial Proud Boys Club Assaulted Inside Vancouver Bar", *Vancouver Sun*, 2017.

<sup>75</sup> ARC, "Anti-Muslim Protesters Outnumbered", 2018.

## Comparisons to other Fascist Groups

Incidents like the ones described above have led researchers and academics to compare Proud Boys to other fascist groups such as the Sturmabteilung—Hitler's 'Assault Division' or Stormtroopers. The similarity in behaviours between the Sturmabteilung (SA) during the Nazi's rise to power in Weimar Germany and the Proud Boys' behaviours during Trump's election deserve further comparison. The SA, "provided protection for Nazi rallies and assemblies, disrupted the meetings of opposing parties, [fought] against the paramilitary units of the opposing parties, and intimidated marginalized communities."<sup>76</sup> Incidents attributed to the Proud Boys show that the group has mirrored the Sturmabteilung in the following ways: (1) They have provided protection to far right speakers and provocateurs;<sup>77</sup> (2) disrupted events by feminists, democratic socialists on campuses, and women's marches, among other opposing parties; and (3) intimidated marginalized communities through rallying, stalking, violence, frivolous litigation, and mass reporting campaigns.<sup>78</sup>

This comparison of both groups has not been made in isolation. During the sentencing of Hare and Kinsman, two Proud Boys found guilty of gang assault, assault, and riot charges, Supreme Court Justice Mark Dwyer said, "I know enough about history to know what happened in Europe in the Thirties. We don't want that to happen in New York, especially at this time in the country when people are so divided."<sup>79</sup> A constitutional law professor made this same comparison while recounting his experience during the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry lockdown; a lockdown initiated by Proud Boy's rallying.<sup>80</sup> He recalled his friend, Justice Hans Linde, who escaped Nazi Germany and relocated with his family to Portland. Lind once confided in him that, "His first clear memory was of watching from the family apartment while Nazis in brown shirts brawled with communists on the Kurfürstendamm below".<sup>81</sup> The hesitations readers may feel when seeing this stark comparison may stem from the nuanced, veiled communication styles the Proud Boys engage in.

## Behavioural Discrepancies in Proud Boys Self-Reporting

While presenting publicly as anti-establishment, Proud Boys also position themselves closely to the US conservative elite.<sup>82</sup> While advocating for limited government, they attempt to act as paramilitary extensions of the police.<sup>83</sup> While publicly identifying as free speech absolutists, they attempt to police the speech of others through frivolous

<sup>76</sup> "SA | Definition, History, & Facts", Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/SA-Nazi-organization>.

<sup>77</sup> "Alt Right 'Proud Boys' Declare Victory In Berkeley Melee", CBS Local San Francisco, 2017, <https://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2017/04/15/proudboys-berkeley-violence-trump/>; Samantha Kutner, "Proud Boys Incident Map 2016-2019", 2018.

<sup>78</sup> Samantha Kutner, "Proud Boys Incident Map 2016-2019", 2018.

<sup>79</sup> Colin Moynihan, "2 Proud Boys Sentenced To 4 Years In Brawl With Anti-Fascists At Republican Club", *The New York Times*, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/22/nyregion/proud-boys-antifa-sentence.html>.

<sup>80</sup> Garrett Epps, "The Proud Boys' Real Target", *The Atlantic*, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/08/meaning-street-protests-portland/596686/>.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> EJ Dickson, "Are The Proud Boys Done Or Are They Just Getting Started?", *Rolling Stone*, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/proud-boys-antifa-attack-trump-rally-2020-election-862538/>.

<sup>83</sup> Taylor Hatmaker, "Facebook Bans The Proud Boys, Cutting The Group Off From Its Main Recruitment Platform", *Techcrunch*, 2018, <https://techcrunch.com/2018/10/30/facebook-proud-boys-mcinnis-kicked-off/>.

litigation, harassment, and in some cases, “organized intimidation”.<sup>84</sup> These discrepancies merit further discussion about the Proud Boys as a fascist organization and the communicative tactics they use to hide their political agenda.

## The Communication Styles of the Proud Boys

### Cryptofascism

Cryptofascism is defined by the author as the communicative tactic by which fascist objectives are obtained and expanded. In the context of this study, the author defines *cryptofascism* as a communication style that uses coded sanitized language and symbols that help Proud Boys obfuscate their fascist worldview, evade detection by people unfamiliar with the terms, and minimize the severity of their actions on and offline. Scholars can think of cryptofascism as Fascism 2.0—an evolution in communication styles that can break through the firewall of centrist and liberal detection. Eight cryptofascist strategies have been identified, along with the subcategory of DARVO. These strategies as they apply to Proud Boys will be described below.

Wynn (2017) outlined 8 cryptofascist strategies: (1) Outright denial; (2) Euphemisms; (3) Selective Pedantry; (4) Secret Symbols; (5) Camaraderie of the accused; (6) Irony, Jokes, Satire, and memes; (7) Shifting Blame; and (8) The Free Speech Defense.<sup>85</sup> These cryptofascist strategies can be condensed into three broad categories of (1) Outright denial; (2) Symbols and Language and; (3) Shifting Blame. They will be described in the context of three cases: The Buckley Wolfe murder, excerpts from the Death of Cool, and McInnes’s lawsuit against the Southern Poverty Law Center.

### Denial & Shifting Blame: DARVO as a Discursive Tactic

Proud Boys believe they are victims of modernity, feminism, and progressive values.<sup>86</sup> A clinical therapist who has engaged with Proud Boys on social media has noticed how their patterns of online responding mirror patterns of responding in clients accused of wrongdoing. These clients, he states, are typically court ordered into therapy, as “they would never go willingly”<sup>87</sup> noted that the way Proud Boys address accusations fall into an empirically validated response pattern called DARVO: (1) Deny; (2) Attack; (3) Reverse Victim & Offender.<sup>88</sup> The researchers explored DARVO as a set of tactics perpetrators use to discourage victims from speaking out. Some perpetrators denied the attack outright; others went on the offensive insulting the victim’s credibility, their character, their morals or their appearance; and others inverted the accusation, claiming that the victim

<sup>84</sup> Campbell, “Portland Cops Knew The Fascists Had A Weapons Cache. They Kept Silent And Attacked Protesters.”, Huffpost, 2018; Jennifer Joyce, “Woman Claims She’s Being Targeted By Western Chauvinist Group ‘Proud Boys’”, FOX 29 News Philadelphia, 2019, <https://www.fox29.com/news/woman-claims-shes-being-targeted-by-western-chauvinist-group-proud-boys>.

<sup>85</sup> Natalie Wynn, *Decrypting The Alt-Right: How To Recognize A F@scist (Contrapoints)*, video, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sx4BVGPKdzk&t=999s>.

<sup>86</sup> Alexandra Hall, “‘Proud Boys’ Founder Gavin McInnes: You’d Be Happier As A Housewife”, To The Best Of Our Knowledge, 2018, <https://www.ttbook.org/interview/proud-boys-founder-gavin-mcinnnes-youd-be-happier-housewife>.

<sup>87</sup> Correspondence with author, November, 2018.

<sup>88</sup> Sarah J. Harsey, Eileen L. Zurbriggen and Jennifer J. Freyd, “Perpetrator Responses To Victim Confrontation: DARVO And Victim Self-Blame”, *Journal Of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 26, no. 6 (2017): 644-663, doi:10.1080/10926771.2017.1320777.

was at fault.<sup>89</sup> These tactics often confuse victims and decrease their willingness to pursue criminal cases.

### Case 1: Outright Denial & Buckey Wolfe

Proud Boys public relations reflect both cryptofascism, post-hoc distancing, (or disavowing members after their activities or overt white nationalist ties are exposed) and a continued abdication from personal responsibility. Post hoc distancing was evident in the Proud Boys' response to the Buckey Wolfe murder.<sup>90</sup> Wolfe stabbed his brother to death and espoused conspiratorial views upon his arrest.<sup>91</sup> Proud Boys, utilizing the cryptofascist strategy of (1) outright denial, claimed he was never a member despite Wolfe appearing in photographs at Proud Boys events in the Seattle area and despite members seen feeding him antisemitic conspiratorial content.<sup>92</sup>

### Case 2: The Symbols and Language of the Death of Cool

Years before the Proud Boys formed, McInnes first referenced a cryptofascist strategy when he described his work overseas. In his memoir, the "The Death of Cool" McInnes wrote: "Being White in Taiwan is like being famous....Actually, they get mad if you say White because that is politically incorrect. The term is Western".<sup>93</sup> Western later surfaced in the Proud Boys 1st degree, where members are required to make a video stating they are "Proud Western Chauvinists [...]" Both western and chauvinists are cryptofascist terms to obscure the Proud Boys' misogyny and white nationalist ties.

McInnes has decades of experience crafting plausible deniability and obscuring his ties to white supremacy and white Nationalism. It is a tradition he continues with today. By 2016, he had been steeped in hate literature, and was ready to export his brand of extremism. Before he left the group to escape deportation (McInnes is a Canadian citizen), he minimized the violence he sanctioned and encouraged. To join the Proud Boys, all members must submit a video stating: "I'm a Proud Western Chauvinist who refuses to apologize for creating the modern world".<sup>94</sup> Offered for comparison is the white supremacist slogan coined by David Lane: "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for our white children".<sup>95</sup> The latter is referred to as "the fourteen words". The Proud Boy's slogan is thematically linked to the fourteen words, as both emphasize the need to secure or preserve western or white culture. To provide further evidence of the linguistic bridge between western and white nationalism, it is important to reference an episode of the Gavin McInnes show, where his guest, Emily Youcis, a vocal supporter of white nationalism, implored him to say the fourteen words to prove he was at the crux of "this movement." Gavin McInnes, in response, recited the 14 words, replacing "white" with western.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.; Will Sommer, "Far Right Proud Boys Attempt To Menace Critic With Late-Night Threat", The Daily Beast, 2019, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/far-right-proud-boys-attempt-to-menace-critic-with-late-night-threat>.

<sup>90</sup> "Announcing The New Proud Boys Bylaws, And Our Chairman", Officialproudboys.Com, 2018.

<sup>91</sup> Campbell, "Portland Cops Knew the Fascists Had A Weapons Cache. They Kept Silent and Attacked Protesters.", Huffpost, 2018;

<sup>92</sup> Farnsworth, 2019, Jan 9; Apostrophecost (2019, Jan 9). Here's another recent Buckey Wolfe conspiracy post, two of his fellow #ProudBoys pop into the comments to validate him, with one of them (Thomas Young) directing him towards explicitly anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. [Tweet]. Available at: <https://twitter.com/apostrophecost/status/1082845018891575298>

<sup>93</sup> Gavin McInnes, *The Death Of Cool*, 2013, 70

<sup>94</sup> "Proud Boys", Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019.

<sup>95</sup> Edward Dunbar, Amalio Blanco and Desirée Crèvecoeur-MacPhail, *The Psychology Of Hate Crimes As Domestic Terrorism* (ABC-CLIO, 2016).

## Case 3: Gavin McInnes's Lawsuit Against the Southern Poverty Law Center

On February 4th, 2019, Gavin McInnes announced his lawsuit against the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). In his statement he characterized the SPLC as a “money making machine.” He claimed the SPLC was “terrorizing people” and opined that it was, “telling we live in a Nazi America.” He then claimed the organization was ruining his life for listing the Proud Boys as a hate group.<sup>96</sup> His lawsuit announcement utilized the cryptofascist, DARVO strategy of (7) shifting blame. Through this strategy, the SPLC, rather than the group's actions under his leadership came under scrutiny. In addition to shifting blame, McInnes used the cryptofascist strategies of (5) camaraderie of the accused and (8) the free speech defense, to raise funds for his lawsuit. The final tally of his lawsuit fundraiser was \$263,442.53, over \$10,000 of its intended goal. The precarious framing that enabled him to fundraise will be explored below.

## Features of Communication Studies

Communication scholars utilize inductive approaches, develop new perspectives, and introduce terms to explore and describe new phenomena.<sup>97</sup> Inductive methods move from data to theory, as opposed to collecting data from theory. With this difference in mind, communication theory might fail to advance a “solitary causal mechanism,” but can “systematically connect assumptions and propositions to promote macro level understanding of communicative phenomena”.<sup>98</sup> In the field of terrorism studies, attempting to advance a solitary causal mechanism for radicalization would be incomplete and likely counterproductive to counter terrorism efforts. This explains why macro level understandings and new methodological approaches are needed alongside statistical analyses in terrorism studies. The theories, methodologies, and terms utilized in the study will be described below.

## Method: A Rogerian Approach to Interviewing

For this project, the author utilized their experience from previous pilot studies<sup>99</sup> to recreate a similarly non-threatening environment—consistent with Rogerian principles of non-directness and active listening.<sup>100</sup> In the study, the researchers defined being empathetic as a choice where “[a] person listening sets aside personal views and values to better understand another person's perspective without judging that perspective; it does not mean just listening”.<sup>101</sup> The underlying philosophy behind Rogers' approach is that when encountering new perspectives or ideas, an individual's threat perception may

<sup>96</sup> Gavin McInnes, "Defend Gavin", *Defendgavin.Com*, 2019, <https://defendgavin.com/>; Bijan Stephen, "Gavin McInnes Is Suing The SPLC For Defamation", *The Verge*, 2019, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/2/4/18211275/gavin-mcinnis-southern-poverty-law-center-defamation-lawsuit>.

<sup>97</sup> Max Besbris and Shamus Khan, "Less Theory. More Description.", *Sociological Theory*, 35, no. 2 (2017): 147-153, doi:10.1177/0735275117709776.

<sup>98</sup> Dawn Braithwaite and Paul Schrodt, *Engaging Theories In Interpersonal Communication: Multiple Perspectives* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2014).

<sup>99</sup> Samantha Kutner, "Proud Boys Incident Map 2016-2019", 2018; Maureen McBride et al., "Responding To The Whole Person: Using Empathic Listening And Responding In The Writing Center", *The Peer Review*, 2018, <http://thepeerreview-iwca.org/issues/issue-2/responding-to-the-whole-person-using-empathic-listening-and-responding-in-the-writing-center/>.

<sup>100</sup> Carl Rogers, *Client-Centered Therapy, Its Current Practice, Implications, And Theory* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1951).

<sup>101</sup> McBride, et al., "Responding to the Whole Person", *The Peer Review*, 2018, par. 11.



decrease if they realize the other person can relate to their lived experience.<sup>102</sup> Being non-judgmental and empathetic are *not* endorsements of the group's actions, nor an attempt to normalize their ideology. They are merely tools to facilitate data collection and build rapport with a hostile and potentially violent subset of the population. Self-categorization theory informed the interview structure of the study, with questions designed to probe the reality of being a member and the ways members framed themselves in opposition to other groups.

## Data Collection

Snowball sampling was used during the recruitment phase of the study. Primary source data collection was approved via in person interviews, phone, Twitter Direct Messaging, Facebook Messenger, and email. Twitter is a unique research setting, as it contains "complex, naturally formed social environments rather than isolated, artificial settings".<sup>103</sup> For this reason, Twitter was chosen as the preferred platform. All protocols were approved by the University of Nevada Reno.

The social media interviews were conducted in an asynchronous format; participants had the option of responding at times that were convenient for them. The time to complete the interview varied as a function of format and each participant's preferred communication style. Additionally, risks of interviews on social media were communicated in the consent forms delivered on their preferred communication platform. The Proud Boys were responsive to transparency about the author's role as a researcher, as many had concerns of being doxed. Clearly communicating their rights in the consent language helped alleviate their concerns.

## Grounded Theory Approach to Data Analysis

Given the lack of comprehensive information surrounding the group, it was preferable to let themes and patterns emerge from the data before preliminary coding was conducted. Codes were then regrouped into 6 broader themes: (1) pull factors towards the Proud Boys; (2) push factors away from mainstream conservatism and towards the group (3); Gavin McInnes as a charismatic leader; (4) camaraderie and brotherhood; (5) felt precarity; and (6) push factors away from Proud Boys.

## Participants

### Sample 1

A sample of Proud Boy Members were interviewed (n=11). Women are not allowed in the group but can support within an auxiliary role as Proud Boys' Girls, who were also interviewed (n=2). There were two part-time comedians, one aspiring travel writer, one former Air Force Veteran, one lawyer, one Proud Boys national council member, one hairstylist, and one political strategist. The remaining three members identified as either self-employed, entrepreneurs, or freelancers. All had finished high school, with varying degrees of college completion.

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<sup>102</sup> Rogers, *Client-Centered Therapy, Its Current Practice, Implications, And Theory*, 1951.

<sup>103</sup> William J. Brady et al., "Emotion Shapes The Diffusion Of Moralized Content In Social Networks", *Proceedings Of The National Academy Of Sciences* 114, no. 28 (2017): 7313-7318, doi:10.1073/pnas.1618923114.

## Sample 2

A sample of both new participants and participants in sample 1 who reconsented for follow up interviews was used (n = 17). This sample included 11 participants from sample 1 who consented to follow up interviews and 6 new members from Australia (1) Canada (2) and America (3). All participants received additional language describing the risks of communicating on their preferred platform.

## Results

### Pull Factors towards Proud Boys

Proud Boys and Proud Boys' Girls appreciated the edginess, or counter-culture appeal of the group (Participant 6) while some framed the group's function as a "rebellion to regressive left" (Participant 7). Others noted the group was a way for men to lead by example. Some, like Participant 18, became involved after a rally, saying, "I saw how they handled themselves and then looked them up. I liked that they were unapologetic and believed in fighting back when necessary (Participant 15)." Some had more personal motivations and said that the group had "pulled" them "out of a bad place mentally" (Participant 2). Others described finding the group during a low or transitional state in their life.

*"I became a Proud Boy in May of this year. I was at a low point in my life as I had just gotten scammed out of my entire life savings by a corrupt elected official in South Texas. I did not want to join right away, and probably watched a good five or six hours of footage related to the Proud Boys and Gavin McInnes. I read Gavin's book, "The Death of Cool" as well to get some additional context. About a week later, I was sold, and I posted a first-degree video of my own to join."*

— Participant 15

### Push Factors away from the GOP

Participant 7 noted he was "frustrated with certain strategic decisions that are made on the top levels of the GOP." Participant 13 spoke directly to the indoctrination process associated with joining, stating, "I stopped watching progressive [sic] content that didn't align with my values." Participant 3 described the loneliness of not fitting into a neatly delineated group:

*"All the groups available to me before the creation of the Proud Boys were either conservative groups that took themselves way too seriously, had too many speeches or conduct rules, or just weren't fun. Before this movement I felt like a man on an island, I was to [sic] socially liberal for conservatives and too conservative in my political views for liberals."*

— Participant 3

### Pull Factors Towards Precarity & Victimhood

Members perceived their personal freedoms and the freedom to be openly proud of Western culture as under attack. Some saw themselves as victims of circumstances and some promoted the group while justifying their reasons for joining. Many of their responses were coded to conceal more overt white nationalist ties e.g. "western

chauvinism” and “the west is the best.” Some also deflected responsibility for the violent behaviour that some members engaged in by framing themselves as the victims. Participant 7 described rally attendance as “standing up to bullies,” echoing anticipatory self-defence and reverse victim-offender narratives.<sup>104</sup> Common concerns were fear of losing one’s voice, fears of persecution, fears of free speech being policed, and an imperative to save or preserve the Western world, despite providing any clear descriptions of policies, actions, or goals to accomplish that aim.

Some—like Participant 12—expressed sympathy for other reactionary groups stating, “after becoming a Proud Boy, I think Tea Partiers were just conservative-minded Americans upset that they had lost their voice in the Obama administration.” Rather than take personal responsibility for joining, many framed themselves as being pushed by circumstance, antifascists, or the left.

*“I found that my world views changed after seeing how rabid and hateful the left had become in certain circumstances. In 2014-15 I started noticing snippets of an ever-increasing disdain and dislike for the conservatives and other centrist right groups. I was met with anger and confusion. I saw them starting to slander anyone they disagreed with. It was around the time of the 2016 election when I was pushed all the way to the right, after seeing such hatred towards anyone who voted for Trump.”*

— Participant 13

*“I can say with confidence though that we wouldn’t have as many current members as we do if ANTIFA would stop attacking people because they disagree with them politically. Some guys can’t stand the sight of seeing innocent people ESPECIALLY women being beaten up in their hometowns and feel the need to stand up to the “bullies.””*

— Participant 7

## Precarious Masculinity

An older, married participant described the gender dynamics of the group as he understood them. He saw a lack of social skills and traditional dating as a consequence of technology. Participant 14 believed certain practices in the group were to counteract the addictive element of porn. Despite McInnes’s stated beliefs on porn’s harmful effects, porn star Mercedes Carrera appeared on his compound America show 71 times.<sup>105</sup> McInnes used the adult film star to promote his show, but later, as the Proud Boy leader, he enforced a stringent masturbation policy. Carrera—known for her role in the scandal referred to as Gamergate—was known for “branding people pedophiles online.” She was later arrested for sexually abusing a minor. Despite contradictions in McInnes’s position on porn, some members felt he provided a de facto rule book for men to be men and for men to interact with women. Another participant joined after watching just five hours of Gavin McInnes’s content and incorporated several Proud Boys’ tenets into his personal examples of how to raise boys to be masculine.

*“And also, you know, one thing that he recognized, which I do believe it’s true, is that a lot of, of younger, younger people is that a lot of younger folks, a really didn’t seem to*

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<sup>104</sup> Harsey, Zurbriggen and Freyd, "Perpetrator Responses To Victim Confrontation: DARVO And Victim Self-Blame", 2017.

<sup>105</sup> Jared Holt, "'Gamergate' Advocate Arrested On Allegations Of Molesting Child", Right Wing Watch, 2019, <https://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/gamergate-advocate-arrested-on-allegations-of-molesting-child/>.

*have, I guess the term for it, “basic game,” meaning that they were well, that they were so involved with primarily internet pornography and I, and, and I think that once you get started on, on pornography, it just sort of escalates for young people. Because, you know, when I was growing up, you found the magazine. It was like finding the holy grail when you hide it, And, and at least that's the way I thought back to the Proud Boys.”*

— Participant 14

*“The deterioration of traditional gender roles I agree with Gavin that women probably are happier as housewives. I think men ought to be free to act like men without being corrected by the nags and the busybodies that our society has produced. I think kids ought to be allowed to make mistakes, get scraped knees, play with BB guns, and that sort of thing.”*

— Participant 15

## Camaraderie, Brotherhood

Many members described the group as a safe space for men to espouse their views without feeling persecuted. Some left traditional university settings after feeling a lack of belonging. The Proud Boys’ mandate explicitly includes Western chauvinism and being unapologetic about one’s views. Freedom from personal responsibility was a common implicit theme.

*“Proud Boys is great because it's mostly about having a good time, having a few beers, and shooting the shit with people who have different opinions. When I got involved with Proud Boys everything just clicked, most of us have great senses of humor, share similar values, and like to drink and hang.”*

— Participant 2

*“This isn’t a temporary thing for me, I have the tattoo. This is a group with beliefs I really share, and I’m not the type to throw in with a group. That’s why I’m not a Republican but a conservative. I got out of the Marine Corps and started at a public University. The environment there is worse than any Breitbart article can paint a picture of. Here I am, surrounded by rich kids casually denouncing our own country and professors urging them on while I get my grades slashed for saying “illegal” instead of “undocumented” in my papers. I knew I wasn’t alone but no other Trump voters would show face because it makes your life hard and there wasn’t a single conservative organization anyway. So, I started this state chapter. The response was immediate, from guys inside and out of the college. It’s a very important thing for like-minded men to relax and drink together. Now we can.”*

— Participant 5

*“Indeed, if any of these guys joined because they were left friendless after marriage -they ain't copping to it! Ha. Kind of an adult frat where politics was secondary to having a good time and having one another’s back.”*

— Participant 14

## Gavin McInnes

Many Proud Boys stated they were already fans of McInnes’s work before joining. They expressed joining as a fairly seamless transition from being a passive consumer of his content, to joining their local chapter. In this way, they *swiped right* on his brand of extremism, believing it to be an assertion of their masculinity.

*“Most Australian PBs were fans of his content on Rebel Media/ TGMS etc....We all found each other and formed chapters in our major cities. Gavin had little to do with forming us. We recruit for our own chapters.”*

— Participant 13

*“I found a video of Gavin on YouTube in early 2016. I subscribed to his channel on Compound media and enjoyed listening to his podcasts. He was a regular on a panel show called Red Eye. And. I just thought he was funny. He was kind of obnoxious. And I just thought he was funny. [When they started protesting] Gavin McInnes [I thought] Wait? Gavin McInnes the comedian? I didn't know he was that political! So, they're chanting, 'Death to Proud Boys!' "Death to Proud Boys!" And I got ahold of a guy on Twitter and suggested you know, a kind of women's auxiliary unit? You know, I didn't. I thought they were funny. They're kind of irreverent. Back then things had not gotten so polarized yet.”*

— Participant 8, Proud Boys Girl

*“An athlete you may know started up his own network and had Gavin on the network. I enjoyed it. I thought he was funny. It was funny, you know, some Canadian references in there which were nice.”*

— Participant 14

## Push Factors away from Proud Boys

Some honorary members avoided becoming officially involved with the group. Participant 4 said, “Would I join PB chapter in the area? Yes, IF I knew they had vetted their members [there] were no white supremacists, which [Proud Boys] have kicked out of every demonstration if they knew they were there.” It is unknown whether Participant 4 remained involved with the group, as his account was suspended from Twitter last year. Others, like Participant 14, left after extended periods of membership due to changing group dynamics and ideological differences. He differentiated his acceptance in the group from “love bombing,” a practice used in cults to gain control over members.<sup>106</sup>

*“I ultimately found a number of people turning on me after a certain point. There was and is. a very (as I call it) luddite feel. I was never subject to any kind of "Love Bomb" aside from the fact, at the start, it was a great bunch of guys. But I recognized early on that, that there were some early, early on to really the, uh, the type of guy, so I saw that would be engaged in these protests or whatever. But I did see a few guys that were definitely, you know, what I might call conspiracy theorists, guys are going to sit back and educate me on 9/11.”*

— Participant 14

Pat Buchanan is the author of a book “Death of the West”, which furthers immigrant invasion narratives. Proud Boys were required to read passages from Buchanan’s book at meetings. Later in the interview project, Participant 14 said that for him, being a Proud Boy didn’t equate to “[becoming] a card-carrying member of the “Pat Buchanan fan club.” He vacillated between moving away from the Proud Boys and rejoining. As of 2019, he was no longer an active member. He expressed a similar concern to other participants, regarding violence and the 4<sup>th</sup> degree, which involves enduring a fight for

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<sup>106</sup> Javier León Gómez, "Religiousness And Spirituality In The New Utopian Movements", *Religions* 10, no. 3 (2019): 166, doi:10.3390/rel10030166.

the cause. Participant 7 adamantly stated, “No, I’m not 4<sup>th</sup> degree and I hope to never get it.”

During the participant recruitment stage, many members spoke of a lawyer who would need to vet the author or approve the project before they spoke further. The lawyer eventually became a research participant. At the beginning of our interview, Participant 7 defended this lawyer, by claiming his actions were exaggerated and his behaviour was more of a “Texas thing.” When the Huffington Post revealed the extensive death threats the lawyer made against Thomas Retzlaff and rapper Talib Qweli, Participant 7 asked the Proud Boys to disavow him. They did not. It is important to note that participant 7 became a member after seeing the footage of a violent rally in Berkeley in 2017. His general aversion to violence was a central pull factor. In 2018, he said that he could no longer justify the Proud Boys’ continued commitment to violence and subsequently defected.

## Thematic Summary

The central themes of joining the Proud Boys are as follows: members stated the counterculture appeal of joining (1). Some expressed a dissatisfaction with conservative policies (2) and most stated a familiarity with and appreciation for Gavin McInnes before joining (3). Many appreciated the camaraderie and brotherhood of being a member (4) and described members bonding over a shared sense of precarity (5), while members who defected stated ideological and pragmatic differences, in addition to opposing violence (6).

## Limitations

This ethnographic interview project collected large volumes of primary source data from a relatively small sample size (n=17). Given the small sample size, there may be variances not captured in the data set. Members also self-selected into the study, and it is likely they do not represent data collected from a random sample. Additionally, this study cannot be replicated on the same social media platforms, as most participants’ accounts were later suspended from Twitter and Facebook (as of 2018, August 14). Future studies will need additional approval to communicate on encrypted platforms of Telegram, Signal, Wire, and Parler, among others. In-depth exploration of themes and individual case histories are also needed.

## Discussion: The Proud Boys as a Multiracial, White Supremacist Organization

The Proud Boys maintain close ties with mainstream conservatism as well as loose alliances with white nationalist organizations. Charismatic leaders draw the mainstream and ethnically diverse members to the fringes through precarious masculinity narratives. The organization’s insular online communities provide a space where men come to adopt more radical views, and multiracial members feel they can transcend their ethnicity through identifying with the West. Offline, their rallying has material effects. Their current chairman, an Afro-Cuban man, recently admitted that the purpose of their rallies is violence, wasting taxpayer money, and attempting to further narratives that demonize their opposition.<sup>107</sup> In the future, low effort involvement from the group could include

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<sup>107</sup> Campbell, “Portland Cops Knew The Fascists Had A Weapons Cache”, Huffpost.Com, 2018.

the following: a celebration of antisocial behaviour, deliberate carelessness, or more overt actions in an attempt to harm marginalized communities.

## Conclusion

Proud Boys represent a new face of far-right extremism, one that recruits through shared precarity and male grievances. Given the dynamic nature of extremist organizations, researchers would benefit from valuing a diversity of methods to analyse groups like the Proud Boys and enhance the role of description from field research. This study explored the pull factors surrounding recruitment, the ways members describe precarity, and the communicative features that mark the group as a violent, cryptofascist extremist organization.

It is important to employ different methodological approaches to understand what drives men to join far right extremist movements. A deeper understanding may help academics, independent researchers, and consultants navigate the rhetorical landscape and reduce the efficacy of narratives that get men to *swipe right*. Understanding Proud Boys' tactics, networks, ideologies, and recruitment strategies will enable policy makers to take concrete steps in countering Proud Boys' brand of violent extremism.

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She continues to seek ways to reduce the efficacy of extremist messaging and ensure. Her current project is the Proud Boys incident map and dashboard, a continually developing OSINT resource to inform the public of Proud Boys activity in America, Canada, Australia, and the UK.



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Samantha Kutner

26 May 2020

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