

PATRIOTS WIN!

A thematic analysis of political deliberation and everyday political talk on pro-Trump social media during the 2020 U.S. Election



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ABSTRACT

PATRIOTS WIN! Is the re-branded manifestation of one of Trump's most fervent online bases of support, /r/the_donald, back from the grave. As the informational landscape becomes increasingly decentralized and the risk of filter bubbles and exclusively echo chambers rises, the salience of political extremism growing there rises as well. Little is known about how exactly political deliberation and everyday political speech is carried out in such insulated spaces, and yet, they can have very real ramifications in fomenting violence, as shown by this year's U.S. Capitol riots. This thesis exhaustively examines 1,000 comments from patriots.win and conducts a qualitative thematic analysis on their content, attempting to answer the research question: "*How was extremist political deliberation and associated 'everyday political talk' conducted on patriots.win during and immediately after the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election (October-January)?*". Sub-questions investigate the roles of conspiracy theories, and political tribalism, and their presence in the corpus. After exhaustive coding, four main themes were discerned. These are: in-group reinforcement, out-group antagonism, socio-political organization, and mis/disinformation & conspiracies. The nature of discourse on patriots.win reveals a troubling example of a self-reinforcing, ideologically extreme group of violent individuals who do not tolerate dissent and regularly call for death of their opponents. Feeding on a diet of almost exclusively conspiracy theories and allegations of fraud, users operate in an environment where everybody who is not with them, is an enemy, and enemies are presented as rightful targets for violent action. Deviation is not tolerated, nor is disloyalty. The site is used for more benign political organization, but with an existing dark undercurrent of more extremist and violent speech ever-present. Future research needs to more accurately ascertain how deradicalization from such spaces can be conducted, and how these deadly cycles can be broken. It must also aim to enhance our understanding of how information spreads within and between such spaces. Extremist tribalism is the default status quo, and users constantly reinforce each other's beliefs in the pro-Trump cause as well as their own rightful mission, complete with militarized language. These insulated spaces need to be studied more closely in order to understand radicalization and extremism better, but also in the off chance that they organize efficiently enough to launch actual attacks on targets and their perceived enemies. They prove to be a disappointing reality for the classical Habermasian public sphere and represent another step in the growing cracks of classical deliberative democracy, driven by technological affordances and developments that simultaneously prove to be awe-inspiring and chilling.

KEYWORDS: *public sphere, political extremism, political tribalism, political deliberation, everyday political talk*

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Ch. 1 – Introduction

The internet has proven to be a fruitful arena for political discourse, and social media sites have rapidly risen to being some of the most politically active domains able to be easily accessed by citizens seeking to deliberate on their democratic rights on various civil fora (Fuchs, 2014; Gayo-Avello, 2015). Accordingly, the concept of digital democracy has been increasingly studied over the past two decades, particularly in relation to its fulfillment of functions permitting political discussion and furthering deliberative democracy, originally enshrined in what philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas called the public sphere (Habermas, 1989). Communications scholars have taken to studying the social implications of online political communication over the past few decades, investigating a plethora of various online spaces, both those intentionally and unintentionally facilitating online political speech (Conover & Searing, 2005; Dahlgren, 2005; Dunne, 2009; Ekström, 2016; Graham, 2010a, 2010b; Grover & Mark, 2019; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Mills, 2018; Papacharissi, 2009; Prior, 2007; Robards, 2018; Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013; Sunstein, 2001, 2007; Tsaliki, 2002). By now, it is apparent that the internet plays a central role in modern deliberative democracy and has reshaped the manner in which political speech is conducted (Dahlgren, 2005; Kaplan, 2015; Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013; Shah et al., 2017). The internet can also act as a tool of tragedy, especially in relation to political radicalization and extremist violence, as extremist individuals congregate and create polarized, isolated socio-political networks with one another while engaging in online political speech (Githens-Mazer, 2012; Grover & Mark, 2019; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Sunstein, 2007).

1.1 – *Research Question*

In order to ascertain the way in which such networks operate, this thesis will use qualitative thematic analysis to examine 1,000 distinct comments in an extremist space. One such network is patriots.win, a website founded following the banning of the iconic pro-Trump subreddit, /r/the_Donald (Halaschak, 2019). How political speech, and therefore deliberative democracy, is carried out on politically relevant spaces has ramifications for the society in which they operate (Benkler et al., 2018; Dahlgren, 2005; Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013). In order to discern the contours of how political discourse is carried out on such a space, the following research question will be investigated:

How was extremist political deliberation and associated ‘everyday political talk’ conducted on patriots.win during and immediately after the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election (October-January)?

In addition, two pertinent sub-questions will also be pursued:

- 1) *How does political tribalism factor into the political discourse present on patriots.win?*
- 2) *How prominent are mis/disinformation and conspiracy theories in political deliberation/everyday political talk on patriots.win?*

1.2 – Theoretical Framework

The specific terms used in the research question must be explained and properly contextualized. The specific academic debate is expounded upon later, in Chapter 2, but the terms political deliberation and everyday political talk have specific contextual meanings relevant to the research question. First, political deliberation is understood to be formalized political discourse through the lens of Habermasian discourse ethics, i.e. a structured, back-and-forth deliberation on the merits of policy between two rational individuals (Habermas, 1989, 1990). Second, everyday political talk is treated as the informal, casual, horizontal counterpart to deliberation, with hard rules and regulations being absent (Conover & Searing, 2005; Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013). Thus, the terms that guide the research question are complimentary, and both fall under the umbrella term of political discourse, but they are conceptually distinct from one another. This distinction will be elaborated upon in Chapter 2.

This thesis seeks to explore the nature of both deliberation and everyday political talk on patriots.win, and qualitatively examine the main themes present therein, as well as the effects of tribalism and mis/disinformation and conspiracy theories on said themes. The sub-questions target the concepts and roles of political tribalism and conspiratorial mis/disinformation and their roles in shaping political speech. Tribalism refers to a style of political speech outlined by Shapiro and Fogel (2019) as one marked by a cult of personality to the leader, whether discourse was harmonious or discordant, how national identity and patriotism were framed within said discourse, and how political leaders’ respect of autonomous democratic institutions impacted their followers’ perception of deliberative democracy. Seeing as heavily polarized politics are on the rise in the U.S. (Benkler et al., 2018; Grubbs et al., 2020; Spohr, 2017; Suiter & Fletcher, 2020), and so is conspiratorial

thinking in U.S. politics (Albertson & Guiler, 2020; Atkinson et al., 2018; Atkinson & Dewitt, 2018; Benkler et al., 2018), these sub-questions aim to investigate pertinent channels of contribution to modern political discourse, especially evident in extremist spaces (Neville-Shepard, 2019; Smallpage et al., 2017).

1.3 – Social and Academic Relevance

The victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Elections signified a paradigm shift in how information was seen in relation to political deliberation (Benkler et al., 2018). While this process had been ongoing for a while, the 2016 election symbolized the disintegration of the previously presumed bedrock of common information into an increasingly fractalized web of increasingly disparate ideological echo chambers and isolated information diets. The information on which the Habermasian public sphere was supposed to be built became increasingly unstable and unreliable, as conspiracy theories ran rampant. A number of events during the 2016 campaign were emblematic of this. One such conspiracy, known as PizzaGate, culminated with the arrest of one Edgar Maddison Welch, who, armed with multiple firearms, entered a pizza establishment and fired off a shot, believing that a child sex slave trafficking ring was being run in the basement by prominent Democratic politicians, including Hillary Clinton (Haag & Salam, 2017). Another was the release of hacked emails by WikiLeaks, which helped feed into conspiracies surrounding Hillary Clinton and other senior Democrats, including PizzaGate. These rumours had been widely circulated on extremist political echo-chambers, primarily by members of the alt-right (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), and one study found that Clinton's emails were the most highly covered subject of the entire election cycle, at least by the traditional mainstream press (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 17). Another noted that false stories, e.g. "Clinton set up Satanic Network", "Clinton had Parkinson's disease" were widely shared among Trump supporters (Sillito, 2016).

The far-right in the United States has been especially adept at adopting new media, blogs, and social media to help disseminate a mixture of conspiracy theories, outright lies in the form of disinformation, and questionable or unconfirmed news as misinformation, helping to further isolate the extreme right away from the mainstream information diet consumed by most other citizens (Faris et al., 2017). Such instances of political radicalization can have dire societal consequences in turning its adherents into more violent individuals (Cohen et al., 2014; Grover & Mark, 2019), as was seen in the January 6th insurrection at the

U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C., which was a politically motivated attack planned primarily through extremist channels on social media (Nguyen & Scott, 2021). This caused the injury of 138 police officers, the death of one and subsequent suicides of two more, the deaths of four rioters, with multiple other hospitalizations, and, currently, over 300 arrests (Emma & Ferris, 2021; Hymes et al., 2021).

The characters of the U.S. 2016 and 2020 campaign cycles can be understood as hallmarks of ‘post-truth’ politics, in which the truth still exists, but it simply does not matter. Christopher Robichaud, a lecturer in Ethics and Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School, described the political environment in 2016 by saying:

It’s true that what Trump is saying is false, it’s just that in the post-truth age of politics, we’re beyond criticizing someone for that. It’s like criticizing an actor for saying a lot of false things. He says whatever he needs to say to move people emotionally (Robichaud, 2016, as quoted in Pazzanese, 2016).

The same trend carried forward to 2020, as President Trump accused mail-in ballots of being rigged, and alleged widespread voter fraud, calling on his supporters to ‘stop the steal’ (Spring, 2020). These lines of argument were not carried out sincerely. One of Trump’s attorneys, Sidney Powell, was herself sued for \$1.3B by Dominion Voting Systems over defamation, and defended herself by claiming in court that no ‘reasonable person’ could have believed her ‘impossible’, ‘inherently improbable [...] wild accusations [and] [...] outlandish claims’ (Singh, 2021). One of the largest consequences of post-truth politics is therefore a fundamental disruption of the common core of information that a functioning public sphere relies on. If one party wants to campaign on actual issues in the country, but the other campaigns on a false premise, that Benkler et al. (2018) refers to as “zombie invasions” (p. 6) then reasonable political deliberation à la Habermas cannot be conducted. The current state of political deliberation, specifically in the United States, has been therefore described as being in a state of ‘epistemic crisis’ (Benkler et al., 2018; Dahlgren, 2018). Moreover, extreme ideologies were themselves identified as prominent examples of “crippled epistemology” (Hardin, 2002), meaning that their followers are prone to dismissing knowledge and perspectives that do not precisely align with their own. Thus, the modern deliberative environment faces a crisis of rising polarization, an extant epistemic crisis, and groups rife with crippled epistemology, raising questions about the functions of a public sphere and modern, internet-mediated deliberative democracy in general.

Patterns of discourse in political extremism surrounding Trump on social media began to be studied in earnest in 2017, but the field still remains new. Robards (2018) examined the Trump fan subreddit /r/the_Donald for approximately a year, ending in mid-2017, and found that the community was characterized by political antagonism and tribalism, with strong ‘us vs. them’ sentiment, as well as ideologically insular and with obscure in-group practices and language. These findings confirm the fact that /r/the_Donald can be considered to be a prototypical example of an echo-chamber per Sunstein (2001, 2007), but the author admits that “considerable work remains to be done” (Robards, 2018, p. 199). However, Robards’ (2018) suggestions for future research are more interested in organization by moderators and subreddit users in order to protest injustices or stage blackouts, rather than tracking the nature of political deliberation and discourse itself. Mills (2018) quantitatively examined /r/the_donald, from February to June, 2016, with the main takeaways focusing on the heavy-handed moderation tactics and on the types of external links published to the subreddit, but focused on the posts that made it to /r/all, lessening the study’s relevance to research directed at extremist echo chambers. Furthermore, the quantitative nature of the study means that the findings do little to properly further academic understanding specifically concerning the qualitative character of political deliberation and political speech on such a subreddit, which this thesis seeks to examine. Medvedev et al. (2019) point out that “The dynamics of discussions is another interesting, yet mostly unexplored, aspect of research” (p. 18), although their suggested methodology is quantitative and based on neural networks, rather than the qualitative form of content analysis utilized in this thesis. The authors also summarize many larger studies on Reddit, pointing out how the majority of them are focused around machine learning-based approaches to analyzing Reddit’s voting algorithms, rather than understanding the content present therein. Still, their point about the actual dynamics of discourse is salient, and remains a relatively understudied area of potential research.

Bright (2018) investigated the role of extremist ideology in furthering polarization by conducting a macro-level comparative content analysis of 115 political groups’ discourse on Twitter, spanning 26 different nations. He found that, uniformly, individuals holding more extreme views - regardless of ideology - were less likely to conduct discourse with members outside of their own groups. This held regardless of their placement on the left-right political spectrum, meaning that discourse between individuals in the center-left and center-right was much more likely than discourse between far-left and center-left or far-right and center-right leaning individuals. These findings are consistent with established lines of thought in

selective exposure theory, and echo Pariser (2011) and Sunstein (2001, 2007)'s warnings. Selective exposure theory, which underpins research on political polarization and extremism, states that individuals' news consumption is often underlined by its congruence to their existing beliefs, leading to gradual polarization and radicalization over time (Arceneaux et al., 2012; Spohr, 2017; Stroud, 2010).

Similarly, another study, using three surveys tracking political ideology taken at various points during a referendum, found that politically extreme individuals' ideologies were much less likely to change than more moderate ideologies (Zwicker et al., 2020). Furthermore, politically extreme ideologies have been identified as particularly susceptible to emotional manipulation through increased acceptance and receptiveness of conspiracy theories (van Prooijen et al., 2015). Taken in tandem, these findings present a problematic view of existing politics, especially in the United States - extreme ideologies, particularly the far/alt-right, are prone to radicalization, resistant to change, prone to ideological insulation in online echo-chambers, which compounds the strength of the aforementioned trend to radicalize, and often operate on an information base rife with conspiracy theories, misinformation, and disinformation (Faris et al., 2017; Tucker et al., 2018). Thus, analyzing the content of political debate and discourse in extremist pro-Trump spaces during the election can help researchers glean additional insight in how this deliberation may have affected radicalization, in the sense of a gradual heightening of political extremism culminating in actual political violence (Githens-Mazer, 2012). It also reveals how the aforementioned mix of ongoing effects manifests itself in real, regular political speech, tangibly affecting users' political outlooks and beliefs, and hence their voting patterns.

The exact qualitative nature of in-group practices must be investigated, in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of how political deliberation - or lack thereof - is handled in social media echo chambers. Building on previous research allows us to circumvent the need to first examine whether patriots.win is an echo chamber (Mills, 2018; Robards, 2018), and instead directly examine *how* it functions in being an echo chamber. The community surrounding /r/the_donald has proven to be remarkably efficient in staying united even as the subreddit has gone through rounds of quarantine and suppression (Chandrasekharan et al., 2020), signifying that despite being banned in June, 2020, the community behind it has managed to stay cohesive and re-establish itself on a copy-cat website like patriots.win (Halaschak, 2019). This thesis seeks to fill an important gap and broaden academic understanding on how such insulated spaces on the internet conduct

themselves - and, specifically, per the ephemeral and ever-changing nature of online spaces (Munger, 2019), how this specific community at this specific time enacts political deliberation and everyday political speech during a contentious general election.

1.4 – *Thesis Outline*

The upcoming chapter lays out an overview of the relevant theoretical concepts, diving into everyday political talk, political deliberation, political tribalism, political extremism, conspiracy theories, and the role of the public sphere in modern deliberative democracy. Afterwards, the methodology describes the research design, sampling process, sensitizing concepts, and data analysis, focusing on the particularities of this thesis and the chosen method being a mix of inductive ethnography and thematic analysis, and answers the question of reliability, validity, trustworthiness of the data, as well as ethical considerations. Then, the data will be reported and subsequently discussed, outlining the main findings and discussing them for each of the four main themes – in-group reinforcement, out-group antagonism, socio-political organization and, finally, mis/disinformation and conspiracy theories. Finally, a conclusion definitively summarizing the main findings for the research questions and discussing the extant limitations is presented, suggesting directions for future research based off the revelations enshrined in the results and discussion sections.

Ch. 2 – Theoretical Framework

The following section will provide a theoretical outline of the various key concepts most pertinent to the research question, the context, and the thesis at large. This will present and summarize the academic debates surrounding the given concepts and discuss their relevance to the question at hand. While a number of expected findings and preliminary hypotheses are drawn from these discussions and from the existing research, these are not deterministic of the actual findings presented later on, but rather act as reflections upon the conclusions reached by extant literature concerning echo chambers, extremism, the virtual public sphere, conspiratorialism, tribalism and online deliberation. Thus, these should be treated more as possible conceptual primers, and, if contradicted and contested, imply an increasingly salient avenue for future research.

2.1 – *Everyday Political Talk and Political Deliberation*

Everyday political talk refers to the horizontal, actor-to-actor, informal methods of political discussion carried out in semi-private or private settings by everyday citizens (Conover & Searing, 2005; Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013). This is precisely the sort of political communication that this thesis seeks to examine in-depth. Everyday political talks have a particular importance because they are the most typical form of interpersonal political communication and, in the words of Schmitt-Beck and Lup (2013), “it seems self-evident that they may also have an impact on how one feels and behaves toward fellow citizens” (p. 527). Thus, everyday political talk refers to how politics are casually discussed on a day-to-day basis, and they help decide what citizens in a deliberative democracy take away from these conversations. Discussions about politics with friends and family are often very casually carried out, but they have a substantial impact on opinion formation and cultivation of political beliefs. Ekström (2016) pointed out how everyday political talk is crucial for the development and self-negotiation of teenager and young adults’ political identities, hinting at the formative nature present in these separately inconsequential everyday occurrences. A contrast must be made to the term political deliberation, which, despite sounding similar, for the purposes of conceptual clarity, will be differentiated from everyday political talk by its particular formality (Dahlgren, 2005).

Everyday political talk and political deliberation are often conflated and confused for one another in researchers’ eyes. For example, Green et al. (2019) use it to refer to political speech of all types, and make no distinction between the two, while Steenbergen et al. (2003)

specifically seek to create a quality index to separate formalized deliberation from informal forms of political discussion. Studies analyzing political deliberation and ‘everyday political talk’, that is, casual, horizontal, spontaneous interpersonal political communication and discourse between members or networks of members in a democratic polity, have undergone a rise in academic popularity over the past two decades (Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013). Originally pioneered by studies initially carried out in the 1950s and 60s (Berelson et al., 1954; Lazarsfeld et al., 1968), the notion that one’s social group was impactful on their political leanings began to take shape, and citizens began to be treated more as products of their environments rather than the objectively rational, context-free individuals that dominated earlier scholarship (Zuckerman et al., 2007, pp. 1 - 31). Normative democratic theorists took a notable “deliberative turn” in the early 2000s, leading to an increase of interest in “talk-centric democracy” (Dryzek, 2000, pp. 1 - 7) and citizens’ discursive practices. This trend carried forward, and its importance was magnified by the growing of digital and social media that originated alongside what is commonly described as the Web 2.0 (Kaplan, 2015), as well as a resurgent interest in the concept of a digital, or virtual, public sphere and its implications for deliberative democracy (Papacharissi, 2009; Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013).

Thus, there are two main camps – one that does not differentiate between deliberation and everyday political talk, and one that does, primarily through a prioritization of what are known as Habermasian discourse ethics (Habermas, 1990), a swathe of suggestions in deliberative democratic theory meant to facilitate reasoned, structured, ideally fruitful discussion in a public setting. While everyday political talk is informal and casual, deliberation is seen as more of a structured, formalized process of rational debate and argumentation, without resorting to ad hominem attacks or fallacies (Habermas, 1990). Still, researchers have primarily focused on informal everyday talk when studying politics, especially after the advent of the internet and the popularization of discursive spaces online. While some, like Green et al., (2019) do not differentiate between the two, many other scholars do. Most studies dealing with analyzing political speech have used normative frameworks for what can and cannot be considered deliberation, mostly basing their assumptions on Habermas’ work. These have ranged from focusing on political talk on news comments (Graham, 2010a; Strandberg, 2008; Tsaliki, 2002), political speech on non-political fora (Graham, 2010b, 2012), social networking sites like Facebook or YouTube (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013), or government-sanctioned virtual discursive spaces (Dunne, 2009).

Some of these have used normative Habermasian notions of deliberation to rank the rationalistic, Enlightenment-style quality of political debate (Kies, 2010; Stromer-Galley, 2007), or attempt to create their own framework for measuring quality (Steenbergen et al., 2003). This thesis lands on the side of using Habermasian principles to determine whether given speech can be considered to be formal deliberation, or whether it can be included under the umbrella of more informal everyday political talk. However, it does not assign normative judgements to the quality of such speech. That is, while the research question focuses on how both deliberation and everyday political talk are carried out on patriots.win, it does not hold up deliberation as the normative end goal or lionize it as more desirable than everyday political talk. It simply seeks to examine how these descriptions of political communication, both formal and informal, together with the processes of tribalism and prominent use of conspiracy theories, are carried out on patriots.win, and what their main characteristics are.

2.2 – Habermas, the Virtual Public Sphere, and the Epistemic Crisis

Now that the nature of political discussion and communication has been explored, its setting must be further expounded upon. Habermas (1989) is the seminal work on which a lot of subsequent theory surrounding political deliberation is based. Briefly, Habermas (1989) theorizes that active, healthy democracies required public places of discussion and political deliberation wherein political ideas could be rationally debated through meritocratic, well-informed rhetoric and an objective comparison of policy goals. This theoretical space was christened as the “public sphere”, a name that has since become ubiquitous and synonymous with fora for political discussion. Naturally, in 1989, this was perceived to be a physical space where people could come and discuss politics, comparable perhaps to French Revolution-era salons and hotels.

Habermas’ vision of the public sphere was built on a deep pessimism of the existing media hegemony’s capacity for facilitating deliberative democracy (Brandenburg, 2006; Habermas, 1989). Since traditional media institutions were increasingly becoming more commercialized and sensationalized, a healthy public sphere was intended to be a remedy to help reinforce deliberative democracy rather than replacing it with one dominated by media conglomerates. Habermas wrote:

The communicative network of a public sphere made up of rationally debating private citizens has collapsed, the public opinion once emergent from it has partly decomposed into the informal opinion of private citizens without a public and partly

become concentrated into formal opinions of publicistically effective institutions (Habermas, 1989, p. 247).

This thesis posits, in part, that political deliberation within the Habermasian Enlightenment-derived ideal of a public sphere is once again under threat. However, the peril originates not from media conglomerates and their outsized capacity for agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), but rather from the emergence of increasingly isolated echo-chambers and informational bubbles on the Internet that heighten the salience of conspiracy theories, unfounded rumors, political tribalism, political polarization, and political extremism (Benkler et al., 2018; Pariser, 2011; Robards, 2018; Scrivens et al., 2020; Sunstein, 2001, 2007).

The Habermasian public sphere has increased its importance in the digital age, with some scholars positing that various platforms on the Internet can now serve as a form of virtual public sphere, allowing for wide-ranging political discussion to be carried out online, ideally leading to heightened civic participation and political deliberation in democratic societies (Brandenburg, 2006; Bruns, 2018; Jennings et al., 2020; Papacharissi, 2002, 2009; Shirky, 2011). This is, however, a relatively optimistic formulation of the possibilities afforded by the virtual public sphere. Scholars such as Webster (2013) and Hartley and Green (2006) take a much more critical view on the applicability of the public sphere to the modern world, arguing that it represents a concept that is inherently too idealistic for reality, too rigid, and comparatively outdated to properly function in modern society. The utopian framing of the public sphere is also not directly applicable when examining more insulated and ideologically homophilic spaces, such as patriots.win, and its antecedent precursor, /r/the_donald (Halaschak, 2019; Mills, 2018; Robards, 2018). A schism thus remains as far as the virtual public sphere is concerned - while the development of the Internet has certainly increased accessibility, and afforded people much greater possibilities for political deliberation, it has also led to broad shifts in our understanding of the world and led to a deepening crisis of trust between the public, the elite political class, and the existing media institutions (Dahlgren, 2009, 2018).

Dahlgren (2018) points out the environmental reality that modern politics operates in is currently plunging through nothing less but an epistemic crisis. The informational landscape has become so fragmented, so multilateral, so post-modern in nature, that the very nature of Platonic episteme has fallen away, and left the certainty of former political

deliberation unmoored, without an empirical basis to properly link itself to. Dahlgren (2018) focuses on two main elements of this ongoing process, with the first being the ongoing processes and fundamental changes spurred by increasingly extravagant technological affordances available to all citizens in the modern media landscape:

While the output on the internet is, from the practical horizons of any user, seemingly inexhaustible, each of us has his/her own areas of interest, networks and sites that we follow [...] doubt about our own horizons can still set in. Cognitive certainty is dislodged by this informational excess [...] as people become all the more media aware [...] suspicion of ‘other’ sources becomes a comfortable disposition (Dahlgren, 2018, p. 3).

The second warning issued by Dahlgren, representative of the more pessimistic position of scholars who are skeptical of the application of Habermasian normative traditions, and their concomitant assumptions, to the Internet (Robards, 2018; Spohr, 2017; Sunstein, 2001, 2007; Warner, 2010) is particularly relevant to this thesis. Dahlgren writes:

What we have today is not just political turbulence but a sort of epistemic cacophony [...] what we see today from the right-wing surpasses traditional anti-intellectualism; it consists of aggressive attacks on basic Enlightenment premises. [...] [Post-truth] signals an emerging epistemic regime, where emotional response prevails over factual evidence and reasoned analysis (Dahlgren, 2018, p. 6-7).

This analysis is emblematic of the pessimistic view, which is the one taken for the purposes of this thesis, in the sense that, if the deliberative qualities of patriots.win are not exhibited, then that would be presumed to be a blow to deliberative democracy, or, at least, a warning sign. New developments in communication technologies have unalterably changed how people interact with each other, which will be expanded upon in section 2.3.

2.3 – Online Deliberation and Echo Chambers - Utopian or Dystopian?

The discordant debate surrounding the public sphere, a unified epistemological basis, and questions surrounding post-truth politics, and an inherently subjective mode of media intake is not entirely as modern of a debate as it may appear. Indeed, warnings of the pervasive power of the internet to alter users’ information habits, and therefore their views and understandings of the world, stretch back to at least the mid 90s. Negroponte (1996) theorized that the Internet’s capacity to personalize content to a given user’s views would be

a problematic precedent as users increasingly built their own idiosyncratic media consumption patterns (which he called a ‘Daily Me’), closing them off to conflicting points of view. However, Negroponte’s conception of this idea was not necessarily inherently negative, it focused more on the potential for algorithmic news curation rather than any latent negative side-effects. A more pessimistic thesis was later elaborated on by Sunstein (2001, 2007), who criticized the Internet for its propensity to create echo chambers and ideologically insulated communities as a dangerous development for deliberative democracy. Pariser (2011) also warned of the disruptive potential of the ‘filter bubble’, although his warning was two-fold: one, due to algorithmic curation of content, individuals uninterested in political news could consciously exclude said news on social media and consume exclusively entertainment; and two, that automatic curation would heighten political polarization by only showing users content similar to that they had previously engaged with. Pariser (2011)’s first concern had already been proven correct by Prior (2007), who found that users with low interest in political content online would opt out of seeing it and remove from their feeds. The main difference here was that in the traditional broadcasting ecosystem, when entertaining content was hard to come by, consumers would resort to political news as a fallback. However, with the advent of social media, the sheer notion of entertainment scarcity has disappeared, removing these low-interest voters from many traditional political consumption practices (Dahlgren, 2019; Prior, 2007). The contemporary situation on social media, wherein political extremism, political polarization, and insulated echo-chambers thrive, seems to have legitimized these warnings beyond pure theory.

Echo chambers can be understood to be relatively insulated spaces for political discussion, and, more often, everyday political talk, occupied by a like minded group of individuals prone to reinforcing their own beliefs through sustained agreement and exclusion of nonconforming viewpoints from the discussion (Sunstein, 2002). The subject of this thesis, patriots.win, can be understood to be a fairly prototypical example of an online echo chamber, where disagreeing viewpoints are rapidly silenced and ostracized from the ongoing discussion, assuming it is similar to its predecessor (Robards, 2018). The question of whether the Internet is a benefit or a hindrance to public political deliberation is still a hot-button issue, and no consensus exists (Dahlgren, 2005), with some scholars arguing that the internet is beneficial rather than detrimental (Bruns, 2018; Jennings et al., 2020; O’Hara & Stevens, 2015; Shirky, 2011; Strandberg, 2008). These lines of reasoning are sustained by pointing out that polarization can lead higher engagement with out-group sources – in tightly controlled

experimental circumstances (Garrett & Stroud, 2014; Jennings et al., 2020). However, broadly, one can say that the corpus of work supporting more pessimistic theses concerning the impact of the Internet on the traditional Habermasian model outweigh the optimistic ones (Benkler et al., 2018; Dahlgren, 2009, 2018, 2019; Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2001, 2007), and have been backed up with plenty of empirical research concerning the negative influence of the Internet, especially social media, on political polarization and extremism (i.e. raising it) (Benkler et al., 2018; Bright, 2018; Gaudette et al., 2020; Prior, 2007; Robards, 2018; Spohr, 2017; Warner, 2010). Habermas himself outright claimed that “we are nevertheless confronted with the prima facie evidence that the kind of political communication we know from our so-called media society goes against the grain of the normative requirements of deliberative politics” (Habermas, 2006, p. 420). This thesis therefore grounds itself in the more pessimistic of these two lines of thought, aiming to ascertain what sort of political deliberation and everyday political talk is carried out by Trump supporters in a relatively isolated and ideologically insulated online echo chamber during the 2020 election.

However, it is also important to note that certain scholars go against the grain, and argue against the more pessimistic characterizations of echo chambers on social media. O’Hara and Stevens (2015) contest the findings of the more dystopian approaches towards social media and echo chambers, and dispute their findings by identifying methodological issues present in various earlier studies. However, these qualms are more centered on the positionality and causality of various effects, rather than the actual existence of said echo chambers, e.g. whether polarization creates more echo chambers, whether these echo chambers foster further extremism, and precisely how difficult it is to deprogram extremist political thought. Ultimately, in-line with Dahlgren (2005), O’Hara and Stevens (2015) conclude that “it is hard to generalize about echo chambers and their effects. This should not surprise us. Research into the facilitation of social networks by technology has thrown up paradoxes and ambivalent conclusions rather than direct unequivocal effects” (p. 418). Many studies cited in this thesis were also conducted after 2015, with a particular rise in salience post-2016, following Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, and so were not able to be criticized by O’Hara and Stevens (2015). The exact nature of the effects of echo chambers still remain contested – and while this thesis studies how political deliberation and everyday political talk is carried out, it does not evaluate its potential on polarization directly.

2.4 – *Political Extremism*

Political extremism is a far-reaching term, and rather commonly used. Indeed, it is such a widespread term, that no single academic definition exists. Articles dealing with it, such as Fernbach et al. (2013), Lima et al., (2018), or van Prooijen et al. (2015) do not bother to give a definition, other than to say that extremists on both sides of the political aisle (e.g. fascists and communists) committed horrible acts in the course of the 20th century. However, for reasons of conceptual clarity, especially since this thesis itself deals with an extremist space, a hard definition is needed. Thus, we turn to Grover and Mark (2019), who investigated warning signs of violent extremism by alt-right members on Reddit, a remarkably similar environment to /r/the_donald, and, hence, patriots.win. Drawing on a framework laid out by Meloy et al., (2012), they identified three main hallmarks of extremist speech in online communities. The first, fixation, refers to behavior exhibiting signs of pathological obsession with a real or imagined enemy, creating a common foe for the members of the extremist community, rife with angry emotional subtones and increasingly negative in tone (Cohen et al., 2014). The second is identification, which refers to the process of self-identification that members of the radical community undergo as they constantly co-reinforce each other as being heroes, warriors, or rightful soldiers of their given ideology (Cohen et al., 2014; Grover & Mark, 2019). The last is leakage, which refers to direct declarations of intent to cause harm, and the required steps to do so – i.e. planning, research, or direct calls to violence, varying in directness or overtness (Cohen et al., 2014; Grover & Mark, 2019). While this definition points to violent extremism over benign extremism, violent extremism is more socially relevant and hence more useful to study in depth, especially if one wishes to analyze how political deliberation and everyday political talk is carried out among a group of potentially violent individuals, and how that violent sentiment is carried forward. In addition, political extremism has also been marked by being understood to be a political outlook that “[offers] epistemic clarity through a worldview that oversimplifies complex problems” (Zwicker et al., 2020, p. 1138). Patriot.win’s original subreddit of /r/the_donald exhibited strong signs of all of these factors, and its members used rather culture-specific language as well (Mills, 2018; Robards, 2018).

Other studies posit that individuals with extremist beliefs have a high confidence in their understanding of the world, and are less likely to change their minds or be able to be persuaded since they believe they hold a nuanced and complete understanding of the political situation (Fernbach et al., 2013; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019). That is not to say that

stubbornly combative polemicists can be classified as extremists - rather, that those who hold a simplified worldview, who are also unable to be reasonably engaged in conversation or remain unreceptive to non-friendly viewpoints can be classified as individuals exhibiting signs of political extremism.

There is also the question of how political extremism interacts with polarization and a feeling of belonging to an echo chamber. Warner (2010) tested the hypothesis that consuming ideologically homogeneous content would cause users' political ideologies to further polarize from one another, heightening the chance of extremism, as each respective camp received ideologically reinforcing and gratifying information. The findings of the article, summed up briefly, state that the hypothesis was supported in relation to moderate and conservative media, but not in relation to consumption of liberal media content. Conservative-leaning individuals were found to have a high increase in attitude militancy, while centrists were found to have a similar attitude, moderating their own views when exposed to centrist content. However, liberal-leaning individuals' militancy did not increase following exposure to liberal content. This finding indicates that right-wing ideologies are particularly prone to self-reinforcement, increasing the potential usefulness of further studying how in-group cohesion is maintained. This article was couched in the fragmentation thesis - a belief that increasing media diversity due to social media would create a congruent diversity of opinion in the general public, and hence in political deliberation, but also increase polarization between various groups (Warner, 2010). Lee et al. (2018) used a phone survey, combined with quantitative hierarchical regression analyses, found that social media reinforced existing viewpoints, rather than formulating new ones. They also found that social media consumption has little relation with variations in ideological stance, further confirming the aforementioned lines of thought originating from selective exposure theory. This increases the theoretical saliency for studying echo chambers and extreme spaces in order to better ascertain how these self-reinforcing mechanisms operate.

van Prooijen and Krouwel (2019) investigated the psychological profile of individuals holding extreme political views and found that there are a number of common themes that appear in most individuals who hold such views. The first factor found to be in common between political extremists was a state of psychological distress, which could be ameliorated through seeking a sense of purpose and belonging through orientation around an extremist ideology, a finding confirmed by Gaudette et al. (2020). Supporting a cause that one believes is meaningful and true is a consistent way to feel important and respected, and counteract

psychological distress (Kruglanski et al., 2006). The second psychological trait was cognitive simplicity, exhibiting signs of oversimplification of complex topics, which was also found by Fernbach et al. (2013). The third hallmark of extremism is overconfidence in one's own position, and an inability to self-reflect critically. This was also found by Kruglanski et al. (2006) and is linked to an epistemic need to make the world a simple place to comprehend and deal with, a particularly salient finding in post-truth times of epistemic crisis. This suggests that extremists are driven to their ideology out of a sense of desperation or to seek a form of mental shelter. Hall and Raimi (2018) concur on this, and mention that this form of belief superiority predicts a trend for extremists to accept congruent information but reject information that does not fit their beliefs. This raises the saliency of susceptibility to conspiratorial messaging further and warrants investigation of the sub-question. Finally, the last psychological characteristic is intolerance, which is itself generally seen across all extremist groups, as they regularly denigrate outsiders and exhibit hostility towards them. These four characteristics are in-line with the aforementioned findings and lay out a number of possibilities to interpret how patriots.win users communicate.

2.5 – Political Tribalism

Political tribalism can be classified as attacks made against an opposed political viewpoint or ideology made in a closed environment where representatives or adherents to said political viewpoint cannot reasonably respond to these accusations. It also includes implicit Otherization and exclusion of outsiders, and a specific in-group culture unique to the political tribe (North et al., 2020; Robards, 2018; Whitt et al., 2020).

Shapiro and Fogel (2019) created a framework from which political tribalism can be identified. It was intended to measure both positive tribalism and negative tribalism, or a variable they dubbed “social resilience”. It is controlled by four main categories. The first category is Cult of Personality, which refers to the level of loyalty exhibited towards a leader by members of a given political tribe. Specifically, it refers to how the leader decides to use power, and whether they would rather engage it with an eye towards personal gain, or in order to uphold the rule of law. It is also regulated by whether the leader operates within the constraints placed upon them by the democratic system, or whether they disregard the rule of law. It was also measured by how willing the leader's allies would be to fall in lockstep with their narratives and commands, even if they countermand the democratic norms present in that society. The second category is politics and policies. In short, this refers to what sort of

policies are pushed by the leader – are they unifying, or divisive? Discordant, or harmonious? Do they embrace civil discourse, or do they encourage demonization and tribal conflict between their supporters and opponents? Thus, if a political leader disregarded the rule of law and attacked their opponents frequently, their supporters would be exhibiting heavy signs of tribalism. The third category is national identity, and it refers to the notion in which tribal members view themselves in terms of national identity, and whether they prioritize national identity over political tribe. Furthermore, does the leader act in order to foster such an identity, or to split it up? Last, but not least, the fourth category refers to political institutions, and, in brief, it refers to how autonomous systems react when torn between a leaders' demand, and between their own autonomy. Thus, if the leader were to make a demand, and otherwise autonomous institutions would happily follow, that would also be marked as a signifier of tribalism.

Clark et al. (2019) take an essentialist approach to tribalism, and, conducting a literature review, declare it to be a natural human trait, simply one that is highly visible in modern political speech, and not dependent on political leaning. This finding clashes with other studies that found right-wing authoritarians to be particularly susceptible to political tribalism and violent extremism (Faris et al., 2017; Schulze, 2020; Suiter & Fletcher, 2020; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019; Warner, 2010). Overall, the weight of evidence suggests that right-leaning authoritarian and populist sympathizers are more likely than other groups to be politically tribalistic. In any case, due to Robards (2018) and Mills (2018), who investigated /r/the_donald, or Grover and Mark (2019), who investigated violent extremism on /r/altright and their subculture, one could reasonably expect that patriots.win, a community deeply tied to both of these subreddits (Chandrasekharan et al., 2020; Halaschak, 2019), to exhibit some of the same signs. Tribalism is mostly centered around loyalty to the group to which one belongs, without critically questioning its stance, and hostility towards perceived opponents. This is a decidedly anti-Habermasian framing of politics or interpersonal political communication, so it is likely that if tribalism is heavily exhibited on patriots.win, that everyday political talk will be more prominent than deliberation.

2.6 – Conspiracy Theories

As outlined by Barkun (2017), Trump's political following and enabling of conspiracies has dangerous result of, as Barkun calls it, the mainstreaming of the fringe. In short, this refers to the process by which previously taboo topics, conspiracies, and ideas, are

whitewashed and given legitimacy because of their adoption by a mainstream political figure. Donald Trump is a particularly notable figure in this sense, and his politicization of conspiracy figures is unlike anything ever seen before. Atkinson et al. (2018) explained how there are a number of main predictors for receptiveness to conspiracy theories, as well as strategies to find other like-minded individuals. They describe the process of so-called costly signalling, wherein individuals will covertly signal a plausibly deniable fact that will seem rather innocent except to other individuals who are in the know. In the case of Trump supporters, who are cited as being the most likely political group to believe conspiracy theories (source), this could be something as simple as dropping an otherwise inconspicuous name of a politician allegedly involved in a conspiracy theory and waiting for others to signal back.

Furthermore, according to Atkinson et al. (2018), political opposition is one of the most salient predictors of politically charged conspiracy theories. To illustrate this fact, they provide figures that state that Democrats are much more likely to believe in the “Truther” conspiracy, which believes that George Bush conducted the 9/11 attacks, while Republicans are much more likely to believe in the “Birther” conspiracy, which Trump helped pioneer, which posits that Barack Obama was not born in the United States, but in Kenya. This gives us a number of takeaways – consistent with earlier expectations, this means that conspiratorial thinking and conspiracy theories can be expected to crop up during analysis of political discussions on patriots.win. The question remains simply of what nature these are. Still, the implications for conspiratorial thinking reinforcing extremist tendencies within psychologically vulnerable or otherwise gullible individuals is very salient. This notion of covert signaling is also particularly relevant to Donald Trump, who is an exemplar of using double-speak and heavily coded language to maintain plausible deniability at all times. Hodges (2020) analyzed his speech in several cases – pressuring FBI Director James Comey, Trump’s infamous comments about “very fine people, on both sides” following the unrest in Charlottesville in 2017, his comments about Russia not being responsible for interfering in the elections at the Helsinki summit, etc. Hodges (2020) concluded that Trump uses a particular style of speech that lets his supporters pick up on the same type of coded language, while maintaining relative plausible deniability. The implications of this are mostly rooted in what meanings supporters can give certain unclear messages, and whether these can be used to spur further extremism, whip up more conspiracy theories, raise tribalism and polarization, or further entrench followers into their mindset.

Van Prooijen et al. (2015) also investigated links between political extremism and susceptibility to conspiratorial beliefs. They carried out three separate surveys and tested respondents for links between political extremism and conspiratorial beliefs. Explaining that this is often a side-effect of a necessity for political extremists to make sense of the world – a finding confirmed by van Prooijen and Krouwel (2019), as well as Fernbach et al. (2013) – they found that political extremists have a quadratic (i.e. U-shaped) preference for susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs according to extremist score, meaning that both extremists on the right and the left are equally liable to fall for conspiratorial thinking. This finding also has implications on the potential findings, and strongly hints at the possibility of conspiratorial thinking helping to color the type of everyday political speech carried out on patriots.win.

2.7 – *Theoretical Summary*

To recap, everyday political talk and political deliberation are two distinct concepts, the first marked by informality and lack of regulations, while the second refers to a more traditional, rational-critical based process of Enlightenment-style deliberation. Modern deliberative democracy has been interminably shaped by the new technological affordances introduced since the 1990s, and citizens' informational practices and habits have likewise been strongly affected. This has led to a number of pertinent trends in various democracies, chief among them the United States, where researchers have noticed a rise in political polarization, extremism, tribalism, partisan conspiratorial thinking, and an increasing post-truth environment, susceptible to an epistemic crisis of massive proportions. The majority of research has leaned more towards pessimistic interpretations of these trends, with much empirical evidence backing that view. However, the specifics of how political discourse appears and what elements are most prominent or relevant remains an understudied area of research, leaving a gap that this research seeks to plug. The following section will expound upon the specific methodology used to glean qualitative knowledge about the selected corpus of texts.

Ch. 3 – Methodology

3.1 – Research Design

Qualitative content analysis is a specific technique that refers to the analysis of given audio, visual, textual, or ethnographic data by researchers in order to discern both the manifest and latent content present in certain data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Manifest content refers to the denotative content inscribed in the data directly, while latent content refers to connotative data that requires contextual or cultural knowledge to be recognized by a researcher (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2000). Content analysis was primarily used as a quantitative method at first, focusing on analyzing the frequency and prevalence of certain concepts in data, more concerned with quantitative approaches drawn from journalistic roots rather than complex socially scientific approaches (Krippendorff, 2004, p. xiii-xiv). Over the course of the latter 20th century, it began to be used more and more by qualitative researchers who were interested in the deeply buried phenomenological complexities that could be unearthed through rigorously contextualized manual qualitative examination, built primarily on interpretative approaches (Mayring, 2000). Qualitative methods also grew more popular with researchers who rejected the positivist hegemony that dominated the social sciences in the mid-20th century (Charmaz, 2006, p. 4-5).

Qualitative methods are particularly suited to answering the given research question as they allow for deep and rich reading of textual data, due to the necessity of the researcher to truly immerse themselves in the data and learn all sorts of contextual information to further supplement their understanding and interpretation of the data at hand (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). It is therefore uniquely positioned to tackle complex and rich texts while taking into consideration the cultural and contextual specificities that undergird the composition of such data (Schreier, 2012, p. 52-54). Thus, it is suited to studying specific sub-cultures like the one present on patriots.win, and its predecessor, /r/the_donald (Robards, 2018) since it allows researchers to fully immerse themselves in the popular currents present in such spaces. These spaces have particularly contextually specific sub-cultures replete with unique elements, that could not be sufficiently analyzed through quantitative methods without risking serious misinterpretation of data or missing out on culturally and contextually grounded data (Riffe et al., 2005, p. 174-176). For example, consider some of the comments drawn from the corpus of patriots.win, and their use of highly idiosyncratic language:

“Proving cucks wrong on /r/AskPolitics with info from t_d, I only hang around because I run

it (come drop red pills to your heart's delight)", "BOOOOMMMMM! MOAB THIS MO FO", "Stacy Abrams if true", "GEOTUS: Haha club and ball go woosh.", "I found our old DOMreddit the last week of 2015. I had no idea what a lot of the more cryptic references meant, or the little frogs. I learned. God Almighty, did I learn!"".

While it is certainly true that a quantitative approach could cover a larger textual corpus, this approach was deemed to be inappropriate since the research question specifically focuses on the idiosyncrasies of Trump supporters' everyday political talk and their general habits of political communication, which would be better gleaned through rigorous and exhaustive coding of a smaller corpus of data through qualitative content analysis.

Briefly, content analysis can be either deductive or inductive. Deductive content analysis is based on existing a posteriori research, and often uses an existing codebook developed in previous studies studying the given phenomena. While this assures external validity of the analysis, and allows for corroboration with existing studies, it is unsuited to more exploratory forms of research that broach previously understudied fields or concepts (Mayring, 2000). Inductive content analysis, also described by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) as conventional content analysis, requires the researchers to come up with codes and themes that come directly from the data as it is being analyzed. It does not use a predefined codebook, and it therefore relies on themes to organically rise out of the data during analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2000). Inductive approaches to content analysis are therefore more suited to exploratory or novel studies that do not have too much existing previous research to base their assumptions on, a category that this thesis falls into.

3.2 – Sampling & Data Collection

The main unit of analysis is the patriots.win community, and the comments act as units of observation. These were chosen due to their pertinence in being exemplars of political discourse on patriots.win, and thus their relevance to the research question. While examining posts would also be useful in determining how political talk is carried out, a cursory glance at the content present on patriots.win reveals that many posts are direct links to tweets, some are images of said tweets, as well as various memes, gifs, videos, edited photos, and a plethora of other content. While much of this content would fit the moniker of political deliberation or everyday political talk, much of it also would not. Thus, in order to facilitate a more streamlined analysis, all analyzed data is textual in nature, drawn from comments. Since comments are still relevant to the threads at hand, and patriots.win is an

inherently politicized forum, these comments can be reasonably considered to be exemplars of users' political deliberation and informal, horizontal, actor-to-actor everyday political speech. As the comments will be drawn from multiple users, they should provide a more holistic representation of political discourse that takes place on patriots.win. In addition, since inductive qualitative content analysis requires deep immersion in the studied community (Mayring, 2000), the researcher has spent considerable time anonymously lurking on the website to holistically be able to identify and examine contextually sensitive and specific information, as well as parse in-group language and other culture-specific terms, such as the example comments given earlier.

The sample numbers 1,000 comments, the maximum allowed in accordance with the ESHCC methodological guidelines (Janssen & Verboord, 2019). Since patriots.win is a carbon copy of Reddit's user interface, it retains the voting system that characterizes it, and, reasonably, one can assume that the most upvoted posts are the ones most representative of users' beliefs, and the ones most representative of the beliefs not only of those writing the comments, but also of those reading and upvoting them. However, filtering capabilities are limited on patriots.win, and no API is publicly available to be scraped, so 200 posts were chosen through manual sampling. The posts were selected, in descending order, based on the amount of upvotes they received from the users. Afterwards, deleted comments were discarded, and 5 comments were drawn from each post, also based on descending vote ranking. Their content was copied to a Microsoft Word document and imported into Atlas.ti 9 for qualitative data analysis.

This sample was collected from among the comment sections of the most upvoted posts posted between October 1st, 2020, and January 31st, 2021. This time frame has been selected since it includes the time right before, during, and after the 2020 U.S. election, which took place on November 3rd. Since the sampling was primarily based on the vote count, the results are skewed towards the months in which users were most active. The final figures stand at:

Table 1*Frequency Table of Sampled Comments by Month*

Month of Posting	Frequency of Sampled Comments
October	10/1000 (1%)
November	255/1000 (25.5%)
December	470/1000 (47%)
January	265/1000 (26.5%)

As mentioned before, the 2020 election was specific in its conduct, marked by repeated assertions of voter fraud by President Trump, and warrants investigation. While periods following the end of elections are not usually rife with political talk that could be analyzed, the idiosyncratic nature of Donald Trump's assertions about election theft has resulted in widespread belief within Republican voters that the election was stolen from Trump (Edwards-Levy, 2021; Kahn, 2020). This belief can be expected to be echoed in political deliberation on patriots.win, and its exact nature should be properly analyzed and parsed. Thus, the time chosen for analysis, being October to January, allows for rich analysis of the period during, and immediately after, the 2020 election. It also includes January, a rather politically pivotal month, during which the U.S. Capitol was assaulted, and Joe Biden was inaugurated two weeks later.

3.3 – Sensitizing Concepts

Since this study is conducted using inductive thematic analysis, no exhaustive antecedent operationalizations of concepts can be presented, since initial codes, sub-themes, and themes will rise out of the data organically (Mayring, 2000). However, a dissection of the concepts relevant to the research question, as well as previous studies of pro-Trump echo-chambers and other extremist spaces on the Internet can provide at least a broad picture of the potential results. The main research question differentiates between political deliberation and everyday political talk, whose particularities have been discussed more extensively in the theoretical framework. To briefly recap, this thesis understands political deliberation to be a formalized, respectful, consensus-seeking debate of rational minds, while everyday political deliberation refers to the informal, citizen, horizontal, person-to-person political communication prevalent online (Graham, 2009). The coding of speech as either one or the

other will be mainly delineated by the adherence to formalized discussion structure (i.e. statement, rebuttal, counter-statement, and so on) and adherence to respect of either directly engaged opponents, or other opposing political groups. Per the findings of Robards (2018) and Mills (2018), it is possible to predict that the vast majority of political communication on patriots.win will fall into the latter category rather than the former, as the precursor to patriots.win was a hotbed of ideological extremism, ideological homophily, and crude language. It is also reasonable to believe that capital-O Othering will be extensively used, although the exact groups it targets will emerge from the analysis. The other sub-questions focus primarily on misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories, which are difficult to distinguish externally. The first of which can be operationalized as information that is misleading but not deliberately falsified, while the latter can be operationalized as deliberately falsified information. However, unless disinformation is demonstrably false, it may be coded as misinformation in order to err on the side of caution. Finally, conspiracy theories can be operationalized as relatively fully-fledged descriptions of events with a given motive and outcome, but without necessarily requiring empirical evidence of any sort. This prerequisite is not required for disinformation.

Consider the following comments: “*Special Forces Raid CIA Run Server Facility in Germany ~ Seize US Election Servers. IT'S TRUE!*” <https://c-vine.com/blog/2020/11/29/special-forces-raid-cia-run-server-facility-in-germany-seize-us-election-servers/>”, “*China owns the Biden family outright [...] It's clear now that a vote for Biden is no less than a vote to deliver every man, woman and child in America into Chinese slavery.*” The former comment includes a link to an article discussing a purported U.S. Special Forces raid alleging the seizing and manipulation of voting data. This is rather blatant misinformation and was confirmed not to have happened (Joffe-Block, 2020). However, the latter comment alleges a conspiracy theory in which the Chinese Communist Party is secretly controlling Joe Biden and his family and elaborates on that by alleging a larger plot of Chinese control of the United States. The first comment was coded as misinformation, while the second was coded as a conspiracy theory.

3.4 – Data Analysis

Data analysis will be conducted through rigorous thematic analysis of the sampled textual content. Thematic analysis is one of the more popular and widespread forms of data analysis present in qualitative research and is based on having a flexible approach towards the

data, wherein codes are identified, and act as building blocks to compose themes, which are then reported and discussed (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2017). Thematic analysis was popularized by Braun and Clarke (2006) in their seminal paper dealing with its use in psychological research, but it has since risen to prominence in many fields, including media and communications research. It is understood to be a method for identifying and analyzing themes present in data, describing phenomena in rich detail, through repeated observation. Briefly, thematic analysis - specifically, inductive thematic analysis - uses a six-step process for analysis. These are, in order: familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The chosen method will take the form of a slight deviation in nature from conventional thematic analysis, drawing on principles of grounded theory in order to make sure that, while being interpretative, the results will remain data-driven and therefore reliably and viably representative of the content found in the sample (Charmaz, 2005; Cho & Lee, 2014). Grounded theory is a method pioneered by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and elaborated upon by Charmaz (2006). Primarily used for ethnographic studies, grounded theory helped bring qualitative methods into the mainstream, dispelling the contemporary notion that qualitative approaches were exclusively useful for precursor phases of a quantitative study (Charmaz, 2006, p. 6). Charmaz (2006) states that her view of grounded theory is one of “a set of principles and practices, not as prescriptions or packages” (p. 9), and this thesis follows that view as it draws on certain analytical tactics used in grounded theory to inform and strengthen its own research design, but not to define it. Rather, this approach is lifted from grounded theory and mixed with thematic analysis in order to limit researcher bias, which remains the pernicious bane of qualitative researchers the world over (Tracy, 2010). However, in order to increase the potential information gleaned from the data, this thesis will eschew thematic analysis’ six-step process in favor of one derived from grounded theory, using a deeper, three-step process, with three distinct rounds of coding, known as open, focused, and axial coding (Charmaz, 2006, p. 50-63). However, the end goal is still primarily to capture emergent themes, albeit with a different methodology than the one suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006).

While thematic analysis has more steps overall, it includes only one or two rounds of coding, and so any errors made in these rounds of coding may risk compromising the final results. Steps two to four as described in Braun and Clarke (2006) are broadly reflexive, and

not as methodically analytical as the three distinct rounds of coding used in grounded theory. Thus, drawing on grounded theory and its distinct methodology of three separate rounds raises the trustworthiness and neutrality of this study, particularly since it lacks inter-coder reliability safeguards. Additionally, going through three rounds of coding in order to create salient themes instead of two should allow the emergent themes to be more conceptually salient, as well as more deeply tied to the data, since they are built up over multiple rounds rather than determined early on, hopefully avoiding path dependency in terms of results. Mixing elements of different methodologies should not be problematic since grounded theory and inductive thematic analysis are also not dissimilar from one another. Braun and Clarke (2006) point out that their outlining of inductive thematic analysis “bears some similarity” (p. 83) to grounded theory. This method, despite being more time-intensive than traditional thematic analysis, safeguards the verifiability and reliability of the results, and made sure that the emergent open, focused, and axial codes were directly linked to individual lines in the data. The benefit of taking such an approach is that it keeps the results close to the data and relies on reflexive coding to do so. This allows one to see emerging themes as they arise out of the data in either the first or second stages of coding, allowing for more nuanced analysis. Each of the three stages is distinctly visible in the coding networks and tables, presented in the appendices.

The three aforementioned rounds of coding present in grounded theory are known as open, focused, and axial coding. Open coding requires the researcher to exhaustively code every single line of data, line-by-line, creating a basis of initial codes from which the origins of the later themes can emerge (Charmaz, 2006, p. 50-51). This step makes sure that every piece of possible data is coded first, on its own, creating a solid foundation for the next two steps. Reflexive note-taking is an important part of this process, as researchers’ own biases cannot be allowed to impact the analytical process (Charmaz, 2006, p. 51). The second step of the process is known as focused coding. Focused coding refers to a process wherein the foundation of initial codes is re-examined, re-evaluated and conceptually synthesized in order to explain larger building blocks of data, working, for example, on coding entire sentences rather than just single lines. These can then be later act as sub-categories that help inform the researcher on what the main salient categories discovered during analysis are. This stage of data analysis is marked by active involvement in the process rather than rote coding, requiring the researcher to constantly re-consider their preconceptions about the topic and

retain the neutrality and trustworthiness expected of a rigorously conducted analytical process (Charmaz, 2006, p. 59; Morse et al., 2002).

The last step of grounded theory-derived coding is the axial coding phase. It refers to, as Charmaz (2006) says, “[relating] subcategories to categories” (p. 60). It is seen as the phase in which the data can be conceptually reassembled into an analytical unit after being fragmented in the open and focused coding phases. While the open coding phase requires the data to be exhaustively and independently coded, and the focused coding phase requires researchers to apply reflexive re-evaluations to the data, and build it back up into cohesive sub-categories, axial coding means that researchers are able to relate the sub-categories to one another create theoretically stable categories that can be concisely and cohesively reported to a researcher’s audience (p. 61-63). Thus, axial coding is perhaps the most important stage of coding, as it is where the main themes and categories of the analytical process are formulated out of the evaluated sub-categories, which themselves are built up from exhaustive open coding.

Recursively re-examining the data in three stages while composing conceptually relevant sub-themes through focused coding, and finally parsing the data a third time to compose conceptually rich and varied themes provided a robust base for analysis. In total, the first round of analysis revealed some 212 distinct open codes. Codes that appeared <5 times in the sample were discarded, and those appearing >5 times were folded into focused codes, or, if prominent enough, were turned into focused codes by themselves. In total, this amounted to 82 salient open codes, out of which 16 different focused codes were created, although it should be noted that these were coded as Smart Codes in Atlas.ti 9, meaning that they do not show up in the visual viewer, but were instead created through the Quotation Manager. The first two rounds of coding were thus conducted on the same document, in order to easily parse existing quotes and create salient focused codes out of them. Finally, the focused codes were then re-coded into 4 main themes, and the corpus of texts was re-coded in a separate document in order to create distinct groupings of comments as belonging to one or more of the four evident themes. This approach compounds with the other strengths of inductive thematic analysis, which is flexible in nature, meaning that this modification did not clash with the ultimate goal of attaining deep, rich, neutrally interpreted data for reporting. A full table of all codes is included in the Appendices, as well as network visualizations.

3.5 – Reliability, Validity, Trustworthiness, and Ethical Considerations

A number of critics of qualitative methods, succinctly summed up as “anything goes” critics, argue that qualitative methods lack methodological rigor, a point of view strengthened by the inherent subjectivity of the constructivist and postmodern schools of thought, which emphasize the view that the social world is itself constructed cognitively, and that capital-R ‘Reality’ is a false notion (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 8). This thesis strikes a middle ground between the hardcore normative positivist notions of objective scientific rigor, and the more fluid postmodern/constructivist approaches of disregarding rigor entirely. That is to say, while a number of criteria for reliability and validity of scientific research should be striven to be met, there is no single normative framework for how such criteria should be handled. Such a view has been posited by Bochner (2000), who argues that qualitative inquiry, and its “multiplicity of goals implies multiplicity in standards of evaluation” (p. 268).

A number of criteria can be used to design the analytical process and preempt typical criticisms of qualitative research. This thesis draws on Tracy (2010), who outlines eight broad ‘big-tent’ hallmarks of methodologically rigorous qualitative research. These are, in order: a worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence. The first is met when a topic is timely, relevant, and interesting, which the given topic is, since it deals with contemporary political deliberation in the United States immediately after a momentous election. Rich rigor is guaranteed by the large sample size ($N = 1,000$) and three dedicated coding phases. Sincerity is met by a dedicated reflexive limitations section in the conclusion. Credibility is guaranteed by, again, the use of three separate coding stages, thick description, and the use of copious illustrative examples to give life to the results. Resonance is guaranteed by the relevance of the topic to contemporary politics, and the use of illustrative examples. Significant contribution is met by the results being significant in that they target a previously understudied group. Ethics are guaranteed by giving the users anonymity and analyzing their speech without tracking their online presence beyond single threads. Finally, meaningful coherence is guaranteed since, as described in this section, the study’s methods and data analysis fit the given research question and achieves its stated goals. The research design was fundamentally informed by questions concerning validity and reliability of qualitative research, and examples of the coding process will be transparently provided in the Appendix. In addition, despite not being highlighted by Tracy (2010), the use of three separate coding stages is one of the main ways in which deep analysis can be guaranteed without compromising on the validity and reliability of the

findings. This was done in order to reinforce the existing research design, which is already angled towards a relevant, ethical, verifiable, confirmable analytical process, as outlined by Tracy (2010). Since analysis is based entirely on observation and subsequent interpretation, and it is incumbent upon the researcher to start the study by ridding themselves of any possible preconceptions in order to avoid unfairly tainting the data with biases or pre-planned answers to given questions, maintaining a highly reflective positionality vis-a-vis the content (Nowell et al., 2017; Tracy, 2010).

Ethical considerations have also been taken into account, and users' usernames will not be recorded nor matched to their words for the purpose of confidentiality and anonymity. This research seeks to characterize general political everyday talk, and deliberation, on patriots.win, which does not require the application of any stable identity to the users that helped build the corpus of text by writing their comments. Besides that, there are no extant ethical conundrums or considerations that warrant resolving.

Ch. 4 – Results & Discussion

Data analysis revealed four main themes present in the selected sample, emerging from deep qualitative thematic analysis of 1,000 comments. These were, in order of most to least prevalent: In-Group Reinforcement, Out-Group Antagonism, Socio-Political Organization, and, finally, Mis/Disinformation & Conspiracies. These are not mutually exclusive, and the same comments could be coded as, for example, both In-Group Reinforcement and Out-Group Antagonism if they exhibited the requisite characteristics. The following section will outline the most relevant findings, before expanding upon them and discussing the theoretical and social implications thereof.

4.1 – *In-Group Reinforcement*

In-group Reinforcement was the most prominently represented form of political communication on patriots.win. 461 comments were found to exhibit signs of in-group reinforcement, accounting for 46.1% of the entire sample, primarily through agreeing with other commenters, celebrating various things said by Donald Trump, reinforcing each others' viewpoints, or exhibiting support for other members of patriots.win, as well as other pro-Trump individuals. These varied from the lawyers fighting to overturn the 2020 election, such as Sidney Powell, or other pro-Trump personalities, such as James O'Keefe, Rudy Giuliani, Lin Wood, Mike Lindell, Kyle Rittenhouse, and others. Many comments also directly praised Trump, expressing support for him or his viewpoints. It also included reinforcement of specific in-group language, replete with terms such as "*GEOTUS*", standing for God Emperor of the United States, a reference to Warhammer 40,000, a miniature wargame, "*pedes*" or "*nimble navigators*", the local name for fellow patriot.win (and, previously /r/The_Donald) users, terms like "*HIGH ENERGY*", and other terms specific to the pro-Trump internet (Rose, 2016; Roy, 2016; Sonnad & Squirrell, 2017). Table 2 lays out the most prominent codes grouped together under the In-Group Reinforcement category. Network visualization is also featured in the appendices.

Table 2*Dummy Table of Themes and Sub-Themes (In-Group Reinforcement)*

Theme	Sub-Themes
In-Group Reinforcement	Support of Fellow Users Support of Trump/Loyalists Celebratory Speech Confident Reassurances In-Group Meme Language

Notable examples include:

Table 3*Example Comments of In-Group Reinforcement*

Comment Number	Example Comments
1	WE WON BY A LOT AND THEY KNOW IT!
2	Holy shit. We're the news now, and THE LAST STAND AGAINST FASCISM! This is why we're rising so fast, and closing in on being the #1 site in America! Reddit never saw it coming!
3	I'll say it again Trump is the greatest president of our lifetime and possibly the greatest president ever.
4	Here here! And also glad we have unanimous support for Kyle Rittenhouse
5	This website is such a Godsend. Now, I want to see the lawsuits [challenging the election].
6	I can't believe the energy he [Trump] has to keep fighting despite all of the opposition. He just keeps going. This guy is amazing.
7	Donald Trump is the first of the second set of founding fathers. Literally saving the union from a decades in the making communist take over. If you told me this 5 years I would've called you crazy. If you don't believe this now I think you're crazy.
8	We are definitely going to win.
9	THATS MY PRESIDENT

Some other comments that exhibited signs of reinforcement were simply repeating pro-Trump slogans or popular catchphrases, such as: “*MAGA!!*” and “*As long as GEOTUS fights, I’m in it. And even after that too. MAGA forever!!!!*”. Overall, support for in-group members was unanimous, and unchallenged. The merits of these individuals, or their allegations, were never discussed since they themselves were proving to be supportive of Trump and his efforts to contest the election. The prominence of this category contains theoretical and social implications which will be expanded upon.

In-Group reinforcement was found to be the most prominent category and accounted for about half of the overall comments that were analyzed. This finding, especially considering the strong usage of culture-specific language, leaves us with several takeaways. Constant reinforcement of the common position creates a decidedly anti-Habermasian atmosphere, where contending viewpoints are not even introduced, nor are they debated except to create antagonistic framings of the issues at hand. Views contrary to the ideological hegemony present in the space are not considered, or entertained seriously, although they are attacked and satirically presented as rhetorical strawmen. Thus, political deliberation, through the lens of the public sphere, is not facilitated by constant support of in-group elements, since a repeatedly praised in-group implies exclusion of outsiders’ political positions (North et al., 2020; Shapiro & Fogel, 2019).

Commenters on patriots.win support and constantly agree with each others’ points, expressing how the in-group not only helps to contribute to their political understanding and opinions, but to their general well-being as well. One commenter, writing in excited capital letters, stated this rather clearly when they wrote: “*TRUMP IS THE BEST PRESIDENT EVER AND THEDONALD.WIN THE BEST COMMUNITY EVER. I CAN’T IMAGINE HAVING FUN WITHOUT MY PEDES ON THEDONALD.WIN.*” The centrality of the virtual community to this commenter’s well-being and general state of mind is clearly apparent, as well as their support of President Trump. These findings are consistent with van Prooijen and Krouwel (2019), who outline psychological distress, and the accompanying desperation for belonging, as a hallmark of extremist political ideologies. Feeling listless and lost, members seek to find likeminded peers with whom to interact, and a group to which they can belong. This notion was also found in other comments: “*Yes been here since reddit. Life changing stuff. Love you all!*”, “*Can I just say how much I love the Donald.win and all my pedes.*

Thanks for your contributions to combat evil.”. Trump, and fellow supporters, are praised, trusted, believed, and celebrated, their actions are supported without question, and with full loyalty. The in-group is therefore reinforced not only for purposes of political talk, but also in order to reinforce members’ sense of belonging and help create a shared sense of identity.

Anyone who supports either Trump or his narrative of electoral fraud is similarly praised and lauded. Drawing on the framework laid out by Shapiro and Fogel (2019), this finding strongly confirms the presence of political tribalism on patriots.win, especially their first category, the Cult of Personality. President Trump’s tweets, and those of his followers, are believed without question, without doubt, and directly oppose the democratic processes of normal elections. Indeed, the constant questioning of the election’s results – more prominently explored under the theme of Mis/Disinformation & Conspiracies – is a dangerous development for political deliberation since it directly threatens the functioning of the democratic process. This fits Shapiro and Fogel (2019)’s typology to a worrying end since the whims of the political leader are prioritized over the necessary functioning of democratic institutions, and Trump’s supporters are willing to disregard the concept of democracy entirely. One user wrote “*States that Trump won need to send THOUSANDS of electors to Washington. Declare that Trump won 240,000% of the state's vote. PACK THE ELECTORATE!*”. Another one claimed that “*We need to force those votes into Michigan*”, believing Trump’s claims of missing ballots. Additionally, the third category of Shapiro and Fogel (2019)’s framework for political tribalism, National Identity, is exhibited in much of the everyday political talk present on patriots.win. As the name suggests, members of this in-group view themselves as patriots, as true Americans, as opposed to their opponents, who are framed as un-patriotic, un-American enemies. Grouped under the code of Celebratory Speech, many users reassured each others’ conduct and sense of belonging to the proverbial group of true Americans by using terms like “*PATRIOT!!!!!!!!*”, “*Godspeed friend and patriot.*”, “*A true patriot and Chad*”, and “*PATRIOT = ALL ACTION. NO TALK.*”. By constantly reinforcing their primacy as true patriots and ideological warriors, patriots.win users help co-create a cohesive group identity as one not only based on political opinions, but on the infinitely more emotional appeals of right and wrong, of moral struggle of their in-group being morally correct and nationally patriotic in its actions, fighting against nothing else than pure evil. This compounds with the aforementioned process of finding a group to belong to, as users co-reinforce each other as being not only morally justified in their actions, but morally superior to outsiders simply by mere virtue of belonging to the in-group.

This same process was outlined by Cohen et al. (2014) as identification and is typically found in extremist circles and as hallmarks of violent political groups, wherein in-group members constantly reinforce each other as being heroes, warriors, patriots, and ideologically/morally justified foot-soldiers of their given ideologies. This is liable to create strong in-group cohesion (Cohen et al., 2014; Grover & Mark, 2019; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019), inspiring fanatical loyalty, as exhibited by one user who recounted a family interaction on Thanksgiving: *“my pops is a doomer, he said this election probably won’t end well for us. I made the most intense eye contact and responded with “too bad, it’s Trump or die, and I’m not fucking playing around”. He changed his tone after that.”*. Thus, patriots.win users’ everyday political talk is full of reinforcing terms and ideas, trusting in the narratives presented by Trump and his operatives without question or doubt, helping users self-identify with an insulated in-group of fellow like-minded individuals, united not only by political opinion but by a shared sense of belonging and identity as Trump supporters. This is reinforced by moral arguments and beliefs in their own superiority as true patriots and ideological warriors, further compounding the sense of belonging and helping to create devoted followers of their ideology, ready to do the utmost for their fellow ‘pedes’ and for President Trump. This extreme sense of loyalty was also apparent in the sample, as commenters exhibited high militancy and a readiness to lay down their lives for their common cause. For example, one user wrote: *“I’m ready for war. I know what it means and I know it will most likely result in my death. But there are some causes, some purposes, that you just know in your heart that are worth your life”*. Others showed the same sentiment through a much more laconic call to action: *“Do or die at this point”*.

This is rather catastrophic for any possibility of political deliberation and gives credence to worries surrounding the possibility of echo chambers harming democratic debate (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2001, 2007). Simply put, dissenting viewpoints are not upvoted, tolerated, discussed, or in any way engaged with, and this tribalistic process has two sides. An in-group must first be lauded, identified with, and supported, and an out-group must then be scorned, opposed, and made out to be an enemy (North et al., 2020; Robards, 2018). The creation of such explicit divisions also supports the notion that patriots.win is an openly extremist space, as in-group members’ rhetoric sees themselves as rightful and justified in their stance against the imagined enemy, a prototypical example of extremist speech (Cohen et al., 2014; Grover & Mark, 2019). Not only is it a strongly tribalized extremist environment, it is also one marked by certainty in its’ own rightfulness, and in the inevitability of victory.

4.2 – Out-Group Antagonism

The second most prominent category, Out-Group Antagonism, appears in 336 comments, representing 33.6% of the overall sample. It is characterized primarily by hostility to outsiders, Democrats, Leftism in general (often stylized as attacks on “commies”), the Media (“MSM”, standing for main-stream media), distrust of the media, hostility towards Twitter and Facebook (“Big Tech”), hostility to anti-COVID measures like social distancing and mask wearing, and even towards anti-Trump Republicans (“RINOs”, Republicans-In-Name-Only), and a litany of various calls for violence, manifesting itself through calls for public executions, hangings, firing squads, and various other forms of capital punishment. Table 4 lays out the primary sub-themes found in Out-Group Antagonism.

Table 4

Dummy Table of Themes and Sub-Themes (Out-Group Antagonism)

Theme	Sub-Themes
Out-Group Antagonism	Call to Arms/Action (Violent)
	Hostility to Out-Groups
	Advocacy of Violence
	Accusations of Treason
	Accusations of Criminality

The main out-groups that are antagonized are Democrats and Leftists in general, with the following comments being typical exemplars of such speech:

Table 5*Example Comments of Out-Group Antagonism*

Comment Number	Example Comments
1	Yeah everyone knows democrats are terrorists. They always have been. Party of KKK and slavery. Nothing has ever changed. I'm glad they are so open about it and they are at least an identifiable enemy. Unlike our rinos.
2	These treasonous commies have bitched about fascism on the right for years now. Except all they know how to do is intimidate with doxxing, violence, and threats...kind of like fascism.
3	When Democrats hear "America First!" they interpret it as "Whites Only!" That's because Dems are the real racists.
4	What in the actual fuck? We have honestly failed as a society. Communism is evil and yet over half of our country is fine with cozying up to it.
5	I am repulsed by the Rinos suggesting that it's "honorable" and "for the good of the country" to concede a stolen election. It's just outrageous.
6	That man [Pence] should be hanging on the capital mall in 30 minutes. This is fucking treason.
7	Changed to No Party Affiliation this morning!! FUCK THE GOP TRAITORS. Don't act like voting them out is an option.
8	Whitmer [Democrat Governor of Michigan] is a WITCH and she should be burn on a fucking stake.!!
9	RIGGERS GET THE ROPE
10	All traitors must HANG. There is no other way
11	[...]grow a spine and act like an adult with patience, you can start braining commies on jan 20th
12	Quick trials and public executions please
13	Firing squad for all of them.
14	Fast trial, death penalty!

Together with distrust of the media, e.g. “*I’m completely ignoring the MSM now which includes Fox News. We only need one of us to watch them so we know what the enemy is doing*”, the out-groups are clearly identified and repeatedly attacked by patriots.win users. Combined with constant in-group reinforcement, out-group antagonism helps to increase political tribalism and violent extremist tendencies within a social group (Grover & Mark, 2019). The concomitant implications for society are a heightening of political polarization, political extremism and accompanying politically motivated violence, as everyday political speech becoming increasingly antagonistic and full of polarized attacks, rather than Habermasian discussion.

Users of patriots.win openly and frequently call for violence and death for their political opponents, who they have already identified and Otherized to be enemies, traitors, liars, thieves, and other disagreeable labels. This process, dubbed as fixation and leakage (Grover & Mark, 2019), is a hallmark of violent extremist speech and is strongly exhibited on patriots.win. One needs to look no further than the January 6th riots at the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C. for a tangible example of where this process can lead. Out-group antagonism is exhibited not only by calls for violence, but also of characterizations of opponents as morally inferior. Much in the same way that in-group reinforcement helps create group cohesion and give users a place of belonging, a demonization of political opponents help reinforce the moral justifications underpinning users’ loyalty to their political ideology. One user, already quoted before, thanked others “*for your contributions to combat evil.*”. Another one decried the Democrats as the “**PARTY OF SATAN**”. Grubbs et al. (2020) outline moral grandstanding as a catalyst for indoctrination and political extremism, especially in causing more visceral reactions to political outsiders and opponents, as marking them as morally inferior or outrageous helps contribute to continuing antagonism and further polarization. Thus, the religious references to Satan, combating evil, and other repeatedly worsening forms of fixation (Grover & Mark, 2019) help to play a role in worsening political tribalism, furthering polarization, fostering politically extreme and violent responses (Cohen et al., 2014).

Democrats, and Leftists, who are often clumped together, are both decried, regularly demonized, and dehumanized as opponents. For example, one user simply wrote that:

“Commies aren't people”, a rather blatant form of dehumanization. Other users referred to opponents as *“dirty fucking commies”*, *“Demonrats”*, *“treasonous commies”*, or *“communist terrorists”*. Others, still, exhibited their antagonism in different ways, including the use of homophobic slurs. One user wrote: *“Just feel like this is a good time to say this: communists are all fags and deserve the treatment they wish upon others”*.

The FBI, CIA, and other federal agencies also received their fair share of antagonism as well, as parts of the perceived “deep state” conspiracy. President Trump frequently attacked them, calling agents “scum” and “rats” who “destroyed lives of people” (Dilanian, 2021). This antagonism was carried forward by his supporters - one user imaginatively combined homophobic slurs with this antagonism, referring to the FBI as the “ [...] *Faggit Bitch Incompetents*”. Others directed their scorn towards in-group members who did not exhibit enough confidence in their shared goal, and who failed to live up to sufficient enthusiasm, tarnishing them as “doomers”. For example, when discussing a perceived reinforcement of fraud allegations surrounding ballot counts in Georgia, one user wrote: ***“DOOMFAGS ONCE AGAIN ABSOLUTELY BTFO AND COVERED WITH EGG!”***, and another decried *“doomer cucks”*, celebrating the reinforcement of their position and the perceived embarrassment of those users dubbed as “doomers” who do not exhibit sufficient loyalty to the in-group. BTFO, meaning “blown the fuck out” is an alt-right term specifying particular embarrassment and perceived defeat, especially in a political or social argument (O’Neill, 2016).

In the community, membership of the in-group and political tribe is regulated by the necessity to exhibit constant support, and antagonism is heaped not only on groups already identified as enemies – such as the Left, Democrats, anti-Trump Republicans, or the FBI/CIA/other agencies, but also on members of the in-group who deviate from such collective behavior, or who do not believe in the common cause with enough fervor. This form of leakage is theoretically understudied, and such self-regulative mechanisms of how in-groups can turn on their own members when they fail to exhibit sufficient loyalty should be further studied and analyzed.

It is noteworthy how open Trump supporters are with their antagonism, and how openly this is carried forward to advocacy of violence, injury, and death for the opponents. The prevalence of violent exhortations and calls for public executions of disagreeable political opponents raises worrying implications for the future of rising violent extremism,

and falling peaceful deliberative democratic conduct, at least in the United States. Constant leakage will inevitably lead to political violence (Grover & Mark, 2019), especially in situations where relatively ambiguous messages, such as President Trump's tweets, are used as priming mechanisms to whip up further antagonism and tacitly encourage violence (Hodges, 2020). Follow-up focus group sessions with extremist political actors could help researchers understand how ambiguity and tribalistic priming factor into extremist messaging, especially by prominent politicians and national leaders like President Trump.

Another group on the receiving end of antagonistic messaging was the media, including the regularly pro-Trump Fox News. According to Armaly and Enders (2021), perceived victimhood is particularly evident within extremist political groups, but especially so amongst Trump supporters. This thesis strongly confirms those findings, as patriots.win users constantly refer to themselves as being cheated, lied to, manipulated, and gaslit by the media. This is manifested through repeated assertions of distrust of the media. This pattern extended for social media as well, such as Facebook and Twitter, dubbed "Big Tech" in the local lexicon. For example, users antagonized "*Big Media and Big Tech [as] Public Enemy #1*", another explained that "*I'm sworn off Fox, NBC, ABC, CBS, cable entirely, Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu - burn it all down*", a third complained that "*They shut down the discussion, and removed all my posts. [...] [for] destroy[ing] a liberal thread on Nextdoor and redpill[ing] 20+ neighbors*". Other users lamented that "[Fox News] is corrupt", that main-stream media is "*owned by the DNC/China/Globalist Apparatus/Swamp*", and that it's fomenting "*[...] SEDITION. It's trying to create conflict and get people at war with one another*". Again, the narrative of victimhood is clearly evident, as patriots.win users circle their informational wagons and progressively retreat into concentrically insulated circles of information, relying more and more on in-group sources than anything deemed as unreliable or untrustworthy. This same process factors into the third and fourth themes, dealing with belief in conspiracy theories, and informational organization and dissemination of informal sources present as part of everyday political talk on patriots.win.

Additionally, increasing informational exclusivity and a general distrust of all outside sources has dire implications for citizens' opinion formation, as political opinions risk becoming increasingly insulated and subsequently reinforced within an in-group, since sources from outside the echo chamber are deemed illegitimate or untrustworthy (Pariser, 2011; Robards, 2018; Scrivens et al., 2020; Sunstein, 2001, 2007). This was exhibited strongly in the comments present on patriots.win, as users generally rejected anything

deemed to be mainstream media, including Fox News, and attacked outsiders regardless of political party. Political tribalism therefore extended not only to political topics, but also the very patterns of information consumption, leading to a discordant basis from which no common ground can be found with political opponents. In a word, political deliberation cannot be carried out by those stuck in the informational bubble of patriots.win, convinced that their fellow citizens are incorrigible enemies, and traitors, who deserve to be publically executed. The growth of such online spaces should be studied more deeply, including their methods of political organization, persuasion, and their means of spurring action. In that vein, the next category focuses on political organization and information habits as described by various commenters.

4.3 – Socio-Political Organization

The third main category, Socio-Political Organization, was found in 230 comments, accounting for 23% of the entire sample. These included comments divulging information to other users, sharing and spreading primarily informal sources (e.g. YouTube videos, pro-Trump bloggers, single tweets, etc.), users' descriptions and suggestions for what informational sources are legitimate, as well as calls to political action, urging of officials to act, organization of outreach (e.g. by sharing phone numbers and pre-written templates of e-mails) and reflections thereof. The main codes corresponding to this category can be found in Table 6:

Table 6

Dummy Table of Categories and Codes (Socio-Political Organization)

Theme	Sub-Themes
Socio-Political Organization	Call to Action (Nonviolent)
	Political Organization
	Informational Organization

Illustrative examples of Socio-Political Organization include acts of political or informational organization, or of non-violent calls to action:

Table 7

Example Comments of Socio-Political Organization

Comment Number	Example Comments
1	This guy says he has a military source that got recalled back to base because the IA [Insurrection Act] was in fact signed today:
2	I've been putting my weekly lunch budget toward GEOTUS's legal fund since I'm not going out to eat anymore. It ain't much, but it's honest work.
3	GEOTUS NEEDS EACH ONE OF US TO HELP HIM STOP THE STEAL! Find your state AG's office contact number here: https://www.naag.org/find-my-ag/ Call and email their public offices and let them know that you won't allow cheaters in a

- handful of corrupt cities to determine the elections for all Americans!
- 4 Now is the time to really get started with Operation Legio XIII. Network with friends, make sure you have backups and storage and ammo. As the roman said: "If you want peace, prepare for war."
- 5 [...] it's really a damn shame that the mods even need to come out and say this... It's like y'all don't understand that they still have to rely on other companies to keep a site like this up and running and those companies aren't going to continue allowing their services if there is open talk and planning for violence... **That is common fucking sense people**
- 6 So then why did you not think about all this BEFORE the march when hundreds of accounts posted here DAILY telling people to arm themselves and fight to the death??

The hallmarks of Socio-Political Organization on patriots.win were found to be discussions of information, plans for political and social action, citizen activism, or in-group coordinations of ways to influence public perception of and public relations with out-groups. By and large, the nature of this discussion still falls far short of the Habermasian ideal of a civilized debate and deliberation on matters of policy. However, it is a rather sophisticated form of everyday political talk, showing citizens who are personally invested enough in their given political communities to volunteer their time for purposes of activism.

This category was heavily used in terms of organizing grassroots citizen activism by presenting templates and disseminating information like phone numbers and e-mail addresses, primarily for the purposes of coordinating outreach campaigns to public officials to demand they stand with Trump and his claims of electoral fraud. In this vein, one user excitedly wrote *"Calling now. HELP ME OUT!"*, while another one urged *"Focus on the SUPREME COURT. Don't let them off the hook"*.

Many of the comments also focused on organizing fellow users' informational intake rather than their political action, describing the sources they used, and scorning main-stream media. For example, one user recommended news sources to fellow Trump supporters, and specifically mentioned *"It's essentially OANN, Newsmax, here, crowder, Levin, Bannon. Which is pretty much all consolidated on this site."* This process of co-created informational

channels and self-reinforced echo chambers should be further investigated, namely, how members of an echo chamber alter their information consumption, and what motivators inform their priorities in picking news sources. This is especially salient considering that most of the sources used and shared by users on patriots.win are informal in nature, stemming from social media, such as other patriots.win posts, or pro-Trump Twitter users. This is in-line with existing literature, which points out the susceptibility of extremists of all stripes, but particularly right-wing authoritarian and populist movements, to low trust in media, and high trust in alternative media (Schulze, 2020; Suiter & Fletcher, 2020; van Prooijen et al., 2015).

More antagonistic political tribalism was also exhibited in certain comments, such as the aforementioned ones, that openly planned extremist violence and called for planned and ideologically motivated violent action against the perceived enemy, that being the Democrats and the Left more generally. This also included anyone who acted against the pro-Trump in-group, as shown by numerous exhortations to hang Vice President Mike Pence for his actions on January 6th, as well as allusions of traitorship. Multiple comments attacked Pence: *“FUCK YOU, Brutus Pence”*, *“FUCK TRAITOR PENCE”*, *“I watched DC police kill a woman right in front of me at the entrance to the Capitol [...] Im livid as fuck [...] Pence let us down”*. Deviant behavior is therefore marked as traitorous to Trump, and, by extension, the national community which patriots.win users purport to represent, a common trait amongst violent extremists (Grover & Mark, 2019).

Users also called for action, both violent and nonviolent, and provided each other with information relevant to claims of electoral fraud. Awareness of public opinion was also discussed within the in-group of patriots.win users, as they warned fellow users against overt planning of violence, signifying the theoretical and social salience of studying second-level extremist networks that are gate-kept in some manner. The necessity to obfuscate and hide such action means that members of given extremist in-groups, like pro-Trump patriots.win users, do not disagree with political violence in principle, but rather with the overt disclosure of said plans and their impact on the public reputation of the website and its userbase. It is reasonable to infer, from comments cited previously, that Trump directly spurs this violence, as illustrated below, although does it in a plausible deniable manner, with coded language rife with ambiguity, meant to be filled in by his supporters.

This fact raises the theoretical saliency of further studying motivators of violent political conduct, especially ones carried out with plausible deniability, as well as those motivating stochastic and indirect violence. For example, when responding to a Trump tweet

castigating electoral officials, one commenter wrote “*What are you trying to say Mr. President? We should fight?*”, while other commenters responded more confidently to various other tweets alleging fraud, or setting rally dates, e.g.: “*THE COMMANDER IN CHIEF HAS ISSUED HIS ORDERS / JANUARY 6TH / WASHINGTON D.C.*”, and “*Should we all drive and bring the guns?*”. Similarly, right before the riots on January 6th kicked off, President Trump encouraged his supporters by saying “And we fight. We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore.” (Trump, 2021, as cited in Naylor, 2021). Using plausibly deniable coded language is a particularly Trumpian feature. Hodges (2020) linguistically investigated Trump’s use of plausibly deniable language during his time in office, and concluded that “Feigning innocence in the face of controversial remarks is not new to the presidency of Donald Trump, but Trumpian discourse often pushes this language game to the limits of credulity” (p. 146).

The everyday political talk on patriots.win is a clear exhibit of how Trump’s language is received, with users interpreting his bashing of perceived injustice and fraud as a viable reason for violent political action, internally justified because of the extreme levels of in-group reinforcement and out-group antagonism that help foster the conditions necessary for political violence, consistent with Grover and Mark (2019)’s outline. Future research should be carried out on the exact nature of reception of coded language and plausible deniability of extremist and violent political action on such echo-chambers. Processes of in-group socialization should also be investigated, in order to more specifically discern how users can be inducted and co-opted into such a culture, as well as how receptiveness to plausible deniability is fostered.

4.4 – Mis/Disinformation & Conspiracies

The final category to be identified through thematic analysis is Mis/Disinformation & Conspiracies. 229 comments mentioned these allegations, making up 22.9% of the entire sample. These include all sorts of blatant mis and disinformation spread by users related to a number of various conspiracies, including but not limited to: Joe Biden being an agent of the Chinese Communist Party, or, alternatively, a pedophile, Democrats regularly cheating in elections, Antonin Scalia, a former Supreme Court judge, actually being assassinated, the Clintons assassinating political opponents, COVID-19 being a fake virus meant to take down President Trump, the vaccine for COVID-19 also being fake, Trump being under attack by a “deep state” within the U.S. government, or, alternatively, a “globalist plot”, and many others.

The vast majority of conspiratorial allegations center around fraud in the 2020 election, which was the single most talked about political issue on patriots.win. By and large, the entire narrative present on patriots.win is underpinned by allegations and assumptions of fraud, as well as conspiracies, rationalized by antagonism of the political out-group as capable of such action. Table 8 presents the main codes found in the category.

Table 8

Dummy Table of Categories and Codes (Mis/Disinformation & Conspiracies)

Theme	Sub-Theme
Mis/Disinformation & Conspiracies	Fraud Allegations
	Conspiratorial Accusations
	Reliance on Informal Sources

The most numerous and salient form of disinformation spread on patriots.win were various claims to do with election fraud, or conspiratorial accusations against Biden or other outsiders. Illustrative examples include:

Table 9*Example Comments of Mis/Disinformation & Conspiracies*

Comment Number	Example Comments
1	ZERO chance this man lost an American election. These fucking criminals need to be put down POTUS, just do what Lincoln would do!
2	Why concede an election he won? More evidence comes out by the day and the forensic audit proved systemic and widespread fraud and more is on the way.
3	They [Fox News] made ZERO mention of the fact that Trump is actively fighting the massive amount of election fraud. What?
4	Fake news reports, fake ballots, fake everything else can't change the outcome. Trump won. End of story.
5	Fraud!!!
6	China owns the Biden family outright and would have held this footage as leverage over the Executive Branch in the event of a Biden presidency.
7	if Lin Wood was 100% on point about this, what else was he on point about? SCJ John Roberts... Jeffrey Epstein?
8	This is why they don't want you talking to your crazy conspiracy theory uncle over the holidays. Be that crazy uncle (or aunt). Now more than ever.

Numerous articles have pointed out a particular link between right-wing authoritarianism, populist beliefs, and heightened receptiveness to conspiracy theories (Atkinson & Dewitt, 2018; van Prooijen et al., 2015). Atkinson et al. (2018) specifically discuss the 2016 election and the initial deployment of conspiracy theories by Trump, and noted how it was uniquely mobilized and politically targeted, creating a novel effect of having it be spread amongst like-minded individuals, specifically those congruent in political affiliation. The prominence of the theme in the sample confirms these results, as conspiracy theories, including widespread allegations of fraud and cheating by Democrats, were universally accepted, re-shared, and not questioned in any substantial manner. Patriots.win appears to be a breeding groups for conspiracy theories, as even the most outlandish concepts

are widely shared, upvoted, and celebrated by users if they reinforce the narrative of electoral fraud being carried out by Donald Trump. For example, when Trump rails against perceived fraud, users respond with comments such as “***TIP OF THE ICEBERG OF THE GLOBALIST PLOT***”. In another users’ eyes, the conspiracy is not just election fraud, but “*breathtakingly-large in scope. It's the entire damned system!*”. Others, still, claimed that they were “*Pretty sure this shit has been going on for forever.*” When Trump, his family, or close associates, like Rudy Giuliani or Lin Wood, claim that a state is about to flip from blue to red, users excitedly respond with comments like “*This is it! Over the next week we're gonna see everything flip!*”. In almost every case, users believe and respond positively to the conspiracy theories.

Especially in the case of allegations of fraud, users can be seen to exhibit strong fixation on Democrats and the Left. Indeed, conspiracy theories and misinformation are more of a supporting category, and, in terms of everyday political speech, are used as supporting elements for in-group reinforcement by creating a common narrative of election fraud, and, crucially, are used as tools to facilitate hatred and polarization in order to foster further out-group antagonism. Consider the following comments: “*Dominion didn't rig the election. The left rigged the election using Dominion*”, “*Hang everyone at Dominion*”, “*Dominion...by faggots for faggots*”. In this particular case, users are fixated on Dominion, although it is used as a proxy for a larger enemy – the Democrats, and, interchangeably, the Left. This outrage is then used to spur calls for violence, justifying and radicalizing the already extant processes of out-group antagonization that are taking place, including the use of slurs. Users are convinced that the election was stolen from Trump, that Biden was elected illegitimately and fraudulently. Their common belief, and their co-reinforcement of such beliefs, also acts as a mechanism for creating group cohesion, as well as building up a common master narrative concerning the election. The end result is that the users of patriots.win believe that the election was fraudulently stolen, and their collective outrage built over months until it boiled over on January 6th. This is in-line with existing research, which stipulates that exposure to conspiracy theories surrounding election rigging depresses citizens’ emotions, and heightens anxiety and anger (Albertson & Guiler, 2020), and that partisan political actors are most likely to blame opposing partisan groups for conspiratorial reasons (Smallpage et al., 2017), a finding strongly reflected on patriots.win, as Trump supporters blamed opposing Democrats and Leftists for rigging the 2020 election against Trump. This was also supported by the fact

that their belief in Democrats' responsibility resulted in strong out-group antagonism, and repeated called for violence

This process is further compounded by the presence of informational exclusivity and hostility towards most media, and a reliance on informal sources. Furthermore, trust of fellow Trump supporters meant that links were not scrutinized or questioned substantially. One comment, for example, simply linked to another patriots.win post as proof of electoral fraud (although the website had since been renamed): "*Data from this pede* <https://thedonald.win/p/11QRov5EwD/timeseries-precinct-data-files-f/>". This was a good example of the informational exclusivity present on patriots.win, with users rarely engaging with outsiders' opinions or dissenting sources. It is also a clear example of what Neville-Shepard (2019) dubbed 'post-presumption' politics, wherein citizens cannot even presume that the information they are seeing has to be checked in the first place, and must be true. The disruption of existing information-seeking patterns and the undermining of a focus on veracity has left political deliberation particularly sensitive to conspiratorial claims. Together with the extant epistemic crisis (Benkler et al., 2018; Dahlgren, 2018), the social implications for how citizens intake information and form their own opinions is worrying. The social relevance of this process, and the prominence of conspiracy theories amongst political discourse on patriots.win, is manifold. Consistent with the findings of Barkun (2017) and Sawyer (2021), Donald Trump is a particularly effective case of mainstreaming the fringe in terms of conspiracy theories, helping to spread and legitimize them. The base most prominently represented on patriots.win, authoritarian and populist right-wingers, has also been researched as a particular breeding ground for conspiracies (Faris et al., 2017). In the case of electoral fraud according to an Ipsos/Reuters poll, belief in Trump's conspiracies is not isolated to extremist groups like patriots.win - his conspiracies surrounding the 2020 election and fraud allegations are believed by 56% of Republicans (Edwards-Levy, 2021). This is, again, much like the other categories, a worrying development in terms of deliberative democracy, since it hints at the persuasive nature of conspiratorial arguments in politics, and risks worsening public engagement with politics and deliberative democracy as citizens become increasingly disillusioned with the process and resign their stakes in the Habermasian public sphere.

Ch. 5 – Conclusion

Exhaustive qualitative thematic analysis was carried out to answer the main question and the associated sub-questions, which target tribalism and conspiratorial mis/disinformation. 1,000 comments were analyzed in order to discern major themes present in the political deliberation and everyday political talk. In order, the most prominent themes found in political discussion were marked by strong in-group reinforcement, extreme rejection of outsiders and out-group antagonism, a use of the online space as a tool for socio-political organization, and prominent display of conspiracy theories and misinformation, as well as disinformation. All of the main themes work together – the in-group is supported, the out-group is antagonized, conspiracy theories and fraud allegations are used as supporting evidence and justification for political action, which is organized in terms of informational dissemination and suggested future socio-political action.

Everyday political talk was marked by strong mechanisms meant to reinforce users' loyalty to one another as well as to President Trump. Constant ideological corrective action was deployed both by the users themselves in the form of self reassurance, by expressing their enthusiasm through repeated use of in-group language and celebratory speech, and co-reassurance, through the constant support exhibited towards other users. In addition, praise was never failed to be expended towards President Trump, the ideological leader of the movement, or any of his subordinates or ideological allies. Users could therefore rely on support and reinforcement of the dominant ideology at any given time. However, when that failed, users did not fail to turn on each other for failing to be loyal or confident enough in their shared goals. Scorn and hatred of outsiders marks everyday political talk almost as dominantly as reinforcement of insiders and expressions of support for fellow Trump supporters do, and, when a Trump supporter fails to be fanatical enough, they are castigated as “doomers” and explicitly attacked by other members of the in-group. This is yet another corrective mechanism exhibited by the group in order to maintain cohesion.

A massive amount of time and energy is spent on constant outrage towards political enemies, ideological foes, and all sorts of members of out-groups, ranging from federal agents to opposing politicians to everyone and everything in between. These attacks range from outright scorn to death threats, calls for violence, and even outright planning of what users perceive to be a second civil war. Users call for blood, hangings, shootings, public executions, gratuitous murder, summary executions, show trials for opponents, and more. Many openly discuss arming themselves and fighting in a civil insurrection, although efforts

to limit openly violent speech are apparent. However, this is part of an apparent socio-political organizing effort to maintain plausible deniability much in the same way that President Trump does with his ambiguous speech. Sources and news that do not match the narrative are discarded and distrusted, and often painted to be part of an anti-Trump conspiracy. Users substitute these with belief in Trump's claim in election fraud, as well as a plethora of various conspiracy theories, each helping to further out-group antagonism depending on its nature. All of these forces are working in tandem to create a breeding ground for radicalization (Cohen et al., 2014; Grover & Mark, 2019), with a cyclical pattern being apparent. Users are brought into the fold, they buy into the master narrative of conspiracy theories and fraud, helping to identify the enemy out-groups. Users become progressively more and more outraged every day and are concurrently reinforced by fellow users in their outrage, as the entire in-group works to maintain both a coherent narrative through informational exclusivity and tightly controlled sourcing, as well as a cohesive group identity through reinforcement of in-group behavior and antagonism towards out-groups.

5.1 – Theoretical and Social Implications

The theoretical and social implications of the findings are primarily centered on increasing processes of polarization, growing extremism, both violent and non-violent, increasingly separated informational diets, and the strong prevalence of conspiratorial thinking as well as post-presumption argumentation on patriots.win (Neville-Shepard, 2019). The main question at hand is whether the discursive habits of patriots.win users can be seen as a temporal extremist outlier, or whether they will begin to crop up in other deliberative spaces online. If the latter option comes to fruition, the ramifications for Habermasian discourse ethics and Enlightenment-style deliberative democracy are dire at best, and post-truth politics will truly come into the fore. The standards of political deliberation fell far short of the Habermasian ideal. Indeed, many of the findings are consistent with the reviewed literature, and patriots.win is clearly a very stereotypical extremist echo-chamber, and not at all a place for rationalistic, Enlightenment-style political debate (Armaly & Enders, 2021; Cohen et al., 2014; Grover & Mark, 2019; Hodges, 2020; Robards, 2018; Scrivens et al., 2020; Shapiro & Fogel, 2019; van Prooijen et al., 2015; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2017, 2019). Users on patriots.win are ready and prepared to fight and die for their cause. Indeed, this is a clear example of an extremist mentality underpinned by the notion of “if you're not with us, you're against us”. This sense of belonging constantly being pushed by all members is consistent with literature (van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2017, 2019, 2020; van Prooijen et al.,

2015; Warner, 2010; Warner & Neville-Shepard, 2014) and it raises the saliency of continuing to further study mechanisms of induction and socialization into the in-group

The constant exhibition of siege mentality and paranoia is shown through the extremely high prevalence of conspiracy theories and allegations of fraud. Users who believe themselves to be patriots, spending their free time on patriots.win, truly do believe in the name – they are incapable of considering their side as losing in a fair and open election, and have devoted an inordinate amount of their time and energy to formulating, sharing, supporting and disseminating conspiracy theories about the election, and all their enemies. This is consistent with Fernbach et al. (2013), Grover and Mark (2019), and Cohen et al. (2014). Members can also find sources, information, other users pointing them to an increasingly marginalized media environment in which dissent is likewise not tolerated, creating potential problems with de-radicalization efforts in the future. The United States now has a socio-political conundrum – a relatively large cross-section of one of the voting bases for one of the two major parties has been substantially primed for media distrust (Edwards-Levy, 2021) and hence further radicalization (Benkler et al., 2018; Faris et al., 2017). The cycle does not seem to be stopping, even with President Trump out of office since January. Further polarization may push users towards seeking more like-minded individuals, as exhibited by patriots.win users' rejection of conventional news sources.

5.2 – Limitations and Future Research

Future research would do well to focus on examining processes of radicalization more closely, but also through by understanding radicalized users on their own terms, for example through focus groups or semi-structured interviews. It would also do well to investigate the coded signals, double-speak, and plausibly deniable language used in such extremist circles, since users were able to infer violent exhortations from Donald Trump's tweets without them being openly and blatantly violent. A mixed qualitative/quantitative methods network analysis of the links between extremist spaces, and their tendency to use informal (i.e. crowdsourced and/or with an unclear origin) news, would deepen the current understanding of processes of political polarization and recursively reinforcing extremism. This is also compounded by the presence of heavy in-group reinforcement as well as out-group antagonism, and the primacy of political tribalism present on patriots.win.

Scholars should also further examine cross-website information flow, and, perhaps through a semantic network analysis, attempt to model a clearer map of where users are

getting their conspiracy fueling information from. This is particularly salient in an increasingly post-truth world, where politics and veracity are becoming increasingly relative and subjective, with dangerous implications for deliberative democracy as we know it to be. In addition, future research should look into processes of deradicalization closely, since fellow members of in-groups tend to create strong bonds with one another. The possibility of de-radicalizing one's own friends after going through the process should be investigated, perhaps through an ethnographic analysis or application of grounded theory on how a given violent extremist is deradicalized and reintroduced into relatively normal deliberative democratic society. Moreover, far-right extremism has also been studied much more extensively, and so a similar sister study should be carried out on far-left extremists in order to compare the two groups and discern if there is any noticeable difference in how they maintain processes of in-group reinforcement, out-group antagonism (i.e. tribalism), whether conspiracy theories play as large a role as they do in patriots.win, and how socio-political organizational efforts differ in nature.

Despite accomplishing its aims, this study is not without a number of limitations. First of all, the entirety of the analysis was carried out by one coder, with no inter-coder reliability tests or safeguards present. While steps were taken to safeguard the reliability, validity and trustworthiness of the analytical process in spite of that, by utilizing a particularly rigorous method, it is entirely possible that the author's bias leaked in and tainted some of the results. Future studies of this type would do well to have at least two coders working in tandem to prevent such a situation, and to more effectively control for bias. Secondly, the sample size, despite being as large as possible, is still only 1,000 comments, and while it is reasonably representative, analysis suffered from the fact that only top-level comments were drawn and sampled. This assures that a larger variety of individual sentiments can be analyzed, and works well for thematic analysis, however, it is limited in terms of implications for analysis of deep discourse, and back-and-forth conversations were unable to be properly analyzed. Future studies should rectify this blind spot and focus entirely on comment chains in order to deeply ascertain what sort of discursive patterns happen in direct, long-winded, interpersonal conversations between members of extremist groups. In addition, these findings are only truly relevant to the U.S., and other studies will need to be carried out specifically for other nations with different political systems and climates. While this study is a good starting point, there is still much to be learned about how extremist groups carry out everyday political talk, and whether there is any form of deliberation. In addition, researchers – with the correct ethical

considerations – could attempt to infiltrate second-level groups that are not entirely visible to every random passer-by on the internet, attempting to analyze how extremists carry out everyday political speech when they operate with the knowledge that they cannot be seen or heard by outsiders. Patriots.win users seemed relatively aware of that fact and had to warn others to tone down their rhetoric at times due to possible repercussions from hosting companies or public opinion at large. Users also bragged about “red-pilling” others many times, which is a term for covert indoctrination of alt-right or populist-right ideas to unsuspecting out-group members. This process likewise warrants investigation, and future research should monitor these processes in order to further ascertain how recruitment to extremist communities works, and what sort of appeals are used in order to get neutral or slightly sympathetic out-group members in to the in-group.

To conclude, patriots.win, and the everyday political talk of its members, has shown itself to be an idiosyncratic place full of specific subcultural language, with specific patterns of positive reinforcement for members, negative reinforcement for outsiders, a plethora of political and social organization, including co-socialization and co-control of informational consumption, and a mass deployment of conspiracy theories of every possible type. As the informational landscape continues to fragment and fractalize further and further, it is not outlandish to consider communities like patriots.win popping up more and more frequently, much in the vein of Sunstein (2001, 2007)’s warnings. Rapidly advancing communications technology and the internet has interminably changed the way politics is conducted both on and offline, and the conduct of it in both the traditional public sphere, as well as potential emerging virtual spheres, will be a fruitful area of research for a long time to come.

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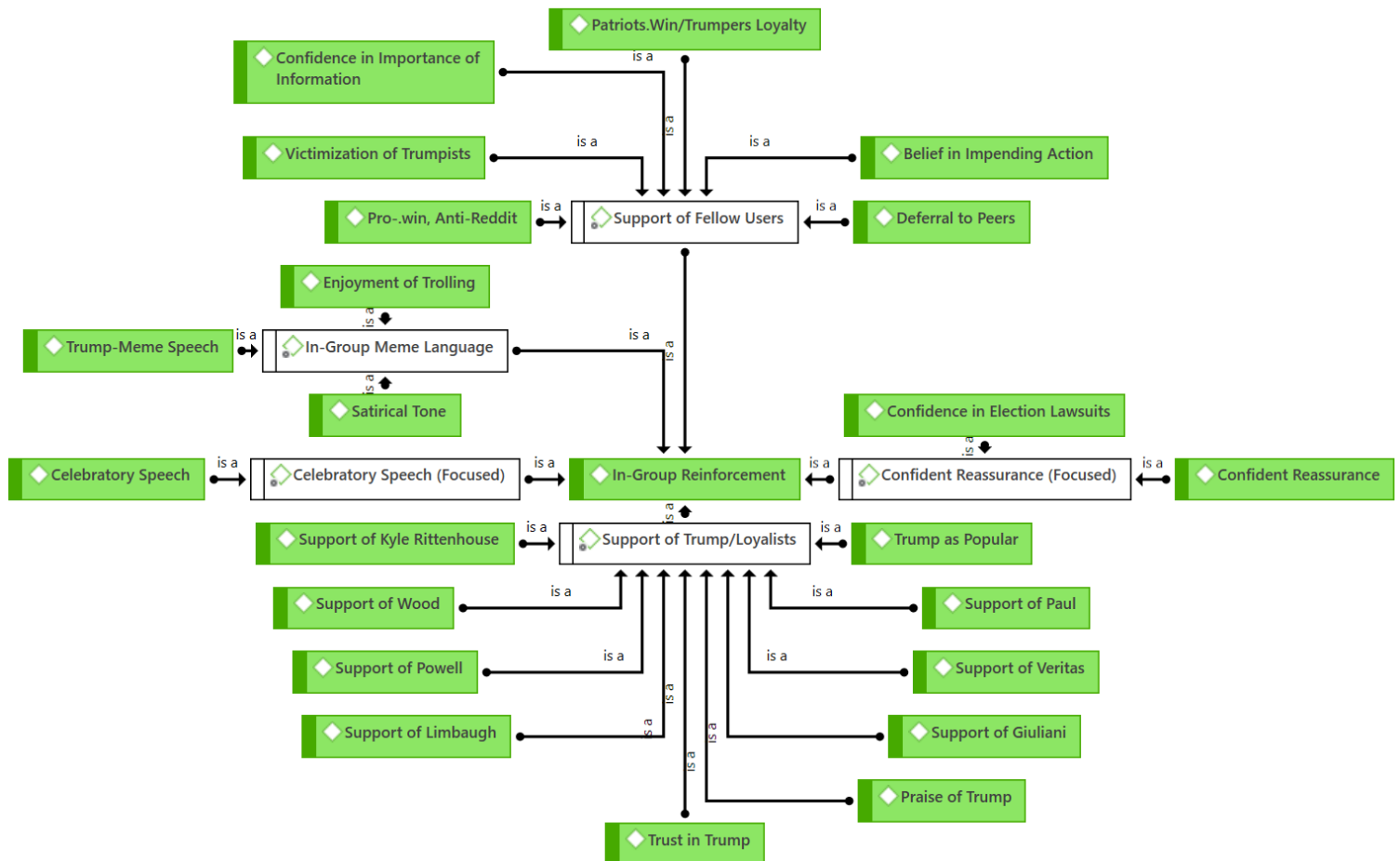
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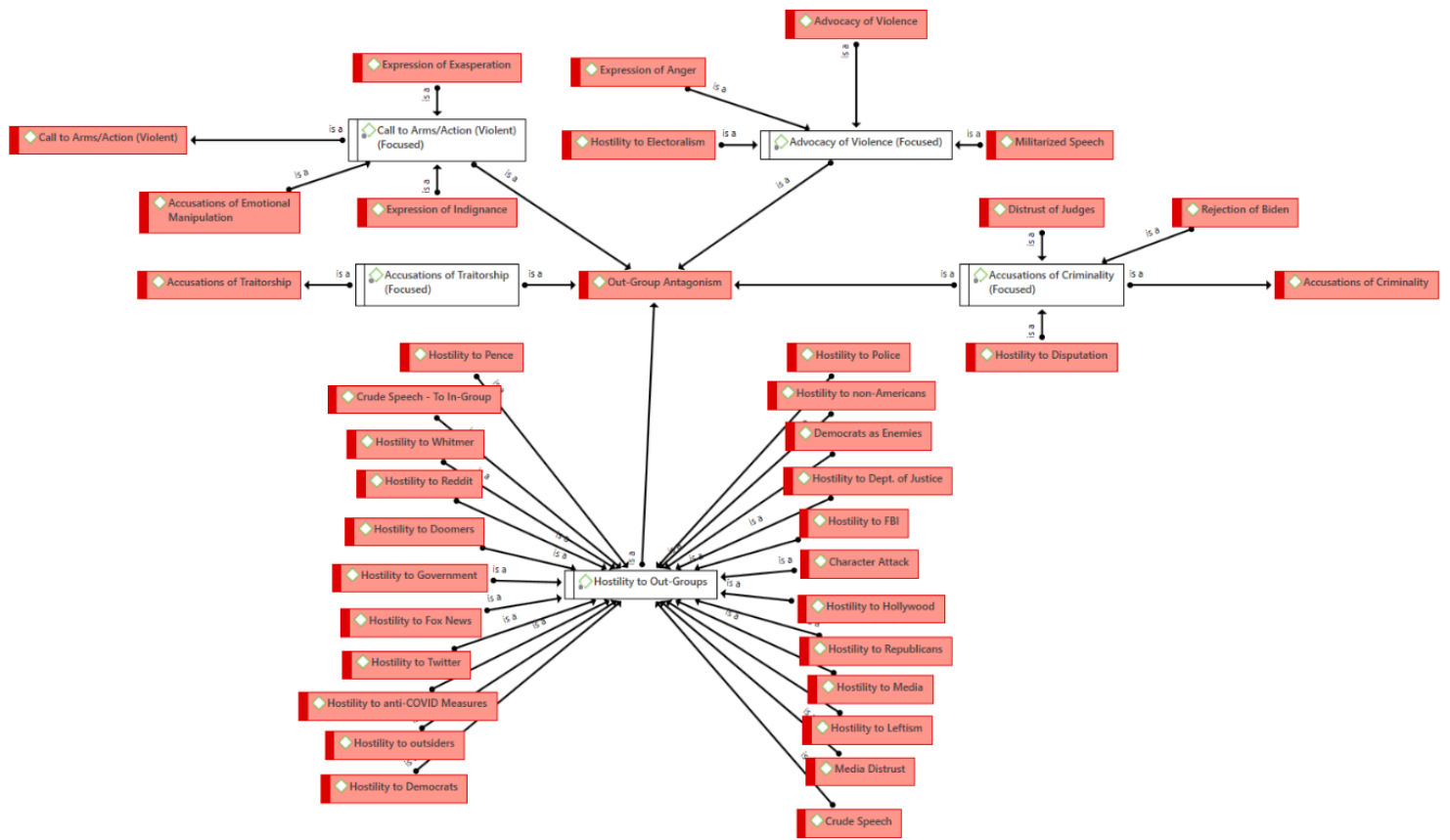
Internal Appendix

Appendix A



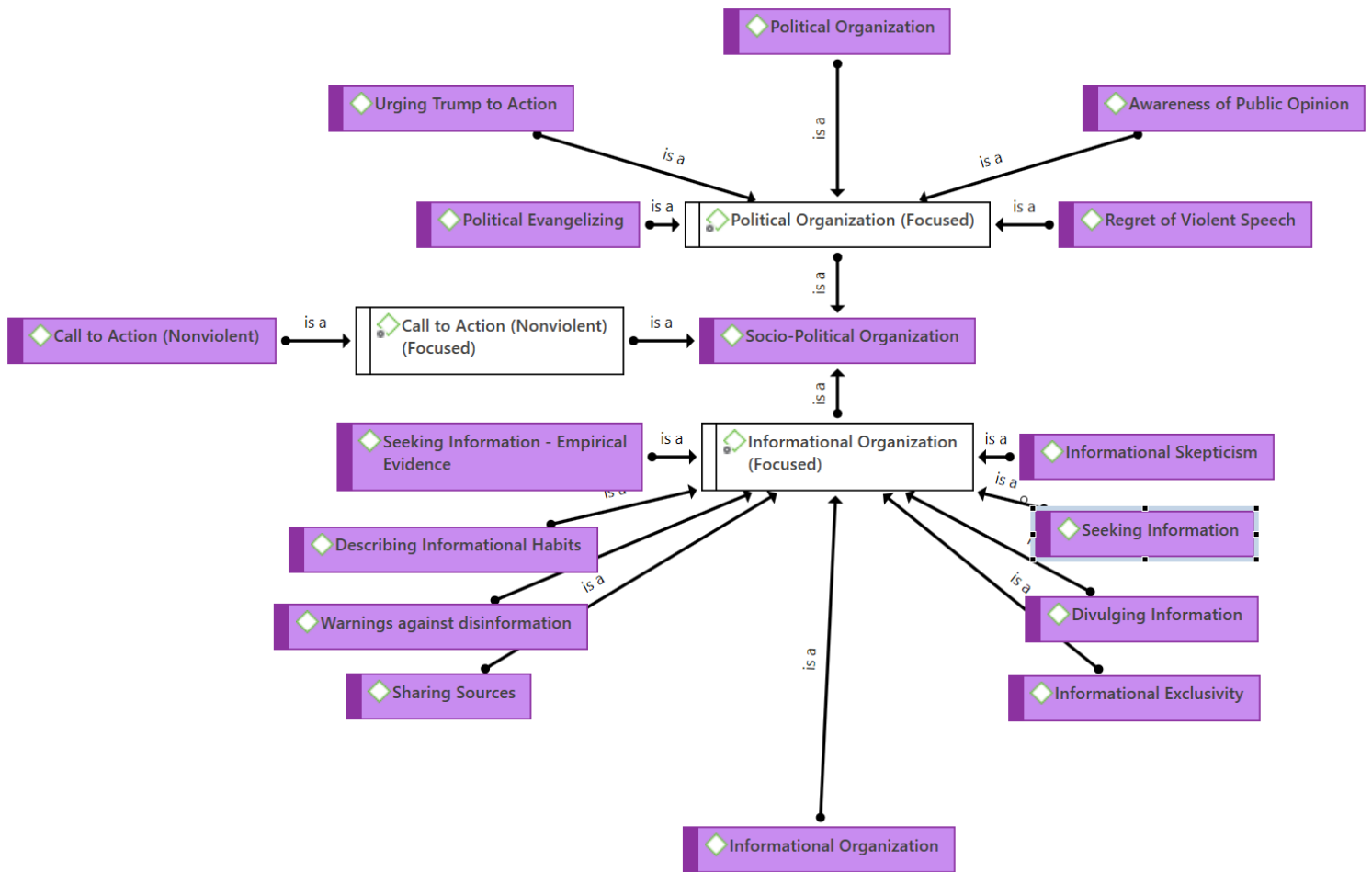
Coding Tree for In-Group Reinforcement

Appendix B



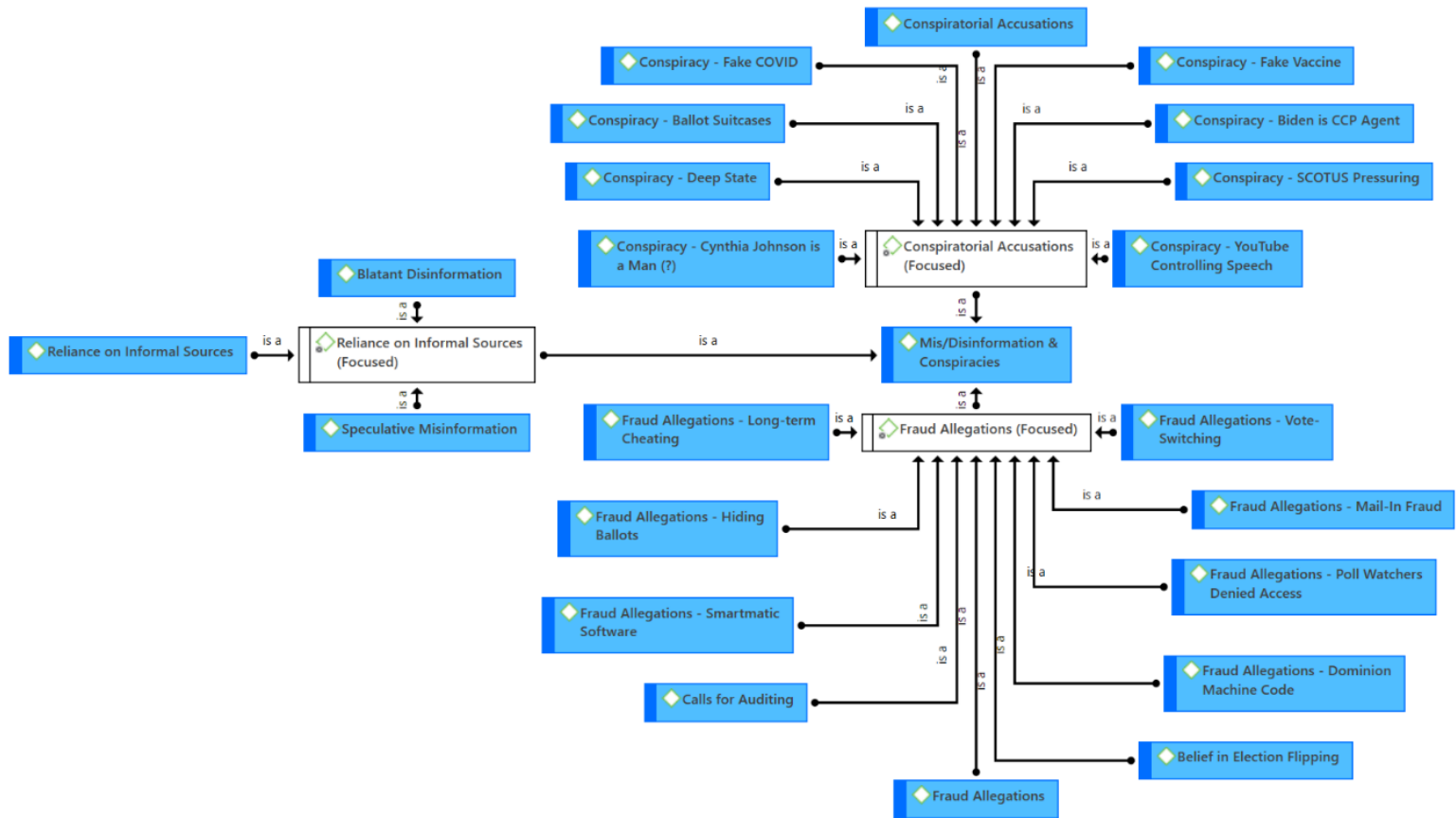
Coding Tree for Out-Group Antagonism

Appendix C



Coding Tree for Socio-Political Organization

Appendix D



Coding Tree for Mis/Disinformation & Conspiracies

Appendix E

Table 10

Table of Themes, Sub-Themes and Open Codes

Themes	Sub-Themes	Open Codes
In-Group Reinforcement	Support of Fellow Users	Deferral to Peers
		Belief in Impending Action
		Patriots.Win/Trumpers
		Loyalty
		Victimization of Trumpists
		Confidence in Importance of Information
	In-Group Meme Language	Pro-.Win, Anti-Reddit
		Enjoyment of Trolling
		Trump-Meme Speech
	Celebratory Speech (Focused)	Satirical Tone
		Celebratory Speech
Out-Group Antagonism	Support of Trump/Loyalists	Support of Giuliani
		Support of Powell
		Support of Limbaugh
		Trust in Trump
		Praise of Trump
		Support of Wood
		Support of Veritas
		Support of Kyle Rittenhouse
		Support of Paul
	Confident Reassurance (Focused)	Trump as Popular
		Confident Reassurance
Out-Group Antagonism	Accusations of Traitorship (Focused)	Confidence in Election
		Lawsuits
		Accusations of Traitorship

Advocacy of Violence (Focused)	Advocacy of Violence
	Militarized Speech
	Hostility to Electoralism
	Expression of Anger
Call to Arms/Action (Violent) (Focused)	Call to Arms/Action (Violent)
	Accusations of Emotional Manipulation
	Expression of Exasperation
	Expression of Indignance
Accusations of Criminality (Focused)	Distrust of Judges
	Rejection of Biden
	Accusations of Criminality
	Hostility to Disputation
Hostility to Out-Groups	Character Attack
	Hostility to Leftism
	Hostility to Government
	Hostility to Democrats
	Hostility to Fox News
	Hostility to Twitter
	Hostility to outsiders
	Hostility to anti-COVID Measures
	Hostility to Media
	Hostility to Republicans
	Hostility to Hollywood
	Crude Speech
	Media Distrust
	Hostility to Doomers
	Crude Speech – to In-Group
	Hostility to Whitmer

Socio-Political Organization	Informational Organization (Focused)	Hostility to Police
		Democrats as Enemies
		Hostility to Dept. of Justice
		Hostility to non-Americans
		Informational Organization
		Warnings against disinformation
		Divulging Information
		Seeking Information
		Informational Exclusivity
		Sharing Sources
	Call to Action (Nonviolent) (Focused)	Describing Informational Habits
		Informational Skepticism
		Call to Action (Nonviolent)
		Political Organization
		Political Organization
Mis/Disinformation & Conspiracies	Reliance on Informal Sources (Focused)	Awareness of Public Opinion
		Urging Trump to Action
		Political Evangelizing
		Reliance on Informal Sources
		Blatant Disinformation
		Speculative Misinformation
		Fraud Allegations (Focused)
		Fraud Allegations – Long- term cheating
		Fraud Allegations – Vote Switching

	Fraud Allegations – Mail-in fraud
	Fraud Allegations – Poll Watchers Denied Access
	Fraud Allegations – Dominion Machine Code
	Fraud Allegations – Smartmatic Software
	Fraud Allegations – Hiding Ballots
	Fraud Allegations Belief in Election Flipping
	Calls for Auditing
Conspiratorial Accusations (Focused)	Conspiratorial Accusations
	Conspiracy – Fake COVID
	Conspiracy – Ballot Suitcases
	Conspiracy – Deep State
	Conspiracy – YouTube
	Controlling Speech
	Conspiracy – SCOTUS Pressuring
	Conspiracy – Biden is CCP Agent
	Conspiracy – Fake Vaccine
	Conspiracy – Cynthia Johnson is a man