More than a mob: Parler as preparatory media for the Capitol storming
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Abstract
On 6 January 2021, a violent mob attacked the United States Capitol. Yet while mob suggests a chaotic and fragmented crowd, networked media had already been working to provide it with “just enough” cohesion, transforming it into a more dangerous political body. This article conceptualizes this preparatory media by examining the “free speech” social media network Parler, drawing on a corpus of ~350,000 posts from the days leading up to and including the attack. This material empirically demonstrates how media worked to forge connections between disparate camps, to incite participants toward violent activity, and to legitimize this attack as moral or even spiritual. Preparatory media frames events, establishes targets, and sets agendas, providing a degree of order and working against disaggregation online. This temporary stabilization contributes to a more mobilized and organized public body. Rather than prosocial or emancipatory, the Capitol storming demonstrates the far darker potential of this work. Understanding this role of media and intervening within these logics provides one component for preventing future attacks.

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The election was stolen, the group attempted to disrupt the formalization of Joe Biden’s presidential victory. To get inside the building, the group overran barricades, smashed windows, and attacked police. The formalization session was halted and both the Senate and House were evacuated, with members donning gas masks to protect them from tear gas (Wire, 2021). Once inside, rioters roamed around the Senate floor, live-streaming their actions and taking selfies, while police barricaded the House chamber and prepared to defend it at gunpoint. Five individuals were killed, including one officer who died from being bludgeoned with a fire extinguisher (Evelyn, 2021).

Certainly, the attack was incited to a significant degree by then President Trump [1]. After all, it was Trump who had invited his followers to D.C. to participate in two rallies, one in Freedom Plaza on 5 January and a “Save America” rally on the morning of 6 January. During these events, Trump had urged listeners to “fight like hell” in order to “take back our country” (Andersen, 2021). There was no question then, that Trump’s rhetoric partially fueled the attack, a fact underscored by his impeachment a week later (Zurcher, 2021). However, if Trump’s contribution is indisputable, it was also vague, a broad encouragement to defend the nation and correct this injustice. His rhetoric, while antagonistic, was limited in its specifics by the norms of public office. What exactly should be the agenda of this war and its potential targets? How might it be legitimized and its combatants understood? And besides Trump, what goals and ideals did these disparate followers share?

One way to consider these questions is to consider the mob as a problem. A mob is powerful yet unstable, dangerous yet potentially directionless. A mob is a temporary coming together of disparate individuals and groups. Given this transience, conflicting agendas may be disastrous, resulting in it dissolving before anything has been accomplished. The group assembles, then disbands, with nothing to show for it. How might this disaggregating tendency be overcome? To put it simply: how might a mob become more than a mob? Here we are interested in “the turning of feelings and thoughts in a definite direction” [2] but assert that today this happens to a significant degree in advance as digital media shapes the expectations and possibilities available to the group.

Answering these questions requires going beyond the traditional political rhetoric of the rally to investigate the role of networked media prior to it. This article introduces the concept of preparatory media to stress the diverse ways in which it worked at logistical, organizational, and ideological levels to render this public into a more stabilized and cohesive force. Digital media, comprising a complex and often overwhelming assemblage of flows and feeds, groups and communities, memes and messages, had already singled out particular enemies and posited ideal scenarios. This “activism of hate” (Zelenkauskaite, et al., 2021) leveraged the affordances of social media to articulate and extend a political vision. This prior work allowed Trump’s incendiary but broad rhetoric to be slotted into an existing framework, amplifying the group’s animosity against certain targets and the urgency of attaining certain goals. The intense anger mobilized at the rallies could be poured into this medial scaffolding.

To conceptualize preparatory media, this article draws on one specific example of it: Parler. Launched in 2018, Parler is a social media alternative to Twitter, a platform that promises to let its users “speak free” (Parler, 2021). Parler is widely understood to be a hate haven, a place where ardent Trump supporters mix with individuals and organizations associated with the far-right and alt-right. As mainstream social networks like Facebook and Twitter came under increased pressure to regulate content, these kinds of users found themselves being blocked, temporarily suspended, or banned altogether, a period they refer to as “the Great Purge.” In this context, Parler became a kind of lifeboat for the radical right, welcoming them onto the platform and promising never to censor their posts. Over the last two years, a number of prominent individuals and organizations have migrated to Parler, including politicians such as Ted Cruz (Lima, 2020) and Jair Bolsonaro (Cordeiro, 2020), QAnon conspiracy theorists (Timberg and Stanley-Becker, 2020), influencers like Fox News hosts Mark Levin and Sean Hannity, and overtly violent groups like the Proud Boys and the Boogaloo movement (Sardarizadeh, 2020). Parler’s popularity ramped up in the final days of the 2020 election. Surging in downloads, it briefly occupied the top spot on the App store, with the COO stating it was adding millions of users to its user base (Heilweil, 2021). Despite this growing influence, there has been almost no academic scholarship on Parler to date, with only a few articles mentioning the
Parler’s role as a hyper-conservative platform and the makeup of its user base thus gives it strong connections to the 6 January attack. But even more specifically, GPS metadata associated with Parler posts showed how its users “breached deep inside” the U.S. Capitol (Cameron and Mehrotra, 2021), posting videos from the hallways, offices, and stairwells of the building. As Parler’s formative role in the storming of the Capitol became clearer, its Web host, Amazon Web Services, announced it would terminate services to the platform in a matter of days (Paczkowski and Mac, 2021). During this period, a number of researchers and activists, led by hacker “donk_enby” (2021), scrambled to collect the thousands of posts and videos that had been recently published, hoping to gain a comprehensive portrait of activity leading up to the event before it was taken off-line indefinitely.

As a result of that work, a computer science researcher (Booeshaghi, 2021) collected approximately 350,000 posts written or shared in the days prior to and including the attack and made them freely available to others. This article draws on that corpus. From an ethical perspective, it should be noted that this material was obtained by Web scraping, a legal method used to obtain text and images from publicly accessible Web pages through batch requests. It should be also noted that this article never identifies individuals attributed to particular posts. For these reasons, and to avoid directing traffic to a platform like Parler, posts are quoted without author’s names or hyperlinks to original posts.

Methodologically, this article uses a theoretical sampling approach, “identifying emergent concepts in data being generated which are then used to guide where, how and from whom more data should be collected, and with what focus” [3]. Rather than coding or classifying each of these 350,000 posts, this approach here is consciously exploratory rather than systematic, drawing on the author’s domain expertise in online hate, radical right cultures, and conspiracy theory (Munn, forthcoming, 2020, 2019) to identify salient themes within this material and then use the same author or similar keywords to thicken these themes with additional examples. This approach follows one of the principal aims of theoretical sampling in seeking to build and refine theory from data [4]. Within this conceptual framework, Parler provides an instance of preparatory media, an empirically grounded example that — while by no means exhaustive or comprehensive — highlights some of the key functions that networked media carries out in terms of scaffolding political action.

### Mobilizing

The first function of preparatory media explored here is that of mobilizing participants. On an immediate level, participants must all be aware that this event will occur at a particular time and place. “CALLING ALL PATRIOTS,” reads one post with over 50,000 impressions, “DONALD TRUMP HAS CALLED FOR US TO COME TO THE NATIONS CAPITOL FOR THE LAST STAND AGAINST THE GLOBALISTS.” There is a simple logistical function at work here, circulating the location and date where participants should assemble. And yet these posts also serve as identifying markers, establishing both the stakes and the sides. In the example above, the battle is between “the patriots” and “the globalists”, a conflict framed in urgent terms as a “last stand.” Given this identity-constructing role, even mundane posts documenting the journey towards this event also work to knit participants together. “God bless America! Patriots singing on flight to DC” reads one post. Another post recounts how politician Mitt Romney boarded one flight to D.C. “filled with Patriots who Chanted ‘Traitor’ and Grilled Him About Ties to Biden.” The participants have not yet congregated; the rally is still days away; but already these posts are working to generate a sense of shared purpose and social cohesion.

If “us” and “them” are becoming delineated, the definition of “us” is also enlarging. As Canetti (1984) noted, a crowd will never miss an opportunity to expand its numbers. On networked media, one of the primary ways this is accomplished is through the hashtag. Far more than a piece of metadata or a semantic
marker, the hashtag provides a way to forge temporary publics (Bruns and Burgess, 2015; Bruns, et al., 2016). One post, with 65,000 impressions, demonstrates how this is accomplished:

Calm before the storm Get Ready Patriots  
#WomenForTrump #MagaMarchDC #MAGA2021 #TRUMP  
#TRUMP2021 #HoldTheLine #maga #donalddonald  
#MarchforTrump #DC #whitehouse #stopthestealcaravan  
#ElectionFraud #HoldTheLinePatriots #WashingtonDC  
#trumptrain #TeamTrump #protest #4moreyears #maggadc12  
#stormtheCapital #patriotsunited #patriots #magamarch  
#millionmagamarch2021 #trumprally #proudboys  
#ProudboysUSA #fuckAntifa #parler #parerusa #trumpramp  
#fakeelection #fakeelections #fakespolls #stopthevote  
#millionmagamarch #dcpolice #dcpolice #rightwing  
#StoptheSteal2021 #jan6 #jan6th #wildprotest #MillionMAGA  
#theproudboys

On one level, this post is simply exploiting the logic of the hashtag to amplify the reach of its message on social media. Yet if these hashtags work to surface the post to different communities, they also function to stitch those communities together, to construct a collective identity. These tags are bridges between camps, asserting that, despite their obvious differences, there are some common ideals and shared interests. Whether contesting a “stolen election” or countering the nefarious plans of “Antifa”, multiple groups believe they must “#HoldTheLine.” The post draws on these types of synergies to expand its potential public. This event will not just be one that matters to a niche public of Trump supporters, but to a broader coalition of “patriots,” a “big tent” composed of protestors, election conspiracists, Q-followers, Proud Boys, and anti-Antifa activists.

Posts like these demonstrate how radical right interests have innovatively leveraged networked media to attract a broader audience. In one sense, of course, these ideologies and antagonisms are not new, drawing upon a long lineage of white supremacy (Pierce, 1978), chauvinistic misogyny (Theweleit, 1977), virulent antisemitism (Sartre, 1948), and anti-immigrant sentiment (Camus, 2011). Yet the seemingly infinite domain of the Internet allows a vast array of these concepts to be assembled into a “scavenger ideology” which can be adapted to particular national contexts or customized according to individual needs. The novel sociotechnical affordances of networked media allows this racism, sexism, and xenophobia to be repackaged into attractive new forms: funny memes, viral short-form video, influencer-produced content, and myriad other vernacular forms that dominate the current Internet. Along with Parler, similar social media like the “free speech” platform Gab have surged in popularity, adding tens of thousands of users over the last two years (Munn, forthcoming). The strategic deployment of digital technologies has allowed the radical right to reinvent themselves, contributing to the “mainstreaming of hate” (Wilson, 2018) witnessed over the last few years.

These platforms mobilize users by marking out a position halfway between the mainstream Web and what we might term the sewer Web. The mainstream Web is composed of the social media behemoths of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and others. This bright arena is highly accessible and widely used but also highly controlled in policing behaviors and language that are allowed. The sewer Web, by contrast, is made up of legacy hate havens like 4chan and 8kun as the “cesspools of the Internet” and encrypted messaging platforms like Telegram. These environments are highly creative but often overwhelming and confusing spaces where shock humor, disturbing imagery, and manga lore sit side by side — and explicit violence and child porn are only a click away. Parler, Gab, and other “Alt-tech” (Donovan, et al., 2019) platforms offer a midpoint between these extremes. These are accessible spaces that emulate the look-and-feel of mainstream platforms, offering users an intuitive experience. At the same time, they promise a more unconstrained experience, where “censorship” (read: content regulation) imposed by corporate platforms has been reduced to a minimum (Zhou, et al., 2019). The content circulating in these spaces, then, often oscillates between reasoned hyper-conservatism and more strident incitements to violence, between barely-suppressed racism
More than a mob: Parler as preparatory media for the Capitol storming and explicit racial slurs, between political mudslinging and personal death threats (Munn, forthcoming). Through both their content and their positioning, then, these platforms form a “bridging function between an established conservatism and an explicitly anti-democratic, latently or openly violent right-wing extremism” [6].

Radical right interests combine the “politics of identity” characteristic of new social movements with the “politics of visibility” that can be leveraged on social media (Milan, 2015) in order to mobilize an extensive and recognizable public. Like the mobilization occurring on other platforms, Parler users employ the novel affordances of social media to fashion a networked public (boyd, 2010), bringing together an array of pro-Trumpian voices to form an imagined collective. And yet rather than merely remaining “networked”, “mediated”, or “imagined”, as this language might suggest, the diversity of the 6 January crowd, ranging from military vets to real estate moms, demonstrated that such preparatory media has material consequences in the “real world.” Numerous articles in the wake of the storming noted how the off-line had moved online (Argentino, 2021; Lourens, 2021) — but more strongly we might question whether that distinction still makes any sense. As everyday life becomes increasingly mediated, preparatory media works ahead of political events, shaping the makeup and expectations of the publics who attend. Boots on the ground are preempted by boots on the platform.

Inciting

The second function of preparatory media is inciting participants towards violent action. “People do not commit political violence without discourse,” notes Apter [7], “they need to talk themselves into it.” Violence, in this sense, is a kind of threshold that must be incrementally attained, a moral and psychological boundary that must be worked towards. Radical and particularly far-right actors on platforms deploy a deluge of media that aims to move its audience closer towards this boundary over time. While wide-ranging in its messages and level of explicitness, this media shares a common logic: to stir up antagonisms, to aggravate and inflame them, and to constantly intensify this animosity to the point where it must erupt into violent action. If the mobilizing rhetoric discussed above worked to establish the boundaries of “us” and “them,” these kinds of challenges do the same, asking the real “patriots” to step forward and deeply commit while others stand on the sidelines.

One strategy for inciting violence is to drive a wedge between talking and doing, between symbolic gestures and transformative deeds. To this end, a number of posts in the Parler corpus stressed the difference between empty posturing and real action. “Just protesting is going to change the minds of the socialist democrat asshole’s who have stolen our elections!!,” quips one post, “If you believe that, we deserve what is coming ... if you don’t then it is time for you to suit up ruck up and get ready for battle tomorrow #stormthecapitol.” Here the act of voicing dissent is framed as too passive to enact any real change. “Gathering is great ... makes you feel good,” admits the same user, posting from Freedom Plaza, but “it’s like political masturbation. #stormthecapitol and arrest the Seditionists? You ready for that folks?” The same sentiments can be seen in the next post, where shock at defeat quickly turns to an urgent call to take up arms: “WE JUST ESSENTIALLY GOT VOTED OUT OF OUR OWN COUNTRY YOU FUCKING MORONS!!! ... PUT DOWN YOUR FAGGY TRUMP SIGNS AND PICK UP AN AR-15!!!! WAKE UP CHILDREN, IT'S TIME TO GO TO WAR!!!!” Across these posts, traditional political activity is dismissed as sign-waving or feel-good congregating that accomplishes nothing. This weak activity is derided, while violence is celebrated as the only means of bringing about real change.

If violence in general is called for, lynching is one frequent and disturbing form of this call. Early analysis of the event has pointed out the similarities between this pro-Trump mob and the earlier lynch mobs operating between the 1890s and 1920s in the southern United States (Jett and Robinson, 2021). These calls, along with similar calls on Parler to hang “Hussein Obama,” demonstrate a deeply racialized vein running through these incitements to violence. Lynching is white supremacy at work, an extralegal form of
punishment that flagrantly takes justice into its own hands. At the same time, hanging has a long history as a state-sanctioned punishment for the crime of treason, a strong association that Parler users draw upon. One poster offered to “build the gallows to hang the traitors for free. Joe Biden first.” Another provides a warning to “Mitch McConnell and the other 534 assholes up there in our house” that if they do not do the right thing, they will “hang from the trees on the White House lawn.” Lynching thus brings together the “white supremacist justice” \[8\] of the deep south with a patriotic justice for crimes against the nation.

In foregrounding race, these threats remind us that the ability to incite violence often relies heavily on whiteness. “You know whose lives DONT MATTER ???. BLM AND ANTIFA !!! NOT A FUCKING ONE IF THEM DESERVES TO BREATHE !!!!” reads one Parler post. This violent threat takes on a darkly racialized tone through its reference to breath, recalling the suffocation of George Floyd in 2020 by a group of police officers. In these contexts, whiteness provides a kind of innate protection even while openly calling for a violation of the law and the death of others. The white subject gets to frame these calls to violence as free speech, while the black or brown body must reckon with them as another layer of incrimination. “In one America, you get killed by sleeping in your car, selling cigarettes or playing in your backyard,” stated one black activist (Johnson, 2021), “in another America, you get to storm the Capitol and no tear gas, no massive arrests, none of that.” White militant groups such as the Proud Boys are able to flex this right while often benefitting from the support of law enforcement, while groups associated with the Black Lives Matter movement are treated to a militarized and often brutal police presence (Pita Loor, 2021). To be white is to enjoy the incitement to violence without consequences.

How will this violence manifest? One post that garnered over 35,000 impressions suggests three ways that violence might play out:

Well if it’s time then let’s start seeing some head rolls dammit we’ve been holding the line very patiently it is time to start seeing these treasonous bastard’s drop at the Gallo’s lined up and shot in the firing squads or wired into the chair and the hammer falls and electricity through the persons body frying them from the inside out.

Another highly popular post, with 25,000 impressions and 68 shares, urges attackers to “Hang traitors to the United States of America! #stopthestea #prosecutethedeepstate.” While this rhetoric is extreme, it pays to also attend to the platform metrics attached to them. Post impressions and shares are not simply trivia but demonstrate the kind of granular feedback that users can attain when proposing acts of violence. Social media provides an immediate feedback loop, allowing incitements to be authored, published, and iterated to find the most “successful” variation.

What role did such incitements play in the storming of the Capitol? Grand claims that violent media has a direct causal relation to violent action should be approached with extreme caution. Yet more modestly, we can observe how these kinds of posts play out violent activity, trying out different scenarios, envisioning possible attacks, and testing the public’s reaction to each possibility. This “war-gaming” of violence, while taking place through digital media, is not virtual nor inconsequential. While speculative, we might draw on parallel communities for insights as to the role these incitements play. In the Incel community, for instance, fantasies of violence against women function to “heighten and crystallize” violence (Scaptura and Boyle, 2020). In the case of serial and mass murder, scholars have suggested that ruminating on these fantasies “both conditions and provides justification, in the murderers mind, to actualize their violent plans” (Murray, 2017a; see also Murray, 2017b). These findings stress that incitements to violence, even if (not yet) pursued, carry out significant psychological and moral work, tabling possibilities and eroding inhibitions across an audience.

In the broader context of preparatory media, these incitements preempt and even anticipate future action, suggesting potential vectors of activity without being deterministic. “There wasn’t a specific time or a formal plan,” notes one researcher (Holt, quoted in Wamsley, 2021), but rather “an idea that was fomenting
and spreading and shared approvingly between users in these extremist communities.” In hindsight, the storming of the Capitol should have come as no surprise, for this was a dream that had already been envisioned and endorsed through the logics of social media. Incitements to violence thus carry out a triple move: dismissing traditional political means as ineffective, insisting that violence is the only solution, and laying out an array of potential scenarios in advance. These functions contribute to the broader work that preparatory media carries out in scaffolding future activity.

### Legitimizing

Hand in hand with this media’s role of inciting is its role in legitimation. If violence is to be expected and even embraced, this violence must nevertheless be justified. In the corpus of Parler posts, legitimation seems to take three variants. First, violence is justified as a means of restoring the country and society along with it. Violence is the bloody gateway that the nation must step through to regain its former glory. One user posted a quotation from Thomas Jefferson: “The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants,” suggesting that these activities remain true to the original ideals of the Founding Fathers. In this vision, the in-group retains an allegiance to the true America, while the out-group are traitors who must be punished for their betrayal. “American traitors hardly realize they are about to be reduced to little more than a fine red paste,” warns one post, “Weeping. Wailing. Gnashing of teeth. It’s all coming — because they have begged for it. What did they think would happen when they fucked with our Republic? ‘Fiat justitia ruat caelum.’”

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**Fiat justitia ruat caelum**— let justice be done though the heavens fall — asserts that “justice” must be carried out, regardless of how devastating the consequences will be for those who have transgressed it. Violence is the only way to recover the Republic.

This means of legitimation resonates with Ahmed’s [9] discussion of white nationalist victimhood, where it is not hate that unites these actors but a love for the oppressed race-nation. America, as many posts on Parler proclaim, has been pushed to the brink of collapse by a grab bag of enemies ranging from cultural Marxists to the Deep State cabal, Black Lives Matter supporters, and Antifa activists. These far-right “myths of imperilment” legitimize violence as a form of self-defense, rendering it not only acceptable but logical (Marcks and Pawelz, 2020). In this remarkable reversal, physical and verbal attacks on others are recast as an unfortunate but unavoidable act of defense. These people are patriots, the argument goes, sacrificing themselves to save the country. Their cataclysmic deeds will usher in a national rebirth (Griffin, 2018), returning the national body to some imagined halcyon period of the past. Only these visceral or even violent acts will “make America great again.”

Alongside national rescue, the corpus of posts legitimizes violence by framing the current context as extraordinary, as outside the bounds of the normal. Normally these participants would abide by law and order. Normally these groups maintain friendly or even cozy relations with police (Castle, 2020), as “thin blue line” flags online and off-line demonstrate. Yet these are not normal circumstances. Everything has become flipped, asserts one Parler post, including law itself: “Truth called a lie. Justice turned into an abomination. Freedom turned into slavery. Good called Evil. The Law to the Lawless.” The United States has entered a “state of exception” (Schmitt, 2005), yet it is the citizens rather than the state who have triggered it based on their anger at a “stolen election” and a fear of imminent defeat. In these unprecedented times, extralegal measures are required: law-abiding citizens will need to transcend the law in the name of public good. As one post in the Parler corpus urges: “The time for good people to do bad things has come.” Actions that are typically unconscionable will become unavoidable.

A final means of legitimizing these actions is through the use of religious cosmologies. This media makes extensive use of eschatological rhetoric drawn from a Judeo-Christian background. “I pray for all my Patriot friends in D.C. tomorrow. Put on the full armor of God because the day of evil has come.” states one post. Another post warns that “if the Patriots do not storm the Capitol, all is lost. If all is lost, it will be full confirmation we are in The Tribulation, seal #4.” Drawing on the notion of the seven seals from the book of
Revelation, the poster stresses the cosmic stakes of this event, a battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. With “Infinite Angels behind us” and an “All Mighty God Above us,” in the words of one user, this army will be unstoppable. This kind of language has a long lineage in the religious right (Martin, 2005) and has been more recently adopted by QAnon (Argentino, 2020).

A statement from Q, reposted on Parler, seamlessly draws together the state-of-exception rationale discussed earlier with this quasi-religious legitimization. These times are extraordinary; these are the end-times.

If America falls so does the world. If America falls darkness will soon follow ... . This is not about politics. This is about preserving our way of life and protecting the generations that follow. We are living in Biblical times. Children of light vs children of darkness. United against the Invisible Enemy of all humanity.

This moment is at once unprecedented and predestined. Patriots cannot let “America fall”, defending it with violence if necessary. And yet they can also rest assured that their actions, even if unorthodox, have the divine blessing. They are the “children of light” waging a righteous war against the “enemy of all humanity.” One phrase that frequently appears in the Parler corpus puts it simply: “God wins.”

Towards a theory of preparatory media

Preparatory media carries out work, mobilizing, inciting, and legitimizing. Mobilizing occurs through digitally native mechanisms, the same features we use to communicate, to share with others, and to stay informed of events. Participants no longer need to commit to being a card-carrying member of a far-right organisation, but can instead be drawn into a tighter affiliation with radical right elements over time. Digital affordances allow these calls to mobilize to circulate widely, winning adherents and building inertia. Inciting seeks to energize these converts, escalating anger until it reaches a critical threshold and erupts into violence. This incitement is not limited to the hushed voices of splinter cells, but takes place openly on the free speech havens of Alt-tech platforms like Gab, Parler, and others. Inciting media uses these spaces as testbeds, experimenting with different scenarios, eroding ethical boundaries, and anticipating a range of future activity. Legitimizing aims to rationalize future violence as moral, ethical, or even spiritual. These justifications are often based on longstanding tropes: nationalist renewal or religious warfare. Yet digital affordances allow this material to be repackaged, spliced into new configurations and presented in the vernacular of the Web.

What do these insights offer us? On an immediate level, they suggest some possible strategies for demobilization. “How do we defuse and transform the conditions that foster the development of fascism?” asked Kay Gabriel (2021) in the wake of the attack. Setting out the mobilizing, inciting, and legitimizing work of preparatory media helps us to understand its logic — not only how these processes take place through the affordances of digital media, but how they become compelling and coherent to individuals. Demobilization, then, would mean understanding this logic and intervening within it to reverse or redirect this activity. De-platforming certainly might be one component of this programme, but it is a blunt instrument that only grants a temporary reprieve: new platforms will always spring up in their place. A more sophisticated and immanent strategy can be seen in the work of ContraPoints (2021), a YouTuber who discusses and deconstructs right-wing arguments by playing various characters. Tagged with right-wing terminology, these videos circulate across the platform, appearing in searches or algorithmic recommendations. This work confronts the logic of radical right media in both senses, engaging with its ideologies empathetically but critically and employing the strategies of networked media to ensure it attains maximum exposure. ContraPoints gestures to a broader strategy that is less about “reining in” extremists
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Back to the neoliberal political middle and more about opening up space for “agonistic” forces to coexist (Mouffe, 2013, 1999). The aim here would be to encourage pluralism and productive conflict. Rather than the communicative echo chambers that characterize the contemporary digital condition, how might governments, technology providers, and civil society organizations create temporary zones where discordant forms of mobilization, incitement, and legitimation swirl and clash?

On a broader level, these findings foreground the critical role of digital media in political life. Based on the trends and patterns they saw emerging within these spaces, several researchers from institutions such as the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab and Advance Democracy warned of impending violence (Wamsley, 2021; Lytvynenko and Hensley-Clancy, 2021). “I don’t know how much clearer they could have been, they flooded the Internet with explicit directions and nobody listened,” lamented one analyst (Collins, 2021), “It’s kinda hard to hear the excuse that ‘it’s just the Internet.’ It’s not just the internet, this is real life.” Preparatory media stresses that digital media be taken seriously. Mediated does not mean imagined and digital does not equate to virtual. This is not a separate sphere walled off from the world, but rather increasingly the means by which our encounters and relations take place. Because of this, networked media plays a crucial role in structuring and shaping that broad domain we term the political. The storming of the Capitol certainly presented the stakes of this influence in a violent and spectacular way. Yet this influence is often more subtle and silent. Rather than the alarm bells evoked by “disinformation” or “radicalization,” this is an everyday or even banal phenomenon, a force exerted over time as online communities create, share, and consume content.

In bringing phrases like communities and content together, we stress that preparatory media must be understood as fundamentally sociotechnical. The mode and manner of mobilization is not simply a function of network affordances, but neither can it be condensed to a pre-existing cultural trait. These digital spaces are both/and, enabling the technological and the social to come together in complex ways. Parler, for instance, is a direct product of a right-wing culture that views mainstream social media as overly censored. Yet if this culture “comes with” certain propensities around freedom and anti-government, these aims are only advanced through the concrete activity of posting, sharing, hashtagging, friending, and the distinct set of mediated practices available on each platform. Far from neutral, platforms are “designed to invite and shape participation toward particular ends” [10], steering these practices in particular directions. This, then, is a deeply entangled relation, where sociality shapes, and is in turn shaped by technical structures.

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**Preparatory media beyond the radical right**

This work of medial structuring does not just apply to the right but also to the left, not just the Proud Boys and QAnon communities, but also to antifascist and anti-racist communities — albeit with important differences. Here we might briefly consider how preparatory media might map onto a movement such as Black Lives Matter. In terms of mobilization, studies have demonstrated how social media platforms and other networked media were used for scaling out this movement (Mundt, et al., 2018). Recalling the organizational and identity-forming work of the Parler posts, Ince, et al. [11] observe how BLM hashtags and other social media affordances were a form of “distributed framing” that allowed the movement to “develop an understanding of problems and solutions that does not exclusively rely on leaders” and “create communities focused around more specific issues.”

When it comes to incitement in the context of Black Lives Matter, we’re speaking about an incitement towards non-violent protest rather than the violent overthrow of government. “Social media is superbly suited to inciting protests,” argues Gordon (2017); in the case of Black Lives Matter, the “sense of anger at the lack of justice and despair at the unlikelihood of change were palpable in the tweets calling for protest and elicited an emotional response that ... brought people together to protest in the streets.” Incitement here can still be understood as an intensification of grief and anger aiming to move the subject across a threshold, to shift them from passive observer to active participant. Like the Parler posts, BLM media often
asserted that “merely” speaking is not enough, that a more visceral commitment to racial justice was required. Yet unlike Parler, this media stressed that this show of force must be non-violent, indeed that “by meeting violence with non-violence, they were able to draw attention to white supremacy, using the violence against them as proof” (Banks, 2018).

**Legitimizing** in the context of Black Lives Matter would focus on the broader narratives that were drawn upon to rationalize protests, funding, and organizational efforts. Networked media provided a way to frame the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner as a pattern rather than anomalies, to show how “racialized bodies are systematically stereotyped, stigmatized, surveilled, and positioned as targets of state-sanctioned violence” [12], situating them in a lineage of black oppression. Foregrounding this history meant that communities with a history of racist police brutality were more likely to participate in protests (Williamson, *et al.*, 2018). Black Lives Matter was also legitimized as part of a broader program of black liberation that sought to confront institutional racism, address systemic inequalities, and advocate for a redistribution of wealth and resources (Taylor, 2016).

Together, these observations sketch out some of the similarities and differences when projecting this model onto a left-leaning anti-racist movement. To be crystal clear, this is not to advocate for a “both sides” argument, where the radical right and a progressive, anti-racist movement such as Black Lives Matter are somehow made ethically equivalent or interchangeable. Instead, it is simply to observe some common “verbs” that political movements share (mobilizing, inciting, and legitimizing) and the increasingly crucial role that networked technologies play in achieving these ends. Preparatory media has implications for political life that extend beyond the specter of radical right violence.

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**Conclusion**

This article has focused on the recent storming of the U.S. Capitol to consider the role that digital media played in anticipating the event and structuring the expectations and activities of its participants. The article examined a single instance of this media, the “free speech” social network Parler, drawing on a large corpus of posts from the days leading up to and including the attack. Building on the author’s prior engagements with online radicalization, hate speech, and far-right cultures (Munn, forthcoming, 2020, 2019), the article used a theoretical sampling approach to identify themes that appeared significant and thickened them by identifying more material with the same keywords or authors. These observations were used to develop the concept of preparatory media and to unpack its key roles in mobilizing participants, inciting them toward violent activity, and legitimizing their assaults as logical or even ethical. Preparatory media frames events, establishes targets, and sets agendas, providing a degree of order and working against disaggregation online. This temporary stabilization contributes to a more mobilized and organized public body.

Of course, this research inevitably comes with constraints. At the time of writing, the storming of the Capitol is a recent event, making any appraisal partial. A comprehensive understanding of the attack and the events leading up to it will take time. For the sake of detail and empirical specificity, this study has focused solely on Parler. Future work might expand the scope of inquiry to include a broader array of mainstream platforms like Facebook, Alt-Tech platforms like Gab, and newer incumbents such as TheDonald.win. Comparing and contrasting these platforms could shed light on how preparatory media is localized, adapting to suit the user cultures and platform logics it is embedded within.

Rather than the “online moving off-line,” the Capitol attack demonstrates the heavy blurring of those boundaries, if not their collapse. With this in mind, advancing our understanding of the role of digital media within this act of terrorism is key to advancing our ability to anticipate future attacks and intervene against them. This is not to suggest that media theory provides a silver bullet for counter-terrorism, but simply to recognize how deeply interwoven this media is with daily life, a condition that also makes it indispensable for political life. Combating the mainstreaming of the radical right will mean going beyond the
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identification of “white rage” (Anderson, 2016; Adams, 2021) to map how that rage is structured and scaffolded in particular ways by networked media.

About the author

Luke Munn is an emerging media studies scholar based in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. His research investigates the sociocultural impacts of digital cultures and their broader intersections with race, politics, and the environment. Previous studies have ranged from Hong Kong protest to Uber labor and far-right radicalization, and have been featured in highly regarded journals such as Cultural Politics, Big Data & Society, and Information, Communication & Society as well as two monographs in 2018 and 2020.

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Notes


2. Le Bon, 2002, p. 3.

3. Conlon, et al., 2020, p. 3.

4. Ibid.


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