



Selected Papers of #AoIR2023:  
The 24th Annual Conference of the  
Association of Internet Researchers  
Philadelphia, PA, USA / 18-21 Oct 2023

## ONE HUNDRED NAZI SCREENS: INTERFACES AND THE STRUCTURE OF U.S. WHITE NATIONALIST DIGITAL NETWORKS ON TELEGRAM

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### Research Question

The “Alt-Right,” a white nationalist online coalition, has collapsed amidst a “revolution” in digital governance (Kor-Sins, 2021; Thompson & Hawley, 2021). After events like the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville that laid bare the scope of reactionary digital networking, Philip Schlesinger (2020, p. 1557) identifies a “regulatory turn,” or a shift in platform management that emphasizes moderation and stewardship over unrestrained cyber-libertarianism. Despite its many limitations, the regulatory turn disrupts the productive capacity of the Alt-Right. For example, abandoned by their service providers, once-sizeable neo-Nazi media outlets such as blog The Daily Stormer and podcast network The Right Stuff lost over 80% web traffic since 2017.

Nevertheless, the regulatory turn remains incomplete because white nationalists utilize web design to subvert public stewardship, directing their affinity groups to “ideological safe harbors.” One such platform is Telegram, a global, encrypted instant messaging application, the most popular messaging app in many post-Soviet nations. It is lauded for its end-to-end encrypted secret chats and its array of “privacy” affordances. Marketed to alleviate surveillance woes, Telegram enjoys spikes in its North American userbase after regulatory events such as the suspension of Donald Trump’s Twitter account and the deplatforming of far-right site Parler (Agarwal, Ananthakrishnan, and Tucker 2022). Telegram is just one of several “parallel” platforms through which white nationalists produce digital networks separate from, yet dependent and influential upon, mainstream platforms (Donovan et al., 2019). These strategies have allowed white nationalists to retain some of their digital presence. However, scholarship in this area primarily focuses on social media platforms and, consequently, privileges public groups and chats on Telegram that crawlers can access (Ali et al., 2021; Jasser et al., 2021). Consequently, scholars have yet to situate Telegram’s private and secret channels at the productive core of its safe-harbor status. To mind the gap between the accessible “public” and enigmatic “secret” sides of Telegram, my project interrogates how the app’s

Suggested Citation (APA): Van Schenck, R. (2023, October). *One hundred Nazi screens: Interfaces and the structure of U.S. white nationalist digital networks*. Paper presented at AoIR2023: The 24th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Philadelphia, PA, USA: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

interfaces enable the constitution of resilient reactionary digital cultures. How do white nationalists manipulate graphical and application interfaces to constitute a user experience which persists in reproducing racist digital networks?

## **Methodology**

Interface critique is a theoretical frame invested in tracing the social affordances of the screened window and its habitual manipulation. The interface gives “form of relation” to computational technology, conditioning the boundaries through which the user is simultaneously empowered to customize platforms and constrained from their totality (Hookway, 2014, pp. 1–7). In so doing, interfaces actively “[create] the subject of the user” by enforcing a normative use-case and prohibiting “exploits” in line with the owner’s design (Hadler & Haupt, 2016, pp. 7–8). The graphical user interface (GUI) aesthetically indexes the means by which users can customize their interaction with platforms, promising possession of artificial “folders” and “links.” Interface design is entangled with the productive infrastructures, physical and symbolic, which give life to online reactionary networks. Menus, tools, and pages impart mood, facilitate response, and pull the eye toward where to spend money. Interfacing with “skins” to facilitate transparency naturalizes the Western white masculine subject as the “average user” (Kendrick, 2005, pp. 397–399). Hence, analyzing the GUI lays bare the marriage of visibility and control which typifies computational media. Read more expansively than the sum of user interfaces, interfacing reifies the ideological black box which binds computation as a “user-friendly medium of empowerment” with it as a “command-based instrument of torture” (Chun, 2011, p. 59).

Interface critique develops a socio-technical understanding of affordances, which seeks to understand how the app’s functions are variously “featured” to bring the white nationalist subject into view. Since scrapers cannot penetrate secret messages, interface critique offers researchers a unique opportunity to appreciate the communicative work accomplished under the veil of secrecy. I apply interface critique by focusing on collective practices in which white nationalists cultivate a reactionary consciousness toward the interface as a seam. Artifacts such as instruction manuals, operational security checks, and community-generated navigation indices explicate the work white nationalists do, not merely to secure their Telegram communications, but to weaponize the interface as a technology for profiling each other, reinforcing a collective fantasy of victimhood amidst the regulatory turn.

## **Findings**

I argue that white nationalist Telegram networks co-opt the “enclave public” (Squires 2002; Bratich 2006) or a constituent and oppositional mode of secrecy within the unitary public, as a mode of white supremacist countermovement. White nationalist Telegram networks bring a racial fantasy of unmediated publicity to bear upon the regulatory turn through what Lisa Nakamura terms the “white interface which “situates user entitlement in relation to the computer interface as a highly visible and theatrical means by which masculinity and whiteness are allied with mastery over transparent interfaces” (Nakamura, 2007, p. 116). White interfacing indexes how white nationalists frame their

browsing as a technology of mastery, delimiting interface criticism from static platform architecture and toward dynamic media practices (Drucker, 2013). In this abstract, I will exemplify my findings by analyzing how the blog interface channels white anxieties of governance.

White nationalist Telegram networks figure publicity as an affectable object, a screened and layered operation that can be readily expropriated, decompiled, and disavowed. Interfaces require users to accept their inhibition through the use-case boundary. White nationalist platform designers encode racial meaning into this contradiction. Any form of regulatory leverage is evaluated as an assault upon white men's future by a cabal of Jewish techno-elites, Black invaders, and duplicitous women (Chebrolu, 2020, pp. 57–62). For example, the prominent “White Lives Matter” Telegram network, reaching at least 30,000 users every day, sends daily “operational security checks,” often screenshots edited in MS Paint, which instruct users on how to optimize Telegram's privacy settings to minimize the public discoverability of their messages. The purpose of these manipulations, however, is to position the white nationalist user with influence over, but unaccountability to, the same public. The graphical amateurishness of these “OPSEC Checks” underscores the logic of paranoia underlying not just white nationalist discourse but also larger neoliberal scripts of individual privacy that animate Telegram as an ideological safe harbor from “Big Tech.” Consequently, users encounter White Lives Matter as embattled political dissidents rather than as bourgeois developers formally identical to the mainstream regulators whom they despise. This fantasy of decentralization reinforces whiteness as the ultimate social linkage that makes the Internet usable, engendering a desire to violently eliminate racial others who threaten the coherence of the network (Atanasoski & Vora, 2019, pp. 27–30).

Interface critique equips the field to analyze the shifting terrain of the online far-right amidst the regulatory turn. The most resilient white nationalist platforms implicate their users' media practices into a racist revolution against the regulatory turn, sustaining a loyal base of consumers bent upon preserving their network as a window for the pro-white movement body. Much like Telegram itself, white supremacists pantomime as a radically democratic but victimized network in order to shore up their productive capacity. In this way, because it is situated as a boundary between the user and the dominant ideology of digital culture, the interface frames how subjects come into being, but not through the circumstances of the users' own creation.

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