US alt-right media and the creation of the counter-collective memory

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Abstract

The media play an important role in shaping the collective memory of their users. Popular movies, TV shows or commemorative newspaper texts influence the ways in which people remember and forget. Many scholars have attempted to describe this connection; however, little attention has so far been paid to alternative media. This article aims to analyse the features of the collective memory constructed by the media associated with the so-called alt-right (alternative right) movement in the United States. I argue that far-right media produce an ethnically exclusive collective memory, which consequently aims to counter the mainstream collective memory. The findings of this study come from the critical analysis of how the New York Times and Breitbart News engaged in a nationwide discussion on the Confederacy’s legacy that ensued in August 2017 after the decision to remove the Robert E. Lee monument in Charlottesville, VA and the mass protests that soon followed.

Keywords

Alternative media, alt-right, collective memory, Confederacy, far right, memory discourses, Robert E. Lee monument

Introduction

This research focuses on the ability of the far-right media to shape their users’ collective memory. Since the media are widely considered to be a platform of collective remembering and forgetting, it comes as no surprise that a number of scholars have attempted to analyse the relations between the media and the popular perception of the past (e.g. Neiger, 2011; Peri, 1999; Zelizer, 1992). Yet little attention has so far been paid to alternative media and their ability to construct and reconstruct collective memory. This study aims to fill that gap, as it helps to explore the manner in which alternative media counter the mainstream collective memory. The recent discussion on the Confederacy’s legacy in the US media, which followed the removal of the Robert E. Lee monument in Charlottesville, VA in August 2017, serves here as a case study of how far-right media use history to perform their main functions. In order to confront collective memories designed by mainstream media and far-right media, I have combined frame analysis with critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2001; Van Dijk, 1997) in order to examine the coverage of the Confederacy in the New York Times and Breitbart News in the period 1–31 August 2017. The former paper represents US mainstream media, whereas the latter is associated with the US far-right movement – the alt right – and is widely read by its sympathisers.

This study suggests that the far-right media produce a counter-collective memory to that provided by the mainstream media, which produce an ‘inclusive’ collective memory that is

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acceptable to the majority of those in society. The character of the collective memory designed by the far-right media, on the other hand, is as exclusive as it is built on ethnic foundations. Since the perception of history impacts the way the present is perceived, by creating a counter-collective memory, the far-right media challenge the contemporary political and social status quo. Moreover, history serves as a tool for them to build and strengthen their users’ identity by indicating enemies and explaining contemporary issues. In other words, collective memory serves to construct a ‘community with closure’ (Coudry, 2002), setting the corpus of the past figures and symbols that will be revered by the target group and rejected by others.

What are radical right alternative media?
Although there exists a plethora of definitions of alternative media, most of them emphasise their role in resisting mainstream media discourses. If such discourses are understood as reflecting and constructing social entities and relations (Fairclough, 2001), then their critique must involve both mainstream media coverage and the very process of news production. In their introduction to *Alternative Journalism*, Atton and Hamilton (2008: 1) point out that ‘alternative journalism proceeds from dissatisfaction not only with the mainstream coverage of certain issues and topics, but also with the epistemology of news’. Since the mainstream media operate within an insurmountable network of ideological, business, and personal connections (Herman & Chomsky, 1988), the alternative media attempt to provide new mechanisms of gaining and disseminating news and opinions. This means, among other things, giving voice to marginalised groups and engaging users at every stage of media production. For that reason, some researchers argue that ‘alternative media’ should be substituted with other terms, such as ‘community media’, ‘radical media’, ‘activist media’ or ‘citizens’ media’ (Downing, 2001: ix; Rodriguez, 2001: 20; Waltz, 2005: 3). In this sense, such media are considered as ‘communication spaces where citizens can learn to manipulate their own languages, codes, signs, and symbols, empowering them to name the world in their own terms’ (Rodriguez, 2001: 24).

Most often, definitions like the one above are applied to those media outlets that operate on the left wing of the political spectrum. If alternative media first and foremost serve to emancipate minority groups and foster political, social and economic change, then they appear to be unfit for the conservative, reactionist environment of the radical right. After all, much as they are politically and socially diverse, far-right groups (especially in the United States) generally remain anti-statist in the sense that they oppose ‘new rights as well as new regulation or redistribution’ (Plotke, 2002: lxvi). Still, since the radical right meets strong opposition from the mainstream politics and the media, it needs to establish its own means of communication with both – its sympathizers and the outside world (Blee & Creasap, 2016: 207–8). The process of production and dissemination of such media to some extent resembles the functioning of alternative media, traditionally associated with left-wing groups. As Downing (2001: ix) explains, alternative (radical) media may ‘represent radically negative as well as constructive forces.’ In other words, even though ‘fundamentalist or racist or fascist radical media are pushing for society to move backward’, they should still be regarded as alternative media (Downing, 2001: ix).

Far-right media perform several functions, all of which are designed to counter the hegemony of the mainstream media: first, they recruit new members; second, they produce and spread propaganda, not only among their sympathizers but also the general public; third, they mobilise their users to direct activity, such as attending political rallies or staging a protest; fourth, such media create and integrate communities of like-minded people, giving them a sense of unity and strength (Eyerman, 2002). Drawing from the very nature of far-right groups, this function should be considered fundamental. This is why, unlike ‘traditional’ (left-wing) alternative media, which first and foremost seek to empower their users, radical right media focus on ‘collective repetition’. The repetition of the same racist stereotypes and as the construction of a unique
corpora of signs, figures and symbols solidify collective identity and consciousness (Sik, 2015: 151). This is often achieved by hierarchical methods of organisation and production (Atton, 2004: 62), which exclude any large-scale active participation of audience. Talk radio (so-called ‘right talk’) and old-fashioned printed pamphlets - still widely popular among far-right sympathizers in the United States - only minimally engage their users. However, the recent online activity of the American alt-right and other similar social movements are characterized by disordered, horizontal organization with seemingly no management centre.

Until the development of the internet, far-right media - much like all alternative media - enjoyed very limited access to a wider audience. Despite strong conservative bias of some of the US mainstream media, far-right ideas were blocked from entering the public sphere. Recently, however, American radical right has successfully bypassed this ‘alternative ghetto’ and established a strong Web presence by creating its own online platforms and using mainstream social media. What is more, ‘right-wing sites often visually mimic more mainstream sites to make them familiar to viewers, while infusing racist and/or xenophobic rhetoric into their messages’ (Blee & Creasap, 2016: 278). In the United States, this tactic was first used by various outlets of the Tea Party in the second half of the 2000s and was further mastered by the Breitbart News Network and its numerous clones in the 2010s.

The internet has also made it possible for radical right ideas to transpire to the public sphere. In their analysis of the Tea Party movement, Skocpol and Williamson (2012: 128) observe that:

[Far right] ideas and news stories often pop up on conservative talk radio or influential websites ... before getting picked up by conservative newspapers and television ... Once a story is up and running, hosts on local conservative radio talk shows play a pivotal role in keeping discussions going and spreading issues or controversies to every community across the land.

This convergence of old and new, alternative and mainstream not only helps the far right avoid being locked up in an ‘alternative ghetto’, but also leads to the radicalisation of the public sphere in general. Consequently, the integrative function of the radical right media is expanded far beyond their traditional audience. In other words, ‘collective repetition’ is exercised on a large part of society.

Media and collective memory

‘Collective repetition’ plays an important role in the construction of collective memory. Even though it is individuals who remember, ‘it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is in society that people normally recognize, and localize memories’ (Halbwachs, 1992: 38). Such memories shape social frameworks and identities by giving unrelated individuals a sense of belonging to an intellectual and cultural legacy of an entire community. Commenting on relations between collective memory and identity, Olick (1999: 335) argues that ‘group memberships provide the materials for memory and prod the individual into recalling particular events and into forgetting others. Groups can even produce memories in individuals of events that they never “experienced” in any direct sense.’ What constitutes collective memory is being decided here and now. This means that, depending on social and political contexts, some of its elements remain unchanged while some are replaced by others. Moreover, the interpretation of facts and figures from the past is also susceptible to change. In other words, something that was once perceived as positive may later be judged as negative and vice versa. This fluidity of collective memory – ‘the active past’ – contrasts with history understood as ‘the remembered past to which we no longer have an “organic” relation’ (Olick, 2008: 7).

Media as a platform of collective remembering and forgetting record ‘a certain apparent continuity and emphasize its loss from memory’ (Anderson, 1991: 204). What was once performed by elders, relatives and religious leaders now remains almost an exclusive prerogative
of the mass media. Considering their ability to shape people’s opinions, the media also influence how people remember and forget (Huyssen, 2000: 29). Apart from providing an interpretation of the past, the media select which of the elements of the past are highlighted and which are marginalised. It thus can be repeated after Thompson (1995: 35) that,

> as our sense of the past becomes increasingly dependent on mediated symbolic forms, and as our sense of the world and our place within it becomes increasingly nourished by media products, so too our sense of the groups and communities with which we share a common fate is altered; we feel ourselves to belong to groups and communities which are constituted in part through the media.

It is true that individuals may, and in fact do, differ in their opinions about this or that past event; however, if such differences cross the generally acceptable frames of interpretation, such individuals risk being excluded from the group.

The mainstream media set the agenda and frames of collective memory. Since those ‘who control the present, control the past and those who control the past control the future’ (Orwell, 2008: 44), the interpretation of past events should be regarded as one of the key elements of maintaining the political, social, and economic status quo. Although Orwell’s 1984 is pure fiction, his vision of a dystopian society shares many elements with actual totalitarian regimes. For example, Thomas J. Anastasio and colleagues (2012: 258) agree with Orwell’s assumption, pointing out that ‘who controls the present can reshape collective memory’, and thus force collective formation in various directions. Such ‘historic’ hegemony, exercised by the mainstream media, relies on a set of events, figures and behaviours that are depicted as desirable and worth remembering. Most often, they serve to build national cohesion and unity, set the acceptable interpretation and indicate the enemy. As such, mediated collective memory is exclusive in its character, rejecting any deviations from the official interpretation. In its ultimate form, media coverage of the past may lead to its ‘sacralisation’, when selected elements of the past acquire a spiritual quality and their critics face some sort of excommunication (Wasilewski, 2016: 128). In the process of setting agendas and framing collective memory – not only in authoritarian regimes – the mainstream media may collaborate with political, cultural and religious authorities. As a result, alternative narrations are not only discursively excluded, but may also be punished by law. Russia and Ukraine provide good examples of penalising of critique of established elements of collective memory – the Great Patriotic War and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army respectively.

The exclusive character of the mainstream collective memory relies on removing all ‘extremities’, instead offering a ‘polished’ version of the past. It means that historical figures, symbols and events, which are at present are considered too radical or too divisive for the general public, are erased from the official memory discourse. This imperative prevents radical left and radical right narrations from entering the mainstream collective memory. While the former is considered unpatriotic, the latter seems to be too divisive for the contemporary multicultural US society. According to Florini (2016: 114), the US mainstream media follow the country’s elite and stand guard over ‘color-blindness’ public discourse, including memory discourse:

> Mainstream US racial politics in the post-Civil Rights Movement era have been increasingly dominated by neo-liberal discourses of ‘color-blindness,’ and in recent years many have claimed the country has entered a ‘post-racial’ era. Such assertions frame racism as a relic of the past and obscure contemporary racial injustice.

However, this mainstream discourse of ‘color-blindness’ meets opposition from various minority groups, which find it too simplistic.

Alternative media, including far-right media, aim to oppose mainstream collective memory. By providing their own narration of the past, such media achieve three goals. First, ‘with their own truths and ideological preferences [alternative media] try to establish their voices in society, and to legitimize themselves’ (Rutten & Zvereva, 2013: 5). Second, they actively undermine the...
dominant memory discourse, which sometimes brings noticeable successes. For example, every inclusion of minorities (ethnic, racial, sexual, cultural and so on) into the US mainstream collective memory has been pressured by various social movements and their media. Finally, a mediated alternative narration builds a sense of a unity among the media’s users. This is especially important for the far-right media, the main function of which relies on the creation of community and identity. Selected figures and events from the past lay the foundations for the group’s unity, since they provide ‘a kind of “identificatory” determination in a positive (“We are this”) or in a negative (“That’s our opposite”) sense’ (Assmann & Czapicka, 1995: 130).

The far-right media try to reconfigure collective memory, usually in an ethnically problematic fashion. Not only does this allow them to reinforce the existing identity of the movement; it also attracts new people who often feel at a loss in an ever-growing multicultural, multi-ethnic environment. In being part of far-right general discourse, memory discourse shares its basic features, such as ‘nativism’ – a combination of nationalism and xenophobia (Wilson & Hainsworth, 2012: 2–3). In other words, unlike mainstream media – which construct collective memory that is ‘digestible’ to all members of the contemporary society – the exclusive character of the far-right media’s collective memory relies on rejection of all elements and narrations that do not meet the expectations of their target group. Much as the far-right memory discourse employs broad categories, such as nation, society or simply ‘people’ – which makes it seem inclusive – it is highly exclusive, as these categories are redefined ethnically.

**Media framing of collective memory**

According to Entman (1993: 52), to frame is to ‘select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/ or treatment recommendation for the item described’. Frames provided by the media define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements and suggest remedies. They can therefore be regarded as a tool to maintain the political and social status quo. According to Gitlin (1980: 257),

> the dominant frames are taken for granted by media practitioners, and reproduced and defended by them for reasons, and via practices, which the practitioners do not conceive to be hegemonic. Hegemony operates effectively – it does deliver the news – yet outside consciousness.

In this sense, the past itself can be regarded as a frame ‘through which we perceive and comprehend current events, making remembering a powerful process that shapes how we understand both ourselves and our social world’ (Florini, 2016: 116). The media frame collective memory by highlighting certain events and figures, while simultaneously downplaying others. Moreover, the selected elements of the past are depicted in a certain way, which results from contemporary political and social conditions. Even though ‘the roles assigned to the past are by no means constant’ (Irwin-Zarecka, 2009: 9), collective memory evolves and so do media frames. Since the mainstream media aim to maintain the status quo, however, they are more likely to use consensus frames rather than conflict frames. This means that they construct a collective memory that strengthens national unity (an inclusive feature) while marginalising any potential past controversies (an exclusive feature). The far-right media, on the other hand, take the opposite strategy: they build unity and identity among their users by focusing on the memories that emphasise differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’. In other words, the far right media frame collective memory as an exclusive phenomena that can be shared only by those who ‘truly’ belong to the group.

Frame analysis allows us to compare how the collective memory constructed by far-right media differs from the collective memory mediated by mainstream outlets. Moreover, the ways in which media frame the past answer the question about their contemporary social and political
goals. After all, frames ‘provide a conceptual foundation for social change that both informs collective identity and orients a group toward other actors, institutions, and the broader public’ (Rohlinger et al., 2012: 55).

**Method and the sample**

As already mentioned, this study relies on critical discourse analysis (CDA). Although CDA, as Van Dijk (1988: 131) points out, is ‘not a homogenous model, nor a school or a paradigm’, it has become widely popular as a qualitative research method. According to Fairclough (1995: 132), it aims to

- systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wide social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power.

As a consequence, one of the key features of CDA is its multidisciplinarity, meaning that it connects within itself society, discourse and social cognition. In this approach, as Van Dijk (1993: 18–19) reminds us, ‘ideologies are the basic frameworks for organising the social cognitions shared by members of social groups, organizations or institutions. In this respect, ideologies are both cognitive and social.’ In other words, at the centre of each discourse lies ideology. If then ideology holds the key to understand a discourse, it also manifests itself in collective memory. A number of studies have indicated the role of collective memory in ideological control of societies, especially – although not exclusively – in totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. For example, Eder and Spohn (2005) write about the soviet state’s ideological control over ‘historical writings and imageries of the pre-War past’ in the formerly German territories, which were incorporated into the Soviet Union after 1945. In more general terms, Schudson (1992: 54) points out that ‘historians are obliged to rewrite history as the values of their society change’. In his study, Schudson regards culture as the element that affects collective memory the most. However, judging from the way he understands the term ‘culture’, it can be considered a synonym for ideology. Defined as a ‘coherent and relatively stable set of beliefs or values’, ideology influences common perception of the past. As a consequence, collective memory – being constructed by the media – is yet another tool to maintain elite hegemony. Critical discourse analysis helps to uncover hidden ideological traces in collective memory.

In this study, I use a specific form of CDA: the discourse-historical approach (DHA). According to Wodak (2015: 1), who has developed this method, the DHA ‘aims to denaturalize the role discourses play in the (re)production of noninclusive and nonegalitarian structures and challenges the social conditions in which they are embedded’. This approach analyses both discourse and its context, since the former shapes the latter as much as the latter shapes the former. Wodak and others indicate several main characteristics for the DHA, among which the most important are interdisciplinary and particularly problem-oriented interests; triangulation as a methodological principle; and orientation toward application. The choice of the DHA for a study concerning collective memory was deliberate and derived from previous research. In fact, the first study for which the DHA was developed concerned the role of the past in contemporary Austrian politics (Wodak, 1990). Since then it has been used in projects related to research on politics of memory (Heer et al., 2008; Kovács & Wodak, 2003; Muntigl, Weiss & Wodak, 2000). In this study, the DHA served as a method of close reading of the selected texts and the basis for frame analysis. Close reading is crucial in the DHA, as it provides concrete discursive samples at the textual micro-level.

Comparative frame analysis for this article was performed on the *New York Times* and *Breitbart News* coverage of the events concerning the shroud of the Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville, VA in August 2017. The city council’s decision to remove the monument
provoked vociferous protests from various far-right groups from all over the state, which culminated in a mass rally on 11–12 August 2017. On the second day of the rally, one of the far-right sympathisers rammed his car into counter-protesters, killing one person (an Antifa activist) and injuring at least 19 others. This tragic episode sparked the print and electronic media to think over the Confederacy’s legacy and its place in America’s contemporary collective memory. Even though the majority of texts in both the New York Times and Breitbart News were published after the 11–12 August 2017 rallies, in the analysis I included articles from throughout August.

The frame analysis was performed on the corpus of texts containing the word ‘Confederacy’, published by the New York Times and Breitbart News in August 2017. Although the debate in the US media on the civil war had already been ongoing for some time, it was doubtlessly the events on 11–12 August 2017 in Charlottesville that gave it an additional boost. By selecting texts from throughout August 2017, I achieved two things: first, I was able to analyse whether the Charlottesville events had any impact on the intensity of reporting on the civil war and its heritage by both media outlets; and second, it allowed me to investigate whether and how the Charlottesville events changed the way the selected texts were framed. By close reading of the gathered texts, followed by their critical analysis, I was able to single out the main frames used in the historical discourse. Depending on what ‘aspects of a perceived reality’ were made more salient, I qualified each frame as inclusive or exclusive in the terms explained above.

Although ‘in US culture, historiocising an event often serves to depoliticize it and allows for the creation of at least the “illusion of consensus”’ (Florini, 2016: 114), due to the activity of the alt-right media, the debate that ensued after the Charlottesville rally was highly partisan. Both mainstream and far-right media tried to establish the place the Confederacy should have in the nation’s collective memory. The debate therefore served as a good example of how various media frame their historical narration.

The Confederacy and the mainstream media

In order to indicate how the US far-right media frame collective memory, and more specifically how they frame the Confederate heritage, I first performed frame analysis on the mainstream media – in this case, the New York Times. In a number of studies, this newspaper has been chosen for content analysis as it ‘sets the agenda for many other media’ (Shoemaker, 1996: 88), including online mainstream media. Accordingly, it can be assumed that the way the New York Times frames history is replicated by other mainstream outlets – at least in part. The New York Times remains one of the most influential newspapers in the United States, widely read by the country’s political and economic elite. While it is commonly considered liberal, the paper regards itself ‘a voice that speaks to all’ (Spayd, 2016), equally distanced from both main parties. Positioning itself in the centre, which is characteristic for the majority of the US mainstream media (Fox News being one of the notable exceptions), requires the usage of those frames that support consensus and unity while avoiding any potential conflict. The same applies to both contemporary issues and history. In the period between 1 August and 31 August 2017, the New York Times printed 49 texts (58,520 words) concerning the event in Charlottesville, which also mentioned the Confederacy and the Civil War. To retrieve the newspaper articles, I used the Academic OneFile database. The unit of analysis for this study was each mention of the keyword ‘Confederacy’. The search was performed on 5 October 2017.

Although the analysed texts focused on the tragic event in Charlottesville, they all contained some information about the Civil War in general and the Confederacy in particular. The top five historical figures who were mentioned were, respectively, Robert E. Lee (27 times), Thomas ‘Stonewall’ Jackson (nine times), Jefferson Davis (eight times), George Washington (five times) and Thomas Jefferson (four times). Since it was the decision to remove the Robert E. Lee monument that sparked the 11–12 August 2017 rallies in Charlottesville, it comes as no surprise that the
general’s name prevailed in the news. However, together with the remaining names, it was subjectively used by journalists to provide a desired historical context. Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis epitomised the Confederacy’s ultimate goal, which was maintaining slavery, while George Washington and Thomas Jefferson served as the symbols of those slave owners who nevertheless sought equality for all. Apart from historical figures, the articles mentioned certain historical organisations. Among those, the most prevailing one was the Ku Klux Klan (it was mentioned in 17 articles), with others, such as the Sons of the Confederate Veterans, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) and Black Lives Matter playing a far more marginal role. Other keywords characteristic of the New York Times’ narration on the Confederacy included racism, slavery, white supremacy, lost cause, nationalists and the Confederate flag.

Drawing from these features, it can be assumed that the New York Times framed the Confederacy first and foremost as a partisan movement to sustain slavery. In consequence of such framing, the Civil War appeared to be a conflict between defenders of slavery and its opponents. Journalists depicted canonical Confederate figures, such as Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis, through the prism of their positive attitude towards slavery. As the New York Times publicist Karen L. Cox (2017: 23) explained, their heritage was one of ‘the darker lessons of Southern history’. Their negative portrayal contrasted unfavourably with that of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson – two of the most admired presidents in US history (respectively no. 1 and no. 4), according to opinion polls (Taranto, 2005). Even though both of them, as one journalist puts it, ‘were imperfect men’ who owned slaves, they still ‘helped create the United States’ while ‘Confederate generals like Jackson and Lee took up arms against it’ (Schuessler, 2017: A12).

Another factor that strengthened such framing was the introduction of the Ku Klux Klan into the main narration. The fact that it was mentioned in over one-third of all the published articles, together with the negative connotation attached to the organisation, allowed journalists to link the Confederacy to post-Civil War racism in the South. Moreover, since members of the Ku Klux Klan were directly involved in the 11–12 August 2017 rallies in Charlottesville, their present defence of the Confederate’s legacy could be located within the historical context. The same role in the narration was played the Sons of the Confederate Veterans and the United Daughters of the Confederacy. By contrast, the NAACP and Black Lives Matter served as symbols of the constant struggle for civil rights. Still, since their contemporary activity is often regarded as partisan and divisive, these two organisations were rarely mentioned.

What did gain an important place in the newspaper’s narration on the 11–12 August 2017 Charlottesville rally, however, was likening the Confederacy to Germany’s Nazi past. For example, one journalist quoted in the New York Times argued that, ‘Americans should treat their Confederate history the same way that Germany treats its Nazi past’ (Dubenko, 2017). Defining Confederation as a force similar to Nazism unequivocally brings up associations with the Holocaust. Keeping in mind the role that the Holocaust plays in contemporary mainstream American culture, where it functions as ‘a screen memory’ (Landsberg, 2004: 115), locating it on the same level as the Confederacy excludes the latter from the collective memory throughout the process of the sacralisation of national history.

The New York Times framed the Confederacy as a movement associated with slavery, violence and racism. Being such a negative and polarising phenomenon, it could not become part of the nation’s collective memory. Moreover, the paper associated the historical Confederacy with the contemporary activity of various white supremacist groups in the United States and elsewhere. By constructing symmetry between defenders of the Confederacy’s legacy and Nazi sympathisers, the newspaper managed to frame the Confederacy as un-American. As one World War II veteran was quoted as saying, ‘These neo-Nazis, whatever you call them – I thought we’d ended all that. These people have nothing to do with American values’ (Egan, 2017: A20). Such
framing allowed the New York Times to exclude the Confederacy’s legacy from the American collective memory as too destructive for social cohesion. Keeping in mind that mainstream media maintain a social and political status quo – in this case, the multicultural society – the Confederacy as a racist and xenophobic phenomenon, shared only by a group of radicals, could not find a place in a collective memory that aims to integrate all of society.

The Confederacy framed by the alt-right media

In the United States, contemporary far-right groups have taken the form of the so-called alt-right (alternative right). The alt-right can be defined as ‘a racist, far-right movement based on an ideology of white nationalism and anti-Semitism. The movement’s self-professed goal is the creation of a white state and the destruction of “leftism,” which it calls “an ideology of death”’ (Stack, 2017: A15). The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC, 2017) points out that the alt-right is ‘characterized by heavy use of social media and online memes’, with the alt-right instrumental to the growth of the movement. The number of media outlets associated with the alt-right is constantly growing. Moreover, despite their radicalism, some of the alt-right platforms have become major news sources for a considerable number of people. According to one Pew Research Centre study, ‘consistent conservatives are tightly clustered around a single news source, far more than any other group’ (Mitchell et al., 2014). The tendency to rely exclusively on a medium that shares one’s ideology was confirmed during the 2016 US presidential election, when the majority of Donald Trump sympathisers received information from conservative media only. Furthermore, alt-right media managed to shape the election agenda, as ‘Clinton’s coverage was focused on scandals, while Trump’s coverage focused on his core issues’ (Garofalo, 2017). The last presidential election confirmed one more thing: the strong position of the Breitbart News website within the US right-wing media ecosystem. Established in 2007, breitbart.com has moved a long way from being a news aggregator to become the top right-wing media outlet in the United States.

The 11–12 August 2017 rallies in Charlottesville were thoroughly reported by Breitbart News. Much like the New York Times, the events provided an opportunity to discuss the Confederacy’s heritage and its part in America’s collective memory. In the period between 1 August and 31 August 2017, Breitbart News published 32 pieces that included the keyword ‘Confederacy’. The texts were retrieved via breitbart.com. The website provides a very limited search engine, which makes it hard to acknowledge the number of 32 texts as final; however, they can be considered representative of the entire discourse. Not only was the number of texts smaller than in the case of the New York Times; they were also much shorter – an average Breitbart News article length was 553 words compared with 1194 words in the New York Times. This suggests that breitbart.com focused less on the historical context and more on the contemporary issues. In this sense, it can by hypothesised that the Confederacy and the discussion about its place in the American collective memory mainly served to integrate and mobilise alt-right sympathisers. The size of the texts can also be explained by the nature of online media, which prefer shorter textual forms over longer essays.

When it comes to the historical figures who were mentioned most often by Breitbart News, their hierarchy, to some extent, corresponds with that of the New York Times. Robert E. Lee was mentioned 10 times while Stonewall Jackson received five mentions and Jefferson Davis four. Unlike the mainstream media, however, in its coverage of the 11–12 August 2017 Charlottesville events, breitbart.com used a plethora of other historical names, few of whom had anything to do with the Confederacy. Others included George Washington, Sam Houston, George Henry Thomas, Harper Lee, Christopher Columbus, Martin Luther King and Lyndon Baines Johnson. As a result, the polarisation between Confederate heroes (Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, Jefferson Davis) and the founding fathers (George Washington and Thomas Jefferson), which was so visible in the New York Times coverage, became blurred on breitbart.com.
Furthermore, the Breitbart News coverage of the 11–12 August 2017 Charlottesville rallies included various organisations. Here, the presence of the Ku Klux Klan was far less prevalent, referred to in just three texts. Black Lives Matter also appeared three times, while the Sons of Confederate Veterans, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the Southern Poverty Law Centre and the Workers World Party were mentioned only once each. In addition, Breitbart News avoided pejorative wording: racism, slavery, nationalism or white supremacy hardly ever appeared in the website’s narration. On the other hand, the texts often referred to communists, socialists, anarchists, Islamic terrorists and Antifa, as well as other controversial and/or radical groups. Breitbart News thus managed to link the opponents of the Confederacy’s legacy with radicalism and divisiveness, whereas its defenders appeared to represent American values.

Breitbart News framed the Confederacy as a legitimate and, more importantly, as a positive part of American history, which should have its own place in the nation’s collective memory. Such framing allowed alt-right sympathisers to unite around the struggle to defend the Confederacy’s legacy and strengthened their sense of belonging. Unlike the New York Times, which devoted much of its coverage to historical background, Breitbart News focused on contemporary issues. The little information that the website did provide depicted the Confederacy in a positive, conciliatory light. In this sense, its legacy seemed to be the legacy of the entire nation. For example, in an article from 15 August 2017, Amanda House (2017b) reminded that ‘more than 30,000 North Carolinians died fighting for Southern independence from 1861 to 1865, a figure representing around one-in-eleven white men in the state’. In another text published on 14 August 2017, Ryan Kruger wrote that,

when the Civil War broke out, members of an Atlanta militia called the Gate City Guard were among the first to take up arms against the North. Afterward, some survivors became part of what would eventually become the Georgia National Guard.

Accordingly, Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis deserved a rightful place in US history, together with George Washington and other founding fathers.

From this point of view, Breitbart News considered every attempt to eradicate the Confederacy from the nation’s collective memory to be un-American and a ‘historical purge’. As the historical background was scarcely provided, the past and present intertwined with each other, turning the Confederate legacy into the foundation of contemporary America. As one journalist quoted an interviewee as saying (House, 2017a):

We all have a choice to make – we can stand united against those terrorists in our midst who would do us harm, or we can dissolve into petty bickering that cracks the foundation our ancestors fought so hard to preserve.

Whereas the New York Times underlined parallels between defenders of the Confederacy’s legacy and various racist and white nationalist groups, especially the Ku Klux Klan, breitbart.com depicted the entire anti-Confederacy movement as partisan and divisive. As a result, the website coverage of the 11–12 August 2017 Charlottesville rallies often referred to numerous radical left organisations, including communists, socialists and anarchists – all of which are perceived as foreign, treacherous and un-American by the majority of conservatives. The following sentence should thus be read not just as a simple opinion-free piece of information, but rather as a message carrying an important ideological declaration (House, 2017b):

The battle over America’s history reignited following the weekend’s deadly events in Charlottesville, Virginia. The protest against the scheduled removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee led leftist organizations and politicians to step up their long-running war on Confederate monuments.

The Breitbart News narration of the Confederacy’s legacy seemed far more combative than that in the mainstream media. Whereas the New York Times coverage maintained the established
social consensus over the Civil War, with the Confederacy as a symbol of everything evil in American history, Breitbart News aimed to redefine its place in the nation’s collective memory. According to the website, every attempt to ‘purge’ the Confederacy from American history – which the removal of Confederate monuments was portrayed as being – amounted to a ‘war on American identity’. Unsurprisingly, breitbart.com depicted those who wanted the monuments down as a small group of radicals with implied foreign connections and disregard for American culture. In an article published on 18 August 2017, Awr Hawkins (2017) wrote that, ‘the American left has adopted Taliban-like tactics in the destruction of historical icons. They have pulled some down, completely uprooted others, and even set some on fire.’ For Breitbart News, what was at stake was not just the Confederacy’s legacy, but the general perception of American history by future generations. The website quoted – without any comment – conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer, who had said (Hanchett, 2017):

Our problem is we’re instilling in our children an understanding of our past which is a patho-history. All of our sins, the Indians, African-Americans, slavery, women, it’s a history of oppression, which is such a one-sided and sort of destructive understanding of history that you get a generation who come out of it and think, ‘What’s left, what is worth defending?’ That’s where I really worry.

Breitbart News used the 11–12 August 2017 Charlottesville events to frame the Confederacy’s legacy as an integral part of US history and the nation’s collective memory. Consequently, those who defended the positive remembrance of the Confederacy represented the core of the American nation, whereas their opponents were depicted as radicals trying to reshape the country’s history. In this sense, the alt-right website’s discourse served to ‘bind and define a people’s sense of who they are from past to present and on into the future’ (Bruyneel, 2017: 36). In Breitbart’s narration, the 11–12 August 2017 Charlottesville events were a tragic symbol of an ongoing war with American history. They could also be read as an attempt to voice objection against multiculturalism (or ‘cultural Marxism’ as the alt-right calls it) that has dominated the public discourse and as such has threatened the ‘traditional white America’. As the Southern Poverty Law Centre (2017) points out, the alt-right’s ‘core belief is that “white identity” is under attack by multicultural forces using “political correctness” and “social justice” to undermine white people and “their” civilization’. This assumption finds support in the words of one leading alt-right publicist, Malcolm Jaggers (2017), who has admitted that Confederate symbols ‘are in fact representative of an iteration of White identity. And to be even more specific, they represent that identity as it is being besieged by liberal dogma on race and “social justice”’. In other words, the discussion over the Confederacy’s legacy that ensued after the 11–12 August 2017 events in Charlottesville was depicted by Breitbart News as yet another front in the ideological war. Consequently, collective memory plays the same role as other ‘ideological battlegrounds’, where the ‘white man’ is threatened and under attack by various enemies – leftists, foreigners and so on (Ekman, 2017: 353).

Framing the Confederacy not only as a positive element of the nation’s collective memory, but also as one that needs to be defended, allowed Breitbart News to achieve several goals: strengthening the identity of its users, defining the enemy (enemies) and placing collective memory in a broader context. As the website provided only scarce historical background, figures and symbols associated with the Confederacy seemed one-dimensional. Deprived of all negative connotations, such as slavery or racism, Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis and the Confederate flag could be portrayed as canonical elements not only of the alt-right’s collective memory, but of that of the entire nation. As a result, those who demanded the removal of the Confederate monuments or criticised Confederate heroes and symbols became enemies of the country. The goal of all patriotic Americans was thus seen as being to defend the Confederacy’s legacy against multiculturalism and political correctness.
Conclusion

In the analysis of the coverage of the 11–12 August 2017 Charlottesville rallies, some significant differences have been found in the framing of the Confederacy and its legacy by the *New York Times* and *Breitbart News*. Whereas the former rejected the Confederacy as too divisive and destructive for the nation’s negotiated and commonly acceptable collective memory, the latter framed it as one of the cornerstones of contemporary American identity. Despite its seemingly inclusive character, as numerous references to the entire American nation may suggest, the alt-right version of collective memory was highly exclusive. Following Atton (2004: 63), it can be stated that this inclusive notion derives from the fact that far-right media have assimilated ‘the language of multiculturalist discourse through their adoption of terms such as “equality,” “fairness” and “rights”’. Where the *New York Times* provided a ‘polished’ collective memory, which would be digestible for various cultural and ethnic groups that comprise the contemporary American society, however, *Breitbart News* constructed a version of the past acceptable to one group only. Ethnicity, or rather ethnic nationalism, seems to be key to the *Breitbart News* framing of the Confederacy and its legacy. History, then, becomes yet another issue, like immigration or civil rights, which the alt-right describes in explicitly ethnic terms. It derives from the fact that alt-right sympathisers usually define themselves in terms of race, ethnicity, language and religion.

Drawing from the above, it can be stated that the *Breitbart News* used the past to forge the common identity of alt-right sympathisers. The website coverage of the Confederacy and its legacy was built on the same assumptions as other far-right discourses concerning immigration or civil rights. As such, it complemented them. The *Breitbart News* Confederacy discourse shared the language, themes and phrases of the website’s other discourses. By arguing that history is yet another front in the ideological war that patriotic Americans wage against multiculturalism and political correctness, *Breitbart News* has managed to reverse the meaning of the Confederacy. Such figures as Robert E. Lee or Jefferson Davis were not considered from the perspective of their attitudes towards slavery or racism, but from the perspective of their usefulness in the contemporary debate. Similarly, the Confederate flag did not stand for ‘the defence of slavery and racial prejudice’ – as the mainstream media maintained – but for ‘a representation of Southern history, Southern heritage, and Southern culture. [It is tied] to questions of state’s rights, and the absence of federal oversight’ (Ferdman, 2016).

The qualitative analysis of the *Breitbart News* coverage of the Confederacy and its legacy has confirmed the hypothesis that the far-right media create their own versions of collective memory. It is a collective memory that derives from completely different assumptions to those of the mainstream collective memory. According to Neiwert (2017), far-right sympathisers ‘have always specialized in creating a kind of alternative universe, a set of alternate explanations for an entire world of known facts, made possible only by willingness to believe in easily disprovable falsehoods’. Such collective memory is thus exclusive in its nature, and it primarily serves to build a ‘community with closure’, as the corpora of figures and symbols it includes can be accepted only by a specific group of people. Those who reject such narration on the past are depicted as enemies – not only of the group, but of the entire nation. By doing this, the far-right media create collective memory to contest the social and political status quo, forge and strengthen their users’ identity and mobilise them to action.
References


