

USA: The Role of New Media in the Charlottesville 'Unite the Right' Conflict

Georgiana BIGEA

Abstract. *The impact of new media on polarization and of social media on populist messaging is as poorly understood as it is widely debated every time that a violent incident occurs. The 2017 Unite the Right rally from Charlottesville has turned into violent conflict through everyday individuals transforming into fighters. Our goal was to find out why, by doing a conflict analysis of the events. The literature review as well as the events leading up to the rally have shown that new media has a polarization-intensification effect on the conflict parties, independent from partisan politics or media bias. To study this phenomenon deeper and to find out how it led to violence, we employed Randall Collins' escalation model. Then in the second part, we focused the research on social media and its role in the events, with the help of Bernard Mayer's triangle of conflict and root cause model. Our findings were that new media-exacerbated polarization and social media were the primary tools for instigation and escalation, which transformed the conflict from potential to actualized. While the first fostered the element of group solidarity, the second provided resource for mobilization. We consider this research valuable in the field of conflict studies insofar as this type of conflict analysis is an important tool to detangle the invisible inter-connected strings that characterize modern conflicts. Interdisciplinary exploration is recommended in the future, with the benefit of gaining a holistic perspective that is more faithful to the dynamic nature of reality.*

Keywords: *social media, Charlottesville, polarization, populism, conflict.*

Georgiana BIGEA

MA Graduate, Faculty of Political, Administrative,
and Communication Sciences
Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
Email: georgiabigea@gmail.com

Conflict Studies Quarterly
Issue 25, October 2018, pp. 20-48

DOI:10.24193/cs.q.25.2
Published First Online: 05/10/2018

Introduction

On August 11 and 12 in 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia, the Alt-right¹ organized a rally to protest the city's resolution to take down the statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. The Alt-right was met by counter-protester groups formed out of students, town inhabitants, and even a local militia. The third party that was involved was the local police force that ended up instating a state of emergency and canceling the rally before it even began, due to violent outbreaks between the factions on the day before and the morning of the rally date. As the groups were scattering, one of the protesters got in his car and drove into the crowd, killing a 32-year old Charlottesville woman. On the same day, one of the helicopters surveying the area crashed and the both crew members lost their lives. In the aftermath, inhabitants of another town took down their local Confederate statue, a protest started in Atlanta, President Donald Trump's statements spiked conflict and controversy throughout the nation, and some rally goers were denounced on Twitter, were publicly chastened, and lost their jobs.

This paper will explore through conflict analysis the part that new media played in this violent conflict, taking into account the polarization intensification effect that it can have. The role of new media and particularly of social media has been explored before in the context of sociology, conflict studies, and of media studies. We chose to address it because in the Charlottesville case as in many others, the media was the only medium of communication through which the parties talked at each other. Therefore, understanding this role is essential for conflict prevention, mitigation, and peacekeeping. Communication is a pillar of cooperation and conversely, of conflict. The existent societal polarization becomes exacerbated when the parties are unable to relate to the other one's point of view or are even unaware of it, creating a conflict escalation loop.

Research Questions

Our study plans to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What were the implications of new media-amplified polarization for the Charlottesville conflict?
- (2) What was the role played by social media in the Charlottesville events?

Methodology and Literature Review

In our conflict analysis, we will rely on Randall Collins' escalation and de-escalation models and Bernard Mayer's Triangle of Conflict and Conflict Root-Cause Analysis Model.

1 "Alt-right" is a term referring to white supremacist, neo-Confederates, neo-Nazis, neo-fascists, and other far right groups. They are usually characterized by one or more of the following: isolationist, protectionist, antisemitic, identitarianist, nativist, Islamophobic, right-wing populist, homophobic, and antifeminist.

We chose these from the plethora of existing conflict analysis models because they give due space to the two issues that we aim to explore: social media and polarization amplification, in other words the role of communication and the consequences of its flaws.

To contextualize our first research question, polarization is known in the field of conflict studies as an escalator (Ramsbotham, Miall, & Woodhouse, 2011; Randall, 2012), as a determinant of the magnitude of wars and arms races (Dougherty & Phaltzgraff, 2001) and a feature of intractable conflicts. Moreover, recent empirical work provides evidence suggesting that polarization outperforms fractionalization as a predictor of civil conflict (Montalvo & Reynal-Querol, 2005; Reynal-Querol, 2002).

New media plays a part in proliferating or countering polarization while in the context of social media, the “filter bubble” phenomenon creates a high level of group homogeneity.

That leads us to the second question. We deem it observable that the social media has changed conflict. The connection between the two has been approached in the literature from a variety of angles. From changing conflict reporting (Aslam, 2016), to offering a new platform to those previously oppressed (Diamond, 2010; Zeitzoff, 2017), to allowing groups of people to organize in protest, to enabling remote radicalization. It has been weaponized: allowing war actors to control the narrative (Zeitzoff, 2017), enabling direct communication from incumbents, insurgents, (Mesquita & Dickson, 2007; Rosendorff & Sandler, 2004 cited in Zeitzoff, 2017) and candidates for election (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012), to micro-targeting of messages, foreign meddling in elections, gaining support for conflicts (Mutz, 2006), and giving whistle blowers a platform (Panama Papers), encouraging citizen journalism, coordination for finding safety in times of conflict (Castells, 2007), and an ability to elicit an international response and expose wrongdoers as well as complicity in genocides Rwanda (Deane, 2013), legitimization of negative messaging through its publishing or tacit legitimization (Mutz, 2006; Mikkonen, 2017).

However, due to the rapid development of technologies, the field of conflict studies is still in need of research to explore the causes, correlations, and effects of what has been happening. Although many of these topics have been discussed over and over in the western media, which makes them seem “obvious,” a search in the available scholarly literature will reveal gaps that are yet to be filled.

This is important because the problems and developments that we are witnessing are likely to exacerbate (Zeitzoff, 2017), with the predicted increase in the number of internet and social media users and the advent of technology embedment in all aspects of life. Due to the inherent globalization and rapidity of information flow, conflict can be provoked at every step. The demand for transparency and the ability of any one actor to reveal sensitive data, generates a certain volatility (Deane, 2013), that conflict practitioners and peace workers ought to be concerned with.

Due to the interconnectedness and multi-faceted effects of social media consumption – into behavioral psychology, philosophy, communication, sociology, IT, marketing, neurology, cognition, conflict, political science, and so on, we believe that studying the phenomenon ought to be multi-disciplinary as well.

In our research, we also give a particular attention to populist² messaging on socializing networks as a contributor to increased polarization, due to the significant echo that the populist President Donald Trump's statements have had in the aftermath of the Charlottesville violent events.

The effect of populist rhetoric proliferation is predicted by conflict studies literature to be social cleavages and conflict characterized by intractability (Mikkonen, 2017; Esteban & Schneider, 2008) because increasing group salience leads to self-categorization, identification with the group over the individual identity, and intergroup animus (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Oakes, 2002; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994).

In the case of the US, polarizing discourse falls on the fertile ground set by the 10% increase in partisan animosity that the country has seen from 1994 to 2015 (Gramlich, 2018). But by fostering intergroup conflict, group prototypes are made even more distinctive from each other, i.e. group members are encouraged to conceptualize a disputed issue by actively contrasting where their group and the opposing group stand (Abrams, Wetherell, Cochrane, Hogg, & Turner, 1990; Hogg, Turner, & Davidson, 1990; Mackie & Cooper, 1984; Mackie, 1986).

Although the scope of this study is the US and US-originating resources, materials, and points of reference, we believe that its implications are global. The US media is globally consumed, as are the social media platforms it is distributed by. Second, the US is a major culture and view-point influencer in the western world. It has been a model of liberalism for centuries, and has been the archetype for democracy. Its positioning – transmitted through the news outlets or the President's tweets – enhance and legitimize certain behaviors, and even announce an example of what will soon be adopted in others parts of the world.

Structure

The first section will briefly introduce Collins' Theory of Social Conflict as well as Meyer's Root Cause Model. Then, we will approach our *de facto* case: The Unite the Right Rally

2 Populism is inherently characterized by an overly-simplistic divisive description of the world, a conflictual view of the "people" against the "elites" that operates within the "good" versus "evil" dichotomy, historically appealing the most in times of distress, economic recession, etc. We will show how this combines with the media's predilection for framing most of its stories in a conflictual paradigm which intensifies polarization. (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neil, 2001 cited in Han, 2016).

in Charlottesville, 2017. Using information and resources available online, we will start by presenting the historical events. In doing so, we will also follow Collins' framework of analysis to map out the conflict evolution: from escalation to de-escalation and the subsequent conflict that emerged. This step will be particularly revealing of the impact of media-intensified polarization in various stages of conflict. After that, we will apply Mayer's Triangle and Root-Cause framework to understand what occurred and why the conflict erupted. Lastly, we will give extended attention to Communication, one of Mayer's root causes and the subject of our second research question. Here, we will illustrate the role that social media played in the conflict from its inception to the aftermath. We end our research with our concluding remarks and recommendations for further exploration.

Randall Collins' Theory of Social Conflict was published under the title *Conflict Sociology* in 1975 in which he drew together all that sociology had learned about conflict and tried to formally state theories. He reduced the hundreds of theoretical statements that found into the following four main points:

1. The unequal distribution of each scarce resource produced potential conflict between those who control it and those who don't. The basic scarce resources can be found in Weber's work: economic (material), power (social positions within networks), status, and cultural resources (Collins understands them as control over the rituals that produce solidarity and group symbols).

2. Potential conflicts become actual conflicts to the degree that opposing groups become mobilized. The two main areas of mobilization are: emotional (moral) and symbolic. Here, the prime component is collective rituals. According to Collins, groups don't simply need material goods to wage war, but there have to be emotional and symbolic goods as well. "The more a group is able to gather physically, create boundaries for ritual practice, share a common focus of attention, and a common emotional mood, the more they will:

- a. Have a strong sense of group identity.
- b. Have a worldview that polarizes the world into two camps (in- and out- group).
- c. Be able to perceive their beliefs as morally right.
- d. Be charged with the necessary emotional energy to make sacrifices for the group and cause".

The second main area of mobilization concerns the material resources, i.e. communication and transportation technologies, materials, monetary supplies, and people. A conflict outcome is also dependent on who can replenish their supplies. A higher level of ritual solidarity, however, can also lead to victory. Civil rights movements are often the case here.

3. Conflict engenders subsequent conflict. In order to *activate* a potential conflict, according to Collins, parties must have a sense of moral rightness. There has to be more than a utilitarian perspective, namely a sense of moral superiority. In addition to affirming social solidarity, ritualized acts of violence are used to garner support.

4. Conflicts diminish as resources for mobilization are used up. The two fronts of demobilization are: emotional resources (important in the short run) and material resources (for the long-run). In intense conflicts, emotional resources are very important, while milder forms of conflict tend to continue longer than the intense ones. This can be seen in guerilla warfare and terrorism, as well as peaceful political movements. Relatively mild forms of conflict also tend to deescalate due to bureaucratization, which can co-opt them. For instance, inequality is something that is studied nowadays, and for that reason it has been co-opted, integrated.

The other front where conflicts can be lost is de-escalation of ritual solidarity. The group has to periodically gather to renew the emotional energy. The intensity of conflicts will also vary by focus of attention, i.e. conflict that is multi-focused will tend to not be able to generate such high levels of emotional energy (Collins, 1975).

Randall Collins' Models of C-Escalation and D-Escalation assumes that conflict escalates through a series of feedback loops. It starts off with stating Simmel's theory elaborated in 1956 by Coser: external conflict increases group solidarity. Solidarity, in turn, causes conflict as it is a key weapon. More solidarity means more capability to mobilize and fight and more sensitivity to threats.

There are three outcomes of successful interaction ritual. The first, group solidarity, makes one willing to sacrifice oneself for the group (Collins, 2011). It also creates idealized symbols of membership, including identifying as good or evil depending on the relation to the group boundary. Emotional energy in conflict takes the form of courage, belief in a win, etc.

The first one of the feedback loops for Collins, after conflict and solidarity cause each other to rise, is the atrocities/polarization loop. He defines atrocities as *opponents' actions that we perceive as especially hurtful and evil, a combination of physical and moral offense that we find outrageous*. Even from the level of conflict talk, atrocities can begin, in the way *trash-talking [...] precedes fights*. (Collins, 2009). Genocides for example, start with the buildup of emotional polarization. Additionally, both sides perceive themselves as strong and the enemy as weak, therefore they expect to win.

The second loop is when the group seeks allies by appealing to ideals, virtues, atrocity stories, emotional appeals by describing how evil the other side is. A typical move, says Collins, is to magnify the enemy threat to include everyone.

Lastly, the third loop is mobilizing material resources. The availability of material resources and of replenishing capacity are indicative of the strength and duration of the conflict.

In terms of de-escalation, Collins says that winning or losing is a matter of how one side successfully attacks key components of the enemy's ability to escalate. Another path to de-escalation is through emotional burnout. Although conflict produces it is unclear how long this solidarity lasts.

Another reason for de-escalation is that material resources are no longer available. This is a reason for which riots tend to be short, because the participants need to go back home, eat, return to work, etc. Additionally, some of the alliances that earlier supported the conflict may fall through. Solidarity is also a source of idealism, so when it dissipates, individuals automatically become less willing to sacrifice themselves for the group. At this point, all the elements required for escalation reverse and lead to de-escalation implicitly.

Bernard Mayer's Triangle is a prominent triangular-type conflict analysis framework. He developed it in 2000, tracing conflict as occurring along cognitive (perception), emotional (feeling), and behavioral (action) dimensions (Mayer, 2000). The framework developed by Mayer to identify conflict sources is called the wheel of conflict, derived from Christopher Moore's Circle of Conflict. According to Mayer, there are five basic forces: the way that people communicate, their emotions, their values, the structures within which these interactions take place, and history.

The Chronological Events

Loop #1 Solidarity breeds polarization, conflict, and atrocities

In August of 2017, white nationalists and supremacists were going to the US town of Charlottesville, Virginia for a Saturday Unite the Right rally. Their plan was to march in a torchlight procession on August, 12, to protest against the removal of a statue of Gen. Robert E Lee. The torches were meant to evoke similar marches of Hitler Youth and other such manifestations. One of the leaders, Richard Spencer, texted a reporter a little after 8 PM: "I'd be near campus tonight, if I were you" he wrote, "After 9 p.m. Nameless field".

The parties involved in the conflict at this point were: a coordinated and armed company of white nationalists, a determined group of counter protesters intent on stopping the Saturday rally, and state and local authorities who were caught off guard by the events.

By 8:45 PM on Friday, a group of about 250 mostly young white males, the majority of which were dressed in khaki pants and white polo shirts, started crossing the Nameless Field, an open field behind the Memorial Gymnasium at the University of Virginia. Their torches were still dark and they had organizers carrying bullhorns. At a signal, their torches were lit and they took off at a brisk pace, yelling "Blood and soil!" "You will not replace us!" "Jews will not replace us!"

Shortly after, next to the Jefferson statue, they met a group of about 30 university students, both white and of color, who had locked arms around the statue to face down the hundreds of torchbearers. The marchers surrounded the statue. Then they chanted “White lives matter!”.

Within moments, chaos began: chemical irritants were sprayed, shoves, punches were thrown, many marchers threw their torches toward the statue and the student. There was only one university police officer on site and several minutes went by before reinforcements appeared.

The basis of this conflict is racial segregation and a fight for supremacy within the American society. In this case, the scarce resources that the parties are fighting over are power and status. While the equal rights movements are trying to establish a political correctness that would ensure equality and spare the feelings of previously humiliated groups, the white supremacists and other such factions fight to maintain their ancestral dominance.

But what made this conflict erupt then and there? We believe the answer lies in Collins’ second principle: **through mobilization potential conflicts become actual conflicts**. Through physical mobilization, i.e. gathering for the rally and against the rally as well as emotional, by perceiving themselves as safeguarding an ancestral right, the two groups had the necessary elements for eruption. A noteworthy addition presented in Collins’ model as well is the “ritual practice” which in this case was wearing the traditional wealthy white man golf club “uniform,” the Nazi reminding torch ritual, and scanting mantras. That simultaneously achieved all the four points in Collins’ conflict theory: created a strong sense of group identity for the rally-goers due to the uniform and of the high degree of racial homogeneity, created a clear discrepancy between them and “the others,” i.e. those not wearing the same items and not carrying torches, chanted “White lives matter” which was a mantra that is morally sound and charged each other with sufficient emotional energy to be willing to jump in the confrontation for each other.

At the opposite end, the students were unified by a common goal and furthermore by the discrepancy between them and the others. External conflict was what increased their group solidarity. They were holding hands, which was their own ritual signaling solidarity. Soon thereafter, the atrocity³ occurred: the white supremacists threw their torches at the group. This seemed particularly “atrocious” due to the opposition being formed by students and the battleground being a university campus. Their young age and the fact that this was happening on university ground, were additional aggravators. Breaking the “peacefulness” of the event was like crossing the Rubicon.

3 Defined as “Opponents’ actions that we perceive as especially hurtful and evil, a combination of physical and moral offense that we find outrageous” (Collins, 2012).

Loop #2 Seeking out allies

The next day, the rally was supposed to begin at 5 PM, but at 8 in the morning the park was filling up. The rallygoers waved nationalist banners and chanted slogans, many carrying shields, clubs, pistols, or long guns.

The counter protesters were there as well, with members of anti-fascist groups yelling at the marchers. Many were armed with sticks and shields. They were joined by locals, civil rights leaders, onlookers, and members of church groups. Most stores and restaurants were closed for the day in Charlottesville.

At 9:30 AM, some clergy members clasped arms and began singing "This Little Light of Mine" while the nationalists yelled "Our blood, our soil!"

The third force arrived. Over 35 members of a self-styled camouflage wearing militia walked in, armed with semiautomatic rifles and pistols. The self-designated commander of the unit, Christian Yingling, said they were there to maintain peace. On the site, there were law enforcement officials as well.

Tensions were beginning to rise. Later, the Charlottesville Police Chief said that the rallygoers went back on the initial plan meant to keep them separate from counter-protesters by coming in through all entrances instead of the designated one.

At this second stage, Collins' model is reflected faithfully again. At least two out of the three conflicting parties returned with allies the next day, although some of them were less keen to participate in violence (e.g. the town people, the church group members) while some others came uninvited (e.g. the militia was not invited by the Police department per se). However, they showed up with reinforcements and that was the second step in the escalation. Additionally, by not intervening, the police forces became enablers of the conflict.

The increase in the scope of the conflict aggravates the potential outcome. Due to the presence of armed militia, police forces, and more people than before, the battle territory extended and there were more volatile elements involved. By just changing the entrance that they came in through, the white supremacists helped escalate the conflict altogether.

Loop #3 Mobilizing material resources

At almost 11 AM, a group of white nationalists carrying large shields and wooden clubs approached the park on Market Street, facing about twenty counter-protesters who formed a line across the street to block their path. The marchers charged through the line with a roar and the counter-protesters fought back punching and spraying chemicals. At this time, the police did not move to break up the fights. Later, the Police Chief motivated that the policemen had to hurry to get their armors. At 11:22 the Police declared an unlawful assembly. At 11:28 AM, a local state of emergency was declared.

The 3rd loop of escalation was unraveling when the parties showed up at the scene of the protest armed with weapons and bats, sprays, and other combat utensils. Because there was more weaponry on site, the number of variables increased and the outcome was more difficult to control. Also, acquiring weapons instigates the opposite party to acquire weapons as well, quickly inflaming the situation. The police observed this and moved to cancel the gathering. That was the first step towards de-escalation.

De-escalation begins: loss of solidarity and loss of allies

Within minutes of the dispersal order, the nationalist groups began leaving the park, still exchanging insults with counter-protesters as they were making their way. As Washington Post Writes, “Go home” and “Go back to Africa” were being yelled from everywhere.

At this point, several people were injured and some arrested, but nothing serious seemed to have happened. Despite some sporadic fighting around town, it all appeared to calm down. The rally had been stopped before it could even begin, both sides were claiming victory, and both thought the police should have intervened earlier to keep the peace. Rally-goers were informed that a state of emergency had been declared and the rally would not go forward.

The loss of the Police as an “ally”

While as before they were relatively uninvolved, they intervened and scattered the people, thus bringing the main de-escalation factor - the loss of solidarity. By being banished from the park and scattered around, neither the protesters nor the counter-demonstrators could preserve their unity and thus became less willing to engage. However, the emotional build-up did not get discharged, so there was sufficient “fuel” for the atrocities to continue. Far from emotional burnout, there was still plenty of tension for the participants to draw from.

In Collins’ theory, the victory can be claimed by the party that is in a better position to limit the opponent’s ability to escalate. In this case, the structural authority of the Police and the fact that the conflict participants had to replenish resources, i.e. they wanted to eventually return home, they were not committed to becoming outlaws, weighed the balance in favor of the authorities and put a halt to the gathering. The sporadic violent outbreaks were broken up and the nucleus of the conflict put out. This mirrors Collins’ 4th principle, that conflicts diminish as resources for mobilization are exhausted.

Loss of material resources and another atrocity

At 1:42 PM, the Charlottesville city Twitter account tweeted: “CPD and VSP respond to 3-vehicle crash at Water and 4th Streets. Several pedestrians struck”. It was not immediately clear from this statement, but witnesses seemed to have no doubt that it was “absolutely intentional” (Heim, 2017). Rallygoer James Alex Fields Jr. had roared his

Dodge Challenger at a crowd of pedestrians. Heather Heyer was killed and 19 others were injured. Later in the day, another report arrived that a helicopter monitoring the rally had crashed in Albemarle County, just a few miles from Charlottesville.

Collins' third principle is *conflict engenders subsequent conflict*. He also mentions that conflict parties use ritualized acts of violence in order to garner support. Though this incident was not particularly ritualized, it was surely a way to "score a win" for the perpetrator's side. Before this, the protest had not been very noteworthy. But because on the side of the supremacists, one of the protesters decided to supplement his material resource by getting behind the wheel of his car and attacking people with it, this enlarged the scope considerably. This step ended the Charlottesville Rally conflict – due to the strong release of energy, but it was the atrocity that generated the next conflict that carried on in the media. Already, this was the 1st loop from a conflict involving the US President, the media, and the left/right supporters from all over the US.

Polarization and Conflict

Polarization is quintessential for conflict because solidarity is a "key weapon" in conflict (Collins, 2012) and polarization is a variation of solidarity, combined with intergroup animus between the few sides. Each step of the conflict, from the initial rituals, to the atrocities, breeds more in-group solidarity and anger and fear toward the enemy.

In this case, the students, the rally-goers, and the town inhabitants might have all gotten along in other circumstances of their lives. Neither one of them had particularly violent intentions to begin with and certainly not towards the woman that died in the aftermath. The parties seemed to develop "moral blindness" to their own atrocities, and this usually proves that the enemy is "morally subhuman". Their polarization was an intense perception that whomever is inside the group is good, and whomever is outside of it is evil. As Collins says, polarization leads to atrocities "because we feel completely virtuous, everything we do is good [and] the enemy is completely evil, they deserve what is done to them". Thus, each part perceives the enemy as weaker and deserving of what they are getting.

On the day of the Charlottesville incident, the events happened too quickly for there to be social media polarization, but in its preparation as well as aftermath, social media was the war room.

Mayer's Conflict Triangle and Root-Causes Model

As presented in the first part, Mayer's Conflict Triangle illustrates three sides: cognitive, emotional and behavioral.

Mayer's Triangle of Conflict revealed the following:

	ALT-RIGHT	ANTI-PROTESTERS	CITY AUTHORITIES
COGNITIVE (GOALS)	Maintaining the statue of Robert E. Lee	Removing the statue	Maintaining the city order.
	Reclaiming/maintaining white supremacy and privilege	Condemning white supremacy (equality)	Protecting the rule of law.
EMOTIONAL	Feeling left out and concerned what their place would be if they “let” ethnic minorities be equal or even advantaged. Attachment to history as a part of their identity.	Feeling that basic human rights were under attack. Fear that history might reoccur.	Fear of escalation. Fear for their own lives.
BEHAVIORAL	Organized a march.	Rallied to protest against the alt-right.	Mobilized to secure order. They were idle at the beginning and then declared an unlawful assembly and state of emergency.

In order to understand the contribution of social media to this conflict, we delved into Mayer’s Root-Cause model as well:

	ALT-RIGHT	ANTI-PROTESTERS	AUTHORITIES
EMOTIONS	Attachment to history, race identity.	Feeling afraid/anxious that the alt-right might dominate again. Desire to confirm that the past is shameful.	Concern at the sight of an increase in scope, weaponry, and rising tensions.
VALUES	Security and chances for themselves and their children. Belief that maintaining the past and social status was essential to that.	Claiming their equality. Fighting against white supremacy. Denouncing the errors of the past as a sign of good faith.	Protecting the law. Maintaining public order.
STRUCTURES	The whites used to have supremacy over the Blacks for centuries and discrimination is still a reality in the United States. Black people are more likely to be jailed, to fall sick, be treated differently, be unable to get jobs, they are likely to live in ghettos, get into selling drugs, etc.		They voted for removing the statue. They allowed the rally and then declared it “unlawful” together with a “state of emergency.”

History

Fragmentation of the American Society

In his 1993 Presidential Address, Randall Collins was saying that “there is more overt conflict in [the US] than perhaps ever before, at the same time, this conflict is extremely fragmented” because of the multitude of mobilized conflict groups. Some of the conflicts of the 21st century (over gender, sexual preference) were quite inconceivable in the previous centuries. It was also in the 19th century that nationalism and ethnicity became prominent. These conflicts flourished due to the widespread availability of resources for organizational mobilization.

What’s more, as per the Marxian theory, capitalist competition that pushes for innovation and for increased production capacity reduces the demand for labor, which is indeed reflective of the American crisis. But then there was no Marxian class mobi-

lization. Marx's "key factor [was] technology displacing labor" but the high level of fragmentation along with institutionalization of conflicts (e.g. studying inequality) kept the tensions under control.

The difference is that in 2016, Donald Trump – through his populist and divisive rhetoric – has given the American society a point of reference around which to become polarized. Additionally, new media rendered itself as an optimal vehicle to transmit that message, therefore intensifying its effect. The POTUS has unified seemingly different factions under a binary system: pro-Trump and anti-Trump, thus meeting the 3 most important characteristics of polarization: "high degree of homogeneity within each group; high degree of heterogeneity across groups; small number of significantly sized groups" (Esteban & Ray, 1994, p. 824).

Thus, even when the subject of discussion is not political per se, the Donald Trump persona offers a position. That is, even if someone did not vote for Donald Trump, by being anti-immigrant or pro-deportation, they become stereotyped (or they even self-stereotype to fit that image).

The conflictual media-framing stimulates self-categorization and increases intergroup animus. If the group identity becomes more salient (and there are a very small number of overarching opposite identities) it leads to exaggeration of stereotypes, assimilation to the group prototype (solidarity) and afterwards, as Collins showed, into conflict.

As we discussed earlier, self-definition makes people behave more consistent with group prototypes and the presence of inter-group conflict helps make prototypes even more distinctive from each other. For example, in the US the political polarization has risen to the level that party sympathizers see the other party as a threat to the nation.

Anti-liberalism

The white supremacists used the historical trope of the torches to remind people of young Nazis. Some journalists speculated that by reviving those symbols, they were reintegrating them into the mainstream, in a populist attempt to gain support. Additionally, Donald Trump's rhetoric and his consequent election has given momentum to Alt-right and white supremacist groups, due to the fact that among his bold stances there's a strong anti-immigrant and even pro-whites position. The press noted that Donald Trump (and the Brexit vote in Europe) were protest-votes, coming from a desire to bring about *change* and something *different*.

Many Americans would seem to agree to what philosopher S. Zizek pointed about the rise of populism (Zizek, n.d.): that it is an indication of the inability of the liberal moderates to provide adequate answers to today's problems. Liberalism became so widely adopted because at the end of the eighteen-century it imposed itself by bringing a new solution to the problem of how to govern the countries of Europe. It came as an alter-

native to the previous choices: having a republic that was “torn by factions” (Manent, 2014) or an oppressive monarchy. This manner of governing was the synthesis of two great options that emerged in European political history: the republic of the antics, and the monarchy.

A distinction must be made, as to how political liberalism and economic liberalism are different. While the first is marked by a continuous endeavor towards achieving *better* representative governing, the latter is focused on economic prosperity. And while the word has a strong positive connotation, prosperity can obviously have negative consequences. Yet in spite of this difference, the two are indispensable to each other.

Today the conditions under which early liberal theorists formulated the principles of free exchange have been drastically modified by the spread of competition. In theory, allowing foreign competitors on a country’s market would incentivize the national productions to increase their quality and limit their chance of profiting from a “captive market” (Manent, 2014). Yet the provisions made by its original author, Adam Smith, had a much more homogenous group of countries in plan. Nowadays, countries from different continents can be in direct competition with one another, a major unforeseen change by the theorists. Free exchange does not boost the quality of a nation’s production anymore, because that respective industry might have been agonizing or even disappearing for the past couple of decades.

In this context, it is understandable that anti-liberals want to reinstate protectionism, bringing back the nation’s businesses and its people from abroad. However, the economic activity seems to have become “emancipated” from the framework of the national policy. As (Bartels, 2009) and (Ferguson, 2011) have shown, politicians are more adjusted to the needs of the wealthy than to the demands of the “99 percent”. It’s been found that in the United States, “when a majority of citizens disagrees with economic elites...they generally lose” (Gilens & Page, 2014) These facts are usually used to argue that democratic principles have become degraded, but if prioritizing those with a greater share or intake is undemocratic, than perhaps the same could be said of the US electoral college system.

In this climate of doubt towards the US Government, about the electoral system, disappointment of the electorate, and the ever-present racial tensions, fueled by non-stop television and internet exposure with a conflictual stance, spikes of violence such as the Charlottesville incident become increasingly likely. People’s nerves are tense due to losing a (however illusive) feeling of life and job security, of American supremacy in the world, and a trust in the country’s leaders.

This is a situation that President Trump could exploit during his campaign, playing into the need that people had for something “different” and someone that would “do the right thing,” “not be afraid,” and have sufficient power to accomplish what they wanted.

Since Donald Trump had been a star of the highly-watched reality show *The Apprentice* and America was familiar with him, it was relatively easy for him to become popular, in spite of much of the news coverage being negative. The sheer fact that he was always on the front page throughout the entire campaign and after his victory ensured that he had visibility and won people's votes, even if that vote might have been anti-Hillary in some cases. But a side-effect of his populist rhetoric is a deepening of the social cleavages that the country is having.

Populists searching for the antidote to capitalism

Historically, the proliferation of extreme ideologies has been tied to some disaster, such as a great economic depression or a war. While the past few decades did not appear to bring anything that dramatic - except perhaps the 2008 economic crisis - a number of changes have proven equally disruptive: globalization and the automation of the world. They both gravely altered the economy that the American working-class was used to, leaving some of the former industrial workers unequipped to survive in today's economy. The political class promoted free trade and globalization as being the key to prosperity and equity. But the reality shows that while some of the more professional classes have greatly benefited from this trend, there is a great number of disenfranchised people who are now exerting their resentment.

The outcome of the Brexit and the election of Donald Trump affected westerners and spread uncertainty to the other continents as well. Worry and suspicion have been eroding people's trust (Pew Research Center, 2016) in the European Union, and the worsening relations with Turkey made the threat of a new wave of refugees more real.

In France, the year of 2015 saw Marine Le Pen's distinguishing between "globalists and patriots", suggesting that the pro-EU parties were essentially anti-French. Because the European establishment did not appear to cope well with the refugee inflow, those who have been long questioning the European project and its liberal values had a reason to reopen the matter. With the terrorist attacks (Freedom House, 2016) taking place in France, Europeans began to be even more suspicious. At the time, the Czech president Milos Zeman named the Middle Eastern migrants an "organized invasion" and the Hungarian PM asserted that "all the terrorists" in the Paris attacks "are basically migrants" (Freedom House, 2016). In Germany, neo-Nazis assaulted refugees and other countries took physical measures (such as building fences) to deter the refugees from crossing their borders.

The facts point to this protectionism trend being the mere beginning. Authoritarian right-wing populism has been gaining popularity in the western world, from the Scottish independence movement, to the Spanish "Poedemos", from the Greek Syriza to Mr. Orban's promised "illiberal democracy".

Moreover, since the Brexit vote and the US 2016 Presidential Election, the media and the mainstream rhetoric have been filled with posturing introspections (Gould-Wartofsky, 2015) about the failure of democracy. The space that was dedicated to all-inclusive non-discriminatory politically correct content is now reserved for the outrage that these surprising results have provoked. Having gotten so far in their progressive journey, the contemporary libertarians have completely forgotten about the worries of every-day citizens.

Puzzled by this unexpected turn of events, some Americans and people around the world are shocked and scared by what is increasingly being perceived as the fall of the libertarian-bastion. The one nation that was believed to be authoritarianism-proof, the nation perceived to be fighting wars for people to be *free, equal and represented* has now seemed to fall prey to *ignorance* (Somin, 2016) and *spite* (Gerson, 2016).

The outcome is now being pinned on various factors, and the liberals seem to believe that this has been just a momentary lapse of judgment, not at all representative for the nation. And while that may very well be the case, there's an alternative possibility: this may be precisely the proof that democracy works. A conviction of moral superiority allows liberals to dismiss what the voters showed to be their concerns. In recent years, American and mainstream liberalism has been striving towards a moral high ground of "identity politics", with minorities unified against the common-enemy: The White Christian America (Ross, 2017).

The results favoring populism should by no means be dismissed or pinned on some *foreign intervention*, or regarded as isolated incidents, nor exaggerated and interpreted as the rise of dictatorship on the ashes of democracy. The grid of rules is not inherently dysfunctional, but when times have changed so rapidly and dramatically, it is mandatory that it is reviewed. Not just at the detail level, but also at its core guidelines.

Because these changes are yet to be made, the past is invoked at every step. As stated in the beginning, representative libertarian democracies came as a novel alternative to authoritarian rules. Lack of a better solution leaves the Western society with the same two extreme alternatives in mind: freedom for all or freedom for none. Populist campaigns follow their predecessors' leads and disenfranchised voters are compelled to do the same. Historians and scholars, being well versed in the mistakes of the past, give warnings on the pitfalls of such decisions. And the media sells copies by propagating these realities. But until honest awareness and innovation in the field of governance will emerge, the metaphorical river will always fall back into its old course.

The Confederates

The pretext that gave this conflict the opportunity to emerge was the debate over the statue of the Confederate Robert E. Lee, the South's leading general who owned a plantation in Virginia before the Civil War. Even though the South lost the US Civil War, the

efforts of the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Sons of Confederate Veterans to portray Confederate soldiers as heroes and during the first half century after the war led to the rising of numerous statues for the Confederates.

In 2015, a white supremacist by the name of Dylann Roof, who shot and killed nine people at a mostly black church in Charleston, South Carolina, was posing with the Confederate flag in pictures that were revealed after the shooting, stirring a debate within the state on whether it should take down a Confederate flag hung at the state capitol for years. In the end, the flag was removed.

Since then, the debate has continued: one side claims that because the Confederacy fought to maintain slavery and white supremacy in the US, these symbols ought to be denounced. The other replies that those are symbols of Southern pride, not of pro-slavery rebellion and that taking them down would erase American history (Lopez, 2017).

In April 2017, the Charlottesville City Council voted to sell Lee's statue but in May an injunction had been issued to halt the removal, after a lawsuit was filed against the city (Spencer & Stevens, 2017).

Lastly, the election of US President Donald Trump has contributed to mounting tensions in the United States. Since the 2016 Presidential Election, there have been post-election protests (DuPree, 2017), conflictual ethnic manifestations (e.g. Unite Right Rally, August 2017; White Lives Matter, October 2017) as well as (supremacist, nationalist American) terrorist incidents (Williams, 2017), while having secession movements (Bernstein, 2017) and further social unrest is a possibility. As AlJazeera writes, "between the November 8 election of Trump and April, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) watchdog documented 1,863 bias incidents, at least 330 of which took place on university campuses. In the 10 days following Trump's election alone, the monitor recorded an average of 87 hate incidents a day. This is five times the daily average of hate crimes recorded by the FBI in 2015. The SPLC noted that the initial increase in the number of bias incidents has since subsided, but it warned of the growing severity of recent incidents" (Strickland & Gottbrath, 2017).

As stated above, his divisive stance on key-issues and sensitive subjects for the American people may have even helped bring him the victory, but has given the nation a point of reference to orient against, thus turning the stability-creating fragmentation, into the conflict-enabling polarization.

The KKK March in July

In May 2017, demonstrators gathered in Charlottesville against removing Confederate Robert E. Lee's statue. A month before the Unite the Right march, in July, there had been a Ku Klux Klan march in Charlottesville in a protest against the same decision.

At the time, around fifty members of KKK⁴ shouted “white power” next to over 1,000 counter-protestors who were hurling insults and “black lives matter⁵” at them. As they were leaving, a group of counter protesters started harassing them; the police declared an unlawful assembly, and officers intervened. Police ordered people to disperse and when they did not, they released three canisters of tear gas, emptying the square. The counter-protesters said that they were motivated by the fact ignoring Alt-right viewpoints might allow them to proliferate (Spencer & Stevens, 2017).

Communication: The Role of Social Media

Mayer’ framework begins with “communication” showcasing its paramount importance. The proliferation of social media creates a situation where every piece of information is quickly transmitted globally, which can bring freedom and salvation as well as scandal and fear.

In the case of Charlottesville, the social media’s contribution was as follows:

1. **Conflict Resource:** The rally was organized via a Facebook event which was removed only a day before and offered the medium for opponents to attract allies and rattle each other. The protests that occurred the next day in Atlanta and the toppling of a statue in North Carolina are additional proofs of that.
2. **Official communication medium:** The Charlottesville Police made their announcements via Twitter. President Donald Trump also made his statements through it.
3. **Citizen Journalism Tool:** In the aftermath of the events, the Twitter account @YesYoureRacist (almost 400,000 followers) began curating images posted by people from the rally and invited submissions, with the purpose of identifying the people who protested there). (Newcomb, 2017) That led to some of them being fired (Hines, 2017) (Helm, 2017).
– **Citizen Fundraising:** A GoFundMe campaign in Ms Heyer’s memory managed to raise \$225,000 over the first weekend alone.
4. **A Virtual, Political Battleground** In the aftermath of the events, President Donald Trump promptly reacted via his Twitter account, spiking a debate and further inflating the issue. On August, 12 he condemned the clashes in a Twitter post and only two days later, after public outcry, he specifically condemned white supremacy. Afterwards on Tuesday, he insisted that there was “blame on both sides” including by anti-fascist protesters. Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke tweeted gratefully: “Thank you President Trump for your honesty and courage to tell the truth”. NY Times criticized Mr. Trump for defending the protesters and equaling the pulling

4 The Ku Klux Klan refers to three distinct movements in the history of the US advocating for “purification” of American society with views of white supremacy and white nationalism.

5 Black Lives Matter is an international activist movement originated in the African American community that campaigns against racism towards black people.

down the Confederate statues with desecrating the memorials of G Washington and Thomas Jefferson, emphasizing that POTUS had given “White Supremacists an Unequivocal Boost” for which the former Ku Klux Klan leader publicly thanked President Trump on Twitter (Stevens, 2017).

The Medium is the Message

At the micro-level, on site, the three parties did not communicate much outside of chanting slogans. The ancestral urge to join voices with fellow “tribe members” is ever-present: at football matches and in church choirs alike. Ancient tribes used sounds to intimidate the adversary, identify group members, and give themselves courage. In Charlottesville, the church group began singing a religious song – probably in part to calm others, but mostly to calm themselves. By yelling “white lives matter” the supremacists were stating both their goals at once: manifesting their importance and mocking the African American movement Black Lives Matter. That simultaneously reinforced their identity and attacked the opposing group. But through ritualist sound-making, the members of a crowd can melt each of their own resources and willpower into a collective (stronger) willpower, in an almost religious experience. That gives super-human courage sometimes and a sentiment of presence. That also increases solidarity and helps escalate events, the same way that two gangs would insult each other before fighting.

At the macro-level, the rallygoers and anti-protesters gathered with the help of social networks and communicated in the aftermath of the events via computer-mediated media. Taking a look at the communication medium will bring important details to light. As communication philosopher Marshall McLuhan famously said, “the medium is the message”.

Two thirds of white Americans get “some” news from social media and 74% of non-whites report getting [all] their news from social media. That should mean that a high percentage of people are looking at the same thing, shouldn't it? Well in fact, due to algorithm-powered agenda-setting people are surrounded by things that they want to see, in order to spend more time online. Furthermore, with over half of Americans reporting that they see made-up and inaccurate news online, it is increasingly hard to distinguish between the truth and the relative perception. But as we'll show below, this problem has another layer still.

The American media landscape is highly polarized. The two camps, liberal and conservative, mirror the two main political parties. Although there is no definite proof that partisan media increases partisanship amongst Americans and no consensus on whether the public is currently more polarized than it used to be, what is confirmed is that the media legitimizes discourse by covering it without filter or even covering it at all. In this way, the media defines the limits of accepted controversy, which the general public is unaware of, by covering some types of content regularly.

Because the country's president is a constant source of controversy and the American media has been found to frame news in conflict centric ways, it follows that the media allocates extensive coverage to the scandalous and divisive content emitted by Mr. Trump. Indeed, even if that were not the case, people would still receive his messages from Twitter, but because the media adds exposure and attention, it desensitizes the public and ultimately legitimizes it as acceptable when journalists engage him.

As a matter of fact, when we performed a Twitter search for the hashtag #Charlottesville on August 11, 2017, the day before the rally was supposed to happen, we found that an overwhelming majority of the tweets were about white supremacy, the confederates, and calling for counter-protesters with a notable tendency to pit parties against each other and show "outrageous" content. On August 12-13, 2017 however, after the incident, almost half of all tweets on #Charlottesville had a reference to the US President and many of them only talked about him and his reaction. Each one of the parties was interpreting his words to their advantage: the liberals and his political rivals accused him of not condemning the supremacists, while white supremacy and KKK sympathizers rejoiced and used his words to feel encouraged.

This is only one example where his statements take over the spotlight, dividing the American people into pro- and anti-. The high-volume news coverage of his statements deepens partisan conflict and polarization, because such news increase group self-categorization and self-stereotyping, as shown above. In other words, by being audacious, he increases group salience, i.e. people either agree with him or not and by exaggerating in-group prototypes he stimulates assimilation. People begin to regard themselves as members of "his" or "the opposition" group, instead of individuals. Those overwhelmingly salient identities are inherently conflictual.

The Charlottesville conflict demonstrated that self-determination made people act in a way consistent with their group prototypes, as in the case of one rallygoer exposed on Twitter who later said *he was not the angry racist* (Taylor, 2017). This kind of ulterior disassociation is indicative of his temporary assimilation into the group dynamic that did not persist while he was by himself. By conceptualizing disputed issues and contrasting viewpoints continuously the way the media frames stories or as it occurs on social media between individuals, prototypes become more distinctive.

Moreover, new media and particularly social media's features lend themselves especially well to the promulgation of conflictual messages and characters. It is also important to note here the role of emotions and partisanship in susceptibility to political misinformation which has been studied by (Weeks, 2015). The findings were that even if people experience anger or anxiety (which are the most powerful click-drivers) independently, that encourages them to consider some doubtful information as true. Due to a politically motivated need for consistency, the theory of motivated reasoning mentioned in (Weeks, 2015), show individuals evaluating information at times in a biased manner to

remain consistent with their prior attitudes. That could mean that someone who was a moderate liberal before this conflict but was made afraid/angry by the events, could shift their political views and afterwards, selectively internalize information that confirms what they had begun believing after the heated events. It's true that sometimes anxiety was shown to increase political information seeking, learning, and deliberation, whereas anger depresses each and promotes close-mindedness' as stated in (Weeks, 2015) but if the information-seeking leads to materials made in bad-faith, that creates confirmation of suspicions and deepens the gap.

Even in cases where other media outlets issue clarifications and reports showing that the previous resource was ill-interpreted or wrong, that is only marginally effective as shown by Chan, Jones, Jamieson and Albarracín (2017) study on the psychological efficacy of messages countering misinformation which found that even if the viewer encounters the correction (which they often do not), it will only be effective provided they are not keen to bring arguments in favor of the first version (due to a variety of reasons, among which group cohesion, party allegiance, or emotions such as anger or anxiety). So, if the person is emotionally invested in a particular storyline, the individual will overlook the debunking articles, the logical discrepancies, and even the ridiculous nature of fake/ill-interpreted news, as their preference will be to keep the confirming views that were internalized due to anger, fear, or some other stressful feeling.

In the case of Charlottesville, before the events the rivaling parties' supporters kept distributing atrocious imagery and information about the "other" in order to attract more people to the event. That creates polarization by portraying the other side as "evil". Then, once the events occurred, social media was used to communicate on the scene (the Police), to organize a fundraiser, a campaign to expose participants⁶, and to discuss Donald Trump's reactions. That politicized and gave the events a high-profile connotation, incentivizing all media outlets to cover this divide. As shown above, American people are inclined to adopt stereotypical behaviors consistent with what their party is doing/having. That increases self-stereotypization and further disassociation with the self as an individual. Back to Collins' model, that was also shown to breed solidarity and conflict.

Thus, by bringing the President into the spotlight, the cleavage is deepening and the underlying causes remain unresolved. The "sensationalization" of the events is evident in how the media also emphasized that three people lost their lives in the Unite the Right Rally, in spite of the fact that there was one victim there and the other two died in an accident later that day. But increasing the number of casualties, they gave a bigger proportion to the events, in order to raise interest and make people engage more.

6 This type of approach *feeds* the bloodthirst and gamifies the experience of tracking down people who showed up in the images, prolonging and adding satisfaction to interacting about the event, while taking away from their "realness" due to the virtual setting of the interaction.

Lastly, when the President's words are distributed by a former KKK leader thanking him for his support, even if many might see through that and not give it much credit, this is definitely a strategy to mobilize supporters and shape the narrative about his group. This strategy can be paralleled with that of Middle Eastern terrorist organizations' which mediated their killings and used communication channels aggressively to manifest their power and attract followers. Although it might seem that someone taking the US President's words as a praise would not make much of a difference, in reality it can be interpreted as such by anyone who either *wants to believe it* or who simply agrees based on a few previous such *misunderstandings*.

Results and Conclusions

We hope that this paper has uncovered some new connections between apparently independent issues and has mapped out the known connections in a logical order that allows one to see a clear picture of the conflict as a whole.

Our first research question was: *What were the implications of new media-amplified polarization⁷ for the Charlottesville conflict?* First, we analyzed the conflict itself using Collins' conflict theory.

The conflict parties: The Alt-Right, the Anti-Protesters (students), and the Police authorities, plus the *allies* (who joined on the 12th): town inhabitants, church groups, a local militia group had the following conflict:

The unequal distribution of each scarce resource produced potential conflict between those who control it and those who don't.	The scarce resource that the parties were fighting over – the context for which is discussed in greater detail using Mayer's model – are privilege and status.
Potential conflicts become actual conflicts to the degree that opposing groups become mobilized.	Mobilization is what converts latent into active conflicts. This is where ICT/social media is the key: it allowed rally-goers to gather and counter-protesters to call upon each other to attend. Both sides exaggerated each other's wickedness or the threat, in order to attract more attendees, which constitutes as <i>emotional mobilization</i> (usually anger and fear).
Conflict engenders subsequent conflict.	The events in Charlottesville were preceded by a KKK march the month before, and by a protest in May, 2017. They were also followed by a media conflict involving the US President, protests in Atlanta on the next day (Sharpe, 2017) about the events, and Durham, North Carolina (Horton, 2017) town's inhabitants toppling their local Confederate statue.
Conflicts diminish as resources for mobilization are used up.	The decline in resources for mobilization ended the conflict: When the police removed the authorization by declaring it an unlawful assembly, they lost solidarity of the group. Once there was a person killed, the thirst for blood/justice was replaced by shock and the crowd's emotional charge was depleted.

7 The definition of polarization required: high homogeneity within each group, high heterogeneity across groups, and a small number of significant groups.

Once we saw the general traits of the conflict, we moved into the chronology which we **found that was an exact match for Collins' (de-) escalation model.**

<p>Loop #1 Solidarity breeds polarization, conflict, atrocities</p>	<p>The alt-right group was homogenous, wearing matching clothing and carrying torches, inspiring solidarity with their predecessors: Nazi groups and plantation owners. Their chanting also helped solidify their identity and what created sufficient distance between them and their "opposition" for atrocities to start occurring. This is the effect of polarization.</p> <p>The students were holding hands surrounding the statue and later the churchgoers were singing together. These are also practices meant to increase group salience and give courage to individuals to sacrifice themselves for the greater good.</p> <p>The atrocity was that the students were attacked and thus the Rubicon was crossed.</p>
<p>Loop #2 Attracting allies</p>	<p>Judging by the augmentation of the crowd the next day, group salience was increasing. People with otherwise diverging interests were joined together by a common goal. This is also where more resource was mobilized.</p>
<p>Loop #3 Mobilizing material resources</p>	<p>The presence of militia with semi-automated rifles, the increase in scope, the illusion of power and that the enemy is weaker, paired with an <i>arms race</i>, quickly escalated the events.</p>
<p>De-escalation begins: loss of solidarity and loss of allies</p>	<p>The quick inflammation of the conflict and the start of violent outbreaks made the police – which was largely not interfering until then – declare it an unlawful assembly and scatter the crowd. This removed all three of the previous escalation elements: solidarity, allies, and even material resources. People wanted to avoid getting arrested and needed to return to work on Monday, so they started to leave (instead of confront the police, for example).</p>
<p>Conflict engenders subsequent conflict.</p>	<p>Although physical solidarity had been taken away, the emotional mobilization and polarization had not been dissolved. That enabled one rally-goer to drive his car into the crowd, resulting in a woman's death. This is also where the need for superiority becomes apparent once again: because he might not have been able to affect enough change by himself and he was away from his alt-right group, he mobilized his material resources to forcefully appropriate the scarce resource of superior status.</p>

To conclude, high group salience (solidarity) made people feel stronger and willing to engage violently. We have also remarked that emphasizing differences (polarization) brings about more salience, and that fractioned communities become polarized when they have a binary issue to rally around (such as removing a statue, or not).

To answer the second research question, regarding the role that social media played in the events, we used Mayer's Conflict Model. It revealed that the students were united by a common enemy, while as the "white nationalists" were united by a common faceless threat. Their chanting of "While Lives Matter" (a spin on "Black Lives Matter," a movement meant to bring awareness to African Americans being killed by police in the US) was an attempt to "reclaim" something that they felt that they lost: the attention that they deserved. This emotional dimension of the conflict is presumably what led one of the rally-goers to run his car into the crowd and kill a town inhabitant in spite of his better interest (maintaining his freedom).

In terms of the behavioral dimension, two of the three parties seemed to have been implicated at least in part against their will into a violent conflict. The students and town inhabitants did not seem to have violent intentions to begin with, nor did the Police forces.

The emotion is built-into the subject matter, with many people in the US having a strong feeling about racial, gender, religious, and other types of segregation, due to their national history, ideals of equality and freedom, and perception of their country as bound to safeguard human rights. Because it is emotions that fuel conflicts of this sort, this one ended quickly once the emotional discharge around her death occurred.

In terms of values, the three parties diverged significantly. On one hand, all three of them wanted to ensure their own security, well-being, chance, a good life for their children, the values that they believe America was founded on, but they disagreed about what those American values were: one of the sides seemed to think that America was founded upon the white-man-supremacy or at the very least, guaranteed place in society, while the other chose to emphasize equality of rights.

The structural causes are particularly prolific in this instance. At the micro level, the protest had to be approved by the authorities and was also stopped by the Police authorities that declared a state of emergency. This structure enabled the events. The macro level is revealed through history.

History

- The American Society has been fragmented and going through a Marxian crisis: capitalism drives competition; competition driving innovation and lowering cost of production; thus, technology is being pushed to displaced labor.
- The US has had an increasing number of conflicts over the past decades due to the widespread availability of resources for mobilization, most notably communication technologies.
- In recent years, global events have increased the collective fear of terrorism and an impending war and it culminated in 2016, when the populist Republican Presidency candidate Donald Trump took over the spotlight and gave people a distinct figure around which to polarize. The media has been keeping him in the headlines ever since he announced his candidacy and has given people material for self-stereotypization and for demonizing the opposition.
- Anti-liberalism has been a global trend, with nations seeing the current regimes as unable to deal with the present-day issues, such as terrorism, refugees, and economic instability. That led to a rise in protectionism and separatist movements, which thanks to the global social media is being transmitted throughout the whole world.
- These protectionist and separatist movements are generally centered around populist leaders who prophesize a depart from the main liberal values, oversimplifying

the issues in a characteristic manner, and splitting the world into the “elites” and the “people” as well as “us” and the “others.” This is a particularly inflammatory rhetoric in the US which is first, a highly diverse country to begin with and second, a country whose inhabitants are used to seeing it as the main superpower in the world. A perceived threat to that (from immigrant/Middle Easterners, for example) brings about a high level of anxiety.

- The Confederates were the ones who fought to maintain slavery in the US civil war. The city voted to remove the Confederate Gen. Lee’s statue in April, 2017.
- The city of Charlottesville was sued. Then, in May, 2017 there was a small march against removing the statue. In July, 2017, there was a 50-people KKK march in Charlottesville met by 1,000 counter-protesters that ended with tear gas and some violence. The rally in August, 2017 was the largest alt-right rally in the recent history of the US.

Communications

The main source of news for over 60% of Americans and over 70% of non-white Americans is social media. Most people use it daily and there has been a recent increase in adoption from adults and seniors over the past couple of year. News outlets broadcast their news on social media and even official announcements are made there. In the conflict of Charlottesville, social media played the following roles:

1. Enabled the parties to gather, to attract allies, and to rattle each other. It also allowed both parties to attract sympathy/followers in the aftermath of the events.
2. Official communication medium on behalf of the Charlottesville Police and the President.
3. Citizen journalism tool – a Twitter account exposed the identities of people who showed up in the pictures from the rally.
4. A virtual political battleground – after the POTUS expressed his (conflicting) views, most of the coverage of the event began to revolve around him and became politicized. That, in turn, shifted the focus from the root causes of the conflict (as enlisted above) to a partisan angle which is a key-polarization factor in the US.

Important findings about new and social media:

- Unlike a television broadcast which shows the same thing to everyone who is watching, social media sets the content using algorithms that feed content with which the user engaged or liked. The main factors driving engagement are the emotions of fear and anxiety. That means that each user has their own customized information source that feeds into what they like and/or what they are angry/afraid of. That generates polarization, a tendency to believe fake news or exaggerated inferences, an inability to see logical inconsistencies, and a feeling that that is how “the world is” or “what everyone thinks.”

- Secondly, by covering certain issues, the media legitimizes them and delineates the acceptable specter of controversy. In the case of Donald Trump, his words were immediately mediated and used by parties to their own interest: some were taking them as a confirmation that he should not have been voted, others rejoiced and felt encouraged that he accused both sides equally, political opponents were taking the chance to establish their views, and the media heavily broadcasted this controversy. Unavoidably, the conflict fell on the second place and certain assumptions (e.g. that the President was racist) were trivialized. That is a problem because it desensitizes people to the meanings of words and renders them unable to react later when they are posed with danger.
- The Donald Trump persona gives Americans a point to orient around, increasing group salience in both anti- and pro- Trump camps and the division between opposing sides. Contrasting the viewpoints repetitively increases group solidarity.

In the end, we have illustrated the important roles of new media-intensified polarization and of social media in the Charlottesville events, going as far as saying that the two of them were the principal drivers that allowed the conflict to transform from potential to actualized. Our exploration of how new media and social media reacted to the events has also shown that the next conflict is a mere mobilization opportunity away. We encourage further inter-disciplinary exploration of these phenomena, with the purpose of delivering viable solutions and empirically supported warnings to the civil society, which is the fundamental function of research and exploration.

Bibliography

1. Abrams, D., Wetherell, M., Cochrane, S., Hogg, M., & Turner, J. (1990). Knowing what to think by knowing who you are: self-categorization and the nature of norm formation, conformity and group polarization. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 29(2), 97-119.
2. Aslam, R. (2016). Building Peace through Journalism in the Social/Alternate Media. *Media and Communication*, 4(1), 63-79.
3. Bartels, L. M. (2009). *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
4. Bernstein, S. (2017, 01 23). *More Californians dreaming of a country without Trump: poll*. Reuters. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-california-secession/more-californians-dreaming-of-a-country-without-trump-poll-idUSKBN1572KB>.
5. Castells, M. (2007). Communication, Power and Counter-Power in the Network Society. *International Journal of Communication*, 1, 238-266.
6. Chan, M. S., Jones, C. R., Jamieson, K. H., & Albarracín, D. (2017). Download PDF Debunking: A Meta-Analysis of the Psychological Efficacy of Messages Countering Misinformation. *Psychological Science*, 28(11), 1531-1546. DOI: 10.1177/0956797617714579.
7. Collins, R. (1975). *Conflict sociology*. New York: Academic Press. New York: Academic Press.

8. Collins, R. (1993). What Does Conflict Theory Predict about America's Future? 1993 Presidential Address. *Sociological Perspectives*, 36(4), 289-313.
9. Collins, R. (2009). *Violence A Micro-sociological Theory*. Princeton University Press.
10. Collins, R. (2011). The Invention and Diffusion of Social Techniques of Violence. *Sociologica*, 2.
11. Coser, L. (1956). *The Functions of Social Conflict*, New York: Routledge.
12. Deane, J. (2013, October). Fragile States: the role of media and communication. BBC Media Action. Policy Briefing 10.
13. Diamond, L. (2010). Liberation Technology. *Journal of Democracy*, 21(3), 69-83.
14. Dougherty, J. E., & Phaltzgraff. (2001). *Contending Theories of International Relations: A Comprehensive Survey*. London: Longman Publishers.
15. DuPree, T. (2017, November 8). The Year in Protests Since Donald Trump's Election. *Splinter*. Retrieved from <https://splinternews.com/the-year-in-protests-since-donald-trumps-election-1820143751>.
16. Esteban, J-M., & Ray, D. (1994). On the Measurement of Polarization. *Econometrica*, 62(4), 819-851.
17. Esteban, J-M., & Schneider, G. (2008). Polarization and Conflict: Theoretical and Empirical Issues. *Journal of Peace Research*, 45, 131-141.
18. Ferguson, T. (2011). *Golden Rule: The Investment Theory of Party Competition and the Logic of Money-Driven Political Systems*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
19. Puddington, A.& Royslance, T. (2016). *Freedom in the World 2016. Anxious Dictators, Wavering Democracies: Global Freedom under Pressure*. Washington: Freedom House.
20. Gerson, M. (2016, 10 3). Trump's angry white men. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trumps-angry-white-men/2016/10/03/32af5f4e-898b-11e6-875e-2c1bfe943b66_story.html.
21. Gilens, M., & Page, B. I. (2014). Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens. *American Political Science Association*, 12(3), 564-581.
22. Gould-Wartofsky, M. (2015, April 3). The Crisis of Liberal Democracy. *Huffpost*. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-gouldwartofsky/the-crisis-of-liberal-dem_b_6782558.html.
23. Gramlich, J. (2018). *America's political divisions in 5 charts*. Washington: Pew Research Center.
24. Han, J. (2016). *Conflict Framing of the News and Group Polarization*. PhD thesis presented at the Faculty Of The Graduate School of The University Of Minnesota, Minneapolis.
25. Heim, J. (2017, August 14). Recounting a day of rage, hate, violence and death. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/local/charlottesville-timeline/?utm_term=.07af1f39af3f.
26. Helm, A. (2017, August 13). #MaskOff: Social Media Exposes Racists From Charlottesville, Va., White Supremacist Rally. *The Root*. Retrieved from <https://www.theroot.com/maskoff-social-media-exposes-racists-from-charlottesv-1797791599>.
27. Hines, A. (2017, August 13). White supremacists from the Charlottesville rally are being outed on social media. *Circa*. Retrieved from <https://www.circa.com/story/2017/>

- 08/13/nation/white-supremacists-from-the-charlottesville-rally-are-being-outed-on-social-media
28. Hogg, M. A., & Reid, S. A. (2006). Social Identity, Self-Categorization, and the Communication of Group Norms. *Communication Theory*, 16(1), 7-30.
 29. Hogg, M. A., Turner, J. C., & Davidson, B. (1990). Polarized norms and social frames of reference: A test of the self-categorization theory of group polarization. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 11(1), 76-100.
 30. Horton, A. (2017, August 14). Protesters in North Carolina topple Confederate statue following Charlottesville violence. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/08/14/protesters-in-north-carolina-topple-confederate-statue-following-charlottesville-violence/?utm_term=.259a8428e4a1.
 31. Lopez, G. (2017, August 23). The battle over Confederate statues. *Vox*. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/8/16/16151252/confederate-statues-white-supremacists>.
 32. Mackie, D., & Cooper, J. (1984). Attitude polarization: Effects of group membership. *Social Psychology*, 46(3), 575-585.
 33. Mackie, D. M. (1986). Social identification effects in group polarization. *Psychology*, 50(4), 720-728.
 34. Manent, P. (2014). The Crisis of Liberalism. *Journal of Democracy*, 25(1), 131-141.
 35. Mayer, B. (2000). *The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution: A Practitioner's Guide*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
 36. Mesquita, E. B., & Dickson, E. S. (2007). The Propaganda of the Deed: Terrorism, Counterterrorism, and Mobilization. *American Journal of Political Science*, 51(2), 364-381. DOI: 10.1111/j.1540-5907.2007.00256.x
 37. Mikkonen, N. (2017). *The role of journalism in polarization – An analysis of Finnish Broadcasting Company Yleisradio's reporting concerning issues related to the asylum seeker crisis and multiculturalism debate between 2015–2016*. Tampere: The Tampere Peace Research Institute.
 38. Montalvo, J. G., & Reynal-Querol, M. (2005). Ethnic Polarization, Potential Conflict, and Civil Wars. *American Economic Review*, 95(3), 796-816.
 39. Mutz, D. (2006). *Hearing the Other Side Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 40. Newcomb, A. (2017, 08 15). Twitter Users are Outing Charlottesville Protesters. *NBC*. Retrieved from <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/social-media/twitter-users-are-outing-charlottesville-protesters-n792501>.
 41. Oakes, J. (2002). Enduring liberalism: American political thought since the 1960s. *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 38(2), 177-180.
 42. Pew Research Center. (2016). *Euroskepticism Beyond Brexit*. Washington: Pew Research Center.
 43. Ramsbotham, O., Miall, H., & Woodhouse, T. (2011). *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*. Cambridge: Polity.

44. Randall, C. (2012). C-Escalation and D-Escalation. *American Sociological Review*, 77(1), 1-20.
45. Reynal-Querol, M. (2002). Ethnicity, Political Systems and Civil Wars. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46(1), 29-54.
46. Ross, D. (2017, November 19). The Crisis for Liberalism. *New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-crisis-for-liberalism.html?_r=0.
47. Sharpe, C. B. (2017, August 15). Atlanta protesters deface Peace Monument in Piedmont Park. *AJC*. Retrieved from <https://www.ajc.com/news/local/atlanta-protesters-deface-peace-monument-piedmont-park/6S670h6xMON2SqfzoKAc2M/>.
48. Somin, I. (2016, November 13). Political ignorance and the election. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/?destination=%2fnews%2fvolokh-conspiracy%2fwp%2f2016%2f11%2f13%2fpolitical-ignorance-and-the-election%2f%3f&utm_term=.d8869106321b.
49. Spencer, H., & Stevens, M. (2017, July 8). 23 Arrested and Tear Gas Deployed After a K.K.K. Rally in Virginia. *New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/08/us/kkk-rally-charlottesville-robert-e-lee-statue.html?_r=0.
50. Stevens, M. (2017, August 17). How the Media Captured Charlottesville and Its Aftermath. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/17/business/media/charlottesville-media-trump.html>.
51. Strickland, P., & Gottbrath, L.-W. (2017, July 17). Threats and attacks: White supremacists target campuses. *Aljazeera*. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/07/threats-attacks-white-supremacists-target-campus-170708055258069.html>.
52. Taylor, L. (2017, August 13). White nationalist rally goer: "I'm not the angry racist they see in that photo". *Salon*. Retrieved from <https://www.salon.com/2017/08/13/white-nationalist-rally-goer-im-not-the-angry-racist-they-see-in-that-photo/>.
53. Tufekci, Z., & Wilson, C. (2012). Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations From Tahrir Square. *Journal of Communication*, 62(2), 363-379.
54. Turner, J. C., Oakes, P. J., Haslam, S. A., & McGarty, C. (1994). Self and Collective: Cognition and Social Context. *SAGE*, 20(5), 454-463.
55. Weeks, B. E. (2015). Emotions, Partisanship, and Misperceptions: How Anger and Anxiety Moderate the Effect of Partisan Bias on Susceptibility to Political Misinformation. *Journal of Communication*, 65(4), 699-719.
56. Williams, J. (2017, 10 02). White American men are a bigger domestic terrorist threat than Muslim foreigners. *VOX*. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/10/2/16396612/las-vegas-mass-shooting-terrorism-islam>
57. Zeitzoff, T. (2017). How Social Media Is Changing Conflict. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61(9), 1970 - 1991.
58. Zizek, S. (n.d.). Against the Populist Temptation. *Lacan*. from <http://www.lacan.com/zizpopulism.htm>.