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The Internet's Town Square? A Critical Discourse Analysis of Parler's "Past Imaginary"

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Abstract

The discursive construction of sociotechnical imaginaries by the leaders of platform companies can help legitimate their platforms, shaping how they are perceived and ultimately regulated. Scholars have identified the construction of "future imaginaries" by large platform companies such as Meta—but do smaller platforms also seek to construct imaginaries, and if so, what form do they take? In this article we undertake a critical discourse analysis of statements by John Matze, co-founder and CEO of the fringe social media platform Parler, that garnered media coverage in 2020. Parler gained significant popularity among US right-wing users during 2020, before it was removed from Apple and Google's app stores in January 2021 following the riot at the US Capitol. Using Van Leeuwen's framework for discursive legitimation, we analyze a curated dataset of 186 news articles to identify the legitimating themes that Matze invoked in media coverage of Parler in 2020. We find that Matze foregrounded free expression, and with it the vision of Parler as a "town square," which can be seen as an attempt to legitimate the fledgling platform. However, this discursive legitimation must be understood in the context of Parler's base of predominantly US right-wing users, many of whom turned to Parler because of the perceived "bias" and "censorship" of mainstream platforms. We argue that, in contrast to the future imaginaries constructed for large platform companies such as Meta, Matze's discursive strategy constructed an imaginary that was fundamentally retrograde. Parler's "past imaginary" resembles efforts by far-right groups to justify and legitimate hate speech in increasingly platformized societies.

Keywords

critical discourse analysis, free speech, legitimation, Parler, platforms, platform governance, social media, sociotechnical imaginaries

Introduction

Over the course of two decades, social media platforms have become an established and integral means of communication for billions of Internet users. At present, a small number of platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram (both owned by Meta), YouTube (owned by Alphabet), and TikTok (owned by ByteDance) dominate the social media landscape in most countries. With an ever-present need to maintain market share and drive further growth, while fending off upstart rivals and eschewing tighter regulation, it is no surprise that—whether in media interviews, legislative hearings, or blog posts—the leaders of these platform companies tend to choose their words carefully. This has led scholars to undertake discourse analyses of these statements, most frequently those of Facebook co-founder and Meta CEO, Mark Zuckerberg. Several analyses of his public pronouncements have found that, through the "discursive construction of Facebook and its users" (Hoffmann et al., 2018), the creation of "future imaginaries" for Facebook (Haupt, 2021), and the espousal of "projective city" values (Rider & Murakami Wood, 2019), Zuckerberg has sought to portray the Facebook platform as a dominant, durable, globally connected community, in ways that align with Meta's narrower corporate goals.

By contrast, less attention has been paid to the discursive strategies adopted by the leaders of smaller platform companies to construct imaginaries for their fledging platforms. Judging by quantitative metrics such as market capitalization

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or number of users, it is understandable that scholarly focus has remained on the largest platforms like Facebook. But, as the raft of online havens for the far-right such as Gab (Jasser et al., 2021) has shown, even platforms that remain small in terms of overall usage can have a decidedly "disruptive" impact on society at large.

The article centers on qualitative analysis of an imaginary that was discursively constructed, predominantly through the media, for Parler: a fringe social media platform especially popular among right-wing American users. Parler was founded by John Matze and Jared Henderson in 2018 with the pledge to "take the concept of constitutionally free speech seriously."[1] Over the course of 2020, Parler rapidly gained both users and attention. Many users were lured to Parler following a wave of defections and banishments from mainstream social media platforms of right-wing figureheads as well as growing restrictions on posts by President Donald Trump (Lima, 2020). Parler reached its apogee between the US presidential election in November 2020 and the Capitol Riot in January 2021, topping app store charts on both occasions (Shieber, 2021). Parler's fall was even more rapid than its rise: the app was removed from Apple and Google's app stores (Cowls et al., 2023), and had its cloud hosting platforms suspended by Amazon, days after allegations that it was used to coordinate the riot at the US Capitol (Fung, 2021); it has since been restored to both companies' app stores.

The ideologically right-wing and geographically American skew of its membership, and the persistent and disproportionate prevalence of problematic content on the platform, cast Parler outside the stable of mainstream social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter. However, prior to its shutdown, Parler executives went to great lengths to portray their platform as an ideologically agnostic competitor to mainstream rivals. This gap between Parler as it was portrayed and Parler as it was experienced makes it an especially significant case study with respect to the sociotechnical imaginaries that are discursively constructed for social media platforms. Here, we investigate this rhetorical portrayal in-depth by critically analyzing the statements made during 2020 by John Matze, Parler's co-founder and CEO, based on a curated corpus of 186 news media articles which featured statements by Matze.

The article proceeds as follows. In section "Background and Rationale," we explain our rationale for a qualitative study of this kind, situating this study at the junction of two broader streams of research: on the sociotechnical imaginaries of big tech, and on the far-right online. In section "Data and Methodology," we explain our choice of critical discourse analysis as the methodology employed in the study, discussing the provenance of the dataset and our analytical process. In section "The Discursive Legitimation of Parler," we turn to our findings and discuss their significance. We find that, in his rhetorical portrayal of Parler's membership, governance, and culture covered by the mainstream media, Matze cited several putatively democratic values—especially free speech—that he claimed were safeguarded on Parler, and invoked various metaphorical visions, most notably that of Parler as a "town square" for free and open debate. Matze's goal in deploying these themes was to lure new users to the platform by differentiating Parler from its supposedly censorious rivals and to legitimate its approach to platform governance. Several of the outlets that covered Parler, particularly conservative American titles, supported this framing in their coverage. Drawing on work by Titley (2020), we argue in the conclusion that Parler's "past imaginary" may be implicitly aligned with efforts by far-right groups to legitimate and create space for the expression of hate speech under mythical understanding of concepts such as "free speech" and the "town square."

Background and Rationale

Sermons From the Mount: Social Media Narratives as Sociotechnical Imaginaries

Technology companies are often subject to "genesis myths" (Poulton, 2005), which ascribe special reverence to the founders of start-ups that go on to become dominant companies (Natale et al., 2019). A prominent example is Apple's creation myth, which as Belk and Tumbat (Belk & Tumbat, 2005) document, foregrounds the role of Steve Jobs and to a lesser degree Steve Wozniak as singular innovators. Myths such as these are not necessarily *fictional*—Jobs and Wozniak are formally recorded as Apple's founders[2]—but they may serve to drastically simplify the complex process by which companies emerge. Genesis myths such as these are underpinned by what Marwick more generally calls (Marwick, 2013, p. 50) Silicon Valley's "almost mythological trust in entrepreneurialism," which, she argues, serves to perpetuate male dominance at the upper echelons of the tech industry. Genesis myths are especially significant when a company's founder continues to manage the day-to-day operations of the company as CEO (or in the case of Jobs, leaves, then returns to further celebration: Streeter, 2015) and to control the direction of their company through dual class share structures that vest them with disproportionate voting power.

As a result, what these founding figureheads say publicly about their companies garners widespread attention. Forums for their statements include, for example, the quarterly earnings calls that public companies are obliged to stage and the legislative hearings at which tech CEOs are increasingly often being compelled to testify. Moreover, in the case of social media companies, CEOs can make statements directly to users via their own platform. However, the most important discursive "venue" for shaping how technology is understood remains the mainstream media. As Hoffman et al. (2018) observe, technology companies, like any corporate actors, may not "hold a monopoly on how technologies are understood, but they are in a position to leverage the power

and reach of mass media to promote particular views of a technology," including their own. As we will see, the mainstream media was especially crucial to the discursive construction of Parler in 2020, because the platform itself—and thus statements posted on it—held less reach than larger rivals, and Matze did not testify in any legislative hearings during the period.

Whatever the venue in which they are offered, statements by the CEOs of technology companies may be thought of as outwardly poetical and implicitly political. CEOs frequently employ grandiose, visionary language to characterize the affordances and social value of their platforms, but this is often designed to serve narrower corporate interests, including to obtain greater legitimacy for their platform governance role (Hoffmann et al., 2018; Rider & Murakami Wood, 2019). Visionary rhetoric is thus a powerful tool in the arsenal of technology companies (Stein, 2002). It contributes to the construction of what has been called the "business celebrity," which consists of "the orchestrated co-production, cross-promotion, and circulation of images, narratives, and personal appearances of such figures via a wide range of media platforms" (Guthey et al., 2009, p. 36). The presentation—and confected "celebration"—of business "celebrities" such as tech figureheads marks "an effort to legitimate concentrated business power by putting a human face on otherwise faceless corporations" (Streeter, 2015, p. 3109).

This phenomenon, variously referred to as "entrepreneurial storytelling," "cultural entrepreneurship," "corporate narrative construction," and "narrating corporate reputation" (Garud et al., 2014; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; Vaara & Tienari, 2011; Vendelø, 1998), is not novel to the tech world (Beckert, 2016; Guthey et al., 2009). However, in view of their rapid global growth and intangible, flexible, and ever-evolving product offerings, social media platforms are especially well-suited to carefully crafted narratives that seek to justify their size, their scope, and increasingly their power to determine what can and cannot be seen and said online. Recent research into the creation of narratives that seek to characterize and legitimate the role of social media platforms in society has engaged with the concept of *sociotechnical imaginaries*. Defined by Jasanoff and Kim (2009, p. 120) as "collectively imagined forms of social life and social order reflected in the design and fulfilment of nation-specific scientific and/or technological projects," the term sociotechnical imaginaries was originally applied to national projects, such as nuclear power. This drew in turn on Taylor's (2004) concept of *social imaginaries*, which he characterized as "that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy." Yet as Mager and Katzenbach (2021, p. 225) note, sociotechnical imaginaries today are "multiple, contested and commodified." It is now more often private companies, rather than states, that are the "primary agents of powerful imaginaries," yet these imaginaries are subject to contestation, including from the bottom-up (Lehtiniemi & Ruckenstein, 2018). It is in this multiple, contested, and commodified sense that we conceptualize sociotechnical imaginaries here.

With respect to how the operators of social media platforms, specifically, construct sociotechnical imaginaries for their services, much scholarly attention has been paid to Facebook, and its attempt to create a "future imaginary" through its corporate communications (Haupt, 2021). Several such studies draw on the Zuckerberg Files,[3] a dedicated online archive consisting of "all public utterances" of Facebook's co-founder from 2004 to 2021. Haupt (2021) conducted a discourse analysis of Zuckerberg's pronouncements, identifying "global community" and "global connectivity" as Facebook and Zuckerberg's predominant imaginary themes. Haupt argues (2021) that these themes rely on existing values already inherent in Silicon Valley and that they are "explicitly *corporate*" (p. 239; italics in original). By presenting a "teleological view of human history" (2021, p. 251), the purpose of these future imaginaries, Haupt (2021) suggests, is in effect to narratively "narrow down the *contingency of the future* in a way that is in line with the company's business objectives" (p. 239; italics added), rendering Facebook a "prophetic corporation" (p. 237). Similar work by Hoffman and colleagues (2018) draws on the Zuckerberg Files to argue that Zuckerberg's utterances are a "part of Facebook's strategies for stabilizing the meaning and potential uses of the platform" (p. 200). Other scholars have focused more narrowly on single documents as artefactual emblems of Zuckerberg's broader vision. Rider and Murakami Wood (2019) examine a single 6000-word open letter, "Building Global Community," published by Zuckerberg in 2017, shortly before a series of scandals that would rock the company. They argue that Zuckerberg's framing of Facebook as a historically novel global community is deliberately designed to distance Facebook from its competitors, elide Facebook's status as first and foremost a profit-making enterprise, and shrug off demands for accountability.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate the potential insights offered by a discourse analysis of a CEO's publicly available statements, as a means of gaining insight into the narratives, purposes, and trajectory of their company (Natale et al., 2019). Although the clear skew of these studies toward Facebook and Zuckerberg is understandable given Facebook's present dominance, insight can also be derived from examining the statements of other founder-CEOs as "business celebrities," including those whose companies are at an earlier stage of maturation. Rather than seeking to justify their existing dominance, the leaders of smaller platforms may seek to contrast themselves with the larger rivals they wish to supplant, trumpeting the distinctiveness and superiority of their own platform's affordances. In our analysis, we describe how Parler's co-founder and CEO, John Matze, sought to discursively construct, through the media, a distinct imaginary for his nascent platform Parler. However, given the ideological and geographical skew of Parler's core user base and the tenor of communication on the platform,

before we turn to Matze's discursive efforts we must contextualize them within the landscape of far-right actors online, in the US context.

The Far-Right Online

The connections between networked online communication and far-right organizing have been the subject of considerable scholarship over the past two decades (Daniels, 2009; Donovan, 2019; Munn, 2019; Phillips, 2015; Whine, 2003). This research has shown how white supremacist and other reactionary groups have adopted new technologies "to amplify, monetize, and mask their ideologies" (Ma, 2021; see also Ganesh, 2020; Massanari, 2017). In this way, white supremacists act as "innovation opportunists," who exploit platform affordances, legislative loopholes, and moderation blind spots to advance their ideological goals (Daniels, 2018). When attention is drawn to these dangerous patterns on their platforms, US-based technology companies have historically adopted a "cyber-libertarian" stance, claiming that "information wants to be free" and that their platforms simply facilitate access to information, even as their algorithms mediate what users see and incentivize some forms of content over others (Dahlberg, 2010; Daniels, 2015). Within this online ecosystem, far-right actors are driven not only by their political agendas but also by the online attention economy, which rewards engagement and thus incentivizes sensational, provocative, and emotionally resonant content (Harsin, 2015; Persily, 2017; Vaidhyanathan, 2018).

In recent years, terms like "alt-right" and "alt-lite" have emerged as distinguishing markers for various strains of the online far-right in the US context. Hawley (2018) dates the first reference to "alt-right" to the title of a talk by far-right ideologue Paul Gottfried in 2008, which was followed by the launch of the website AlternativeRight.com by fellow far-right figure Richard Spencer in 2010. As Hartzell (2018) argues, Spencer's website focused on "arguing for the importance of embracing pro-white racial consciousness" (p. 19). Building on the legacy of white supremacist organizing throughout the 20th century, the "alt-right" embraces a "victim ideology" that frames advancements won by Black people, and other people of color, as discriminatory attacks on the rights of white Americans (Berbrier, 2000; Ma, 2021). They also claim, baselessly, that the white race itself is endangered due to low white birth-rates, miscegenation laws, and high rates of non-white immigration.

While many self-identified members of the US "alt-right" explicitly endorse the goal of building a white ethno-state, the term has also been used in journalistic and scholarly accounts to describe a broader swathe of reactionary actors online. Some of the less extreme personalities in this fractious coalition have been deemed "alt-lite": a pejorative term coined by "alt-right" figures to refer to those who broadly align with their ideology but do not openly advocate for white nationalism (Ma, 2021). These "alt-lite" figures on social media leverage race in different ways, utilizing "mitigating rhetorical strategies" crafted to "temper and obfuscate their reactionary views." Common tactics include claiming a "color-blind" worldview and "maintaining an ironic distance" from more explicitly hateful claims, all the while remaining "firmly entrenched in white supremacist ideology" (Ma, 2021, p. 1, 13).

As our analysis will reveal, apparently similar rhetorical tactics were at play in the discursive construction of a "past imaginary" for Parler. In *Is free speech racist?* (2020, p. 11), Titley documents the longstanding efforts by far-right groups in multicultural, "post-racial" societies in North America and western Europe to appropriate free speech to "reshap[e] how racism is expressed and legitimized in public culture." As a "central modern imaginary" that is almost universally "celebrated as a fundamental liberty" (2020, p. 12), Titley argues that free speech has been captured and leveraged by these groups to re-litigate harmful and discredited ideas under the guise of open debate and deliberation. Manufactured "crises of free speech," many of which stem from the deplatforming of "controversial" figures on college campuses and social media platforms, feed the perception that free speech is under assault, situating free speech maximalism as the only defensible response.[4] As we will show, this dynamic emerges in the case of Parler as a platform for "free speech." While existing work on the "alt-right" and "alt-lite" tend to focus on the *users* of platforms, both high-profile content creators and ordinary users (e.g., Munn, 2019), here we take an analogous approach to assess how the *operators* of platforms, in this case Parler, leverage free speech and related claims. As we will show, the past imaginary constructed by and for Parler closely mirrored the rhetorical strategies associated with the US right-wing that we have identified here.

Data and Methodology

In this section we describe the practical steps taken to conduct an analysis of the statements made by Parler CEO John Matze during 2020. This consisted of several tasks, including the collection, cleaning, and analysis of the data that we discuss in turn.

Data Selection and Collection

Mainstream media coverage was especially crucial to the discursive portrayal of Parler in 2020, as compared with larger, more established platforms. As a private company, Parler's executives did not participate in earnings calls for investors, nor testify before Congress. Moreover, as a smaller platform, a statement made by Matze *on* the platform could not be sure of reaching beyond the narrow confines of Parler's users (though this was in fact the case in some instances). For this reason, we made mainstream media coverage of Parler the basis of our sampling and the focus of our analysis. This raises the question, in turn, of how we

conceptualize the role of media organizations as mediators of Matze's statements. Our sample consists of an ideologically and industrially heterogeneous set of news organizations, spanning truly "mainstream" media organizations such as Reuters; widely read newspapers such as the *New York Times*, and *Wall Street Journal*; news channels, especially Fox News, which features very prominently; and online-only outlets considered a part of the "alt-right" ecosystem, such as Breitbart. Given this breadth, the precise nature of the mediating role is difficult to conceptualize overall; some outlets approached Matze's statements critically, while others, as we will see, were instinctively sympathetic and even outwardly supportive. In what follows, where it is relevant, we reflect on the motivations of the media organizations whose articles we quote from. But when we summarize overarching findings, it is important for this diversity of media sources in our sample to be kept in mind.

Since there exists no equivalent "Matze Files" database akin to the "Zuckerberg Files" used in analogous studies, the first task for this study was to create one. To build a dataset of media coverage of Matze's statements, we turned to two existing large databases of news articles: Media Cloud and Google News. The collaborative Media Cloud project describes itself as an "open-source platform for studying media ecosystems."[5] Using its Explorer tool, we queried Media Cloud's "United States" news media database for stories whose text mentioned both "Parler" and "John Matze," between 1 January 2020 and 1 January 2021. This returned 198 results from a variety of news sources, most of which were in English. To ensure that as many relevant stories as possible were captured in the dataset, we performed the identical query on Google News (US) across the same period, resulting in 105 stories, and removed duplicates. This left us with a dataset of 248 news articles that matched the search criteria, with a publication title, article title, date, URL, and unique ID for each story.

The next step was to populate the database with the full text of the news articles.[6] To do so we used the qualitative data analysis software NVivo, creating a file for each of the 248 stories, which we populated with all relevant text (excluding comments and other web page artifacts). Although the primary purpose in accessing each page and copying across content was simply to create a full database of raw text files, it had two further effects. First, it allowed us to exclude an additional 62 stories from the total of 248, for reasons which only became clear when reading the stories themselves.[7] This resulted in a dataset of 186 accessible, time- and content-relevant, English-language stories, for which we had the full text prepared for analysis. Second, accessing each story and copying across the relevant text was the first time we were exposed to the underlying content that we would later analyze in earnest. Therefore, while we did not perform any coding, it was at this juncture that, inescapably, the iterative process of interpretation, sensemaking, and pattern-detection—that is, the qualitative analysis—began. Although this did not result in any empirical "findings" since nothing was written down or recorded at this stage, it nevertheless framed the formal process of analysis which followed.

Data Analysis

The coding process involved carefully reading through each story, and applying none, one, or multiple codes to each passage.[8] Prior to coding we developed a preliminary schema, which was determined by: the scope and initial focus of the study; reading of wider material about Parler, Matze, and the events of 2020; and our initial exposure to the material when extracting it from the web. With this in place, we coded passages in each of the articles. During the coding process, we noticed other values and symbols arise that did not fit neatly into the existing codes.[9] We also recorded when a particular passage was a direct quote from Matze,[10] and recorded references made to third parties such as rival platforms, politicians, and the media.

We adopted a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to derive our insights. CDA was the method used in one of the studies closest in subject matter and purpose to this one (Hoffmann et al., 2018) and lends similar affordances to this study. Emerging from information systems research, CDA is an established approach for reflexive qualitative research (Cukier et al., 2009; Jäger & Maier, 2016; Wall et al., 2015). Within CDA, we align our methodology most closely aligned with Van Leeuwen's (2007) work on the discursive legitimation of institutions. For Van Leeuwen (2007), "legitimation is always the legitimation of the *practices* of specific *institutional orders*" (p. 92; italics added). The legitimation components of a particular text are those that concern the question "why": why something should be done, and why in some particular way, within the institutional order in question (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 93). Here, we consider the "institutional order" in question to be the management of Parler as a social media platform. Thus, the central "why" question at issue is: why should Parler have been managed in the particular way that it was? This "why" question was, in some form or another (and with varying degrees of implicit sympathy and support), the question that was most often put to John Matze in the media coverage we explore.

Van Leeuwen introduces four categories or forms of legitimation, which we used as an organizing framework with which to assess Matze's discursive strategy for the legitimation of Parler's governance in the mainstream media. For each text that we examined, we considered the different forms of legitimation at play. The first category is authorization, which Van Leeuwen describes as "legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom and law, and of persons in whom institutional authority of some kind is vested" (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 105). Most relevant to our analysis was the authorization of custom, tradition, and law. In the corpus, we often found Matze invoking,

however, tenuously, precedents from American history and jurisprudence as a basis for Parler's own rules. Van Leeuwen's (2007) second category of legitimation is moral evaluation, which is "based on moral values, rather than imposed by some kind of authority without further justification" (p. 97) as in the previous example. Moral evaluations may be said to hide in the plain sight of everyday language, hinted at through commonplace terms such as "healthy" and "normal." We found Matze incorporating such moral evaluations as justifications for actions the platform took, such as in his contrasting evaluations of the healthy debate among conservative users compared with left-wing users he branded, and banned, as "trolls." The third category is rationalization, or "legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action" (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 92). Here we found Matze deploying certain axioms, such as the idea that falsehoods on social media are best countered by exposure to alternative views, to explain Parler's approach to content moderation. Finally, the fourth category, mythopoesis, explores how legitimation can be achieved through storytelling, including "moral tales" and "cautionary tales." We found Matze employing several mythopoeic narratives in the corpus, including by appropriating the "moral tale" of the American War of Independence in his portrayal of rival platforms as tech "tyrants" and Parler as a platform of and for "the People." In the following section we examine how Matze combined these forms of legitimation to express several specific legitimating themes.

The Discursive Legitimation of Parler

It is important to situate the analysis of Matze's statements within the context of Parler during 2020. Over the course of the year, Parler experienced a dramatic rise to prominence, against the backdrop of other platforms "deplatforming" right-wing American figures and sanctioning the accounts of President Donald Trump. While existing analyses of statements by Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg reveal his intention to justify and defend Facebook's present dominance, Matze's appearances in mainstream media had a different purpose. The events of late 2020 propelled Parler briefly to the top of app store charts, yet even at its zenith, Parler's claimed user base of 15 million users remained significantly smaller than that of the largest platforms (Hagey & Horwitz, 2021). As such, it is reasonable to presume that Matze's core purpose throughout 2020 was to attract as many new users to the platform as possible, as well as to legitimate Parler's approach to platform governance. In this section, we analyze the key themes that Matze emphasized in his mainstream media appearances to meet these dual objectives.

Figure 1 summarizes the legitimating themes that we found Matze to have evoked across the corpus. The themes typically incorporate multiple categories of legitimation—traditions, values, goals, and mythopoeic narratives. The number given in the *y*-axis indicates th*e number of articles in the dataset* that *contain at least one direct quote from Matze* that were coded as *relating to the respective theme*. To restate our caveat above, because of the broad range of news outlets in the sample and the varied reception—from credulous to critical—that Matze received in each article, this summary tells us about the themes that Matze sought to convey, rather than necessarily how they were received and framed in media coverage.

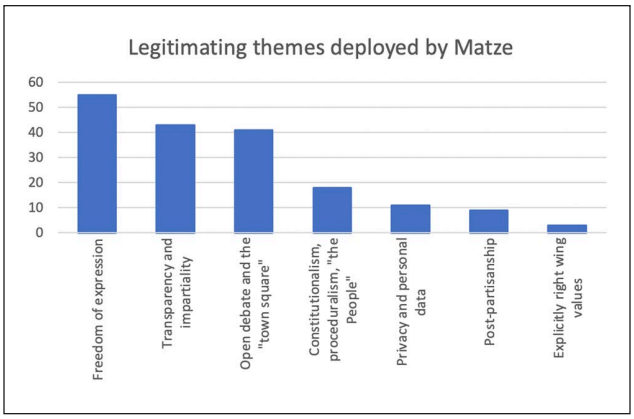

Figure 1. Number of articles in the dataset containing at least one direct quote from John Matze pertaining to different legitimating themes.

As Figure 1 shows, most prominently, we observed that Matze characterized Parler as safeguarding *freedom of expression*, which drew together aspects of tradition, moral evaluation, and rationalization. Matze routinely touted "free speech" as being supposedly safeguarded on his platform, drawing on what he characterized as the proud American tradition of free speech, moral claims about healthy debate, and the utility of free speech in combatting harmful content online. To a similar extent, Matze laid claim to *transparency and impartiality*, portraying Parler as an impartial arbiter of content. The third major theme was the value of open debate, which was most often expressed by the mythopoeic vision of Parler as a "town square" where different arguments could be leveled and engaged with. A less common theme was *constitutionalism, proceduralism*, and a vision of *"the people,"* which appealed most to the historical authority of the United States Constitution, as well as a mythopoeic tale of Parler as analogous to American revolutionaries, fighting tyrannical oppression. Matze also, on occasion, cited *privacy and personal data* as something that his platform allegedly safeguarded, as well as *post-partisanship*, or the idea that Parler represented a domain beyond partisan divides. Only very occasionally did Matze make appeals to explicitly *right-wing* themes or values. Throughout the corpus as a whole, Matze contrasted uplifting depictions of life on Parler with the perceived failings, weaknesses, and inequities of larger rivals.

Taken together, the "imaginary" that Matze discursively constructed over the course of 2020 relied on invocations of specific democratic values, virtuous civic traditions such as

constitutionalism, and evocative metaphorical narratives such as the "town square." In the remainder of the section, we explore the most common of these themes, assessing how each was used by Matze to promote Parler, win new users, criticize rivals, and legitimate its approach to platform governance, and examining how these efforts were received by the media. In two cases (sections "Freedom of Expression, Open Debate, and the 'town square'" and "Transparency, Impartiality, and Post-partisanship"), we have combined discussion of multiple themes in a single subsection owing to the frequent overlap in their use.

Freedom of Expression, Open Debate, and the "Town Square"

Freedom of expression was the value that Matze most frequently invoked across the dataset. In a March 2020 article, the American "alt-right" news site Breitbart covered a speech given by Matze at the high-profile Conservative Political Action Conference. It quotes Matze as claiming that "we created Parler with free speech . . . in mind," drawing a contrast with rivals who "don't respect that." Both Matze's speech and the article nudged prospective users to join the platform, with Matze urging his audience to "go to your app store, type in Parler, it's the red app, you can download and join, you can follow me there @ john," and the article ending with a link to Parler's website.

Given Breitbart's status as a key node in the online right-wing US ecosystem, its uncritically favorable coverage of Matze, and especially his totemic "free speech" claim, is unsurprising. Other, less partisan outlets approached Matze's free speech claims somewhat more critically. Matze was quizzed on the meaning and implications of Parler's "pro-free speech" stance in an interview with Forbes published in June. The article begins with a vignette: Matze apologizes for eating during the interview—"I hope you don't mind . . . I haven't eaten all day"—then explains why: he is "sitting here like, banning trolls." The "trolls" Matze is banning are in fact "teenage leftists" who had descended on Parler in recent days. The article takes at face value Matze's claim that these users are troublemakers, who are, it suggests, "swamping them with messages that make it unpleasant for the app's conservative users to post and interact with each other." The apparent contradiction here—a platform described as being "dedicated . . . to the promulgation of free speech," whose CEO personally bans users he deems "trolls" for "swamping" the network's "conservative users with messages"—is not fully explicated in the article. However, elsewhere in the interview, Matze is "asked if there ever might be an instance when the N-word would be appropriate" or permitted on Parler, and has this answer:

> "It depends on the context. If they just said that word alone, I don't think we would touch it." He thinks a couple minutes longer, then restates his opinion. "If somebody came on there and said the N-word to somebody, and they got very upset as a result of that, then it would get taken down."

Here, in initially trying to remain consistent to Parler's free speech absolutism, Matze invoked an idealized scenario in which the N-word was simply stated on its own, devoid of context, intention or, presumably, malice. After further reflection, however, he seemed to reckon with the reality that language is deployed within specific social contexts and between people occupying different social positions, and rather often with harmful effects. As such, he conceded that whether and how someone is affected by a hateful slur could affect how a message would be treated by the site. This episode is, however, a rare contrast to Matze's more general tendency to propound the virtue of untrammeled free speech without reckoning with its implications.

Many of the articles in the sample that referenced Parler's "free speech" credentials also featured Matze's concomitant attacks on rivals. "Censors" and "censorship" are words that routinely recurred when Matze assailed the moderation activities of rival platforms. A sympathetic Fox News interview between host Laura Ingraham and Matze in October 2020 hailed Parler as a contrast to what the chyron described as "Social media's war on free speech." The strapline on the published article reinforces this contrast, quoting Matze as claiming that "instead of censoring people more, we're advocating for people to give information." The interview (for which the article in the sample is a verbatim transcript) includes his allegation that "Twitter is getting involved and is actively editorializing this topic . . . to manipulate what the public thinks."[11] In reality, the examples of "shameful censorship" that Matze assailed were mild, ad hoc attempts by platform operators to dampen the spread of harmful misinformation relating to topics such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the presidential election.

However, while Matze alleged that "conservatives," specifically, "have been repeatedly censored and disenfranchised on Twitter and Facebook," he nonetheless maintained that the platform was intended for users of *all* political stripes, using the metaphor of Parler as a "town square." In an interview in June 2020, Fox News host Neil Cavuto pushed Matze on who the platform was for, asking whether "you are more of a conservative site, or are liberals welcome, everybody's welcome, how would you describe it?" Matze responded, "Well we're a town square, that's how I view us. So, everyone's welcome." However, as Matze went on, "we're seeing a lot of popularity with conservatives. They seem to be the ones most affected by Twitter's censorship or Facebook's censorship." This image of a town square is the most prominent mythopoeic narrative that Matze evoked to portray the culture he claimed that Parler represented, and the theme appears in 41 of the articles in the dataset (see Figure 1).[12] However, the latent tension between Parler as a refuge for "disenfranchised" conservatives on one hand and Parler as an all-inclusive "town square" on the other goes unresolved.

In several interviews, Matze and his interlocutors made much of the role of the First Amendment to the US Constitution—which constrains the US government from impinging citizens' speech rights—in shaping the rules that govern Parler as a private platform. In a Fox News interview in November 2020 above the chyron "The conservative alternative to big tech," host Tucker Carlson began by offering Matze "congratulations [on] the massive surge of popularity in your company." Carlson asked Matze how he would respond to facing "massive pressure" to "censor" voices on the platform. Matze responded,

> it's not against the law to have [unpopular] opinions. It's not against the law to express yourself, you know. And if you like one political candidate or another, or you believe or don't believe in climate change, or whatever it might be, you shouldn't be taken offline because of it.

Carlson was fawning in his response. "Exactly right . . . exactly," he had already started to reply before Matze had finished speaking. He went on to tell a beaming Matze: "Thank you. You just restated the traditional *American* understanding of free speech which the left defended for decades—apparently they didn't mean it—but it's left to you to continue that noble defense." Placing emphasis on the word "American," Carlson drew on the authoritization of the American political tradition to endorse Parler's and Matze's "distinctive" approach to platform governance.

This grounding in American "freedom" might have held superficial appeal for prospective users aggrieved by opaque, arbitrary content moderation and community standards enforcement elsewhere online. In practice, however, Matze was forced to announce ever more caveats to this supposedly straightforward and transparent policy over the course of 2020—all while *rhetorically* holding firm to free speech as a cause célèbre, justifying every policy change as furthering his site's mission to safeguard rather than squash free expression. For example, when justifying the platform's new restrictions on spam in June 2020, Matze described spam as "malicious" and as "trying to take away [users'] voice." A *Washington Post* article the following month noted that while Parler "ha[d] become the poster child for free expression online," Matze had recently announced some rather peculiar rules on the platform, among them: "when you disagree with someone, posting pictures of your fecal matter in the comment section will not be tolerated," and "you cannot threaten to kill someone in the comment section." Yet even when justifying guidelines such as these, Matze again resorted to the mythopoeic vision of a town square, quoted in the story as saying that the purpose of these rules was to help "create a proper town square without people ruining it by violating it with speech not protected by the First Amendment or FCC guidelines." That Matze was able to iteratively adjust his metaphorical portrayal of Parler as a free and open town square to fit each speech-restricting rule that his site was forced to introduce reflects the discursive flexibility of the legitimating strategies that he employed.

Transparency, Impartiality, and Post-Partisanship

Another set of themes that Matze embraced with regularity were transparency and impartiality. In promoting Parler, Matze made much of its feed, which displayed to the user content from everyone they followed in a simple reverse-chronological timeline—mimicking features that Twitter and Facebook had abandoned in favor of algorithmically powered timelines that prioritize "most relevant" content. Matze drew on this contrast as part of a broader critique of these rivals, who he suggested were "manipulating people" with their feeds. An appearance on Fox & Friends in November 2020, began with a softball question, the host claiming that "the president himself has been censored 52 times [on other platforms] since election day—how do you do things differently over there on Parler?" As a scrolling walkthrough of Parler's homepage was visually overlaid behind him, Matze restated Parler's claimed commitment to free speech, but went further:

> Parler is of course about free speech, making sure people have a voice again . . . but we're so much more than just free speech too, because people also want freedom from the data manipulators, they want change in social media in general. . . . People want a social media like Parler that works the way they thought, where it truly is by the people, it's private, you choose the content you wanna see, and you get the content that you've chosen to see. And so there's so much more than just free speech.

With his reference to "freedom from data manipulators," Matze framed one of Parler's design choices—its reverse-chronological feed—as a matter of fundamental liberty.

When Parler briefly overtook Twitter on the top chart for News apps on Apple's App Store, Matze posted a valedictory message on Parler that was picked up by conservative site RedState. It read:

> This is our victory as a community for free speech over the tech tyrants. This is a symbol that we want a Town Square for free discussion. We the people do not want to be told what to think, we do not want to be manipulated, and we want our data to be private. We reject technofascism and those who think they are the sole arbiters of truth. We reject their biased editorial panels, we reject their "fact checkers" and we reject censorship.

Drawing on the language of American democracy, here Matze hails "we the people"—aping the US Declaration of Independence—for rejecting "technofascism," an umbrella term which includes "biased editorial panels" as well as "fact checkers," a reference to content moderation and anti-disinformation efforts. Parler was, by contrast—as Matze explained in an email interview with Fox News's "Media Angle"—a haven for free thought and information, which

left fact-checking "to the responsibility of the community." Users should not "be worried about receiving inaccurate information on Parler," Matze went on, because "our users are wise enough to filter and judge information themselves." This places the responsibility of deciphering fact from fiction squarely on individual users, thus conveniently letting Parler off the hook for its role in facilitating the spread of harmful disinformation.

Matze was fortunate that the events of 2020 provided scope for critique of social media management. The release in September of the documentary *The Social Dilemma* on Netflix offered insight into how the design of social media platforms and algorithmic systems affect social and political life—and in an interview with Fox News shortly afterwards, Matze seized on this more widespread critique of larger rivals to take a retrospective victory lap:

> As I was watching the movie, I kept thinking we encountered this decision [at Parler] and could have done that but we decided not to . . . We've really done a good job avoiding a lot of these problems.

Restrictions on right-wing American users such as President Trump by Parler's rivals allowed Matze to go on the front foot, assailing the larger companies for what it claimed was excessive moderation, while sidestepping the issues that plagued Parler's own "laissez-faire" approach. In an October 2020 blog post on Parler's website that was picked up by outlets including Newsweek, Matze claimed that, by restricting the spread of a *New York Post* article about Hunter Biden's laptop, "Facebook and Twitter have proven that they are agenda-driven publishers who want to control information and trample on our right to read what we want and decide for ourselves what to think." By casting Facebook and Twitter as "publishers," rather than their preferred "platforms," Matze aligned these companies with establishment media outlets, which have long been lambasted by US conservatives as elite-owned and ideologically biased (Hemmer, 2016; Lane, 2019). The Newsweek piece quotes Matze's blog post at length, focusing mainly on Facebook and Twitter's justifications for the restrictions rather than Parler's own failings, besides noting that Parler has become "a haven for right-wing commentators."

With these efforts, Matze tapped into both longstanding perceptions among US conservatives of tech platforms' bias against them, and opacity regarding how content on social media platforms is ranked, filtered, and presented to users by algorithmic systems. As a report on the alleged bias against conservative social media users observes, "there are no empirical studies that definitively assess the claim of anti-conservative bias," but nonetheless, what evidence is available suggests that US conservative voices enjoyed considerable attention on mainstream social media platforms like Facebook during 2020 (Barrett & Sims, 2021, p. 14). Whatever their merit or lack thereof, claims of anti-conservative bias were rife throughout the period, and Matze frequently drew upon them in making the case for Parler. Meanwhile, when it came to the opacity of the algorithmic systems employed by sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to rank and filter content, Matze had chanced upon an issue that had already elicited valid grievances from many groups, not just the American right.

Finally, Matze also frequently painted Parler as a cross-ideological or even post-partisan arena for political discussion—even though, in practice, its membership leaned heavily conservative. Tacitly acknowledging this present reality, Matze claimed in a Fox News interview in June 2020 that "you're going to see a lot of people on the other side of the aisle coming over very soon . . . in fact, we're seeing them in waves now." Again, self-aggrandizement regarding Parler's cross-ideological membership was never far removed from criticism of Parler's larger rivals and predictions of their coming demise. In an interview with CNBC, Matze is portrayed as non-partisan: "Matze doesn't want [Parler] to be just an echo chamber for conservative voices. Personally, he says he doesn't like either political party and he wants to see more healthy debate." The article goes on:

> Matze expects Parler to become a more attractive site for a more diverse audience over time because he sees Twitter continuing down a path of alienating right-wing voices, and "no one is going to want to stay on Twitter if the conservatives are gone."

Yet, for all Matze's attempts to present Parler as the only "impartial" platform, the vast majority of new Parler users were disgruntled US conservative émigrés from larger platforms (Brustein, 2020), whose predominance on Parler created not some post-partisan paradise but instead an "echo chamber" for the US right wing—or perhaps a platform-wide "echo mansion." This led Parler to resemble what Titley (2020, p. 108) has characterized as a "discourse laboratory": a space where participants critique media coverage and generate counternarratives to oppose "the presumed hegemony of progressive, 'liberal' positions in public culture." Matze may have trumpeted "free thought," "impartiality," and "post-partisanship" and other superficially neutral terms—but in practice, these "features" appealed almost exclusively to US conservative users who subscribed to a belief in Silicon Valley's bias against right-wing voices.[13]

Constitutionalism, Proceduralism, and "The People"

In addition to making much of the claim that Parler safeguarded *substantive* rights such as free speech and free thought, Matze also suggested that Parler users enjoyed *procedural* rights, such as due process and equal treatment that were not enjoyed by denizens of other platforms. Such appeals were most often couched in terms of American constitutionalism. We have already seen the authoritizing role

that the First Amendment to the US Constitution played in Matze's portrayal of Parler as a free speech haven, but Matze also alluded to the governance institutions charged with defending the Constitution, especially the US Supreme Court, as in his interview with Fox News' Laura Ingraham:

> Ingraham: So no censoring—if someone says something inciting violence, you will leave it up?
>
> Matze: Well, see, that's actually against the law. So anything that we get involved with has to have some sort of Constitutional violation, some sort of Supreme Court premise, something that says, hey, that's really not all right. There has to be a premise for it, though. We really don't want to get into the business of determining what is and is not allowed to be discussed.

Here, Matze outlines a view of moderation that appears heavily influenced by American governance. Likewise, in an email to the *Washington Post*, Matze cited "speech not protected by the First Amendment or FCC [Federal Communications Commission] guidelines" as a basis for determining the sort of content that Parler would sanction. As the *Post* article noted, in jurisprudential terms this was an odd basis for standards-setting, since the First Amendment generally only prohibits censorship by the *government* not by private companies, and since FCC guidelines only concern content broadcast on public airwaves, not online platforms. Yet when such claims are viewed in symbolic rather than concrete terms, Matze's appeals to the Constitution, Supreme Court, and FCC as "precedents" for Parler's own rulemaking can be seen as fitting with his broader attempt to paint Parler as a bastion of support for the foundational democratic values of the American republic.

Moreover, these symbolic allusions even seemed to translate into concrete procedure, in the form of Parler's embryonic "Community Jury" system for judging the appropriateness of content, which in the summer of 2020 was said to consist of a roster of 200 unpaid volunteer Parler users. In the November 2020 interview with Tucker Carlson, the host frames Parler as being "created as an alternative to Twitter," before asking Matze "what is it you offer that [your rivals] don't?" Matze replies:

> What we're seeing is a massive explosion in growth because people trust that Parler is gonna do the right thing. So as opposed to these other companies, where moderation seems to be the norm, on Parler we have a Community Jury. This is where the people decide what is allowed and what is not allowed. You're judged by your peers just like our government allows for people. You're innocent before [*sic*] proven guilty, unlike these other platforms, that are colluding to, I guess, find things to find you guilty for.

By invoking the presumption of innocence and the common law tradition of jury trial, Matze sought to associate Parler's processes with longstanding hallmarks of legal proceduralism. Moreover, as the *Washington Post* noted in a December 2020 article flagging Parler's problem with moderating pornography on the platform, the rather grandiose guidelines on the Jury's official Parler page assert that:

> No user shall be stripped of his parleys or comments, nor shall he be suspended, banned, or deprived of his standing in any other way, except by the conscientious judgment of his equals.

Such rhetoric is laden with allusions to American constitutionalism: the negative-liberty ("freedom from") construction of the Jury's guidelines knowingly echoes the wording of the First Amendment.[14]

It is revealing to consider what such virtues were commonly set against. As with free speech and free thought, the virtue of constitutionalism was often said to be under assault by rival platform operators. "A Declaration of Internet Independence," published on Parler's website in June 2020,[15] and picked up by outlets in the sample including mic.com, consciously mimics the 1776 equivalent, beginning:

> When in the Course of technological development, it becomes necessary for free people to reject the Terms of Service which have connected them with a platform, and to take back their Constitutional and Human rights, our great American traditions call on us to declare the causes which impel the separation.

The "Declaration," it soon becomes clear, is aimed at Twitter, which "once pledged to be a Public Square" but has "long ceased to be . . . They are now merely a publisher. And a bad, biased publisher at that." Twitter has "become a Tech Tyrant," which "threaten[s] all of us with digital extermination should we dare to challenge them, chilling debate and forcing the People to self-censor." This heady rhetoric—whose analogical connection to 1776 is rather weakened by Trumpian phrases like "a bad, biased publisher at that"—bears similarities to the victim ideology and apocalyptic imagery of the "alt-right" and other far-right groups (Berbrier, 2000). Thus, to complete the analogy with American independence, it is the "tech tyrants" like Facebook and Twitter who assume the role of the British colonial government, whose oppressive behavior necessitates a popular uprising. Matze and Parler's embrace of the tropes of a distinctly American form of constitutional government, overlaid by populist rhetoric, sought to portray the platform as a haven not only for free speech, but more broadly for the cultivation of a democratic culture that was almost Tocquevillian—set against the faceless, fact-checking, coastal elites. The reality of Parler was, again, very different. But Matze's rhetorical construction of Parler as a paradise of democratic governance represented an attempt to legitimate the nascent platform through appeals to these sources of American authority—eliding the gender- and race-based exclusions that were intertwined with these historical touchstones.

Conclusion: Parler's "Past Imaginary"—Town Square or Safe Space?

Our analysis has found that, in his many mainstream media appearances to tout the fast-growing platform during 2020, Parler's CEO John Matze leant most heavily on the safeguarding of free speech as a supposedly distinctive affordance of his platform, alongside several other legitimating themes. Matze tapped into concerns about how larger social media platforms were governed to tout Parler's superiority, and by tying his platform's affordances to specific touchstones in American political history, sought to ground Parler's (in reality inchoate and chaotic) policies in the traditions of American constitutionalism and democracy.

As a discursive construction, it is notable that—in contrast to the utopian "future imaginaries" constructed by larger rivals (Haupt, 2021)—Matze's imaginary for Parler looked backward, to a supposedly grand historical past. At the heart of the imaginary that Matze constructed was the vision of Parler as a "town square" where an ideologically heterogeneous group of users could gather and exercise their right to free thought and expression. Matze also made frequent references to the supposedly "constitutional" way in which the platform was governed. The "town square" that Matze so frequently invoked recalls an idealized version of ancient Greek agorae and the coffee houses of Enlightenment-era Western Europe—with these spaces come connotations of open, democratic society where rational debate flourishes, public opinion is shaped, and social progress is secured. However, a darker vision lies behind this superficially appealing veneer of freedom, openness, and inclusivity. Critical scholars have long argued that the nostalgic invocation of Enlightenment-era public sphere(s) obfuscates the inequities and exclusions that have always undergirded these spaces (Benhabib, 1992; Berlant & Warner, 1998; Fraser, 1990; Squires, 2002). And in recent years, an absolutist vision of "free speech" as a rhetorical calling card has been deployed by far-right groups and leveraged to make space for racist discourse (Titley, 2020). We can see similar themes at play in Matze's depiction of Parler. Our critique, therefore, is not just that Matze's vision of free speech was applied inconsistently in practice. It is also that the discursive premise of universalist "free speech" can, in the wrong hands, paper over fundamental disjunctures regarding how speech rules are operationalized within unequal societies. Notwithstanding Matze's portrayal of a virtual town square welcome to all, the facilitation of speech that dehumanizes and harms some groups not only produces silencing effects on members of those groups, but also sends a clear message as to whose speech is valued by a platform and whose is not (Kreiss et al., 2021). In one interview in our sample, Matze seemed briefly to grasp the idea that whether a particular word—in this case the N-word—should be allowed on his platform could depend on the identity of its speaker and receiver, as well as its effect. Yet the rarity of this exception only serves to illuminate the broader flaw of Parler's policy of almost blanket permissibility. Concluding *Is free speech racist?* Titley observes (2020) that "when claimed as a property of the nation, freedom of speech works to shape who can speak, in what role and register, and how they will be heard and listened to" (p. 135). Our analysis suggests that this rings true not only for nations, but also for platforms. Very little of the Panglossian vision that Matze painted for Parler is true—what Parler provided was not a "town square" for all, but rather a "safe space" for crude, discredited, and often dangerous far-right content, espoused by those banned by mainstream platforms. Yet our analysis has nonetheless highlighted the political utility of Parler's discursively constructed "past imaginary" as a means of legitimating fringe, extremist digital fiefs. Such platforms may never become fully mainstream, yet they can—as the events of 6 January 2021 demonstrate—nonetheless wreak havoc at the heart of democratic societies. As such, the defense of democracy may lie not in the unquestioned acceptance of free speech online, but in more difficult debates over its limits.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. https://web.archive.org/web/20180709191600/https://home.parler.com/test-2/.
2. Although so too is the far lesser-known Ronald Wayne.
3. https://zuckerbergfiles.org.
4. This should not be taken as suggesting that any expression of concern about constraints on free speech is an example of such tactics, nor that all advocates of free speech maximalism belong to such groups.
5. https://mediacloud.org.
6. For clarity it should be noted that, although the full text was not returned in the search results, both searches returned matches with the full text of stories, not just with headlines.

7. These included syndicated stories, where text was copied verbatim (usually from an agency such as the Associated Press) and republished elsewhere under a different URL ($N=9$); broken URLs ($N=4$); paywalled articles that we were unable to access with existing institutional subscriptions ($N=16$); articles which, despite the search parameters, fell outside of the time period under analysis ($N=4$) or did not contain the searched-for text strings ($N=3$); and non-English language articles ($N=26$).
8. Most codes were applied across an entire sentence and sometimes a whole paragraph, to ensure maximal context when reviewing all coded material; occasionally, only a single clause was highlighted where the context was sufficiently clear and self-contained. See Supplementary Material for an example coded passage.
9. These included claims about Parler's *post-partisan* appeal, as well as references to *explicitly right-wing values*; these were appended to our schema as additional codes.
10. Although we also coded many passages that were not quotes as useful indicators of how Parler's communications were framed by the news media, the results below are based solely on direct quotes from Matze.
11. At various points, Matze characterized Silicon Valley platform operators as "technoauthoritarians," "technofascists," and "socialist dictatorships."
12. According to Matze, Parler was, variously, a "neutral town square," a "community town square," and a "free and open town square"; the strapline on Parler's homepage likewise described the platform as "the world's town square."
13. This is backed up by contemporaneous polling, such as one poll in August 2020, which found that 90% of Republican voters "say it is likely that social media sites censor political viewpoints," versus 59% of Democrats (Vogels et al., 2020).
14. While the First Amendment is neutral with respect to gender, Parler's Jury guidelines substitute the masculine "he" and "his," revealing the imagined publics invoked by Parler's policies.
15. An archived version is available on the Internet Archive: https://web.archive.org/web/20200715181055/https://news.parler.com/email-letters/declaration-of-internet-independence.

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