

CREST Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats



Understanding 21st-Century Militant Anti-Fascism

FULL REPORT

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This report details the key findings of work conducted by the CREST commissioned project *Understanding Twenty-First Century Militant Anti-Fascism: An Analytical Framework And Matrix*. You can view all the outputs from this project at: crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/twenty-first-century-militant-anti-fascism/

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: KEY POINTS AND RISK MATRIX

Anti-fascist militancy has existed for as long as fascism has, but militant anti-fascism is still largely neglected across both academic and policy-practitioner communities. A far more robust, evidence-based understanding is now needed, especially in a context where militant anti-fascist protest in the United States has been conflated with ‘domestic terrorism’.

The militant anti-fascist movement, or Antifa, is a de-centralised, non-hierarchical social movement. It is loosely structured on dispersed networks of local groups. It has a distinctly anti-authoritarian orientation, consisting, for the most part, of anarchists; anarcho-communists; left-libertarians; and radical socialists. The movement is transnational, but it responds in local conditions.

This report presents evidence from six local case studies: three from the United States: Portland, New York City, Philadelphia; and three from Britain: Brighton, Liverpool, London. It adopts a multi-method approach, combining interviews with anti-fascist activists drawn from these six localities, as well as analysis of digital platforms used by local militant anti-fascist groups (Rose City Antifa; NYC Antifa; Philly Antifa; Brighton Antifascists; Merseyside Anti-Fascist Network; and London Antifascists).

The following conclusions are drawn:

- Militant anti-fascists are not wedded to a narrow definition of fascism, but they do believe that fascism is qualitatively different from all other forms of politics in that it is exceptional in its threat and use of violence.
- Militant anti-fascists do not see ‘fascism’ everywhere and generally retain their focus on the

political space which is commonly understood by the mainstream society as ‘far right’.

- Militant anti-fascists share a common commitment to the principles of ‘no platform’, whereby individuals holding views regarded as ‘fascist’ or ‘fascistic’ should be prevented from contributing to public debate ‘by whatever means necessary’.
- Militant anti-fascists also share a commitment to ‘direct action’, whereby anti-fascist actors use their own power to directly reach their goals rather than appeal to the authorities.
- While the willingness to use confrontational violence separates militant anti-fascism from non-militant forms, militant anti-fascists exercise restraint in their use of violence. This is significant. It clearly challenges simplistic associations with terrorism and the planning of terrorist acts and/or mass violence that threatens life. The claim that fascism is defined by an ultra-violent credo imposes a value-based, prefigurative boundary on militant anti-fascists in both their use and rhetorical representation of violence. Strategic concerns factor too, such as the risk that violent escalation will lead either to group isolation from the wider anti-fascist coalition or dissolution as a result of increasing state repression. Internal cultures of decision-making and recruitment structures function as further dynamics of restraint (or ‘internal brakes’, as suggested in previous CREST-funded research (<https://crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/internal-brakes-on-violent-escalation/>)).
- The aforementioned conclusions are borne out with regards to not only the street activism of militant anti-fascist groups but also their digital activism. On their websites, blogs and social media accounts, the form of ‘direct action’ most

commonly engaged in by anti-fascist groups is ‘doxing’: publicising information about far-right activists in the hope that this will result in legal or economic consequences for the individual. These digital platforms also offer the opportunity for different groups to forge networks. However, these networks are largely solidaristic rather than organisational in nature (both within their own national settings and trans-nationally).







- The respective histories of militant anti-fascism in both the US and Britain reveal a long-term trend towards promoting greater public participation at protest events. However, there remains an obvious tension between broadening the base of opposition to ‘fascism’ and retaining group coherence and militancy. Nonetheless, the direction of travel is not towards the formation of clandestine, underground cells. There is little evidence of a push towards the escalation of violence from non-lethal to lethal, or the adoption of a *modus operandi* that is more typically associated with terrorist groups.
- Anti-fascism is reactive, and its defensive response is shaped by the nature of the perceived threat. In terms of public order risk assessment, context is critical. In the US, following the election of Donald Trump in 2016, a conflict between anti-fascists and the far right attracted an international profile, and the demonisation of Antifa as ‘domestic terrorists’ bent on sowing chaos and disorder, encouraged each side to define one another in terms of an existential threat. During 2020, this polarisation further deepened with the pandemic, the killing of George Floyd, excessive use of law enforcement, and Trump’s rejection of the presidential election result as fraudulent. The presence of armed individuals on protests is a further context-specific aggravating factor.
- In Britain, while society polarised over Brexit, the pandemic dampened down far-right street mobilisation, and while anti-fascists remain pessimistic regarding future developments, the far right is not currently considered an existential

threat. Unlike the US, the militant anti-fascist movement is rarely discussed in this country in relation to public debates on ‘violent extremism’. It is not subject to the same levels of disinformation, rumour, hysteria, and moral panic that could trigger vigilante action by the far right, and in turn, encourage more militant responses.

- On both sides of the Atlantic, the most likely risk in terms of the escalation of violence from the sub-lethal to lethal rests with impressionable individuals imbibed with anti-fascism’s dehumanisation of the far right. This is the individual who might lack the framework of restraint, who might only loosely associate with a militant anti-fascist group, and who is motivated entirely by their hostile response to ‘fascism’ as an egregious and abhorrent injustice.
- This is a reactive mindset, which requires a stimulus, whether coming from the provocation of the far right directly through aggressive displays of force (e.g. a pro-Trump protest where paintballs are shot from the beds of pickups), or by government policies (e.g. immigration raids and detention centres). This threshold has been reached in the US. In Britain, however, for the moment such stimuli remain less likely. It will probably require a deeply polarising event, or series of events, to trigger an impressionable individual to seek recourse to lethal violence as a way of venting their anger at perceived ‘fascist’ injustice.

The following matrix is a risk projection for the next two to three years. It is based on the assumption that Britain’s far right will return to the streets in significant numbers following the end of the pandemic.

RISK MATRIX

SCENARIO	Low	Medium	High
Antifa in the US will be formally classified as a domestic terrorist organisation			
Antifa in the US will go underground and prepare for armed struggle			
Antifa in the US will escalate from sub-lethal to lethal violence			
Individuals loosely affiliated with militant anti-fascism in the US will escalate from sub-lethal to lethal violence			
Militant anti-fascists in Britain will become more clandestine and revert to para-military “squaddism”			
Militant anti-fascists in Britain will reach a tipping point when groups (or individuals sympathetic to these groups) escalate to lethal violence			

2. INTRODUCTION

In April 2016, a US Department for Homeland Security and FBI report raised the possibility that if ‘fascist, nationalist, racist, or anti-immigrant parties obtain greater prominence or local political power in the United States’ it could lead to a ‘violent backlash from anarchist extremists’.

During 2017, as increasing numbers protested against racist and nationalist views held by the alt right, Antifa shot to national and international prominence (Bray, 2017). Reflecting growing concern over anti-fascist violence, 368,423 people signed a petition calling on President Trump ‘to formally declare ANTIFA a domestic terrorist organisation’.

The following year, a Republican-sponsored Congressional bill (H.R. 6054), otherwise known as ‘Unmasking Antifa Act of 2018’, sought to amend title 18 of the United States Code, ‘to provide penalty enhancements for committing certain offences while in disguise, and for other purposes’. In 2019 two Republican senators, Ted Cruz (R-Texas) and Bill Cassidy (R-La) introduced Senate Resolution 279 calling for ‘groups and organizations across the country who act under the banner of ‘Antifa’ to be designated domestic terrorist organizations’.

As Antifa became synonymous with physical opposition to fascism in the US, militant anti-fascist groups across Europe became increasingly active too. In Britain, the Anti-Fascist Network (AFN), originally formed in 2011, emerged as the primary vehicle for militant anti-fascism in response to violent street agitation by the English Defence League (EDL).

Militant anti-fascism, which is the most radical type of anti-fascist activity, has a long history across Europe and the US, stretching back to the 1920s. Its guiding principle is that physical opposition to fascism – direct confrontation – is necessary, effective and justified.

However, activists interpret their militancy in broad ways, and do not limit themselves exclusively to violence (Burley, 2017).

Militant anti-fascism sits within the field of the radical autonomous left – a patchwork of loosely overlapping political tendencies that includes anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists, anarcho-communists, left-libertarians and socialists. Militant anti-fascism’s repertoire of extra-parliamentary intervention is characterised by contentious forms of direct action, civil disobedience, protest demonstrations, cultural/counter-cultural activities and increasingly, digital activism. In the 21st century, this activism finds expression under the international (colloquial) banner of Antifa, organising in decentralised, grassroots networks of geographically dispersed local groups.

As we document, Antifa has evolved globally but it responds in local conditions. With anti-fascist confrontational street politics typically presenting in urban spaces at a local level, militant anti-fascism exhibits many of the defining characteristics of a ‘street gang’: street-oriented, young, sharing group identity and engaging in violent criminal activity. Criminological perspectives are useful here (Pyrooz & Densley, 2018) but the militant anti-fascist milieu is ideologically motivated, street gangs are not (Copsey, 2018). Confrontational street activism occupies a defining place in militant anti-fascist identity and mobilisation, yet contemporary militant anti-fascism manifests in multi-layered praxis (Vysotsky, 2021).

Significantly, the increasing capacity of local groups to access global online networks enables militant anti-fascists to participate in online struggles to exert control over narrative messaging. This has now become a key consideration in ‘framing’ forms of action. Accordingly, any investigation of militant anti-fascism today requires an innovative hybridised

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methodological approach (see *Section 4*) that acknowledges the intermingling of the ‘online’ and ‘offline’ and simultaneously targets activism in the streets, on social media, and at the points where these overlap (Merrill and Pries, 2018).

This report starts from a position where UK security, law enforcement and intelligence analysts have been drawn more to pro-Jihadist, the extreme right, or Irish republican threats. Within the policy and practitioner fields, militant anti-fascism has been neglected. But in a context where different permutations of the extreme and populist ‘right’ have gained further ground, a more rigorous, sober, and integrated assessment of the propensity to violent extremism from self-proclaimed militant anti-fascists is needed, especially where the prevailing narrative, in the US at least, conflates Antifa with ‘terrorist’ violence.

The literature on militant anti-fascism to date is dominated by self-congratulatory accounts written by activists. Academic study, while in development, remains largely embryonic. Far-right extremists rather than their self-proclaimed (militant) opponents occupy the focus of national and international scholarship.

As neglected actors, militant anti-fascists have been left in the academic cold. Scholarly understanding of this violent form of extremism is still lacking, despite the fact that any understanding of fascism/right-wing extremism is incomplete without appreciating the dynamics of its opposition. In extending and enhancing knowledge of 21st-century militant anti-fascism both conceptually and empirically, this report helps to redress this significant gap in our academic understanding.

3. DEFINING TERMS: ANTI-FASCISM; MILITANT ANTI-FASCISM; ANTIFA

3.1 WHAT IS ANTI-FASCISM?

Anti-fascism can be defined simply as *opposition to fascism*. However, this opposition can take active and passive forms (expressed in action and/or argument). The labelling of the opponent as ‘fascist’ rests with the anti-fascist.

3.2 THREE TYPES

There are three main types of anti-fascism: Militant; Liberal; State:

- Militant anti-fascism.** A type of anti-fascism that engages in non-legalistic forms of direct confrontation and violence.
- Liberal anti-fascism.** A type of legalistic anti-fascism that abstains from violence and calls on the state and authorities to take action against fascists.
- State anti-fascism.** An ‘official’ type of anti-fascism, sponsored by the state, which can be extolled as state doctrine (as in the former German Democratic Republic, for example).

Each of these three types can manifest in a different form. Militant anti-fascism is typically the preserve of the radical left, but it does not have to be, as the historical example of the 43 Group in 1940s Britain reveals. Types (a) and (b) constitute civil society’s anti-fascist movement, with militant anti-fascism forming the so-called ‘radical flank’. At various moments, these forms can work together collaboratively (through so-called ‘united’ or ‘popular fronts’ for example). At other times they remain separate and sometimes antagonistic.

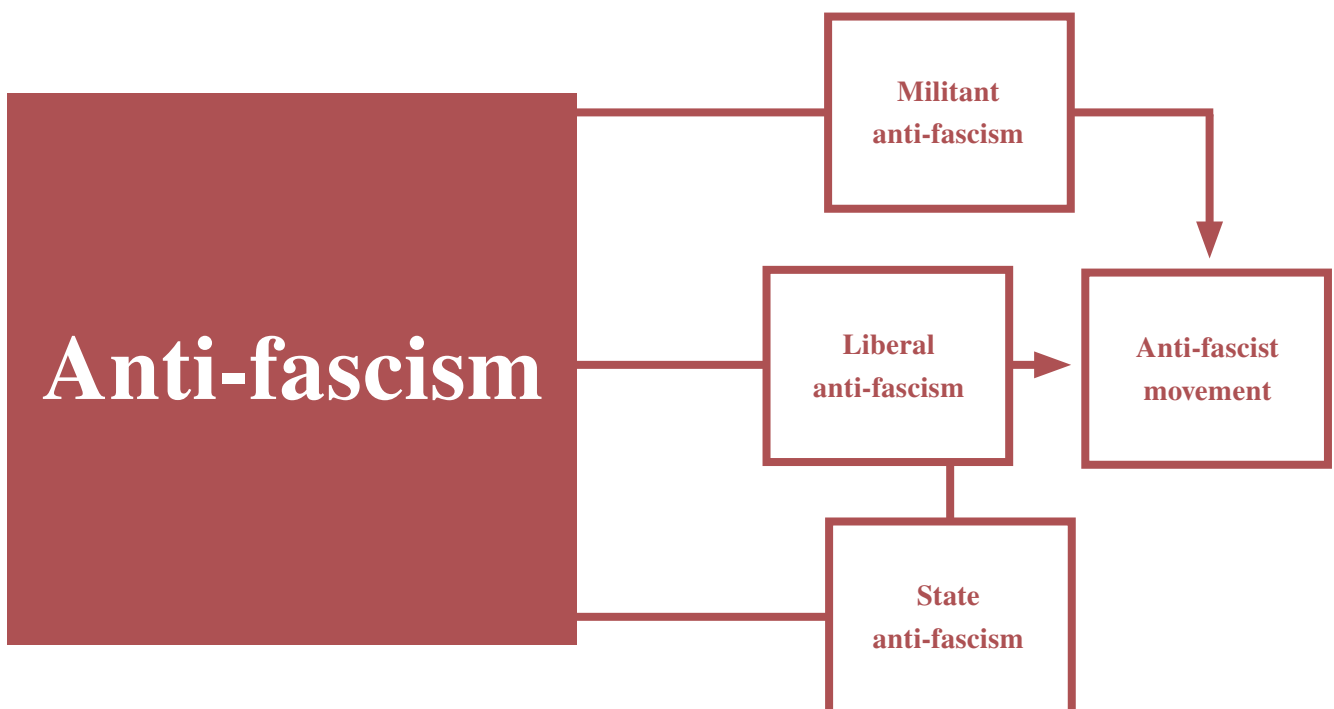


Figure 3.1.1 Anti-Fascism: Primary Types

3.3 ANTIFA

The term Antifa is commonly used in colloquial parlance as an abbreviation for a person (an Antifa) or group/movement that engages in anti-fascist activity. Its use is more common in North America and continental Europe than in Britain, although there is now greater recognition of the term in this country as a consequence of recent developments in the United States (Oxford Languages shortlisted the word Antifa as its ‘Word of the Year 2017’ with usage frequency having peaked in August 2017).

The provenance of the term Antifa is not North American but German. It is a derivation of *Antifaschistische Aktion*, a militant Communist Party-sponsored organisation, which was active during 1932-33. In the 1980s West German autonomists revived the term Antifa. It was later adopted by militant anti-fascists in the US as a way of drawing attention to shared repertoires of militant ‘direct action’ alongside radical anti-authoritarian praxis. For a while, militant anti-fascists in Britain adopted the moniker too (see *section 6.1* in this report).

For the purposes of this report, we apply the term Antifa to a transnational social movement comprising autonomous groups that are affiliated by their militant opposition to fascism and other forms of the far right.

Antifa

A highly decentralised, radical social movement, comprised of geographically dispersed, non-hierarchical autonomous groups that use both violent and non-violent forms of direct action against ‘fascism’ and other forms of the far right. Its activists mainly subscribe to a range of anti-authoritarian, radical left-wing ideologies.

4. METHODOLOGY

This report focuses on case studies of militant anti-fascism drawn from six locations, three in the US (Portland, New York City, Philadelphia) and three in Britain (Brighton, Liverpool, London). Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with anti-fascist activists from various groups in each of these locations.

These anonymised interviews (transcribed verbatim where consent was given) focused primarily on personal accounts of activist participation, addressing understandings of fascism and anti-fascism; the place of militancy; sub-lethal violence and restraint; activist histories; relations with other groups; social media platforms; and future trajectories. Interviews were carried out by lead-author, Nigel Copsey, in the period from October 2019 through to September 2020 (and so pre-date the 2020 US presidential contest).

This report's findings are also based on an analysis of social media content, specifically blog posting, Facebook, and Twitter activity. This analysis, undertaken by Samuel Merrill, deployed manual and computational techniques. First, broader social media ethnographies were carried out across these three social media platforms. These ethnographies revealed

1) the extent to which each selected militant anti-fascist group had used blog(s) since their creation, 2) their presence on Facebook and 3) their Twitter activity. The results of these ethnographies are detailed and quantified in sections 5.2,5.3,5.4,6.2,6.3,6.4 of this report.

The measure of each group's Twitter activity within these ethnographic surveys was based on a sample of tweets collected from each of the case groups' official Twitter account according to the social media platform's regulations (see *Table 4.1*). These regulations permit the collection of approximately 3,200 of an account's most recent tweets. Collections for this sample were run on 14 June 2019, 25 July 2019, and 28 August 2019 and then compiled. Overall the collection of these tweets enabled a more detailed analysis of the use of Twitter.

Close readings of the tweets in sample 1 contributed to the analysis behind this report's key findings as detailed under sections 5.5 and 5.6. For example, word frequency analysis focused on militant terms (like 'violence', 'attack', 'assault', 'fight', and 'terror') and close readings of the tweets containing these terms were used to study how the case study groups defined

Account	Tweets	Retweets	Date Range
@brightonanti	1951	1517	13/11/2011 – 19/07/2019
@ldnantifascists	1991	1119	02/08/2013 – 28/08/2019
@MerseysideAfn	3361	2499	13/11/2016 – 28/08/2019
@NYCAntifa	4741	1004	15/12/2018 – 28/08/2019
@PhillyANTIFA	2338	1393	05/06/2011 – 05/02/2019
@RoseCityAntifa	3971	2349	13/03/2018 – 28/08/2019

Table 4.1: Twitter Sample 1 Content Summary

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fascism and violence as well as the extent to which they exercise rhetorical restraint (see, for example, 5.5.1 – 5.5.4 and Copsey & Merrill, 2020).

A second Twitter sample (see *Table 4.2*) collected on 28 August 2020 was used to map the trans-local social media connections of the case groups as detailed in sections 5.5.6. and 6.5.4. The descriptive statistical analysis of each case group's retweet activity and the coding of the accounts they retweeted in terms of their geographical scale was used to this end. Retweet connections were also visualised as a network using Gephi.

Account	Tweets	Retweets	Date Range
@brightonanti	2647	2020	13/11/2011 – 27/08/2020
@ldnantifascists	2108	1184	02/08/2013 – 28/08/2020
@MerseysideAfn	2968	2215	13/10/2018 – 27/08/2020
@NYCAntifa	3200	1338	24/05/2020 – 28/08/2020
@PhillyANTIFA	2225	1285	05/06/2011 – 02/05/2019
@RoseCityAntifa	3154	1937	03/07/2019 – 27/08/2020

Table 4.2: Twitter Sample 2 Content Summary

5. MILITANT ANTI-FASCISM IN THE UNITED STATES

5.1 HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The origins of modern-day militant anti-fascism in the United States date back to 1977 and the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee (JBAKC), formed in response to Klan organising within the prison system in New York state.

Established by veterans of the 1960s New Left (Students for a Democratic Society/Weather Underground), JBAKC defined itself in the radical tradition (named after the white abolitionist John Brown who attempted a violent insurrection against slavery in 1859). On 3 November 1979 in Greensboro, North Carolina, five anti-Klan protesters were shot dead by members of the United Racist Front, an umbrella organisation for the Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party.

The ‘Greensboro Massacre’ drew attention to an evolving collaboration between Klansmen and Nazis, launching ‘a new, pan-right extremism – a toxic brew of virulent racism, anti-government rhetoric, apocalyptic fearmongering and paramilitary tactics’ (Assael & Keating, 2019). With the white supremacist movement further emboldened by the election of Ronald Reagan – an effect repeated over three decades later with Donald Trump – JBAKC expanded into a national network of around a dozen chapters, remaining active until 1992 (Moore & Tracy, 2020).

By the mid-1980s the US far right had made significant inroads into youth subcultural spaces. Within the punk scene, the encroachment of white racist skinheads gave rise to violent retaliation. Aside from JBAKC, groups such as SHARP (Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice), RASH (Red and Anarchist Skinheads), and Anti-Racist Action (ARA) emerged. The latter, the immediate forerunner to Antifa, was originally formed

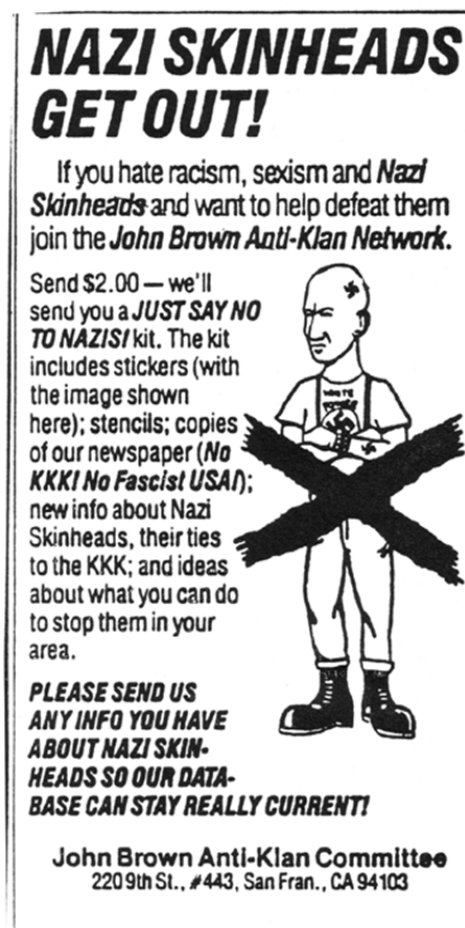


Figure 5.1.1. JBAKC Flyer (n.d.)

in 1987 by a multi-racial crew of anti-racist skinheads known as the ‘Baldies’ from Minneapolis. As one of the ‘Baldies’ remarked candidly, ‘From our experience the tactic that has worked in Minneapolis includes physical confrontation. Which is fighting them and kicking the shit out of them’ (Sprouse & Yohannan, 1989). While aware of, and inspired by, the example of Anti-Fascist Action (AFA) in Britain, the ‘Baldies’ opted for the name ‘Anti-Racist Action’ believing that, in the US, the term ‘anti-racist’ would resonate more widely. ‘To us, the word ‘fascist’ sounded too

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academic. But everybody knew what a racist was' (Mogelson, 2020).

Though the politics were immature – informed largely by music lyrics – a militant political consciousness developed, mainly thanks to the involvement of an anarchist group in Minneapolis known as the 'Revolutionary Anarchist Bowling League' (RABL or 'Rabble'). The 'Rabble', heavily influenced by the British-based anarchist group Class War, emphasised the need to stir-up class hatred amongst the working class through expressions of spontaneous working-class anger, such as rioting and looting. In one of its more 'humorous' incidents, the 'Rabble' threw a bowling ball through the window of an army recruiting centre in Minneapolis (Brown, No 3, Fall 2002).

Following the example of ARA in Minneapolis, other ARA groups emerged. By the end of the 1980s, a regional ARA network comprised of anti-racist skinhead crews was formed in the Mid-West known as the 'Syndicate'. But there were limits to further expansion:

'ARA was at this point predominantly male, and despite the growing political consciousness and understanding that ARA needed to be more than just a Skinhead group, the emphasis placed on physical confrontation and violence often bred a mentality where in the end, ARA was only about beating down the nazis' (McGowan, 2003, p. 6).

Responding to internal criticisms of machismo and sexism, ARA Minneapolis took the lead and reoriented ARA toward broader leftist concerns such as patriarchy, gender, abortion struggles, and police brutality. By the early 1990s, skinhead culture no longer defined ARA. Nonetheless, underlying tensions festered over the relative place of class, gender, sexism, individual and group identity.

In 1995 ARA Minneapolis and members of the Midwest Antifascist Network (comprised of various

radical-left tendencies) responded by re-launching ARA as the Anti-Racist Action Network (ARA Net). ARA Net was a loose network held together by four common Points of Unity (POU) (see *Figure 5.1.2*).

While embracing several radical-left tendencies, a large number now self-identified as anarchists, working within ARA as part of the Love and Rage Anarchist Federation. Between 1996 and 1997 ARA would reach 'its pinnacle in membership, easily estimated at 1,500 supporting activists'. However, its 1998 national conference proved fractious; ARA emerged from it both 'splintered and demoralized' (McGowan, 2003). That same year, two ARA members, Lin 'Spit' Newborn and Dan Shersty, were murdered by suspected neo-Nazis. Both had worked closely together to form the ARA chapter in Las Vegas.

Events the following year would provide ARA with fresh momentum. The anti-globalisation protest in Seattle on 30 November 1999 'lit up people's imaginations and many ARA groups that were still active threw themselves into the various mass protests' (McGowan, 2003, p. 11). Taking inspiration from the anarchist Black Bloc tactic of 'N30', on 12 January 2002, at the so-called 'Battle of York' in Pennsylvania, ARA formed an anti-fascist Black Bloc for the first time in order to confront a white supremacist demonstration. This 'battle', where one white supremacist fired a handgun and another ran over a female anti-racist, would set the precedent for subsequent direct action against fascists.

Forming the template for later incarnations, the ARA Net was decentralised, non-hierarchical and 'anyone anywhere can and does use the ARA name if they identify with the "brand" of militant, confrontational, counter-cultural direct action' (ARA-LA/PART, 2009). By 2009 there were over 20 local ARA-affiliated chapters across North America. In 2013 ARA Net relaunched as the TORCH Network, 'Out of the old Anti-Racist Action Network rises a new, militant anti-fascist network'. This was not,

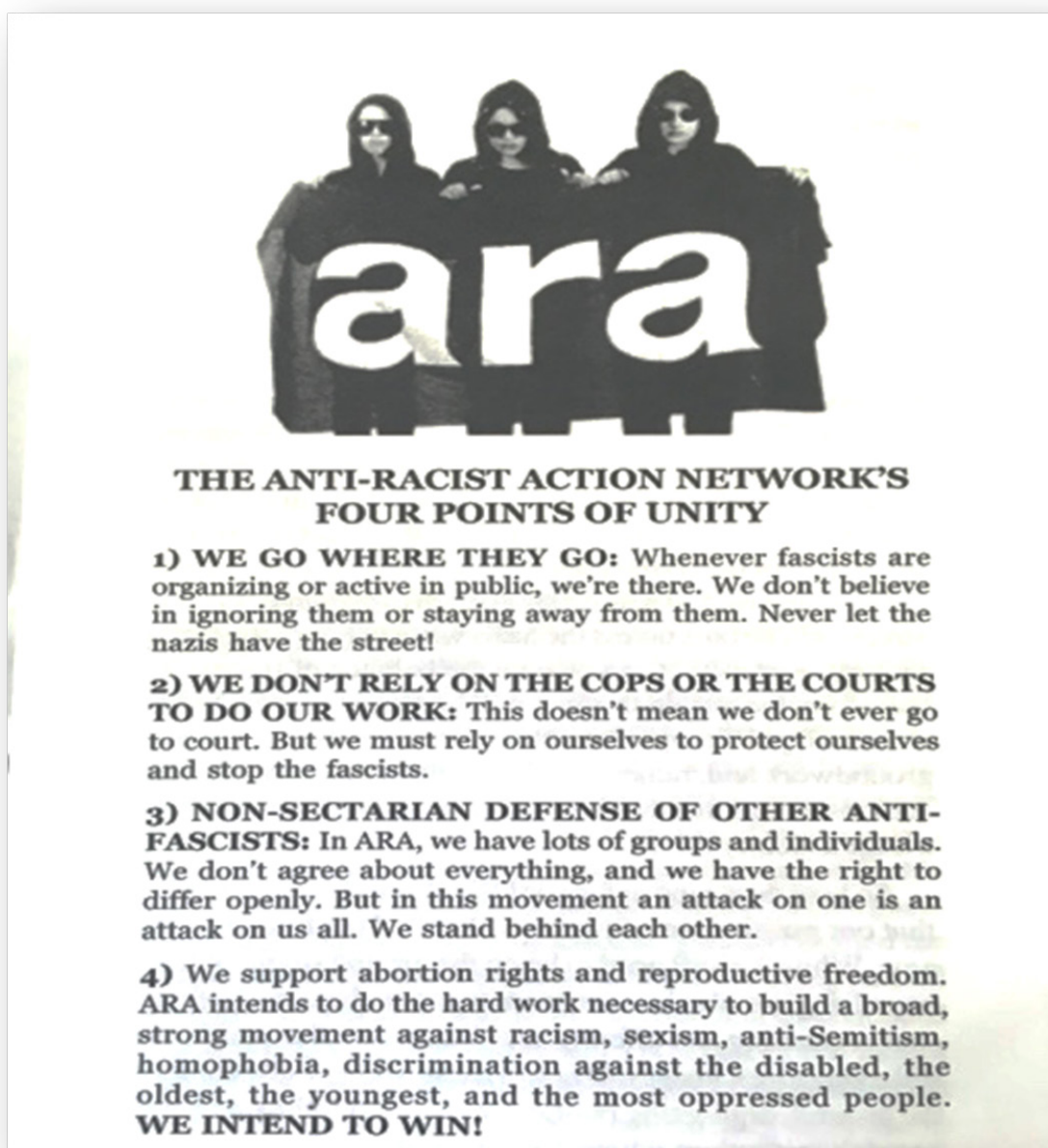


Figure 5.1.2 Anti-Racist Action Network's Four Points of Unity (n.d.)

'[...] a fracture or schism coming from internal strife but the result of the realization that the blueprint laid out in a time before the Internet no longer serves as a sufficient model for combating fascism [...] We wanted to build a new network that fits our needs and politics, one that is more relevant and appealing to a new generation of anti-fascists' (ARA-LA/PART, 2014).

Founding chapters were several of the most radical: Southside Chicago ARA, CenTex ARA, ARA-LA/ People Against Racist Terror (PART), the Hoosier Anti-Racist Movement (HARM), Central Florida Antifa, and from December 2013, Philly Antifa.

On 11 November 2016, a few days after Trump's election, TORCH chapters gathered in Denver for their third annual network conference. The question they asked themselves was a pressing one: 'What does this

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mean for Antifa?’ Rocky Mountain Antifa and the TORCH Antifa Network obliged:

‘It means our role has increased drastically. We are more than local crews combating local fascists. We are essentially tasked with building resistance to a fascist regime. For those of us who saw this coming as well as those who are just waking up, we need to recognize our significance at this moment. All social movement organizing is now antifascist organizing. We are at a pivotal point in the outcome of this overwhelming shit show (Rocky Mountain Antifa/TORCH, 2016).

During 2017, Antifa groups in the US then rose to national and international prominence. Serious disturbances occurred in Berkeley, California, in March. But the seminal moment came in Charlottesville, Virginia, on 12 August 2017 when violent clashes between white supremacists and anti-fascist opponents culminated in the death of a young anti-racist activist, Heather Heyer. The immediate effect on Antifa was that it had ‘suddenly gone from marginalized janitors of the anarchist movement without social capital to high-respect activism’ (Gilles, 2019, p. 242).

But TORCH was not the only militant anti-fascist network to take up the cudgels. Other radical initiatives emerged too, such as ‘Redneck Revolt’. As founder Dave Strano explains,

‘In mid-2016 several former Kansas John Brown Gun Club members came together to build Redneck Revolt, a national project of armed organizing against white supremacy. Some of our branches are John Brown Gun Clubs, but all of our national network focuses on firearms and community defense as a two-part strategy: using firearms as a way to do anti-racist outreach and relate to other working-class people from all

backgrounds, and as a way to build real, meaningful cross-racial solidarity amongst working-class folks’.

What this meant in practice, was engaging in ‘direct outreach in the places where white nationalists traditionally recruit, such as gun shows, state fairs, cattle sales, and flea markets, and our goal is to build long-term relationships with people, not just hand them a flier’ (Strano, 2018, p. 266).

At first, Redneck Revolt collaborated with TORCH but it did not define itself as an Antifa group. Tactically, there were key differences: Redneck Revolt eschewed the ‘Black bloc’. They did not engage in property destruction, nor did they physically attack fascists in the street. For Strano, the key was to make ‘ourselves accessible to our communities as a form of accountability: our faces are uncovered and many of our names are known because we have a responsibility to engage directly with our neighbors and speak to our words and actions’ (Strano, 2018, p. 266).

Yet following allegations of sexual abuse levelled against Strano, by the end of 2017, TORCH had increasingly distanced itself from Redneck Revolt. Come 2019, the Redneck Revolt network, which had quickly expanded to some 40 chapters in 2017, was in organisational disarray.

As of 2020, TORCH was still functioning as the primary umbrella organisation for Antifa in the United States. Describing itself as a network of militant anti-fascists across but not limited to the United States, TORCH was clearly in debt to ARA: ‘We are born out of, and pay our respects to, the Anti-Racist Action Network’ (TORCH Network, n.d.). TORCH’s (now five) Points of Unity reflect these obvious roots in ARA:

1. We disrupt fascist and far right organizing and activity.
2. We don’t rely on the cops or courts to do our work for us. This doesn’t mean we never go to court, but

the cops uphold white supremacy and the status quo. They attack us and everyone who resists oppression. We must rely on ourselves to protect ourselves and stop the fascists.

3. We oppose all forms of oppression and exploitation. We intend to do the hard work necessary to build a broad, strong movement of oppressed people centered on the working class against racism, sexism, 'nativism,' anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and discrimination against the disabled, the oldest, the youngest, and the most oppressed people. We support abortion rights and reproductive freedom. We want a classless, free society. We intend to win!
4. We hold ourselves accountable personally and collectively to live up to our ideals and values.
5. We not only support each other within the network, but we also support people outside the network who we believe have similar aims or principles. An attack against one is an attack against all.

While recognising that activities from group-to-group did vary, a recent US Congressional Research Service briefing paper provides a useable summary of the types of activity that Antifa groups promote for their adherents:

- Develop an online/social media presence to promote antifa views and recruit new members.
- Monitor the activities of groups and individuals who describe themselves as white nationalists, among others.
- Throw fundraisers and setup promotional tables at a variety of public events to recruit new members.
- Join rallies held by like-minded organizations and stage counter-demonstrations to fascist rallies.
- Compel organizations hosting speakers or rallies with a fascist bent to cancel such events. Protest can involve obstructing access to venues and intense lobbying of hosts. This activity has been

called 'noplatforming' (i.e. denying opponents a public platform).

- Remove or deface the publicly posted flyers of perceived enemies.
- Publicize information about perceived enemies. This can include group affiliations (such as the KKK), home addresses, photographs, phone numbers, social media profiles, and their employers. This kind of activity, often involving lawful online research, is called doxing. In some instances, innocent persons (cases of mistaken identity) have been targeted and had their lives disrupted by doxing, although antifa activists engaging in this line of work purport to avoid such outcomes.
- Develop self-defense training regimens involving martial arts and the legal limits governing self-defense items such as pepper spray, retractable clubs, and firearms. Where and how antifa followers use such training and equipment likely depends partly on the threat posed by opponents at rallies or the risk of arrest and criminal conviction. (Sacco, 2020).

Nine affiliate chapters were listed on the TORCH website in 2020: Antifa Sacramento, Western North Carolina Antifa, Rocky Mountain Antifa, Rose City Antifa, Atlanta Antifascists, Pacific Northwest Antifascist Workers' Collective, Antifa Seven Hills, Central Texas Anti-Racist Action, and Northern California Anti-Racist Action (TORCH, 2020).

Portland's Rose City Antifa formed a local chapter in ARA Net and is affiliated to TORCH. Philly Antifa left the TORCH network due to disagreements; NYC Antifa was never formally part of the network (although it did attend one TORCH conference with observer status). Significantly, membership of TORCH does not impose a list of common enemies on its affiliates, and as we shall see, local context is crucial in determining how a group identifies who or what is 'fascist'.

5.2 PORTLAND

Portland, Oregon, has a reputation for being one of the most liberal cities in the US, a veritable stronghold of progressive (counter) culture (exemplified in the city's slogan, 'Keep Portland Weird'). In the 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump failed to win in a single precinct in Portland. He did not visit the city during the Republican primaries, nor during the presidential campaign itself. In November 2016, in the wake of his election victory, downtown Portland became the site of anti-Trump protest lasting several days. But even earlier, during the presidency of George Bush (Snr.), staff at the White House would refer to Portland, on account of the fierce anti-war protest that Bush encountered there, as 'Little Beirut'.

Yet too much can be made of progressive reputations. According to one 2014 study, Portland ranked twelfth on a list of the most liberal US cities (Tausanovitch & Warshaw, 2014). It is also easy to miss traces of the city's illiberal past. During the 1920s Oregon had the highest per capita Klan membership in the country (an estimated 10,000 in Portland alone) (Langer, 2003, p. 211). Racism was endemic. It was 1959 before the state ratified the 15th Amendment, finally giving black people the right to vote. Even today, Portland remains the 'whitest' of all major US cities, with a population 72.2 per cent white and only 6.3 per cent African American (according to the 2010 census).

Portland's recent history also reveals moments of significant fascist/anti-fascist intervention. Between 1988 and 1993 the city was a 'center, if not the center, of racist skinhead organizing in the United States' (Treloar, 2004). A local far-right presence revived in the early 2000s in the form of Volksfront. In 2007, the neo-Nazi Hammerskins chose the greater Portland area as the venue for their 20th-anniversary celebration. It was from the opposition to this 'Hammerfest' event in October 2007, first manifesting in an Ad-Hoc Committee Against Racism and Fascism, that Rose City Antifa (RCA) was originally formed. As one RCA respondent told us, 'we had the rudimentary bones

there of our group like maybe a week or two after that event' (RCA05, 2020).

The RCA was the first anti-fascist group in the United States to adopt the moniker Antifa. The same respondent explains:

'I think a lot of the people in our group were coming from the perspective that we identified with a lot of European anti-fascist movements that were going on and also that we wanted to broaden the scope beyond ARA [...] a lot of us were coming from, like, anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists, this kind of political tradition. And so, we saw ourselves in this greater lineage of anti-fascism throughout history. So, we identified with the anti-fascist moniker and also with ideas beyond just racism, of systems of oppression that we were against that were larger than racism, sexism, homophobia [...] and also this was sort of when Antifa was becoming more of a label in Europe. Yeah, that was like it. You know, Sweden and Germany [...] I think, yeah, we felt part of more of an internationalist movement, I guess. And so, we wanted to show that through our name. We felt like we were in solidarity with an international community' (RCA05, 2020).

Prior to Trump's election in November 2016, Rose City Antifa's primary focus was on monitoring and opposing the activities of (the now-defunct) Volksfront – a white power skinhead organisation that originally emerged in the Oregon prison system that wanted the Pacific Northwest turned into a 'whites only' homeland. According to one of our RCA respondents, the group's efforts were ultimately successful in that 'we did eventually kind of like just nip at their heels until they finally collapsed' (RCA05, 2020). This did not come without some cost, however. Volksfront members were suspected of being responsible for the

March 2010 shooting of Portland RCA activist Luke Querner (who was left paralysed).

Trump's election in 2016 occasioned five consecutive nights of protest on Portland's streets and anti-Trump protest was sustained into 2017, with large demonstrations on Inauguration Day (20 Jan. 2017) and President's Day (20 Feb. 2017). It was against this background of heightened street protest that the local Trump-supporting far right made its first intervention. The aim was to goad anti-fascists. In April 2017, Patriot Prayer, led by Joey Gibson, organised a 'March for Free Speech' rally in east Portland.

Formed in 2016, in Vancouver, Washington (a suburb of Portland), Patriot Prayer is an 'anti-government' Patriot group. It denies that it is racist. Gibson is of Irish and Japanese descent; he has a daughter of colour. Despite that, his rallies in Portland have drawn gatherings of white nationalists and white supremacists, including 'Western chauvinist' Proud Boy supporters as well as activists from other far-right groups such as Identity Evropa. So, for anti-fascists, the significance of Patriot Prayer lay not in the size of the group itself – reports suggested a core membership of just 15 – but in its links to other far-right organisations. As one local anti-fascist commentator put it, Gibson's 'own politics mattered little as his movement has functioned as a Trojan horse for actual white nationalism, facilitating its growth and expansion' (Burley, 2019).

Patriot Prayer became a local cipher for more extreme elements. In May 2017 two men were fatally stabbed and a third was seriously injured on a Portland MAX train. The men had intervened when Jeremy Christian started abusing two girls, one of whom was wearing a hijab. Christian had attended the April 2017 Patriot Prayer event. Armed with a baseball bat, and giving Nazi salutes, he had hollered 'die Muslims!'

Table 5.2.1 provides a chronological outline of the most serious incidents of far-right/anti-fascist protest in Portland during 2017 and 2018. During this period, far-right mobilisation was initiated by Patriot Prayer.

During early 2019 Patriot Prayer changed tack. In January the group attempted to disrupt meetings of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). The DSA's meeting space was also vandalised with graffiti and broken windows. This led the DSA to become increasingly active in the local anti-fascist coalition (DSA01, 2019).

Further small-scale far-right provocations followed, culminating in May 2019 with a violent encounter at the Cider Riot bar in Northeast Portland, a well-known gathering place for the city's anti-fascists. Around 20 Patriot Prayer supporters, including Gibson, turned-up at the venue, which was hosting a May Day celebration. Gibson live-streamed this provocation on his Facebook page, introducing Cider Riot as 'Antifa central'. After harassing individual customers, a brawl ensued. One far-right activist allegedly struck one female anti-fascist unconscious, leading to a serious vertebrae fracture.

The Cider Riot melee gave rise to a \$1 million lawsuit filed against Patriot Prayer, Gibson and others by the proprietor of Cider Riot (Cider Riot v Patriot Prayer Complaint, 2019). With Gibson choosing to step back from the fray – he would be arrested in August 2019 on charges related to the disturbances at Cider Riot – the initiative passed to others, and to the Proud Boys in particular. Formed in 2016 in New York by the Canadian-British political commentator Gavin McInnes, a local chapter of the Proud Boys was established in Vancouver, Washington. Known for dressing in black/yellow Fred Perry polo-shirts, the Proud Boys provided security for Gibson.

On 29 June 2019, the Proud Boys staged a demonstration in Portland's city centre. It was met with a counter-protest from Rose City Antifa, Portland's Democratic Socialists of America, and Popular Mobilization (or, 'PopMob'). The latter, launched over the summer of 2018, saw itself as a broader-based movement. As one of its activists told us, it respected 'a diversity of tactics of militant groups and liberal non-violent groups and everybody in-between' (PopMob01, 2019). Three arrests were made; eight people sustained injuries. Of

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Date	Event	Portland City Council Observations (City of Portland Ordinance, 24 October 2018).
29 April 2017	<u>Patriot Prayer</u> , ‘March for Free Speech’	‘More than 100 demonstrators and counter demonstrators participated in the event. Some demonstrators wore helmets and brought thick wooden sticks. Other weapons observed included a baseball bat and collapsible baton. Several people were arrested.’
4 June 2017	<u>Patriot Prayer</u> , ‘Trump Free Speech Rally’	‘A total of more than 2,000 people participated in the demonstrations. Projectiles were thrown at police by demonstrators, including eggs, fireworks and mortars, soda cans, rocks, an unknown chemical agent, and a metal bar. Weapons confiscated by police included sticks, batons, shields (metal and plastic), knives, brass knuckles, crowbar, wrist rocket, switchblade, reinforced weaponized shields, and other homemade implements. Multiple fights occurred including a report of a large fight involving 50–60 people. Vandalism occurred. One person was injured. An officer was struck in the head with a rock, denting his helmet. Another officer was struck by a brick on his arm [...] Multiple people were arrested’.
6 August 2017	<u>Patriot Prayer</u> , ‘Freedom March’	‘More than 300 people participated in the demonstrations. Some of the demonstrators engaged in physical altercations including use of pepper spray on each other. Several demonstrators were impacted by the pepper spray. A few people were arrested.’
3 June 2018	<u>Patriot Prayer</u> counter-protests at left-wing rally against police violence; RCA counter-protests the <u>Patriot Prayer</u> rally with ‘Call to Resist Patriot Prayer Bringing Nazis to Portland’	‘On June 3, 2018, multiple demonstrations occurred in downtown Portland [...] More than 300 people participated in the demonstrations. Throughout the events, members of competing groups were observed deploying pepper spray and throwing projectiles, including fireworks, bottles, rocks and ball bearings. Multiple fights and skirmishes broke out, including a physical altercation in which a participant was struck repeatedly with a helmet. Several people went to the hospital and several people were arrested.’

30 June 2018	<u>Patriot Prayer/Proud Boys</u> , ‘Freedom and Courage Rally’	‘Close to 300 people participated in the demonstrations [...] Large scale fights broke out between the competing groups resulting in multiple injuries. Weapons were used by demonstrators and projectiles were thrown at police, including eggs, water bottles, and a wooden dowel. Other projectiles included fireworks, rocks, and construction equipment. Emergency responders provided on-scene medical evaluations to several people and four people were transported to area hospitals by ambulance. One PPB officer was also injured and transported to the hospital as a result of being struck by a projectile [...] PPB declared a riot. Multiple people were arrested.’
4 August 2018	<u>Patriot Prayer/Proud Boys</u> , ‘Gibson for Senate Freedom March’	‘More than 1,000 people participated in the demonstrations [...] Prior to the start of the scheduled demonstrations, police discovered individuals who had positioned themselves on a rooftop parking structure in downtown Portland with a cache of firearms. Officers located and seized multiple weapons throughout the demonstrations including rocks, smoke bombs, fireworks and mortars, unknown chemical agents, bottles, items from a slingshot and other projectiles. Multiple participants also came to the event armed with firearms [...] Multiple fights and skirmishes broke out [...] PPB declared a civil disturbance [...] Several people were arrested.’
13 October 2018	<u>Patriot Prayer</u> , ‘Flash demo’, ‘March for Law & Order’	‘[...] a group of demonstrators marched to the site of a vigil in downtown Portland and they were met by counterdemonstrators. Earlier in the evening, members of the groups were seen with hard knuckle gloves, knives and firearms. At the vigil, the two groups exchanged taunts and threats. Later in the evening, members of the two groups engaged in a brawl downtown.’

Table 5.2.1 Portland: Chronology of protest 2017–18

those arrested, a 24-year-old anti-fascist militant was sentenced to nearly six years in prison after pleading guilty to a second-degree assault involving a baton struck across an opponent’s head.

What attracted most attention, however, was a physical attack on the online right-wing provocateur ‘journalist’ Andy Ngo, who was doused with a milkshake and silly string, and punched by an anti-fascist. Ngo alleged that he was later diagnosed with a subarachnoid brain haemorrhage and hospitalised overnight. Although

unsubstantiated, Portland Police tweeted on the day that the milkshakes that anti-fascists had been throwing may have contained quick-drying cement.

It was significant that footage of Ngo’s attack went viral. It was picked up by conservative media commentators as evidence that the US faced a serious problem with left-wing violence and that Antifa posed a real threat to public safety. On 18 July 2019, Senator Ted Cruz (R-Texas), a prominent right-wing conservative and member of the Senate Judiciary

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Committee, referenced Ngo’s attack in his resolution to the U.S. Senate calling for Antifa to be designated a ‘domestic terrorist organisation’.

In an effort to further exploit political and media scrutiny of Antifa, the far right planned an ‘End Domestic Terrorism Rally’ in Portland, scheduled for 17 August 2019. This was organised by a right-wing media personality, Joe Biggs, in conjunction with Proud Boys leader, Enrique Tarrío (both domiciled in Florida). The event drew widespread attention, occasioning a tweet from President Trump that, ‘Major consideration is being given to naming ANTIFA an “ORGANIZATION OF TERROR”’. Portland is being watched very closely. Hopefully the Mayor will be able to properly do his job!’ (Trump, 2019).

While concern abounded that this event might see a repeat of Charlottesville, only around 200–300 attended in support of the rally, outnumbered by up to 1,000 counter-protestors. Less than 30 minutes after the rally had started, the protesters bid their retreat. For all the fears over the potential for deadly confrontation, violence was minor and sporadic. The most significant confrontation occurred when counter-protesters smashed several windows of a bus carrying a contingent of protestors.

Further escalation appeared likely, however, when a defiant Proud Boy Enrique Tarrío vowed to return, ‘Either he [Mayor Ted Wheeler] takes charge and

removes the scourge of violent domestic terrorists from his city, or we come back month-after-month’ (Mesh, 2019). Yet the far right did not make good on this threat. The tide of street protest in Portland receded through the remainder of 2019 until its revival was occasioned not by far-right provocation, but by the killing of George Floyd in May 2020.

RCA has maintained a website with a blog since at least November 2010. At the time of writing (September 2020) their blog featured 155 posts. The majority of these posts were focused on local or regional affairs and profile local far-right groups and activists as part of RCA digital activism and doxing strategies. Illustrating this, many of the tags appended to the posts are the names of prominent far-right groups and activists including many of those discussed above. Posting activity on the blog was relatively intermittent – ranging from just five posts in 2013 (spread over three months) to 29 posts in 2017 (spread over 10 months) (Figure 5.2.2). These moments of dormancy may reflect the group’s degree of engagement in street activism. Such a claim is lent credibility by the fact that the blog posting on the website was most pronounced and consistent between May 2017 and July 2019. In this period 70 posts were added to the blog and there were only two months during which no posts were added (September 2018 and May 2019). While this activity suggests the influence of both Trump’s election and increased Patriot Prayer organising in Portland, the

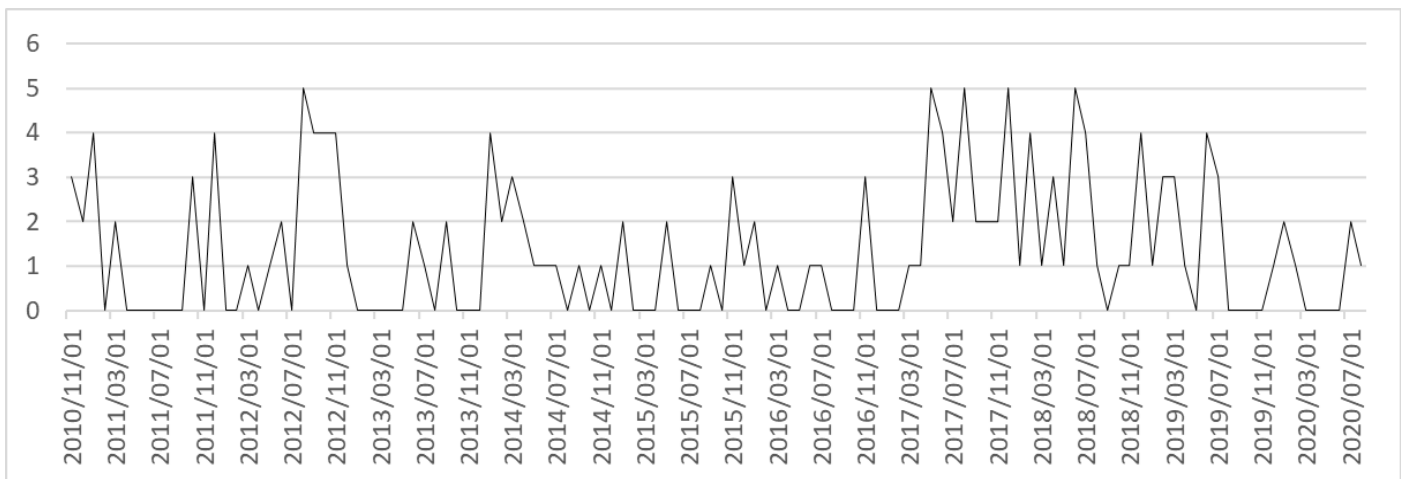


Figure 5.2.2: Rose City Antifa’s Monthly Blog Posting Activity (from launch until August 2020).

more recent drop off in posting activity with just seven posts between August 2019 and August 2020 and none between March and July 2020 suggests that high-levels of street activism as witnessed in Portland during this time may also limit the time available to maintain certain forms of online presence.

RCA also maintains a presence on Twitter and Facebook. RCA opened a Twitter account in April 2011 and since then it has posted at least 10,100 Tweets and accrued around 38,700 followers. A sample of 3,971 these Tweets, spanning between 13 March 2018 and 28 August 2019 (Twitter Sample 1), reveals how spikes in the group's Twitter activity corresponded to some of the protests and counter-protests mentioned above (*Figure 5.2.3*). For example, the spikes on 1 July, 4 August, and 13 October 2018 all coincided with Patriot Prayer and Proud Boys demonstrations in Portland. The largest spike in activity occurred on 17 August 2019 and coincided with the 'End Domestic Terrorism Rally'. This suggests that RCA uses the platform within its digital activism by live-tweeting information about how local rallies and their counter-protests unfold.

One of the tweets posted during the 'End Domestic Terrorism Rally' revealed how an RCA Facebook event page, used to recruit for their counter demonstration,

was taken down by Facebook along with the group's Facebook community page shortly before the counter demonstration. The latter, first created in February 2016, was eventually restored and is currently followed by over 23,000 Facebook accounts. The community page remains very active having been updated 59 times between 1 August and 17 September 2020.

5.3 NEW YORK CITY

Like Portland, New York City also holds a reputation for being a liberal and progressive city. Unlike Portland, however, it has not been subject to the same degree of far-right incursion. As one activist put it, 'I know places like Portland have a very visible far-right presence but for New York, at least especially in Manhattan, it's like you don't see like people like marauding through the streets like that' (UARF01, 2020). However, with Trump's election, the alt right did feel sufficiently emboldened to move from the online space to the streets, even in downtown Manhattan.

The most well-known incident occurred on 12 October 2018 when members of the Proud Boys, after leaving a Gavin McInnes speaking event at the Metropolitan Republican Club in Manhattan's Upper East Side, physically assaulted four masked militant anti-fascists affiliated to NYC Antifa. With video footage

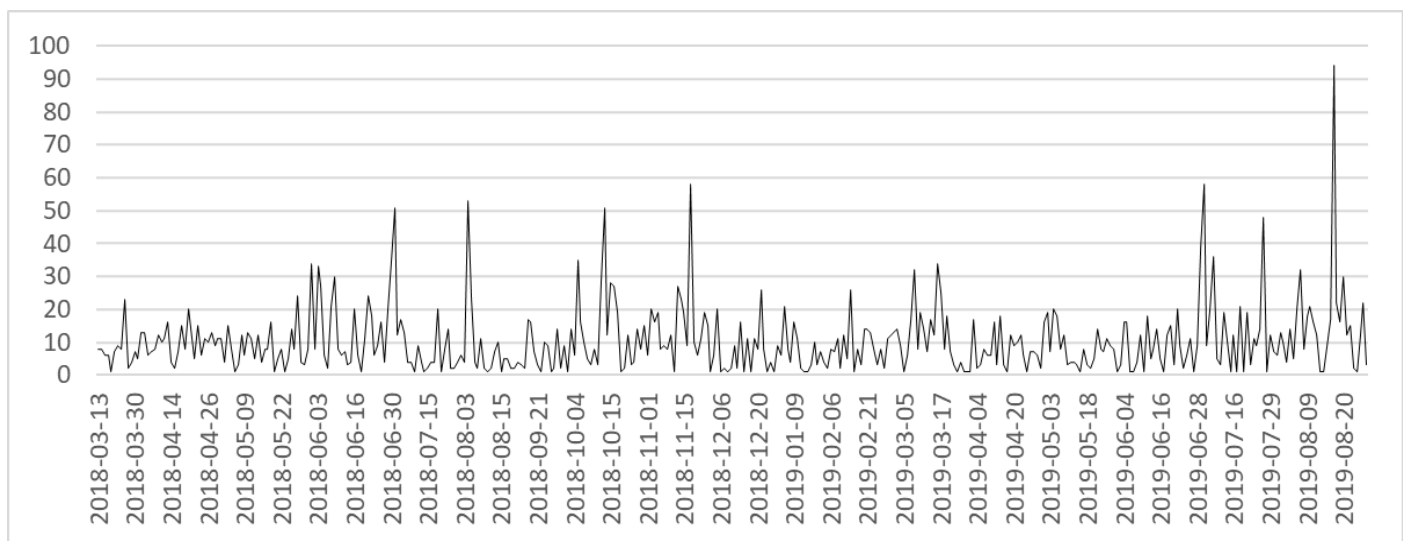


Figure 5.2.3: Rose City Antifa's Daily Twitter Posting Activity (from Twitter Sample 1, days of no activity are not plotted).

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of the attack going viral, NYC Antifa then doxed the Proud Boys involved. Ten Proud Boys were arrested and charged. Two of them were later convicted and sentenced to four years imprisonment. The Proud Boys claimed they had acted in self-defence (the night before, the club had been vandalised by militant anti-fascists with ‘Circle As’ and smashed windows; locks were glued; and a communique had denounced Republicans for supporting white supremacy) (Anon., 2019).

While pre-dated by militant anti-fascist groups, such as NYC Anti-Racist Action, which had disrupted David Irving’s speaking tour in November 2009, NYC Antifa was established in 2010 as ‘an autonomous blog that is trying through different media (news, videos and information in general) [to] help to build, defend, educate and create an effective cultural resistance against fascism’ (NYC Antifa, 2010). Remaining formally outside ARA Net, its focus until Trump’s election, was on countering the presence of fascists within the city’s subcultural hardcore, techno and thrash punk scenes.

With Trump’s election, attention shifted towards exposing the city’s alt right. ‘The first step in countering them is pulling off the sheets they are hiding under. These people have jobs and hang out in neighborhood bars. We encourage everyone to get to know your local fascist. NYC Antifa is going to unmask the Alt Right in the NYC metro area’ (NYC Antifa, 2016). As NYC Antifa began to share information about the Proud Boys with their employers, Gavin McInnes urged the Proud Boys to attend an Antifa concert and ‘wreck the shit’ of the ‘f*ggots’ (Idavox, 2016).

Ahead of the incident at the Manhattan Republican Club in October 2018, the most significant disorder arose at New York University in February 2017 when Proud Boys’ founder Gavin McInnes spoke at an event hosted by NYU College Republicans. While ‘NYU Against Fascism’, a coalition of NYU students, faculty and alumni, disrupted the talk from within the hall, outside, dozens of counter-protestors, including NYC

Antifa, clashed with McInnes supporters and police leading to 11 arrests.

Yet before long NYC Antifa had largely fallen apart. As one activist told us, ‘NYC Antifa had basically broken up for various reasons in the days after or the months after Charlottesville 2017. And there had been the usual personal beef and political battles and people had gone their separate ways’. And so, ‘there was no real anti-fascist front in the city at the time in the fall of 2018 that was capable of actually getting a mass base of people out to an action at all. So, we got our, not me personally, but our friends got their asses kicked by the Proud Boys and that was kind of a wakeup call’ (OutliveThem02, 2020).

As a result, towards the end of 2018, the anti-fascist milieu in New York City reconfigured. One response took the form of ‘Outlive-Them’, a militant Jewish anti-fascist group:

[...] the Pittsburgh massacre was kind of a program that woke some more people up. And we started having these mass meetings and we had a kind of committed street march and started doing de-platforming campaigns locally and so on. And so, I think it was just about where was our base. And, you know, one in four New Yorkers is a Jew of some kind. So, it's also specific to our contexts, organising as Jewish anti-fascists in a place where we have one and a half million Jews [...] (OutliveThem02, 2020).

Elsewhere, ‘United Against Racism and Fascism’, established in December 2018, looked to build a broader coalition. Modelled on the example of KEERFA (Movement United Against Racism and the Fascist Threat) in Greece, this organisation aspired to build a united front with the capacity to mobilise numbers on the street:

‘That is the goal of the organisation or the coalition, because the more people you have, you know, I mean, the neo, like neo-

Nazis are in the minority, right? The fascists are in the minority. And if like 20 of them show up and twenty thousand of us show up, they're not even going to try to punch' (UARF01, 2020).

Portland , we didn't have like a PopMob or one of these sort of coalition groups that could bring people out into the street . And also that could bring people out into the street somewhat safely. You know, they'd be able to list their names , their organizations have some sort of public point of contact and could call for things officially in a way that smaller groups could not without kind of exposing members. It allowed us to do things like press and interviews, and at the same time, I think there was a sense of widening support for a broader anti-fascist organizing [...]' (MACC01, 2020).

United Against Racism and Fascism (UARF) put out a call for a counterdemonstration by ‘everyday anti-fascists’ on 16 November 2019, when two dozen Proud Boys supporters held a rally at Trump Tower. The UARF’s call was supported by Outlive-Them, the DSA, and a variety of other socialist and anarchist groups, including the Metropolitan Anarchist Coordinating Council (MACC), which in 2017 had formed an anti-fascist working group known as ‘No Platform for Fascism’. (In a novel departure, this group also developed a free software plug-in that offered assistance to anyone who wanted to register a complaint about far-right videos on YouTube). ‘No Platform’ had functioned as a bridge between various socialist and anarchist groups and was originally intended to be a more public-facing partner to Antifa. As our MACC-affiliated respondent explained:

'This is when groups, Alt Right groups were organizing a lot more in-person rallies. And the response was often very minimal. The ANTIFA groups are frequently small research-based groups, you know, as much as forces that could actually mobilize. Unlike

Outnumbered by counter-protesters and rendered inaudible by the music, noise, and slogans coming from the opposition, the Proud Boys soon dispersed. For New York City, as one activist said, ‘This kind of coalition building is a breath of fresh air [...] There is still work that needs to be done. Conversations need to be had making further distinctions between the United Front approach and the kind of anti-fascism which relies on a militant minority wearing black masks’ (Hummel, 2019).

NYC Antifa’s website dates back to September 2010 and in September 2020 contained 204 blog posts. Reflecting the group’s primary conceptualisation in terms of a blog, it is perhaps unsurprising that in its

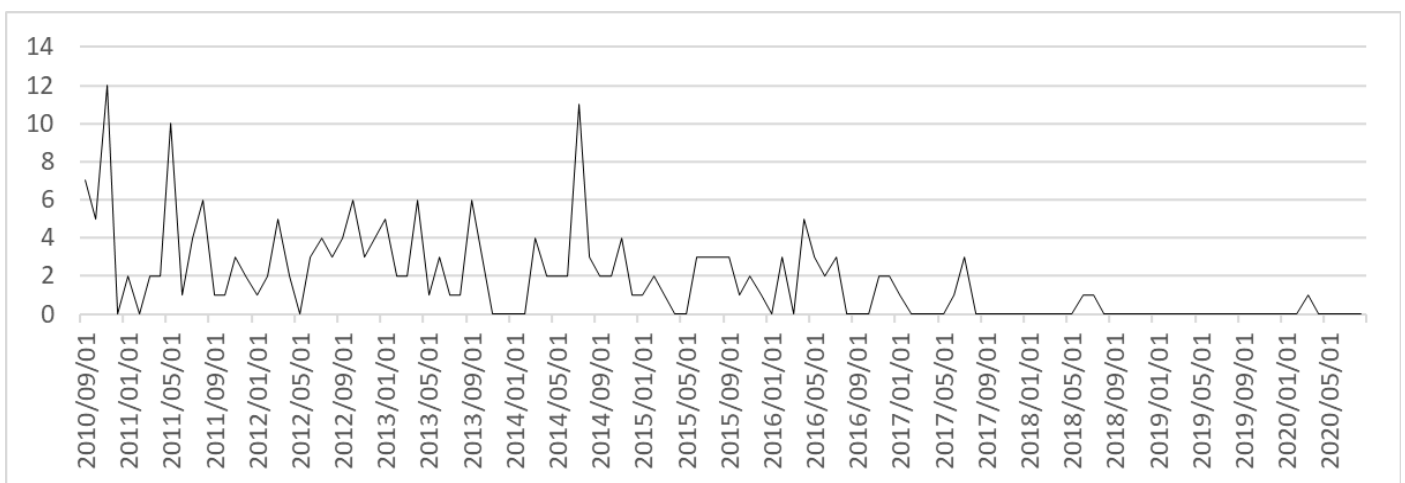


Figure 5.3.1: NYC Antifa’s Monthly Blog Posting Activity (from launch until August 2020).

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earliest years blog posts were added to the website very a regular manner (Figure 5.3.1). Between 2011 and 2014 between 30 and 36 posts were added to the webpage each year. Much of the content of these posts reflected transnational solidarity and interest in the Antifa subcultural scene. Twenty posts were added in both 2015 and 2016 but thereafter, confirming the erosion of NYC Antifa, only six posts have been added to the website and none during 2019. The most recent blog post – dating to March 2020 – is a doxing entry, however, confirming (along with occasional earlier examples) that the group does use this digital venue for that sort of digital activism.

While NYC Antifa’s blog lies dormant, its Twitter account which was started in March 2014 continues to be very active. This suggests that NYC Antifa may have shifted its platform and that overall it is more active in digital activism than street activism. NYC Antifa has posted around 23,100 tweets – so although it has been on the platform for a shorter time (by around three years) it has posted over double the number of tweets than RCA – and accrued around 60,500 followers. A sample of 4,741 tweets dating from between 15 December 2018 and 30 August 2019 (Twitter Sample 1) interestingly reveals a peak of activity like RCA on 17 August 2018 (Figure 5.3.2). Indeed, many of these tweets fed into the event in Portland that day and

amplified RCA’s success and the failure of the ‘End Domestic Terrorism Rally’. NYC Antifa had also used Twitter for doxing purposes as illustrated by a tweet containing a doxing video based on professionally edited CCTV footage of the confrontation with the Proud Boys that took place in New York on 12 October 2018, which for a time was the account’s pinned tweet.

5.4 PHILADELPHIA

In an article published in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* in August 2017, two journalists set out to explain why ‘Antifa, black-clad and often violent, is strong in Philly’

‘With its influx of millennials attracted by cheap rents, its punk music scene, and its long-time smattering of anarchist collectives along Baltimore Avenue in West Philadelphia, Philadelphia was a natural incubator for the movement. Four years ago, well before the ascendancy of Donald Trump, the city’s local antifa chapter was one of the first to align with a national parent group. Two years ago, the local chapter hosted the second national annual convention of antifa groups at the Rotunda, an auditorium at 40th and Walnut Streets’ (Phillips & McCoy, 2017).

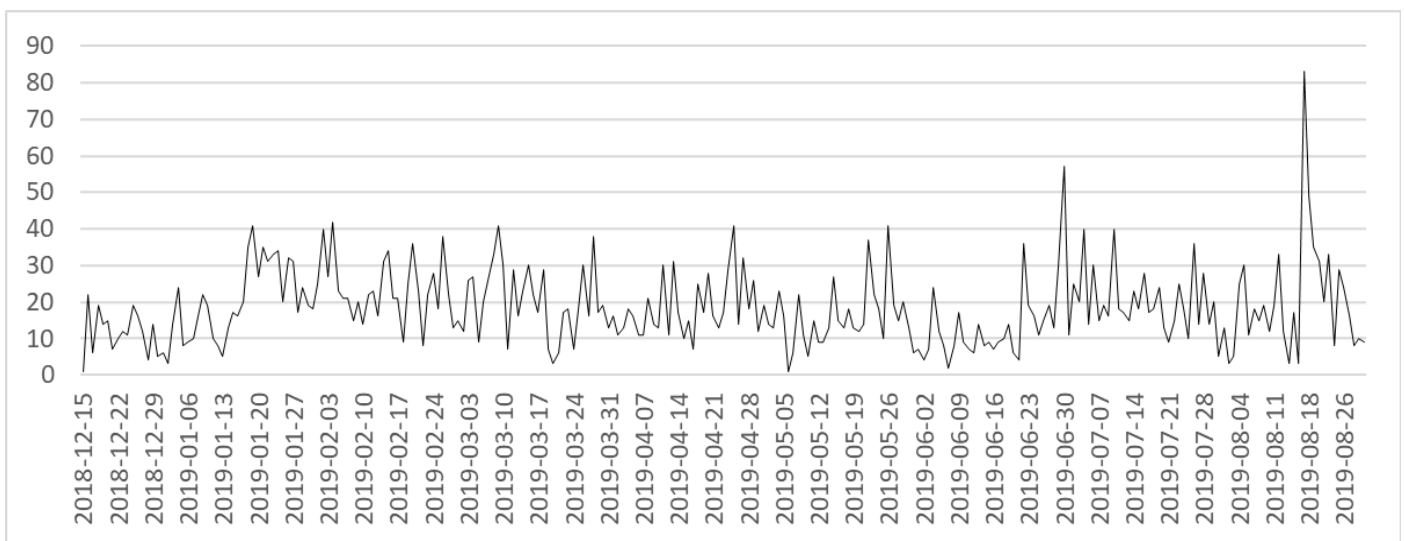


Figure 5.3.2: NYC Antifa’s Daily Twitter Posting Activity (from Twitter Sample 1, days of no activity are not plotted).

Philly Antifa, which dates from 2012, ‘was originally formed specifically to deal with one problem, which was the Keystone State Skinheads were holding annual marches in Philadelphia, in Fairmount Park, ostensibly to celebrate Leif Erikson Day’ (PhillyAntifa01, 2020). The Keystone State Skinheads had been established in 2001 in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, rebranding in a more media-friendly iteration as Keystone United in 2008. On 9 October each year, the KSS/KU would memorialise the ‘first European to land in America’ to support their claim that Nordics discovered North America, that the US is a ‘white nation’, and that the US belongs only to those of ‘pure’ European descent. There is no statue of Erikson in Fairmount Park; they would rally to the statue of Icelandic explorer Thorfinn Karlsefni instead.

Philly Antifa would typically disrupt the event, shouting down speakers. In October 2018, for the first time in many years, the KSS/KU was forced to cancel their rally when anti-fascists removed the Thorfinn Karlsefni statue from its pedestal in the early hours and threw it into the Schuylkill River. To further rub salt into the wounds, Philly Antifa subjected KU/KSS supporters to a synchronised campaign of doxing starting on 11 September 2018 and running for no fewer than 30 days:

‘[...] it was like 30 days a new dox every day. And these were like patched members, supporters, like long time neo-Nazis. And this was really like an attempt to really destroy this group as much as possible, you know, get a couple of them fired, you know, and really make it hard for them to function’ (PhillyAntifa01, 2020).

Anticipating a backlash, anti-fascists warned that the KSS/KSU was intending a show a force at a pro-Trump ‘We the People Rally’ the following month organised by the militia movement and the Proud Boys. In the event, after Philly Antifa and other anti-fascists pledged to counter-demonstrate, the KSS/KSU withdrew. Few far-right activists attended – a couple of dozen – while

hundreds of counterdemonstrators turned out wielding ‘Gritty’ signs (the official mascot for the Philadelphia Flyers National Hockey League team).

All this implies Philly Antifa’s strength lay in numbers. But the counter-protest was organised through a wider left-wing coalition known as ‘PushBack’. Even in the wake of Trump’s election, Philly Antifa remained ‘closed’; its numbers kept intentionally small. On 21 August 2018, it had placed the following message on its Facebook page:

‘We do not recruit total strangers generally. People we meet in person socially or in other political work, people referred by friends/comrades, or vouched Antifa who have relocated to Philly are our bread and butter, beyond that we don't really recruit. We understand that is limiting to our group's growth but we have chosen to sacrifice that for stability and quality’ (Philly Antifa, 2018).

This message was posted just a few days before Philly Antifa mobilised against an alt-right rally organised on Facebook by a group calling itself ‘Sports Beer & Politics II’ (SPB). While only around 20 far-right supporters marched in downtown Philadelphia, black-clad militant anti-fascists clashed with police, leading to 16 arrests.

Philly Antifa’s website features blog posts dating from May 2012 and in September 2020 numbered 159 in total. During that period posting activity was relatively regular culminating in an intense period of posting between 9 September and 11 October 2018 when the group used daily blog posts to dox 30 members of Keystone United in the build-up to that year’s Leif Erikson Day as detailed above. After that, however, blog posting on the website trailed off with the most recent post dating to May 2019. Their website is now dormant.

While Philly Antifa has been active on Twitter and Facebook in the past it now seems as if the group is

shunning these commercial platforms. While they have gained around 19,100 followers on Twitter since starting their account in June 2011, between then and early May 2019 they posted just 2,420 tweets. A sample of 2,238 of tweets posted between 5 June 2011 and 2 May 2019 (Twitter Sample 1) shows peaks of activity on 12 August 2017 and 17 November 2018 in response to the Charlottesville ‘Unite the Right’ Rally and, in Philadelphia, the ‘We the People Rally’ which drew support from the Proud Boys and Three Percenters. (Figure 5.4.2). As per the Twitter activity of RCA, this further illustrates the synchronisation of digital and street activism. After 2 May 2019, Philly Antifa did not, it seems, tweet again until 17 September 2020 and, based on a quantitative comparison of the two Twitter samples, may have also deleted older tweets.

Philly Antifa’s Facebook community page (created in July 2016) is currently unavailable. When it was viewed in September 2019 it had accrued around 4,600 followers and had not been posted to since February 2019. It is unclear why the page is no longer available, but it might not necessarily be the case that Facebook has removed it. The account administrator may have chosen to restrict access to it or delete it.

5.5 THE VIEWS OF MILITANT ANTI-FASCISTS: KEY FINDINGS

5.5.1 ON DEFINING ‘FASCISM’

Antifa does not hold fast to a narrowly-agreed definition of fascism, and for good reason:

it is ‘not necessary for people to have totally unified... It’s like you might not all agree on what you’re fighting, but you all agree on why you’re fighting it and what you’re against about it, which is why I try not to get into too much in the rhetorical arguments about is or is not somebody a fascist’ (PhillyAntifa01, 2020).

In other words, while many in Antifa would agree that a core ideological tenet of fascism is ultra-nationalism, in practice ‘fascism’, a ‘slippery animal’, tends to be approached more in terms of everyday social forces and tendencies, such as racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, the scapegoating and marginalising of oppressed groups, and police brutality.

That said, militant anti-fascists in the US have ‘stayed resolutely and precisely on target over the decades’ and have kept their focus on the political space that is generally viewed as ‘far right’ (Gilles, 2019). The problem today, of course, is the blurring of boundaries between the far right and the Trump-supporting conservative right: groups such as the Proud Boys and

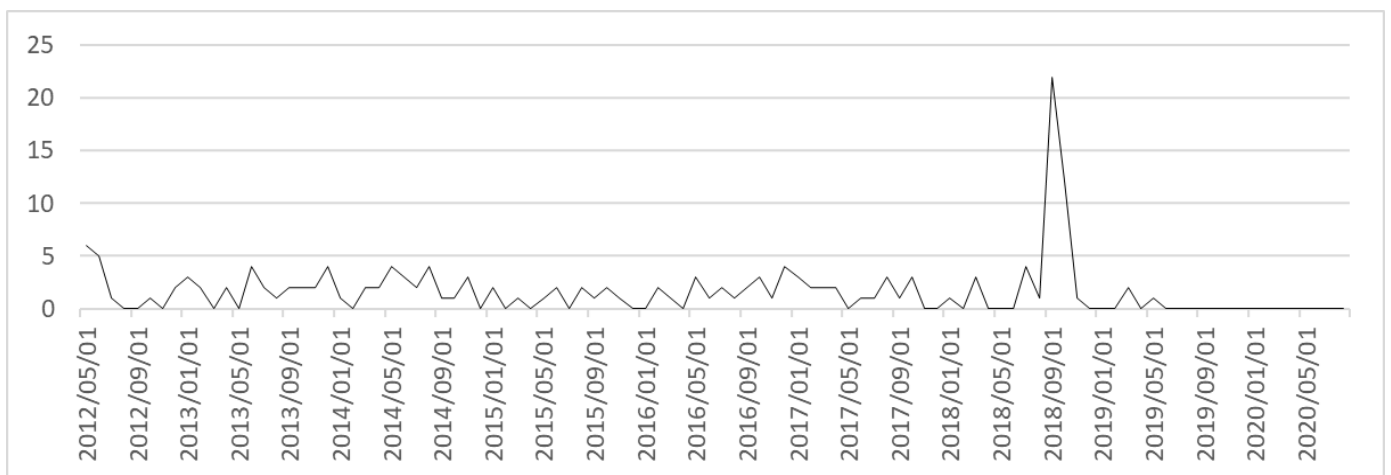


Figure 5.4.1: Philly Antifa’s Monthly Blog Posting Activity (from launch until August 2020).

Patriot Prayer, that claim not to be racist ‘and only embrace the hyper-nationalist patriarchal components of fascism, but still recruit and collaborate with white nationalists and neonazi gangs’. For Antifa, it would be ‘obviously amiss for anti-fascist activists to ignore such auxiliaries and attempts at obfuscation’ but what this means is that Antifa does ‘nevertheless struggle with intellectually dishonest conflation’ (Gilles, 2019, p. 220). Inevitably, this invites accusations that Antifa is ‘notoriously generous in distributing the fascist label’ (Johnstone, 2019, p. 105).

These complexities can be illustrated by a close reading of a sub-sample of 648 more ‘militant’ tweets posted by RCA which featured variants of the words: ‘violence’, ‘attack’, ‘assault’, ‘fight’, and ‘terror’. These tweets concerned an array of the group’s main adversaries, in other words, who they broadly conceived to be fascist or at least to display fascistic tendencies or associations. These adversaries included actors considered both explicitly fascist and/or complicit in fascist causes and ideologies. Among the adversaries were: fascist, far right, right-wing, white supremacist, white nationalist, Nazi and neo-Nazi groups in general; specific activist movements falling under the umbrella of these groupings; individuals active or associated with these movements; as well as Republican politicians like Donald Trump and Ted Cruz, and police forces including most prevalently the Portland Police Bureau (PPB) (see Copsey & Merrill, 2020).

5.5.2 WHAT IS MILITANT ABOUT ‘MILITANT’ ANTI-FASCISM?

The term ‘militant’ is used by our respondents as an adjective, to describe a permutation of anti-fascism (and so the noun ‘militant anti-fascist’ refers to those who favour this type of anti-fascism). In the US, this type of anti-fascism has three main definitional traits:

The first is the advocacy of ‘no platform’ for ‘fascists’ (to prevent a person or persons, or organisation(s), regarded as having ‘fascist’ or ‘fascistic’ views from expressing those views):

‘Well, I guess the difference between militant and non-militant anti-fascism would just sort of be the biggest difference. I guess there’s lots of differences, the biggest would be: how much do you think fascism should be sort of included in the marketplace of ideas. As a militant anti-fascist, I advocate sort of a no platform approach to fascism, which is that we’re going to make it as difficult as possible for them to organize, to rally, to recruit, sort of recognizing fascism as an exceptional threat’ (PhillyAntifa01, 2020).

The second is that no-platforming (or ‘de-platforming’) should be located in ‘direct action’, that is to say, in any form of action that is intended to prevent fascist

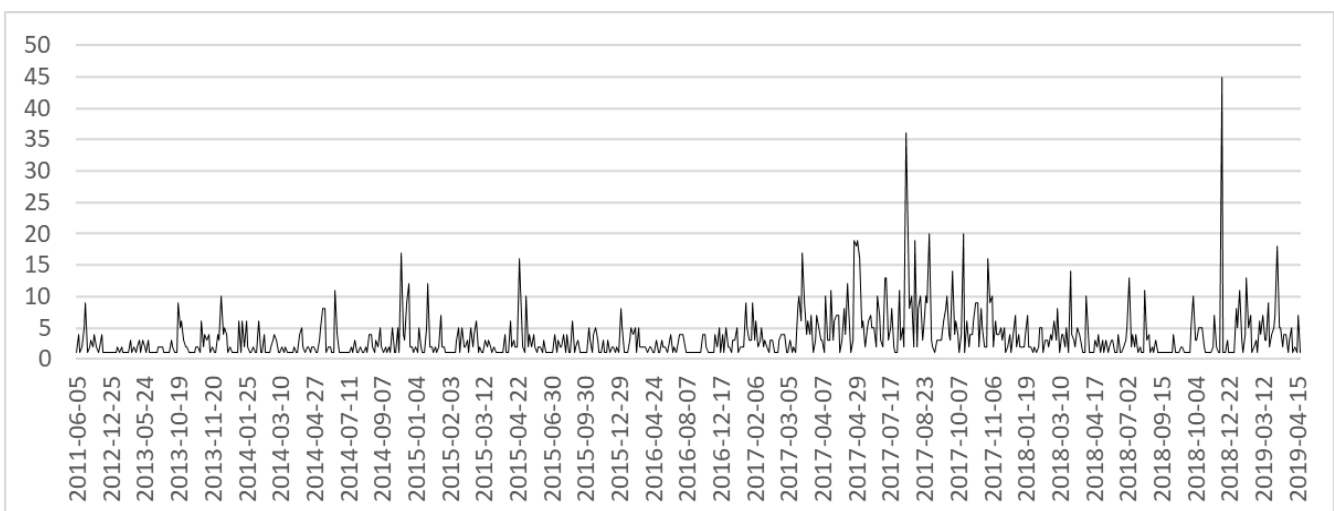


Figure 5.4.2: Philly Antifa’s Daily Twitter Posting Activity (from Twitter Sample 1, days of no activity are not plotted).

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organising, and which is not beholden to the state. As the US anarchist website, CrimethInc. clarifies, ‘Direct action, simply put, means cutting out the middleman: solving problems yourself rather than petitioning the authorities or relying on external institutions’ (CrimethInc., 2020). ‘We reject’, the RCA’s website puts it, ‘the ‘right’ of the government and police to decide for us when fascists have crossed the line from merely expressing themselves into posing an immediate threat’ (Rose City Antifa, 2020). Quite simply, militant anti-fascists are opposed to using the state to defeat fascism. The state and law enforcement agencies are not viewed as ‘neutral arbiters’ but are said to collude with fascists. The police are viewed as a repressive force with pro-fascist sympathisers in the ranks.

Therefore, should the need arise, anti-fascists must be prepared to break the law to impede ‘fascists’ from organising, even if this means putting bodies on the line and literally ‘kicking them off the streets’:

‘So, one that is not afraid of engaging in violence or aggression against fascism that understands, like, “no-platforming” as probably one of the most effective tactics in fighting fascism, that “no-platforming” means denying fascists the street, denying them speaking’ (RCA03, 2019).

‘And I think that’s where the militancy comes up. The idea that that there is really a need to do this work to disrupt fascist organising. And it’s worth going further and taking more risks and putting our bodies on the line’ (RCA01, 2019).

The third is recognition that non-militant forms of anti-fascism are simply ineffective, and that history has demonstrated this to be so:

‘The idea that you could engage in a successful and effective anti-fascism in the face of like true, like fascist organising that was non-militant and could also be that

successful is simply historically inaccurate’ (RCA02, 2019).

5.5.3 VIOLENCE AS ‘SELF-DEFENCE’

‘Extreme-right and fascist organising inevitably leads to massive violence, displacement and murder when allowed to grow unchecked [...] Self-defence by communities and marginalised people against threats and attacks from the far right is 100 per cent justified’ (Interview with member of Atlanta Antifascists, Independent, 8/9/17).

Violent disruption of ‘fascist’ assembly is an axiom of Antifa praxis. As one RCA activist put it, ‘it’s not just about punching a Nazi in the face. It’s also punching a Nazi in the face and making sure they don’t come back again. And you don’t have to do it every year’ (RCA01, 2019). Or, as another Antifa activist candidly remarked, ‘I have no qualms about violence against fascists [...] But I just don’t care if fascists get hurt. It doesn’t bother me’ (PhillyAntifa01, 2020).

Yet even if violence is so deeply ingrained in movement praxis, it is also moderated through reference to how Antifa defines ‘fascism’ as its primary antagonist. Antifa, as an anti-fascist oppositional movement, defines its violence in relative terms and so its violence is necessarily tempered by the movement’s relationship to ‘fascism’ (by what it is struggling against).

The moral righteousness of anti-fascist direct action is thus drawn from the perceived illegitimacy of its opponent. If on one level, this limits the deployment of violence (Antifa declare their opposition to ‘unprovoked violence’), at the same time, it also facilitates their violent engagement. As one anti-fascist explains:

‘Anti-fascists make regular and intensive use of “othering” tactics against fascist and white supremacist movements. Many anti-fascists make fascists into something that

can never be understood but can only be hated and fought. This has strategic value. It's harder to fight someone with whom you deeply empathize' (Bevensee, 2017).

Even if Antifa do not agree upon a single definition of fascism, its activists concur that a key defining feature of 'fascism' is its overwhelming predilection for violence. As left-libertarian writer Darian Worden says, 'The reason fascism must be treated differently than other forms of tyranny is the centrality of violence to the fascist project' (Worden, 2019, p. 382). As one RCA activist told us, fascism is 'a political movement that feels that it gains power through violence and power through intimidation [...] that's kind of the core of what I would call a fascist politics' (RCA01, 2019). 'Violence is absolutely essential to fascism. But I am also of the opinion that violence is inherent to a lot of politics [...] But in practice, of course, fascism has just a thousand percent batting average of violence' (PhillyAntifa01, 2020). A New York activist put it this way:

'But I think ultimately, yes, fascism is violence and their goals are violent [...] that's something that a lot of people don't understand about the right, the far right in this country is that they really are violent [...] I mean, like punching someone on the face is not like the ultimate definition of violence. You know, it's violence when you take your machine gun and take it into a black church or into a mosque or a synagogue and like shoot people up... that's violence, not punching a Nazi in the face' (UARF01, 2020).

'Without physical force', so the Antifa argument runs, 'fascism will come to power, and the aggressive violence that will occur both on its way to power and after that power is acquired will be so world-historically horrific that aggression is justified' (Byas, 2019, p. 262). 'The only reason why you even see violence', Daryle Lamont Jenkins, veteran New Jersey-

based anti-fascist activist, put it to us, 'is because we are dealing with people who are themselves violent – to the point that they will kill people if left to their own devices and have' (Jenkins, 2020).

When rationalising the recourse to violence, Antifa will view it as pre-emptive – to protect the marginalised and the oppressed from the oppressive violence inherent to fascist organising. This 'counter-violence' is understood primarily as a form of community self-defence, deploying physical force to counter or forestall an immediate threat of violence to marginalised communities: people of colour, immigrants, Muslims, Jews, LGBTQ+, and so on.

In his *Philosophy of Antifascism*, Devin Zane Shaw writes that the goal of militant anti-fascists is a form of 'emancipatory community self-defense, building spaces of solidarity through organizing to stop Far Right recruitment while supporting targets of right-wing scapegoating and policing [...] physical confrontation, including punching nazis, must be understood as a method of emancipatory community self-defense' (Shaw, 2020, p. 113). But what is also clear is this defensive response does not preclude initiation of physical force and so 'It's fairly, fairly simple [...] 'proactive self-defense' is what we do' (RCA01, 2019).

Within Antifa's tactical repertoire, it is the case that physical force anti-fascism occupies 'only a small, but important, short-term piece of what Antifa groups do' (Bevensee, 2019, p. 417). Violent and non-violent tactics are deployed simultaneously, with the latter, often tedious and mundane, accounting for the lion's share of activism:

'But it's not just showing up and having like, you know, the big glorious fight with the police. A lot of it is like doing boring shit, like sitting outside of a house and in a car for like a bunch of hours, making sure that a person lives there. You know, like there's a

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lot of non, non-sexy labor that really makes anti-fascism work' (RCA05, 2020).

Indeed, one RCA member estimated that doxing investigations consume about 100 hours per week, and standards are demanding: 'We do what we can to make it an undeniable fact that the people we are doxing are tied explicitly to violent rhetoric or acts of violence. As muddled as the lines are right now, we don't want to go after someone for wearing a maga hat' (Mogelson, 2020).

Moreover, militant anti-fascists view direct confrontation as not only a physical battle but also a psychological battle too. The primary aim is to 'intimidate, humiliate, and make them uncomfortable, while simultaneously raising confidence among antifascists'. This means that where physical confrontation is deemed too dangerous, confrontations may not escalate beyond the verbal: 'A verbal rout can be just as demoralizing to the fascists as a physical beat-down – both have their place' (CrimethInc. Workers' Collective, 2017, p. 31).

In the sub-sample of 648 more 'militant' RCA tweets, calls to battle mostly related to sharing information that might support doxing efforts and participating in call-ins designed to get known fascists fired from their jobs. These could be said to partly constitute RCA's militancy – their forms of 'violence' – although these were also most often couched in the more restrained rhetoric of a predominantly symbolic 'fight' against fascism and its violence. Even if this occasionally meant subtly implying the use of physical force, this force was always framed as reactive and connected to discourses of self-defence in order to be justified (see Copsey & Merrill, 2020).

5.5.4 VIOLENCE AND THE EXERCISE OF RESTRAINT

'Be wary of people who just want to fight. Physically confronting and defending against fascists is a necessary part of anti-fascist work, but is not the only or even

necessarily the most important part. Macho posturing and an overemphasis on picking fights and physical combat can be reckless, un-strategic, and unnecessarily dangerous for your group' (Anon., 2017).

Antifa reject 'unprovoked violence': there must be provocation (of communities being at risk of fascist violence). However, this raises the problem of when to distinguish between peaceful and violent forms of provocation (since not all far-right demonstrations will be violent). One way to resolve this issue is for Antifa to point to underlying patterns of violence (i.e. a correlation between far-right assembly and far-right violence). For anti-fascist writer Natasha Lennard, given the pervasiveness of this relationship, avoiding violent confrontation has now become impossible:

'Anti-fascist violence is thus a counterviolence, not an instigation of violence onto a terrain of existing peace. A situation in which fascists can gather to preach hate and chant 'blood and soil' - this is a background state of violence. The problem we face, then, is not so much that of necessary violence as it is one of impossible non-violence' (Lennard, 2019, p. 22).

If non-violence is impossible, it does beg the question: what are its limits? Where does Antifa draw the line? As we have seen, there has been a history of US anti-fascists having been killed, or having suffered life-changing injuries: Newborn, Shersty, Querner and Heyer to cite four examples. And yet, as one anti-fascist writer pointed out in 2019, 'absolutely no anti-fascist has killed anyone or come close. The incredible restraint that anti-fascists have shown in this war is remarkable in context' (Gilles, 2019, p. 207–8).

At this point, it is worth considering how anti-fascists understand respective intent. 'Nazis tell us their intent: they want genocide. And when they get the chance, they act on this intent', as one anti-fascist writer explained. Advocates of anti-fascist violence

understand their violence differently: ‘Now let’s look at the intention of anti-fascist violence. There are two goals: to protect people and to show force and strength in an attempt to discourage the nazis’ (McHugh, 2019, p. 355). The intent behind anti-fascist violence is to reduce overall harm (as seen through a communitarian, anarchist/left-libertarian ethical lens). Ideologically, this ethical lens is shaped by a broader utopian vision of ‘a kinder, more equitable society [...] It may sound hokey, but anarchism is about love as much as it is rage’ (Kelly, 2020).

A prefigurative limiting principle is at work here: the ethical base of ‘project libertarians’ versus fascism as an inherently violent ideology. Fascism is exceptional; violence against the makers of that ideology is justified in the context of the protection of the vulnerable; yet this violence should not be unbridled – it should remain sub-lethal. Lethal conflict escalation would eliminate the qualitative difference between anti-fascism and fascism. Simply put, it would undermine the normative basis for Antifa’s argument that fascism is truly exceptional in its use of violence. So, as the anarchist author of ‘Not Your Grandfather’s Antifascism’, advised, ‘We have to become adept at spelling out the ethical differences between fascism and anti-fascism, and all the justifications for forms of direct action that can actually be effective in this struggle’ (CrimeThInc., 2017).

If Antifa were to fetishise their violence, the danger is that it would undermine their ethical and ideological challenge to fascism; give credibility to the idea of the unity of the radical extremes (‘false equivalency’); attract those only interested in violence; and encourage male hegemony and chauvinism. As one RCA respondent told us, ‘You can’t just have violence for the sake of violence or whatever’ (RCA05, 2020). Antifa holds no truck for bloodthirsty sociopaths: ‘It’s not wanting to sort of appear to the general public in a negative light. But it’s also to sort of be true to each other and to be part of a righteous movement and not feeling like, “oh man, am I just in some political cult or something?”’ (PhillyAntifa01, 2020).

Signs of rhetorical restraint were also evident in the sub-sample of 648 more militant RCA tweets. With the exception of the word ‘fight’ the other words associated with a more violent vocabulary (‘violence’, ‘attack’, ‘assault’, and ‘terror’) were overwhelmingly attributed to RCA’s adversaries more than themselves. When these words were rarely used in connection with RCA and its allies it was usually to contest accusations that they were part of a violent movement and thus anti-fascist violence mainly appeared in inverted commas. In fact, within the sub-sample, RCA’s militancy never led to any explicit incitements to enact physical violence, the result no doubt of a combination of both internal and external breaks on escalation, insofar as this might not only have led to the group’s alienation but also to Twitter suspending their account (see Copsey & Merrill, 2020).

When asked about the importance of anti-fascists exercising restraint when it comes to the application of violence, the following response was indicative:

‘I think that yeah, I think that especially in today’s day and age of, you know, everything being recorded and then everybody’s a content creator and they’re creatively editing things to make you look a certain way that you really have to look good while doing it (in a way that we didn’t used to). And so, I think that restraint is so important. I think that is so demoralising and so disruptive, you know, it’s such bad propaganda. You know, it’s very upsetting when I see it, when I see stuff or think about the times that I’ve been involved in stuff where restraint was not properly used. And I think. Yeah, yeah. It’s just, just very, very, very important. Much more important to, you know, exercise restraint and possibly not confront somebody who needs to be confronted than to not exercise restraint’ (PhillyAntifa01, 2020).

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Aside from concerns over audience reception, there is also the further concern that a serious escalation in violence will invite overwhelming governmental repression. Hence, as one RCA activist said, this would lead to ‘a very concerted state effort to identify and repress, and then imprison, and I think it would very quickly lead to the dissolution of militant anti-fascist groups as organised and as activist groups’ (RCA03, 2019).

When thinking about the exercise of restraint, we also need to take group dynamics and culture into account. Criminologist Stanislav Vysotsky offers an apt summary of this culture in his recently published book, *American Antifa*, which is worth quoting here:

‘Antifa activists do not make tactical decisions lightly. Militant groups are organized around an affinity group model that stresses direct democracy and accountability. Tactical decisions are made collectively by group members in meetings where their relative merits and disadvantages are thoroughly discussed. Group members vote on potential actions striving for consensus in decision-making in order to maintain maximum tactical unity. The internal processes of antifa groups reflect more than a desire for collective reinforcement, but are driven by a commitment to decentralizing power and avoiding hierarchical control’ (Vysotsky, 2021, p. 97).

Significantly, an internal culture of consensus gives space for the expression of a variety of concerns regarding the use of violence, but it also means that decisions will not be made against the will of a minority, and if a person disagrees, they can abstain. This mode of collective decision-making is also suited to maintaining smaller groups:

‘Consensus can be difficult the larger, you know, a gathering or an organisation

gets, but people definitely try to behave democratically, horizontally. But in anarchism and left-libertarianism there is, there's no compulsory behaviour’ (PhillyAntifa01, 2020).

Specifically, in relation to RCA, there are also structural mechanisms in place to mitigate the possibility that one or more of its activists might venture off-piste and deviate from group norms. There is a lengthy, six-month membership process and,

‘[...] a pretty intense screening process [...] Making sure they're not a loose cannon. They don't have like a lot of mental health stuff going on. How they can act in a group, like are they able to make decisions collectively? [...] And then there's you know, you go through a program, the program last six months, you have a mentor. There are classes twice a month that are two hours long. And there's like reading. It's also to see if people can work’ (RCA05, 2020).

Within the RCA, the ‘direct action’ group is comprised of only those who are the most trusted: We don't even involve people in direct actions until they are better known’ (RCA05, 2020). Trust is key,

‘We don't wanna feel badly about each other or feel distrustful about each other. And if somebody appears to be working out their issues or on an adrenaline trip or whatever other reason that they're behaving irresponsibly, that's not really about the core issue or dealing with a threat [...] it's going to like fray your movement, it's going to drive people away’ (PhillyAntifa01, 2020).

Tactically, while militant anti-fascists endorse the use of violence, there are occasions when militant anti-fascists may also purposefully direct activists towards non-violent forms of confrontation:

'I do think confrontation is very important. Mostly related to how fascism views controlling the streets and the way they mythologise their strength. That being confronted, I don't necessarily mean violence, by the way, because the most successful confrontations that I have been involved in are in such overwhelming numbers that there was no chance there was no fight. They were just sort of swept off the streets. So, you know, if you need to fight, it's almost in itself a little bit of a failure of organising because you could maybe create a situation where it was not even necessary' (PhillyAntifa01, 2020).

In New York City, for example, our respondent from UARF told us about how in the run-up to their first street demonstration the group had a couple of training sessions on de-escalation:

'I think it's crucial for people to have some consciousness around de-escalation, through training or through experience, whatever it is. Because if you're not, like, centered and grounded in what you're doing, and you don't have the tools to deal with someone that tries to come and mess with you, you're going to be screwed because someone's going to be on camera like punching that that heckler [...] There's people out there who really, really know how to de-escalate. And I've listened to some of them talk and it's incredible. I think they have like someone who's like coming yelling at them, attacking with very, very, very like vile, hateful, hateful language directed directly at them. And they just have to, like, get that person out of there without laying a finger on him (UARF01, 2020).

Retaining local anti-fascist solidarities can also be an important strategic consideration, as a spokesperson for PopMob told us:

'[...] we support the Black Bloc. And they are oftentimes they are our frontlines. They put their bodies between us and the fascists, whether we're talking civilian fascists or the fascists in uniform. So basically, we feel like we would not be safe out there demonstrating if not for the frontlines [...] We don't see it as a separation between like us and them' (PopMob01, 2019).

Part of the PopMob message is to de-stigmatise (militant) anti-fascism. Any serious escalation of violence from RCA would undermine this message. PopMob did not start out,

'[...] working specifically with RCA, for instance. RC[A] would have their event and we would have our event and we like would meet like once beforehand, just be like, here's what we're doing, here's what we're doing. But we didn't like, have a close relationship. But I was really invested from the beginning and trying to build that relationship because of this historic, like, separation between the militant and like, quote, "non-militant" anti-fascists"' (PopMob01, 2019).

Where Antifa is depicted by the conservative right as a synonym for terrorist violence, it is also incumbent on activists not to lionise their violence lest it give these exaggerated representations further credibility. For sure, as many an activist will tell you, 'It feels good to punch a Nazi' and expressive violence is not a brake but an accelerator. And yet, as we reveal below, RCA does not seek rhetorical glory:

'Yeah, like we don't apologise, and we let it be known that we're OK with that stuff, but we never bragged about it. We had a very much an internal culture, kind of like, you know, security, modesty. We're here for the cause, not like to blow our own horn. And also, we didn't want that kind of overly macho public image' (RCA05, 2020).

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A further factor influencing the exercise of restraint is the possibility that a) the ‘fascist’ antagonist may be carrying a loaded firearm and/or b) the anti-fascist is carrying a loaded firearm. Portland, New York City and Philadelphia all prohibit open carry but concealed carrying is permitted with a concealed carry permit. In other states, open carry is permitted, and militant anti-fascists did openly carry firearms in Charlottesville (a contingent of militant anti-fascists from New York City were in Charlottesville).

The first point to make with regard to firearms is that militant anti-fascists, in general, do endorse the principle of community armed self-defence (taking up arms temporarily for defensive purposes in response to specific circumstances). This means that militant anti-fascists will carry firearms on counter-demonstrations (typically concealed):

‘I would say, I mean, the group as whole believes in being armed. Not necessarily all the time in a reaction, but we think it’s a good policy given this is some sort of the Cold War nuclear deterrence theory of firearms [...] the group does want to, in terms of our membership, provide opportunities for understanding and using firearms’ (RCA03, 2019).

‘And we train on guns. You don’t have to. I mean it’s up to you. But the direct action group trains shooting’ (RCA05, 2020)

The decision on when, and what, to carry will also be determined by a group-based assessment of the perceived threat. As another RCA activist explained,

‘[...] when you start bringing firearms into the equation and that makes things a lot more complicated, it can make a situation a lot more volatile, both from a legal perspective and in terms of the violence that we have. So, I think it’s something that we always do is we make very particular determinations about what we’re going

to do, what the tactics are going to be. We don’t just all show up. It’s like, you know, everybody show up and do whatever you want. We sit down and we have a plan and we say, here’s what we feel are going to be the particular threats that we’re facing, here is the best way to counteract these threats [...] There was an incident in 2018 where it was only determined after the fact that there was a group of far-right people on top of a parking garage looking over the protest armed with rifles. And the police just let them keep their weapons and let that go on. And that you know, thankfully that didn’t turn into any kind of a tragedy. And we only knew about it after the fact. But it’s you know, that’s harrowing to discover after the fact that that was the case’ (RCA01, 2019).

In *Forming An Antifa Group: A Manual* (2017), the guidance relating to firearms states:

‘A word about guns. Ask yourself: Can another weapon suffice instead of a gun? If you do choose to own guns, engage in regular practice. A gun can give you a false sense of security and if you’re not in practice, you’re more likely to be injured than if you don’t have one. Keep in mind that gun shops and range owners themselves are often connected to right-wing political groups.

If you choose to engage in firearms training, make sure everyone understands basic gun safety—as well as local laws—when it comes to owning, transporting, and potentially using firearms’.

Reflecting on his experience of openly carrying an AR-15-style rifle in Charlottesville, one anti-fascist activist (‘Inman’) recalled: ‘I hadn’t actually conceptualised what happens if I have to discharge my weapon in self-defence’. He described being approached by two

neo-Nazis who attempted to snatch his rifle away from him, and in the tussle that ensued, he managed to retain possession. Inman subsequently felt that armed anti-fascists at Charlottesville had not given sufficient critical consideration to the ‘what ifs’, particularly to the ballistics that they were carrying (in his case, an automatic rifle with six magazines, 29 rounds of 5.56 green-tips with armour-piercing capabilities) (Inman, 2019). It was therefore fortunate that the far-right activist who fired a gun at counter-protestors at Charlottesville did so in Emancipation Park, rather than in Justice Park where four groups of armed anti-fascists had grouped in defence of that specific space.

5.5.5 REVOLUTION AND THE ‘THREE WAY FIGHT’

So, what of the relationship between militant anti-fascism and the wider revolutionary or insurrectionary struggle? For militant anti-fascists typically subscribe to a ‘three-way’ fight analysis. As Michael Staudenmaier put it,

‘At its core, the three way fight is a critique of authoritarianism as much as it is a response to fascism. It is also a way to understand various social movements through a sort of schematic categorization. The two sets of “them” that I mention here can roughly be taken to represent the capitalists and the fascists, and the “us” can be thought of as the anti-authoritarian revolutionary left’ (Staudenmaier, 2009).

In the context of the right’s upswing under Trump, radical-left voices have called for a shift from purely defensive anti-fascism to a more offensive, system-oppositional approach. In other words, a focus more on *them* (the capitalist state) than on *them* (the ‘fascists’). Influenced by the work of radical French political theorist Gilles Dauve (pen-name: Jean Barrot), there are radical-leftists who remain critical of Antifa and claim that ‘everyday anti-fascism’ has become a distraction from revolution. As a result, ‘anti-fascism’

has become, in Dauve’s words, ‘the worst product of fascism’ (Barrot, 2001, p. 4).

Tellingly, however, as Antifa activists from Philadelphia and New York have responded, Antifa sees itself as a ‘subset of the anarchist movement’ and as such it is ‘a piece of, but not replacement for the larger radical vision’. This means that Antifa’s focus of intent remains overwhelmingly defensive; ‘a bulwark against the most ideologically reactionary forms of the Far Right’ (Antifa, Philly; Antifa, NYC, 2016).

Revolution, as one RCA activist put it, ‘is not really what we’re here to talk about. What we’re here to talk about is how can we disrupt these groups. How can we basically pull the wheels off their cart’ (RCA03, 2019). So ‘if we were worried about, you know, the intricacies of what, you know, a revolutionary party should look like for example, then we’d get kind go off into the weeds and we wouldn’t be focused on the actual thing that we’re doing’ (RCA01, 2019). This is not some popularity struggle, ‘We’re not here to get the majority of people in the country behind us. We’re not here to elect candidates. We’re not here to build a lasting political organisation. What we’re here to do is prevent groups like the Proud Boys from beating up people in the street’ (RCA01, 2019).

5.5.6 RESPONDING TO ‘POLITICAL CRISIS’: TRUMP’S ELECTION

The term ‘political crisis’ is understood here as a discursive or cognitive frame of reference that is used by subjects to describe a ‘turning point’, the onset of an especially difficult, dangerous, or challenging time. For sure, the surprise election of ‘right-populist’ billionaire Donald Trump in 2016 occasioned profound shock and a sense in which the political situation had become seriously threatening. The immediate response of NYC Antifa was to declare that:

‘We must fight tooth-and-nail against the future which Trump and his cabinet of horrors are working to usher in: increased deportations, the registration of Muslims,

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bans on abortion and birth control, attacks on LBTQ people, anti-Semitic populism and the newfound electoral coalition of U.S. White Nationalism' (NYC Antifa, 2016).

Did this mean that Antifa should recalibrate and focus on organising radical opposition to Trump?

For some on the radical left, this became *the* priority. In December 2016 in New York City, several members of the Trotskyist Revolutionary Communist Party initiated 'Refuse Fascism' as a non-violent, broad-based anti-Trump/Pence campaign group. In its first call to action, the group declared that 'The Trump/Pence Regime is a Fascist Regime. Not insult or exaggeration, this is what it is. For the future of humanity and the planet, we, the people, must drive this regime out' (Refuse Fascism, n.d.).

Although Refuse Fascism had no affiliation with Antifa, it recognised, in the wake of Charlottesville, that 'Antifa and others played a courageous role in defending people against the brutal violence threatened and inflicted by fascists' (Anon., 2017). A series of planned protests by this group in over 20 cities in November 2017 gave rise to the first of several Antifa 'civil war' conspiracy theories. Rumours were spread online by the alt right and fake Antifa social media accounts that Antifa, allegedly funded by George Soros, were intent on using these demonstrations to foment nationwide insurrection.

Yet, as one RCA activist told us, it wasn't so much Trump that led to their joining the group, but the increasing visibility of far-right groups emboldened by his election:

'It wasn't Trump exactly that everybody was against or that was really the motivating factor. But it was the other groups that felt empowered by his election and seeing their activities' (RCA01, 2019).

'I remember in particular there was this photo that was in the newspaper [...] of a

woman giving the Roman salute Sieg Heil at one of Trump's primary events. And that was very disturbing. I was like, okay, this is something new. I knew that there were people out there who were racist, that there's people out there who believe in white supremacy. But seeing that, they feel the confidence that they can start doing this in the street made me think that it's time to get involved and do what I can to stop it' (RCA01, 2019).

With Trump's election, interest in joining, or forming Antifa groups spiked. However, pre-existing groups did not opt for open recruitment, and so any surge in membership should not be overstated (there was no 'explosive growth'). As one of Philly Antifa's activists recounted to us:

'After Trump's election, and then even more specifically, after Richard Spencer was punched at the inauguration, Antifa became a much more a household term in the US, there was a lot more interest because of the nature of our group, which was always very small and based on a very strong amount of trust. We've never been one for open recruitment. We tried to make some forays into bringing some more people in and we did bring a few more people in. But our position for people that we didn't know or didn't trust was basically like, you know, here's the handbook. There's lots of advice on sort of starting your own fascist group, you know, sort of get out there and let us sort of see how you operate before we start working more directly together. And we did work with other groups. There were various, a couple different anti-fascist groupings in Philadelphia in the period immediately following Trump's election sort of through Charlottesville. And most of those groups have pretty much fallen apart, partially because I think of their willingness to just

sort of take in people without properly vetting them. And, you know, when you do that, you're just going to let certain toxic, predatory people into your groups and groups are going to, are gonna fall apart after a certain amount of time or just, you know, more run of the mill political differences getting laid bare in a way that we have tried to avoid within Philly Antifa, both by keeping it within sort of our known trusted circle, but also by avoiding more of a political sectarianism as much as possible, which were, I think, for younger and newer activists that are very excited about, you know, their shiny new ideology is harder' (PhillyAntifa01, 2020).

six months, you have a mentor are there are classes twice a month that are two hours long. And there's like reading' (RCA05, 2020).

Indeed, when it comes to organising militant opposition to Trump, practical issues of scale and capacity remain:

'So, some of the things Trump is doing, which I find very concerning, the Southern border, the internment of migrants. The things that ICE is doing. Those are certainly concerning, but they're more difficult for a small group of militants to act against, to respond to, or to respond in a way that's an effective use of energy, whereas it's much easier to put pressure on smaller groups. It's much easier and more very effective use of time. It's very efficient at doing militant work against smaller groups' (RCA03, 2019).

In Portland, although relatively more 'open' than Philly Antifa, the group also did not issue a recruitment call.

'A lot of people kind of jumped into it when Trump got elected like, oh shit, this place is going that shit crazy where we're going to do about fascism now. But at least we had those years and preparation and we had training, we had a system and so we were in somewhat in good shape' (RCA05, 2020).

As a result, notwithstanding outliers, Antifa groups generally kept the focus on organising opposition to the more radical or 'reactionary' elements of the right.

What this meant in practice was that RCA did not relax recruitment protocols to capitalise on the spike in interest. When receiving an email enquiring about the possibility of membership,

'[...] then we ask them like some basic questions to do some background vetting, look at their online presence. So, you could pull their records, stuff like that. So, we do like a background check. Then we do an interview where we meet with them and we have interview questions that we go through that go through different stuff [...] if you pass the interview, then you go to an orientation [...] And then there's you know, you go through a program, the program lasts

In the wake of Charlottesville, a poll undertaken by NPR/PBS News Hour/Marist on 16 August 2017, revealed that five per cent of nationally registered voters in the US said that they 'mostly agreed' with Antifa. This roughly equates to between 7–8 million voters (NPR, 2017). Yet, it also remains true that even with Trump's election having occasioned a 'political crisis' for the radical left, triggering a rise in the number of Antifa groups and activists, their actual numbers (as opposed to those who may be sympathetic) remain very small. In September 2017, it was reported that RCA had 'roughly 40 members' (Montgomery, 2017). But this was more the exception than the rule. One of the more reliable estimates suggest that most Antifa groups count between five to 15 members in those locations in which they organise (Kenney & Clarke, 2020).

5.5.7 TRANS-LOCAL DIMENSIONS: REGIONAL, NATIONAL, AND INTERNATIONAL

The first point to make regarding the US is rather an obvious one: geographical distances between cities can be prohibitive. If on the West Coast, the travelling time from Portland to Seattle, for example, is close to three hours by car; to Sacramento in California (which was the site of serious disturbances in June 2016, resulting in at least 10 people sustaining injuries, many of whom were stabbed) it is nine hours by road; to Berkeley, it is closer to ten hours. When asked about regional collaborations, it is perhaps unsurprising that RCA’s closest links were with fellow activists in Seattle: ‘Certainly we’ve gone up to Seattle. People from Seattle have come down here. That’s a pretty easy connection because that’s only a few hours drive’ (RCA01, 2019).

This is reflected in the group’s recent Twitter activity. One of the accounts that they have most amplified through retweeting is @WANaziWatch which, according to its own Twitter profile, is based in Seattle. Otherwise, RCA only retweeted Portland-based @PopMobPDX and the US-wide *It’s Going Down* news account (@IGD_News), which caters for anarchist, anti-fascist, autonomous anti-capitalist and anti-colonial movements (Figure 5.5.7.1).

In many cases, it is often those on the far right that are more likely to travel. In August 2017, for example, Joey Gibson ventured to Berkeley for a protest, and was attacked by an anti-fascist with pepper-spray:

‘I think there’s a lot of information sharing something because I think there’s connections that we’ve made with other people who are doing similar sorts of work in other cities. And yeah, a big thing that we all benefit from is sharing information, especially given the way some of these groups that we’re opposing, they travel a lot. They definitely send people from out of state to come to some of these events. So, if we know that somebody from Portland or somebody from a Portland area is going to travel to Berkeley or something like that, we could make contact with activists down in Berkeley and perhaps send them some information that would be helpful for them. Like here are the people that you’re going to see. Here’s what we know. Here’s what you might expect from them individually’ (RCA01, 2019).

While by no means the only, nor most important avenue for this type of information sharing, RCA does use Twitter in this manner. In fact, RCA uses it not only to highlight the intentions of far-right activists to attend rallies outside their local areas but also to prevent them by, as the Tweet below illustrates, reporting their plans to the crowdfunding platforms through which they are attempting to fund their travels:

‘[...] a violent PNW Proud Boy, is attempting to raise funds to pay for travel expenses to Joey Gibson’s August PDX &

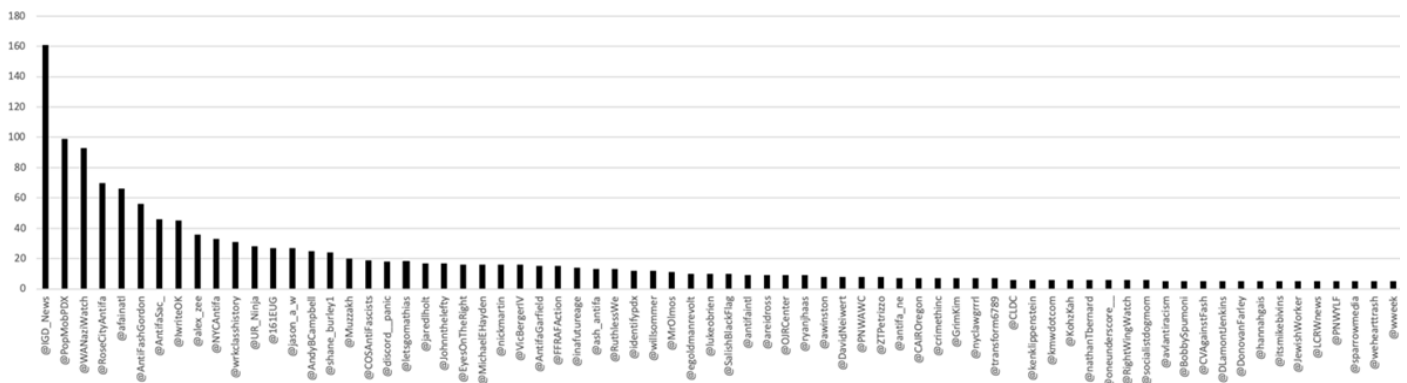


Figure 5.5.7.1: The accounts recently retweeted by @RoseCityAntifa five or more times (from Twitter Sample 2).

Berkeley rallies. Please report his paypal & patreon in a show of solidarity West Coast anti-fascists' (Merrill, Data Set 1, 2020).

northeast. And so it's very important, but also cannot be a substitute for real movement building on a local level' (PhillyAntifa01, 2020).

While it is difficult to neatly classify the geographical scales of different Twitter accounts as there can be discrepancies between their stated origins and their activities and interests, on the whole most of RCA's recent retweeting activity has related to national, regional and local interests (Figure 5.5.7.2). Their relatively limited retweeting of accounts beyond the USA somewhat contradicts, at least in this digital venue, the commitment to international solidarity that lay behind their choice of the Antifa moniker.

On the East Coast, maintaining physical connections between activists can be easier given closer proximities between cities:

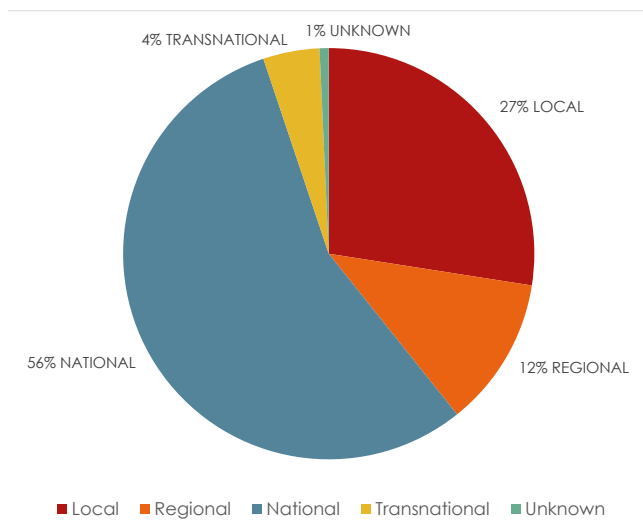


Figure 5.5.7.2: The geographical scales of the retweets from accounts recently retweeted by @RoseCityAntifa five or more times (from Twitter Sample 2).

'But you have regional crews work together on projects. We work with other groups and in New Jersey and Pennsylvania and New York and at times of large things around Charlottesville there is coordination with people towns all along southeast and the

This is also borne out by @PhillyANTIFA's recent Twitter activity with @NYCAntifa being one of the accounts that it most retweeted, again second only to @IGD_News (Figure 5.5.7.3). Similar to RCA, the majority of Philly Antifa's recent retweet activity relates to the national scale but in contrast, a regional focus seems to outweigh the local (Figure 5.5.7.4). This may indicate the influence of Antifa activity in the large cities of neighbouring states not least New York and Washington DC. Moreover, it is interesting to note that (at least) the retweet relationship between @PhillyANTIFA and @NYCAntifa appears to be a little one-sided. This may be a result of @NYCAntifa producing more original Twitter content than @PhillyANTIFA (retweets accounted for 42% of the former's total tweets but 58% of the latter's) itself indicative of NYC Antifa's increasing reliance on digital rather than street activism. While @RoseCityAntifa is among @NYCAntifa's most retweeted accounts, @PhillyANTIFA is not (Figure 5.5.7.5). Like both @RoseCityAntifa and @PhillyANTIFA, the majority of the accounts that @NYCAntifa amplifies have a national focus. Like @RoseCityAntifa but in contrast to @PhillyANTIFA, @NYCAntifa also uses Twitter to amplify local more than regional accounts (Figure 5.5.7.6).

But it is also quite clear that different cultures between groups in different regions can give rise to conflicts. From a wider perspective, the existence of network structures such as TORCH should not be taken as a proxy for a unified vision (and indeed, some groups have left the network, as we have seen, and on Twitter, the network's account @TorchAntifa only made it into one of the group's top recently most-retweeted accounts (@PhillyANTIFA)). So, the real strength of this network relates more to the sharing of resources and information:

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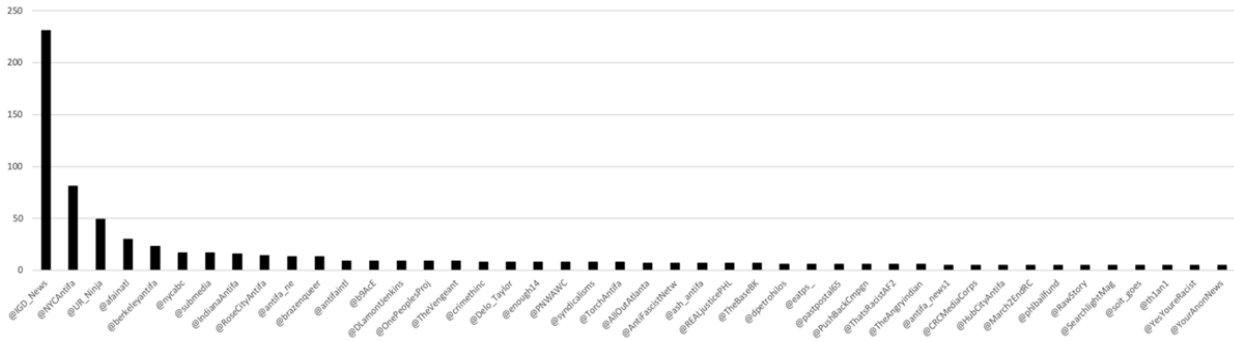


Figure 5.5.7.3: The accounts recently retweeted by @PhillyANTIFA five or more times (from Twitter Sample 2).

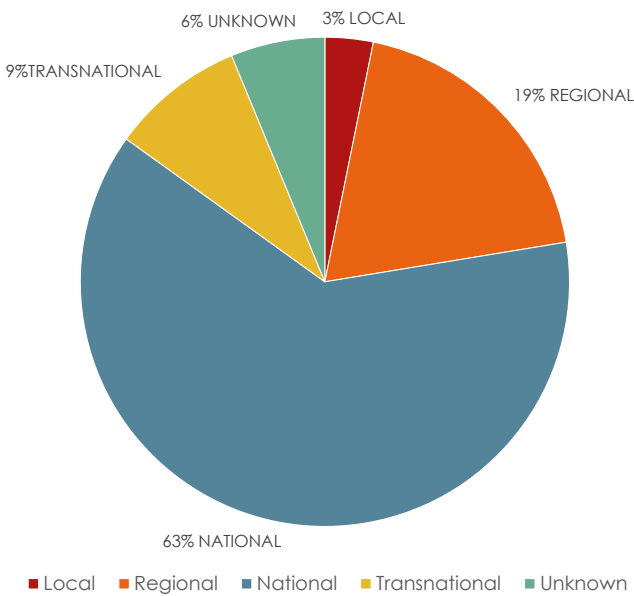


Figure 5.5.7.4: The geographical scales of the retweets from accounts recently retweeted by @PhillyANTIFA five or more times (from Twitter Sample 2).

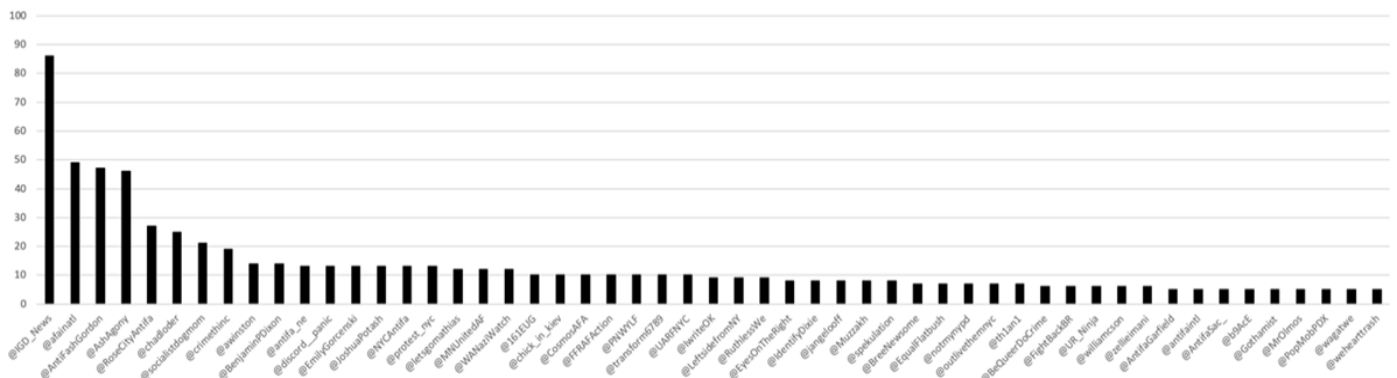


Figure 5.5.7.5: The accounts recently retweeted by @NYCAntifa five or more times (from Twitter Sample 2).

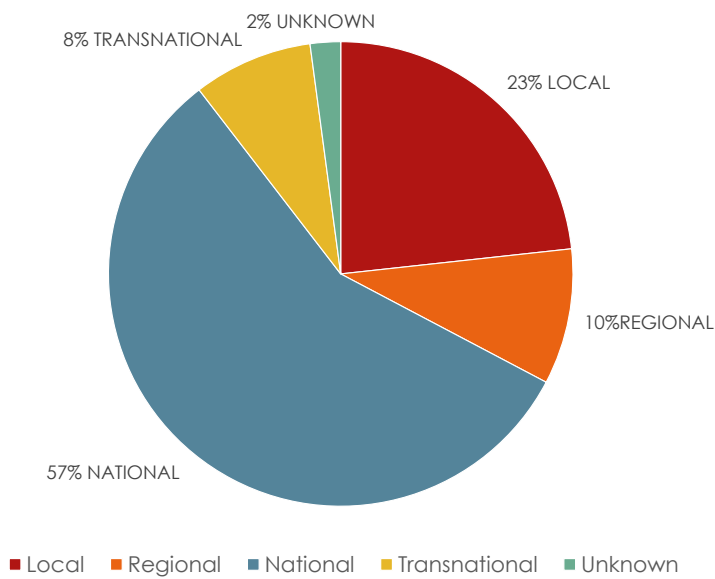


Figure 5.5.7.6: The geographical scales of the retweets from accounts recently retweeted by @NYCAntifa five or more times (from Twitter Sample 2).

'I think that in terms of like steering a network, like an organisation, which is often something that happens when people want us to sort of have a more unified vision just creates conflict. I think that the people that organise on the East Coast, in the Midwest and the West Coast just have very different approaches a lot of the time and very different sensibilities and aesthetic. And we just run into a lot of conflict. But as far as information sharing and resource sharing, it was just invaluable' (PhillyAntifa01, 2020).

In this respect, what is clear from the three groups' retweet activity is the centrality of @IGD_News as an information hub. Following from its status as the account most retweeted by all three groups it is central to the retweet network created between the three groups (Figure 5.5.7.7). This network also suggests greater shared contacts between @NYCAntifa and @RoseCityAntifa than between either of these accounts and @PhillyANTIFA, the consequence perhaps of the recent ongoing events in Portland that have placed the city front and centre in discussions about anti-fascism in the US more broadly. Of the six accounts recently

retweeted five or more times by all three groups, three accounts, including @IGD_News, were also recently retweeted to a similar extent by some of the British case study groups covered in this report.

While these and similar accounts indicate transnational Twitter connections, on the whole, as some of the figures above illustrate (Figures 5.5.7.2, 5.5.7.4, 5.5.7.6), the transnational dimension of these groups' use of Twitter to reach beyond the US, including to Britain, has been relatively limited, remaining mostly in the realm of information sharing and displays of solidarity.

This is not to say that there has not been any offline transnational contact. There was a speaking tour on the Pacific West Coast in mid-2018 by members of London Antifascists (see later). They visited the RCA in Portland; they were also interviewed for a podcast on *It's Going Down*. (*It's Going Down*, 2018). Needless to say, contacts can also be informal and personal: a number of RCA's members having lived in Britain, for example (RCA05, 2020).

5.6 PROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS: THREE SCENARIOS

SCENARIO 1: THAT ANTIFA WILL BE DESIGNATED A 'DOMESTIC TERRORIST' ORGANISATION.

On 31 May 2020, in the wake of the mass protest that followed the death of African American George Floyd, Donald Trump tweeted that the US Government will be designating Antifa a 'terrorist' organisation. This threat was neither sudden nor unexpected. Trump's response to Charlottesville had been to apportion blame to both sides, a deliberate exercise in 'false equivalency' according to his critics. Sensing an opportunity, right-wing provocateur 'MicroChip', dubbed 'Trumpbot overlord', initiated an online petition calling on the Federal Government to formally declare Antifa a 'terror group – on the grounds of principle, integrity, morality and safety'. The petition's popularity – 368,423 signed it – occasioned significant media coverage from conservative media outlets such as Fox News. The aim, according to 'MicroChip', was to shift the post-Charlottesville narrative, to re-unite conservative opinion, 'and prop up antifa as a punching bag' (Musgrave, 2017).

Antifa has been a recipient of numerous 'punches' from conservative right-wingers ever since. A Republican-sponsored Congressional Bill (H.R. 6054), cited as the 'Unmasking Antifa Act of 2018', called for an amendment to Title 18 of the United States Code to provide for enhanced penalties for committing an offence while wearing 'a disguise, including a mask'. The following year, two Republican senators, Ted Cruz (R-Texas) and Bill Cassidy (R-La) introduced Senate Resolution 279 calling for 'groups and organizations across the country who act under the banner of Antifa to be designated as domestic terrorist organizations'. Cruz had written to the US Department of Justice and FBI on 23 July 2019 requesting that Antifa be subject to a criminal investigation. He penned the following:

Antifa's violence is widespread and well-known. Earlier this month, the "Rose

City" chapter of the domestic terrorist organization "Antifa" rampaged through Portland, Oregon, stealing and destroying property, disrupting traffic, and assaulting civilians. One journalist, Andy Ngo, was attacked so severely that he was hospitalized for a brain hemorrhage. This weekend, Willem Van Spronsen, an Antifa terrorist, attacked a US Immigration and Customs Enforcement center in Tacoma, Washington, igniting a vehicle and attempting to ignite a propane tank. This mayhem follows previous armed attacks and rioting by Antifa in Portland, as well as the arsons, destruction of property, batteries, and related crimes by Antifa following President Trump's inauguration' ('Nox and Friends', 2019).

Two days later, in the House of Representatives, Rep. Brian K. Fitzpatrick (PA-1) introduced House Resolution 525 calling on the House to strongly condemn the violent actions of Antifa; to recognise that Antifa engages in 'domestic terrorism'; and to urge the President and the President's Cabinet to use all available resources to address the Antifa threat. On 27 July 2019 Trump tweeted:

'Consideration is being given to declaring ANTIFA, the gutless Radical Left Wack Jobs who go around hitting (only non-fighters) people over the heads with baseball bats, a major Organization of Terror'.

But there is much here that is political bravado and bluster. The US Federal government does not hold the necessary executive authority to designate a domestic group as a 'terrorist organization'; it can only declare foreign groups 'terrorist' (although it can, under existing legal statutes, classify certain acts as 'terrorist acts'). Any move to classify Antifa as a 'terrorist' organisation would run counter to the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of association. It would be unconstitutional to criminalise on the basis of membership of a domestic ideological

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organisation. What is more, Antifa is not even a formal organisation as such – a fact noted by FBI Director, Christopher Wray, in his response to Ted Cruz at a Senate Committee hearing in July 2019. Nonetheless, since the US defines a terrorist act, very broadly, as ‘premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents’ (Title 22, Chapter 38, Section 2656f(d)(2) of the United States Code), then Antifa can be defined, in strict US legal terms, as a movement that engages in ‘terrorist’ acts.

The response of militant anti-fascists to threats of being subject to the designation of ‘domestic terrorism’ has taken numerous forms:

The first has been to dismiss it as a form of political posturing that is little more than a cynical attempt by Trump to appeal to his base:

‘I do think he's throwing a lot of red meat to his base right now. He's trying to get people excited for re-election. It's kind of a sexy enemy. There's lots of, you know, already negative content out there by people that have a bone to pick with Antifa. There's people that have felt the wrath of Antifa in various ways that we have enemies and a lot of places. You know, Tucker Carlson, being a prime example, he's become a real anti Antifa crusader since a demonstration at his house by SmashFascism D.C. And he has friends. There's definitely somebody in the New Jersey Homeland Security Office that has a bone to pick that they just put out a press release calling National Lawyers Guild legal observers to be a subset of Antifa. So, there's you know, that my fear that he's actually going to successfully classify Antifa as a terrorist organisation is small, though obviously I'm not discounting anything at this point because it's hard to predict how the future is going to go in this country right now’ (PhillyAntifa01, 2020).

‘All rhetoric, as far as I'm concerned. Part of that rhetoric is that Antifa is considered a terrorist organisation is here in my state of New Jersey. Not only is that untrue, but [...] in February, the state's annual Terrorism Threat Assessment report noted the threat level for white supremacist extremists was raised to high, right at the top of the category for threat levels here’ (Jenkins, 2020).

‘I agree that its more bark than bite. But I also think they have been biting us for a long time with the terrorism designation and I mean, it's nothing new. We've been treated like domestic terrorists for years’ (OutliveThem02, 2020) .

The second has been to challenge the designation as a form of misinformation:

‘And that's kind of the way that we went about it when there was that recent incident with, you know, trying to declare Antifa a terrorist organisation. You know, it's just continue, to continue with the facts. it's how many people have white nationalists and fascists killed? How many people have Antifa killed? Zero. And it's just continuing to go with that and go with the facts rather than go with the misinformation’ (RCA01, 2019).

This ‘zero’ statistic has been recently challenged, however, by the killing of a ‘Patriot Prayer’ activist in Portland, on 29 August 2020. During a pro-Trump caravan demonstration, an altercation led to the fatal shooting of Aaron Danielson by Michael Reinoehl, who had declared himself ‘100% anti-fascist’. Reinoehl, who was several days later, shot by a federal fugitive task force, had given an interview to *Vice News* in which he claimed that he had acted in self-defence. According to a 19-page affidavit, there was an expandable metal baton found near the victim, along with a can of bear attack deterrent that had been hit by

a bullet. At Danielson's waist, there was a loaded Glock 17 pistol, but this was still holstered (*Willamette Week*, 4.9.20).

Yet Reinoehl, although a self-declared Antifa supporter, does not appear to have been an RCA member. Reinoehl revealed in the *Vice* interview that he was not a member. 'I'm not a member of anything'. Tellingly, RCA's website was silent on the incident; its Twitter page retweeted the *Vice News* article. Attention has since shifted to Reinoehl's alleged 'extra-judicial' killing by police (the local Coroner's Court declared it a homicide; witnesses claimed he was shot without warning).

The third type of response has been to appeal to broader left-wing solidarity:

'So our approach with the Ted Cruz thing was we've brought out a statement and then tried to get, you know, other organisations to sign on to it, you know, like pushing this more unity message of everybody's an anti-fascist [...] like anybody's at risk, kind of pushing that unity, broad left solidarity message more [...] I mean, we've been demonised by liberals the whole time. But I think, though, people are actually now maybe, I mean, more sympathetic, they kind of get it more. And I would say you see more people defending anti-fascists and that are sort of moderates, not super political people, but understanding why it happens' (RCA05, 2020).

That said, the public mood can change. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests – Portland marked its 100th night of consecutive protests on 4 September 2020 – it is probably no exaggeration to say Antifa 'hysteria' swept through the US. Mass disinformation, encouraged by Trump's White House, misleadingly conflated BLM protests with Antifa anarchists bent on fomenting chaos. BLM and Antifa are not 'one and the same', as a recent UK-based Intelligence report

erroneously suggested (Intelligence Fusion, 2020). While Antifa activists are supportive and do attend as individuals, they do not generally play a leading role in organising racial justice protests. As one Portland-based activist told a reporter, 'We don't feel like, as a group, we should be taking away space from people who have dedicated their lives to this' (Mogelson, 2020). In any case, in the period between 24 May and 22 August 2020, in more than 93 per cent of all demonstrations connected to BLM, demonstrators had not engaged in violence or destructive activity (ACLED, 2020).

Moreover, during the George Floyd protests, Twitter shut down multiple *fake* Antifa accounts that were inciting violence, and which originated with the far right, not the far left. In June 2020, federal prosecutors did not link any Floyd protest arrests to Antifa (*The Independent*, 11 June 2020). The only link they found was to an 'accelerationist' far right encouraging others to infiltrate the protest and use 'cocktails, chainsaws and firearms' against the police in order to start the 'boogaloo' (a second Civil War). In early September 2020, it was reported that there had been around 300 arrests made across the country in relation to civil unrest and protest. Of those arrests, around a third had been in Portland where violent demonstrations were mostly confined to specific blocks in the city's downtown area. Yet none of the court documents from federal cases in Portland referenced Antifa or the wider anti-fascist movement; and more than 70 per cent were for minor citations and misdemeanours, not felonies. (Lucas, 2020). One recent, egregious, example of this type of disinformation is the claim that Antifa is responsible for deliberately setting forests on fire in Oregon. Ironically, many in RCA had a history of activism in radical environmental groups, such as Earth First! (RCA05, 2020).

When interviewed in June 2020, our respondent from Philadelphia was pessimistic:

'And I'm still proud to say that I'm an anti-fascist. But now it's like you're going to

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encounter people who have such a distorted idea of what you are and what you do. And they cannot be reasoned with because everything the counter threat view is just fake news. And they're getting this from a man that they think is just totally honest with them, even the biggest liar in the whole world. The threat is very real. Whether or not he declares us a terrorist organisation. I mean, the effects are already being felt and continue to be felt. And it's you know, it's definitely a negative for the movement' (PhillyAntifa01, 2020).

'What I think is happening right now with Antifa is a little less red scare and a little more satanic panic. And by that, I mean, if it was not total fiction in the, you know, in the 40s and 50s to say that there were communists and communist sympathisers that worked in different industries in the country [...] there was actually some truth to that. Right? It is pretty much fiction, most of the stuff that's coming out about Antifa, you know, busing in to destroy your town. George Soros is the funder, you know, secret Democratic connection. That's all sort of invented. So very much reminds me the satanic panic in this country in the 80s' (PhillyAntifa01, 2020).

However, following Joe Biden's (contested) election in November 2020, it now seems very unlikely that a future presidency will specifically target Antifa as a 'terrorist' threat. This does not mean, of course, that Biden condones Antifa. On 7 September 2020, when asked by a reporter, 'Do you condemn Antifa?', Biden responded, 'Yes I do – violence no matter who it is' (Reuters, 16/10/20).

SCENARIO 2: ANTIFA WILL GO 'UNDERGROUND' AND PREPARE FOR ARMED STRUGGLE

Probability: Low

Here, we might usefully reference the historical experience of the Weather Underground, a radical-left militant organisation that was active in the US between 1969 and 1981. Like Antifa, it drew support from radicalised white youth; it also had strong connections to college campuses. Emerging from the Students for a Democratic Society, the Weathermen called for the overthrow of the US government through armed insurrection.

The Weather Underground's history is instructive for a number of reasons. In the first place, it demonstrates that escalation (and de-escalation) is context-bound. In the case of the Weathermen the key triggers behind their decision to go 'underground' and initiate an 'armed struggle' were:

1. The Vietnam War and the revelation, in particular, of the coverup of the My Lai massacre in November 1969
2. Admiration for the success of the North Vietnamese, Cuban revolutionaries, and other Third World revolutionary 'guerrilla' groups
3. The perceived failure of street protest following the 'Days of Rage' in October 1969
4. Anger at the killing of a Black Panther leader, Fred Hampton in early December 1969
5. In-group dynamics and the charismatic leadership of Bernardine Dohrn
6. *Foco* theory: the idea developed by 'Che' Guevara and the French theorist, Regis Débray, that an elite cadre of paramilitaries, through vanguardist actions, i.e. 'exemplary' violence, could serve as a focus for a more general armed insurrection.

At the start, the Weathermen adopted a strategy of lethal escalation, a strategy that intended to injure and kill. There was a theoretical justification (which

demanding the intensification of violence); a desire for genuine solidarity with Third World revolutionaries; a feeling that world revolution was imminent; a desire to demonstrate solidarity with black militant struggle (Black Panthers); and a process of ‘de-humanisation’ whereby ‘small’ violence was deemed necessary to stop the ‘greater violence’ of US imperialism and institutional racism.

However, after a Weathermen bomb factory accidentally exploded in New York’s Greenwich Village in March 1970, killing three of its activists, the group de-escalated and thereafter avoided violence against people (their typical repertoire of action was limited to bombings and arsons against property that were preceded by warnings). While the Greenwich Village incident is regarded as a seminal moment in the process of de-escalation, prompting a period of self-reflection, it is also clear that the wider radical milieu reacted negatively to this ‘preview of violent escalation’. According to Luca Falciola, ‘in order to safeguard the “solidarity pact”, Weathermen were forced to adjust and moderate their repertoires’ (Falciola, 2003). In the end, the Weather Underground did not kill or injure anyone.

For sure, militant anti-fascist activists are aware of the risks of undermining wider anti-fascist solidarities and the dangers of becoming isolated (as the Weathermen did, especially after the end of the Vietnam War). While militant anti-fascists see themselves as being part of a wider transnational movement, this is not a movement defined by revolution and armed insurrection. There is no cultural adherence to *foco* as a theoretical justification for violent escalation either. The Weather Underground had a hierarchical structure; Antifa is non-hierarchical and there is no charismatic leadership. The Weathermen’s organisation, in the form of collectives, also became increasingly ‘cultist’, featuring ‘criticism/self-criticism’ exercises that were derived from Maoist techniques. There is no sense that Antifa is inclined to go underground and build hardened revolutionary groups on the basis of Marxist-

Leninist or Maoist doctrine under any centralised leadership.

The most likely response to any potential increase in state surveillance, infiltration, and criminalisation, will be a doubling-down on internal group security. This may tempt groups to become more clandestine, but it would be a mistake to see Antifa as a ‘proto-terrorist’ movement primed to react to their forced removal from the public arena by forming an underground cadre of armed, de-centralised cells. There is little appetite amongst anti-fascists to wage some kind of ‘guerrilla war’. In the first place,

‘anti-fascism comes out for the need of a united front. Otherwise, we would just be calling ourselves communists or anarchists. And Antifa is a recognition of the need for solidarity, non-sectarian solidarity across a lot of lines to deal with a threat like an existential threat’ (PhillyAntifa01, 2020).

The lessons of the past have also been learned, and there is the recognition that such a course of action would lead to the isolation, and then dissolution, of militant anti-fascism:

‘Like if he [Trump] gets another term, it’s going to be just like Franco [...] I don’t think there’s a way that we can necessarily be as approachable to the public anymore. So, I think what we’d see, unfortunately, is more of an underground situation, probably more repression towards up-ground groups [...] but if you get too herded off from the rest of the left, you’re easier to destroy. Like there’s a tendency to want to hide and be like, OK, well, we’ll just go further underground and be more militant. But most groups that adopt that approach are more heavily targeted because then you don’t have any solidarity. You don’t have any community support [...] I would think probably security would have to be more intense’ (RCA05, 2020).

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For sure, Antifa lacks sufficient popular support to sustain underground groups. This is recognised as a weakness and if anything, the direction of travel has been towards making anti-fascism more accessible and building broader coalitions. In Portland, this has been effected through groups like PopMob and the DSA; the same is true for New York through above-ground groups such as Outlive-Them, UARF and the Metropolitan Anarchist Co-ordinating Council. This is concerned with functioning in the public arena, with going into the streets with large numbers to oppose the far right. It is not indicative of militant anti-fascists developing an underground revolutionary vanguard. Indeed, in this respect, the response of *It's Going Down* to Biden's election victory is telling:

'But while, as usual, there is no hope to be found in electoral politics, the streets are a different matter. The fury over George Floyd's murder has not gone away, but lies waiting to erupt again at the next videotaped murder or other outrage [...] As the reality of "winning" an election between two racist corrupt millionaires sinks in, people will become more receptive to solutions outside the electoral spectacle' (Anon., 2020).

Indeed, if a Biden presidency struggles to end the polarisation of US society, and the pace of wider social unrest quickens, Antifa's role may even become less significant:

'I also think that just every iteration of unrest in this country seems to be happening and going down faster, but they're happening more often. So, I think we're going to see just an increase in in the kind of unrest that we saw after the murder of George Floyd. More and more and that anti-fascism, Antifa specifically as a movement is going to be kind of a bit player in that other than as a villain for the right to sort of point at, because it's not the goal of any serious Antifa activist to make wider discussions

about, you know, what's wrong with this country' (PhillyAntifa01, 2020).

SCENARIO 3: ANTIFA WILL ESCALATE ITS REPERTOIRE TO LETHAL VIOLENCE

Probability: Low

Throughout the history of contemporary militant anti-fascism in the US (as we have seen), militant anti-fascist groups do not reciprocate to lethal far-right provocation with corresponding levels of violence. Death spirals were not the consequence of the murders of Newborn, Shersty, or Heyer. In Portland, there was no lethal escalation in the wake of the shooting of Querner. In January 2020, the revelation that in Atlanta, a group of 'accelerationist' far-right activists known as the 'Base' had conspired to kill a married couple whom they suspected of having leading roles in Atlanta Antifascists did not trigger a series of revenge attacks (notwithstanding the fact the married couple were never members of the Atlanta Antifascists in the first place).

The lethal actions of Reinoehl, whether carried out in self-defence or not, are an outlier. It suggests that the risk of lethal violence comes not so much from the anti-fascist group itself, but from actions perpetrated in its name/cause by individuals who choose to identify with it. A more recent case from October 2020 in Denver, where a television security guard and Antifa-sympathiser, shot dead a 'patriot' following a 'Patriot Muster' rally and 'Antifa-BLM soup-drive' counter-protest, also seems to follow this pattern. It is an important distinction to make for these individuals may well interpret 'self-defence' as requiring the ability to match the actions of the far right/or vigilante groups, including the use of lethal force if necessary.

As one RCA activist admits,

'[...] when you start bringing firearms into the equation and that makes things a lot more complicated, it can make a situation a lot more volatile, both from a legal perspective, both in terms of the violence

that we have. So, I think it's something that we always do is we make very particular determinations about what we're going to do, what the tactics are going to be. We don't just all show up. It's like, you know, everybody show up and do whatever you want. We sit down and we have a plan and we say, here's what we feel are going to be the particular threats that we're facing here is the best way to counteract this threat' (RCA01, 2019).

Situations are volatile, especially when they involve violence. As we have seen, there have been cases of anti-fascists openly wielding firearms on demonstrations (as in Charlottesville). A lack of training in combustible protest situations might lead to firearms being discharged by group activists by mistake (but not with deliberate tactical intent, or by being primarily motivated by a desire to inflict lethal violence on 'fascists').

Looking forward, the trend during 2020 has witnessed a five-fold increase in the number of protests by armed non-state actors relative to 2019, and this trend may well continue if US society remains as deeply polarised in the wake of the 2020 presidential election. There is also evidence to suggest that heavy-handed police responses can inflame tensions (as in Portland) and thereby increase the risk of lethal escalation. However, there are also grounds for some optimism. As Joe Biden said in his statement following the death of the pro-Trump supporter in Portland, 'The job of a President is to lower the temperature. To bring people who disagree with one another together' (CNBC, 30 Aug. 2020).

6. MILITANT ANTI-FASCISM IN BRITAIN

6.1 HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The recent history of militant anti-fascism in contemporary Britain is synonymous with one group in particular; Anti-Fascist Action (AFA). A major reference point for militant anti-fascists, AFA casts a long shadow. Originally formed in 1985, as a non-sectarian successor to the 1970s Anti-Nazi League, AFA was re-launched in 1989 as a physical force anti-fascist group. When relaunched, it was primarily the work of Red Action (RA), with support from both affiliated (Direct Action Movement) and unaffiliated anarchists, as well as from other radical-left groups, such as the Trotskyist Workers' Power.

Red Action, a Marxist, pro-IRA group, was originally formed by militant anti-fascists who had been expelled from the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) for engaging in physical force 'squaddist' activity (Copsey, 2017). As a small 'fighting unit', anti-fascist 'squaddism' had its origins in *ad hoc* groups that first emerged in 1977. Initially established to steward and defend ANL meetings from violent attacks by the National Front (NF), at the end of the 1970s these 'squads' adopted a more mobile, offensive *modus operandi*, violently breaking-up far-right meetings and demonstrations. The problem for many of the left, however, was that this mode of direct action became increasingly isolated from mass mobilisation, inviting criticism for being too secretive, adventurist, and vanguardist.

Taking its cue from Red Action, AFA defined itself not only by its militancy but also by its working-class orientation. 'At its inception,' Mark Hayes writes, 'Red Action was a product of what was considered to be the SWP's strategic failure to organise effectively against fascists, and a cultural antipathy toward working-class members' (Hayes, 2017). Accordingly, AFA looked 'to reclaim working class areas then claimed by fascists as their own' (Anon, 2006). What

this meant in practice, was that AFA traded in low-level 'squaddist' confrontations with the far right, which could, on occasion, escalate into more serious clashes, such as events at London's Waterloo station in September 1992. In the worst fascist/anti-fascist street violence in central London for nearly two decades, at least 44 people were arrested in the so-called 'Battle of Waterloo' (*Mail on Sunday*, 13/9/92).

By the mid-1990s, AFA claimed close to 40 branches. But from 1994 onwards, once the British National Party (BNP) withdrew from the streets, choosing more conventional electoral activity instead, AFA's militant anti-fascism became increasingly redundant. With AFA having seemingly served its purpose, some (though not all) anti-fascist militants shifted toward electoral involvement in a community-based working-class initiative known as the Independent Working-Class Association (a strategy pushed by Red Action). AFA, struggling to define an identity, disbanded in 2001 (Copsey, 2017).

Over the next decade, in response to a series of electoral breakthroughs by the BNP, 'electoral anti-fascism' became the dominant strand in British anti-fascism. In maximising the anti-racist vote, 'electoral anti-fascism' countered the BNP at the ballot box, not on the street. Rather than being led by militant anti-fascists, it was driven by more moderate anti-fascist campaign groups, such as *Searchlight's* Hope not Hate (HnH) and Unite Against Fascism (UAF). Even though militant anti-fascism did not disappear entirely, it found itself pushed to the margins. Here it found the rump NF desperately trying to fill the void on the streets left by the BNP's 'normalisation' strategy.

Vestiges of AFA launched a successor group, No Platform in 2001: 'a new fleshing out of a working agreement between anti-fascist socialists and

anarchists’ which ‘developed as a tactical response to the inability of anti-fascists to effectively oppose the NF attempts to march and establish a presence in Margate, Kent, throughout the spring of 2000’ (Anon., 2001). While based in London, the No Platform network eventually extended to West Yorkshire, the Midlands and Brighton. However, it proved short-lived and soon folded.

Thereafter, came Antifa. Established in 2004, Antifa emerged from within the anarchist milieu: Anarchist Federation, Class War Federation, and No Platform. Antifa’s original statement declared:

‘By calling people to vote Labour or Tory to keep the BNP out, liberals have been asking people to vote for the same people who created all the problems that made them turn to the BNP originally. As such, the fascists have continued to grow and make further headway in communities up and down the country. It is out of this context that a new anti-fascist group has been set up. Antifa aims to tackle fascism from two angles. First, ideologically. We intend to expose the BNP and other far-right parties for what they are: lying racist politicians with no solutions for the British working class. We intend to counter the fear and lies spread by such groups and fight a “hearts and minds” struggle with them. Countering their policies and taking away the basis of their support is a massive part of what Antifa

will do (and arguably the most important). ‘Secondly, Antifa intends to tackle fascism physically, head first, on the streets. Fascism is not an “extreme” version of conservatism. It is an ideology based on violence and terror of opposition. It is no coincidence that wherever far-right groups become active, there is an upsurge in racial violence’ (Antifa Action Statement, n.d.).

Antifa styled itself as a collective of militant anti-fascists committed to the ‘no platform philosophy and the tradition of fighting fascism/racism stretching back to Cable Street, Red Lion Square, Lewisham, and Waterloo’ (Antifa, 2004). ‘As such’, it declared in *Bash the Fash: An Introduction to Antifa*, ‘militant direct action against fascist mobilisations is an essential part of the overall struggle against fascism’ (Antifa, n.d.).

Although locating itself within a domestic tradition of anti-fascist militancy, appropriating the name Antifa suggested that autonomist anti-fascists in Europe, especially in Germany, had become a major source of inspiration. As one of Antifa’s founders explained,

‘There needed to be a militant anti-fascist group on the streets again, and we looked at the rest of Europe and saw the antifa groups. They had the common tactics – either all black bloc types, all mainly anarchist – and we thought we’d lump in with them and we’d create an English version of the existing



Figure 6.1.1. Web banner of Antifa (n.d.)

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European antifa organisation, so that's what we did' (Poulter, 2018).

However, with its Germanic origins, the term Antifa did give rise to some confusion amongst anti-fascist militants, necessitating further clarification:

'Militant anti-fascists all accept the need for physical confrontation with fascists; they understand that fascist groups promote their ideas through political violence and that there needs to be a counterweight to this. They also accept that if the struggle against fascism is to be successful it must be tackled by communities, not the state. These principles have led many to confuse the character of Antifa and militant anti-fascism. These aims clearly have a political quality and come hand-in-hand with a radical, class based critique of capitalist society. Yet while the roots of militant anti-fascism are clearly political, Antifa is essentially a tactic. It is about defending the streets against those who wish to claim them and presenting an active and confrontational face for working class opposition' (Antifa, 2008).

Having been originally founded in East London, Antifa established a broader national network, covering Yorkshire, Nottingham, Birmingham, Essex, Bristol and the South Coast. Yet rarely did Antifa attract wider notoriety. One notable exception came in August 2008 when some 100 black-clad members clashed with police at the BNP's 'Red, White, and Blue' Festival in rural Derbyshire, leading to around 40 arrests (Lyons, 2008). At the end of the following year, however, Antifa dissolved. This had been occasioned by a wave of arrests in July 2009 that followed a case of violent disorder at Welling train station when two neo-Nazis, making their way to a 'Blood and Honour' music event in March 2009, were attacked by militant anti-fascists. Six Antifa activists served prison sentences, one of whom recalled:

'Really, I think that was that for the Antifa as a group. It didn't, as far as I know, do actions while we were in prison – didn't do anything afterwards at all. It kind of took the wind out of our sails and, I mean, I personally came out of prison thinking, 'I can't get involved in any more activity' (Poulter, 2018).

Following the demise of Antifa, militant anti-fascist groups in Britain then largely eschewed the Antifa moniker. As one of our respondents from Brighton put it, 'To my mind Antifa doesn't mean anything to the average English person in the street. It sounds like a type of pasta or somewhere you go on a stag do' (BAF01., 2020).

With the rapid rise of the English Defence League (EDL) from 2009, however, anti-fascists now had to confront a different challenge on the streets. When faced with up to 2,000 or so EDL supporters, 'squaddism' was of little use; the situation demanded the mobilisation of greater numbers. Although UAF, which was the only anti-fascist organisation with the capacity to respond to the EDL at that time, appropriated the mantle of 'militancy', deploying aggressive slogans such as 'Nazi Scum! Off our Streets!', it found itself subject to stinging criticism from anti-fascist militants. Requesting permission for counterdemonstrations from local authorities, and co-operating with the police, UAF demonstrations were increasingly rendered into static protests with little possibility of engaging in effective direct action (Testa, 2017).

As one of the respondents, then an organiser for UAF recalls:

'After Bolton, certainly, Luton, and Oldham, we were going into pre-agreed kettles with the police, which were further and further away from where the EDL planned to march or demonstrate. And I wasn't comfortable, certainly in Luton, I was stewarding on the

day and I ended up in a situation where I realised I was actually helping the police kettle young Asian lads at this car park that we were at, while the EDL just ran riot around communities and then we got on the coach and went home and left these communities to deal with the fact that they still had the EDL there' (MAFN01, 2020).

In seeking a more combative alternative to UAF, local groups from Brighton, Portsmouth, Plymouth, in conjunction with anti-fascist militants from Wales, initiated the Anti-Fascist Network (AFN) in 2011. The rationale behind the AFN was increasing recognition that any effective anti-fascism could not be complete without the mobilisation of large numbers of people as well as direct physical resistance to the fascist threat. This, Brighton Antifascists, dubbed the 'Brighton Doctrine' (BAF01., 2020).

The role of the AFN was to issue national call outs in order to support local actions, thereby ensuring that anti-fascists were 'never outnumbered'. As an early AFN flyer explained,

'Anti-fascism needs to evolve to meet this rapidly changing threat from the far-right. We need an anti-fascist movement which is inclusive, comes from the ground up and is committed to direct action and community self-defence against the fascists [...] The aim of the network is to support these local actions and to join together to counter regional and national far-right events, ensuring maximum numbers on the streets as well as sharing resources, information and experience [...] The Anti-Fascist Network is non-hierarchical, will never work with the police and is not affiliated to any political party. We are not about telling people how to campaign in their areas, what type of anti-fascist activity they should undertake or what political analysis they should adopt' (Anti-Fascist Network, 2013).

The imagery on this flyer (*Figure. 6.1.2*) emphasised that what really mattered was confronting the far right with numbers:



Figure. 6.1.2

The AFN reached peak influence during 2015–16 in major mobilisations against the far right in Liverpool in August 2015 (against the National Action's 'White Man March'), and in Dover in January 2016. This also came at a time when the UAF had lost credibility in the wake of an internal crisis within the SWP, creating something of an organisational vacuum amongst Britain's anti-fascists. From 2013, a new campaign group, Stand Up to Racism (SUTR), succeeded UAF, but this was still widely seen as a front group for the SWP. The suspicion was that SUTR had been created to distance UAF from the internal sex scandal that had engulfed the SWP.

As of 2020, the Anti-Fascist Network still exists as the principal network for militant anti-fascists in Britain – it held its latest networking conference in Oxford in December 2019. Yet, if truth be told, the network is now largely confined to activist groups in southern England.

6.2 BRIGHTON

Brighton is well-known as a progressive and culturally diverse city. It is the only city in Britain to ever return a Green Party MP (in general elections in 2015, 2017, and 2019). With a gay, lesbian, and bi-sexual resident population estimated to number between 11–15 per cent in 2014, it is widely considered to be the 'unofficial gay capital of the UK'. The BME population, at around 19.5 per cent (2011 census), is very close to the national average of 20.2%. (Brighton

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& Hove City Council, 2014). Historically, Brighton is viewed as a centre of anti-fascist resistance, from opposition to Mosley's fascists (e.g. 'the battle of The Level') in 1948 through to organising against the far right in the 1970s and 1980s (Greenstein, 2011). The BNP did not contest seats in Brighton in either the 2005 or 2010 general elections; and in 2019, the UKIP candidate, the candidate in Brighton Pavilion furthest to the right, polled less (at 0.3 per cent) than the Monster Raving Loony Party candidate (0.5%).

Brighton Antifascists, as a group, had its origins in an *ad hoc* defence of a local Unite Against Fascism meeting on the theme of 'Defending Multiculturalism'. This meeting, held in April 2011, was attacked by a group of far-right activists,

'And then so we get a phone call from (Anon.) and a group calling itself the South Coast Patriots were counter-mobilising to that. So, an ad hoc group headed down to deal with that. And they attacked the meeting. They tried to force their way in and a couple of our members, people who became members, were able to sort of fend them off and hold the door. But again, it was like, wow, this is a surprise. Two dozen of us headed down there and there were 30 of them. And that's really where the group came from' (BAF01, 2020).

With a rapidly growing EDL across the country, it was felt that a local response was needed. While this local response became focused on opposition to an annual event (see below), much of the activities of the group initially took place outside Brighton, travelling to a number of different towns and cities to oppose the EDL:

'We went everywhere. We went everywhere. That was the intention to try and galvanize [...] So, they [the EDL] were doing a lot up and down the country very effectively. What became the AFN was us going over to show solidarity with people in Portsmouth.

Because being, you know, being an anti-fascist in Brighton is a piece of piss, being an anti-fascist in Portsmouth is a very different kettle of fish [...] And certainly in the first couple of years of the Anti-Fascist Network, primarily, we went to provide a more militant presence on the left. That would often be our roles, what we end up doing' (BAF01, 2020).

Though Brighton was no far-right hotbed, it did become subject to a series of far-right interventions, primarily through March for England (MfE). Originally formed as 'March for the Flag' by two Tottenham Hotspur fans, it was renamed 'March for England' in November 2007. Although MfE claimed to be innocently celebrating English patriotism and declared itself, 'English and Proud – Proud not Racist', its support overlapped with the English Defence League, Causals United, and other far-right groups.

MfE started holding St. George's Day processions in Brighton from 2008 onwards (initially billed as 'family events'). The first two went unopposed; the third, in 2010, was met with counter-protest from anti-fascists. By this time, MfE was regarded as a front for the EDL. Portsmouth-based 'Pompey' Dave Smeetyon, identified as the MfE's central organiser, had been active in the early demonstrations in Luton in 2009 that gave rise to the EDL (although he would maintain that the MfE was the more 'family friendly' organisation). There were other sporadic far-right interventions, such as one by the English Nationalist Association in August 2010, but for the most part, the MfE cycle was annual and lasted until 2014.

Unite Against Fascism led in the initial counter-protests. However, in anticipation of the 2012 march, Brighton Antifascists launched the 'StopMfE' campaign. An alternative vehicle to UAF, it became increasingly influential. Its aim was to encourage community mass mobilisation, calling on people to 'Line the route and oppose the march in any way you feel comfortable'. As our respondent explains:

'Two tactics ran in parallel; black bloc form spontaneously, you know, people do that [...] But then we facilitated a huge mass of people to be there. Our propaganda for that, for example, was very like, actually quite fluffy. So, we would say, you know, the propaganda would say we would stop the March for England not smash or fuck up the March for England or anything like that. And we deliberately didn't use loads of Black Bloc imagery because we knew that that was likely to happen anyway' (BAF01., 2020).

Below is a timeline of far-right demonstrations in Brighton, organised by MfE, from 2010 onwards:

Date	Event	Counter-Protest	Notes
25 April 2010	March for England, St George's Day parade	Unite Against Fascism	25 masked protesters attempt to use force to stop march; nine people arrested
24 April 2011	March for England, St. George's Day	Unite Against Fascism	Police estimate 150 on either side present on 24 April; eight arrests. Minimal disruption; large police presence (350 officers attended)
22 April 2012	March for England, St. George's Day	StopMfE/Brighton Antifascists/AFN/UAF	140 MfE. Police re-route march after anti-fascists block original route. Estimates of anti-fascist contingent as high as 2,000. Three people arrested; police later seek five people in connection with violence
21 April 2013	March for England, St. George's Day	Stop MfE/Brighton Antifascists/AFN/UAF	700 police deployed; police bus protestors in and out; riot vans form barrier between protesters and counter-protesters; splinter groups clash; 19 arrests
28 April 2014	March for England, St. George's Day	Stop MfE/Brighton Antifascists/AFN	150 on protest; over 1,000 on counter-protest. Repeat of 2013: seafront march passes without incident; splinter groups involved in a series of clashes. 27 arrested
26 April 2015	In Sept. 2014 MfE decide not to return to Brighton in 2015; EDL announce national demonstration for 18 April instead but cancel in March 2015	Stop MfE hold international picnic at The Level under theme of 'Levelling out Racism'	

Table 6.2.1 Brighton and the 'March for England': Timeline

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In 2015 MfE ventured north to Blackpool and held their annual procession there but after that, it all fizzled out. As we were told,

‘So, March for England, they jacked that in as a bad job [...] And that was a complete provocation. There was no local support for the march whatsoever that we were able to discern, very few Brighton residents actually on the march. Almost all Portsmouth and the south east. They never did quite get the EDL to come down. They tried numerous times to get the EDL to come down, but they didn’t’ (BAF01., 2020).

Brighton Antifascists did not wind down, however. The group simply transferred activities to other

locations, such as Dover, where anti-fascists from Brighton participated in a particularly violent protest against the far right in January 2016; and then on to London from 2017 to the end of 2019, in opposition to a series of Football Lads Alliance (FLA)/Democratic Football Lads Alliance (DFLA) demonstrations and ‘Free Tommy’ protests (see 6.4 London).

Brighton Antifascists have had a website with blog since their formation in early 2011. The blog features 122 posts dating between February 2011 and May 2020 (Figure 6.2.2). Overall, the group’s blog posting activity has steadily decreased over time following 36 and 27 posts in 2011 and 2012 respectively. There have only been 14 posts added to the blog since 2016 including a spell of 21 months of complete inactivity between May 2018 and February 2020 (after which

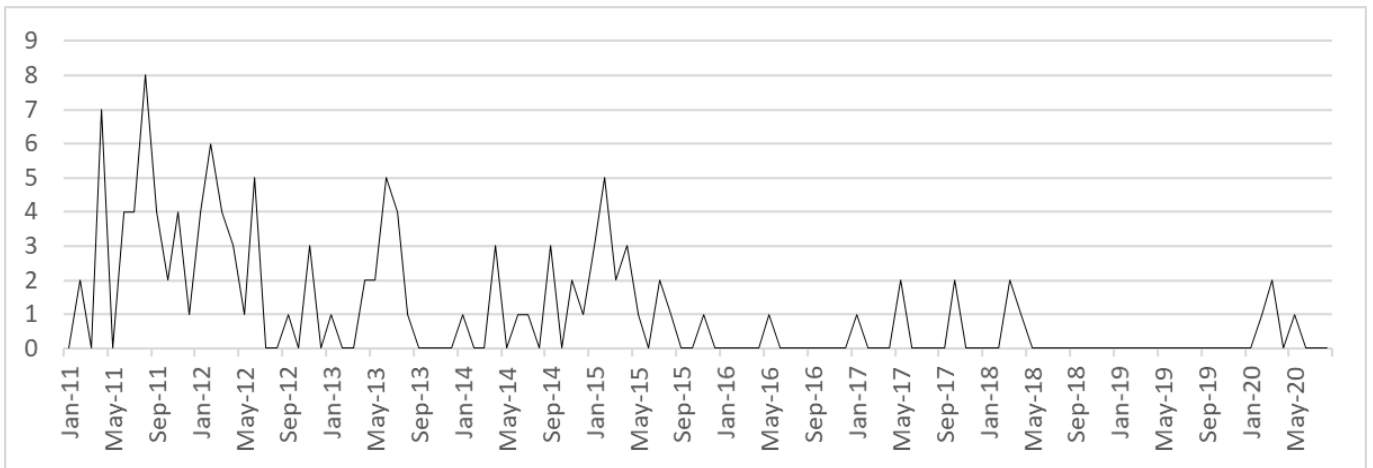


Figure 6.2.2: Brighton Antifascists’ Monthly Blog Posting Activity (from launch until August 2020).

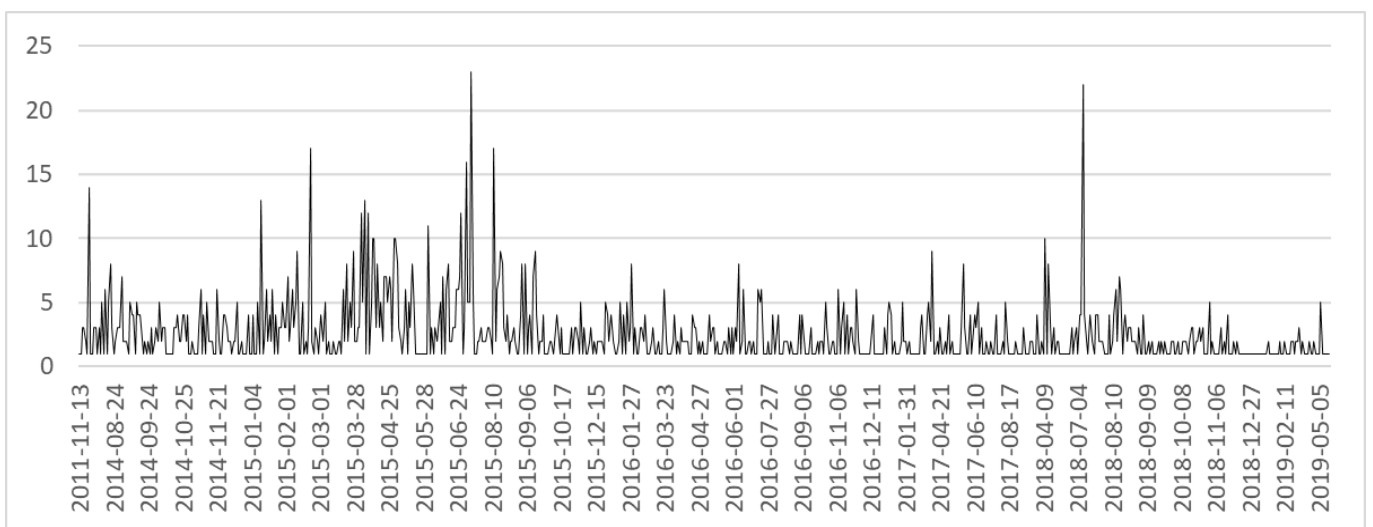


Figure 6.2.3: Brighton Antifascists Daily Twitter Posting Activity (from Twitter Sample 1, days of no activity are not plotted).

the blog was used to publish and interview with representatives of Rose City Antifa).

Later in 2011, Brighton Antifascists also launched a Facebook Community page (October 2011) and a Twitter account (November 2011). On the latter, they have around 5,300 followers but have posted just 2771 tweets. A sample of 1,951 tweets, spanning between 13 November 2011 and 19 July 2019 (Twitter Sample 1), reveals a number of peaks in activity (*Figure 6.2.3*). These include on 3 July 2015 and 7 July 2018 when Brighton Antifascists used the platform to amplify calls to attend counter-demonstrations at different places across the country first tweeted by other anti-fascist accounts.

The Brighton Antifascists Community Facebook page has around 9,500 followers and, in comparison to the other groups, is relatively active with four updates posted in the six-week period from 1 August to 17 September 2020.

6.3 LIVERPOOL

Liverpool is noted for being a ‘Red Citadel’. Its radical heritage stretches back many years: from the 1980s Militant-led Labour council through to present-day ‘Corbymania’ (the five safest Labour seats in the 2019 general election were all located in Liverpool). Complementing its reputation for socialist politics, anti-fascism is widely held to be a ‘core element of the city’s Scouse identity’ (Clark, 2018). In one infamous incident in 1937, Oswald Mosley was stoned in Liverpool, knocked unconscious and hospitalised for five days. Reflecting on this episode, in 1996 Anti-Fascist Action claimed that this ‘wounding marked the end of fascist activity in the area. The policy of No Platform had become a reality – and Merseyside anti-fascists are proud that it remains in force to the present day’ (Anti-Fascist Action, 1996)

In the early 1990s, the BNP admitted to the *Liverpool Echo* that by the mid-1980s it had been driven underground by ‘left-wing’ extremists – the BNP



Figure 6.3.1: Merseyside Anti-Fascist Network, ‘Oppose the White Man March’ flyer. (Museum of Liverpool, MOL.2015.72)

had contested a seat in the 1983 general election in Liverpool and polled a derisory 343 votes. The BNP would eventually return to the city to contest the 2010 general election. Across three seats, it averaged a paltry 1.8 per cent of the vote. Admittedly, BNP leader Nick Griffin was elected to the European Parliament in 2009 for the North-West region, and in Liverpool, the BNP captured 5,308 votes. But the BNP still came in sixth, finishing behind the Greens and the Conservatives.

Merseyside Anti-Fascist Network dates from 2015. The catalyst for its formation was the decision by National Action (NA) to hold a ‘White Man March’ in Liverpool. By this point, as Graham Macklin points out, the neo-Nazi NA had become sufficiently

[...] emboldened to move beyond small “flash” demonstrations to organise larger scale activities. The first was the ‘White Man March’ in Newcastle in March 2015,

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which ended in nine arrests [...] In August, they alighted upon Liverpool as the site for a further “White Man March”, sending a menacing letter to the city mayor that Liverpool “will go up in flames” if the march was prohibited. “Only bullets will stop us!” they declared’ (Macklin, 2018, p. 104).

As our respondent tells it,

‘I acquainted myself with a couple of other people, just got anti-fascists that we knew together in a room to set up a sort of steering group. We formed Merseyside Anti-Fascist Network at that point and started to link in more with the AFN nationally as a network [...]

We only had a few months to organise. But in some ways, that was quite positive that we were a new group because we didn’t have any sort of baggage with each other. And we just got on with it, we were very focused on organizing to stop the White Man March, which meant that you had a good mix of different politics. Socialists, Marxists, anarchists, all working together, you know, and working really successfully together without very many problems. And we just tried to sort of build a mass mobilisation within Liverpool against the White Man March but we were also linked in with a lot of the AFN groups nationally who then put out a national mobilisation call for the White Man March’ (MAFN01, 2020).

In the event, on 15 August 2015, around 100 militant anti-fascists from the AFN descended on Wetherspoons pub at Liverpool Lime Street rail station, where possibly around 20 NA supporters, including the North West Infidels’ Shane Calvert, had gathered. Penned in by police for their own safety, the fascists were forced to cower in the station’s left luggage facility, until escorted away by police. Hundreds of jubilant anti-

fascists then marched the route that the NA march was supposed to have taken, ending at the Pier Head. NA’s Twitter feed had boasted that ‘In years to come, your grandchildren will speak this day and how the NA made history’. For the AFN, it was the anti-fascists that had made history. One AFN spokesperson thought that ‘This might be the biggest anti-fascist victory in the UK for 20 or 30 years. It was a total victory over NA, who are completely humiliated. NA came out of the internet and now the internet is ripping the piss out of them on a scale they could never hope to reach’ (Webb, 2015). Hope not Hate’s Nick Lowles would tweet:

Nick Lowles @lowles_nick

In 26 years of activity I can’t remember fascists so comprehensively beaten as #NationalAction and #NWI were today in Liverpool by #Antifa

For sure, this gave a major confidence boost to the newly established Merseyside Anti-Fascist Network:

‘So, it gave us sort of a bit of an easy win early on. it gave people in Liverpool a big confidence boost [...] And, you know, we got a reputation of this is what happens when the far right or fascists come to Liverpool, Scousers do this. So then when we’ve gone to organise counter protest after the White Man March, it’s been made a little bit easier’ (MAFN01, 2020).

National Action threatened to return to Liverpool two weeks later, but it was bluster. However, in February 2016, Blackburn-based far-right activist, Shane Calvert, did organise a surprise protest at St. George’s Hall. This demonstration, originally planned for Manchester, but switched to Liverpool at the eleventh hour, saw missiles and bricks being thrown, and violent clashes on the steps of St. George’s Hall. Merseyside police arrested 34 people for offences including assaulting a police officer, violent disorder and possession of weapons. For militant anti-fascists, one consequence was that tactics had to be more restrained in the future:

'We had people who were kept under investigation or had certain conditions put on them for like twelve months after that. So, what came from that was a slight change in tactic. When we then got to the next EDL demonstration in Liverpool, which was June 2017, we moved more to a strategy of blocking the road and trying to just, you know, build as many people as possible to block and to sit down [...] There was less likelihood of people being criminalised at that point' (MAFN01, 2020).

Anti-fascists did succeed in cutting the EDL march short; as the EDL made their way back to the train station, they were further subjected to the ridicule of the Benny Hill theme tune. Nonetheless, for all the comic value, and non-aggressive intent, there were still incidents of violent disorder, with bottles being allegedly thrown. The police made a dozen arrests.

'And then that sort of brings us to now where the last time the EDL organised was last year or the year before, and again, we had a good turnout, but their numbers were very low' (MAFN01, 2020).

In November 2018, just five members of an EDL splinter, the 'North West Frontline Patriots' attempted to march to Liverpool's Derby Square. On their arrival at the city's Moorfields station, and heavily outnumbered by anti-fascist protestors, the march was

abandoned within minutes. As our Merseyside Anti-Fascist Network respondent explains,

'So, we have not really had the experience in Liverpool of trying to stop thousands and thousands. We've always been able to build a counter protest where our numbers are much bigger. And that stops it being as dangerous because we tend to be able to contain them in as they come into the city, which tends to be through the train station or we know where they are coming in cars, and they don't actually get to move around very much when they get here. And that's been really effective for us to work like that' (MAFN01., 2020).

The Merseyside Anti-Fascist Network does not appear to have its own dedicated website or blog. Its public-facing digital presence relies on Twitter and Facebook accounts. It joined Twitter in June 2015 and since then has posted around 4,800 tweets and has around 3,300 followers. A sample of 3,938 tweets spanning from 13 November 2016 to 28 August 2019 (Twitter Sample 1) reveals a number of peaks in Twitter activity (*Figure 6.3.2*). The largest of these, on 19 May 2019, was in response to a Tommy Robinson Rally in Merseyside's Bootle, illustrating how this group also used the platform to provide live information and coverage of their counter-demonstrations. Around 8,000 Facebook accounts follow the group's Community Page which was updated eight times in the six-week period from 1 August to 17 September 2020.

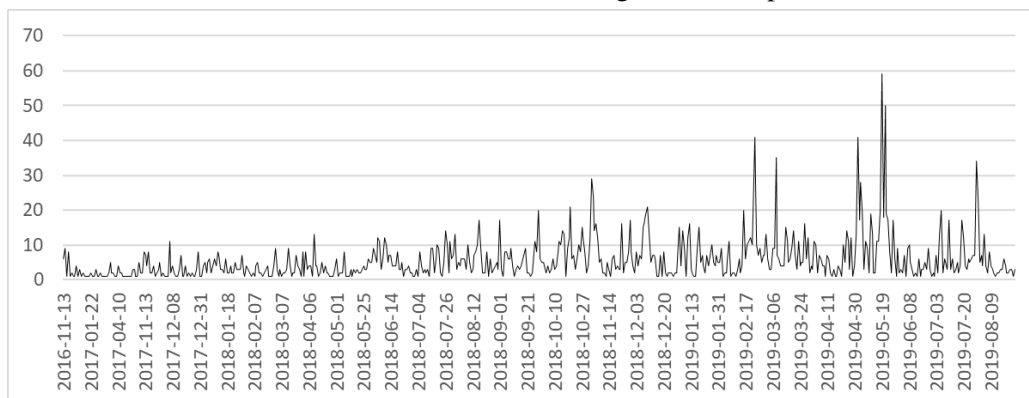


Figure 6.3.2: Merseyside Anti-Fascist Network's Daily Twitter Posting Activity (from Twitter Sample 1, days of no activity are not plotted).

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6.4 LONDON

As the AFN network was being established, in London, the network would initially co-operate with a militant activist group called ALARM (The All London Anarchist Revolutionary Movement), which had been formed in May 2011. In the wake of the 'London riots' of August 2011, this group, which organised against the EDL in Tower Hamlets in September 2011, was less inclined to make its militant anti-fascism 'accessible' and 'fluffy' (as the flyer, *Figure 6.4.1* below reveals).

London Antifascists (LAF), which aligned to the AFN in January 2013, wanted to bridge the gap between the UAF-style mass rallies and small-group 'squaddist' action, making militant anti-fascism more inclusive. In the approach to the next EDL demonstration in Tower Hamlets, which was scheduled for 7 September 2013, LAF put significant work into mobilising the local community through a large, 'family friendly' public meeting, which over 250 people attended (See *Figure 6.4.2*).

RESISTANCE TO FASCISM & RACISM IN THE EAST END
6PM - 12AM SATURDAY 31ST AUGUST
FREE ENTRY/DONATIONS

6.30PM MOMENTS OF RESISTANCE / FROM CABLE STREET TO BRICK LANE

FEAT. MAX LEVITAS VETERAN OF THE BATTLE OF CABLE STREET (TBC) / JULIE BEGUM FOUNDER MEMBER OF WOMEN UNITE AGAINST RACISM / DANIEL TRILLING AUTHOR "BLOODY NASTY PEOPLE" / LOUISE P. EDITOR "PHYSICAL RESISTANCE: 100 YEARS OF ANTI-FASCISM" / PANDIT G FOUNDER MEMBER OF ASIAN DUB FOUNDATION AND MANY MORE

8.30PM AMAZING FOOD! SAG ALOO, CHANA, RICE & NAN

9.00PM OPPOSING THE EDL / ANTI-FASCIST ASSEMBLY
GET INVOLVED, GET ORGANISED! HOW TO OPPOSE THE ENGLISH DEFENCE LEAGUE MARCH THROUGH TOWER HAMLETS ON 7TH SEPTEMBER

10.00PM TUNES! DJ SET FROM PANDIT G & FRIENDS

@THE RAG FACTORY
16-18 HENEAGE ST
OFF BRICK LANE
LONDON E1 5LJ

ldn-afn.org · slaf.org.uk · antifascistnetwork.wordpress.com

Figure 6.4.2 London Antifascists/South London Antifascists/AFN flyer (2013)

3RD SEPTEMBER 2011

FUK EDL

TOWER HAMLETS ALARM

SOUND THE ALARM

3RD SEPTEMBER 2011

On the 3rd of September the English Defence League (EDL) will be entering Tower Hamlets. The EDL are a far right group of Nationalists, supporters of the dead dreams of Queen and Country. They want to enter our area and stir up racial tensions, dividing our class on behalf of our masters. They want a sterile society, no difference, everyone loyal, bowing to the rich and to the flag. Fuck 'em!

When they come here on the 3rd, whether it's a flash mob, marching mob or static picket, they will be confronted. People won't be running away to hide in Weavers Field with Unite Against Fascism. Black, White and Asian will be out on the streets to defend our community and smash them out of our area. If they come here the people of Tower Hamlets will resist and the EDL will lose.

The EDL need to be stopped from entering our area - we want people out, willing to stop this invading army roaming our streets harassing our people.

On the day we suggest you protect your identity, wear a hood, cover your face with a Keffiyeh scarf. EDL, journalists and police will all have photographers out on the day - there's no reason to give them a nice picture of your mug just because you're willing to stand against the Nationalists.

**FOR UPDATES FOLLOW THE BLOG
TOWERHAMLETSSALARM.WORDPRESS.COM**

Join us on Facebook www.facebook.com/Alarmists

Figure 6.4.1: Tower Hamlets ALARM flyer (2011)

This event was also supported by South London Anti-Fascists (SLAF), a group that had first been formed in 2008 in response to the election of a BNP candidate to the Greater London Assembly, but which had recently relaunched in response to far-right attempts to exploit the murder of Lee Rigby in Woolwich. Our LAF respondent recalls that it was this Tower Hamlets mobilisation that first drew him into LAF and militant anti-fascism:

'So, it was 2013, September or maybe August time, and the EDL at the time had announced that they were going to march initially through Tower Hamlets up to the East London mosque, which is a quite a flashpoint for a lot of far-right groups. And I was living in Hoxton at the time [...] But I remember feeling pretty outraged about it. It was quite obvious to me that it was, it was a very antagonistic, active intimidation [...] I saw that this group called London Anti-Fascists who were holding these public organising meetings and they, I think they held about four once a week in the run up to the demonstration over the course of the end of August and up to September. And I just kind of went. I just went to one of those meetings and at the end of the meeting, I volunteered to do some leafleting. Going from shop to shop down Whitechapel high street or whatever. Talking to people, asking if they can put posters up, things like that. And that was really the start of it, to be honest. I think after that, one thing kind of led to another. And I just did another thing after I finished the leafleting and I went to the next meeting...' (LAF01, 2020).

Yet, it was also clear that the tension still existed between inclusivity and the adoption of more militant tactics, as one anarchist commentator admitted:

'Slightly undercutting this message was some of the information put out in advance

of the demo which encouraged people to adopt black bloc dress and tactics. There were strange-looking videos of black blockers practicing weird formations in a field somewhere in Germany and encouragements to "wear anything as long as it's black". A long list of "safety guidelines" was circulated in advance of the demo criticising such things as "attention grabbing behaviour" that were then adapted into another set of shorter rules/guidelines by the mobilisation organisation. It seems bizarre to be putting lots of effort into giving out thousands of leaflets all around Whitechapel and Brick Lane, encouraging mass participation in the demonstration and then a few days before the demo telling all those same people that really they all had to find an "affinity group", mask up in black and leave all their ID and their phone at home [...] It's hard trying to square the circle of mass participation and community involvement while also maintaining some particular politics and a commitment to direct action' (Anon, 2013).

In the event, no fewer than 286 anti-fascists were arrested. According to an AFN press release (10/9/13), 'A bloc of around 600 within the demonstration, coordinated by the Anti-Fascist Network (AFN), attempted to hold a march to get within sight of the EDL's route and present a visible opposition, which was then blocked and kettled by police. Despite police attacks the front of the AFN bloc did manage to get within sight of the EDL march, meaning the only political opposition the racists saw on the day was a direct result of the AFN mobilisation'. The mass arrests followed after anti-fascists broke away from their designated kettle. In an obvious jibe at UAF, which had liaised with police and felt that it important to stay in the designated area, a spokesperson for London Antifascists remarked that 'The 600 people who attempted to march with AFN on Saturday shows that a moderate, "respectable" anti-fascism based on

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deference to the state and the political status quo is no longer the only show in town' (AFN, 2013).

Be that as it may, London Antifascists still remained a relatively small, exclusive group:

'You know, it's a seven year-old organisation now and it's always been like a fairly small group of people. It's not a large group, organisation or whatever. And so the group has changed as people have come in and out and the group had had different priorities as well. When I was involved, particularly when I first got involved, we were very much concerned with organising in opposition, almost in opposition to UAF and in opposition to Stand Up to Racism. Not that LAF would go out and fight them or anything, nothing like that. But it was two different anti-fascisms that often were pushed up against each other operating with a very different logic' (LAF01, 2020).

Over the period since, anti-fascist organising in Britain seemed to be, as one commentator put it, 'polarised in two directions. At one extreme, static demonstrations or A-to-B marches, usually organised under police supervision, that don't really interfere with the fascists' day out. And at the other extreme, black bloc activism that is daring but only mobilises quite small numbers of pre-existing leftists' (RS21, 2019, p. 16). Yet, such distinctions are too neat. As we have seen, anti-fascist militants in the AFN have reached out in order to maximise participation when numbers are deemed essential, as in Brighton, Liverpool, and Tower Hamlets. Yet this has not been as possible in central London, as our respondent explains,

'I think there is very much a distinction particularly in London between the main central London areas like Trafalgar Square, Parliament Square, Oxford Street, that area and the boroughs outside of that [...] The area of central London is, for one thing, it's

like a staging point for every national thing that happens [...] Everything happens there. If you're having a national mobilisation more times than not, it is happening in that very small area. And it's also like the most state-surveilled area in the world. You know, central London, most CCTV'd area. It's a different thing to do anti-fascism in that particular area. Almost uniquely than for example, Tower Hamlets or somewhere else in London. So, I would make that distinction between central London and outside of that. Most of demonstrations I've been involved organising, I've been trying, if you like, to do so through grassroots community mobilisation. And you can't do that in central London because there's no community inside. Or the community that's there are like people who own a house in central London, and they're not interested in community. So, I've come to kind of see the central London area as a bit of a stage show almost where it's so stage managed by the police and by the government' (LAF01, 2020).

Following something of a lull in far-right activities in Central London, 2017–18 witnessed an uptick, occasioned by the intervention of the Football Lads Alliance (FLA) and its more radical offshoot, the Democratic Football Lads Alliance (DFLA). Numbers turning up on these demonstrations were often well in excess of anything the EDL had managed during its peak in 2011. Indeed, in what was widely seen as the largest far-right demonstration in Britain since the Second World War, on 9 June 2018, 15,000 supporters of Tommy Robinson gathered in central London in a protest calling for his release from prison. Yaxley-Lennon's arrest had become something of a cause célèbre for the far right, not only nationally but internationally too.

It was a wake-up call for anti-fascists. There had only been a token counter mobilisation on the day, 200 to

300 people, and it had been subjected to attack by breakaways from the main far-right march. Meanwhile, on the far-right side, the cause of ‘Free Tommy’ was coalescing an array of different groups, sparking fears of resurgent unity on Britain’s far right. ‘Now is a time to get organised’, one militant anti-fascist implored ‘to start having serious conversations amongst ourselves and also to start considering who we can work with and what forms of action we are willing to take, because whatever we’re doing at the moment isn’t working’ (Anon, 2018).

The immediate response to 9 June took the form of an *ad hoc* alliance of militant anti-fascists (including the AFN), left-wing political groups, and various community organisations. This held a series of open assemblies and formed independent blocs to oppose the far right, which returned to central London on 23 June, 14 July, 13 October, and 9 December 2018. At the beginning of 2019, this anti-fascist alliance then became formalised in the launch of the London Antifascist Assembly (Lafa). A counterpoint to Stand Up to Racism, Lafa was designed to function as a grassroots democratic collection of individuals committed to building a mass anti-fascist movement in London that was both accessible and militant. In a novel departure, a Feminist Anti-Fascist Assembly (FAF) was also launched independently. Its aim was to push back against the far-right’s narrative on sexual violence and so-called ‘Muslim grooming gangs’. But while offering an inclusive space, its feminist politics lacked class militancy (Gal, 2019).

When asked about the founding of the Lafa, our respondent from London Antifascists replied:

‘I think marginalising Stand up to Racism would have been a positive. Their form of mass mobilisation didn’t actually mobilise that many people anyway. They’re kind of rooted in trade union bureaucracy and that kind of leadership. And that’s what we found. And during the Free Tommy stuff, you know, when they had that incredibly large march of tens of thousands of people, and the anti-fascist opposition at the time was about two hundred people. And it really like hit home to me that. A kind of exclusive, insular movement which is concerned with anti-fascism itself doesn’t work like in a lot of cases’ (LAF01, 2020).

The first major mobilisation by Lafa took place on 3 August 2019 in opposition to another ‘Free Tommy’ rally. It drew support from the AFN and over 25 other groups. Numbers, at around 1,000 on either side, were now fairly evenly split. This was taken as a positive sign and looking forward, a commentator from the radical-left group, Plan C, wrote, ‘The heavy lifting can’t be left to militant anti-fascists anymore – we need to create a vibrant, diverse anti-fascist movement as soon as possible. Hopefully, Saturday the third of August was the beginning of that process’ (Plan C London, 2019). But our respondent was less sanguine

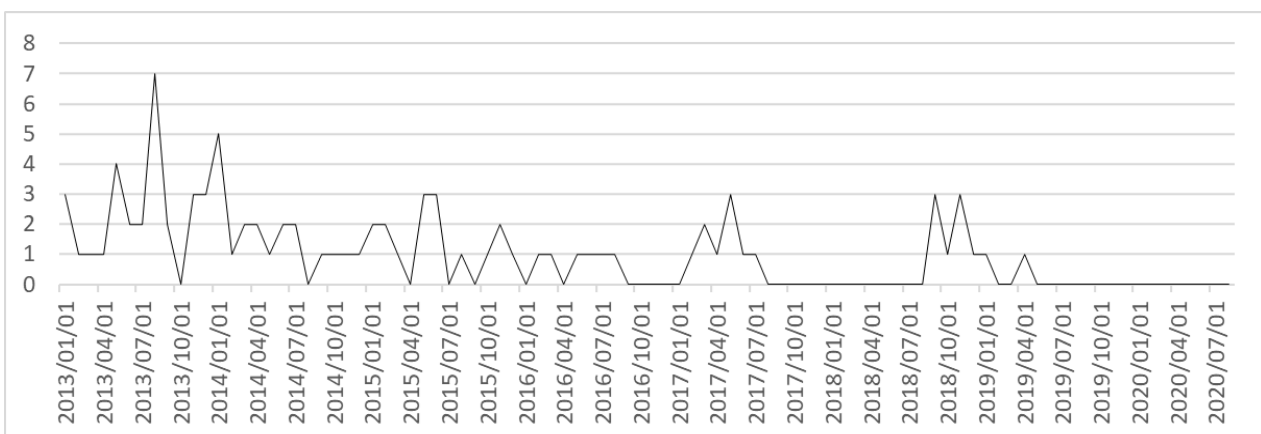


Figure 6.4.3: London Antifascists’ Monthly Blog Posting Activity (from launch until August 2020).

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about LAFAs prospects, ‘It didn’t work. I think. And it really has degenerated now in 2020’ (LAF01, 2020).

London Antifascists have had two websites with blogs and both remain online. The first was launched in January 2013 and features 77 posts up until July 2017. The second was launched in September 2018 and since then has been posted to just 10 times and most recently in April 2019 (Figure 6.4.3). This conforms to the general pattern in how websites and blogs have been used relatively inconsistently by all of the groups studied with the exception of RCA.

London Antifascists have had a Twitter account since August 2013 but have posted just 2,157 tweets. They have, however, accumulated around 15,800 followers. A sample of 1,991 tweets ranging from 2 August 2013 to 28 August 2019 (Twitter Sample 1) reveals peaks in Twitter activity around counter-demonstrations including the EDL’s rallies in central London on 13 September 2013 and in Walthamstow on 9 May 2015. Overall, however, it seems as if the group is now using the platform in this way (to live-tweet counter demos) to a lesser extent perhaps out of recognition of its use as means of surveillance.

Like the other British groups and in distinction to those in the US, London Antifascists have more

followers on Facebook than they do on Twitter. They started a Facebook Community Page in June 2013 and now have around 29,400 followers. The page featured four updates in the six-week period from 1 August to 17 September 2020.

6.5 THE VIEWS OF MILITANT ANTI-FASCISTS: KEY FINDINGS

6.5.1 UNDERSTANDINGS OF ‘FASCISM’

‘Fascism is a violent ideology, from its very beginnings it meant to take power and impose its regime by force; it glorifies violence and seeks to intimidate its opponents into standing aside, until it’s in a position to do away with them altogether.

‘Wherever fascism has taken hold it has ended in violent conflict, history shows that the more people are involved in resisting it, and the earlier they take action, the less violent that conflict will be. Denying a platform to fascists is just common sense, to do nothing is to invite catastrophe’ (Anti-Fascist Network, 2013).

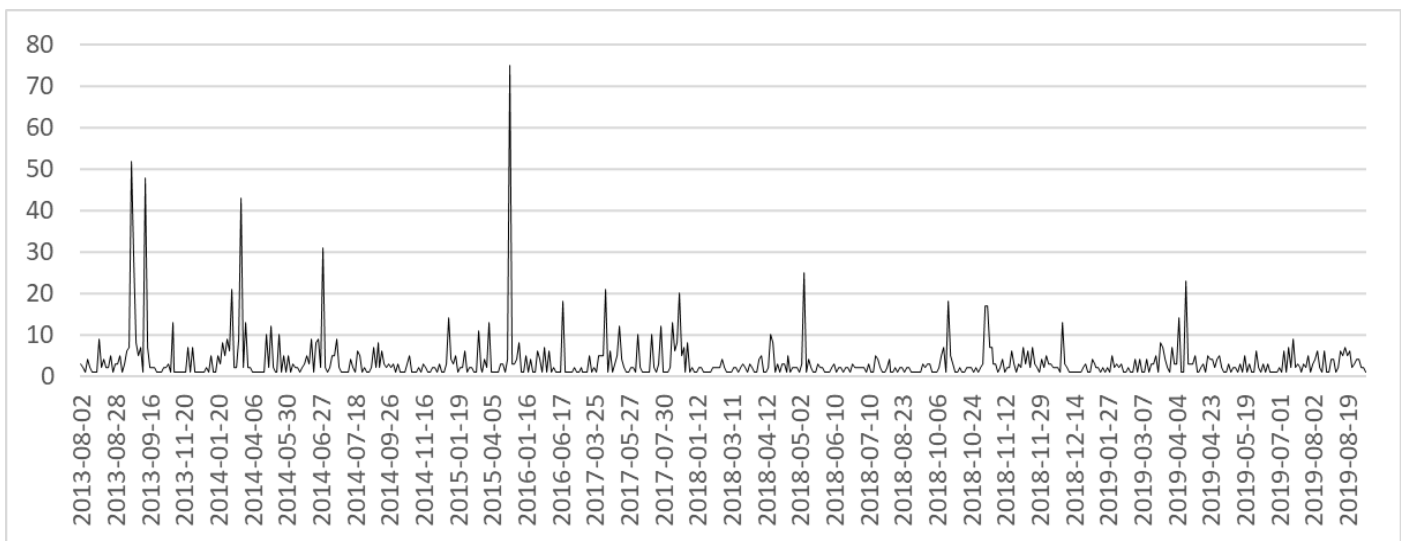


Figure 6.4.4: London Antifascists’ Daily Twitter Posting Activity (from Twitter Sample 1, days of no activity are not plotted).

Fascism, for militant anti-fascists in Britain (as their counterparts see it in the US), is an ideology that is, by its very nature, violent. However, beyond that, there is no standardised definition. This gives local groups the opportunity to determine their own. For Bristol Antifascists,

'Fascism is a far-right political ideology, based upon authoritarian control and supremacy of the nation and state. In practice this means extreme nationalism, racist attacks and terrorising any opposition are well as ruthless control, tyranny and repression of working class movements once in power. Fascism is a violent ideology that will not hesitate to crush any opposition in it's [sic] pursuit of power. It seeks to turn working class people against each other and furthers the divisions created by capitalism' (Bristol Antifascists, n.d.).

Elsewhere, the AFN-affiliated Leeds Antifascist Network agrees:

'[...] that the core elements of fascism are: far-right ideology; ultra-nationalism and authoritarianism. Fascism and far-right ideology serves to promote hatred by demonizing and scapegoating communities; through racist attacks and murders; and to maintain social inequality through the creation of social, political and/or economic conditions. Not every action we take is against 'pure' fascism but we strive to confront an environment that allows fascism to exist' (Leeds Antifascist Network, 2020).

Where local group definitions are not forthcoming, definitions remain personal to the subject. So, for example, our Merseyside respondent referenced the classic Comintern definition that fascism is 'the terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinist imperialist elements of finance capital' and so coming from 'a Marxist perspective, I'd say it's the

degeneration of capitalism into dictatorship' (LAF01, 2020). Yet for our London respondent, an anarchist, it was more a case of framing fascism in diametric opposition to social liberation: 'I have a general disposition towards movements of social liberation, like freedom from economic or racial oppression. Things like that, you know. So, through liberation, all that kind of stuff and fascism is like diametrically opposed to all of that stuff' (LAF01, 2020).

This notwithstanding, our respondents did share a practical concern with avoiding blanket application of the term:

'You know, from my experience with anti-fascist counterprotest. You know, I think it's really important that we don't label every group as a fascist group. And you know there are most certainly groups that we would say at most definitely far right and racist but not what we would call fascist groups. And it's just trying to make to make that definition clear' (MAFN01, 2020).

'So, yeah, I think it is a really important question for anti-fascists, particularly because it's basically a question about who we decide to organise against or not; like who falls within the parameters of anti-fascism or not' (LAF01, 2020).

So, where do militant anti-fascists draw the line between legitimate and illegitimate targets?

'And I've come to kind of an understanding. I suppose now I kind of divide groups of potential fascists into three groups. There are the ones that like call themselves fascists and really like Hitler. And you know they're the easy ones. Like they call themselves fascist. But I think there's this divide in the UK particularly between civic nationalism and ethnonationalism, and when I think of ethnonationalism, it is white solidarity, anti-migrant, anti-the left, these kind of

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very basic fundamental things which are pretty obviously fascist, especially when combined with some kind of commitment to street violence or controlling the streets or something like that. And then there's the other side of it, which is a civic nationalism, which I think can be a bit more contentious. Tommy Robinson and people like the DFLA swear down that they're not fascist at all, just nationalists and you know, like pro Churchill and stuff. I think it's still appropriate to oppose these people' (LAF01, 2020).

'So, I wouldn't even say that groups like the EDL were fascist. We would describe them as the one of the "amino acids of fascism". They are loyalist, nationalist street gangs. They're not classical fascists. I mean, Nick Griffin might, with his Third Position, might well have been a classical fascist. But the groups we ended up opposing, even though we've adopted the moniker of anti-fascism, they're not fully-fledged fascists. They have fully fledged fascists among them [...] Well, I always come back to Mark Twain, which is History does not repeat, but it does rhyme. And you could see in these groups a very clear rhyme and an echo of what's gone before' (BAF01, 2020).

However, since the parameters are not determined centrally through the AFN, but locally, this can widen the net, catching more mainstream right-wing establishment figures that others would not pursue. In February 2018, for instance, Bristol Antifascists (part of the AFN) interrupted a talk by Jacob Rees-Mogg at the University of West of England. Six black-clad anti-fascists barged into the lecture room, shouting 'bigot', 'fascist' and 'racist' at Rees-Mogg, and a minor scuffle ensued. Justifying their actions, Bristol Antifascists later said:

'When Jacob-Rees Mogg is given a microphone at UWE then the bigots and

homophobes in the audience are legitimised and emboldened. Militant antifascists aren't concerned with free speech so much as with self-defence, and the defence of marginalised communities from the real, physical threat of fascism' (Bristol Antifascists, 2018).

Yet had Rees-Mogg spoken at a university in Brighton, it is unlikely that he would have encountered violent interruption from Brighton Antifascists:

'[...] one of the things we never did, for example, was use physical force against anybody from UKIP [...] We would never go, we wouldn't go to the Tory Party conference and start using anti-fascist tactics [...] I could see that milk shaking Tommy Robinson, absolutely brilliant and the public loved it. Milkshake Nigel Farage, on the other hand, not so much. And certainly not, in my opinion, going and turning up in black bloc to a Jacob Rees-Mogg talk' (BAF01, 2020).

6.5.2 ANTI-FASCIST MILITANCY

As with Antifa in the US, militant anti-fascists in Britain also adhere to the principle of 'No Platform', and likewise, draw a distinction between the right to free speech and the right to organise. The issue with fascism, militant anti-fascists argue, is that it is so rooted in violence that if fascist groups are left free to organise, they will be sufficiently emboldened to deploy violence against marginalised communities. Indeed, 'Any level of fascist organisation represents a physical threat to BME people, LGBT people, Disabled people, and working-class organisations', London Antifascists maintain. What this means is 'mobilising to confront and disrupt all types of fascist organisation – including marches, demonstrations, meetings, and gigs' (London Antifascists, n.d.). 'This is what militants mean by no platform' – one anti-fascist commentator wrote – 'using all physical and direct action means to prevent fascists from organising and from putting their ideas into practice. It's not easy and it's not pretty. But it's

not outdated either, and it *will* make them think twice about attacking minorities and make it more difficult for them to recruit and organise' (Dickens, 2013).

Direct action 'from below', that is not beholden to the state, is absolutely central to anti-fascist militancy on this side of the Atlantic too. As we were told:

'It's got to be grass roots. So, it's got to not rely on the power of the state or seek permission from the state in any way. That kind of what makes it militant [...] So obviously, from the police's point of view, there would be like two little camps of people, you know, opposite ends of the town, have a demo and go home. And obviously we would say no, it is necessary to stop them. And to do so, we've got to be near them. And that would be the militant aspect of it, not seeking permission from the police, not involving elected politicians, not trying to mediate through those approved channels, and that's what makes it militant' (BAF01, 2020).

'Militant in that it is concerned primarily with direct action. But I would be much more expansive than that, I guess, direct action which includes popular mobilisations that actively do something [...] one that doesn't work with the police. Or like liaison with the police in any way. And is independent from them' (LAF01, 2020).

As in the US, there is also an acknowledgement that to be militant also means a general acceptance that bodies may well have to be put on the line:

'I think for me, a militant anti-fascism is more about a group, you know, having pre-agreed commitments within a group of people that you're prepared to use direct tactics to stop fascists or the far right from organising or marching or giving a hate speech. And with an understanding of the

potential risks that that carries for activists' (MAFN01, 2020).

Finally, as in the US, there is also recognition that 'liberal' forms of anti-fascism are simply ineffective:

'Anti-fascism which ties working-class people to mainstream politicians in defence of the status quo is politically bankrupt' (London Antifascists, n.d.).

6.5.3 VIEWS ON VIOLENCE AND RESTRAINT

Needless to say, as part of the militant anti-fascist commitment to confront fascist organising, violence is understood as a legitimate tactic. A key trope of militant anti-fascism is the justification of violence as a form of community self-defence. This is typically considered to be the (unfortunate) outcome of violence initiated from the far right:

'Any experience that I have had on anti-fascist protests with regards to violence has been a response to violence from the far right or from fascists. Because ultimately when we organise and we're trying to stop them from marching or making hate speech or getting any kinds of win, that where they could grab confidence and recruit, etc. And unfortunately most of the time, you know, if we sat down in front of them, then they would be going through us. So unfortunately, when you make a decision that your aim is to stop them, you are physically putting yourself in front of these people. And most of the time, the response to that is violence. I think that it's absolutely acceptable then that anti-fascists are able to defend themselves and to protect themselves. And if that means responding in that way, then unfortunately that means responding in that way. I don't know any anti-fascist who is particularly happy about having to take those risks but

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unfortunately, it's sometimes necessary'
(MAFN01, 2020).

Violence, in this context, becomes unavoidable: '[...] it inevitably happens within the context of opposing these groups, these kinds of people, physical conflict is going to happen. There are going to be fights. It's going to get violent' (BAF01, 2020).

Yet, for those groups that are more 'squaddist', this sometimes means that violence is going to be initiated by anti-fascists. And here we find recourse to consequentialism: 'Yes, I think it is perfectly right and proper to shut down fascist organising with violence, or, you know, with whatever means at your disposal. Because I think if fascists are allowed to organise openly, we've already seen the consequences of that happening. We shouldn't let those consequences happen' (LAF01, 2020).

In Britain, when it comes to physical confrontation, there are, it seems, everyday 'rules of engagement':

'So, what do we get? Well, you know, fists, feet, sticks, people throw stuff. That's kind of the level that the violence goes too. In my whole time of doing this, I've never seen a knife, for example from them or us, so nobody escalated it to that, if you know what I mean. We never had the kind of escalation that they had at Charlottesville, that's not happened [...] even in the big pitched fights that I've seen, I think if somebody pulled a gun out on either side, actually, everyone would have shit themselves in the British context. If I was in the middle of a punch up and somebody on our team just pulled a gun out or even a knife, I think I'd be like, fuck it, this has gone way beyond any expectation. Well, we know what the rules are, what the law is here. Everyone, us and them, are aware of that, like the violent disorder in Dover, all the big sentences handed out for three year if you pulled a knife out the

middle of that you might get 10 or 12. You know what I mean, I think, you know, that sort of thing is that there is the legality of it, there is a culture of street organisation in this country anyway. I don't know where that comes from, what's in and what's not, one of those weird cultural quirks' (BAF01, 2020)

So, there is, as our respondent from London Antifascists says, very little expectation of any serious escalation from sub-lethal to lethal violence:

'But someone who, you know, I used to organise with, had a screwdriver pulled on them in the street by a fascist and they were anti-fascist. And, you know, that's obviously serious. But it's quite a rare thing. I suppose I've never thought about it because it doesn't really happen much. I don't think. Yeah. Yeah. It's not like I said, compared to America, it's not a thing' (LAF01, 2020).

Since anti-fascism is quintessentially reactive, limitations will be placed on violent praxis by the nature of the threat:

'Obviously, it depends on what the fascists are trying to achieve. And I think that's something that's often been a problem with anti-fascist organising - people want to do one particular type of thing. And, you know, moments when we're in a small squad of people can pull something off, absolutely blinding, and really halt fascist plans in its tracks. But then at other times it can be completely irrelevant. I think to achieve your aims, you gotta be willing to use all the tools in the box. And so, I think people can become very wedded to certain ideas of how things ought to be done. They try to apply those tactics to situations that are not necessarily very appropriate. I mean, I always said this with squaddism in the

beginning of the EDL. It's like, okay, so if 20 of us did jump out of a pub and beat five of them up. Right. What's that actually going to do? That's not gonna make that next demo any smaller or anything. You know, there may have been other ways. I think a lot of people were pushing for that sort of activism at the beginning. We could pick them off. So fucking what? What's that? What's it gonna do to actually interrupt their growth loop?' (BAF01, 2020).

Indeed, for our London respondent, it was important to differentiate between the average EDL activist and hardcore Nazis:

'Well, I don't think it was particularly appropriate go out to bash the average EDL demonstration goer. But, you know, some people on those demonstrations were fascist, there were fascists within it. You know, we saw in 2018, it was Free Tommy actually, a quite prominent trade union figure, you know, was attacked in a pub and went to hospital. And that was done by, I believe, the people associated with the Chelsea Headhunters hooligan firm. Now, these people are violent fascists in my opinion and should be treated differently to like the guy who got on a minibus down from Rotherham to come to London to say Free Tommy. These are different people' (LAF01, 2020).

For militant anti-fascist activists on Merseyside, the need to retain their involvement in a wider coalition means that the emphasis is away from violent, small group actions:

'We work within a wider coalition group in Merseyside at the moment. We see our role within the broader movement as making an argument for the potential for a more militant approach to anti-fascism than some other organisations might in the strategies

that they push. And we've been pretty successful in winning people over to those ideas within coalitions and within the wider movement. We don't particularly use sort of squaddist tactics. Although that's not to say that we haven't had groups involved in our counter protests that do use those tactics as they have been really helpful with regards to what's gone on during the day. That's not really what we're about as a group, we are more about building big mobilisations but being very clear that we are prepared to use specific direct action tactics' (MAFN01, 2020).

It is also clear that militant anti-fascists have learned lessons from the recent past. The example of what happened to Antifa in Britain in the wake of the incident at Welling train station still resonates:

'[...] on the question of restraint itself, I think it's really, really important. Mainly because, you know, if everyone gets arrested for doing violent disorder, then there's no one to do anti-fascism anymore. And it's these waves of big arrests, like serious criminal cases in the past, that really damaged anti-fascism in many ways. And that's one aspect to it' (LAF01, 2020).

6.5.4 TRANS-LOCAL DIMENSIONS: REGIONAL, NATIONAL, AND INTERNATIONAL

With closer geographical proximity in Britain, we would expect to see higher levels of offline co-operation between local groups. For sure, as we have seen, local groups have travelled to other locations in response to AFN national call-outs (in January 2016, the coaches that were attacked by far-right activists at a service station in Maidstone were carrying anti-fascists from London to Dover). However, as our Liverpool respondent points out, the AFN is certainly not as cohesive as it once was:

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'When we first linked in with AFN, there was much more of a structure with regards to national meetings and things. And at that point we would all respond to national call outs and travel to counterprotests, etc. That's not happening as much anymore. Most of the links we've got now are sort of personal relationships that we've built over time through activism and where we're linked in with individuals in different areas. But with regard to the national AFN structure, we're not currently sort of attending national meetings and things like that, but we will share information and sort of look at what other groups are doing and learn from any wins or any mistakes from them' (MAFN01, 2020).

Indeed, it was in response to a perceived failure of the AFN to integrate activists in the North more effectively, that an alternative regional network was established:

'We did set up something which we called Northern Network a few years ago. And that was operating for a couple years. That was a response to the fact that groups in the north felt that the AFN was quite too focused down south and that we weren't sort of communicating as effectively. So, we set up a northern network, but that was when there were a lot of counter protests being organised. And so that's not really worked as a network for the past year or so' (MAFN01, 2020).

This North/South split is also not helped by the dominance of London:

'And there's also the thing with London, of course, is because London is the de facto national demonstration place, the place of national demonstrations, it means that there are groups constantly coming to London to oppose whoever and oftentimes people

in London, for whatever reason, don't reciprocate' (LAF01, 2020).

But even regionally, there are issues:

'There are strange dynamics between Liverpool and Manchester that we've never really been able to sort of break down. 0161 focus a lot on community work as well. So they've tended to do their thing and we've tended to do our thing. Although we will respond to call outs in Manchester but 0161 don't tend to be involved in counter protests. So, we haven't really got much to do with them with regards to that side of things'.

'I went to Manchester recently to speak with a group of people that asked me to speak on behalf of Merseyside Anti-Fascist Network. And it was like come and teach us what to do. And the first thing I said to them as a group is: I can't do that because what works in Merseyside doesn't necessarily work here. And, you know, even half an hour up the road in Manchester, you've got totally different communities, different geographies' (MAFN01, 2020).

In practice, therefore, it often becomes less about formal group-to-group contact, and

'more to do with sort of people's personal relationships because obviously you can build quite strong ties with people within anti-fascist work. Because, you know, you've had some pretty sort of major experiences with these people. So that tends to be the way people communicate' (MAFN01, 2020).

This is not to say that anti-fascist militants in Britain are not familiar developments outside of their locality, be that regionally, nationally or internationally. There is recognition that the struggle against fascism is a global one and,

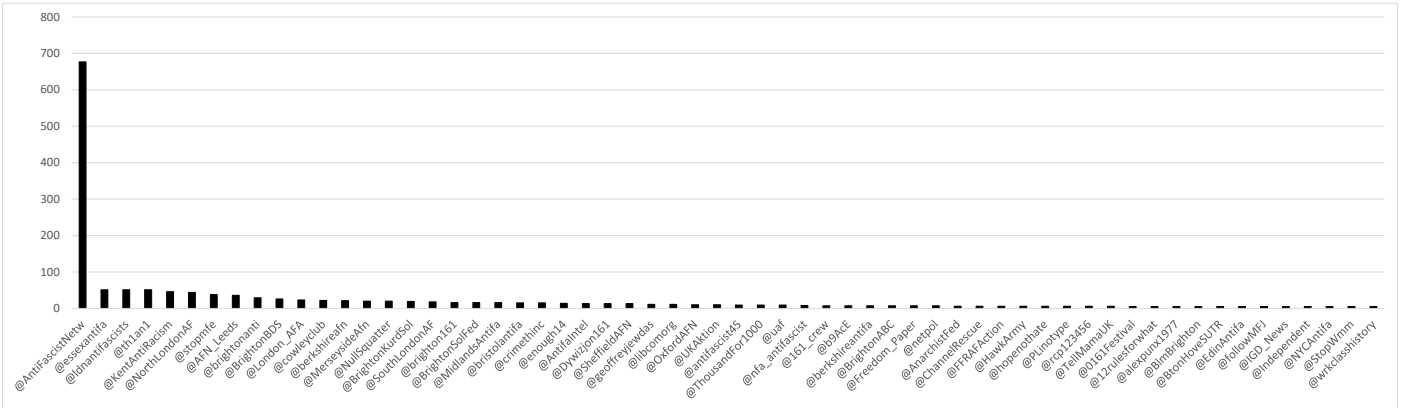


Figure 6.5.4.1: The accounts recently retweeted by @brightonanti five or more times (from Twitter Sample 2).

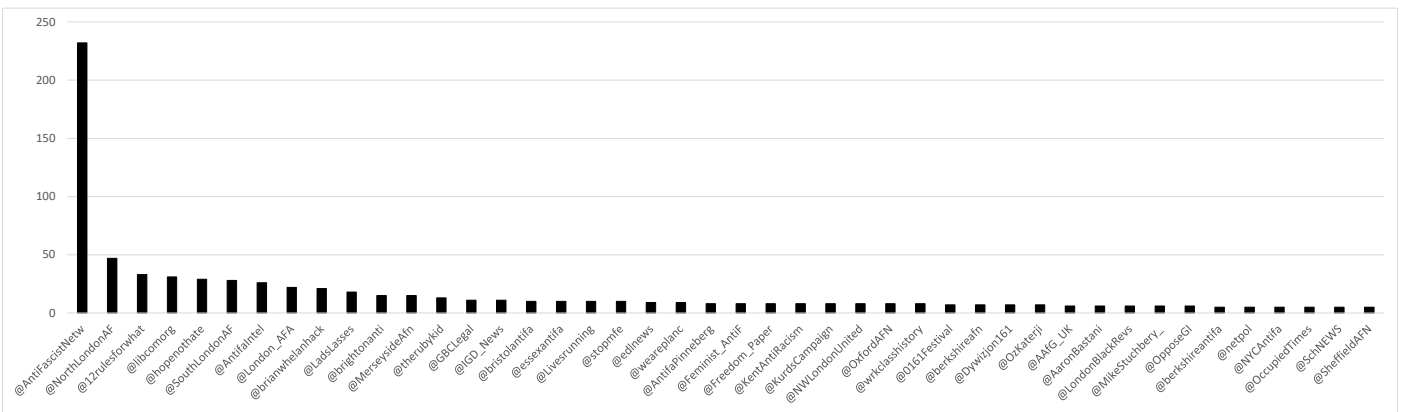


Figure 6.5.4.2: The accounts recently retweeted by @ldnantifascists five or more times (from Twitter Sample 2).

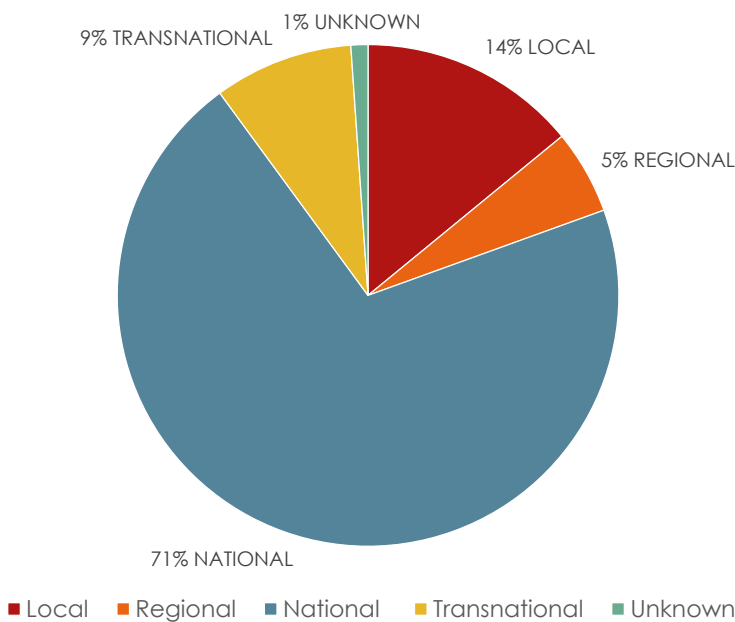


Figure 6.5.4.3: The geographical scales of the retweets from accounts recently retweeted by @brightonanti five or more times (from Twitter Sample 2).

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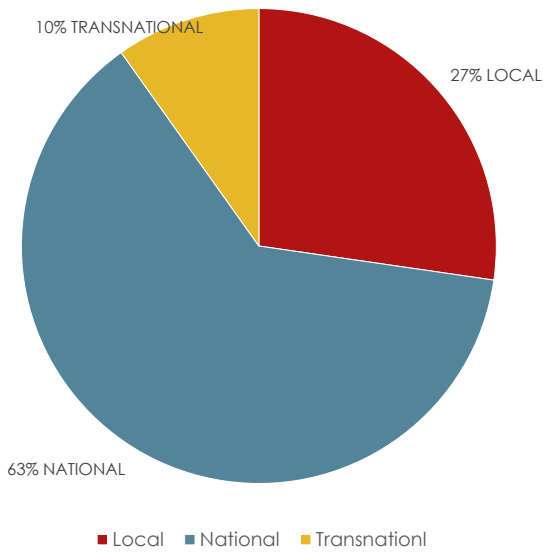


Figure 6.5.4.4: The geographical scales of the retweets from accounts recently retweeted by @ldnantifascists five or more times (from Twitter Sample 2).

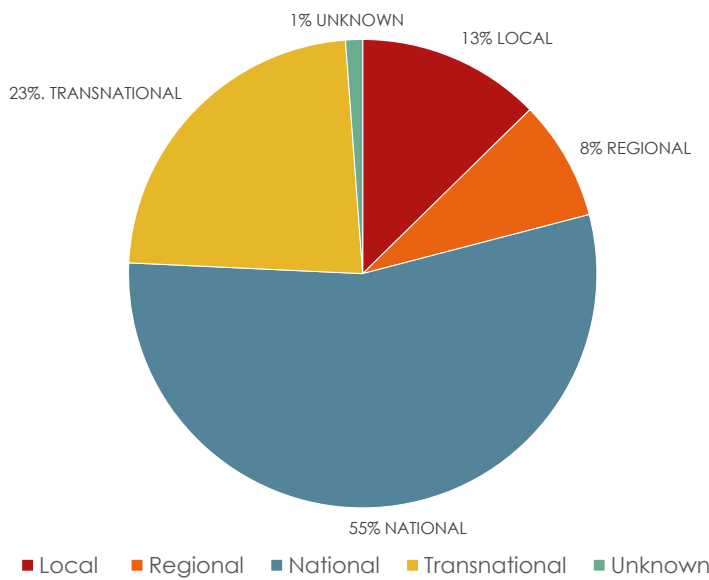


Figure 6.5.4.5: The geographical scales of the retweets from accounts recently retweeted by @MerseysideAfn five or more times (from Twitter Sample 2).

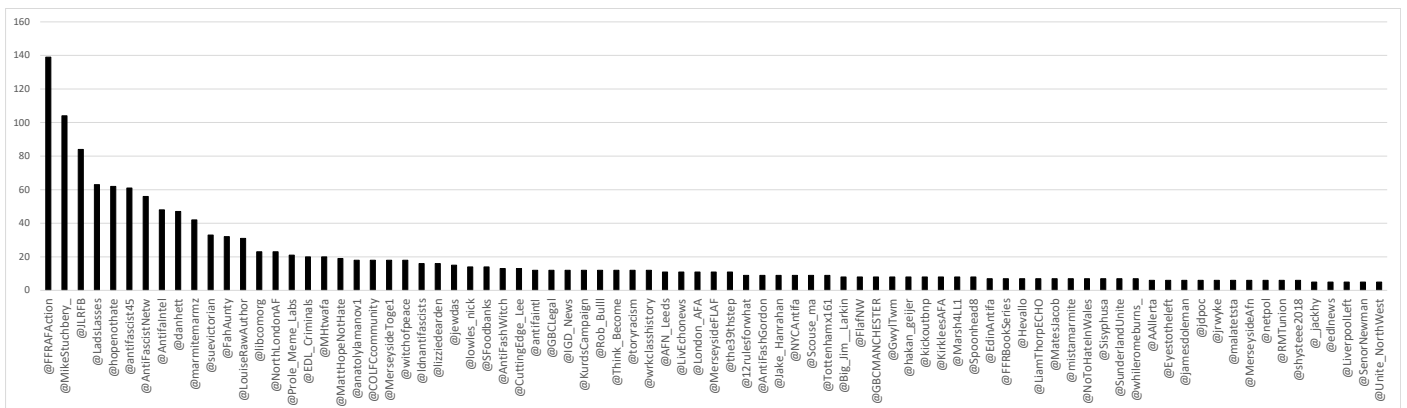


Figure 6.5.4.6: The accounts recently retweeted by @MerseysideAfn five or more times (from Twitter Sample 2).

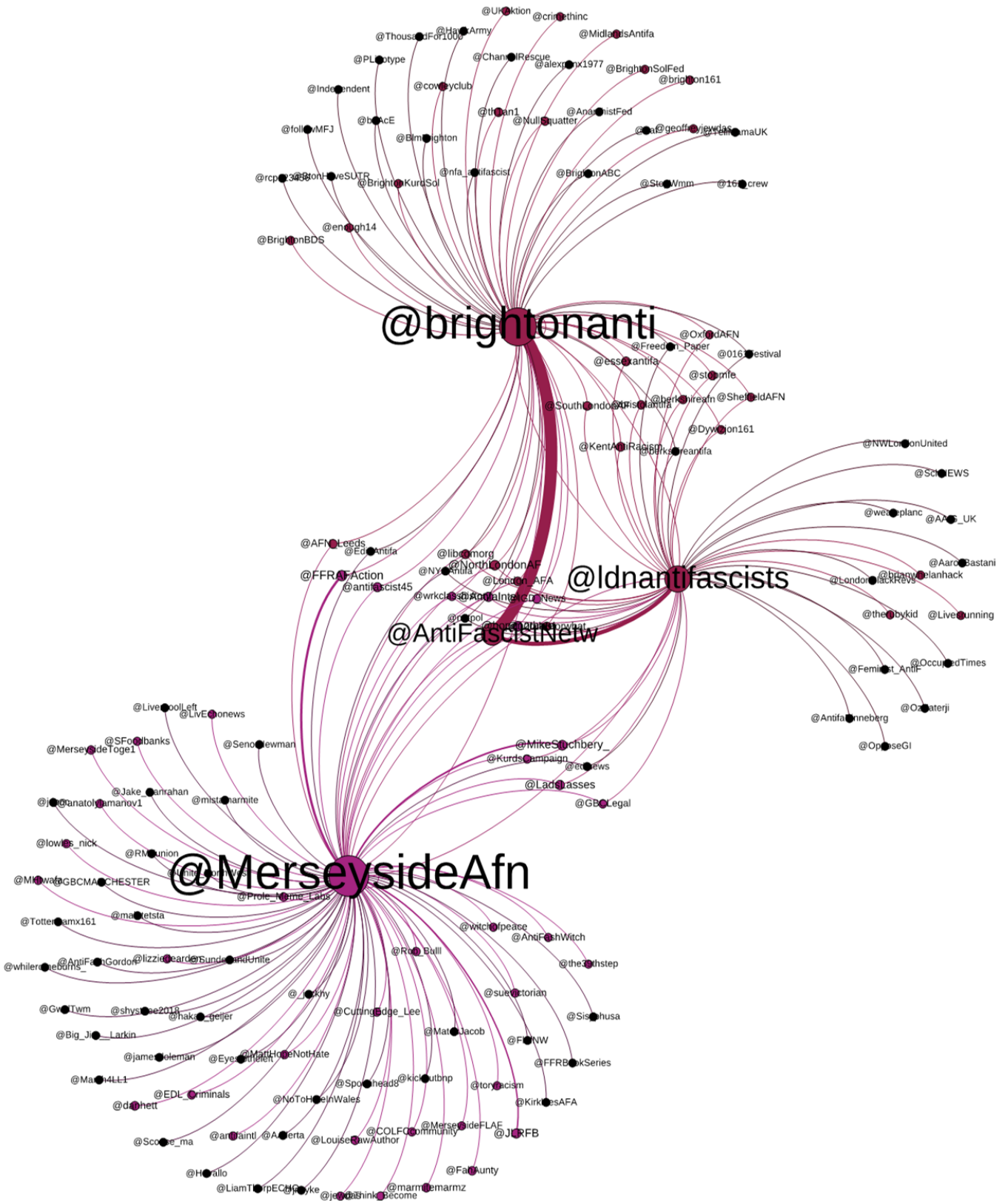


Figure 6.5.4.7: Retweet network of British cases based on the accounts they retweeted five or more times (from Twitter Sample 2).

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'[...] obviously we want to maintain international links . So we're all engaged in similar struggles. But what we're confronting is nationalists, so by their very definition, they're different everywhere you go, their agenda, their tactics [...] We've supported anti-fascist prisoners abroad [...] We've sent money to a group in Poland because, fair play, they got the Law and Justice Party in office. I suppose our primary aim would be to build links you know, to show solidarity but where we want to build links is in the wider left here and amongst non-political people here not to create some sort of international Antifa. The fight is here and not over there. You know, it's not like we are not going to help but we're not going to fly to you know, we're not going to fly to Warsaw to do something there. And even if we did, it would literally be parachuting adventurists. That's not where the struggle is for us' (BAF01, 2020).

'I mean, we look at what other anti-fascist groups and other anti-fascist movements have done in other countries [...] We have got activists within our group who have moved over, for example from Germany, various other countries. So they bring with them, you know, experiences from where they've organized elsewhere. But we are from Merseyside. We can be quite sort of closed off to how other local groups do things and we focus quite a lot on what lessons we've learned I suppose from our own experiences of building, and mistakes that we've made with regards to linking in with communities and things like that. So learning our own lessons sometimes takes up enough time without learning from everyone elses' (MAFN01, 2020).

As for online content, with the AFN dominated by activists from the South, it is probably unsurprising that

Brighton and London Antifascists retweet AFN tweets more than Merseyside. Indeed, the Twitter accounts connected to two of the British cases, @brightonanti and @ldnantifascists, were relatively similar in their recent retweet activity. The most retweeted account by both of these was @AntiFascistNetw, the network comparable to TORCH in the US although with a greater social media presence on Twitter (as of September 2020 @TorchAntifa has 9.5 thousand followers compared to @AntiFascistNetw's 34.3 thousand (Figures 6.5.4.1 & 6.5.4.2).

As with the US accounts, @brightonanti and @ldnantifascists retweets mostly amplified accounts engaged at the national level followed by local and regional accounts (Figures 6.5.4.3 & 6.5.4.4). These designations, however, are complicated by the fact that although Brighton and London are geographically close to one another they belong to different regions. Thus, the extent to which they retweet each other and other groups from each other's localities is masked in the figures. In addition, @ldnantifascists has no regional tweets because London is a region in itself.

A closer look at the retweets reveals that @brightonanti retweeted London-based accounts 148 times (13% of all its national focused retweets most of which otherwise related to @AntiFascistNetw (677 retweets)) including @ldnantifascists 51 times. @ldnantifascists on the other hand retweeted Brighton-based accounts 25 times including @brightonanti 15 times. This suggests a scenario somewhat similar to that involving @NYCAntifa and @PhillyANTIFA in the US where Twitter retweet activity between two groups that are located relatively close to each other geographically is not necessarily equally reciprocated regardless of the extent to which they might collaborate in street activism. Again, this might also be partly the result of @ldnantifascist's greater production of original Twitter content compared with @brightonanti (Retweets accounted for 56% of the former's total tweets but 76% of the latter's), despite overall being less active on the platform.

While @AntiFascistNetw also features among the accounts most retweeted by @MerseysideAfn the more transnationally focused @FFRAFAAction was the account it retweeted the most (Figure 6.5.4.6). While @MerseysideAfn also uses Twitter to amplify first and foremost national accounts via retweeting in a way consistent with the five other groups, it stands out insofar as the number of its retweets from transnationally focused accounts exceeds those from local and regional accounts (Figure 6.5.4.5). This possibly reflects the fact that a) Merseyside Anti-Fascist Network is no longer as well-networked within the AFN; that b) its regional networks have become less important; and that c) a relative lack of local anti-fascist campaigning which has left space to amplify the activities of other, overseas groups.

The retweet network (Figure 6.5.4.7) of the three British accounts reflects these dynamics and interestingly the Gephi algorithm for modularity class groups @brightonanti and @ldnantifascists together as a single cluster/ community (note how they appear in the same shade of crimson in the visualisation). This reiterates just how densely these groups are connected on Twitter.

6.6 PROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS: TWO SCENARIOS

With the COVID pandemic, there has been a lull in activities on the street with little far-right activity to contest. While we have seen some mobilisation with regard to BLM, this has not been on the scale or intensity of the US. In Liverpool, for example, sensitive to the fact that the group is predominantly white, there was a conscious decision to step back from BLM protest:

'[...] we've said that we haven't organised anything, we need to step back and ensure that this is a place for Black activist anger and organisation and that we are there to support that' (MAFN01, 2020).

It is therefore hard to predict when, or where, activity will resume. But for sure, there is an expectation that the far right will return, especially in the precarious context of post-pandemic economic crisis:

'I'll put my money not on de-escalation. I think we're going to enter a very precarious, a really precarious time, what with the pandemic. The resulting massive economic crisis is here already. We know it's a very obvious correlation that in times of economic downturn and destitution and things like that, it gives space for fascist or far right organisations to grow' (LAF01, 2020).

In terms of future scenarios, we assess the following should the far right make a return to the streets in large numbers:

SCENARIO 1: THAT MILITANT ANTI-FASCISTS WILL BECOME MORE CLANDESTINE AND REVERT BACK TO AFA-STYLE PARAMILITARY 'SQUADS'

Probability: Low

The direction of travel from the demise of Antifa in 2009 has been towards a more inclusive, more accessible style of militant anti-fascism. This means that even though 'squaddist' action will remain within the militant anti-fascist toolkit, there will also be attempts to mobilise large numbers of people should the far right succeed in mobilising their numbers.

There is an obvious tension here between direct physical resistance and the need for wider community mobilisation. So, even where militant anti-fascists begin to hold open meetings, there is recognition that they need to hold onto the small-scale in order to retain group cohesion:

'[...] you do need a core group. In the end, a core group of people who are reliable, who are known and are going to do what they say they're going to do. You can't do that with an open group. Neither are we like some

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clandestine terrorist cell either’ (BAF01, 2020).

There have been various initiatives at resolving this tension, with the London Anti-Fascist Assembly being the most recent. However, for these initiatives to maintain some lasting momentum, they do require a palpable sense of threat (typically, a series of large-scale far-right demonstrations).

Militant anti-fascism in the US has followed a similar trajectory to Britain. The idea that militant anti-fascists in Britain will import a ‘model’ from the US is a basic misconception. As one RCA activist, interviewed by Brighton Antifascists explained,

‘Community outreach and coalition building has been a part of our strategy from our founding. Our goal has always been to build and organize resilient communities to resist the fascist threat. To that end we also employ squaddism, whether at demos or at opportune times to disrupt fascist organizing wherever it arises. We work closely with more mass-organizing based groups, for example locally a group of antifascists has recently arisen called “Pop Mob” that does outreach in more mainstream ways and is able to mobilize sections of the community that may not be as keen on engaging in militant antifascist action but nonetheless share the same goals. By working in tandem with such groups we are able to mobilize the community and also raise awareness of fascist activity here in our city. So far this strategy has led to the ability to bring the larger Portland community together to oppose the activities of the far right’ (Brighton Antifascists, 2020).

The example of Brighton (and elsewhere) seems to suggest that where there is ‘reciprocal radicalisation’, it can work to the favour of anti-fascists. As our respondent from Brighton explains,

‘I think to a certain extent that can work in your favour because you’re the reactive organisation. They’re the ones with a proactive agenda. So, if they are radicalised, so if they cannot find space in their ranks, the people who are not militant enough for a punch up or they lose all their intelligentsia, they lose all their people. The interesting transition is the one going from a group that intimidates Muslims to a group that has punch up with the anti-fascists. They’ve completely lost their political objective at that point. We’re still off perhaps doing renter’s unions or digging trees or, you know, whatever we do. We’re still doing all that. But their primary political objective is having a punch up with us. I totally get where you’re coming from, and I think that does happen. That did happen. Clearly, there was an escalation. Once they became aware of who we were, a couple of years before they started saying, oh, hang on, there’s this anti-fascist thing happening ... and then groups like the Pie & Mash Squad and Casuals United split off in order to do nothing but confront us’ (BAF01, 2020).

When that happens, the far right becomes,

‘[...] politically blunted by that point [...] In our context, things escalate to the point where the authorities say enough of that, which is more or less what happened, or one side or other is convincingly defeated and that shatters their morale and they don’t come back . Which I think in the case of National Action as an example of that very decisive intervention . It was quite ‘fighty’ with National Action. And I think they were, at the time, trying to build a coalition. They were like, ‘We can do this completely mental thing of marching through Liverpool , the Red City’ , and there were all sorts of Polish fascists turned up for that, and the Northwest

infidels and all sorts of groups. Had that been a success for them, I think they would found themselves with a mob of two or three hundred they could have called on with the intellectual leadership of these groups. It was a total fuckup and total disaster really humiliating . And that was the end of that. So that's an example, I guess the way that the violence, the escalation led to a very rapid de-escalation. They just disappeared off the face of the map after that' (BAF01, 2020).

Militant anti-fascists in the US are deeply critical of policing/police brutality. The belief that they are subject to frequent attacks by police on counter-demonstrations and that there is often co-ordination between the police and the far right is ubiquitous. Our interviews with RCA activists, for instance, referenced alleged collusion between Patriot Prayer and the Portland Police Bureau.

One of our respondents from New York remarked that even 'the police officer message boards are basically like fascist message boards and white nationalist. I mean, like without using all of the iconography. I mean, the things they talk about and the viewpoints that they hold' (OutliveThem01, 2020). The negative view of Antifa in the US is also reinforced by the mainstream media, such as Fox News, besides Trump and conservative Republicans.

In Britain, in contrast, while there is no suggestion that militant anti-fascists will ever liaise with the police, there is almost a grudging respect for them, especially when it comes to managing protest:

'[...] the MET is like very, very adept at identifying different anti-fascist groups and trying to work with some and not with others. And, you know, I mean, they are very good at what they do' (LAF01, 2020).

The militant anti-fascist movement is rarely discussed in this country in relation to public debates on 'violent

extremism'. It is not subject to the disinformation, rumour, hysteria, and moral panic that could trigger vigilante action by the far right, and in turn, encourage more militant responses.

SCENARIO 2: MILITANT ANTI-FASCISTS WILL REACH A TIPPING POINT WHEN GROUPS (OR INDIVIDUALS SYMPATHETIC TO THESE GROUPS) ESCALATE TO LETHAL VIOLENCE.

Probability: Low

Is there a tipping point, a moment when militant anti-fascists might seek recourse to lethal violence? As we saw with our discussion on the trajectory of the Weather Underground in the US, the decision to escalate was largely context-bound.

The context now is fundamentally different: there is no equivalent to Vietnam; there is no desire to emulate Third World revolutionaries; there is no credible doctrine of revolution by way of guerrilla war; there is no appetite amongst militant anti-fascists for a vanguardist group to set off some broader social uprising through violence; there is no central charismatic leadership. The ideology of the autonomous anti-authoritarian left involves a rejection of 'guerrilla-inspired' terrorism, so while militancy is deemed legitimate, lethal violence is not.

If there is a tipping point, it will be when the individual, imbibed with anti-fascism's de-humanisation of the far right, allows their emotional state to overpower them and violently strikes out in anger. This is the individual who might lack the ideological framework of restraint, who might only loosely associate with Antifa, and who is motivated entirely by their hostile response to 'fascism' as an egregious and abhorrent injustice.

Nonetheless, this is a reactive mindset, which requires a stimulus, whether coming from the provocation of the far right directly through aggressive displays of force (e.g. a pro-Trump protest where paintballs are shot from the beds of pickups), or by government

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policies (e.g. immigration raids and detention centres). This point has been reached in the US.

In Britain, however, such stimuli remain less likely. It would probably require a deeply polarising event, or series of events, to trigger an impressionable individual to seek recourse to lethal violence as a way of venting their anger at perceived 'fascist' injustice. It is hard to foresee such an event happening, but it is also not entirely beyond the realms of possibility.

7. CONCLUSION

Militant anti-fascists are not wedded to a narrow definition of fascism, but they do believe that fascism is qualitatively different from all other forms of politics in that it is exceptional in its threat and use of violence. Militant anti-fascists do not see ‘fascism’ everywhere and generally retain their focus on the political space which is commonly understood by the mainstream society as ‘far right’. They share a common commitment to the principles of ‘no platform’, whereby individuals holding views regarded as ‘fascist’ or ‘fascistic’ should be prevented from contributing to public debate ‘by whatever means necessary’. Militant anti-fascists also share a commitment to ‘direct action’, whereby anti-fascist actors use their own power to directly reach their goals rather than appeal to the authorities.

While the willingness to use confrontational violence separates militant anti-fascism from non-militant forms, it is important to note that militant anti-fascists do exercise *restraint* in their use of violence. The claim that fascism is defined by an ultra-violent credo imposes a value-based, prefigurative boundary on militant anti-fascists in both their use and rhetorical representation of violence. As we have seen, strategic concerns factor too, such as the risk that violent escalation will lead either to group isolation from the wider anti-fascist coalition, or to dissolution as a result of increasing state repression. Internal cultures of decision-making and recruitment structures function as further dynamics of restraint (or as ‘internal brakes’, see Busher, Holbrook & Macklin, 2019).

The aforementioned conclusions are borne out with regards to not only the street activism of militant anti-fascist groups but also their digital activism. On their websites, blogs and social media accounts, the form of ‘direct action’ most commonly engaged in by anti-fascist groups is ‘doxing’: publicising information about far-right activists in the hope that this will result in legal or economic consequences for the individual.

Digital platforms also offer the opportunity for different groups to forge networks. However, these networks are largely solidaristic rather than organisational in nature, both within their national settings and between the US and Britain.

The respective histories of militant anti-fascism in both the US and Britain reveal a long-term trend towards promoting greater public participation at protest events. However, there remains an obvious tension between broadening the base of opposition to ‘fascism’ and retaining group coherence and militancy. Nonetheless, the direction of travel is not towards the formation of clandestine, underground cells. There is little evidence of a push towards the escalation of violence from non-lethal to lethal, or the adoption of a *modus operandi* that is more typically associated with terrorist groups.

Anti-fascism is reactive, and its defensive response is shaped by the nature of the perceived threat. In terms of public order risk assessment, context is critical. In the US, following the election of Donald Trump in 2016, a conflict between anti-fascists and the far right attracted an international profile, and the demonisation of Antifa as ‘domestic terrorists’ bent on sowing chaos and disorder, encouraged each side to define one another in terms of an existential threat. During 2020, this polarisation further deepened with the pandemic, the killing of George Floyd, excessive use of law enforcement, and Trump’s rejection of the presidential election result as fraudulent. The presence of armed individuals on protests is a further context-specific aggravating factor.

In Britain, while society polarised over Brexit, the pandemic dampened down far-right street mobilisation, and while anti-fascists remain pessimistic regarding future developments, the far right is not currently considered an existential threat. Unlike the US, the militant anti-fascist movement is rarely discussed in

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this country in relation to public debates on 'violent extremism'. It is not subject to the same levels of disinformation, rumour, hysteria, and moral panic that could trigger vigilante action by the far right, and in turn, encourage more militant responses.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the most likely risk in terms of the escalation of violence from the sub-lethal to lethal rests with impressionable individuals imbued with anti-fascism's de-humanisation of the far right. This is the individual who might lack the framework of restraint, who might only loosely associate with a militant anti-fascist group, and who is motivated entirely by their hostile response to 'fascism' as an egregious and abhorrent injustice.

This is a reactive mindset, which requires a stimulus, whether coming from the provocation of the far right directly through aggressive displays of force (e.g. a pro-Trump protest where paintballs are shot from the beds of pickups), or by government policies (e.g. immigration raids and detention centres). This threshold has been reached in the US. In Britain, however, for the moment such stimuli remain unlikely. It would probably require a deeply polarising event, or series of events, to trigger an impressionable individual to seek recourse to lethal violence as a way of venting their anger at perceived 'fascist' injustice.

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