



Veneratio Diligentia Vires



# DISCORD: How an Internet Platform Galvanized the Alt-Right/Neo-Nazi Movement in America

By Edward Maggio

*Christopher Cantwell (C) and other white nationalists participate in a torch-lit march on the grounds of the University of Virginia ahead of the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 11, 2017. Picture taken August 11, 2017. REUTERS/Stephanie Keith*

It has been more than a year since the tragic events of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. Members of the Alt-Right and Neo-Nazi movement who participated in the violence had descended on Charlottesville from all regions of the United States. These participants represented different political, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds. Although unified in their racist and anti-Semitic views, they had originated with varied and sometimes conflicting agendas. Groups who participated in the rally were led by infamous leaders such as Richard Spencer and Jason Kessler while others are still remaining unknown in the shadows to this day. Investigations are still ongoing to understand how the participants were able to successfully organize in a manner that unified them into a violent force of hatred.

The answer to that question comes in the form of the gaming platform known as “Discord”. Without addressing the liability of internet platforms or internet service providers when it comes to monitoring content and responding to threats of violence; this article serves to illustrate how gaming technology can be used for nefarious purposes by terrorist organizations. For the sake of expediency and to avoid a debate on how terrorism is defined; this article works under the premise that the horrific events of the rally were in fact a planned terrorist event. Furthermore as this article will show, the violent events that unfolded during the rally, including the use of a car to cause a mass casualty event was not unforeseeable.

The use of gaming platforms in planning terrorist activity has been previously investigated by law enforcement and counter-terrorism professionals. In July 2018, the Jakarta Globe reported that terror organizations could use World of Warcraft and Clash of Clans to communicate covertly for purposes of planning attacks. The Indonesian National Cyber and Encryption Agency (BSSN) reported that there were evidentiary signs that the terrorists who carried out the November 13th 2017 attack in Paris used PlayStation 4 consoles to communicate and coordinate their planned violence. In the case of the Unite the Right rally, the violence that occurred could not have been planned and carried out without the Discord gaming platform.

## **What is Discord?**

Discord is a proprietary freeware VoIP application and digital distribution platform designed for video gaming communities that specializes in text, image, video and audio communication between users in a chat channel. Discord runs on Windows, macOS, Android, iOS, Linux, and in web browsers. As of May 2018, there are 130 million unique users of the software. Originally developed as a messaging platform for group “game play,” Discord is set up as a series of private, invite-only servers, each providing a space for real-time group discussion. Each server is organized into “channels,” indicated by a “#” before the name. Participants in the chat use “handles” or nicknames to identify themselves. Participants can request to be “tagged” as a member of a group.



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Discord gained popularity with the Alt-Right/Neo-Nazi movement due to the platform features which offer anonymity and privacy. Analyst Keegan Hanks from the Southern Poverty Law Center said “It’s pretty unavoidable to be a leader in this [alt-right] movement without participating in Discord” The ability for a lay person to immediately setup their own community server with full communication abilities and user friendly interface made Discord immediately popular with the gaming community. Unfortunately, it also attracted another section of the population.

Discord also differs from other online gaming platforms in one key way: The chatrooms provided on the platform are entirely opt-in, meaning the potential for unsolicited public awareness is significantly lower. This feature of the gaming platform was essential for the growth of the Alt-Right/Neo-Nazi hate movement since general public scrutiny and response was significantly lowered compared to apps such as Twitter or Facebook.

## **Where Hate Comes to Meet (A Timeline):**

On October 22nd 2016, a Discord chat server called “/pol/Nation” emerged on the platform.

The name was based on the controversial 4chan image board — where more than 3,000 users participated in a rolling multimedia chat extravaganza of Hitler memes, white nationalist revisionist history, and computer game strategy. By Election Night two weeks later it had grown into a thriving online community area on the Discord platform with more than 1,000 simultaneous users from around the world celebrating Donald Trump’s victory.

In January 2017, like-minded Alt-Right/ Neo-Nazi members began chatting and hosting their own communication servers on a much larger scale. Discord’s CEO Jason Citron acknowledged in a January interview of the growing problem with Alt-Right and Neo-Nazi groups using this platform. He informed BuzzFeed News that “We’re very focused on making an amazing communication product for gamers... I had a hunch that it would be used outside of gaming, but it wasn’t anything we thought specifically about.”



Despite Discord having Terms of Service and Community Guidelines prohibiting hate filled violent content, the Alt-Right/Neo-Nazi participants continued to grow in size in terms of sheer numbers using the platform. By February 2017, Over 25 million users had flocked to Discord. Despite the company raising at least 30 million in venture capital funding, the company had only five “customer experience” personnel and no moderators on its staff at that time.

With a high enough volume of Alt-Right/Neo-Nazi members using Discord, the “/pol/Nation” chat server took on another nefarious purpose. Links to other servers, including Muslim and LGBT online communities would be posted in a room called ‘Raids’. This was done with the purpose of facilitating the 1000+ Alt-Right/Neo-Nazi members to engage vulnerable or unsuspecting online communities on a large scale. Their main goal; To harass, humiliate, and threaten people online. The success of these activities only emboldened hate groups to move their activities from the cyber world to the real world.

### Origins of Unite the Right:

In June 2017, a “Charlottesville 2.0” Discord server was established as an online location for group discussions. This server was moderated by Jason Kessler and Eli Mosley. The group was “invite only” and not open to the public. One user explained that Discord was “for closed, top super-secret communications intended for the elite inner circle of the alt-right.” Alt-Right/Neo-Nazi members used this server on Discord as a tool to promote, coordinate, and organize the Unite the Right “rally,” and as a means to communicate and coordinate violent and illegal activities “in secret” during the actual events of that rally weekend. On July 11, 2017, Eli Mosley reminded all Discord participants that publicly sharing information not approved by the organizers would result in the immediate banning of the individual from all future Alt-Right events. This strict insistence on silence outside of the community helped the participants plan and communicate without any hindrances.

The Alt-Right/Neo-Nazi members began expanding their use of Discord to organize

the logistics and operational aspects of the Charlottesville rally. Within the platform, the organizers assigned tasks to specific members and appointed “state organizers” to coordinate travel and logistics with members in specific states and regions. There were at least 43 separate server channels set up in the “Charlottesville 2.0” chatroom for the purpose of planning and sharing information regarding the Rally. Those channels included:

- |                              |                    |
|------------------------------|--------------------|
| #announcements               | #news              |
| #dixie-lyrics                | #safety_planning   |
| #mod_help                    | #alex_jones_chat   |
| #confirmed_participants      | #midwest_region    |
| #shuttle_service_information | #beltway_bigots    |
| #code_of_conduct             | #voice_chat        |
| #self_promotion              | #friday-night      |
| #flags_banners_signs         | #sunday-night      |
| #promotion_and_cyberstrike   | #chants-           |
| #gear_and_attire             | #virginia_laws     |
| #antifa_watch                | #lodging           |
| #demonstration_tactics       | #lodging_wanted    |
| #sponsors_only               | #lodging_available |
| #i_need_a_sponsor            | #carpool_wanted    |
| #pictures_and_video          | #ma_ct_ri          |
| #vt_nh_me                    | #ky_tn             |
| #great_lakes_region          | #tx_ok             |
| #florida                     | #georgia           |
| #california_pacific_nw       | #carolinas         |
| #carpool_available           | #ny_nj             |
| #pennsylvania                | #dc_va_md          |

These channels provided the skeleton framework from which to launch their operations. One of the group’s moderators also set up private, organization-specific channels so members in each group could coordinate and plan for the Rally. The organizers would hold periodic “Leadership Meetings” where each Alt-Right organization was encouraged to have at least one representative present for the call. The listed groups and participants included Identity Evropa Traditionalist Worker Party, Vanguard America, and League of the South. In addition to Jason Kessler and Eli Mosley, other contributors to the “Charlottesville 2.0” Discord chats included Christopher Cantwell, Mathew Heimbach, Invictus, David Mathew Parrot, and Richard Spencer.

### Warning to Discord:

By June 2017, Discord was the unofficial online location for organizing the planning details of the Unite the Right rally. New York Times reporter Kevin Roose placed himself online within the Alt-Right/Neo-

Nazi community on Discord to understand their level of activities. He reported:

*“For two months before the Charlottesville rally, I embedded with a large group of white nationalists on Discord, a group chat app that was popular among far-right activists. I lurked silently and saw these activists organize themselves into a cohesive coalition, and interviewed a number of moderators and members about how they used the service to craft and propagate their messages.”*

Roose brought this activity directly to the attention of the senior management at Discord. As noted in his article, it was a problem that Discord was not prepared to solve with any type of cohesive plan. As Rouse noted,

*“I also asked Discord executives what, if anything, they planned to do about the white nationalists and neo-Nazis who had set up shop on their platform and were using it to spread their ideology. Several said they were aware of the issue, but had no concrete plans to crack down on any extremist groups.”*

By the end of June 2017, the group finalized an operational document titled “General Orders” to provide a consistent overall plan to be followed by rally participants. The General Orders were deliberately edited to serve as a layer of protection for the Rally’s organizers and were not indicative of the group’s communications in the months leading up to the Rally. The organizers appointed a team that was responsible for providing “security” at the Rally. The individuals assigned to lead the security team were Anthony Overway and Brian Brathovd.

On July 7, 2017, Anthony Overway circulated a document entitled “Shields and Shield Tactics Primer” to the leaders of the various Alt-Right organizations. In preparations for counter-protestors, the purpose of the primer was to instruct Alt-Right members on how to effectively use shields and “shield walls” during the Charlottesville Rally. Similar to a Roman phalanx, the document envisioned two lines of men: the first serving as a defensive wall and the second as the offensive component using polearms and other “longer weapons” to push back people as the group advances.



16 August 2017 Tim Kaine inspects a makeshift memorial to Heather Heyer at the site of her killing. PHOTO Office of Senator Time Kaine

As Discord moderator, Eli Mosley stated: “I run this [the Unite the Right “rally”] as a military operation . . . I was in the army.”

On July 16 2017, Jason Kessler posted in the Discord channel #demonstration tactics a general call for people to assist with general security and to become a “party of a highly organized defense”. On the remaining Discord channels, participants repeatedly advocated violence and encouraged attendees to bring weapons to the rally. For the sake of brevity, many of the discussions that occurred repeatedly on Discord concerned how to carry out violence and address the legal consequences for such activity. Discord was also filled with instructions on how to construct flag poles and shields so that they could be used as weapons. Members were all told to dress to intimidate, including wearing military gear, shields, uniforms, flags, and signs decorated with Nazi iconography that would instill fear along racial and religious lines to any potential counter-protestor.

### **The Foreseen Car Attack**

The idea of using a vehicle to hurt protesters did not originate on the Discord site. The term “Run Them Over” has been continually used for years as a counter-culture response to the Black Lives Matter movement. Thus it was only a matter of



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time before Alt-Right/Neo-Nazi participants also began posting offensive meme pictures to Discord with discussions on running over protestors. One posting in particular featured a scene from Dawn of the Dead, in which the protagonists of the film ram buses through hordes of zombies. On the Discord site, user “AltCelt” noted his approval of such violence and provided a “crying laughing” emoji in the discussion thread. In reference to running over people, he wrote “This will be us.”

With months of planning and discussions on how to engage and conduct violence, the participants of the Alt-Right/Neo-Nazi movement caused one of the worst incidents in recent U.S. history. As a result of the Unite the Right rally, America and the world at large would see Tiki torches paraded through the night by Discord participants while they shouted racist and anti-Semitic chants. Alt-Right/Neo-Nazi participants brought their shields and weapons which were used to assault people. By the time the rally was over, 34 people would be injured, two state troopers killed in a horrific helicopter crash, and James Fields would drive his Dodge Challenger into a crowd of peaceful protesters killing Heather Heyer and injuring others.

On the Monday following the tragic events of the rally, Discord officials finally took



action to address the use of their gaming platform by the Alt-Right/Neo-Nazi participants. They initiated a sweep to ban several of the largest Alt-Right/Neo-Nazi communities and helped to end their movement’s online headquarters. By February 2018, Discord began to enforce its Terms of Service (ToS) and Community Guidelines. A Discord representative stated in reference to the terms and guidelines that.

“These specifically prohibit harassment, threatening messages, or calls to



violence. Though we do not read people’s private messages, we do investigate and take immediate appropriate action against any reported ToS violation by a server or user. There were a handful of servers that violated these ToS recently and were swiftly removed from the platform.”

Free-Speech advocates note that the hateful speech posted online by the Alt-Right/Neo-Nazi community on Discord does not equal criminal or civil responsibility among all the participants for the violence that ensued at the rally. That would be true if the conversations and meetings held on Discord only contained racist and anti-Semitic comments. Instead, the use of Discord allowed a transition among participants from sharing their hateful viewpoints towards the actual planning and execution of violence at an operational level. The original application for the Unite the Right permit submitted by Jason Kessler claimed that the event



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would be a protest of the removal of the General Robert E. Lee monument. The discussions on Discord however reveal that the participants also intended that the rally’s purpose would be to instill fear and terror in Charlottesville’s minority population. They wanted to use the events of the rally weekend to intimidate the broader civilian population and recruit more followers to their own groups through a demonstration of power and presence. In simplistic terms, the rally became focused on demonstrating that Alt-Right/Neo-Nazi participants would be the new emerging political and social power. They would show the world that



they would be willing to engage in violence on anyone that opposed their actions.

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Alt-Right and Neo-Nazi participants in the rally and their online supporters conspired to incite violence and to threaten, intimidate, and harass the civilian population of Charlottesville, in particular, individuals of a racial, ethnic or religious minority, and to commit other unlawful acts. At no time did any of the Alt-Right/Neo-Nazi chat moderators on Discord take measures to remove participants that advocated violence or ban them

from attending the Unite the Right rally. They also coordinated with numerous named and unnamed supporters, many of whom investigators are still trying to uncover and shed light on their identities.

Researchers have noted that the current state of the Alt-Right/Neo-Nazi movement has been crushed through the efforts of law enforcement, the court system and communities at large. However the potential still



remains for such evil forces to reorganize again through another mode of technology. Even with Alt-Right/Neo-Nazi leaders facing the reality that companies are cutting off their access to the U.S. financial system and their own bank accounts, such groups are using cryptocurrency and blockchain technologies to continue funding their organizations. This conflict is far from over. The potential still remains for Alt-Right/Neo-Nazis to gather again in mass for another tragic incident. As the old maxim tells us, a conflict is over when your enemy decides to stop fighting\*\*.

## About the Author

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\*\*Many of the individuals named in this article are currently facing criminal and/or civil litigation along with further investigations. All parties are presumed innocent until found guilty or liable in a court of law.

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People gather for a vigil in response to the death of a counter-demonstrator at the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, outside the White House in Washington, U.S. August 13, 2017. REUTERS/ Jonathan Ernst TPX IMAGES OF THE DAY

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