

Trump Helps Bigots Go Viral

As Facebook tries to ban extremists, the president amplifies them.

By Michelle Goldberg

In 2017, the Canadian right-wing activist and filmmaker Lauren Southern joined a group of young European nationalists on a boat in Mediterranean waters. Their mission was to interfere with humanitarian groups that rescue migrants at sea. The next year Southern released a [documentary](#) about the threat of “white genocide” in South Africa. She’s a proponent of the “[great replacement](#)” theory, which holds that white Europeans are being systematically [supplanted by Muslim migrants](#).

On Friday, her public profile got a boost from Donald Trump when he retweeted her.

Last week, Facebook announced that it was banning a group of extremist figures from the platform. Among them were the conspiracy theorist Alex Jones; Louis Farrakhan; and Paul Joseph Watson, a British former editor at large for Jones’s website, Infowars, who now makes anti-Islam and anti-feminist YouTube videos like “Why Are Feminists Fat & Ugly?”

It was the latest wave of bans for Facebook, which last year kicked white nationalist Richard Spencer off the site. People on the far right have been incensed about losing access to technology platforms, and some, like Spencer, have been [publicly angry](#) Trump hasn’t done more to help them.

As if to assuage this anger, Trump went on a Twitter tear on Friday night. He retweeted a squib from Southern [jeering at establishment conservatives](#) who aren’t concerned by the bans. Trump tweeted that he was surprised to see “Conservative thinkers” like Watson de-platformed, and [retweeted Watson’s call for solidarity](#): “The support for me has been incredible. This could actually lead to some genuine change. Keep up the pressure. Don’t let it rest.”

That wasn’t all; Trump also tweeted an Infowars [video](#), as well as retweeted a [message from a conspiracy account](#) that said, “The ‘elite’ proclaim America must submit to Islam or else!!!”

It’s tempting to ignore Trump’s tweeting, even if his social media messages do occasionally cause global financial markets to plummet. Yet when Trump amplifies far-right voices, people on the fringes notice. On 8chan, the online hangout of both the man charged with slaughtering Muslims in New Zealand recently and the man charged in the [Poway synagogue shooting](#), a poster wrote, “IF POTUS is retweeting something like this, the gloves are really off. It’s ON.”

There’s a roiling political debate about the extent to which the president condones and inspires white nationalism and attacks on religious minorities. After Joe Biden launched his presidential campaign with a video about Trump’s response to the white nationalist riot in Charlottesville, Kellyanne Conway [went on CNN](#) and insisted,

absurdly, that Trump had condemned “racism, bigotry, evil” and that he opposes “anti-Muslim activity.” His fans on the far right know better.

On Saturday I spoke to Spencer, who always welcomes media attention, and is perhaps best known for being punched in the face on TV during Trump’s inauguration. I wanted to see what he thought of Trump’s tweets. After the 2016 election, Spencer was filmed giving a Nazi-style “Hail Trump” toast at a D.C. banquet, but he’s since become disillusioned with the president, in part because Trump hasn’t pushed back more against tech companies that ban people with far-right views — people like Spencer. He told me he’s still cynical about Trump but thinks others in his ideological circles will take Trump’s tweets as a message of encouragement.

Trump, said Spencer, “grasps the dynamic that it actually wasn’t Fox News that elected him. Fox News went after him at the beginning. It was this alternative media, and the ability to directly reach people, that got him elected. And so I think he’s kind of returning to his old tricks, which is playing footsie with us under the table.”

But it’s not under the table — it’s out in the open. “Having a stamp of approval from the most powerful man in the world normalizes these people,” said Joe Mulhall, a senior researcher at the U.K.-based anti-racist group Hope Not Hate. For those trying to curb the influence of figures like Watson, said Mulhall, “one of the things that’s difficult is when people turn around and say, well, they can’t be that bad, because the president of the United States has said he’s O.K.”

Obviously Trump, who has suggested a possible [federal investigation of “Saturday Night Live”](#) because it makes fun of him, isn’t concerned with free speech. He has not complained about Facebook censoring Farrakhan, and over the weekend, he asked why “Radical Left Wing Media” like The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN and MSNBC are allowed on Facebook and Twitter. He’s not devoted to the First Amendment; he just likes reactionary conspiracy theorists, and appears to recognize their importance to his political prospects.

By Monday morning, Trump’s far-right Twitter spree had mostly passed out of the news cycle, but at least some of the people his message was intended for took it to heart. Watson made a video titled, “Trump Tweeted About Me.” On his online video program, Jones, known, among other things, for instigating a harassment campaign against the families of children murdered at Sandy Hook, boasted of Trump’s support, and claimed to have access to secret White House intelligence. “The president is intending to move, to have the deep state actors indicted,” Jones said. Why shouldn’t his audience believe him? The president himself thinks Infowars is a reliable source.