

Mother Jones

Meet Silicon Valley's Secretive Alt-Right Followers

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March 10, 2017

Readers of *The Right Stuff* long knew that founder "Mike Enoch" had two main interests: technology and white supremacy. Posts on the neo-Nazi site have included discussion of "a new blogging platform built on node.js," while other less techie content has alluded to the "chimpout" in Ferguson, putting Jews in ovens, and Trump's "top-tier troll" of Jews on Holocaust Remembrance Day.

In January, Enoch was outed as Mike Peinovich, a Manhattan-based software engineer. His unmasking highlighted a lingering question about the racist far-right movement that rose to prominence with Donald Trump's election: What support might the so-called alt-right have among techies?

Ever since I began investigating the extremist groups lining up behind Trump last spring, several of their leaders have made big claims to me about an alt-right following in Silicon Valley and across the broader tech industry. "The average alt-right-ist is probably a 28-year old tech-savvy guy working in IT," white nationalist Richard Spencer insisted when I interviewed him a few weeks before the election. "I have seen so many people like that." Andrew Anglin, the publisher of the neo-Nazi *Daily Stormer*, told me he gets donations from Silicon Valley, and that Santa Clara County, home to Apple and Intel, is his site's largest traffic source. Chuck Johnson, the publisher of the conspiracy-mongering site *Got News*, said he gets lots of pageviews from the Bay Area.

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After Peinovich was outed, he also insisted to me that many techies secretly identify with the alt-right, which he attributed to a backlash against the "corporate feminist and diversity agenda" of tech companies. "The fact that speaking up about this virtually guarantees career and social suicide, as in my case, shows why so many white males in tech would be attracted to the alt-right."

None of these alt-right figures would provide any data to support their claims. As I've reported, some alt-right sites have wildly overstated their reach. Moreover, the tech industry is renowned for its globalist outlook: Public opinion surveys conducted by a Stanford political economist

have found that rank-and-file workers in Silicon Valley exhibit less racial resentment and more favorable views towards most forms of immigration than average Americans.

Nonetheless, "alt-techies" as Spencer and others call them, do appear to play a role in a movement that first incubated in the backwaters of the internet and eventually spread online with the rise of Trump. Some heroes of the far right are associated with tech: They include former *Breitbart News* "tech editor" Milo Yiannopoulos; the infamous neo-Nazi hacker Andrew Auernheimer (a.k.a. Weev); and the video gaming vlogger Felix Arvid Ulf Kjellberg, whose "Pewdiepie" YouTube channel featuring Nazi-themed jokes has 54 million subscribers. (Last month Kjellberg apologized for the jokes and said he is not a Nazi).

There are also successful figures in the tech industry who appeal to and have commingled with the alt-right: The DeploraBall, a gathering of far-right activists and conspiracy theorists during Trump's inauguration, was co-organized by software investor Jeff Giese and attended by tech billionaire and Trump backer Peter Thiel. San Francisco-based tech entrepreneur Curtis Yarvin is known for launching the pro-authoritarian "neoreactionary" movement and reportedly has been in contact with Trump's chief strategist Steve Bannon. (Yarvin denies this.) Giese and Yarvin, both of whom I interviewed, reject the "alt-right" label for its associations with white nationalism, yet they share the movement's disdain for the race and gender politics of the left. (Thiel's media representative did not respond to a request for comment from him.)

To further gauge the influence of the alt-right in tech, I interviewed seven people in the industry who embrace aspects of the movement. They included current or former employees of Google, Facebook, Yahoo, and Twitter, some of whom responded to me after I reached out to them through their Facebook pages. They asked that I not publish their names, citing concerns about their jobs. I also interviewed two techies associated with the *Daily Stormer*; one declined to disclose his identity to me but has a posting history on the site indicative of working in tech in the Bay Area.

Three of the alt-techies I interviewed said explicitly that they were white nationalists. The others did not identify that way, but they emphasized their belief in racial or gender differences in IQ or social behavior, and strongly rejected identity politics, affirmative action, and what they see as toxic political correctness. Their views shed light on how the alt-right has found a receptive audience on the margins, at least, of the tech world.

A former product manager for a top tech company who now consults for Twitter told me that white and Asian male domination in the tech sector has more to do with innate abilities and culture than discrimination. "If you even try to posit that racism and sexism aren't why women and minorities aren't making it, that it's some combination of talent and values, people's heads just explode," he says. "They just refuse to even float the idea."

"I'm not necessarily saying any one race is bad," says "Mark," a former software developer for Yahoo and Facebook. "But we should at least agree that statistically race and sex genes do make us differ enough on average to make things uneven in certain areas."

"The history of nearly every field of science and engineering was driven by white Europeans," declares a 45-year-old computer chip designer who says he lives in Berkeley, and who posts

under the name "White Morpheus" on the *Daily Stormer*. "Nobody will say their real feelings [about the alt-right] because a mob of fat blue-hair complainers will drive you away from your career forever. Peter Thiel coming out [for Trump] was a joy to us all, because he could show his support for the Trump train where we could not."

In 1990, Ku Klux Klan "Grand Dragon" Don Black created *Stormfront* as a dial-up computer bulletin board for former KKK leader David Duke's campaign for Louisiana governor. By 1995 it had evolved into the first major public website dedicated to promoting white supremacy, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks hate groups. But online hate speech mostly remained confined to its traditional base of neo-Nazis and Klansmen until the launch in 2003 of 4chan. Originally conceived as an anonymous message board for discussing Japanese anime and manga, 4chan attracted a cult following among techies at around the same time that its political discussion board, now known as /pol/ (short for "politically incorrect"), became a hotbed for racist jokes and ironically intended Hitler memes.

The political glue binding the predominately young, male 4chan community is essentially anti-leftist: a disdain for identity politics and so-called "social justice warriors." This attitude thrives amid a culture of anonymity, in which status ostensibly comes from pageviews rather than one's gender, ethnic, or social background. "Larry," a software engineer for Google and alt-right fan, points to the infamous 4chan post, "There are no girls on the internet," where one 4chan user profanely lectures another about how online life is a meritocracy in which gender should play no role.

Yet, hostility towards women and people of color thrives on 4chan and on Reddit, the social sharing site whose political and gaming forums /r/the_donald and /r/kotakuinaction are popular with the alt-right. In 2014, 4chan and Reddit users launched an elaborate campaign of rape and death threats against female video game developers that became known as Gamergate. They found champions in Yiannopoulos, who argued that the true victims were the men whose gaming culture was being destroyed by "feminist bullies" and the "achingly politically correct" tech press, and in Mike Cernovich, a blogger who has trumpeted the neuroticism and other alleged weaknesses of women as well as what he claims to be the criminal proclivities of certain ethnic groups. When former Reddit CEO Ellen Pao last year banned five "harassing subreddits," including one called ShitNiggersSay, the move unleashed weeks of bigoted trolling (a.k.a. "shitposting") and digital vandalism on the site—and a migration to a Reddit copycat site, Voat. (More recently, similar migrations took place after Reddit banned /r/altright and discussion of the fake-news scandal #PizzaGate.)

The anonymity of 4chan and Reddit make it impossible to tell to what extent they are dominated by tech workers, though an abiding interest from the tech press suggests considerable overlap. "It's definitely geek culture," says McGill University cultural anthropologist Gabriella Coleman, who has studied how 4chan gave rise to the hactivist group Anonymous. "Clint," a Valley cybersecurity startup founder and long-time visitor to the site, told me that the majority of active users on 4chan/pol/ are in tech, though typically in lower-level system administrator and tech support jobs that come with a lot of downtime during the workday. Dale Beran, who recently wrote about the political history of 4chan, argues that techies have become less dominant as 4chan and similar sites have expanded, though they still play a role: "We can define [4chan

users] by their retreat into the computer, which means a lot of them have computer skills—whether that's networking or coding or whatever—but to some it may have simply been World of Warcraft."

"Most contributions that built the internet came from white people," declares one notorious hacker.

Before Gamergate, Larry, the Google software engineer, was "a standard Democrat straight-voting person," as he puts it. But reading about the movement in the tech press and on pro-Gamergate websites "did highlight some of the inconsistencies and hypocrisies with positions on the left," he says. A comment in a Gamergate thread led Larry to the *Unz Review*, a website run by Palo Alto tech entrepreneur and former GOP gubernatorial candidate Ron Unz. There, Larry says he was exposed to treatises on "human biological diversity" expounding on the supposed cognitive differences between intellectually superior and inferior races.

Human biological diversity has also gained currency in the Valley through computer scientist Curtis Yarvin, who writes under the pseudonym Mencius Moldbug. Starting in 2007, in series of blog posts often cited by alt-right followers, Yarvin laid out a political philosophy known as neoreaction or the "Dark Enlightenment." Combining a technocratic sensibility with reactionary political thought, neoreaction rejects Enlightenment concepts—such as democracy and equality of the races and sexes—and instead advocates something much closer to authoritarianism. Yarvin believes government would work much better if run like a tech company and helmed by an all-powerful CEO president. He spoke admiringly of Napoleon, whom he considers to be "kind of the Steve Jobs of France."

Yarvin's blog combines dorky programmer lingo with dense references to obscure, proto-fascist political texts. "When I started blogging 10 years ago, the availability of completely unorthodox written content [online] was mostly confined to the pre-1923 corpus, which Google did such a nice job scanning," Yarvin told me in an email. He believes that software programmers are attracted to his writings because they "are always looking for something to do with their restless, fidgety brains. Especially if it's weird and doesn't involve dealing with physical humans."

Silicon Valley billionaire Peter Thiel, who reportedly gave Trump more than \$1 million during the campaign and was an adviser on Trump's transition team, has circled neoreactionary ideas. "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible," he wrote on the Cato Institute's blog in 2009, adding that women and "welfare beneficiaries" have through their voting habits "rendered the notion of 'capitalist democracy' into an oxymoron" (He clarified two weeks later that he supports women's suffrage and redirected blame for the supposed demise of democracy on "unelected technocratic agencies.")

Thiel is reportedly an investor in Yarvin's cloud computing company, though Yarvin told me that he and Thiel have never discussed neoreaction. Michael Anissimov, another well-known neoreactionary blogger, was formerly the media director of the Machine Intelligence Research Institute, which has received funding from the Thiel Foundation.

While a student at Stanford University in 1987, Thiel founded the conservative *Stanford Review* to inspire campus debate by "presenting alternative viewpoints." In the 1995 book "The Diversity Myth: Multiculturalism and Political Intolerance on Campus," Thiel and

former *Stanford Review* editor-in-chief David O. Sacks argued that multiculturalism at colleges was hurting education. In one bizarre passage, they speculated that some college date-rape cases were actually "seductions that are later regretted"—a comment for which Thiel apologized last October, telling Forbes: "Rape in all forms is a crime. I regret writing passages that have been taken to suggest otherwise."

DeploraBall cosponsor Jeff Giese, also a former *Stanford Review* editor, worked for Thiel Capital Management in the late 1990s. Last year, Giese partnered with far-right blogger Mike Cernovich on MAGA3X, a digital operation dedicated to waging meme warfare on behalf of Donald Trump's campaign. Enlisting a network of pro-Trump Twitter influencers such as former *BuzzFeed* employee Anthime Gionet (a.k.a. Baked Alaska) and right-wing troll Jack Posobiec, the group spread *BreitbartNews* content and memes based on conspiracy theories such as #SpiritCooking and #Pizzagate. The DeploraBall stirred controversy among the alt-right when Giese and Cernovich decided to remove Gionet from their "featured guests" list after he posted several anti-Semitic tweets. But Giese told me that he generally agrees with the views of alt-right fellow travelers such as Yiannopoulos. In January, he told BuzzFeed: "I see Trumpism as the only practical and moral path to save Western civilization from itself."

In 2014, Jesse Jackson began pushing Silicon Valley tech companies to disclose statistics about the racial and gender composition of their workforces. By the following summer, he had pressured Google, Facebook, Apple, and many other major tech companies to reveal their paucity of black, Hispanic, and female employees and commit to making improvements. But when he appeared on Reddit that summer to answer questions about diversity in tech, he faced a virulent backlash. By far the most up-voted question began: "You are an immoral, hate-filled race baiter that has figured out how to manipulate the political system for your own gain."

The comment came from an anonymous account that was later deleted; few people in Silicon Valley are willing to question the value of diversity out in the open. "If there was [opposition to diversity policy], it's probably something someone says to themselves in the car on the way home or on the bus on the way back to San Francisco," says Reed Galen, a GOP consultant who advises tech companies and has been trolled online by the alt-right over his criticism of Trump.

Chuck Johnson, who runs the pro-Trump site *Got News* from his home in Fresno and claims to have received funding offers from wealthy tech investors, points to an obvious outlet for closeted alt-techies: "A lot of these people see a sort of ostracism takes place [after they question the value of diversity], and they either rebel against it internally or they go online and they have a different identity and they shitpost on Reddit."

Several alt-techies I interviewed said they were fans of "A Troublesome Inheritance," a national bestseller published in 2014 by former *New York Times* science writer Nicholas Wade that makes a case for the existence of differences in average IQ and behavior between races. The book and others like it have been widely criticized by geneticists as misleading, overly speculative, and not based on scientific consensus, but the alt-techies claim such critiques are just political correctness. "Nobody wants to touch it or admit it for fear of being branded alt-right," Mark, the Facebook engineer, told me.

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White supremacists see the historical dominance of Silicon Valley by white males as a reflection of the world's natural order. "The reality is that for the vast majority of all human civilization the majority of makers have been white," insists Andrew Auernheimer, a.k.a. Weev, a notorious troll and hacker who says he does tech support for the *Daily Stormer* and *The Right Stuff*. "Most contributions that built the internet came from white people," he says, but now "our contributions are essentially being stolen from us."

Alt-techies are scornful of South Asians working in Silicon Valley under H-1B visas. White Morpheus, the *Daily Stormer* reader, told me that he became a white supremacist after working with "unqualified subcontinentals who were brought in by visa fraud to drive down American engineering wages" and who "produce sub-par work product." (Before I contacted him, White Morpheus had posted on *Daily Stormer* about forming a neo-Nazi meet-up group in Silicon Valley and using programming tools to create more video games "like Angry Goy.")

The H-1B visa program, which Trump has vowed to reform, is unpopular among many tech workers due to concerns about its effect on wages and job security. Studies have shown that the largest recipients of H-1B visas are outsourcing firms, and that H-1B workers get paid less money than their American counterparts for the same work. But hardcore racists see an opening to turn the H-1B debate into a recruitment tool in the Valley. "A bill is being introduced in the House of Representatives that will neutralize the economic advantages these anti-American companies get from gaming the H1-b visa system," a contributor to the *Daily Stormer* wrote recently. "If the cucks in Congress don't block it, the not-so-humanitarian motives of big business in browning and third-worldizing America will be revealed."

"Tomorrow, being a Hispanic, Black, Muslim or woman in the USA is going to be very scary," the Latino founder of a Silicon Valley startup wrote on Facebook on election night. The post elicited an outpouring of solidarity from many Bay Area techies—but not from Andrew Torba, an alum of the Y-Combinator tech incubator, who tweeted a screenshot of the post with the line: "Build the wall."

When other Y-Combinator graduates began criticizing Torba on Facebook, he waded into the fray: "All of you: Fuck off," he wrote. "Take your morally superior, elitist, virtue signaling bullshit and shove it." Using an alt-right term meant to demean mainstream conservatives, he added: "I call it like I see it, and I helped meme a president into office, cucks."

Y-Combinator soon banned Torba from its alumni network for "speaking in a threatening, harassing way towards other YC founders," in violation of its ethics policy. Torba denied threatening or harassing YC founders and called the ban "a quintessential example of Silicon Valley censorship in action." He later turned down my request to speak with him about the incident by posting parts of my email to him on social media with the comment: "We don't interview with fake news sites."

Picking fights online may have helped Torba's startup Gab, a social media network that quickly positioned itself as a haven for alt-right-ers banned from Twitter. Gab's frog logo is reminiscent of the alt-right mascot Pepe the frog, and Torba has posted on Gab what could be construed as riffs on the Pepe hand signal and the alt-right's red pill meme. (A Gab spokesman said Torba does not identify as part of the alt-right). Trump's victory seemed to encourage other alt-techies to speak up, albeit pseudonymously.

"What if some cultures are better?" a commenter wrote a few days later on Y-Combinator's popular social forum, *Hacker News*. "Why should we respect foreign cultures if they don't respect our own? Why should you lose your job if you make a joke in public that some people deem offensive? Why is racism against whites and sexism against men acceptable?"

Another commenter on the thread chimed in: "Based on the tone of the comments around here lately, I'm getting a sense that HN has been populated by closeted alt-right for a while now." (A few weeks later, *Hacker News* announced a "political detox week" in which political stories and threads were banned.)

A similar controversy has played out in recent months on Reddit—another young, male, techie dominated site—as r/The_Donald has risen to become one of the site's most active subreddits. Its participants are notorious for trolling other Reddit communities and attacking people based on their religion, race, gender, and sexual identity, as *Gizmodo*'s Bryan Menegus has documented. Citing two former Trump campaign officials, *Politico*'s Ben Schreckinger recently reported that Trump's campaign team privately communicated last fall with r/The_Donald's most active users to seed new trends and feed catchy memes from the site back to Trump social media director Dan Scavino.

The gaming vlogger Pewdiepie, whose YouTube channel is the world's largest, made rape jokes early in his career and sometimes uses the word "slut" as an insult. Since August, he has made nine videos featuring Nazi imagery or anti-Semitic humor, according to an investigation by the *Wall Street Journal*. (He later apologized but also said that the *Journal* took the remarks out of context). In a vlog posted in January that has been viewed more than 7 million times, he jokes about getting banned from Fiverr, a website where freelancers offer their services for \$5, after hiring people to make a video of themselves holding a sign that said, "DEATH TO ALL JEWS"—drawing kudos from neo-Nazis. In February, Disney's Maker Studios said it would no longer run PewDiePie's network and YouTube canceled the release of the second season of his reality show, "Scare PewDiePie."

The alt-techies I spoke with remain aware of the risks of emerging further from the shadows. "If I posted publicly about what I told you, I'd get fired," says Larry, the Google software engineer. "Even with Trump, there is huge cultural inertia."