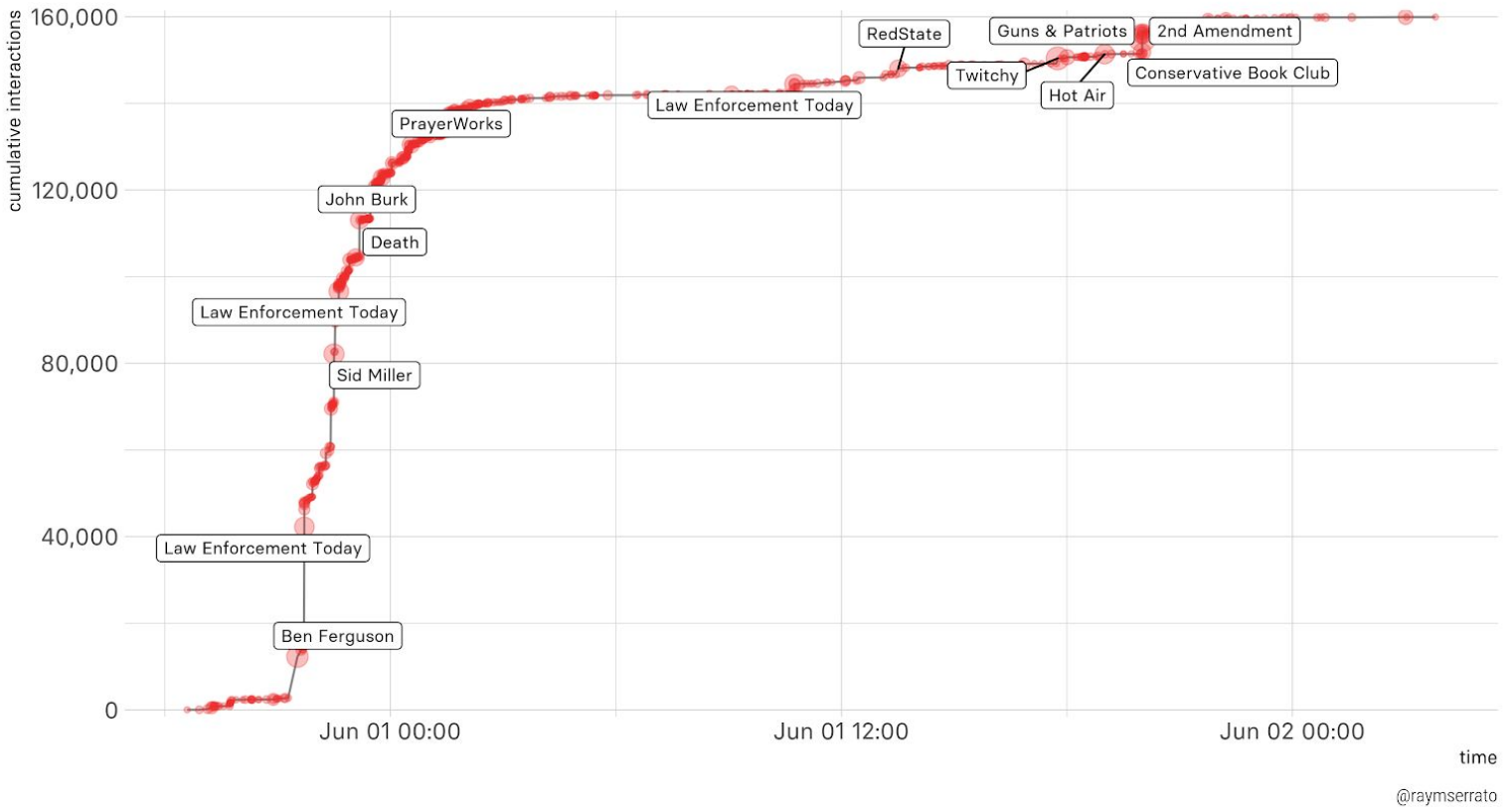




## Cumulative Facebook interactions of a fake Antifa tweet

Screenshots of the tweet first circulated in pro-Trump groups. Accounts with more than 500k likes labeled.



### COMMUNITY RESOURCE

# FIGHTING MISINFORMATION IN SMALL TOWNS AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

## SUMMARY

Starting on May 30, 2020, our network began hearing the same [rumor](#) mentioning out-of-town “antifa” rioters bussing into various regions across the country. Since then, we’ve uncovered a nationwide misinformation campaign that’s specifically targeting law enforcement officials, business leaders and civic patrol or local fake militia groups.

## OVERVIEW

Does [this](#) sound familiar?

***"We're being told that buses are en route from [out of town] for today's march downtown, businesses - please bring in any furniture, signs, etc. that could possibly be thrown through windows. Let's keep our city safe and peaceful!"***

If so, then it's likely that your community has been targeted by an active white nationalist online misinformation campaign. Using Facebook and other social media outlets, white nationalists [are working quickly to disrupt the progress of racial justice](#) in the wake of the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd.

## HOW THE CAMPAIGN WORKS

Through intelligence gained by civic leaders in our network and reports from national media outlets, it appears that white nationalists are using a combination of online misinformation tactics and their ["flyering" street teams](#) to create a sense of panic and possibly incite violence between supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement, right wing fake militia groups, and local law enforcement .

On June 1, NBC NEWS [reported](#) that a Twitter account claiming to belong to a national "antifa" organization was linked to the white nationalist group Identity Evropa (Recently rebranded as the American Identity Movement). The account was spread violent rhetoric related to ongoing Black Lives Matter protests. The fake "antifa" tweets quickly found their way onto Trump Jr.'s instagram page where he wrote: "Absolutely insane. Just remember what ANTIFA really is. A Terrorist Organization! They're not even pretending anymore." His post was liked 96,000 times.

Shortly after, [rumors](#) began circulating on Facebook and Nextdoor that buses filled with thousands of antifa and other outside agitators were on their way to loot communities outside major metropolitan areas. Many of the posts featured a screenshot of a tweet by a fake antifa Twitter account.

Based on reports from civic leaders in the RuralOrganizing.org network, individuals with connections to white nationalist organizations like [Patriot Front](#) and [Identity Evropa](#) were caught on camera handing out false information to community leaders claiming they had intelligence that supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement were planning to commit violence.

## WHO IS BEHIND THIS CAMPAIGN?

Ray Serrato, an independent disinformation researcher, [first tracked the viral spread](#) of this misinformation campaign to a tweet from an white nationalist-run fake Twitter account named @ANTIFA\_US. The tweet [went viral](#) on the night of Sunday, May 31st.

“Tonight’s the night, Comrades,” with a brown raised fist emoji and “Tonight we say 'F--- The City' and we move into the residential areas... the white hoods.... and we take what's ours ...” the Tweet read. This rumor that an “antifa” mob was coming to loot white neighborhoods quickly spread through screenshots on Facebook, Nextdoor, Instagram, and text messages.

Investigators quickly found that the @ANTIFA\_US Twitter account was created by the white nationalist group [Identity Evropa \(aka American Identity Movement\)](#).

Additionally, on June 5, Facebook [removed nearly 200 social media accounts linked to white supremacy groups](#) that planned to encourage members to attend protests over police killings of black people — in some cases with weapons, company officials said Friday.

The accounts were tied to the [Proud Boys](#) and the [American Guard](#), two hate groups already banned on the platform. Officials were already monitoring the accounts in preparation for removing them when they saw posts attempting to exploit the ongoing protests prompted by the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

In addition to their online campaigning, groups like the Patriot Front and Identity Evropa/American Identity Movement are known for their offline disruption and hateful instigation. In 2019, the [American Identity Movement](#) and the [Patriot Front](#) (another white nationalist hate group), ramped up their efforts [posting hateful and provocative flyers](#) in public spaces and college campuses across the country.

Already, we are seeing flyering and stickering efforts from [Patriot Front](#) coincide with online misinformation, and threatening physical counter demonstrations by armed members of the [Proud Boys](#), the [American Guard](#), and the highly dangerous [“Boogaloo” movement](#).

For example, on June 9, police in Brookings, South Dakota [tracked elements of this misinformation campaign to members of a white supremacist group](#) known as Patriot Front. Brookings police say members of the hate group, Patriot Front, placed stickers on sign posts throughout the community last week. Members of the same group are also believed to be behind a letter handed out to Brookings business owners telling them that protest organizers were keeping their plans “secret” to “facilitate acts of rioting.” The unsigned letter also recommended boarding up windows and putting signs like “minority owned” on them.

# WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS CAMPAIGN?

## UNDERMINE PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR BLACK LIVES MATTER

According to the New York Times, public opinion on race and criminal justice issues has been steadily moving left since the first protests ignited over the fatal shootings of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown.

Since the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis Police on May 25, public opinion on race, criminal justice and the Black Lives Matter movement increased by nearly as much as it had over the previous two years, according to data from [Civiqs](#), an online survey research firm. By a 28-point margin, Civiqs finds that a majority of Americans support the movement, up from a 17-point margin before the most recent wave of protests began.

Public support for the Black Lives Matter agenda and leadership is a direct threat to organizations who promote a white supremacist world view and this misinformation campaign appears to be an attempt to reduce public support for Black Lives Matter protesters.

## CIVIC “SWATTING”

Based on information provided through the RuralOrganizing.org national network and [national media reports](#), the groups and individuals behind this misinformation effort are attempting to generate fear and violence among residents prior to Black Lives Matter rallies.

Their tactics blame a specific person or group using false threats of violence with the intention of eliciting an armed response from law enforcement, militia groups, often heavily armed individuals. [Tactics such as these are known to law enforcement as “Swatting.”](#) referring to SWAT teams showing up at the houses of those targeted.

Police are trained to deal with this form of misinformation, and we found it helpful to describe the far right’s online misinformation as this a form of Swatting—helping them understand that not only are peaceful protesters being targeted, but that local law enforcement is also a target for manipulation.

## ESTABLISH A FEAR-BASED ELECTION YEAR NARRATIVE

Though the frequency of protests has started to slow since the first week of June, and the coinciding misinformation campaigns to disrupt Black Lives Matter demonstrations has followed suit, we are seeing a shift in the Right’s political narrative. The emerging narrative leverages white fear of looting and unrest to create racial divisions that benefits Trump and his far-right candidate block while hobbling support for the Black Lives Matter movement.

The Right is using the spectre of Antifa and racist images of Black protesters to scare white people into rallying around racist candidates who promise violent responses to the Black Lives Matter movement, particularly targeting people of color. Our friends at America’s Voice outlined this emerging narrative [here](#).

# HOW CAN COMMUNITIES RESPOND?

## RUMORS TO WATCH

We can't track every false narrative floating churning through small town rumor mills, but here are a few threads that should catch your attention:

- Any mentions of “antifa”
- Buses coming from out of town
- Looters targeting businesses and malls
- Any warning about protests and/org looting in neighborhoods
- Warnings for businesses and neighbors about looting/protest
- Advice about closing down businesses and bearing arms to prevent looting
- Any other warnings that encourage preparation for potential violence or destruction of property

The truth is, it's [well documented](#) that Antifa is not showing up in the places where these rumors are spreading and where unrest has occurred. Again and again, it's [been confirmed](#) that the overwhelming majority of those arrested in protests across the nation are local residents. No, Antifa is not coming. Yes, your hometown actually does believe that Black Lives Matter and that racist policing needs to end now.

## RECORD THE CONTENT

If you come across content that appears to be inflammatory or could potentially instigate fear, immediately screenshot it in a manner that includes the time, date, and sender.

After documenting the harmful content, there are two places to report these rumors; first, report to local law enforcement, and second, report to the social media company.

## CONTACT THE POLICE

Police are trained to deal with [“Swatting”](#)—fake 911 calls designed to instigate violent police response at an unsuspecting victim under false pretenses. Law enforcement understands that this is done through their emergency response systems and 911 dispatchers, and they also understand that this tactic poses a serious risk to community safety.

Law enforcement needs to understand that the same type of response can now be targeted and triggered through social media in the local rumor mill.

Call your local law enforcement office as quickly as possible to notify authorities of the threat and be prepared to share the information that you've collected about the post. This step should be coupled with reporting the content directly on the social platform you are using.

It is entirely possible that the content may be reposted by a friend or community member who has just fallen prey to the far right's campaign. Reporting a post that someone is reposting accidentally won't result in that person getting prosecuted—it is just important that the false claims circulating get documented and reported to local law enforcement as quickly as possible so they can get to work mitigating threats and working to stop the spread of misinformation targeting their officers. Do not call 911 unless you believe there is a life threatening emergency.

## NOTIFY SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES

In addition to reporting to local law enforcement, report social media rumors directly to the company. Here are step-by-step guides about how to report harmful and/or fraudulent content on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), and [NextDoor](#).

According to the Center for Countering Digital Hate's [Don't Feed the Trolls Guide](#), "These platforms will often prioritise complaints coming from public figures. If the content is potentially criminal, then keep a record and seek advice on whether and how to report it to the police or to discuss it with a defamation lawyer."

## CALMLY SPREAD THE TRUTH AND EXPOSE THE STRATEGY

Additionally, when engaging this content to combat misinformation, it is crucial that you never repost rumors without definitively stating that the information contained in the rumors are false. Anything but a firm response plays right into the hand of online trolls.

If you are going to engage in rapidly countering the spread of misinformation, consider what community leaders have followings online who would be able strategically amplify your message about the truth. A local elected official joining you in posting to debunk rumors might get more reach in your community than you and a couple friends.

## TRACE THE POSTS

By reaching out to individuals who have posted the rumors through direct messages, phone calls, and emails (Do not comment on the post itself or you risk "Signal Boosting" the post), work to identify the source of the rumor posts in your community.

It may not be possible to identify the local source, but it is worth spending some time working to see if you can identify any posters who have other suspicious content on their pages. Here is a [database of known hate symbols](#) compiled by the Anti-Defamation League. Other resources for identifying hate symbols are listed under "Additional Resources" at the end of this document.

## DON'T ACCIDENTLY "SIGNAL BOOST" THE MESSAGE

Trolls want you to engage with their content to raise visibility of their propaganda. Our aim is, instead, to reduce harm to you and others. "Signal Boosting" refers to the increased reach of social media content that results from users resharing content again and again, which in turn prompts the platform's algorithm to be more likely to display the content in people's feeds.

The far right benefits when misinformation in social media content is shared again and again, regardless of your intentions about debunking rumors as you share posts, react to posts, and comment on posts with misinformation. Each of those actions—commenting, sharing, and reacting to a misinformation post—will make that post more likely to show up in other people’s news feeds.

If you are working to calmly debunk rumors and fight misinformation, you are aiming to get people who have fallen victim to delete posts from their newsfeeds, and then reach back out to their networks to calmly share what’s going on and invite people to help spread the truth.

If you feel that you must share the specific wording of a post, you are better off posting a screenshot than sharing the entire post. This will reduce the notoriety of that content while still getting the word out about what rumors to be on the lookout for.

Again, be clear and thorough in your explanation that this is a misinformation campaign that’s targeting your community, and that the best thing that people can do is reach out individually to their networks to debunk rumors and to contact local officials who can take action.

## CONTACT BUSINESS LEADERS

It’s also important to ensure that community leaders are made aware of the misinformation campaign. The far right is particularly trying to instill fears about the looting of local businesses to manipulate the cancellation of peaceful protests and incite violence from local law enforcement, fake militia groups, and other outside agitators. This particularly endangers the safety of people of color in the community.

Here are a few important local contacts that you should consider reaching out to in order to debunk rumors and expose misinformation. It is imperative that when notifying these entities, you are clear that the rumors are false and that you expose the campaign in its entirety. Failure to be clear and thorough could result in accidentally spreading fear.

- Chamber of commerce
- Local Banks
- Start up groups
- Business development groups
- Local Parks and Public Services

## ORGANIZE LOCAL THE ACTIVIST COMMUNITY TO JOIN YOU

In addition to reporting harmful rumors on your own, recruit allies in the local activist community to join you in educating community leaders, contacting authorities, and tracing the source of misinformation. Tell them to keep an eye out for suspicious activity and to screenshot rumors they are seeing in their networks. Pool screenshots and collaboratively trace digital content.

Again, it is important that you are clear, thorough, and calm as you explain what is happening so you do not accidentally spread fear. Unchecked urgency could leave potential partners and allies feeling scared. Any increase in local fear is still a win for the far right who is working to convince the community that these peaceful protests aren't worth the trouble, regardless of the issue at hand.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### TRAE CROWDER VIDEO

[Trae Crowder setting the record straight](#)

### OTHER RESOURCES

[A practical guide by the Center for Countering Digital Hate. The guide was developed in the UK for public figures targeted by online hate.](#)

[Digital Security Resources by Equality Labs](#)

[Tools compiled by the AFT that can help you keep student leaders safe online](#)

[Internet Safety for Women Guide by VPNMentor](#)

[Deescalation at Protests Resources created by Training for Change](#)

[Five quick thoughts on planning political protests in small towns](#)

### PRESS COVERAGE

[NBC New: Antifa rumors spread on local social media with no evidence](#)

[Keloland News: White supremacists spread fear and propaganda in Brookings' protest](#)

[Iowa Public Radio: Social Media Misinformation About 'Buses Of Rioters' Fuels Real Fears In Iowa And Across The Country](#)

[PNS: 'Not the Small-Town Rumor Mill': False Claims Spread During Protests](#)

[Columbus Dispatch: Small Ohio towns join in protests against racism, police brutality](#)