# DIGITAL EXTREMISMS

## Readings in Violence, Radicalisation and Extremism in the Online Space

### EDITED BY MARK LITTLER AND BENJAMIN LEE
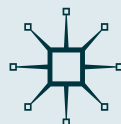
# Palgrave Studies in Cybercrime and Cybersecurity

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This book series addresses the urgent need to advance knowledge in the fields of cybercrime and cybersecurity. Because the exponential expansion of computer technologies and use of the Internet have greatly increased the access by criminals to people, institutions, and businesses around the globe, the series will be international in scope. It provides a home for cutting-edge long-form research. Further, the series seeks to spur conversation about how traditional criminological theories apply to the online environment. The series welcomes contributions from early career researchers as well as established scholars on a range of topics in the cybercrime and cybersecurity fields.

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Editors

# Digital Extremisms

## Readings in Violence, Radicalisation and Extremism in the Online Space

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**Stephen Herron**  is an anthropologist, specialising in the study of conflict, security and the military. A research fellow at the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice, Queen's University Belfast, Ireland, Herron has also previously been a visiting research fellow at Dublin City University as part of the VOX-Pol programme, which examines online extremism. Herron recently acted as a co-investigator on a project which examined how counter-insurgency warfare impacts on the post-deployment reintegration experiences of British land-based military personnel. This research, the first of its kind, has led onto a project, which is examining former soldiers who experience 'negative transitioning', such as those who have been in prison, homeless or under mental health supervision. Herron's contribution to this chapter is based on research he has carried out on the activities of Ulster Loyalism online.

**Paul Jackson** is Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Northampton, UK, and specialises in the history of fascism and the

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**Gilbert Ramsay**  lectures jointly at the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence and the Department of International Relations at the University of St Andrews, UK, where his research interests focus mainly on cultural aspects of jihadism, with a side interest in contempo-rary Arabic media. He has recently completed a book (co-written with Syrian PhD candidate Moutaz Alkheder) examining the role of humour in the struggle against Jihadi-Salafism in the Arab world.

**Ryan Scrivens**  is an assistant professor in the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University, USA. He is also a visiting researcher at the VOX-Pol Network of Excellence, a research associate at the International CyberCrime Research Centre at Simon Fraser University and the associ-ate editor for Theses of *Perspectives on Terrorism.* Scrivens conducts prob-lem-oriented, interdisciplinary research, with a primary focus on terrorists' and extremists' use of the Internet, right-wing terrorism and extremism, combating violent extremism, hate crime, research methods and methodology and computational social science.

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# 1

# Introduction

## Mark Littler and Benjamin Lee

*Social media companies … have created platforms used by billions of people to come together, communicate and collaborate. They are used often by campaigns and individuals for positive messages and movements challenging hatred, racism or misogyny—for example @everydaysexism or #aintnomuslimbruv. However, there is a great deal of evidence that these platforms are being used to spread hate, abuse and extremism. That trend continues to grow at an alarming rate but it remains unchecked and, even where it is illegal, largely unpoliced.*

—House of Commons Home Affairs Committee Report *Hate crime: abuse, hate and extremism online*, 2017

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From the standpoint of two thirty-something academics writing in the Summer of 2019, it is possible to argue that contemporary social life cannot be understood without a thorough appreciation of the two phenomena that have had the greatest impact on social structure over the last 20 years: the return of violent extremism and the rapid rise of the internet. These same academics could argue that each phenomenon has posed significant challenges to twenty-first century life, disrupting traditional behavioural norms and triggering un-envisaged shifts in patterns of social and political engagement. Moreover, they could suggest that together these forces have amplified and interacted with each other, birthing a social and political environment that is so markedly different from all that came before that it cannot be understood through recourse to established scholarship. Indeed, they could suggest that these changes represent a realignment of such magnitude that comparator cases arise only once in several generations, for example, the coming of the printing press or the arrival of the industrial revolution.

To make such an argument would clearly be an exercise in contrarianism, as it ignores the impact of other equally significant social forces over the last two decades (e.g., the 2008 financial crisis, or the surge in left- and right-wing populism in Western democracies since 2012)—however, there is clearly some merit to this view: as with all good contrarian arguments, the hyperbole conceals at least a kernel of truth.

It is certainly beyond dispute that the digital revolution and the dramatic expansion of mass casualty terrorism will be counted by future historians amongst the defining features of the early twenty-first century. While older commentators look to the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the Cold War as the most important event of the last 50 years, most under the age of 40 will see the felling of the twin towers and the arrival of social media as casting greater—and perhaps more long-lasting—shadows under which we all now live.

The last two decades have seen concerns around terrorism ("the tactic of intentionally directing violent attacks at non-combatants with lethal or severe violence for political purposes"—Coady 2004) and the closely related phenomenon of 'violent extremism' ("the commission of acts of violence as a means to political or religious goals"—Schils and Pauwels 2014) rise to endemic proportions, moving from fringe concerns to

factors that shape all aspects of modern life. Everything from increased airline security (Wilkinson and Jenkins 2013) and the introduction of counter-radicalisation programmes (Dudenhoefer 2018), to the rise of mass surveillance (Norris et al. 2004) and the limited suspension of habeas corpus (Paye 2005) can be attributed to the post-9/11 security environment, with each act of terrorism seeing an increasingly fearful public (Altheide 2006) turn to politicians who, acting on media demands for 'tough' responses (McGarrity 2011), enact repressive measures in the name of reassurance and public safety. From Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures (TPIMs) and Control Orders (Hunt 2014; Burton 2014) to rendition and the use of torture (Sadat 2006), the significance of these changes cannot be understated. Moreover, such trends show no sign of abating, with data collected in the US showing a doubling in the number of citizens registering concern over terrorist attacks since 1999 (Gallup 2019), and data collected in the European Union showing almost half of all citizens identify terrorism as a key concern (Eurobarometer 2017).

Alongside this, the role of the internet is more ambiguous and potentially more profound. What began in the 1970s and 1980s as a rather limited academic collaboration tool (Leiner et al. 2009) had, by the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, grown to become a truly global community embracing the majority of the globe's population. Data from the International Telegraphic Union and World Bank highlights that, from a base of around 2.5 million users in 1990, internet use has risen exponentially to almost 4 billion users by the end of 2017 (ITU 2017). Driven by rapid expansion in ecommerce provision and a growth in the availability of mobile devices (Meeker and Wu 2013), the internet has become the primary communications tool for billions, facilitating both the consumption of traditional media (George 2008) and direct peer-to-peer communication (Eysenbach et al. 2004).

The unique selling points of the internet are perhaps too obvious to note: its democratisation of communication through one-to-many, many-to-one channels has allowed millions to find a voice, whereas its low costs, rapid speed of publication and global reach have made it attractive to those seeking a leaner and more agile alternative to traditional social and commercial structures. However, as the advent of the mass

media was accompanied by a boom in the publication of salacious and dishonest content (Burkhardt 2017), so too has the boom in internet use seen a number of unforeseen and negative consequences.

While allowing previously dispersed communities to coalesce in a manner impossible 'in real life' has created opportunities for special interest groups to form, so too has it allowed criminal and extremist networks to flourish beyond traditional geographical boundaries. It has created possibilities to recruit and to train would-be terrorists that would otherwise be impossible, and has complicated beyond measure the regulation of access to restricted and illegal content from MP3s to urban combat manuals (Weimann 2006).

Both rising concerns about extremism and the increased access to one-to-many communications tools have intersected to create a seemingly intractable problem for democratic societies. In one camp sit technology firms tasked with running and monetising platforms and services that boast user numbers in the millions or even billions. In the other camp are governments and citizens that are increasingly beginning to question the effects of large technology platforms on their societies. In some cases, there has been undeniable progress. Where groups are easily recognisable or widely condemned, they have been forced off of open platforms such as Twitter and Facebook (see Stern and Berger 2015; BBC 2018). However, a large quantity of extremist content remains untouched on social networks. A 2018 report published by the Intelligence and Security Committee of the UK Parliament included harsh criticism of internet companies suggesting that exerting pressure through advertisers should be explored (Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament 2018). In some cases, the refusal to engage may be linked to a wider streak of tech-based libertarianism that still infuses Silicon Valley (Dahlberg 2009). A good example being the concerns expressed by Matthew Prince, CEO of CloudFlare, the hosting company that withdrew services from the alt-right website the Daily Stormer. After announcing the decision Prince published a long and thoughtful blogpost describing events as 'dangerous' (Prince 2017). In other cases, the success of internet companies in detaching themselves from any liability for the content they host, one suspects, is more driven by a pursuit of economy and scale. Moderation, or editing, is after all time consuming and expensive.

The end result is that the extreme fringes of society, including in some instances those who directly advocate violence and terrorism, are accessible as never before. Where previously extreme narratives were confined to specialist publishers, homebrew newspapers and sketchy public venues, they are now open to all. Despite frequent claims about the intractable rise of extremism, the measurement of abstract beliefs, particularly clandestine ones, is still difficult on a representative scale. However, when measured in print inches, public debate and impact on the zeitgeist, it is difficult escape the conclusion that extremist thought is again challenging the mainstream consensus in democratic societies, powered in no small part by cheap and easy one-to-many digital platforms with little or no editorial oversight.

## Studying Extremism Online

As a result of these shifts, the volume of academic research focussing on online extremism and extremist use of the internet has grown significantly in the last 20 years. Beginning in the 1980s with Berlet's (2001) work on far-right extremist use of bulletin boards and USENET groups, and accelerating rapidly in the aftermath of the 9/11, the academic study of online extremism can, in 2019, be regarded as a mature sub-field. A cursory search of Google scholar lends credibility to this view, highlighting in excess of 400 peer-reviewed papers published since 2001, dozens of policy reports (including major contributions by Bartlett and Krasodomski-Jones (2015), Hussain and Saltman (2014) and Littler (2018)) and recent weighty volumes by Weimann (2015), Aly et al. (2016) and Khader et al. (2016).

Consequently, we now have a far better understanding of what extremism is, and a plethora of theoretical models that can be used to frame enquiry into extremist groups online. Moreover, certain modes of extremism (particularly Islamist) have been subject to intense scrutiny, and as a result, are relatively well understood at both academic and policy levels.

However, much as offline extremism is broader than militant Islamist groups, so too is research on online extremism. While political scientists and international relations scholars have been at the forefront of research

on online extremism in recent years, there remain a number of key limitations to the literature they have produced. Conway's (2017) seminal review highlights this well, drawing attention to the limited volume of ethnographic and quantitative research on online extremism, the lack of interdisciplinary and non-US approaches, and—crucially—the failure to engage in the meaningful study of non-Islamic groups.

The editors of this volume agree entirely, and the publication of this collection is, in part, an attempt to begin to address these deficiencies while simultaneously offering space for a broader conversation around online terrorism and extremism. This ties explicitly to our additional criticism of the current state of the discipline: that there is no obvious place in which interdisciplinary research can be brought together. Despite the potential for valuable insights from other fields (as Conway identifies), the terrorism and extremism studies canon—while undoubtedly rich—remains the property of a narrow range of journals, excluding valuable work from those working outside this milieu.

By bringing together in a single volume a varied group of scholars, many of whom are from outside the mainstream of terrorism and extremism studies, we hope to offer a place for new research that begins to address the key deficiencies in this important and under-researched space.

## Overview

This volume is designed to offer an overview of research that cross-cuts many of the key non-Islamist extremist threats present online. Its content covers the far-right, anti-abortion groups, animal rights extremism and Northern Irish groups, as well as provides some discussion of the challenges that characterise research and policy engagement in this area. Its coverage is deliberately broad; however, there are also some important omissions—not least in respect of left-wing extremism. This volume should therefore be taken not as a definitive reference text, but rather as an introduction to several important but neglected fields of inquiry.

The first section of this volume focuses on the many and varied forms of right-wing extremism online, as perhaps the most significant non-Islamist security threat facing Western nations. Across four chapters, it

will consider the challenge these groups pose from a range of different perspectives, beginning with a contribution from a historian of the far right, Dr. Paul Jackson of Northampton University, in Chap. 2. Dr. Jackson's chapter focuses on the beginnings of online extremism and the far right's use of 'Web 1.0' technologies in the 1990s, offering a number of insights that have direct relevance for our approach to researching more contemporary right-wing extremism. Dr. Jackson is widely regarded as one of the most original—and persistent—voices researching the radical right, and his work at Northampton (home of the Searchlight archive) has provided a range of invaluable insights into historic and contemporary extremist groups. This chapter is no exception.

Chapter 3 continues with a contribution from political scientist Dr. William Allchorn, Associate Director at the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR). Dr. Allchorn's work provides a highly original perspective on the cumulative extremism hypothesis as seen through the lens of Twitter. Attempting to provide an empirical consideration of several periods of historical escalation and non-escalation by far-right and Islamist groups, Dr. Allchorn's chapter does much to improve our understanding of the pivotal role of social media in moderating and framing movement–counter-movement dynamics.

Chapter 4 is provided by Dr. Ryan Scrivens of Michigan State University and Dr. Amarnath Amarasingam from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, offering a social media content analysis of the Canadian far right's use of Facebook. In addition to providing a template for mixed methods social media research, Scrivens and Amarasingam also provide a strong case for the benefits of working past the academic-practise divide, embracing insights from the policy world to provide research that has real world application—a theme to which others return later in the volume.

Dr. Benjamin Lee's chapter on alt-right memes (Chap. 5) concludes our exploration of the far right, offering an interesting perspective on an under-researched—but increasingly important—niche within the right-extremism milieu. His insights in this chapter have value not just for this specific sub-field, but also for all scholars seeking to understand the influence of our increasingly pervasive meme culture on the exhibition and transmission of extremism.

Moving from far-right extremism to a broader consideration of other, more disperse, extremist risks, Chap. 6 sees Dr. Lorraine Bowman-Grieve of the Waterford Institute of Technology and Dr. Stephen Herron of Queens University in Belfast map one of the most underexplored but persistent extremist threats online—the legacy of the Northern Irish troubles. Addressing both Ulster Loyalism and dissident Irish Republicanism, their work offers a comparison of the use of the internet by these predominantly regional movements, and offers some suggestions as to why these differences exist in relation to both existing scholarship and the current social and political context in Northern Ireland.

Chapter 7 offers an overview of a similarly underexplored field—online animal rights extremism—with Dr. Rachel Monaghan and Dr. Ruth McAlister of Ulster University mapping how violent animal rights extremists use the internet in the pursuit of their cause, alongside an interesting comparison of this usage to other violent extremist groups. Dr. Monaghan is the current President of the Society for Terrorism Research and is widely recognised as one of the leading scholars working in this important area.

In Chap. 8, Dr. Mark Littler of the University of Huddersfield offers an overview of British anti-abortion extremism on Facebook, focusing on the prominent—and often controversial—activities of Abort67. Through a consideration of post themes, format and user engagement, he argues the need for a more nuanced understanding of anti-abortion extremism and for a greater base of evidence on this long-running extremist risk. In light of recent events, and ongoing discussions around regulation in respect of such groups, this contribution is particularly timely.

Our final empirical chapter (Chap. 9) by Dr. Gilbert Ramsay of the University of St Andrews addresses the elephant in the room—Islamist extremism—exploring the position of Jihadi 'fans' and arguing that, through their adoption of internet conventions (including memes, sarcastic humour and a culture of insinuation), their distinctive features are increasingly eclipsed by factors that render them more similar to other radical groups online. In this chapter, Ramsay implicitly argues the capacity for insights in respect of one online extremist risk to span multiple risks—a key theme of this volume.

The penultimate chapter (Chap. 10) moves away from the exploratory focus that characterises much of this volume, with Jonathan Birdwell, Deputy Director and Head of Policy and Research at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, exploring the increasingly significant field of research-based 'secondary interventions' to counter violent extremism. Discussing the policy challenges represented by these important approaches, he argues the need for policymakers to encourage the combination and codification of knowledge across former extremists, social workers and mental health specialists to develop a robust basis for interventions, highlighting the opportunities social media presents for identification and engagement with those at risk.

The final chapter (Chap. 11) is by Dr. Pelham Carter of Birmingham City University and Katherine Kondor of the Loughborough University. Their contribution offers a reflection on the methodological challenges of researching extremism online, with a particular focus on the opportunities for new technologies to enhance our understanding of these phenomena, utilising the unique characteristics of the digital space to better connect with, explore and understand far-right groups. Dr. Carter is widely recognised as a leading expert in online methodology, having recently contributed work utilising cutting-edge digital methods to the formal report of the British Government's Commission for Countering Extremism, whereas Ms. Kondor, whose doctoral work explored British and Hungarian far-right extremism online, is a recent recipient of the Cas Mudde Early Career Scholar Award and an emerging voice in this important field.

By presenting this work together in a single volume, the authors hope to draw attention to the pockets of excellent research that characterise the study of non-Islamic extremism online, and to highlight the overlap of themes and approaches that can complement and add to existing scholarship within the terrorism and extremism studies canon—a key theme addressed in further detail in the concluding chapter (Chap. 12). By doing so, we hope both to contribute to knowledge in this important discipline, and to broaden the conversation to include voices that are so frequently absent from policy and academic consideration of these issues.

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# 2

# Pioneers of World Wide Web Fascism: The British Extreme Right and Web 1.0

Paul Jackson

It has become commonplace to discuss the rise of the Internet as game-changing for extreme right politics. For example, Simpson and Druxes (2015) have demonstrated, persuasively, the transformative effects of online activism. The advent of what has been described from around 2004 as Web 2.0—typically understood as online tools promoting greater levels of interaction and a much more user-friendly experience (O'Reilly 2005)—have certainly offered many political extremists new ways to foster communities online. However, analysis on the use of more recent Web 2.0 formats, such as social media, or alternatively the ways extremists use the nebulous 'dark web' (Weiman 2016), steers discussion away from reflection on the early pioneers of online communication. Behind current practices, there is a curious 'web history' of fascist activists who recognised, around the turn of the millennium, the new possibilities offered by the Internet. Richard Rogers, among others, has started to conceptualise how historians can engage in researching such 'web his-

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tory', and the problems it poses. Although problematic, understanding this history is important. Notably, as early as 1999, David Copeland used Internet searches to help develop a terrorist campaign (McLagen and Lowles 2000). At the same time, a number of British fascist organisations began exploring ways to develop their activism through forms of online publication and dissemination.

Examining such ways a variety of British fascists embraced websites helps to bring depth and historical context to debates on contemporary forms of online extremism. To explore the rise of this early, online milieu, this chapter will examine various examples of early adopters to construct a picture of the ways webpages started to be used as a means of communication and engagement. While these websites now look quite basic and amateurish, in their day they certainly provided a novel avenue for conducting political activity. However, before examining examples of early British fascist websites, it is worth briefly clarifying some conceptual and methodological issues for exploring these online spaces.

## The Wayback Machine, and Studying the 'Web History' of 'British Fascism'

By concentrating on British fascists, what follows will focus on a disparate but related set of individuals, groups and organisations that emerged from an interconnected culture engaged in variants of revolutionary white nationalism—from Holocaust deniers, to registered parties, to fringe extremist groups. While 'fascism' is a much-debated concept, this chapter uses the term in the manner developed by historians of the phenomenon, such as Roger Griffin (2018) and Roger Eatwell (2003). Griffin argues that fascism is usefully understood as a heuristic term indicting a range of ideologies that share a 'family relationship' of promoting a politics that calls for national or racial regeneration, or palingenesis, in order to escape from a liberal-democratic modernity deemed decadent and threatened by an existential threat of some description, such as a Jewish plot to destroy the nation. Following Griffin, it is important to stress the need to explore the diversity of fascist cultures, including those online, and he recognises that a fascist culture can be expressed in a wide range of phenomena. As I

have argued elsewhere (Jackson 2016), modern British fascist activism is spread across a wide range of small groups, or groupuscules, organisations that can include political parties, violent direct action groups and intellectual debating networks. Therefore, rather than focusing on a single node in British fascist culture, this chapter will explore how various groupuscules, especially of the later 1990s and early 2000s, developed forms of online activity. Among them were activists who tried to legitimise the past actions of fascists, such as David Irving, alongside others who used the legacy of earlier fascists as direct inspiration for new types of party political activity, for example, Nick Griffin. Moreover, some were out-and-out conspiracy theory obsessives, such as Simon Sheppard, while others were trying to engage with philosophical ideas to develop their fascist activism, such as Michael Walker.

Proponents of using Roger Griffin's 'culturalist' approach to analysing the history of British fascism include Nigel Copsey (2008) and Graham Macklin (2007). Other scholars of British fascism, such as John Richardson (2017), are critical of some elements of this methodology, though he too recognises the importance of exploring the cultural and linguistic dynamics of fascist activism. To help understand the diversity in fascist cultures, Macklin (2015), among others, have employed the term 'cultic milieu', originally coined by Colin Campbell, to help conceptualise the wide range of esoteric knowledge found within the politicised, clandestine worlds generated by fascists. Jeffrey Kaplan and Helene Lööw (2002) helped to introduce this term to fascism studies, and they emphasise that the cultic milieu is a heterogeneous space where a wide range of ideas, sharing characteristics of being taboo and unacceptable within mainstream culture, vie and combined in a variety of ways to provide its adherents with a sense of mission and purpose. Others have also recognised how British fascist cultures are constructed through their deeply oppositional stance to mainstream cultures. For example, Chris Atton (2006) identified that British fascists had, by the early twenty-first century, adopted discourses that presented their activism in ways akin to messages found in post-colonial discourses. As Atton expands, in his analysis of the British National Party's (BNP) online materials of the 2000s, these focused on narrating the party's agenda as a struggle to sustain and develop a sense of identity in an era they deemed oppressive.

Experts on the wider extreme right have been sensitive to the impact of online systems for some time. For example, in terms of the American extreme right, Chip Berlet (2008) has suggested that 1984 was the key year when 'hate went online', claiming that George P. Deitz was the first to use a public bulletin board system (BBS) to spread white supremacist material. Berlet and Carol Mason (Berlet and Mason 2015) have also discussed how others in America, such as Tom Metzger, started using online communication around this time. Regarding the British extreme right, as early as 1999, Michael Whine recognised the Internet offered cheap, potentially anonymous networking opportunities that would allow marginalised political extremists to punch above their weight and reach new audiences, including those who were younger and more educated that their traditional support bases (Whine 1999). He also stressed the growing transnational dynamics found in the milieu as a consequence (Whine 2012). Moreover, Jamie Bartlett (2017), a leading commentator on the use of the Internet by political extremists, has rightly noted that far-right activists have been successful and effective early adopters of the Internet, highlighting not only American websites such as Stormfront that was developed in the 1990s but also the relative sophistication of the British National Party's website in the 2000s when compared to those of other political parties of the period.

To help explore the rise of online communication by British fascists, this chapter engages in 'web history' of the phenomenon, by using archived forms of online activity as a way to engage in the type of source analysis historians normally apply to traditional paper-based archives. It uses archived websites generated by the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine to capture the variety of websites created by British fascists before Web 2.0 made the Internet much more user friendly and accessible. However, before proceeding, it is worth noting there are some methodological issues with using the Wayback Machine in this way. Superficially, it may seem that its archived Internet websites are simple records of a discrete site at a specific time. However, there are issues of automated reproduction at play with the Wayback Machine's method for archiving sites that prevent them from ever being perfect reproductions of online material from an earlier time. Richard Rogers (2017) explains that archived websites are complex reconstructions of parts of what was once online, and stresses that the Wayback Machine stores different sec-

tions of websites at different points in time. In other words, they are only ever artificial approximations of what were once discrete websites. For Richard Rogers, these are 'websites reborn', and far from perfect reproductions of original websites. Therefore, care should be taken when exploring archived websites as source material, and the claims that can be made when using them.

With this in mind, what follows seeks merely to use these 'reborn websites' as tentative samples of what was once on offer to those interested in British fascist politics around the turn of the millennium. It uses them to piece together what Jane Winters (2017) describes as 'micro histories' of specific websites, and uses these comparatively to draw out the groupuscular dynamics from a range of discrete yet related websites that made up an online fascist milieu.

## British National Party and the National Front: British Fascist Parties Online

Both the British National Party and the National Front can be described as organisations promoting forms of British fascism at the turn of the millennium. They both sought a fundamental political as well as demographic reordering of Britain, and identified forces of liberalism and political and social pluralism as an existential threat to an authentic British identity. The BNP had clearly also become receptive to the power of the Internet by the end of the 1990s. This coincided with the era of Nick Griffin's takeover and 'modernisation' of the party, which essentially sought to couch the BNP's underlying fascist objectives in a more 'saleable' language and a more family-orientated public profile (Goodwin 2011). A positive attitude towards the Internet could be detected in Griffin's own arguments for rebranding the party at this time.

Notably, shortly before becoming leader, Griffin (1999) wrote a key article in the influential extreme-right publication *The Patriot*, 'BNP—Freedom Party!' Here, he outlined some central elements of his modernisation strategy. Revealing his own cultural reference points, the essay included a discussion on how, in their own era, the Nazis had been pioneers who drew on new communication technology. As he explained, 'In

the '30s, the Nazis seized upon the new technologies of the day: the recent invention of the spotlight, loudspeaker systems and radio made it almost inevitable that their movement would make use of huge rallies and the spoken word.' Although Nick Griffin argued that such techniques were now somewhat 'old hat', the idea of using new forms of mass communication was an important lesson for the party's future. As he presciently identified: 'The potential of this new medium [the Internet] to destroy the mass media's much abused position as self-appointed "gatekeepers"', was crucial to grasp, and he also identified the public's:

> growing dissatisfaction with the remoteness of all this [i.e. mainstream media], and its unsatisfactory results. But within the next five years, ten at the most, the continued march of information technology into every home will give, to any would-be revolutionary force which cares to grasp it, an unprecedented opportunity to remodel our entire system of government.

By 1999, Griffin foresaw that the Internet could be used by a modernised BNP to create radio stations, television programmes and even an independent news system, allowing a revolutionary fascist party to connect directly with an alienated electorate, bypassing the mainstream media altogether.

The first record the Wayback Machine has for www.bnp.org.uk is from 15 August 2000. At this time, the website greeted visitors with a Flash animation of Griffin's four keywords for the modernised BNP, 'Democracy', 'Freedom', 'Security' and 'Identity', but the Wayback Machine has only preserved the Young BNP webpage from this time. Here, it explained that 'our website is a bastion of truth and hope for the future security and survival of our race', and gave an email and telephone contact details for those wanting more information (BNP 2000). The Wayback Machine's capture from 8 March 2001, however, offers a much more complete picture of the early BNP website. Its Introduction page set out its propose as follows:

> The aim of this website is to foster and promote a feeling of national and cultural unity amongst our people, whilst allowing them access to facts and information denied to them by the liars of the media. We aim to instill [sic] in the British people of today pride in themselves, their people, their history, their culture and their country. (BNP 2001)

Much of the website was designed to transmit information of various types to those either active in the BNP, or at least interested in its agenda. For example, a latest news section offered two email news services, one offered messages related to the ongoing running and campaigning activities of the BNP itself, the other offered 'Politically Incorrect news from around the world', as well as graphics from the party's publicity department. Elsewhere, a photo gallery section on the site helped to evoke a sense of community, putting a human face on the activities developed by the BNP. This section included uploaded photos detailing the party's Red, White and Blue festival of 2000, featuring images of a wide range of BNP activists as well as its leaders. There were also images of Paul Golding, Nick Griffin and other leading BNP figures visiting Jean Marie Le Pen's Front own National Bleu-Blanc-Rouge festival, which the BNP had effectively copied; a bonfire night celebration also from 2000; and a BNP rally in February 2001, with photos from the speeches delivered by various figures. This included the party's Director of Technology, Simon Derby, talking 'about the technology revolution and how the BNP is grasping it for the cause of British survival!'

Derby's arguments were also prominently featured in the 'Library' section of the website, which included his article 'Nationalist Radio is Within Our Grasp'. Derby argued that, despite the Internet's reputation for being slow, new asymmetric digital subscriber line (ADSL) technology would allow faster download speeds opening the possibility for the party to develop an Internet radio station. The 'Library' section was already expansive, and featured around 125 essays, book reviews and interviews on a wide range of topics, from the supposedly 'totalitarian' nature of liberalism to a review by John Tyndall of David Duke's book *My Awakening*. The BNP was clearly alert to changing developments in online systems, and keen to find ways to draw on them. In an era before YouTube, a 'Multimedia' section of its 2001 website even offered downloads of video files of BNP-created media in Real Video format, and a link to download Realplayer software so people could watch them.

Other sections of the website took care of a wide range of elements related to running a growing political party. In the 'Programme' section, the website set out the BNP's core political views, and talked up the role of technology in the party's proposed alternate future for Britain. It

argued that they sought a 'massive expansion of Freedom and Democracy to roll back the erosion of our traditional freedoms and truly reflect the wishes of the people; the adoption of popular referenda & hi-tech direct democracy' (BNP 2001). Threatened 'traditional' values would be restored through the latest technology. The website also offered merchandise, such as stickers and T-shirts; links to the websites of related groups in Europe, such as the National Alliance and the Front National; adverts for its print publications, such as *Freedom* and *Identity*; a donation page that accepted credit card payments online; and a membership form, though this still needed to be printed out and posted. In sum, looking at an early incarnation of the BNP's website demonstrates the party's ambitions to pioneer the online space. A wide range of material was being shared online, and this early website sought to generate a sense of community in a new way.

Fast-forward to 2009, at the party's electoral height, and here a more recent Wayback Machine capture shows how the website had changed dramatically (BNP 2009). By this time, it offered a much wider range of material: donor and membership details were now clearly on the homepage; BNPtv offered a range of streamed video content; and activist guides included information from summaries of the legal rights of campaigners, to advice on how to use appropriate language when engaging with the public. Moreover, a wide range of news and party-related developments were used to keep the website regularly updated. Ultimately though, most of this retained a transmission approach to engaging with an audience, and little effort was devoted to cultivating an online network of activists.

As well as a central site for the party, by this time the BNP's various local branches had also developed their own blogs. For example, www. northantspatriot.blogspot.com was active from 2007 and engaged with a wide range of local issues. In a Wayback Machine snapshot from October 2009, the site had uploaded 55 articles in 2007, 241 in 2008 and 269 in 2009, suggesting that these local blogs were regularly maintained in online spaces at the BNP's height. The BNP also sought to place a degree of distance between the central party and such local online initiatives, ensuring that the following text was displayed on local party blogs: 'Please note that these posts are entirely the opinion of the author/s and not the

British National Party' (Northantspatriot.blogspot.com 2009). In sum, over the 2000s, the BNP clearly developed a complex online presence, and were attuned to the potential of using this Internet presence to connect with a wider audience from the beginning of the 2000s onwards.

As the BNP leadership promoted a more outwardly populist profile under Griffin, other components of the groupuscular milieu responded critically. John Tyndall, for example, created a webpage for his own magazine, *Spearhead*, founded in 1964. The Wayback Machine has archived the www.spearhead-uk.com website from August 2000. The site contains articles from August 1999 onwards. Initially, Tyndall's online version of *Spearhead* was supportive of the BNP, despite his demotion from the party leader. For example, articles from October 1999 by Bernard Write from Oldham BNP commented positively on the nature of BNP activism in the region, and set out why the town was on the front line of conflict between white and Asian communities (Spearhead 1999). However, Tyndall grew increasingly critical of Griffin, reflected in the article from March 2001, 'BNP Election Special', which explained that he sought to challenge for the leadership against Griffin. Another article, 'One Change too Far', from October 2001, was more critical still, and complained about the BNP's new Ethnic Liaison Committee, as well as Griffin's public assertions that achieving a white-only Britain was no longer possible. As Tyndall stressed, 'the day we abandon our commitment to the aim itself will be the day for the abandonment of our party and all it stands for and has fought for' (Spearhead 2001). In 2003, Tyndall was briefly expelled from the BNP for his hostility towards Griffin, though was later reinstated. His *Spearhead* website stated afterwards: 'An out of court settlement was reached when Griffin and [Tony] Lecomber were persuaded that there was no chance that a judicial review, initiated by Mr Tyndall, could be won' (Spearhead 2003). Online spaces offered opportunities for conflicts between leading figures to be developed in public; Tyndall's criticism of Griffin could be made widely accessible to any activist with access to the Internet.

One-time competitor to the BNP was the National Front. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, it had declined to a shadow of its 1970s heyday. From the late 1990s, the National Front too cultivated an online presence; its activists wanted to grow the organisation as a hard-line competi-

tor to the BNP's seemingly moderate public image. The Wayback Machine's earliest records for www.natfront.com are from November 1999; yet, at this point, the site was very basic. It consisted of a homepage, which promised to send home refugees who had come to the UK from the conflict in Balkans, and just seven sub-pages. These included a short outline of the party's policies, as well as a brief history of the National Front. It described how the party was embracing online communication, for example, stating:

> Now, every two weeks *White Nationalist Report* in [sic] distributed in both printed and e-zine form. Its email distribution regularly reaches over 1,000 subscribers. The new NF website is being constantly updated and expanded. (National Front 1999)

Like BNP, there was effort to report on gatherings, though this consisted of only one event, the annual Remembrance Day rally from November 1999. Such examples, with just one photo and a short description of the event, show how the National Front's website was far more limited when compared to the BNP's.

Other features of this early online presence included a page with a set of statistics that claimed white people were far more likely to be the victims of racist attacks; and a link to an edition of the *White Nationalist Report*, edited at this time by Eddie Morrison. The *White Nationalist Report* offered a range of articles including the following: discussion on the Kensington and Chelsea by-election of 1999, where the party intended to stand a candidate; the alleged sale of human skin in Zaire, in a story clearly designed to demonise African people; and detailed tips for how to hold a successful National Front meeting. It also called for new and former activists to return to the party, and gave a @breathemail.net email address for such returnees. The *White Nationalist Report* concluded with a membership application form, though no online system for joining was provided. The contact page itself listed one email address, again a @breathemail address, nineteen postal addresses for regional branches, and a mobile contact number, suggestive of a limited embrace of using online systems to recalibrate activism.

When compared to the BNP's more recently archived site, the www.national-front.org.uk website of 2009 remained an inferior imitation. It too now included leaflets and posters for downloading, news stories, a selection of online videos, a collection of articles and some branded merchandise (National Front 2009). However, while the BNP website had clearly grown throughout the 2000s into a rich, complex and genuinely impressive online space, the National Front's competitor offering remained much more restricted. As with the BNP, by this time some of its local branches had also developed related blog sites. For example, in Swindon, www.swindonnf.blogspot.com (Swindon Blogspot 2009) was active from 2008 to 2012, again expressing party policy in a local context. In sum, while the National Front clearly saw the value of developing an online presence, the party's much more limited resources were all too clearly reflected in its online presence.

## The Cultic Milieu and Online Neo-Nazi and Conspiracy Theorists

The early use of the Internet by British fascists allowed a wide range of fringe activists to present their politics in new ways. Here, the tenor was often much closer to the cultic milieu concept described by Campbell. For example, one particularly curious site, offering access to a wide range of esoteric knowledge and fascist leaning material was Simon Sheppard's website for the Heretical Press. Notably, in 2008, Sheppard, along with a co-defendant Stephen Whittle, was arrested, and later successfully prosecuted for inciting racial hatred using a website hosted in a foreign jurisdiction, a legal first (BBC 2010). The Wayback Machine's first functioning archive was dated 31 August 1999. Its homepage boasted that www.heretical.com had been active since June 1998. Evoking the trope of users gaining accessing forbidden information, it stated: 'it is now split across multiple servers to better withstand attempts at censorship. **If you've made it this far—congratulations!** Powerful vested interests are doing their best to prevent it.' Sheppard's site included numerous essays promoting anti-Semitic conspiracy theories as well as pseudo-scientific anal-

ysis arguing against the equality of men and women, a particular obsession of his. The website also offered tasters from his various print publications engaging with these themes, as well as details on how people could purchase them—via a PO Box based in Hull. For example, regarding his book *Anna Frank's Novel: The 'Diary' is a Fraud*, the website explained: '*Anne Frank's Diary*, claiming to document the period 12 June 1942–1 August 1944, is really a collection of letters to eight imaginary people, sketches and fictional stories. The collection was supplemented and rewritten when Annelies Marie Frank decided to write a novel in 1944'. Other pages ranged enormously, some analysing on taboo subjects such as cannibalism; another offered extract from John Charnley's memoir about his time in the British Union of Fascists, *Blackshirts and Roses*. There was even a guide to using a variant of the programming language BBC Basic. The overall impression is akin to Campbell's ideas on the cultic milieu, offering readers access a many esoteric themes, some ideologically fascist others not. It was a world apart from the efforts by the BNP to present themselves as legitimate through their new online spaces.

While the www.heretical.com (1999a) website was primarily a portal to Sheppard's own esoteric interests, it also included a link to www.skrewdriver.org (1999), the website for Blood & Honour England. Blood & Honour, founded in 1987 by Ian Stuart Donaldson, had by this point become a transnational network of neo-Nazi activists held together by a shared culture of White Power Music (Pollard 2016). The first substantial Wayback Machine record for this site was from 28 April 1999. Here, an early form of online shopping appeared central. An ISD Records CD List and Order Form included a range of CDs, at £12 per disk. After printing the form, people could send cheques or postal orders 'leaving the payee blank', or send cash in US dollars, to an address in Denmark. There was also an option to place any non-music orders via another website, one that did take online credit card payments. However, this linked back to a www.heretical.com webpage selling Sheppard's books, as well as a wide range of posters featuring Norse mythological themes (heretical.com 1999b).

As well as online shopping, Blood & Honour's early website included pages that demonstrated its neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic credentials, such as 'Adolf Hitler on Jews' and 'What is "ZOG"'. It also expressed the trans-

national nature of Blood & Honour, with reports on 'News from B&H Spain', and 'Stand by Serbia'. There were also several pages dedicated to Ian Stuart Donaldson, founder of Blood & Honour, who died in a car crash in 1993, promoting a mythology of 'Ian Stuart' as a martyr for international neo-Nazism. These neo-Nazi webpages were more ideologically coherent than Sheppard's, though still offered taboo knowledge, a sense of mission and an alternate worldview deeply oppositional towards mainstream values—all evocative of the cultic milieu.

Sheppard was also involved in creating the website www.redwatch.org, launched in 2001. Once more, this website was driven by opposition to mainstream values. Along with Sheppard as technical support, it was run by, among others, Kevin Watmough and Tony White (redwatch.org 2001). The aim of the Redwatch website—itself an extension of a print newsletter of the same name published by Combat 18 in the 1990s—was essentially to engage in an early form of doxing, publishing photographs and addresses of left-wing activists and anti-fascists. Clearly racist, its posts were also steeped in a language of highly aggressive homophobia. Alongside pages listing details of left-wing activists organised by cities and regions, the Wayback Machine archived a version of www.redwatch.org from August 2002 that included a 'Reds on the Net' section, featuring the names and photos of twelve people, most with an email address, presumably to encourage online harassment (redwatch.org 2002). Redwatch developed several mirror sites too, including www.redwatch.net and www.redwatch.co.uk. A recent iteration of the site explains this was necessary due 'to a hysterical campaign by Marxist moaners against Redwatch' (redwatch.org 2018).

The Redwatch website linked to another Blood & Honour / Combat 18 website, www.skrewdriver.net (2000). The Wayback Machine has archives of this website dating back to October 2000. A December 2000 variant includes a range of material, including a version of the Blood & Honour Field Manual written by 'Max Hammer', which includes a specific chapter called 'Violence and Terror' as well as an online magazine called *Strikeforce*. This webpage was archived later (screwdriver.net 2001), and its articles included 'Holohoax!' which analysed the impact of the first Holocaust Memorial Day in Britain, that took place in 2001, through its lens of its deeply conspiratorial neo-Nazi worldview. One article in

*Strikeforce* was an interview the White Power band Razor's Edge, while another webpage feature interviewed Serbian Action, an openly militant National Socialist group that emerged from Blood & Honour activism in the Balkans region during the breakup of Yugoslavia. As well as ideological material, www.skrewdriver.net included an online chat room (though Wayback Machine archiving does not allow access to this), and a guest-book where people could write in comments of support and criticism for the movement as a whole. Such elements within the website suggest efforts to develop a sense of online community in these early, overly neo-Nazi web spaces.

Along with Morrison, Watmough helped to found the White Nationalist Party (WNP) in 2002, another neo-Nazi groupuscule of the period. The White Nationalist Party was again keen to present a far more extreme version of a fascist politics than was offered by the BNP at this time. Its online presence was www.aryanunity.com (2002). As an archived statement on its webpage shortly after it was founded explained, 'The Purposes of this Site…' is to 'represent the interests of the ultra Nationalists of Great Britain', necessary as 'with the advent of "Populism" into the edges of the mainstream of British politics, there are many of us who refuse to compromise our principles and strategy'. Clearly critical of the BNP's direction under Griffin, it argued that the White Nationalist Party offered a more authentic version of a white nationalist politics. In terms of ideological material, the site featured an online book by Morrison, *The White Revolution*, offering not only a racist pseudo-history of Britain but also a 'political blueprint for the future salvation' of the white race. After surveying Britain from pre-Roman times to the present day, the conclusions stressed a transnational project, as:

> White nations all over the world must throw of the shackles of Zionist International Finance … A new line up of White nations all dedicated to a racial Imperialism would have no boundaries and could look to the stars!

As well as such material promoting an international vision for revolution, to encourage interaction there was also guestbook, once again acting akin to a letters page in a more traditional publication; and even an online poll, here asking the question 'Is an Aryan World possible?' Alongside

features encouraging reader participation, there was practical guidance for activists. The page 'Organising a White Nationalist Party Unit' included tips on leafletting, using PO Boxes and developing press releases to raise awareness for the party. Such tactics suggest a limited embrace of new types of online activism, as all involved older methods, such as using letterboxes, postal services and engaging with the print media. Indicating expectation that activists may receive attention from the police, there was also a page titled 'The Political Rebel's Survival Kit', offering advice on how to avoid arrest, and what to do if this did happen.

There was a transnational element to White Nationalist Party in other ways, as it described itself as the UK branch of the organisation Aryan Unity, which had its own pages on the www.aryanunity.com website. These included a description of the organisation's main aims, promoting 'co-operation between White Nationalist Organisations throughout the world' and working 'with the FOURTEEN WORDS as our guide for the preservation of our Aryan people for the future.' There was also a page that advertised the sale of *Signal*, described as a quarterly 'multi-media CD-ROM magazine' that was 'packaged in a professional and great way to learn about White Nationalism.' Copies cost £2.50, were available through a PO Box address based in London, paid for by cheques and postal orders made out to WNP, or foreign banknotes worth £5.00. The Aryan Unity pages were filled with more ideological content, such as another online book by Morrison, his 'politico-biography' *Memoirs of a Street Soldier*, which he dedicated to the inspiration offered by American Nazi Party founder George Lincoln Rockwell; and a link to an online copy of *Mein Kampf*. There were articles on a range of fascist-related topics, from the Spanish interwar fascist Antonio Primo de Rivera, to William Pierce's obituary for George Lincoln Rockwell, to a discussion by Tomislav Sunic on the idea of death in the writings of the Romanian intellectual and sympathiser with the fascist Iron Guard, Emile Cioran. Such elements again evoked a fascist variant of the cultic milieu, and show that online content could be quite lengthy and even include philosophically complex material. The pages also feature a news section, sharing emotive stories on themes such as attacks on white people by black people, and issues around immigration from America, Australia, New Zealand, as well as the UK, arguing that white people were threat-

ened around the globe. Finally, showing Morrison's debt to earlier British fascists, it also featured several pages dedicated to Colin Jordan, including a reproduction of his dystopian, racist novella *Merrie England—2000*.

In sum, for those seeking the most extreme forms of neo-Nazi fascist activism, by the early 2000s British activists had developed a range of webpages that promoted small, clandestine groups, and allowed people to access a rich array of ideological material steeped in National Socialist themes. Typically, these had a more cultic element than was found on the BNP's website, which itself aimed at mainstream acceptance.

## David Irving, Troy Southgate and the Online Fascist Intelligentsia

As well as overtly neo-Nazi activists, other early adopters of online activism included what could be described as Britain's fascist intelligentsia, those who tried to present their extreme political views in more intellectualised ways. Most prominently, another keen early adopter was David Irving. The Wayback Machine's first archived page for the website for Focal Point Publications, www.fpp.co.uk, was 2 December 1998 (fpp.co.uk 1998). A hub for Irving's ideas, it demonstrated his entrepreneurial approach to self-promotion. Giving him an aura of legitimacy, its homepage featured decontextualised quotes styling Irving merely as a radical historian, including from leading historian of the Holocaust Hans Mommsen as well as the respected academic journal *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*. By this time www.fpp.co.uk was well established, and displayed engagement between readers and Irving himself. For example, it included fifty letters sent to Irving from a range of authors. Often he replied online too, making his online engagement with fans public. This section of his website was described as fostering open debate, and stated Irving would publish any letters he received, unless asked not to. One letter, written during Irving's attempt to prosecute Deborah Lipstadt for libel, stated:

> Best wishes in your fight in the courts. Freedom of thought, speech [sic] and truth is a long drawn out process that only the strongest of men can endure. I am an American, but freedom of speech and thought must be universal for the truth to endure. Best of luck from across the pond.

Another was written by the daughter of Arthur Liebehenschel, one of the commandant's of Auschwitz. She enquired whether the crematorium she had seen on a visit to Auschwitz I was actually used during the Second World War. Irving's reply stated the Polish government created it after the war, adding 'More women died on the back seat of **Edward Kennedy**'s car at Chappaquiddick than were murdered in that "chamber"'. Authors of letters also included: Anneliese Remer, the widow of Otto Remer—who was central to foiling the plot to kill Hitler in 1944 and later became a founder of the Socialist Reich Party in West Germany, among other neo-Nazi activities—commenting on her problems with the German government; and a former student at Berkley who explained she enjoyed Irving's talk on campus in 1994, was a fan of his books, and how she disliked the way the university's history professors tried to discredit him in her classes.

Elsewhere, Irving's website showed his international profile. For example, events and tours to various countries, including South Africa and especially America, were given dedicated pages, often framed around lengthy excerpts from his diary as well as photos of him addressing large, attentive audiences. The website also featured stories detailing how Irving struggled against Jewish individuals and organisations. This included a page that highlighted the Anti-Defamation League was threating legal action unless its logo was removed from Irving's website; another explained the Board of Deputies of British Jews were raising funds for Deborah Lipstadt, for her libel defence case. Irving's role in the controversy around the Hitler diaries scandal was also included, as the website described his actions as unmasking reports in *Der Stern*, *The Sunday Times* and *Newsweek* that claimed these notorious forgeries were genuine. While these types of pages are to be expected from a Holocaust denial website, other elements are more curious. There were short summaries of not only the staff Irving employed, but also his family. Moreover, the site advertised an extensive collection of photos, and documents, linked to Reinhard Heydrich including letters by his wife Lina Heydrich and others detailing his relationship with Heinrich Himmler. Described as being in the hands of a private collector who now wished to sell the collection, Irving both vouched for the collection's veracity and acted as a point of contact for anyone wanting to purchase the set.

The website also included a link to an online version of David Irving's *Action Report*, another effort to proselytise Holocaust denial themes. One page commented on ways that the Anti-Defamation League was trying to free speech on the Internet. The article 'Cyberspace is Still out of Control' explained this was happening in two ways that even George Orwell would have found beyond imaginable:

- They are seeking technical ways of blocking material that they find objectionable.
- They are seeking ways of forcing governments to impose this software on the communications industry at every level.

The mainstream was not to be trusted, in other words, and was attacking those who opposed it online, such as Irving. Like the BNP at this time, Irving was clearly aware of new possibilities of self-promotion and communication the Internet offered.

While Irving offers one example of an online fascist 'scholar', there were others who sought to cast new forms of fascism in an intellectual light, using online tools. Troy Southgate was an activist who linked to the National Front in the 1990s, who then went through a range of ideological transformations—explored more fully by Graham Macklin (2005)—to become what he described as a National Anarchist. By the early 2000s, he was a leading figure in the National Anarchist milieu, and helped run its online academic-style journal *Terra Firma: National Anarchism Online*, hosted at www.terrafirma.rosenoire.org. The Wayback Machine's earliest capture is from January 2004, and it reproduced the Summer 2003 edition of *Terra Firma*. This included an essay outlining of the core ideals of National Anarchism, using the pseudonym 'Darksphere', explaining some of its core principles:

> The National-Anarchist thus aims to create a kind of popular Nationalism in which the culture of his/her Nation is kept alive through a living, vibrant interest in the public for the culture of the Nation rather than through artificial State-support: A popular Nationalism in which people freely decide to indulge in their own culture. (terrafirma.rosenoir.org 2004)

Southgate also explained, in an interview republished from *L'Ecole Europa*, that National Anarchism was neither left or right wing, and so distinct from traditionally 'right-wing' parties such as the National Front and the BNP. The website also featured interviews with a diverse range of international figures, such as the French activist Christian Bouchet and the Russian Victor Anpilov, among others. Authors of articles in this edition of the journal included Tomislav Sunic, who wrote on the theme of 'Intellectual Terrorism'; a discussion on the ideological power of the film 'Fight Club' by Greek activist Achilles Kritikos; and an essay by Jonothon Boulter on the idea of the Anarch, which was described as 'endlessly moving nomadically with mercurial freedom through thought, synthesising conflicting ideas. But always firmly grounded in Nihilism'. The site also had an associated Yahoo group. Although a closed site and not archived, the Wayback Machine has preserved a capture of its homepage from February 2004 listing 108 members (Yahoo.com 2004). Finally, notably the site had a links page, with over 80 suggestions, spanning Hezbollah, the Russian National Bolshevik Party, the Sexual Freedom Coalition, David Icke, the Unabomber manifesto, and the Ramblers Association. Again, such an eclectic range of (mostly) esoteric and (mostly) counter mainstream perspectives is to be expected from the cultic milieu.

Another link listed on www.terrafirma.rosenoire.org was to *The Scorpion*, a pseudo-academic publication run by Michael Walker, a leading British representative of the European *Nouvelle Droite*. The Wayback Machine's earliest archive for the website www.thescorp.multics.org is 15 December 2002. The first online edition of *The Scorpion* was edition 15, which included a 12,000 word essay by Walker titled 'The State', exploring the history, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of states; and an essay by leading light of the *Nouvelle Droite*, Alain de Benoist, on the achievements and importance of Ernst Jünger (thescorp.multics.org 2002). Issues 17–22 were also available online, with essays on topics as diverse as Julius Evola's politics, Roger Pearson's ideas on eugenics, and the philosophy of Carl Schmitt. Back issues of *The Scorpion* were also available, either as a hard copy, priced between £1 and £5, or alternatively editions 1–19 were available as a CD priced £65. Like other sites of this period, there was a guestbook where visitors could leave comments, as well as an email contact.

Websites created by people such as Irving, Southgate and Walker were quite different from either those of the BNP, or overtly neo-Nazi sites such as Redwatch. These spaces though were primarily about broadcasting fascist ideas, and to a degree fostering debate among activists. They often shared deeper, sometimes quite philosophically driven, arguments that were certainly oppositional, and evocative of the cultic milieu, but were not primarily about directing party political or direct activism.

## Conclusions

Surveying these websites helps draw out some broad observations on the variety of attitudes, practices and approaches among British fascists. By the early 2000s, the BNP in particular was finding many ways to take advantage of new modes of online communication, and recognised its potential to circumvent traditional media. By the end of the 2000s, it was certainly a leader in this field among fellow British fascists. The BNP cast a shadow over other forms of British fascism, and the party was often much criticised by the wider array of British fascist activists. In the shadow of Nick Griffin, other fascist groupuscules of the period presented their activism as more authentic when compared to what they saw as the sell-out BNP. The websites of the National Front and especially the White Nationalist Party included clear examples of this trope, though were clearly less well resourced. Nevertheless, activists linked to these smaller groupuscules produced innovations such as CD magazines, and sale of material online. Often, these more extreme sites engaged with elements of the cultic milieu to give their activism some sense of deeper, more profound significance. This was especially clear in websites created by activists such as Simon Sheppard, Troy Southgate and Martin Walker, whose online spaces in various ways presented extreme positions at variance with those of the BNP and made claims of disseminating higher truths denied by mainstream society.

While the rise of Web 2.0 has made online activism much easier, these early online offerings from British fascists were certainly innovative in their era. They show clear evidence of activists developing range of tactics that now seem commonplace, from using the Internet to circumvent

mainstream media, to selling merchandise and generating new income streams, to disseminating ideological material, to decrying opponents and even doxing. British fascists at the turn of the millennium can certainly be described as people experimenting with, and embracing, online activism. Some were remarkably prescient. Indeed, Nick Griffin's interpretation of the potential for online activism from 1999, arguing that the Internet would soon transform the abilities of revolutionaries such as himself to connect directly with likeminded followers, in many ways seems remarkably prophetic and accurate.

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# 3

# Cumulative Extremism and the Online Space: Reciprocal Radicalisation Effects Between the Extreme Right and Radical Islamists in the UK

**William Allchorn**

## Introduction

Originally coined in 2006 by prominent far-right scholar, Roger Eatwell, cumulative extremism (CE) has become a popular term in the social scientific and policy lexicon—being discussed variously as 'tit-for-tat radicalisation' (Jackson 2011), 'cumulative radicalisation' (Bartlett and Birdwell 2013) and the 'connectivity between extremisms' (Ranstorp 2010). Used to describe 'the way in which one form of extremism can feed off and magnify other forms' (Eatwell 2006: 205), it has most readily been used to describe instances of violent and non-violent tactical escalation between radical Islamists and the far right—with one notable study applying it to sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland (Carter 2016). This was however altogether different from Eatwell's initial use of the term—

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using the British example of the 2001 Milltown riots to demonstrate how communal polarisation can precipitate political violence.

Such has been the scale of interest and attention devoted to the idea of cumulative extremism, there has been a veritable cottage industry of literature engaged in both developing and proving the concept. One prominent example of this is Joel Busher and Graham Macklin's (2015a) article that sets out six proposals for how to make CE 'conceptually and analytically robust' (p. 886). In it, Busher and Macklin suggest that by making better distinctions between extreme narratives and actions, 'spirals of violence' and wider communal polarisation, as well as CE and the wider cultural, social and political environment, it might become 'a *useful* addition to the vocabulary of scholarly and policy debates about extremism' (p. 885). In addition, Jamie Bartlett and Jonathan Birdwell (2013) also made a useful addition to the early literature that largely focused on developing cumulative extremism as a social scientific concept. Coming in the wake of the Woolwich terror attacks, Bartlett and Birdwell's 'provocation essay' set out to challenge four underlying assumptions of CE. In it, Bartlett and Birdwell debunk suggestions that: (1) 'the activities of one side will result in the increase of support for the other side' (i.e. the 'recruiting sergeant' argument); (2) the 'activities of one side will trigger the retaliation of the other' (i.e. the 'spiralling violence' argument); (3) 'the process affects both sides equally'; and that (4) 'tackling radicalisation on one side, requires also tackling radicalisation on the other' (pp. 5–10). Instead, they conclude that—apart from interactions between opposing forms of extremism themselves—'…other aspects of the environment [such as policy, political opportunities and socio-political relations] are likely to be significant' in determining whether action escalates towards violence between two opposing extremist groups (p. 12).

More recently, studies of CE have tried to add empirical flesh onto the conceptual bones of earlier works—with three works standing out in particular. The first, written again by Joel Busher and Graham Macklin (2015b), aims to map the 'missing spirals of violence' between fascist and anti-fascist groups (such as the British Union of Fascists (BUF), National Front [NF], British National Party [BNP], 43 Group, Socialist Worker's

Party and Anti-Fascist Action) but also extremist Islamist and the far right in the UK (e.g. the English Defence League [EDL] and Al-Muhajiroun). What they find is that '…in none of the four cases do we find the kinds of 'spirals' of violence that have been invoked in some discussions about Cumulative Extremism' (p. 58). Instead, they suggest that movement strategies, intra-movement dynamics, the role of state actors as well as movement cultures and identities are better predictors of patterns of violent escalation between opposing groups.

The second study to explore the usefulness of CE in empirical reality was Alex Carter's 2016 article in a special edition of the journal, *Behavioural Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression.* In it, Carter despairs at the 'surprisingly scant empirical investigation' of CE and the literatures hitherto exclusive focus on non-escalation (p. 37). He therefore examines Loyalist and Republican escalation from peaceful protest to lethal sectarian violence in Northern Ireland from the early 1960s to 1972. What he finds is that '…the greater the extent to which the mutually incompatible goals of opposing social movements correspond to the symbolic and material interests of wider distinct communities, the greater the chances of CE' (p. 46)—acting as both a 'recruiting sergeant' for either side and the continuing escalation of conflict.

The third and most recent text to empirically investigate the CE concept is Carter's (2018) edited book chapter—looking this time at movement–countermovement contests between fascists and anti-fascists in Britain between 1967 and 1979. What he finds is qualified empirical proof of the CE concept—with National Front and Anti-Nazi League mobilisations during the period 'coevolv[ing] in a much more closely symbiotic, or tightly and symmetrically coupled, fashion' (p. 108). This Carter (ibid.) compares with minority community mobilisations against the newly emergent National Front who 'were [understandably] much more reluctant to engage with the far right.' Moreover, Carter detects recognisable tactical escalation between the far-right, anti-fascists and minority groups during the period—with the National Front setting up its own Honour Guard in response to Socialist Worker's Party Squads and Bengali groups training themselves in karate in order to defend themselves from the National Front on the streets (p. 107).

Despite this more empirical turn in the literature on CE, there still remains room for more studies grounded in reality that focus attention on improving this concept. In particular, there is a gap in current studies on CE that focus on ideological, rhetorical and discursive forms of escalation rather than purely tactical, behavioural or violent forms of escalation.[1] As Busher and Macklin (2015a: 888) point out:

> [T]he tactical choices made by social movement activists are shaped by the protest narratives that they and their supporters construct, and these tactical choices are in turn likely to shape how activists feel about their opponents and how they narrate their struggle.

Here, we are therefore looking at narrative—as opposed to action—forms of escalation, using McCauley and Moskalenko's (2008: 417) idea of a pyramid that sees greater radicalisation of beliefs, feelings and behaviours as one reaches the top. This conceptualises radicalisation as 'changes in beliefs, feelings and behaviour in the direction of increased support for a political conflict' (McCauley and Moskalenko 2010: 82). Furthermore, much has been written focusing on offline cases of CE. Whilst it is important to look at physical interactions, increasingly important are online manifestations of reciprocal radicalisation that then go-on to have a real world impact.[2] For example, and as posed by Busher and Macklin (ibid.: 895–896), 'What differences are there between online and offline encounters in terms of the way that they contribute to solidifying, polarising, and radicalising group identities?' This chapter will do just that—looking at online–offline radicalisation effects between far-right and extremist Islamist groups in the seven days before and after a number of terrorist attacks that shook the UK from March to June 2017.

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[1] The prime exception to this being Matthew Feldman's (2012) Faith Matters essay looking at the role of the 'clash of civilisations' in radicalising the European and US far right.

[2] An example of this being the English Defence League's 5 June 2017 'March on Parliament'—coming after an escalation in online Twitter activity; both in terms of the tone and extremity of posts.

# Methods and Cases: Online Content Analysis and the UK's 2017 Wave of Terror

In order to measure with some exactitude moments of escalation between opposing extremist groups online, it is first important to identify a focal event that might cause a spike in radicalisation effects between said groups. In late spring/early summer 2017, such a focal event came about—with the UK coming under sustained attack from both extreme Islamists and a far-right terrorist. The first attack was in March 2017 when a 52-year-old man, Khalid Masood, drove through crowds of tourists on Westminster Bridge before entering the Palace of Westminster and fatally wounding a police officer (*The Daily Telegraph*, 26 March 2017). Such an attack shocked the nation and became a source of publicity for far-right vloggers, such as the former EDL leader Tommy Robinson (Oppenheim, 22 March 2017). The second of these came at the end of May when a young, twenty-two-year-old man of Libyan extraction, Salman Abedi, detonated an explosive vest at the end of an Arianna Grande pop concert—killing 22 people and injuring 120 (*The Daily Telegraph*, 26 May 2017). Continuing the cruder nature of attacks around this period, the third came at the start of June when a van (again) mounted the pavement near London Bridge—after which the attackers ran to a nearby restaurants and pubs in Borough Market to attack customers there (*BBC News*, 12 June 2017). Finally, in late June, a 47 year-old man from South Wales, Darren Osborne, drove a van into a group of late night worshippers at Finsbury Park Mosque—killing one man and wounding several others. Osborne was reported to have shouted 'I want to kill all Muslims' whilst driving into the crowd and had previously followed the leaders of UK far-right group, Britain First, and former leader of the English Defence League and Pegida UK, Tommy Robinson, on Twitter (Morris, 21 June 2017).

Unfortunately for the researcher, Twitter and other social media sites do not carry sufficient historical posts to look at all far-right and extreme Islamist groups as far back as the Westminster attack. Only the British National Party's (BNP) official twitter account holds historical posts dating back to the seven days before and after the Westminster attack, whilst the accounts of the English Defence League, Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), and Britain First all hold data from late April onwards. Such restrictions pre-

vent the observation of extreme Islamist-far right escalation in the online space across the wave of terror cited but do, however, at least allow us to conduct a content analysis of posts. Here, we operationalise McCauley and Moskalenko's (2008) idea of narrative radicalisation by looking at escalation in tone, frequency and ideological claims made seven days before and after these attacks. We also conduct a theme analysis of posts as well as monitoring key individuals identified to map changes in issues and targets of communication over time. Moreover, we do this in a 'nested' fashion—focusing on each group's response to a specific focal event.

This chapter, therefore, will mainly focus on the radicalising effects of the offline event as a form of cumulative extremism—taking the Twitter profiles of two right-wing extremist groups (the British National Party and English Defence League) and one radical Islamist group (Hizb ut-Tahrir). These accounts were selected due to ease of access and transparency of record at the time of research (July 2017). Moreover, they give us a representative sample of party-political, social movement and campaign organisations aligned with these movements. Finally, they represent the national-level discourse of all actors concerned—presenting the most prominent public-facing messages from the parties involved at the time of attacks, and therefore, the content that their opponents would have ready access to in the wake of the March–June 2017 terror incidents.

## Case 1: The British National Party and the Westminster Terror Attack (22 March 2017)

Many of the British National Party's Twitter posts in the seven days prior to the Westminster Terror Attack showed comment by the neo-fascist party on a number of domestic and foreign affairs issues. At the start of the period under review, for example, the @BNP official twitter account expressed support for the anti-Islam activist and leader of the Dutch Freedom Party PVV, Geert Wilders—striking a populist note by suggesting that 'The people of Europe are starting to wake up to the lies & betrayal from out of touch politicians' (British National Party, 15 March 2017a). It did not take long for one BNP activist to place a more extreme stance on this populist message—commenting: '[I] wonder if [the Dutch Parliamentary elections] will be as rigged with Muslim electoral fraud as it is here???' (Ibid.) In any case, this

initial message was followed by a number of foreign affairs announcements that related to the acquittal of a UK marine who had killed a wounded Taliban fighter and the celebration of St. Patrick's Day—complete with the provocative epithet, 'Make the most of it. Multiculturalism is killing cultures!' (British National Party, 17 March 2017b) (Fig. 3.1). Finally, this 'pre-attack' period concluded with BNP complaints over the BBC's coverage of Martin McGuiness, former Deputy Northern Ireland First Minister and Irish Republican Army commander. Commenting on a specific article describing McGuiness as a 'peacemaker', the @BNP twitter account replied with thinly veiled indignation at such an adjective—posting in response a picture of a dead soldier killed by the IRA in the late 1980s (British National Party, 21 March 2017c). All these posts were regularly interspersed by petitions to join and donate to the party).



**Fig. 3.1**   BNP's 'Traitorous @BBC' tweet

Moving on to domestic issues highlighted in the run up to the Westminster Attack, these varied between usual tropes about the negative effects of multiculturalism and 'Islamisation' as well as more specific issues around child sex offenders and homosexuality in the UK. Starting with the former, the period started with a Brietbart News article—highlighting how the news of foiled Bristolian suicide bomb plot demonstrated 'the full horror of 'diversity and enrichment' (British National Party, 15 March 2017d). Turning to the issue of 'Islamisation', the BNP piggy-backed on 'broken' and 'toxic' comments by Baroness Warsi about the UK's Prevent strategy stating that 'The best 'Prevent Strategy' is to stop the further Islamification of Britain … Halt immigration / send illegals back!' (British National Party, 20 March 2017e). Finally, and concluding on a more worrying note, the BNP also made a number of pronouncements seven days prior to the Westminster Attack on the issue of the restoration of capital punishment for child sex offenders and how the Labour Party has turned a 'blind eye' to the so-called Muslim Rape Gangs (British National Party, 21 March 2017f). Moreover, in a tweeted article entitled 'Homosexuality—Where does the BNP stand?', the group is clear about its opposition to same-sex marriage and identifies the 'real threat' to gay people coming from 'radical Muslims who believe their [sic] should be stoned to death' (British National Party, 19 March 2017g).

So moving on to the day of the Westminster Terror Attack and the seven day period after, we see a clear radicalisation in discourse and shift in focus by the BNP against Muslims and Islam more generally. Tweeting their first article about the attacks, the @BNP official account decided to focus on the identity and ethnicity of the terrorist—stating cryptically: 'Another "Asian" doing what "Asians" do best perhaps? Or perhaps yet another mentally ill "Asian"' (see Fig. 3.2, British National Party, 22 March 2017h). This clearly prejudicial post is joined by other shrill pieces of commentary targeted at either mainstream or identifiably Muslim politicians in the UK. For example, in one post with a photo-shopped image of London Mayor Sadiq Khan, the party replies to the Mayor's comments that 'terror attacks are part and parcel of living in a big city' by suggesting that: 'The #BNP would say this is only when there is a significant Muslim population' (British National Party, 24 March 2017i). Moreover, in a tweet posted the day after the attack, the party states that: 'The blood of

**Fig. 3.2**   BNP's 'Another mentally ill "Asian"' tweet

every victim is on the hands of immigrant loving politicians. They have betrayed the British people' (British National Party, 23 March 2017j). Finally, and again highlighting the ability of the party to weave its own populist xenophobic discourse into current events, the BNP takes aim at the *Guardian* and its headline reading 'Killed by a Homegrown Terrorist'— suggesting that it should read: 'Killed by consecutive immigrant loving traitorous British governments who continue to ethnically cleanse Britain' (see Fig. 3.3, British National Party, 23 March 2017k).

## Case 2: The EDL and the Manchester Terror Attack (22 May 2017)

Another far-right group that also weighed in on the 2017 wave of terror attacks in the UK were the anti-Islam protest movement, the English Defence League. Firmly in decline at the time of the attacks (like the BNP), the group has taken to espouse most of its borderline Islamophobic

**Fig. 3.3** BNP's 'Traitorous British Governments' tweet

rhetoric on social media. Unfortunately, restrictions around tweet retention inhibit a proper comparative analysis of Twitter posts before and after the second successive attack to hit the UK in 2017—the Manchester Arena attacks on 22 May. Having said this, we do have sufficient Twitter data to plot the extent of radicalisation (or extremity in content and tone of online discourse) after the event. What is surprising about the advent of the second terror attack and the content posted to the @EDLofficialpage is the level of initial non-escalation. It was not until several days after the attack on 27 May that we see the group's first tweet about the incident. Even then, the tone is fairly muted—with the snide remark of 'But they will NEVER match the hate crime of the bombing' accompanying the BBC headline 'Hate crime 'doubles' after jihadi bombing in Manchester'

**Fig. 3.4** EDL's 'Hate Crimes & Jihadi Bombings' tweet

(see Fig. 3.4, English Defence League, 27 May 2017a). The main focus by the group in the immediate aftermath of the 22 May attacks seems to be a campaign against sexual grooming in Rochdale. With tweets focusing on the religion and ethnicity of the perpetrators, child sexual exploitation is clearly a focal issue for the group. For example, one tweeted headline reads: 'Rochdale horror goes on as Muslim child sexual abuse continues 10 years on' (English Defence League, 27 May 2017b). This is accompanied by other instances of violent crime that highlight the Muslim background of the perpetrators (English Defence League, 27 May 2017c). As the week after the attack elapses and more about the terrorist, Salman Abedi, emerges, however, most of the attention of the @EDLofficialpage account turns to the identity and religion of the attacker. On the day that the identity of the attacker was revealed, the group tweeted four national newspapers carrying the picture of Salman Abedi on their front pages with the comment: '5% of Population, 100% of

Headlines.' Moreover, this was joined by several posts focusing on the mosque where the attacker had worshipped and its potential role in Salman Abedi's radicalisation.

## Case 3: The EDL and the London Bridge Attack (3 June 2017)

Looking at the radicalisation effects of the next 2017 terror attack and the seven days before the London Bridge attack, the @EDLofficialpage Twitter account was mainly taken up by advertisement for the group's demonstration against the Manchester attacks. This involved the publication of a so-called media briefing (English Defence League, 1 June 2017d), responses to local politicians who publicly stated that the group was not welcome in the City (English Defence League, 1 June 2017e) and final arrangements for the group (English Defence League, 2 June 2017f) as well as images highlighting protest action on the day itself. Other posts during the period leading up to the attacks on London Bridge and Borough Market mainly highlighted negative news stories about Islam and the refugee crisis. Similar to the aftermath of the Manchester terror attacks, one of the predominant focuses of posts was on the issue of child sexual exploitation as part of one of the group's ongoing campaigns. Many such posts highlight the religious identity of the perpetrator—with one tweeting a link to a 'public database' on (mainly Muslim) 'grooming gangs', kept and maintained by the group since 2012 (English Defence League, 29 May 2017g). Other stories about the refugee crisis tended to highlight the dysfunction within aid agencies (English Defence League, 2 June 2017h) or displayed calls for boats from the Horn of Africa to be sent back (English Defence League, 2 June 2017i) (Fig. 3.5).

In contrast, and compared with the group's initial response to the Manchester attacks, the @EDLofficialpage's coverage and escalation—in both the tone and extremity of rhetoric—was relatively instantaneous in the seven days after the London Bridge Attack. Coming to the day of the aforementioned Liverpool demonstration, again, the radicalisation of

**Fig. 3.5** EDL's 'Aid & Sexual Exploitation' tweet

discourse surrounding the religion of the perpetrator and potential courses of action was profound—with an underlying anti-elitist message becoming part of a lot of posts in the aftermath of the attack. For example, one of the first tweets after the attack was a meme—saying: 'Let's not jump to conclusions … aaand it's Islam' (English Defence League, 3 June 2017j). Moreover, and tweeting coverage by the Daily Mail on Sunday, the @EDLofficialpage stood by its slogan of '5% of the Population, 100% of the headlines' (English Defence League, 4 June 2017k). More specifically, the group called for tougher measures on suspected radical Muslims (English Defence League, 5 June 2017l) and the effects of 'Islamism' and 'Islamisation' (English Defence League, 4 June 2017m). In terms of anti-elite rhetoric, a number of retweets were issued by the group from prominent right-wing and far-right commentators in the

wake of the attacks. Signalling part of the indignation at the centre of the @EDLofficialpage's reaction to the London Bridge Attack, they reiterated the comments of a former British Army officer, who stated that: 'Today 73 years ago our soldiers didn't storm into the face of German fire for a country that would knowingly harbour mass killers & rapists' (Anonymous 1, 6 June 2017). Finally, the EDL also retweeted the comments of far-right activist and former Pegida UK and Liberty GB leader, Paul Weston, who criticised Sadiq Khan's comments about terrorism being 'all part and parcel living in a city' by suggesting that 'Oddly enough, [this] doesn't happen in Bratislava or Prague' (Weston, 3 June 2017a). In a separate video, also retweeted by the @EDLofficialpage group, Weston calls Theresa May and other politicians 'a traitor class who are pretending to deal with Islamic terrorism'; he suggests halting Muslim immigration, shutting down mosques, banning the Koran as a 'hateful book' and shutting down sharia courts as the only way to 'halt Islamic terror' (Fig. 3.6; Weston, 4 June 2017b). It was no surprise that this ramping up of rhetoric about 'action' on the issue of Islamic terrorism led to the announcement of a second EDL demonstration; this time a 'March on Parliament' on 5 June—demonstrating how rhetoric in the online space can translate onto the streets.



**Fig. 3.6**  Paul Weston's 'Combat Islamic Terror' tweet

## Case 4: Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Finsbury Park Mosque Attack (19 June 2017)

In order to contrast CE effects of Islamist extremism on the far right, it is also noteworthy to contrast these with the same effects of extreme right-wing terror attacks on radical Islamist organisations. Here, the British branch of the international pan-Islamic organisation, Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), has been chosen as a suitable proxy for the attitudes and aims of radical Islamists in the UK. Hizb ut-Tahrir was chosen specifically because of its radical critique of Western democracy and emphasis on the restoration of an 'Islamic Khilafah'—something shared with more extreme UK-based Islamist groups, such as Al-Muhajiroun, who have been banned because of their ties with domestic terrorist activities. Like the above, we will look at the seven days before and after the attack by an opposing movement; in this case, our focus will be on the terror attack carried out on the Finsbury Park Mosque in the follow-up to the end of Ramadan that saw one man die and several others injured whilst worshippers were attending midnight prayers.

As one might expect, a lot of the posts issued by the @hizbuttahrir UK Twitter account in the seven days leading up to the attack were on the subject of Ramadan. Some of these were retweets of high-ranking, UK-based and international members of HT and talked around the themes of blessings, victories and Islamic heroes. For instance, in one post by an HT activist, they invite Facebook followers to 'Name 30 blessings we are enjoying during #Ramadan' (Anonymous 2, 12 June 2017). Moreover, another talks of the seventh-century 'great Battle of Badr', which 'made Muslims look forward in anticipation towards a new era in which the whole Arabian Peninsula would follow the Deen of Islam' (Anonymous 3, 12 June 2017). Finally, one also lists a number of historical battles in which Muslims were a deciding force (Hizb ut-Tahrir, 12 June 2017a). After a while, however, such anodyne posts are replaced by tweets that reveal the underlying political message. Of particular note are regular retweets by HT's Pakistan media office, whose first tweet during this period was that: 'Muslims must restore their shield, the Islamic Khilafah State, so that #Ramadhan [sic] becomes a month of victory

**Fig. 3.7**    Anonymous 4's 'Democrats & Garbage Bens' tweet

again…' (Media Office HizbPK, 12 June 2017). Moreover, others criticise democrats as 'produce of life's "garbage ben [sic] of Thoughts"' (Fig. 3.7; Anonymous 4, 15 June 2017) as well as UK foreign policy for having the 'technology to bomb people abroad but not to save people at home #GrenfellTower' (Hizb ut-Tahrir, 16 June 2017b). These posts, then, feed into and amplify the group's core ideological aims of criticising democratic forms of governance and Western foreign policy.

In the seven days after the Finsbury Park Mosque attack, and contrary to expectation, there was no escalation in rhetoric on HT's twitter account. In fact, and in contrast to most right-wing extremist content reviewed above, the Islamist discourse was quite low key with only one tweet noticeably claiming that British Muslims are forced to 'leave Islamic values for secular values' (Anonymous 5, 19 June 2017a). The tone and content of other tweets was therefore quite measured and sensible—revolving around critiques of attack's coverage, the British Governments response and sources of Islamophobia that might have led to the radicalisation of the attacker. One example of these comments was by a UK-based activist. Live-tweeting in the wake of the attack, this activist bemoaned the belated use of labelling the incident as a 'terror' incident (Anonymous 5, 19 June 2017b). Moreover, he suggested the different treatment visited

**Fig. 3.8**   Anonymous 5's 'Finsbury Park & Armed Police Raids' tweet

upon right-wing terrorists as compared to Islamic terrorists—suggesting that: 'After #FinsburyPark there won't be a series of armed police raids on this man's wife/mother to see if they knew about his intentions' (see Fig. 3.8, Anonymous 5, 19 June 2017c). Finally, subsequent posts explore the culpability of UK society and other mainstream actors. In one post tweeting a middleeasteye.net article, the tweet reads: 'How mainstream media in the West fuelled [sic] by Government agendas is radicalizing racist white men in2 [sic] violent extremism' (Anonymous 6, 20 June 2017). Moreover, the headline of another tweeted link reads: 'After Finsbury: Time for the UK's right-wing press to address its Islamophobia' (Anonymous 5, 20 June 2017d). While the underlying ideology of the group is radical, therefore, we actually see a non-escalation in radical content in the days after the Finsbury Park Terror attacks—suggesting a rather one-sided extreme right escalation in relation to the 2017 UK terror attacks online.

## Discussion

This survey of radical Islamist and far-right extremist online discourse in the wake of a number of terror attacks in early to mid-2017 throws an interesting light on the concept of cumulative extremism (CE) and the interaction between online and offline spaces. In terms of findings, there

is variation between different organisations and groups in terms of radicalism before and radicalisation after a particular incident by an opposing group. In the case of the BNP, it was most certainly the effect we were expecting—clear radicalisation in the tone and content of discourse following the Westminster attacks. This involved the 'ramping up' of rhetoric surrounding populist xenophobia but also anti-elitism—using them as potent cocktail to place the fault of the attack at the door of Islam as a religion but also the UK Government. This also led to fairly swingeing attacks on mainstream politicians for not taking tougher action earlier and for holding some culpability/complicity for the attacks.

Next, and in contrast with the first case study, the anti-Islam EDL's response to the Manchester Arena attacks were initially fairly muted—with a time lag of several days between the attack itself and its first mention on their @EDLofficialpage twitter account. Even after this, the response on their twitter page was slightly muted—confined to snide remarks and repetition of '5% of the population, 100% of the headlines' comments; this suggesting it was seemingly a distraction from the group's main aims of highlighting the issue of child exploitation among some South Asian communities in the UK. In direct contrast to this was the same as the group's response to the subsequent London Bridge terror attacks. Showing the comparative advantage of using a 'nested' set of case studies and repetitious targeting of the same groups, such an attack saw an instantaneous uptick in extreme rhetoric—with a specific radicalisation of discourse surrounding the religion of the perpetrator and potential courses of action. Partially attributable to a particular highpoint in activism (the night of a particularly large EDL march), this heightened emphasis demonstrates the importance of intra-movement dynamics pointed out in Busher and Macklin's (2015a) article on CE.

Finally, and moving on to Case 4, Hizb ut-Tahrir also showed an exception to the rule when it came to its displays of ideology and rhetoric, post-attack. Despite displaying some fairly innocent content before the Finsbury Park Mosque attack, underlying this was a thinly veiled promotion of the group's radical Islamist ideology. Moreover, and afterwards, @hizbuttahrir's UK twitter account actually displayed a toning down of its core ideology—putting forward reasoned comments on the coverage of the attack, the drivers of the attacker's motives and the

broader societal environment that might have let it happen. In sum, then, while two of the cases under study saw expected spirals of (narrative) radicalisation associated with the CE concept (Cases 1 & 3), the other two actually saw negligible or no impact (Cases 2 & 4); these 'missing spirals' might be as a result of a lack of validity in the CE concept but are most likely the result of intra-group aims and dynamics—with the EDL's large fixation on child sexual exploitation taking most of its focus and HT's direct targeting of the UK government and media rather than far-right group's per se.

## Broader Recommendations and Implications

The case studies discussed earlier have shed an interesting and as yet unseen light on the role of online–offline dynamics in relation to the CE concept that merit further attention. In particular, it is the first study to consider the online space and how offline events can spark escalation (and non-escalation) when it comes to the extremity and tone of discourse of a particular group as well as its ideology. Moreover, this has been applied to a unique wave of UK-based terror attacks—showing the broader ripples of a high-profile attack on these fringe political community's online. More work obviously needs to done in terms of sampling online—specifically given the limitations of accessing historical data on social media platforms. Also, a key limitation of this study is its inability to study direct processes of interaction between extremist groups. However, the novel 'nested' nature of the research design and demonstrable reaction to an offline incident markedly offsets this point about causality (i.e. while looser, it is still evident).

Feeding-forward, there have been several areas of interest that could be applied in future studies of the CE concept that this chapter has alluded to. The first is about the role of the media in shaping patterns of escalation and CE. As noted by Feldman and Littler (2015), media interpretations of significant terror events are crucial in shaping extremist discourse and radicalisation. In particular, the tone and framing of media stories acted as basis on which the three radical and extremist groups talked about and navigated issues highlighted by the attacks. Fortunately, many

of stories highlighted by the groups did not lead to a radicalisation of discourse in themselves but were often used as a basis to make claims about the identity of the perpetrator, government action and the wider societal drivers of the issue at hand. As Feldman and Littler (2015: 4) note, therefore, the print and broadcast media have a responsibility to 'promote a more nuanced understanding of terrorist motivations' in order to tone down responses by extremist groups that might lead to instances of cumulative extremism—with groups seizing on coverage to promote their own ends.

The second aspect to look upon in any future studies of cumulative extremism is the role of (pre-existing) ideology when an event by an opposing movement occurs. In particular, it is interesting how extremist and radical groups refract and interpret key events (such as a terrorist attack) through their own ideology—making sense of the world through either a populist xenophobic, anti-elitist or radical Islamist worldview. Indeed, future studies might wish to focus on whether significant world events lead to a detectable shift in ideology towards a more extreme or moderate place. Using the example of Hizb ut-Tahrir, for example, we can actually see a moderation in content and tone of rhetoric after the attack—alluding to more mainstream (but admittedly left-wing) sources of opinion and explanation in order to interpret and investigate the rationale behind the Finsbury Park Mosque attack. Such 'cognitive openings' could potentially provide a chance for policy practitioners to engage in better dialogue with radical and extremist groups—paving the way for more tailored countermeasures and interventions (see Wiktorowicz 2005).

Finally, and perhaps addressing the issue of key importance is how such group's talk about these events in the online space are then translated into the offline space. For example, in the case of the EDL, the London Bridge Attack had a clear and demonstrable impact upon its cycle of mobilisation in this particular period—leading to a 'March on Parliament' after a demonstration in Liverpool the weekend prior to the attack. This was, however, prefigured by a noticeable increase in the 'extreme' nature of the group's rhetoric and the policy proscriptions it was advocating when compared with its response to the Manchester arena attacks. It also showed a 'ratcheting' effect—with multiple attacks leading to more extreme rhetoric and offline mobilisations taking place. Moreover,

both the Westminster and Finsbury Park Mosque attacks demonstrated the risks of mainstreaming extremist rhetoric—with some of the most viewed online content on the days after these events coming from the EDL's ex-leader, Tommy Robinson, and the alt-right Infowars' blogger, Paul Joseph Watson.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, then, this chapter has highlighted how the CE concept can be transferred to the online space—using case studies of the BNP, EDL and Hizb ut-Tahrir. What has been found is that rhetorical and ideological escalation online has occurred as a result of the four terrorist attacks in the UK between March and June in 2017—albeit in an asymmetric way. This has, to some extent, led to offline escalations in mobilisation but also, in some cases, the de-escalation of online rhetoric—with radical Islamist groups actually pursuing more mainstream critiques in the post-Finsbury period. As highlighted above, future studies would be wise to investigate how intra-group dynamics and aims as well as media coverage affect this process of cumulative extremism—and whether escalation leads to the mainstreaming of extremist discourse. Such instances should place a greater responsibility on Government and social media providers to crack down and remove extremist content. The mainstream media also needs to erect a cordon sanitaire around extremist groups and figures, such that instances of violent escalation cannot occur and do not fuel the 'connectivity between extremisms' (Ranstorp 2010).

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# 4

# Haters Gonna "Like": Exploring Canadian Far-Right Extremism on Facebook

**Ryan Scrivens and Amarnath Amarasingam**

## Introduction

Following the deadly Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Canadian right-wing extremist (RWE) groups tried desperately to band together, planning a number of rallies and events in some of the nation's most urban cities to show support for the extreme right in general and to promote racist, anti-immigration sentiment in particular (Scrivens 2017). These groups used an array of social media outlets, with a particular emphasis on Facebook to promote this event (Dangerfield 2017). The use of this social media tool is common practice amongst RWE groups in Canada. In fact, these groups—like RWE groups around the globe (see Ekman 2018)—depend on Facebook to connect, recruit, and stabilize themselves as movements, as well as disseminate propaganda and plan

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various events and activities (see Lamoureux 2017; see also Dangerfield 2017; Kanji 2016; Patriquin 2016; Zhou 2017). Yet, what we know about Canadian RWE groups on Facebook is more of a journalistic description of the movement than an academic analysis. In other words, we have little scholarship on how RWE organizations in Canada exploit Facebook and fewer efforts to methodologically and systematically analyze their online activities on a national level. There can be little doubt, then, that an assessment is needed.

Indeed, the overwhelming focus in the scholarly literature on extremist groups online tends to focus on violent jihadist groups like the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) and Al Qaeda, largely overshadowing the activities of RWE groups in cyberspace (Conway 2017). Yet with RWE violence erupting in places like Charlottesville with the Unite the Right rally (Helmore and Beckett 2017) or in Quebec City with the mosque shooting (Perreau et al. 2017), and with a new generation of extreme right-wing activism—from the likes of the alt-right—coming to the fore (Southern Poverty Law Center 2018), there is a need to better understand how RWE groups communicate online, not only in Canada but around the globe. While the racist "old guard" has maintained its presence in traditional online spaces, a new generation of RWEs is communicating on an array of social media sites, with Facebook at the forefront of their efforts to spread misinformation—from memes and videos to unreliable "news" sources. And while some scholarship is emerging on RWE's use of Facebook (e.g., Davey and Ebner 2017; Dean et al. 2016; Ekman 2018; Forchtner and Kølvraa 2017; Nouri et al. 2017; Stier et al. 2017), relatively little remains known about how RWE groups make use of these platforms and in what ways they may be inspiring others to take up their causes. This gap in the research is particularly prevalent in the Canadian context.

In this chapter, we will draw from a sample of 34 of Canada's most prominent RWE group pages on Facebook using a mixed-methods approach to assess the popularity of the group pages, as well as the volume of content and the types of posts that generate the most user engagement. First, we will provide descriptive statistics on the popularity of these pages over time, followed by an overview of the frequency with which the groups post content on Facebook and the types of posts that resonate with users. Lastly, we will conduct an in-depth analysis on the

group posts that generate the most "buzz" amongst users, exploring who is targeted, why the content is so popular, and how the use of violence is negotiated by the RWE groups.

## Studying Canadian Far-Right Extremist Groups on Facebook

In an increasingly digital world, RWEs—like the general population—continue to make use of the Internet to connect and communicate with like-minded individuals. Historically, online discussion forums such as Stormfront have remained at the forefront of online and interactive mediums used by RWEs, serving as a centralized space in which radical discourse spreads and circulates around the globe (Bowman-Grieve 2009; Levin 2002). Yet over time, and with technological advancements, we have seen a shift in the types of online platforms used by extreme right adherents, with a growing presence on Twitter (Berger 2016; Berger and Strathearn 2013; Burnap and Williams 2015; Graham 2016), YouTube (Ekman 2014; O'Callaghan et al. 2014), and Facebook (Burke and Goodman 2012; Ekman 2018; Nadeau and Helly 2016; Stier et al. 2017). Soldiers of Odin, for example, an anti-Islamic (AI) vigilante group founded in 2015 in a small town in Finland, has used Facebook as a recruitment and propaganda tool to spread anti-Muslim messages across the globe, reaching various parts of the world, including Canada, the United States, and Australia, to name but a few (Anti-Defamation League 2016). Other RWE groups such as the Three Percenters in Canada have been very active on Facebook, relying heavily on the social media platform to expand their chapters across the country (Lamoureux 2017). The Canadian Three Percenters—who, during their early days, were merely an angry Facebook group—have developed into a far-right wing militia group, actively arming and engaging in paramilitary training (see Perry et al. 2017).

Researchers, to some extent, have attempted to keep up with these developments, but much is unknown about how contemporary RWE groups operate on social media platforms in general. Even less is known about how they communicate on popular platforms like Facebook (notable exceptions include Dean et al. 2016; Ekman 2018; Forchtner and

Kølvraa 2017; Fry 2016; Nouri et al. 2017; Stier et al. 2017). This is an important oversight, as Facebook is by far the most popular social networking site in the world (Statista 2018), and it too is largely exploited by the transnational RWE movement (Wong 2017). Despite this, however, the majority of the research on how extremists use Facebook has tended to focus on jihadist groups (e.g., Awan 2017; Ducol 2012; Johnson et al. 2016; Kennedy and Weimann 2012; Van San 2015; Vergani 2014; Weimann 2010). This imbalance, too, has been exacerbated in a Canadian context (see Perry and Scrivens 2019), as the majority of scholarship has been on jihadist radicalization and violence in Canada (e.g., Bramadat and Dawson 2014; Dawson and Amarasingam 2016; Gurski 2015, 2017; Ilardi 2013; Mullins 2013; Zekulin 2011) rather than on how RWEs around the world may be spurring on a kind of Canadian mobilization (notable exceptions include Parent and Ellis 2014, 2016; Perry and Scrivens 2019; Perry et al. 2017).

Fewer attempts have been made to systematically explore the online activities of these movements in Canada, especially those by the extreme right. Perry and Scrivens (2019), for example, conducted the most comprehensive study on Canada's contemporary RWE movement in Canada, interviewing law enforcement officials, community activists, and current and former RWEs, paired with open-source analysis of court records, media scans, and websites, to assess the internal (see Perry and Scrivens 2016) and external (see Perry and Scrivens 2018) factors that were most likely to give rise to—or minimize—RWE groups and associated violence, as well as provide evidence-based strategies to respond to RWE in Canada (see Scrivens and Perry 2017). Overlooked in this national study, however, was an in-depth look at how Canadian RWE groups exploit some of the more current social media outlets, including Facebook, and instead focused on the more "traditional" virtual platforms such as blog sites and discussion forums. Some researchers, on the other hand, have explored anti-immigrant sentiment found on Canadian Facebook pages, but it was either done so in passing (e.g., Perry et al. 2017), did not focus on RWE groups specifically (e.g., Nadeau and Helly 2016), or was focused on groups in a specific province (e.g., Tanner and Campana 2014) and not at a national level. This chapter, then, will be one of the first to explore the national presence of Canadian far-right extremist groups on Facebook.

Here, we define "far right-wing extremism" in Canada as a loose movement, characterized by a racially, ethnically, and sexually defined nationalism. This nationalism is often framed in terms of white power and is grounded in xenophobic and exclusionary understandings of the perceived threats posed by such groups as non-whites, Jews, immigrants, homosexuals, and feminists. Within this context, the state is perceived to be an illegitimate power serving the interests of all but the white man, and extremists are, therefore, willing to assume both an offensive and defensive stance in the interests of "preserving" their heritage and their "homeland."

## Methodology and Analytical Approach

The purpose of this study was to explore how Canadian RWE groups exploit Facebook, highlighting the extent of their online popularity, types of content posted and levels of user engagement, who these groups target, and how they discuss violence and the use of force. To do this, 34 public Facebook pages that were maintained by some of Canada's most prominent RWE groups—and in English—were included in the initial sample.[1] Pages were identified by visiting public Facebook accounts of some of the most well-known RWEs in Canada, identifying which Canadian RWE group pages they "liked" and then selecting pages based on the following criteria:

1. Popularity: group pages that were amongst the most popular in Canada's RWE movement (i.e., pages that maintained high fan counts)
2. Notoriety: pages that were operated by well-known Canadian RWE groups, according to extensive fieldwork by Perry and Scrivens (2019)
3. Media attention: RWE groups that operated pages and were reported on by Canadian news media for their radical offline activities (e.g., rallies, marches, and pamphletting and postering campaigns)

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[1] We acknowledge that this list is not inclusive of every Canadian RWE group who maintains a Facebook page. Some of the Facebook pages of the most prominent groups, such as the Canadian Three Percenters, were temporarily suspended during the data extraction, while other group pages were in French.

Following this sampling procedure, pages were analyzed using a three-step process. First, Facebook's Graph API (v3.0) was used to collect open-source content from the 34 Facebook pages we selected (for more information on Graph API, see Facebook 2018).[2] Data was extracted at three separate time points, roughly two months apart, over approximately a six-month period between September 15, 2017, and February 11, 2018. The purpose of this approach was twofold: to understand, first, whether these group pages were growing in fan count and, second, whether the pages were facing similar suspension pressures from Facebook as jihadist group pages, such as ISIS and Al Qaeda (see Bickert and Fishman 2017). In total, 30 of the 34 pages survived all three data extractions, while four pages survived data extraction one and two but were suspended by extraction three.[3]

Second, data that was collected from the third extraction served as the basis of the analysis, and these 30 group pages that survived all three extractions were coded into separate categories: anti-Islamic (AI) groups and White Canadian Pride (WCP) groups. While there is likely to be overlap in membership and/or ideological kinship between these two coded groups, the slight difference in emphasis and outlook suggested interesting avenues for analysis. For instance, the AI groups tended to focus on protecting Canadians against the outside threat of Islam, lambasting politicians who promoted multiculturalism and diversity as "sellouts" who were willingly or ignorantly blind to the "real threat." WCP groups, on the other hand, tended to place an emphasis on white pride, an ahistorical presentation of a past golden age when Western European (i.e., white) culture was revered and consequential. The argument ran that, with immigration and multiculturalism, this golden age had become diluted. In other words, while both groups tended to see the out-group in similar ways, they emphasized "protection" of the in-group and "promotion" of the in-group in different ways. As a result, we defined these two groups as follows:

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[2] At no time did the data extractor proceed to download individual Facebook user profiles, locations of individuals, or private photos and other content. Only the content found on the public group pages, including content posted by the groups and user responses to the content was extracted for the current study.

[3] The four pages that were suspended were: Alternative for Canada, Proud Boys Canadian Chapter, The Three Percenters, and WCAI Canada. It was not entirely clear why these four pages were suspended, or which specific posts may have been flagged by users as violating Facebook's terms of service. For the purposes of this chapter, however, this was not a question we explored in depth.

1. Anti-Islamic (AI) groups, drawing from Sharify-Funk (2013, p. 443), take a particularly black-and-white view of the relationship between "Islam" and the "West", arguing for "Western moral superiority vis-à-vis a monolithic, authoritarian, and misogynistic Islamic culture; betrayal of Western culture by 'political correct' intellectual elites wedded to ideas of multicultural accommodation; and a cascading threat posed by the rapid influx of unassimilable Muslim immigrants who are poised to mount a demographic takeover."

2. White Canadian Pride (WCP) groups, as opposed to strict AI groups, tend to focus on fostering white and Canadian pride, often referring to the "good old days"—a time before immigration was "rampant," and when the Liberal Party of Canada was not stripping Canadians of their white heritage, for example. WCP fiercely oppose multiculturalism, and instead encourage others to stand up and be proud of their whiteness.

Once the 30 group pages were divided into these two codes, a complete scan of the data was carried out to determine whether data was available, consistently, across several years. Unfortunately, the data proved to be quite fragmentary, as is expressed in Table 4.1.

While four groups in the sample were operational on Facebook between 2012 and 2017, the majority were only active on Facebook in more recent years. This, in part, may be the result of Facebook taking some steps to suspend RWE group pages (see Dredge 2015), but most likely due to the fact that most RWE groups in Canada have a very limited shelf life, with high levels of ideological in-fighting and subsequent group instability (see Perry and Scrivens 2016). In addition, some of the groups in the sample were amongst the newest RWE groups in Canada, so they may not have had a chance to disband. Nonetheless, for consistency purposes, we conducted a comparative analysis of the 12 group pages that were operational for a three-year period (2015–2017), with six AI groups and six WCP groups in the final sample. Next, we evaluated the extent to which these pages grew in popularity over time by calculating their fan counts at each of the three data extractions, followed by an analysis of the group content that generated the highest level of user engagement by assessing the frequency with which group posts (i.e., event postings, page links, photos, status updates, and videos) were "shared" by users as well as

**Table 4.1** Data available for 34 Canadian extreme right Facebook pages, 2010–2018

| Group name | Category | 2018 | 2017 | 2016 | 2015 | 2014 | 2013 | 2012 | 2011 | 2010 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 28 Canada | WCP | x | x | x | | | | | | |
| ACT for Canada | WCP | x | x | x | x | | | | | |
| Alberta Alt-Right Conservatives | WCP | x | x | x | | | | | | |
| Canada First | WCP | x | x | x | | | | | | |
| Canadian Coalition for Concerned Citizens | WCP | x | x | | | | | | | |
| Canadian Combat Coalition | AI | x | x | | | | | | | |
| Canadian Defence League | AI | | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | |
| Canadian Nationalist Front | WCP | x | x | x | | | | | | |
| Canadian Patriots | WCP | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | | |
| Canadian Silent Majority | WCP | x | x | x | | | | | | |
| Canadians-Against-Islam | AI | x | x | x | x | | | | | |
| CAN-Guard Canadian Civil Militia Services | WCP | x | x | x | x | | | | | |
| Cultural Action Party Northern Canada | WCP | x | x | | | | | | | |
| Cultural Action Party Ontario | WCP | x | x | x | x | x | | | | |
| Immigration Watch Canada | WCP | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | |
| Independent Patriots—Canada | WCP | x | x | | | | | | | |
| Old Stock Canadian | WCP | x | x | x | | | | | | |
| Pegida Canada | AI | x | x | x | x | | | | | |
| Pegida Canada Alberta | AI | x | x | x | x | | | | | |
| Pegida Canada BC | AI | x | x | x | x | | | | | |
| Stop Islamization of Canada | AI | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Soldiers of Odin—British Columbia | AI | | x | x | | | | | | |
| Soldiers of Odin—Vancouver British Columbia | AI | | x | x | | | | | | |
| Soldiers of Odin—Victoria Chapter | AI | | x | x | | | | | | |
| Soldiers of Odin Canada | AI | | x | | | | | | | |
| Soldiers of Odin Fort McMurray | AI | | x | x | | | | | | |
| Soldiers of Odin Grande Prairie | AI | x | x | x | | | | | | |
| Soldiers of Odin Manitoba | AI | x | x | x | | | | | | |
| Soldiers of Odin Red Deer | AI | | x | x | | | | | | |
| Vinland Awake | WCP | x | x | x | x | | | | | |

Note: AI = Anti-Islamic; WCP = White Canadian Pride; x = Data available

the number of reactions elicited by users (i.e., frequency of Facebook "likes," "loves," "sad," and "angry" expressions).[4]

Third, we conducted an in-depth analysis of the content posted by the AI and WCP group pages that generated the highest level of engagement amongst its viewers. In particular, a thematic content analysis was conducted on the groups' photos, videos, and page links that were most widely shared by users in the sample. The purpose of this was to gain insight into the topics of discussion that generated the most "buzz" amongst users, exploring the ways in which RWE group narratives were framed and why the messages appealed to users, understanding who was being "othered" by the RWE groups, as well as the context in which the RWE groups discussed violence and the use of force. Note that the number of times a post was "shared" by users, unlike the number of times that users reacted to the posts (e.g., "like," "love" emojis), was arguably the most accurate measure of engagement, as a user who shares a post is perhaps more engaged in the content because they took the time to share it with their Facebook friends rather than simply "like" it. They too are making their radical views even more apparent, attaching themselves to the particular viewpoint by sharing it amongst their own networks.

A thematic coding scheme—which took a grounded theory approach—guided the content analysis, wherein the topics of discussions, the language, and tone of the content were evaluated. Here, we analyzed and coded the three most widely shared photos, videos, and page links for the AI and WCP group pages independently of one another, identifying the themes and patterns through two distinct lenses. Together, the use of multiple perspectives enhanced the reliability of the observations and the subsequent understanding of the "appealing" content posted by the RWE groups. The purpose of this strategy was to authenticate our coding and to maximizing the robustness of the results (Denzin 1970). Data was coded as follows: a four-column table was created for each of the most popular posts in the sample ($n$ = 18). Column one included the initial theme of the post (e.g., "keep Sharia law out of Canada"); column two included language used in each post (e.g., words, such as "barbaric,"

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[4] For most of Facebook's history, users could only "like" a post on pages, but Facebook expanded this list of reactions to include "love," "sad face," "angry," "haha," and so on in February 2016. This gave users a fuller range of responses to certain Facebook posts.

"dangerous," "oppressive," etc.); column three included the tone of the post (passive, active, sarcastic, humorous, or unclear); and column four included a direct quote from the post. These tables were compared within and across groups.

# Results

The results are divided into three sections: (1) a macro-level assessment of the popularity (i.e., page fan count) of the AI group and WCP group pages across three data extractions (September 15, 2017, to February 11, 2018); (2) a macro-level assessment of the type of content that the groups posted and the level of user engagement and reaction that the content generated; and (3) an in-depth exploration of the content (i.e., photos, videos, and page links) that generated the highest level of user engagement.

## Popularity Across Time

Fan counts for the AI pages and WCP pages were tallied and compared for each of the three data extractions. For the AI groups, fan counts increased from 52,760 page likes to 53,162 likes (a less than 1 percent increase) between data extraction dates one and two, and from 53,162 page likes to 57,438 likes (an 8 percent increase) between extraction dates two and three. On the other hand, fan counts for the WCP groups decreased from 94,028 page likes to 93,766 likes (a less than 1 percent decrease) between data extraction dates one and two, and then increased from 93,766 page likes to 98,481 likes (a 5 percent increase) between extraction dates two and three. While WCP group pages were considerably more popular than AI pages, the popularity of the group page—when looking at the fan counts—remained minimal over time (see Fig. 4.1).
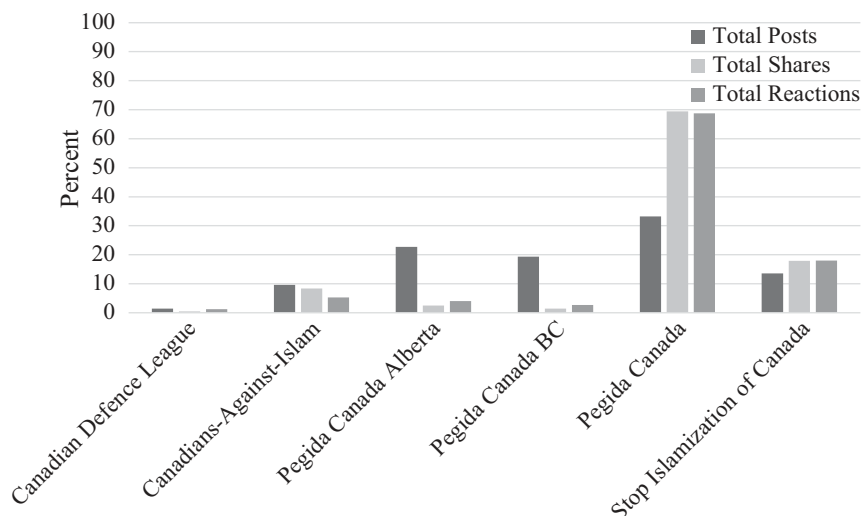
## User Engagement

Although Facebook pages were organized into two coded groups based on their ideological similarities, it was clear that when we examined the RWE group pages in isolation, some pages generated much higher levels
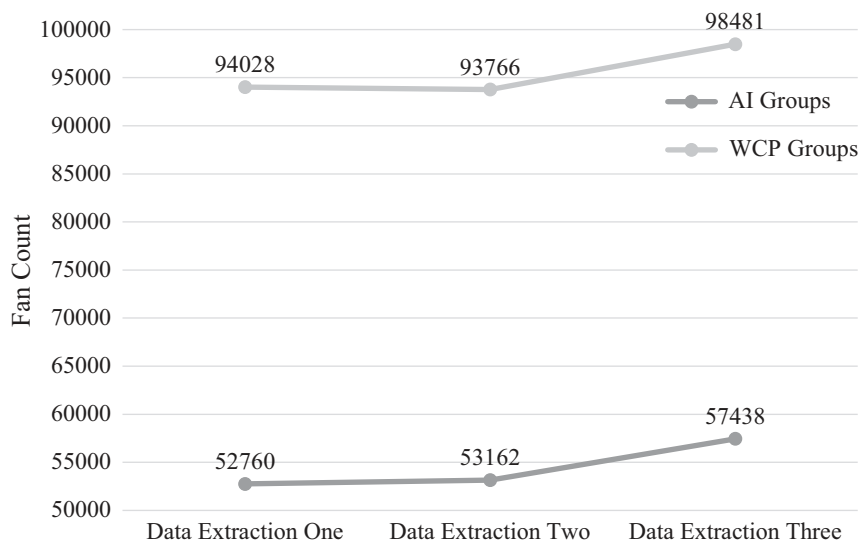
**Fig. 4.1** Fan counts for AI and WCP Facebook Group pages across data extractions (September 15, 2017, to February 11, 2018)

of user engagement than others. To illustrate, the AI group pages accumulated a total of 5,315 posts between 2015 and 2017 and the frequency with which each group posted content on Facebook was, for the most part, evenly distributed across groups. Yet an assessment of user engagement (i.e., number of "shares") and user reactions (i.e., "likes," "loves," etc.) for each group page revealed that certain RWE groups generated much more "buzz" than others (see Fig. 4.2).

As is clear in Fig. 4.2, while groups like Stop Islamization of Canada, Canadians-Against-Islam, and the Canadian Defence League had moderate to low levels of group posting activity and subsequent user engagement, the various Canadian branches of Pegida stood out in terms of overall posting activity for the AI group pages; both Pegida Canada Alberta and Pegida Canada BC (British Columbia) made up 22.71 percent and 19.36 percent of the total posts, respectively, for the AI pages but constituted for less than 5 percent of user engagement. The main Pegida Canada page, however, accounted for 33.25 percent of total posts for the AI groups and accounted for 69.43 percent of shares and

**Fig. 4.2**   Posts and user engagement across AI Facebook Group pages, 2015–2017

68.78 percent of user reactions. Put differently, Pegida Canada published 1767 Facebook posts between 2015 and 2017 and these posts were shared a staggering 196,654 times by users.

A macro-level assessment of the types of posts that were most frequently published by the AI groups revealed that links to news articles and photos were posted at the highest rate; links accounted for 49.14 percent of all posts by the AI groups, and photos accounted for 35.13 percent of all posts. Yet, as is clear in Fig. 4.3, page links constituted for almost half of AI posts from 2015 to 2017 but only made up 12.17 percent of all shares and 23.51 percent of all user reactions. On the other hand, photo postings on the AI pages accounted for the vast majority of user engagement, responsible for 64.34 percent of total shares and 56.85 percent of total user reactions. While status updates and video postings were not particularly prevalent or popular amongst users, worth noting was that, even with the inclusion of an organization like Pegida Canada—who are known for organizing offline protest events (see Zhou 2017)—in the sample, event postings accounted for a mere 0.88 percent of all posts for the AI groups.
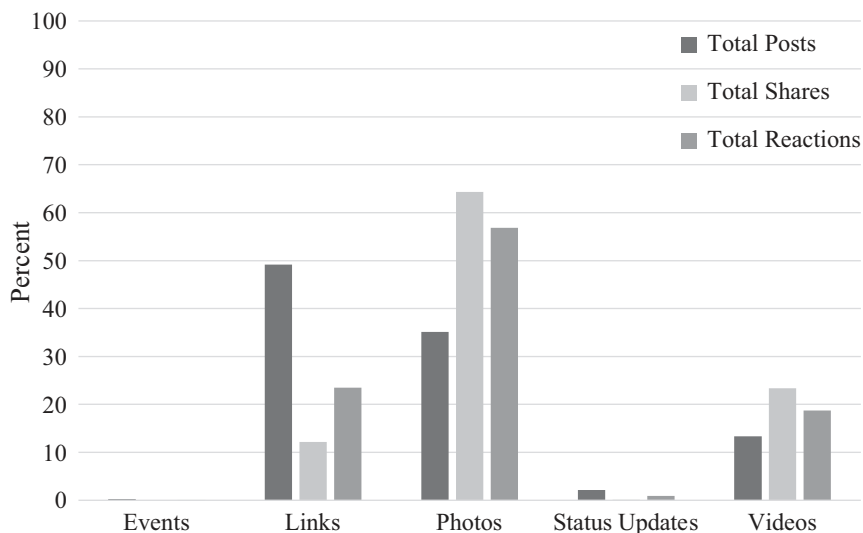
**Fig. 4.3**  Type of posts and user engagement across AI Facebook Group pages, 2015–2017

Many of the abovementioned trends for the AI groups were similar for the WCP groups, whereby one group page stood out for its extremely high level of user engagement. To illustrate, between 2015 and 2017, the WCP groups published a combined total of 7498 posts to Facebook. With the exception of Vinland Awake, which accounted for 267 (3.56 percent) of the WCP group posting, the other groups published a similar volume of content on Facebook, ranging from 1000 to 1700 posts. The 1514 posts that were published by ACT for Canada, for example, were shared 10,203 times while Immigration Watch Canada's 1504 posts were shared 27,552 times. Canadian Patriots, however, stood out in terms of user engagement. While responsible for only 1767 posts (23.56 percent) of the total content posted by the WCP groups, Canadian Patriots' posts were shared a staggering 805,563 times (94.89 percent of the total) and elicited 514,406 reactions (90.31 percent of the total) from users (see Fig. 4.4).

Similar to the AI groups, WCP groups circulated page links at a higher rate than all other types of content but, again, photos generated the highest level of user engagement. While page links accounted for 61.08 per-
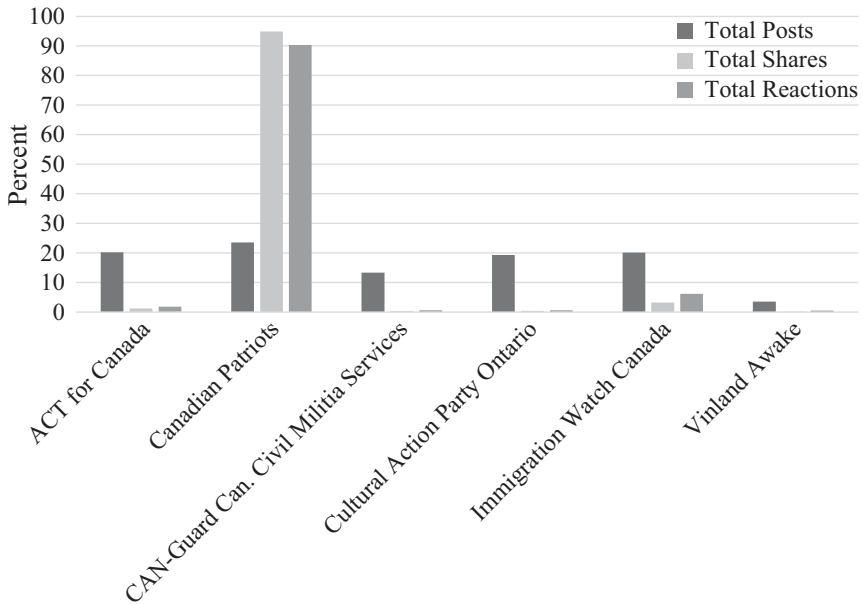
**Fig. 4.4** Posts and user engagement across WCP Facebook Group pages, 2015–2017

cent of all posts in the WCP groups, page links only accounted for 5.63 percent of total shares and 12.96 percent of total reactions. Photo postings by WCP groups, on the other hand, made up 30.67 percent of total posts but accounted for 93.56 percent of the total share count and 83.28 percent of total user reactions for the WCP groups. The Canadian Patriots page, as noted above, was almost single-handedly responsible for much of this activity. Status updates, videos, and event postings were, again, not particularly prevalent or popular amongst its users, as is expressed in Fig. 4.5.

## Content Analysis of the Most Engaging Content

An in-depth analysis of the most engaging content revealed a number of key themes. First was the AI and WCP groups' main target of attack: the former condemned Islam, specifically, as a religion, while the latter more
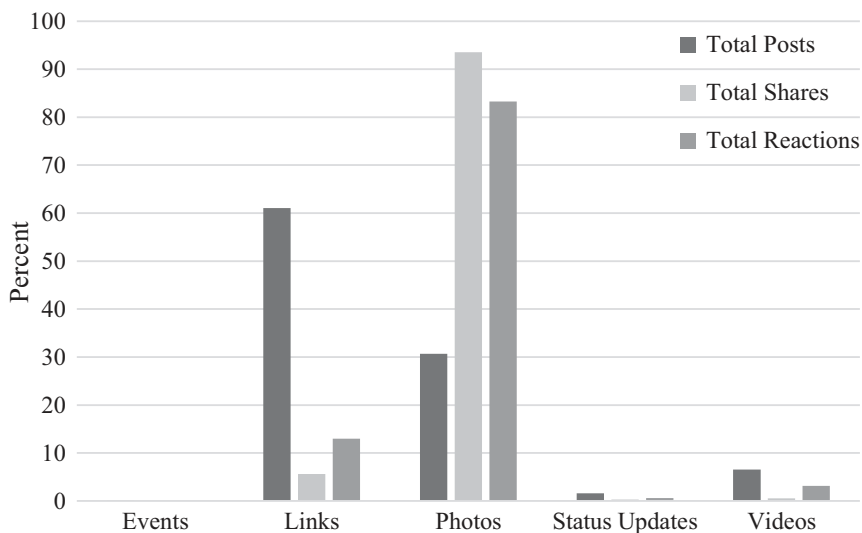
**Fig. 4.5** Type of posts and user engagement across WCP Facebook Group pages, 2015–2017

broadly took aim at Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's ability to govern Canada in a way that reflected Canada's "true" values. To illustrate, the most widely shared content by the WCP groups, by and large, attacked Canada's Liberal Party policies and initiatives in general and Trudeau as a leader in particular. At the helm of this content was a clear message that Trudeau and his Cabinet were a "group of incompetent morons"[5] and "no other prime minister in Canadian history has caused more damage, or caused more division among the Canadian people than Justin Trudeau,"[6] according to the most widely shared photos in the sample. Similarly, Trudeau was the target of attacks in the videos, with one of the most widely shared video, "Is Canada's New Prime Minister Trudeau a

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[5] This meme photo, which generated 27,134 shares at the time of the last data extraction, can be viewed at https://www.facebook.com/cda.patriots/photos/a.265525130220765.49091.159787357461210/983652985074639/?type=3.

[6] This photo, which was shared 34,695 times when the data was last captured, can be found by visiting https://www.facebook.com/cda.patriots/photos/a.265525130220765.49091.159787357461210/1143638582409411/?type=3.

Radical Muslim?",[7] featuring a commentary about Trudeau as a Muslim convert who, amongst other claims, was accepting of Islam in its most radical forms. While the WCP groups did, in many ways, target Islam and Muslims, their focus was more on Trudeau's ability to govern the nation and, by extension, preserve Canada's white heritage and conservative values. On the other hand, content that was most widely shared by the AI groups focused on Canada's national security and public safety, with an emphasis on the "threat" of Islam. For example, one of the most widely shared photos was of an individual wearing a black burka covering their face, holding a piece of paper that read: "WHO, OR WHAT, AM I?" Below this image was a list of possible answers:

A) Female suicide bomber
B) Male suicide bomber
C) Weird Cross-Dresser
D) Two dwarfs
E) ?????"
Who the Hell Knows!!![8]

The purpose of this image was to raise concern about the burka, arguing it should be banned because "IT'S NOT ABOUT RELIGION" but rather "IT'S ABOUT SAFETY." Likewise, one of the most widely shared videos featured a young and angry Salafi Imam, essentially discrediting Christianity as a religion by discussing how, when someone says "Merry Christmas," they are congratulating people on their false religion and false understanding of life, calling it a crime and worse than killing someone, according to the Quran.[9] Here, it was implied that Islam was not only intolerant of other religions, but it also was a hostile and violent religion, threatening the safety of Canadian citizens.

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[7] This video, which was shared 289 times up to the last data extraction, can be found by visiting https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SbRLqUDQnYE&feature=youtu.be.

[8] This photo was shared 14,355 times when the data was last captured and can be viewed at https://www.facebook.com/113065962075296/photos/a.113994498649109.8296.113065962075296/908632739185277/?type=3.

[9] This video was shared 7648 times during the last data extraction and can be found by visiting https://www.facebook.com/Pegida.canada/videos/2031362737140791/.

Second was the sarcastic tone and humorous imagery associated with most of the popular content from the RWE groups on Facebook. For example, the most widely shared image within the AI groups was a meme of Muslim women praying, with the caption "HOW IS THIS OK?", followed by an image of children with their left hands on their hearts, pledging allegiance to the Canadian flag with the caption "AND THIS NOT?"[10]

Similarly, the most popular content from WCP groups painted Trudeau as a young, inexperienced leader of the nation. To illustrate, one of the most widely shared images was a meme of Trudeau walking on Parliament Hill, leading his Cabinet members, who were walking behind him. The image also showcased Trudeau's awkward and, in many ways, uncertain smile, paired with his Cabinet members who too were smiling, which suggested that his Cabinet was blindly following the inexperienced leader.[11] In addition, the most widely shared photo by the WCP groups was an image of young Trudeau, in front of Parliament Hill, and gazing off into the distance, almost in a foolish manner.[12] Comparably, a widely shared video by the WCP group featured Trudeau, lost for words, during a press conference and clumsily searching for something to say about Canada joining the U.S. ballistic missile defense program to defend against North Korea.[13] Clearly, the RWE groups used humor and sarcasm to frame Canada's Prime Minister as unintelligent and unfit to govern the nation, and this content was most likely popular because it featured short and, at times, creative and humorous messages that carried cultural ideas and practices in line with contemporary issues in Canada and other parts of the Western World, including controversies about banning the burka, or wishing someone "Merry Christmas" rather than "Happy Holidays."

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[10] This meme photo, which was shared 16,282 times when the data was last extraction, can be viewed at https://www.facebook.com/Pegida.canada/photos/a.1534518543491882.1073741828.1533411596935910/1888505171426549/?type=3.

[11] This image, which was previously discussed in endnote four, can be viewed at https://www.facebook.com/cda.patriots/photos/a.265525130220765.49091.159787357461210/983652985074639/?type=3.

[12] This image was previously discussed in endnote five and can be viewed at https://www.facebook.com/cda.patriots/photos/a.265525130220765.49091.159787357461210/1143638582409411/?type=3.

[13] This video was shared 233 times up until the last data extraction and can be found by visiting https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xkSIdKMd9vE.

Third was a large proportion of the most popular content, particularly the videos and links posted by the AI groups, borrowed from sources outside of Canada. The most widely shared video by the AI group, for example, included an interview with an American soldier who explained how "those people" in the Middle East hated Americans "with a passion" and were always waiting to attack them; "unless you are armed," the soldier claimed, "you're nothing but the infidel" to them. When later asked when the next 9/11 attack would occur, the soldier chuckled and said he was "surprised it hasn't happened yet."[14] Likewise, two of the most widely shared videos featured insights from far-right adherents outside of Canada, including a commentary from ultra-right leaning American writer and filmmaker, Bill Still, about Trudeau as a radical Muslim,[15] or a speech from the leader of the anti-EU, anti-immigration, and anti-Islam Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, Geert Wilders, describing "the facts" about Islam: "Islam is an ideology of submission, of hate, of violence, that terrorism is just a tool […] The goal of Islam is conquest."[16] Moreover, half of the most popular page links were from sources outside of Canada, including sound bites from Brietbart News Network about a 16-year-old girl's incessant fear about Arab and Muslim immigration in Germany,[17] or a piece from the Jerusalem Post about Geert Wilder telling Dutch Parliament during a parliamentary debate that Europe is being overrun by an "Islamic invasion."[18]

Lastly, the AI and WCP groups discussed violence and use of force in a rather methodical manner, which transmitted through two streams. An example of the first stream was of the widely shared photos by the WCP

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[14] During the last time that the data was extracted, this video was shared 12,547 times. It can be found by visiting https://www.facebook.com/Pegida.canada/videos/1961039570839775/.

[15] This image was previously discussed in endnote six and can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SbRLqUDQnYE&feature=youtu.be.

[16] This video was shared 2642 times up until the last data extraction and can be found by visiting https://www.facebook.com/Pegida.canada/videos/1974332649510467/.

[17] During the last time that the data was extracted, this page link was shared 397 times. The link can be found by visiting http://www.breitbart.com/london/2016/01/22/16-year-old-girls-migrant-fears-video-keeps-disappearing-off-facebook/.

[18] This page link, which was shared 777 times during the last time that the data was captured, can be found by visiting http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Wilders-tells-Dutch-parliament-refugee-crisis-is-Islamic-invasion-415828?utm.

groups, which raised concerns about Canada's 150th anniversary of Confederation logo.[19] RWE adherents suggested that the flag, which was selected by the Liberal Party, did not embody Canadian values, as it was a multicolored leaf that represented diversity and inclusiveness amongst Canadians. In response to this so-called threat to Canadian culture and values was a call for action, wherein viewers were urged to remove Trudeau "from office as soon as possible," as well as send a "strong message" to the Liberals that their policies and initiatives would not be tolerated. Similar sentiment was echoed throughout the most popular content in the sample wherein RWE groups urged others to stand up against the so-called corrupt Trudeau government as well as "violent Islam" imposed on Canadians. Interestingly, any discussion about violence was used to describe non-whites; that is, Muslims were stereotypically framed as the perpetrators in the second stream of discourse that was associated with violence. Using fear-mongering tactics to generate attention among Facebook users, the RWE groups would draw attention to violent minority groups, Muslims in particular, and how their mere presence posed a threat to the white race. Never, however, did these groups outright call for violent action against this so-called threat. Instead, a broader narrative was framed about violent Sharia law being imposed on Canadians and the consequences of it: "radical Islamic terrorism" thriving in Canada.

## Conclusion and Discussion

While a new generation of RWEs is communicating on various social media sites, little is known about how the groups exploit some of the most widely used social media sites, and even less is known about this in a Canadian context. As a result, we conducted one of the first studies on the presence of Canadian far-right extremism on Facebook. In particular, we used a mixed-methods approach to assess the popularity of Canada's most prominent extreme far-right group pages, as well as the volume and

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[19] This meme photo was shared 32,802 times during the last data extraction and can be viewed at https://www.facebook.com/cda.patriots/photos/a.265525130220765.49091.159787357461210/1250600111713257/?type=3&theater.

types of content that generated the most user engagement. We then combined this macro-level analysis with an in-depth look at the group posts that generated the most "buzz" amongst users, exploring who was targeted, why the content was so popular, and how the use of violence was negotiated by the groups. Several conclusions can be drawn from this exploratory study.

First, while there has been a lot of discussion—particularly, in the media (e.g., Goujard 2018; Kanji 2016)—about the steady growth of Canadian RWE groups on Facebook in recent times, our findings show that growth, at least when looking at the fan count of these Facebook pages, remains minimal. Our findings also show that fan counts for RWE group pages, although negligible at best, decreases from time to time; there are moments when people "unlike" RWE group pages for a variety of reasons. Second, RWE group pages do not appear to be suspended at the same rate as jihadi group pages, despite public and media pressure in recent times, particularly following the deadly attack in Charlottesville. This, perhaps, is the consequence of Canadian RWE groups attempting to tone down their rhetoric in an effort to maintain their presence online (see Perry and Scrivens 2019), paired with a general lack of *longstanding* and *consistent* media attention—and subsequent public pressure—on RWE movements relative to violent Islamists in Canada (see Perry and Scrivens in press).

These two findings, however, may be symptom of the relatively short period in which the data was captured for the temporal analysis, as well as the social media platform under investigation: a number of RWE groups, such as racist skinheads, may be too extreme for Facebook and in turn are not accounted for in our sample. Moving ahead, then, data should be captured over a longer period of time than what was possible for the current study, as doing so will provide a better sense of growth over time and whether suspension pressure has any real effect on diffusion of content or the groups. Longer term trends, particularly seen in conjunction with world events and political developments, may also prove quite interesting. In addition, future studies should include more extreme platforms in the sample (e.g., reddit, Voat, 4chan, 8chan, and Gab), drawing comparisons between user popularity on Facebook pages

and subreddits, for example, or a comparison of the types of RWE content posted on the abovementioned platforms. Doing so may provide a more nuanced understanding of how RWEs use mainstream social media platforms compared with more underground media platforms, gauging whether groups are toning down their rhetoric to keep their Facebook presence, as well as whether Facebook is making RWE groups less explicitly violent, out of fear that their extremist pages will be suspended or removed. Results of this exploratory study do, however, suggest that RWE groups discuss the use of force and violence on Facebook, but in doing so they describe minority groups, Muslims in particular, as the violent perpetrators and themselves as those who must defend themselves from "them." In other words, the groups deliberately present their radical views in a subtler manner, framing themselves as victims rather than perpetrators—an othering tactic commonly used by RWEs, amongst other extremist movements (see Meddaugh and Kay 2009).

Third, Canadian RWE groups tend to post the highest volume of links to their Facebook pages, but this content generates very little user engagement and reaction, relative to the photo postings and videos. An in-depth analysis of this content reveals that, although much of the most popular content is posted by a small cluster of RWE groups (e.g., Pegida Canada) who are "established" RWE groups based on their offline activities (e.g., rallies and marches) and connections to other RWE groups in Canada and abroad, photos and videos are riddled with humor and sarcasm, or posts that are prepackaged as memes designed to poke fun at Prime Minister Trudeau and his policy decisions, as well as raise national and international safety concerns about Islam. This finding seems to mirror previous studies that highlight easy-to-digest captioned images and catchy videos as increasingly popular amongst a new generation of RWEs, particularly those targeting Muslims (e.g., Davey and Ebner 2017; Jakubowicz et al. 2017). Worth highlighting, however, is that RWE's use of humor in their propaganda material is not new. In fact, an assessment of the historical publishing practices of right-wing terrorist organizations of, for example, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) reveals that the use of cartoons and humor has been a central component in their propaganda (see Billing 2001). Going forward, future studies should continue to explore why this

kind of hateful content is so popular amongst adherents, as well as explore the frequency with which this content is circulating online, particularly amongst a younger generation of activists, and whether the use of humor represents the future of the RWE propaganda machine, especially on an international scale.

With the Charlottesville attack and the changing rhetoric against Muslims and minorities from the highest levels of the American government, experts predict that we will see real consequences at the grassroots level in terms of young men and women increasingly drawn to extreme RWE groups and ideologies (see Southern Poverty Law Center 2018). It is perhaps still too early to tell if these predictions are accurate. What is clear, however, is that the online space is buzzing with hateful and xenophobic content, especially on widely used social media sites like Facebook. As scholars have noted for years, the communications of RWEs—even in the recent past—were largely localized and geographically bound (Levin 2002; Schafer 2002). Yet, technological affordances in general and social media in particular allow RWEs to mobilize transnationally and appeal to a much wider audience, many of whom are from younger generation (Davey and Ebner 2017). While these organizations have deep local roots and locally held grievances, it is quite evident, not only from the results of the current study but from other studies as well (e.g., Davey and Ebner 2017; Ekman 2018; Jakubowicz et al. 2017), that adherents are forming transnational alliances, promoting each other's content and worldview, and sharing resources. While youths who join the social movements online may have minimal grounding in real life, their perceived grievances, emotional and social bonds, and activism are indeed real—and are increasingly part of a global brotherhood and sisterhood of the RWE movement. Scholars and policy makers should pay closer attention to how RWE groups appeal to this vulnerable community on popular social media sites. They too should pay particular attention to how RWE groups are using memorable captioned images (i.e., memes) and catchy videos, not only for recruitment purposes, but also for the purposes of extending beyond their echo chambers, reaching a wider national and international audience.

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# 5

# 'Neo-Nazis Have Stolen Our Memes': Making Sense of Extreme Memes

### Benjamin Lee

## Introduction

The title of this chapter quotes from a YouTube video produced by the popular online collective the Yogscast. The video, posted to the YOGSCAST Lewis & Simon channel, featured a play through of a custom Minecraft adventure map called 16 dyes. The players were tasked with retrieving dyes from 16 floating islands. One island included a dungeon defended by hostile Minecraft versions of popular internet character Pepe the Frog. On defeating the frogs, one player expressed his discomfort at the inclusion of Pepe, in reference to the then recent reports that Pepe the Frog was now a hate symbol of the alt-right movement. Another player pleaded, 'Don't let them [the Neo-Nazis] get Harambe' (YOGSCAST Lewis & Simon 2016).

The extraordinary spectacle of the co-option of a popular internet symbol—Pepe the Frog—by an extreme political network, loosely referred to as the Alt-Right (see below for discussion of this term), is

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perhaps a good time to pause for thought and to consider the ramifications of what are widely thought of as internet memes. Although the origin of the term meme is well understood, it is not clear how a term originally developed to apply evolutionary principles to culture can now be applied to an internet cartoon frog and be linked to neo-Nazism. There are serious scholars who argue that internet memes are tools for cultural reproduction, imbued with deeper meaning. Likewise, some activists within political networks, in particular the alt-right present themselves as seeing memes as having an almost supernatural power. Accurate empirical investigation is difficult, but for those who study or police extreme movements, the belief alone that memes are significant and powerful is enough to make them of interest. This chapter summarises how the concept of memes came to be adopted as a shorthand for what superficially seem to be internet ephemera. It also aims to provide the reader with an understanding of how memes have been represented within extremist networks, as well as to provide the reader with a better understanding of the potential strategic roles of memes.

## Origin of the Meme

The term 'meme' originates in the book *The Selfish Gene* by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. Taken as a shortened version of the ancient Greek word Mimeme (imitated thing), memes are replicators roughly analogous to genes in their ability to transmit information (Dawkins 1989: 192).[1] Rather than biological information, however, memes instead replicate and pass on cultural information via human interaction. This information can be almost anything cultural, and Dawkins uses the examples of music, fashion, architecture, belief in God, and the theory of evolution. There was no discrete limit placed on the scope of any one meme by Dawkins, further adding to the definitional problems. A meme can consist of a single phrase of music, or an entire

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[1] Shifman (2013: 363) notes that the phrase Die Mneme (from the Greek for memory) had already been coined as a term for cultural evolution in 1870 by Austrian sociologist Ewald Hering, thus perhaps giving an unintended example of independent mutation in memes over 100 years apart.

symphony, the oft-cited example being Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and extracts thereof (Dawkins 1989: 195).

As with genes, memes were also envisaged as being in competition with one another, with only the best-suited memes receiving attention and less well-adapted memes going extinct (Shifman 2014: 9). Dawkins also envisaged memes as undergoing a process of 'continuous mutation' as they were passed from one host to another (Dawkins 1989: 195). While exact imitation is unlikely in this context, Blackmore argues that imitation applies only to the core of a unit of transmission, the gist of a story, essence of a tune, or in her words, the 'broad sense' (Blackmore 1999: 6–7).

The concept of memes and memetics gave rise to a highly contested academic space. Shifman (2013: 364) outlines a range of critiques of meme theory arguing that the discipline has drawn 'constant fire'. Coker (2008: 905) notes the split between internal and external understandings of memes, that is, does the term meme refer to the idea within a brain loaded onto cultural items or can memes only be evaluated through the resulting behaviours observed? He goes on to recount that despite attempts by Dawkins to redefine meme as an idea held within the brain, popular understanding has fixated on the concept as demonstrated by externally measurable behaviours (Coker 2008: 905). Other complaints have centred on the morality (or amorality) of memes as cultural replicators and role of culture as a venue for cultural transmission (Schrempp 2009; Pimple 1996: 237).

Blackmore contends that central to critical approaches to memetics is the loss of human agency represented by the identification of a 'second replicator' in the world. If meme theory is accurate, our ideas and culture spread independently of us in much the same way that our genes do (Blackmore 1999: 8; Coker 2008: 907). However, this idea does not seem to trouble Blackmore as it does others:

> *Each of us is a massive memeplex running on the physical machinery of a human body and brain—a meme machine. Crick was wrong. We are not 'nothing but a pack of neurons'; we are a pack of memes too. And without understanding the pack of memes we can never understand ourselves.* (Blackmore 1999: 235)

Other approaches give more agency to human intervention in meme creation, giving rise to theories of memetics akin to intelligent design in genetics (Coker 2008: 906). Despite the controversy, memetics has continued to be an obscure theme in the study of fields as diverse as international relations (Coker 2008) and folklore (Pimple 1996). Coker suggests that regardless of the untestability of meme as a concept that:

> *What we can say is that the world is starting to make money out of taking them seriously*. (Coker 2008: 906–906)

## Internet Memes

As well as a scientific term, memes are unusual in that they seem to have found, in some form widespread public acceptance and understanding decades after the concept evolved. Shifman (2013: 363) describes memes as moving 'from academic to public discourse (and back?)'. From its original development as a concept in evolutionary biology, public understanding of memes has split from scientific conversations, resulting in a division between meme, as it is commonly understood in scientific terms and what will be termed in this chapter, internet memes. There are unquestionably aspects of the web that seem well suited to the distribution and replication of memes, including its flexibility, ubiquity and its accessibility (Shifman 2012: 189). This includes the capacity for users to reinvent texts either through mimicry of key aspects, or through remixing elements of the original content (Shifman 2014: 20). Berger, dealing specifically with memes in relation to Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), argues that the web allows for the creation of intimacy at great distances:

> *Social contagion is the spread of memes or ideas through personal contact, and social media enables high levels of personal contact across wide geographies without the loss of intimacy that once attended such great distances.* (Berger 2015: 65)

He also speculates about the structural features of extremist online networks specifically, suggesting that densely packed networks, such as

those associated with ISIS supporters, may be better vectors for the spread of apocalyptic ideas (Berger 2015: 64).

However, analysis of memes online has partially sought to break the connection with the memes as genes analogy posited by Dawkins. That memes are distributed by choice, and human agency as opposed to innate replicability of ideas, is a key component of internet memes (Shifman 2012: 189; see also Mina 2014). Probably, the key variation between academic and internet memes for the external observer is the focus on artefacts over the ideas they represent. While Dawkins original conception of a meme was extremely vague and could refer seemingly to almost any idea, in discussion internet memes are more likely to be seen as specific texts or collections of texts, audio–visual content, or funny pictures (Shifman 2014: 14; Hawley 2017: 81).

Despite this variation, writers like Limor Shifman (2014) have argued that the two interpretations should not be seen as entirely separated. In a position that closely resembles some approaches to explaining the power of advertising to tap into 'referent systems' (Williamson 2002: 19), Shifman maintains that

> *the gap between popular and serious accounts of memes can be bridged. While memes are seemingly trivial and mundane artefacts, they actually reflect deep social and cultural structures. In many senses memes can be treated as postmodern folklore in which shared norms and values are structured through cultural artefacts such as Photoshopped images or urban legends.* (Shifman 2014: 13–14)

Shifman (2014: 41) suggests that internet memes specifically cannot be understood as single texts, but as collections of texts indicative of a shared understanding underlying them across many different users.

## Weaponising Memes

Thus far, memes have been presented both as fundamental replicators of culture capable of passing on huge ideas such as belief in Gods, and as internet-based ephemeral artefacts. While these two views are not necessarily entirely divergent, memes have also been adopted by groups seeking to bring about social change. The concept of the militarised meme origi-

nates not on the extreme right, but on the anti-corporate left. Kalle Lasn, a founder of the Canadian media collective AdBusters,[2] identified memes as crucial weapons in what he saw as an information war—what he described as a 'dirty, no-holds barred propaganda war of competing world views and alternative visions of the future' (Lasn 1999: 124). To break what he saw as a suicidal cycle of consumerism, Lasn argued that:

*We build our own meme factory, put out a better product and beat the corporations at their own game.* (Lasn 1999: 124)

Lasn drew extensive parallels between the work being undertaken at AdBusters, and warfare, equating powerful paradigms such as equal access to media (Media Carta) with nuclear bombs, with the potential to remake the strategic landscape entirely. Individuals taking part in this information warfare were described as 'meme warrior', using tactics such as subvertising, virtual sit-ins[3] and purchasing short anti-corporate advertising slots where possible (Lasn 1999: 129–133). The internet, still in its early days at that point, was recognised as 'one of the most potent meme-replicating mediums ever invented' (Lasn 1999: 132). In Lasn's interpretation, memes retained their connection to deeper ideas, and artefacts such as the content produced by AdBusters were a vehicle for the deeper ideas (memes).

While Lasn's account places memes firmly in context of reaching outwards, remaking the world along revolutionary lines, memes have also been analysed in more sober terms as tools for inspiring social change. Rather than reaching out, Mina (2014) argues that memes are an important tool for circumventing restrictions on online debate in China, allowing internet users to develop hard to penetrate argots that evade censors.

*The grass mud horse, like many internet memes, is a form of in-joke. At least until it became too famous, its friendly face and punny name meant it could slip past the scrutiny of internet censors, while inspiring hilarity amongst its users. It looks harmless in image form, but it's an outcry against the very policies that forced it to become a secret symbol.* (Mina 2014: 361)

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[2] Adbusters can be accessed here: http://www.adbusters.org/.

[3] Which would now probably be described as distributed denial of service (DDOS) attacks.

Probably, the most recent, and most striking articulation of meme warfare recently, has come from the extreme-right networks that latched onto the Trump 2016 presidential campaign. Terms such as alt-right have been used to describe the group, although this designation is not accepted without controversy. Critics argue that the group is synonymous with neo-Nazism and that the term alt-right is an exercise in normalising extreme views (West 2016). Guidelines issued by the Associated Press stress that the term should only be used in quotation marks and that the group should not be allowed to define itself in a way intended to make its views more publicly acceptable (Hathaway 2016).[4]

The concrete reality of the alt-right is almost impossible to describe. Although the use of the term alt-right is now common, the movement is diverse and contains many different political perspectives as well as indistinct boundaries (Hawley 2017). Membership of the alt-right is entirely self-described and can be highly contested. Richard Spencer, editor of Radix journal and widely acknowledged key alt-right figure, used the term 'alt-light' to refer to a number of figures he saw as aligned with, but not fully ideologically committed to his version of the alt-right, including Milo Yiannopoulos (Spencer 2016). Ties between the Trump campaign and the alt-right are complex and indistinct. When questioned about the group directly, Trump appeared to distance himself from their views (Diamond 2016). However, the appointment of Steve Bannon, formerly of Breitbart News, an extremely controversial website that has ties to the alt-right, indicated a more ambiguous relationship (Michael 2016).

The use of memes, however, takes place deeper within the alt-right networks. In a post written on alt-right touchstone blog The Right Stuff, one writer heavily echoes the work of Lasn (very probably unknowingly), arguing that 'normies', alt-right slang for the non-politicised who 'would rather watch sportsball or Netflix than keep an eye on his government', can be controlled through memes.

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[4] To be clear, the use of the term alt-right in this chapter without quotation marks should not be taken by readers as any kind of endorsement or legitimisation of the network's views. Although the network is diverse and membership is fluid, elements of the alt-right do strongly resemble fascism with neo-Nazi overtones, albeit often with a heavily ironic twist. The term alt-right is used here without quotation marks to be as objective and dispassionate as possible in discussing a highly emotive issue, and in recognition of the likely specialist audience for this work.

*What can be done can be undone, for it is the nature of the normie to conform, but that requires the creation and dissemination of a new value model or paradigm to conform to. One can see some Guillaume Faye's archaeofuturism[5] here in that we need primordial solutions to present problems, one of which is the normie question. We need to create a new values system based on known but rejected truths. This is precisely where the metapolitics of meme warfare come into play. The goal of meme warfare is quite simply to control the normies. To be able to influence what they see and think, to give them a worldview that they cannot build from their lived experiences alone.* (Murray 2016a)

The affinity for memes as tools of radical social engineering espoused here is a direct continuation of the conceptualisation of memes as folklore, or memes as weapons seen above (Lasn 1999; Shifman 2014). The idea also seems to connect with notions of occult warfare suggested by Julius Evola, a philosopher influential on contemporary white nationalism (Evola 1972; see also: Johnson 2012; Goodrick-Clarke 2002). Angela Nagle draws a firm connection between the memes of the alt-right and the beliefs of the French New Right, rooting the alt-right's belief in meme warfare in the Gramscian doctrine that politics follows culture and that the culture wars need to be won before politics can be reclaimed (Nagle 2017: 40).

However, memes have also been viewed as having a more mundane awareness-raising role. Other accounts of memes have focused on them as effective rhetoric. In response to complaints from a conservative writer for National Review over abuse he had suffered for criticising another conservative for being too close to the alt-right, notorious science fiction author Vox Day[6] wrote:

*What all this whining indicates is that the ruthless, relentless meming of the Alt-Right is effective. When they cry racist, send them King Kong and field hand memes. When they cry anti-Semitism, send them swastika and oven memes.*

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[5] In Archaeofuturism, Faye, an author of the new right, calls for a closer fusion between those on the right seeking new social and technical forms, and those seeking a return to tradition.

[6] Day (real name Theodore Beale) is both a science fiction author and a far-right provocateur best known for attempting to game the 2015 Hugo science fiction awards by encouraging supporters to nominate a slate of authors he approved of, known as the Rabid Puppies. This resulted in several award categories where only puppy writers were nominated and corresponding votes to make no award in that category. For more, see the account in Wired magazine at: https://www.wired.com/2015/08/won-science-fictions-hugo-awards-matters/.

*The reason they are attempting to ban memes from social media is because it is powerfully effective rhetoric. It is rhetoric that resonates and persuades.* (Day 2016)

A post on the site Atlantic Centurion, also by Murray, gets more specific about the memes that he sees as having brought success to the alt-right, measured in publicity and increased acceptance for the alt-right worldview.

*Paid chattering class content creators have written about and continue to write about our memes like cuckservative, echo brackets, and rare pepes.* (Murray 2016b)

In the 'Echoes' campaign begun in 2014, the alt-right has explicitly embraced non-image-based memes. The campaign was launched following an episode of the Daily Shoah podcast in which supposedly Jewish names were given an echo sound effect (Fleishman and Smith 2016; Yglesias 2016). The Daily Shoah is an alt-right podcast hosted on the site The Right Stuff. Online, this was translated as including parentheses around assumed Jewish surnames and institutions, seemingly to draw attention to the perceived influence and prevalence of Jews. This campaign was further developed through a plug-in application for the web browser Chrome, which automatically added parentheses to names based on a database of supposed Jewish names. The campaign also led to the widespread changing of names on profiles either to intentionally identify as Jewish (i.e. taking it back), or as a gesture of solidarity from non-Jewish posters. What is notable about Echoes is both the use of non-image-based memes, and also the relative success of the campaign in breaking into the mainstream and garnering press attention.

Other treatments of memes within the alt-right space centre entirely on practical advice. Zeiger, a poster on the site Daily Stormer, produced an hour-long YouTube video, uploaded to the Weevlos channel, describing the use of the free image editor Gimp to make image memes. The video is entitled Pepemancy 1 (The Adolf Hitler School of Meme Magic), and is intended to instruct viewers to the level of skill required to make their own internet image-based memes referencing news events. One example included in the video was creating a meme based on the image

of Omar Mateen, the perpetrator of the Orlando nightclub shooting. The attack took place three days before the video was uploaded to YouTube. In the video, the narrator urges audiences to consider the objective of their meme, offering goals such as ridiculing the enemy, glorifying allies, diffuse enemy propaganda produced by leftists and Jews, or creating an emotion in response to an event.

> *Pepemancy is the sacred art of using our occult tools, in this case graphic editing software, and manipulating pixels and vectors to produce images that will trigger butt-hurt in our enemies and lulz in our allies.* (Weevlos 2016)

Seemingly, the validation of this thinking among the pro-Trump alt-right nexus was the release in 2016 of a document by the Clinton campaign identifying Pepe the Frog, a character originally featured in the online cartoon Boys Club, as a hate symbol. This was echoed by the US-based Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which added Pepe to its database of hate-symbols alongside other symbols such as 14 words, the number 88, the Celtic cross and the othala rune.[7] Memes have also made the leap from the alt-right network to more traditional bastions of the far-right. In a presentation to the London Forum, George Whale, a far-right activist from the UK argued that memes were a 'conceptual weapon with which to break the taboos of the left-wing establishment' (Whale 2017).

## On (Meme) War

Judging the effectiveness of memes is dependent on what the intended effects are. If memes are interpreted as ideas, then the effectiveness is dependent on measuring and explaining the development of deep-seated norms, an extremely difficult task. Certainly, the triumph of Donald Trump in the 2016 US election was claimed as a success for meme warfare in some alt-right circles. After the 2016 US election results came in, alt-right website The Right Stuff claimed that 'A man was just memed into the white house' (Murray 2016). One post on Trump-supporting

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[7] The ADL's database is available here: http://www.adl.org/combating-hate/hate-on-display/.

subreddit r/the_donald doubled down on the effectiveness of memes in the campaign. Alongside an image of Pepe incorporated into the Gadsen flag,[8] the text now reading 'no steppe on pepe', the post read:

> *Although we have memed our way to the White House, let us never forget our roots. We will not be oppressed. We will not be slandered unjustly. And if we are, we will strike with the force of a thousand memes.* (Redkurtain, r/the_donald, 22 November 2016)

While a full-scale remaking of the cultural landscape solely as a result of meme-magic seems unlikely, there is a more moderate case to say that the use of exciting and impactful imagery that travelled well in social networks does benefit the alt-right movement itself. Richard Spencer, editor of the journal Radix, claimed that the public recognition of the alt-right by the Clinton campaign was a 'breakthrough' for the movement and a recognition that the alt-right represented a real ideological challenge to dominant liberal paradigms (Spencer 2016). This effect was likely hardened by the release a few weeks later by the Clinton campaign of an explainer dedicated to Pepe the Frog (Chan 2016). In larger online venues such as Reddit, Trump supporters, some of them claiming membership of the alt-right, certainly had some success in promoting pro-Trump content. The mechanics of Reddit allow particularly successful posts to appear on an aggregated listing of posts on the site (r/all), and r/the_donald was so successful in these terms that it caused Reddit to alter the algorithms used to create r/all and introduce an option to filter out specific subreddits (Spez 2016; Kravets 2016). Hawley (2017: 83) suggests that memes allowed alt-right propagandists to introduce concepts into mainstream debate, including the term red pill (borrowed from the 1999 film The Matrix) to indicate alt-right affiliates awareness of a truth hidden from everyone else. Memes as awareness-raising tools also find some support from attentional economic perspectives on memes (Shifman 2014: 32). At the very least, the use of memes was attention-grabbing and interesting compared to much of the other political coverage of the time.

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[8] The Gadsen flag traditionally features a rattle snake on a yellow filed on the words 'don't tread on me'.

A final possible benchmark for meme success is likely confined to political networks themselves. While in their original interpretation memes were cultural replicators, internet memes often seem to be far more exclusive. A focus on images, the use of in-jokes, obscure humour and the reliance on prior knowledge combine to make the current world of internet memes somewhat impenetrable and highly specific to those already involved in a network. Even relatively successful alt-right memes such as Pepe and echoes are likely baffling for many US voters not in touch with various internet subcultures required to decipher them. The reaction to Clinton's Pepe explainer was one of slight incredulity from many commentators, even those highly embedded in meme culture (ETC Show 2016). Internet memes are attractive to internet subcultures largely because they are impenetrable to outsiders. Returning to Shifman's approach to memes, mimicry and remix require a level of common knowledge to work, and without the required prior knowledge the idea that a cartoon frog could by symbolic of a neo-Nazi political network is unlikely to be immediately apparent. Gal et al. (2015) noted in the context of an LGBTQ meme campaign—'It gets better'—that imitating and remixing content had a dual purpose. First, to persuade and negotiate boundaries and norms, and second, to construct a collective identity. Shifman (2014) also makes the point that memes, in particular memes that involve mimicry by the creator, provide opportunities for self-expression in a connected way. This he links to Wellman's concept of networked individualism, which recognises the competing pressures we all face to simultaneously develop our own identities and belong to broader social networks. Memes, in which self-expression is bounded within the tight rules of the specific meme being invoked, for example, Pepe the Frog, provide in Shifman's (2014: 33) words the opportunity to 'have it all'. The analysis of mainstream attempts to co-opt memes (in form if not spirit) has revealed a picture of images restricted to existing and largely closed political networks, thickening participation not broadening it (Lee and Campbell 2016). A third measure of meme success may be their ability to enable participation by activists who are either already engaged with or sympathetic to the alt-right. Much of the insider appeal of internet memes comes precisely from their inaccessibility to, in the alt-right's vernacular, 'normies'.

The last point in this analysis is also the most troubling from a practitioner's perspective. There remains a serious question as to the extent to which movements based heavily on online participation should be taken seriously in respect to the physical world and their relationship to observable behaviour. While in some spaces (such as Radix) the alt-right is clearly attempting to develop an ideological basis, other behaviours open-up questions as to how genuinely held alt-right beliefs are. It is impossible to engage with the alt-right material without developing at least some sense of the joyful absurdity on show in some spaces. The general irreverence of the alt-right network is further compounded by the efforts in some circles to elevate Pepe the Frog to divine status as the avatar of the chaotic God Kek.[9] At this point, it is impossible to tell how genuine or deeply held these beliefs are for many activists. Trolling, the act of saying deliberately provocative things in the hope of getting a reaction online, is a well-documented phenomenon. Research with professed trolls suggests that such behaviours are not only potentially very destructive, but the products of emotional disassociation between the actions of a troll and consequences, the only criterion being the 'lulz', laughter at the anguish of another (Philips 2015: 28–29). This sentiment certainly pervades some of the posting surrounding memes in the alt-right, for example in the post by Zeiger hosted on the Weevlos (2016) YouTube channel quoted above. Given that the co-origins of the alt-right and the online social movement are anonymous, it is perfectly possible that many who believe themselves on the alt-right are simply in it for the 'lulz'.[10] Alt-right memes, to some extent, may simply be an extension of the same chaotic and nihilistic mindset that brought us rick-rolling, anonymous and lolcats.

However glib the attitudes of some within the alt-right network, the risks associated with far-right extremism, its potential to legitimise violence, threaten social cohesion and promote terrorism, remain real.

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[9] See the anonymous posting here: https://pepethefrogfaith.wordpress.com/.

[10] Note as well as an ancient Egyptian god, Kek is also the translation of the expression 'lol' in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) World of Warcraft between Alliance and Horde players.

# Conclusions

Memes represent a challenge for those seeking to understand extreme political networks. Scientific understanding of memes began with the development of the concept to explain the transmission of culture in a manner akin to genetic transmission. Memes were ideas. The current embodiment of the meme, the internet meme, is different. Internet memes are seen as collections of texts with a common linking theme. Each individual text will resemble the original template in some way but will also differ enough to add something of the creator.

Despite the shift in meaning, both academics and activists have made the case for internet memes representing the gateway to deeper culture substructures. Shifman (2014), for example, sees memes as a type of post-modern folklore. In the case of the alt-right network, memes have taken on a quasi-mystical significance. For some alt-right activists, memes are tools that allow the reprogramming of society to better reflect their interests. Some quarters of the alt-right have even gone so far to frame 'meme magic' as having religious significance, although, as with vast swathes of the alt-right, there are questions over how sincere activists are in these beliefs. Concern over the apparent increasing permissiveness of liberal societies towards far-right ideas certainly warrants pause for thought. Historian Aristotle Kallis has described the apparent rise of taboo-breaking political discourse as 'lethal mainstreaming' (Kallis 2013: 221).

On the effectiveness of internet memes, however, their reliance on often obscure insider jokes and knowledge seems to work against the interpretation that they are fuelling major shifts in societies. Whereas anti-corporate activists like Lasn used familiar cultural references, for example, remaking adverts, internet memes are relatively impenetrable to a mass market audience relying on evermore obscure subcultural knowledge. Where in the past internet memes have penetrated the mainstream, as was the case with viral phenomena such as Gangnam Style and rick-rolling, the memes of the alt-right have seemingly become increasingly inward looking.

With respect to meme warfare, the greatest success of the alt-right was the attention generated firstly by the 2016 Clinton campaign's acknowl-

edgement of its existence, and secondly by the spectacle of a presidential candidate releasing material addressing a cartoon frog. These successes are exceptional and isolated. Memes are not the quasi-religious superweapons imagined by some activists. For most of the populace, they are stuck at the level of internet ephemera. However, memes are an important opportunity for activists within extreme political networks to participate. For the majority of activists, memes provide an internal argot: a language that only they and fellow activists have the required knowledge to fully understand. For those creating memes, the narrow margins of interpretation allow for a fusion of individual and networked political participation, enabling individual expression within a wider network of activists.

Those tasked with understanding extreme memes from outside of political networks, both researchers and investigators need to keep in mind these competing aspects. On one level, the likely strategic function of memes is enabling belonging and performance, sometimes with an eye to generating outrage in outsiders if possible. In addition, practitioners need to make a determination about an individual activist's own level of commitment. For some activists, memes undoubtedly do represent some kind of mythological superweapon, reprogramming society behind the scenes. For others, memes are simply good fun.

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# 6

# Then and Now: Irish Republicanism and Ulster Loyalism Online

Lorraine Bowman-Grieve and Stephen Herron

## Introduction

Perhaps surprisingly, Irish Republicans were one of the first international terrorist movements to take up the internet as a potential tool to further their ideological communication capabilities, as well as to contribute to their fundraising efforts. However, for various reasons Irish Republican organisations (and there are various factions of them both historically and currently) make minimal use of the internet compared to some other terrorist and extremist movements worldwide. Ulster Loyalism's association with the internet and social media has on the other hand taken rather longer to materialise, with the 'benefits' of social media as an organising tool being most readily displayed during the 'flag' protests of 2012–2013 when

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Belfast City Council decided to restrict the flying of the union flag on Belfast City Hall to designated days only. Loyalism has since realised the power of social media as a platform in galvanising support and expressing particular views. In the sections which follow this chapter will outline the changing nature of Irish Republicanism and Ulster Loyalism online from 2002 to the present and will provide interpretations as to why some things have changed and why some have remained the same. To aid in this discussion, the concepts of 'communities of practice' (Wenger 1998; Hundeide 2003) and 'voluntary associations' (Kerri 1972) will be used. Communities of practice can be defined as social spaces which allow people to come together to share common ideas and/or shared interested in pursuit of a common goal. Voluntary associations can be defined as voluntarily organised private groups where members join to pursue a shared interest. These terms have common functional aspects in that they both facilitate the formations of communities of individuals with shared interests and provide a public space for group members. The following discussion will utilise the concepts of 'communities of practice' and voluntary associations in explaining the function of the online spaces of Irish Republicanism and Ulster Loyalism, respectively.

## Background

At the core of the current and ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland (NI) are ethno-nationalism and a conflict arguably based predominantly on identity, over economic or even political issues. Conflicts of this nature are inherently challenging in that they are difficult to permanently end, and even while some elements of the peace process of the 1990s and the subsequent Good Friday Agreement (GFA) or Belfast Agreement (1998) were successful, they have not resulted in a final and fundamental peace. Unrest persists in NI predominantly around issues to do with identity, and that relate to daily life for those who live in the communities of this region. For example, issues relating to the naming of the region (Ireland or UK, NI or Ulster, Derry or Londonderry), the flags representing the region (Irish, British or some new flag to represent the area), the ongoing divisions between historical and traditional Nationalist and Loyalist

spaces, and the parades, marches and commemorations that Nationalists, Republicans[1] and Loyalists want to engage with to represent their identity, history and culture. Similarly, ongoing concerns regarding regional policing, community perceptions of justice and equality, prisoner status and the impact of early release schemes, and the experiences of victims and their families in the region have their part to play in concerns about the future of NI and those who reside there. (For a review of these various issues, see Currie and Taylor (2011), McAuley and Ferguson (2016), Morrison (2013), Peake and Lynch (2016), and Sluka (1995).)

Furthermore, since the signing of the GFA there have been further developments in Irish Republican groupings, with former members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) teaming up with other factions and/or younger recruits to resume hostilities and violent engagement in NI since 2010 (Horgan and Morrison 2011). These contemporary factions in Irish Republicanism appear to be made up of both the old vanguard and newer/younger elements and these groupings and their online presence since 2010 are outlined in the following section. For Ulster Loyalists, their place within post-conflict NI provides an illustration of the complexity and multi-layered identities, which occur in localised conflict zones. Since the signing of the GFA, Loyalism has struggled to find both a stable identity and an accepted role within NI.

Ulster Loyalism is viewed as one segment of a larger unionist identity within NI (Todd 1987; Gallagher 1995; Tonge and Evans 2001) and is often connected with more right-wing elements within unionism. Committed to NI remaining part of the UK, with a strong Protestant base as well as suggestions of a closer connection to Scotland than found within mainstream unionism, Ulster Loyalism has been associated with organisations such as the Orange Order, Protestant marching bands and right-wing political parties such as the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). The more extreme elements of Loyalism have been associated with protests, violence and paramilitary activity, with organisations such as the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) amongst the largest and most active Loyalist paramilitary forces during the conflict in NI.

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[1] A distinction between Nationalists and Republicans is being made here—both seek to achieve a United Ireland; however, Republicans support the use of violence to achieve this goal.

Despite a continuing peace process, low-level political violence involving groups on the Ulster Loyalist and Irish Republican sides point to the fragility of peace in NI. Inter-ethnic hostility also remains, with protests, marches and sectarian intimidation occurring in towns and cities throughout NI. Considering such antagonism and mutual suspicion, symbols, identity and alternative forms of political and sectarian expression become ever more important. The internet and especially social media provide such a platform wherein Loyalism as well as Irish Republicanism can express their opinions onto others while also reinforcing mutual sectarian hostility.

## The Development of Online Republicanism

As early as 1997, the activities of Irish Republicans online achieved media attention with an article published in the News of the World (Trevor 1997) discussing the IRA's plans to use the internet to 'poison the minds of children'. The article describes a website, Fieldcraft for the Freedom Fighter, which includes details of how to make a nail bomb and how to use a petrol bomb during a riot. Such early coverage reveals that Republicans were quick to use the internet not only to communicate with a wider audience, exchange information and spread propaganda but also to monitor other Republicans (the Irish Republican Bulletin Board—previously located at http://www.irbb.rr.nu—was especially useful to this end).

However, the internet has changed since these early days and is now not only a space for passive consumption, as it was when Irish Republicans first 'went online' and developed static (and often very basic) websites (Bowman-Grieve 2006). The explosion of Web 2.0 and increased accessibility to the internet has resulted in much reinvention and the internet is now a space for consumption, discussion and production (Bowman-Grieve and Conway 2012). This however leads to its own problems and may result in a flooding of the online space so that there are many websites and potential forums, where once there were few. This flooding can in turn result in a thin spread of users across sites and a poorer sense of community in any one place as a result. This of course depends on the

absolute numbers of supporters/potential supporters who are seeking to engage via the internet—a difficult figure to gauge for any movement. Similarly, while many movements have progressed in their online use and self-promotion via the internet (e.g. in their uptake and use of newer social media and communication platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, etc.), Irish Republicans appear to have taken a back seat in these domains.

From 2002 to 2006, Irish Republicanism, both online and offline, was experiencing a period of decline in terms of activity and support (Bowman-Grieve 2006). This period saw an increase in support of the Peace Process and the Good Friday Agreement, the 'Provos' decommissioning, Sinn Fein gaining political legitimacy and increased support, and increased counter-terrorism legislation as a function of the 9/11 attacks in the US. In many ways, it was quieter in NI than it had been for many years; however, despite this relative calm on the ground, there was a continuation of activity online at this time—perhaps because the internet was still seen as a relatively safe and anonymous space where Republican supporters could continue to communicate and interact. During this time, a number of discussion forums were busy and active in supporting Irish Republican discourses, including the discussion of topics relating to the current state of the movement (and its various factions), the political players (and their worth/value to Irish Republicanism), continued dissection of the Good Friday Agreement and its impact, the problems of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), and ongoing discussions of 'enemies' of Irish Republicanism and justifications to use violence (Bowman-Grieve 2006, 2010).

However, post-2008 saw a shift in Irish Republican structuring with a new wave of Irish Republicanism marked by Violent Dissident Republicans (VDRs, Horgan and Morrison 2011), made up of a number of splinter groups who espoused the continued use of violence to achieve a United Ireland. VDRs are characterised by their refusal to sign-up to the Good Friday Agreement (1998), their rejection of the PSNI and their commitment to the continued use of violence to expel the British presence from the 'six counties' and the establishment of a United Ireland (Bowman-Grieve and Conway 2012). VDRs are comprised of Republicans from various factions of the older versions of the IRA and newer groupings, which have more recently formed. Members of the old guard of the

Continuity IRA (CIRA)[2] and the Real IRA (RIRA)[3] have come together with new recruits to form groups such as Oglaigh na hEireann (ONH)[4] and the 'New IRA' (a combination of RIRA and Republican Action Against Drugs [RAAD]).[5]

During this time, direct encouragement of violence remained relatively rare within both the general Irish Republican online space and its Dissident sub-sections. Perhaps, the best example of an exception to this came about in April 2010 when community members of www.irishrepublican.net were communicating in real time about the protests and riots which were sweeping through the Ardoyne area of Belfast at that time, thus facilitating the communication of information that was being used by some to create/add to 'Flash Mobs' in the rioting areas via additional text messaging services (Moriarty 2010).

However, online users generally remained cautious during this time and were often careful to warn each other that their online interactions could be monitored by security services (Bowman-Grieve and Conway 2012). Therefore, in terms of 'real world' activism, the emphasis has remained 'traditional' in Irish Republican circles, with a focus on supporting

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[2] The CIRA formed in 1986 when they split from the Provisional IRA. This split occurred as a result of the PIRA's acceptance of the so-called dual approach of 'the armalite and the ballot box', which referred to their continued commitment to violent struggle while at the same time ceasing their policy of abstensionism.

[3] The RIRA was formed in 1997 by PIRA Quartermaster Michael McKevitt and other former PIRA members as a result of perceived betrayal of Republican ideals. The RIRA was affiliated with the 32 County Sovereignty Movement (32CSM) which was founded by Bernadette Sands-McKevitt (sister of Bobby Sands). The RIRA rejected the Good Friday Agreement and Peace Process and came to be widely known following the Omagh Bombing in 1998, which killed 29 people and injured 220 more. McKevitt was convicted in 2003 for his involvement with the RIRA, and was subsequently released in 2016. The 32CSM has an online presence, including a Facebook page with over 6500 followers (as of January 2018).

[4] Oglaigh na hEireann (ONH) translates to Youth of Ireland and is used to refer to a recognised grouping of soldiers or warriors of Ireland. ONH are recognised to be an off shoot of the RIRA, formed in 2009. This group was one of the first to be labelled as Dissidents as a result of their rejection of the GFA and return to violent strategies and terrorism to achieve their goal of a United Ireland. This group is reported to be linked to Republican Network for Unity. They do not consider themselves to be 'Dissidents'.

[5] The formation of a so-called New IRA was discussed in 2012 when it was reported in various news sources that the RIRA was being joined by the Republican Action Against Drugs group (a known vigilante group in Derry) with plans to escalate activities to destabilise the power sharing agreement of NI. The group has since its inception engaged in a range of terrorist activities (both violent and disruptive) in the region to achieve this aim. This group also do not consider themselves to be 'Dissidents'.

Republican prisoners and attending Republican commemorations of various sorts. The latter points to the likelihood that many of both the producers and consumers of VDR online content were resident in either NI or the Republic of Ireland and, therefore, in a position to attend gatherings in either or both locales. This heavy emphasis on not just virtual support, but opportunities for face-to-face interactions probably meant that there was less of a need on the part of VDRs to post potentially sensitive information online than there is for other more widely dispersed political violence movements. The renewed Dissident threat was underlined in 2009 when in a 48 hour period in March of that year, Dissidents claimed responsibility for two separate attacks that resulted in three murders.[6] In 2010, VDR activity was so prevalent that it was described by the UK and Irish Independent monitoring commission as 'brutally active' and a 'severe threat'.

During the period 2010–2016, when Irish Republicanism online had taken an apparent down turn, or at least remained static, street-level activity continued, albeit not at the level previously known prior to the GFA (and therefore less widely reported perhaps).[7] Media coverage of this activity remained predominantly local with national coverage (i.e. in the Republic of Ireland and in the UK) minimal, mainly covered in the broadsheet newspapers rather than TV media. In some instances (e.g. those involving fatalities and/or injuries), coverage was more apparent; however, international coverage remained at a minimum, perhaps as a function of the regional aspect of the activity and also perhaps because of the nature of terrorism in NI, that is, Nationalistic rather than violent Jihadi. It may also be that the desire to 'sell' the GFA as a success is more beneficial than reporting on its apparent shortcomings in relation to continued peace in the region.

Returning to Irish Republicanism online (and based on earlier research published by Bowman-Grieve and Conway 2012), while the number of Irish Republican websites may remain numerous (albeit with a number of these now appearing dated and not regularly updated), the number of

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[6] March 2009: Massereene Barracks, County Antrim: Sappers Patrick Azimkar and Mark Quinsey are killed as they collect pizzas outside their barracks. The Real IRA said it carried out the attack; Craigavon, County Armagh: Constable Stephen Carroll, 48, is shot dead as he and police colleagues answer a call for help. The Continuity IRA says they shot the policeman.

[7] Based on conservative estimates from incidents reported by the BBC for this period (2010–2016).

Irish Republican discussion forums has apparently lessened over the last 20 years. Of the few that have remained popular, the discussion forum commonly referred to as the Irish Republican Forum (online at www.irishrepublican.net now at Republican.ie) is the most notable. This forum appears to variously alter from being open and closed to non-members. As a 'closed' virtual community, it requires user registration to both view and contribute posts to some/all areas within the forum. Registering parties are required to provide details of their political affiliation and recommendations from already registered members have been requested in the past, although it is not clear if this was a formal registration requirement.

Currently, the forum is completely closed to non-members; however, as of June 2014 when the forum was partially accessible, it had over 16,800 registered members and over a million discussion threads. Web-based discussion forums such as the Irish Republican forum can be used to create and disseminate discourses that support, critique and promote the ideology and traditions of Irish Republicanism, in both its present-day and historical guises. What has been discovered here in past research by Bowman-Grieve (2006, 2010) and Bowman-Grieve and Conway (2012) is how members, supporters and sympathisers of these movements interpret Irish Republicanism and the rhetoric and actions of both Irish Republican politicians and paramilitaries. These interactive online spaces therefore have showcased the evolving face of Irish Republicanism, made up of what are variously referred to within these online milieus as 'die-hards', 'true republicans', 'dissidents' and even 'sell-outs' and 'traitors'.

This research supports the position that the form and function of Republican discourses online feeds into concepts of 'communities of practice' (Wenger 1998; Hundeide 2003) whereby the online space is being utilised by predominantly like-minded individuals to create social spaces of support and to promote the viability and legitimacy of violence to achieve the overall goal of a United Ireland. Consistent in discussions of online Republicanism and its links with offline activity is the core argument that the likelihood of involvement in violent/terrorist activity is limited where there is online activity alone, and that the ethno-Nationalist nature of this conflict makes involvement on the ground more likely where there is exposure to both terrorist ideology (such as the discourses accounted for above) and actual social bonds and links in the region.

## The Development of Online Loyalism

With respect to Ulster Loyalism, online communication and social media first came to prominence in the winter of 2012–2013 following the decision of Belfast City Council to fly the Union flag from Belfast City Hall on certain designated days only. In response to this, and recognising the networking power of social media, Loyalists set up a series of Facebook pages which helped organise protests throughout NI. The ability of Facebook to help organise the gathering of protestors in particular areas quickly caused considerable difficulties for the security forces that had little preparation time to react to events occurring on the streets. Pages such as *Save the Union Flag*, *Loyal Peoples Protest* (LPP) and *Protestant Coalition* were important in organising Loyalists as well as providing a forum for the dissection and distribution of pro-Loyalist views. While the use of social media for the 'Save the Union Flag at City Hall' protests may have dwindled, social media as a tool for organising protests, marches and more traditional Loyalist band parades remains.

The structure and layout of the Loyalist Facebook pages further lend themselves to being seen as voluntary associations. Kerri (1972: 44) defines voluntary association as 'any private group voluntarily and more or less formally organized, joined and maintained by members pursuing a common interest, usually by means of part-time, unpaid activities'. Norbeck (1967) meanwhile refers to 'common interest associations', in which he argues that by participating in civic organisations, individuals build social relationships and access social resources that are likely to enhance their social and economic prospects. Little (1965) discusses how voluntary associations organised by migrants allowed them to recreate in a distant, urban milieu something of the traditional society they were accustomed to. The idea of an association which establishes a connection with the past is useful in terms of the functionality and purpose of Loyalist Facebook pages, principally because they play a vital role in allowing users to publicly declare their Loyalist identity. Furthermore, in a political environment of uncertainty, a society in the midst of post-conflict change and lack of sustained overt physical violence social media groups allow for sectarianism and ethnic hatred to be displayed on all sides without actual violence taking place. Hostility and conflict on the streets have

been superseded by a cultural and symbolic conflict of which social media plays an increasingly important role. Yet social media can also, when required, play an important role in enabling the facilitation and organisation of hostility on the streets, as shown in the flag protests organised by pages such as *Save the Union Flag*. Weekly flag protests outside Belfast City Hall organised by the group *Loyal Peoples Protest* (LPP) still take place of which their Facebook page plays an important role in both arranging and promoting these ongoing protests.

Highly visible displays of patriotic symbolism and imagery on Loyalist pages assist in both public declarations as Loyalists and the next stage of a post-Troubles cultural conflict. Among the perceived benefits of these social media pages are that Loyalists can enter an environment in which they experience camaraderie and respect, share emotions, engage in social interaction and express views with like-minded individuals. This platform provides the freedom to speak and reflect on memories that are more challenging to express in a face-to-face setting. Within the Loyalist pages collective, informal rituals provide effective healing and 'create a positive sense of identity for those who have experienced rejection or marginalization' (Dubisch 2009: 10).

Loyalist Facebook pages provide a setting to interact socially and remember a particular version of the conflict in NI. This acts as a community of memory by providing people a sense of place and familiarity, while reaffirming their localised cultural identity within a global network of communication (Bellah and Madsen 1985). Despite its virtual context, geographical commonality is also emphasised through mentions of local events, incidents, previous attacks that took place during the Troubles and so forth, thus providing the means to enable individual Loyalists to come together in a virtual manner.

Notably, Facebook has become increasingly important in the Loyalist band scene. By promoting parades and events, it also assists in the recruitment of new members by encouraging visitors to join their local Orange Lodge or band. The *Ulster Bands Forum* (11,705 likes), *Ulster Bands* (12,784 likes) and similar Loyalist band pages provide regular updates of forthcoming band parades throughout NI and the UK mainland, and encourage people to either attend or join a local band. From this, there are sub-regional pages in existence providing information on Loyalist

bands in particular geographical areas such as the *West Ulster Bands Forum.* There are also a large number of individual band Facebook pages.

It is clear that social media has become increasingly important as an organisational tool. As such, it can be viewed as an online community of practice, thus providing insights into an individual's engagement within social relations and the wider community to which they belong. Within communities of practice, 'learning is an issue of engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities' (Wenger 1998: 7). Contained in these band pages is considerable pride in justifying their existence. In the face of considerable inter-ethnic tension surrounding Loyalist parades, it thus requires sustained engagement and interaction by users in these informal virtual environments to continue to get a particular message across. Not only do such virtual communities of practice provide a forum for the distribution of Loyalist views and information to new audiences but they also help to reaffirm commitment and support from existing Loyalists. Regular Facebook page administrators and posters will focus on promoting their community(s) and presenting a particular narrative.

Anderson (1971) draws attention to the fact that many associations are a collection of groupings joined together and associations may themselves be subdivided into a number of subgroups in recognition of this diversity. Meanwhile, for Chapple and Coon (1942: 418), this characteristic is dominant: 'It must be remembered that, whatever the other characteristics of an association, it is always formed at the point of tangency of several institutions, or of subsystems within an institution'. For the Ulster Loyalist band scene, the joining of forces into collective band pages and organisations helps present a united message of support for a Loyalist band scene, which remains a resource for continued debate amongst broader NI society. It also helps provide support and recognition for individual bands, many of whom, especially in some rural areas, struggle to survive in post-conflict NI where recruiting new young members becomes increasingly difficult in a social environment of greater choice and disposable income.

In short, such Loyalist band pages offer 'the chance to come together with others to create or participate for collective benefit' (Bishop and Hoggett 1986: 3). Members are characterised 'by their common purpose of defending and promoting functionally defined interests' (Streeck and

Schmitter 1991: 231). This has particular relevance with respect to presenting Loyalism to the digital world, helping to create a platform where those unfamiliar with Loyalism can come to learn 'the truth' while at the same reaffirming the views of existing Loyalists, views which can and have been tested in the unpredictability of post-conflict NI.

The following sections of this chapter will address the current status of internet use by these groupings, in particular seeking to account for the comparative down turn in activity by Irish Republicans and the current relevance of the continued use of online spaces by Ulster Loyalist groups.

## Interpreting the Current Status of Republicanism Online

The current downturn in the use of the online milieu by contemporary Irish Republicans may be a function of various factors including but not limited to a slow tapering of interest in Irish Republicanism more generally and by online users in particular. While initially it appeared that online Republican discussions might be moving to other online spaces, such as those facilitated by social media communication (such as Facebook, Twitter, etc.), this does not appear to be the case, with only a few Facebook pages dedicated to Irish Republicanism and even fewer of these having a notable following. Because of this apparent downturn, it may be argued that there has been a reduction of interest in Irish Republicanism online (but not Irish Republicanism per se) as a function of several factors.

To begin with, there may be an increased awareness of the lack of suitability of the internet medium to providing any further ongoing support to this predominantly regionally based movement. The communities of practice that were formed and forming online could find themselves just as easily forming in the offline space. In line with this, it may be that most UK Terrorism legislation, which clearly states that the support and/or dissemination of terrorism supporting material are against the law, has had at least some of its desired effect. Probably more influential is that as a Nationalist-based conflict the internet simply has less of a role to play in recruitment and strategising, which remains predominantly on the

ground and within the communities where this conflict is based. In line with this, further changes to Irish Republican group structuring (an ongoing theme in Irish Republicanism) mean that 'the Dissidents' do not necessarily rely on online support, either from within the region or from outside diaspora communities, but rather, seek old IRA members and new membership from largely regional based communities, making recruitment more about back room conversations rather than twitter feeds. In line with this, diaspora support has become less relevant except for its monetary benefits. To this end, online communities of support which might have previously had a large online diaspora community have become less used/less relevant. However, Irish Republican merchandising remains popular and is available online, and provides both a way for the diaspora community to show its support and for organisations to make some money.

Additionally, and in relation to the question of 'who are the Dissidents?', it is recognised that there are more 'Dissenters' than 'Dissidents', with a recognisable difference between the two. The latter reject the GFA and promote the use of violence to achieve all Ireland unity; the former also reject the GFA (questioning its value and promises) and the policies pursued by Sinn Fein, but acknowledge that violence cannot be used to achieve a long-term change in NI.

On a related note, we must also consider the impact and popularity of Sinn Fein as the political party representing Irish Nationalist ideals in NI and in the Republic. According to Klout, a service that provides insights and reports on social media influence, the all-island Republican party Sinn Féin has the most online influence with a Klout score of 59. The recent stepping down of Gerry Adams (2017) as leader of Sinn Fein (10 February 2018), and the taking up of the leadership role by Mary Lou Mac Donald, will mark a time of change and most probably increased growth in terms of party popularity among Nationalists both north and south of the border, as the party continues to promote itself as community aware, active and relevant.

Similarly, the impact of Brexit and the recent death of Martin McGuiness cannot be overlooked, both of which received attention online from Republicans themselves and other commentators. With regard to Brexit, see for example the discussion piece written by Hoey (2016) and reproduced

on The Pensive Quill website, which notes that 'Brexit has brought the land question back to the table and dissidents who did not buy into the fudge of the Peace Process or the idea that the border would suddenly magically one day disappear as peace progressed, appear to be due some sort of vindication'. Similarly, McDonald (2016) reporting in the *Guardian* (post Brexit results) commented that the Brexit results indicated to Republicans Dissidents a chance to break up the current link between NI (where a majority vote to remain part of the EU) and the rest of Britain (where a majority voted to leave the EU). According to this report, Dissident Republicans (close to the New IRA group) commented that most hardliners welcomed the Brexit vote: 'For the first time, anti-Good Friday agreement republicans are on the same side as the apolitical people in the street here in Derry—the men and women who are furious that while they voted to stay in the EU the English voters were the ones that counted.'

However, more recently, in media coverage by the Irish Times (Carswell 2017), including an interview with former IRA member (and current Irish Republican and Nationalist), Gerry McGeough, commented that Brexit is the 'gift that keeps on giving'—felt it would bring about constitutional crisis in United Ireland—that is, it would lead to constituent parts of UK pulling apart from each other leading to a United Ireland by default. For example, the reinstituting of a border (hard or soft) would focus the minds of Irish people north and south on the topic of a United Ireland. In commentary from another Republican source in the same article (McKearney), 'There is very, very little appetite among republican circles in the North for a resumption of any armed campaign….as a community willing to return to armed conflict, there just isn't an appetite for that'. However, English (2017) notes: 'The Republican Dissidents have not- and will not- go away'. English goes on to caution that the Dissidents pose an ongoing and continued threat in the region, a threat that is currently being managed by the PSNI but which should not be dismissed nonetheless. Additionally, with various Republican movements releasing New Year statements in

2018[8] vowing to continue in the pursuance of a United Ireland through continued involvement in 'grassroots activism', it is apparent that the discourse of Irish Republicanism in the online realm remains.

## Interpreting the Current Status of Online Loyalism

For Ulster Loyalism, their social media pages are important in developing and sustaining an identity many users feel is under threat in a changing NI. Harris (1998: 609) argues that the essentially voluntary nature of participation in associations means that considerable attention must be given to responding to individuals' demands and needs to ensure that they remain members: 'Members seek from [associations] 'expressive' social and personal benefits such as friendship, mutual support and exchange of news'. Loyalist pages have thus become an example of the multi-layered nature of Loyalist identity and 'community'. Participation in these online associations has become important in helping to express their identity as Loyalists in a geo-political and socio-cultural environment of increasing uncertainty.

As such, a number of general Loyalist Facebook pages have been created to promote Loyalist views including *Proud to be a protestant banter* which with nearly 61,000 likes is one of the largest Loyalist Facebook pages focused on promoting what it views as all things 'Ulster British'. This includes references to bands' parades, Orange Order events, British military and Loyalist paramilitary symbolism, and other Loyalist markers of identity. Fear of Loyalists' positioning within the UK is a common theme in these pages. It is thus perhaps not surprising that page visitors come mainly from NI. Nonetheless, there is evidence of some interaction from Loyalists in mainland UK and in particular from Scotland who like and contribute to such pages, reaffirming Ulster-Scots' connections with Loyalism and the sectarian division within Scotland.

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[8] Republican Sinn Fein published their new year statement on their homepage. Available at https://republicansinnfein.org/2018/01/10/new-year-statement-from-the-leadership-of-republican-sinn-fein-2/.

Despite suspicion towards the UK government, politicians and symbols of authority, within these Loyalist pages are significant numbers of posts expressing support for the British military, reflecting the multifaceted nature of Loyalist identity. Besides, a focus on the military's involvement in NI, there is also support for British troops involved in recent conflicts such as that witnessed in Afghanistan. Posts are often accompanied with pictures or photographs of British soldiers either showing support for 'our troops' or remembering soldiers who have been killed in action. There is a particular focus on local troops who operated in NI during the Troubles, such as members of the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR), a locally recruited British Army Regiment who only operated in NI during the Troubles. A source of pride for many within Loyalism and subsequently hostility by many within Republicanism, due to alleged UDR and Loyalist paramilitary collusion, Loyalists' memories of the UDR reflects their approach to remembering the Troubles and that their actions were morally justified against the actions of Republican paramilitaries.

In such politically fragile contexts, these statements of justification are of even greater importance for Loyalists and can thus be grouped into two major areas. The first is social media posts, which seek to justify the political objectives and actions of Ulster Loyalism set within post-conflict NI, whereby the positioning of Ulster Loyalism itself is in a state of ambiguity and uncertainty. There is suspicion of political leaders across all spectrums but particular anger is directed towards unionist leaders and mainland UK politicians who Loyalist posters feel have betrayed and/or sold out Ulster. The lack of trust towards traditional political leaders means that social media platforms provide an outlet for the expression of political opinions, which may not be possible otherwise. With Loyalists least likely to vote in NI elections, especially from working class areas, social media provides an alternative forum for those critical of, or unwilling to vote for, mainstream unionist parties. Social media also enables those who may be unable to get coverage through traditional media forms to have an outlet for exposure.

The second is posts which seek to justify acts carried out by both Loyalist paramilitaries and the British military during the 'Troubles', such as Bloody Sunday in 1972 when British paratroopers killed 14 civilians in

Derry/Londonderry during a civil rights march. Of particular interest here is the attempt to justify political violence by Loyalists as a legitimate defensive response to the aggression of what they view as Republican terrorists. This is underpinned by Loyalists' accounts as victims. Post-conflict environments involve efforts to find frameworks that deal with past violence (see Mueggler 2001), particularly as violence during the Troubles was close to home. The social media narratives provide an additional outlet upon which to examine how Loyalists recall the past, how they view their position in NI and how they move on with their lives.

Acts of remembrance are especially important. Various notable dates where incidents against Loyalists and the military were carried out are recalled and followers are asked to remember such occasions by liking and/or commenting on the post. Here, acts of remembrance, normally solemn and formal, become appropriated and reinterpreted through new methods of communication, which results in acts of remembrance becoming a daily activity.

The Remembrance period in November—a period set aside in the UK to remember those who died in combat—is especially a time when a collective narrative of suffering and victimhood is promoted by Loyalist pages on Facebook. This period is also used by Loyalist pages to reaffirm broader political viewpoints and/or voice criticism at the erosion of—in a Loyalist sense—their British identity. During this 'official' period of remembrance in November, Loyalist social media posts place importance on remembrance symbolism and ritual with the culturally recognised symbol of remembrance, the poppy, on display. Remembrance of past conflicts provides an opportunity for Loyalists to express not only their British identity, but also a Loyalist identity and community, which they feel has been rejected and alienated from wider British society.

During the Union flag protests of 2012–2013, dedicated Facebook pages were created informing members of protests being organised throughout NI. Often these protests were organised at short notice and relied on social networking sites such as Facebook to spread the word. The initial failure of the PSNI to recognise the power of social media in facilitating these protests only served to enhance their impact on everyday life. While ultimately unsuccessful in achieving their goal of returning the flag to City Hall, Loyalists nonetheless came to see the benefit of

social media as both a mobilising tool and a forum for the promotion of Loyalist identity and beliefs.

As the overt physical conflict in NI recedes, it has been replaced by increasing activism whereby each side seeks to gain moral and political authority. The increasing role social media plays in facilitating Loyalist activism in particular represents a significant shift in the actions of this community. Initially created as a social forum for the coming together and exchanging of narratives between Loyalists, recent years have witnessed these organisations take on an ever-growing activist role. Weiss (2009) examines how military combat experience can be mobilised and transformed into social activism whereby 'Veterans embraced their public image as war heroes, seeking to use their moral authority to bolster the effectiveness of their activist message' (Ibid.: 6). With respect to online Loyalism, online platforms are increasingly being used to present a particular narrative about their experiences. An important element in the success of such strategies is Loyalists' ability to claim authority over Troubles-related narratives.

The requirement to speak with authority and authenticity with regard to conflict experience has taken on greater importance since the conclusion of the Troubles. Ashplant et al. (2000) highlight the contested nature of collective narratives of war memory as a complex hegemonic process that operates within a number of different socio-political spaces or social arenas, each constituting different types of collectivity. These range in social breadth and political importance from the networks of families or kinship groups, to those of communities of geography or interest, to the public sphere of nation-states and transnational power blocs. Traditionally, these shared memories circulate within relatively private social arenas. In order to secure more extensive public recognition, the members of face-to-face social groups must create agencies capable of recasting its narratives into a new, integrated collective form and project this into a public arena where it speaks to others beyond the immediate circle of memory. Social media in this context plays an important part in providing the platform for the expression and sharing of conflict memories.

Loyalists' social media actions project a particular image and impression upon wider society. This is primarily because as the conflict has now ended, the competition for recognition and justification of actions

undertaken by those in the conflict means that Loyalists, like all Troubles participants, must look beyond their own respective communities and project their message to outsiders in order to defend their own groups' beliefs, ideologies and actions from becoming attacked or marginalised.

Yet Loyalist activism can also take a more sinister turn as shown on the *Republican Bigot Watch* Facebook page. This page has been created to monitor the actions of what page managers and users believe to be Irish Republicans and Republican sympathisers. While there are posts which reinforce Loyalists' sense of injustice and alienation in post-conflict NI, this page goes further by encouraging Loyalists to become active in highlighting actions carried out by Republicans. This can range from illegal parades and shows of strength by Republicans to pointing out pro-Republican messages. In a reflection of the potential dangers posed by social media in localised conflict zones, this page is also used to expose social media users who post Republican and/or anti-Loyalist messages. Screenshots of social media posts by such individuals are uploaded onto the *Republican Bigot Watch* page along with their account or user name and profile picture. Visitors to and users of this page are then encouraged to share these reposts in order to shame and expose those individuals who have posted pro-Republican and/or anti-Loyalist opinions. The consequences of such actions can be damaging, with exposed individuals at risk of online and even physical abuse due to the localised nature of the conflict.

Finally, while the majority of posts and opinions within Loyalist social media pages focus on the Troubles and the remaining inter-ethnic suspicions between unionist/Loyalist/Protestant and Nationalist/Republican/Catholic communities, increasing numbers of posts highlight hostility towards 'foreign' communities, namely immigrants, asylum seekers and Muslims in particular. Recent debates surrounding the UK's role following a referendum to leave the European Union and threats posed by global terrorism have highlighted increasing Loyalist focus on world issues and have facilitated further linkages between Loyalist groups and far-right groups on the UK mainland.[9]

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[9] The 32 CSM published their new year statement on their Facebook page. Available at https://www.facebook.com/32CountySovereigntyMovement/posts/1590531044349763.

# Conclusion

To conclude, a brief word on alternative discourses and future research in this area. As is well recognised, the role of the internet in creating public space for any given topic or interest is clear, and to this end, it is no different for terrorist and extremist groups who wish to proliferate, promote and pursue ideological discussions of support. What the internet also affords is the space for alternative views and dissenting voices, which are as apparent in the Republican realm as elsewhere. Previous research in this area (Bowman-Grieve 2006) found that dissenting views within virtual communities came in two forms. The first were oppositional views that would be completely shut down by in-group members (so e.g. views which argued that Nationalism/Republicanism had no place in Northern Ireland discourse, culture and/or politics). The second were centered around internal arguments concerned with the various factions within Irish Republicanism, the communities they claimed to represent and the political views they espoused with regard to the region, and, the nature and the future of the conflict itself (that is whether violence was an accepted method to achieve goals). The virtual communities online provided space for the discussion and dissection of these views, an internal community often at odds as to how to move forward and mirroring factions that existed offline also. Outside of virtual communities, independent websites have also been set up to provide dissenting and alternative viewpoints to traditional Republican narratives, most notable among these that have gained online traction is 'The Pensive Quill' a website by former IRA member Anthony McIntyre, who continues to aspire to a United Ireland but through non-violent means.

Ulster Loyalists' use of the internet and social media has been shown to be an important tool in enabling them to express their political opinion(s) while also maintaining inter-ethnic hostility in a society in the midst of change following 30 years of ethnic and religious conflict. Facebook groups and pages can be seen as communities of practice which require sustained engagement by users in order to get their message(s) across. They can also be viewed as a contemporary example of voluntary associations which support Loyalists caught in the disorder of social change by helping them socialise and interact.

As Ulster Loyalist pages seek to bridge the gap(s) between them to present a coherent and united message, this has also led to increasing connections with extreme-right organisations on the UK mainland. Extreme-right groups across the UK are using social media to promote their message, develop networks with similar groups and help organise events and protests across the UK. Loyalist groups in NI are playing an increasingly important role in this process and are strengthening existing networks and spreading their message across the UK. Thus, as communication technologies continue to progress, and the UK's role in Europe and the world evolves, the actions and support for these groups, both online and offline, will be important to monitor further.

With regard to future research, perhaps this research area, as it currently stands, has reached some of its limits. Over the 15-year period of examination of Republican discourses online, they have arguably changed very little. This is not to say that they do not have a role and function to play, but that in the case of Irish Republicanism at least, this role and function is very much of a supportive nature with action and activity on the ground not necessarily reliant on this online milieu. This is arguably due to the historic and regionally based nature of the conflict. The history of Irish Republicanism in the region is long (over 100 years), it is often time romanticised and in many ways passed from one generation to the next with a strong oral history that does not require online spaces to disseminate it. The region is small enough that those involved can avoid online engagement in favour of 'on the ground' involvement, and thus avoid exposing themselves unnecessarily online. The ethno-Nationalist nature of the conflict and the ongoing political machinations and identity disputes in the region continue to feed both older and newer generations of Republicans who seek a change from the status quo, and with the desire towards a 32 county state as just a part of this.

Perhaps, what we could see more of in this field of research is comparative studies considering, for example, how the cyber activism of ethno-Nationalist groups compares and contrasts with other groups, are their online strategies similar or do they diverge significantly. Is the internet really the playground for the international and regionally diverse and networked group as opposed to the regionally and traditionally hierarchically structured group?

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# 7

# Animal Rights Extremism and the Internet

**Ruth McAlister and Rachel Monaghan**

## Introduction

Much of the literature on extremism and the Internet has focused on violent Islamic groups and their networks, especially with respect to Al-Qaeda and more recently the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) (Weimann 2004; Nacos 2016; Conway 2017). Such a focus has meant that violent animal rights extremism has largely been overlooked in the research (there are a few notable exceptions; see Crilly 2001; Upton 2010; Davies et al. 2015). The Internet has provided animal rights extremists with a forum through which to network, exchange information and coordinate their activities worldwide. Various websites can be found on the Internet such as the *Bite Back*, the Animal Liberation Front worldwide news and information resource about the ALF (hereafter referred to as the Animal Liberation Front website) and the North American Animal Liberation Press Office, all of which contain postings claiming responsibility for actions taken against those

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involved in businesses or practices, which exploit animals and deny them their rights. Other information found on such sites include direct action guides, interviews with activists, details of informers or agents, lists of current prisoners and information on potential targets. Yet despite the proliferation of information relating to activities around the world, the provision of how-to guides and the identification of targets, violent animal rights extremism has over the past decade, at least in the United Kingdom, experienced a reduction in terms of the number of attacks and types of activities undertaken in the name of animal rights (Monaghan 2013). This chapter explores how violent animal rights extremists use the Internet in the pursuit of their cause and compares their usage to other violent extremists, drawing upon the existing literature. In doing so, it falls within Conway's (2017) category of 'descriptive research' with respect to research to date on the role of the Internet in violent extremism and terrorism.

# A Brief History of Violent Animal Rights Activism

Most animal rights activism worldwide is legal and peaceful utilising a range of tactics including organised peaceful protests, letter writing, email or online petitions as well as public information stalls. However, a very small number of individuals have carried out illegal actions in order to pursue their agenda—this is referred to as animal rights extremism. Such extremism has historically targeted many different animal rights interests including agriculture, whaling, hunting, fur farming, the pet trade and laboratory-based animal research. Animal rights extremist groups do not have members per se, but rather they are loose affiliations, which are led by a few committed individuals who may come together to form 'cells' or work independently (Monaghan 1997, 1999, 2000, 2013).

## United Kingdom

The first organised animal grassroots pressure groups were formed in the United Kingdom and were initially concerned with the treatment of animals in the farming industry and working animals such as pit ponies

(Garner 2004). However, by the end of the nineteenth century, the concerns altered to begin focusing on the increasing use of animals in scientific research. This led to the creation of two groups that are still active today, the first was the National Anti-Vivisection Society in 1875 and in 1898 the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection (Garner 2004). It was not however until the 1960s that we saw a new phase of animal rights protest, namely, through the formation of the Hunt Saboteurs Association. The tactics of the group were non-violent with roadblocks being used to cause disruption and hunting horns used to disturb hunts. However, growing frustration at the lack of success of these activities led some members to break away and form the much more militant Band of Mercy who undertook arson attacks against animal research laboratories (Monaghan 1997). The group founders (Ronnie Lee and Cliff Goodman) had come to "feel that action should also be taken to save animals in laboratories and factory farms" and not just on behalf of animals hunted for recreation (cited in Monaghan 1997: 109). Lee, a key member of the group, described it as "… a non-violent guerrilla organization dedicated to the liberation of animals from all forms of cruelty and persecution at the hands of mankind" (quoted in Arkangel n.d.: 20). Whilst animal rights extremism is increasingly rare in the United Kingdom, activities have ebbed and flowed over the past 50 years (Monaghan 2013).

In 1976, Lee established the Animal Liberation Front (ALF); the aim of the organisation is to "inflict economic damage on those who profit from the misery and exploitation of animals" (Animal Liberation Front website). Initially the organisation concentrated on stealing animals from farms, circuses and research laboratories, yet this direct action in later years also included arson attacks against universities, retailers and research organisations (Monaghan 1997). In 1982, a previously unheard of group, the Animal Rights Militia (ARM), claimed responsibility for explosive devices sent through the post to the leaders of the four main political parties. Whilst the ARM holds similar views to that of the ALF, they were willing to harm humans; for example, they claimed responsibility for six minor bomb attacks on scientists' homes in 1985 and four car bombs in January of the following year targeting individuals associated with the use of animals in research. The group was also responsible for the planting of incendiary devices in shops in Cambridge, Oxford, York and Harrogate

and on the Isle of Wight in 1994 (Monaghan 2013). A decade later, a further group calling itself the Justice Department, which like the ARM, was prepared to harm humans in their pursuit of animal rights emerged. In October 1993, the Justice Department claimed responsibility for a letter bomb that exploded at a postal sorting office, which was addressed to an individual connected with field sports. A further thirty attacks including timed incendiary devices, poster tube and videocassette bombs were claimed by the group in the last three months of 1993. Targets included individuals connected with field sports, companies involved in animal experimentation and furriers (Monaghan 2013).

However, it is Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC) formed in 1999 who were perhaps the leading animal rights extremist group in the United Kingdom up until its dissolution in 2014. SHAC's aim was to close down Huntingdon Life Sciences (HLS). Actions by this group ranged from violent demonstrations outside HLS sites, vandalism against employee property and a physical attack on the managing director. Following this SHAC began to target those who supplied HLS, thereby utilising secondary targeting. This itself was a successful tactic with many suppliers cutting ties with the company (Metcalfe 2008; Monaghan 2013). With many extremist campaigners arrested or serving prison sentences, the amount of activity declined significantly leading to the eventual end of the campaign in the United Kingdom—although activists are still going through the courts, with the most recent sentenced in January 2018 (Baynes 2018).

In addition to SHAC, SPEAC (Stop Primate Experiments at Cambridge), now rebranded SPEAK, was formed in 2002 with the aim of preventing the construction of a primate research facility at Cambridge University. SPEAK claim to avoid violence, or any other form of illegal behaviour in favour of campaigns, letter writing and peaceful demonstrations; however, it does encourage supporters to be 'active' followers. In 2009, one of the co-founders was sentenced to ten years in prison for conspiracy to commit arson after incendiary devices were planted in Oxford University colleges (Monaghan 2013). These more extreme tactics led to a backlash from students, academics and the general public who were opposed to such violent tactics. Following support from the media, politicians and the public and the formation of pro-research advo-

cacy group Pro-Test, there was a significant fall in illegal activity, with the result that the Biomedical Research Centre was officially opened in November 2008 and is now fully operational. It houses a variety of animals, mainly rodents, but also some non-human primates. Still, however, SPEAK protest outside this facility every single week to draw attention to the work that is undertaken here and to highlight the animal suffering.

From the discussion above, it would appear that a number of animal rights extremist groups exist who undertake illegal activities. According to the ALF Credo and Guidelines found on the Animal Liberation Front website: "Any group of people who are vegetarians or vegans and who carry out actions according to ALF guidelines have the right to regard themselves as part of the ALF." Thus, the ALF is a non-hierarchical organisation with no centralised organisation or co-ordination with activists operating in small groups or individually, choosing their own targets and methods. This then can give rise to lone-wolf operatives such as Barry Horne, who having previously undertaken actions with other animal rights activists under the banner of the ALF chose to work alone as the ARM with respect to his firebomb campaign in the 1990s (Monaghan 2013). Moreover, it has been suggested that animal rights extremists associated with the ALF have invented names for supposedly new groups that then took notional responsibility for acts too violent to accord with the ALF's public stance of non-violence to humans (Henshaw 1989). This was acknowledged by Robin Webb (2003), the ALF's Press Officer who conceded that "If someone wishes to act as the Animal Rights Militia or Justice Department, simply put, the …policy of the Animal Liberation Front, to take all reasonable precautions not to endanger life, no longer applies."

## United States

With regard to the United States, direct actions in the name of the ALF soon followed those in the United Kingdom and developed along similar lines. The first acts were 'liberations' of animals from academic research centres and often involved substantial criminal damage. An ALF cell caused $700,000 worth of damage in a raid on a laboratory at the

University of California in 1985 and stole 468 animals. Two years later, an arson attack on another University of California laboratory destroyed a building and twenty vehicles, causing $5.1 million worth of damage (Jasper and Nelkin 1992). Research conducted by Carson et al. (2012) found more than 1000 criminal and terrorist incidents attributed to radical environmental and animal rights groups between 1970 and 2007. Groups like the ALF are considered by the FBI to pose a serious threat in terms of domestic terrorism, and arrested members continue to be charged with domestic terrorism offences (Lewis 2004; Troup Buchanan 2015).

## Elsewhere in the World

Violent animal rights activism is not confined merely to the United Kingdom and United States. The Animal Rights Extremism Information (2018) website reports incidents in Canada (e.g. arson attack on a company which supplies research animals and animal feed to companies that experiment on animals and the release of farmed mink), Brazil (e.g. the theft of 170 dogs from the Royal Institute in São Roque) and Chile (e.g. arson attack at Concepción University). Europol (2018) includes coverage of animal rights violent extremism under single-issue terrorism in its annual *EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Reports*. Those targeted in EU member states in recent years include pharmaceutical industries and research laboratories, airlines transporting animals for testing, the fur and leather industry and fast-food restaurants. Switzerland has also experienced a number of incidents ranging from vandalism, theft of animals, home visits (of executives employed by large pharmaceutical companies which are headquartered in the country) and arson attacks (Flükiger 2008).

## History of the Internet and Animal Rights Online

The Internet began life in the late 1960s as a small scientific project funded and run by the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), a development arm of the US military. The Pentagon aimed to create an

'ARPANET' of linked computers to help American academics share datasets and valuable computer space. In 1969, the first networked connection was made between two computers in California (Leiner et al. 1997). What we now know as the Internet was very different to its predecessor, yet both work on the same principles, to have an unlimited world of people, information and ideas.

The creation of Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) in 1978 and Usenet in 1979 brought a different kind of life online, both of which are the forerunners to what we now describe as chat rooms and forums. These were available to anyone with a modem and home computer, and although slow and primitive by today's standards, thousands of people were attracted by this new virtual environment. By the mid-1990s with the emergence of the World Wide Web and now with individuals having access to computer networks at home, in school and in work, these electronic mail networks represented a potential agent for social change (Perry 1992). Thus, the Internet had been transformed to a popular space accessed by millions of people across the developed world, including those who campaigned for animal rights. The bulletin boards provided the first and rather unique opportunity for researchers to analyse patterns of communication between diverse individuals holding specific and usually strong beliefs about social issues.

In the spring of 1989, one such bulletin board dedicated to animal rights was established under the auspices of the Animal Rights Electronic Network (AREN) to facilitate communication among animal activists (Herzog et al. 1997). Its aim was to create a global network linking activists and animal rights organisations, something which would have been impossible only a few years previously. In the early days, it was separated into a *news* section and *talk* section. In AR Talk, the messages posted by users were not screened, approved or otherwise reviewed by a moderator—therefore adhering to the early principles of the Internet as described above, to allow free speech and enable communication to remain censorship free. This was reinforced by the AR Talk charter:

> The purpose of this list is to open channels where new ideas, philosophies and concerns can be exchanged freely. Debates are likely to occur as well as friendships and associations… The list is open to anyone who is interested regardless of his/her opinion on animal rights. (Herzog et al. 1997: 401)

In order to guide discussion, several potential topics including vivisection, factory farming, furs, environmental protection, animal research and vegetarianism were listed.

The analysis of this bulletin board undertaken by Herzog et al. (1997) revealed that the largest number of posts analysed concerned the consumption of animals by humans and their use as subjects in biomedical research and was the dominant ethical concern of the participants. Analysis of current Internet activity reveals that these topics are still of passionate concern to animal rights advocates, with the exception that vegetarianism is increasingly being shunned in favour of veganism, a way of living which seeks to exclude, as far as is possible and practicable, all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose, the significance of which will be returned to later in the chapter.

## The Role of Technology Today

With contemporary society now increasingly dependent on digital technology, and accessing the Internet through a variety of digital devices, it is important to examine how the exponential growth of connectivity has been utilised by animal rights activists. Today, advocacy groups are not limited by static email or bulletin boards, rather users can connect through organisation websites, blogs and importantly a wide variety of social networking sites on the surface, deep and dark web using a plethora of digitally connected smart devices such as phones and tablets and wearable technology such as watches. The majority of the population when connecting to the Internet will interact with what has been discussed so far, the surface web; this is the top layer of the web that is indexed by search engines. This openly searchable Internet, including the entire World Wide Web, however, is said to comprise at most (but no one really knows for sure) 10 per cent of the Internet (Hurlburt 2017). The remaining 90 per cent contains the deep web and the dark web.

The deep web consists of web pages accessible on the surface web, but not via search engines such as Google with recent reports suggesting that increasing amounts of criminal networking may take place here on lan-

guage- and topic-specific forums (Europol 2014). The term dark web was first introduced in 2000 and has been in use both in the media and in academia since then (Baravalle et al. 2016). This 'underground' market is vast enough to contain its own search engines and sites just like the World Wide Web. It is highly organised and dependent on trust between anonymous buyers and unknown sellers. Despite its murky reputation, the dark web is easily accessible most commonly through Tor software which protects the user by encrypting and then bouncing your communications around a distributed network of relays or nodes. The anonymisation of the Tor network is attractive and utilised every day for a wide variety of purposes and by varying people, including journalists, law enforcement officers, those in the military, activists and many others. However, for the purposes of this chapter, the content discussed here will refer to the openly available surface web, given that most individuals access the Internet in this way and it is where most information regarding animal activism and extremism is hosted. That said, it is possible that information relating to animal rights extremists could be posted here; however, in line with other extremist groups, it is potentially by invitation only to verified members of animal rights extremist groupings.

## Contemporary Animal Rights and Extremism Online

It has been well documented that one of the most effective methods of influencing public opinion on an issue involves reaching out to the media to get the issue to the forefront of the media's and the public's agenda (Esrock and Leichty 1998). Therefore, it is imperative that an organisation effectively manages its public relations by working tirelessly to create press releases and pitch stories to media outlets. This is especially the case where issues involving animals are concerned. Animal rights campaigners must act as a voice for the voiceless and push stories that are of the public interest *and* of interest to the public. A particularly effective way to do this is to have an active Internet presence, which can generate conversations with concerned stakeholders through grassroots campaigns using email, blogging, social media and discussion forums. It has been sug-

gested that these tactics are much more likely to engage others in conversation than pressure tactics like those practised by the Animal Liberation Front (Miller 1989; Smith and Ferguson 2001; Waters and Wang 2011).

Ferguson (1997, cited in Waters and Wang 2011) also documented how relationship building and effective communication to foster relationships is more effective on public opinion than direct action. Using the Internet to communicate information and share news and events also helps to educate the public and persuade people to become involved in activism and animal welfare more generally. The difficulty however is dedicating the time and resources to do this effectively. Grassroots organisations usually rely on the goodwill of volunteers (who often have full-time and jobs and other commitments) to do this. That said, the Internet is a powerful means of impacting public opinion because of its reach, particularly in cases where animal cruelty is identified; two Northern Ireland cases demonstrate this well with the Justice for Cody campaign in 2012, where a pet collie was doused with fuel and set on fire, and the Justice for Sparky campaign in 2018, where an 11-week-old pup was beaten with hammers and burnt to death in a microwave. The former Facebook page has over 64,000 followers, whilst the latter has over 100,000 signatures on an online petition calling for tougher sentences of those found guilty of animal cruelty (Change.org). These two cases alone show the power of social networking sites to communicate information widely and garner worldwide support.

However, when assessing how animal rights campaigners and extremists use the Internet in pursuit of their cause, it is important to examine their organisational websites and social media to determine how technology may have altered their modus operandi and to better understand how followers connect and share ideas in the current digital age. The seminal research undertaken by Herzog et al. (1997) analysed the vocabulary and arguments made by users of AREN. Here a number of themes were identified from users of the site; these included depictions of animal suffering, constructing humans and scientists as greedy, presenting animal use as oppression, constructing a sameness between humans and animals and presenting animal rights advocates as humanitarians. Whilst AREN was a discussion forum, analysis of Internet activity of AR groups already mentioned reveals that similar themes are still evident today.

# The Content of Animal Rights Extremist Websites

Compared to the primitive days of the Internet, many animal rights extremist groups have detailed websites providing a range of sources and information for visitors to the site. In attempting to problematise human use of animals, animal rights extremist groups in particular appeal to the site visitors' emotions by using visual media, namely, videos and a written narrative explaining the suffering endured by animals. The emphasis being that animals do not have rights and are not treated as equals. Therefore, within this discourse, the use of a defenceless trapped animal is simply for human benefit, with animals given a victim status to arouse sympathy and even guilt in those who view this material. For example, information shared on the Animal Liberation Front website tells the visitor about Britches, a newborn stumptail macaque monkey, who was separated from his mother shortly after birth and had his eyelids sewn together:

> The stitches which blinded him were not even the neat surgical sutures of experience but huge crude stitches with thick twine, the stiches of indifference, the equivalent of stitching a human's eyes with string.

Additionally, videos shared by animal rights extremist campaigners through social media contain distressing images of animals involved in animal testing and highlight conditions endured by animals farmed for their fur such as chinchillas. Such images of distressed animals are potent in evoking the shock and sympathy of visitors to the site, a tactic not confined to animal rights extremism sites but also more mainstream animal rights sites, which do not advocate violence (Scudder and Bishop Mills 2009). Davies and Harré (1990) contend that the power of a discourse is in its provision of subjects. The self and others are constituted and reconstituted as they move between discourses. This transformation of the self and the other is known as positioning. The power of the use of a discourse of suffering is that it functions not only to problematise humans' use of animals but also creates a subject position for animals as suffering victims that is likely to evoke sympathy for their plight. This discourse and subsequent subject positions work to reconstruct the mean-

ing of our use of animals in such a way that makes it problematic, not only by evoking sympathy for the animals but also possible anger at those positioned as hurting them. The pro-animal rights side of the debate uses the comparisons of the use of animals to human oppression to construct animal use as discrimination and to create a more politically powerful subject position for animals.

The written content explaining the aim of stated organisations is explicit and evocative, for example, SPEAK, mentioned earlier, who campaign against the use of animals at Oxford University, have the following on their home page:

> Imagine that your skull has been sliced open and part of your brain has been removed. Then imagine that you have spent fifteen years imprisoned in a barren cage denied contact with your own species, never feeling the sun, the wind or the rain on your face, never experiencing the natural world into which your forebears were born, and that you have been experimented on over and over again by your jailers. Without any respite, without any hope. Now imagine that this scenario is being enacted as you are reading this. This isn't fiction—it's fact. That's what animals at Oxford University are forced to endure every day.

The campaign against animal use here is unwavering, with protests held each Thursday afternoon. Whilst the number of activists taking part can be low, we are reminded by one of the co-founders that: "It's not about numbers though. Just because you can't see the victims doesn't mean you can discount them. We are here to question the science of animal experimentation and the suffering it inflicts on nonhumans. And that message will keep being heard whether it's one or one hundred of us," which clearly demonstrates their passion and determination to help the caged victims inside, and much like the videos mentioned earlier is designed to evoke disgust and sympathy in equal measures.

Those visiting the website are directed to pro-animal rights material which discusses bad science and bad politics concerning the use of animals in research laboratories. There is also a gallery depicting the life of animals held in research laboratories. For those who have been convinced to find out more, there is also a link to a demonstration diary and also a

blog where animal rights campaigns are broadcast. This call to action resonates with findings from Herzog's (1993) work which identified that animal rights perspectives resemble something of a religious conversion amongst followers. This 'conversion' is potentially expedited through social media networking, for example, through Facebook, where friends of friends can connect to stay updated on a relatively straightforward manner with campaigns across the country and to share ideas on diet and lifestyle, importantly, veganism.

The issue of veganism is frequently included on animal rights extremism sites. For example, on the Animal Liberation Front website, there is a forum entitled 'Purely Vegan,' and on the North American Animal Liberation Press Office, there is a link to Veganarchy's (2014) *Anti-Speciesist Warfare and Direct Action*. These examples illustrate an increasing link towards animal rights activists and veganism, which goes beyond traditional vegetarian activists, with most activists stating they have been vegan from a young age because animal rights equals human rights:

> Veganism is not only an extension of compassion and respect to non-human animals, but to *all* animal species and the fight for liberation. Therefore, radical vegans deploy tactically diverse direct actions against speciesism and all forms of oppression by any means necessary. Solidarity means *ATTACK!* (Vegan Anarchy 2014)

It is on the Animal Liberation Front website that visitors can read both the ALF's guidelines in English and French and its mission statement. In addition to advocating animal rights, the website advises users on Internet security, such as safer browsing, encryption and masking your identity (IP) address online, primarily through using the Tor software mentioned earlier in this chapter. There are also reports of direct action, those imprisoned for the cause and those who have been released, and a detailed media section. Similar information can be found on the North American Animal Liberation Press Office including a merchandise and donation page. Visitors to both websites can download the *ALF Primer*, which is a detailed guide to direct action. This manual describes how best to begin your own 'cell' and how to invite trusted members, along with the most effective way to plan and prep for an attack and how to deal with the

police. It describes various direct action tactics but states that arson is the most potent weapon of direct action. Additional information can be found on the ALF Supporters Group website, which has more of a focus on support for those arrested and/or imprisoned for the cause including keeping fit in prison, security and legal advice.

Although SHAC's website is no longer hosted, we were able to access it through the Internet archive (Wayback Machine). SHAC.net, unlike the other sites we examined, published the names of its targets (e.g. shareholders, customers and suppliers) including addresses, email accounts and fax and telephone numbers. Upton (2010: 105) in his analysis of SHAC's communication campaign notes that in addition to this provision of information online, the website also had 10,000 email alert subscribers, who were frequently asked the question "if you have the time and the commitment, why not send a few emails or make a few phone call to politely tell Company A that HLS is involved in animal cruelty?" Prior to 2002, SHAC were able to publish reports, namely, claims of responsibilities that they had received from the ALF with respect to direct action against HLS property, the private property of shareholders and the company's suppliers and customers. In 2003, HLS acquired a UK High Court injunction preventing SHAC from publishing details of any further attacks. Subsequently, an American animal rights activist established the *Bite Back* website, which allows ALF activists from around the world to send details of their direct action. As Robin Webb, the Animal Liberation Press Officer in the United Kingdom, explained, this decision was because "… enshrined in the American constitution is the freedom of speech and expression, whereas in the UK we have no protections. It is safer for activists to send their communiqués" (quoted in Upton 2010: 101).

# How Animal Rights Extremists Use the Internet

There has been considerable research on terrorism, extremism and the Internet (examples include Crilley 2001; Kaplan 2009; Oh et al. 2011; Mahmood 2012; Benson 2014). A number of reoccurring themes emerge

from the literature. For example, the Internet is used for psychological warfare. Both Weimann (2004) and Mahmood (2012) note how terrorism is more psychological than physical and that terrorists can use the Internet to instil fear in their targets by delivering threats and posting images and videos designed to persuade visitors to their websites of the legitimacy of their cause. Weimann (2004: 5) suggests, "the Internet—an uncensored medium that carries stories, pictures, threats or messages regardless of their validity or potential impact—is peculiarly well suited to allowing even a small group to amplify its message and exaggerate its importance and threat it poses." This can be seen in the campaign by SHAC against HLS. As an organiser for SHAC explained, "[t]he presence of ALF activity in the campaign has caused a great deal of trepidation for anyone who lands on the SHAC radar screen" (Jonas 2004: 268).

A second theme is that of publicity and propaganda. It has long been suggested that terrorists need the media to publicise their actions and to get their message out to a broader audience. Historically, acts of violent animal rights extremism were often ignored by traditional media, namely, television, radio and the print media (Monaghan 1997). Additionally, such activism was dismissed by others within the animal rights movement as the work of a small misguided minority (Monaghan 1997). The Internet then allows animal rights extremists to share their messages via websites, forums and social networking sites such as Facebook. As already noted, a number of the animal rights extremist websites contained worldwide diaries of actions including the Animal Liberation Front website, *Bite Back* and the North American Animal Liberation Press Office. This is somewhat different to Weimann's (2004: 6) findings as he argues that "most terrorist sites do not celebrate their violent activities." Additionally, Hale (2012) in his research on white supremacist groups found that their extremist websites were increasingly employing non-violent communication to offset their violent image. These differences may relate to how animal rights extremists conceptualise violence in that violence can only be perpetrated against sentient beings (human or otherwise). Thus, the ALF according to its guidelines undertakes "…non-violent direction action and liberations…. [while taking] all necessary precautions against harming any animal, human and non-human." Some within the movement reject such a stance and argue that the firebombing of empty

research laboratories is violence (Regan 2004). Moreover, the violence is justified in that it is undertaken in the defence of innocents (animals); it is used to rescue the animals "so that they are spared terrible harms… [and] excessive violence is never used" (Regan 2004: 233).

Many of the animal rights extremist websites contained coverage of those individuals imprisoned for their actions including details of the prisons where they were being held and their prisoner number. This is to facilitate correspondence between supporters and prisoners and the sending of cheques and postal orders. The ALF Supporters Group is primarily concerned with prisoner support and contains information on current prisoners, requests for financial support for the group and prisoner news. Thus, the Internet allows animal rights extremists' direct control over not only the content of their message but also the opportunities to further shape how they are perceived from within and outside the animal rights movement.

Weimann (2004: 6) observed that the Internet and in particular the World Wide Web offered terrorists the opportunity to engage in what he termed 'data mining' in that the "World Wide Web alone offers about a billion pages of information, much of it free - and much of it of interest to terrorist organizations". As already noted, SHAC.net provided visitors to its site and email subscribers with lists of potential targets including the contact details of HLS shareholders, customers and its suppliers. The diary of actions found on most websites would provide visitors with enough information to be able to Google the individuals or companies directly and/or to research details of similar targets.

Crilley (2001) noted that terrorist and extremist groups were using their websites as a source of revenue. This can also be observed on a number of the animal rights extremist websites that we looked at. For example, the ALF Supporters Group offers membership for £24 per year and has a downloadable standing order form to facilitate this, while *Bite Back* allows for financial support to be given through PayPal and Square Cash. The North American Animal Liberation Press Office website has both a donation (including a $25 monthly membership) and merchandise link. Visitors to the site can purchase a range of clothing and literature. Many of the sites stressed the volunteer nature of their efforts; thus fundraising while included on many sites was one of many links and relatively subtle.

The potential of the Internet to aid in terrorist recruitment has also been discussed within the literature. Mahmood (2012: 575) observes that "to recruit new members and maintain the loyalty of their existing supporters and sympathizers, terrorists have to engage in marketing strategies." Online social networks and group websites help terrorists to do this in a variety of ways including the sharing of videos, literature and training manuals. Whilst websites allow for one-way transfers of information, forums including Facebook pages facilitate the creation of online communities of like-minded individuals who post messages, read responses and give feedback to each other (Hale 2012). Davies et al.'s (2015) research specifically looked at how extremist groups including animal rights extremists employed recruitment-narratives and tools on their websites. They found in their analysis of the Animal Liberation Front website that there was considerable attention given over to recruitment through the provision of express appeals for participation and access to materials on how to become involved in activism including various types of activism such as letter writing campaigns, civil disobedience and demonstrations. Additional information included details of where to be involved including a list of events, demonstrations and various volunteer opportunities.

Crilly (2001: 252) observes that the Internet has facilitated the increase of dispersed network forms of organisation in that geographical location is now immaterial as "small and previously isolated groups or individuals can now communicate, collaborate and link up to conduct co-ordinated joint ventures as never before, with any prejudices reinforced by like-minded people." Thus, the Internet permits animal rights extremists to engage in networking and campaigns that initially start in one country but can quickly spread to others. An example of this would be SHAC's campaign against HLS, which initially started in England but spread to the United States, and extremist actions were even recorded in Europe, often claimed by Militant Forces Against HLS (e.g. Austria, Germany and Switzerland). The ALF which too began in England is considered to be active in forty countries.

The sharing of information has also been identified as an important use of the Internet by terrorists and extremists (Weimann 2004; Bouchard and Levey 2015). The Animal Liberation Front website posts a range of information relevant to animal rights extremists including direct action guides

such as the *ALF Primer*, *Eco-Defense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching* and *The Anarchist Cookbook*. The Animal Liberation Front website does have the following disclaimer with respect to the *ALF Primer*:

> This guide is for your entertainment, information and general interest only. It is not meant to encourage the activities described within. We're just writing it for the heck of it. We would never dream of encouraging someone to use the proven-effective methods presented within to free innocent beings from the depths of hell, or to destroy the tools used to torture, mutilate, and murder them. We'd much prefer you sit at home watching TV and remain apathetic.

Other information available on the North American Animal Liberation Office offers visitors to the site advice on Internet security and details of photos of suspected US federal agents and British and American infiltrators and informers, referred to as snitches.

One area of Internet activity where we did not find any evidence of animal rights extremism engagement was that of cyberterrorism. Cyberterrorism "is typically defined as the use of the Internet as a vehicle through which to launch an attack" (Kaplan 2009) and would include the hacking of computer networks to harm or shut down critical national infrastructures such as energy, transportation and government operations (Weimann 2005; Nacos 2016). Whilst there have been instances of states being suspected of distributed denial of service attacks and hacks (e.g. Stuxnet and the Sony hack), non-state actors have only undertaken social media hacks or website defacements. Examples would include the hack of the US Military's Central Command Twitter and YouTube account and several government websites in Ohio and Maryland that had to be shut down after being hacked to display messages supporting ISIS by hackers on behalf of ISIS (Nacos 2016; AFP 2017).

## Conclusion

This chapter has not explored every single social media site, nor every single animal rights extremist website; despite this, from reviews undertaken, it is clear to see the Internet has revolutionised the animal rights

movement including the more extremist element. Individuals can now post their own videos directly to social networking sites and establish Facebook and Twitter pages and network with others throughout the world. The evolution of the Internet has allowed this to happen, and it has allowed the campaigns and calls to action to be advertised. It is an easy, simplistic method to connect with volunteers and those sympathetic to the needs of animals; it especially works well on a local scale. Animal rights groups and animal rights extremists use the Internet much like other extremist groups to network; share ideas, videos and training material; postulate ideology; call for direct action; and request donations. Where there may be a difference is where we debate the idea of cyberterrorism. There are growing concerns from law enforcement agencies that traditional international crime networks are evolving, for those involved in serious and organised crime including extremism and terrorism. Crimeware markets are commercialising all types of data, software and services used to facilitate cybercrime. For example, online marketplaces will offer financial information, compromised email accounts, spyware, ransomware or other malware services, hacking services, cybercrime tutorials and much more. These marketplaces are increasingly becoming a significant illegal ecosystem (Motoyama et al. 2011). In crimeware markets, the phenomenon of cybercrime-as-a-service poses a growing concern as it allows people with no or low technical expertise to become a criminal threat, defying the myth that cybercriminals are necessarily technical geniuses. Given this, it may be suggested that animal rights extremists could potentially diversify from physical direct action to virtual direct action in line with other extremist groups.

The preceding discussion has focused upon what Conway (2017: 78) terms 'descriptive research' in that we have attempted to answer the question "What is going on in animal rights extremist websites?" As already noted, animal rights extremism is becoming increasingly rare in the United Kingdom despite the abundance of information available online to would-be extremists. Bouchard and Levey (2015: 1) aptly state:

> It is easy for the outside observer to make the connection between radicalization and the Internet. After all, so many of the homegrown terrorists making headlines have been involved in online discussion forums, blogs

and social media outlets, while having being "self-radicalized" and finding inspiration through watching videos on YouTube as well as reading violent literature found on extremist websites.

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# 8

## 'Demonic Slappers' and 'Fascists'? Exploring Extreme British Anti-abortion Activism on Facebook

### Mark Littler

While recent scholarship—including in this volume—has sought to make the case for a greater non-US evidence base on online extremism by the far-right, environmental extremists, and legacy groups in Northern Ireland, comparably little attention has been given to the complex interplay between the internet and anti-abortion actors in Europe. This is perhaps surprising given the American experience, where anti-abortion groups have long been recognised as major extremist threat, being both a potential source of violent extremism and a key domestic security risk (Wilson and Lynxwiler 1988).

However, before beginning a discussion of this phenomenon and its relationship to the UK context, the author wishes to make a number of disclosures in the interest of transparency and objectivity. Firstly, the author wishes to make clear that he does not seek to advance an agenda in respect of abortion, which the author notes is both an extremely sensitive and an extremely personal matter. Secondly, the author accepts that

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while the term 'extremist' is widely taken to be pejorative, being often used to vilify ideological opponents (Khalil and Zeuthen 2014), and that it may also be taken by some to imply a moral judgement in respect of the groups and individuals in question (not least given the British Government's defining of extremism as "vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values"—HM Government 2011), its use here should not be seen in these terms. Rather, the use of the term 'anti-abortion extremism' and the inclusion of this chapter in this volume reflect simply the opposition of the groups and individuals in question to abortion, and their outlying quantitative 'extremity' in terms of a population distribution. In this, the use of 'extremism' mirrors elements of Wintrobe's (2004) observations regarding extreme outlook and extreme method, and Sotlar's (2004) comments on distance from mainstream opinion. The extent to which anti-abortion groups can be considered extreme under a more conventional—and less academic—definition is, in part, a focus of this chapter.

Finally, the author wishes to make abundantly clear that he accepts that the majority of anti-abortion activists reject violence and that—as in the case of most political phenomena—its use is therefore a property associated with a small minority of fringe activists, on whom this chapter does not specifically focus.

Despite all of this, however, it is nevertheless true that anti-abortion extremism remains an issue of concern in many countries. Evidence suggests that the last 20 years have seen US abortion providers fall victim to murder, property destruction, and stalking as a result of their participation in the provision of abortion services (Caudill and Mixon 2000), with anecdotal evidence suggesting that even non-violent anti-abortion activism has created a climate of fear, hostility and aggression in the US (Jeltsen 2019). The seriousness with which US security agencies view such groups can be seen from a review of their policy initiatives at both federal and state levels: the FBI's teen-focussed *Don't Be a Puppet* programme names abortion extremism as a key domestic threat in the vein of Radical Islam and White Supremacism (FBI 2018), while state-level homeland security agencies argue the need for vigilance around anti-abortion groups in light of the ongoing risk of abortion-related violence across the US (New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness 2019).

Given this context it is unsurprising that a large volume of academic research has sought to map US anti-abortion extremism, covering phenomena as diverse as individual psychology (Moskalenko and McCauley 2011), geographic dispersion (Webb and Cutter 2009), and legal responses (Pridemore and Freilich 2007). Moreover, as a large number of anti-abortion groups are active online (SPLC 2001), and many were amongst the earliest adopters of the internet as a tool for organisation and recruitment (Bowman-Grieve 2009), a similarly large number of papers have sought to explore US anti-abortion groups' use of the internet, mapping their provision of content, key themes and modes of user engagement, as well as the legal frameworks in which their internet use sits (Schlosberg 2001; Bowman-Grieve 2009; Bloch 2007). As a consequence, the nature of the relationship between American anti-abortion groups and the internet is well understood, and academics have, to some extent, charted the complex ecosystem of organisations and individuals (of varying degrees of extremity) that comprise this space.

By contrast, a search of Google Scholar identifies comparably few papers addressing European anti-abortion extremism, perhaps reflecting the low level of policy attention paid to the topic in recent decades. Despite a number of recorded acts of violence across the continent over the last 30 years (Parkes 1999), the European Union's list of those subject to counterterrorism restrictions currently includes no anti-abortion groups (Council of the European Union 2009). Moreover, in most European countries the domestic counter violent extremism (CVE) framework makes no explicit mention of anti-abortion extremism, and while some—not least the UK—employ expansive definitions of 'extremism' that may be taken to capture anti-abortion activity, there is no publicly available evidence of any interventions having been made against those who hold an anti-abortion ideology anywhere in the EU.

Perhaps the most obvious explanation for this disparity may be found in national context: unlike the US, where the question of abortion remains a 'hot' political issue (Ravitz 2016), most European states grant (some, albeit limited) abortion rights to their citizens,[1] and public support for access to foetal termination is comparably high (Finchelstein 2005). The issue of

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[1] Excepting Malta, the only member state in which abortion remains illegal.

abortion may consequently be regarded as 'closed' in Europe, with even traditionally conservative Catholic majority states allowing access to foetal termination and pressure groups opposed to abortion largely regarded by the public as 'marginal extremists' (Sheldon 1997).

In the context of mainland Britain, however, the picture is somewhat different. While access to abortion has been legal since the passage of the 1967 Abortion Act and public attitudes have largely remained pro-choice (Jackson and Valentine 2016), recent events suggest a growing majority for further liberalisation (Taylor 2017); as a result, the issue of access to abortion has begun to return to the political fore. A private member's bill intending to liberalise provision was introduced to the House of Commons in 2017 (Boseley 2017), and changes to the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act in respect of Northern Ireland were implemented—despite significant opposition—in July 2019 (Walker and Carroll 2019). This increase in policy attention has been accompanied by a rise in media salience and public debate such that the issue can no longer be consider truly 'closed' (Taylor and Wilson 2019).

The shift in public attitudes favouring further liberalisation has been accompanied by a rise in activity on the part of British anti-abortion groups (Forbes 2015), many of whom are alleged to be adopting increasingly hard-line tactics to further their agenda (Lowe 2018). These mirror the strategies employed by extreme but non-violent US groups (McGuinness 2015), many of whom operate as part of networks alleged to include violent actors. While UK groups are often not physically violent, the extent to which their activities may be constructed as a threat to public safety, or as a form of 'extremism' under the Government's definition (particularly its provisions in respect of opposition to "individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different … beliefs"—see HM Government 2011), remains both under-researched and subject to debate. Equally, despite the growth of social media, and anecdotal evidence that British anti-abortion groups are active online (Quinn 2016), comparably little evidence exists as to the nature and extent of their internet use.

## Research Focus

Given this rapidly changing context, this chapter represents an attempt to begin to explore the somewhat nebulous field of contemporary British anti-abortion extremism online, focusing on the use of Facebook—as the largest social media platform in the UK (YouGov 2019)—by Abort67, a major actor in the British anti-abortion space and the organisation labelled by *The Sunday Times* as "[by] far the most radical [anti-abortion] group in this country" (Kinchen 2012).

Established in 2008 (McIvor 2019), Abort67 is named after the 1967 Abortion Act and is one of half a dozen major anti-abortion groups currently operating in the UK (alongside the Good Counsel Network, 40 Days for Life, the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child, Life, Christian Concern, and Both Lives Matter). While many British anti-abortion organisations work together to advance their agenda, sometimes developing joint campaigns and events, Abort67 sits somewhat apart, enjoying significant links with American anti-abortion group the US Center for Bio-Ethical Reform, whose tactics they have—to some extent—adopted (Jackson and Valentine 2016). Over the last decade, they have built a reputation for high-impact public demonstrations that make extensive use of visceral images of foetal termination (Jackson and Valentine 2016), street harassment (McGuinness 2015), and sophisticated social media positioning (Evans 2015), building a significant social media footprint in the process. Describing itself as a "public education project" (Abort67 2018) and claiming to share accurate information about abortion, the group has been subject to intense media scrutiny including a Channel 4 documentary (Channel 4 2016), a BBC Newsnight report (BBC 2018), and pieces in *The Sunday Times* (Kinchen 2012), *The Telegraph* (Sanghani 2014), *The Guardian* (Topping 2017), and *The Economist* (*The Economist* 2018). Moreover, activities by members of the group have triggered (unsuccessful) prosecutions under the Public Order Act (Boseley 2017), with media labelling of the group as 'extremist' upheld by an independent Ofcom investigation in 2017 (Ofcom 2017).

While members of the group dispute these characterisations of their position and activities, it is certainly true that Abort67 is one of the most striking, distinctive, and divisive British anti-abortion groups active online. Reporting on numerous demonstrations each month and possessing a social media following on Facebook of almost 5000 supporters,[2] it can be considered an outlier in terms of both its level of support and the volume of content produced when compared to other major British groups.

Moreover, while its members have been labelled 'extremists' (Channel 4 2016), its website contains a statement clearly repudiating violence and harassment of abortion providers, disassociating the group from individuals and organisations that embrace violence, and threatening legal action against those who defame the group in respect of its involvement in violence (Abort67 2018). However, the extent to which its social media content is consistent with this outlook remains to be seen, and very little is understood about the way the group engages with social media, with no studies exploring the group's use of the internet currently publicly available. To this end, this chapter seeks to provide a first exploration of Abort67's use of Facebook, with a view to ascertaining what types of content they seek to promote and publish, how they position content, and how their supporters interact with it.

## Method

Analysis utilised data collected from posts made by Abort67's authorised Facebook account on their official Facebook page between February 21, 2018, and March 22, 2018. During this period, the researcher made daily visits to the group's Facebook page, recording the number of posts made and reviewing each in detail, attributing every post codes for theme and content format. Alongside this data on user interaction as measured through comments, shares, and 'likes' (including 'loves') was recorded, with evidence of pro- and anti-violent sentiment from comments noted in a research diary alongside qualitative observations on any key themes in user responses.

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[2] Since completing this research project, the Facebook and Twitter pages for Abort67 have been removed. The reasons for this are, as yet, unclear.

The final data comprised 39 posts, 333 shares, 1071 likes, and 877 user comments. The results of analysis undertaken using these data are presented below.

# Results

## A Place for Extremism?

Analysis of published content illustrated an even mix of format and theme. Of the 39 posts made on the official group page, 10 were videos, 13 images, 12 links, and 4 texts. Thematically, content was evenly divided (Table 8.1) across posts promoting future events (both by the group and affiliated organisations) ($N = 14$), reportage on demonstrations ($N = 10$), and propaganda ($N = 13$), with a further 13 posts covering an esoteric variety of themes ranging from comment pieces on protest restrictions to news articles on fracking. Some posts spanned multiple categories, particularly in respect of reportage and promotion of future events; these were attributed multiple codes accordingly.

Interestingly, the spread of content posted by Abort67 differed markedly from other—more widely acknowledged—extremist groups, with Littler and Kondor's (2019) study of Facebook use by the English Defence League (EDL) and Britain First suggesting high levels of social media activity, low levels of 'calls to action', moderate merchandising activity, and high levels of content sharing on topics unrelated to the core focus of the group. This accords with Conway's (2006) findings in respect of the goals of extremist groups using the internet; however data for Abort67 suggests a picture more in line with traditional political actors (see Bartlett et al. 2013), with far lower levels of social media

**Table 8.1** Thematic content of posts

| Post theme | Number of posts |
| --- | --- |
| Event promotion | 14 |
| Reportage | 10 |
| Propaganda | 13 |
| Others | 13 |

*NB: N = 39*

**Table 8.2**  Post type and level of user engagement

| Post type | Mean shares | Mean likes | Mean comments |
|---|---|---|---|
| Video (*N* = 10) | 18.83 (SD = 19.2) | 33.92 (SD = 33.81) | 87.29 (SD = 52.3) |
| Image (*N* = 13) | 6.38 (SD = 8.56) | 33.38 (SD = 33.49) | 20.84 (SD = 40.23) |
| Link (*N* = 12) | 4.75 (SD = 7.74) | 21.58 (SD = 16.63) | 3.42 (SD = 6.35) |
| Text (*N* = 4) | 0.25 (SD = 0.5) | 7.70 (SD = 10) | 17.06 (10.5) |

*NB: N = 39*

activity, a far tighter focus on their core issues (in this case, abortion), and no merchandising activity. In this respect, the group's online footprint appears significantly different to that of other, more widely recognised, extremist groups, lending support to those who argue against typologising Abort67 in these terms.

In respect of user engagement, the evidence is equally surprising. Table 8.2 provides an overview of the patterns of supporter interaction with content, highlighting significant disparities in respect of audience engagement by post format.

While the overall number of cases under consideration is small, these data nevertheless suggest that textual posts were the least likely to be shared and the least likely to be liked, with a mean share rate of 0.25 and a mean like rate of 7.70. This represents a significant shortfall compared to rates of sharing and liking for both image and link posts, with the mean number of likes almost 3 times higher (21.58) for links and the mean number of shares (4.75) 19 times higher. Combined with results highlighting greater levels of engagement with video posts (18.83 mean shares, 33.92 mean likes), these data may be taken to argue the importance of format in determining engagement, suggesting Abort67's content delivery strategy is shaped in a way that is consistent with work on social media use by Hofmann et al. (2013) and Dimitrova et al. (2014).

Such findings are unsurprising given the increasingly visual nature of the online space and observations from the advertising studies literature suggesting that content providers push visual content because it is more likely to foster user engagement (Kaparaboina 2017). In the context of extremist groups, the adoption of an image-led strategy has been evident for a number of years (see Littler and Kondor 2019; Lee and Littler 2015), consistent with the oft-repeated observation that extremist groups are

'early adopters' of technological trends (see Littler 2018). In this, the data suggest that Abort67 may be pursuing an approach which is qualitatively similar to that employed by widely acknowledged extremist groups such as Britain First and the EDL (see Littler and Kondor 2019; Lee and Littler 2015)—although it should also be noted that extremist groups are, to some extent, merely appropriating successful advertising tactics as employed in other (more mainstream) fields (for a more expansive discussion of this phenomenon, see Bhui and Ibrahim 2013).

Regardless of the rationale, it is clear that Abort67's extensive use of visual content has significant implications for the tone and nature of content shared and for the nature of the user response. As Sharma and Sheth (2004) note, the promotion of visual media allows content producers to engineer their online presence more effectively than traditional text-based media, building user engagement and establishing more responsive interactions between users and content publishers than with text-based content (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). This in turn has changed content producer-user interaction, including by encouraging users to 'share' content across their own networks (Malhotra et al. 2013).

While there is evidence to support this view in the data from Abort67, qualitative analysis of the content shares raises an interesting corollary. Work by McLaughlin and Vitak (2012) on norms on social media highlights that sharing divisive or inflammatory content is often avoided because of the risk of social censure, stigma, and the possibility of damaging—or terminating—friendships with ideologically opposing peers.

Somewhat surprisingly, these data suggest that some of the most visceral content induced some of the highest rates of user interaction, with higher levels of 'sharing' than more moderate posts and significantly larger volumes of comments. The three most shared posts, all of which were videos depicting graphic content at demonstrations and conflict with counter-protesters, attracted the highest rates of comment from users, and while the latter can, to some extent, be explained by the ferocity of debate between supporters and opponents of the group (in the case of the latter, many seem to have 'liked' the Abort67 page simply to argue with its posts), the high levels of sharing are harder to explain.

One possible approach lies in work around 'filter bubbles' (Flaxman et al. 2016), and the way in which social media content management algorithms filter content from within social media networks, increasing exposure to content that is supportive of individual user outlooks while minimising the visibility of content in opposition to user views (Ford 2012). In such circumstances, individual users may feel more free to share extreme content as it is less likely to attract negative stigma because of its reduced visibility to ideologically opposed peers. The implication of this is particularly serious when considering groups operating within liberal and pluralised political environments, as the potentially limiting of opportunities for extreme viewpoints to be challenged may increase ideological entrenchment and reduce the possibility of compromise solutions—a process on which liberal democracies rely (for a fuller discussion, see Bozdag et al. 2014).

A final interesting observation may be made around the factors underpinning Abort67's selection of format when posting information. While their use of video and images is doubtless significant in itself, it is important not to oversell the impact of this choice and to consider not just differences in content strategies and engagement norms as a topic of academic interest but the ways in which these choices are used to advance different aims and objectives (Lee et al. 2018).

A consideration of Abort67's posts highlights this point well: while it is tempting to suggest that they have pursued a video-led content strategy because of its impact on user engagement rates, a closer interrogation of the data suggests that content format appears to be a product of a more nuanced consideration of content aim, with textual posts generally used to communicate practical and organisational information and videos and pictures used to illicit an emotional response. The dominance of video content can thus be understood not simply as being indicative of a general move towards visual communication (see Burgess and Green 2018) but as a conscious choice tied to the promotion of anti-abortion messages, which are—by definition—often reliant on an appeal to passion and emotion. While a greater sample would be necessary to sustain the making of robust inferences in respect of this view, the data in this paper are certainly consistent with such an argument.

## A Place for Violence?

In addition to a consideration of social media strategy and usage characteristics, this chapter also sought to use the data explore the extremity of Abort67 in terms of its activities online. Perhaps most strikingly given the innuendo of the group's opponents, there was little evidence to substantiate any relationship between the group and those involved in the promotion or perpetration of violence. Of the 877 comments included in this analysis, only one—by a supporter of Abort67—may be argued to have actively promoted violence by suggesting that abortion providers should be sent to concentration camps. Consistent with the group's publicly espoused 'zero tolerance' policy for pro-violent content (outlined in both their website and on the 'About' section of their Facebook page), it was met by a swift rebuke from the official page moderator who replied with the following comment:

> Please resist the urge to use words that make a personal attack on individuals. Thank you.

Interestingly, however, the initial pro-violent comment was not deleted, and a follow-up response of "Why they are muderers! [sic]" was left uncontested. While it may be possible to suggest that the failure to engage in further debate/rebuking of the posting user may reflect a general policy of limited (or non-engagement) in debate around extreme content, the willingness of the group's moderators to take part in significant debates with pro-abortion activists suggests that such a view is untenable. It is, however, impossible to definitively infer the underlying rationale for this inconsistency on the basis of these data.

No further evidence of overtly pro-violent sentiment was present in the data; however, the general tenor of much of the comment content can be fairly characterised as aggressive, hostile, and beyond the realm of civilised debate. Comments by Abort67 supporters regularly engaged in the making of ad hominem attacks against pro-abortion activists, and there was evidence of highly insulting language in respect of those seeking abortions, in one comment labelling them sexually immoral 'slappers' operating under demonic influence. It should be noted, however, that

similarly offensive and ad hominem attacks were also levelled against Abort67 supporters by pro-abortion activists, with accusations of backwardness and 'fascism' evident in the data. While Abort67's page moderators did, in some cases, condemn such conduct (by both sides), this action was neither universal nor consistent in its application; again, however, it is impossible to definitively infer the underlying reason for this inconsistency on the basis of these data.

## A Place for Conflict?

Consistent with research on the use of social media by extreme groups (Bartlett et al. 2011; Bartlett and Littler 2011), there was significant evidence of 'trolling' of comment threads linked to posts on the Abort67 page. A significant proportion of the total volume of comments originated from pro-abortion users whose engagement with the Abort67 Facebook page was seemingly driven only by a desire to offend and stigmatise Abort67 supporters. Indeed, many of the most vitriolic exchanges were initiated by pro-abortion users, with aggressive and hostile posts by anti-abortion activists largely confined to responses in these exchanges. While these comments were often equally aggressive and vitriolic, it is important to note that they were generally a response to direct—and often, personal—provocation. While the data analysed in this chapter are limited in their scope, and it is therefore difficult to offer definitive conclusions, the interplay between these opposing factions and the impact this seemingly had on interpersonal hostile would seem a good—albeit limited—example of Eatwell's (2006) 'cumulative extremism' hypothesis, with movement-counter-movement dynamics feeding off each other in ways which magnify and exacerbate conflict.

With this in mind, the role of social media platforms, and Facebook in particular, should be considered beyond their function merely as tools facilitating the exchange of views. Rather, Facebook needs to be understood as a creator of opportunities for confrontation that would not otherwise exist, forming possibilities for cumulative extremism and inter-group conflict that would be bounded by time and geography in the real world. Absent Facebook extreme pro- and anti-abortion exchanges would largely be limited to the physical space adjacent to offline demonstrations, and

while it seems likely that Abort67's offline actions occur mainly in locations picked to provide the preconditions for such conflict, the reach offered by social media magnifies these opportunities for conflict to an extent not otherwise possible. Facebook provides Abort67 and its opponents with a platform that is truly global, 24-hour, and loosed from the standards of decorum required by face-to-face interaction. Indeed, research evidence suggests that the internet actively encourages exchanges that are more aggressive as a result of both physical distance and the relative anonymity of users (Zimmerman and Ybarra 2016).

As a result, Abort67's presence on Facebook may be argued to have increased the number of opportunities for supporters and opponents to clash in an environment where the consequences of poor behaviour are low. Simply put, any angry extremist can now find a willing opponent keen to scrap at any time of the day or night, doing so in a way which most normal people would find abhorrent. Such enhanced opportunities for conflict go beyond the abortion debate and cross-cut many of the key issues facing contemporary societies (see Castells 2015); as a result, a broader consideration of their impact on our norms of political and social debate would be welcome. However, such enquiry is clearly beyond the scope of this chapter; additional research in this area would clearly be beneficial.

## Conclusions

This paper set out to offer an overview of the use of Facebook by Abort67, one of the most active, widely supported, and radical anti-abortion groups operating in the UK. In so doing, it aimed to provide an initial exploration of the patterns and characteristics of social media use by extreme British anti-abortion groups. The results of the analysis presented in this chapter achieve this goal, and while the limitations imposed by a short time frame, a focus on a single group and the use of only one social media platform prevent the drawing of unambiguous conclusions; the results of these analyses nevertheless offer an overview of the content themes, formats, and engagement characteristics that typify the Facebook presence of one of the UK's most prominent anti-abortion actors.

In terms of content theme, the data suggest that Abort67's posts cluster tightly around the anti-abortion message that is at the heart of the group. Reportage on demonstrations, anti-abortion propaganda, and event promotion comprised the majority of the group's 37 posts, suggesting a tighter focus than would typically be characteristic of more conventional extremist groups.

Data on content type were equally interesting, with posts suggesting that Abort67 have pursued a visual content strategy, relying on video and images, as the cornerstones of their online presence. While the reasons for this are hard to infer from the data, there is some basis to suggest that content format may be a product of aim and intended audience, with visual content more commonly used to push emotive messages than textual posts. The dominance of video and images amongst Abort67's outputs may also be taken as a response to the changing nature of the digital space, mirroring innovations in other, more mainstream, forms of advertising (see Bhui and Ibrahim 2013).

Contrary to popular perceptions, this paper found little direct evidence that would support characterising Abort67 as an 'extremist' group: in addition to their patterns of social media usage, there was little evidence of 'extremity' in respect of user comments. While there were some cases of ad hominem attacks and offensive content being posted, this did not seem to transgress the bounds of protected political expression and certainly fell short of the extremity of language found in more conventional extremist groups. In this, Abort67's social media outputs have at least as much—if not more—in common with mainstream political actors than with widely recognised extremist groups.

The absence of overt calls for violence and swift moderator response to direct attacks against commentators lends further support to this view and suggests an effective commitment to opposing illegal and violent activity on the part of the group. Despite this, inconsistencies were evident in moderator responses across different comment threads, the reasons for which cannot be inferred from the data in this chapter.

Observations from other sources regarding the hostile and threatening environment around the group (*The Economist* 2018; Kinchen 2012) have proved harder to rebut, with qualitative evidence suggesting that the dynamics between supporters and opponents of the group may reasonably be characterised as an example of 'cumulative extremism' (Eatwell 2006) in

action, although further research is necessary to explore this contention. Certainly the group's use of social media can be argued to create the preconditions for instigating and exacerbating inter-user tension, with the unique characteristics of social media amplifying this beyond the possibilities offered by offline interactions.

The policy implications of this accord with current practice, suggesting that treating Abort67 and its followers outside the bounds of conventional criminal and CVE frameworks is both a sensible and proportionate response to the risk the group and its supporters pose. This paper provides no evidence to rebut the contention that—in terms of their online outputs—the activities of the group lie within the bounds of English law and ought therefore to be protected.

Despite this Facebook—as the content hosting platform—may wish to consider the extent to which content management algorithms serve to exacerbate the problems of conflict and ideological entrenchment by creating filter bubbles that limit exposure to opposing views. While the scope of this problem exceeds anti-abortion extremism, it is clearly an issue that has resonance in respect of this field.

Future research may wish to apply the approach taken here to other anti-abortion groups in the interests of better understanding the UK's digital anti-abortion milieu. Equally, further research around the cumulative extremism risk posed by online interactions between pro- and anti-abortion activists would be welcome, both as a contribution to the broader scholarship on cumulative extremism and as a source of insight into anti-abortion extremism online.

Finally, research exploring the linkages between groups in Britain and America would also be beneficial—particularly given accusations in the print media in respect of the alleged growth in extremity on the part of British anti-abortion groups (The Economist 2018).

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# 9

# Jihadi Fans Revisited: Mapping the Commonalities with Non-Islamic Extremism

**Gilbert Ramsay**

## Introduction

As I put the finishing touches to this chapter, my other immediately pressing task is revising the module guide for a course entitled "Propaganda, persuasion and information war in the modern Middle East". Particularly important to get right this year is a short passage which warns students about the potential risks of accessing "terrorist publications", and the new sensitive research form which must be completed by those seeking to carry out assignments which might involve (carefully supervised) access to "this content". By 'this content' we could, in principle, be talking about any one of a number of things, of course: the anti-abortion extremist "Army of God" website, the "Naxal revolution" blog, the incelculture reddit or (more relevant to this particular course) any number of online materials by Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria or violent extremist settler movements in Israel. Realistically,

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though, what I am referring to is material created by jihadi-salafis claiming affiliation with Al Qaeda or "Islamic State" (IS).

Without wishing to invoke a broader discussion about the disproportionality—or otherwise—of the intense focus on Sunni Islamist extremism in Western countries (especially in the one chapter on that topic in a book aimed at moving beyond it!), it is interesting to consider how pronouncements—usually very abstract—about the supposed virulence of jihadi-salafism online often serve to create the impression that jihadist radicalisation in this space is somehow subject to fundamentally different laws than other processes of online media consumption. "Extremists" are, of course, exceptionalised by definition. In the case of jihadis, however, their Internet "savvy" or comfortable familiarity with contemporary media dynamics—or for that matter, their connection to almost anything humdrum or everyday—is still often treated as something inherently interesting.

In recent years, the attitude of exceptionalism has to some extent been challenged by a growing interest in the idea of jihadi-salafism as a cultural, rather than simply political or religious, phenomenon. An important landmark here has been the publication of the collection *Jihadi Culture* (2017) edited by Thomas Hegghammer, a work which showcases and brings together the work of a number of scholars—predominantly specialists in the fields of Islamic, Arabic and Middle East studies in order to explore importance of music, poetry, visual culture and even dream interpretation practices to jihadi fighters. Hegghammer offers two ways of defining and problematising these phenomena. On the one hand, he has argued that the cultural practices of jihadi militants present a "sociological puzzle" since, on the face of it, they seem to violate the utility-maximising behaviour which Hegghammer—as a rational choice theorist—expects of "hunted men". On the other, Hegghammer insists that the "big idea" uniting the jihadi culture research agenda is that "ideology is really two different things: doctrine and aesthetics". Overall, it seems that Hegghammer seeks to define jihadi culture as a distinct sphere of jihadi activity, one that can be isolated from both the military and doctrinal dimensions of the phenomenon of jihadi-salafism.

Largely parallel to this body of work, there has also emerged scholarship which seeks to deploy insights from the realm of youth culture and subcultural theory in order to gain insights into jihadism as a whole—and particularly into individual processes of engagement with jihadism. In contrast to the work of Hegghammer and the scholars whose work he seeks to bring together, this body of research is largely focused on the experience on Islamist radicalisation in Western countries, and those who have taken the lead in it have tended to approach it from a sociological or criminological angle. Here, jihadism is approached as a subcultural phenomenon locatable within the postwar history of Western youth subcultures such as skinheads, punk, hip-hop and so on. Researchers such as Simon Cottee (2011) and Daniela Pisoiu (2014) have drawn attention to the possible importance of notions such as "jihadi cool" in explaining recruitment into violent extremist networks. Similarly, Olivier Roy (2017) has argued forcefully for the view that recruitment of Islamic State in Western countries cannot be made sense of in terms of conventional notions of political movements or of religious fundamentalism. Instead, phenomena such as what he calls the "aestheticisation of violence" and the creation of a "gaming space" contributed to the mobilisation of young people who whose values were shaped more by late-modern consumerism and individualism than by any stable cause or recognisably "Islamic" tradition in the conventional sense.

Juxtaposed, these two rather different and divergent conceptions of jihadi-salafi culture point to a number of problems and lacunae. For one thing, they seem to create an overall impression of a vast divergence between jihadi-salafism as practised by militants in Muslim majority contexts and as upheld by supporters and recruits in Western countries. Reading the work of Hegghammer and his contributors, one could well gain the overall impression that jihadi-salafism, as practised by militants in Muslim majority contexts, is—despite obvious innovations—in fact quite deeply rooted in authentic Islamic traditions. Reading the work of authors such as Olivier Roy, on the other hand, one would likely conclude by contrast that the jihadism of the West bears only the most flimsy and passing resemblance to anything Islamic, or to any long-established Islamic culture. Such a diagnosis may not, in fact, be utterly false, but it

is certainly not the whole truth. As I shall try to indicate in this chapter, jihadi-salafism, as a mediated phenomenon in Arabic (and presumably also in Turkish, Urdu, Somali or Bahasa Indonesia), shares many of the youth cultural features observed with regard to the phenomenon in the West.

In my own work, I have previously sought to understand the online culture of jihadi-salafism from the standpoint of the literature on cultural consumption and, specifically, through the analogy of fandom. In this chapter I wish to update and develop this argument in dialogue with newer work on jihadi culture, and also with the state of affairs since the rise and apparent fall of IS, specifically with reference to two sets of texts: a jihadi "fan" video and an Arabic language Facebook group which seems to be informally dedicated to supporting a jihadi position. In doing so, I wish to make two interlocking points. First, I wish to argue that important aspects of the online culture of jihadi-salafism are fruitfully understood from the standpoint of late-modern subcultural media consumption—that is to say, "participatory culture" which, following the work of Henry Jenkins (1992, 2006, 2016), can be traced to the "resistant reading" practices of fans. In this sense, jihadis do, after all, look a lot like other dissident online groups. The second point I wish to make is that the embracing, by online jihadis, of these cultural forms and practices should not be read in isolation from the Islamic fundamentalist (i.e. salafi) beliefs to which jihadis at least nominally adhere. On the contrary, jihadism can be fruitfully understood precisely in terms of the paradoxes created by the convergence of militancy, fundamentalist theology and late-modern cultural consumption practices.

## Jihadi Fans?

In *The ISIS Apocalypse*, the veteran analyst Will McCants (2015) noted that "just as the flag of the Islamic State was being trampled underfoot, jihadist fanboys and Al Qaeda's own affiliates began to lift it up". The turn of events McCants is referring to is of specific interest. But before considering this, it is also worth noting the way he uses the phrase "jihadist fanboys", in a manner which is simultaneously tongue in cheek and

yet, somehow, semi-technical. This is, in fact, characteristic of the way the word is used in writing about jihadists. Another, more recent example would be the spoof "alternative" organisational structure chart for the "Islamic State" posted by Lebanese satirist and analyst Karl Sharro on Twitter (Sharro 10/9/2014). A spoof of IS's self-important propaganda releases detailing elaborate list of internal departments and provinces, the chart featured two "departments" for "Twitter fanboys", carefully segregated from the Twitter fangirls section at the other side of the page. A similar—but much more seriously intended—coinage is the term "jihobbyist", used by the jihadism expert Jarret Brachman (2011). Indeed even jihadis have been known to use the term "fan", to characterise overenthusiastic online supporters who seem to do more harm than good.

There is a certain irony in the pejorative way that the word "fan" is used in such cases. As Henry Jenkins, one of the first scholars to seriously examine fandom as a cultural phenomenon, noted in his groundbreaking work *Textual Poachers* (1992), fans have long been stereotyped as "dupes" of popular culture—socially awkward outsiders who waste their lives on a baffling addiction to trivial or worthless materials which consume them so deeply that they lose the ability to distinguish fantasy from reality. Clearly, this caricature has a good deal in common with how jihadis are often characterised, especially when they are not perceived as presenting an immediate threat. And yet, as the work of Jenkins and numerous other fan-studies scholars (e.g. Hills 2017) would go on to show, in the case of real fans, at least, the stereotype gets things fundamentally wrong. Far from being marginal outsiders, the fans Jenkins studied in the late 1980s and early 1990s were pioneers whose insistence on creating their own user-generated "participatory culture" that could challenge and even seize creative control of the mass products of the culture industry. Indeed, with the passage of time, and the emergence of the Web as a more natural two-way medium, fans would increasingly move from the periphery of culture to its centre. Fandom would cease to be socially unacceptable, and the language of fandom would spread to encompass engagement with forms of culture—such as serious literature or classical music—where previously more respectable terms had been used to describe associated consumption practices.

In particular, Jenkins sought to explore the way in which fans creatively re-appropriate the materials they consume in order to create their own distinctive culture, "poaching" as he put it, on what are supposed to be walled off and proprietary areas of culture in order to insert into them their own interests and concerns. In the specific case Jenkins explored at the outset of his career—*Star Trek* fans—this meant the creation of fan art, music and the entire genre of erotic "slash" fiction. This relationship, he noted, had something of a paradoxical quality. On the one hand, fans were defined by their apparently single-minded devotion to their favoured texts—a devotion which some characterised (mischaracterised in Jenkins' view) as almost religious in nature. And yet, in the very act of obsessive engagement with these texts, fans ended up taking control of them for their own ends—subverting them if necessary. In short, fandom ends up subverting the texts it consumes not in spite of but precisely *because of* fans' deep devotion to them.

In this sense, fans engage in what Jenkins and others have identified as "resistant reading", actively reinventing and repurposing texts in line with their own cultural and personal needs. In making this claim, Jenkins was consciously drawing on the previous work of cultural theorists associated in particular with the tradition established by the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies—particularly a lineage stretching from Stuart Hall's (1979) notion of "coding and decoding". A central concern of this tradition had been to move beyond the pessimistic assumptions of Frankfurt School Marxists—notably Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (2016)—by considering the ways in which ordinary people could build their own forms of autonomous and diverse culture out of a propagandistic mass-mediated culture industry.

This tradition has commonly been characterised by a binary view of politics such that resistance against ideological incorporation by the capitalist culture industry—in whatever form that might take—is inherently progressive and that attempts by authority structures to curb and limit the creation of autonomous culture are thus almost always a bad thing. Nonetheless, the empirical development of alternative communities and subcultural approaches to media consumption has in recent years increasingly obliged scholars of contemporary culture to accept the notion that participatory culture is not inherently committed to a single ideological agenda. As Angela Nagle (2017: 3) writes:

Writers like Manuel Castells and numerous other commentators in the *Wired* magazine milieu told us of the coming of a networked society in which old hierarchical models of business and culture would be replaced by the wisdom of crowds, the swarm, the hive mind, citizen journalism and user-generated content. They got their wish, but it's not quite the utopian vision they were hoping for.

There is little need to labour the point in the present day that regressive ideologies of many varieties—antifeminism, racism, ultra-nationalism and others—have proven highly adept at expressing themselves by means of precisely the set of resistance "tactics" identified by fan theorists: playfulness, irony and the assertion and validation of personal identity by means of creative re-reading and re-working of mass culture. The post-ironic racism of Pepe the Frog memes, the cultural revolt of a particular group of video-game consumers and recent fan-led battles against supposed "cultural Marxism" in new *Star Wars* instalment *The Last Jedi* represent fairly obvious (albeit inherently complex and ambiguous) examples.

Understood in this sense, the idea that jihadism is, in important ways, premised on the creative appropriation of the products of a hegemonic culture industry is perhaps fairly obvious. After 9/11, numerous cultural commentators (Riegler 2014) noted the close resemblance between the real life catastrophe and numerous fictional scenarios imaginatively presented by Hollywood studios. More recently, similar points have been made concerning propaganda material created by IS. In IS videos, real-life shootings are used to enact the popular computer game *Grand Theft Auto*—itself intended as a satire on American media portrayals of American gang violence (Jenkins 2006). The beheading videos for which the group is particularly notorious involve sound effects and camera glitch-style jump cuts that closely resemble modern horror films (Ramsay 2013). Videos depicting IED (improvised explosive device) explosions use techniques such as slow motion and rewind which seem more reminiscent of the visual language of action films, or even of computer games, than of documentary. In short, jihadi media is a quintessential example of "hyper-real" postmodern media.

These examples, however, all reflect the deliberate and strategic use of Western aesthetics by more or less organised military actors with a clear and identifiable agenda. What is perhaps more interesting and relevant is

the way in which jihadi commitments are constructed and defended at the quotidian level—by precisely those people described, semi-ironically, as jihadi "fans". Once these people are considered, however, a more complex picture begins to emerge: one which does not merely present online jihadism as a form of cultural resistance to Western hegemony—but also to the dominance of jihadi-salafism's own ideological and military hierarchies.

To see why, it is instructive to return to the Will McCants quotation which opens this section. At this point in time, Al Qaeda were very largely the only show on the road when it came to the organisational expression of global jihadism, while a coterie of respected jihadi clerics such as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatada al-Filastini and Abu Basir al-Tartusi associated with the website Minbar al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad were the dominant voices of religious authority in the movement. Mere "supporters of the mujahidin"—often people whose contribution to the movement was little more than to lurk on forums and repost propaganda videos or to get into lengthy online arguments—did not have much obvious clout compared to the movement's political, military and theological leadership. Nonetheless, a fashion developed for online jihadis to display conspicuous devotion to a particular jihadi "martyr"—the former leader of IS, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi. Al-Zarqawi was not necessarily an obvious candidate for this sort of devotion. He had conspicuously fallen out with the Al Qaeda leadership. Al Qaeda's deputy leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, had famously written to him to personally reprimand him for his excessively bloodthirsty and sectarian tactics in Iraq. Moreover, Al-Zawahiri's advice seemed to have been borne out in practice: IS had managed to alienate almost everyone and seemed to have been almost eliminated as a result. On top of this, Al-Zawahiri's excessive violence had also earned the condemnation of the dean of jihadi clerics, his former mentor Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. The eagerness of Internet jihadis to identify with this symbol, however, seems to have been because of, rather than in spite of, its controversial nature. In an emerging split in online jihadi communities between supporters of al-Maqdisi and supporters of al-Zarqawi, the Zarqawists favoured their man precisely because he represented action over words. Of course, online supporters of al-Zarqawi didn't necessarily have any military credentials *themselves*. But by trumpeting military experience over

complex argumentation, they were—ironically—able to out argue their opponents. Given that there were people actually putting their lives on the line, sounding too clever in an argument—so the jihadis would cleverly argue—was disrespectful, if not borderline treacherous. Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's image—and, with it, the IS flag—became in this way a source of cultural capital that online jihadis could use to evade the ideological control of their own movement's authority figures, not only to carve out an ideological space for themselves but to incubate within it a new vision of Islamic militancy which, once it got its chance, would rapidly outgrow and outmanoeuvre its ostensibly more serious and credentialed competitors.

## Exclamation! A Postmodern Online Jihadi Community

At this point, in order to flesh out a picture of how an online jihadi—or apparently jihadi—community can look in the present day, I turn to my first case study. *Exclamation!* is an Arabic language Facebook community, also available as a Telegram channel. The name of the page is provided in English and in its Arabic translation (*ta'ajub*) in the form of a snappy logo, which reveals no trace of typical jihadist style. Indeed, there is nothing visually "jihadi" about the page at all.

Nevertheless, the essentially jihadi sympathies of the page can be confidently inferred from occasional but fairly explicit claims to this effect, such as the following:

> I'm not one of those people with beards and short dishdashas, nor one of those people that carries a *siwak* wherever I go, and I'm not a specialist in theological knowledge of hadith or religious interpretation.
>
> But this doesn't prevent me from recognising that the "khawarij" and "milk-toothed infants" are the ones who presented their bare chests and stormed Palmyra prison in order to free prisoners who had vanished "behind the sun" into this terrible prison since 1980.
>
> Those khawarij, these agents of America and Zionism, agents of Iran, the creation of the regime, are the ones who showed the courage of the

*sahaba* when they freed the Sunni women prisoners from Badush prison in Mosul where the Shiite scum were taking turns to rape them.

These khawarij, agents of America and Zionism, agents of Iran, these cuckoos of the sex-jihad, these milk toothed infants, these khawarij of the present day and dogs of the people of hellfire, they are the ones who advanced under the leadership of the Shahid Abu Anas al-Shami in the raid of Fatima against Abu Ghraib prison to free the female prisoners who were screaming for men of honour and shame, and no one responded on their behalf except the khawarij and milk-toothed infants.

The milk-toothed infants didn't go to Astana and no one rolled out a carpet for them in Geneva, and they didn't ride the green buses, nor present themselves at the rooms of the Al-Muk operations room. Rather, they found their beds on the ground, and fought the armies of sixty-two nations: an alliance including the "Sahwa" groups and the "vetted" militias; and they went head to head with them for three years in Raqqa and Mosul. (*Exclamation!* accessed 16/5/2018)

This comment, it can be noted, represents almost a perfect statement of jihadi "fandom". By asserting its commitment to the superior virtues of military deeds over the niceties of correct religious practice, the statement also serves, by implication, as a legitimation of the poster's own admitted lack of exactitude in his (the poster is of course presenting as male) religious practice.

There are also more subtle indications, such as pro-IS memes posted by supporters of the page, or short-quoted snatches of lyrics from well-known jihadi nashids. In response to the killing of sixty Gazan protestors by Israel, for instance, *Exclamation!* overlaid words from the IS nasheed *Qariban*—the same song which soundtracked the execution video in which Jordanian pilot Mu'adh al-Qasasbeh was burned to death.

Often, however, *Exclamation!* relies on irony, insinuation and sarcastic humour (including memes) to present its jihadi world-view. Indeed, the site typically establishes its position negatively rather than positively—satirically attacking traditional enemies of jihadis, notably Western countries, but more tellingly Arab governments, Shiites, moderate Muslims and the Muslim Brothers, as opposed to openly stating its own positions.

Despite this, it is worth stressing that, since it apparently never shares official propaganda produced by jihadist groups, or directly incites people

to join such groups of carry out acts of violence, the page may well fall within the acceptable limits of Facebook's community guidelines. Similar to other publications—especially those created by informal jihadi sympathisers—much of the page's political commentary reflects widespread and commonplace political concerns, such as anger at the arms industry or at political corruption and authoritarianism.

While a good deal of material is serious in nature, one of the most notable things about *Exclamation!* is its generally relaxed and irreverent tone. This extends to jokes which are not just mischievous but verge on downright blasphemy. In one recent example (at the time of writing), the insinuation is made that water from the sacred well of *Zamzam* "tastes different", having been polluted by Ivanka Trump's urine (*Exclamation!* 18/5/2018).

Another distinctive element of the page's overall discourse is reflected in its inclusion of content without a clear political or obviously religious theme, apparently on the grounds that it is seen as thought provoking and meaningful. Indeed, there is some apparent overlap between the page's membership and that of another entitled "Out of the Matrix" (Accessed 28/6/2018). In contrast to *Exclamation!* this page is in fact more explicitly "Islamic" from a visual point of view. Its focus, however, is esoteric subject matter such as fringe "scientific" claims ad conspiracy theories, read from a broadly Islamic perspective. The pop cultural reference, of course, clearly resembles to notion of "red pilling" popular in some alt right contexts.

*Exclamation!* is not entirely unprecedented. The satirical tone it adopts towards the news has been quite a longstanding feature of online jihadi communities, and the use of memes has similarly become normalised among online jihadis in recent years. Nonetheless, *Exclamation!* remains striking for its sheer level of irreverence and for its frequent reliance on insinuation, irony and ambivalence. Like other forms of contemporary online community which claim to support totalitarian values, its behaviour displays an attractive rebelliousness which seems—on the surface at least—to belie these. It also illustrates how ideologies such as jihadism can maintain plausibility by openly presenting not their own elaborate belief systems but rather by functioning as a critique of others.

## Jihadism and Salafism

To fully appreciate why jihadi-salafism, despite its much-vaunted and clearly evident "savvy" within the spaces facilitated by digital media, remains vulnerable to subversion by its own consumer-producers, it is important to revisit an issue which is interestingly underplayed in the literature on jihadi culture: that is, the relationship between jihadism and salafism. For Olivier Roy (2017), it is simply a mistake to identify modern-day jihadism with salafism (salafism being understood, roughly, as a fundamentalist strand of Islam which teaches, first, that Muslims ought not to follow the teachings of traditional law schools unquestioningly but should instead return to the original sources of the religion and, second, that these sources must be read literally with minimal application of analogical reasoning). As Roy observes, numerous recruits to groups such as IS seem to have had only the most minimal knowledge of Islam, and many have had lifestyles—even immediately prior to involvement in jihadist violence—which were extremely far from the austere practices that salafism requires.

Hegghammer, by contrast, tends to find from his rather different vantage point that jihadis do, in fact, take salafi strictures quite seriously. In his own accounts of jihadi culture, he finds little evidence of radically innovative practices among jihadi groups. The forms of "jihadi culture" which his volume contributors concern themselves with are almost all rooted in genuine practices of Islamic cultures and evidenced by authentic Islamic texts. Nevertheless, as we noted at the outset, he seems reluctant to invoke Islam in general, or salafism more particularly in attempting to problematise precisely what is interesting and particular about "jihadi" cultural forms.

Nevertheless, a useful clue can be found in his notion of doctrine and aesthetics as two distinct components of ideology. As it stands, this statement seems to be somewhat unsatisfactory. That ideology combines doctrine and aesthetics is, of course, correct. But the combination of the two does not lead us to "culture" as something distinct. Rather, it leads us to propaganda. However, aesthetics are always potentially perilous to totalitarian systems precisely because of the risk that they will become detached

from the utilitarian purpose of propaganda and end up becoming an end in themselves—something which satiates, instead of inciting. An interesting (albeit probably tongue in cheek) example of this actually happening in practice would be the so-called art competition once launched by the jihadi forum Ansar al-Mujahidin in which participants submitted designs based on a pre-designated set of propagandistic images, with each one judged on—presumably—its aesthetic qualities. The outcome was still propaganda, but the mischievous use of the word "art" served to imply that there was value to the activity that went beyond the mere goal of producing support and adherence for jihadi fighters.

The aesthetic qualities of jihadi culture also provide a useful entry point for explicit and deliberate attempts at subversion. Jihadi nashids— a cappella hymns—of course convey doctrinally authorised messages. But they also work as music. Indeed, one of the most effective parodies of the form (alas now taken down by overzealous YouTube content moderators) was the account *In Jihad We Rock*, which overlaid original heavy metal instrumentals on authentic nashid vocals (often accompanied on the videos by original jihadi artwork depicting dark scenes of medieval carnage). The joke worked precisely because the *lack* of incongruity—the two musical aesthetics —seemed to work perfectly together.

Jihadi-salafis are quite openly concerned that even explicitly jihadi cultural forms can risk becoming a distraction from more appropriate forms of activity. A fairly commonplace complaint even about pious nashids, for example, is that they are too popular and risk becoming a distraction from reading the Qur'an. However, in addition to the idea of culture as an inappropriate focus, there are also more specific ways in which digital media consumption seems to threaten core salafi rules and values.

A frequent canard of parodies of Islamist extremism by the relatively liberal Arab media shows the newly converted salafi throwing out, or trying to throw out, the family television. In reality, salafism has of course developed a much more complex relationship with modern media. Salafists routinely make use of television, websites and social media for purposes of religious instruction. A more controversial debate concerns the idea of *Al-Fann Al-Hadif*—that is, "meaningful" art (Kubala 2005). More moderate Islamists, roughly aligning with the Muslim Brothers,

tend to take the view that music, visual art, fiction writing and film making are all acceptable provided they seek to convey a clear Islamic message. Harder-line salafis, however, do not necessarily agree, continuing to uphold positions opposed to instrumental music (Baig 2008), representative art (Al-Munajjid 2018) and sometimes even the creation of written fiction (Islamweb 2010). And yet even these stricter opinions are today more or less unanimous in recognising the legitimacy of technological recording and reproduction. Portraiture may not be acceptable, but photography is. Music is still impermissible, but it is not forbidden to record the human voice.

We can note that these constraints—which are in fact rooted in centuries-old attitudes of conservative Islamic authorities (which is not to say that they have ever been universal or uncontested in Islam more generally)—seem to be specifically vulnerable to being made a mockery of by the logic of new media and, in turn, to the culture of creative consumption which it sustains. Nashids theoretically abide by the rule forbidding musical instruments. In practice, however, they involve such extensive use of overdubbing and vocal effects as to render the lack of musical instrumentation moot. Graphic design inherently blurs the boundaries between "real" photographic depiction and representative visual art. Taken to its logical conclusion, the outcome is the creation of mythological accounts which threaten to compete with both the (supposedly) factual deeds of the mujahidin and the legitimate objects of worship supplied by Islam.

## The Emergence of Jihadi Fiction

We now turn to our second case study. In January 2018, a video began to circulate online under the title *Conquering Washington* (Moore 2018). The video was, in fact, one "episode" in a longer production, running to just over half an hour in total, entitled *And We See it Nigh*, produced by an entity which called itself *Al-Abd Al-Faqir Foundation*. Organised into five parts—"episodes" as they are called—the video describes itself as "a cinematic film depicting the triumph of the Islamic State in the near future".

If there is such a thing as jihadi fan fiction, then *And We See it Nigh*, surely, is it. Even the name of the creator is telling. *Al-Abd Al-Faqir* means "the poor servant", while the tendency to designate oneself as a "foundation" (*mu'asasa*) is typical of real jihadi groups. Also suggestive is the group's logo—a stylised al-Abd al-Faqir—followed by the word "designer". Again, this seems to stress that whoever is behind the video is not a fighting organisation but rather a media specialist (or specialists) working without formal backing. While the video incorporates numerous stylistic elements typical of IS propaganda, such as extensive use of black in transitions and the use of futuristic-looking fonts and graphics, virtually none of the content of the video is original. Rather, it is a carefully constructed montage, made up primarily of footage from commercial action movies, together with some re-used IS propaganda and edited news footage. Finally, it would appear that the creator of the video is a native Arabic speaker with only limited access to English. While the video uses both Arabic and English, the English translations contain numerous grammatical mistakes typical of Arabic speakers. Moreover, some glaring spelling mistakes (e.g. the misspelling of "nigh" as "nihg" in a key title) suggest that the main designer of the video is not proficient in English and relied on translation assistance from someone else.

The idea of lifting content from commercial entertainment media is not itself unprecedented in jihadi propaganda. The use of visuals taken from commercial films—usually Hollywood blockbusters—has become commonplace, especially with regard to still footage. For example, IS notably illustrated a story in the first issue of its English language *Dabiq* magazine with a photograph from the 2014 film *Noah*—despite the fact that the film itself had been banned from a number of Muslim countries for transgressing Islamic norms forbidding the depiction of prophets.

Similarly, there are previous examples of footage being creatively edited by jihadist groups into what amount to fictional narratives. One of these might be the *Baghdad Sniper* video series created by the "national jihadist" Islamic Army of Iraq used the montaging of real, but necessarily brief and context-free footage of sniper attacks in order to create an entirely fictitious narrative around the character of "Juba", the eponymous "Baghdad Sniper". Given that this media campaign fairly clearly involved

an act of untruth, it is perhaps notable that the Islamic Army in Iraq (IAI) was never part of the mainstream jihadi-salafi fold.

Another intriguing case is that of a video produced by a Gazan jihadi-salafi group called Jund Ansar Allah, entitled *The Communicative Raid* (*ghazwat al-balagh*). The video documents an attempt to attack an Israeli checkpoint by means of horse-borne IEDs. The raid itself was essentially abortive. However, the video dwells extensively on the attackers' preparations, showing them galloping around romantically in the desert and setting off explosives, soundtracked by the *Surat al-ʿAdiyyat* (Qur'an: 100) and unusual choice of Qur'anic passage for a jihadi video which concerns the thundering of horse hooves. Given how little attention is given to the anticlimactic attack attempt, the video is very nearly reducible to a purely cinematic work of imagination.

Both of these examples, however, were created by active militant groups, and neither explicitly admits any kind of fictionalisation. By contrast, *And We See it Nigh* is at pains to state that it is a work of imagination. In breaks between "episodes", text states that all "data" [the video's own translation of *bayanat* in Arabic] is "purely imaginary". The need to state the apparently obvious, together with the odd juxtaposition of imagination and "data", speaks to the unfamiliarity of both creator and audience with the concept of imaginative fiction as a genre.

Even the title of the work is significant in this regard. The phrase is a quotation from *Al-Maʿarij*—a chapter of the Qur'an believed to come from the Meccan period, in which Muhammad and his believers represented an oppressed dissident sect. Since the original phrase (also quoted the video) contrasts how "they [the unbelievers] see it as distant, but we see it as near", the phrase seems, thus, to offer a comment on the reality of what is being presented—located not perhaps wholly in the realm of fantasy but rather in a metaphorically "nearer" one of future possibility.

Ironically, even the use of this phrase to anchor and justify the video is an example of creative licence. *Surat al-Maʿarij*—and indeed this particular phrase—concerns not the eventual triumph of the Muslims but rather the coming of Judgement Day. As such, the video is—potentially blasphemously—substituting the coming of God's judgement for the earthly goal of the military triumph of the Islamic State. This is reinforced by a near-final scene in which a collection of deceased jihadi leaders, including

Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi and Osama bin Laden, are portrayed surrounded by clouds in an image which seems to resemble hagiographic iconography.

The actual narrative of the video is not complex. Four episodes set out the fictitious campaign in which Islamic State forces conquer first Washington, capturing the White House, and then proceed to Paris, where they topple the Eiffel Tower. These conquests are set out specifically in episodes three and four—the previous two present a less specific advance by imaginary Islamic State forces. A final episode then presents the world after the triumph of Islamic State—probably (although it is not precisely specified) over the whole world, centring on a dialogue between "John Stephens", an imaginary new convert in a Western country, and a fighter who travelled to Syria—presumably during the establishment of the original IS caliphate. The conquest episodes, which are stitched together largely from footage taken from films such as *Olympus Has Fallen* and *London Has Fallen*, depict the Islamic State advance as involving unrestrained violence against civilians. Of course, this violence is of course ultimately derived from the original violence presented in the original films themselves, but it is eagerly identified with. On the other hand, footage of advanced Western weaponry—particularly aircraft—is repurposed in order to represent an imaginary Islamic State air force, edited to display IS insignia.

What is most obviously interesting about this work is precisely the way in which it explicitly and literally presents what scholars such as Roy (2017) have previously attempted to deduce: namely, the jihadi "imaginary". What are the most significant features of this? As a work of imagination, its most striking and obvious characteristic is its extremely inconsistent and provisional nature. At a purely military level, the victorious violence of IS's conquering forces doesn't attempt to offer even a Hollywood level of military realism. Despite its depictions of modern military equipment, and notwithstanding the source material, the battle scenes have a dream-like (or nightmare-like) logic, which is more reminiscent of the fantasy confrontations of superhero films than war or even action movies. The utopian nature of the final caliphate is, unsurprisingly, thinly presented; but what is more striking is its close resemblance to the world of today. Mocked-up newspapers and 24-hour news stations continue to present the triumphs of IS; the glorious victors use

Facebook to communicate, just as before. Indeed, in one oddly incongruous moment, an airport departure board is used to advertise the borderless world which IS's triumph has brought into being—and yet the board itself displays "The Islamic State" as just one destination alongside others—including Washington, which we have previously learned has supposedly already been renamed after its conquest as the province of *Al-Faruq*. It is as if the prestige of Washington in particular and the international order in general—not to mention the symbolism of air travel as a representation of modern cosmopolitanism—is still needed in order to give substance and validation even to the very "Islamic State" which seeks to overturn and triumph over these things.

The imaginative limits of *And We See it Nigh* are revealing in one sense in that they demonstrate how deeply dependent and parasitical jihadism actually is on the existing structures and imaginaries of contemporary commercial media. Jihadis—at present—do not seem able to articulate any vision of a future other than a version of the present, edited to remove elements of it deemed un-Islamic. Given, however, how tentative and preliminary such forays into pure imagination are, it may be more productive to read such efforts as first drafts—indications of a media saturated generation breaking free from an ideological structure deeply sceptical of such exercises in the first place.

## Conclusion

Islamism itself is frequently argued to be, at root, a response to the encroachment of modernity on traditional Islamic societies. In the present day, jihadi-salafism, perhaps unsurprisingly, is shaped in important ways by processes of media globalisation. That Internet jihadis are actively creating culture for themselves online which seems to challenge key tenets of fundamentalist Islam should not be taken, however, to mean that it is likely to abandon its totalitarian and violent objectives— on the contrary, it seems to be precisely this worship of violence which facilitates jihadism's rebellion against tradition and embrace of postmodern practices and habits of thought. But this should not be seen as exceptional. In this, too, jihadis bear a depressing resemblance to other young, angry voices online.

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# 10

## Developing Effective and Ethical 'Secondary' Intervention Programmes to Counter Radicalisation and Polarisation

**Jonathan Birdwell**

## Introduction

How do we, as a society, respond to individuals who believe that Muslims are 'invaders' and 'rats' who need to be exterminated in order to protect the white race? How do we respond to individuals who openly express a belief that in order to be a good Muslim, it is one's duty to kill unbelievers? It may be argued that, in a liberal society, such beliefs, however abhorrent, are protected and there is little that governments can or should do so long as these individuals do not go on to commit violence. However, does this principle still hold once a certain number of their ideological fellow travellers act on these same beliefs with violence and murder? Is there a way to intervene with these individuals to counter the spread of these ideas, in a manner that is consistent with human rights considerations and that a sceptical public can support?

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Developing programmes and approaches for 'intervening' with individuals who are showing signs of support for extremist ideologies is now a core part of the policy area that has come to be referred to as 'CVE' or Countering Violent Extremism. Prior to 9/11, government efforts to counter extremism were exclusively led by police, security and intelligence services. While these efforts remain a key tool for governments, security-led approaches have been increasingly supplemented by policies and programmes that seek to address the root causes of extremism and to *intervene* in an identifiable and reversible *process of radicalisation* that can lead to terrorism, support for violent extremism and the spread of hate. In just over a decade, the field of counterterrorism was significantly transformed through an unprecedented focus on preventing terrorism and extremism through cognitive and behavioural intervention programmes. This turn towards prevention was not just driven by the changing nature of the threat and concerns over 'home-grown' terrorism. It was also consistent with broader efforts within government risk management, policing and criminology to focus on early intervention and the identification and management of risk prior to the commission of a crime (Ashworth and Zedner 2014; Innes et al. 2017).

Influenced by the field of public health, CVE interventions occur at three levels: primary, secondary and tertiary. Primary interventions focus on broad community resilience and protecting all citizens from extremist ideologies (e.g. education), 'secondary' interventions focus on interventions that target individuals or groups that may be vulnerable to radicalisation or showing early signs of support for extremist ideologies, and tertiary interventions are those with individuals who have already radicalised (Weine et al. 2017; Williams et al. 2016). Harris-Hogan et al. (2016) adopt a similar model with secondary interventions consisting of interventions 'for those who are showing signs of radicalisation, because they are engaged within an extremist social network'. At the tertiary level, with individuals who are already firmly committed to an extremist group or ideology, individual interventions are typically of two types: 'de-radicalisation' interventions, which focus on 'cognitive' radicalisation or tackling the ideologies and ideas of an extremist ideology; and 'disengagement' interventions, which address 'behavioural' radicalisation and focus instead on social and psychological to address what are

perceived as non-ideological contributing factors to radicalisation (Romaniuk 2015). While countries like Denmark, the Netherlands and Germany have typically been described as focusing on 'disengagement', programmes in the UK have been more willing to address the ideological component of the radicalisation (Romaniuk 2015; Gielen 2017). While the debate around de-radicalisation versus disengagement typically focuses on tertiary-level interventions, these same questions apply to secondary interventions.

In Europe, the most well-known CVE intervention programmes are the UK's Channel programme, Dutch 'Safety Houses', the Danish 'SSP' Model (which stands for schools, social services and police) as well as long-running de-radicalisation and disengagement programmes in Germany and Sweden. The UK's Channel programme was launched in the aftermath of the 7 July 2005 London bombings as a multi-agency model for referring and intervening with individuals who were identified as being vulnerable to or in the process of radicalisation. In 2015, following concerns over the rise of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and people seeking to travel to Syria and Iraq, the UK Government created a statutory duty for public sector staff, including teachers, to refer people suspected of radicalisation to the Channel programme as part of their safeguarding duties. This led to a dramatic increase in referrals. In 2017/2018 alone, over 7300 people were subject to a Channel referral based on concerns of vulnerability to terrorism. In Denmark, the 'SSP' Model was created in the 1970s to prevent youth crime and delinquency but was expanded to cover prevention of violent extremism with the publishing of the Danish National Action Plan in 2009 (Crone and Nasser 2018). Other countries, including the Netherlands, Germany, Australia, Canada, Norway and Sweden, among others, operate their own secondary intervention programmes.

In addition to government-run programmes, there are many NGOs delivering intervention programmes. Notable initiatives include EXIT/Fryshuset in Sweden, EXIT Germany and the Violence Prevention Network in Germany, as well as a range of NGOs who deliver programmes in partnership with governments.

These programmes are typically delivered by 'multi-agency' teams that operate at the local level with municipalities, social services and the police as key partners. These multi-agency teams undertake community

outreach with frontline workers and key constituencies, and act as local bodies to receive referrals from concerned members of the community about individuals that are showing worrying signs of radicalisation.

While the term 'intervention' is used broadly in the CVE sector, the focus of this chapter is on intervention programmes that take place at the 'secondary' level, with people who are seen to be vulnerable to extremist ideologies or are at the initial stages of commitment to extremist ideologies or groups. This is not to suggest that primary- or tertiary-level interventions do not have a role in CVE. Nor that insights from primary- or tertiary-level interventions are not relevant for the design and delivery of secondary interventions. A number of examples of useful lessons are highlighted in this chapter. The focus on secondary interventions lies in the fact that they are the most conceptually interesting and most promising in terms of actual behavioural and cognitive prevention, particularly given the needed shift away from framing primary interventions under the umbrella of CVE. Primary-level programmes are important and valuable (e.g. targeting community cohesion, economic inequality, political representation); however, experience from the UK and elsewhere has shown that tackling these issues as part of a CVE policy agenda can be counter-productive and lead to the 'securitising' of other policy and social areas (Romaniuk 2015). Tertiary programmes, on the other hand, take place after radicalisation and extremist identification have already fully occurred. These types of deradicalisation and disengagement programmes are vital, particularly in the face of current policy challenges relating returning foreign fighters and the release of hundreds of individuals, convicted of terrorism-related charges, from prisons. But before tertiary interventions are needed, there are a range of alternative approaches and opportunities to prevent the evolution of extremist ideologies. As Berger (2018) cautions, 'interventions pitched earlier in the radicalisation process risk backfiring and pushing at-risk people into further engagement with extremism, while interventions later in the process face a much steeper challenge in dislodging ideas that have already taken hold'. This chapter looks at what's possible in between.

In some ways, secondary intervention programmes are the most controversial tool within the 'CVE' toolkit. Critics argue that programmes like the UK's Channel programme equate to policing thought, turning

teachers and social workers into 'spies' or 'agents of the government' (Hall 2015). Some critics have argued that intervention programmes stigmatise Muslims (Pantazis and Pemberton 2009; Kundani 2009; Mythen et al. 2013). Low cultural or religious understanding among public sector workers could lead to a tendency for over-referring individuals to Channel, which could further diminish trust in vulnerable individuals and be counter-productive. Indeed, UK Government statistics showing that only 10% of referrals were progressed to a Channel intervention raises concerns about over-reporting, the effect of which on the individuals referred is unknown. While research (Busher et al. 2019) has begun to shine some light on the impact of the statutory duty to refer on teachers, the unintended consequences of national intervention programmes, like Channel, particularly on the young people referred to the programme, remain hidden from view.

Yet, despite these controversial aspects, the continued rise of ideologically motivated extremist and violent extremist groups across the ideological spectrum underpins the need for a greater focus on secondary intervention programmes that can be applied across extremist ideologies. While ISIS's territory has been reclaimed, the threat from ISIS's ideology—and other forms of Islamist extremist ideologies—remains present, as demonstrated most recently by the Easter attack in Sri Lanka. Moreover, extreme right groups are on the rise, spreading conspiracy theories like the 'great replacement', which have inspired attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand, as well as shootings at the Tree of Life and Poway synagogues in the US. According to the Center for International and Strategic Studies, the number of far right terrorist attacks in the US doubled between 2016 and 2017 and increased 43% in Europe during the same timeframe (Koehler 2019). These two groups inspire and motivate each other, providing further evidence for the truth and validity of their own ideologies. This cycle of 'cumulative' or 'reciprocal' radicalisation is now playing out on a global scale: an Islamist attack in Sweden motivated an extreme right terrorist in New Zealand which inspired an Islamist-inspired knife attack in the Netherlands and the attacks in Sri Lanka. 'Secondary'-level intervention programmes could be a valuable tool to prevent this cycle of radicalisation from escalating further. It is vital therefore that governments, civil society organisations and researchers have a clear idea of what works in terms of

secondary interventions, clearly understand the challenges that underpin these programmes and devise ways forward that seek to draw on their effectiveness, but in a manner that respects ethical considerations and the potentially unintended consequences of these programmes, including on public perceptions. The ability to design effective intervention programmes, which maintains the trust and faith of the public, will be critical to ensure that we can address the continued rise of ideologically motivated extremism.

This article identifies a number of challenges currently facing approaches to the establishment of effective secondary intervention programmes. This includes developing a clear, non-politicised definition of extremism rooted in social identity theory and able to apply to all forms of extremism; ongoing difficulty measuring impact; the need to recruit, train and manage a body of effective intervention providers that incorporates 'former' extremists and social workers; the need to recruit intervention providers who can address different forms of extremism, including extreme right and extreme left; the need to develop online approaches to individual interventions; and, finally, the need to ensure that countries that operate intervention programmes do so in a human rights compliant manner.

In discussion of these challenges, this chapter offers a number of suggested avenues for further exploration in terms of both the strategy and tactics that should underpin secondary intervention programmes designed to address extremist ideologies as defined by reference to social identity theory. This includes the need to develop and codify a new 'intervention science' field of practice in order to scale and professionalise secondary interventions, the need to develop and scale online interventions and the need to ensure that local secondary intervention programmes are designed in a way to ensure human rights protections for those individuals who may be identified as needing a secondary intervention.

## Defining Secondary Interventions and Redefining 'Extremism'

As noted above, secondary intervention programmes are those programmes that seek to identify and engage with individuals (or small groups) who are in the early stages of showing support for extremist ide-

ologies. Secondary interventions can thus take many forms: from online social media campaigns that present counternarratives or alternative narratives to those engaging with extremist ideas, to education interventions, to one-to-one mentoring programmes. As the UK notes with regard to Channel: 'the type of support available is wide-ranging, and can include help with education or career advice, dealing with mental or emotional health issues, and theological or ideological mentoring'.[1] In the literature and programming, 'secondary'-level interventions are often distinguished by whether they focus on disengagement and behaviours, or whether they focus on cognitive interventions that seek to address the ideology.

While the majority of government-run programmes have focused on Islamist extremism, there are a number of NGO programmes that have developed significant expertise on extreme right groups and ideologies. The UK Channel programme and other government-led programmes developed in the 2000s were heavily focused on Islamist radicalisation; however, there have been notable increases in extreme right referrals. The latest figures from the Channel programme showed a 30% increase in the number of Channel referrals for the extreme right. For the first time in the programme's ten-year history, the proportion of people who received support on Channel was roughly equivalent between Islamist and extreme right: Of 394 individuals who received support from Channel, 179 were related to concerns of Islamist extremism, and 174 were related to concerns of far right extremism.[2] Germany in particular has significant experience with extreme right intervention programmes. According to a recent policy briefing published by International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), Koehler (2019) argues that Germany has almost three decades of experience with deradicalisation and disengagement programmes for far right extremists. In 2014, one study found 18 deradicalisation and disengagement programmes for far right in Germany, 12 of which were run by the government.[3]

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[1] https://homeofficemedia.blog.gov.uk/2018/12/13/factsheet-prevent-and-channel-statistics-2017-2018/.

[2] https://homeofficemedia.blog.gov.uk/2018/12/13/factsheet-prevent-and-channel-statistics-2017-2018/.

[3] Koehler citing Glaser, M., Hohnstein, S., and Greuel, F., 'Ausstiegshilfen in Deutschland. Ein vergleicherender Uberblick uber Akteure und Voregensweisen,' in Hilfe zum Ausstieg? Ansatze un Erfahrungen professioneller Angebote zum Ausstieg aus rechtsextreme Szenen, E. Peter Rieker (Weinheim: Beltz Juventa, 2014): 45–76.

However, despite a few examples, Koehler and others have recently argued that government and non-governmental secondary-level intervention programmes need to be expanded to include all forms of violent extremism.

This requires—in part—renewed attention to the definition of extremism. Across government policy documents, and the academic literature, there are a plethora of definitions of 'extremism' and 'radicalisation'— influenced on the one hand by academic debates and on the other hand by political considerations. For example, in the UK, extremism has been defined as 'vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs'. The focus on 'British values' has been one of the biggest criticisms of the UK Government's approach in the past five years, with many teachers, for example, arguing that they are uncomfortable with this aspect of the government's definition (Busher et al. 2019). Most of these definitions were designed during the era in which Islamist extremism was the dominant—if not sole— focus of governments and NGOs designing programmes. As a result, these definitions can be political and controversial, such as the UK's British values focus, or not based on empirical data relating to phenomena like the rise of the extreme right wing. Rather than these politicised and out-dated definitions of extremism, it's important that governments and practitioners unite on a definition of extremism that is able to accommodate different ideologies and is truer to the phenomena we face at present and likely into the future.

Adopting a definition of extremism based on social identity theory, which focuses on 'in-group' and 'out-group' hostilities and mind-sets, provides a more robust basis for describing the challenge society faces from both Islamist extremists and ethno-nationalist extremists. Recently, J.M. Berger has brought some much needed clarity to the definition of extremism. Drawing on social identity theory, Berger offers the following definition: 'Extremism refers to the belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group.' This definitional framing is also similar to the definition used by the organisation I work for, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. As outlined on our website: 'Extremism is the advocacy of a system of belief

that posits the superiority and dominance of one "in-group" over all "out-groups", propagating a dehumanising "othering" mind-set that is anti-thetical to the universal application of Human Rights. Extremist groups advocate, through explicit and more subtle means, a systemic change in society that reflects their world view.'

A definition of extremism rooted in social identity theory not only provides a less controversial and more solid conceptual footing, it can also help to classify and design more targeted secondary intervention programmes in addition to indicators for measuring success. For example, as Berger notes, having a strong in-group identification, negative conceptions of the out-group and a sense of impending crisis are features of the initial stages of radicalisation, but 'the most critical stage in the process is the consideration of an extremist ideology'. It is therefore important, Berger concludes, to target secondary interventions at this stage in the process, as intervening too early could have the unintended consequence of pushing individuals further into radicalisation. A social identity theory of extremism can also present the basis for development of validated indicators for measuring impact rooted in 'in-group' and 'out-group' attitudes as well as perception of crisis and whether it is perceived as linked to the existence or actions of an out-group. In the next section, the evidence of the impact of secondary intervention programmes is outlined. In particular, attention has been paid to those programmes that are consistent with a social identity conception of extremism.

## What Works in Terms of Secondary Interventions to Counter Radicalisation and Polarisation?

What do we know about the effectiveness of secondary interventions to prevent and counter extremism? Much has been written about the inherent challenges in evaluating de-radicalisation and disengagement intervention programmes (Horgan and Braddock 2010). In a forthcoming report from Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), based on interviews with 19 far right intervention providers, it was revealed that most intervention providers assessed the impact based on 'gut' feeling or instinct.

This is particularly due to the fact that 'secondary' and 'tertiary' interventions need to be highly personalised and designed to the specific circumstances for the person in question. An indicator of success for one person might not be considered relevant for another. In this manner, the assessment of the clinician is elevated in the absence of diagnostic tools that can reliably predict and measure (Skeem and Monahan 2011). Part of the difficulty in assessing intervention programmes, of course, lies in the inherent difficulty of proving a counterfactual (Hughes 1998; Innes et al. 2017). This logic fundamentally applies to all forms of prevention-related activities but is particularly difficult to assess in the context of countering violent extremism at an individual level due to the small sample sizes. Due to small sample sizes and ethical challenges, it is not possible to assess intervention programmes using a randomised control trial.

Governments and practitioners attest to the success of intervention programmes, but there is a lack of publicly available and independently verifiable evidence of the effectiveness of government-run secondary intervention programmes. The UK Government has claimed that the Channel programme prevented hundreds of individuals from travelling abroad to join ISIS. Security Minister Ben Wallace has claimed that 'over 500 people entered the Channel programme via Prevent have gone from posing a threat of violent extremism to no longer being of concern'.[4] According to Home Office statistics published in December 2018, over 1200 people were diverted from extremism through the Channel programme.[5] The 'Aarhus Model' in Denmark has been cited as contributing to a decline in the number of people travelling to Syria during the height of ISIS.[6] However, due to its sensitivity, government data is tightly guarded and is not subject to independent academic review. NGO-run programmes may offer a better potential for being able to assess the effectiveness of secondary interventions but are similarly very careful and restricted in terms of data sharing.

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[4] Hamilton, Fiona, 'Most programme to stop radicalisation are failing', The Times, 6 June 2018: https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/most-programmes-to-stop-radicalisation-are-failing-0bwh9pbtd.

[5] Warrell, Helen, 'Inside Prevent, the UK's controversial anti-terrorism programme', The Financial Times, 24 January 2019.

[6] https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/07/15/485900076/how-a-danish-town-helped-young-muslims-turn-away-from-isis.

There is, however, some evidence from programmes which can be applied to interventions that take place at the secondary level. Insights from these programmes point to a number of potential risk and protective factors that can be targeted by well-designed intervention programmes. In a comprehensive review of evaluation studies of CVE programmes, Gielen (2017) identified 23 evaluations that focused on 'increasing resilience', a sub-set of which included 'secondary'-level interventions with individuals and groups, and 15 studies that looked at assessing the effectiveness of 'tertiary' intervention programmes with individuals. Among the programmes assessed was a mentoring programme in the UK (Spalek and Davies 2012), a resilience training in the Netherlands (Feddes et al. 2015) and education interventions that utilise value complexity theory (Liht and Savage 2013) and theories of moral disengagement (Aly et al. 2014). Lub (2013) also provides a review of evidence on counter-radicalisation and counter-polarisation interventions. These programmes highlight a number of different approaches that can apply to 'secondary'-level interventions targeting extremist ideologies as identified above.

With a focus on interventions that aim to counter-radicalisation and counter-polarisation, Lub (2013) identifies four types of secondary intervention. *Social ecological interventions* seek to 'prevent or counter extremist behaviour of young people by offering support within their social ecological context' and are underpinned by social bonding theory emphasising the importance of positive attachments. The second type, *peer mediation* interventions, is also based on social bond theory but emphasises peer-to-peer interventions and mentoring. *Intergroup contact* interventions are programmes 'designed to increase tolerance between young people of different ethnic origins, religions and sub-cultures', based on the contact theory hypothesis which states that prejudice decreases with contact between different groups. The fourth type of intervention focuses on *self-esteem enhancement*, which Lasco describes as 'empowering supposed mentally vulnerable youths, perceived as susceptible to radicalism'. These programmes have their theoretical underpinning in social identity theory and seek to build positive self-esteem for young people dealing with identity issues.

Interestingly, Lub ([2013](#)) finds a mixed evidence base on the effectiveness of these different approaches. Social ecological approaches appear effective at reducing 'extremist' behaviour, but that there is less evidence of their cognitive impact on ideological change. Peer mediation models show some positive results, but it's not possible to disambiguate whether the impact is more reflective of mentoring programmes overall or the youth, peer component. Intergroup mediation has shown some positive indications of reducing prejudice, but effect sizes are small and there is a lack of long-term evidence. And finally, the basis for self-esteem enhancement is weak, and some studies even suggest that 'boosting levels of self-confidence can even contribute to greater in-group bias'.

Other evaluations have highlighted approaches that could underpin successful 'secondary'-level interventions. These include the use of value complexity theory, the application of moral disengagement theory, approaches to increase empathy and perspective-taking as well as approaches that focus on social capital theory, with an emphasis on bonding, bridging and linking capital.

Liht and Savage ([2013](#)) assess the impact of an intervention programme in the UK that sought to apply value complexity theory to the prevention of extremist ideologies. According to this theory, conflict can arise when people have fundamental disagreements about which values are more important (e.g. tradition versus equality versus freedom). Inevitably, faced with competing values and decisions, humans have to prioritise or rank values in a hierarchy. This ranking of values can lead to social conflict when there are disputes about the priority or importance of different values. The ability to recognise that humans prioritise certain values over others, and that other people may have different value hierarchies, is related to having high 'integrative' complexity. Extremist ideologies, on the other hand, are characterised by low integrative complexity. Value complexity theory argues that some people are uncomfortable with the complexity of human values and the need to make trade-offs and thus may be attracted to simplistic 'black and white' thinking which elevates one value above all others. This logic is consistent with a social identity theory of extremism: for example, that one value—often the protection and enhancement of an in-group—is elevated against all other out-groups that are perceived as threating. The value of this approach is

summarised by Liht and Savage as follows: 'Rather than focusing on the content of ideology or beliefs particular to a community, the focus is on the structure of thinking—a cognitive construct that is precise and measureable, while being applicable to a range of extremisms or inter-group conflicts'. Liht and Savage's evaluation found that the programme under evaluation increased young people's integrative complexity scores, which were in turn tied to shifts towards indicators of openness. While it is beyond the remit of this chapter to analyse and present the different aspects of programme design which were driving greater appreciation of value pluralism, it suffices to highlight that further work is needed in designing secondary intervention programmes with value complexity theory in mind.

Moral disengagement theory also offers an interesting conceptual basis for the development of secondary intervention programmes. In their evaluation of Australia's Beyond Bali Education Resource, Aly et al. (2014) explore the application of moral disengagement theory to preventing violent extremism as part of an educational programme. While the programme is an example of a 'primary'-level intervention, they argue that moral disengagement can act as a risk factor for individuals that can be tied to increased potential for violence. Moral disengagement theory posits that in order to justify acts of violence, people undergo a cognitive process that enables them to justify the violence. 'Mechanisms of disengagement allow individuals to cognitively reconstruct the moral value of violence, putting aside self-sanctions, so that acts of violence can be committed'. Mechanisms of disengagement can include dehumanising members of an 'out-group', justifying the extreme or violence actions on the basis of justice in the face of crisis—what Berger (2018) refers to as 'crisis narratives'—diminishing personal agency and disregarding the negative consequences of violence. As Berger notes, 'the most vulnerable points in this process are the extremist arguments connected to crisis—the linkage of an out-group's intrinsic identity to a crisis afflicting the in-group, the link between extremist in-group and a solution for the crisis, and the very existence of a crisis in the first place'. This suggests that a useful approach to measuring individual resilience in the context of secondary interventions could include psychological propensity for moral disengagement, and the existence and strength of self-regulatory

mechanisms to prevent it. And that secondary interventions that sought to address moral disengagement should focus on the four factors identified above: humanising 'out-groups', reasoning to undermine the link between the perceived crisis and the extremist solution to the crisis, building personal agency and highlighting the negative consequences of violent action.

In an evaluation of a 'resilience-building' programme called Diamant in the Netherlands, Feddes et al. (2015) explore the impact of building self-esteem, agency, empathy and perspective-taking in order to build resilience to violent extremism. Empathy and perspective-taking in particular, loosely defined here as the ability to put oneself in another's shoes and to consider the experiences and behaviour of other people, have been tied to reductions in prejudice, stereotyping and aggressive behaviour (Pettigrew and Tropp 2008; cf. Feddes et al. 2015). Their evaluation found that empathy in particular was tied to less support for ideology-based violence, but interestingly that perspective-taking was tied to more positive attitudes towards ideology-based violence. The authors cite a study based on bias and perceptions between Israelis and Palestinians, which showed that for Israelis, perspective-taking helped to increase empathy for Palestinians; however, the same thing was not true for Palestinians. Rather, what was more important for Palestinians was 'perspective-giving' or allowing them to vent and be heard. These findings are interesting and suggest avenues for secondary interventions in an age of reciprocal radicalisation, focus on building empathy but consider different approaches to perspective-taking or perspective-giving depending on the nature of the ideology countered.

Taken together, these evaluations and programmes begin to suggest a range of indicators that could be used to measure the impact of secondary intervention programmes to address a social identity-based understanding of extremism. This includes indicators to measure risk or vulnerability to potential radicalisation, including indicators of in-group identification and perceptions of status, out-group negative perceptions and hostility, perception of crisis facing 'in-group', low tolerance for value complexity and cognitive receptiveness to moral disengagement. On the other hand, protective indicators could include empathy and self-esteem, high integrative complexity and acceptance with value pluralism as well

as indicators of social capital, including bonding, bridging and linking capital. Tools like Mosalenko and McCauley's Activism and Radicalism Intention Scale (2009) can also help assess an individual's readiness to take part in legal/non-violent activism versus illegal violent political action.

While improvements in the field of measurement and evaluation have been noted as part of a second 'wave' of CVE policy (Romaniuk 2015), all governments and practitioners need to strive to improve measurement and evaluation of secondary intervention initiatives. The indicators presented above provide potential avenues for developing ideologically agnostic proxy measures to measure openness to extremist ideologies, rooted in established social theories and based on a social identity theory definition of extremism.

## Who Undertakes Intervention Work?

The types of practitioners who undertake secondary intervention work can vary from former extremists, to social workers, to psychologists and mental health specialists.

Some intervention providers are well-known figures, with public profiles on social media. But many intervention providers operate in obscurity. There has been no research to date to shine a light on the make-up of the growing body of individuals who undertake secondary intervention work, in terms of their background, expertise, methods or effectiveness.

There has been some research looking at the effectiveness of 'former' extremists undertaking CVE work (Tapley and Clubb 2019); however, there are no detailed assessments of the effectiveness of 'formers' in delivering interventions. Moreover, as noted by Tapley and Clubb, one person who happens to be a 'former' extremist may be particularly effective at engaging people and delivering interventions. This of course does not translate to an assumption that former extremists are inevitably well qualified to undertake secondary interventions.

ISD's research on online interventions with individuals expressing support for extremist ideologies on Facebook revealed some interesting differences in effectiveness between formers, survivors and social workers

(Davey et al. 2018). While professional social workers were able to deliver more interventions, survivors were more likely to have a sustained conversation, and formers were most likely to receive an initial response. However, the number of intervention providers on the programme was limited to a dozen, and online interventions are far less developed than secondary intervention programmes that have worked with thousands of people across Europe.

There is also little known about the current gaps in skills, abilities and relevance of intervention providers. ISIS led to an unprecedented rise in female supporters. With the return of women and children from ISIS, there will be increasing need for female intervention providers who can work with these groups. Forthcoming research from ISD in Summer 2019 looks at the specific considerations and challenges of female radicalisation and interventions and provides guidance to practitioners. However, it remains unclear how big of a gap this presents to prevent programmes in countries like the UK, France or the Netherlands.

There have also been increases in extreme right-wing violence, but it's not clear if secondary intervention programmes—like Channel in the UK—have the expertise among intervention providers to deal with the new wave of extreme right wing. The already limited number of intervention providers who specialise in extreme right tends to be of a different era of white supremacism. The new wave of white supremacist groups now combines an intricate and detailed knowledge of online sub-cultures and in-jokes. It is therefore vital that intervention providers working with individuals involved in the latest wave of the extreme right are aware of and able to converse on these topics.

One potential avenue for increasing the base of intervention providers is to develop stronger links with pedagogy and schools of social work, mental health and psychology. Experience in the UK with the statutory duty suggests that it has been challenging to engage with traditional social workers in an area of work that is often police-led and imposed by the national government. Rather than a top-down diktat from counterterrorism-focused national government departments, a better approach would be to encourage and enable practitioners to develop a new practice area for the fields of social work and psychology that deals with ideologically motivated anti-social behaviours and mind-sets based on a social identity theory of extremism.

Given the rise of polarisation and extremist ideologies from Islamist to extreme right and extreme left, the field of secondary interventions will likely continue to grow. An effective and scientifically based field of practice needs to be developed and increasingly offered in the fields of social work and psychology. The field of practice should combine knowledge of ideological and extremist trends (experts), first-hand knowledge of the process of adopting an extremist mind-set (formers), knowledge and practices about engaging with vulnerable individuals who may be suffering from abuse, family issues or mental health problems (social work methods and psychologists). In the words of Koehler quoted in a forthcoming ISD report on interventions: 'intervention work is a specialisation in itself. We need specific BA, MA, PhD-level course to give people a chance to study what researchers have accumulated over decades and make practical experiences'.

## Are Online Secondary Interventions Possible?

The rise of social media and communications technologies, a boon for extremists, also presents opportunities for engaging with individuals who are expressing support for extremist ideologies. There is increasingly a need for secondary intervention programmes to utilise online outreach.

People may be more likely to express extremist viewpoints online, compared to offline, making them easier to identify. There is a vocal and identifiable group of people who express support for extremist ideologies or specific extremist groups on public social media platforms. In ISD's *Counter Conversation* programme, we identified over 1000 people who were using violent, dehumanising and extremist language on public social media platforms, supporters of both Islamist and extreme right ideologies. Utilising public information of their profiles, ISD's intervention providers were able to assess these individuals utilising a risk framework from the UK's Prevent programme and social work as showing sufficient signs of radicalisation to merit an attempt at a one-to-one intervention.

Being able to identify individuals who are showing signs of radicalisation presents an opportunity for engagement.

Research has shown that, in order to be effective, counternarrative campaigns need to be paired with online outreach and willingness to engage in conversations. This approach mirrors the strategy and recruitment tactics of extremist groups: initial identification through engagement with propaganda and then one-to-one conversations in private chat forums. As Berger notes: 'much of ISIS's success on social media comes from large volumes of fast-paced activity, and subsequent engagement in the form of conversations about the content that ISIS seeks to promote'. Berger noted in 2016 that there are very few efforts that seek to facilitate consistent engagement in conversation. However, based on interviews with extreme right-wing intervention providers undertaken by ISD, it appears that many intervention providers do engage in consistent conversation. Of course, a conversational therapeutic approach is at the core of offline secondary interventions. And there were many examples from the research, particularly from the US, of individual activists (often formers themselves) undertaking online conversational-based interventions on a voluntary basis. ISD works with many of these individuals and seeks to support them through the Against Violent Extremism network of former extremists and survivors of extremist attacks. Indeed, the research found that many intervention providers were integrating online engagement into their work but that it was often unstructured and informal.

ISD's 'counter conversations' work sought to test whether online interventions could be delivered. The programme included former extremists, survivors of extremist attacks and social workers—trained in secondary intervention methods—reaching out via Facebook Messenger to individuals identified as potentially supportive of extremist groups. Of the approximately 600 individuals who were contacted as part of the programme, one in five responded to the outreach, two-thirds of those who responded engaged in a sustained conversation, and one in ten of those showed some signs of regret over the comments they made or expressed willingness to continue the conversation. While these results are modestly encouraging, there were also indications within the programme of being able to identify and spread best practices with respect to online outreach and engagement. One intervention provider, who was the survivor of a terrorist attack, was able to achieve a 50% response rate and an 80% engagement rate. The evalua-

tion also found that social workers were most effective in terms of delivering the most interventions, underscoring the potential to professionalise secondary intervention work as noted above.

A new body of practice on ideologically motivated interventions, as called for above, should also include online interventions at the heart of their focus. The delivery of secondary interventions utilising new forms of technology has changed rapidly in recent years. Text-based programmes, such as Crisis Text Line in the US, have shown how technologies can be leveraged to deliver crisis intervention and mental health support utilising SMS texts. Williams et al. (2016) also point to the potential for text-based referral services to enable people who have concerns that friends may be radicalising but who are otherwise hesitant to raise these concerns with police or CVE intervention programmes. The use of video or Skype to undertake secondary interventions should also be explored. A number of far-right intervention providers who worked online noted that online was beneficial not only because it enabled identification but also because it provided a degree of anonymity, was cost-effective and enabled interventions that would otherwise have been logistically unfeasible due to physical location.

There will continue to be a strong focus from policymakers and the social media companies on removing terrorist and extremist content from platforms. The rise of ISIS led to increasing pressure on the social media companies to develop technology and approaches to remove illegal terrorist content from their platforms. More recently, following the attack in Christchurch, Facebook pledged to ban all white supremacists and white nationalists from their platform. While some form of content removal/platform ban is desirable from a legal standpoint, and efficacious in terms of disrupting extremist groups (Berger 2016), it is impossible to ban all expressions of extremism without undermining free speech principles. Moreover, simply banning or removing people from social platforms treats the symptom, and does nothing to address or engage with the individuals expressing these views.

However, removing or banning someone from some social media platforms could undermine the potential for engagement in potentially effective outreach from trained practitioners. Banning or removing someone on Facebook—a platform that is amenable to online outreach—may

send them to alternative platforms like Telegram or Discord, where discussions are more extreme and the platforms are less amenable to interventions. Policymakers and social media companies need to consider the potential unintended consequences of platform displacement as a result of decisions taken by social media decisions regarding the terms and conditions of their platforms.

Governments and NGOs need to make a more concerted effort to support the extension of secondary intervention work in the online space. This may be more difficult to do in some countries. For example, in the UK, the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA) legislation raises a number of issues with implementing an online intervention programme, including what constitutes 'surveillance' online and restrictions in the outreach that can be undertaken (e.g. requiring intervention providers to declare themselves as a government intervention provider in the initial outreach message).

# Establishing an Effective System for Secondary Intervention Programmes: Global Best Practice

According to Romaniuk (2015), 'if CVE has been the most significant development within counterterrorism in the last decade, the emergence and spread of micro-level counselling and mentoring programs has been the signature development within the last few years'.

This is reflected across Europe, with the UK Channel programme, Dutch Safety Houses, the Danish Model as well as EXIT Sweden and the Violence Prevention Network and EXIT in Germany. Other local programmes operate across Europe, including in Belgium (in cities like Brussels and Vilvoorde) and the CAPRI centre in Bordeaux. In North America, secondary intervention programmes operate in Canada, and while there is no formal secondary intervention programme in the US, some intervention work does take place (Davey et al. 2019) informally and on a voluntary basis. Outside of the 'West', there have been de-radicalisation and disengagement intervention programmes in countries like Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia (El Said 2012).

ISD also works with municipalities, many of whom operate secondary intervention programmes. Indeed, the design and establishment of a secondary intervention programme inevitably involves municipal and local-level actors, as seen in 'multi-agency' models across Europe. However, certain conditions need to be in place for a secondary intervention programme to be able to operate ethically, effectively and in proportion to the risk facing the community in question.

Firstly, the country and city in which a secondary intervention programme is taking place must be compliant with human rights protections against unlawful detention and torture. The operation of a secondary intervention programme inevitably involves the identification of individuals who are potentially in the early stages of showing signs of radicalisation. Without sufficient protections, the information of such individuals could be passed to overzealous police and security services, potentially putting individuals at risk of detention and torture. Robust confidentiality and information protocols are vital. Laws need to be developed to determine risk and responsibility of local practitioners. At the same time, effective relations with the police and security services are vital to ensure appropriate protocols for information-sharing to ensure that secondary interventions are not being undertaken with individuals who are an imminent danger.

In addition to legal protections, successful secondary intervention programmes need to be supported by a group of practitioners who have the skills and knowledge to be able to work with individuals who may be demonstrating curiosity or support for an exclusionary, extremist ideology. This principle is at the heart of the multi-agency approaches that currently operate in the field of secondary interventions. As noted above, not much is publicly known about the skills and approaches of intervention providers in preventing violent extremism, aside from a handful of mainly qualitative studies. However, practitioner networks, such as Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) and ISD's Strong Cities Network, can help to directly connect intervention providers in order to share tips and techniques for engaging and working with someone potentially vulnerable to extremism while protecting the sensitivity of data in this field.

Finally, it is critical that a trusting relationship exists between the local multi-stakeholder team that leads on assessing and delivering secondary interventions and the members of the public who may have concerns about individuals showing signs of radicalisation. Some research has

looked at the willingness and hesitancy of individuals to raise concerns of radicalisation (Williams et al. 2016; Thomas et al. 2017). In Williams et al., it is argued that friends are more likely than frontline practitioners to observe concerns about radicalisation, but can be hesitant to raise concerns. Their research suggests the use of text-based referral as a means of mitigating this hesitancy. But it also underlines one of the key roles of a local multi-stakeholder team in engaging with members of the community to raise awareness and demystify concerns.

As a case study for the establishment of the infrastructure to facilitate secondary interventions, for the past three years, ISD has been working in Lebanon and Jordan to help pilot the creation of local multi-stakeholder teams—coordinated by municipalities—who can work on preventing violent extremism in their communities. The aim of the programme was to transfer insights from the Danish local SSP Model and adapt them to Lebanon and Jordan. With support from both national governments and mayors, there are now 6 'Community Prevention Networks' operating in 6 municipalities across Lebanon and Jordan, bringing together over 95 local practitioners, including municipal representatives, religious leaders, teachers and psycho-social intervention providers. To date, these 'Community Prevention Networks' have focused on undertaking 'primary' prevention initiatives that engage with key groups on wider issues or root causes of violence and extremism in their community. The networks do not include police, because of a lack of training of local police on community policing and preventative measures, as well as an effort to enable trust building with the community. While some NGO-operated secondary intervention programmes exist in Lebanon, there have also historically been concerns about preventative detention and use of torture in Lebanon and Jordan. This makes the establishment of a secondary intervention programme, such as operates in the UK, the Netherlands or Denmark, based on a multi-agency model, extremely risky as information about individuals potentially vulnerable to radicalisation could be passed to police or the security services.

This does not mean that secondary interventions are not possible in countries like Lebanon and Jordan. But they do need to be approached carefully to mitigate concerns. One approach, for example, which could be pursued in the future, would be to skill up members of Community Prevention

Networks (particularly those who may come into contact with vulnerable individuals or groups) to be able to undertake secondary interventions informally. This could include building protective factors for disengagement, such as diversionary activities, as well as easy-to-use diagnostic assessment tools and guidance for cognitive engagement based on theories of value complexity, moral disengagement, social capital theory and building empathy.

## Conclusion

There are no indications that ideologically motivated violent extremism and terrorism will subside in the near future. The ISIS ideology continues to inspire despite intensive and successful efforts to tackle them militarily and on social media. With a string of attacks in 2019, including in Christchurch, extreme right terrorism will likely continue to rise spurred on by conspiracy theories like the 'great replacement'. Moreover, these two extremisms play off of each other, on a global scale.

This threat assessment underlines the need to develop intervention programmes that seek to identify individuals showing early signs of support for extremist groups and intervene to reverse their progression. Referred to as secondary interventions in the field of public health, there are now a range of both government- and NGO-run programmes delivering these interventions, but little in the way of publicly available evidence of impact. This makes it hard to make the case for the importance of these interventions in the face of concerns and criticism that they represent a twenty-first-century form of thought police.

In order to confront these challenges, we need a broadly recognised definition of extremism that is rooted in social identity. Social identity theory-based definition of extremism can not only potentially gain more support from a sceptical public but also suggests a number of interesting tactical approaches for trialling secondary interventions.

This chapter highlighted a few of these approaches, including building empathy and self-esteem, value complexity theory and resilience against moral disengagement. Ultimately though, we need to bring the practice of 'secondary' CVE interventions out of the shadows and into universities and study programmes as part of a new 'intervention science'. This

new body of practice would combine the expertise and insights from across formers, religious leaders, ideology experts, social workers and mental health specialists and help to formalise both required knowledge and tactical approaches for undertaking interventions. Mainstreaming and professionalising interventions in this manner can also help to address gaps in relevant skills and profiles among current intervention providers to be able to deal with growing caseloads among women and the extreme right in particular.

Additionally, the world of interventions needs to be brought online—utilising new technologies—in a much bigger and more ambitious way. Intervention providers are already increasingly incorporating social media into their work, but often informally and in an ad hoc manner. Online interventions offer a number of benefits for facilitating counter-radicalisation outreach, but more work is needed to understand what's effective, how online interventions can be linked to offline programmes and in what way the impact of regulatory changes on the social media platforms can affect our ability to undertake online intervention.

Last but not least, it is vital that secondary intervention programmes are only set up in the right context. This includes legal protections against human rights abuses, as well as a certain level of skills, knowledge and abilities among local stakeholders who may undertake such interventions. Attempts to set up secondary intervention programmes in countries with poor human rights records must be extremely careful. In these contexts, though, it may be possible to build local capacity to deliver informal interventions that draw on best practice but do not involve information-sharing structures.

If done effectively, secondary intervention programmes may be our best hope to confront the rise of polarisation, division and extremism.

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# 11

# Researching the Radical Right: Making Use of the Digital Space and Its Challenges

**Pelham Carter and Katherine Kondor**

## Introduction

Since the turn of the century, there has been a resurgence of radical right movements throughout the UK, Europe and most of the Western world. This can be seen through street-level organisations like the Generation Identity movement across Europe and National Action in the UK. Groups like the Hungarian Defence Movement (Magyar Önvédelmi Mozgalom; MÖM) and the Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement (Hatvannégy Vármegye Ifjúsági Mozgalom; HVIM) in Hungary, Pegida (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident) in Germany and countless other radical right protest movements across Europe all exemplify

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this shift back in thought. While many would argue that some groups like the English Defence League (EDL) have declined in physical support at demonstrations and events (Morrow and Meadowcroft 2018), most groups still have a presence on the internet, often through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (though recent restrictions by some platforms are gradually impacting on this).

The digital world is an online space that provides both benefits and challenges. Whilst the online world can be a space of increased socialisation (Freberg et al. 2010; Weidman et al. 2012) and helpful disclosure (Suler 2004) and even a source of practical information (Attard and Coulson 2012), it has also provided a further platform for extremism and online-based aggression (Cheng et al. 2017). With 90% of UK homes now connected to the internet and more than two-thirds of adults agreeing they have the means to access it at any time (Prescott 2017), connecting and interacting with people with shared interests, both nationally and globally, has never been easier. Many protest movements are active online, using the digital space for recruitment, to disseminate their ideas, mobilise supporters and build solidarity between supporters. This online presence can create a feeling of a safe space for individuals looking to promote their ideologies, which is especially seen in the radical right organisations. Such online spaces can act as an echo chamber which reinforces, distributes and popularises extremist content (Awan 2017), with some social media platforms such as Twitter being well placed to create intense social clusters that strengthen such echo chamber effects (Kotenko 2013). Such digital spaces offer new opportunities for radical right organisations to recruit members and some organisation, such as the EDL have been found to often be more active online than they are on the streets (Bartlett and Littler 2011).

This affords new opportunities for researchers to both research this expansion into the online space by the offline radical right using the internet to extend traditional forms of research (accessing hard to reach populations) and to research unique properties and behaviours related to these new online radical presences. As the radical right and other extremists have moved into online spaces and platforms such as Twitter, Gab, Facebook, YouTube and Telegram, there has also arguably been a change in the behaviour and language we can observe. Some of these platforms offer a unique

insight into the radical right, the associated online communities and the ways in which they utilise these platforms. The increased use of online digital spaces in comparison to traditional face-to-face settings by radical right organisation like the EDL, for example, highlights the need to research their online specific nature rather than simply just extending offline research methods to them.

In some areas there are clear extensions on offline/real-world behaviour and interactions into this space that are either largely analogous or can be researched using largely traditional research methods that have been adapted for the online space—for example, the use of Skype, WhatsApp or other online messaging applications to interview hard-to-reach participants. Whilst online based this is simply an extension of a traditional interview. In some cases online research can be as simple as using the online space and these new digital platforms as an additional form of recruitment making larger data collection easier and more accessible, not necessarily intrinsically different from the offline real-world research method counterparts. In these cases, the online research is essentially allowing recruitment of difficult-to-access individuals.

There are however unique opportunities for online research, utilising a range of different methods that do not have readily available offline equivalents. For example, more complex linguistic methods allow the collection of not only much larger data sets but also data that occurs online in natural and unstructured settings. Therefore, when considering how we research the radical right, we need to account for how we can extend and use traditional methods as well as how we can adapt and use these new tools and spaces to further explore the radical right. There is also the hybridisation of traditional techniques with the advantages of these newer approaches, such as the relatively recent increase in popularity of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis (CADA) (Baker et al. 2008; Taylor 2013), which combines the qualitative depth and detail of a traditional discourse analysis with objective rigour of corpus collection, computational topic modelling and vast data set sizes (see below).

These new methodologies do raise a range of challenges, and the ease of access and benefits of the sample sizes suddenly available when using such methods can also come with very specific practical and ethical issues. Whilst these online places might be considered public by some, and of

sufficient interest/worth to investigate, issues of privacy and consent still prevail. The ethical water is further muddied by sometimes vast differences between disciplines when conducting research in these areas, with psychology and socio-linguistics, for example, offering very different interpretations and expectations around privacy.

In this chapter, we will present:

- The extension of traditional offline research methods into online research of the radical right
- New and unique opportunities for online research such as Corpus Linguistics, Sentiment Analysis, Predicative/Computational approach and Big Data
- Hybridisation of traditional and new online research methods such as Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis
- The ethical issues connected to such new methodologies and online spaces when researching the radical right and interdisciplinary conflict when approaching such research

# Extension of Traditional Research Practices to the Online

Both traditional qualitative and quantitative research methods can be extended relatively easily to online and digital spaces when considering radical right research. In these instances, we can consider these methods to be facilitated by the online to research the radical right rather than being used specifically to research online radical behaviour or unique aspects of these digital spaces that cannot be researched by other methods.

## Qualitative Approaches

The digital space can offer many opportunities to conduct research on hard-to-reach populations. Internet-mediated research (IMR) has been used for more than twenty years for several types of qualitative and quantitative analyses. The first researchers to use the internet for research

purposes in the 1990s used earlier technologies such as email and discussion groups (Hewson 2014a). The internet was primarily used to conduct interviews and focus groups (Murray and Sixsmith 1998), as well as for observational analysis like that of Howard Rheingold, who in 1993 produced his seminal work on the Virtual Community, which is still considered an influential piece of internet research focusing on communities (Dutton 2013). Social media now gives an opportunity for all internet users to have their voice heard, to share nearly any form of content and to easily network and communicate with peers. Also, with the acknowledged omnipresent nature of mobile telephones and tablets, what was once only retrievable through the use of a modem became constantly accessible to everyone with a portable device; social media became ubiquitous, leading to a sense of attachment from many users. "What started off as a source of knowledge turned people into gadget freaks, attention seeking, financial and societal deficits" (Sundaram 2017: 23).

The internet can be a very effective and efficient way to disseminate information. Indeed, most information for organised demonstrations and events can be found online; for example, the EDL are, at the time of writing, advertising through Facebook for an upcoming event in Wellington, UK, in March 2019 (EDL 2019a). Social movements and political organisations, such as nationalist and radical right organisations, now also use the internet in similar ways. Indeed, groups like the EDL and Stormfront have websites, stating information like their goals, traditions, contact information and events (EDL 2019b; Stormfront 2018). Many groups are also present on social media such as Facebook and Twitter (or their more radical counterparts, VKontakte and Gab), either as an official page run by the group itself or as a 'fan' page run by supporters (Hall 2018). Some mainstream platforms have taken steps against some groups and individuals, banning or curtailing their presence though this does not completely eliminate the associated presence of supporters or the presence of such individuals on alternative platforms. This can lead to virtual connections between internet users and aids in growing a community, organisation or social movement across vast geographical locations. While organisation members encourage each other in their ideologies, philosophies and strategies, there is also growing international cooperation (Mulhall et al. 2017). For example, Generation Identity used

a crowdfunding site to raise funds for their 'Defend Europe' project, where they rented a boat and patrolled the Mediterranean Sea in a partial bid to send migrants back to Africa (Walsh 2017) and interfere with NGOs. This project was ultimately unsuccessful in its goals; however, the project raised over £175,000, which was predominantly funded by radical right activists from the US (Hope not Hate 2019).

Hence, the internet provides a host of readily available and searchable content for analysis. The digital space can be useful for many diverse methodologies; while it can be used for qualitative interviews and focus groups, the internet can also be used for participant observation, non-participant observation and data analysis. Initially, traditional qualitative methodologies such as focus groups and interview are easily extended into the online. In place of face-to-face meetings, Skype and other synchronous messengers and virtual classrooms/chatrooms can be used to easily replicate face-to-face interactions, providing final transcripts of rich qualitative data for analysis in much the same format (Janghorban et al. 2014; Seymour 2001). Even asynchronous methods such as email-based interview (Burns 2010; Meho 2006; Kazmer and Xie 2008) or instant messengers (such as Hussain and Griffiths 2009) can be effective and produce data comparable to that of face-to-face traditional research. It may actually lead to greater disclosure in such interviews due to the potential anonymity provided by online data collection. Relative anonymity may allow for greater disinhibition and disclosure in communication (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 2015), as demonstrated in some online therapy interactions (Fletcher-Tomenius and Vossler 2009).

The online space and ease of communication can also be used to facilitate access to hard-to-reach and research individuals and communities. This is especially true when stigma might be associated with the participant group or practical access issues that would otherwise limit or stop participation, which often occurs within health research, for example (McDermott et al. 2013; Wilkerson et al. 2014). These approaches do not just allow those in marginalised populations or difficult-to-reach (and digital) places to take part in research though. Such methods can also be applied to already existing data if we can treat the data as online transcripts, discourse or documents. For example, traditional document analysis is defined by Bowden (2009) document analysis as a systematic

procedure for reviewing and evaluating documents. Online this involves published documents such as on websites and personal homepages, blogs, news articles and other forms of public media.

One focus of document analysis, for example, could be the organisations' use of symbols. Symbols are "objects, acts, concepts, or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of disparate meanings, evoke sentiments and emotions and impel men to action" (Cohen 1974: ix). In the present analysis, the majority of symbolism that will be discussed is in the form of images. Virtually anything can serve as a symbol, given that a symbol represents something broader or unlike itself (Alvesson 1991). Symbols aid in communication (Firth 1973); some are objective and always identified in the same way by different people, while others evoke emotion associated with a situation (Edelman 1985). The latter type can induce "patriotic pride, anxieties, remembrances of past glories or humiliations" (Edelman 1985: 6).

Symbols can promote identification with a group in several ways, as the symbol can serve as a representation of the group and strengthen emotional ties between an individual and an organisation. The symbol aids in ingroup identification, hence encouraging individuals to distinguish their group from another in an effort to boost self-esteem (Schatz and Lavine 2007). Symbols strengthen ties within a group as they, in themselves, communicate 'groupness' (Schatz and Lavine 2007). Symbols can give an organisation a seemingly larger meaning or purpose, ultimately drawing in individuals and evoking "powerful emotions of identification with a group" (Firth 1973: 77).

National symbols allow nationalist organisations to project their image to their own group members as well as to others outside the organisation, giving their ideology a shape and form (Breuilly 1993). There is quite a range and variation of symbolic items used by nationalist movements, but they do tend to mimic those seen in a national context. Most often seen is the flag, but it can also be any other item, a piece of clothing or general appearance, slogans, chants and even specific numbers. For example, the number 14 representing the fourteen words of the white power slogan "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children," or the number 18 representing the first and eighth letters of the alphabet, or 'Adolf Hitler.' It is important to consider that "a symbol is

under the direct authority of, or capable of being manipulated by, the person wishing to affect the behaviour of others" (Firth 1973: 84). Particularly in a political context, symbols are selected and combined to provoke certain emotions and refer to specific ideas (Mach 1993).

There are several advantages to conducting online document analysis or online qualitative analysis. Firstly, the information is readily available in a convenient format, saving time and resources for the researcher. Secondly, information is available regardless of geographical location, collapsing geographical boundaries and enabling special analysis and comparison. Lastly, and most controversially, when using documents freely available in the public domain, disclosure is not always necessary (see later for more on ethical considerations), thus simplifying the research process in these cases. However, there are also practical limitations with such application of traditional qualitative methods to online data. Online forums, blogs and participants pools/communities can offer a vast amount of rich data but practically only a small portion of this can be accessed. For example, Lawson et al. (2019) qualitatively analysed over 3000 forums posts as part of a study on a social deviant fringe community (men who pay for sex), but these posts only represented less than 1% of the total data available within that community. Qualitative analysis may not aim to produce data that can be generalised to the wider population, but this disparity in what can be analysed and what is not analysed demonstrates the wealth of data that may be beyond the practical reach of traditional methods that are just carried over into the online domain and digital spaces.

## Quantitative Approaches

The digital space can allow for several types of research on radical right organisations, looking both at the organisations themselves and members and supporters. Online quantitative data is just data that can be obtained and analysed through "calculations and systematic methods" (Cherney et al. 2018: 9). It is mainly numeric and includes values and counts which can be expressed as a number (i.e. age, number of visits to a site or number of 'likes' or posts on a page). It could also include variables not usually expressed as a number (i.e. gender, ethnicity) but which can be assigned

numeric values (Cherney et al. 2018). It could also include quantifiable motivations to join radical right groups or support social media pages (i.e. how many people respond with the same answer on a survey).

Along with several online European-wide surveys, a great tool which is especially useful for those researching the radical right in Europe is the Demand for Right-Wing Extremism Index (DEREX Index), produced by the Political Capital Institute in Budapest, Hungary. The indexes are calculated using the biennial European Social Survey (ESS) data, with surveys conducted in even years and indexes calculated in odd years. At the time of writing, the most recent indexes released are from 2017, analysing the 2016 survey data. They use twenty-nine survey questions, divided into four broad categories: prejudice and welfare chauvinism (six questions), anti-establishment attitudes (eight questions), right-wing value orientation (eight questions) and fear, distrust and pessimism (seven questions). The project involves thirty-six countries, mostly from the European region. A specific country's DEREX score is created by calculating the rate of respondents who belong to three or four of the main categories. The website for the index provides an analysis tool, in which countries can be easily compared by index score or each of the above-mentioned categories individually.

One of the first quantitative studies to be conducted on radical right activities online was by Bartlett et al. (2011) looking at tracing the rise of populism in Europe through online behaviour. The analysis acquired data from 11 different countries and analysed more than 10,000 survey responses. Although the researchers noted some limitations throughout, this research found that many supporters of these groups had lost all conviction in their respective governments and that "restoring confidence in civic institutions must be part of any response" (Bartlett et al. 2011: 23). This study highlighted the potential of using the internet to gain empirical evidence in this area, which could still potentially be used to positively change policy.

The examples above demonstrate that traditional questionnaires can be ported to online platforms to allow for either general data collection or data collection that targets specific online users group. The process and design behind such an approach does not differ a great deal from face-to-face quantitative approaches. For example, Pauwels and Schils (2016) study

into the effect of online exposure to extremist content utilised both a pen and paper and an online web survey approach using the same measures. Alternative quantitative approaches can also be applied such as quantitative observation of online behaviours or the use on online platforms like Qualtrics and Gorilla.sc to present online experiments (Helbling and Traunmüller 2018; Wilhelm and Joeckel 2019).

As with the qualitative approaches, these online surveys and platforms can allow for participant from vulnerable or hard-to-reach populations/individuals, the gathering of larger data sets and even targeted recruitment that may be difficult face to face, but ultimately this does not offer much that differs from traditional quantitative research.

## Challenges Associated with Extending Traditional Research Approach to the Online

Whilst there are some specific issues with this extension of traditional research methodologies into the digital spaces frequented by the radical right such as the practical considerations of only analysing a select and small sample of the overall data available within an online community, in actuality very little is different from the traditional offline research methodologies.

For example, when considering issues of data protection, whilst UK/EU researchers may be bound by the terms of General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR 2018) and the legal issues attached to it, or even the concerns surrounding the application of the Prevent Duty (2015), these are still the same issues that abound if the research was conducted face to face and used traditional paper-based surveys or interviews. Whilst the online facilitation of these methods might speed data collection, increase sample sizes, preserve some research anonymity and allow for communication with small and niche groups that would not be otherwise accessible, the standard ethical concerns around consent, debriefing and response for the participants remain the same.

Even practical issues such as participant bias and social desirability when considering responses remain much the same. Arguably, the added

anonymity allowed via the online world might actually mitigate these to an extent; greater anonymity is consistently linked to greater disclosure and disinhibited behaviour, the expression of the true self and beliefs with less fear of judgement (Bargh et al. 2002). A researcher employing any of the above approaches might have new platforms and services to learn about, but they are unlikely to have to radically reassess how they approach the ethical considerations related to such research. They are also no more likely to be left with new practical issues that do not effect traditional face-to-face/offline data collection.

## New Approaches to Online Research Methods

Corpus Linguistics (McEnery and Hardie 2011), Sentiment Analysis (Pang and Lee 2008) and Computational Topic modelling are all unique approaches that can be utilised to research specific online behaviour and language use. With much of the internet being a language-based medium, it is often appropriate to use such linguistic data. Where traditional methods may attempt to apply familiar forms of content analysis or engage in the production of new data through online interviews, these alternative approaches are able to use the mass of data that already exists in online spaces, largely quantitatively, whilst still keeping the context of the original language use intact. These are potentially very useful for research into online radical right communities and interactions, the communication that takes places within these groups and between members as well as the interactions that take place between different online groups, such as when members of the radical right react or interact to members of their perceived outgroups. These methods have existed for some time in other disciplines such as Linguistics (Corpus Linguistics) or Marketing (Sentiment Analysis), but with changes to technology and increase online platform accessibility through the sharing of APIs, these are now readily applied to online research within the social sciences, offering a window into data and behaviour that was bound and produced online in volumes that were previously impractical to utilise.

## Corpus Linguistics

Corpus Linguistics is a text/word-level approach that considers the relative frequencies of word occurrences, patterns of word/phrase usage, and pairings of words within a data set or between data sets (Biber et al. 1998; McEnery and Hardie 2011). These data sets, or corpora, are collections of text that can number in the millions of words and in turn represent (or are a sample of a larger collection). It is possible to compare corpora and determine whether certain words, phrases or word pairs occur statistically more frequently in one corpus than another. It is possible to determine whether certain words are more key or important within a text (used more than would be expected by chance alone) and which words are paired together (or share a certain linguistic space or distance—collocates) again beyond that expected by chance.

Practically this allows for the comparisons of difference sources of text to determine if language is used differently and how it used differently. Generally, it has been used to compare author or publication styles, to investigate language around sexuality (Baker 2018) and political discourse (Orpin 2005) and has even found some forensic use. Coulthard (2013) highlights forensic uses of Corpus Linguistic methods to compare confession statements made by prisoners and incident statements made by law enforcement to determine the likelihood of sample confessions being forced or forged. Many already existing corpora are available for analysis such as historical examples of English from select time frames, or samples from newspapers. Baker et al. (2012) study provides a pertinent examination of language use a corpus of British newspapers regarding the word 'Muslim.'

Such methodologies can be applied readily to online data, whether that is in the form of blog/video comments, tweets, forum posts or blog and news posts used by radical right members or those with a shared ideology. Whilst individual tweets, for example, have a character limit of 280 (previously 140), and present a sparse source of data for traditional qualitative analysis, a corpus of several million words can be gathered from a particular community (depends on activity levels and postage frequency) for statistical analysis. This can even be used to compare to similar data from other communities even if there is a relative difference in size as word frequencies can be normalised per thousand or million

words to create equivalence for statistical comparison. The same applies across a range of platforms. If the data exists as text, then a corpus can be produced from it for analysis and comparison.

Awan et al. (2019) have applied such methodologies to far-right and Islamophobic tweets, comparing the amount of Islamophobic terms across differing levels of user anonymity, membership length and postage frequency—determining in the process that whilst Islamophobic terminology was statistically more frequent in the high anonymity users, the length of time the user had been a member on Twitter, and how often he posted, did not have a significant relationship with the amount of Islamophobic content expressed. This approach considered over 100,000 tweets, forming a sizeable sample that would have previously been impractical to gather and analyse using traditional quantitative content analysis approaches or qualitative analysis.

Similar methods have been applied to the analysis of rape threats on Twitter (Hardaker and McGlashan 2016), utilising a corpus of over 900,000 words. McEnery et al. (2015) have used Corpus Linguistic methods to explore the content of tweets in response to media coverage of the murder of Lee Rigby in comparison to press coverage. This approach has been applied in some cases to examples within the radical right such as the EDL and their online-bound communities and content. Brindle (2016) produced a corpus based on EDL online material, including the EDL Facebook page, and from this corpus was able to examine discourse around othering and the use of victimhood. Brindle and MacMillan (2017) discovered similar patterns of language used when examining a corpus based on Britain First materials. Using a corpus approach, Aguilera-Carnerero and Azeez (2016) were able to discern a more frequent use of jihad and related terminology by Twitter users expressing Islamophobic sentiment than users who were actually Muslim.

As previously mentioned, though this is predominantly a quantitative approach statistically comparing frequencies and patterns of word use, the software used to gather and analyse such data is able to keep the original source data intact, and in the context it was originally presented. Software such as AntConc (Anthony 2019), FireAnt (Anthony 2019), TAGs (Hawksey 2014) and SketchEngine (Kilgarriff et al. 2014) have views known as Keywords In Context (or KWIC) which present the

researcher with the statistically significant words and word patterns in the original context they were used rather than just as a simple tally if how often they were used or paired. With this function, it is possible to have an extremely large data set, statistically analysis differences and relationships across a range of large data sets, yet still keep the original context of the language used intact for further exploration.

Although some software such as FireAnt and TAGs are set up to work with the Twitter API, the more generic corpus tools of AntConc, SketchEngine and others are developed to work with any plain text input. Such online corpus analysis is therefore not limited to Twitter. If the data can be converted to a plain text format, it can be analysed. This is of particular relevance when we consider the recent banning of certain members of the right from particular online platforms, the rise of alternative social media platforms such as Telegram and the range of online platforms utilised by the radical right to communicate with each other but also to recruit those outside their communities.

## Sentiment Analysis

This approach traditionally has been used within marketing to determine the perception towards particular products, services or adverts. In its most basic form, it is the simple recording of whether a response to an item is positive or negative (the polarity) and can be done either via manual classification of responses or by using data mining and machine learning (Pang and Lee 2008). This approach has gradually become more sophisticated with the inclusion of emotional lexicons and specialist lexicons. These are specific dictionaries where specific terminology is given a value, for example, words associated with a positive response can be given a positive value, and those with a negative response a correspondingly negative value. Though there are differences to this approach depending on whether a domain-dependant or domain-independent approach has been taken (Crossley et al. 2017). Comments and responses can then be parsed and a value assigned to each based on the overall sentiment expressed in that response based on the lexicon values. This can again be as simple as a positive or negative assessment, but with increasing research

in natural language processing, psycholinguistics and emotional valence, much more subtle lexicons have been developed.

For example, EmoLex (Mohammad and Turney 2013) is an emotional lexicon that has two broad categories (positive and negative) and eight emotional categories (anger, anticipation, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, surprise, trust) with each of these having a list of associated words (essentially synonyms and modifiers). The EmoLex when applied can then give values for the level of emotional sentiment expressed in a body of text. This give a much more fine-grained understanding of the emotional content of a response that can be quantified and compared with greater objectivity and reliability than a qualitative or manual assessment and importantly can be scaled across a huge volume of comments or corpora. This process can be automated by software such as the Sentiment Engine for the Analysis of Cognitive Emotion, or SEANCE (Crossley et al. 2017). This software includes other emotional lexicons such as the Geneva Affect Label Coder (Scherer 2005) which allow for the quantification of sentiment across thirty-six emotional categories, and the Valence Aware Dictionary for sEntiment Reasoning (VADER; Hutto and Gilbert 2014) is a lexicon developed specifically for social media text.

Sentiment Analysis has been used to explore product and movie reviews and even discussion of medical care by patients (Greaves et al. 2013). Although not radical right content, Sentiment Analysis has also been used to explore gender differences in response to YouTube-based Jihadist content (Bermingham et al. 2009). As such, it is also clearly appropriate to be used for online language-based date from radical right users and communities, whether this is in the form of tweets, comments or forum posts. It is an approach that is especially apt when the comments or focus of the radical right users and communities is on a specific event, individual or concept, allowing the views and sentiment towards them to be assessed objectively.

This approach shares many of the benefits of the Corpus Linguistic approach, quantitative analysis of large data sets, objectively and with some reliability, offering insights that are difficult to gain using such data sets using more traditional methods alone. Sentiment Analysis does have its critics when considering certain vagaries of language and emotion. Sentiment Analysis is only as good and reliable as the lexicon it is using.

If the underlying assumptions of the lexicon are flawed or based on a limited sample, then by extension the sentiment analysis results will be too. For example, whilst the VADER lexicon is developed and calibrated for social media (including emoticon rating), other lexicons are developed for longer plain text.

Another factor that was a serious issue for automated Sentiment Analysis until recently was the impact of negation in human language. We use modifiers that can drastically alter the sentiment expressed that are not easily analysed. For example, the comment 'it is bad' and 'that is not bad' would both score highly for negative sentiment as bad is a keyword with high negative value; this is compounded by the usually negative use of not. However in our example 'that is not bad' the 'not' has acted as modifier of bad, reducing the negative impact of the comment. Such simple and common turns of phrase are not readily recognised by all or even most automated Sentiment Analysis. However, some software such as SEANCE check for negation and will 'look' back from a keyword with emotional valence to check for any modifiers (within three words) and adjust scores accordingly. If such checks of negation are applied, and appropriate lexicons are used, Sentiment Analysis can be a very useful tool for gathering further information from naturally occurring online data.

## Hybridisation/Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis

Discourse Analysis can be a very useful, traditional, form of qualitative analysis for analysis discussion of power structures, identity, negotiated identity and even group membership. As there is a great deal of online discourse present within Twitter interactions, chatrooms, forums and other social media platforms, online spaces provided potentially a very rich source of data. As previously discussed, you can extend traditional offline measures and can conceivably manually collect and analyse such data from the radical right. However, the practical considerations mean that only small samples of the vast amount of online data can realistically be used, even by a large research team.

There is a growing trend that looks to address the issues of large data sets whilst keeping elements of traditional qualitative research (though

this approach is not new as it has its roots in the earlier 1990s). This is Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis/Studies, or CADA/CADS, though this could be equally applied to other forms of analysis such as thematic analysis if required. The modern version of this approach involves the initial collection of large data sets via traditional Corpus Linguistic methods such as webcrawling/spidering to gather a large corpus of potentially hundreds of thousands of words. This vast data set can then go through a process of statistical topic modelling, providing researchers with a set of topics that can be reliably replicated by others using the same data set and the same topic modelling parameters. These topics can then be searched via the topic keywords, and a traditional qualitative analysis can be performed on the examples (in their original context) for each of these topics. This approach takes into account the entire data set to develop the topics and keyword examples but can then be used to narrow the focus of the analysis to specific examples from those keywords. This is essentially a mixed method approach that provides reliability and replicability at the broad topic level, but includes the fine-grained richer depth of the qualitative analysis at the keyword level, assisting qualitative analysis for a larger data set than could normally be accounted for. In some examples topic modelling is not used, but the traditional tools of Corpus Linguistics applied to guide the following more traditional qualitative analysis.

CADA/CADS has been applied to views and discourse of migrants in the press (Salahshour 2016; Taylor 2014), anti-Semitism in the press (Partington 2012), nationhood and identity (Freake et al. 2011), political ideology in the press (Jeffries and Walker 2012) and representation of Muslims in the media (Samaie and Malmir 2017). Whilst not direct investigations of the radical right or their online presence, these are areas with clear links. As above with Sentiment Analysis and Corpus Linguistics, there is clear potential for such methods to be applied to radical right content.

Such hybridisation of corpus and qualitative approaches is both a response to some of the perceived flaws of both the extended traditional offline methods (small selective samples due to practical considerations) and the issues with newer online-specific methodologies such as Sentiment Analysis (reductionism of complex language data to simple quantitative scores). It also reflects the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of online research, where tools and concepts previously used for vastly different

topics and content are being repurposed for online research and research into the radical right.

## Big Data and Identification, and Computational Modelling

Social media, the internet and the possibilities of research have continued to grow in the last decade (Hewson 2014a; Zimmer and Kinder-Kurlanda 2017). With the ever-growing opportunities that have been enabled through the use of 'Big Data,' research that was once not obtainable to any researcher or that would take months, if not years, to conduct, can now be processed in almost real time (Ahmadi and Dileepan 2016). The continued growth of Big Data for more than thirty years has led to estimates that, by the year 2020, it will have grown to accumulate forty zettabytes worth of data, "an increase of 300 times since 2005" (Herschel and Miori 2017: 2). Big Data is a relative term and has different meaning and capacity for different institutions (Jennex 2017). Essentially, "big data refers to large sets of complex data, both structured and unstructured, which traditional processing techniques and/or algorithms are unable to operate on" (Taylor-Sakyi 2016: 2). Big Data has several uses ranging from healthcare (Belle et al. 2015), to business (Jennex 2017), to space exploration, but most crucial for the current chapter is the use of Big Data to prevent and detect violent extremist online.

Social media has changed the size and scope of the data volume that is available to research. Utilising social media, Zaman (2017) developed a way to identify extremist users on social networks. By examining behaviour and applying statistical modelling and optimised search policies, they analysed 5000 Twitter accounts of either known ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) members themselves, or friends and followers connected to many known ISIS members. They then established methods to predict the appearance of new users to the social media platform, to categorise individuals using multiple accounts and to detect suspended extremist users who create new accounts, effectively giving the ability to partially disrupt extremist activities online. While this study focused on ISIS members, the researchers state that the techniques developed could

be applied to assess any group on a diverse range of platforms, including the radical right (Zaman 2017).

Another quantitative study utilising Twitter and Big Data analytics is Benigni et al.'s study of ISIS supporters on Twitter (2017). While this study again focuses on jihadi extremism, the conclusion made also allows insights into how the techniques could be used for other groups. By using an Iterative Vertex Clustering and Classification (IVCC), an innovative method to detect and extract information from online communities, this research revealed a community of extremist online supporter totalling over 22,000 individuals. These included "fighters, propagandists, recruiters, religious scholars, and unaffiliated sympathisers" (Benigni et al. 2017: 2). This study has made two major contributions to the advancement of knowledge in this area. Firstly, the pioneering development of the IVCC, which, as the researchers maintain, "outperforms two existing approaches on a classification task of identifying ISIS-supporting users by a significant margin" (Benigni et al. 2017: 19). Secondly, the study provides a descriptive case study of the ISIS-supporting network on Twitter, which is claimed to be the most comprehensive study on this network (Benigni et al. 2017).

In addition to these analyses is Looking Glass, an innovative piece of technology being developed out of Arizona State University. This groundbreaking piece of technology, developed by Davulcu and Woodward (2015), uses data mining techniques allowing researchers to filter through posts and engagement to identify not just those that hold radical views but, more importantly, those who are more likely to join a group and engage in violence. The biggest issue facing Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs is the ability to determine who is most at risk (Davulcu and Woodward 2015); determining this could not only assist in intervention but could also dramatically reduce time and funds spent by the Police and Security Services in ascertaining true threats to a population.

## Ethical Issues

With newer online specific measures, and the increasing levels of interdisciplinary research on the radical right (an area already fraught with research issues), there are a range of ethical and practical issues to con-

sider. The ethical and practical issues for research that extends the methodologies traditional used in offline radical right research are largely unchanged for the online research. The same cannot be said for the online-specific research as many new ethical issues are raised due to the nature of the digital space inhabited by online users and radical right communities and the practicalities of some of the newer measures.

Several ethical issues can arise with research in the digital space, especially when working with radical right organisations. Given the sensitivity surrounding research on extremism, it is crucial to consider these potential issues and how they can affect research and data collection. There is significant debate in ethics surrounding research in the digital space (Grinyer 2007; Buchanan and Ess 2009), and as the internet grows and continues to expand, the difficulties become ever more complex. What could be applicable one day may be obsolete in the next, giving any ethics committee the difficult task of applying any fix rules to the governance of research on the internet. Even the UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO) only provides guidance on best practice, stating that "as the internet is an emerging research landscape, and technologies available to researchers are also emerging, it is not recommended to apply the guidance in this document prescriptively" (UKRIO 2016: 1). Indeed, "ethical guidelines for the use of digital trace data are still a moving target" (Ackland 2013: 43). This has a multitude of reasons, one being that traditional rules of ethics are contradictory to arguments around the challenges of gaining informed consent and ensuring privacy and anonymity (Grinyer 2007). This is particularly relevant when considering issues with Big Data such as the initial collection of the data, initial permissions given and lay expectations of privacy from the average internet user.

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) provides a list on their website of the possible ethical predicaments a researcher may encounter when doing research on the internet. They pose such questions as: "what constitutes privacy in an online environment?", "what does informed consent entail in that context?" and "when is deception or covert observation justifiable?" (ESCR 2019: 1). It remains difficult to answer these questions, with Sugiura and colleagues (2017) asking if it is even possible to truly ascertain these ethical considerations online. This is

made even more problematic when you consider the range of different disciplines engaged in online research.

Different disciplines have varied approaches to online research and research involving vulnerable or fringe groups. For example, psychologists have to adhere to the research guidance and principles of the British Psychological Society (BPS) (2018). These principles traditionally centre on the respect, competence, responsibility and integrity. By extension, this covers the gaining of informed consent, protection of anonymity and confidentiality where possible, the right to withdraw, debriefing and support and general protection from psychological and physical harm. This does cause some issues when considering observational research online of largely public domain data as consent, privacy and debriefing are all difficult or impossible to address. As a result the British Psychological Society (BPS) have published specific guidance for online research that moves the focus of the debate to what can or cannot be considered in the public domain online, and what steps can appropriately be taken to best protect individual identities and online communities that may act as safe spaces for individuals (BPS 2017). Such guidance has led to assumed good practice such as double layers of anonymisation (anonymise even user names that are already anonymous), anonymising the communities they are from (and instead broadly describing the properties or known demographics of the community) and careful editing of example text to avoid reverse searches that lead to identifiable individuals.

Some professional bodies, whilst not as prescriptive as the BPS in their guidance, promote similar ethical values and expectations. For example, the British Society of Criminology (BSC 2015) promotes similar general values as the BPS but makes just limited reference to the specifics of internet-based research. In doing so, they focus more on the legality of potential content than offering concrete guidance. The public/private debate is referred to but only in one paragraph of the code of ethics. The British Sociological Association (BSA 2017) in contrast has developed a digital ethics annexe with a range of case studies to support decision-making around online research, but this does again refer to case-by-case ethics judgements similar to some of the guidance given by funding bodies and other organisations.

However, some disciplines have very different expectations. Published work within Linguistics and Corpus Linguistics for purposes of transparency, replicability and validity will often make the communities the data collected from public and even use examples of the exact users or verbatim quotes that render the individuals identifiable (Hardaker and McGlashan 2016). Such a contrasting approach does mean there are variable expectations surrounding the ethical issues (anonymity, consent, privacy) common to online research. This is arguably intensified when researching users and communities that may express extreme, harmful or socially deviant content. Ethical missteps in this arena could lead to the identification or harm of individuals.

Whilst researchers must obviously adhere to the ethical standards of their own professional bodies and discipline expectations, it is suggested by the authors here that when interdisciplinary research is engaged in that the most stringent of ethical guidance is adopted. Further guidance and sharing of good practice can potentially be sought via organisations such as the UK Anonymisation Network (UKAN) for specific issues such as anonymisation and privacy.

# Conclusion

The digital space is a crucial tool for conducting research on radical right organisations. As discussed, and seen throughout this chapter, radical right groups are increasingly using the internet for the dissemination of their ideology and advertising demonstrations and events. The internet can, therefore, be used for observational research of interactions between supporters and for the document analysis of the organisations' websites and social media pages. The internet can also be an excellent tool for engaging with individuals in hard-to-reach populations. However, such research is largely just an extension of traditional research approaches. Online spaces and communities can be investigated using more online-specific approaches such as Corpus Linguistics, Sentiment Analysis, Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis and large-scale modelling/computational approaches to Big Data.

Although this chapter placed focus on the radical right online, this could be expanded and have implications for all forms of extremism online. Indeed, all types of extremist organisations have an online presence, including, but not limited to, Islamic and other religious extremism, the radical left and animal rights activists. As we have discussed within this chapter, some of the proposed online-specific methodologies have already been applied to other areas of radicalism and extremism or to areas that have some relationship to radical right research. The digital space provides ample opportunities, through a vast selection of platforms, for extremists to disseminate their ideology and potentially recruit new supporters. Therefore, more research is essential on extremism in the digital space in order to fully understand this diverse and complex phenomenon.

The approaches presented here can allow for progress to be made in this area. Yet, though there are clear benefits to some of the suggested online research methodologies, such as increased sample sizes and examination of natural language data within the context of online communities, there are still issues to contend with—ethical issues being the foremost of the challenges facing researchers of online digital spaces.

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# 12

# Conclusion

## Benjamin Lee and Mark Littler

In the introduction, we noted converging trends of political and religious extremism and associated violence, and the increasing role of the internet and World Wide Web in ordering both individual lives and societies. While this convergence has found its most dramatic expression in the study of militant Islamism online, we also noted a need to ensure that other narratives and ideologies were addressed by scholarship. In this volume, we invited scholars to submit work that dealt online extremism not related to militant Islamism. The response to the request was diverse. Perhaps predictably, as a widely acknowledged growing terrorist threat in many countries, the extreme right makes a strong showing, with several of the chapters choosing to focus on how the extreme right has adopted the World Wide Web. These include Jackson's work in the field

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of 'web history' of the UK extreme right. It has also included contemporary analysis of the extreme right on social media, both through Facebook, in the chapter submitted by Scrivens and Amarasingam, and Twitter, in the chapter by Allchorn. Lee's analysis of the use of memes by the extreme right is less tied to any one specific platform but still centres on the use on the extreme right and web technologies. The focus on the extreme right reflects both the growing pre-occupation with the apparent rise in popularity, or at least notoriety, of extreme right ideas online, and several recent incidents inspired by the extreme right including attacks in the UK by Darren Osbourne and Thomas Mair and the plots by figures including Jack Renshaw, and US attacks by figures such as James Fields and Dylan Roof. Most recently has been the wave of concern about the extreme right touched off by the terrorist murder of 51 people in Christchurch, New Zealand, by an Australian supporter of the extreme right.

However, of the ten chapters in this volume, only four are focused on the extreme right. In addition to chapters on policy and methods, work has also encompassed: the use, or sometimes the non-use, of online tools by Loyalist and Republican groups in Northern Ireland, anti-abortion advocacy, and animal rights activism. Finally, it is perhaps a testament to the dominant position of Salafist-Jihadism in the academic landscape that, even in a volume premised on looking at other forms of extremism, there remains a chapter focusing heavily on Salafist-Jihadism, albeit from the perspective of an internet-powered subcultural fandom potentially shared with other forms of extremism. A notable gap in the responses we have received has been the absence of any chapter on left-wing extremism.

The chapters reflect a range of methodological approaches being taken to the issue of digital extremism. Online data tends to be paradoxical, mixing simultaneously the promise of 'big data' with the curious absence of crucial data about audiences and how they engage. While it is possible (as several authors have done) to take a nearly complete quantitative measure of the output of extremist groups, very often the authors have needed to limit themselves to understanding only the supply side of the equation. This problem persists even where highly complex methods are used (see Carter's chapter). The composition of audiences and what they choose to do with the material available to them is difficult to determine

with any degree of accuracy. This is a long-standing problem in the study of terrorism and extremism that is unlikely to be solved so long as individuals feel uncomfortable about being approached as extremists, a feat that so far has only been pulled off in ethnographic-level accounts of extremist movements. Even where some level of interactivity takes places, potentially in the form of a Facebook like or a YouTube comment, there is little understanding of (a) how sincere the author is, and (b) the reactions of the potentially significant proportion of people who chose not to engage.

Despite the diverse range of groups being considered, and the contrasting approaches to methods, there were a surprising number of common themes on display. A complete summing up is overly ambitious here, but reading through the chapters, there are a number of standout observations that give some clue to how research may develop in the future.

## Some Extreme Groups Took an Early Lead Online Compared to Mainstream Ideas (Although Those Days May Have Passed)

The first is that extreme groups in many cases have been trailblazers in adopting online tools. Jackson's survey of UK fascism's use of the web from some of its earliest days provides a useful reminder that fascist groups were among the first in the UK to take advantage of the web as a political communications platform and that for a time their efforts outstripped those of the mainstream parties. This echoes earlier findings from the US and elsewhere. Quite why the British extreme right was so quick to mobilise online while the established parties seemed to hold out is hinted at in Jackson's discussion of the online cultic milieu. Readers who made it as far as the more esoteric websites of the British extreme right were congratulated on making the journey in the face of supposedly powerful organised efforts to prevent them. In the depths of the British National Party's (BNP) attempted transition from fascist to (outwardly at least) populist, political party leader Nick Griffin realised that the web was a medium of the outsider, a way to circumvent the institutions that

maintained the status quo. After decades of being restricted to largely inaccessible and obscure publications, the ideas of the British National Party, along with countless other modes of thought too stigmatised to ever make it past broadcast media gatekeepers, could finally find a home. There certainly seems to be a case to say that taboo ideas at least have some kind of affinity for the online realm. Additionally, the heterodox position of many of these groups and individuals likely remains a core point of connection among ideologically disparate groups.

This eagerness for fresh spaces for outsider movement is mirrored to some extent by the analysis offered by Bowman-Grieve and Herron, particularly where they focus on Irish Republicanism. The idea that the nature of the conflict in Northern Ireland, and the age and (localised) ethno-nationalist convictions of the groups involved, was a limiting factor in the adoption of the web as a tool to support activism. Northern Ireland was a conflict fought between local communities far more than a clash of competing ideologies, and perhaps because of the intense importance of geography, the geographically ambiguous web was perhaps of less relevance. From this then we might conclude that where extreme ideological positions are already heavily embedded in infrastructure and social fabric, they are as reluctant as, or even more reluctant than, moderate groups were to travel online.

More recent analysis of the situations in Canada and the UK, by Scrivens and Amarasingam and Allchorn, respectively, suggests a different situation is now the case. Outsider movements are finding themselves increasingly at the mercy of large technology companies and are dependent on the whims of Silicon Valley to get their messages across. Although there is a nascent hate-tech movement in the form of parallel applications developed to prioritise non-interference (Gab, Hatreon, and Voat being key examples), increased use of privacy-centric apps like Discord, and, as Lee discusses, attempts to remain at a hypothesised cutting edge in the communications environment through memes and humour, there is little to suggest that extreme groups are anything like as competitive online with the behemoths of mainstream politics. The revelations associated with Cambridge Analytica strongly suggest that better-resourced movements (although often not mainstream) have re-established a lead in any digital arms race. While extreme movements may have taken an early

lead, they seem to be facing an environment of growing hostility. However, it is doubtful that the greater regulation and scrutiny of technology companies now in the offing will put extremisms entirely back in the box they occupied prior to the arrival of the web.

## Extremists Online Are Confronted with Loss of Control (Just Like Everyone Else)

While tightening content policies and greater regulation are the main external threats to extremist online presences, a second, potentially harder to observe threat is internal. We often seek to draw lines around particular varieties of extremism, suggesting that militant Islamists, right-wing extremists, and single-issue extremists all enjoy their own particular digital spaces. While this may be true to an extent, Ramsey's chapter reminds us that the use of shared tools and a degree of a shared online culture means that all political groups online face some degree of loss of control. Factionalism and dissent have never been easier to plan or disseminate. Even the most culturally restrictive Salafist groups are being faced with an online support base deeply embedded in online culture that seeks to meme and innovate around their cause. Much of this book has been designed to shed light on the digital extremisms that have been largely overlooked in the fixation on Islamist militancy. At the same time, however, the effects of digital culture even on the superficially most conservative of religious groups cannot be overlooked. In the future, the cultural mainstays of militant Islamism may be as vulnerable to mutation and reconfiguration as the esoteric doctrines of the extreme right.

Worse still from the perspective of those seeking to organise in the space of extremist politics, online users are also vulnerable to counter messages and other forms of intervention designed to counter violence extremism. Birdwell's chapter on secondary CVE (Countering Violent Extremism) interventions does a good job of highlighting the challenges surrounding this space. Not the least of these is the fact that information on CVE practice is hard to come by and is controlled by organisations largely outside the academic space. Despite this, it is clear that as well as

a channel for extremisms of all kinds the digital environment is also potentially fruitful ground for those seeking to counter extremist claims.

Added to this perceived loss of control and external ideological threats are the observations made by Jackson and Bowman-Grieve and Herron, that online spaces at times provide venues for internal criticism. Jackson, for example, notes the role of the web in hosting material designed to attack Nick Griffin's leadership of the British National Party. Bowman-Grieve and Herron identify a role for the web in hosting dissident content critical of more orthodox approaches. What's less clear from these analyses, however, is the extent to which the web was providing a platform for new dissent within movements. Or was it simply airing pre-existing grievances that previously would have been difficult to observe? Ramsey's argument that there exists a fan-caste culturally distinct from conventional activists seems to suggest that the web is supporting more critical discussions within movements, whereas Jackson's account of Tyndall's critique of Griffin suggests that Tyndall was likely to be critical using any means at his disposal.

Building on Ramsey's ideas slightly, it is not difficult to make an argument that the web is having a deeper impact on how extreme movements organise themselves. While extreme movements were traditionally demanding in terms loyalty from their supporters, the fragmentation and atomisation supported by the web suggests that future developments may be far harder to categorise. There is already a well-documented trend towards the so-called lone-actor terrorism among Jihadist and extreme right movements. Where movements are organised as digital networks of sometimes competing nodes composed of a mixture of keyboard warriors, ideological entrepreneurs, and various one-person bands of direct actors, the potential for chaotic and near-random ideologically infused violence only seems to grow. The connections between lone actors and their ideological inspirations are already difficult to discern. This is further complicated by the behaviours of organised extremist groups. ISIS, for example, has been quick to claim every attack they can. The extreme right, still seeking mass support and legitimacy, are often quick to distance themselves from their violent offspring. Where societies stand on the moral and legal responsibilities in these cases is still in flux.

# Studying Extreme Movements Requires the Analysis of Images (We Are Not Well-Equipped to Do This)

An altogether different observation is that modes of ideological communication are also evolving. Although imagery has long been a component of mainstream politics, we still typically consider ideological and rhetorical material as being mainly text-based, dusty volumes of often arcane lore. The evidence presented here strongly suggests that activists are increasingly engaging with different modes of communication to make their point. Scrivens and Amarasingam's chapter on Canadian right-wing extremists on Facebook notes that although links remain the most popular content posted by these groups on Facebook, it is photos and videos that seem to be generating reactions from audiences. Scrivens and Amarasingam suggest that this may be related to the use of humour and 'easy-to-digest' material. Similar findings emerge from Littler's study of anti-abortion activism online, with visceral images linked to greater audience engagement. Likewise, Lee makes the case that image memes, while not the esoteric superweapons they are claimed to be, are at least edgy and engaging form of rhetoric for those users that understand them. From a research point of view, understanding and analysing images, and in particular video and audio, is a different sort of task to understanding the printed word. However, it is one that those interested in the study of different extremist groups online are increasingly going to have to undertake.

Another facet of this problem lies in the more mundane realm of reporting and publicising results from research. Academic publishing is not set up to deal with reproducing sometimes even moderate amounts of image content. Issues around copyright long since solved for text remain a potential block and often necessitate extensive text-based descriptions of image or video content. Issues around copyright are particularly acute around images which have no immediately apparent owner. If the original content was reproduced without the copyright owner's permission, what are the legal issues surrounding critiquing it? Even where owners can be identified, ideological factors are likely to

make them unsympathetic to requests to reproduce images. Assuming the difficulties around engaging with and reporting images can be addressed, it seems likely that the study of images, video, and audio is likely to become an increasingly important component of analysing extremism online. Although dense doctrinal texts remain crucial to developing an in-depth understanding of movement's goals and methods, these are growing increasingly distant for audiences that are used to engaging with ideas through images and video.

## Impacts of Online Behaviours

Less clear from the analyses here are the impacts of online behaviours. The majority of chapters have focused on acts of communication, and the web remains above all else a tool for communication. While the outgoing messages are relatively easy to capture and analyse, those that are public at least, much less clear is the interpretation and impact of those messages on potential audiences. McAlister and Monaghan's chapter notes that despite the apparent ease of access to detailed information required to engage in direct action as part of the animal liberation movement being available online, the number of actions has in fact dwindled. This suggests that a major by-product of online activism maybe inertia and inactivity. This point is echoed in Ramsey's chapter, in which a key threat to the Salafist Jihadi movement is the inertia of activists who prize the aesthetics of online imagery over practical action. Keyboard warriors spreading the word online are seemingly less likely to directly participate offline. The problem of slacktivism is by no means unique to extremist movements. At the same time, digital networks have at times seemingly spurred on real-world activism, for example, underpinning the electoral successes of the BNP as noted by Jackson.

These debates are useful, but they also inadvertently highlight a tendency to draw sharp distinctions between online and offline activism. Where physical consequences are being considered, such as violence, this is undoubtedly a relevant distinction. However, for many extremist activists, the web and social media in particular have seemingly become synonymous with meaningful political action. Control over digital narratives

on social media is worthwhile for its own sake as it represents ideas making inroads into mainstream culture. The equivalency between social media and culture is obviously open to question, but it is certainly the case the cultural relevance of social media has increased massively in recent years.

## Conclusions

On 23 April 2018, 25-year-old Alek Minassian drove a rented van into a crowd in Toronto, Canada, killing 10 and injuring 16. Prior to the attack, Minassian posted a message on Facebook referencing 'The Incel Rebellion' and 'Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger'. Elliot Rodger killed six in a shooting attack near a University of California, Santa Barbara, campus in May 2014. The attack ended with a wounded Roger taking his own life. Prior to the attack, Rodger had uploaded a video to YouTube and emailed a manifesto to several acquaintances in which he justified his attack as vengeance for not being able to find a female sexual partner. Incel is short for involuntary celibate and is a descriptor used by an online milieu of men who channel sexual frustration into an ideology that presents them as victims of female rejection. Within hours of Minassian's attack, incel. me, an incel message board, was flooded with visitors (and posts from existing users complaining about them) as researchers, journalists, the general public, and presumably also security practitioners sought to understand what had driven Minassian to act as he did.

The Minassian case is striking in that it bears the hallmarks of violent Islamist and extreme right terrorism but seemingly originates in an ideological position distinct from them (although misogyny is an aspect of both the extreme right and militant Islamism). Nobody, it seemed, had given much thought to the incel movement prior to Minassian's attack with the exception of the communities that arose for the specific purpose of mocking them (e.g. the subreddit r/IncelTears). And yet, the same tools and design features that have allowed extreme movements of the right, left, and groups advocating for national separatism and violent animal liberation, to thrive online have also seemingly been used by the incels. People with a common grievance who may never had met

physically have been able to find one another, build communities, craft and perpetuate a worldview at odds with the norms of mainstream society, and create a discourse that is at best dehumanising and ambiguous on questions of violence, and ultimately one of those supporters has gone on to do violence. It's not clear if Minassian saw his efforts as contributing towards a social and political settlement more to the incels' liking, or if it was an elaborate suicide attempt. The use of the phrase rebellion suggests a political objective; Minassian's confrontation with the police after the attack strongly suggests that he wanted to die. The pattern of soft condemnation on display on incels.me after the event strongly mirrors that of the extreme right's response to terrorists like Breivik, Roof, Mair, Tarrant, and Osbourne.

Violent Islamist extremism remains the security challenge of the day for many states. Given that the threat from militant Islamism has emerged at the same time as accessible, low-cost, and powerful digital tools, it has inevitably become intertwined with them. As more recent accounts of the extreme right have shown, however, other extremist movements have been busy crafting their own digital milieus. These developments have not been limited to the nebulous and complexly connected relationship between violent Islamism and the extreme right however. The web has been adopted by those fighting conflicts that have either fallen from the headlines, or never quite made them in the same way. The relevance of these ideas should not be overlooked by those seeking to counter violent extremism.

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[1] Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.