



American Counterterrorism Targeting & Resilience Institute

Report

The Nature of Far-Right Extremism Online Post-2015 in the United States

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The American Counterterrorism Targeting & Resilience Institute (ACTRI) is a cross-disciplinary, nonprofit research organization focused on the broad spectrum of transnational extreme-right and militant jihadi political violence. The Institute studies the relationship between the two, as well as the manner in which they emerge, spread, dominate, and influence countermeasures.

Abstract

The growing threat of far-right extremism in the United States has become more rampant and violent in recent years. The internet provides an easily accessible means to spread far-right ideologies, as well as inspire violence against minorities and those with opposing political views. This study used content analysis of 208 pieces of far-right content from 20 different social media platforms to discern which sites contained or hosted the most far-right content. The study also analyzed patterns in themes, linguistics, hashtags, and symbols. The study found that there is a current shift away from mainstream social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, to platforms that directly challenge mainstream social media platforms and cite free speech and privacy justifications for hosting far-right extremist content, such as 4chan, Bitchute, Gab, and Parler. Common linguistical patterns largely related to Americanism and American values, such as patriotism, war, and an “us” versus “them” mentality. The “us” versus “them” mentality elucidated that online conversations are highly polarized, with evidence of groupthink and group polarization taking place. The results of this study are intended to better inform Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) stakeholders tasked with creating effective counternarratives against the growing far-right movement in America.

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Introduction

The United States has long considered international terrorism, primarily of that rooted in militant jihadi, Islamist-driven extremism, to be a grave national security concern. However, emerging trends suggest that the greatest current violent extremism and terrorism threat is at the hands of those with extremist right-wing ideologies. Right-wing violent extremism has considerably risen across both the United States and Europe since 2015.¹ The number of far-right attacks in the United States alone quadrupled from 2016 to 2017 and has increased by an estimated 320% in Western countries since 2018.² Despite the statistical jump, terrorism is no new global phenomenon, nor is the presence of right-wing extremism in the United States new. The ideologies that drive far-right extremism have deep historical precedence that lie in the very founding of the country and its laws.

Formed in 1865, the Klu Klux Klan (KKK) is the most notorious right-wing extremist group in the United States. The group espouses an ideology rooted in white supremacy and racial and religious hatred of all the others. Although the KKK is decentralized, the “alt-right” (Alternative Right) has become the modern-day equivalent. Far-right ideologies have justified decades of murder and violence against individuals and groups that do not share conservative beliefs or possess identities that are not American-born, white, protestant Christians.³ Early recruiting and radicalization tactics for the KKK, and later smaller cells of far-right groups, began in the form of spreading material propaganda, such as flyers, cards, and CD’s, to impressionable

students and younger individuals, often through face-to-face interactions. The “Kleagle’s” were official officers for the KKK, whose main role was to recruit new members, oftentimes by exploiting already formed groups or people fighting or interested in similar causes.⁴

With changes in technology, globalization, and modernization, the tactics used by extremist organizations and lone-wolf actors for recruitment, radicalization, communication, propaganda sharing, plotting, and attacks have also changed. The internet and social media have meant a large shift to online interactions and engagement for terrorist organizations all across the globe, including far-right groups in the United States. Private chat rooms, social media, and sites on the dark web provide a new avenue for violent extremists to recruit and radicalize new individuals. The internet has opened a new level of reach and access for the sharing of propaganda and individual messaging, while also making detection and monitoring by law enforcement, intelligence, and other Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) stakeholders more difficult.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, most social interactions, including that of far-right extremism, have shifted online. While the global pandemic has meant a large boom for eCommerce and online businesses, as communities around the world remain under lock-down orders, it has also become a politically charged issue within the United States, with divides on the proper guidelines to be enforced. Recent news reports noted that in over 30 states where protests took place over the stay at home orders, many have included “boogaloo bois,” an emerging



far-right ideology that initially stemmed from the weapons discussion board on 4chan labelled (“/k/”).⁵ At least one recent shooting—an ambush of two federal security officers in Oakland, California, on May 29, 2020—has been linked to the boogaloo movement.⁶ In addition to the rising boogaloo movement, the UK counterterrorism agency reported that white supremacist groups were encouraging their followers to deliberately infect Jews and Muslims with the coronavirus.⁷ Further, on March 24, 2020, a Missouri man died in a shootout with police as he was plotting to bomb a Kansas city hospital filled with COVID-19 patients.⁸ While the illness itself is already perilous, the pandemic and its protocols have also led to new avenues for exploitation and attacks by white supremacists around the world.

Both organized right-wing groups and lone actors have become bolder and more lethal in their rhetoric, recruiting, and attacks since 2015.⁹ However, there is a lack of research on how the far-right in America, both organized groups and lone wolf actors, are interacting, participating, and contributing to violent extremism online post-2015. A number of studies on terrorism and hate rhetoric link social theories and frameworks, such as *groupthink* and *group polarization*, to activities occurring online. It is often contended that groupthink and group polarization may lead individuals within extremist cells and those communicating individually to embolden and incite violence without ever interacting in person. Further, the particular sites and platforms that are the most popular for extremist content change rapidly and it is therefore critical for CVE stakeholders to recognize and monitor the most prevalent trends for online recruitment

and radicalization. The authors conducted content analysis to identify the current social media and internet platforms most widely being used by far-right networks in the United States from 2015 to 2020. Additionally, content analyses were used to determine how the emboldening and resurgence of right-wing violent extremism has impacted the nature of extremist interactions that are occurring online in the 2015-present era. Lastly, the content analysis of extremist conversations and online posts will be presented to elucidate patterns in linguistics, symbols, and hashtags that contribute to online radicalization, potentially initiating violent behavior.

Literature Review

Far-Right Rising Since 2015

There are several analytically different ideologies within far-right extremism that are used to justify violent acts against those that the ideologies target. Many far-right ideologies are based in white supremacist beliefs, similar to that of the KKK and its offshoots. Modern day white supremacist groups include alt-right, or white nationalists, and neo-Nazi’s, as well as the neo-confederacy, Christian Identity, and the racist skinhead movements. The second sphere of far-right ideologies includes anti-government and sovereign citizenry-based ideologies.¹⁰ There are also single-issue based violent extremism groups and individuals whose violent ideologies rest in anti-LGBTQ, anti-Muslim, anti-immigration and anti-abortion rhetoric.¹¹ These types of single-issue ideologies go beyond the scope of traditional conservatism and cross the threshold to beliefs that justify or incite violence based



on politically and culturally charged issues. Although individuals and groups may share components of several different far-right ideologies and they are not always mutually exclusive categories, it is important to consider the range in ideologies when analyzing propensity for violence, large-scale attacks, symbols, propaganda, radicalization, and recruitment strategies.

While the threat to the United States by international violent extremist groups has steadily decreased since 2002, a relatively high presence of domestic violent extremism activities and plots remain alarming, however.¹² Several recent studies suggest that a large majority of terrorist and violent extremism incidents are no longer stemming from militant jihadi, Islamist-driven ideology, but rather the far-right. For instance, despite the threat of militant jihadi, Islamist-driven terrorism garnering much of the global attention, right-wing extremism has been responsible for nearly three quarters (73%) of domestic extremist-related fatalities from 2009 to 2018.¹³ This evidence is also supported by the recent statistic indicating that out of 57 violent extremism events in the U.S. in 2018, 28 were committed by far-right extremists.¹⁴ While 27 of the remaining events remain undetermined in motive, only two are confirmed to be inspired by jihadi-based ideologies.¹⁵ Other studies have reported that far-right extremists have murdered more people in 2018 than in any year since 1995.¹⁶

While only a small portion of mass shootings are classified in the U.S. as acts of terrorism, the rate of terrorism-related shootings is also increasing. Mass shootings in the United States had previously only been categorized

as a terrorist attack in one in every five cases.¹⁷ However, the past ten years has seen this statistic rise steeply to include every 1 in 3 shootings as motivated by violent extremism or classified as a terrorist attack.¹⁸ Simple analysis of post 2015 mass shootings in the United States also supports these recent statistics. A majority of the high-profile mass murders and the rise in hate crimes in the past five years have been motivated by far-right ideologies.

The 2015 Chapel Hill triple homicide of three Muslim college students by their white male neighbor after a parking incident raised questions of hate-based ideologies and sparked global outrage via a social media movement, with over two million tweets advocating for the rights of Muslims.¹⁹ The shooting marked the beginning of a pattern of high-profile murders with far-right ideology as motivators from 2015 and on. In 2015, the Charlottesville Unite the Right Rally left one dead and 19 injured after a white supremacist drove his car into the crowd. In October 2018, Cesar Sayoc was arrested after mailing 16 explosive devices to 13 prominent democratic leaders and media figures who had been critical of President Trump.²⁰ Further analysis of recent shootings has revealed that white supremacists have been identified in at least 92 murders in the United States since 2015 (*See Table 1*).

While not all of the perpetrators of these acts were legally charged with terrorism-related offenses, each of these cases have shown evidence of a range of right-wing ideology, to include racism and white supremacy, as well as single issue stances on anti-abortion, anti-Democratic party, and sovereign citizenry. Central to this particular study is the evidence



that nearly every single perpetrator of the aforementioned attacks left manifestos, posts, and conversations online regarding their ideologies and plots to commit attacks. The prevalence of the internet in many recent crimes is a significant emerging trend that needs more attention in order to produce the most effective preventative responses.

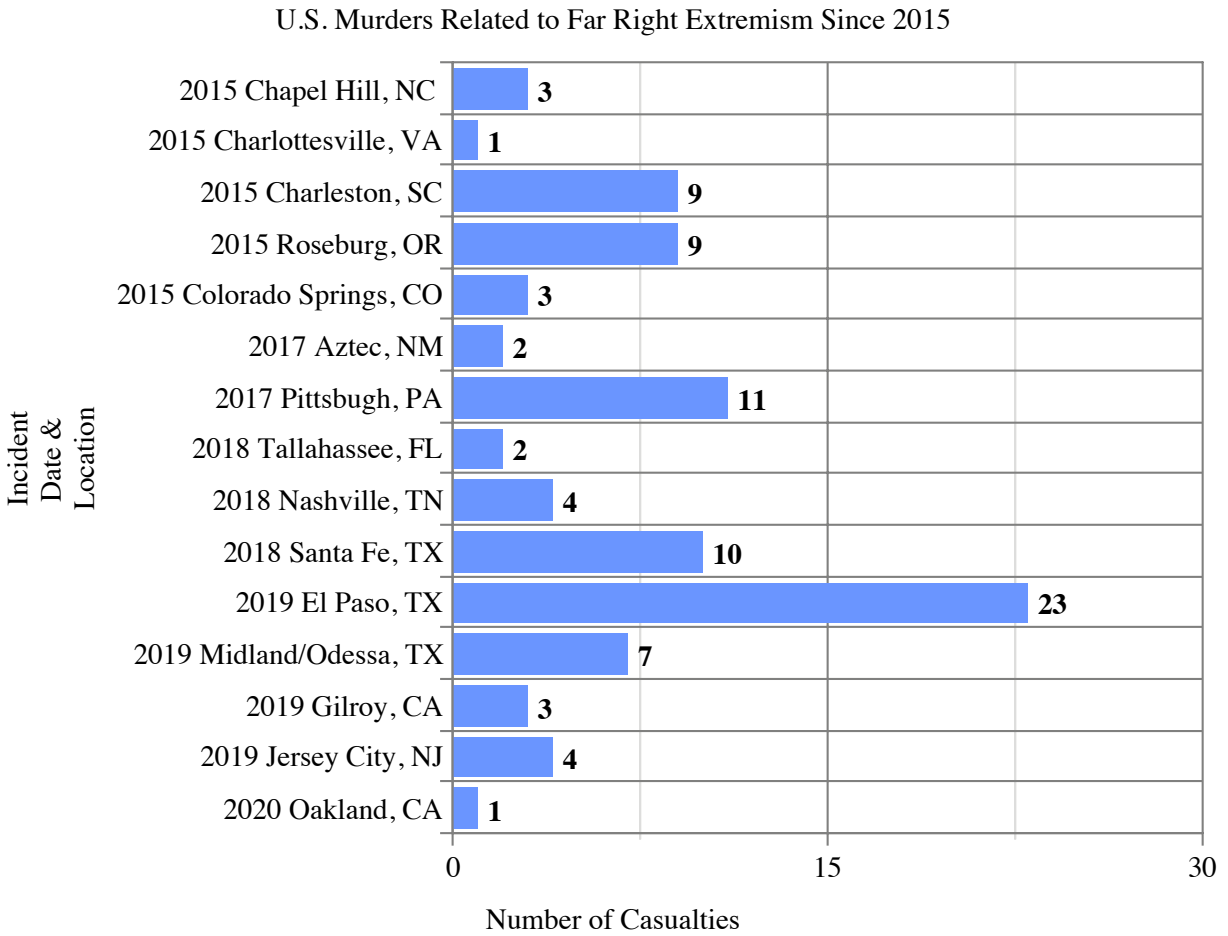


Table 1. U.S. murders since 2015 connected to far-right ideologies. Death counts are based upon news reports covering the individual incidents.²¹ *

*Gunman deaths not included in casualty counts



Post 2015 Political Climate

Major political changes and divisions over immigration policies, racial justice, violence against minorities, police brutality, gun control, the current presidential administration, and the novel coronavirus pandemic policies have taken place in the United States since 2015. These political and social issues also intersect with criminality and violent extremism trends. For instance, while the 2020 protests over the death of George Floyd that swept the nation led to the debate on police brutality and racial injustices, they also opened a new avenue to be exploited by violent extremists. Both members of the far-left and far-right had infiltrated the Black Lives Matter movement and protests. Several news sources reported that members of Antifa, the Boogaloo Bois, and other white supremacists were heavily armed at the protests, attempting to incite violence or cause property damage to counter the cause.²²

As stated earlier, the COVID-19 is also being exploited by extremists. The boogaloo movement was initially introduced to 4chan in 2019 but has been adapted as a new type of slang to mean an inevitable civil war in the United States. The boogaloo ideology has been accelerating rapidly through memes, apparel, and discussion boards online. The boogaloo bois have been identified at several protests wearing Hawaiian shirts and being heavily armed.²³ There is evidence to suggest that the boogaloo movement was accelerated, in part, by the stay at home orders, as individuals were at home all day, unemployed, with open access to the internet.²⁴ These factors gave opportunity

for vast spread of the boogaloo propaganda, memes, and motivation towards violence. The conversations quickly shifted from a 4chan discussion board about guns to real individuals with extremist ideologies showing up on the streets, heavily armed and prepared for violence. This is a prime example of how the current political and social climates factor into the radicalization process and can become a driver towards violence, as political factors can create environments of opportunity.

In addition to protests and the pandemic, polarization over the current presidential administration has also raised questions of whether political rhetoric and political elite impact surges in violence and extremist rhetoric. Some historians have contended that CVE stakeholders and political leaders have underestimated the presence and power of far-right beliefs in the U.S.²⁵ This is particularly elucidated by the number of far-right attackers who have noted President Trump as their inspiration.²⁶ Cesar Sayoc, the perpetrator who mailed several pipe bombs to democratic leaders, is not the only perpetrator to outright connect President Trump's policies and rhetoric with their actions. In August 2015, Scott and Steve Leader brutally beat a homeless man with a metal pipe and urinated on him because they thought he was an illegal immigrant. During the police interview, they told police that "Donald Trump was right... all these illegals need to be deported."²⁷ In March 2018, Michael Hari, Michael McWhorter, and Joe Morris were charged with the August 5, 2017, bombing of the Dar Al-Farooq Islamic Center in Bloomington, Minnesota. The men admitted they wanted "to scare Muslims out of the country" and "defend our culture, our



language, our heritage, from any outsiders,” making inferences to similar rhetoric previously used by President Trump.²⁸ In 2017, Hari pledged a \$10 billion donation to the U.S.-Mexico border wall and had several online conversations supporting President Trump, as well as conspiracy theories about “deep state activities.”²⁹ Evidence also revealed that James Alex Fields Jr., the perpetrator of the Charlottesville rally murder, as well as Nikolas Cruz, the perpetrator of the Marjory Stoneham-Douglas school shooting, had conversations and posts online about how President Trump would approve of and inspired their violence.³⁰ In alignment with this evidence is a well circulated study indicating statistically significant increases in hate crimes, by 226% in specific cities, where rallies by President Trump were hosted.³¹

The issue of mass shootings and the threat of terrorism in the United States predates the election of President Trump. Hate groups and far-right violence were on the rise before the Trump Administration.³² Additionally, mass shooters and violent extremists have indicated support for democrats as well in the past.³³ However, there has been a jump in crimes with motives and justifications based on anti-immigration, anti-Muslim, and white supremacy rhetoric since 2015. Therefore, understanding current political drivers and rhetoric that can be perceived as aligning with one’s far-right ideologies is critical for CVE stakeholders. If there is a trend of individuals pledging allegiance to President Trump and using the administration to support their violence, then adequate CVE strategies must be in place to sway those individuals away from violence, while still acknowledging their role as integral to their

political leader’s agenda and support base. With major changes in the political climate, the types of interactions and prevalence of far-right extremist content online may also be changing, as it has changed drastically since the pre-2015 timeframe. This research contributes to the most recent literature by addressing the post-2015 era in the United States, where there is much less data on the nature of far-right extremism online, as most perpetrators have been connected to online usage. Further, with the upcoming presidential election, it is more critical than ever to analyze contributing factors leading to rise in violent extremism in order to determine appropriate CVE responses.

Trends on Social Media

The 2019 Global Terrorism Index revealed that far-right terrorism in general is witnessing more individuals becoming broadly aligned with ideologies rather than hard allegiance to any specific groups. This analysis is supported by significant prior literature suggesting the decentralization of groups through modern intelligence and military conflict. Recent literature highlighted that terrorist groups have become largely decentralized organizations with less of a chain of command compared to earlier groups, such as the KKK in the United States, and ISIS globally.³⁴ These findings correspond to other research that indicate that leaderless, decentralized groups are opening the door for the internet and online dialogue to become a critical component for modern-day terrorists. Some authors argue that having leaderless cells and more individualized extremist actors not only makes it harder to track extremists but has also led to the internet becoming the main



means for communication, propaganda sharing, funding, recruitment, and plotting.³⁵ The internet also provides a breeding ground for the introduction and indoctrination of new recruits.³⁶ With decentralized extremist groups and lone actors exercising free range of access to content and communications online, often protected by privacy and free speech rights, there is a critical risk that individuals have a greater independence and lower threshold for operations that beforehand would have been controlled by the chain of command.³⁷ This shift in the nature of terrorism is critical to consider when turning to the question of individuals' interactions online. If extremists are becoming more individualized in their radicalization approach, it is necessary to identify how the internet may be used as a driver for such processes, as interactions, conversations, and the spread of propaganda is much more accessible without any face-to-face interactions with group members and leaders.

However, a large portion of the literature on the role of social media and terrorism has focused on how transnational violent extremist and terrorist groups, such as ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Boko Haram, have been utilizing different sites and platforms.³⁸ A recent study focused on the far-right groups in the United States found that social media played a role in the radicalization process of 90% of violent extremists in 2016 across all ideologies.³⁹ In the case of Islamist-driven extremists, the internet often played a primary role in the dissemination and consumption of content. Yet, for other extremist groups and ideologies, including the far-right, the internet is most often used to supplement face-to-face and group

interactions. The internet, even though being used in a secondary role, was still found to be a direct accelerant of the radicalization process.⁴⁰ Further, the far-right is particularly active online, more so than the far-left, but not more than radical Islamist violent extremists.⁴¹ Between 2005 and 2016, only 9.06% of domestic violent extremists utilized the internet to facilitate an actual plot, suggesting they are utilizing offline methods, such as face-to-face interactions to do so.⁴² The evidence did suggest that of that 9.06%, 11 far-right violent extremists utilized social media to begin a plot, compared to 10 Islamist extremists and only 3 far-left extremists.⁴³

This initial evidence serves to highlight the role that social media and the internet play in keeping far-right movements active in the United States. Although the number of far-right individuals that use social media as a primary means of engaging and consuming content, as well as plotting an attack, remains small, one must not downplay the role of social media in facilitating the radicalization of more violent extremists. One of the major limitations in the current literature is that no similar studies have identified the popular platforms and the nature of the far-right online past 2016. Therefore, studies have not adequately considered the aforementioned cultural and political shifts in American society.

Further, previous work on the far-right prevalence online has named sites such as Kik, LinkedIn, Myspace, Vimeo, and 8chan as popular platforms for far-right content.⁴⁴ However, the trends for popular social media platforms shift very quickly. Since these studies were run in 2012, 2014, and even

2018, the popularity and accessibility of certain platforms has changed. Kik, Google+, and 8chan have since been offline. Further, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Reddit have been steadily decreasing in site traffic and usage since 2018, while platforms such as YouTube and Tik Tok are taking over popularity polls.⁴⁵ This study will seek to contribute to the existing literature to determine the current platforms and sites that are most widely used by far-right extremists in order to inform adequate CVE strategies to fit the current context and trends.

Groupthink and Group Polarization Online

Groupthink and group polarization are two psychosocial theories and frameworks that have occasionally been studied within the phenomenon of terrorism to describe terrorist group decision making and individual behavior. Groupthink refers to how group dynamics can lead decisions to be more extreme than any one person would have decided on their own due to the need to conform, sometimes through fear or desire to fit in. It often leads group behavior to become irrational, dangerous, and based in an “us” vs “them” mentality, similar to how terrorist groups and individuals base their ideology.⁴⁶ Group polarization theory also determines how people’s opinions become more emboldened or neutralized based on group dynamics and interactions with outgroups. Research has been undertaken recently to understand whether these theories apply to online interactions, under the assumption that people are more likely to interact and engage with people who share their belief systems, which could potentially embolden and further radicalize violent extremists towards violence if following traditional groupthink

theory.⁴⁷ This assumes that group polarization can occur when groups are not physically together, but rather conversing and interacting virtually through online platforms.⁴⁸ A recent study analyzed how Twitter interactions in relation to the shooting of late abortion doctor George Tiller emboldened or neutralized individuals’ positions. The study found that interactions between two like-minded individuals and between two individuals from different groups emboldened their positions and group affiliations, suggesting that group polarization theory is occurring online.⁴⁹ There is little rigorous literature, however, past this study analyzing the extent and prevalence of groupthink and group polarization trends online in regard to violent extremism and racial injustices.

Methodology

This study encompassed two qualitative research steps. The first piece of analysis included compiling a database with social media platforms that right-wing extremist content has been found on before, as well as the current popular platforms. In total, the authors compiled a database of 28 platforms and domains where far-right content has been reportedly found based on prior literature (*See Table 3*). After collecting the database of platforms and surface web domains, Open Source Intelligence Techniques (OSINT) were used to collect and determine the current usage of content by far-right extremists. Access to initial conversations were most often gained by utilizing popular hashtags and keywords. These hashtags and keywords stayed relatively consistent when entering a new platform.

The authors began by searching the



words ‘politics,’ ‘deep state,’ ‘civil war,’ ‘race,’ ‘race war,’ ‘white,’ ‘blacks,’ and ‘illegals.’ The content analysis later revealed popular hashtags among users that were used to gain access to extremist content. These hashtags included #Qanon; #WWG1WGA; #EndGame, #GreatAwakening; #BoogalooBois and variations such as #boogaloo2020 and #bigigloo; #2a; #shallnotbeinfringed; #dotr; and #DayoftheRope. Once an extreme comment was found, as determined by the authors, the authors then followed up by exploring that user’s previous comments to determine whether they had a pattern of extremist comments, how long they had been engaging in such rhetoric, and whether they had a wide following. Essentially, finding one piece of content opened the door to a chain, as the authors were then able to trace more followers and users with similar ideological beliefs and violent rhetoric.

Platform	Application Type	Activity Level	Release Date
4chan	Imageboard	High	October 1, 2003
8chan	Imageboard	Offline	October 22, 2013
Ask.fm	Social Networking	Little/No Activity	June 16, 2010
Bitchute	Video Sharing	High	January 3, 2017
Discord	Private Messaging	-----	May 13, 2015
Facebook	Social Networking	Moderate	February 4, 2004
Gab	Microblogging/Social Networking	High	August 15, 2016
Google Plus	Social Networking	Offline	June 28, 2011
iFunny	Photo Sharing	Moderate	April 26, 2011
Instagram	Photo Sharing	Moderate	October 6, 2010
Kik	Private Messaging	-----	October 19, 2010
LinkedIn	Social Networking	Little/No Activity	May 5, 2003
LiveJournal	Personal Blogging	Little/No Activity	April 15, 1999
MySpace	Social Networking	Little/No Activity	August 1, 2003
Paltalk	Private Messaging	-----	June 1998
Parler	Microblogging/Social Networking	High	August 2018
Qposts/Q Alerts	Microblogging	High	November 2017
Reddit	News Aggregation/Microblogging	Moderate	June 23, 2005
Skype	Private Video Chat	-----	August 29, 2003
Surespot	Private Messaging	-----	February 2014
Telegram	Private Messaging	-----	August 14, 2013
TikTok	Video Sharing	Little/No Activity	September 2016
TinyChat	Private Video Chat/Messaging	-----	February 2009
Twitter	Microblogging	Moderate	March 21, 2006
WhatsApp	Private Messaging	-----	May 3, 2009
VK	Social Networking	-----	October 10, 2006
Vimeo	Video Sharing	Moderate	November 2004
YouTube	Video Sharing	Moderate	February 14, 2005

Table 3. Platform descriptions and activity level.



The analysis revealed that the sites were not all equally utilized and appeared to be spread across a spectrum of popularity. The categories used to describe this spectrum of popularity were *Highly Active*, *Moderately Active*, *Little/No Far-Right Activity*, and *Offline*. The criteria used to determine popularity were based on the ease of access to threads via hashtags, volume of negative posts, evidence of extremist content being posted since 2015, evidence of extremist content being posted within the prior week, number of users engaging with the extremist content, evidence of users spreading and sharing extremist propaganda, and whether extremist users had large networks of followers. If the hashtags opened access to several pieces of content, showed evidence of violent extremism content being posted and engaged with for a prolonged period of time, as well as recently, and users had large followings, the platforms were categorized as Highly Active or Moderately Active, depending on the amount of content relative to one another. Platforms that did not show results and were particularly hard to access any content at all, even with extended searchers, were categorized in the Little/No Far-Right Activity, while sites that are no longer running were categorized as Offline.

It is important to note that private chat room applications were not used in this study, as the content analysis was passive and qualitative as to not provoke extremist conversations in order to sway the results of the study. Based upon these limitations, the decision was made not to analyze the following platforms: Discord, Kik, Telegram, WhatsApp, Paltalk, VK (primarily Russian

based and Russian speaking platform), Skype, Surespot, and Tinchat. This left the authors with 20 platforms to analyze for recent far-right activity. Conclusions were drawn to reveal which platforms were no longer popular in the context of far-right extremism, sites that are now offline, as well as the current trending platforms. Samples of far-right users' profiles, propaganda, interactions, and conversations from each of these 20 popular platforms were then collected in order to perform a qualitative content analysis of the data. In total, 208 pieces of content were analyzed in a 4-week time period between June and July 2020. The qualitative content analysis looked at particular patterns in theme, symbols, phrases, words, polarizing effects, and concepts within the texts. The analysis of polarizing effects was of particular importance to this study, as one of the key research questions was to determine if out-group interactions, those interactions with individuals who do not share the same spectrum of beliefs, further polarized and emboldened individuals' initial beliefs.

Results

Platform Usage Analysis

The study found that two platforms formerly considered hotbeds for far-right content now fit into the offline category of the spectrum. 8chan and Google Plus have both gone offline since studies last looked at popular platform usage in 2016. As of August 5, 2019, 8chan was offline after receiving backlash for being connected to at least three high profile violent extremist attacks in 2019.⁵⁰ Patrick Crusius, the 21-year-old perpetrator of the 2019 El Paso Walmart



shooting who killed 22 and injured 26 others, had posted a manifesto style writing to 8chan just moments before the shooting began. The manifesto espoused Crusius' anti-immigrant and anti-Hispanics views. In 2019, the perpetrator of the mass shooting of the mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, which left 51 dead, also had posted an 87-page white nationalist document to 8chan and Twitter before the attack.⁵¹ In April of 2019, a white nationalist manifesto was discovered on 8chan just five minutes before perpetrator John Timothy Earnest opened fire at a Chabad synagogue in Poway, California.⁵² 8chan has since been voluntarily taken offline by its owner after having to testify in front of the House Homeland Security Committee in late 2019.⁵³ Google Plus was shut down on April 2, 2019, due to low user engagement and user security concerns.⁵⁴

Even though the goal of this study was not to analyze content on private messaging applications, the authors did find that Kik was currently downloadable and functioning. In September 2019, there were widespread news reports that Kik was going offline, however, it was later reported that the company had been bought out and still running.⁵⁵ There is a misconception in the CVE community that Kik is no longer a threat, though the authors' findings suggest that Kik is still active and should be analyzed in further works that look at messaging applications. Although the offline platforms limit the channels available to analyze far-right content, it is, however, a significant finding for CVE stakeholders to consider when attempting to push out counter narratives.

Further, five platforms—Ask.fm, LinkedIn, LiveJournal, MySpace, and Tik Tok—did

not present with any pressing concern over far-right content being on their platforms and were categorized as Little/No Far-Right Activity. While Tik Tok was of particular interest, as it has been one of the fastest growing platforms in 2019 and 2020, the content was rather moderate. There is certainly a political side to Tik Tok, namely where users shared videos and comments about their political views and opinions of the upcoming election, but the authors found no evidence of far-right content. This perhaps could be attributed to the fact that Tik Tok is mostly utilized by younger demographics and that younger users may not necessarily have cemented ideological views. This does not mean that Tik Tok will not become an issue in the future, however. The use of the platform by the younger demographics also means that users may be more vulnerable if exposed to extremist content. Tik Tok warrants future research to consider any changes in content and far-right usage in the future. LiveJournal, Myspace, and Ask.fm all had lower traffic in general compared to the rest of the studied platforms and minimal conversations regarding politics at all. The political conversations that were apparent on these sites also remained fairly moderate and particularly professional on LinkedIn.

Five of the platforms—4chan, Bitchute, Gab, Parler, Qpost/Q Alerts—were placed in the High Activity category. Bitchute has flown under the radar of many researchers and CVE stakeholders and was not discussed in any of the previous literature. The platform is a video sharing source that is largely filled with false news articles, conspiracy theories, and far-right propaganda. Like many of the platforms, the videos on Bitchute call for a war against the left. Many videos also



argued that whites are being oppressed, with some content invoking the need to carry on Hitler's legacy and expel all Jews from Germany. Bitchute requires further scrutiny and surveillance to ensure that conversations and propaganda do not escalate to incite real world violence. Bitchute will continue to be one of the most critical online platforms for far-right propaganda, especially as users move away from mainstream platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube due to content moderation guidelines and removal.

4chan was one of the most difficult platforms to learn to navigate, search, and find content on. There is a thread title "Politically Incorrect of /pol/" where thorough analysis did begin to find far-right content and users within the comment sections of images. Unlike social networking platforms though, it was difficult to trace communities, as users are not connected with others and are often posting anonymously to the thread. Without being able to trace the users to any name, group, or find histories of comments, it is a much harder platform to analyze or surveil, despite providing a significant environment for echo chambers of hateful rhetoric and ideologies to be spread.

Surfacing out of 4chan is another highly active online platform known as QAnon, or by its site name, Qalerts. QAnon is a conspiracy theory that has been widely accepted by some public President Trump supporters, as well as far-right violent extremists.⁵⁶ The conspiracy is set in a belief that President Trump is going to bring justice to a highly corrupt government system with undertones of racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, and justified acts of violence.⁵⁷ Not only is QAnon its own popular platform

that is filled with far-right extremist content and material, it is also a widely popular hashtag across other platforms. The QAnon platform was just as full of far-right content as Gab and Parler, if not more. Research on effective counter narratives to combat the plethora of conspiracy theories regarding the government and rights of minorities and interfering must be considered.

The four largest social media platforms globally—Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube—were placed in the Moderately Active category. iFunny, Reddit, and Vimeo were also found to be Moderately Active. iFunny has previously been analyzed as a popular platform, but the authors only found few examples of far-right extremist content on both the main pages and in the conversations section. Far-right content certainly exists on iFunny, but not to the extent that it does on the High Activity platforms. However, of the ten found samples of far-right content on iFunny, all of them suggested that minority groups should be killed or felt a civil war was needed, elucidating the level of aggression that individuals feel towards the groups which their ideologies target. Reddit also appeared to have a moderate amount of far-right extremist content on its platform. Yet, many recent posts revealed frustration with Reddit over recent banning of particular threats that invoke hate speech and racism. It is highly likely that the activity on Reddit could begin to shift to the Little/No Activity category over the next year as far-right and moderate conservatives transition to platforms that do not censor or flag content at all.

Instagram also had moderate levels of far-right content, but even less than its



counterparts on Twitter and Facebook, this may be due to its primary function being photo sharing rather than microblogging or other social networking platforms. There were still users who shared xenophobic views and considered minorities to be threatening to American values. These types of posts in particular led to echo chambers of far-right views, similar to most other platforms. Vimeo and YouTube, both video sharing platforms, had similar levels of far-right propaganda videos largely targeting liberals and calling for a civil conflict within the United States. The key word “libtard” produced the most results with videos of individuals calling for the end of the left movement in America.

Particularly noteworthy was the difficulty finding far-right content on Facebook and Twitter, as they have long been considered hot spots for far-right recruitment, propaganda, and conversations online. While there were thousands of tweets discussing political ideologies, the majority of conversations generally elucidated the current polarization of party lines. Facebook was found to be much more moderate than expected as well. There are many MAGA profiles and supporters, and conservative groups, but these alone do not classify an ideology or individual as extreme. The calls to war against liberals, Muslims, and people of color were not found on Facebook as readily as they were on Gab and Parler, perhaps due to removals and content guidelines imposed by the company, as well as shifts away from using Facebook altogether. However, this could largely be due to limitations in the methodology. Researchers only had personal profiles to work from to access the extremist content on Facebook, which is largely based upon

the users already connected network. By not being already connected in a far-right community on Facebook, access to actual content may have been limited. It is much harder to collect far-right content on the platforms where posts were not public unless connected with that individual. Facebook also has one of the most sweeping content takedown policy of any of the platforms explored. Facebook’s Community Standards directly states that it will remove terrorist activity, organized hate, or any incitement of violence that is deemed credible.⁵⁸ With Facebook working diligently to moderate the content on its platform and removing terrorist activity, the findings of this study could also have been affected.

There is a very transparent shift happening from Facebook and Twitter to Gab and Parler from both moderate conservatives and those with far-right ideologies. The analysis of Twitter in particular revealed many public threads discussing and encouraging individuals to switch to Parler in order to protest against Twitter’s content removal policies. One tweet put out by California Congressman Devin Nunes on June 24, 2020, was retweeting Chuck Ross with the added comment, “Are you on Parler yet?” Although this tweet itself cannot be categorized as far-right content, it reveals a very open and transparent pushback from the right to move away from Twitter and Facebook to sites that emphasize freedom of speech and less censorship. The engagement on this tweet was particularly high, with 1,538 retweets and 5,953 likes. Congressman Nunes continued advocating for the right to leave Twitter in two more tweets (*See Image 1*) in the following days, which both received high interactions.



Congressman Nunes' efforts helped catapult Parler to the #1 ranking social media app available on the Apple Store, overtaking Twitter and Reddit. This is noteworthy as Gab and Parler were already the easiest platforms to access far-right extremist content and have long been a concern by CVE stakeholders for being an echo chamber of alt-right, neo-Nazi, anti-feminist, and other hateful rhetoric. With a drastic jump in engagement, the opportunity for emboldening and further radicalization of vulnerable individuals becomes heightened. In the wake of Congressman Nunes' tweets, some respondents from the left were advocating for others to go to Parler to share their own versions of counter narratives and fight the far-right ideologies. One tweet read "I'm over there and having a field day with all the Trump Supporters. Parler won't censor anything so I can tell them exactly what I think, and they can't do anything about it." This spurred a moderately long chain of responses arguing over free speech, as well as comments from leftists saying they were inspired to move to Parler for the same reason. Perhaps this type of engagement indicates a shift in the American belief on the true threat of far-right extremism, and that both supporters from the right and left side of political spectrum are beginning to understand the true threat of the far-right ideologies rather than simply focusing on Islamist-driven extremism.

Despite being able to analyze which platforms provided the most access to far-right content, it must be noted that the sample size is particularly small, as finding extremist content on the surface web was difficult.

Outside of Gab and Parler, there was much difficulty finding key words and hashtags to gain access to content that pushed the extremist threshold and was not just a political discussion. The difficulty tracing accounts and content raises the question of whether the surface web platforms are actually the hub for extremist content or if private messaging apps and the dark web is truly where the problem lies.

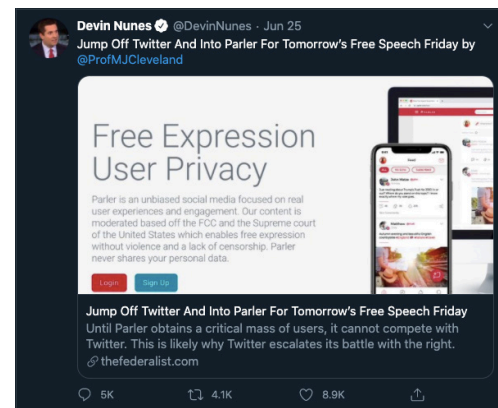
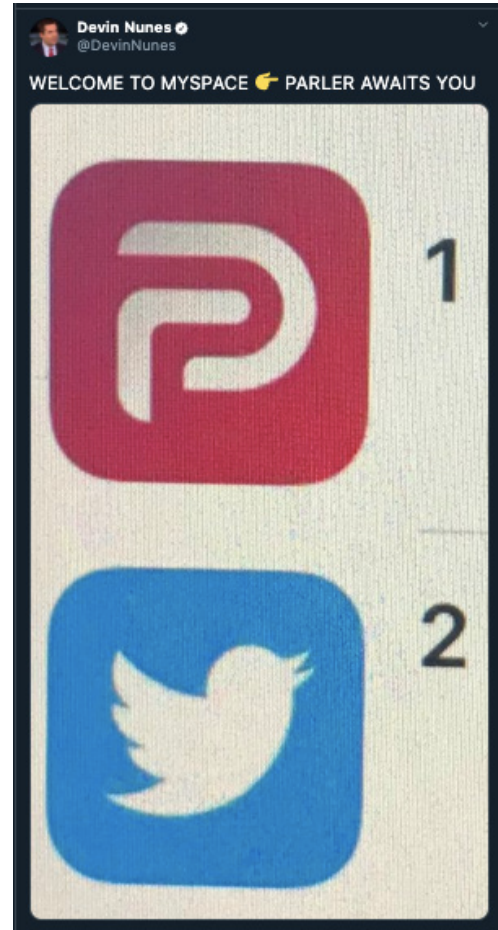
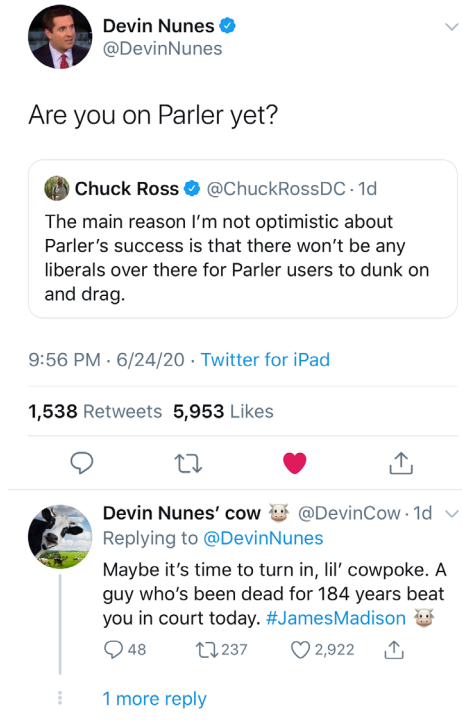


Image 1. Source: @DevinNunes Twitter Account: Congressman Devin Nunes encourages followers to join Parler and reacts when Parler takes over Twitter for the most popular app charts on the Apple Store

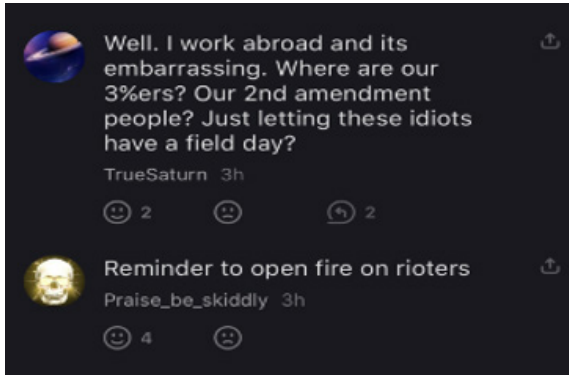


Image 2. Source: iFunny user justifying violent against Black Lives Matter Protesters.



Image 3. Source: Twitter user responding to Philando Castile murder video by implying further violence.

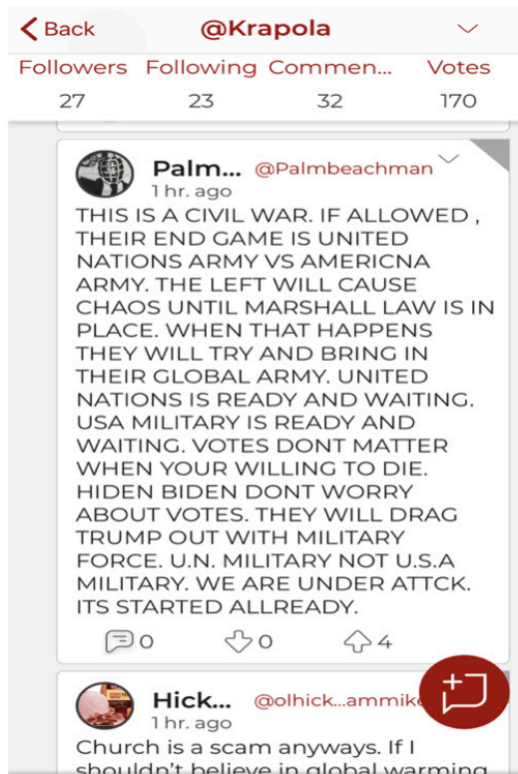
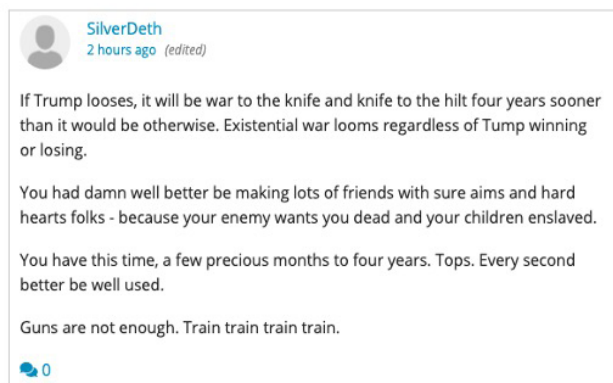


Image 4. Source: Users who believe a civil war is inevitable after the 2020 election and encourage followers to train.



Content Analysis

Tone

One of the most consistent patterns across all of the platforms analyzed were the tones of the far-right messages. Many of the messages were angry and agitated, with very few incidents of progressive conversations that actually had mutual respect for different opinions. Most of the content turned into echo chambers of belittlement and a belief that anyone with remotely liberal views was “stupid,” “psychotic,” “unhinged,” or a “libtard.” Further, there was no fear, but rather a striking display of confidence that the far-right will defeat the left in an inevitable second civil war. These messages were not exclaiming that the far-right could win a war, but that they will win the inevitable war, suggesting a belief that war is a necessary step in winning back their country. This confidence was partnered with tones of patriotic encouragement and a moral duty to prepare and not be afraid of a war. The theme of patriotism was the most obvious and widespread theme found in this analysis. Patriotism was apparent in the tone, word patterns, symbols, and profiles of far-right users.

All of the authors’ findings from iFunny advocated for violence against minority groups. One example on iFunny of the violent and aggressive tones advocated for “opening fire on all rioters” ‘ who were protesting justice for the Black Lives Matter movement (*See Image 2*).

One of the most startling examples of overt aggressive tones was seen in a Tweet in response to the widely circulated video of

the killing of Philando Castile, who was killed by police in front of his girlfriend and 4-year-old daughter. In the video, the young girl worried her mother would be next and asked her not to yell so she wouldn’t get “shouted.” In response to the video, a twitter user exclaimed “Ha. ‘shouted.’ 4 years old. It’s shot dead. They’ll learn soon enough” (*See Image 3*). Although many respondents called out the user for the comment, the comment did receive several retweets and likes, suggesting that there is a degree of public support of violence among some users towards minority groups living in America.

Linguistic Patterns

The aggressive tones, and particularly the theme of patriotism, were further elucidated by patterns in linguistics. The content analysis revealed a widespread belief that America is about to engage in a civil war, largely dependent upon the upcoming election results. The words “civil war,” “war,” “revolution,” “invasion,” “left wing militants,” and an urging for Americans to train for war were repeatedly seen throughout the content (*See Image 4*).

Patterns in speech also revealed that the enemy of this envisioned war is two-fold. There is an argument over the fact that liberals are taking away the right’s freedoms, including freedom of speech and the right to bear arms, which the far-right feels will produce a civil war. There is also a pattern in thinking revealing that there is a perceived race war, where white people are now becoming the oppressed and experiencing a genocide against them (*See Image 5*). Many users are perceiving an invasion of their country by people of color, Chinese people,



and Muslims. One Twitter account stated in their bio, “Whites for Trump wants to Reelect Donald and to remove the Black and Brown people for our Christian White Nation” (see image 6). Another read, “We need to purge America of the inferior races and sent the blacks back to Africa.” Many oppose mass immigration and consider diversity to be a deception that goes against American values. One group that had accounts on Parler, Telegram, and Twitter with the handle @SmashCulturalMarxism reiterated this message. The founding ideology of the SmashCulturalMarxism platform revealed a deep feeling that white people were under attack and that minorities wanted them “gone” from the country. The direct quote from the webpage reads as follows:

We believe that White Europeans have a moral obligation to stand up for their own people and their nations and to oppose this Genocidal system which is destroying us all. We advocate White interests; we advocate Whites exerting those interests and rejecting this state enforced multicultural madness. What we stand for was perfectly stated by Sir Oswald Mosley when he said: “We are fighting for nothing less than a revolution in the spirit of our people. “The revolution in the spirit of our people does not involve violence or intimidation, that is something employed by the left and the state sponsored foot soldiers wearing blue. Our revolution is a revolution of the mind, we seek to awaken our people to their own legitimate interests and to identify the enemies of our people and culture.

This quote reveals both the theme of a need for a revolution and the perception that there is a genocide and oppressive movement

against white people. The most prevalent and seemingly critical component to the far-right ideology is the perception of an anti-white movement and fear that cultural Marxism is a threat to the founding principles of the United States. The far-right is attempting to preserve the American ideals they see as core to their national identity, but at the expense of inciting, provoking, and justifying violence to do so.

Content analysis also revealed a pattern in pronoun usage. Rather than users using the first person “I” when sharing their views, the majority of content used the plural “us” and “we.” There is an “us” versus “them” mentality within the posts, which does fall in line with the theme of war and engaging with some sort of perceived enemy. However, the “us” is of particular importance because it serves to convey a sense of unity and cohesiveness of the far-right. That sense of cohesiveness is not only present in the language and words used by these individuals in their online engagements, but it is also apparent based on the large followings that many of the accounts have. Gab and Parler elucidated that the Conservative party desired to be connected and to communicate with its follower base. Although that in and of itself is not alarming and can lead to productive political dialogue, it also raises concerns over the reach that those with far-right ideologies rather than moderate ideologies can have. Many of the Gab and Parler accounts that were analyzed had thousands of followers. Image 7 provides examples of two accounts that have engaged in and shared extremist content for a continued period of time and have particular high engagement with 10.2k and 7.8k followers, respectively. However, despite having thousands of followers, not

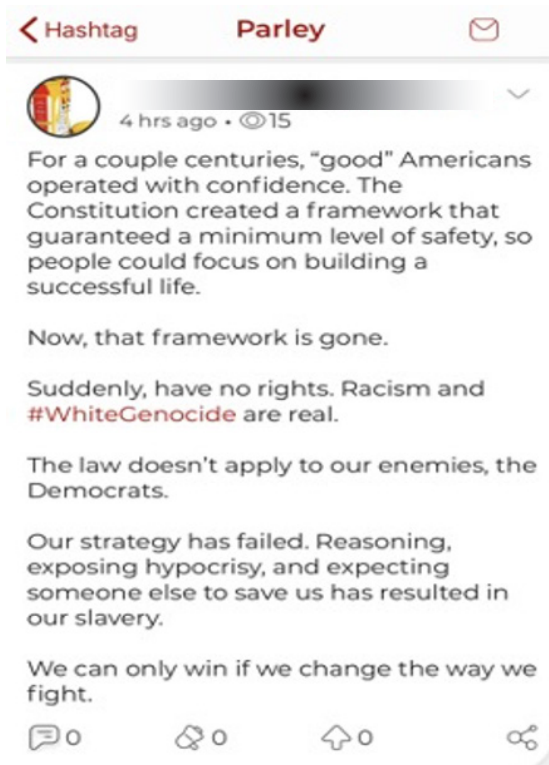


Image 5. Source: Parler user who believes there is a white genocide occurring.



Image 6. Source: Twitter user bio sees President Donald Trump as a leader for their movement against racial minorities.

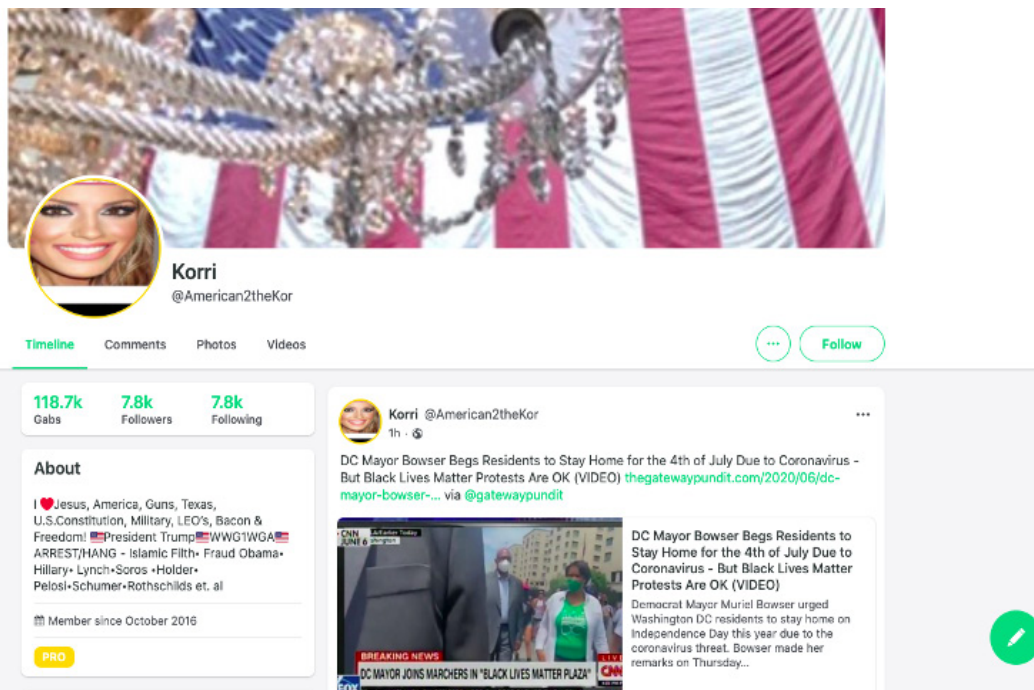
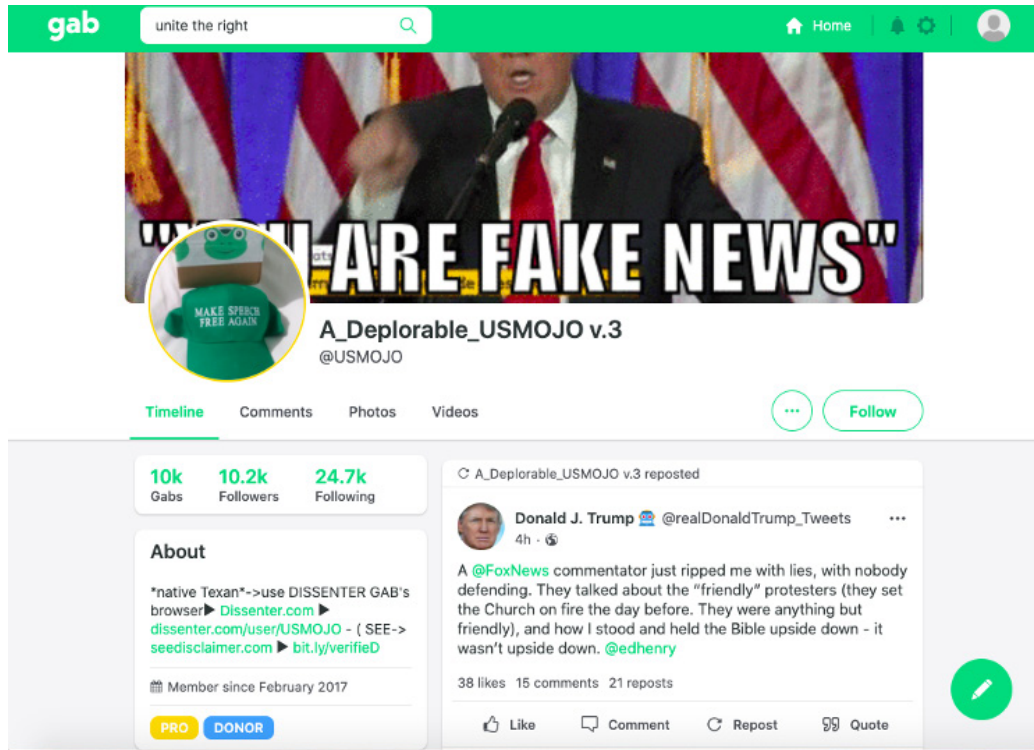


Image 7. Source: Examples of Gab users who have shared far-right content with large followings.



all of these users' posts were getting ample engagement. In line with past research,⁵⁹ the authors' findings also suggest that most people online, violent extremists included, are much more likely to passively consume information and propaganda rather than create and engage in a conversation about it.

Furthermore, many of these quotes and propaganda pieces directly referred to President Trump as a leader for the white power movement. Users went as far to urge violence against Americans if President Trump loses the election. A thread on Gab went so far as to hypothetically plot the best ways to damage American cities if President Trump were to lose the election (*See Image 8*). Although supporting President Trump is not in and of itself breaching the threshold of far-right extremism, it is evident that many of the accounts sampled are inciting a revolution, war, and violence in his name and believe they have President Trump's support to do so. This further supports the evidence that political rhetoric has real-life effects on both being exploited and misconstrued to spread falsehoods rooted in hate and emboldening hatred and hateful ideologies.

Hashtags

Building off of the linguistic patterns, there were also common hashtags that granted access to wider conversations that encompassed far-right content. One of the most popular was the #QAnon hashtag found on Gab, Vimeo, YouTube, Parler, Bitchute, and Twitter, with many users pledging their allegiance to "Q," as well as sharing the information dropped by the anonymous dealer. The QAnon conspiracy theorist also coined another popular hashtag

#WWG1WGA, meaning, "Where We Go One We Go All." Q will sometimes end posts with this hashtag, which has since been largely attached to far-right users' profiles and posts. It is meant to inspire individuals to not give up the fight they are seeking.

#EndGame and #GreatAwakening were also popular hashtags to symbolize that America was about to enter the height of political polarization and contention and that conflict and change were coming. Hashtags were much harder to track and use to gain access to far-right content than expected. Many of the hashtags that could be easily connected to far-right ideologies were often spammed in order to flush out the extremist messages in an attempt to counter them. Spamming of popular far-right hashtags included #whitelivesmatter and #alllivesmatter, particularly heavy in the wake of the George Floyd protests. The hashtags that would have been used to push back against the Black Lives Matter protests and movement online were flooded out with K-pop music videos and tweets. This was a popular way of protesting back against the rising wave of far-right ideologies sweeping across the U.S., although it can make true surveilling and analyses more difficult.

The protests that swept the nation also highlighted a new movement that is surfacing online and on the streets. The boogaloo bois have already been connected to at least one murder and two thwarted plots. The movement does not seem to be slowing down anytime soon. The hashtag #boogaloo and its variations #boogaloo2020 and #bigigloo produced accounts, videos, and chains of conversations on most platforms, was particularly popular on Gab, Bitchute, and

Parler. Facebook and Instagram removed the “boogaloo” content and banned its network, taking down 220 Facebook accounts and 95 Instagram accounts on June 30, 2020.⁶⁰

Some users openly associate boogaloo as an imminent tipping point of civil war and one that they are training and are prepared for (*See Image 9*). The boogaloo movement is one of the most pressing security concerns for CVE stakeholders and law enforcement, as the followers already consider the left and the government to be its targets. The boogaloo followers can be best categorized as accelerationists who want to provoke conflict and chaos. Many followers have also exclaimed that they have or are capable of obtaining masses of weapons. The threat over more gun control in America is one of the driving factors of the boogaloo movement. Boogaloo bois fear that they are going to have their right to bear arms taken away by liberal politicians and policies. The ideology then suggests that a “boogaloo” will start if weapons are taken away from gun holders. The movement, however, is quickly turning from a conversation about gun rights and weapons into an armed militia-like movement, as seen through the examples of the individuals protesting while heavily armed in recent days.

Symbols

The patterns also largely reflected those that are representative of America and its founding principles. Many of the memes that were pushed out by far-right users include bald eagles, military personnel, weapons, the American flag, and the Confederate flag, further emphasizing the patriotism that is critical to the identity of many far-right

extremists (*See Image 10*). Memes were also very readily used by leftists who were attempting to counter or discredit far-right content. The content analysis revealed several memes mocking President Trump and his followers, including one of a snowflake wearing a red MAGA hat. Memes often received a high level of engagement across platforms and across ideologies, perhaps due to their relatability within one’s own group. Memes were used in comment sections and as an original post.

The American flag was the most popular symbol throughout all platforms and was found in the majority of the personal accounts that were analyzed. Many users, both moderate conservatives and the far-right, have been known to put American flags in their bios and in content to show their patriotism. The memes also often contained images of soldiers and weapons in a perceived effort to show strength and preparedness for the ever-coming civil war against liberals and minorities within the United States. Red X’s in users’ profiles have also commonly been attributed to the conservative party on Twitter. However, it can be contended that many of the users on Gab and Parler with the red X’s have at least some comments and threads that shift towards violent extremism rather than moderate or traditional conservative values. The memes generally encompassed many elements of the themes that were discussed earlier, including a call for war, aggression, patriotism, and an “us” versus “them” mentality. Examples of popular images and memes shown are shown in Image 10 below.



Polarization Effects

As previously described, group polarization theory often leads to an “us” versus “them” mentality. This was one of the most apparent patterns in the data analyzed as well. The far-right has collective enemies that are seen as a threat, while also heavily uniting themselves online to share their hate further. There is also large evidence of groupthink dynamics occurring online. When one individual hints towards violence, it often leads to others arguing for even further damage. This was best elucidated by the thread on Gab in Image 9. The thread started with a comment about a potential attack against infrastructure in the United States if President Trump loses the election. The next user’s comment escalated that threat to guerrilla warfare. The following user comment escalated it to identifying more bridges to bomb and placing strategic aircraft crashes. Then, the original poster commented back, reporting on great tactics used in the first civil war and introduced the option for ammonium nitrate. The users rapidly went down an escalating echo chamber, only making their potential plots more and more dangerous and risky. The ideas became more extreme than the original comment posted, and were influenced by others’ agreement and escalation, which is the dangerous essence of groupthink.

The lack of productive and tolerant conversations between individuals of different parties also revealed the group polarization seems to be occurring online as well. This is best evidenced by the need for conservatives to completely shift platforms to Gab, Parler, and Bitchute from Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, often citing a lack of freedom of speech or out of a desire to not

have to engage in conversations with liberals or minorities. Particular conversations analyzed revealed that most outgroup conversations led to users belittling and insulting each other and their parties, rather than attempting to tolerate other viewpoints. Especially on Twitter, users would reply with a sarcastic meme rather than attempting to engage in bipartisan or counternarrative conversations. On other sites, such as Gab, Parler, Bitchute, and 4chan, outgroup users were often not even welcome to the conversation, only further concluding that groupthink and group polarization theory are occurring within far-right extremism online.

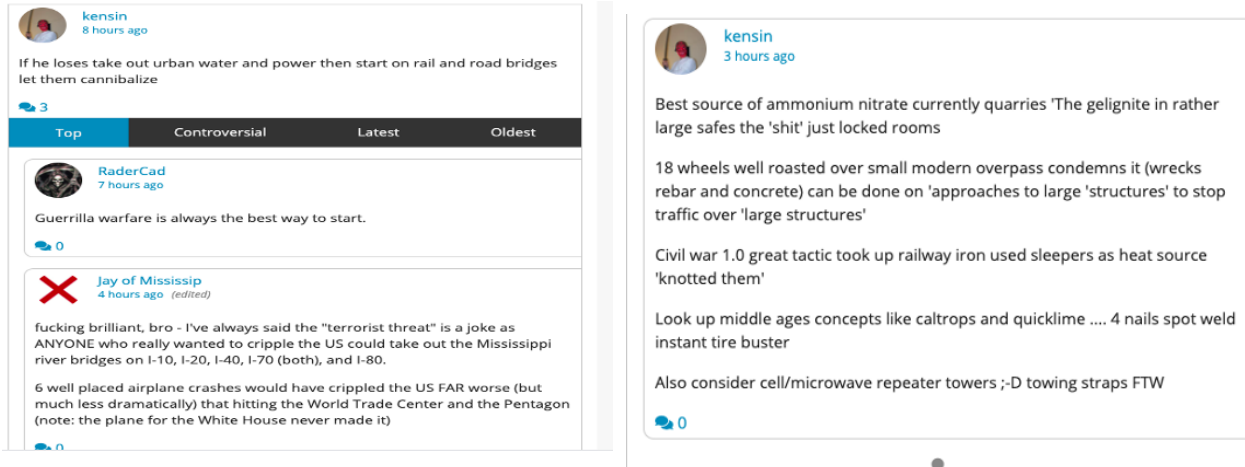


Image 8. Source: Example of Gab users discussing ways to plot revenge if Trump loses the 2020 election.

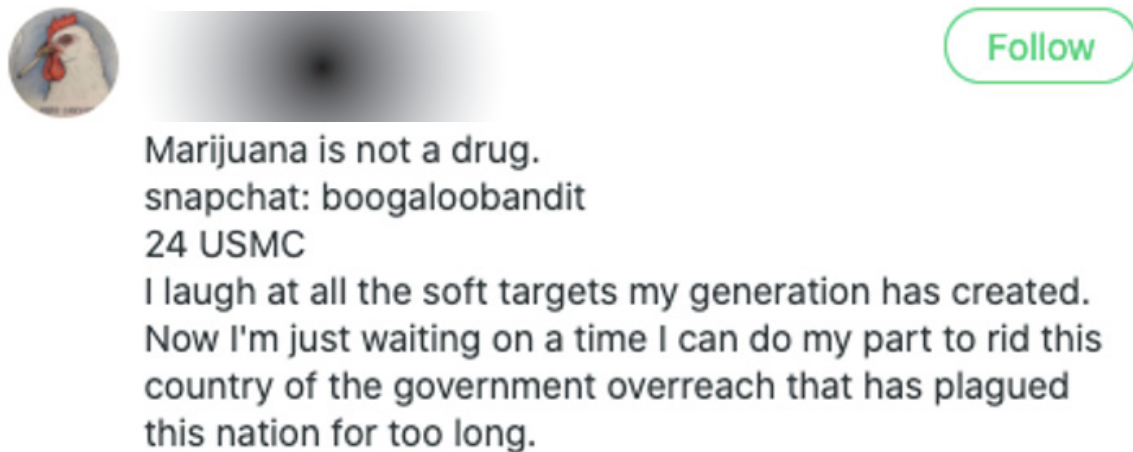


Image 9: Source: Gab user found searching with keyword “boogaloo.” The bio identifies specific targets of the movement.

Good Night, Patriots...Sleep Well!



Freedom has never been in better hands.



Image 10. Source: Gab and Parler: Examples of well circulated memes by Parler and Gab users.

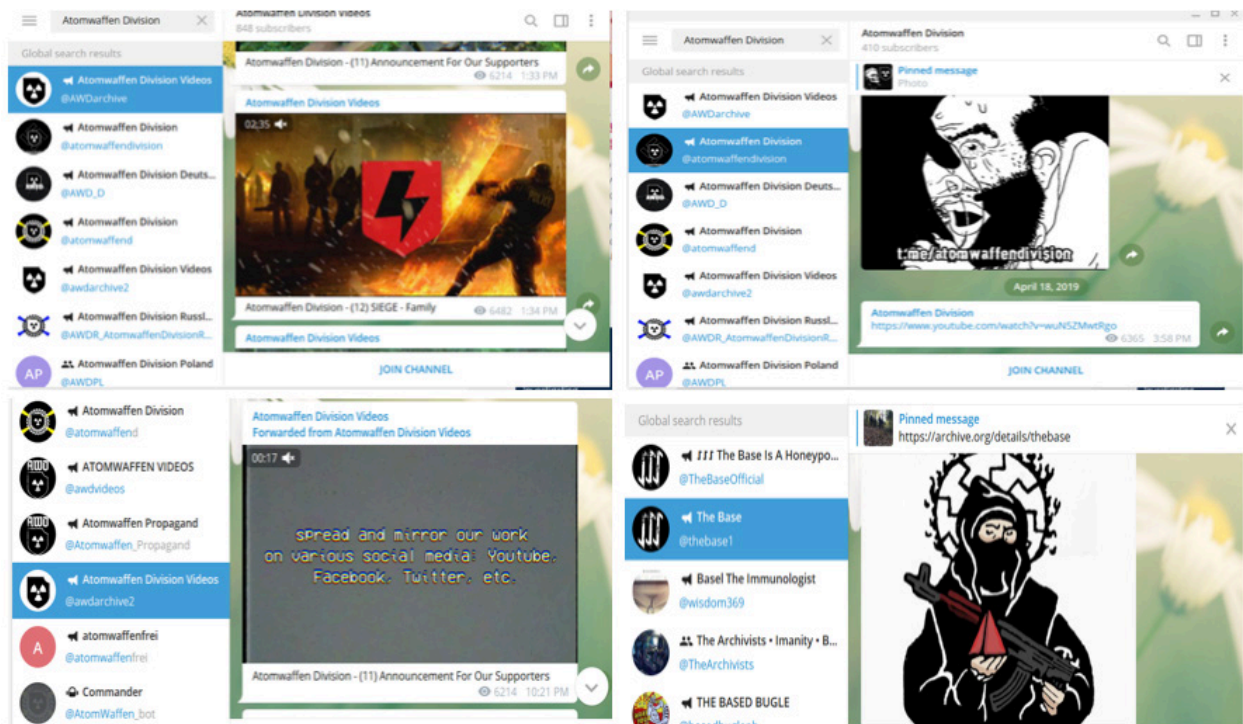


Limitations

Despite many useful findings for CVE stakeholders, there are limitations to consider. This study utilized a small sample size and it was hard to find content on many of the platforms, suggesting that the surface web may not hold the most dangerous conversations but rather the dark web platforms should be analyzed. The content analysis is also a qualitative method and does not use numerical data to draw any conclusions about potential effects that the online activity has on actual crimes by violent extremists. The database created is also certainly not a complete list of platforms and sites and it is nearly impossible to find all of them. There are more out there that need just as much analysis to determine the significance they provide within the far-right movement. In particular, future studies should consider analyzing private chat room platforms, as they offer much more protection and privacy than public forums and social media networks for far-right users and content to hide. Kik should be explored further, as it has long been considered a dangerous hotspot for child exploitation and violent extremism. The app has very little security protocols and users do not have any way of verifying who they are chatting with.

Lastly, the authors did not consider content on Telegram and the dark web. As part of a larger study on Telegram and dark web platforms, the authors have identified the presence of hundreds of channels encompassing different strands of the far-right movement, namely from material and channels dedicated to far-right rhetoric to openly aligning and expressing support for far-right and right-wing violent extremist and

terrorist groups.⁵⁹ As a counterreaction to the de-platforming of their content on Twitter, Facebook and other mainstream social media platforms, the authors also found Telegram to be a platform for far-right activists to engage in private and individual recruitment, content archiving, and disbursement of short messages to different channels. The ability for recruiters to connect with and groom vulnerable teenagers in such platforms is rampant and should be considered in future research.⁶⁰ Additionally, the level of far-right content on the dark web is exponentially greater than that available on the surface web and further research is warranted to understand the pressing threat on other domains to fully target the wide range of platforms available online.



Source: Author: Right-Wing Extremist Channels on Telegram



Discussion and Conclusion

The era when the United States and Americans considered Islamist-driven violent extremism to be the most pressing security concern is beginning to shift to focus on the very real emboldening of the far-right movement. At the current rate, hate crimes and far-right based violent crimes are reaching heights that have not been seen since the 70s and 80s. With the political climate in the United States becoming more contested, domestic violent extremism has been even more explicated in the mainstream media and social media platforms. Now that it is a recognized danger, the necessary steps must be taken to target the dangers of far-right rhetoric and far-right violent extremism.

This study ultimately found many changes in the nature of the far-right online content and activities since the last major and significant studies on the topic.⁶¹ The popularity of particular platforms and the rise of new ones changes rapidly. The United States is witnessing another one of those changes as masses of the far-right, as well as moderate conservatives, move away from sites that have content and user guidelines to less monitored platforms, such as Bitchute, 4chan, Gab and Parler. Researchers and CVE stakeholders must shift with this trend. This shift also poses real challenges for those who attempt to enter the conversation with counternarratives. These platforms represent drastic echo chambers with no desire for progressive outgroup conversation, to the point that effective counternarratives may be difficult to inject if not tailored correctly.

Further, the outgroup conversations witnessed on even the moderate platforms

did not suggest that outgroup conversations will have a positive effect, especially if too aggressively liberal in their message approach. However, the themes that were elucidated in the content analysis—war, patriotism, anger—can be utilized within counternarrative strategies. The far-right believes they are fighting for their country and its founding values. If messages were to target individuals with patriotic undertones, understanding their anger but trying to shift it to tolerance, explaining how patriotism can be more than violence towards minorities and liberals, they may be more effective in producing a deradicalizing effect. The levels of groupthink and group polarization also suggest that, to the extent possible, the counternarratives must come from within one's own group. Leaders within the conservative party and respected community leaders must be utilized to deradicalize and curve the emboldening of the far-right. The messages also need to be as individually tailored as possible. With groupthink seeming to occur online, targeting large threads and conversations rather than individuals may only lead to a firing squad of backlash and disapproval with every comment further emboldening the next. Threads and messages to individuals remove the likelihood of groupthink occurring.

As seen in the content analysis, many of the far-right users pledged a type of allegiance to President Trump and saw him as a leader of the white power movement. The current political climate of any state plays a role in polarization and the state of society. Although the assumption that the United States is headed towards an inevitable civil war may not be the case, it is certainly headed down a dangerous path. Politicalians, law



enforcement personnel, tech companies, and CVE experts must collaborate to produce the most effective counter narratives, without imposing more heavy content restrictions. This may mean counternarratives that convince users that supporting the current administration does not equate to violence and can be done peacefully. A perception by the far-right that their freedom of speech is becoming more censored will only add fuel to the fire. Producing targeted counter narratives and engaging with these emboldened and radicalized individuals online must be implemented as a pillar of CVE strategy in order to begin to curb the upwards trends in violence before conflict does occur.

A drastic shift in far-right extremist content and presence online is happening in real time, as social media platforms crackdown on such content and censorship seems to be further outraging the far-right, arguably making the problem far worse. Perhaps, the most effective means to counter these messages is not full censorship but attempting to promote the values so desperately innate to the far-right ideology, which includes freedom of speech. Freedom of speech works for CVE stakeholders just as well and gives an avenue to engage in the far-right content with targeted approaches to minimize the likelihood of violence. Furthermore, more research is warranted to better understand the effects of takedown efforts by mainstream social media platforms, including their impact on critical social media research as it relates to extreme far-right speech and rhetoric and its follower base, and how the “deplatformed” content and material transitions to dark corners of the internet.⁶²

A number of organizations have invested in

initiatives that target far-right and right-wing extremism online. One such method includes the “Redirect Method.”⁶³ Applied in the context of both militant jihadi and far-right and right wing extremist content, the method relies on Google ads to redirect online users to content and material that undermines extremist narratives.⁶⁴ The redirect method is especially useful as it seeks to interrupt the process of radicalization at an early stage, and has proven a good alternative to take-down and policing extremist content online.⁶⁵ Equally important, as the recent research suggests, redirect method “avoids taking decisions based on the nature of the content.”⁶⁶ In addition to significant take-down efforts implemented on its platforms in recent years,⁶⁷ Facebook ads have also made it possible for advertisers and CT and P/CVE research institutions to target users interested in militant jihadi and far-right extremist content online.⁶⁸ Some online intervention programs have paired their online communications with target audience(s) such as sociologists, psychologists, imams, and the “formers” offline.⁶⁹

While noble and well intentioned, redirect methods and other campaigns that rely on the exploitation of keyword search technology and search engines have proven to be largely successful at connecting target audience with the message (reach), with limited success in discerning the impact of the message. In terms of content, redirect methods applies advertising tools and internet channels that mostly direct to content that discuss religion or challenge extremist ideologies. While important, the method may not be [adequately] receptive to constantly evolving VE extremist content and recruitment efforts (e.g. content not being recent) and



factors other than ideology and religion that render openness to the solutions offered by violent extremist groups. Equally important, measurement and evaluations through redirect methods underscore engagement and fall short of actually measuring impact.⁷⁰

To counter the appeal of Islamist and right-wing groups online, including their affiliated and unaffiliated supporters, the “Strategic Narrative Disruption (SND)” model suggests that lessons might be taken from traditional advertising to guide curious users toward a specific outcome by *affirming their reality, encouraging exploration, and offering socially productive outlets and deradicalization services at the end of their journey*.⁷¹ The method will also entail serving our target audiences incremental doses of messages that we would want them to resist, allowing them to develop counterarguments on their own.⁷² Rather than immediately offering users alternate content or counseling, as with the Redirect Method, we give them a space to explore and grow; a space that accepts their line of questioning and uses repetition and affirmation to reinforce that it is the conclusion of violence that is wrong. In line with recent research, the proposed model considers the fact that resilience to extremist narratives could not be reduced to countering extremist narrative alone; rather, we must create safe spaces for the young and vulnerable to extremist rhetoric to engage with questions and concerns that are harnessed by violent extremist narratives. In fact, as stressed in recent research, “failure to address criticisms of the prevailing social order [e.g. claims of unjust social practices, social/institutional discrimination, government repressive measures, etc.] reduces resilience to an uncritical acceptance

of society as it is.”⁷³



Samantha Walther

Sam was the Program Coordinator for the Institute for Women’s Leadership at Nichols College, with previous experience researching policy and criminal justice issues at domestic and international levels. Sam received a Bachelor of Arts in Government from Hamilton College in 2018 and a Masters of Science in Counterterrorism from Nichols College in 2020. Previous research topics include a field study in Sweden on criminal justice reform and immigration, civil liberties violations of Muslim-Americans since 9/11, as well as work on the Nuremberg Trials and human rights which was awarded the 2017 Raphael Lemkin Essay Prize on the Practice of Genocide. At ACTRI, Sam researches the role of women in right-wing extremist groups and movements, with a comparative focus lens on the role of women in both right-wing and Islamist groups. She also explores the characteristics and the trends of the far-right presence online through the lens of group polarization theory.

Endnotes

- 1 The terms “far-right” and “right-wing” extremism are often conflated. The authors define far-right extremism as a rhetoric that promotes authoritarianism, populism, nativism, etc., and that draws heavily on the rhetoric of right-wing extremist organizations (e.g. anti-immigrant, anti-refugee, etc.), though not necessarily promoting violence. A number of far-right groups flirt with right-wing extremist ideologies (e.g. white supremacist driven), though not necessarily explicitly identifying themselves as such. Right-wing violent extremism or terrorism, on the other hand, driven by right-wing and far-right rhetoric, is defined as acts of violence that are ethnically or radically motivated, such as white supremacist and anti-government attacks. See, for example, Jones, “The rise of far-right extremism in the United States,” 2018.
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- 10 Anti-Defamation League, “Extreme Right/Radical Right,” n.d.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Institute for Economics & Peace, “Global Terrorism Index,” 2019.
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- 14 Institute for Economics & Peace, “Global Terrorism Index,” 2019.
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- 19 Kassie, “Anatomy of Hate,” 2020.
- 20 Gonzales, “Florida Man Who Mailed,” 2019.
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- 25 Perlstein, “I thought I understood the American Right,” 2017.

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27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Hasan, "Here is a list," 2018.
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36 Ward, "Do terrorist groups really die," 2018.
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38 Speckhard and Shajkovci, "Is ISIS still alive and well on the internet," 2019.
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40 Ibid.
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42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 University of Maryland START, "The Use of Social Media," 2018; Dean, Bell & Newman, "The dark side of social media," 2012; Marcu & Balteanu, "Social media- a real source," 2014.
45 Perrin & Anderson, "A share of U.S. adults," 2019.
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47 Yardi & Boyd, "Dynamic debates," 2010.
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64 Rogers, "Deplatforming: Following extreme Internet celebrities to Telegram and alternative social media," 2020.
65 Greer & Ramalingam, "The search for extremism: Deploying the redirect method," 2020.
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- 67 MacFarquhar, “White extremism faces a subversive foe online: Google ads,” 2019.
- 68 See also page 12, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/practical-guide-to-first-rule-of-ctcve>
- 69 Tech Against Terrorism. “Analysis: ISIS Use of Smaller Platforms and the DWeb to Share Terrorist Content.”
- 70 Speckhard & Shajkovci, “Engaging English-speaking Facebook users in an anti-ISIS awareness campaign,” 2018.
- 71 Frenett & Dow, “One-to-one online interventions—A pilot CVE methodology,” 2015.
- 72 See for example <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/practical-guide-to-first-rule-of-ctcve>
- 73 The authors refer to the targeting model being developed by the American Counterterrorism Targeting and Resilience Institute (ACTRI). The strategy is described as “attitude inoculation,” whereby target audiences are exposed to small arguments and messages to counter their position. Rooted in social psychology, and with application in persuasion theory within the field of communication, the premise of the strategy is to engage committed individuals (ISIS, al Shabaab ideology) just enough to get their reactions but not make them feel as though overwhelmed or attacked. Mild and minor doses of messages (anti-ISIS) may stimulate target audiences to reflect on counter arguments and build their resistance against persuasion (prevent persuasion). For research on the strategies to boost resistance to persuasion vis-à-vis violent extremist groups see Braddock, Weaponized words: The strategic role of persuasion in violent radicalization and counter-radicalization,” 2020. For applications in other fields, see McGraw-Hill, Botvin, Schinke & Orlandi, “School-based health promotion: Substance abuse and sexual behavior,” 1995.
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