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THESIS

TROLLS OR THREATS?
CHALLENGES OF ALT-RIGHT EXTREMISM
TO LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

by

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September 2020

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13. ABSTRACT (maximum 200 words)

The alt-right subculture is a relatively new component of online right-wing extremism. Because it is dissimilar from older white nationalist movements and has a perplexing style of communication, the media and public discourse incoherently and inconsistently frame the movement. Due to a lack of consistent background information on the movement, local law enforcement executives have found themselves underprepared for alt-right gatherings in their jurisdictions. This thesis provides agencies with guidance on the alt-right, including a discussion of existing theories of recruitment, self-recruitment, and the acerbic culture. The thesis also provides a comparative case study of mass casualty incidents perpetrated by individuals who openly espoused ideologies linked to the alt-right and movements with significant overlap, such as the manosphere. Finally, based on the theoretical and case study comparative analyses, this thesis concludes that although the movement's popularity is declining, the alt-right remains a threat to homeland security and the ideologies behind it are likely to subsist under another name.

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TROLLS OR THREATS? CHALLENGES OF ALT-RIGHT EXTREMISM TO LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The alt-right subculture is a relatively new component of online right-wing extremism. Because it is dissimilar from older white nationalist movements and has a perplexing style of communication, the media and public discourse incoherently and inconsistently frame the movement. Due to a lack of consistent background information on the movement, local law enforcement executives have found themselves underprepared for alt-right gatherings in their jurisdictions. This thesis provides agencies with guidance on the alt-right, including a discussion of existing theories of recruitment, self-recruitment, and the acerbic culture. The thesis also provides a comparative case study of mass casualty incidents perpetrated by individuals who openly espoused ideologies linked to the alt-right and movements with significant overlap, such as the manosphere. Finally, based on the theoretical and case study comparative analyses, this thesis concludes that although the movement's popularity is declining, the alt-right remains a threat to homeland security and the ideologies behind it are likely to subsist under another name.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ENR	European New Right
GI	*Generation Identitaire* (Generation Identity)
incel	involuntary celibate
KKK	Ku Klux Klan
MCI	mass casualty incident
SPLC	Southern Poverty Law Center

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The term *alt-right* signifies a myriad of ideas and actions, from baffling online discourse to white supremacist violence. The alt-right is unlike political movements of the past, as it lacks any identifiable formal structure, leadership, or goals.[1] Individuals who self-identify as alt-right—or who are linked through the movement based on public participation in its events—have a spectrum of beliefs that range from opposition to political correctness to white supremacism. Law enforcement executives tasked with policing gatherings of alt-right personalities have found themselves unprepared for the events, which attract protesters and counterprotesters and often turn chaotic. This thesis provides background on the alt-right for local law enforcement and a discussion of the extent of the threat posed by the group.

Although some in the media dismiss the alt-right as a white supremacist movement or a modern-day Ku Klux Klan, the reality is more complicated.[2] Few in the alt-right refer to these movements as inspiration and many have never even heard of them.[3] The alt-right does contain trace elements of historical white supremacist movements, but initially it was more closely linked to alternative conservative movements such as paleoconservatism and foreign anti-immigrant movements such as the European New Right.[4]

The term alt-right has its roots in a 2008 speech by paleoconservative Paul Gottfried, who lamented his movement's failure to gain power and warned of an "alternative right" coming to prominence.[5] Neo-Nazi Richard Spencer picked up the term and began using it in online magazines to represent ideals counter to traditional

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[1] George Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 12.

[2] See, for example, John Daniszewski, "Writing about the 'Alt-Right,'" *Behind the News* (blog), November 28, 2016, https://blog.ap.org/behind-the-news/writing-about-the-alt-right.

[3] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 80.

[4] Joseph A. Scotchie, *The Paleoconservatives: New Voices of the Old Right* (Abingdon-on-Thames, England: Routledge, 2017), 1; Hawley, 29.

[5] Scotchie, 1; Hawley, 29.

conservatism.[6] Although some references were of white nationalism, others referred to libertarian, paleoconservative, and counter-conservative ideals.[7] Alt-right articles were written intellectually, in some cases defending white nationalist ideals without the hate and vitriol of older movements.[8] While the term faded from prominence in 2013, it was resurrected online two years later in the midst of the 2016 presidential election season.

An aggregation of disconnected ideas emerged with the alt-right label. This second version of the alt-right presented itself on social media without any attempt at intellectual discussion.[9] It became an anonymous, social-media-driven group that aligned with other movements with differing grievances but similar strategies, such as the anti-feminist manosphere, the anti-immigrant European Identitarian movement, and a subculture of trolling (which means intentionally derailing online discussions) that was prominent on internet sites like 4chan. In addition, the alt-right saw a surge in popularity from individuals who agreed with some tenets—such as anti-political correctness—without adopting white nationalism beliefs. In academia, this group is known as the alt-lite, and includes members such as Milo Yiannopoulos—that is, some of the few individuals who publicly supported the alt-right.

As an anonymous group, the alt-right does little recruitment in the traditional sense of the word. Borrowing from domestic and international extremist groups, the alt-right instead pushes its material in a format familiar to young millennials: by embedding irony and humor into its material, which makes hateful content more palatable. By adapting unique styles only familiar to the in-group, the alt-right draws in curious outsiders looking for a sense of group membership.

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[6] Matthew N. Lyons, *Ctrl-Alt-Delete: The Origins and Ideology of the Alternative Right* (Somerville, MA: Political Research Associates, 2017), 4, https://www.politicalresearch.org/2017/01/20/ctrl-alt-delete-report-on-the-alternative-right#sthash.CL0l7E2e.dpbs.

[7] Lyons, 4.

[8] Hawley, 57; Lyons, 4.

[9] Andrew Anglin, "A Normie's Guide to the Alt-Right," Daily Stormer, August 31, 2016, https://dailystormer.su/a-normies-guide-to-the-alt-right/.

Following another trend of extremist groups, the alt-right uses cultural icons of the internet to push its material into the mainstream, freely exchanging offensive memes (images or content that spreads virally between a population) with each other and encouraging followers to create their own spins. Through memetic warfare, in which memes are used as weapons of information warfare against an enemy—typically the out-group and especially the media—the alt-right attempts to push its memes into public discourse, create controversy, and thus invite mainstream attention that can draw in disaffected individuals.

As an exception to the rule, some organizations in the alt-right do maintain identifiable leadership and conduct recruitment drives. For one, the American Identity Movement—formerly known as Identity Evropa—maintains an organizational structure and has placed recruitment flyers in public places such as college campuses. This visibility has resulted in expected negative attention as public officials decried the flyers, but has fed into the alt-right's tactic of using negative attention to recruit more disaffected individuals.

As a loose collection of ideologies, an aggrieved individual faces many potential entry points into the alt-right; potential members may be upset about a recent job loss, relationship breakup, immigration, or political correctness. Coopting a term from the movie *The Matrix*, the alt-right identifies someone who has come to agree with one of its tenets as taking the "red pill," whether or not that person actually knows of the alt-right.[10]

Although most keep their angry banter confined to social media, some members of the alt-right have committed mass casualty incidents (MCIs), announcing their intentions on social media in advance. This thesis conducts a comparative case study of six MCIs perpetrated by individuals with alt-right affiliations, and concludes the following:

- Four of the six attackers were millennial males.

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[10] In the movie *The Matrix*, a character is given a choice of taking a blue pill, which will cause him to live a delusional but contented life, or a red pill, which signifies his choice to accept truth, whether pleasant or not. See Debbie Ging, "Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere," *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 4 (October 2019): 640, https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X17706401.

- Four of the six attackers announced their intentions on social media preceding the attacks.

- Four of the six attacks were motivated by anti-immigration beliefs, one by anti-feminist beliefs, and one in response to the proposed removal of a Confederate statue.

- Five of the six attackers maintained profiles on mainstream social media sites. Of these five, four contained potential warning signs of radicalization but lacked actionable information to trigger intervention that might have prevented the attack.

- Five of the six attackers met all three cognitive traits theorized by Luke Munn as meeting the "alt-right pipeline" to radicalization.[11]

- All four of the millennial attackers surrendered to police after the attacks—in some cases, despite claiming they would not go down without a fight—while the two older attackers committed suicide or battled with police.

This research suggests that the alt-right poses a threat to homeland security. The alt-right's alliances with similar digital movements and international extremist organizations provide many entry points for disaffected individuals. The alt-right's communication style is sarcastic and breaks every moral boundary of offensiveness. The alt-right encourages followers to view the out-group—which could be immigrants, women, or any other group a particular person has a grievance with—as apolitical objects. Alt-right individuals have committed five MCIs in the United States; at least four of the attackers targeted a group with which they held a grievance and used a tactic known as

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[11] Hawley, 24, 138; Luke Munn, "Alt-Right Pipeline: Individual Journeys to Extremism Online," *First Monday* 24, no. 6 (June 1, 2019), https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v24i6.10108.

"gamification" of terror to treat their attack as a first-person video game.[12] Although the popularity of the alt-right appears to be declining, the ideologies behind its attacks will not go away, and aggrieved individuals may likely find another online movement in which to air their grievances.

This thesis concludes with five recommendations for local law enforcement:

- Hire and train culturally literate intelligence analysts who are familiar with digital subcultures.

- Be aware of a potential contagion effect with MCIs.

- Be alert for lightning rod events.

- Be aware of methods of recruitment among some alt-right factions—particularly, anti-immigrant groups like the American Identity Movement.

- Understand the traits of the extremist-troll boundary and attempt to identify individuals who may be nudged along the alt-right pipeline to extremism.

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[12] Jason Burke, "The Age of Selfie Jihad: How Evolving Media Technology Is Changing Terrorism," *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 11 (November 2016), https://www.ctc.usma.edu/the-age-of-selfie-jihad-how-evolving-media-technology-is-changing-terrorism/.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Right-wing extremism—a broad term referring to white supremacist, anti-government, and other single-issue movements—has been responsible for more deaths than Islamic terrorism on United States soil since September 11, 2001.[1] Since 2018, for example, right-wing extremists unaffiliated with a formal organization have been responsible for eight attacks resulting in forty-two fatalities.[2] Excluding one domestic violence attack, post-incident investigations reveal that six of the remaining seven attackers had an online presence through which they espoused misogynist or racist beliefs.[3] Despite the rising threat from online right-wing extremism, law enforcement executives tasked with policing right-wing gatherings have found themselves understaffed and underprepared for the events, which are swarmed by protesters and counterprotesters and often turn chaotic.[4] In such cases, experienced law enforcement executives had little actionable information before throngs of extremists descended on their jurisdictions.

In the 2010s, right-wing extremist groups shifted from congregating in person to congregating on social media. The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) rallies of the twentieth century have been replaced by social media echo chambers, where loosely connected individuals trade antagonistic memes among themselves.[5] This shift is in line with a move toward a "leaderless resistance" philosophy—the preference for loosely organized groups over

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[1] Peter Bergen et al., "Part IV. What Is the Threat to the United States Today?" in *Terrorism in American after 9/11* (Washington, DC: New America, 2019), https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/terrorism-in-america/what-threat-united-states-today/.

[2] See Bergen et al.

[3] "FBI Investigating Murder of KC Woman as Possible Hate Crime," FOX 4 Kansas City, July 24, 2018, https://fox4kc.com/2018/07/24/fbi-investigating-murder-of-kc-woman-as-possible-hate-crime/; Bergen et al., "Threat to the United States Today".

[4] Janet Reitman, "U.S. Law Enforcement Failed to See the Threat of White Nationalism. Now They Don't Know How to Stop It.," *New York Times*, November 3, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/03/magazine/FBI-charlottesville-white-nationalism-far-right.html.

[5] Seth Jones, *The Rise of Far-Right Extremism in the United States* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018), https://www.csis.org/analysis/rise-far-right-extremism-united-states.

hierarchical structures susceptible to dismantling—and a mirroring of foreign terror groups, which also capitalize on the internet's ability to reach a wide audience.[6] Brian Levin, director of the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, points out that legacy organized white supremacist groups with identifiable structures have been replaced by a "democratized and geographically dispersed set of erratic do-it-yourselfers" in a "virtual neo-Nazi boot camp available 24/7."[7] Potential causes for the recent surge of right-wing extremism include worldwide nationalist elections and movements, often linked to the opposition of immigration and globalism and which have driven some aggrieved individuals into extremist beliefs.[8] A component of online right-wing extremism is the relatively new subculture known as the *alt-right*; however, this movement's contradictory beliefs and dissimilarity from formal right-wing extremist groups has left the media and public baffled.[9] Because the alt-right subculture is unlike hate groups of the past, academics must develop new frameworks when analyzing its adherents.

The alt-right, and its more palatable spinoff known as the alt-lite, evolved from an internet troll culture which has been co-opted by white nationalist beliefs and has attracted a younger, more mainstream group that does not fit the typical profile of an extremist.[10] This new subculture, which primarily exists online, has caught law enforcement executives off guard; in-person gatherings orchestrated by controversial speakers thought to be part of the alt-right have resulted in large protests and violent clashes, and individuals—radicalized online—have committed mass casualty incidents (MCIs).[11] Despite some research that simplifies the alt-right as a modern version of the KKK, a comparison

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[6] Jones.

[7] Sabrina Tavernise et al., "Shootings Renew Debate over How to Combat Domestic Terrorism," *New York Times*, August 5, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/05/us/politics/domestic-terrorism-shootings.html.

[8] William A. Galston, "The Rise of European Populism and the Collapse of the Center-Left," Brookings, March 8, 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/03/08/the-rise-of-european-populism-and-the-collapse-of-the-center-left/.

[9] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 34.

[10] Hawley, 4.

[11] Amy Rock, "UF Cancels Richard Spencer Event; UC Berkeley to Host Ben Shapiro," *Campus Safety Magazine*, August 17, 2017, https://www.campussafetymagazine.com/university/uf-richard-spencer-uc-berkeley-ben-shapiro/; Reitman, "U.S. Law Enforcement."

between the two movements is tenuous, and historical methods of viewing right-wing extremism may no longer be applicable.[12]

In this context, this thesis, building on existing research, provides local law enforcement agencies with guidance on the alt-right subculture, including a discussion of existing theories of recruitment, self-recruitment, and the acerbic culture. This thesis also discusses MCIs perpetrated by individuals who openly espoused ideologies linked to the alt-right and movements with significant alt-right overlap, such as the manosphere, and, using case studies, develops lessons learned on common traits in the attacks.

B. RESEARCH QUESTION

What should local law enforcement agencies know about the alt-right, including background, recruiting methods, and modus operandi, and how can agencies mitigate alt-right violence?

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review discusses the academic debates on the background of the online alt-right subculture and the extent to which the alt-right is a threat to homeland security. The research commences with a review of academic debates surrounding the alt-right's foundation and how it rose to prominence, and concludes with an analysis of academic discussions concerning the extent to which the alt-right is a threat.

Because the alt-right is a relatively new phenomenon, peer-reviewed research into the group is nascent. During the literature review process, the author noted two books that frequently appear as source material for academic articles: George Hawley's *Making Sense of the Alt-Right* and Angela Nagle's *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*. These books provide an impartial discussion on the alt-right's foundation and beliefs, and serve as a useful starting point for deeper research into the nuances of the group.

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[12] See, for example, Nathan Eckstrand, "The Ugliness of Trolls: Comparing the Methodologies of the Alt-Right and the Ku Klux Klan," *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 10, no. 3 (November 25, 2018): 12, https://doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v10.i3.6026.

One significant point of divergence among scholars is the extent to which the alt-right is a threat to homeland security. For example, Hawley, who is assistant professor of political science at the University of Alabama, dismisses the alt-right as mostly limited to online activities, while Thomas Main paints the group as an extreme threat.[13] Much of the academic research attributes the alt-right's prominence to worldwide elections of nationalist leaders. This literature review discusses the areas in which academic research concurs and diverges, and highlights gaps in the nature of the alt-right threat.

1.   Background

The alt-right is not a monolithic political organization with identifiable leadership and agreed-upon beliefs.[14] For this reason, the literature disagrees about many aspects of the group's formation and history, and what makes one a member. In *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, Hawley defines a member of the alt-right as "anyone with right-wing sensibilities that rejects the mainstream conservative movement."[15] Going beyond that, he notes a common, if not universal, focus on race in the alt-right and that it is "at its core … a white-nationalist movement."[16] Niko Heikkila, who agrees with Hawley, notes that while white nationalism is a central theme of the alt-right, the alt-right displays a continuum of extremism, with moderate apolitical provocateurs on one end of the spectrum and neo-Nazis on the other.[17] Scholars agree about the high-level definition of the alt-right, but have differing viewpoints on many other issues concerning the movement, particularly its formation and how much of a threat it poses to homeland security.

White nationalist movements are an unfortunate part of American history, and the alt-right has risen in the wake of notable twentieth-century movements. At a basic level,

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[13] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 12; Thomas J. Main, *The Rise of the Alt-Right* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2018), 4, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/59462/.

[14] Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Alresford, Hampshire: John Hunt Publishing, 2017), 11.

[15] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 12.

[16] Hawley, 11.

[17] Niko Heikkilä, "Online Antagonism of the Alt-Right in the 2016 Election," *European Journal of American Studies* 12, no. 2 (July 31, 2017): 3, https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.12140.

literature agrees that white nationalists believe the United States' identity should revolve around white ethnicity, and that white individuals should remain the demographic majority.[18] The term is not analogous to white supremacism, which holds to the superiority of the white race over others, but the two philosophies have parallels. Some research, including Nathan Eckstrand's, paints the alt-right as a modern iteration of the KKK and similar movements of the time.[19] Other research, including Hawley's, says that while white nationalist groups such as the KKK may share common beliefs with the alt-right, the philosophical overlap ends there.[20] Most other literature agrees that the alt-right differs from white nationalist and white supremacist groups of the past.

The *alt-right* term has been in use on and off for over a decade, having taken on varying meanings over the years. Academics credit neo-Nazi Richard Spencer with bringing the term "alternative right" to prominence in 2008 when he used it in his writings with *Taki's Magazine* to describe opinions of the right-wing that were contrary to typical conservative beliefs.[21] Later, Spencer founded the website AlternativeRight.com, which promoted "old school scientific racism"—that is, white nationalist material written at an intellectual level.[22] The website shut down in 2012, and the term appeared dormant until 2015. While research does not address how the term cropped up again, Hawley suspects it was caused by the Twitter hashtag #altright; other research, including Lyons's, simply notes that individuals suddenly began using the *alt-right* moniker around that time.[23] Research into why the alt-right experienced a resurgence is similarly inconclusive, but Hawley postulates that existing online white-identity movements that hoped to avoid the white nationalist label coopted the alt-right identity.[24] The definition of the alt-right has

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[18] See, for example, Amanda Taub, "'White Nationalism,' Explained," *New York Times*, November 21, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/22/world/americas/white-nationalism-explained.html.

[19] Eckstrand, "The Ugliness of Trolls," 53.

[20] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 24.

[21] Hawley, 64; Lyons, *Ctrl-Alt-Delete*.

[22] Lyons, *Ctrl-Alt-Delete*.

[23] Lyons, *Ctrl-Alt-Delete*; Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 68.

[24] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 12.

evolved over the years, from initially referring to intellectual individuals with white supremacist beliefs to today's movement, which has become an unclear patchwork of extremist philosophies.

Existing research lacks clarity about the true extent of the alt-right threat. Hawley, for one, notes that the alt-right is "mostly limited to the internet" and not necessarily "dangerous and tangible to the real world."[25] Thomas Main disagrees, commenting in *The Rise of the Alt-Right* that the group is "far more radical and dangerous than the right-wing extremism of past decades."[26] Eckstrand agrees with Main, concluding that the alt-right is an extreme threat and an evolved version of the KKK.[27] Mike Wendling takes a middle-of-the-road approach, acknowledging the alt-right as a danger due to its potential for radicalization.[28] Federal government sources contain little information on the threat posed by the alt-right. Existing research therefore does not conclude whether the alt-right is merely an online phenomenon, as Hawley suggests, or a true threat.

2.   Recruitment through Trolling and Memeing

Trolling and sarcasm are essential components of alt-right messaging—a departure from older white nationalist groups' modus operandi.[29] Although hate was the predominant expression of legacy white nationalist groups, today's alt-right presents a more palatable image to a younger audience. Research agrees that the alt-right disseminates its ideas via trolling and memes.[30] A typical alt-right individual is a young, technologically savvy male; as Hawley notes, the stereotypical "angry, bitter skinhead with limited skills

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[25] Hawley, 12. It should be noted, however, that Hawley published this book before an individual associated with the alt-right murdered a counterprotester in Charlottesville, Virginia, which this thesis discusses in a later chapter.

[26] Main, *The Rise of the Alt-Right*, 4.

[27] Eckstrand, "The Ugliness of Trolls," 56.

[28] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 192.

[29] Hawley, 24.

[30] Viveca S. Greene, "'Deplorable' Satire: Alt-Right Memes, White Genocide Tweets, and Redpilling Normies," *Studies in American Humor* 5, no. 1 (2019): 23, https://doi.org/10.5325/studamerhumor.5.1.0031.

and prospects" is no longer the average profile of a white nationalist.[31] Hawley acknowledges that the decentralized nature of the movement makes it difficult to conduct a demographic analysis, but notes that the "youthfulness" of the alt-right's dialogue and the typical profile from its rallies lends support to this theory.[32] Nagle summarizes the alt-right, with a comedic spin, as a "strange vanguard of teenage gamers, pseudonymous swastika-posting anime lovers, ironic South Park conservatives, anti-feminist pranksters, nerdish harassers and meme-making trolls."[33] Main agrees with these assumptions, quoting white supremacist thinker John Derbyshire, who laments that the alt-right is a "youthful movement."[34] This youthfulness has made the white nationalist movement fashionable by co-opting symbols recognizable to a younger audience.

The alt-right uses memes and sarcasm—symbols typically recognizable by millennials—to drive its point home. Today, the word *meme* refers to dynamic, user-generated media used to shape an opinion or interaction.[35] Although most people use memes for harmless amusement, the alt-right uses memes strategically to push ideas into popular discussion.[36] Alt-right thought leader Andrew Anglin's "A Normie's Guide to the Alt-Right" refers to this as an intentional act of "culture-jamming and … social engineering."[37] Viveca Greene notes that this tactic creates in-groups and out-groups through niche memes.[38] Nagle discusses "in-jokery," the alt-right's exploitation of current events and social justice causes to create viral memes that may appeal to a mainstream audience.[39] Academic literature covers the sarcastic nature of the alt-right in detail and notes its application in recruiting.

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[31] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 76–77.

[32] Hawley, 77.

[33] Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 2.

[34] Main, *The Rise of the Alt-Right*, 275.

[35] Greene, "'Deplorable' Satire," 38.

[36] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 32.

[37] Anglin, "A Normie's Guide to the Alt-Right."

[38] Greene, "'Deplorable' Satire."

[39] Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 8.

3. Conclusion

Researchers generally agree about how the alt-right formed, acknowledge the existence of the "alt-lite" (the more palatable version of the alt-right), and report on the alt-right's use of cultural memes to recruit individuals via social media platforms. The literature is most contentious, however, about the threat the alt-right poses to homeland security. A measure of the threat to homeland security is extremely subjective and, in the case of some of the research, such as Eckstrand's, depends on the author's political viewpoints.

D. RESEARCH DESIGN

The thesis uses these two approaches to provide recommendations to help local law enforcement combat the dangers of the alt-right subculture. The first approach is to untangle the complicated nature of the alt-right movement through comparative analysis of the main theoretical concepts surrounding the movement. To this end, this thesis provides the scholarly views on the alt-right introduced in the literature review, including the extent to which it is a threat to homeland security. The second approach is a comparative case study of MCIs perpetrated by individuals who openly espoused ideologies linked to the alt-right and overlapping movements.[40] Based on the theoretical and case study comparative analyses, this thesis determines that the alt-right poses a threat to homeland security particularly at the local level, and concludes with recommendations that can help law enforcement leaders identify what they need to know about the alt-right to prevent violence.

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[40] This thesis is limited to events through May 1, 2020.

II. THE EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF THE ALT-RIGHT

Public discourse uses the term alt-right to represent a loose collection of ideas that range from countercultural online discourse to violence in the name of white supremacism.[41] Although often referred to as a movement, the alt-right does not meet the strict conventional definitions of a political movement, as it lacks universal issues, agendas, leaders, concerns, or goals.[42] Some generally accepted principles, such as antifeminism, bridge the entire range of adherents, but as a whole, people who self-identify as alt-right— or who are assumed to be members because of their public statements of participation in certain events—are divided from one another by fuzzy, unclear lines. The only commonality uniting the alt-right is a desire to be an alternative (hence the *alt*) to traditional conservatism and to be avant-garde. Historical white supremacist and white nationalist movements in the United States preceded the alt-right, but share little overlap in terms of tactics and beliefs, and the alt-right embraces many contradictory ideas that are not internally coherent. This chapter reviews the alt-right's ideological foundations, which seem to comprise perplexing online subcultures and a fusion of disparate ideas drawn from the last century.

A. THE ALT-RIGHT'S IDEOLOGICAL INSPIRATIONS

Although components of the alt-right's ideological inspiration derive from white nationalist and white supremacist movements of the past, some researchers and media organizations assume that white supremacism furthers the alt-right. For instance, in 2016 the Associated Press published guidance to its reporters recommending that, when referring to the alt-right, the phrase should be placed in quotation marks and that the reporter should include a disclaimer that it is a "white nationalist movement."[43] The next year, the

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[41] George Hawley, *The Alt-Right: What Everyone Needs to Know®* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2018), 5–6.

[42] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 12.

[43] Daniszewski, "Writing about the 'Alt-Right.'"

Associated Press recommended avoiding the phrase altogether except when quoting others, stating that the term only exists to be a "euphemism to disguise racist aims."[44]

As Hawley notes, few in the alt-right refer to historical white nationalists as their inspiration.[45] While there are some links, which this chapter discusses further, Hawley believes that most alt-right members are ignorant of these antecedent movements; they simply parrot ideas promulgated by the larger alt-right.[46] Several movements of the last century, some of which held explicitly racist belief systems and some of which reacted to mainstream conservatism, form the foundations of the alt-right. This section explores how these movements became part of the alt-right's foundation.

1.   Post-War White Supremacy and Attempts to Gain Political Relevance

Several white supremacist organizations formed or expanded in the post–World War II era, particularly in opposition to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.[47] Some of the larger organizations attempted to go mainstream but failed to gain political relevance. For instance, George Rockwell's American Nazi Party, established in 1959, tried to establish itself as a political party but sputtered after Rockwell's death in 1967.[48] Other groups, such as the National Alliance and Aryan Nations, had similar fates due to lawsuits or deaths of key members.[49] In 2020, the KKK, the most well-known white supremacist organization, represents a shell of its former self, with approximately 3,000

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[44] John Daniszewski, "How to Describe Extremists Who Rallied in Charlottesville," *Behind the News* (blog), August 15, 2017, https://blog.ap.org/behind-the-news/how-to-describe-extremists-who-rallied-in-charlottesville.

[45] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 80.

[46] Hawley, 80.

[47] Shaun Assael and Peter Keating, "The Massacre That Spawned the Alt-Right," *Politico*, November 3, 2019, https://politi.co/2pBUVou.

[48] Lois Beckett, "George Lincoln Rockwell, Father of American Nazis, Still in Vogue for Some," *Guardian*, August 27, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/27/george-lincoln-rockwell-american-nazi-party-alt-right-charlottesville.

[49] "Aryan Nations/Church of Jesus Christ Christian," Anti-Defamation League, accessed April 22, 2020, https://www.adl.org/education/resources/profiles/aryan-nations; Anti-Defamation League, "National Alliance," Anti-Defamation League, accessed April 22, 2020, https://www.adl.org/resources/profiles/national-alliance.

members nationwide claiming allegiance to a small number of chapters.[50] To someone unfamiliar with the alt-right's history, these groups seem to be precursors; in reality, however, they share little in terms of precise beliefs, strategies, or tactics.

During the twentieth century, white supremacists began using the term *white nationalism* to reflect their beliefs, in a move some believe to be a mere rebranding effort. Hawley notes that some in media and academia continue to label all far-right groups as supremacists, but literature does not agree on a clear cut definition of the two terms.[51] Using generally accepted terms in far-right circles, a supremacist is one who believes multiple races can live together but whites must remain the dominant group; a nationalist, on the other hand, believes in complete separation of the races into different states.[52] Far-right groups have increasingly called themselves nationalists over supremacists in an effort to distance themselves from the vitriol of groups like the KKK.[53] Using the far-right's nomenclature, there is an ideological connection between the alt-right and white nationalism within the realm of *intellectual white nationalism*.

Intellectual white nationalism, sometimes referred to as highbrow white nationalism or coat-and-tie nationalism, is a more contemporary version of white nationalist ideologies that avoids the anger and rage of older movements and the skinhead appearance and pomp and circumstance of groups like the KKK.[54] David Duke, the KKK grand wizard and labeled as "America's most well-known racist and anti-Semite" by the Anti-Defamation League, was an early adopter of this new strategy.[55] Duke combined

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[50] Anti-Defamation League, *Tattered Robes: The State of the Ku Klux Klan in the United States* (New York: Anti-Defamation League, 2016), 12, https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/assets/pdf/combating-hate/tattered-robes-state-of-kkk-2016.pdf.

[51] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 13.

[52] Hawley, 13.

[53] Hawley, 13.

[54] Christopher Petrella, "Well-Educated Elites Are No Strangers to White Supremacy," *Washington Post*, August 14, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2017/08/14/well-educated-elites-are-no-strangers-to-white-supremacy/; Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 17.

[55] Adam Klein, *Fanaticism, Racism, and Rage Online* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International, 2017), 21, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-51424-6; "David Duke," Anti-Defamation League, 2013, https://www.adl.org/resources/profiles/david-duke.

white supremacist talking points with political issues of the time—such as affirmative action—and was elected Republican state representative in his home state of Louisiana in 1989.[56] Although unsuccessful in subsequent political attempts, he realized that abandoning the KKK robes and symbols helped his cause seem more legitimate.

In another move to normalize white supremacy—and perhaps the earliest influence in spreading these ideals online—Duke partnered with fellow KKK member Don Black, who learned computer programming while in prison for a plot to bomb the Caribbean island of Dominica to support anticommunist forces.[57] Black created the white supremacist website Stormfront and its namesake discussion forum, which claims over 300,000 registered users and provides links to a variety of other organizations, ranging from white militia groups to relatively tame European heritage organizations.[58] In an interview with Princeton University Professor Russell K. Nieli, Black discusses how he harnessed the power of this then-burgeoning technology:

> It was with the exponential growth of the Internet, which began, I think, in '94 or '95, that we first had the opportunity to reach potentially millions of people with our point of view. These are people who, for the most part, have never attended one of our meetings or … subscribed to any of our publications. We were for the first time able to reach a broad audience.[59]

Although Stormfront is the most visited white nationalist website, with over 800,000 monthly visits, other top sites include Metapedia, a Wikipedia-like encyclopedia with bigoted interpretations on a variety of subjects that appear intellectual at first glance.[60] Also ranked highly are *American Renaissance*, a magazine run by Jared Taylor, who identifies himself as a "race-realist," and *VDARE*, a magazine whose founder denies a white nationalism focus but has published articles by known white supremacists.[61]

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[56] Klein, *Fanaticism, Racism, and Rage Online*, 31.

[57] Carol M. Swain and Russell Nieli, eds., *Contemporary Voices of White Nationalism in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 153.

[58] Stormfront, accessed April 23, 2020, https://www.stormfront.org/forum/.

[59] Swain and Nieli, *Contemporary Voices*, 155.

[60] Klein, *Fanaticism, Racism, and Rage Online*, 31.

[61] Klein, 76, 113; Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 23.

Inspiration from intellectual white supremacist publications such as *American Renaissance* and *VDARE* provided context to the first expression of the alt-right. By using the internet, these magazines allow white nationalists to normalize and rapidly spread propaganda in new ways. The modern alt-right shares vague similarities with American white nationalist movements, but the closest parallels to other movements are the paleoconservative movement—where the term alt-right first appeared—and European far-right movements.

2.   Paleoconservatism and Creation of the *Alternative Right* Term

In its early history—before white nationalism influences crept in—the alt-right had more in common with movements that provided an alternative to traditional conservatism. One political movement that had direct influence on the early alt-right is the paleoconservative movement.[62] Paleoconservatives emerged in the 1980s to counter the influence of the pro-interventionism neoconservatives of the time.[63] Paleoconservatives subscribed to what they believed to be conservatism's original roots, favoring nationalism and conservative Christian ethics and opposing foreign intervention.[64] The alt-right's critiques of modern-day conservatism echo paleoconservative complaints; for the most part, however, paleoconservatives rejected racism and embraced religion.[65] Hawley notes that at its peak, paleoconservativism was "the most serious right-wing threat to the mainstream conservative movement."[66] In particular, the noted paleoconservative Paul Gottfried—who does not identify with the current alt-right—had significant influence in the early paleoconservative movement.[67] Gottfried would go on to be the inspiration for the creation of the term alternative right: he coined the term in a speech many years later

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[62] Scotchie, *The Paleoconservatives*, 1; Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 29.

[63] Scotchie, *The Paleoconservatives*, 1.

[64] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 29–30.

[65] Hawley, 107.

[66] Hawley, 29.

[67] Hawley, 32.

to lament the sputtering paleoconservative movement.[68] Early on, Gottfried mentored Richard Spencer, who later became an avowed white supremacist responsible for the initial emergence of the alt-right, and wrote published articles in paleoconservative publications that popularized the alt-right term.[69] Those philosophical underpinnings of the original alt-right quickly disappeared when the group began to align with white nationalism, as well as with similar foreign movements.

3.   European New Right

The European New Right (ENR) is one such foreign ideological influence on the alt-right with parallels to American intellectual white nationalism. The ENR promotes the idea that individual cultures should coexist, but separately—not joined together in an America-style melting pot.[70] Established in the 1960s in France by Alain de Benoist, this antiassimilationist ideal later spread across the continent, but the ENR does not fit neatly as either a right wing or left wing movement.[71] The ENR, for its part, declares the left–right split to be "obsolete."[72] The ENR advocated the concept of ethnopluralism as an alternative to globalization and multiculturalism, emphasizing that each culture and ethnicity should be separated throughout the world.[73] The ENR's beliefs were a natural fit for white nationalist movements, which likewise believe in separation of races into different states.[74]

By the 1990s, ENR gained traction in the United States and had several ideological parallels to the paleoconservative movement.[75] On some issues, such as opposition to

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[68] Helen Chernikoff, "Meet the Jewish 'Paleoconservative' Who Coined the Term 'Alternative Right,'" *Forward*, August 29, 2016, https://forward.com/news/national/348372/meet-the-jewish-paleoconservative-who-coined-the-term-alternative-right/.

[69] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 23.

[70] Jean-Yves Camus and Nicolas Lebourg, *Far-Right Politics in Europe* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), 130.

[71] Camus and Lebourg, 43.

[72] Camus and Lebourg, 43.

[73] Camus and Lebourg, 124.

[74] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 13.

[75] Lyons, *Ctrl-Alt-Delete*, 3.

multiculturalism and immigration, the two movements had common ground; on others, specifically religion—paleoconservatives tended to be conservative Christian while many in the ENR were secular—they had differences.[76] Despite this, a hybrid of paleoconservative and ENR ideas laid the groundwork for future white nationalist movements.[77] ENR's ideals are instrumental in Europe's modern-day Identitarian movements, which do have clear links to the alt-right (discussed in more detail later in this chapter).[78]

4. Conclusion

Popular discourse assumes alt-right history is linearly traced to white supremacist and white nationalist movements such as the KKK, and that the alt-right is merely a digital version of these movements. While these movements did provide some inspiration, a more significant contributor to the early alt-right was the paleoconservative movement, whose detractors sparked the initial term and concept of the alternative right as an alternative to traditional conservatism. Another source of inspiration was the European New Right, a far-right movement advocating beliefs similar to white nationalism in Europe. Paleoconservativism and the ENR had the strongest influence on the first version of the alternative right, before the movement dropped attempts at intellectual conservatism and became an online countercultural movement.

B. THE ALT-RIGHT

Although public discourse frames the alt-right as a new phenomenon, it has existed since Gottfried coined the term in 2008.[79] The movement began as a hybrid of domestic and international political theories, one of which was white nationalism. Although the movement went dormant for several years, it resurged in 2015 as a mix of antifeminists,

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[76] Lyons, 4.

[77] Lyons, 4.

[78] Imogen Richards, "A Philosophical and Historical Analysis of 'Generation Identity': Fascism, Online Media, and the European New Right," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, September 30, 2019, 1, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1662403.

[79] Paul Gottfried, "A Paleo Epitaph," *Taki's Magazine*, April 7, 2008, https://www.takimag.com/article/a_paleo_epitaph/.

gamers, and white nationalists, with a tamer and less explicitly racist spinoff known as the alt-lite. This section explores early alt-right history, the group's resurgence, and the melding of other disparate groups into the modern alt-right.

1. Formation

Although the ideological foundations of the alt-right have layers of complexity, the history behind the term's creation is much less murky. As previously mentioned, in an April 2008 issue of *Taki's Magazine*, an online publication featuring conservative and paleoconservative writers, paleoconservative Paul Gottfried lamented his movement's failure to gain power or prominence.[80] Gottfried instead touted a newer alternative to traditional conservatism that seemed more appealing to activists, who are younger than the "aging faces and tired voices of this neocon elite":

> Even now an alternative is coming into existence as a counterforce to neoconservative dominance. It consists mostly of younger (thirty-something) writers and political activists; and although they are still glaringly under-funded, this rising generation is building bridges on the right.[81]

In the article, Gottfried goes on to predict that this new political philosophy will continue the paleo tradition of fracturing the conservative ideology. During a November 2008 meeting at the conservative H.L. Mencken club, Gottfried used the two words together for his speech entitled "The Decline and Rise of the Alternative Right."[82] Gottfried, though he disavows white nationalism, later acknowledged developing the term but denied being any part of the alt-right.[83] The credit for creating the alt-right as a concept goes to a former mentee of Gottfried's—Richard Spencer.

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[80] Gottfried.

[81] Gottfried.

[82] Paul Gottfried, "The Decline and Rise of the Alternative Right," *Taki's Magazine*, December 1, 2008, https://www.takimag.com/article/the_decline_and_rise_of_the_alternative_right/.

[83] Paul Gottfried, "Some Observations from the Man Who Created Alt-Right," *Frontpage*, August 30, 2016, https://archives.frontpagemag.com/fpm/some-observations-man-who-created-alt-right-paul-gottfried/.

Despite Gottfried's denunciation, the alt-right has some roots in white nationalism. Spencer, a Ph.D. dropout from Duke University who became managing editor at *Taki's Magazine* in 2008, is a political writer and avowed white nationalist with a long tradition of working in the intellectual white nationalist arena.[84] During Spencer's tenure at *Taki's*, the phrase *alternative right* appeared in many articles to represent those whose ideals ran counter to established conservative ideals, including some white nationalist, libertarian, and paleoconservative individuals.[85] In 2009, Spencer left *Taki's* and founded the *Alternative Right* online magazine, described as "an online magazine of radical traditionalism," which, in Spencer's words, "took race very seriously."[86] Hawley notes that *Alternative Right* was not solely about race but discussed a range of current events, generally written with a white nationalism bent. Spencer maintained control of the magazine until 2012 when, in his words, he had "accomplished most of the goals" he set when founding the site.[87]

2.   An Alt-Right Movement Fails to Launch

In 2012, Spencer relinquished editorial control of *Alternative Right* while maintaining ownership. By that point the site had a significant following but had failed to spark the meaningful new movement envisioned by its founders.[88] In December 2013, Spencer shut the site down without warning to its current editors. The abrupt shutdown led to debates, to which Spencer replied in his new magazine, *Radix*, that the concept of the alternative right was a "bold experiment and short-term project to differentiate itself from the American conservative movement."[89] Two former *Alternative Right* writers attempted to launch a new website with the same name, but it failed to gain traction. The *alternative*

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[84] Lyons, *Ctrl-Alt-Delete*, 4.

[85] Lyons, 4.

[86] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 57; Lyons, *Ctrl-Alt-Delete*, 4.

[87] Richard Spencer, "The Future of AlternativeRight.Com," *Radix Journal*, May 3, 2012, http://archive.is/MKotX.

[88] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 63.

[89] Hawley, 15.

right term faded from popular use for several years after, until it resurfaced on Twitter during the 2016 U.S. presidential election season.

3.   Modern-Day Alt-Right

After Spencer took down his website, the term *alternative right* was relatively dormant on the internet. Then, in 2015, social media users began using the shortened Twitter hashtag #altright when discussing the concept.[90] This reemergence of the alternative right made no pretense of intellectualism but intentionally made offensive comments, crossing every moral standard regarding race, gender, ethnicity, and religion. Some alt-righters took the Nazi label seriously, flying swastikas and repeating historic white nationalist slogans such as "1488."[91] The alt-right revival turned away from engaging in intellectual discussions in favor of shock value.

The literature does not pinpoint exactly how the *alternative right* phrase returned to the white nationalist lexicon. At the time, as Hawley notes, the internet had a growing white identity movement that did not want to carry the label of "white nationalism."[92] Hawley surmises that this group merely co-opted the label in the absence of a better one, and the term became a catch-all for this newer movement. Although Spencer initially developed the concept of the alt-right, it was not until—as Spencer claims—he "let it go" that it began to gain international prominence.[93] In the absence of a name, this new movement adopted the already existing alt-right label.

The current version of the alt-right intentionally follows a leaderless resistance philosophy. This strategy began in the 1960s as a way to battle Soviet communism.[94]

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[90] Hawley, 68.

[91] The term *1488* is popular in white nationalist circles. It combines the so-called fourteen words of "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children" along with the eighth letter of the alphabet twice—*HH*—short for *heil Hitler*. See Hawley, 68.

[92] Hawley, 69.

[93] Hawley, 68.

[94] The leaderless resistance strategy was initially used by American-sponsored foreign troops in the fight against communism. See Jeffrey Kaplan, "Leaderless Resistance," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no. 3 (September 1997): 80–95, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546559708427417.

White supremacists and white nationalists began co-opting the strategy, and KKK member Louis Beam encouraged its use by white supremacists in his 1983 essay, to prevent authorities from dismantling the KKK.[95] In this essay, Beam says that "federal tyranny represents a threat to everyone," describing his philosophy as follows:

> Since the entire purpose of **Leaderless Resistance** is to defeat state tyranny (at least insofar as this essay is concerned), all members of phantom cells or individuals will tend to react to objective events in the same way through usual tactics of resistance. Organs of information distribution such as newspapers, leaflets, computers, etc., which are widely available to all, keep each person informed of events, allowing for a planned response that will take many variations. No one need issue an order to anyone. Those idealists truly committed to the cause of freedom will act when they feel the time is ripe, or will take their cue from others who precede them.[96]

The leaderless resistance philosophy has been co-opted not just by white supremacists but also by Islamic terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas.[97] Andrew Anglin, a neo-Nazi and one of the most prominent public members of the alt-right, acknowledges the alt-right's intentional lack of hierarchical structure in the article "A Normie's Guide to the Alt-Right," posted on his blog, *The Daily Stormer*.[98] In line with many extremist groups, the alt-right does not have organized leaders, chapters, or a formal structure.

As Anglin notes, the post-Spencer alt-right is an "entirely leaderless" movement whose contributors use a variety of social media sites to espouse their beliefs, including 4chan, Twitter, and Reddit.[99] This version of the alt-right often drops attempts at intellectual discussion, preferring irony and sarcasm; that does not mean, however, that the alt-right has given up attempts to be a serious movement. Anglin explains:

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[95] Kaplan, 88.

[96] Louis Beam, "Leaderless Resistance," *The Seditionist*, no. 12 (February 1992), http://www.louis beam.com/leaderless.htm.

[97] George Michael, "Leaderless Resistance: The New Face of Terrorism," *Defence Studies* 12, no. 2 (June 2012): 259, https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2012.699724.

[98] Anglin, "A Normie's Guide to the Alt-Right."

[99] Anglin.

Some of the ways the movement presents itself can be confusing to the mainstream, given the level of irony involved. The amount of humor and vulgarity confuses people. The true nature of the movement, however, is serious and idealistic. We have in this new millennium an extremely nihilistic culture. From the point when I first became active in what has become the Alt-Right movement, it was my contention that in an age of nihilism, absolute idealism must be couched in irony in order to be taken seriously. This is because anyone who attempts to present himself as serious will immediately be viewed as the opposite through the jaded lens of our post-modern milieu.[100]

Despite Spencer's early influences, Hawley notes that much of the alt-right's lingo first appeared in the online magazine *The Right Stuff*, a white nationalist publication formed in 2012.[101] In addition to publishing articles, *The Right Stuff* appears instrumental in many of the bizarre phrases in the alt-right—such as "dindu nuffins" to refer to African Americans—and even published a manual entitled "Tips for Trolls," which provides instructions for intentionally derailing online discussions on Twitter and newspaper comment sections.[102] *The Right Stuff* set the tone for the alt-right's strategy of muddling online discussions and injecting their viewpoints into mainstream platforms.

The reinvention of the alt-right created a much younger, millennial-focused movement. Though it is difficult to obtain demographic data because of the movement's online and anonymous nature, researchers and even alt-right personalities have made educated guesses about alt-right membership. At the few conferences held by alt-right personalities, millennials have comprised most of the attendees.[103] In an interview with Hawley, Spencer postulates that the average alt-right person is "thirty years old, … a tech professional, … atheist, … and lives on one of the coasts."[104] Available information paints

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[100] Anglin.

[101] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 72.

[102] "Tips for Trolls," The Right Stuff, November 6, 2016, http://archive.is/Te7a9.

[103] Lauren Fox, "'We Want to Change the World': Inside a White Supremacist Conference Aimed at Millennials," *Salon*, October 29, 2013, https://www.salon.com/2013/10/29/white_separatists_are_afraid_of_the_future/; "Youth Turn Out in Large Numbers for NPI's Rainbow Racist Gathering," Southern Poverty Law Center, November 3, 2015, https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2015/11/03/youth-turn-out-large-numbers-npi%E2%80%99s-rainbow-racist-gathering.

[104] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 78.

the audience as tech-savvy millennial males; understanding the alt-right therefore requires the appropriate frames of millennial digital culture, as it seeks to be a countercultural movement. And as a countercultural digital movement, the alt-right mingles with other movements that have different objectives but similar grievances and ideologies.

4.   Antifeminism Influence

In its continued evolution, the alt-right has strengthened its antifeminist positions. For example, researchers note crossover with online antifeminism communities dubbed the *manosphere*.[105] Like the term alt-right, the term manosphere has no consistently clear definition, but often describes misogynist ideologies present on many of the same sites used by the alt-right—4chan, Twitter, and Reddit, among others.[106] The manosphere includes communities such as pick-up artists (men who treat romantic seduction as a skill that can be learned and perfected), incels (involuntarily celibate men who blame women for their inability to find romantic partners), men's rights movements, fathers' rights movements, and other antifeminist philosophies.[107]

The Reddit subforum "The Red Pill" played a key role in the growth of antifeminism on the internet and, by extension, the manosphere.[108] The "red pill" reference comes from the movie *The Matrix*, when the character Neo is given a choice between taking a blue pill, which will cause him to live a delusional but content life, or a red pill, which signifies that he wants to accept truth, pleasant or not.[109] In the manosphere, the red pill symbolizes participants' awakening to antifeminist positions. Similarly, the alt-right has used the red pill concept going back to its *Alternative Right* online magazine foundations, referencing those who have opened their eyes to this brand of conservatism; the term still

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[105] Ging, "Alphas, Betas, and Incels," 640.

[106] Ging, 641.

[107] Ging, 644.

[108] Donna Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 14; Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 77.

[109] Ging, "Alphas, Betas, and Incels," 640.

remains in extensive use.[110] Although the manosphere and the alt-right are two distinct movements, the antifeminist philosophies of the alt-right facilitated significant cross pollination between them.[111] While some antifeminist positions do not appear unreasonable—for instance, many can sympathize with fathers who are denied custody of their children—many are explicitly misogynist.

The GamerGate controversy of 2014 also had significant influence on early alt-right culture. GamerGate was a coordinated and anonymous attack on female video game developers and reviewers by young males who felt the females were encroaching on their culture.[112] While GamerGate did not have any connection with the alt-right at first, alt-right figures seized the opportunity to cheer on this group and use it for political purposes, as discussed later in this chapter.[113] Essentially, GamerGate gave voice to a group that felt ignored and disenfranchised, and established the power of a collaborative digital movement.

5.   Parallel European Movements

An element of the alt-right that has manifested particularly on college campuses and in protests is the Identitarian movement, which has its roots in the Great Replacement theory. Great Replacement is a conspiracy theory suggested by French philosopher Renaud Camus in his 2011 book, *Le Grand Remplacement*.[114] His theory holds that elites are pushing for native white Europeans to be replaced by black and brown immigrants from Africa and the Middle East and that white Europeans will eventually be completely replaced due to lower native birth rates and mass migration.[115] Camus does not believe

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[110] Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 77.

[111] Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men*, 32.

[112] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 47.

[113] Kristin Bezio, "Ctrl-Alt-Del: GamerGate as a Precursor to the Rise of the Alt-Right," *Leadership* 14, no. 5 (October 2018): 556–66, https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715018793744.

[114] Thomas Chatterton Williams, "The French Origins of 'You Will Not Replace Us,'" *New Yorker*, November 27, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/04/the-french-origins-of-you-will-not-replace-us.

[115] Williams.

that this issue is isolated to Europe; in his view, America is experiencing a similar phenomenon due to its increasing acceptance of Spanish and other foreign languages.[116] The Great Replacement theory has been evoked in European politics, particularly among far-right parties and candidates for political office in Germany, France, Austria, and Hungary.[117] The logic of the Great Replacement became the motivator behind assaults committed by alt-right individuals in the United States and internationally.[118] Marchers at the alt-right-led Charlottesville, Virginia, protesters chanted slogans such as "You will not replace us," as they protested the removal of Confederate statues.[119] Chapter IV of this thesis furthers discusses this incident.

In Europe, the largest Identitarian movement, and one with direct links to the alt-right is *Generation Identitaire* (Generation Identity, or GI).[120] GI first arose in France in 2012 in the wake of the European migrant crisis, the result of refugees fleeing war and destruction in the Middle East and North Africa. GI went on to establish chapters in numerous western European countries, targeting a millennial, male audience.[121] On GI's English-language website, the group articulated its Great Replacement beliefs, stating, "We are becoming less and less while we are also being replaced by vast numbers of immigrants," going on to recruit youths to join their mission.[122] Although GI differs markedly from the alt-right—for example, it maintains a hierarchical structure and organized chapters—the two movements have significant overlap.[123] For one, Identitarian

[116] Williams.

[117] Elaine Ganley, "Taboos Fall Away as Far-Right EU Candidates Breach Red Line," Associated Press, May 16, 2019, https://apnews.com/f55b5bed3da04586b2136e6aa1c13351.

[118] Rosa Schwartzburg, "The 'White Replacement Theory' Motivates Alt-Right Killers the World Over," *Guardian*, August 5, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/aug/05/great-replacement-theory-alt-right-killers-el-paso.

[119] Williams, "You Will Not Replace Us."

[120] Richards, "Generation Identity," 7–8.

[121] Richards, 4.

[122] Generation Identity, accessed April 19, 2020, https://www.generation-identity.co/.

[123] Joe Mulhall, "HNH Explains... the Identitarian Movement and the Alt-Right," Hope Not Hate, October 31, 2017, https://web.archive.org/web/20190807020912/https://hopenothate.com/2017/10/31/hnh-explains-identitarian-movement-alt-right/.

theories about immigrants replacing white Americans have long been espoused in alt-right forums.[124] The United Kingdom's antiracism group Hope Not Hate notes that the European Identitarian movements have inspired the alt-right and resulted in a "transatlantic amalgamation."[125] The movement officially reached American soil when former Marine Nathan Damigo founded the Identitarian "Identity Evropa" movement—later rebranded as the American Identity Movement—which has been involved in on-campus recruiting attempts, a topic which this thesis covers in greater depth in Chapter III.[126] Damigo's American Identity Movement is an outlier among the alt-right, having an identifiable leader and organizational structure. Although the foreign Identitarian movement has seemingly pushed the alt-right even closer to earning its white nationalism label, there was an opposing force of more moderate individuals joining the movement who did not necessarily profess the same beliefs.

6.   Alt-Lite

As the alt-right exploded in popularity during the 2016 election season, many Americans began to sympathize with its members, though they did not admit to supporting the movement's most vocal white supremacist figures.[127] Without centralized leadership, there is no verification and there are no criteria for being a member of the alt-right. During this period, Hawley argues, the alt-right was returning "to its original meaning" of traditional conservatism due to the influx of moderate conservatives joining the movement.[128] The *alt-lite* label distinguishes the ideologically moderate members of the movement from the openly racist ones. Research has not identified individuals who specifically subscribe to the alt-lite label, and some alt-right elements use it as a derogatory

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[124] Heikkilä, "Online Antagonism of the Alt-Right," 3.

[125] Mulhall, "HNH Explains."

[126] Benjamin Gladstone, "Inside the White Nationalist American Identity Movement," Forward, August 25, 2019, https://forward.com/news/national/429705/american-identity-movement-white-nationalist/.

In 2019, Damigo rebranded the former Identity Evropa group into the American Identity Movement after several of its members were doxed—that is, had their real identities exposed.

[127] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 140.

[128] Hawley, 140.

term.[129] Researchers use the term to represent those who are unlikely to support white supremacist elements of the alt-right but might agree with the alt-right's general philosophies on race relations and immigration.[130] Many of the mainstream conservatives associated with the alt-right, including those who have held rallies or spoken on college campuses, might be better classified as alt-lite.

One notable figure at the time of the alt-lite's emergence is Milo Yiannopoulos. Despite being labeled as an alt-right leader, as a Jewish man Yiannopoulos is unlikely to align himself with the white supremacist beliefs of, for example, Richard Spencer.[131] Yiannopoulos coauthored an article for *Breitbart* entitled "An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right," in which he argues that the alt-right is a countercultural movement and the vocally racist elements of the alt-right are a "tiny, irrelevant contingent."[132] Yiannopoulos repeatedly gave—or attempted to give—speeches on college campuses which resulted in massive counter-protests.[133] Yiannopoulos's career came to an abrupt end in 2017 when social media comments apparently supporting pedophilia surfaced.[134] For a time, however, Yiannopoulos was heralded as an alt-right leader by many since he was one of the few individuals who maintained a public identity.

Gavin McInnes is another well-known figure who could be considered alt-lite. Although McInnes cofounded millennial-focused *Vice* magazine and married a woman of

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[129] Hawley, 143.

[130] Hawley, 141; Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 38.

[131] See, for example, Madeleine Sweet, "Please Shut Up about Milo and 'Free Speech,'" Huffington Post, July 22, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/please-shut-up-about-milo-and-free-speech_b_57926293e4b0a86259d13bf4.

[132] Milo Yiannopoulos and Allum Bokhari, "An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right," Breitbart, March 30, 2016, https://www.breitbart.com/tech/2016/03/29/an-establishment-conservatives-guide-to-the-alt-right/.

[133] Susan Svrluga, "UC-Berkeley Says 'Free Speech Week' Is Canceled. Milo Yiannopoulos Says He's Coming Anyway.," *Washington Post*, September 23, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/09/23/uc-berkeley-says-free-speech-week-is-canceled-milo-yiannopoulos-says-hes-still-coming-to-campus/; Grace Elletson, "College Prevents Milo Yiannopoulos from Speaking on Campus," *The Ithacan*, April 25, 2018, https://theithacan.org/news/college-prevents-milo-yiannopoulos-from-speaking-on-campus/.

[134] Rebecca Hersher, "After Comments on Pedophilia, Breitbart Editor Milo Yiannopoulos Resigns," NPR, February 21, 2017, https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/02/21/516473521/after-comments-on-pedophilia-breitbart-editor-milo-yiannopoulos-resigns.

Asian ancestry, he has aligned himself with alt-right institutions, including writing for *Taki's Magazine* while Spencer was the editor. In at least one article, he supported white supremacist figures.[135]

Like many political movements, the alt-right fractured between its hardcore and mainstream followers. Despite the fuzziness over the alt-lite versus the alt-right, Hawley notes that the alt-lite has a more significant, mainstream following.[136] Among the alt-right, some have labeled the alt-lite a threat for not being extreme enough, while others speculate that it can serve as a gateway to more extreme beliefs, despite Hawley noting a lack of evidence that the alt-lite has acted as a pipeline for white nationalism.[137] As a leaderless movement with no clear goals, a fracturing of beliefs seemed inevitable between those opposed to traditional conservatism and those who do not share racist or misogynist views.

7. Conclusion

The term *alternative right* was coined in 2008 and was initially used to represent ideas that diverged from traditional conservatism. While at first the term and its namesake website were sometimes white nationalist, the term represented a school of political thought that believed conservatism had lost its way. The term went dormant in 2013 but was resurrected on social media in 2015, generally shortened as #altright or alt-right. Dropping any attempt at intellectual discourse, the alt-right became an anonymous, social-media-driven movement that aligned itself with several other digital movements with different grievances but similar strategies. Academics studying the alt-right phenomenon use the term alt-lite to represent certain individuals—for example, Milo Yiannopoulos and Gavin McInness—who publicly supported alt-right ideals while disavowing the white

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[135] Gavin McInnes, "Love Your Fellow Hater," *Taki's Magazine*, October 6, 2016, https://www.takimag.com/article/love_your_fellow_hater_gavin_mcinnes/.

[136] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 147–48.

[137] Andrew Anglin, "Kike-Lover Lauren Southern Should Shut Her Slut Mouth!," Daily Stormer, February 19, 2016, https://dailystormer.su/kike-lover-lauren-southern-should-shut-her-slut-mouth/; Andrew Anglin, "Holy Crusade: Alt-Right to Boycott Breitbart Until Milo Is Removed," Daily Stormer, February 29, 2016, https://dailystormer.su/holy-crusade-alt-right-to-boycott-breitbart-until-milo-is-removed/; Alexander Hart, "Entryists or Entry Point? In Defense of the Alt-Lite," American Renaissance, August 30, 2016, https://www.amren.com/news/2016/08/entryists-or-entry-point-in-defense-of-the-alt-lite/.

nationalism elements. While the alt-right was forming into a cohesive online movement, on other corners of the internet a digital culture war resulted in further alt-right alliances and drew more disaffected young people into the movement.

C.   ONLINE CULTURE WARS

The early 2010s changed the nature of political protests. Protesters in Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, and politicized "hacktivism" movements all organized on social media and fed off each other's strategies.[138] With a little advance notice, a digital flash mob of protesters could easily show up at a location to protest a cause. In her book *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*, Angela Nagle refers to this as "the leaderless digital counter-revolution": a play on Louis Beam's leaderless resistance strategies.[139] Nagle argues that it is unlikely the alt-right of today would have entered mainstream discourse as it did if its activities had been limited to the "intellectual" magazines where they originated.[140] In this context, Nagle credits the website 4chan's /pol/ (political) board with injecting youthful energy into the alt-right movement as a counter to left wing social justice activism.[141]

1.   On One Side of the Equation: 4chan

Founded in 2003, 4chan is an image-based online discussion board that does not permit registration; virtually all posts are made anonymously. Boards represent a multitude of topics, from sports to fitness to politics.[142] 4chan's /b/ (random) board is the hub for all off-topic posts and one of its most popular. This board, an example of which is shown in Figure 1, quickly became a hub for misogyny, self-deprecation, pranks, and shocking images. For one, users collectively nominated 4chan's founder Christopher Poole for *Time*

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[138] Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 14.

[139] Nagle, 14.

[140] Nagle, 16.

[141] Nagle, 16.

[142] Nagle, 17.

magazine's 2008 person of the year.[143] *The New York Times*'s Mattathias Schwartz summarizes /b/ as "like the inside of a high-school bathroom stall, or an obscene telephone party line, or a blog with no posts and all comments filled with slang that you are too old to understand."[144] Before its conflation with the alt-right, 4chan had already been a hub for irony and tasteless humor, with general opposition to feminism and multiculturalism.[145] The alt-right was a neat fit into frenetic 4chan culture.

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[143] Nagle, 18.

[144] Mattathias Schwartz, "The World of Web Trolling," *New York Times Magazine*, August 3, 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/03/magazine/03trolls-t.html.

[145] Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 13.

Figure 1.   Screenshots from 4chan's discussion board[146]

Prior to the alt-right's emergence, 4chan had long been involved in political movements. The hacktivist group Anonymous originated in 2003 as a collective effort among the board's users.[147] Since its establishment, Anonymous has become a collective identity of loosely organized computer hackers who target institutions in the name of social justice. Anonymous committed vigilante cyberattacks against the Church of Scientology, corporations, governments, and other organizations.[148] Much like the alt-right, Anonymous is leaderless but internally coordinated, often working toward a collective goal.[149] While Anonymous is politically and ideologically distinct from the alt-right—Anonymous has a decidedly libertarian bent—Anonymous shows that a political movement can arise from within the chaos of 4chan.

The next collaborative movement to arise on 4chan was GamerGate. This new movement began in 2014 when the ex-boyfriend of feminist Zoe Quinn, an independent game developer who created the *Depression Quest* game, made a blog post claiming that Quinn had cheated on him with a journalist from the gaming review site Kotaku, among other infidelities.[150] The gamer community on 4chan quickly picked up on this allegation because it already felt feminists were influencing gaming journalism (a field historically dominated by young males) with politically correct games. This community made unsubstantiated allegations that Quinn slept with that writer to obtain positive reviews of *Depression Quest* proclaiming to enforce "ethics in games journalism" on their part.[151] This snowballed into a collaborative online harassment campaign targeted at feminist game developers and reviewers. Like the alt-right, gamers felt themselves to be a marginalized group under attack by political correctness. To the 4chan community, the jilted boyfriend's allegations confirmed their suspicions that feminists want to change the culture of gaming and gamers, a mostly young and male audience, and make games more social-justice-

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[147] Mike Wendling, *Alt-Right: From 4chan to the White House* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 53.

[148] Wendling, 53.

[149] Wendling, 53.

[150] Bezio, "Ctrl-Alt-Del," 561.

[151] Bezio, 562.

oriented.[152] This idea led to females in the gaming industry, both developers and journalists, becoming the victims of online harassment, death threats, and doxing (leaking of private information).[153] While 4chan's prior movements involved a small subset of social media—one to computer hackers, the others to gamers—Nagle and others argue that GamerGate was a significant precursor to right-wing mobilization on 4chan and subsequently on the rest of the internet.[154] As Nagle states:

> Gamergate brought gamers, rightist chan culture, anti-feminism and the online far right closer to mainstream discussion and it also politicized broad group of young people, mostly boys, who organized tactics around the idea of fighting back against the culture war being waged by the cultural left.[155]

During GamerGate, several individuals now associated with the alt-right came out in support of the movement. Yiannopoulos—who up until that time was critical of gamers—wrote an article for Breitbart entitled "Feminist Bullies Tearing the Video Game Industry Apart."[156] Steve Bannon, then-CEO of Breitbart, harnessed the power of GamerGate and Yiannopoulos's tech following, dedicating news coverage to the controversy and recognizing its ability to convert people to right-wing politics.[157] In the book *Devil's Bargain: Steve Bannon, Donald Trump, and the Storming of the Presidency*, Bannon affirmed tapping Yiannopoulos's interpersonal skills to connect with the GamerGate crew while Bannon acted as an advisor to Donald Trump's presidential campaign, telling author Joshua Green, "I realized Milo could connect with these kids right away. You can activate that army. They come in through Gamergate or whatever and then get turned onto politics and Trump."[158] Bannon and Yiannopoulos tapped into the

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[152] Bezio, 562.

[153] Bezio, 562.

[154] Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 25; Bezio, "Ctrl-Alt-Del."

[155] Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 25.

[156] Milo Yiannopoulos, "Feminist Bullies Tearing the Video Game Industry Apart," Breitbart, September 1, 2014, https://www.breitbart.com/europe/2014/09/01/lying-greedy-promiscuous-feminist-bullies-are-tearing-the-video-game-industry-apart/.

[157] Joshua Green, *Devil's Bargain: Steve Bannon, Donald Trump, and the Storming of the Presidency* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 117.

[158] Green, 117.

disaffection among the gamer demographic, potentially nudging many of them along the alt-right path.

Much of the vernacular used during GamerGate is now used by the alt-right: for example, *safe space*, representing a physical or virtual space for marginalized people free of judgment, and *snowflake*, a pejorative term for someone easily offended.[159] In an article for *The Guardian*, Matt Lees notes that Yiannopoulos and others made the GamerGate conversation not so much about videogames but about progressive voices—"social justice warriors"—trying to infiltrate every facet of society, not just gaming, particularly facets traditionally underrepresented by women and non-whites.[160] The GamerGate movement morphed into a larger cause, resonating with gamers and non-gamers alike who are critical of political correctness.

2. On the Other Side: Tumblr and Identity Politics

Some argue that the popularity of the alt-right and alt-lite is a counterreaction to the growth of the progressive left. Nagle believes that the growth of left wing identity politics is one possible explanation for the current state of the alt-right and alt-lite movements, full of in-jokes, sarcasm, and intentionally offensive language.[161] If there were an alt-left, Tumblr would be its home base. This social media platform, established in 2007, found a home to a range of millennials who felt they were marginalized, along with progressive-minded individuals—often referred to pejoratively as "social justice warriors."[162] Tumblr's "About" page explains that its mission includes "handing the megaphone to the marginalized"—those traditionally oppressed by society—so that they can "become [their] own collective agents of change."[163] Tumblr differs from other social media platforms in that it allows users to have their own personalized public space, which is usually—if

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[159] Matt Lees, "What Gamergate Should Have Taught Us About the 'Alt-Right,'" *Guardian*, December 1, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/dec/01/gamergate-alt-right-hate-trump.

[160] Lees.

[161] Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 61.

[162] Allison Mccracken, "Tumblr Youth Subcultures and Media Engagement," *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 1 (2017): 151, https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2017.0061.

[163] "About," Tumblr, accessed April 20, 2020, https://action.tumblr.com/about.

desired—publicly visible. Unlike Facebook, users do not provide their real names, and there are fewer rules than major social media platforms.[164] Like 4chan, Tumblr allowed a group of individuals to amplify fringe ideas into modern discourse. Tumblr quickly became a "reverse mirror image of … 4chan," and adopted its own language, vocabulary, and style.[165] Its mostly millennial user base found a digital safe space in Tumblr, particularly those in communities that have historically felt pushed aside, where they can anonymously share their thoughts and feelings.[166] Collectively, Nagle argues, Tumblr worked to expand the Overton window of acceptable discourse further and further to the left, while restricting speech on the right.[167] This narrowing made anti-white, anti-male, and anti-heterosexual speech acceptable on the site, while encouraging a "self-flagellation" of sorts among the "privileged" sympathetic users who fit into the above categories.[168] Tumblr users, as Nagle points out, were antagonizing American society with far-flung and often unsubstantiated claims of misogyny, racism, and so forth.[169] In his "A Normie's Guide to the Alt-Right," Anglin makes numerous pejorative mentions of "social justice warriors," giving their increasing numbers credit for recruiting people to the alt-right.[170] Nagle argues that the media space for the left potentially caused a counter-reaction from alt-righters, who felt—like gamers did—that political correctness was having a deleterious effect on society.

D.   CONCLUSION

When researching historical white supremacist and white nationalist movements in the United States, tenuous connections link the alt-right to older movements. Similarly, at their few public appearances—such as when Polo-shirt-wearing alt-righters marched down

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[164] Mccracken, "Tumblr Youth," 156.

[165] Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 62.

[166] Mccracken, "Tumblr Youth," 151.

[167] The Overton window, named after its creator, Joseph Overton, refers to the range of acceptable policies that politicians can generally support without losing popularity. See "The Overton Window," Mackinac Center for Public Policy, accessed June 23, 2020, http://www.mackinac.org/OvertonWindow.

[168] Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 66.

[169] Nagle, 67.

[170] Anglin, "A Normie's Guide to the Alt-Right."

the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia—one can see elements of intellectual white supremacist movements. When active online these days, the alt-right's intellectual sophistication is generally lost.

Creating a precise lineage of the alt-right is a challenging task. Individuals most familiar with framing politics through a binary left–right lens have a hard time categorizing the movement. The alt-right is best understood as a melting pot of digital subcultures all coming together, including the manosphere, intellectual white supremacists, the alt-lite, and neo-Nazis. To the casual, predisposed viewer, the alt-right offers a bit of edginess and fun; someone who might not attend a Richard Spencer speech might find amusement in 4chan's /pol/ board and get drawn into the alt-lite realm. The alt-right is best understood as a new movement, beginning in 2008, reborn in 2015, and, at its core, a loose coalition of online ideologies representing an alternative to traditional conservatism and fierce opposition to political correctness.

Despite the varying ideologies that make up the alt-right, a commonality is the movement's use of social media to spread views and recruit members. The next chapter reviews how domestic and foreign extremist groups use social media to recruit members and which of these tactics the alt-right likewise uses to recruit.

III.   RECRUITMENT, SELF-RECRUITMENT, AND RADICALIZATION

The alt-right is a melting pot of ideologies converging under one umbrella. Some in the movement participate only in online activities while others have moved offline to participate in protests or engage in criminal activities. The common thread, however, is mobilization on the internet—specifically social media—which helps the alt-right spread its message and recruit others. Its unorthodox and offensive use of irony and humor intentionally confuses the out-group, which consists of the media and *normies* (people with mainstream beliefs), and masks the threat it poses. This chapter reviews how the alt-right uses social media to spread its message across varying platforms and the parallels with recruiting methods used by domestic and foreign extremist groups. The chapter concludes by discussing how individuals are attracted to the alt-right and examines theories on the radicalization process that have led some alt-righters to take their online banter into real-life action.

A.   HOW EXTREMIST GROUPS RECRUIT ONLINE

Through the internet, anyone can quickly, and inexpensively, spread a message across the world. Extremist groups have long capitalized on the internet to spread their message and recruit. A RAND study of fifteen extremists and terrorists noted how groups used the internet to recruit, concluding that the internet makes it easier for an individual to view extremist material; to operate in an echo chamber, only viewing material that confirms existing beliefs; and to radicalize without ever attending a physical meeting.[171]

Literature on online radicalization notes how domestic and foreign extremists release propaganda tailored to youths via social media.[172] This generation is particularly susceptible to online radicalization, as so much of its identity is tied to their members'

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[171] Ines Von Behr et al., *Radicalisation in the Digital Era: The Use of the Internet in 15 Cases of Terrorism and Extremism* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2013), xii.

[172] Séraphin Alava et al., *Youth and Violent Extremism on Social Media: Mapping the Research* (Paris, France: UNESCO, 2017).

online lives.[173] For the last decade, Islamic terror groups pioneered a propaganda strategy called "jihadi cool" to resonate with young people and encourage lone wolf terrorism.[174] A slew of the rap videos, websites, online magazines, and other digital media aimed at young Americans remain easily accessible on the internet.[175] In 2010, NPR reported on this strategy, noting it is "clearly aimed at young people nursing resentments and looking for thrills."[176] Young people viewing sanitized extremist propaganda can, under the right conditions, be drawn into a movement that seemingly fills a void in their lives.

Internet culture has changed significantly since NPR's 2010 report, and extremist groups have shifted their recruitment tactics in unison. The last decade saw the internet shift from a collection of static websites to a participatory culture that enables real-time collaboration and information sharing, termed Web 2.0.[177] Today's internet users operate in a digital culture mostly dominated by sharing short blurbs of texts, photographs, videos, and captioned graphics among themselves.[178] Extremist groups have established presences on these sites, pushing out material that resonates with a younger demographic for which internet culture is ingrained.

Foreign terrorist groups' social media communications have adapted to the youthfulness of online cultures. Much like the alt-right, the Islamic State uses irony and humor in its messaging, employing countercultural subversive tactics to make its message resonate with adolescent and post-adolescent audiences.[179] In the *Journal of Terrorism Research*, Laura Huey discusses the Islamic State's use of "political jamming," a tactic

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[173] Alava et al., 13.

[174] Dina Temple-Raston, "Jihadi Cool: Terrorist Recruiters' Latest Weapon," NPR, March 26, 2010, https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=125186382.

[175] Jessica Stern, "A Radical Idea," *Hoover Digest*, no. 1 (January 23, 2012), https://www.hoover.org/research/radical-idea.

[176] Temple-Raston, "Jihadi Cool."

[177] Mike Wolcott, "What Is Web 2.0?" CBS News, May 1, 2008, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-505125_162-51066094/what-is-web-20/.

[178] Laura Huey, "This Is Not Your Mother's Terrorism: Social Media, Online Radicalization and the Practice of Political Jamming," *Journal of Terrorism Research* 6, no. 2 (May 25, 2015): 4, https://doi.org/10.15664/jtr.1159.

[179] Huey, 1.

used across many internet subcultures, including the alt-right, which she defines as altering a common photo or slogan to corrupt its intended meaning for a political purpose.[180] In Figure 2, for instance, the Islamic State uses a play on former President Barack Obama's "Yes we can!" campaign slogan, altering it to postulate that targeting children with drone strikes embodies the American spirit.

Figure 2.   Meme posted on Twitter by Islamic State[181]

Social media users tend to spread information through "small, highly digestible forms" of information—in other words, images and small text blurbs rather than essays and dissertations.[182] Political jamming appeals to countercultures because it encourages the viewer to mock the target.[183] As Huey notes, political jams can appeal to youths, particularly disaffected youths, who create and share the images to be seen as "cool and

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[180] Huey, 6. Some political science literature uses the term *culture jamming* interchangeably with this term, but Huey notes that political jamming is essentially culture jamming for a political purpose.

[181] Source: Huey, 5.

[182] Huey, 4.

[183] Huey, 4.

edgy."[184] Although the alt-right is structurally dissimilar to foreign terror groups, the two movements use social media communications in much the same way.

The alt-right, likewise, presents itself as a lighthearted, fun movement to this tech-savvy, younger generation. Like foreign extremist groups, the alt-right spreads political messaging, much of it extremely incendiary, while packaging the message in a jovial manner familiar to its target audience.[185] The messaging is often dual-purpose: to use messaging strategies familiar to the in-group and to goad their targets—specifically, media, celebrities, and politicians—into overreacting.[186] Consequently, to ascertain the threat posed by the alt-right, we must understand the digital subcultures in which the movement resurfaced.

B.   TROLLING, MEME CULTURE, AND MEMETIC WARFARE

The future of warfare isn't on the battlefield, but on our screens and in our minds.

—"Memes That Kill"[187]

During a July 2018 drug bust, a group of police officers from the Jasper, Alabama, Police Department took a group photo after executing a narcotics search warrant.[188] Although police officers often take such photos after notable arrests, this photo contained something out of the ordinary: four of the officers making a subtle *OK* symbol with their hands by placing their thumbs and forefingers together. Though seemingly innocuous, this photo caused the city's mayor to suspend the officers for a week because, as some local politicians alleged, the mayor believed the gesture is a white supremacy symbol. Others came to the officers' defense, saying that the sign is a play on the children's "circle game"

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[184] Huey, 4.

[185] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 20.

[186] Hawley, 20.

[187] "Memes That Kill: The Future of Information Warfare," CB Insights, May 3, 2018, https://www.cbinsights.com/research/future-of-information-warfare/.

[188] Anna Beahm, "AL Officers Suspended Over Controversial Hand Symbol," AL.com, July 17, 2018, https://www.al.com/news/2018/07/jasper_officers_suspended_for.html.

of subtly making a circle with your fingers to convince someone to notice it.[189] Although the officers' intentions are unclear, this gesture's association with white supremacy goes back to the ground zero of internet trolling: 4chan.

In early 2017, users of 4chan's /b/ (random) board—a digital hub of the alt-right—engaged in a collaborative action dubbed Operation O-KKK to convince the media that the OK hand gesture is a subtle white supremacist code, under the theory that the alt-right could discredit any media outlet that subsequently claimed the signal is racist. The 4chan post credited with starting the trend argued, "We must flood twitter and other social media websites with spam, claiming that the OK hand sign is a symbol of white supremacy [because] leftists have dug so deep down into their lunacy. We must force them to dig more, until the rest of society ain't going anywhere near [leftism]."[190] The Anti-Defamation League concluded that the symbol's link to white supremacy was a "hoax," citing the 4chan post as evidence.[191] Further clouding the issue was that, in the months before the 4chan article, alt-right figures and individuals associated with President Donald Trump's then-nascent administration—individuals apparently not associated with the alt-right—were photographed making the subtle hand signal.[192] Trolling tactics of the alt-right and 4chan fuel a challenge-response cycle between the movement and social-justice-minded individuals, with one side allegedly eager to dispense racism claims and the other attempting to provoke overreactions.

1.   Trolling for a Political Purpose

The alt-right—building on 4chan's legacy—is a manifestation of the larger internet troll culture. For years, 4chan and its spinoff sites have treated the act of trolling as a sport,

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[189] Beahm.

[190] "Is That an OK Sign? A White Power Symbol? Or Just a Right-Wing Troll?" Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed May 1, 2020, https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/09/18/ok-sign-white-power-symbol-or-just-right-wing-troll.

[191] "How the 'OK' Symbol Became a Popular Trolling Gesture," Anti-Defamation League, May 1, 2017, https://www.adl.org/blog/how-the-ok-symbol-became-a-popular-trolling-gesture; Emily Pothast, "Does the OK Sign Actually Signify 'White Power,' or What?" Medium, December 16, 2019, https://medium.com/s/story/does-the-ok-sign-actually-signify-white-power-or-what-6cf3309df985.

[192] Pothast, "OK Sign."

with the media as their primary target. In the report "Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online," Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis identify four typical content strategies behind 4chan's trolling:

- Ambiguous content—i.e., it is difficult to determine if the author is sincere or parodying extremism.

- Content that seeks an emotional reaction.

- Content that antagonizes mainstream media and the common perception of media drumming up moral panic.

- Deliberately offensive speech that pushes the boundaries of morality.[193]

The alt-right's trolling styles are identical to 4chan's, but with different goals. Instead of for amusement, trolling for the alt-right is a political strategy with a serious purpose.[194] Alt-right members troll to be countercultural, encourage discord, and receive attention from the out-group, and they spread their trolling to a variety of sites—outside of alt-right friendly venues such as 4chan—to mainstream social media and online newspaper comment sections, infusing ideas into popular discourse beyond the reach of their standard platforms.[195] With trolling tactics embedded in the movement, alt-righters can spread abhorrent material and then distance themselves from the content by claiming simply to be engaging in lighthearted trolling.[196] For his part, Milo Yiannopoulos—who is best categorized as alt-lite, as previously discussed—downplays the movement's offensiveness, likening it to the kids who followed the 1980s death metal movement without actually being satanists.[197] Regardless of individual participants' true beliefs, alt-righters believe

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[193] Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis, "Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online" (report, Data & Society Research Institute, 2017), 5.

[194] Hawley, *The Alt-Right*, 109; Marwick and Lewis, "Media Manipulation," 2.

[195] Hawley, *The Alt-Right*, 108, 26.

[196] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 20.

[197] Yiannopoulos and Bokhari, "An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right."

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that any reaction to their trolling—even a negative reaction—is a victory.[198] The group's trolling strategies thus allow anyone with an internet connection to be a part of its army.

2.   Memetic Warfare: Weaponizing Social Media

Biologist Richard Dawkins coined the term *meme* to describe how behaviors and ideas spread from person to person within a culture, with a given meme acting as a "unit of cultural transmission."[199] Today, the word represents a concept—image, text, song, hashtag, among others—that spreads virally through social media and encourages creative people to add their unique spin on the specific concept.[200] To be successful, a meme must be replicated by someone else, from one mind to another, like a communicable virus moving between populations.

Although social media users have harmless and humorous interactions with memes, malicious actors have used memes in information warfare operations. The Russian government used memes to exploit political divides and interfere with the 2016 U.S. presidential election, illustrating how seemingly harmless memes can be propagandized for strategic political purposes.[201] Figure 3 illustrates a meme posted on September 8, 2016, to a Facebook page called Being Patriotic, a popular page later connected to Russia's Internet Research Agency. This meme's inflammatory caption was:

> At least 50,000 homeless veterans are starving dying in the streets, but liberals want to invite 620,000 refugees and settle them among us. We have to take care of our own citizens, and it must be the primary goal for our politicians![202]

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[198] Hawley, *The Alt-Right*, 109.

[199] Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 40th anniversary edition (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1976), 249.

[200] Greene, "'Deplorable' Satire."

[201] Nicholas Thompson and Issie Lapowsky, "How Russian Trolls Used Meme Warfare to Divide America," *Wired*, December 17, 2010, https://www.wired.com/story/russia-ira-propaganda-senate-report/.

[202] Scott Shane, "Some of the Popular Images and Themes the Russians Posted on Social Media," *New York Times*, December 17, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/17/us/russian-social-media-posts.html.

Figure 3.   A meme Russia's Internet Research Agency propagated on
Facebook before the 2016 U.S. presidential election[203]

The meme contrasts the refugee crisis of the time with support of homeless veterans, insinuating that the two issues are mutually exclusive. Although the post used dubious statistics and unsourced claims, it amplified timely political debates concerning veterans' affairs and refugee assistance.[204] Facebook users shared the image over 600,000 times, with each successive share gaining the imprimatur from each subsequent person who shared the post. Although this particular meme targets conservative-minded individuals, Russian trolls pushed content geared toward a myriad of political ideals in their effort to sow division.[205] The alt-right embraces this unconventional tactic—dubbed memetic warfare, or meme war for short—as a matter of practice.

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[203] Source: Shane.

[204] Shane.

[205] Shane.

While these Russian memes targeted American society at large, the alt-right targets "normies"—their out-group—anticipating that the memes will go viral through mainstream social media platforms and will get their messaging into general circulation.[206] For instance, a meme popularized by 4chan in 2017 encouraged people to post signs with the supposedly harmless text "It's okay to be white" on college campuses and city streets. The reaction from the media and college administrators served as proof from the alt-right mindset that white people are a persecuted race; controversy surrounding the signs pushed their narrative of oppression against white people in society.[207] The opponent in the alt-right's meme war is the status quo, and the goal is to implant their ideas into the mainstream.

Many of the alt-right's memes are repurposed versions of common images or concepts. As previously mentioned, this approach—called political jamming or culture jamming—is not unique to the alt-right; it has been used for many years by political advocacy groups to increase awareness.[208] An example political jam is shown in Figure 4, where the former mascot for Camel cigarettes, Joe Camel, has been rebranded as "Joe Chemo" and is lying in a hospital bed, ostensibly due to his cigarette smoking.

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[206] Hawley, *The Alt-Right*, 109.

[207] "From 4Chan, Another Trolling Campaign Emerges," Anti-Defamation League, November 6, 2017, https://www.adl.org/blog/from-4chan-another-trolling-campaign-emerges.

[208] Huey, "Not Your Mother's Terrorism." Huey notes that political jamming is essentially the same as culture jamming, except that it is used for political purposes. Some literature uses the terms interchangeably.

Figure 4.   Political jam used by an anti-smoking campaign[209]

In "A Normie's Guide to the Alt-Right," Andrew Anglin claims that repurposing common recognizable concepts is "not only meaningful, but also extremely fun."[210] Much like the alt-right's attempts to take ownership of the OK hand symbol, alt-righters also branded a popular online cartoon frog named Pepe as their mascot.[211] A crudely drawn anthropomorphic comic frog (see Figure 5), illustrator Matt Furie conceived of Pepe for his comic "Boy's Life."[212] In the original, mid-2000s version of the cartoon, Pepe mirrored Furie's college life, living out various scenarios familiar to college kids. Later, the alt-right faction on 4chan spread pictures of Pepe wearing a KKK hood, or standing in front of a burning World Trade Center wearing a yarmulke, and in other similar offensive and racist scenes.[213] Pepe—much to the dismay of his creator—soon became the de facto alt-right logo, spread virally through alt-right Twitter pages; many alt-righters used frog emojis in

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[209] Source: "Spoofs," Adbusters Media Foundation, accessed May 18, 2020, https://www.adbusters.org/spoof-ads.

[210] Anglin, "A Normie's Guide to the Alt-Right."

[211] Hawley, *The Alt-Right*, 114.

[212] Jessica Roy, "How 'Pepe the Frog' Went from Harmless to Hate Symbol," *Los Angeles Times*, October 11, 2016, https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-pepe-the-frog-hate-symbol-20161011-snap-htmlstory.html.

[213] Roy.

their Twitter profiles.[214] After Hillary Clinton made a comment about Donald Trump supporters being "deplorables" in the height of the 2016 presidential election, the alt-right altered the poster for the movie *The Expendables* to show Trump and his advisors, featuring Pepe (see Figure 6). Trump's son, Donald Trump Jr., shared the image in a tweet.

Figure 5.   Pepe the Frog[215]

Figure 6.   Alt-right meme shared by Donald Trump Jr.[216]

This post elevated Pepe into the national spotlight. In response to backlash, Trump Jr. said he had no prior knowledge of the meme's origins; in an interview with television host George Stephanopoulos, Trump Jr. said, "I thought it was a frog in a wig. I thought it

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[214] Roy.

[215] Source: "Feels Good Man," Know Your Meme, accessed May 18, 2020, https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/95218-feels-good-man.

[216] Source: Donald Trump Jr., "A friend sent me this. Apparently I made the cut as one of the deplorables…," Instagram, September 10, 2016, https://www.instagram.com/p/BKMtdN5Bam5/.

was funny. I had no idea there was any connotation there."[217] If we accept Trump Jr.'s statement at face value, it shows how the alt-right is able to virally spread its ideas by coopting commonly recognizable symbols.

C. RECRUITMENT

As a leaderless movement, the alt-right does little recruiting in the traditional sense. Unlike groups such as the KKK, there is no membership process and the alt-right has few physical meetings.[218] Despite this, some groups affiliated with the alt-right have attempted to formally organize a political movement.[219] These groups have placed recruitment flyers in public and have—in some cases unsuccessfully—given speeches on college campuses.[220] The offshoots' attempts to recruit on college campuses aligns with the alt-right's general strategy of drawing in millennials.

1. Identity Evropa and the American Identity Movement

The Identity Evropa organization is one exception to the generally unstructured alt-right. Founded in 2016 by dishonorably discharged Marine Nathan Damigo, Identity Evropa is a white supremacist organization that uses some of the intellectual tactics of movements discussed in Chapter II.[221] Its clean-cut members marched in Charlottesville, Virginia, wearing khakis and Polo shirts during the deadly 2017 Unite the Right rally, which this thesis covers further in Chapter IV.[222] Identity Evropa—which later rebranded itself as the American Identity Movement after hackers leaked chat logs—was founded as

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[217] Nick Gass, "Trump Jr.: 'I've Never Even Heard of Pepe the Frog,'" *Politico*, September 16, 2016, https://politi.co/36CSmTG.

[218] Hawley, *The Alt-Right*, 26.

[219] Hawley, 26.

[220] Hawley, 26.

[221] "Identity Evropa/American Identity Movement," Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed April 19, 2020, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/identity-evropaamerican-identity-movement.

[222] Southern Poverty Law Center.

the American wing of the European Identitarian movement, maintaining linkages to the Alt-Right for in-group legitimacy.[223]

Identity Evropa made news after the group's professionally designed posters showed up on college campuses. Damigo notes that college campuses are the group's "number one target" for recruitment due to, in his view, the encroachment of left-wing politics on campuses.[224] During the summer of 2017, Identity Evropa hung banners throughout the country in attempts to create awareness of its message and recruit members; the banners (see an example in Figure 7) featured slogans such as "Secure our border, secure our future" and "A new dawn is breaking, rise and get active."[225] In mid-2017, Identity Evropa encouraged its students to put posters with provided graphics up on college campuses. In an interview, Damigo estimated that, as of 2017, flyers were displayed in at least seventy college campuses.[226] The organization's website posed a series of questions to those who wished to become part of the movement, including asking for verification of ethnic heritage.[227] Universities and cities in which Identity Evropa members hung posters generally condemn the material; some removing the material while others left it up in the name of free speech.[228]

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[223] Southern Poverty Law Center.

[224] Southern Poverty Law Center.

[225] Southern Poverty Law Center.

[226] "Meet the Neo-Nazi Coming to Put up White Pride Posters on Your Campus," The Tab, February 15, 2017, https://thetab.com/us/2017/02/15/nathan-damigo-identity-evropa-60697.

[227] The Tab.

[228] Nate Hegyi, "White Nationalist Groups Increase Recruiting and Propaganda across the West," NPR, March 19, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/03/19/704586335/white-nationalist-groups-increase-recruiting-and-propaganda-across-the-west.
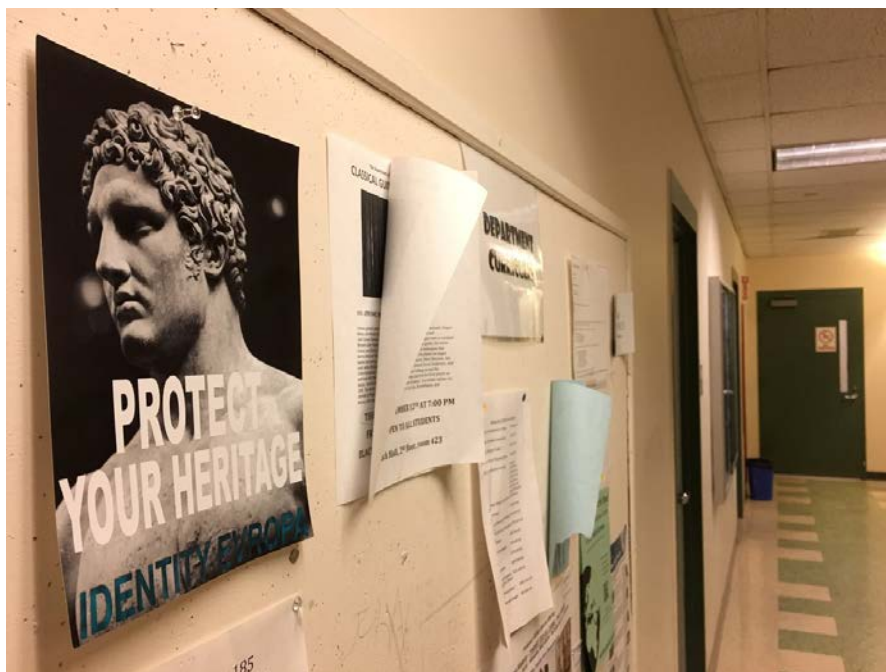
Figure 7.   An Identity Evropa poster on a college campus[229]

Identity Evropa is not the only right-wing group that has placed flyers in public spaces. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) notes that in 2019, right-wing organizations such as the alt-right-affiliated Patriot Front were responsible for 1,500 incidents of flyers in public spaces such as colleges, religious buildings, and Planned Parenthood clinics.[230] Because the alt-right believes that even negative attention is beneficial, the publicity they received from the mainstream media for the public flyers created a feedback loop.

2.   Red Pilling and Self-Radicalization

For the purposes of this thesis, self-radicalization refers to how individuals adopt countercultural alt-right ideas through inadvertent discovery of alt-right material. As a decentralized movement, the alt-right generally lacks an initiation process or structured

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[229] Source: The Tab, "Meet the Neo-Nazi."

[230] "Spotlight on Tactics: A Flurry of Flyering in 2019," Southern Poverty Law Center, March 18, 2020, https://www.splcenter.org/news/2020/03/18/spotlight-tactics-flurry-flyering-2019.

beliefs.[231] Although the term *radicalization* generally implies a person is willing to commit violence to advance his or her causes, for most individuals who discover the alt-right, trolling and online harassment may be the worst offenses.[232] For a minority, though, alt-right recruitment was the first step in a journey to violent acts in the name of white supremacy.[233] This section explores how individuals discover alt-right messaging and become part of the movement.

Although the alt-right does not actively recruit, its members do actively encourage followers to push their ideas to the outside. As previously mentioned, the alt-right uses the term *red pill*—a homage to *The Matrix*—to refer to an individual who has come to agree with basic alt-right tenets.[234] Just as taking the red pill allows Neo to leave the fantasy world of his current reality and enter the true, unpleasant reality of the matrix, the alt-right believes that the majority of Americans—"normies"—live in a fantasy world filled with progressive myths; being red pilled awakens one to inconvenient realities.[235] Alt-right message boards are filled with suggestions for helping members red pill their friends and families.[236] In the alt-right, someone who has taken the red pill is not necessarily part of the movement or even aware of its existence; rather, it signifies that the person has shunned mainstream ideologies and perspectives on one or more issues.[237] Essentially, the term red pill is the label the alt-right places on someone who has adopted positions outside the mainstream.

A common pathway for self-radicalization—red pilling—into the alt-right is a reaction to national politics, societal problems, and current events. Hawley discusses how

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[231] Hawley, *The Alt-Right*, 26.

[232] Alex Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-radicalisation, Counter-radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review" (research paper, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism Studies, 2013), 18–19, https://doi.org/10.19165/2013.1.02; Hawley, *The Alt-Right*, 26.

[233] Hawley, *The Alt-Right*, 24, 138; Luke Munn, "Alt-Right Pipeline: Individual Journeys to Extremism Online," *First Monday* 24, no. 6 (June 1, 2019), https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v24i6.10108.

[234] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 83.

[235] Hawley, 83.

[236] Hawley, 83; Marwick and Lewis, "Media Manipulation," 29.

[237] Marwick and Lewis, "Media Manipulation," 29.

young people who were upset with increased racial discord in America, particularly during the administration of President Barack Obama, were pushed into the movement.[238] Controversial shootings of African Americans, some at the hands of law enforcement, received much attention from the alt-right, whose members believed the media did not fairly portray these incidents.[239] Refugee crises were another boon to the movement. In line with international movements, fear of whites being outnumbered in future years may have turned some to extreme beliefs.[240] Regardless of the veracity of these claims, current events are pushing people to the alt-right.

Being red pilled into one alt-right viewpoint can lead to being red pilled in other areas. As discussed in Chapter II, the alt-right is an amalgamation of different ideas, including opposition to feminism, immigration, globalism, mainstream media, and liberal political correctness.[241] Acceptance of a non-mainstream position in one area can increase the likelihood of acceptance of other non-mainstream positions, much like accepting one conspiracy theory makes one more likely to accept others.[242] There are many potential entry points into the alt-right, dependent on an individual's grievances.

The alt-right views red pilling as a journey without an ending, not a singular event or an immediate transformation. Put simply, instead of consuming a singular pill like Neo did that caused him to discover truth forever, individuals consume many red pills over time, discovering the truth of a new topic with each pill.[243] Although most in the alt-right do not make a transformation to real-life action, many do. The next section discusses theories on how individuals were red pilled to the point of violence.

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[238] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 78.

[239] Hawley, *The Alt-Right*, 27.

[240] Hawley, 70.

[241] Hawley, 9.

[242] Rebecca Lewis and Alice Marwick, "Taking the Red Pill: Ideological Motivations for Spreading Online Disinformation," *Understanding and Addressing the Disinformation Ecosystem* (December 2017): 20, https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/9d91/58807cbf03fff609e74ef9e0e61c2e6088d8.pdf#page=21.

[243] Munn, "Alt-Right Pipeline."

D.   REAL-LIFE EXTREMISM

> Well lads, it's time to stop shitposting and time to make a real life effort post.

> —Brenton Tarrant, The Great Replacement

After killing fifty Muslims who were worshipping in two Christchurch, New Zealand, mosques, Brenton Tarrant posted on the 8chan website—a now-shuttered 4chan derivative—that he was moving his online trolling discourse into real-life actions.[244] Tarrant's manifesto, filled with alt-right slang and posted to 8chan before the attack, made it clear that he felt murdering worshippers was his last stop on his path to radicalization. Tarrant, and others like him, initially constrained his radicalism to digital media before targeting an alt-right out-group—specifically, Muslims—with violence.[245] The internet allows extremist groups to reach audiences, and, as discussed, international and domestic groups have capitalized on social media for recruitment. Anyone sitting in front of a computer can easily acquire dangerous information. This section reviews a theory of alt-right digital-to-reality journeys that led to violent actions.

In a paper for the journal *First Monday*, Luke Munn pinpoints three overlapping cognitive traits in the "alt-right pipeline," providing a framework for how the movement gradually impels its members to take up violence. Munn argues the pathway from engaging in online discourse to real-life alt-right violence is a nonlinear process involving normalization, acclimation, and dehumanization.[246] While not necessarily in this order, once an individual completes all three processes, Munn believes they are more likely to commit violent acts.

In normalization, ideas that would generally be considered offensive by themselves—such as white supremacy—are "repackaged" through memes and irony by

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[244] Munn.

[245] Brenton Tarrant, "The Great Replacement," Biblioteka ATeKa, accessed April 18, 2020, http://biblioteka.kijowski.pl/zbrodniarze/10-Tarrant%20Brenton%20-%20The%20Great%20 Replacement.pdf.

[246] Munn, "Alt-Right Pipeline."

the alt-right to make them appear more palatable.[247] As mentioned, the memes cycle through alt-right discussions, being repurposed and transmitted internally and externally. As the memes are recycled, the concept becomes more familiar and the shock value is reduced. Anglin affirms this strategy in "A Normie's Guide to the Alt-Right," noting it should not be obvious to the "unindoctrinated" if an alt-right individual is joking about a particular topic.[248] A person passing through the normalization process becomes desensitized to racism and other abhorrent material, viewing it as normal.

Overlapping with normalization is acclimation to the new environment. Through a process of "psychological habituation," viewing a constant stream of offensive content desensitizes the mind.[249] This repeated exposure establishes a new normal for acceptable discourse, pushing a person to more provocative and inflammatory communications. Some of the less vitriolic alt-right figures—i.e., the alt-lite—may appear to be too traditionalist and diluted for their liking.[250] The acclimated individual may then look for more extreme alt-right influencers to follow.

The third trait in Munn's framework is dehumanization. A person with this cognitive trait no longer sees people of certain backgrounds or lifestyles as humans; rather, they are "apolitical objects," thus "clear [ing] the way for its targets to be mistreated."[251] Munn argues that this allows the alt-right to support actions such as genocide or mass deportation while retaining moral superiority. In his manifesto, Christchurch shooter Tarrant referred to his enemies as "invaders," believing that killing each one meant "one less enemy your children will have to face."[252] Dehumanization makes the target no longer an individual with rights but part of a group lacking relevant claims or causes.

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[247] Munn.

[248] Anglin, "A Normie's Guide to the Alt-Right."

[249] Munn, "Alt-Right Pipeline."

[250] Munn.

[251] Munn.

[252] Tarrant, "The Great Replacement."

Once someone has adopted all three traits—normalization, acclimation, and dehumanization—his or her worldview is now "thoroughly transformed"; Munn notes that it is difficult to classify someone with these traits as either a terrorist or violent extremist under typical frameworks, as they hold hateful ideas but do not take action.[253] However, he argues that such people have begun to "collapse the extremist/troll boundary" and are more likely to act out, particularly if in the company of others with similar beliefs.[254] Because the alt-right's online discourse generally does not raise red flags with law enforcement, attacks appear to be "random, isolated, [and] entirely unpredictable."[255] Those who have completed Munn's "journey" can be a significant threat yet may fail to appear on conventional law enforcement radars before they execute a tragic, sudden act of violence.

Not all alt-right individuals will complete this journey. Part of a multifaceted movement with no membership criteria, some alt-righters take on all three cognitive traits, and are thus fully radicalized according to Munn's framework, while others do not possess any. Munn argues that an individual who does possess all three traits is more likely to be a threat since their extremism can be undetectable and unpredictable.

E.   CONCLUSION

Extremist and terrorist groups have long capitalized on the internet for communication and recruitment. These groups can push material to all corners of the world; anyone with internet access can sit alone and view dangerous content. As methods of internet communications have changed over the years—from the static webpages of the 1990s and 2000s to the user-generated content of today—dangerous groups have adapted their methods. No longer publishing impassioned treatises or angry diatribes on websites, today's groups, both organized and leaderless, communicate in ways that are familiar to millennials. They embed irony and humor into videos and memes to make hateful content

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[253] Munn, "Alt-Right Pipeline."

[254] Munn.

[255] Munn.

more palatable. By using unique language and style only familiar to the in-group, these groups can attract curious individuals who are looking to join a movement. Under the right conditions, young people who view this sanitized propaganda can be drawn into a movement that they feel fills a void in their lives.

Like other groups, the alt-right has adapted to the culture of the internet to push its ideas into the mainstream. Memes can be found in bulk on any social media site, and individuals can alter these commonly recognizable symbols, adding their own spin. For the alt-right, though, memes serve a strategic political purpose. The alt-right's unorthodox and offensive use of irony and humor intentionally confuses the out-group (consisting of the media and "normies"), masking the threat the group poses. Through memetic warfare— when memes are used as political tools against an enemy—the alt-right attempts to befuddle the out-group by obfuscating its true message. While not all memes have a political agenda—people with no affiliation to the movement have shared them simply because they are humorous—alt-righters use political jamming to repurpose commonly recognized items to advance their agenda.

The alt-right does not recruit in the traditional sense. While some formal organizations with alt-right affiliations have hung flyers in public places, the alt-right more commonly draws in new members by pushing its ideas into the mainstream. Since the alt-right has a loose collection of ideologies, there are many potential entry points into the movement for an aggrieved individual, whether that person is upset about perceived political correctness or reeling from a recent job loss or relationship breakup.

Although most alt-righters stick to the internet, some take their grievances further, into real-life action; this is what Munn terms the "collapse [of] the extremist/troll boundary."[256] Legal frameworks that classify people who have dangerous views as terrorists or violent extremists are not normally applied to alt-righters, as their online discourse often fails to raise red flags with law enforcement. As Munn notes, attacks committed by alt-right-affiliated individuals are often downplayed as isolated events that

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[256] Munn.

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could not have been avoided. Munn proposes a three-phase, nonlinear journey of normalization, acclimation, and dehumanization that, when completed, identifies an individual who is more likely to commit violence.

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IV. BREAKING THE EXTREMIST-TROLL BOUNDARY: SIX CASE STUDIES

Right-wing extremists have been responsible for the vast majority of terror attacks on U.S. soil since September 11, 2001, outpacing attacks from Islamic terror groups and left wing extremists.[257] In particular, right-wing attacks accelerated between 2004 and 2020, and the number of right-wing plots is likely to increase in the near future.[258] In "The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States," Seth Jones, Catrina Doxsee, and Nicholas Harrington identify three overarching categories of right-wing terrorism responsible for terror attacks on U.S. soil: white supremacists, involuntary celibates (incels), and anti-government extremists.[259] Attacks by the alt-right are often categorized as right-wing terrorism, which makes it difficult to determine how many attacks have been committed by individuals affiliated with the alt-right. This chapter argues, however, that alt-right sentiments can move a person from engaging in anonymous online discourse to committing a terror attack.

This chapter reviews six such attacks with apparent alt-right connections—five in the United States and one in New Zealand. The Anti-Defamation League's Hate, Extremism, Anti-Semitism, Terrorism (H.E.A.T.) Map catalogs extremist incidents in the United States, and identified 105 murders affiliated with right-wing groups between 2015 and May 2020 in the United States.[260] In five of the incidents, the perpetrators had explicit or implicit alt-right connections. This chapter excludes one incident: an apparent road rage murder in Florida in which police identified the attacker as having alt-right connections,

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[257] Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, and Nicholas Harrington, "The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States" (brief, Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2020), 1, https://www.csis.org/analysis/escalating-terrorism-problem-united-states.

[258] Jones, Doxsee, and Harrington, 1.

[259] Jones, Doxsee, and Harrington, 3.

[260] "ADL H.E.A.T. Map," Anti-Defamation League, accessed July 16, 2020, https://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resource-knowledge-base/adl-heat-map.

but without further elaboration.[261] The remaining four incidents are analyzed herein, along with an attack in New Zealand that served as inspiration for two of the four U.S. attacks. Each of the attackers in these cases openly espoused ideologies or symbolism associated with the alt-right or other, closely aligned movements.

Organizations that track terrorist attacks, such as the University of Maryland's START project (which stands for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism) and ADL's H.E.A.T. Map, categorize alt-right attacks under the broader "right-wing" category, which includes individuals motivated by many different issues.[262] This chapter analyzes a small subset of right-wing extremist attacks—those with connections to the alt-right or broader online milieu of its aligned movements. Each case study discusses the attacker's childhood, education, occupation, and the events that led them to adopt alt-right positions, to the extent that this information is available through media, academic research, court records, and other open-source information.

A.   CHARLOTTESVILLE, VIRGINIA, UNITE THE RIGHT RALLY

The 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, was the alt-right's largest public event, bringing various factions together in person and removing the cloak from anonymous followers. Charlottesville resident Jason Kessler obtained a permit to host this rally on August 12, 2017.[263] Kessler noted on the permit that the purpose was a "free speech rally in support of the [Robert E.] Lee Monument," which the Charlottesville City Council had voted to take down in the wake of a larger national movement to remove Confederate symbolism from public places.[264] Kessler invited a variety of right-wing and

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[261] Kavitha Surana, "Old Northeast Shooting Suspect Fascinated by Mass Shootings, Stockpiled Weapons, Police Say," *Tampa Bay Times*, May 31, 2019, https://www.tampabay.com/breaking-news/old-northeast-shooting-suspect-fascinated-by-mass-shootings-stockpiled-weapons-police-say-20190530/.

[262] "Global Terrorism Database," University of Maryland National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, accessed July 17, 2020, https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/; Anti-Defamation League, "H.E.A.T. Map."

[263] Timothy Heaphy et al., "Final Report: Independent Review of the 2017 Protest Events in Charlottesville, Virginia" (report, Hunton & Williams LLP, November 2017), 69, https://www.policefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Charlottesville-Critical-Incident-Review-2017.pdf.

[264] Heaphy et al., 23–24, 69.

white nationalist speakers and groups, many with direct alt-right affiliations; the permit application estimated five hundred people would be in attendance for the five-hour event.[265] The Charlottesville Police Department's intelligence review notes that similar protests had occurred across the country, attracting thousands of protesters and counterprotesters and with a high likelihood of violence, speculating that the Unite the Right rally would be no different.[266] Despite their due diligence, local authorities were underprepared for what happened on the day of the rally.

On the day of the event, protesters descended on Charlottesville, many of them coming from thousands of miles away, and proudly waved flags representing their supporting ideologies. The SPLC identified flags from right-wing movements such as:

- Kekistan: A fictional country; part of 4chan lore. Their flag resembles a German Nazi flag but with 4chan's official logo in the corner. The alt-right often uses this flag as a trolling tactic.

- Identity Evropa: An Identitarian movement that recruits young white males, particularly disaffected college youths looking for socialization, by providing fraternity-like camaraderie.

- American Guard: A white nationalist movement that seeks to disrupt left wing rallies and events.

- National Socialist Movement: An American neo-Nazi movement whose members often dress in Nazi uniforms at protests.[267]

This confluence of flags illustrates the range of ideologies and organizations represented in the march, from troll-like 4chan members breaking free from their computer screens to avowed neo-Nazis with matching regalia. The rally also attracted a variety of alt-right

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[265] Heaphy et al., 4, 69.

[266] Heaphy et al., 4.

[267] "Flags and Other Symbols Used By Far-Right Groups in Charlottesville," Southern Poverty Law Center, August 12, 2017, https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/08/12/flags-and-other-symbols-used-far-right-groups-charlottesville.

figureheads, including an alt-right trolling personality called Baked Alaska, the early alt-right leader and neo-Nazi Richard Spencer, and Identity Evropa founder Nathan Damigo.[268] In addition to these groups, armed right-wing militias such as Georgia's Three Percenters also traveled to the rally, some of whom disavowed racism while opposing statue removal.[269] In short, the Unite the Right rally had a strong turnout from right-wing groups across the political spectrum.

Counterprotesters with opposing beliefs showed up too, setting up inevitable conflict. Counterprotesters included Charlottesville residents, college students, and Antifa, and most of them marched peacefully; some, however, engaged in clashes with protesters.[270] Many counterprotesters, like the protesters, also openly displayed firearms.[271] The protest devolved into physical fights, causing the Charlottesville Police Department to declare the rally an "unlawful assembly," which required everyone to vacate the area.[272] After this declaration, splinter groups began to form in the area, many of them breaking out into fights with each other.[273]

The escalation of violence had fatal consequences. A few hours after the Charlottesville Police ordered protesters to disperse, protester James Fields deliberately drove his gray Dodge Charger into a crowd of counterprotesters.[274] Fields reversed course

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[268] Conor Gaffey, "The Families of Unite the Right Participants Are Disavowing Them," *Newsweek*, August 16, 2017, https://www.newsweek.com/unite-right-charlottesville-nathan-damigo-trump-651266; Victoria Wreslio, "Charlottesville Groups Send Out 'Call to Action' against Upcoming Rally," NBC29, August 7, 2017, https://web.archive.org/web/20170807192054/http://www.nbc29.com/story/35996322/charlottesville-groups-send-out-call-to-action-against-upcoming-rally.

[269] "White Nationalists See Violent Charlottesville Rally as Successful Turning Point," PBS, August 14, 2017, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/white-nationalists-see-violent-charlottesville-rally-successful-turning-point.

[270] Heaphy et al., "Final Report," 151.

[271] Heaphy et al., 151.

[272] Heaphy et al., 133.

[273] Heaphy et al., 135–43.

[274] Heaphy et al., 144.

to flee the scene but quickly surrendered when police officers pulled his car over nearby.[275] Fields's attack killed thirty-two-year-old Charlottesville resident Heather Heyer and injured thirty-five others.[276] Fields pled guilty to federal hate crime charges and was sentenced to life in prison.[277]

At the time of the attack, Fields was a twenty-year-old resident of Maumee, Ohio, who drove to Charlottesville for the rally.[278] His father died in a car accident before he was born, leaving his mother, who had been paralyzed from a different car accident, to raise him alone.[279] Fields grew up with his mother in Kentucky, and they moved to Ohio when she took a new job.[280] Fields worked as a security guard, earning little more than minimum wage, and played video games in his free time.[281] Fields's violent actions had precursors in his teen years. As an adolescent, Fields physically and verbally abused his mother: while living in Kentucky, police responded to nine 911 calls Fields's mother placed, alleging a variety of violent actions toward her.[282] The call transcripts show her pleading with authorities to get her son psychological help.[283] In high school, Fields had

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[275] Heaphy et al., 144; Claudia Koerner and Cora Lewis, "Here's What We Know about the Man Accused of Killing a Woman at a White Supremacist Rally," BuzzFeed, August 12, 2017, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/claudiakoerner/what-we-know-about-james-alex-fields-charlottesville-crash.

[276] Paul Duggan and Justin Jouvenal, "James Fields Jr. Pleads Guilty to Federal Hate Crimes in Charlottesville Car Ramming That Killed Heather Heyer," *Washington Post*, April 1, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/neo-nazi-sympathizer-pleads-guilty-to-federal-hate-crimes-for-plowing-car-into-crowd-of-protesters-at-unite-the-right-rally-in-charlottesville/2019/03/27/2b947c32-50ab-11e9-8d28-f5149e5a2fda_story.html?noredirect=on.

[277] Duggan and Jouvenal.

[278] Abigail Hauslohner et al., "James Fields Jr.: A Neo-Nazi's Violent, Rage-Fueled Journey to Charlottesville," *Washington Post*, August 18, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/trafficandcommuting/a-neo-nazis-rage-fueled-journey-to-charlottesville/2017/08/18/a7e881fa-8296-11e7-902a-2a9f2d808496_story.html.

[279] Hauslohner et al.

[280] Hauslohner et al.

[281] Hauslohner et al.

[282] Bob Strickley et al., "911 Calls, Records Reveal Tumultuous Past for Accused Charlottesville Driver, Family," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, August 15, 2017, https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/local/northern-ky/2017/08/14/mom-previously-accused-charlottesville-driver-james-alex-fields-jr-beating-her/566078001/.

[283] Strickley et al.

an obsession with Nazi ideologies. One fellow student described him as a student who adored Adolf Hitler and scribbled swastikas on his work, while a teacher notes that he once turned in an assignment that he described as being "very much along the party lines of the neo-Nazi movement."[284] His former high school, for its part, denies receiving any complaints about his behavior; however, one of his former teachers told the media that he tried to mentor Fields away from this ideology and onto a straight path.[285] After high school, Fields joined the Army but failed out of basic training four months later.[286] Fields became radicalized to neo-Nazi ideologies as a teenager and adapted the alt-right's facetious humor on social media. The pattern of violence started in his home and expanded to identifying with neo-Nazism.

Although Fields's social media accounts contained warning signs, they did not contain any actionable material. After the attack, journalists located Fields's Facebook page, on which he used the moniker Conscious Ovis Aries—the binomial name for *sheep*. The page shows symbols affiliated with the alt-right, such as Pepe the Frog, along with Adolf Hitler as an infant, pictures of Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, and Fields standing next to the same vehicle he later used in the attack.[287] The archived Facebook page does not contain any posts other than these images, nor does the page contain any pre-attack indicators.

By the same token, other cues would have been insufficient to provoke police action. Video footage shows Fields marching with Vanguard America, a neo-Nazi white supremacist group which the Anti-Defamation League notes was initially "firmly in the alt-right hemisphere"; he was preoccupied with white identity before gradually adopting white supremacist positions.[288] In the footage, Fields carries a shield bearing Vanguard

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[284] Strickley et al.

[285] Strickley et al.

[286] Hauslohner et al., "James Fields Jr."

[287] "Conscious Ovis Aries Facebook," Archive.Today, accessed July 11, 2020, http://archive.is/Vd4oV.

[288] "Vanguard America," Anti-Defamation League, accessed July 12, 2020, https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/vanguard-america.

America's symbol of two crossed battle axes, and he is wearing the movement's typical uniform, khakis and a white Polo shirt.[289] However, Vanguard America posted on its Twitter account after the attack that Fields "was, in no way, a member of Vanguard America."[290] It has not been confirmed if Fields was a part of an official movement, and Fields did not appear to announce his intentions on social media preceding the attack. Thus, while Fields aligned with one group of protesters, it appears he committed this attack without sharing his intentions with others.

B.   PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA, SYNAGOGUE SHOOTING

On October 27, 2018, during morning Shabbat services, forty-six-year-old Robert Bowers entered Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania's, Tree of Life Synagogue carrying an AR-15 rifle and three handguns, all legally purchased.[291] Bowers began indiscriminately shooting at the congregants and making his way through the building while yelling, "All Jews must die."[292] After several minutes, Bowers went to exit the synagogue and faced responding police officers. Bowers and the officers exchanged fire; in the firefight, Bowers sustained several gunshot wounds and injured four police officers.[293] The attack killed eleven congregants and injured two, not including the police officers.[294] Federal and state officials charged Bowers with numerous counts that could result in the death penalty. Bowers has pled not guilty and has not yet faced trial.[295]

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[289] Hauslohner et al., "James Fields Jr."

[290] Hauslohner et al.

[291] Mitchell Silber, "Terrorist Attacks against Jewish Targets in the West (2012–2019): The Atlantic Divide between European and American Attackers," *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 5 (May 2019), https://ctc.usma.edu/terrorist-attacks-jewish-targets-west-2012-2019-atlantic-divide-european-american-attackers/.

[292] Christal Hayes, Kevin Johnson, and Candy Woodall, "Who Is Robert Bowers? Accused Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooter Left Anti-Semitic Trail," *USA Today*, October 27, 2018, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2018/10/27/pittsburgh-shooting-robert-bowers-identified-suspect-synagogue/1789239002/.

[293] Silber, "Terrorist Attacks."

[294] Silber.

[295] Torsten Ove, "Prosecutors Say Defense Balking at Setting Robert Bowers Trial Date for Tree of Life Killings," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 25, 2019, https://www.post-gazette.com/news/crime-courts/2019/09/25/tree-of-life-shooting-robert-bowers-trial-date-scheduling-order-discovery/stories/201909250129.

A resident of the Pittsburgh suburb of Baldwin, Bowers was initially raised by his mother after his father committed suicide after a rape accusation in 1979.[296] After his mother developed health issues, his grandparents took custody of Bowers, who dropped out of high school in his senior year and worked his adult life as a trucker.[297] Prior to the attack, he had never been arrested.[298] According to Bowers's former coworkers and friends, he never espoused anti-Semitic beliefs. However, he did appear to acknowledge some conspiracy theories and anti-government beliefs.[299] One friend notes that Bowers kept a shotgun by his front door in the event of a raid by the United Nations "blue hat" security forces.[300] Bowers did not have any prior contact with law enforcement and was described as normal by his coworkers, outside of occasional paranoia.

Bowers's online persona did not match the stories told by his acquaintances. Bowers had an active account on the social media site Gab, a Twitter-like platform with a large alt-right following due to its looser free speech policies.[301] Bowers's Gab account shows him pushing a number of conspiracy theories, particularly concerning white genocide—a belief that Jewish people are conspiring to destroy the white race—up until his last post on the morning of the attack (see Figure 8).[302] The SPLC notes that refugee crises with a large volume of immigrants to Europe and the United States have amped up white genocide messages among white supremacist groups and Identitarian movements.[303]

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[296] Silber, "Terrorist Attacks."

[297] Silber.

[298] Silber.

[299] Rich Lord, "How Robert Bowers Went from Conservative to White Nationalist," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, November 10, 2018, https://www.post-gazette.com/news/crime-courts/2018/11/10/Robert-Bowers-extremism-Tree-of-Life-massacre-shooting-pittsburgh-Gab-Warroom/stories/201811080165.

[300] Lord.

[301] Alex Amend, "Analyzing a Terrorist's Social Media Manifesto: The Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooter's Posts on Gab," Southern Poverty Law Center, October 28, 2018, https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/10/28/analyzing-terrorists-social-media-manifesto-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooters-posts-gab.

[302] Amend.

[303] Amend.
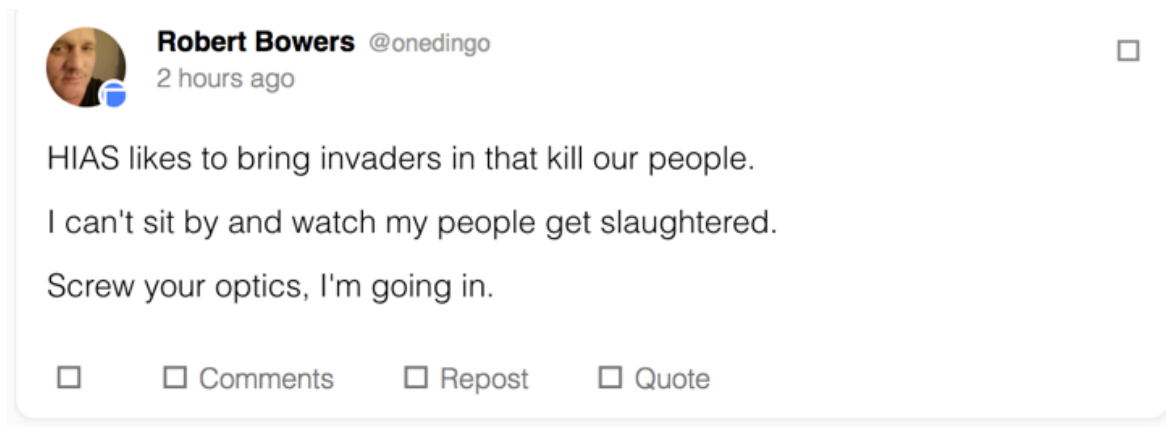
Figure 8.   Bowers's last post to Gab preceding his attack[304]

Bowers targeted the synagogue because he saw Jewish people as an existential threat to the white race. The SPLC notes that the *HIAS* reference in Bowers's final tweet before the attack is to the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, a Jewish–American organization that provides humanitarian aid to refugees.[305] His use of the term *optics* likely refers to a debate in alt-right circles about the best way to improve their public appearance after the Unite the Right rally.[306]

C.   TALLAHASSEE, FLORIDA, YOGA STUDIO SHOOTING

Alt-right proponents are not monolithic. The involuntary celibate (incel) movement, which blames women for members' lack of romantic success, is part of the larger manosphere. As misogyny is a common theme among the alt-right, and the manosphere was a precursor to the alt-right, incels are in no uncertain terms part of the broader alt-right movement.

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[304] Source: Amend.

[305] Amend.

[306] Amend.

On November 2, 2018, Scott Paul Beirele entered the Tallahassee Hot Yoga studio in Florida, under the ruse of attending a scheduled class.[307] Beirele reached into his duffel bag, took out a Glock handgun, and began shooting, injuring four and killing two women in the class.[308] Beirele's handgun malfunctioned after another patron attacked him with a vacuum, allowing time for the other attendees to escape.[309] Beirele then turned the handgun on himself, taking his own life.[310] Beirele was staying at an extended stay motel prior to the attack and had left both his room keys in the hotel room; Tallahassee Police Chief Michael DeLeo surmised that Beirele had no intention of making it out alive.[311] Investigators could not conclude why Beirele chose this location for his attack.[312]

Beirele's history shows he had a problem with women. A forty-year-old resident of Deltona, Florida, which is located hundreds of miles away from the attack site, Beirele had a master's degree from Florida State University in Tallahassee, perhaps explaining his connection to the city.[313] He was a U.S. Army veteran, honorably discharged after two years for "unacceptable conduct"—specifically, inappropriate actions with female soldiers.[314] Beirele worked as a teacher in several schools in Maryland and Florida, but he lost all of his jobs quickly due to inappropriate contact with female students.[315] While a student at Florida State, he was arrested for groping females on campus.[316]

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[307] Daniel Warren, "Field Report Case Supplement: Case #2018-00034992" (case supplement, Tallahassee Police Department, February 12, 2019), https://www.talgov.com/uploads/public/documents/tpd/supplemental_report.pdf.

[308] Warren, 6, 8.

[309] Warren, 27.

[310] Warren, 64.

[311] Warren, 8, 9; Jeff Burlew and Karl Etters, "Tallahassee Yoga Studio Shooting: TPD Report Reveals Gunman Planned 'Horrific Event' for Months," *Tallahassee Democrat*, February 12, 2019, https://www.tallahassee.com/story/news/2019/02/12/tallahassee-yoga-studio-shooting-scott-beierle-report-tpd-florida/2849736002/.

[312] Warren, "Field Report Case Supplement," 47.

[313] Burlew and Etters, "Tallahassee Yoga Studio Shooting"; Warren, "Field Report Case Supplement," 47.

[314] Warren, "Tallahassee Yoga Studio Shooting"; Warren, "Field Report Case Supplement," 56.

[315] Warren, "Field Report Case Supplement," 55, 56.

[316] Warren, 56.

After his attack, journalists located a YouTube channel run by Beirele under the moniker Scott Carnifex.[317] In his videos, produced in 2014, he acknowledges being a misogynist and part of the incel community.[318] In addition to targeting women, in the videos he rants about African Americans, immigrants, mixed-race couples, and other groups.[319] He also complains about the "collective treachery" of girls from the high school he attended, listing names of women he encountered from eighth grade until his time in the Army who rejected him, giving them credit for causing his "rebirth."[320] He also praises incel Elliot Rodger, who murdered ten people in 2014, targeting sorority females near the University of California, Santa Barbara, as retribution for a society that "denied" him love.[321] By the same token, Beirele blamed many different groups for his perceived failures in life.

BuzzFeed reporters also identified music purportedly created by Beirele shared on the music-sharing platform Soundcloud in the months before the attack. In the songs, Beirele includes lyrics lamenting women who did not find him attractive and talks about holding women prisoner in his basement.[322] Beirele held strong misogynistic positions, viewing women as a group that was responsible for his inability to find a romantic partner.

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[317] David Mack, Amber Jamieson, and Julia Reinstein, "The Tallahassee Yoga Shooter Was a Far-Right Misogynist Who Railed against Women and Minorities Online," BuzzFeed, November 3, 2018, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/davidmack/tallahassee-yoga-shooter-incel-far-right-misogyny-video.

[318] Mack, Jamieson, and Reinstein.

[319] Mack, Jamieson, and Reinstein.

[320] Mack, Jamieson, and Reinstein.

[321] "How Rampage Killer Became Misogynist 'Hero,'" BBC, April 26, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-43892189.

[322] Mack, Jamieson, and Reinstein, "Tallahassee Yoga Shooter."

D.   CHRISTCHURCH, NEW ZEALAND, MOSQUE SHOOTING

On March 15, 2019, during Friday prayers, twenty-eight-year-old Australian personal trainer Brenton Tarrant entered the Al Noor Mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand. He opened fire, killing forty-two people.[323] Tarrant then drove to the Linwood Mosque and killed seven more worshippers. Responding police officers apprehended Tarrant after ramming his car; Tarrant is currently awaiting trial for the offenses.[324]

Approximately ten minutes before entering the first mosque, Tarrant announced the impending attack on the /pol/ board of 8chan, a 4chan spin-off site, as shown in Figure 9. In the post, Tarrant announces he is done "shitposting"—engaging in voluminous amounts of trolling to emotionally provoke the out-group—and is moving on to real-life action.[325] Tarrant provides a link to his personal Facebook page and several written documents, and announces that he will livestream the attacks for all to see. Among Tarrant's linked documents was a seventy-four-page manifesto entitled "The Great Replacement," much of it written in a question-and-answer format and explaining his personal justification for the coming attacks.[326] Tarrant had also emailed the manifesto to seventy media outlets, to New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Arden, and to other politicians.[327] However, Arden's spokesperson explained that the manifesto was sent only a few minutes before the attacks and contained no actionable information.[328]

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[323] Graham Macklin, "The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, July 18, 2019, https://ctc.usma.edu/christchurch-attacks-livestream-terror-viral-video-age/.

[324] The New Zealand government commissioned an after-action report to investigate Tarrant's attack. This report has not yet been completed.

[325] Robert Evans, "Shitposting, Inspirational Terrorism, and the Christchurch Mosque Massacre," Bellingcat, March 15, 2019, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/rest-of-world/2019/03/15/shitposting-inspirational-terrorism-and-the-christchurch-mosque-massacre/.

[326] Tarrant, "The Great Replacement"; Macklin, "The Christchurch Attacks."

[327] Macklin, "The Christchurch Attacks."

[328] Harry Cockburn, "Mosque Killer Sent Email to New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern Minutes before Beginning Attack," *The Independent*, March 16, 2019, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/australasia/new-zealand-shooting-mosque-jacinda-ardern-email-prime-minister-a8826021.html.

Figure 9.   Post made to 8chan immediately before the first New Zealand mosque attack.[341]

341 Source: Evans.

True to his word, Tarrant activated the Facebook Live feature as he began driving to his first stop, the Al Noor Mosque.[342] Using a helmet-mounted camera to record, Tarrant moved through the mosque, killing forty-two people in under ten minutes.[343] 8chan users encouraged Tarrant and narrated the attacks as they watched the livestream. As he headed to the Linwood mosque, the livestream cut out for apparent technical reasons.[344] Tarrant continued his attack despite the malfunction, killing seven more people at the mosque.[345] "The Great Replacement" mentions an anticipated third "bonus objective" attack on the Ashburton Mosque, but police rammed Tarrant's car before he could arrive, ending the attacks eighteen minutes after the first emergency call was placed.[346] Tarrant's attack is the worst mass shooting in New Zealand's recent history.[347]

Tarrant had a relatively unremarkable upbringing in the Australian city of Grafton.[348] He describes himself in his manifesto as an "ordinary white man" who grew up in a "working class, low income" family and had "little interest in education," barely earning satisfactory grades.[349] His only occupation on record is as a personal trainer in a Grafton gym after high school, and he ran free fitness programs for children in his spare time.[350] Tarrant spent several years traveling the world, living off cryptocurrency trades

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[342] David Brown and Hugh Tomlinson, "New Zealand Mosque Attack: 'Let's Get This Party Started' Boasted Brenton Tarrant," *The Times*, March 16, 2019, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/new-zealand-mosque-attack-let-s-get-this-party-started-boasted-brenton-tarrant-before-shooting-spree-f5c8j09hc.

[343] Richard Pérez-Peña, "Two New Zealand Mosques, a Hate-Filled Massacre Designed for its Time," *New York Times*, March 15, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/world/australia/new-zealand-mosque-shooting.html.

[344] Macklin, "The Christchurch Attacks."

[345] "Mosque Attacks Timeline: 18 Minutes from First Call to Arrest," Radio New Zealand, April 17, 2019, https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/387248/mosque-attacks-timeline-18-minutes-from-first-call-to-arrest.

[346] Tarrant, "The Great Replacement"; Radio New Zealand, "Mosque Attacks Timeline."

[347] Macklin, "The Christchurch Attacks."

[348] Sarah Keoghan and Laura Chung, "From Local Gym Trainer to Mosque Shooting: Alleged Christchurch Shooter's Upbringing in Grafton," *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 15, 2019, https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/alleged-christchurch-gunman-identified-as-former-grafton-local-20190315-p514nm.html.

[349] Tarrant, "The Great Replacement."

[350] Keoghan and Chung, "From Local Gym Trainer to Mosque Shooting."

and his father's inheritance, before settling in New Zealand in 2017.[351] Tarrant owned five firearms, including two semiautomatic weapons, and legally possessed all weapons under New Zealand law with the exception of an illegal one-hundred-round magazine.[352] Described by his family as a video game "addict," he treated the massacre as a type of game. This strategy, often called "gamification of mass murder," has been used by Islamic terror groups in a manner sometimes referred to as "selfie jihad."[353]

Little is known about Tarrant's social media activity; his accounts were all removed once his identity became public.[354] However, researchers do not have to guess how Tarrant became radicalized: in his manifesto, Tarrant notes a chain of events during his 2017 tour of western Europe that preceded his own extremism, including an Islamic terrorist murdering an eleven-year-old Swedish girl, the defeat of Marine Le Pen's far-right Front National party in the French presidential election, and, finally, his own observations of French culture being taken over by "invaders."[355] Tarrant states this upset him so much that he felt the need to "take the fight to the invaders myself."[356] By the same token, Tarrant denies being a part of an official movement, though he states he has donated to "many nationalist groups."[357] Research later revealed at least two donations Tarrant made to Identitarian movements in Austria and France.[358] In this way, anti-immigrant sentiment acted as Tarrant's entry point into the alt-right milieu.

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[351] Keoghan and Chung.

[352] Macklin, "The Christchurch Attacks."

[353] Jason Burke, "The Age of Selfie Jihad: How Evolving Media Technology Is Changing Terrorism," *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 11 (November 2016), https://www.ctc.usma.edu/the-age-of-selfie-jihad-how-evolving-media-technology-is-changing-terrorism/.

[354] Macklin, "The Christchurch Attacks."

[355] Tarrant, "The Great Replacement."

[356] Tarrant.

[357] Tarrant.

[358] Macklin, "The Christchurch Attacks."

Because all posts on 8chan—much like 4chan—are completely anonymous, it is unclear to what extent Tarrant was active on the site preceding the attack. However, his manifesto reflected alt-right in-jokes and Great Replacement theory terminology.[359] The manifesto includes many statements that the reader is meant to take literally but also many statements meant to confuse the outsider. Bellingcat journalist Robert Evans notes that the manifesto includes "booby traps" designed to create controversy and sow division among those who do not understand the alt-right vernacular.[360] One example is Tarrant's praise of African American conservative personality Candace Owens:

> Is there a particular person that radicalized you the most?
>
> Yes, the person that has influenced me above all was Candace Owens. Each time she spoke I was stunned by her insights and her own views helped push me further and further into the belief of violence over meekness. Though I will have to disavow some of her beliefs, the extreme actions she calls for are too much, even for my tastes.[361]

Evans notes that Owens holds some controversial conservative beliefs—particularly surrounding the issue of immigration—none of which are violent or extreme. Evans doubts the sincerity of this passage and notes that it may have been a form of bait meant to further a divide between the left and right.[362]

Tarrant recognized the power of memes to spread among a community, writing that "[m]emes have done more for the ethnonationalist movement than any manifesto."[363] 8chan and right-wing chatroom users on the Discord platform exploded in celebration, with users on both sites glorifying the violence with text and image-based memes, comparing Tarrant to religious saints and vowing to commit their own acts.[364]

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359 Evans, "Shitposting."

360 Evans.

361 Tarrant, "The Great Replacement."

362 Evans, "Shitposting."

363 Tarrant, "The Great Replacement."

364 Macklin, "The Christchurch Attacks."

Ten days after Tarrant's attack, New Zealand's Prime Minister Arden called for an inquiry to identify intelligence failures.[365] The commission that was tasked with making recommendations has not yet released its final report, and Tarrant remains in jail pending a trial.[366] In an interview with *The New York Times*, New Zealand's intelligence chief, Andrew Little, notes that the intelligence services mostly focused on Islamic terrorism, only considering right-wing extremism to be a possible threat in 2017.[367] Failing to consider its threat to New Zealand, right-wing extremism is not mentioned in any of the agency's annual reports since 2001, and the report's online extremism section does not note the threat of right-wing radicalization.[368]

E.   POWAY, CALIFORNIA, SYNAGOGUE SHOOTING

During Saturday services on April 27, 2019, John Timothy Earnest walked into at the Chabad of Poway synagogue in Poway, California, with a semiautomatic rifle and began moving through the building, indiscriminately shooting at over one hundred people in attendance, killing one person and injuring three.[369] Once Earnest's ten-round magazine emptied, he tried to reload the weapon but was confronted by several congregants.[370] Several in the congregation chased the gunman out of the synagogue, including an off-duty Border Patrol agent who returned fire with Earnest, at which point he fled the scene in his car.[371] Earnest drove approximately two miles from the scene and called 911 to surrender.[372] He told the 911 operator that he was the shooter, adding, "I just shot up a synagogue. I'm just trying to defend my nation from the Jewish people…. They're

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[365] Jamie Tarabay and Charlotte Graham-McLay, "Could the Christchurch Attacks Have Been Prevented?" *New York Times*, June 18, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/18/world/australia/new-zealand-terrorism-christchurch.html.

[366] Macklin, "The Christchurch Attacks."

[367] Tarabay and Graham-McLay, "Could the Christchurch Attacks Have Been Prevented?"

[368] Tarabay and Graham-McLay.

[369] United States of America v. John Timothy Earnest, 3:19-cr-01850 (2019).

[370] United States of America v. John Timothy Earnest at 10.

[371] United States of America v. John Timothy Earnest at 10.

[372] United States of America v. John Timothy Earnest at 11.

destroying our people…. I opened fire at a synagogue. I think I killed some people."[373] Earnest noted that he targeted Jewish people for his attack "because the Jewish people are destroying the white race."[374] San Diego Police arrested Earnest without incident and recovered a tactical helmet, rifle, and five loaded magazines.[375] Earnest was charged in federal and state court with over one hundred counts in connection with the synagogue shooting and a prior mosque arson to which he also confessed.[376] Earnest has not yet had a trial for these charges, for which he faces the death penalty.[377]

At the time of the attack Earnest was a nineteen-year-old resident of San Diego, California.[378] He excelled academically in high school, played sports, and was well-liked.[379] He then enrolled in nursing school, where he continued to do well.[380] Earnest came from a stable home with six children, and his father was a popular teacher at the high school he attended.[381] By all accounts, and by his own admission in his manifesto, Earnest was a happy child with no prior criminal contacts who did not display outward signs of extremism.

His online persona, however, was much different. Mimicking Christchurch, New Zealand, mosque shooter Brenton Tarrant, Earnest attempted—and failed—to livestream his attack and posted his intentions to 8chan beforehand, as shown in Figure 10. Earnest's manifesto, entitled "An Open Letter," begins by stating he is "blessed by God" for having

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[373] United States of America v. John Timothy Earnest at 11.

[374] United States of America v. John Timothy Earnest at 11.

[375] United States of America v. John Timothy Earnest at 11.

[376] "State Prosecutors Seeking Death Penalty for Alleged Poway Synagogue Shooter John T. Earnest," KUSI News, March 5, 2020, https://www.kusi.com/state-prosecutors-seeking-death-penalty-for-alleged-poway-synagogue-shooter-john-t-earnest/.

[377] KUSI News.

[378] "New Details Emerge on California Synagogue Shooting Suspect," CBS News, April 30, 2019, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/poway-synagogue-shooting-suspect-john-earnest-was-scholar-athlete-california-state-university-san-marcos-2019-04-30/.

[379] CBS News.

[380] CBS News.

[381] CBS News.

"a magnificent bloodline" that can be traced back to European colonists.[382] In the question-and-answer portion of his manifesto—similar to Tarrant's—he lists figures that inspired him, including Jesus Christ, Adolf Hitler, Tarrant, Pittsburgh synagogue shooter Robert Bowers, and the alt-right meme Moon Man.[383] Earnest also glorifies Tarrant and explains the rationale for his attack.[384] Similar to Tarrant, Earnest invokes the threat of white genocide, claiming, "Every Jew is responsible for the meticulously planned genocide of the European race."[385] Earnest's synagogue attack was clearly inspired by Tarrant's, with the same style manifesto filled with alt-right references, memes, and in-jokes.[386]

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[382] John Earnest, "An Open Letter," Bard Center for the Study of Hate, accessed July 8, 2020, https://bcsh.bard.edu/files/2019/06/Earnest-Manifesto-042719.pdf.

[383] Earnest.

Moon Man is based on a 1980s McDonald's commercial; it was recently repurposed by the alt-right to be the star of computer-generated song parodies. See "Moon Man," Anti-Defamation League, accessed July 13, 2020, https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/moon-man.

[384] Earnest, "An Open Letter."

[385] Earnest.

[386] Robert Evans, "Ignore The Poway Synagogue Shooter's Manifesto: Pay Attention t`o 8chan's /Pol/ Board," Bellingcat, April 28, 2019, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/americas/2019/04/28/ignore-the-poway-synagogue-shooters-manifesto-pay-attention-to-8chans-pol-board/.

Figure 10. Earnest's pre-attack post[387]

F. EL PASO, TEXAS, WALMART SHOOTING

On August 3, 2019, twenty-one-year-old Patrick Wood Crusius drove 650 miles from his affluent suburban hometown to an El Paso, Texas, Walmart Supercenter.[388] Crusius brought along his legally purchased semiautomatic rifle, which he used to shoot customers in the parking lot, soon entering the store and continuing his spree down the aisles.[389] At the end of his attack, twenty-two people were killed and twenty-six were wounded; it is the third deadliest shooting in Texas's history.[390] Police responded within six minutes after the first 911 call; Crusius escaped the scene before they arrived but

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[387] Source: Evans.

[388] United States of America v. Patrick Wood Crusius, 3:20-cr-00389 (2020).

[389] United States of America v. Patrick Wood Crusius at 2.

[390] Mitchell Silber, "The El Paso Terrorist Attack: The Chain Reaction of Global Right-Wing Terror," *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 5 (May 2019), https://www.ctc.usma.edu/el-paso-terrorist-attack-chain-reaction-global-right-wing-terror/.

stopped a quarter mile away to surrender to a responding police officer.[391] Crusius was charged in state and federal court; the cases have not yet gone to trial.[392]

Inspired by Christchurch, New Zealand, mosque shooter Tarrant, minutes before the attack Crusius announced his intentions on 8chan and posted a link to his manifesto, "The Inconvenient Truth" (see Figure 11).[393] The post, however, was deleted by site moderators within minutes.[394] Unlike Tarrant, it does not appear Crusius attempted to livestream the attack. His manifesto begins by noting that the "attack is a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas," providing insight into why he drove overnight from his town to the border city of El Paso.[395] Crusius confirmed this rationale during his police interrogation, adding that he chose to drive to El Paso to reduce the risk that his family would find out what he did.[396] In his manifesto, Crusius frames his actions as acceptable with a Great Replacement–like theory: "They are the instigators, not me. I am simply defending my country from cultural and ethnic replacement brought on by an invasion."[397]

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[391] United States of America v. Patrick Wood Crusius at 2; Silber, "The El Paso Terrorist Attack."

[392] "Accused El Paso Walmart Shooter Faces New Capital Murder Charge," KDBC, April 28, 2020, https://cbs4local.com/news/local/accused-el-paso-walmart-shooter-faces-new-capital-murder-charge.

[393] United States of America v. Patrick Wood Crusius at 2.

[394] Robert Evans, "The El Paso Shooting and the Gamification of Terror," Bellingcat, August 4, 2019, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/americas/2019/08/04/the-el-paso-shooting-and-the-gamification-of-terror/.

[395] United States of America v. Patrick Wood Crusius; Patrick Crusius, "The Inconvenient Truth," Randall Packer, August 2019, https://randallpacker.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/The-Inconvenient-Truth.pdf.

[396] Silber, "The El Paso Terrorist Attack."
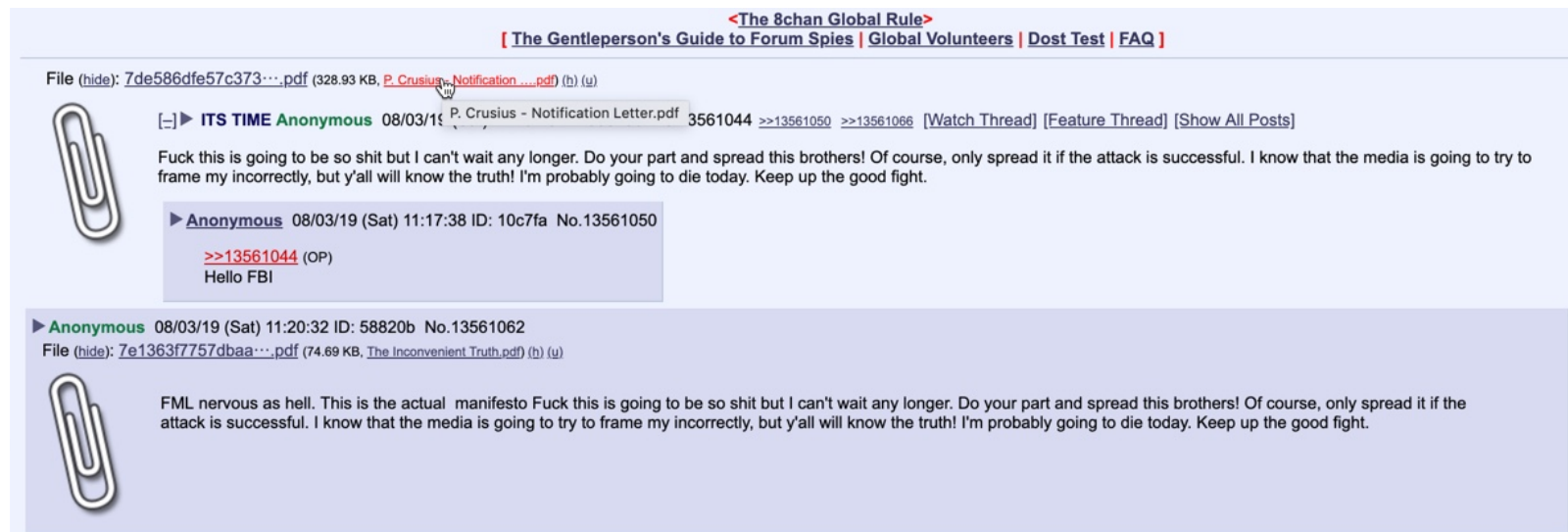
[397] Crusius, "The Inconvenient Truth."

Figure 11.   Crusius' pre-attack post[398]

398 Source: Evans, "The El Paso Attack."

Crusius grew up in the middle class Dallas suburb of Allen, Texas, with his parents and two siblings.[399] He graduated from a local high school, and his former classmates described him as introverted; the few friends he did have, he made through online gaming.[400] Crusius moved in with his grandparents after high school and briefly attended college.[401] Prior to the attack, it does not appear he had contact with law enforcement, although his mother did call police with vague concerns about his firearms ownership.[402] Thus, Crusius would not have come up on the police's radar. Similarly, his online activity triggered no alarms. Bellingcat journalist Robert Evans notes that Crusius had a presence on four mainstream social media platforms.[403] While his posts do echo sentiment pushed by the Trump administration concerning immigration policy, Evans notes that Crusius's social media "projected the image of a relatively normal Trump-supporting Republican," with nothing particularly extreme.[404] Further, because 8chan is an anonymous site, his posting history preceding the attack on that site cannot be analyzed.

Crusius does not point out a singular event that pushed him to extremism; rather, Evans suspects 8chan gamification of mass shooters like Tarrant may have provided inspiration for the attack, which Crusius had been planning for a month.[405] Unlike other shooters, Crusius's manifesto is devoid of alt-right in-jokes, and is more serious and anti-immigrant in tone; it does encourage other 8chan users to commit further attacks.[406]

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[399] Erin Ailworth, Georgia Wells, and Ian Lovett, "Lost in Life, El Paso Suspect Found a Dark World Online," *Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 2019, https://www.wsj.com/articles/lost-in-life-el-paso-suspect-found-a-dark-world-online-11565308783.

[400] Ailworth, Wells, and Lovett.

[401] Ailworth, Wells, and Lovett.

[402] Ailworth, Wells, and Lovett.

[403] Evans, "The El Paso Shooting."

[404] Evans.

[405] Evans; Crusius, "The Inconvenient Truth."

[406] Crusius, "The Inconvenient Truth."

G. CONCLUSION

Right-wing terrorism is arguably the biggest security threat facing the United States today, and it is only like to worsen beyond 2020 as individuals use elections and pandemics as precursors for radicalization. This chapter conducted a deep dive into each factor that potentially caused attackers to break the extremist-troll boundary discussed in Chapter III. Although the attackers did push this boundary, each had a different path to radicalization.

Not every attacker fit the typical alt-right profile of a millennial, tech-savvy male. Some were in an older age bracket but shared grievances with the younger attackers. As shown by their social media, however, the younger individuals embraced alt-right humor—even in the manifestos they wrote before their heinous attacks—while the older ones were forthcoming with their rage. Although each attacker had a different path to radicalization, the internet played a role for all of them.

Based on publicly available information, there were no intelligence failures leading up to the attacks. Although two of the attackers were previously known to law enforcement—one for domestic violence, one for stalking—no obvious red flags or actionable social media posts preceded the attacks. However, three attackers did use 8chan before their attack, though the anonymity of the site makes the extent of their activity unclear. The next chapter analyzes these six cases to identify motives and patterns of behavior in attacks committed by perpetrators with alt-right ideologies.

V. ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The alt-right is a melting pot of digital subcultures such as the manosphere, intellectual white supremacists, the alt-lite, and hardcore neo-Nazis. Although the alt-right has early links to white nationalism, it currently includes individuals with grievances against a myriad of groups and issues, ranging from anti-political correctness to neo-Nazism. It is a leaderless movement with few agreed-upon principles, goals, or desires that uses an intentionally offensive and perplexing style of online discourse that heralds misogynist and offensive terminology; members to claim to be joking if they receive negative attention. Some enter the movement out of a desire to fit into an online community. While the majority will never leave the online realm, tragically, some followers have taken their online discourse into real life, committing attacks against groups of people with which they felt aggrieved. Despite this, it appears the typical use of *alt-right* as a self-descriptor is in decline; the principles and tactics behind the movement, however, are likely to live on under a different banner.

The previous chapter introduced six mass casualty incidents (MCIs) in which traits of alt-right extremism were present; see Table 1 for a synopsis. Using a comparative analysis approach, this chapter analyzes the events' commonalities and differences to identify what may have led to the attacker's radicalization and subsequent decision to carry out a violent attack. The chapter concludes with recommendations for local law enforcement and by discussing the potential future of the alt-right.

Table 1.   Synopsis of the six case studies

| | Background | | | | Breaking the Extremist/Troll Boundary | | |
	Date	Age	Ideology	Triggering Event	Normalization	Acclimation	Dehumanization
Charlottesville Rally	8/12/17	20	Neo-Nazi	Anti-protester	Yes	Yes	Unknown
Pittsburgh Synagogue	10/27/18	46	Anti-government	Anti-immigrant	Yes	Yes	Yes
Tallahassee Yoga Studio	11/2/18	40	Incel	Incel	Yes	Yes	Yes
Christchurch Mosque	3/15/19	28	Anti-immigrant	Anti-immigrant	Yes	Yes	Yes
Poway, CA, Synagogue	4/27/19	19	Anti-immigrant	Anti-immigrant	Yes	Yes	Yes
El Paso Walmart	8/3/19	21	Anti-immigrant	Anti-immigrant	Yes	Yes	Yes

A.   COMPARATIVE FINDINGS OF CASE STUDIES

In line with academic theories surrounding the alt-right's average demographic, discussed in Chapter II, the average attacker was a tech-savvy millennial male. Acknowledging the difficulty of conducting a proper demographic survey of members, early alt-right figurehead Richard Spencer posits that the average alt-right member is "thirty years old, … a tech professional, … atheist, … and lives on one of the coasts."[407] Although this guess is in line with the average age of the attacker—twenty-nine—none of them worked in technology or lived in a coastal city, and there is no information available about their religious beliefs. Most, but not all, of the radicalized attackers fit into the estimated demographic.

Each attack was planned alone, without any outside knowledge or assistance, and drew inspiration from rhetoric the attackers were exposed to online. The 8chan forum was linked to three of the six attacks, with the perpetrator announcing the impending attack on the forum (see Table 2). A contagion effect occurred in the aftermath of the New Zealand mosque attack, with two more attacks occurring within five months. The two attackers that announced their intentions on 8chan after Tarrant copied Tarrant's tactics and verbiage.

Table 2.   Social media platform used to announce impending attack

Social Media Platform Used	Incidents
8chan	3
Unknown or not applicable	2
Gab	1

Attackers attributed anti-immigrant Great Replacement theories to the majority (four) of the alt-right-affiliated attacks (see Table 3). These four shootings also include a secondary motive, with hatred of Jewish people, Muslims, or Hispanics being the perceived source of a declining white population.

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[407] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 78.

Table 3.   Motive for attack

Primary Motive	Incidents
Anti-immigrant	4
Anti-female	1
Anti-protester	1

Five of the six attackers had identifiable online presences on differing mainstream social media sites preceding the attack. The profiles were all taken down after media platforms revealed their identities, but internet archive sites maintain static snapshots of these profiles. Four of the profiles contain typified alt-right imagery—including neo-Nazi propaganda, Pepe the Frog, offensive memes, and generally racist content—that may have clued an authority figure into the attacker's potential radicalization (see Table 4).[408] However, none appear to contain specific warning signs of an impending attack.

Table 4.   Social media history in time leading up to attack

Social Media History	Incidents
Potential warning signs of radicalization	4
Generally conservative views	1
Not found	1

In five cases, the attacker appeared to meet all three cognitive traits Luke Munn theorizes as being responsible for the "alt-right pipeline" to radicalization.[409] Chapter III of this thesis describes the three traits of this nonlinear pathway; briefly, they are:

- Normalization: becoming desensitized to racism and supporting materials.

- Acclimation: establishing a new normal for discourse, pushing to more provocative and inflammatory communication.

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[408] It is probable that at least three attackers had a posting history on 8chan. Due to the anonymized nature of the site, however, it is difficult to ascertain their posting histories leading up to the attacks.

[409] Munn, "Alt-Right Pipeline."

- Dehumanization: viewing individuals of certain backgrounds as "apolitical objects," no longer having relevant claims or causes.[410]

In five cases, the remnants of each attacker's social media profile shows an individual who most likely possessed all three traits. In the sixth case, there were insufficient data to conclude whether the individual met the three traits.

The attackers surrendered to police in starkly different ways (see Table 5). The younger, millennial attackers surrendered to police either voluntarily or after police intervention. Despite being armed and in some cases writing in manifestos that they did not plan to be apprehended peacefully, they did not attempt to escape or harm responding officers; all the millennials surrendered to police. By contrast, the forty-six-year-old Pittsburgh synagogue shooter shot responding police officers and the forty-year-old yoga studio shooter committed suicide after his attack. Based on publicly available information, none of the attackers were on a law enforcement watch list, and only two were known to law enforcement due to prior contacts.

Table 5.   Methods of arrest

How Attacker was Arrested	Incidents
Surrender	4
Shoot-out	1
Suicide	1

B.   RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

In the preceding chapters, this thesis analyzed the alt-right's background and recruitment methods and conducted a comparative case study of six MCIs with alt-right links. Based on the analysis of the similarities and differences in the case studies presented in the previous section, this thesis offers the following recommendations to local law enforcement executives.

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[410] Munn.

(1)   Hire and train culturally literate intelligence analysts.

The alt-right employs language that can be confusing to someone not familiar with the movement. Law enforcement agencies must ensure intelligence analysts monitor right-wing extremism at a level proportional to the threat posed by this extremism. In addition, analysts must be familiar with the framework within which the alt-right operates if they are to properly identify the threat posed by an individual or an event.

(2)   Be aware of a potential contagion effect with MCIs.

Communities must understand how an attack perpetrated by an alt-right member elsewhere may be complemented by a local attack. As a global movement that primarily operates through social media, attackers can push their own narratives and personal justifications for an attack that can result in copycat attacks. Executives should deploy resources and share threat information with potential targets of copycat attacks.

(3)   Be alert for lightning rod events.

A local movement—such as Charlottesville's attempted statue removal—or broader debates surrounding immigration or racial issues can result in localities receiving attention from alt-right-affiliated groups. Law enforcement intelligence analysts must monitor these broader, nationwide conversations for possibilities that the alt-right may use these events as a motivation to mobilize.

(4)   Be aware of methods of recruitment among some alt-right factions—particularly anti-immigrant groups like the American Identity Movement.

The few factions of the alt-right that maintain public identities have hung flyers on college campuses and other public places in an effort to recruit or draw people to alt-right events. This visibility has resulted in expected and appropriate public condemnation of these flyers. However, the alt-right feeds off negative attention, and such publicity may help members push their message even further than a simple flyer. It would be unwise for government agencies or colleges to ignore these events; they must be prepared for the unintended consequences that can result from publicly denouncing these recruitment attempts.

(5) Understand the traits of the extremist-troll boundary and attempt to identify individuals who may be nudged along the alt-right pipeline to extremism.

The extremist-troll boundary framework laid out in Chapter III presents one theory of how an alt-right individual can advance from online trolling to a heinous attack. In all the alt-right attacks with relevant data, the attackers went through all three phases of the pipeline. School administrators and intelligence analysts should be aware of these three characteristics. Law enforcement agencies that engage in countering violent extremism and deradicalization programs should ensure the programs include efforts to counter the threat posed by alt-right extremism. Training and presentations provided to school administrators should include a discussion of alt-right jargon and how individuals become progressively radicalized.

C. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The alt-right spent several years limiting its activities behind the anonymity of the internet. While pushing social media to its limits and testing free speech on these platforms, its members intentionally sought to shock and offend the casual viewer and target "normies." At the same time, until the Charlottesville attack, no instances of violence had been linked to the movement. In the two years that followed, however, the alt-right was responsible for five more MCIs, confirming that its mostly millennial user base is comfortable moving its online grievances into the real world.

Common use of the term *alt-right* as a self-descriptor appears to be declining. Within alt-right circles, the Charlottesville attack resulted in internal strife that may have caused fractures.[411] Nevertheless, the ideologies behind the alt-right attacks may not go away, and aggrieved individuals are likely to find another online movement. As such, online radicalization may spark future incidents. The boogaloo movement, for example, is a right-wing movement that shares many of the alt-right's social media tactics but is decidedly anti-government and accelerationist, pushing for a nationwide civil war among

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[411] Jack Thompson and George Hawley, "The Decline of the Alt-Right" (working paper, ResearchGate, 2020), https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.31296.76804.

races to establish a white ethnostate in the United States.[412] While this thesis examined how a conflation of digital and real-life movements led to the alt-right's current state, additional research should be conducted to learn how the alt-right may merge with other ideologies or subcultures to produce an even more dangerous movement.

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[412] Robert Evans and James Wilson, "The Boogaloo Movement Is Not What You Think," Bellingcat, May 27, 2020, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2020/05/27/the-boogaloo-movement-is-not-what-you-think/.

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