

What kind of rhetoric is most effective for accelerating online right-wing extremist radicalization?

Ariel Wexler

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## *Introduction*

Oslo, Norway, July 22, 2011. Santa Barbara, California, May 23, 2014. Charleston, South Carolina, June 17, 2015. Portland, Oregon, May, 26, 2017. Charlottesville, Virginia, August, 12, 2017. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, October 27, 2018. Christchurch, New Zealand, March 15, 2019. Poway, California, April, 27, 2019. El Paso, Texas, August 3, 2019. Kenosha, Wisconsin, August 25, 2020. Combined, these right-wing extremist terror attacks have killed 183 and injured more than 400.<sup>1</sup> Many of the perpetrators referenced memes and online culture in their manifestos. It has become overwhelmingly clear that Internet activity has real world consequences, including death and destruction.<sup>2</sup> Over the last decade, an emerging field of research has become dedicated to studying online right-wing extremist radicalization. Scholars have written about the brief, but consequential history of this online extremism and the so called “alt right.”<sup>3</sup> Others have studied the demography of the movement, or its philosophical underpinnings.<sup>4</sup> This paper examines what kind of rhetoric is most effective for accelerating online right-wing extremist radicalization. It hypothesizes that most effective rhetoric emphasizes a sense of alienation, particularly in young, white men, and offers right wing ideology as a solution to this problem. First, I will look at the history of Internet use in right wing

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<sup>1</sup> “Part IV. What Is the Threat to the United States Today?,” New America, accessed October 26, 2020, <http://newamerica.org/in-depth/terrorism-in-america/what-threat-united-states-today/>.

<sup>2</sup> Jessica Johnson, “The Self-Radicalization of White Men: ‘Fake News’ and the Affective Networking of Paranoia,” *Communication, Culture and Critique* 11, no. 1 (March 1, 2018): 100–115, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcx014>.

<sup>3</sup> Aaron Winter, “Online Hate: From the Far-Right to the ‘Alt-Right’ and from the Margins to the Mainstream,” in *Online Othering*, ed. Karen Lumsden and Emily Harmer (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 39–63, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-12633-9\\_2.e](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-12633-9_2.e)

<sup>4</sup> Anna Kyler, “Alt-Right as a Social Movement Ethnic Competition Theory and Internet Searches for Online Content” (Tempe, Arizona, Arizona State University, 2020). William Remley, *The Philosophical Foundation of Alt-Right Politics and Ressentiment* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2019).

extremist movements, and show how they gained the momentum that we see today. Next, I will focus on the philosophical underpinnings of the movement, and focus on some of its core beliefs and leaders. After, I will discuss who belongs to these movements, how they differ from the membership of traditional white supremacists movements, and what their motivations are. Next, I will examine my interviews with Caleb Cain, a former member of the “alt-lite”, and currently a researcher at American University. Finally, I will examine several vectors, or entry points, into online right wing extremism. These include anti-feminism and anti-immigration, among others. I theorize that one of the biggest factors leading towards online right wing radicalization is alienation caused by neoliberalism, whether that be social, economic, political or otherwise, and that the most effective rhetoric for radicalization uses right wing philosophy to posit why this alienation exists and how to combat it.

### *Historical Context*

It is necessary to give a brief history and introduction to the world of online right wing extremism before detailing its different rhetorical and strategic tactics. This history shows how right wing ideology, the Internet, and alienation have always been intertwined. White nationalists have been using computers since they became widely available to the mainstream population. The Aryan Nation Liberty Net launched in 1984.<sup>5</sup> Prominent member and leader Louis Beam Jr. once wrote “American know-how has provided the technology which will allow those who love this country to save it from an ill deserved fate.” This early period also saw the proliferation of

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<sup>5</sup> Winter, “Online Hate.”

racist video game culture, which still exists today as a prominent vector for extremism.<sup>6</sup> In 1985, the White Aryan Resistance (W.A.R.) released video games for the Commodore 64 console like “Drive By 2” and “Border Patrol”. However, physical material still played a larger role in dissemination in the 1980s and early 1990s. Another turning point was the creation of the infamous neo-Nazi website Stormfront in 1995 by Klansman Don Black. Stormfront still exists today, and is a popular platform for some of the most extreme white nationalist rhetoric on the Internet.<sup>7</sup>

By the early twenty first century, the Internet played a major role in right wing extremist activity. Stormfront increased in size and scale, and drew a larger, less niche audience. After the 9/11 terror attacks, the online right recruited online primarily through Islamophobia and the proliferation of conspiracy theories.<sup>8</sup> Creators like Alex Jones and his website InfoWars became massively popular. Jones was “deplatformed”, or removed, from major social media websites like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter in 2018 although he still runs and maintains the InfoWars website.<sup>9</sup>

The election of the first Black President, Barack Obama, in 2008 also resulted in an increase in online extremist activity. By the time President Trump first announced his run for President in 2015, Stormfront had more than 300,000 members.<sup>10</sup> The increased popularity of social media platforms allowed this extremism to find a mainstream platform. Between 2012 and 2016, there was a 600 percent increase in followers of white nationalist Twitter accounts. The

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Alex Hern, “Facebook, Apple, YouTube and Spotify Ban Infowars’ Alex Jones,” *The Guardian*, August 6, 2018, sec. Technology, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/aug/06/apple-removes-podcasts-infowars-alex-jones>.

<sup>10</sup> Winter, “Online Hate.”

first mention of social media in a terrorists' manifesto occurred in 2011, when Anders Breivik, who killed 77 people in two different attacks in Norway, mentioned the utility of Facebook for spreading the movement's message.<sup>11</sup>

This was the state of affairs in August, 2014, when Gamergate happened. Gamergate was a relentless harassment campaign against women in the video game industry like developers Zoe Quinn and Brianna Wu, but particularly feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian, who was working on a project about sexism in video games. This rapidly escalated into a dogpile on websites like 4chan, 8chan, Twitter, and Reddit.<sup>12</sup> The momentum from this event created a base of "red-pilled", or radicalized, "men's rights activists" (MRAs for short). These MRAs were ready to attack at the drop of a hat, and a cottage industry of personalities were there to goad them. YouTubers such as Milo Yiannopolus, Sargon of Akkad, and Ben Shapiro became incredibly popular in the years following Gamergate. Their videos focused on how "triggered" (angry) college aged liberal "snowflakes" (weaklings) were when their ideas were challenged.<sup>13</sup> Using cherry picked examples and simplified right wing ideology, these figures built a massive base that became even more mobilized during the 2016 election.

What is known as the "alt-right" thrived from Trump's campaign announcement in 2015 to the Charlottesville attack in August 2017.<sup>14</sup> Prominent white nationalists like Richard Spencer were given a national stage during this time with media profiles from publications like the *Los*

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Emily Price, "We Live In A Society: Violence and Radicalization in the Internet Manosphere" (Arcadia University, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Caleb Cain, Preliminary Interview, September 30, 2020.

*Angeles Times* and *Mother Jones*.<sup>15</sup> Evil radicals had rebranded themselves to be edgy, cool, and dapper with the help of the media and a growing audience. Meanwhile, an increasing population of trolls on 4chan and YouTube began to feel more empowered as Trump, their chosen meme candidate, won the Republican primary and then beat the avatar of their hated neoliberal, corporate feminism, Hillary Clinton.<sup>16</sup> The apex of the “alt-right” came at the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. After a protestor hit and killed Heather Heyer, a counter protester, with his car, Spencer knew it was time for a rebranding. In fact, other right wing alternative media figures blamed Spencer for creating too extreme of an environment. Mike Cernovich called him a “social retard.”<sup>17</sup> The media, academics, and some members continue to refer to right wing extremists as alt-right to this day, but extremist leaders themselves no longer referred to themselves that way.<sup>18</sup>

Since Charlottesville, online right wing extremists have splintered into several different directions including the Intellectual Dark Web, Men’s Rights Activists, and avid Trump supporters. The Internet became a safe place for right wing ideology. The “Intellectual Dark Web” grew into a full-fledged force. Figures like Jordan Peterson and Dave Rubin still have immense audiences. The IDW is the more intellectual, philosophical part of the movement.<sup>19</sup> Peterson is a licensed psychologist and his book *12 Rules for Life* became a best seller in 2018.

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<sup>15</sup> Lisa Mascaro, “White Nationalists Dress up and Come to Washington in Hopes of Influencing Trump - Los Angeles Times,” accessed October 26, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-pol-white-nationalists-thinktank-20161119-story.html>.

Josh Harkinson, “Meet the White Nationalist Trying to Ride the Trump Train to Lasting Power,” *Mother Jones* (blog), accessed October 26, 2020, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/10/richard-spencer-trump-alt-right-white-nationalist/>.

<sup>16</sup> Johnson, “The Self-Radicalization of White Men.”

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Lombroso, *White Noise* (The Atlantic Productions, n.d.).

<sup>18</sup> Caleb Cain, Preliminary Interview.

<sup>19</sup> Manoel Horta Ribeiro et al., “Auditing Radicalization Pathways on YouTube,” *ArXiv:1908.08313 [Cs]*, December 4, 2019, <http://arxiv.org/abs/1908.08313>.

Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) are also known as incels, short for involuntarily celibate. Incels are infamous for their violent attitudes towards women, and wallowing in their own self-pity<sup>20</sup>. Additionally, many alt-right Twitter accounts were almost entirely devoted to defending President Trump, according J.M. Berger's 2018 study "The Alt-Right Twitter Census".<sup>21</sup> By 2018 and 2019, extremist manifestos start to frequently refer to memes and specific online figures.<sup>22</sup> Now, militia movements that started online like the Proud Boys and the Boogaloo Bois have been mobilized by the recent Black Lives Matter protests.<sup>23</sup> However, some of the most extreme online rhetoric has also recently become much more difficult to access. Earlier this year, Reddit banned their Trump subreddit r/The\_Donald and YouTube banned white nationalist users David Duke, Richard Spencer, and Stefan Molyneux.<sup>24</sup> YouTube and Facebook have also recently banned mentions of Qanon, the conspiracy theory that expanded rapidly from 4chan and 8chan.<sup>25</sup> Since its inception, the Internet has always been a radicalization and dissemination tool for right wing extremists.

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<sup>20</sup> Emily Price, "We Live In A Society: Violence and Radicalization in the Internet Manosphere."

<sup>21</sup> J.M. Berger, "The Alt-Right Twitter Census: Defining and Describing The Audience For Alt-Right Content On Twitter" (VOX-Pol Network of Excellence, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> Caleb Cain, "My Descent into the Alt-Right Pipeline," [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfLa64\\_zLrU&ab\\_channel=FaradaySpeaks](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfLa64_zLrU&ab_channel=FaradaySpeaks).

<sup>23</sup> "Militias, Far-Right Groups Recast Selves as Mainstream at Lansing Gun Rally," September 17, 2020, <https://www.bridgemi.com/michigan-government/militias-far-right-groups-recast-selves-mainstream-lansing-gun-rally>.

<sup>24</sup> Julia Alexander, "YouTube Bans Stefan Molyneux, David Duke, Richard Spencer, and More for Hate Speech," The Verge, June 29, 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2020/6/29/21307303/youtube-bans-molyneux-duke-richard-spencer-conduct-hate-speech>.

<sup>25</sup> Kari Paul, "YouTube Announces Plans to Ban Content Related to QAnon," *The Guardian*, October 15, 2020, sec. Technology, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/oct/15/youtube-ban-qanon-content-technology>.

## *Philosophy*

Understanding the psychological, political, and philosophical underpinnings of this movement is crucial. Towering figures in the subculture like Molyneux and Peterson use academic language to legitimate their beliefs. They understand that many Americans feel estranged from the world around them, and they offer right wing explanations and solutions backed by a certain strain of philosophy. George Hawley traces the origins of alt-right philosophy in the first chapter of his 2017 book, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*.<sup>26</sup> He claims that traditional white nationalism, paleoconservatism, radical libertarianism, European right wing movements, anti-immigration sentiments, and the “war on political correctness” all influenced the alt-right. Paleoconservatism: anti-interventionist, anti-trade conservatives in the late twentieth century, were a particularly influential force. This movement was a break from the interventionist neoconservative mainstream Republican Party.<sup>27</sup> The paleoconservatives had a similar relationship to presidential candidate Pat Buchanan in 1992 and 1996 that the alt-right and online extremists had to Donald Trump in 2016 and 2020. Buchanan ran “on a platform of economic protectionism, immigration restrictionism, foreign policy noninterventionism, and cultural traditionalism.” Nearly all the other forces mentioned are described by scholar Andrew Woods in his chapter titled “Cultural Marxism in the Cathedral: Two Alt-Right Perspectives On Critical Theory” in an anthology called *Critical Theory and Humanities in the Age of Alt-Right*.<sup>28</sup> He describes the difference between the two: “Whereas Paleoconservatives idolize the founding

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<sup>26</sup> George Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Christine M. Battista and Melissa R. Sande, eds., “Cultural Marxism in the Cathedral: Two Alt-Right Perspectives On Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory and the Humanities in the Age of the Alt-Right* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 39–60, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-18753-8>.



fathers and crave a return to a purer form of American democracy, Neoreactionaries believe that America should be transformed into a neo-feudalist corporation ruled by shareholders and a CEO.” Wood also introduces the concept of the Cathedral, coined in 1992, as “the expansive institutional complex (including the press, the entertainment industry, and the universities) that produces and regulates public opinion to ensure the perpetuation of the ‘progressive’ status quo.”<sup>29</sup> This leads directly to the alt-right theory of Cultural Marxism, an antisemitic conspiracy theory that claims that elites are waging culture wars, particularly in academia, to promote multiculturalism and political correctness. These Paleoconservative and Neoreactionary forces combined with traditionalism and virulent racism create the political context for the alt-right and other online right wing extremist movements.<sup>30</sup>

Later in the anthology, Tonnia L. Anderson discusses race and the alt-right in her chapter “*Herrenvolk* Democracy: The Rise of the Alt-Right in Trump’s America.”<sup>31</sup> “*Herrenvolk*” means “master race” in German. A *Herrenvolk* democracy is one in which rights and freedoms are guaranteed to members of a “master race”, while members of other races are disenfranchised and left out of the democratic process. Anderson argues that Trump promised a Jacksonian, right populist vision of a *Herrenvolk* democracy, and that the alt-right was emboldened by that.<sup>32</sup> She also claims that this philosophy combined with *ressentiment* – “anger, anxiety, resentment among many whites, and a desire to restore standing” fueled the Trump campaign, and by extension, the online right. Anderson points to a 2016 study by PPRI and the Brookings Institute

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Christine M Battista and Melissa R Sande, eds., “*Herrenvolk* Democracy: The Rise of the Alt-Right in Trump’s America,” in *Critical Theory and the Humanities in the Age of the Alt-Right*, 2019, 81–100.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

that says that more than half of Americans believe that discrimination against whites is a major issue, and that more than 75 percent of Republicans believe the same thing about Christians.<sup>33</sup>

The concepts of the Cathedral, Cultural Marxism, *Herrenvolk* Democracy, and a persistent feeling of oppression against a white, traditional, Christian way of life appear frequently in the videos of popular online right-wing figures. Stefan Molyneux was an incredibly popular YouTuber with nearly a million subscribers before his channel was shut down for hate speech in 2020.<sup>34</sup> He still creates content on his website, Free Domain.<sup>35</sup> One of the most popular Molyneux videos, “The Story of Your Enslavement” argues that governments grant citizens certain freedoms to allow them to become more productive workers, and compares the forever wars of the United States to the fall of Rome.<sup>36</sup> Both extremes of the political spectrum can agree with statements like these. But in later videos, Molyneux uses this populist framework against racial minorities. “The media are compliant and willing to scream ‘racist’ at anyone who points out fact-based differences between ethnicities in America and around the world,” he said in a 2015 video called “The Impending Collapse of Western Civilization.”<sup>37</sup> In an interview with neo-Nazi Jared Taylor, Molyneux says “the fomenting of anti-white hatred is extremely strong and very toxic. I can’t help but think, Jared, that if I lived in a society of only white people, then the giant fly swatter of ‘shut up whitey, you’re racist’ could never be used against.”<sup>38</sup> The clearest example of *ressentiment* in Molyneux’s ideology is his views on the Holocaust. “... The

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Alexander, “YouTube Bans Stefan Molyneux, David Duke, Richard Spencer, and More for Hate Speech.”

<sup>35</sup> Stefan Molyneux, “Free Domain,” n.d., <https://www.freedomain.com/>.

<sup>36</sup> Stefan Molyneux, *Stefan Molyneux - The Story of Your Enslavement*, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eq3jjzI8Gdo&feature=emb\\_title&ab\\_channel=cowfootman](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eq3jjzI8Gdo&feature=emb_title&ab_channel=cowfootman).

<sup>37</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, “Stefan Molyneux,” *Extremist Files* (blog), n.d., <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/stefan-molyneux>.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

Germans were in danger of being taken over by what they perceived as Jewish-led Communism. And Jewish-led Communism had wiped out tens of millions of White Christians in Russia and they were afraid of the same thing. And there was this wild overreaction and all this kind of stuff.”<sup>39</sup>

Molyneux is an extremist to the point where YouTube thought it was necessary to ban him. But less ideological, more mainstream “alt-lite” figures like Jordan Peterson use these ideas as well. Peterson is a psychologist, professor, and a bestselling author. His book, *12 Rules for Life* has sold more than 3 million copies.<sup>40</sup> He first went viral after uploading videos criticizing a bill passed in Canada that prohibited discrimination against “gender and identity and expression”. Peterson argued that not using a person’s preferred pronouns had become illegal, and that it was a violation against free speech.<sup>41</sup> Another video of him speaking titled “Postmodernism and Cultural Marxism” was uploaded to YouTube (not by Peterson himself) in 2017 and has more than 800,000 views.<sup>42</sup> In it, he uses his experience in academia to promote the idea of the Cathedral and Cultural Marxism. “We’ve been publicly funding extremely radical post-modern leftist thinkers who are hell-bent on demolishing the fundamental substructure of Western civilization, and that’s no paranoid delusion, that’s their self-admitted goal,” he claims.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> “Publisher’s Weekly Bestseller List,” Publishers Weekly, January 18, 2019, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/nielsen/HardcoverNonfiction.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Jessica Murphy, “Toronto Professor Jordan Peterson Takes on Gender-Neutral Pronouns,” *BBC*, November 4, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-37875695>.

<sup>42</sup> Jordan Peterson, *Postmodernism and Cultural Marxism - Jordan B. Peterson*, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLoG9zBvvLQ&ab\\_channel=Ruminate](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLoG9zBvvLQ&ab_channel=Ruminate).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

Molyneux and Peterson's mirrored rhetoric represents a phenomenon known as inoculation theory. Inoculation theory was invented by a social psychologist named William McGuire and involves the following: "that people can be made resistant to persuasion if they (a) perceive threat from an impending attempt to change their beliefs and attitudes and (b) receive information to refute such an attempt."<sup>44</sup> McGuire compares this indoctrination to a vaccine, hence the name "inoculation." Vaccines work because the body creates immunity from a small sample of a virus that doesn't make patients sick. In this metaphor, Peterson would be the "vaccine" that only has a small sample of right wing extremist philosophy. But avid Peterson consumers would be "immune", and not be phased when the "virus" like Stefan Molyneux starts talking about race realism, and interviewing with self-described neo-Nazis. Inoculation theory is typically discussed in terms of counter-radicalization, but experts say that it applies to the original radicalization process as well.<sup>45</sup> Even if he isn't a member of the alt-right himself, Peterson has popular videos that demonize the left, and encourage right wing, conspiratorial thinking. Some Peterson viewers have been inoculated against leftist theories, which they might now consider to be part of a Cultural Marxist plot. This allows Peterson viewers to be primed for more extremist rhetoric that comes from creators like Molyneux. This is why the core philosophical and rhetorical underpinnings of this movement are so important. According to inoculation theory, once one becomes familiar with this ideology, they are less likely to recognize when it crosses a line into extremism.

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<sup>44</sup> Josh Compton, "Inoculation Theory," in *The SAGE Handbook of Persuasion: Developments in Theory and Practice*, ed. James Price Dillard and Lijiang Shen, 2nd ed (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2013), 220–36.

<sup>45</sup> Caleb Cain, Secondary Interview, October 21, 2020.

### *Demographics*

In order to understand inoculation theory in regards to the online extreme right, one must know who this rhetoric is aimed at, and who it is reaching. Alienation isn't just a strategic tool that the right uses, it's a felt experience across the country. Anna Kyler of Arizona State University wrote a Masters' Thesis called "Alt-Right As A Social Movement: Ethnic Competition Theory and Internet Searches for Online Content" studying the social determinants of the Alt-Right.<sup>46</sup> She used Google Analytics data, the American Community Survey, and information from the Southern Poverty Law Center to determine how the Alt-Right differs from more conventional white supremacist organizations. She found that there is no correlation between the two groups. People were not more likely to become radicalized on the Internet if they lived in an area with a large traditional white supremacist population. However, online radicalization is positively correlated to areas with high populations of college graduates and Asian immigrants, and negatively correlated with areas with higher numbers Black people, Latinos, and Central and Southern American immigrants. Kyler writes that "Taken together, these findings suggest that perceived threat posed by the presence of educated non-white and immigrant groups is key to the Alt-Right's appeal."<sup>47</sup> J.M. Berger and Vox Pol's 2018 project "The Alt Right Twitter Census" collected similar data from a set of 41 Twitter accounts and the vast follower network they created. He found that the accounts were spread across the United

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<sup>46</sup> Anna Kyler, "Alt-Right as a Social Movement Ethnic Competition Theory and Internet Searches for Online Content."

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

States and the globe, but were most common in the Pacific Time Zone and the Eastern Time Zone, which disproportionately represents the West Coast compared to the United States population.<sup>48</sup>

Director Alex Lee Moyer took a more anecdotal approach to researching the online right with her documentary *TFW No GF* (That Feeling When No Girlfriend).<sup>49</sup> The film follows five young American white men that are part of right wing troll online communities on websites like 4chan and Twitter. The film somewhat contradicts Kyler's quantitative findings, but because only five people are interviewed in the film, they could be statistical anomalies. All five men are white and in their twenties.<sup>50</sup> They are also NEETS, an acronym that stands for "Not in Education, Employment, or Training. Basically, they are at a dead end. They don't have jobs, and they aren't enrolled in college or trade school. Two brothers, Charles and Viddy, live in Kent, Washington, a city with about 130,000 people. Sean lives in a similarly sized city in Colorado called Thornton. Kyle lives in El Paso and Lubbock in Texas, and his family is on food stamps. A man known only as "Kantbot" resides in New York City. The online communities they belong to are almost entirely male. "I'm not implying that girls can't be disaffected obviously," explains Charles, "but it's so much more prevalent in nerdy, young boys to be cast to the wayside like their feelings weren't really concerned. They only really have each other to rely on."<sup>51</sup>

The men discuss how feelings of depression, alienation, and hopelessness drive them to these websites where they commiserate with their peers. Some of these worries are economic in

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<sup>48</sup> J.M. Berger, "The Alt-Right Twitter Census: Defining and Describing The Audience For Alt-Right Content On Twitter."

<sup>49</sup> Alex Lee Moyer, *TFW No GF*, 2020.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

nature. They are deeply nihilistic, and talk in a language steeped in layers of irony. Charles said that “where the irony ends and the sincerity begins, it’s almost obscured on purpose.” “Kantbot” said that “people are uncomfortable not really knowing what I believe.”<sup>52</sup> The men thrive off this discomfort, and their political positions are almost entirely determined by it. They explicitly say that this is a way for them to deal with their own alienation, economic or otherwise. Sean says that he identifies as part of a subculture. “It’s just a bunch of young guys who have been raised with complete anonymity like their whole lives and made some use of it... But it’s just kind of people existing between the cracks...it’s an outlet but it’s also constructive... A lot of guys feel pressure to not say thing that they think about [in public]. Practically anything you could say about your positives as a man, it’s almost like taboo... People think they want to see just complete turmoil at every given opportunity. They’re right to think that it’s toxic and not inviting, but the biggest misconception is that they’re doing it for reasons other than fun.”<sup>53</sup> The actual members of these communities may have beliefs that differ wildly from their leaders. They may not know what “paleoconservatism” is, or understand the intricacies of a *Herrenvolk* Democracy. What they do know is that they are dissatisfied with their lives, they are looking for a way out, and they don’t see any conventional solutions working for them.<sup>54</sup>

### *Caleb Cain*

Caleb Cain was also looking for a sense of direction, and he found it in YouTube. His story is proof of how powerful of a force alienation can be, and how the right cynically seizes onto attempts at improving it. Cain was a NEET, living at home in West Virginia after a failed

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

stint at community college.<sup>55</sup> He grew up liberal, but always had an interest in conspiracies and Internet culture. Naturally, he turned to self-help YouTube videos. “The self-help stuff was very cringey, but I was becoming a stronger person, I was becoming more adapted and more able to deal with my emotions,” Cain said in a YouTube video uploaded to his channel, Faraday Speaks, called “My Descent into the Alt-Right Pipeline.” But the videos took a darker turn as the YouTube recommendation algorithm sent him further into the “self-help” subculture. “It was something to do with depression and self-help and bettering yourself. It looked interesting to me. I clicked on it, and it was this Canadian YouTuber...It was Stefan Molyneux.”<sup>56</sup> I discussed Molyneux’s influence and philosophy earlier in this paper. Cain needed an authority figure, and Molyneux and other YouTubers provided that for him. “He calls himself a philosopher...I was young and naïve, and honestly kind of dumb...and when he would feed me his information about his... theories and social commentaries, because of the benefits I’d gotten from him and the pain that he had relieved in me, I assumed that he was honest,” Cain admits.<sup>57</sup>

Cain began to change his beliefs to align with Molyneux’s, and he rapidly started consuming the content of Molyneux and his peers, who would appear on the channel as guests. He became more and more conservative until he was listening to Jared Taylor, a self-described Nazi. All of the Internet personalities – Ben Shapiro, Gavin McInnes, Lauren Southern – created an “out group” of the left that Cain believed was out to get him, and the lifestyle that he had come to believe was morally upright.<sup>58</sup> “They would play it up like they were victims... and I bought up into that rhetoric.” Eventually, he believed that “we can’t have a free society without

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<sup>55</sup> Caleb Cain, “My Descent into the Alt-Right Pipeline”

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.



social cohesion.” Cain compares this rabbit hole to a sales funnel used in marketing. “What a sales funnel does is it takes potential customers, in a broad general sense, and tries to funnel them down to the point where they buy a product. And the funnel acts in two ways: it educates and motivates the buyers that will buy and it expels the potential customers that won’t buy. And this is kind of what this ideology did. So I started off as a libertarian and because I thought that we needed social cohesion I became a conservative. And then from there I thought that conservatives weren’t going far enough. You know, we call them ‘cucks.’ And I started to believe that we needed strong borders and we needed a national identity and we needed to raise the birth rates.”<sup>59</sup>

Cain pulled himself out of the rabbit hole slowly, and with the help of left wing content creators. Destiny, a YouTuber and streamer that made leftist video game content, debated Lauren Southern, a prominent figure in right wing circles just after President Trump was inaugurated in 2017. “He destroyed her. I mean, he mopped the floor with her.”<sup>60</sup> Cain also credits ContraPoints, a trans, lesbian YouTuber with more than a million subscribers, with helping him. ContraPoints uses characters, elaborate costumes, humor, and concise explanations to deradicalize right wingers. Her most popular videos address topics like the West, incels, and pronouns.<sup>61</sup> Cain is now a leftist, and uploaded his explanation video in the aftermath of Christchurch shooting in a mosque in New Zealand, where 51 people were killed and 40 were injured. Cain recognized the rhetoric in the shooter’s manifesto, and decided he needed to speak out about his experiences.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Natalie Wynn, “ContraPoints,” YouTube Channel, n.d., <https://www.youtube.com/c/ContraPoints/videos>.

<sup>62</sup> Caleb Cain, “My Descent into the Alt-Right Pipeline”

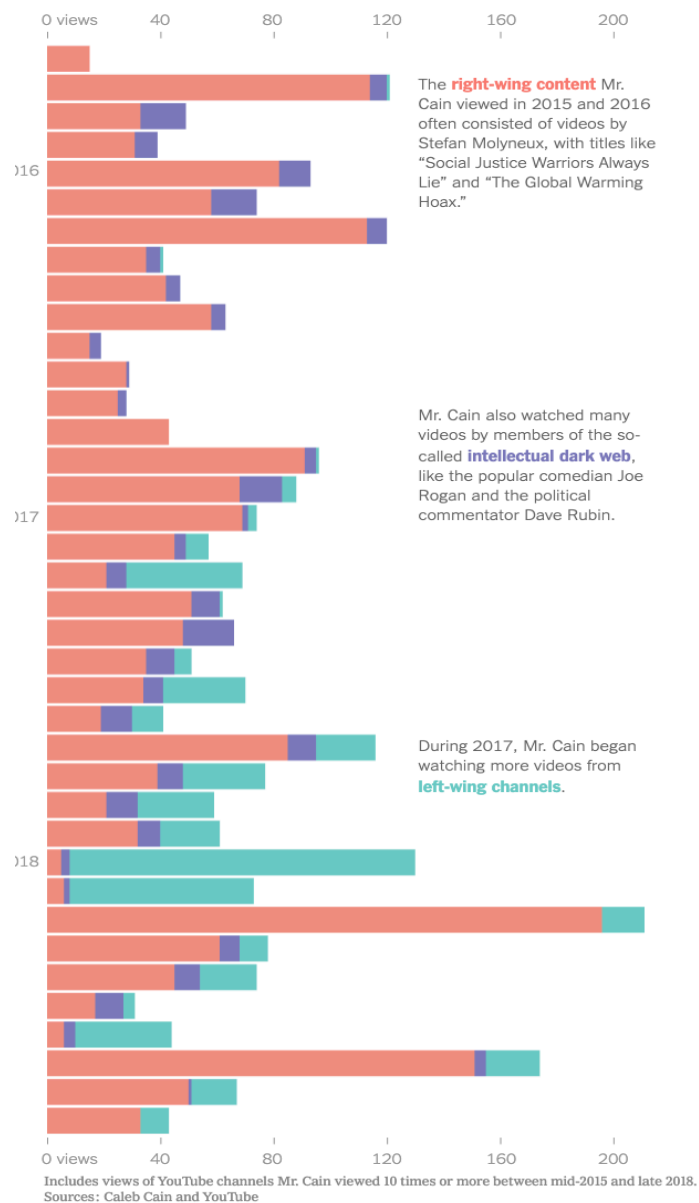
Kevin Roose, a tech journalist at the New York Times, interviewed Cain and analyzed the data in his YouTube search history since 2015, with more than 12,000 videos watched from 2,500 searches.<sup>63</sup> The graph below shows how the videos that Cain viewed 10 times or more changed as the years went by. The data stops at the end of 2018, and he uploaded his own video to YouTube just a few months later, on March 21, 2019.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Kevin Roose, “The Making of a YouTube Radical,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 2019, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/08/technology/youtube-radical.html>, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/08/technology/youtube-radical.html>.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

### Here Are the Number of Political Videos Cain Watched Each Month



Roose also walks the reader through one 48 hour period of Cain's search history in 2015, at the height of his involvement in this community. It included videos like "The Market Value of

Female Sexuality” from Stefan Molyneux, “The Rise of Cultural Libertarianism” from InfoWars’s Paul Joseph Watson, and “The Safe Space Ploy” from StudioBrule.<sup>65</sup>

Cain now resides in Washington, D.C., and is a Program Research Associate for the Polarization and Extremism Research Innovation Lab (PERIL) at American University.<sup>66</sup> I interviewed him twice, as well as exchanged many text messages with him. He cites the breakdown of modernity as one of the reasons why people get radicalized towards both the right and the left. “All of these things [extremist groups] have this same thing in common where they are attempting to give people a story to live inside of to explain their life, and people really need that right now because we do live in postmodernity and the structures, the institutions, the religions, the meta narratives that structured people’s lives, those have broken down. They’ve broken down because we are a globalized world, we have instantaneous communication, we have the scientific method which deconstructed old hierarchies and old traditions, so people feel that they’re in a vacuum, they’re vacuous and they’re searching for something, and all of these cults, they offer that to them.”<sup>67</sup>

Later, Cain elaborates more on this institutional breakdown, and how the institutions aren’t doing themselves any favors by pretending that everything is the same as it once was. “The institutions have fucked us over. In that vacuum of not having institutional trust, in being told, especially with Americans, being told as kids, we were told that everything’s getting better, America’s got its bad stuff in the past, us liberals we fixed the Civil Rights stuff, and yeah there’s still racism but we’re fixing that and yeah there’s some enemies overseas but we’re fixing that. Like this whole neoliberal, neoconservative project and the shining city of the hill, and kind

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Caleb Cain, Preliminary Interview.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

of casting off the success that the United States had for about a hundred years or so, all of that was a lie. And 9/11 was the first crack in that and the financial crisis was the second crack. And I think that people feel discarded and they feel lied to and they feel lost. And it's causing people to turn away from institutions and turn to basically anybody.”<sup>68</sup>

Cain says that the alt-right and its predecessors were smart to capitalize on this decay, focusing on cultural breakdown and creating enemies out of the mainstream. He quotes Andrew Breitbart, “politics is downstream from culture.” “Liberals now hold the majority of cultural power in America, and it becomes easy for the right, especially online extremists to feel edgy and subversive. Cain calls this the “comedy subversion cycle.”<sup>69</sup> This trolling creates a deep sense of community that is hard to penetrate, and it becomes a recruiting tool as well. Cain speculates high level operators like Steve Bannon, and Andrew Anglin of the white nationalist website Stormfront were active on 4chan, influencing these communities that are guided less by ideology and more by paranoia, pleasure, and connection.<sup>70</sup>

### *Vectors*

In their paper “Auditing Radicalization Pathways on YouTube”, Manuel Horta Ribeiro, Raphael Ottoni, Robert West, Virgilio A.F. Almeida, and Wagner Meira Jr. analyze 330,925 YouTube videos from 349 channels.<sup>71</sup> They find that the videos fell into one of four categories: Media, the Alt-Lite, the Alt-Right, and the Intellectual Dark Web. They found that the Alt-Lite and Intellectual Dark Web content served as a gateway to funnel users into more extreme Alt-

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Caleb Cain, Secondary Interview.

<sup>71</sup> Ribeiro et al., “Auditing Radicalization Pathways on YouTube.”

Right content compared to the more traditional mainstream media content.<sup>72</sup> The Alt-Lite is not overtly white supremacist, but argues for nationalism and conservatism more broadly. Popular Alt-Lite personalities included Paul Joseph Watson, Steven Crowder, and other channels mentioned in Cain's YouTube video.<sup>73</sup> The Intellectual Dark Web (IDW) is a term coined by Eric Weinstein and described by former opinion columnist Bari Weiss in the *New York Times*. "It is a collection of iconoclastic thinkers, academic renegades, and media personalities who are having a rolling conversation – on podcasts, YouTube, Twitter, and in sold out auditoriums – that sound unlike anything else happening, at least publicly, in the culture right now. Feeling largely locked out of legacy outlets, they are rapidly building their own mass media channels."<sup>74</sup> Some of the most well-known IDW figures are psychiatrist and author Jordan Peterson, whom I discussed earlier, and conservative YouTuber Ben Shapiro, who has more than 2.5 million subscribers on YouTube. The IDW is more well known amongst the mainstream media, and their ideology is more ambiguous than Alt-Lite or Alt-Right figures.<sup>75</sup> But the researchers in the paper proved that their videos led towards more extreme ones.<sup>76</sup> A similar, quantitative analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I am going to conduct a qualitative analysis of different vectors for online right-wing radicalization based on discussion topics. Many other topics are discussed within these communities, but I am choosing to focus on feminism and immigration. Both of these topics rely on alienation as a form of recruitment.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Bari Weiss, "Meet the Renegades of the Intellectual Dark Web," *New York Times*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/opinion/intellectual-dark-web.html>.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ribeiro et al., "Auditing Radicalization Pathways on YouTube."

### *Feminism*

As I discussed earlier, many popular right-wing figureheads came to their popularity from the aftermath of Gamer Gate. This led to the creation of the “Manosphere”, online communities where men try to improve themselves, advocate for men’s rights, and critique feminism. Emily Price, a student at Arcadia University, wrote an in depth analysis of the Manosphere for her Masters’ thesis.<sup>77</sup> She writes that “the loose philosophy of men’s rights activists can be categorized as essentially an active response to perceived aggression, one that has been exacerbated by neoliberalism.”<sup>78</sup> Cain agrees with Price. “Social movements and technological movements and liberation movements are not neutral and they are not purely positive. There are consequences to these things which do have negative repercussions,” he claims. “We have to find ways to work within these, obviously. It does not mean we just get rid of feminism because it has certain consequences. And it’s not just the social movements but also the technology, the birth control, the washing machine, the capitalist incentive to push women into the workforce, all of these changed society fundamentally and it’s caused a lot of chaos that we haven’t adapted to. And I would argue that men don’t have a social movement specifically for men and tailored to themselves...In that vacuum, men are growing up in a culture that is basically a feminist culture in the outset but then they are still in a lot of ways... through their social conditioning and when they look back in history, they are still kind of taught how to live in the old world and not in this new world.”<sup>79</sup>

This is where the ideology of the Manosphere kicks in. Some prominent personalities like Roosh V and Mike Cernovich describe themselves as self-help gurus and pick up artists, trying

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<sup>77</sup> Emily Price, “We Live In A Society: Violence and Radicalization in the Internet Manosphere.”

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Caleb Cain, Preliminary Interview.

to solve the problems that Cain mentioned. But their lectures quickly deteriorate into sexism, and they promote a controlling, hierarchical worldview. For example, Roosh V once said on his Pick Up Artist website Return of Kings that rape should be legalized on private property.<sup>80</sup> Another major part of the men's rights movement and ideology is the Red Pill. The Red Pill was invented by more anonymous members of the movement on Reddit, sometimes described as incels. A reference to *The Matrix*, taking the red pill means accepting the man-hatred in society.<sup>81</sup> An ideal red-pillled man is strong, alpha, and rejects the advances of women who aren't chaste. This is in opposition to most men in society, who are blue-pillled. They let women use them for sex and money, they are weak, and they have no self-control. This leads men down a dangerous pathway of idolizing strength, and hating femininity. It also creates a paradigm where mainstream, neoliberal feminism is put in opposition against a traditionalist, populist vision of the country.<sup>82</sup> Combined with the popular racist idea that strong black men are taking white women from white men, a justified vision of a *Herrenvolk* democracy is created. This is not to say that every man that takes a self-help course from a Men's Rights Activist is a fascist, far from it. But a portion of those alienated, young men who can't get a date may go down a rabbit hole similar to Cain.

### *Immigration*

The Manosphere relies on romantic alienation, but anti-immigration rhetoric relies primarily on economic and social alienation. Cain listed anti-immigration rhetoric as one of the main drivers of recruitment on the online right.<sup>83</sup> One example of this rhetoric in action is

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<sup>80</sup> Price, Emily, "We Live In A Society: Violence and Radicalization in the Internet Manosphere."

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Caleb Cain, Secondary Interview.



popular right wing YouTuber Lauren Southern. She has almost 700,000 subscribers on YouTube, and her film “Borderless” examining migration patterns in Europe has more than a million views.<sup>84</sup> In May 2017, Southern sailed off the coast of Italy, trying to stop migrant boats from coming into the country. “If the politicians won’t stop the boats, we’ll stop the boats, said Southern on a livestream.<sup>85</sup> In a documentary called *White Noise* produced by *The Atlantic*, Southern tells an interviewer in her hometown of Toronto that she “leave[s] her house everyday with just immense cringe.” “I certainly have the large part of public opinion against me, against my skin color, against my sexual persuasion as well I suppose. There aren’t a lot of good things that the politicians or the media have to say about straight white people.”<sup>86</sup> As she walks the streets and passes a market, she says “I literally cannot see a single European face. Not only that, they were giving out free Qurans and free henna in the tents on Canada Day, and there was just women in burqas, with Canada flag burqas. They either assimilate or they go home. If they don’t want to be a part of Western Culture, why the hell did they come here?”<sup>87</sup> This rhetoric victimizes racial majorities, and otherizes minorities, building them up as a threat to Western culture. It also allows whites to blame their alienation on a specific group, rather than as a consequence of living in a capitalist society.

Southern is also a good example of how anti-feminism and anti-immigration interact. Later in the *White Noise* documentary, Southern travels to Russia and discusses traditionalism with her peers. Daria Sharova, a Putin youth activist tells, her that she “strongly fights against feminism and in favor of femineity. And I think there’s only one way society can be well

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<sup>84</sup> Lauren Southern, “Lauren Southern,” YouTube Channel, n.d., <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLa6APLHX6W3FeNLc8PYuvg>.

<sup>85</sup> Lombroso, *White Noise*.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

organized.” Southern nods vigorously and later says that she “wants to preserve traditional values.”<sup>88</sup> Yet one of her most popular videos is called “Asking Feminists: Women’s Rights or Islam?”<sup>89</sup> Western women must return to an era before degeneracy, but Muslim women are barbaric and stuck in the past.

Southern screened “Borderless” at the EU Parliament, proving how much power these movements have. In the United States and elsewhere, they’ve reached the highest halls of power.<sup>90</sup> Deregulation and neoliberal trade deals like NAFTA led to massive job losses in sectors like manufacturing.<sup>91</sup> Workers became jobless and alienated from society and production. President Trump and those on the online right influenced by him like Southern used this opportunity to generate mass hysteria against immigrants. Violence against immigrants, or those helping them has become commonplace. The recent mass shootings in Christchurch, Pittsburgh, and El Paso were motivated by these sentiments.<sup>92</sup> It is clear that this rhetoric is powerful and dangerous.

### *Conclusion*

I believe that alienation is the single most powerful factor in right wing online extremist radicalization. The most effective rhetoric pitches extremism as a cure to alienation, and then slowly builds on the philosophical ideas that the alt-right is based upon: the Cathedral, Cultural Marxism, and *Herrenvolk* Democracy.<sup>93</sup> Inoculation theory suggests that the pathway from moderation to extremism is quite easy to follow, once you have been “vaccinated” against

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Southern, “Lauren Southern.”

<sup>90</sup> Lombroso, *White Noise*.

<sup>91</sup> “NAFTA’s Legacy: Lost Jobs, Lower Wages, Increased Inequality” (Public Citizen, February 2018).

<sup>92</sup> “Part IV. What Is the Threat to the United States Today?”

<sup>93</sup> Battista and Sande, “Cultural Marxism in the Cathedral: Two Alt-Right Perspectives On Critical Theory.”

certain concepts and ideas that would interfere in the process.<sup>94</sup> Most of the people radicalized in this way are young white men living in both urban and rural areas.<sup>95</sup> Sometimes, they find a sense of identity in these communities and they become invested quite quickly.<sup>96</sup> This is what happened to Caleb Cain. Like many others, he was a NEET (Not in Education, Employment, and Training), feeling lonely and lost. He had grown up on the Internet, and it seemed to be the most logical place to look for help. Instead, he found an ideology that preyed on his insecurities, and drove him down a rabbit hole that ended up alienating him even more.<sup>97</sup> Topics like feminism and immigration resonated deeply with him.<sup>98</sup> It took sustained intervention from left wing YouTubers and content creators to pull Cain out of his spiral.<sup>99</sup> I think that this method is the most effective counter-radicalization tool. Other potential solutions have been “deplatforming”, or removing extremist content from platforms, and adding fact-check boxes to videos and Tweets. Cain bashed both of those as ineffective and called deplatforming a “Band-Aid.”<sup>100</sup> Society cannot dismiss these communities as crazy or immoral and allow them to go even further down in their rabbit holes. These communities are vulnerable and are full of men that want what we all crave, intimate human connection. I believe that understanding this concept and creating content with it as an underlying principle is paramount to creating more success stories like Cain’s.

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<sup>94</sup> Josh Compton, “Inoculation Theory.”

<sup>95</sup> Anna Kyler, “Alt-Right as a Social Movement Ethnic Competition Theory and Internet Searches for Online Content.”

<sup>96</sup> Alex Lee Moyer, *TFW No GF*.

<sup>97</sup> Caleb Cain, “My Descent into the Alt-Right Pipeline.”

<sup>98</sup> Caleb, Cain, Secondary Interview.

<sup>99</sup> Caleb Cain, “My Descent into the Alt-Right Pipeline.”

<sup>100</sup> Caleb Cain, Preliminary Interview.

That being said, I had several research problems during this process due to the sheer volume and speed of the Internet. This subculture I have chosen to study is massive, and divides into thousands of groups with their own subtle differences and ideologies. Many volumes could be written about each group and their behaviors. I tried to focus on the most popular creators as well as the ones that Cain said were a big influence on him. But I am most certainly leaving out key information about online right wing extremism. Additionally, the Internet moves too fast to write about. By the time I turn in this paper, it will already be outdated. Many of my sources are from two or three years ago, a lifetime in Internet years. Many of the YouTube channels I mentioned aren't nearly as popular in 2020 as they were from 2016-2019.<sup>101</sup> I have also not mentioned major world events like the coronavirus pandemic, the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement after the death of George Floyd, and the 2020 election results. All of these events certainly had an impact on how these spaces operate, what they choose to focus on, and what their future is. Alienation has only become more prevalent as Americans social distance, the economy tanks, and the government largely ignores the situation at hand. I have no doubt that the rhetorical styles described in this paper will be used in the future as the neoliberal world order continues to crumble. Overall, persistent feelings of loneliness and alienation have become a force that successful online right wing extremists play off of to radicalize their audiences, sometimes with deadly consequences.

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<sup>101</sup> Cain, Caleb, Secondary Interview.

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