

Birth of the Alt Right

Never believe that anti-Semites are completely unaware of the absurdity of their replies. They know that their remarks are frivolous, open to challenge. But they are amusing themselves, for it is their adversary who is obliged to use words responsibly, since he believes in words. The anti-Semites have the right to play...They delight in acting in bad faith, since they seek not to persuade by sound argument but to intimidate and disconcert. —Jean-Paul Sartre, “Anti-Semite and Jew,” 1944¹

S ometime on October 10, 2014, feminist computer-game developer Brianna Wu began receiving a series of tweets on her Twitter account from someone named “DeathToBrianna”:

You just made a shitty game no one liked. That’s it. No one will care when you die. [sic]

I hope you enjoy your last moments alive on this earth. You did nothing worthwhile with your life.

If you have any kids, they’re going to die too. I don’t give a fuck. They’ll grow up to be feminists anyway.

Your mutilated corpse will be on the front page of Jezebel tomorrow and there isn’t jack shit you can do about it.

I’ve got a K-Bar and I’m coming to your house so I can shove it up your ugly feminist cunt.

Guess what bitch? I now know where you live. You and Frank live at [her real address].²

Wu, the development chief at game-maker Giant Spacekat, and her husband called the police and moved out of their home that evening for several days, eventually hiring a bodyguard. Within days, she was accused by her tormentors

of having “manufactured” the threats; they advised their readers in memes to “incite as much butthurt as possible, so don’t engage in civil reasoned debate. Flame anyone who disagrees...” Two years later, she continued to receive threats at such a volume that she hired a staff member to track them all.³

The threats directed at Wu arose from her involvement in the so-called “Gamergate” controversy, a bitter online dispute that revolved around the internal politics of the video-gaming community. On one side were feminists and other liberals who argued for greater inclusion of games appealing to women. On the other side were men who found such talk not merely threatening but a declaration of a “culture war,” wherein “social justice warriors” used the cudgel of political correctness to impose the values of multiculturalism.

The predominantly White men making these arguments, however, were not content merely to debate their positions online. Instead, a whole army of them swung into action on social media and Internet chat rooms, harassing and threatening feminists and liberals like Wu.

One of the feminists’ chief online assailants was Milo Yiannopoulos, a young gay man living in London who wrote a widely read column for *Breitbart News*. In a September 2014 piece he described the anti-Gamergate faction as “an army of sociopathic feminist programmers and campaigners, abetted by achingly

politically correct American tech bloggers, [who] are terrorising the entire community—lying, bullying and manipulating their way around the internet for profit and attention.”⁴

Yiannopoulos, who would parlay his Gamergate activism into a job as *Breitbart’s* tech editor and later as a leader of the emerging “Alt Right” phenomenon, responded to the threats against Wu in a typically “not-my-fault-she-deserved-it” tweet: “Whoever sent those tweets deserves to be charged and punished,” he wrote. “It was vile. But I cannot be alone in finding the response distasteful.”

The controversy heralded the rise of the Alt Right: a world dominated by digital trolls, insanely unbridled conspiracy, angry White-male-identity victimization culture, and ultimately, open racism, antisemitism, ethnic hatred, misogyny, and sexual/gender paranoia. A place where human decency and ethics are considered antiquarian jokes, and empathy is only an invitation to assault.

TROLL LOGIC

The most influential aspect of the rise of the Internet in the 1990s was the liberation of information from the constraints of the mainstream media—something expected to further democratize the globalized economy. After all, the more information people had at their fingertips, the thinking went, the more they could be liberated by the truth.

Within a few years, however, it be-

came evident that there was a serious downside to all this liberation: while the constraints on information imposed by a top-down mass media had seemingly been lifted, one of the press's important by-functions was vanishing as well: namely, the ability to filter out bad information, false or badly distorted "facts," and outrageous claims designed not just to titillate but to smear whole groups of people and to radicalize an audience against them. The Internet, with its easy anonymity and wanton disregard of the rules of evidence and factuality, by the early 2000s had already become host to a swamp of conspiracy theories, false smears, and wild speculation. As Chip Berlet and Matthew Lyons have observed, the 1990s Patriot/militia movement was the first right-wing movement widely organized and promoted online.⁵

And the same "anything goes" ethos applied doubly to people's behavior online. No entity embodied this anarchical and deliberately destructive sensibility quite like the digital troll: the usually anonymous creatures who lurk under the bridges of our discourse, lobbing insults, nonsequiturs, off-topic remarks, and racial or religious incendiary grenades. Their chief tactic is called "flaming," in which they mercilessly abuse their target, substituting aggressive abuse for debate.

"Trolling" which takes its name from the fishing technique of dropping a lure on a long line and waiting for fish to take the bait, was initially considered a relatively benign, if juvenile, pastime. There was even a kind of "positive" trolling in which the "troll" used fact-based questions to lead a target to a logical conclusion. However, as "flaming" behaviors matured and spread, the resulting ethos created a "troll" whose deportment came closely to resemble the dreaded creatures who dwelt under bridges and snagged unwary travelers of legend. Trolls are ultimately engendered by a third kind of consequence of the rise of the Internet: namely, the ability of people in modern society to construct their entire social lives online, with only a nominal interaction with the reality of the physical

world. Increasingly, some people's social lives began increasingly to revolve around chat rooms, email listservs, political and special-interest forums. As social-media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter took off, this phenomenon became not only widespread but profoundly consequential.

As media theorist Judith Donath explained in her groundbreaking 1999 study of trolling behavior: "In the physical world there is an inherent unity to the self, for the body provides a compelling and convenient definition of identity. The norm is: one body, one identity ... The virtual world is different. It is composed of information rather than matter."⁶

This helps explain why the introduction of bad information—false or distorted "facts" that creates an alternative "reality" for people largely detached from the real world—so profoundly toxifies people's worldviews, their understanding of news and current events, as well as their interactions with others. The culture of trolling, by its very nature, quickly attracted some of society's

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most toxic elements: sociopaths, psychopaths, and sadists. And that, in turn, had a profound political effect.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF TROLLING

A disturbing study released in 2014 by a team of psychologists led by Erin E. Buckels of the University of Manitoba sketched out a personality profile of trolls, focusing particularly on people attracted to "antisocial" uses of the Web. Buckels' results found that many trolls share what psychologists call the "Dark Tetrad" of psychological traits: Machiavellianism (willing deception and manipulation), narcissism (self-obsession and egotism), psychopathy (an utter absence of empathy or remorse), and sadism (enjoyment of the suffering of oth-

ers). The correlation of trolls with the last of these—sadism—was particularly powerful.⁷

"Both trolls and sadists feel sadistic glee at the distress of others," Buckels wrote. "Sadists just want to have fun ... and the Internet is their playground!"

And the more time a person spends exclusively online (as opposed to in the material world) the stronger the connection becomes, Buckels found.

Buckels' study also found that even though trolls have an outsized influence on Internet discourse, they comprise only a small percentage of Web users—just 5.6 percent of the survey's respondents said they enjoyed trolling, while some 41 percent reported they don't engage with other people online at all. Some trolled merely for fun, while others were driven by personal motivations, including politics.

As it happens, Buckels explained by email, there is, in general, a high correlation of these "Dark Tetrad" traits with another important mass-psychological phenomenon known as "social dominance orientation," or SDO. It's based on

the recognition that people orient themselves socially based on a kind of fundamental view: do they believe people are inherently equal, or unequal? Psychologists have tested people accordingly, devising an "SDO scale" that measures a person's level of preference for hierarchy based on inherent inequalities within any social system, as well as the concurring desire for domination over lower-status groups.

The original 1994 study that designed the SDO scale asked participants whether they favored ideas such as "increased social equality," "increased economic equality," or simply "equality" itself. Conversely, subjects were asked whether they agreed that "some people are just more deserving than others" and that

“This country would be better off if we cared less about how equal all people were.”⁸ SDO trolls, by dint of their personalities, were often inclined not only to share but to act out right-wing political views, often of the extremist variety.

“In short,” writes Robert Altemeyer, a psychologist who’s studied authoritarianism, “in social dominators’ way of thinking, equality should not be a cen-

turalists.¹⁰

White nationalism quickly devolved from its original claim—to be simply promoting the interests of ethnic Whites—to, by the late ‘90s, demonizing non-Whites and LGBTQ people, as well as embracing far-right undercurrents of antisemitism and conspiracism. And indeed, many of the movement’s leaders displayed the kind of personal-

the decade wore on, the far-right conspiracists fixated on the idea of “political correctness” as a form of what they called “Cultural Marxism.” This idea grew from a fundamentally antisemitic White nationalist theory: that a small group of Jewish philosophers at Columbia University in the 1930s had devised an unorthodox form of Marxism that aimed to destroy American culture by convincing mainstream Americans that White ethnic pride is bad, sexual liberation is good, and traditional American “family values” and Christianity are bigoted and reactionary. (Among the subscribers to this theory, circulating in far-right circles since the ‘90s, was the right-wing Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik, who in 2011 slaughtered 69 children at a Norway youth camp after detonating a series of bombs in Oslo that killed eight.¹¹)

The audience for conspiracy theories, as Altemeyer observes, is often comprised of right-wing authoritarians: people who are inclined to insist on a world in which strong authorities produce order and peace, often through iron imposition of “law and order.”¹² Highly ethnocentric, fearful of a dangerous world, aggressive, dogmatic, and inclined to extreme self-righteousness and poor reasoning, they are, as Altemeyer explains, “very dependent on social reinforcement of their beliefs. They think they are right because almost everyone they know, almost every news broadcast they see, almost every radio commentator they listen to, tells them they are. That is, they screen out the sources that will suggest that they are wrong.”¹³

A LETHAL UNION

To understand the growth of the Alt Right, one must explore the relationship between social dominators and right-wing authoritarian followers. Altemeyer, who conducted groundbreaking work on the psychological makeup of right-wing authoritarian (RWA) personalities, explains that people with high SDO scores—“dominators”—correlate poorly with people who score highly on the RWA scale. The two groups are distinct. Authoritarian followers lack dominators’ lust for power and they are generally much more religious; their hostility is rooted in fear and self-righteousness



A sign at the 2017 Women’s March on Washington, D.C. Photo: Mark Dixon via Flickr (CC BY 2.0).

tral value of our society or a goal toward which we should strive. To high SDOs, ‘equality’ is a sucker-word in which only fools believe.”⁹

In contrast to the trolls who played the trolling game for its own sake, right-wing political trolls saw their activities as direct reflections of their politics. If trolling was often rude and openly transgressive, so were their politics.

If any movement could be said to describe the manifestation of Social Dominance Orientation in the political realm, it’s White nationalism. A far-right movement that took hold among “academic racists” in the 1990s, who contended that racial genetics imparted inherent characteristics such as intelligence, White nationalists followed these arguments with a call for distinct ethnostates that could enable racial separation. Moreover, the movement’s ideologues claimed, traditional White European culture faced an onslaught from non-White immigration and liberal multicul-

ity characteristics—lack of empathy, manipulativeness and aggression, and hostility to femininity and equality—associated with people who score highly on the SDO scale.

During the Bush administration years, White nationalists focused less on attacking liberalism than on attacking Republicans who they believed were failing to “stand up for White interests.” The antagonism created a gulf in which the movement, rife with contentious would-be leaders, struggled to reach new followers.

The White nationalists’ predilection for conspiracism, however, soon brought them the audience they sought. The conspiracy theorists who’d first become mobilized through the 1990s antigovernment Patriot movement found new inspiration in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which they portrayed as an “inside job” perpetrated with assistance from the Bush administration and its “New World Order.” As

in the name of authority, while dominators use hostility as a means of intimidation and control.

Though they are dissimilar in many ways, dominators and right-wing authoritarian followers share an overpowering tendency towards prejudice against racial and ethnic minorities, women, LGBTQ people, and religious minorities as well as deeply conservative politics.

Altemeyer's 2006 book warning about the rise of authoritarianism focused on the special kind of chemistry that happens when right-wing authoritarian followers and social dominators come together. He called it the "lethal union":

When social dominators are in the driver's seat, and right-wing authoritarians stand at their beck and call, unethical things appear much more likely to happen. True, sufficiently skilled social dominators served by dedicated followers can make the trains run on time. But you have to worry about what the trains may be hauling when dominators call the shots and high RWAs do the shooting.¹⁴

It was during the Obama administration years, following the election of the first Black president, that the gradual coalescence of the alternative-universe worldviews of conspiracists, Patriots, White supremacists, Tea Partiers and nativists occurred. Fueled in no small part by racial animus toward Obama, the Internet and social media became the ground on which this "lethal union" could finally occur, after decades of internecine bickering among and marginalization of far-right factions. Those same chat rooms and Facebook threads where trolls gathered and harassed became the places where far-right social dominators—many of them espousing openly transgressive worldviews such as neonazism and misogyny—could come together with the right-wing authoritarian followers whose ranks grew with every conspiracy-theory convert and wannabe Oath Keeper militiaman.

That "lethal union" ultimately gave birth to a new baby created for the 21st century: the Alt Right.

THE ROAD TO GAMERGATE

It all began with people talking online about Japanese anime—the animated

cartoons featuring everything from ultra-cute kittens to horrifying monsters, and everything in between.

The website's owner, a then-15-year-old New York City student named Christopher Poole, called it 4chan when he launched it out of his bedroom in 2003. His idea was to create an open forum where anyone could post images and chat about anime and associated manga comic-book culture. And it was an immediate success, drawing a million hits in his first six days of operation. Soon it had expanded into a massive operation, one of the Internet's most influential referral sites.¹⁵

Much of its original success was built on memes like "LOLcats," featuring photos of cats over-scripted with funny phrases (the most famous of which, "I Can Haz Cheezburger," went on to spawn a million-dollar company hosted at 4chan). 4chan also became known for its trolling, with resident trolls creating, among other things, the long-lived Internet prank known as "RickRolling."

But 4chan was also the ultimate open forum. People could register without entering an email address, so most commenters posted anonymously. 4chan's boards became host not just to gamers and hobbyists but also neonazis, White supremacists, gay-bashers, and a flood of pornographic material. Trolling—of the nasty kind—soon became not just the ruling ethos but a competition among peers at 4Chan.

The "manosphere," too, was a major presence at 4chan. An online community comprised of blogs, chat forums, and Reddit sub-communities, the manosphere was generally dedicated to the "men's rights" movement, ostensibly to defend men against feminism. In reality, the movement had quickly become an open sewer of rampant misogyny and rape culture, particularly at the "Men's Rights Activists" (or MRA) discussion boards at 4chan. Within this world, MRAs called feminism "a social cancer," and asserted that, "Feminism is a hate movement designed to disenfranchise and dehumanize men." They complained that women "cry rape" too easily, and, using Holocaust denialism as a metaphor, claimed that feminists had "created" the concept of patriarchy to justify abortion and "the destruction

of men and masculinity."¹⁶

Given the various communities gathering at 4chan, it was unsurprising when, in early 2013, all these forces converged to create the "Gamergate" controversy—an initially online phenomenon that crept over into the real world.

"Gamergate" began when a feminist game designer named Zoe Quinn was lauded for her woman-friendly online game "Depression Quest," which guided users through the trials and tribulations of a person suffering from clinical depression.¹⁷ Quinn's creation, reviewer Adam Smith wrote at *Rock, Paper, Shotgun*, transformed computer gaming from a mere exercise in conflict to "game' as communication, comfort and tool of understanding."¹⁸

The positive coverage of Quinn's creation, however, attracted the ire of anti-feminist gamers, livid at the success of a feminized game that was a stark departure from "male" battle games. She soon found herself inundated with hate mail and threatening social-media messages. Someone mailed a detailed rape threat to her home address. Then, in August 2014, a year after "Depression Quest" was released to the general public, a former boyfriend of Quinn's published a nasty tell-all post about their relationship, complaining that her new boyfriend was video game journalist Nathan Grayson. At 4chan's boards, this story quickly took on a life of its own, as Quinn's critics began claiming that Grayson had written a positive review of "Depression Quest" as a result of their relationship, even though, in reality, no such review existed.¹⁹

In a glimpse of trends to come, though, that fact did not matter. The 4chan trolls were off and running, claiming they had uncovered an ethical scandal within the world of gaming journalism. Grayson's supposed breach of standards reflected what they claimed was a pro-feminist, pro-liberal, anti-White-male bias growing within the computer-game industry. Soon anyone who questioned their interpretation of events was part of the conspiracy. Actor Adam Baldwin, highly active in right-wing circles, dubbed the controversy "Gamergate" in a Twitter hashtag, and it spread like wildfire.

Quinn's previous flood of hate mail was dwarfed by the incoming tide of vit-

riol that now descended upon her. She was “doxxed”—her home address and personal contact information published online—and forced to flee her home.²⁰

Nor did the harassment end with Quinn. Anita Sarkeesian, a well-regarded feminist cultural critic, endured death and rape threats, as well as a phoned-in bomb threat that canceled a speaking appearance, after she became a public critic of the Gamergaters. That was followed shortly by the online threats against Brianna Wu.²¹

Appalled by the wave of harassment emanating from their boards, the owners of 4chan announced in September 2014 that they would ban any further

and the threats that were flooding out to women, LGBTQ folk, and people of color in the industry. It was a language of dismissal and belittlement. They called their targets “special snowflakes” and “cry bullies,” derided their websites as “safe spaces” and their hope for civil discourse as “unicorns.” The targets of the abuse, they claimed, were lying or exaggerating; and even when the abuse was factually substantiated, Gamergaters’ usual response was that people on their side were being abused too.

The Gamergaters shared a predilection for conspiracism as well. Feminists, for example, were portrayed as a subset within the larger “Cultural Marx-

ism” conspiracy to destroy Western civilization. But what was once an idea with limited popular appeal was gaining widespread circulation through popular conspiracists like Alex Jones, creator of the massively popular conspiracy mill InfoWars. At 4chan and 8chan, the threat of “Cultural Marxism” became the focal point of many discussions, first about Gamergate, then, increasingly, politics. A common theme began to emerge: that White men were being systematically oppressed by dangerous left-wing forces, and that mainstream conser-

vatives, through their “weak” response to multiculturalism, had “sold them out.”

Eventually Gamergate passed out of the news cycle, and the controversy subsided, to no one’s real satisfaction. What had transpired in the process, though, was far more important. Aggrieved MRAs from the “manosphere,” White nationalists who shared their virulent hatred of feminists and adora-

tion for “traditional values,” as well as gamers and online trolls, had coalesced as a movement. And they continued on as a community, talking now more about politics and conspiracies than gaming, and how much they hated “sell-out” mainstream conservatives. They reserved their most bilious outbursts for liberals, multiculturalism, gays and lesbians, Blacks, Hispanics, and Jews—especially Jews.

Their growing community of like-minded defenders of the White race and “traditional values” had to have a name, and so they gave it one: the “Alt Right.”

THE MOB IS THE MOVEMENT

In 2009, a young White nationalist named Richard Spencer coined the term “Alternative Right” while writing a headline for the paleoconservative *Taki’s Magazine*, where he was an editor at the time.²² The headline was for an article by White nationalist Kevin DeAnna, describing the rise of a new kind of conservatism— one hostile to neoconservatism and open to “racialist” politics. Less than a year later, in early 2010, Spencer founded his own webzine and named it *The Alternative Right*. In short order, the name of the movement it promoted was shortened to “Alt Right,” and it stuck.

The name was developed with public relations well in mind; after all, it permitted White nationalists to soften their image while drawing in recruits from mainstream conservatism. When the movement rose to national prominence in 2016 in conjunction with the Trump campaign, a controversy erupted over whether to use the movement’s preferred name or simply call its members what many took them to be: “neonazis” or “White supremacists.” (This mirrored a similar discussion in the 1990s over whether to call the Patriot movement by its chosen name or other descriptors such as “antigovernment” and “antidemocratic.”)

However, as researcher Matthew Lyons explains, the movement is much more complex than any of those simple terms.²³ It incorporates elements not only from White nationalists and supremacists of various stripes, but also misogynist anti-feminists, certain “neo-reactionary” activists who regard democratic rule as a threat to civilization, as



White nationalist Richard Spencer is credited with coining the term “Alternative Right” in 2009. Photo: V@s via Flickr (CC BY 2.0).

Gamergate discussions. However, a longtime 4chan user named Fredrick Brennan had, that previous October, already created a similar, competing website called 8chan, because he believed 4Chan had become too censorious.

The Gamergaters at 8chan, on Twitter and Reddit and other forums created a lingo of their own: mainly a range of pernicious rhetorical devices designed to create a buffer between themselves

well as some right-wing anarchist elements. Identifying it as only one of those elements is not only inaccurate, but obscures the Alt Right's peculiarly culture-savvy orientation and the strength of its appeal.

Take Pepe the Frog, for example. Pepe did not begin life, as it were, as the mascot of the Alt Right. His cartoonist creator, Matt Furie, a liberal Democrat, drew the smiling character in 2005 as part of an absurdist comic book; Pepe's panel featured the frog peeing with his pants down around his ankles, saying, "Feels good man."

Pepe's catchphrase and image—big-eyed, large-lipped, cheerful—proliferated and became a common part of memes. By 2014, he had become one of the most popular memes on social media.

And then he was hijacked by the Alt Right. Already wildly popular among the far-right trolls at 4chan, Pepe's image came increasingly to be featured in Alt Right memes as the trolls spread to other forums. Andrew Anglin, a former skinhead who was one of the leading trolls at 4chan, featured Pepe's visage prominently at his neonazi blog *The Daily Stormer*; other Alt Right activists followed. Soon regular users stopped using Pepe in memes out of fear that they would be presumed to be racist White nationalists.²⁴

It was only a dumb cartoon, but what Pepe really represented to the Alt Right was something much more powerful: irony. Unlike their historical forebears in the Ku Klux Klan and Aryan Nations, the leaders and followers of the Alt Right see themselves as smarter and more sophisticated, their rhetoric of racism, violence, and open eliminationism wrapped in more wit and humor, at least of a sort.

As Anglin explained, "A movement which meets all of the [Southern Poverty Law Center's] definitions of Neo-Nazi White Supremacism using a cartoon frog to represent itself takes on a subversive power to bypass historical stereotypes of such movements, and thus present the ideas themselves in a fun way without the baggage of *Schindler's List* and *American History X*."²⁵

Pepe is hardly the only cartoon figure deployed by the Alt Right. The move-

ment's roots in 4chan are evident in its many anime-fueled memes, most of them showing cute cartoon girls wearing various kinds of Nazi regalia, or sporting openly misogynistic, racist, and antisemitic texts. Comic characters of various kinds are deployed to ironically promote White nationalist ideas.

The Alt Right established itself primarily through its cultural agility—its ability to stay at the forefront of current events, themes, and ideas by adapting them to its own uses and then running wild with them. Spencer explains that these memes have "power" and are "a way of communicating immediately." The movement takes pride in the inscrutability of its memes and other cultural markers—from the "echo" of placing parenthesis around the names of Jews (a tactic since reclaimed by some Jews), to the use of "Shitlord" as an honorific to describe Alt Right true believers—and revel in using them as a kind of secret handshake. The most pernicious of these is the #WhiteGenocide hashtag that handily reduces the White nationalist "mantra" that "Diversity is a Code Word for White Genocide."

Many Alt Right memes tap into popular culture: Taylor Swift's image pops up to promote "Aryan" beauty standards; the new Star Wars films are mocked for including central Black and female characters. Masculinity is a fixation for Alt Rightists, reflected in lingo such as "cuck" or "cuckservative," which characterize mainstream conservatives as spineless cuckolds. They revel in naked racism for its transgressive value, reflected in their term "dindu nuffin" (caricatured dialect for "I didn't do nothing," used to describe African Americans, especially Black Lives Matters protesters). The terms spawned social-media hashtags (#Cuckservative, #Dindu) that spread the ideas behind them to a mostly young and impressionable audience.

Frequently, Alt Right activists describe the conversion to their point of

view as getting "red pillled," after the red pill in the 1999 science-fiction film *The Matrix* that enables Keanu Reeves to see reality. Alt Righters see it as a metaphor for what they consider to be the revelatory power of their ideology, which cuts through the lies of "social justice warriors," "Cultural Marxists," and the mainstream media they insist is actively suppressing their views.

Pepe the Frog was one of the most popular memes on social media by 2014 before being hijacked by the Alt Right.



Image via clipartsgram.com.

"The Alt-Right is a 'mass movement' in the truest possible sense of the term, a type of mass-movement that could only exist on the Internet, where everyone's voice is as loud as they are able to make it," explained Anglin. "In the world of the internet, top-down hierarchy can only be based on the value, or perceived value, of someone's ideas. The Alt-Right is an online mob of disenfranchised and mostly anonymous, mostly young White men. ... The mob is the movement."²⁶

And yet, by virtue of its spreading online presence, and the genuinely extremist nature of the ideology it promoted, the Alt Right was much more. It had become a massive mechanism for the online radicalization of mostly young White Americans.

INTERNET RADICALS

In the wake of domestic terrorism attacks in the fall of 2015 in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and San Bernardino, California, committed by non-Whites ostensibly motivated by Muslim extremism, various media pundits, experts on terrorism, and government officials began raising concerns about the role of “online radicalization” in fueling such violence. The massacre of 49 people at an Orlando gay nightclub in June 2016 by a Muslim man who espoused beliefs from radical Islam, seemingly picked up online, only intensified the conversation.

The massive media attention paid to these incidents, however, underscored how acts of terrorist violence related to the influence of White supremacy or other far-right ideologies rarely received

be fueling terrorist acts by Muslim “radicals” was occurring simultaneously in a completely separate dimension of the Internet: among the gathering White male nationalists of the Alt Right.

How does online radicalization happen? A number of different models have been developed for understanding the phenomenon. Most of them, unsurprisingly, have been geared toward examining Islamist radicals, but their findings fit remarkably well in explaining how the same process works with White nationalism.

One of these theories is called “identity demarginalization,” articulated by psychologists Katelyn McKenna and John Bargh in a 1998 study. It attempts to explain why some social groups are more drawn to the Internet than others.

ing that concern about Islamist radicalization had produced such government efforts to combat the problem as the U.K.’s “Prevent” program, examined the course of various Alt Right adherents as they became increasingly vitriolic and even violent in their views. “Reading through the posting history of individual aliases,” she wrote, “it’s possible to chart their progress from vague dissatisfaction, and desire for social status and sexual success, to full-blown adherence to a cohesive ideology of white supremacy and misogyny. Neofascists treat these websites as recruitment grounds. They find angry, frustrated young men and groom them in their own image. Yet there’s no prevent equivalent to try to stamp this out.”³²

Southern Poverty Law Center analyst Keegan Hanks, who devotes much of his time to monitoring the activities and growth of the Alt Right, explained that the very shape of the movement’s discourse plays an important role in its recruitment: People are first exposed to their ideas by going wildly over the top with jokes that celebrate Nazis or other kinds of ugly behavior designed to attract attention by its craziness.

“You know, people will laugh at these things, just because they’re so transgressive. And who is most susceptible to that? Young minds,” continued Hanks. “The idea is to attract young minds, and of course, they are targeting the people who spend the most time in these environments. This movement is very immersive, and people wind up building their whole lives around it.”³³

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Dylann Roof, for example, spent most of his days reading Alt Right websites. It was clear, but little noted, that the same phenomenon believed to be fueling terrorist acts by Muslim “radicals” was occurring simultaneously in a completely separate dimension of the Internet: among the gathering White male nationalists of the Alt Right.

the same treatment.²⁷ When 20-year-old Dylann Roof murdered nine people in a Charleston church in a June 2015, both media accounts and law-enforcement officials were reluctant to identify the act as domestic terrorism, despite the fact that it more than adequately fit the FBI definition of such crimes.²⁸ Similarly, when an anti-abortion extremist shot up a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs in November 2015, killing three people, the crime was again not identified as terrorism.²⁹ And when a (White) militia gang was arrested for plotting to bomb a Kansas Muslim community in October 2016, even though the plotters were ultimately charged with domestic terrorism, there was relatively little media coverage of the case.³⁰

But all of these incidents had one thing in common: their perpetrators were all motivated in large part by Internet communities. Roof, for example, spent most of his days reading Alt Right websites. It was clear, but little noted, that the same phenomenon believed to

People with “concealable and culturally devalued identities” were found to be more likely than people with mainstream identities to participate in and value online communities. McKenna’s and Bargh’s study found that people who posted in online forums dedicated to concealable identities, such as being LG-BTQ or a neonazi, valued the feedback and opinions of other group members much more strongly than people who belonged to forums focusing on easily perceivable marginalized identities, such as obesity and stuttering.³¹

“For the first time,” McKenna and Bargh wrote, an individual exploring his or her marginalized identity in an online environment “can reap the benefits of joining a group of similar others: feeling less isolated and different, disclosing a long secret part of oneself, sharing one’s own experiences and learning from those of others, and gaining emotional and motivational support.”

The process of radicalization occurs in steps. Journalist Abi Wilkinson, not-

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