Radicalization And Recruitment Online: An Analysis of Alt-Right Online Extremist Groups in the United States

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INTRODUCTION

- The introduction of Web 2.0 caused people and platforms to experience unprecedented amounts of connection.
- While originally heralded as a space to cultivate an online utopia, the Internet was exploited for malicious gains (e.g., cybercrime and cyberviolence) by extremist groups who identified the Internet as home base for recruitment, radicalization, and unification.
- Many extremist groups rely on the Internet to normalize extremist behavior, acclimate potential recruits, and dehumanize groups deemed as inferior through extremist education and separation, defamation, and deception from and towards the outgroup.

- RQ1: What indoctrination mechanisms does the alt-right employ in online social forums?
- RQ2: How does perceived oppression contribute to the indoctrination process and subsequent violence?

ABSTRACT

- Existing literature focuses heavily on general models of radicalization based off jihadist groups, with gaps surrounding the US alt-right in the online context.
- This study seeks to contribute to existing literature by synthesizing general radicalization and social network theories to identify indoctrination methods used by the alt-right in online social forums and the role of perceived oppression.
- Data were gathered using digital ethnography, and qualitative content analysis and social network analysis were used to analyze data within thematic categories and participants’ social ties.
- It was found that alt-right online indoctrination generally subscribes to processual, stepwise radicalization theories contingent on the Internet’s fluid infrastructure, thus allowing the alt-right to rely on passive and active indoctrination methods.
- It was also found that feelings of victimization and oppression stemming from aggregated entitlement, anger, and fear catalyze a cycle of victimization, violence, and enlightenment that increases feelings of disconnect, fear, and anger.
- Findings imply the need for collective consciousness raising through counterhegemonic education that critiques systems rather than individuals and the need for early, continued media literacy education.

METHODS

- Digital Ethnography
  - Data collection using digital ethnography over 5 weeks
  - Covert observer on Gab, Reddit, and MeWe
  - Gab was primary arena for data collection
- Data were collected in the form of textposts, reposts, memes, pictures, videos, comments, and hyperlinks
- Content Analysis
  - Primary analytical method
  - Data analyzed using MAXQDA
  - Primary codes: tactics, out-group identity, emotive tone, intended audience, indicators of victimization/oppression/entitlement, and calls to action
  - Longitudinal study was conducted on user @MrStone
  - Secondary codes: online connections (hashtags, hyperlinks, mentions)

Social Network Analysis

- Secondary analytical method
  - Social network data was collected from the Gab group Fighting AntiNazis on Gab
  - Data collected in the form of likes, reposts, comments, and members
  - Social network map was created using Gephi
  - Includes origin and destination users, directed/undirected ties

DISCUSSION

- Dissemination of alt-right propaganda is mostly done through the fluid nature of the Internet (passive dissemination)
- Active dissemination through conspiracy theories and hyperbolic language augments the effects of passive dissemination
- User generated content varies in extremist value by platform
- Online anonymity is used to feign authority and protect offline identities
- Berger’s findings of social media “beaconsheads” is corroborated
- Disillusioned feelings of victimization and oppression underpinned by anger, despair, and/or fear catalyzes individuals’ descent into extremism
- Adoption of alt-right values as a simple explanation for unfavorable circumstances significantly increases individuals’ tendency to adopt an us vs them mindset that dehumanizes and scapegoats racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual minorities
- Corresponding obsession with enlightenment through conspiracy theories convinces adherents that they are intellectually and morally superior
- The Internet’s inevitable passive role in indoctrination highlights the need for early and continued media literacy education to prepare susceptible populations to critically consume potentially harmful media
- Widespread feelings of victimization and oppression within the alt-right highlights the need for collective consciousness-raising that critiques systems rather than individuals

RESULTS

Research Question 1:

- Conspiracy theories
  - Still think this overly contrived “pandemic” isn’t just a global human depopulation by the allies wanting more natural resources for themselves?
- Frequency: 35

- Hyperbolic language
  - Luciferian Government of Canada has launched an all out assault on human decency. It’s difficult to fathom the level of decadence that would necessitate those choosing complicity by allowing the suffering the government has inflicted.
- Frequency: 20

- Humor/memes
  - Women are Incapable of Loving Men.
  - Women Don’t Care About You.
  - These videos have validated conclusions that I have already done years before.
- Frequency: 7

- Online interactions*
  - Normalization of extreme views
    - Most people agree with him (transphobic teacher who was disciplined), so how can they getting away with it?
    - Frequency: 1
  - Repost
    - Mr.Stone reposted
    - Frequency: 250
  - Hyperlink
    - neolamnienet.org
    - Frequency: 82
  - Hashtag
    - GlobalwprocessRustedsand
    - Frequency: 30

Research Question 2:

Vicimization

- Approved entitlement results in feelings of victimization and oppression, leading to rage, despair, and/or fear. Individuals look for easy answers to explain their hardships.
- Confirmation bias results in individuals adhering to a belief in anti-white racism and intentional deprivation by the out-group
- “Answers” prompt an us vs them mindset that defines and dehumanizes the out-group

Violence

- Anger remains and may be augmented. In-group acts as a breeding ground for normalizing extremism through hyperbolic language and conspiracy theories, red-pilling, and grooming
- Steadily acclimation to and justification for anti-Semitism, anti-feminism, racism, etc.
- Extremists are projected out of the group and passive actions against the out-group cement an us vs them mentality

Enlightenment

- A belief in intellectual superiority, adherence to conspiracy theories, and red-pilling
- Causal conditions advance individuals into “enlightenment” the race of anti-whiteness and moral corruption in society is revealed through conspiracy theories
- Constant exposure to rightist memes and conspiracy theories confirm individuals’ belief that enemies are equal to greatness and is being attacked and limited by the out-group

REFERENCES

Broniatowski, D. A., Dus, N., & Nouri, L. (2020). The discourse of the US alt-right online: A case study of the traditionalist work.’ Women are Incapable of Loving Men’. These videos have validated conclusions that I have already done years before.

Figure 1: Social network map of the group Fighting AntiNazis on Gab with data collected from Gab. Group had 85 members at time of analysis with four users (1, 2, 3, and 5) disseminating significantly more information than other users (avg. clustering coefficient: 0.333). Map shows directed edges (likes and reposts) that are designated by undirected edges (comments) that are designated by bilateral arrows (avg. path length: 2.941).