The Influence of Social Media on Insurrectionist Radicalization

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PSYC 997: Independent Study

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July 26, 2021
On 6 January 2021, Americans watched in shock as thousands of people surrounded the U.S. Capitol Building and hundreds forced their way inside for a variety of reasons ranging from conducting violent actions against the political leadership of the United States to simply participating in what they believed was a political action. In the aftermath, five people died, over 140 people were injured, and over 400 participants have been charged with federal crimes (Atlantic Council's DFRLab, 2021; U.S. Department of Justice, 2021a). In the months since, it has become clear that while some were expressly involved because of deeply held racist or violent ideologies, many of the people involved did not actually intend to commit a crime but rather had been radicalized to believe they were doing their patriotic duty. Of this group, there appears to be an overwhelming pattern of self-perceived marginalization and intense involvement in social media (Atlantic Council's DFRLab, 2021; Pape & Chicago Project on Security and Threats, 2021). This social media involvement was centralized around a relatively small number of social media influencers, barrages of posts and high-quality videos fostering conspiracy theories, and distinctive group language that generated a sense of belonging which mirrored the radicalization processes used by the Islamic State during their rise in the 2010s.

While the insurrection was recent, studies regarding the influence of social media on radicalization have been ongoing for years, although the audience for such studies has been primarily focused on international counterterrorism rather than domestic security.

One note before delving too deeply. It is important in evaluating this topic to avoid the trap of politics. Some reviewed studies, such the article “Who Believes in Conspiracy Theories? Network Diversity, Political Discussion, and Conservative Conspiracy Theories on Social Media” by Min (2021), frequently reference the beliefs of Republicans versus Democrats and conservatives versus liberals in a manner implying one is more correct than the other. While
much of the research does show a strong correlation with a specific political leaning, use of this language could lead an otherwise openminded reader to suspect political motivation in the research and possibly lessen the perceived credibility of the overall study. To that end, throughout this review, I will make a concerted effort to remove political implications wherever possible and focus on facts, peer reviewed theories, and evidence-based assertions.

**Terminology**

**Radicalization**

In examining this topic, we first need to set some agreed upon definitions because a contentious topic tends to have a breadth of definitions that meet the needs of various groups. There are few better examples of this than when examining the definition of radicalization. In various scholarly articles, radicalization is defined as “socialization to extremism which manifests itself in terrorism” (Alonso, et al., 2008); “the strategic use of physical force to influence several audiences” (Della Porta & LaFree, 2012); and “what goes on before the bomb goes off” (Neumann, 2008). For the purposes of this review, I will adapt a definition I developed for a previous paper on marginalization of American Muslims in which I combined various definitions to define radicalization as “the process by which an individual is socialized toward extremist ideology resulting in providing material or ideological support to a legally defined terrorist organization” (McNeil, 2020). To use this definition, we then must agree whether the groups in question meet the definition of a legally defined terrorist organization. While American politicians and law enforcement are hesitant to do so, from a strictly legal and academic perspective, this terminology can be applied. According to the United States Legal Code, domestic terrorism is “violent, criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups to further ideological goals stemming from domestic influences, such as those of a political, religious,
social, racial, or environmental nature” (18 USC Ch. 113B: TERRORISM, 1990). As we will see in reviewing this topic, the individuals who participated in the insurrection did in fact commit violent criminal acts (U.S. Department of Justice, 2021a) and, by their own words, those acts were to further ideological goals stemming from political motivations – specifically to influence the results of the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election (National Public Radio, 2021; U.S. Department of Justice, 2021a). The definition also requires the idea that they support an organization and, as will be demonstrated, some of the individuals belonged to formal groups while others subscribed to an organized ideology sustained through specific social media communities. The use of the definition of terrorist is not meant to indicate the individuals who participated were terrorists or that the events of January 6th were acts of terrorism. However, as the definition applies, then so can the definition of radicalization, so long as we can demonstrate that the individuals were “socialized toward extremist ideology” – in this case, specifically through social media. Even beyond that, by understanding that the concept of terrorism can apply to this group, one can more easily understand that the process and psychology of radicalization can also apply.

**Insurrection**

The next essential definition is that of insurrection. Again, it is essential to set politics aside and look at definitions because there are strong political motivations to downplay the events of January 6th to the point that one U.S. Congressman referred to the events of that day as a “normal tourist visit” (Jalonick, 2021). In a time when there are efforts on many parts to subjectify what would normally be objective legal facts, the apolitical way forward is to stick to the legal definitions. To that end, what is insurrection? In the book *A Law Dictionary, Adapted to the Constitution and Laws of the United States*, insurrection is defined as “a rising or rebellion of citizens against their government, usually manifested by acts of violence” (Bouvier, 1848).
Another more specific definition from case law is “a violent uprising by a group or movement acting for the specific purpose of overthrowing the constituted government and seizing its powers. An insurrection occurs where a movement acts to overthrow the constituted government and to take possession of its inherent powers” (Younis Bros. & Co. v. Cigna Worldwide Ins. Co., 899 F. Supp. 1385, 1392-1393, 1995). Were these individuals rising against the government? According to video evidence presented during the 2021 presidential impeachment hearings, individuals participating in the event were recorded inside the U.S. Capitol Building saying “Hang Mike Pence” and “Bring out Pence” and a “makeshift gallows” was constructed by the crowd outside (Associated Press, 2021; Cicilline, 2021). An armed group stating that they intend to execute the Vice President of the United States for the purpose of instating a leader of their choosing could be defined under these legal definitions as insurrectionists.

**Alternative Right**

In discussing groups involved, there is a specific term that is used but not necessarily understood. That term is the “alternative right,” or alt-right, and both the organized groups and the unaffiliated individuals tended to subscribe to this ideology. If you were to ask the average right-leaning individual, they may even self-identify with the term alt-right because the media has skewed and distorted the meaning of the term and they see themselves as someone with strong political opinions that do not necessarily align perfectly with their political party. Others who lean more to the left may use the term for anyone who they strongly disagree with on political or social issues. For the purposes of this paper though, the term alt-right will stay as close as possible to what could be considered the original definition by tying it to the origination of the term. The term first came into use in 2010 when Richard Spencer launched an online blog titled “The Alternative Right” after he was fired from his position as assistant editor at The
American Conservative magazine for expressing viewpoints seen by the magazine as too extreme (Sedgwick & Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 227-228). Spencer went on to form the AltRight Corporation in 2017 (Sedgwick & Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 228) and later that same year led the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia (Doubek, 2017). The definition of the term alt-right is highly tied to the political and social beliefs of Richard Spencer, but it also has strong ties to social media, specifically the 4chan page /pol/ (short for “politically incorrect”) whose members originally shortened Spencer’s “Alternative Right” to the term alt-right (Elley, 2021). What may surprise many though, is this means the term alt-right is not tied to traditional conservatism because Spencer believes conservatives “can’t or won’t represent explicitly white interests” (Anti-Defamation League, 2013) and described his alt-right as “identity politics for white Americans and for Europeans around the world” (Oppenheim, 2017). Based on the original expressed beliefs of those coining the term, the alt-right believes in white nationalism and white supremacy as well as opposition to what they term “neoconservatism” and political correctness (Dobratz et al., 2019; Forscher & Kteily, 2019). While many may see themselves these days as “not politically correct” this does not mean they are alt-right because the level of extremism inherent in alt-right ideology is fundamental to identifying a true alt-right believer. Instead, this primarily social-media based group of individuals believe that “that ‘white identity’ is under attack from pro-multicultural and liberal elites and so called 'social justice warriors' (SJWs) who allegedly use 'political correctness' to undermine Western civilisation and the rights of white males” (Hermansson et al., 2020, pp. 1). While there are numerous definitions of alt-right, they all center around the concept of “white identity” and white supremacy – a concept that will be important in examining the later ideologies leading to participation in the
attack on the Capitol. Note: See Figure 1 for the logo of the /pol/ message board and its ties to white supremacy.

Figure 1

*Logo of the /POL/ Message Board on 4Chan*

*Note: Sourced from the article A Normie’s Guide to the Alt-Right in which the author, a former follower of Alt-Right ideology, explains the complexities of the online world that the Alt-Right inhabits (Anglin, 2016)*

Within the broader Alt-Right community, there are more formally organized groups who subscribe to aspects of the overall Alt-Right ideology while additionally adding in their own beliefs to fit their specific agenda. The most closely aligned to the Alt-Right ideology whose members were among the more violent participants in the insurrection were the Proud Boys. Additionally, the 3 Percenters and the Oath Keepers claim not to hold the white supremacist ideology, but many members have participated in many of the same events as the Alt-Right, and
specifically the Proud Boys, and they all subscribe to the set of conspiracy beliefs that led to participation in the attack on the U.S. Capitol.

**Proud Boys**

According to “Proud Boys, Nationalism, and Religion” the Proud Boy are “an opportunistic hate group whose message of white male chauvinism is infused with religious and nationalist symbols” (Kitts, 2020, p. 1). Of all the domestic extremism groups in the United States, this is one of the most well-known and may have the distinction of being the only extremist group whose members were directly addressed by a sitting U.S. President – in September 2020, during a Presidential Debate, the President told the members of the Proud Boys to “‘stand back and stand by’” (Kitts, 2020, p. 2). This was an especially significant moment for the organization which was founded on election night in 2016 when the President, who would later address them, was first elected (Kitts, 2020).

Apart from the commonality that the Proud Boys are nearly all male (there are a few exceptions), there is little that specifically unites them ideologically. Rather, they are primarily united by their broadly defined oppositions to various groups and ideas. While some claim the Proud Boys adherence to Christianity, this is by no means a requirement or even a common belief as others claim to follow Norse or Pagan religions or even agnostic or atheist beliefs. Instead, they find religious unity through a common hatred of Jewish and Muslim religions. For other members, the common bond is in their hatred of women. These members find each other on social media communities for “Incels,” or involuntary celibates – individuals who believe they are ignored and mistreated by women and believe they are unable to find women who will engage in sexual intercourse with them because women are in some way conspiring against them. While this may seem minor or even humorous to many, these Incels can take their hatred
of women to extreme lengths such as the 2014 and 2018 attacks by self-described Incels which together killed 16 people and injured 30 more (Kitts, 2020). Finally, and where they incorporate their membership in the broader Alt-Right, is their belief in white supremacy. One key motto of the organization is “White men are not the problem” (Kitts, 2020, p. 3) and centers the organization around the commonality of being both white and male.

**Three Percenters and Oath Keepers**

The Three Percenters and the Oath Keepers are separate organizations, but their ideologies are similar and members may participate in both organizations. Three Percenters believe that the U.S. and Canadian governments have overstepped their authority and that they exist to "push back against tyranny" and support local county sheriffs rather than the federal government as the “supreme law of the land” (Mockaitis, 2019, pp. 80-81). The group’s name is based on the discredited belief that only 3% of American colonists fought the British during the American Revolution (Crothers, 2019, pp. 136–137). The formal Three Percenters organization was dissolved on 21 February 2021 after the backlash from the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol (Three Percenters Organization, 2021) but local chapters of the organization are still active. In June 2021, the Canadian government formally labelled the remaining Three Percenters, as well as the Proud Boys, as a terrorist entity (Tunney, 2021).

The Oath Keepers is a group composed primarily of current and former members of the U.S. military and law enforcement which “aims to protect Americans from what it perceives as violations of citizens’ natural rights by the federal government and is known for participating in armed standoffs with federal agents in the western United States” (Lokay et al., 2021, p. 160). The Oath Keepers are a highly regulated organization with strong top-down leadership. Members of the Oath Keepers were some of the most visible during the Insurrection for their wearing of
tactical gear and have also been observed wearing military-style equipment and carrying assault weapons during other engagements in which they opposed federal and state government policies. The organization is one of the few groups that formally organized their participation in the insurrection, including setting up a fitness training camp for members, arranging bus travel, and conducting logistics preparations of firearms, mace, gas masks, and other tactical gear in Washington, DC during the first week of January 2021 (Lokay et al., 2021).

Officially neither of these organization subscribes to the Alt-Right ideology of white supremacy and condemns such beliefs; however, several members of the organizations have displayed racist ideologies on the groups’ official social media pages (Mockaitis, 2019) and participated in Alt-Right events such as the “Unite the Right” rally (PBS Newshour, 2017). Their belief in racist ideology, however, is secondary to the radicalization of their members and willingness to conduct violence in the pursuit of their goals. These groups also follow the radicalization process outlined below, as can be seen through the radicalization of one of the arrested members of the Oath Keepers on the Parler social media app from a successful business owner to an extremist who was willing to “fight, kill and die for our rights” (Caniglia, 2021).

**Conspiracy Theory**

Finally, and much less contentiously, we must define the term “Conspiracy Theory.” One of the key elements driving individuals to move from simply patriotic Americans whose party was voted out of office to violent extremists was the introduction of a set of conspiracy theories crafted in such a way as to radicalize those who believe fully in them. So, what is a conspiracy theory? Conspiracy theories are “attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors” (Douglas et al., 2019). In this case, the two primary conspiracy theories identified below
culminated in a single belief that the separate groups of individuals identified in the theory conspired in a secret plot to alter the results of the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

**The Conspiracy Theories**

There were two primary conspiracy theories followed by the individuals arrested following the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol in January (Pape & Chicago Project on Security and Threats, 2021). The first, and more widely held theory was the belief in Qanon. The second and seemingly lesser-known theory is referred to as the “Great Replacement.” Each of these theories has differing sets of beliefs; however, they are similar in that they both center around the idea that there is a powerful group in the United States holding influence over politics and society. It is also important to note that the two groups are not necessarily independent of each other in reference to their followers, as the followers of the different conspiracy theories tend to overlap (Anglin, 2016).

**What Is Qanon?**

To simplify the complex and confusing set of beliefs that make up this ideology, Qanon followers believe that a cabal of Satanic, cannibalistic pedophiles run a global child sex trafficking ring. Their beliefs are broad in scope; however, one key element is a belief that the cabal conspired against former President Donald Trump during his term in office (Ellis & Heilweil, 2018; Neiwert, 2018; Zuckerman, 2019). Qanon first emerged on 28 October 2017 with a post on the social blogging site 4Chan by an individual using the screen name "Q Clearance Patriot” (Zuckerman, 2019) – later referred to simply as “Q.” Q claimed to be a high-level government informant, theoretically with the Department of Energy based on the assumed name, and wrote a cryptic post titled "Calm Before the Storm" which included far-right
conspiracies about Hillary Clinton, Huma Abedin (Hillary Clinton’s former Deputy Chief of Staff), and George Soros. The title of the post was a reference to a 5 October 2017 comment by then President Donald Trump in which he referred to a dinner with military officers as “the calm before the storm” (Ellis & Heilweil, 2018).

By 19 December 2017, only 52 days after the first post, the hashtag associated with Qanon had been used so many times that when New York Magazine posted the first article on the conspiracy theory, they referred to the hashtag as “untrackable” (Ellis & Heilweil, 2018). By March 2018, Qanon had their first official celebrity member, Rosanne Barr, and by June 2018, the online group had billboards in Georgia and Oklahoma. By August 2018, the conspiracy group reached a pinnacle when a key member took a photo with Donald Trump in the Oval Office. In September 2018, Reddit banned the main Qanon subreddit for “inciting violence, harassment, and the dissemination of personal information” (Ellis & Heilweil, 2018). In the years since the initial post, Q has posted “Q Drops” alleging a variety of increasingly conspiratorial predictions – none of which have come true (Reed, 2018) leading Q to claim that the false posts are purposeful because “disinformation is necessary to wrong foot the deep state” (BBC News, 2021).

Qanon is the quintessential social media conspiracy. While in previous decades, similar discredited ideologies have flourished without social media, such as the 1980s belief that satanic cults were running the nations childcare centers which was spread by popular television news shows (Bromley, 2019), the Qanon conspiracy has received comparatively little national news coverage and has spread almost entirely on social media sites ranging from popular ones such as Facebook and Twitter to more niche sites such as 4Chan, particularly on the /pol/ message board (Munn, 2019; Neiwert, 2018). In much the same way that terrorist ideology from the Islamic
State sprouted and thrived in the fertile grounds of social media to take over nations in the middle east, Qanon has grown rapidly from tweeted memes and 4chan rants to becoming a part of the national conversation and incited insurrection in the United States.

What Is The “Great Replacement?”

The “Great Replacement,” or the “Grand Replacement” as it is known in France where it originated in 2010, is a conspiracy theory that complicit and/or cooperative “replacer elites” are assisting in the demographic and cultural replacement of white populations through mass migration, demographic growth, and low birth rates (Bracke & Hernández Aguilar, 2020; Feola, 2020). The first indications of this theory in the United States showed at the “Unite The Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia where protesters used slogans such as "You will not replace us" and "Jews will not replace us" (Bromley, 2018; Weitzmann, 2020). In the years that followed, this theory began showing up in speeches from far-right leaning American politicians such as U.S. Congressman Steve King from Iowa (Croucher, 2019; Reints, 2019), Florida State Senator Dennis Baxley (Paton, 2019), and U.S. Congressman Scott Perry from Pennsylvania (Hullinger, 2021). In 2019, a believer in this theory killed 23 Hispanic people at a Wal-Mart in El Paso, Texas, leaving behind a 2,300-word manifesto promoting the Great Replacement theory (Arango et al., 2019). In examining the Great Replacement theory in relation to this topic, there are two key aspects to keep in mind: (1) this theory is couched in fear – specifically fear that the world is changing in a way the believer does not understand and fear that they are being marginalized; and (2) the speed with which this theory moved from a single individual in France to the mouths of United States Congressmen would not have been possible before the advent of social media.

Who Were The Insurrectionists?
Now that we understand the essential elements of the groups and conspiracy theories involved, to begin looking at what could cause people to participate in this event, we need to start by looking at who they are. One study by the Chicago Project on Security and Threats at the University of Chicago sought to understand this topic by examining the demographics of this group. In developing their study, they identified that 29% of the U.S. population claims to believe the conspiracy theory that the U.S. election was “stolen;” however, the overwhelming majority of that 29% did not take violent action in response to this belief. Only approximately 4% of those individuals were willing to join in potentially violent activities to support that belief (Pape & Chicago Project on Security and Threats, 2021) so what leads someone to be in that 4%?

According to the Pape & Chicago Project on Security and Threats (2021) study the key demographics of the participants are:

- Primarily white males, although there were numerous exceptions.
- Older than those arrested for similar crimes in previous years (67% were >34).
- 85% were employed.
- 30% were white collar workers and 14% owned their own business.
- Most only had high school education.
- 12% openly admitted to membership in an extremist group – specifically the Proud Boys, Three Percenters, or Oath Keepers.
- 52% came from areas where Biden won the election, with most of those in areas where Biden won by 40% or more.
- Most spent more than 7 hours per day on social media.
- Most followed QAnon Conspiracies and the “Great Replacement” theory.
Not everyone who was present on January 6\textsuperscript{th} was there for insurrectionist purposes. A few seemed to be there because it got them some type of attention. One example of this is Antionne DeShaun Brodnax, also known by his rap name "Bugzie the Don," who appears to have been present to film a rap video sitting on a U.S. Capitol Police SWAT truck during the riot (U.S. Department of Justice, 2021). However, this review as well as the Pape & Chicago Project on Security and Threats (2021) study are focused on the individuals who were arrested and charged with crimes for their participation. Of those individuals, many appeared intent on violence and political upheaval – in line with the definition of insurrection. According to the indictments by the U.S. Department of Justice, 183 individuals were charged with Violent Entry and Disorderly Conduct in a Capitol Building, 74 were charged with Assaulting, Resisting, or Impeding Certain Officers or Forcibly Assaulting, Resisting, Opposing, Impeding Federal Officers, and 116 of the charges included the use of a weapon (U.S. Department of Justice, 2021a). One indictment against Gina Michelle Bisignano, who was prominently participating outside the Capitol inciting others through a megaphone quoted her as saying "Everybody, we need gas masks…we need weapons...we need strong, angry patriots to help our boys" and “We the people are not going to take it any more... You are not going to take away our votes. And our freedom, and I thank God for it. This is 1776, and we the people will never give up. We will never let our country go to the globalists. George Soros, you can go to hell” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2021a).

These individuals were clearly angry and had been incited towards violence – a process that does not happen overnight and does not occur without some instigating factors. In examining the demographic factors, the last three especially stand out in looking at potential radicalizing factors. Of all the people arrested, 52\% came from areas where Biden won the
election, with most of those in areas where Biden won by 40% or more (Pape & Chicago Project on Security and Threats, 2021). Did they feel like their voices were not heard in areas where the population overwhelmingly disagrees with them? If so, there is evidence for the argument that there is a strong correlation between marginalization and radicalization (McNeil, 2020). Could the other factors of heavy social media involvement and belief in Qanon and the “great replacement” conspiracy be radicalizing factors in line with this marginalization?

**Marginalization of the Right**

What make an individual feel marginalized? According to the Oxford Dictionary, to marginalize someone is “to make somebody feel as if they are not important and cannot influence decisions or events; to put somebody in a position in which they have no power” (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, 2021). As identified in the Pape & Chicago Project on Security and Threats (2021) study, most of these individuals came from areas where Biden won the election, with most of those in areas where Biden won by 40% or more. These were people who have strong political beliefs, but they saw the people around them have more influence on the results of the U.S. election than they did.

There are those who say that conservatives cannot be marginalized because they have a voice in politics and the media (Hinke, 2019). For the purposes of this topic though, it does not matter whether the individuals in question can prove that they are marginalized or whether an objective third party would agree that they are marginalized. For the purposes of the impact on radicalization, it simply matters whether they feel marginalized. The key premise behind Qanon and the Great Replacement is that they believe powers beyond their control are working to limit their influence over decisions or events in the United States. Interestingly though, these individuals are also led through interactions on social media to believe they are part of a majority
within the United States. This is not a new concept for conservatives, as U.S. politicians have been using the concept of the conservative “moral majority” as far back as Ronald Regan (Mcgirr, 2015, p. 214) although in the age of social media the term has shifted to “silent majority” as social media’s stove piped design led the followers to believe there were more of them than their numbers showed due to “media bubbles and echo chambers” (Knoblock, 2020). This concept of believing one is both marginalized and in the majority is akin to cognitive dissonance.

While events like the attack on the Capitol appeared to show the power of a group like the alt-right and followers of Qanon because videos showed a massive crowd outside, it is essential to put this into the context of the actual population of the United States to see whether this group is a “silent majority” or an actual marginalized group who makes up a small percentage of Americans without the ability to influence decisions or events. In 2020, the republican candidate won 46.9% of the popular vote (Federal Election Commission, 2020) and approximately 66.2% of eligible Americans voted in this election (McDonald & University of Florida U.S. Elections Project, 2020). This means 22.39% of the entire population of the United States (331,449,281 people as of April 2020) voted for the Republican candidate in 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The individuals who attacked the U.S. Capitol in January 2021 claimed they represented these voters but the article “A Psychological Profile of the Alt-Right” shows that only 6% of the U.S. population and 10% of Republican voters identify as alt-right (Forscher & Kteily, 2019). Assuming the larger number of 10%, this would be 7,421,149 people, or 2.239% of the U.S. population align as Alt-Right followers supporting the Republican party. Compare this to the Pape & Chicago Project on Security and Threats (2021) study that showed 4% of individuals who believe in the stolen-election theory participated in the insurrection and it
becomes clear that while the alt-right and qanon followers are not a negligible subset of society, they are a relatively small group of people who do exist on the margins of American society.

**“Taking the Red Pill”**

Within the social media communities occupied by the insurrectionists, the term “taking the red pill” is essentially synonymous with beginning the process of radicalization. This term, taken from the 1999 film The Matrix, is meant to imply that the individual in question has chosen to accept the reality these groups espouse and begins to move down the path to radicalization (Munn, 2019). While the terminology may be somewhat unique to Alt-Right radicalizers (excluding the fact that this phrase has inundated social media for decades due to the popularity of the movie franchise), the concept of taking the first step down the path to radicalization is not unique to this group. In fact, examining the radicalization path of Islamic extremists would find a nearly identical process, although U.S. law enforcement refers to the “red pill” moment for Islamic extremists as “self-identification” (Koehler, 2014; New York Police Department, 2007; Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 2012).

Comparing the radicalization process of members of the insurrectionists to the NYPD’s radicalization process as shown in Figure 1 (Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 2012, p. 12), the two are nearly identical. While the NYPD identifies four phases, the “pre-radicalization” phase is simply the time before the process begins in which the individual possesses a vulnerability to radicalization and is not necessarily part of the process. In the article “Alt-Right Pipeline: Individual Journeys to Extremism Online”, the alt-right radicalization process is broken down into similar phases as “normalization, acclimation, and dehumanization” (Munn, 2019). In comparison of the two processes, normalization aligns to self-identification, acclimation to indoctrination, and dehumanization to jihadization.
Normalization OR Self-Identification

The first stage beyond the point of basic vulnerability is normalization. At this point, the individual begins moving away from their previous identity, begins associating with like-minded individuals, and adopts the beliefs of the new group as their own. This “red pill” moment, regardless of applicable group, generally begins following one of four triggers: economic triggers (losing a job, blocked professional mobility), social triggers (alienation, discrimination, racism – real or perceived), political triggers (international or domestic conflicts involving their beliefs) and personal triggers such as a death in the close family (Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 2012). Within the alt-right, this process begins in a way that appears innocent to the unaware – simply the sharing of “animated GIFs, dumb memes, and clever references” (Munn, 2019) that lay the groundwork for shifting the initiate into an ideological
belief system they may have previously found overtly racist, if not repulsive. The individual is slowly desensitized through “edgy humor” that is so over the top and ridiculous that it does not appear to be serious at first. The joking methodology also provides the group with deniability if they are called out on overt racism and/or misogyny by allowing the members to claim that the whole thing was a joke and the individual who made the claim is simply being sensitive or politically correct. In doing so, these groups seem to depend on concepts such as Godwin’s Law, an internet theory which states that “as an online debate increases in length, it becomes inevitable that someone will eventually compare someone or something to Adolf Hitler or the Nazis” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2021), to hide the reality of their existence. It is common for arguments online to devolve into name-calling resulting in one individual referring to another as a Nazi, and over the years most people have learned to ignore this. This allows members of alt-right groups, some of whom are actual members of legitimate neo-Nazi organizations or espouse the beliefs of Nazi groups (Constantino, 2018; New York Times Educational Publishing, 2019, pp. 179–180), to blame the accuser of inflammatory or exaggerated language without having to acknowledge the validity of the accusation and provides the individual being radicalized, who may come across such accusations, the opportunity to maintain a cognitive bias towards the reality of their new group of peers.

**Acclimation OR Indoctrination**

There is no hard line between normalization and acclimation. Instead, the process is gradual with a shifting from being introduced to the concepts of the alt-right to being comfortable with the concepts as the individual is brought deeper and deeper into the belief systems and conspiracy theories. As Munn (2019) explains it, an individual may have been normalized into the group with links to social media sites such as popular YouTube star
PewDiePie’s channel which includes videos such as a man carrying a “death to all Jews” sign, use of the “n-word” in one stream, and references to a female streamer who called for equal pay for women as a “crybaby and an idiot.” Then, as they become more desensitized to this type of speech and behavior, they are introduced to more extreme viewpoints such as anti-feminism as they are shifted to new websites and video channels but not taken all the way to the point of introduction to white supremacy or violence (Munn, 2019). In this process of habituation, the indoctrinate views a near constant stream of offensive content, in both audio/video as well as written forms, which desensitizes the mind (Anglin, 2016; Bobin, 2020). This level of habituation can be seen in the radicalized participants of the insurrection through their excessive (more than 7 hours per day) use of social media sites.

The indoctrination phase of terrorist radicalization follows much the same path as acclimation, whether the individual is being radicalized in person in a madrassa or through social media, as is so common in the Islamic State. The individual is introduced to a group of like-minded followers who work to deepen the ideology within the individual through encouragement and reinforcement of the views. In terrorist indoctrination, the members of the group “share memes and inside jokes, terms, and phrases you’d only know if you were a follower” (Singer & Brooking, LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media, 2019, p. 170). This common language does more than just aid in radicalization though. It creates a sense of belonging and community among the followers. This sense of community is a key component of radicalization, regardless of the end goal of the radicalizer, because of the commonality of feelings of marginalization amongst the radicalized. In fact, the idea of belonging and community appears to matter so much to the Alt-Right community that when certain inside jokes and memes become known to the
broader online world, they are quickly changed or altered to keep the meaning of their terms inside their closed group of followers (Anonymous, 2019).

**Dehumanization to Jihadization**

We have all seen on the news, and sadly some of us firsthand, what happens at the end of the terrorist radicalization cycle. To many times over the last few decades, terrorist attacks have claimed the lives of innocent people simply going about their lives. In the jihadization phase of terrorist radicalization, the individual has completed their radicalization process, fully accepted the ideology of the terrorist organization, and has made the choice to participate in their interpretation of jihad, as a “holy warrior” or mujahidin (Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 2012). It is less clear though what happens at the end of the Alt-Right radicalization process. The term used is dehumanization and it essentially means that at this point in the cycle, the indoctrinate sees those outside of his group as less than human, thereby allowing for violence against those outsiders but also for the removal of their basic human rights. In the past, this dehumanization concept was used primarily for other racial groups, such as the idea that Africans were less human than Caucasians and therefore enslavement of them was justified. This concept has evolved though and in its new context, Munn (2019) explains that to the Alt-Right, dehumanization means that anyone outside of their group who has been dehumanized can no longer be seen as a peer with a name, a claim, and a story. While the white supremacy components of the Alt-Right do include the dehumanization of other races, it also includes any group of people that they disagree with such as “social justice warriors” – a term used for people fighting for equal rights for women, LGBTQ persons, immigrants, and any other marginalized group.
How To Move Forward

If we can look to decades of counterterrorism experience to understand the radicalization process and impacts of marginalization, perhaps it is best to also look to this same field for the way forward in deradicalization and preventing future events such as the insurrection. In counterterrorism, as with the Alt-Right, we start by countering the narrative. This process involves strategic messaging across the spectrum of radicalization from those still entering the normalization phase all the way to individuals who have already reached the point of dehumanization (Briggs & Feve, 2013; Silverman et al., 2016). According to the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, the strategic messaging plan should include the following three-pronged approach:

(1) Counter-Narrative Messaging: activities that directly or indirectly challenge extremist narratives;

(2) Alternative Narrative Messaging: activities that aim to provide a positive alternative to extremist narratives; and

(3) Strategic Communication by the Government: activities that provide insight in what the government is doing (van Eerten et al., 2017, p. 27).

Platforms for these messages can include direct approaches, social media campaigns, or public advertisements (print, televised, or radio) informing about radicalization and conspiracy messaging. Additionally, groups and organizations can be financed to target specific audiences most at risk for radicalization (van Eerten et al., 2017).

Beyond strategic messaging to counter the radicalizing message, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has identified steps including collaborating with domestic and
international partners and emphasizing locally based solutions which can enable information sharing and identify opportunities for preventing or de-escalating radicalization (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2019). Again, this strategy has been developed to counter international and domestic violent terrorism but still applies to countering the affects of this form of radicalization – to include collaboration with international partners. While it may seem unusual to seek out international partners for domestic issues, the nature of social media and some of these organizations such as the Three Percenters provide evidence that these issues do not necessarily stay within U.S. borders. Considering Canada has identified the Three Percenters as a terrorist organization, they will almost certainly be willing to collaborate to counter the organization in the interest of their own national security. Finally, DHS encourages engagement with local organizations provides opportunities to identify signs of radicalization and de-escalate individuals as the move along the radicalization pathway. In the context of Alt-Right radicalization though, local organizations should also include online social media corporations who can use their understanding of data aggregation algorithms to help identify radicalizing trends early in the process before they have time to take hold.

**Future Research**

Apart from a few studies like the Pape & Chicago Project on Security and Threats (2021), much of the research that has been done on this topic is focused on violent extremism and international terrorism related to religious beliefs. While the concepts of the radicalization process, the impact of marginalization, and the theories related to de-radicalization appear to apply due to alignments in the processes and psychological vulnerabilities, more research is essential to verify the commonalities and validate that counterterrorism methodology will also work to counter the type of radicalization that led to the insurrection. Research on the topic
should start by interviewing the individuals who have been arrested for their participation in the insurrection, specifically the ones who have expressed regret and a regression in beliefs following their arrests. Studies can identify (1) the beliefs held before radicalization began and vulnerability factors that made the individuals susceptible, (2) specific means of approach or factors which initially attracted the individual to the conspiracy theory or alt-right organization, (3) elements that made the ideology take hold, and (4) the specific point that led them to realize they had been mistaken. While some of the individuals who are expressing remorse are almost certainly attempting to minimize sentencing, interviews with some of the individuals appear to indicate a realization that they became wrapped up in a belief system that they did not fully understand or appreciate (Weiner & Hsu, 2021). Perhaps if they really have changed their views, participating in studies to prevent such actions in the future can serve as an act of contrition and help them understand the aspects within themselves that led them to rise against the nation to which they claim undying allegiance.
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