



The Third Generation of Online Radicalization

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The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and nonviolent extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study. The Program aims to develop pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of The George Washington University.

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Introduction

“From where did you receive/research/develop your beliefs?
The internet, of course. You will not find the truth anywhere else.”
— Brenton Tarrant, 2019

When a 13-year-old boy was caught by Estonian police in early 2020 for leading an international terrorist organization, shockwaves rippled through the Western counterterrorism community. But, it was merely the latest uncomfortable milestone in a long-term trend of extremist material growing increasingly accessible online. “Accessing a world of hate online today is as easy as it was tuning into Saturday morning cartoons on television,” Oren Segal of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) opined, offering a painful comparison illustrating how modern extremism has replaced more benign pastimes.¹ The capture of Feuerkrieg Division’s leader provided perhaps the most shocking—if not outright damning—evidence yet of the ever-increasing impact of social media on the extremism and terrorism stage: individuals in their early teens were not just being recruited by neo-Nazis but were actively recruiting and leading their peers.

In *The Diffusion of Military Power*, the University of Pennsylvania’s Michael C. Horowitz describes major military innovations (MMIs), defining them as “the introduction and spread of new means of generating military power.”² Social media is an MMI for extremists and terrorists, allowing them to reach new constituents and inspire violence oceans away. But this development has not been uniform, nor has it been sudden. Terrorist and extremist use of social media has progressed, and continues to progress, in successive generations, which—like variants of the coronavirus—seem to overtake and eventually dominate the previous strain. They do not start anew; instead, they build upon one another to create a more multifaceted and variegated threat. Understanding these generations and the transitions between them carries important counterterrorism implications by highlighting the critical need to project the next generation and its tools, and work to interdict it before it again inspires new violence.

Although many scholars have tackled the question of online radicalization, far fewer have connected the nuances of the online world to their offline impacts beyond the simple question of whether terrorists inspired online commit violence offline.³ This article aims to assess how online extremism changes over

¹ Kunzelman, Michael and Jari Tanner. “He led a neo-Nazi group linked to bomb plots. He was 13.” *ABC News*, April 11, 2020. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/led-neo-nazi-group-linked-bomb-plots-13-70099974>.

² Horowitz, Michael C. *The Diffusion of Military Power: Causes and Consequences for International Relations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010: 2.

³ For other general overviews of social media and its impact on extremism and terrorism, see: Winter, Charlie, Peter Neumann, Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Magnus Ranstorp, Lorenzo Vidino, and Johanna Fürst. “Online Extremism: Research Trends in Internet Activism, Radicalization, and Counter-Strategies.” *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 14, no. 2 (2020). <https://www.ijcv.org/index.php/ijcv/article/view/3809/3868>; Conway, Maura, Ryan Scrivens, and Logan Macnair. “Right-Wing Extremists’ Persistent Online Presence: History and Contemporary Trends.” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague*, October 2019. <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2019/11/Right-Wing-Extremists-Persistent-Online-Presence.pdf>; Conway, Maura. “Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Six Suggestions for Progressing Research.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, (2017). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1157408>; Baele, Stephane J., Lewys Brace, and Travis G. Coan. “Uncovering the Far-Right Online Ecosystem: An Analytical Framework and Research Agenda.” *Studies in Conflict*

time, and therefore, how it impacts terrorism and counterterrorism on the ground level. This longer-term and more strategic look at the history of online radicalization is worthwhile in part because it captures the array of research performed over several decades and sorts it into three overarching, chronological categories. Research conducted into key sub-elements such as platforms, groups, networks, moderation evasion, and radicalization patterns informs the framework and helps reveal the characteristics of each generation. The following paper should therefore be understood, in part, as a literature review highlighting important work on key factors in online radicalization. It also reflects the need to constantly reassess our understanding of the latest trends in extremism on the internet. As Meili Criezis writes, “Online environments can be fast-paced; with dynamics constantly shifting and evolving, researchers are required to frequently revisit and reassess these spaces.”⁴

The Estonian teen was young, radicalized on encrypted chatrooms, communicated with like-minded peers oceans away, radicalized others, and was inspired by an esoteric mix of extremist traditions. As we will see, he was firmly a product of the third generation of social media radicalization. But how does his radicalization story differ from his predecessors in the previous two generations? What are the characteristics of each wave, and how do they manifest in real-world violence? How can we prepare for the next developments in online extremism that might signal the arrival of another generational wave? And how can we use those characteristics to stop the next terrorist attack?

& *Terrorism*, (2020). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1862895>; Gill, Paul, Emily Corner, Maura Conway, Amy Thornton, Mia Bloom, and John Horgan. “Terrorist Use of the Internet by the Numbers: Quantifying Behaviors, Patterns, and Processes.” *Criminology & Public Policy* 16, no. 1 (2017).

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/1745-9133.12249>; Aly, Anne, Stuart Macdonald, Lee Jarvis, and Thomas Chen. *Violent Extremism Online: New Perspectives on Terrorism and the Internet*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.

⁴ Criezis, Meili. “Wilayat Facebook and Instagram: An Exploration of Pro-IS Activities on Mainstream Platforms.” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, April 21, 2023. <https://gnet-research.org/2023/04/21/wilayat-facebook-and-instagram-an-exploration-of-pro-is-activities-on-mainstream-platforms/>.

First Generation (1984 to Mid-2000s)

In the words of Chip Berlet, “hate went online” in 1984, through multiple bulletin board systems created by pioneers of modern far-right extremism such as Louis Beam and Tom Metzger.⁵ Beam’s Aryan Liberty Net spread particularly quickly, connecting eager activists across the U.S. and Canada. Beam viewed the new technologies as a true game-changer. “It may very well be that American know-how has provided the technology which will allow those who love this country to save it from an ill-deserved fate,” Beam wrote in 1984. “Imagine, if you can, a single computer to which all leaders and strategists of the patriotic movement are connected. Imagine further that any patriot in the country is able to tap into this computer at will. [...] Such a computer is already in existence and operational. We hereby announce the Aryan Liberty Net.”⁶ The online format allowed Beam to circumvent many of the legal and cultural barriers that had been erected to limit his propaganda’s reach, such as laws prohibiting the sending of hate mail. In perhaps the first warning about far-right exploitation of new online technologies, the ADL in 1985 presciently cautioned that the networks, including Beam’s Aryan Liberty Net, might contribute to violence. “More troubling,” the ADL report noted, “the use of new technology to link together hate group activists coincides with an escalation of serious talk among some of them about the necessity of committing acts of terror.”⁷ The report also noted that the forums were bringing the extremists closer to a new clientele, “[spreading] their hate propaganda among young people, surely the most vulnerable to its influence.”

It is unclear whether these primitive networks ever directly inspired acts of far-right violence. Some speculate that Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh may have accessed them before his 1995 attack (at the very least, McVeigh was a talented computer user, having allegedly hacked into a Department of Defense computer in the 1980s).⁸ However, these early online extremist networks certainly laid the groundwork for future radicalization pathways. Extremists were learning that the internet provided an ideal venue for propagandizing, allowing hate networks to reach and attract new recruits. By 1995, the bulletin boards had given way to more permanent World Wide Web sites such as Stormfront, which still exists today.⁹

Although the American far-right pioneered early online radicalization, radical movements elsewhere similarly spotted the potential of the Internet. In 1994, a leftist organization calling itself the Zapatista

⁵ Berlet, Chip. “When Hate went Online.” Presentation at the Northeast Sociological Association Spring Conference Fairfield, CT, April 28, 2001.

⁶ “Louis Beam: In His Own Words.” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, Accessed October 24, 2022. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2015/louis-beam-his-own-words>.

⁷ Lowe, David. “Computerized Networks of Hate.” *Anti-Defamation League*, January 1985. <https://archive.org/details/ComputerizedNetworksOfHate/page/n11/mode/2up>.

⁸ “Terror on Trial: Who was Timothy McVeigh?” *CNN*.

<https://www.cnn.com/2007/US/law/12/17/court.archive.mcveigh2/index.html>; Michel, Lou and Dan Herbeck. *American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh & The Oklahoma City Bombing*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001: 32; Smith, Laura. “Lone Wolves Connected Online: A History of Modern White Supremacy.” *The New York Times*, January 26, 2021.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/26/us/louis-beam-white-supremacy-internet.html>.

⁹ Berlet, “When Hate went Online.”; Burris, Val, Emery Smith, and Ann Strahm. “White supremacist networks on the Internet.” *Sociological Focus* 33, no. 2 (2000): 232.

National Liberation Army revolted against the Mexican government. Prepared to respond to the budding insurgency with overwhelming force, the government soon found that the movement had broadcast its cause online, sharing updates and ideology with likeminded followers (and journalists) around the world, largely through a mailing “list” that regularly updated followers with non-official storylines. “The fact that this type of news has sneaked out through a channel that is uncontrollable, efficient and fast is a very tough blow [to the state],” the group’s spokesman, Subcomandante Marcos, would reflect.¹⁰ The government was forced to relent in the face of global pressure.¹¹ Turn-of-the-century jihadists also eagerly embraced the new technology. As Gabriel Weimann noted in an early report on terrorist exploitation of the Internet, “Al Qaeda operatives relied heavily on the Internet in planning and coordinating the September 11 attacks.”¹² The internet played a role not just in radicalization or coordination, but also in propaganda. Bruce Hoffman argued that by the early 2000s, the “implications of this development [were] enormous: challenging the monopoly over mass communication of the terrorist message long exercised by commercial and state-owned broadcasting outlets.” Al-Qaeda had just one website before 9/11; by 2006, the group had over fifty sites.¹³

Early sites, which usually involved a one-way conversation, were defined by their educational and propaganda value, and not by the “social” aspects that would define future generations. These sites allowed individuals and groups to store and share digital material for the first time, while also allowing them a more accessible marketplace to sell extremist wares.¹⁴ In addition to propaganda and recruitment advances, the sites also offered groups an avenue to conduct remote training and virtual command-and-control.¹⁵ Accordingly, concerns first abounded during the first generation that the internet would facilitate tactical advancements like CBRN or cyber terrorism, although these did not come to fruition.¹⁶

The first generation of online radicalization was characterized by ambition and fits-and-starts on primitive social media and simple websites. Regardless, it laid the foundations for extremists to come—

¹⁰ Russell, Adrienne. “The Zapatistas Online: Shifting the Discourse of Globalization.” *Gazette* 63, no. 5 (October 2001): 401.

¹¹ Singer, P.W. and Emerson T. Brooking. *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*. New York: Mariner Books, 2019: 40-41; “IntelBrief: The Evolution of the Online Violent Extremist Landscape.” *Soufan Center*, October 20, 2022. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2022-october-20/>.

¹² Weimann, Gabriel. “www.terror.net: How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet.” *United States Institute of Peace*, March 2004. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr116.pdf/>.

¹³ Hoffman, Bruce. “The Use of the Internet By Islamic Extremists.” Testimony presented to the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, May 4, 2006. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT262-1.html>.

¹⁴ Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, Audrey Alexander, and Nick Kaderbhai. “The Impact of Digital Communications Technology on Radicalization and Recruitment.” *International Affairs* 93, no. 5 (2017): 1233–1249.; Schafer, Joseph A. “Spinning the web of hate: Web-based hate propagation by extremist organizations.” *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 9, no. 2 (December 2002): 69-88.

¹⁵ Amble, John Curtis. “Combating Terrorism in the New Media Environment.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35, no. 5 (2012): 339-353.

¹⁶ For example: Pillar, Paul R. “Terrorism Goes Global: Extremist Groups Extend Their Reach Worldwide.” *Brookings Institution*, September 1, 2001. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/terrorism-goes-global-extremist-groups-extend-their-reach-worldwide/>.

who, within years, would harness a range of more accessible, dynamic, and user-friendly social media sites to supercharge their recruitment and commit more frequent acts of violence.

Second Generation (Mid-2000s to Late-2010s)

If the dawn of the first generation was heralded by the invention of the computer, the second generation of online radicalization was born in the Harvard dorm room where Mark Zuckerberg invented Facebook. The second generation, which emerged in the mid-2000s, was sustained on massive public social media platforms—Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram—which grew into tech behemoths in a new, more connected, user-generated internet. Unlike bulletin board systems and early forums like Stormfront which were more esoteric and therefore required specific interest and knowledge of means of access, the public-facing profile allowed radicals to share their extreme ideology with friends and family, while the centralized social marketplace provided by these sites’ “home” pages brought together extremists across borders and oceans. Search engines like Google could link searchers directly to the extremist content they sought.¹⁷ In J.M. Berger’s words, “Open social-media platforms changed the game.”¹⁸

This generation first promised great fortune, playing a critical role in the Arab Spring protests which upended the Middle East’s political order from 2010 onwards.¹⁹ The online medium and its ease of access revolutionized activism. Offline interactions remained important, but they could be complemented with near-constant online contact.²⁰ After watching the role social media played in encouraging the Arab Spring, one scholar warned, “Analysts and decision makers involved in intelligence and national security need to be engaged in social media so they can understand the nuances of how nefarious users can leverage the benefits of social media to radicalize populations.”²¹ Indeed, in the months and years after the Arab Spring, political vacuums in the region provided the setting for a range of jihadist networks to rise to prominence, both online and offline.²²

The Obama administration was quick to notice the revolutionary role the internet was playing in radicalization—including among Americans in the homeland inspired or directed by extremists abroad. Indeed, as new platforms grew more interactive, extremists worked to globalize their proselytization; for instance, “jihadist propaganda turned away from Arabic language content towards English, and

¹⁷ Ahmed, Mubarak and Fred Lloyd George. *A War of Keywords: How extremists are exploiting the internet and what to do about it*. Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2017.

¹⁸ Berger, J.M. “The Strategy of Violent White Supremacy Is Evolving.” *Atlantic*, August 7, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/08/the-new-strategy-of-violent-white-supremacy/595648/>.

¹⁹ For more: Lynch, Marc. *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East*. New York: Public Affairs, 2016: 35-36.

²⁰ For more on movement between the online and offline spaces: Gill et al, “Terrorist Use of the Internet by the Numbers.”; Cragin, R. Kim. “Virtual and Physical Realities: Violent Extremists’ Recruitment of Individuals Associated with the US Military.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, (2022). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2133346?src=>.

²¹ Thompson, Robin. “Radicalization and the Use of Social Media.” *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 167-190.

https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26463917.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Acc5ae224a56c6eaece047b754c9ef5da&ab_segmen ts=&origin=&acceptTC=1.

²² For example: Hamid, Shadi. “Radicalization after the Arab Spring: Lessons from Tunisia and Egypt.” *Brookings Institution*, December 1, 2015. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/radicalization-after-the-arab-spring-lessons-from-tunisia-and-egypt/>.

consequently became accessible to a more global audience.”²³ In fact, in September 2011, President Obama made one of his more controversial decisions, approving the killing-by-drone of a U.S. citizen, al-Qaeda propagandist Anwar al-Awlaki. Awlaki, once dubbed the “bin Laden of the internet,” was renowned for his ability to speak to and radicalize Western Muslims through the virtual format. His blog, www.anwar-alawlaki.com, which went live in 2008, arguably conformed more to first-generation characteristics and proved particularly appealing to readers in the United States and the United Kingdom.²⁴ Awlaki’s assassination was intended to put an end to his ability to radicalize and inspire terrorism. That day, President Obama praised the killing as a “significant milestone in the broader effort to defeat al-Qaeda and its affiliates.”²⁵ But the U.S. government was misunderstanding arguably the most consequential development in terrorism history. Awlaki’s presence online was such that his killing only augmented his legendary status. New followers flocked to YouTube to watch his sermons, and new extremists were radicalized by the extrajudicial killing of an American jihadist luminary. In the words of Audrey Kurth Cronin, “In his Internet immortality, he will haunt us long after ISIS and al-Qaeda have disappeared.”²⁶

In the defining characteristic of the second generation, modern social media usage began to feature prominently in the radicalization trajectory of Western terrorists. Awlaki’s uploads, for instance, helped inspire an American Army major, Nidal Hasan, to commit an act of terrorism at Fort Hood in Texas in 2009, killing 13 fellow servicemembers. While social media was not the sole mechanism behind his radicalization—his “religious intensification” was spurred by real-world events—YouTube and online blogs filled his free time and confirmed his increasingly extreme views.²⁷ The radicalization process now infiltrated every aspect of a subject’s life, and a radicalizer could project influence into a living room or bedroom.

Both trends would be exemplified by the “jihadi cool” approach to radicalization used by the Islamic State that rose to prominence in the Levant in 2014.²⁸ Recruiters, frequently located in Iraq and Syria, broadcasted the excitement of life in the caliphate on their social media pages, and those who answered the call-to-arms and traveled to the region could then share their new lives back to friends and family from their old life, accelerating radicalization in their home communities. Crucially, terrorist groups could now share their propaganda on a much broader scale, which “also meant that the traditional relationship between mainstream media and violent actors was reversed,” Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Seamus

²³ Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, and Kaderbhai. “The Impact of Digital Communications Technology on Radicalization and Recruitment.”

²⁴ Hoffman, Bruce. *Inside Terrorism*. New York: Columbia Press, 2006: 240.; Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander. As American as Apple Pie: How Anwar al-Awlaki Became the Face of Western Jihad. International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2011.

²⁵ “Obama: Anwar Al-Awlaki death is major blow for al-Qaeda.” *BBC*, September 30, 2011. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-15132308>.

²⁶ Cronin, Audrey Kurth. *Power to the People: How Open Technological Innovation is Arming Tomorrow’s Terrorists*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020: 175.

²⁷ Poppe, Katharine. Nidal Hasan: A Case Study in Lone-Actor Terrorism. The George Washington University Program on Extremism, October 2018. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Nidal%20Hasan.pdf>.

²⁸ Bjelopera, Jerome P. “American Jihadist Terrorism: Combating a Complex Threat.” *Congressional Research Service*, February 19, 2014. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R41416/19>.

Hughes, and Bennett Clifford argue, building on Hoffman’s earlier observation, “with the former now relying more on the latter’s social media output for information gathering, and terrorist groups no longer requiring the mainstream media to disseminate information.”²⁹ Extremist recruitment, never an easy job, accordingly became not only simpler but safer. Not only was there now no tangible distance between a recruiter and a recruit, but there were few real consequences if an online, often anonymous, recruiter was detected by law enforcement.³⁰ Young Westerners, like prominent British jihadist Shamima Begum, sought out and engaged extremist channels on mainstream platforms such as Twitter, which gleefully fueled their radicalization and encouraged their travel to the Middle East.³¹

In this new online environment, radicalizing extremists would congregate in so-called echo chambers—closed spaces where alternative viewpoints are not dismissed with erudite arguments but with a simple click of an “unfriend” or “unfollow” button. From there, the radicalization process would exponentialize. “The more they increase their involvement with online sympathizers,” Mark Hamm and Ramón Spaaij explain, “the more they isolate themselves from people in their real-world communities, which, in turn, makes it easier for them to change identity and live outside of ordinary social arrangements, thereby fueling the radicalization process even more.”³² The development of search engines and recommendation systems on the internet and social media sites, meanwhile, led to what scholar Cynthia Miller-Idriss calls “algorithmic radicalization,” which she defines as “changes in human attitudes, beliefs, or behavior as individuals are directed to extremist content, networks, groups, or other individuals as a result of guided searches, filtered news feeds, recommended videos, and connections from extremist adjacent sites.”³³ Such mechanisms allowed perhaps unwitting individuals to fall into radical internet rabbit holes, where sites would continue to feed them increasingly shocking or hostile content.

Echo chambers and algorithms were notoriously effective at creating uniform emotion—when everybody in one’s network feels a certain way, and when there are few competing stimuli either offline or online, a user becomes more likely to adopt that emotion. The emotion that spread most seamlessly across social media, and was therefore most likely to impact a user’s offline mood, was not happiness, a sense of companionship, or pluralism—but anger.³⁴ The very existence of angry echo chambers created the same “us vs them” thinking that had always inspired radicalization. In these spaces, recruitment and radicalization to violence did not even have to be direct or active—the existence of these angry chatrooms themselves inevitably led to violence. In the words of Talia Lavin, “The thing

²⁹ Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford. *Homegrown: ISIS in America*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2021: 88.

³⁰ Berger, J.M. *Extremism*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018: 149.

³¹ “Shamima’s list.” *The Economist*, February 26, 2015. <https://www.economist.com/international/2015/02/26/shamimas-list>.

³² Hamm, Mark and Ramón Spaaij. *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017: 158.

³³ Miller-Idriss, Cynthia. *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020: 150.

³⁴ Singer, P.W. and Emerson T. Brooking. *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*. New York: Mariner Books, 2019: 162.; Rathje, Steve, Jay J. Van Bavel, and Sander van der Linden. “Out-group animosity drives engagement on social media.” *PNAS* 118, no. 26 (2021). <https://www.pnas.org/doi/full/10.1073/pnas.2024292118>.

about channels that are filled, twenty-four hours a day, with stochastic violence—testosterone-filled megaphones shouting for blood—is that, sooner or later, someone is going to take them up on it.”³⁵

With intensified online radicalization came advances in terrorist operational art. Lone actors, inspired by the network but ultimately acting alone, became more prominent with extremists now able to scour the internet for targets, training, and weaponry. Lone actor terrorism had long been promoted by extremist polemicists such as Louis Beam—whose “leaderless resistance” treatise is still often cited by radicals frustrated by government interventions—and jihadists including Abu Jihad al-Masri and Abu Musab al-Suri. However, it took until the Islamic State’s blitzkrieg assaults on both Mesopotamia and social media for lone actor terrorism to take off, as evidenced by that group’s devastating wave of inspired attacks across Europe in the middle of the last decade.³⁶ Lone-actor terrorism was also rising in the United States during this period. Analyzing a database they compiled, Hamm and Spaaij found that “during the first five-and-a-half years of the 2010s, the lethality of American lone-wolf terrorism rose to an all-time high.”³⁷

The lone-actor terrorist model also heralded developments in targeting and weapon choices. With limited coordination and direction, hard targets—so-called because of heavy security presences—became less attractive, and complex plots, such as those involving explosives, grew prohibitive. Terrorism was instead defined by soft targets and rudimentary weapons. In a study of 116 jihadist terrorist attacks in the West between 2004 and 2019, Reinier Bergema and Olivia Kearney found that “More intricate plots with closer ties and operational direction from central leadership unsurprisingly allowed for the use of more sophisticated weaponry, but as there was a move away from such plots so too was the reliance on advanced munitions.”³⁸ In Europe, melee attacks and truck rammings became king. In the United States, however, the accessibility of firearms meant capability was never in question. More rudimentary targeting and tactical choices opened the terrorism possibility to newcomers across the political and ideological spectrum, as was exemplified by Dylann Roof who—claiming to have been radicalized through Google searches—entered the Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina in June 2015 and murdered nine Black parishioners having conducted little-to-no training. “Well someone has to have the bravery to take it to the real world,” he wrote, “and I guess that has to be me.”³⁹

³⁵ Lavin, Talia. *Culture Warlords: My Journey into the Dark Web of White Supremacy*. New York: Hachette Books, 2020: 130.

³⁶ Hoffman, Bruce. “Back to the Future: The Return of Violent Far-Right Terrorism in the Age of Lone Wolves.” *War on the Rocks*, April 2, 2019. <https://warontherocks.com/2019/04/back-to-the-future-the-return-of-violent-far-right-terrorism-in-the-age-of-lone-wolves/>. For more on the origins of lone actor strategy in jihadist thinking: Bakker, Edwin and Beatrice de Graaf. “Lone Wolves: How to Prevent This Phenomenon?” Presentation at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague Expert Meeting Lone Wolves, November 2010. <https://www.icct.nl/app/uploads/download/file/ICCT-Bakker-deGraaf-EM-Paper-Lone-Wolves.pdf>.; Wright, Lawrence. “The Master Plan.” *The New Yorker*, September 3, 2006. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/09/11/the-master-plan>.

³⁷ Hamm and Spaaij, *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism*, 37.

³⁸ Bergema, Reinier and Olivia Kearney. “Rise O Muwahhid, Wherever You May Be: An Analysis of the Democratization of the Terrorist Threat in the West.” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism — The Hague*, May 12, 2020. <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2020/05/An-Analysis-of-the-Democratisation-of-the-Terrorist-Threat-in-the-West.pdf>.

³⁹ Roof, Dylann. “rtf88.” June 2015.

With lone actors rising in prominence, organizations became less important to terrorism, with ideology growing more central.⁴⁰ Organizations were, however, as important as ever in radicalization, providing both the centralized ideological light around which mothlike extremists could swarm, as well as providing distant direction to would-be terrorists thousands of miles away. The development was eagerly exploited by groups like the Islamic State. In a speech delivered in September 2014, Islamic State spokesperson Abu Mohammad al-Adnani called for Westerners to attack their own countries and to do so however possible. “If you are not able to find an IED or a bullet, then single out the disbelieving American, Frenchman, or any of their allies,” Adnani declared. “Smash his head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car, or throw him down from a high place, or choke him, or poison him.”⁴¹ The appeal allowed the angry, lonely, and traumatized to weaponize their frustrations under the Islamic State umbrella, politicizing it and turning it against an ideological enemy—by any means necessary. As Peter Bergen wrote in *United States of Jihad* in 2016, “This will be ISIS’s legacy in the United States: the crowdsourcing of jihad, so that men [...] can convert personal grievances into what they believe is a righteous holy war.”⁴²

Indeed, this marks perhaps the most important and tangible manifestation of this second generation and the lone actor operations it encouraged: terrorism became more accessible, with technological and geographical barriers to entry effectively eviscerated. In diametric opposition to the multilateral, cell-based approach taken by al-Qaeda on 9/11 (and, admittedly, employed by the Islamic State on rare but extremely deadly occasions, including in Paris in November 2015 and Brussels in March 2016), terrorism became defined by its simplicity. For example, lone actor van attacks in Nice, London, Barcelona, New York City, and beyond in the middle of the last decade were so terrifying precisely because they seemed so simple, and therefore unavoidable.⁴³ These killers were not the recruited, trained, international, professional terrorists who flew planes into several targets on 9/11—they were ordinary citizens, homegrown men and women who had only interacted with the terrorist groups they would kill for through social media, if at all.

As organizations grew less dominant within this generation, new ideologies also came to the fore. Although Salafi-jihadist terrorism had dominated the 21st century to date, the extremist far-right, its

⁴⁰ Hoffman, Bruce and Colin P. Clarke. “The Next American Terrorist.” *Cipher Brief*, July 2, 2020.

<https://www.thecipherbrief.com/the-next-american-terrorist>.

⁴¹ Bergema and Kearney, “Rise O Muwahhid, Wherever You May Be.”

⁴² Bergen, Peter. *United States of Jihad: Investigating America’s Homegrown Terrorists*. New York: Crown, 2016: 287. See also: Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander and Seamus Hughes. “The Threat to the United States from the Islamic State’s Virtual Entrepreneurs.” *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 3 (March 2017). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-threat-to-the-united-states-from-the-islamic-states-virtual-entrepreneurs/>.

⁴³ For more on terrorist attacks defined by their simplicity: Segal, Oren. “Terrorist Propaganda Encourages Attacks With Common Items.” *Anti-Defamation League*, July 15, 2016. <https://www.adl.org/blog/terrorist-propaganda-encourages-attacks-with-common-items>; Erickson, Amanda and Isaac Stanley-Becker. “How ramming cars into crowds became a major terror tactic.” *The Washington Post*, March 22, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/03/22/as-the-london-attacks-show-the-sedate-sedan-can-be-turned-into-a-deadly-unpredictable-weapon/>; Rotella, Sebastian. “Truck Terror Attacks May Be a Sign of ISIS Weakness, But They’re Very Hard to Stop.” *ProPublica*, November 1, 2017. <https://www.propublica.org/article/truck-terror-attacks-isis-weakness-very-hard-to-stop>.

terrorism threat defined by white supremacists and neo-Nazis picking up the Beam call-to-arms and acting even more independently than their jihadist counterparts, rapidly proliferated. In Norway, the deadliest Western far-right terrorist attack since the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing would claim 77 lives in 2011 and shake an entire nation to its very foundations. And incels, perhaps exemplifying better than any other movement the online radicalization that defined this new wave, also rose to prominence in North America, providing an ideological veneer to the sexual frustrations of many young American men.⁴⁴ Incels demonstrated that while the online space was supercharging extremist organizing, the ideas underpinning these new ideologies were not necessarily new: the new information environment had instead allowed like-minded individuals, in this case angry and sexually frustrated men, to find each other online and develop distinct communities based on this age-old resentment.⁴⁵ “In some ways, the internet, with its rapid dissemination of dubious words, seems made for a prejudice that works best in whispers and intimations,” Talia Lavin writes, highlighting the spread of age-old anti-Semitism on these new platforms.⁴⁶

A prominent counterargument to the growing scholarship on “online radicalization,” most frequently advanced by Swansea University scholar Joe Whittaker, states that the impact of the online space is overstated.⁴⁷ These scholars are right to note that social media often acts as a complement, not a replacement, to other radicalization mechanisms. The second generation began to shed light on this process: instead of replacing offline interaction, for instance, the online space acted as an accelerant, allowing for far more frequent and immersive contact with a would-be recruit or a cell. Although some participants would largely stay online, most frequently bounced back into the offline space in some way, the internet acting “like a permanent gateway to offline political activism.”⁴⁸ Many extremist groups and networks in the U.S. and around the world accordingly began to embrace what David Ucko calls “ideational insurgency,” involving the heavy and persistent use of social media to inspire followers to violence and protect the organization and movement from government countermeasures.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Hoffman, Bruce, Jacob Ware, and Ezra Shapiro. “Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 43, no. 7 (2020). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1751459>.

⁴⁵ For more: Roose, Joshua M. *The New Demagogues: Religion, Masculinity and the Populist Epoch*. New York: Routledge, 2021.

⁴⁶ Lavin, *Culture Warlords*, 19.

⁴⁷ For example: Whittaker, Joe. “Rethinking Online Radicalization.” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 4 (August 2022).

<https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2022/issue-4/whittaker.pdf>; Herath, Chamin and Joe Whittaker. “Online Radicalisation: Moving beyond a Simple Dichotomy.”

Terrorism and Political Violence, (2021). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09546553.2021.1998008>;

Holbrook, Donald. “A critical analysis of the role of the internet in the preparation and planning of acts of terrorism.” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 8, (2015): 121-133.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17467586.2015.1065102>; Hamid, Nafees and Cristina Ariza. Offline Versus Online Radicalisation: Which is the Bigger Threat? Tracing Outcomes of 439 Jihadist Terrorists Between 2014–2021 in 8 Western Countries. Global Network on Extremism & Technology, 2022. <https://gnet-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/GNET-Report-Offline-Versus-Online-Radicalisation.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Koehler, Daniel. “The Radical Online: Individual Radicalization Processes and the Role of the Internet.” *Journal for Deradicalization* 1, (Winter 2014/15): 128.

⁴⁹ Ucko, David H. *The Insurgent's Dilemma: A Struggle to Prevail*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.; Switzer, Tobias Bernard. “The Changing Face of Insurgency.” *Modern War Institute*, July 28, 2022. <https://mwi.usma.edu/the-changing-face-of-insurgency/>.

Instead of a dominant group or ideology, the common denominator across ideologies increasingly seemed to be the profile of the perpetrator: second-generation terrorists were often younger males, adrift and unhappy, lashing out on their own. And, in most cases, social media played a central role at some stage of their radicalization. As the generations shifted—it is difficult to date it exactly, but likely around the mid-2010s—terrorism diffused in ideology, and was defined by lone actors, radicalized online, targeting softer targets. To use language proposed by Post et al., a collection of “virtual communities of hatred” had emerged, all equally effective at radicalizing its denizens.⁵⁰ But by the time scholars began to understand the radically new threat environment, it was already shifting further. Already, another new generation was emerging.

⁵⁰ Post, Jerrold, Cody McGinnis, and Kristen Moody. “The Changing Face of Terrorism in the 21st Century: The Communications Revolution and the Virtual Community of Hatred.” *Behavioral Sciences & the Law* 32, no. 3 (2014): 306-334. For analysis of a similar “electronic community of hate”: The Consequences of Right-Wing Extremism on the Internet. Anti-Defamation League, 2013. <https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/assets/pdf/combating-hate/The-Consequences-of-Right-Wing-Extremism-on-the-Internet.pdf>.

Third Generation (Late-2010s to Today)

We are now witnessing a third generation which is both an intensification and departure from its predecessor. Not only are organizations less important; ideologies are less important. And not only are lone actors now central; they are frequently their own propaganda arm, sharing manifestos and livestreams that further feed the ideology. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated those trends, supercharging a new brand of “mass radicalization” conspiracism that relies not on “alternative facts” but on an absence of facts.⁵¹

While the larger social media platforms that defined the prior generation continue to play an important role, the latest developments in social media radicalization are defined in no small part by a newer online culture that prioritizes anonymity over notoriety and even friendship. Newer social media sites, including Telegram and Gab, emphasize encryption and privacy, not widespread influence. QAnon, a distinctly third-generation movement, provides an instructive example with the group’s very name alluding to an anonymous government official leaking state secrets. Followers of the movement are implored to “do your own research”—emphasizing individuality—while the network’s “Where We Go One, We Go All” (WWG1WGA) motto stresses the importance of unity and commitment to the cause. Even when social media still emphasizes public posting, it often occurs in a climate of anonymity, as displayed by several terrorists who describe themselves as “anons” (“Hi, my name is Anon, and I think the holocaust never happened,” one livestream of a far-right attack in Germany began⁵²). Ephemerality matters too—on message board-style apps and sites like 4chan and Telegram, posts are part of a fast-moving discussion, not intended to be liked or commented on but intended merely to further or intensify an ongoing conversation.⁵³ Complementing those developments, the normalization of end-to-end encrypted chatrooms (and social media companies frequently refusing to share information from their platforms with law enforcement) allows extremists to recruit and plot in relative secrecy.⁵⁴ In sum, an “ecosystem” has emerged, characterized by various sections of the extremist internet filling different roles, all increasing the chances of radicalization and mobilization to violence.⁵⁵

Today’s extremists are adept at using a range of social media platforms, exploiting each service’s individual features to propel their preparation for violence.⁵⁶ A report authored by the Office of the New

⁵¹ For example: “Researchers warn of rise in extremism online after Covid.” *BBC*, December 30, 2022.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-61106191>.

⁵² “Shooting in Halle, Germany: What We Know.” *Anti-Defamation League*, October 10, 2019.

<https://www.adl.org/blog/shooting-in-halle-germany-what-we-know>.

⁵³ Thorleifsson, Cathrine and Joey Düker. “Lone Actors in Digital Environments.” *Radicalisation Awareness Network*, 2021. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/whats-new/publications/lone-actors-digital-environments-october-2021_en.

⁵⁴ For more: Clifford, Bennett and Helen Powell. *Encrypted Extremism: Inside the English-Speaking Islamic State Ecosystem on Telegram*. The George Washington University Program on Extremism, June 2019.

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/EncryptedExtremism.pdf>.

⁵⁵ Baele, Brace, and Coan, “Uncovering the Far-Right Online Ecosystem.”

⁵⁶ This includes terrorist-operated platforms. For more: Bradley, Arthur and Deeba Shadnia. *Examining Online Migration to Terrorist and Violent Extremist-Owned Domains*. The George Washington University Program on Extremism, July 2022.

https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/Examining_Online_Migration_to_Terrorist_and_Violent_Extremist-Owned_Domains_TATFinal.pdf; For more on the various categories of platforms and the interactions between them:

York State Attorney General in October 2022 detailed the myriad platforms that had contributed to the journey to violence undertaken by a gunman who opened fire that May at a supermarket in Buffalo, killing 10 African Americans. These platforms included 4chan’s /pol/ board and Reddit during his radicalization; Discord during his attack planning; YouTube, 4chan’s /k/ board, Discord, and Reddit to help prepare his arsenal; and Twitch to live stream the attack.⁵⁷ To explain his radicalization, the shooter largely plagiarized a manifesto from another white supremacist who opened fire at two mosques in Christchurch in 2019. Answering his own question about how he radicalized, the perpetrator of the Buffalo supermarket shooting wrote that he developed his worldview “mostly from the internet. There was little to no influence on my personal beliefs by people I met in person. I read multiple sources of information from all ideologies and decided that my current one is most correct.”⁵⁸ The modern combination of public and private channels allows radicalization to be both broadened and deepened—spread wider in public, and with more intensity in darker chatrooms. As Erin Saltman of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism concedes, “Fighting terrorism online requires addressing this interplay, but any single platform or company lacks visibility into the trends elsewhere online.”⁵⁹

Across platforms, radicalization today has been shaped by the construction of a shared extremist online culture. In an article published hours after the Christchurch attack and titled “A Mass Murder of, and for, the Internet,” *The New York Times*’s Kevin Roose reflected that “in some ways, it felt like a first — an internet-native mass shooting, conceived and produced entirely within the irony-soaked discourse of modern extremism.”⁶⁰ Today’s extremists are no longer just consumers of radical material shared by propagandists; they are, in the words of Kesa White, “Webmasters of Hate”—conducting their own research, spreading their own propaganda, and ultimately succeeding in creating a climate hostile to outsiders.⁶¹

As part of what some scholars have called a “visual turn,” once-innocent memes now play as important a role as text, their versatility and inherent lightheartedness making them more appealing and conducive to the radicalization process.⁶² In this more chaotic space, ideology initially plays a less

Williams, Heather J., Alexandra T. Evans, Jamie Ryan, Erik E. Mueller, and Bryce Downing. “The Online Extremist Ecosystem: Its Evolution and a Framework for Separating Extreme from Mainstream.” *RAND Corporation*, 2021.

<https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1458-1.html>.

⁵⁷ “Investigative Report on the role of online platforms in the tragic mass shooting in Buffalo on May 14, 2022.” Office of the New York State Attorney General Letitia James. October 18, 2022. <https://ag.ny.gov/sites/default/files/buffaloshooting-onlineplatformsreport.pdf>.

⁵⁸ Gendron, Payton. “What you need to know.” May 2022.

⁵⁹ Saltman, Erin. “Challenges in Combating Terrorism and Extremism Online.” *Lawfare*, July 11, 2021.

<https://www.lawfareblog.com/challenges-combating-terrorism-and-extremism-online>.

⁶⁰ Roose, Kevin. “A Mass Murder of, and for, the Internet.” *The New York Times*, March 15, 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/technology/facebook-youtube-christchurch-shooting.html>.

⁶¹ White, Kesa. “Webmasters of Hate: Right-Wing Extremists Are Getting Smarter Online.” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, December 7, 2021. <https://gnet-research.org/2021/12/07/webmasters-of-hate-right-wing-extremists-are-getting-smarter-online/>.

⁶² Conway, Scrivens, and Macnair, “Right-Wing Extremists’ Persistent Online Presence.”; Donovan, Joan, Emily Dreyfuss, and Brian Friedberg. *Meme Wars: The Untold Story of the Online Battles Upending Democracy in America*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2022. For more on “the aesthetics of violence”: Molloy, Joshua. “Terrorwave: The Aesthetics of Violence and Terrorist Imagery in Militant Accelerationist Subcultures.” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, April 5, 2023.

important role, with irony and humor instead central to entrenching people in the community and desensitizing them to the racism, sexism, and radical rhetoric that permeates this online discourse. These extremists develop their own language, and frequently unite across specific ideologies by opposition to authority and “political correctness.” These “specific behaviors of the digital subculture, such as provocative posting practices and meme-making are important pull factors for engagement,” Cathrine Thorleifsson and Joey Düker find.⁶³ As in both the first and second generations, the internet may not always provide the initial introduction to extremism, but it can accelerate radicalization by steadily removing a subject from their real-world influences and alternatives.⁶⁴

Indeed, the genius of the modern social media radicalization model exists in so-called shitposting culture, which encourages users to post a flood of increasingly shocking and inflammatory content. Any far-right social media channel will present counterterrorism practitioners with an onslaught of intelligence that is almost always threatening and quite often outright violent, but it is fundamentally misleading information. Comments made by budding terrorists are often impossible to differentiate from those made by shitposters—indeed, often those truly mobilizing to violence avoid using threatening language for fear of exposing their plans. “There are further practical difficulties in distinguishing between those who are just talkers and the potential doers (that is, those likely to mobilize to violence),” a report commissioned after the Christchurch shooting found.⁶⁵ Extremists hide behind this façade of shitposting, mocking those who take offense or flag concerns as “liberal snowflakes” or “social justice warriors.”⁶⁶ But through that dance, bonds inside the in-group are strengthened, and distrust and hatred of the out-group crystallize as connections solidify between extremist networks oceans apart. Through humor and mockery, radicalization intensifies. The often blatant and open hatred of the online world, and the carelessness and callousness of the violence it inspires, is aptly summarized by a declaration issued by a neo-Nazi terrorist who opened fire at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh in October 2018: “Screw your optics.”⁶⁷

<https://gnet-research.org/2023/04/05/terrorwave-the-aesthetics-of-violence-and-terrorist-imagery-in-militant-accelerationist-subcultures/>.

⁶³ Thorleifsson and Düker, “Lone Actors in Digital Environments.”

⁶⁴ Gaudette, Tiana, Ryan Scrivens, and Vivek Venkatesh, “The Role of the Internet in Facilitating Violent Extremism: Insights from Former Right-Wing Extremists.” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 7 (2022): 1339-1356.

⁶⁵ Ko tō tātou kāinga tēnei. Royal Commission of Inquiry into the terrorist attack on Christchurch masjidain on 15 March 2019, December 8, 2020: Part 4, Chapter 4. <https://christchurchattack.royalcommission.nz/>.

⁶⁶ Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland*, 154.

⁶⁷ For more: Katz, Rita. *Saints and Soldiers: Inside Internet-Age Terrorism, From Syria to the Capitol Siege*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022: 32-61.; Katz, Rita. “How ‘Screw Your Optics’ Became a Far-Right Rallying Cry.” *Foreign Policy*, October 23, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/23/far-right-terrorism-white-supremacy-islamic-state/>.

This online culture, uniting like-minded extremists across borders and oceans, has blurred the lines between domestic and international terrorism.⁶⁸ Global grievances are acted upon with great fury in very local contexts—and yet, the main audience is often online.⁶⁹

The third generation of online radicalization has introduced us to new constituencies eager to join the fray. Women and children have always played a role in terrorism, and the “women and children” cliché has always stripped agency from dangerous extremists, as devastatingly displayed during the rise of the Islamic State’s caliphate in the Levant during the second generation.⁷⁰ However, those groups have rocketed to even greater prominence through factions of the far-right such as QAnon and neo-Nazi “accelerationist” groups.⁷¹ QAnon, for its part, has proved particularly appealing to women—perhaps because its “Save the Children” motto has appealed to maternal instincts more so than exclusionary white supremacist dictums.⁷² A recent survey, for instance, found “that women are more likely than men to believe in conspiracy theories that feed into the QAnon movement, including those that purport to protect children, building on the belief in the existence of global pedophile rings.” At the time the survey was released, over 20% of the known QAnon-linked January 6 rioters had been women.⁷³ Neo-Nazi ideology, meanwhile, is proving appealing to teens: one study conducted by the *Guardian* and released in early 2021 identified that “At least 17 children, some as young as 14, have been arrested on terrorism

⁶⁸ For more: Hoffman, Bruce and Jacob Ware. “The Challenges of Effective Counterterrorism Intelligence in the 2020s.” *Lawfare*, June 21, 2020. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/challenges-effective-counterterrorism-intelligence-2020s>.; Ware, Jacob. “America the Exporter: Far-Right Violent Extremism in Brazil and Beyond.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 10, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/article/america-exporter-far-right-violent-extremism-brazil-and-beyond>.; Craig, Jiore, Cécile Simmons, and Rhea Bhatnagar. “How January 6 inspired election disinformation around the world.” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, January 13, 2023. https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/how-january-6-inspired-election-disinformation-around-the-world/.; Geltzer, Joshua A., Mary B. McCord, and Nicholas Rasmussen. “The Christchurch Shooting: Domestic Terrorism Goes International.” *Lawfare*, March 19, 2019. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/christchurch-shooting-domestic-terrorism-goes-international>.

⁶⁹ Roose, “A Mass Murder of, and for, the Internet.”

⁷⁰ For analysis of “women and children” in the caliphate: Vale, Gina. “Women in Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps.” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague*, October 17, 2019. <https://www.icct.nl/publication/women-islamic-state-caliphate-camps>.; Cook, Joana and Gina Vale. “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’ II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate.” *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 6 (July 2019). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/daesh-diaspora-challenges-posed-women-minors-fall-caliphate/>.; Margolin, Deborah. *The Changing Roles of Women in Violent Islamist Groups*. The George Washington University Program on Extremism, February 2019. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/The%20Changing%20Roles%20of%20Women%20in%20Violent%20Islamist%20Groups.pdf>.; Bloom, Mia and John Horgan. *Small Arms: Children and Terrorism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019.

⁷¹ For more: Pandith, Farah and Jacob Ware. “Women and Children to the Front.” *Lawfare*, October 9, 2022. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/women-and-children-front>.

⁷² For more: Pandith, Farah, Jacob Ware, and Mia Bloom. “Female extremists in QAnon and ISIS are on the rise. We need a new strategy to combat them.” *NBC News THINK*, December 11, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/female-extremists-qanon-isis-are-rise-we-need-new-strategy-ncna1250619>.; For more on motherhood and extremism: Won, Ye Bin, Meili Criezis, and Jordan Chapman. “Influential Moms: Examining Extremist Influencer Mothers.” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, December 7, 2022. <https://gnet-research.org/2022/12/07/influential-moms-examining-extremist-influencer-mothers/>.; Farrow, Ronan. “A Pennsylvania Mother’s Path to Insurrection.” *The New Yorker*, February 1, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/a-pennsylvania-mothers-path-to-insurrection-capitol-riot>.

⁷³ A Data-Driven Approach to Understanding the Threat Posed by QAnon. The Soufan Center, April 2021. https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/TSC-White-Paper_QAnon_16April2021-final-1.pdf.

charges over the past 18 months.”⁷⁴ By his own account, a shooter who attacked a gay bar in Bratislava, Slovakia, in October 2022 had begun radicalizing at 15, as “a kid cruising the Internet, picking up shit along the way and throwing it away just as quickly.”⁷⁵ And, of course, the aforementioned leader of the Feuerkrieg Division had been just 13 at the time of his apprehension. Extremist groups, for their part, deliberately target their propaganda online to reach these younger groups. “Our goal is to turn nationalists into activists,” Thomas Rousseau, founder of Patriot Front, wrote in a leaked message. “To target our desired demographic we must focus on where we are most able to find them, which is online.”⁷⁶ Conversely, some analysis also points to the increased involvement of elderly people in extremism and terrorism.⁷⁷

The riot at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, sparked a series of analyses of the participants in the riot which suggested that they were not typical participants in extremism and terrorism. “[A] closer look at the people suspected of taking part in the Capitol riot suggests a different and potentially far more dangerous problem: a new kind of violent mass movement in which more ‘normal’ Trump supporters—middle-class and, in many cases, middle-aged people without obvious ties to the far right—joined with extremists in an attempt to overturn a presidential election,” Robert Pape and Keven Ruby argued.⁷⁸ A plot to overthrow the German government in late 2022, meanwhile, involved a judge, a gourmet chef, and a prince.⁷⁹ Both QAnon and the January 6 attack confirm an emerging trend of conspiracism in which extremist theories no longer require kernels of truth to inspire their followers. In this new conspiratorial climate, experts Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum argue, “There is no punctilious demand for proofs, no exhaustive amassing of evidence, no dots revealed to form a pattern, no close examination of operators plotting in the shadows. . . . What validates the new conspiracism is not evidence but repetition.”⁸⁰ In QAnon’s case, movement predictions—such as the prophecy that John F. Kennedy Jr had faked his death and would return and run as former President Trump’s running mate

⁷⁴ Townsend, Mark. “How far right uses video games and tech to lure and radicalise teenage recruits.” *The Guardian*, February 14, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/14/how-far-right-uses-video-games-tech-lure-radicalise-teenage-recruits-white-supremacists>.; For a series on Gen Z and extremism: Ayad, Moustafa, Milo Comerford, and Jakob Guhl. “Gen-Z & The Digital Salafi Ecosystem.” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, April 24, 2023. https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/gen-z-the-digital-salafi-ecosystem/.

⁷⁵ Juraj K. “A Call to Arms.” October 2022.

⁷⁶ Smith, Brenna and Ryan Little. “Plastering hate: Why white supremacist stickers are appearing in Maryland and beyond.” *Baltimore Banner*, December 2, 2022. <https://www.thebaltimorebanner.com/politics-power/national-politics/patriot-front-stickers-maryland-ZDFA4SG72RBLXBYK66SEIKTDW4/>.

⁷⁷ Jensen, Michael. “The Link Between Age and Extremism.” *Generations*, March 15, 2023.

<https://generations.asaging.org/link-between-age-and-extremism/>.; Wells, David. “The Growing Concern Over Older Far-Right Terrorists: Data from the United Kingdom.” *CTC Sentinel* 16, no. 2 (February 2023). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-growing-concern-over-older-far-right-terrorists-data-from-the-united-kingdom/>.; For an earlier argument: Horgan, John, Mia Bloom, Chelsea Daymon, Wojciech Kaczkowski, and Hicham Tiflati. “A New Age of Terror? Older Fighters in the Caliphate.” *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 5 (May 2017). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/a-new-age-of-terror-older-fighters-in-the-caliphate/>.

⁷⁸ Pape, Robert A. and Keven Ruby. “The Capitol Rioters Aren’t Like Other Extremists.” *The Atlantic*, February 2, 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/02/the-capitol-rioters-arent-like-other-extremists/617895/>.

⁷⁹ Wallner, Claudia and Jessica White. “The Prince, the Judge and the Paratrooper: Germany’s Foiled Far-Right Coup.” *RUSI*, December 12, 2022. <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/prince-judge-and-paratrooper-germanys-foiled-far-right-coup>.

⁸⁰ Muirhead, Russell and Nancy L. Rosenblum. *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020: 3.

in the 2020 presidential election—are continuously proven wrong, but the movement’s most ardent believers do not turn away.⁸¹ Some experts term this “mass radicalization”—a further reflection of the continually lowered barriers to entry to radical beliefs and extremist activism.⁸²

Perhaps relatedly, in the third generation, mental health has emerged as a possibly significant factor in radicalization.⁸³ No far-right group epitomizes the trend more clearly than the Atomwaffen Division, a neo-Nazi network that inspired several killings around the end of the last decade. The group’s leader, Brandon Russell, as well as several members within the group, had diagnoses of Autism spectrum disorder, alongside a range of other conditions.⁸⁴ Incels, too, self-report high levels of mental illness and trauma.⁸⁵ This development has also been prevalent in the United Kingdom, with a recent study performed for the Ministry of Justice assessing every convicted terrorist prisoner since 2010 in England and Wales finding that “Most convicted terrorists in Britain were turned to extremism by the internet, with half of those radicalized online having some problems with mental health, personality disorders, depression, or autism.”⁸⁶ Moreover, 92% of those convicted between 2019 and 2021 “were radicalized wholly or in part online.”

In other cases, an inability to reach one’s own personal and professional aspirations also seems to contribute to radicalization across ideologies. After 51 were killed in two mosques in Christchurch in 2019, Peter Bergen took his aforementioned 2016 argument on “the crowdsourcing of jihad” further, suggesting that personal grievances outstripped the role of ideology. Comparing the Christchurch gunman to the Orlando Pulse nightclub shooter three years earlier, Bergen noted that both men “seem

⁸¹ Dickson, EJ. “QAnon Followers Think JFK Jr. Is Coming Back on the 4th of July.” *Rolling Stone*, July 3, 2019. <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/qanon-jfk-jr-conspiracy-theory-854938/>.

⁸² For example: McCauley, Clark and Sophia Moskalenko. “Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism.” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 3 (2008): 415-433.; Stanton, Zack. “The Problem Isn’t Just One Insurrection. It’s Mass Radicalization.” *Politico*, February 11, 2021.

<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/02/11/mass-radicalization-trump-insurrection-468746>.; Allam, Hannah. “Right-Wing Embrace Of Conspiracy Is ‘Mass Radicalization,’ Experts Warn.” *NPR*, December 15, 2020.

<https://www.npr.org/2020/12/15/946381523/right-wing-embrace-of-conspiracy-is-mass-radicalization-experts-warn>.

⁸³ For more on the challenges of diagnosing and treating mental illnesses in CVE cases: Schulten, Norah. “Practitioners’ perspectives on the challenges of dealing with the interaction between mental illness and violent extremism in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE).” *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*. (2022).

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19434472.2022.2142268>.; Others argue that some extremists are more akin to “opioid addicts”: Moskalenko, Sophia and Mia Bloom. “Why QAnon followers are like opioid addicts, and why that matters.” *NBC News THINK*, August 22, 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/why-qanon-followers-are-opioid-addicts-why-matters-ncna1277323>.

⁸⁴ For more: Ware, Jacob. “Fighting Back: The Atomwaffen Division, Countering Violent Extremism, and the Evolving Crackdown on Far-Right Terrorism in America.” *Journal for Deradicalization* 25 (Winter 2020-21): 74-116. <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/issue/view/35/showToc>.

⁸⁵ For more: Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro, “Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence.”; O’Malley, Roberta Liggett and Brenna Helm. “The Role of Perceived Injustice and Need for Esteem on Incel Membership Online.” *Deviant Behavior*, (2022). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01639625.2022.2133650>.

⁸⁶ Dodd, Vikram. “Most convicted terrorists radicalised online, finds MoJ-backed study.” *The Guardian*, December 8, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/dec/08/most-convicted-terrorists-radicalised-online-finds-study>.

to have been drifting through life while they shopped for an ideology that justified acts of violence.” It was through the online medium that they were able to identify that ideological justification.⁸⁷

Indeed, the latest developments in extremist radicalization have further diminished the once-central role played by organizations and even ideology. In fact, in a trend variously described as “fringe fluidity,” “ideological convergence,” “salad bar ideologies,” “composite violent extremism,” or “hybridized extremism,” terrorists today often cherry-pick their grievances and self-construct their justification of violence, arraying it above their personal frustrations.⁸⁸ Such mixing and matching only intensifies the aforementioned lowering of terrorist barriers to entry.⁸⁹ Extremists no longer need to justify their violence by learning obscure Quranic passages or reviewing European fascist canon: they can instead simply add a veneer of extremist ideology on top of their preexisting propensity for violence. As one senior FBI official hypothesized, “ideologically fluid extremists may be drawn more to violence than to the ideology itself.”⁹⁰ Reflecting this development, the United Kingdom now includes a “mixed, unstable or unclear ideology” option for Prevent referrals—with individuals in this category recently outnumbering both extreme-right and Islamist referrals combined.⁹¹

Social media has allowed recruiters to bypass many of the traditional societal gatekeepers that protected vulnerable and impressionable youths—including their parents and educators—and has

⁸⁷ Bergen, Peter. “Why terrorists kill: The striking similarities between the New Zealand and Pulse nightclub shooters.” *CNN*, March 18, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/18/opinions/why-terrorists-kill-striking-similarities-bergen>.

⁸⁸ Hoffman, Bruce and Jacob Ware. “The Terrorist Threat from the Fractured Far Right.” *Lawfare*, November 1, 2020. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/terrorist-threat-fractured-far-right>.; Alcoke, Matthew. “The Evolving and Persistent Terrorism Threat to the Homeland.” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, November 19, 2019. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/evolving-and-persistent-terrorism-threat-homeland>.; Wakefield, Jonny. “‘Salad bar extremism’: Edmonton researchers release second report on violent extremist movements.” *Edmonton Journal*, September 3, 2022. <https://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/salad-bar-extremism-edmonton-researchers-release-second-report-on-violent-extremist-movements>.; Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed and Madeleine Blackman. “Fluidity of the Fringes: Prior Extremist Involvement as a Radicalization Pathway.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 45, no. 7 (2022). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1531545>.; Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed, Andrew Zammit, Emelie Chace-Donahue, and Madison Urban. “Composite Violent Extremism: A Radicalization Pattern Changing the Face of Terrorism.” *Lawfare*, November 22, 2022. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/composite-violent-extremism-radicalization-pattern-changing-face-terrorism>.; Jones, Isabel and Milo Comerford. “Radical reinforcement: The January 6 attack and the methodology of hybridized extremism.” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, February 17, 2023. https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/radical-reinforcement-the-january-6-attack-and-the-methodology-of-hybridized-extremism/.

⁸⁹ Miller-Idriss, Cynthia and Brian Hughes. “Blurry Ideologies and Strange Coalitions: The Evolving Landscape of Domestic Extremism.” *Lawfare*, December 19, 2021. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/blurry-ideologies-and-strange-coalitions-evolving-landscape-domestic-extremism>.; For one case study: Allam, Hannah and Souad Mekhennet. “Accused Pelosi attacker’s history shows blurry lines of radicalization.” *The Washington Post*, October 31, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/10/31/david-depape-pelosi-online-radicalization/>.

⁹⁰ Alcoke, “The Evolving and Persistent Terrorism Threat to the Homeland.”

⁹¹ Richards, Barry. “Mental health and terrorism: more people flagged to authorities have ‘mixed, unstable, unclear’ views than Islamist ideologies.” *The Conversation*, December 6, 2021. <https://theconversation.com/mental-health-and-terrorism-more-people-flagged-to-authorities-have-mixed-unstable-unclear-views-than-islamist-ideologies-173115>.; *User guide to: Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme, England and Wales*. Home Office, November 18, 2021. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/user-guide-to-individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-england-and-wales/user-guide-to-individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-england-and-wales>.

allowed those seeking an identity, community, and purpose to find it among extremist communities.⁹² Personal grievances are therefore more important than ever to the radicalization trajectory, with Simon Purdue writing that “An act of terrorism can offer an apparently political response to the personal problem of how to manage overwhelming feelings of rage, or to transcend a deeply damaged self.”⁹³ This new era might also be narrowing the distance between a “terrorist” and more conventional, and non-ideological, American mass or school shooters.⁹⁴ Take, for instance, a mass shooting that occurred in Highland Park, Illinois on the 4th of July, 2022. The gunman was, by almost any objective definition, not a terrorist—there was no discernable ideology directly inspiring the attack—but he displayed many of the same fascinations with violence shared by extremist killers.⁹⁵ This trend has been compounded by the spread of a “free-wheeling violent nihilism” online.⁹⁶ Many extremist chatrooms, such as incel communities, now trade in a fatalistic “doomerism” which encourages greater violence by normalizing, and even celebrating, suicidal ideation and glorifying forum members, for example, “going ER”—an incel term denoting ending one’s own life in an act of suicidal mass murder.⁹⁷ Some choose to pursue that option—whether they ultimately find an ideological veneer to justify their violence, or not. Therefore, questions are frequently asked about whether acts of violence by third-generation perpetrators qualify as acts of terrorism.⁹⁸

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated several of these trends.⁹⁹ Impressionable minds—who may previously have had little exposure to extremist ideology and conspiracy theories—have spent unprecedented amounts of time online, with little supervision, wrestling with major questions about their futures and the well-being of their loved ones. Many encountered nefarious actors offering simplistic, radical explanations. Political discourse about the responses to the pandemic was tailored for

⁹² For more on the search for identity, community, and purpose in radicalization: Picciolini, Christian. *Breaking Hate: Confronting the New Culture of Extremism*. New York: Hachette, 2020: xxxiii.

⁹³ Richards, “Mental health and terrorism.”

⁹⁴ In a recent paper, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross et al. argue for a framework of composite violent extremism and suggest that the inclusion of an “ambiguous category in the framework reduces the risk of overlooking violent extremist cases that closely resemble non-ideological mass killers.” Gartenstein-Ross, Zammit, Chace-Donahue, and Urban, “Composite Violent Extremism.”

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Kriner, Matthew, Meghan Conroy, Alex Newhouse, and Jonathan Lewis. “Understanding Accelerationist Narratives: The Great Replacement Theory.” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, May 30, 2022. <https://gnet-research.org/2022/05/30/understanding-accelerationist-narratives-the-great-replacement-theory/>.

⁹⁷ Purdue, Simon. “Ideological Nihilism and Aesthetic Violence: Mass Shooters and Online Antisocial Subcultures.” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, July 13, 2022. <https://gnet-research.org/2022/07/13/ideological-nihilism-and-aesthetic-violence-mass-shooters-and-online-antisocial-subcultures/>; Siegel, Daniel. “Generation Doomer: How Nihilism on Social Media is Creating a New Generation of Extremists.” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, December 12, 2022. <https://gnet-research.org/2022/12/12/generation-doomer-how-nihilism-on-social-media-is-creating-a-new-generation-of-extremists/>; For more on “mass shooterism”: “Mass Shooterism and the Need for Online Interventions and Bystander Resources.” *Moonshot*, August 2, 2022. <https://moonshotteam.medium.com/mass-shooterism-and-the-need-for-online-interventions-and-bystander-resources-4d81eac5378f>.

⁹⁸ For example: Hinnant, Lori and Frank Jordans. “Paranoia, racism: German killer drew on conspiracy tropes.” *AP News*, February 20, 2020. <https://apnews.com/article/new-zealand-mosque-attacks-shootings-ap-top-news-international-news-berlin-22f46b2de06ebe04c59e0e9bff87850e>; Gurski, Phil. “Incel violence is not terrorism... at least not yet.” *Borealis Threat & Risk Consulting*, May 28, 2020. <https://borealisthreatandrisk.com/incele-violence-is-not-terrorism-at-least-not-yet/>.

⁹⁹ It largely remains to be seen how much this impacts terrorism. Binder, Jens F. and Jonathan Kenyon. “Terrorism and the internet: How dangerous is online radicalization?” *Frontiers in Psychology*, (2022). <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.997390/full>.

extremist backlash. From the initial lockdowns to the rapid development of a vaccine, to government mandates requiring vaccination and mask-wearing, the pandemic has created a conspiratorial wasteland in its wake, introducing millions of Americans to extremist rhetoric and viewpoints, and possibly providing a gateway to a longer career of conspiracism for many.¹⁰⁰

The third generation of social media extremism is defined in no small part by its evolving reaction to moderation efforts, as well as its preference for less-policed locations.¹⁰¹ Supporters of the Islamic State, for example, have developed a range of evasion methods allowing them to entrench themselves once again on mainstream platforms.¹⁰² Other groups are defined by their moderation evasion techniques. The boogaloo movement, for example, often wears Hawaiian shirts covered in igloos. Both symbols are efforts at content moderation, specifically the movement's occasional rebranding as "big luau" or "big igloo" to avoid social media companies' detection algorithms. Much of the modern far-right's more violent rhetoric, too, seeks to evade crackdowns—either legal or from tech companies.¹⁰³ The Poway shooter, for instance, disguised a call for further attacks as only being part of a video game, advising his readers that "It is so easy to log on to Minecraft and get away with burning a synagogue (or mosque) to the ground if you're smart about it."¹⁰⁴ Moderation, or in more serious cases deplatforming, has also affected terrorism by inadvertently radicalizing the extremist fringe by filtering out the more casual, less extreme voices. As Berger writes, "Deplatforming helped reduce the overall reach of white-supremacist propaganda, but users who migrated to less prominent platforms quickly created a pressure-cooker environment where radicalization to violence could take place very quickly, with adherents goading one another into ever more extreme views and actions."¹⁰⁵

Beyond ideology, the third generation is also defined by a more personalized radicalization experience. Lone actors now often radicalize not along an ideological pathway but in the shadow of a predecessor they admire—dubbed "Saints" within the movement. A chain reaction of terrorism that struck Norway, New Zealand, the United States, and Germany from 2011 to 2019, which involved several far-right

¹⁰⁰ For example: Samayoa, Javier A. Granados, Courtney A. Moore, Benjamin C. Ruisch, Shelby T. Boggs, Jesse T. Ladanyi, and Russell H. Fazio. "A gateway conspiracy? Belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories prospectively predicts greater conspiracist ideation." *PLoS ONE* 17, no. 10 (2022).
<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0275502>.

¹⁰¹ Düker, Joey. "A Practitioner's Guide to Tackling Extremist Digital Environments." *VoxPol*, March 9, 2022.
<https://www.voxpol.eu/a-practitioners-guide-to-tackling-extremist-digital-environments/>.

¹⁰² McDonald, Brody. "Extremists are Seeping Back into the Mainstream: Algorithmic Detection and Evasion Tactics on Social Media Platforms." *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, October 31, 2022. <https://gnet-research.org/2022/10/31/extremists-are-seeping-back-into-the-mainstream-algorithmic-detection-and-evasion-tactics-on-social-media-platforms/>; Criezis, "Wilayat Facebook and Instagram."

¹⁰³ For more on content moderation: Clifford, Bennett. *The State of Online Terrorist Content Removal Policy in the United States*. The George Washington University Program on Extremism, December 2021.

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Moderating%20Extremism%20The%20State%20of%20Online%20Terrorist%20Content%20Removal%20Policy%20in%20the%20United%20States.pdf>; Alexander, Audrey. *A Plan for Preventing and Countering Terrorist and Violent Extremist Exploitation of Information and Communications Technology in America*. The George Washington University Program on Extremism, September 2019.
<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/A%20Plan%20for%20Preventing%20and%20Countering%20Terrorist%20and%20Violent%20Extremist.pdf>.

¹⁰⁴ Earnest, John. "An open letter." April 2019.

¹⁰⁵ Berger, "The Strategy of Violent White Supremacy Is Evolving."

terrorists citing their predecessors' manifestos, showcased the critical role that successful terrorists could have in inspiring successors.¹⁰⁶ The baton was then picked up by the aforementioned 18-year-old in Buffalo, New York, who opened fire at a Tops Friendly Market. The shooter's heavily plagiarized manifesto, which copied his predecessor in Christchurch, served as a tribute to the radicalizing power of not just that attack and the ideology that inspired it, but the attacker himself. An even more recent incident in Bratislava cited several prior attacks as motivation and was written in English which further evidences the increasingly globalizing nature of the violent far-right.¹⁰⁷ These attackers view themselves as additions to a long-standing lineage of white warriors defending their communities from some kind of foreign invasion, whether racial or cultural. As Thorleifsson and Düker write, "the *anons* themselves do not perceive the attack as a single, isolated event, but an interconnected chain of violent actions."¹⁰⁸

For those deeming the publication of manifestos alone to be insufficient, the livestream has also become an important propaganda tool—as displayed at Christchurch, Poway (although it failed to upload), Halle, and Buffalo. The "propaganda-by-the-deed" terrorist act practiced by today's far-right terrorist is perhaps most reminiscent of the anarchist terrorists of the early 1900s described in David Rapoport's seminal "four waves of modern terrorism" theory. "The creators of modern terrorism inherited a world in which traditional revolutionaries, who depended on pamphlets and leaflets to generate an uprising, suddenly seemed obsolete," Rapoport explains. "A new form of communication [...] was needed—one that would be heard and would command respect because the rebel took action that involved serious personal risks that signified deep commitment."¹⁰⁹ Terrorists today are, in other words, their own propaganda wing. As one team of scholars recently explained, "The objective of these communications is continually bidirectional: they address and encourage a transnational assemblage of online followers by saluting previous attackers and inciting further violence, and simultaneously disseminate hatred of already-marginalized groups, based on their religion, race or ethnicity."¹¹⁰ Indeed, today's terrorists often deride their companions who do not take action as so-called "keyboard warriors" who are insufficiently committed to the cause.

These developments have all impacted violence on the ground. Perhaps most notably, the decentralization of terrorist ideology has impacted terrorist targeting. The targets of violence have grown even more diffuse, as a greater array of possible justifications for extremist violence broaden the

¹⁰⁶ Macklin, Graham. "The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age." *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 6 (July 2019). <https://ctc.usma.edu/christchurch-attacks-livestream-terror-viral-video-age/>.

¹⁰⁷ For more: Ware, Jacob and Cleary Waldo. "Ideological Leaderless Resistance in the Digital Age." *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, October 26, 2022. <https://gnet-research.org/2022/10/26/ideological-leaderless-resistance-in-the-digital-age/>.

¹⁰⁸ Thorleifsson and Düker, "Lone Actors in Digital Environments."

¹⁰⁹ Rapoport, David C. "The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism." In Audrey Kurth Cronin and James M. Ludes (eds.) *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy*. Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2004: 50.

¹¹⁰ Kupper, Julia, Tanya Karoli Christensen, Dakota Wing, Marlon Hurt, Matthew Schumacher, and Reid Meloy. "The Contagion and Copycat Effect in Transnational Far-right Terrorism: An Analysis of Language Evidence." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 4 (August 2022).

<https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2022/issue-4/kupper-et-al.pdf>.

range of communities and institutions under threat. The early days of the COVID-19 pandemic provide an instructive example—as more traditional targets like places of worship shuttered their doors, a new range of COVID-specific targets, like hospitals and hospital ships, the Asian American community, and 5G towers (which some claimed were spreading the virus) found themselves under attack.¹¹¹ QAnon also shows the challenge of predicting terrorism from a more eclectic extremist network: the targets of QAnon and its conspiratorial allies' violence included a Washington DC pizzeria, the New York City mafia, and the Hoover Dam.¹¹²

In fact, in certain cases, the endgame is frequently just chaos. The emergence of youthful, largely online-based neo-Nazi organizations such as the Atomwaffen Division and The Base has catalyzed the re-emergence of accelerationism as a distinct terrorist strategy.¹¹³ Although a strategy with deep roots in American extremist history, not least in *The Turner Diaries*, referred to by some as the “bible of the racist right,” accelerationism has been coopted by this newer vein of online extremists who advocate for the destruction of Western liberal democracy in order for a new society to be constructed in the aftermath.¹¹⁴ Seemingly contradictory ideologies have sometimes united in the goal of “accelerating” chaos—as evidenced by a mutual affinity between some Salafi-jihadists and far-right extremists.¹¹⁵ Accelerationist strategy advances a new set of targets—such as infrastructure and political leaders.¹¹⁶ The end goal of this violence, these extremists say, is merely to accelerate the societal collapse already underway.

In other words, the lowered barriers to entry to violence, a trend begun during the second generation, have only continued to drop. As noted in the Department of Homeland Security's September 2019 Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence, “Communication advances have likely contributed to compressed ‘flash-to-bang’ timelines, the period between radicalization to violent

¹¹¹ For example: Stern, Samantha, Jacob Ware, and Nicholas Harrington. “Terrorist Targeting in the Age of Coronavirus.” *International Counter-Terrorism Review* 1, no. 3 (June 2020).

https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2562/Terrorist_Targeting_in_the_Age_of_Coronavirus#gsc.tab=0.

¹¹² Amarasingam, Amarnath and Marc-André Argentino. “The QAnon Conspiracy Theory: A Security Threat in the Making?” *CTC Sentinel*, 13, no. 7 (July 2020). <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-qanon-conspiracy-theory-a-security-threat-in-the-making/>

¹¹³ For more: Kriner, Conroy, Newhouse, and Lewis. “Understanding Accelerationist Narratives.”

¹¹⁴ Jackson, Camille. “The Turner Diaries, Other Racist Novels, Inspire Extremist Violence.” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, October 14, 2004. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2004/turner-diaries-other-racist-novels-inspire-extremist-violence>.

¹¹⁵ For example: Argentino, Marc-André, Amarnath Amarasingam, and Emmi Conley. “One Struggle”: Examining Narrative Syncretism between Accelerationists and Salafi-Jihadists. International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2022.

¹¹⁶ For example: Krill, Ilana and Bennett Clifford. *Mayhem, Murder, and Misdirection: Violent Extremist Attack Plots Against Critical Infrastructure in the United States, 2016-2022*. The George Washington University Program on Extremism, September 2022.

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/CriticalInfrastructureTargeting09072022.pdf>; Lyngaas, Sean.

“Violent extremists are increasingly sharing tactics for attacking power stations, DHS warns.” *CNN*, April 24, 2023.

<https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/24/politics/dhs-violent-extremists-power-stations/index.html>; Hoffman, Bruce and Jacob Ware. “The Accelerating Threat of the Political Assassination.” *War on the Rocks*, August 24, 2022.

<https://warontherocks.com/2022/08/the-accelerating-threat-of-the-political-assassination/>; Makuch, Ben and Mack Lamoureux. “Neo-Nazi Accelerationists Celebrating Attack on Congress As Start of Civil War.” *Vice*, January 6, 2021.

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/k7ankz/neo-nazi-accelerationists-celebrating-attack-on-congress-as-start-of-civil-war>.

extremism and mobilization to violence.”¹¹⁷ The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, based at the University of Maryland, released data in March 2023 showing that “From 2019-2021, 44.9% of far-right offenders [...] mobilized in less than 1 year compared to 21.5% from 2016-2018. Similarly, from 2019-2021, 55.7% of far-left extremist offenders mobilized in less than 1 year compared to only 9.7% from 2016-2018.” While conceding that “there has been a much smaller increase in the speed at which Islamist offenders have moved from radicalization to mobilization in recent years,” the timespan offered by the START researchers coincides roughly with the end of the second generation and beginning of the third generation proposed by this article.¹¹⁸ These shortened timelines have likely contributed to less effective attacks from less professional attackers—as seen at Poway when a gunman, whose manifesto declared “If you told me even 6 months ago that I would do this I would have been surprised,” was forced to abort his attack after his gun jammed after having killed one congregant.¹¹⁹

Significantly, lone-actor terrorism still reigns supreme across ideologies. According to Christine Abizaid, director of the National Counterterrorism Center, in 2022, “since 9/11, 37 of the 45 ISIS or Al Qaeda linked attacks in the homeland have been inspired by these groups, rather than centrally directed by them.”¹²⁰ And, beyond its impact on radicalization, the Internet is also playing a role in helping attackers tactically prepare for their attacks. In the Christchurch attack, for instance, the gunman was able to scavenge the open source for intelligence on his targets, including most notably, a video posted on Facebook of the inside of the first target, Masjid al-Noor.¹²¹

The net result of the third generation’s emergence is unpredictability: there is simply no telling who will launch the next terrorist attack; against whom; and where, how, and why. Accordingly, law enforcement and intelligence agencies are stretched, dealing with a widening array of extremist threats, just as resources are drawn away by other pressing national security concerns.¹²²

¹¹⁷ *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence*. Department of Homeland Security, September 2019. https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/19_0920_plcy_strategic-framework-countering-terrorism-targeted-violence.pdf.

¹¹⁸ Jensen, Michael, Sheehan Kane, Elena Akers. Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS). START, March 2023.

https://www.start.umd.edu/sites/default/files/publications/local_attachments/PIRUS%20March%202023%20Update.pdf.

¹¹⁹ Earnest, “An open letter.”; Taxin, Amy and Christopher Weber. “Rabbi says gun ‘miraculously jammed’ in California attack.” *Associated Press*, April 28, 2019. <https://apnews.com/article/ap-top-news-us-news-religion-shootings-california-14d2196c6d584b1287bc862a0e53c00a>.

¹²⁰ Abizaid, Christine. Statement for the Record to United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs Annual Threat Assessment to the Homeland, November 17, 2022.

<https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/congressional-testimonies/congressional-testimonies-2022/item/2342-2022-ata-d-nctc-opening-statement-of-record-to-the-hsgac>.

¹²¹ Ko tō tātou kāinga tēnei. Royal Commission of Inquiry into the terrorist attack on Christchurch masjidain on 15 March 2019, December 8, 2020: Part 6, Chapter 6. <https://christchurchattack.royalcommission.nz/>

¹²² For more: Hoffman, Bruce and Jacob Ware. “The counterterrorism dilemma.” *The Hill*, September 11, 2021.

<https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/571711-the-counterterrorism-dilemma/>; Hoffman, Bruce and Jacob Ware. “The Terrorist Threats and Trends to Watch Out for in 2023 and Beyond.” *CTC Sentinel* 15, no. 11 (November/December 2022). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-terrorist-threats-and-trends-to-watch-out-for-in-2023-and-beyond/>.

Conclusion

In 2004, terrorism scholar David Rapoport published his aforementioned “four waves of modern terrorism” theory.¹²³ Though sometimes maligned for its lack of predictive powers, its digestible explanation of the waves of terrorism (anarchist, anti-colonial, new left, and religious waves, with the last beginning in 1979), and the fact that the fourth wave should theoretically end soon, means the article and the theory it proposes are still often debated and tested. For example, the previously noted “virtual community of hatred” theory put forth by Jerrold Post’s team was one effort to predict the fifth wave—lone actor terrorism.¹²⁴

But, beyond ideology, there is an often-overlooked secondary aspect to the theory. Rapoport argues that each terrorism wave was set off by a major international event or development. The religious wave, for instance, was sparked in 1979 by the Islamic revolution in Iran, the start of a new Muslim century, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Scholars today disagree on the nature of Rapoport’s fifth wave, but many are united by their understanding of the spark—social media and the rise of online radicalization.¹²⁵ Predicting a “technological wave,” Jeffrey Simon writes that “no single type of terrorist ideology will dominate this new wave [...]. Instead, technology is there for all to take advantage of, offering any group or individual the opportunity to compete in the world of terrorism.”¹²⁶

In other words, many scholars agree that not since the transformative global earthquakes that set off the religious wave characterized by al-Qaeda and the Islamic State has an event or innovation (or “major military innovation,” to again borrow Horowitz’s language) so thoroughly revolutionized the terrorism threat as social media. “The computer offers, to those who become proficient in its use, power undreamed of by the rulers of the past,” Louis Beam, longstanding KKK leader, declared in 1984 as he planned to deploy the new technology as part of his extremist recruitment efforts.¹²⁷ Almost 40 years later, his words appear prophetic.

¹²³ Rapoport, “The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism,” 46-73.

¹²⁴ Post, McGinnis, and Moody, “The Changing Face of Terrorism in the 21st Century.”

¹²⁵ For example: *Ibid.*; Simon, Jeffrey. *Lone Wolf Terrorism: Understanding the Growing Threat*. Amherst: Prometheus, 2016.

¹²⁶ For more: Simon, *Lone Wolf Terrorism*.

¹²⁷ Beam, Louis. “COMPUTER AND THE AMERICAN PATRIOT.” *Inter-Klan Newsletter & Survival Alert*, 1984.

Table 1: The Three Generations of Online Radicalization

	First Generation	Second Generation	Third Generation
Years	1984 to mid-2000s	Mid-2000s to late-2010s	Late-2010s to today
Platforms	One-way forum sites and websites	First generation; large social media platforms, like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram	First and second generation; end-to-end encrypted apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram; and far-right specific apps like Gab and Parler
Impact on Radicalization	Extremist groups and networks spread propaganda more broadly and reach new recruits.	Extremists congregate in “echo chambers” which intensify radicalization, while algorithmic radicalization speeds up the process. Organizations are less important; more extremist ideologies turn to violence.	Ideology also grows less important, as “convergence” blends different traditions. Humor and memes contribute to the radicalization process and strengthen in-group bonds. Attackers more often share manifestos and cite online communities and predecessors. Women and children play a greater role as part of “mass radicalization,” as does mental health and a range of other “vulnerabilities.”
Impact on Terrorist Tactics and Targeting	Training and command-and-control now possible through virtual formats.	Violence increasingly defined by lone actors, with little training, attacking soft targets, using more rudimentary weaponry.	Almost all violence now committed by lone actors, employing even more diffuse terrorist targeting, often aimed at “accelerating” collapse. Shortened “flash-to-bang” timelines, often contributing to less effective attacks from less professional fighters. All contributes to a climate of unpredictability.

As mentioned, the generations of social media radicalization that Beam jumpstarted present themselves much like strains of the coronavirus—they emerge rapidly and eventually dominate predecessors, but those previous waves still linger, leaving a more diffuse and chaotic threat landscape. The third generation of social media-based radicalization, then, should be understood as both a departure from its predecessors, as well as an addition. In other words, we are facing both

fundamentally different extremists, as well as more numerous extremists. Certainly, recent years have seen acts of violence by both generations. For instance, a recent migrant processing center attack in Dover, England, was perpetrated by an older, long-term extremist who had frequently posted on Facebook.¹²⁸ The key for practitioners and policymakers now is continuing to work to better understand how each of the generations differs, how their unique characteristics affect different counter-measures that should be arrayed against them, and the various conditions that might make older generations come back to the fore.

Counterterrorism scholars and practitioners will also now be burdened with projecting the next developments on the horizon.¹²⁹ There is a perennial problem in counterterrorism studies: typically, by the time a trend is identified and countermeasures are deployed, that trend has already largely subsided and been replaced by a newer threat profile. The third generation proposed here may indeed already have been eclipsed by a fourth—defined by technologies that have not yet presented themselves in the public eye, or that are too novel to be truly appreciated.¹³⁰ Terrorist exploitation of the internet is not necessarily unique or particularly innovative—extremists make use of broader advances also used by more benign users.¹³¹ So, what comes next? The so-called “metaverse,” which offers an immersive form of virtual reality, may boost terrorist recruitment and coordination and allow for attacks on virtual targets.¹³² In other words, what Meta calls “the next chapter of social connection” might directly inspire the next chapter of social media radicalization. As might Web 3.0, which promises greater decentralization.¹³³ Both developments will continue to lower the barriers to entry to extremism to a range of constituents, further encouraging younger people and those without reliable offline grounding into radicalization. Artificial intelligence will present a range of opportunities, from targeting to coordination, and will boost the production of extremist propaganda.¹³⁴ Cryptocurrency may provide

¹²⁸ Hardy, Jack, Patrick Sawyer, and Berny Torre. “Dover petrol bomber ranted about migrants in racist Facebook posts.” *Telegraph*, November 1, 2022. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/11/01/migrant-dover-bomb-attack-suspect-named-as-counter-terror/>; Basra, Rajan. “The Online Footprint of the Dover Migrant Centre Terrorist.” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, December 13, 2022. <https://gnet-research.org/2022/12/13/the-online-footprint-of-the-dover-migrant-centre-terrorist/>; Wells, “The Growing Concern Over Older Far-Right Terrorists.”

¹²⁹ For more: “IntelBrief,” *Soufan Center*.

¹³⁰ Increasing the threat, groups will likely learn from those who successfully incorporate new technologies. Daymon, Chelsea, Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, and Emil Archambault. Learning from Foes: How Racially and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists Embrace and Mimic Islamic State’s Use of Emerging Technologies. *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, 2022. <https://gnet-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/GNET-Report-Learning-From-Foes.pdf>; Argentino, Marc-André, Shiraz Maher, and Charlie Winter. Violent Extremist Innovation: A Cross-Ideological Analysis. International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2021. <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/ICSR-Report-Violent-Extremist-Innovation-A-Cross%E2%80%91Ideological-Analysis.pdf>.

¹³¹ Neumann, Peter R. “Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 6 (2013): 431-459. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2013.784568>.

¹³² For example: Elson, Joel S., Austin C. Doctor, and Sam Hunter. “The metaverse offers a future full of potential – for terrorists and extremists, too.” *The Conversation*, January 7, 2022. <https://theconversation.com/the-metaverse-offers-a-future-full-of-potential-for-terrorists-and-extremists-too-173622#>.

¹³³ Fegan, Sasha. “Web3 is coming – with national security implications, too.” *Lowy Institute*, September 5, 2022. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/web3-coming-national-security-implications-too>; Rudman, Riaan and Rikus Bruwer. “Defining Web 3.0: opportunities and challenges.” *The Electronic Library* 34, no. 1 (2016): 132-154. <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/EL-08-2014-0140/full/html?fullSc=1&mbSc=1&fullSc=1&fullSc=1>.

¹³⁴ For more: Ware, Jacob. “Terrorist Groups, Artificial Intelligence, and Killer Drones.” *War on the Rocks*, September 24, 2019. <https://warontherocks.com/2019/09/terrorist-groups-artificial-intelligence-and-killer-drones/>; Siegel, Daniel and Mary

new covert funding streams.¹³⁵ It is also worth watching for new tactical, operational, and targeting trends that might herald the emergence of a new generation—as diffusing technologies, including 3D-printing and drones, get turned against the public.¹³⁶ As the counterterrorism community reflects on the challenges presented by the current generation of threats, it must prepare for the next MMI to bless extremists with new tools. A shifting information environment can also affect radicalization. The takeover of Twitter by businessman Elon Musk in October 2022, coupled with his principles of “free speech absolutism,” has considerably lessened the pressure on extremists on that platform. Indeed, within days of the new ownership, hate speech skyrocketed.¹³⁷

But there is an opportunity, particularly in the floods of intelligence posted online by terrorists themselves, both before and during their acts of violence. According to the Program on Extremism at The George Washington University, in around 77% of cases against participants in the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, defendants were arrested partly because of information gathered online.¹³⁸ In a new Twitter environment that extremists will see as more permissive to their ideology, they may loosen their rigid operational security guidelines, offering a boost to counterterrorism. Conversely, many third-generation extremists now make a very deliberate attempt to avoid online posting, unwilling to risk detection. Such practices were followed by the Christchurch gunman, the Christchurch Commission report concluding that “The individual took a number of steps intended to minimize his digital footprint so as to reduce the chances of relevant law enforcement agencies, following the terrorist attack, being able to obtain a full understanding of his internet activity.”¹³⁹ We therefore cannot rely solely on the online space for our counterterrorism.

Bennett Doty. “Weapons of Mass Disruption: Artificial Intelligence and the Production of Extremist Propaganda.” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, February 17, 2023. <https://gnet-research.org/2023/02/17/weapons-of-mass-disruption-artificial-intelligence-and-the-production-of-extremist-propaganda/>; Baele, Stephane. “Artificial Intelligence And Extremism: The Threat Of Language Models For Propaganda Purposes.” *Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats*, October 25, 2022. <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/artificial-intelligence-and-extremism-the-threat-of-language-models/>.

¹³⁵ Dion-Schwarz, Cynthia, David Manheim, and Patrick B. Johnston. *Terrorist Use of Cryptocurrencies: Technical and Organizational Barriers and Future Threats*. RAND Corporation, 2019. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3026.html.

¹³⁶ Cronin, *Power to the People*.; Rassler, Don and Muhammad al-'Ubaydi. “Anticipating Future Directions of Tech-Enabled Terror.” *Lawfare*, December 12, 2021. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/anticipating-future-directions-tech-enabled-terror>.

¹³⁷ Busch, Ella. “The Bird Has Been Freed, and So Has a New Era of Online Extremism.” *Small Wars Journal*, (January 2, 2023). <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/bird-has-been-freed-and-so-has-new-era-online-extremism>; Miller, Carl, David Weir, Shaun Ring, Oliver Marsh, Chris Inskip, and Nestor Prieto Chavana. “Antisemitism on Twitter Before and After Elon Musk’s Acquisition.” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, March 15, 2023. <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Antisemitism-on-Twitter-Before-and-After-Elon-Musks-Acquisition.pdf>.

¹³⁸ Clifford, Bennett and Jon Lewis. ‘This is the Aftermath’: Assessing Domestic Violent Extremism One Year After the Capitol Siege. The George Washington University Program on Extremism, January 2022. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/This%20is%20the%20Aftermath.pdf>; Reyes, Kevin D. “Jan 6 series: How OSINT powered the largest criminal investigation in US history.” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, February 14, 2023. https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/jan-6-series-how-osint-powered-the-largest-criminal-investigation-in-us-history/.

¹³⁹ Ko tō tātou kāinga tēnei. Royal Commission of Inquiry into the terrorist attack on Christchurch masjidain on 15 March 2019, December 8, 2020: Part 4, Chapter 4. <https://christchurchattack.royalcommission.nz/>.

The generational framework proposed here should encourage academics, counterterrorism practitioners, and tech policymakers to avoid discussing “social media radicalization” as a monolith. As Stuart Macdonald and Joe Whittaker note as part of a reflection on the overestimation of the impact of the online space in radicalization, “A striking feature of the term online radicalization is the variety of behaviors to which it is used to refer.”¹⁴⁰ Indeed, this trend has now developed considerably from even 10 years ago, and today’s radicals have little in common with those who radicalized in an earlier era. A more nuanced approach both to studies of online radicalization and to efforts to combat it would be beneficial.

Additionally, the factors characterizing the third generation offer important implications for academics, practitioners, and policymakers. Firstly, given the unique characteristics of the third generation, including the greater prevalence of youth and those dealing with mental health issues, more research is now needed to determine whether online communities sometimes might actually deter violence by providing the precise community and sense of belonging many seek.¹⁴¹ Whereas in the first and second generations social media was purely a means to an end for extremists, for many third-generation extremists, it is the end in itself. Any efforts to moderate online extremism must also account for replacing the sense of community that many radicals have found in such spaces. Scholars should also intensify their study of shitposting culture, employing algorithms to determine whether some language is more frequently used by individuals who are genuinely plotting violence as opposed to merely bloviating.¹⁴² Such conclusions would have considerable utility for practitioners seeking to identify credible threats online.

For practitioners, the growing prevalence of “vulnerabilities” or “susceptibility” in the radicalization story has highlighted the importance of bold and innovative measures to counter violent extremism, both online and offline.¹⁴³ The demographics of far-right extremism have grown more diverse, and

¹⁴⁰ Macdonald, Stuart and Joe Whittaker. “Online Radicalization: Contested Terms and Conceptual Clarity.” In John R. Vacca (ed.) *Online Terrorist Propaganda, Recruitment, and Radicalization*. Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2019.

¹⁴¹ For example: Thorburn, Joshua. “The (de-)radical(-ising) potential of r/IncelExit and r/ExRedPill.” *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, (2023). <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/13675494231153900>.; Daly, Sarah E. and Annie Laurie Nichols. “‘Incels are shit-post kings’: incels’ perceptions of online forum content.” *Journal of Crime and Justice*, (2023). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0735648X.2023.2169330?journalCode=rjcrj20>.; There is also a growing literature on “internal brakes” that might stop a movement from turning to violence. Busher, Joel, Donald Holbrook, and Graham Macklin. “The internal brakes on violent escalation: a typology.” *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 11, (2019): 3-25. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19434472.2018.1551918>.; Schuurman, Bart. “Non-Involvement in Terrorist Violence: Understanding the Most Common Outcome of Radicalization Processes.” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, no. 6 (December 2020): 14-26.

¹⁴² For example: Scrivens, Ryan, Garth Davies, Tiana Gaudette, and Richard Frank. “Comparing Online Posting Typologies among Violent and Nonviolent Right-Wing Extremists.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, (July 2022). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2099269>.

¹⁴³ For more on “vulnerabilities”: Schuurman, Bart and Sarah L. Carthy. “The Makings of a Terrorist: Continuity and Change Across Left-, Right- and Jihadist Extremists and Terrorists in Europe and North-America, 1960s-Present.” *Deviant Behavior*, (2022). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01639625.2022.2118088>.; For more on “susceptibility”: Rieger, Diana, Lena Frischlich, and Gary Bente. *Propaganda 2.0: Psychological Effects of Right-Wing and Islamic Extremist Internet Videos*. Köln: Luchterhand Verlag, 2013. For more on “exclusion”: Cuppens, Tessa. “Conference Note: Offline Exclusion, Online Inclusion?” *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 33 (Winter 2022/23): 318-328. <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/683/401>.; For more on the possible need for mental health programming

counterterrorism should also grow more diverse.¹⁴⁴ Practitioners should, for example, look at ways to involve younger people in counter-extremism.¹⁴⁵ This is difficult to organize organically, but essential. If young people are playing a growing role on the extremism stage, young people must also be enrolled in efforts to counter the violence extremism inspires. *Birds Aren't Real*, a grassroots faux conspiracy theory, offers one model of what such organizing might look like while simultaneously underscoring the challenges inherent in such efforts.¹⁴⁶ Such programs should be studied for their effectiveness and assessed for whether they can or should be encouraged or funded by government or private actors. Practitioners should also assess the importance of parents in the counterterrorism space, studying whether parents, particularly those with a vulnerability to radicalization, should be encouraged to play an active role in monitoring their children's social media access and relationships with online friends. With the radicalization process now extending into bedrooms, parents, who traditionally have played a leading role in guarding against extremist recruitment of their children, have been circumvented. One mother wrote in *The New York Times*, "Racists Are Recruiting. Watch Your White Sons."¹⁴⁷ Her suggestion—that open discussion of the challenging questions young people might seek answers to online is an important counterterrorism tool—needs to be studied.¹⁴⁸

And for policymakers, the chaotic nature of the third generation, as well as the equally chaotic takeover of Twitter, has revealed in stark terms the importance of greater oversight of social media companies. Compounding the challenge of this latest manifestation of extremism online is the fact that social media has allowed terrorists to circumvent the government altogether. As the Biden Administration's June

as a response to radicalization: Kenyon, Jonathan. "The Internet and Radicalisation Pathways: Technological Advances, Mental Health and the Role of Attackers." *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, January 16, 2023. <https://gnet-research.org/2023/01/16/the-internet-and-radicalisation-pathways-technological-advances-mental-health-and-the-role-of-attackers/>; Corner, Emily and Paul Gill, "Is There a Nexus Between Terrorist Involvement and Mental Health in the Age of the Islamic State?" *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 1 (January 2017). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/is-there-a-nexus-between-terrorist-involvement-and-mental-health-in-the-age-of-the-islamic-state/>; Koehler, Daniel. "The Radicalisation Pendulum: Introducing A Trauma-Based Model Of Violent Extremist Radicalisation." *Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats*, November 13, 2022. <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/comment/the-radicalisation-pendulum-koehler/>; Copeland, Simon and Sarah Marsden. "The Relationship Between Mental Health Problems And Terrorism." *Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats*, November 4, 2020. <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/the-relationship-between-mental-health-problems-and-terrorism/>; For a counterargument: Hollewell, Georgia F. and Nicholas Longpré. "Radicalization in the Social Media Era: Understanding the Relationship between Self-Radicalization and the Internet." *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 66, no. 8 (2022): 896-913. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0306624X211028771>.

¹⁴⁴ For more on how to incorporate new constituencies into counterterrorism and countering violent extremism: Pandith, Farah. *How We Win: How Cutting-Edge Entrepreneurs, Political Visionaries, Enlightened Business Leaders, and Social Media Mavens Can Defeat the Extremist Threat*. New York: HarperCollins, 2019.

¹⁴⁵ For one example in the Philippines: Ragandang, Primitivo III Cabanes. "Youths Challenging Violent Extremism through Digital Platforms in the Philippines." *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, March 24, 2023. <https://gnet-research.org/2023/03/24/youths-challenging-violent-extremism-through-digital-platforms-in-the-philippines/>.

¹⁴⁶ Lorenz, Taylor. "Birds Aren't Real, or Are They? Inside a Gen Z Conspiracy Theory." *The New York Times*, December 9, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/technology/birds-arent-real-gen-z-misinformation.html>; For more on counter-narratives: Liang, Christina Schori and Matthew John Cross. "White Crusade: How to Prevent Right-Wing Extremists from Exploiting the Internet." *Geneva Centre for Security Policy* 11, (July 2020).

¹⁴⁷ Schroeder, Joanna. "Racists Are Recruiting. Watch Your White Sons." *The New York Times*, October 12, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/12/opinion/sunday/white-supremacist-recruitment.html>.

¹⁴⁸ Some similarly call for raising the internet age, for example, to 16: Auchincloss, Jake. "Too many young men are failing online." *Boston Globe*, April 20, 2023. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/04/20/opinion/jack-teixeira-discord-online-hate/>.

2021 National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism noted, the “front lines are overwhelmingly private-sector online platforms.”¹⁴⁹ Without the private sector’s willingness to contribute, then, counterterrorism becomes near-impossible.¹⁵⁰ These platforms’ inertia has led to significant debates over the future of Section 230—an element of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 giving platforms immunity from legal culpability over material posted on their sites—as well as two landmark Supreme Court cases.¹⁵¹ Companies have had enough opportunity to improve moderation standards and make their platforms healthier (One scholar argues that “a cultural change is required in terms of how social networking and media sharing platforms understand their role”—a noble if perhaps quixotic argument).¹⁵² Policymakers, in collaboration with academics and practitioners, need to play a far more aggressive role to ensure platforms can no longer radicalize such masses of people.¹⁵³ Although the consequences of such oversight may be severe, many social media companies have lost the right to be trusted to forge a better path forward. Deterring new generations of social media-radicalized extremists will require a more active government role.

Unfortunately, the clearest conclusion of this study is that combating online extremism remains an all-encompassing and overwhelmingly difficult challenge. Terrorism scholars and analysts have watched the rising impact of social media and the internet on extremism for 40 years now. How to counter such organizing remains the field’s million-dollar question. As we approach a fourth generation of online radicalization, we are no closer to an answer.

¹⁴⁹ *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism*. National Security Council, June 2021.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/National-Strategy-for-Countering-Domestic-Terrorism.pdf>.

¹⁵⁰ If social media companies do decide to play a greater role, some (flawed) content moderation options can be found in Byman, Daniel. “Content Moderation Tools to Stop Extremism.” *Lawfare*, September 22, 2022.

<https://www.lawfareblog.com/content-moderation-tools-stop-extremism>.

¹⁵¹ For example: Millhisser, Ian. “The Supreme Court hears two cases that could ruin the internet.” *Vox*, February 16, 2023.

<https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2023/2/16/23582848/supreme-court-internet-section-230-terrorism-cases-gonzalez-google-twitter-taamneh>; Ryan-Mosley, Tate. “The Supreme Court may overhaul how you live online.” *MIT Technology Review*, February 13, 2023. <https://www.technologyreview.com/2023/02/13/1068311/supreme-court-section-230-gonzalez-google-content-recommendation-algorithm/>;

Schonfeld, Zach. “Pro-ISIS content at heart of Section 230 Supreme Court arguments.” *The Hill*, February 15, 2023. <https://thehill.com/policy/technology/3858005-pro-isis-content-at-heart-of-section-230-supreme-court-arguments/>; Parker, Andy. “My daughter was killed during a live interview. This Supreme Court case could reshape the internet.” *The Independent*, February 16, 2023.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/alison-parker-supreme-court-gonzalez-google-video-b2282937.html>; Fishman, Brian. “Dual-use regulation: Managing hate and terrorism online before and after Section 230 reform.” *Brookings Institution*, March 14, 2023. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/dual-use-regulation-managing-hate-and-terrorism-online-before-and-after-section-230-reform/>.

¹⁵² Allington, Daniel. “Conspiracy Theories, Radicalisation and Digital Media.” Global Network on Extremism & Technology, 2021. <https://gnet-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/GNET-Conspiracy-Theories-Radicalisation-Digital-Media.pdf>. For more on platforms’ refusal to act: Mac, Ryan and Sheera Frenkel. “Internal Alarm, Public Shrugs: Facebook’s Employees Dissect Its Election Role.” *The New York Times*, October 22, 2021.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/22/technology/facebook-election-misinformation.html>; Barrett, Paul, Justin Hendrix, and Grant Sims. “How tech platforms fuel U.S. political polarization and what government can do about it.” *Brookings Institution*, September 27, 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2021/09/27/how-tech-platforms-fuel-u-s-political-polarization-and-what-government-can-do-about-it/>.

¹⁵³ For more on the possible role of the military in this space: Clarke, Colin P. “In-Depth Briefing #43: Tech-savvy terrorism.” *CHACR*, January 13, 2023. <https://chacr.org.uk/2023/01/13/in-depth-briefing-43-tech-savvy-terrorism/>.



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