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**Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships
Academic Digest | Spring 2021**

Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Academic Digest | Spring 2021



Note from the Director

Welcome to the inaugural issue of the targeted violence and terrorism prevention (TVTP) Academic Highlight. Here, the Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships (CP3) will provide the latest and most cutting-edge research supporting innovations in prevention efforts at the local level. We offer this digest as a service to those establishing and expanding local prevention frameworks.

Our hope is that this digest will serve as a resource to ensure that evidence-based practices continue to mark the progress of prevention at the local level. We will continue to expand and enhance this digest based on the feedback of readers like yourself, so please be sure to provide us feedback—good and critical—to help us improve this product for you.

Dr. John T. Picarelli, Director

DHS Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships

Executive Summary

As the public health approach to understanding targeted violence and terrorism prevention gains traction, academia has increased its focus on the social, psychological, emotional, and attitudinal factors of radicalization to and disengagement from violent extremism. Recent studies have placed an emphasis on the role of the Internet, social media, and videogames as tools for recruitment and radicalization to violence, but also as a space for potential intervention and rehabilitation. The online environment has also facilitated the proliferation of disinformation and conspiracy theories, which have been tied to violent extremist beliefs and behaviors. Finally, with heightened research in the online space comes increased considerations for ethical guidelines and researcher safety.

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New Models for Deploying Counterspeech: Measuring Behavioral Change and Sentiment Analysis

Saltman, E., Farshad Kooti & Karly Vockery. (2021): Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2021.1888404>.

SUMMARY

The efficacy of countermessaging in preventing and countering violent extremism programming has been contested throughout the years. What are the measurable impacts of this messaging on an individual's behavior and attitudes? Through two models of counterspeech—A/B testing and the Redirect Method—behavioral change and sentiment analysis can be better measured and understood, beyond assessing reach of and engagement with this online content. “Counterspeech” in this context includes both preventative and alternative messaging in addition to more directed countermessaging. In this study, the A/B test observed a target audience of 37,000 individuals over a two-week period and focused on assessing both “softer” preventative content and “harder” counter-content through ad marketing. The goal was to assess behavioral changes among audiences with early indicators of radicalization to violence. The second model combined features of the Redirect Method (potentially harmful online searches that trigger engagement with offline intervention practitioners) and existing online safety interventions on Facebook. Results showed no negative impacts—or increased radicalization—of counterspeech. Specifically, the A/B test showed positive shifts of decreased engagement with extremist content for what the authors defined as “higher risk” populations. The Redirect Method led to significant increases in audiences discovering off-platform engagement and disengagement resources. Since the latter initiative was launched in March 2019, the NGO facilitating intervention and disengagement from the Redirect Method saw an increase in over 200 new users and referrals from Facebook.

Uncovering the Far-Right Online Ecosystem: An Analytical Framework and Research Agenda

Stephane J. Baele, Lewys Brace & Travis G. Coan (2020): *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1862895>.

SUMMARY

The authors provide an analytical framework for studying the “far-right online,” to ensure data collection and analysis is comprehensive and cumulative. Rather than viewing far-right online communities and activities as part of a static landscape with well-defined components, the authors contend these communities are best understood as a dynamic and multidimensional space, or “ecosystem.” This ecosystem is comprised of four main components that require their own level of analysis: entities (individual domains), communities (linked entities), biotopes (groupings of communities with shared thematic, ideological, or cultural sub-identities) and whole network (vast and evolving ecosystem).

Playing for Hate? Extremism, Terrorism, and Videogames

Nick Robinson & Joe Whittaker (2021): *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*,
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1866740>.

SUMMARY

While the production of new videogames by terrorist organizations and extremist groups has been on the decline over the past two decades, their use in recruitment and propaganda remains an integral part of communication tactics. Much of the research to date has focused on videogames solely as a tool for recruitment, and there is a considerable gap in understanding these platforms as effective spaces for persuasive messaging and propaganda. This messaging often serves to reinforce and normalize the beliefs already held by those in the movement, including game-based iconography that is easily recognized by followers of that ideology. Gameplay and interactivity are other key elements of gaming that are just as important as narrative and content, and deserve further study. For instance, the communities of players, hierarchies, and organized groups that are fostered by gameplay provide players with a sense of identity and belonging, that can be exploited by terrorists and violent extremists. Ultimately, the audiences of these games, including mods to existing video games, should be viewed as heterogeneous and therefore may be impacted by their messaging in a number of ways.

Introduction to the Special Issue: Extremism and Terrorism Online – Widening the Research Base

Maura Conway & Stuart Macdonald (2021). *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*,
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1866730>.

SUMMARY

The author offers six suggestions for advancing research on the role of the Internet in violent extremism and terrorism: 1) widen the range of types of online violent extremism and terrorism behind studied beyond violent jihadis; 2) compare, not just across ideologies, but also groups, countries, language, and social media platforms; 3) deepen analysis; 4) improve capacity to undertake “big data” collection and analysis; 5) move beyond terrorism studies to become acquainted with Internet Studies literature and other interdisciplinary research; and 6) consider more closely the role of gender. This special issue of *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* expands the research base, and encompasses articles that compare transnational online posting behavior; discuss multimodality of images, symbols, and interactive play; platform migration; and examines ethical frameworks for countering online extremist and terrorist propaganda.

Incel (E)motives: Resentment, Shame and Revenge

Simon Cottee (2021). *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1822589>.

SUMMARY

In this article, the author makes several key points regarding research on Incels. Incels are part of a fringe online subculture, whose ideology is rooted in misogyny, self-pity, resentment, and fatalism. Incel grievances revolve around being unable to find sexual partners. Beyond feelings of frustration, the deficit of sexual relationships instigates a feeling of moral wrong inflicted upon them by women, society, and genetics. It is important to clarify that not all violence carried out by incels will—or should—count as terrorism, as many of these attacks will lack the necessary ideological motive or justification. Additionally, it is critical to differentiate incel violence from gender-based violence against women, as many incel-inspired attacks have also targeted men. Incel-inspired violence serves four interrelated purposes: 1) to punish women and the specified categories of men, 2) to therapeutically de-humiliate the perpetrator, 3) to communicate a message of hurt and visibility, and 4) to attack what is seen as the complacency of mainstream society. Importantly, inceldom does not ideologically justify acts of violence, as most individuals who identify as incels do not believe violence is necessary to accomplish their goals. Researching feelings of shame, revenge, and victimhood can provide a useful lens through which to analyze incel-inspired attacks.

Comparing the Online Posting Behaviors of Violent and Non-Violent Right-Wing Extremists

Ryan Scrivens, Thomas W. Wojciechowski, Joshua D. Freilich, Steven M.

Chermak & Richard Frank (2021). *Terrorism and Political Violence*.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1891893>.

Analyzing data found on the largest white supremacy website, Stormfront, the authors describe the differences in behaviors of violent versus non-violent extremists. Content was collected from 125,000 posts made by approximately 7,000 authors between 2001 and 2017, identifying a total of 49 violent and 50 non-violent extremists from this list of usernames. Measurements of online activity included total forum and sub-forum posts, frequency of posts, active months in the communities, and the status of offline violence. Ultimately, the study found that there was a general decline in posting behavior over time, suggesting that users may have migrated to other smaller platforms to avoid detection. Violent extremists in this study posted more messages in the sub-forum in the beginning of their posting careers than the non-violent group, but posted less than the non-violent group in the later portions of their posting careers. This suggests that from a policy perspective, more attention should be given to those who post in these online forums less. The study may serve to inform future risk factor frameworks used by law enforcement and intelligence agencies to identify credible threats online.

Contextualizing Disengagement: How Exit Barriers Shape the Pathways Out of Far-Right Extremism in the United States

Michael Jensen, Patrick James & Elizabeth Yates (2020). *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1759182>.

Push and pull factors for engagement and disengagement in violent extremism are complex mechanisms that dynamically interact in a variety of contexts. Previous research often views these factors in isolation from personal, social and structural conditions, which can limit understanding of the complex nuances of disengagement. The authors of this study used qualitative comparative analysis of 50 far-right extremists (25 who successfully disengaged and 25 who remain engaged in extremism) and used the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) database to show how push and pull factors and barriers to exit influence disengagement pathways. Two major obstacles to disengagement were present in every case within the sample that failed to disengage: 1) past incarceration and 2) the presence of radical family members or romantic partners. The barrier of previous incarceration tended to cluster with other obstacles such as poor education or work histories, substance abuse, and mental illness, while existing radical family members often clustered with identity-related obstacles. Results of the study provide insightful recommendations for the specific disengagement strategies appropriate to individuals. For example, extremists who were incarcerated but not tied to movements through family members disengaged when exposed to support services that addressed psychological issues and socioeconomic disadvantages. In these cases, drug and alcohol rehabilitation or mental health counseling were often successful. Conversely, individuals who were tied to extremist movements through radical family members or romantic partners but did not have prison histories disengaged after they became disillusioned with the groups and severed personal ties. In these cases, drug and alcohol rehabilitation and mental health counseling did not have a positive impact on disengagement. Finally, individuals who had both barriers to exit were the least likely to disengage, as they faced psychological, emotional, economic, and social barriers. These findings have important policy implications for applying specific intervention, rehabilitation, and reintegration programs to individuals.

Conspiracy Beliefs and Violent Extremist Intentions: The Contingent Effects of Self-efficacy, Self-control and Law-related Morality

Bettina Rottweiler & Paul Gill (2020). *Terrorism and Political Violence*.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1803288>.

SUMMARY

The authors found a strong correlation between the propensity towards conspiracy beliefs and violent extremist intentions; however the impact is dependent upon individual behavioral and attitudinal characteristics. This correlation of similar violent extremist and conspiracy beliefs may support the theory that underlying psychology helps to explain why some individuals are drawn to these narratives. Research links conspiracy beliefs to threat perceptions, prejudice and negative attitudes against powerful or social marginalized outgroups, which may lead to feelings of alienation and political or social disengagement. Like conspiracy beliefs, which seek to make sense of complex and distressing social or political events, extremist beliefs also seek to structure the world unambiguously to reduce feelings of uncertainty. This study surveyed 1502 respondents in Germany using the Radicalism Intention Scale and the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire, as well as questions regarding self-efficacy, self-control, and legal cynicism. Individuals who held stronger conspiracy beliefs exhibited a higher readiness to engage in violent extremism, and individuals who scored highly in both conspiracy beliefs and self-efficacy may feel more capable of taking violent action in order to achieve their goals or address grievances. Results also support the theory that low self-control presents a risk factor when coupled with a propensity toward conspiracy thinking. When belief in conspiracy theories is high and self-control is high, the impact of conspiracy beliefs on violent extremism intentions is mitigated. These findings support the need for further research into protective factors with an additional focus on the psychological, attitudinal, and cognitive factors that facilitate conspiracy theory and violent extremist beliefs.

From Pawn to Knights: The Changing Role of Women's Agency in Terrorism?

Mia Bloom & Ayse Lokmanoglu (2020). *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1759263>.

SUMMARY

The authors contend that gender roles are shifting in violent extremist organizations and movements. Analyzing case studies of Al-Qaeda, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and Boko Haram outside of the typical patriarchal lens is necessary for understanding the agency of women in terrorist organizations beyond simply the stereotypes of pawns or victims. While the misogynistic and patriarchal society has kept women from having a role in combat, Al-Qaeda has enabled them to significantly impact recruitment and messaging, particularly with the growing role of the Internet. Women in Boko Haram and ISIS fulfilled roles with more active agency, such as suicide bombing, but also provided some of the same tactical support as seen in Al-Qaeda. Many of these support roles or involvement in recruitment and messaging are considered to give only the appearance of agency and may only be a façade. Ultimately, despite instances where groups attempt to convey only the appearance of increased women's agency, recent research shows that women's participation in terrorism cannot be assumed and has evolved beyond merely symbolic or supportive roles.

The Truth Is Out There: The Prevalence of Conspiracy Theory Use by Radical Violent Extremist Organizations

Gregory J. Rousis, F. Dan Richard & Dong-Yuan Debbie Wang (2020). *Terrorism and Political Violence*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1835654>.

SUMMARY

The authors argue that the nexus between conspiracy theories, disinformation, and violent extremism is becoming an increasingly pertinent topic for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. In this study, English language recruitment propaganda was analyzed for radical violent extremists, nonviolent extremists, and moderate groups to determine whether conspiracy theories propagated calls for violence and elicited a sense of loss of significance via the quest for significance theory. This study suggests individuals' grievances are exploited for recruitment into violent extremist groups to fulfill the desire for one's life to have meaning. Six groups and their affiliated publications were considered, and using text analysis software, passages were coded to measure the frequency of violent and conspiracy theory content. The study concluded that radical violent extremist groups used exponentially more conspiracy theories in their rhetoric than nonviolent extremist and moderate groups.

Online Extremism and Terrorism Research Ethics: Researcher Safety, Informed Consent, and the Need for Tailored Guidelines

Maura Conway (2021). *Terrorism and Political Violence*.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1880235>.

SUMMARY

As the Internet continues to play an exponentially greater role in terrorism and violent extremism, research in this space will inherently increase, and with it, the author contends there will be an increase in complications and concerns over research ethics and researcher safety. The mental and emotional wellbeing of researchers is paramount when working in this field and it is no different when discussing social media and online sources. Other practitioners and professionals in the space of online extremism and terrorism content “benefit from a certain level of welfare” and protections, whereas academia is lagging in this regard. Additional knowledge, resources, and training are required to mitigate some potential risks and harms. The hostile environments of online violent extremist spaces can be particularly problematic and harmful for those who are targeted by the hateful and violent rhetoric of the ideologies being studied, including for people of color, LGBTQIA+ individuals, Jewish people, immigrants, and women. The author also notes that there are debates surrounding whether the content of online data is public or private, and whether consent for gathering this data is necessary. The only type of extremist or terrorist content that is explicitly public is that which has been created and shared with the express purpose of being disseminated, such as propaganda and messaging. The author concludes that when it comes to field work in the online space, tailored guidelines are necessary to appropriately address researcher safety and ethical considerations of informed consent.

A Public Health Ethics Model of Countering Violent Extremism.

Neil D. Shortland, Nicholas Evans & John Colautti (2021). *Terrorism and Political Violence*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1880231>.

SUMMARY

This study applies four ethical criteria drawn from public health to a recent CVE initiative. Operation250 (an organization funded by the National Institute of Justice for this study) created a prevention program for students. A randomized control trial on program effectiveness found that students who were exposed to their programming showed a significant improvement in their ability to recognize online disinhibition and risky behaviors. The four criteria drawn from public health ethics include impingement on civil liberties, the degree to which it is effective in achieving its goals while minimizing harms on others, the degree to which it is the least infringing policy that can achieve the goal, and finally the degree to which the program has widespread public support. Operation250 met these criteria. The authors conclude that applying this ethical framework rooted in public health may serve to ensure best practices are being met with respect to program design and civil liberties.

Primum Non Nocere – First Do No Harm

Max Taylor & John Horgan (2021). *Terrorism and Political Violence*.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1880239>.

SUMMARY

The do no harm principle, typically applied in medical fields, can be an appropriate guiding principle for terrorism researchers and counterterrorism practitioners, as this field necessarily involves real-world practice and potentially real-world consequences. In this article, the authors argue that terrorism researchers and practitioners are constantly faced with a range of ethical dilemmas, and this is further complicated by the inherent dangers in the reciprocal relationship between action and reaction in terrorism—that is, terrorist violence could generate a violent response. Other disciplines such as law and medicine have established various regulations and controls to avoid abuse and potential damage, but because terrorism and political violence draw upon many areas of study, and not all ethical structures across those fields are equal. Ethical responses to terrorism, both operational or research-focused, are necessary to consider the effectiveness of counterterrorism or prevention programming, and can serve to focus attention on the importance of personal responsibility and integrity in research.

Criminal or Terrorist?: Fear, Bias, and Public Support for Prisoner Reentry Programs.

Mary Beth Altier (2021). *Terrorism and Political Violence*.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1866556>.

SUMMARY

Public support for terrorist rehabilitation programs plays a significant role in their efficacy and success. Drawing upon existing research from criminology and social psychological theory, the author conducted a survey of over 1,000 U.S. citizens to gauge perceptions of and attitudes towards rehabilitation programming and whether public support changed depending on several key variables: the ideological motivations of the offender, the nature and tactics of the attack, and the offender's age. Results show that public support for reentry or rehabilitation programs is significantly lower for terrorists when compared with other criminal offenders, but was still supported by a majority of respondents. Second, support was significantly lower when respondents are primed on an Islamist terrorist with a traditionally Muslim name versus a white nationalist terrorist with a traditionally Caucasian name. Third, support for rehabilitative programming was significantly higher for an Islamist terrorist convicted of conspiracy to commit murder than a juvenile convicted of material support. Finally, men, younger individuals, those with some college education, and self-identified liberals were more likely to support terrorist rehabilitation programming.

Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships (CP3) Additional Resources:

- [Threat Assessment and Management Teams](#)
- [Media Literacy and Critical Thinking Online](#)
- [Mitigating Social Isolation in Youth](#)
- [Building Peer-to-Peer Engagements](#)
- [Risk Factors and Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention](#)
- www.dhs.gov/CP3

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