



The Internet as a Breeding Ground for Extremist Ideology

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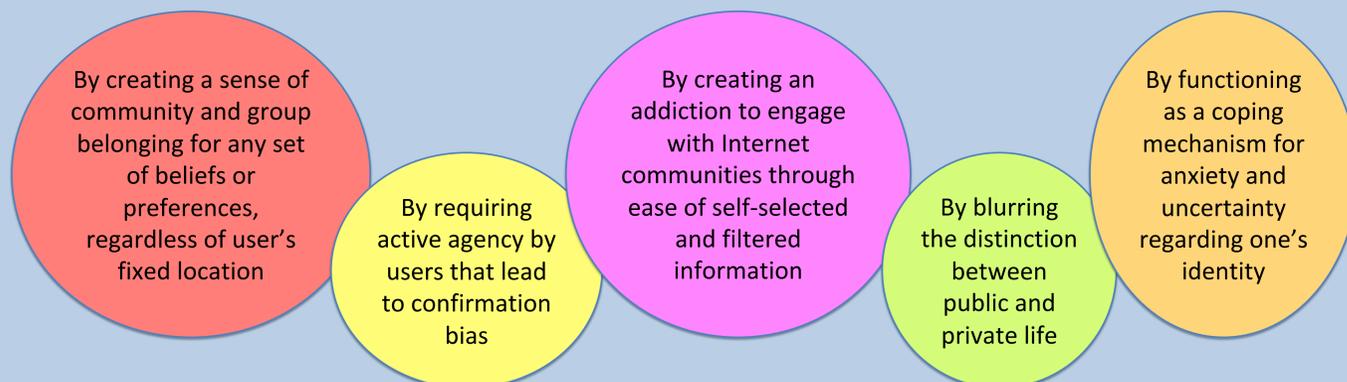
Introduction

Political polarization between the left and right is sharpened by the tendency of parties to communicate in echo chambers, in which exposure to information and ideas serve to reinforce pre-existing worldviews (Garrett, 2009; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). These echo chambers are exacerbated by the Internet, a political public sphere, which facilitates the compartmentalization of various political ideologies (W.L. Bennett, 2016). In particular, social media has become instrumental to the formation, legitimation, and consolidation of recent social movements (e.g. MeToo, Black Lives Matter).

Political groups have used the Internet to proliferate their ideas, organize rallies, create virtual communities, engage with public figures and political opponents. Legions of Twitter users have used the hashtag #AltRight to promote an ideology tied to the White Power Movement (WPM), which envisions a transnational racial nation uniting all White people across national boundaries (Belew, 2018). In 2017, the Alt-Right used Internet platforms to organize the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia which led to the violent confrontation between two politically polarized groups (Alt-Right and Anti-Fa) and the death of Heather Heyer. Since its founding, WPM factions have used the Internet to recruit and radicalize new members. Thus, there remains a serious need for Internet-specific principles around media literacy, and the understanding of the Internet as a breeding ground for extremist ideologies and in furthering the violent goals of the WPM.

Theoretical Framework

While the literature on media effects has discussed the ways in which media has reconstituted social interactions, privacy, presentation of identities, and civil discourse (Dill-Shackleford, 2016), little has been written on how mechanisms specific to the Internet have normalized extremism. This proposal creates a new theoretical framework connecting particular types of Internet use with extremist behaviors. The Internet likely breeds and normalizes extremist ideology through five avenues:



Birth of Internet Extremism

Decades before social media was popularized, White power activists were already using computers to coordinate their radical activism (Belew, 2018):

1977-1985

The Internet was used for WPM organizing activities (when minicomputers were mass-distributed by Apple and Microsoft) through a strategy of *leaderless resistance*: cell-style organizing where activists worked without direct communication from movement leaders, which unified WPM factions and allowed them to become less visible to law enforcement.

1983

WPM ideology shifted from supporting the state to declaring revolutionary war on the federal government. Factions connected through a culture of narratives cemented by personal relationships, publications, and computer message boards. The Internet also consolidated *The Order*: a secret society and paramilitary strike force that executed the most criminal acts on behalf of WPM.

1984

Liberty Net was created with code-word-accessed message boards that connected the WPM nationally and globally. It featured recruitment materials, personal ads, pen pal programs, hit-list messages, and hate literature. This propelled leaderless resistance by allowing groups to coordinate without leaving trails of evidence, especially prior to the years in which the FBI began decrypting their messages.

Research & Policy Implications

The Internet is a distinct space of socialization and learning, creating entirely new and intangible communities. A dark side to this new technology has been the rise of WPM and public violence. Below are some implications related to the proposed framework:

- It is not necessary for actors to show up in a physical space to learn about and become radicalized by extremist ideologies. WPM pioneered the early infrastructure for organizing radical activists through leaderless resistance and a common cultural narrative, allowing individual actors to enact violence while participating and being supported by the WPM online (Belew, 2018).
- Cell-structure organizing has stymied public education and understanding around domestic terrorism, leading attacks to be perceived as “lone wolf” acts rather than as part of a deeper ideological movement (Byman, 2017). This shapes how the media, researchers, judicial system, and law enforcement respond to extremist activism.
- Policies need to take into account vulnerable users who are increasingly exposed to WPM ideologies and who may be radicalized online (Monaco, 2017) (e.g., Alt-Right has used memes to promote anti-feminist views among young men).