

Fascist Aspirants: Fascist Forge and Ideological Learning in the Extreme-right Online Milieu

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Learning in extremist settings is often treated as operational, with little regard to how aspiring participants in extremist settings engage with complex and abstract ideological material. This paper examines learning in the context of the amorphous network of digital channels that compose the extreme-right online milieu. Through an in-depth qualitative analysis, we explore how well the prevailing model of extremist ideological learning (in ‘communities of practice’) accounts for the behaviour of aspiring participants of *Fascist Forge*, a now-defunct extreme-right web forum. The findings suggest that some of the social aspects of communities of practice have been replicated in the online setting of *Fascist Forge*. However, for a combination of technical and ideological reasons, the more directed and nurturing aspects of learning have not. Several issues are raised about the role of ideological learning in online communities, notably the open accessibility of extremist material, the lack of ideological control leading to potential mutation and innovation by self-learners, and the role of digital learning in the preparation, shaping and recruitment of individuals for real world organising and activism.

Keywords: extremism; learning; ideology; extreme-right; Fascist Forge; communities of practice

Introduction

The emergence of an extreme-right online milieu has been well-charted, from the earliest developments to the more recent move towards alternative and encrypted platforms (Berlet, 2008; Jackson, 2020). Most recently there have emerged a new cohort of extreme-right groups with similar aesthetics and ideological convictions, many tracing their influences through the web forum *Iron March* and the works of James Mason. Much of this development has taken place in a web of interconnecting platforms and channels referred to here as the extreme-right online milieu (Lee & Knott, 2020).

This paper discusses ideological learning in online extremist settings, an increasingly important subject generated by the move to online political organisation and communications. The focus here is on the extreme-right milieu, but the issues are no less relevant for other extremist online settings in which the acquisition and maintenance of key beliefs and practices between followers and across cohorts is important, whether jihadist, white supremacist, anarchist, or related to conspiracy theories or single issues. We draw on theories of social learning (Bandura, 1971; Akers 1998), building on work done previously in terrorism studies which utilises the concept of ‘communities of practice’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991). While ideology has often been narrowly understood in this field, we take a broader view, treating ideologies as practical as well as conceptual, and going beyond explicitly ideological material like propaganda and reading lists to include the range of cultural practices and artefacts that constitute any ideological space (Freedon, 2000; Koehler, 2015; Knott & Lee, 2020).¹ We see activists as not only needing to learn the basics of their beliefs, but also how to carry themselves, how to address others both supportive and hostile, and how to behave in extremist settings, including online spaces (Crone, 2016).

We take for a case study the extreme-right web forum *Fascist Forge*. The site was an online ideological and social environment with members who subscribed to a radical interpretation of fascism with an emphasis on esotericism. No space in the extreme-right milieu can be considered typical. Nevertheless, *Fascist Forge* constitutes a valuable case study that speaks to an ideological interpretation of fascism that is

¹ For further elaboration of what we mean by ‘ideology’ and its relationship to radicalisation and extremism, see Knott & Lee (2020).

under-represented in research, was not directly aligned with any specific group,² and operated as an online community in a similar way to much of the extreme-right online milieu.

In what follows, we set out the ideological background to *Fascist Forge*, review the current state of research on ideological learning in terrorism studies, and then, through an in-depth qualitative analysis focused on introductory posts and responses on *Fascist Forge*, attempt to reconcile the two. The conclusions suggest that, for reasons of both design and ideology, *Fascist Forge* constituted only a weak community of practice with limited opportunities for the kind of nurturing and mentoring often seen in offline extremist spaces. Nevertheless, it provided newcomers with ample examples of fascist behaviour and style on which to model their own identities. The analysis also raises the possibility that successful public engagement on *Fascist Forge* was a way to demonstrate ideological commitment and thereby gain access to deeper, more private formalised structures.

Fascist Forge: Ideological Formation and Relationships

Fascist Forge emerged as an intended successor to the now infamous web forum, *Iron March*, influential on a number of extreme-right groups that emerged from 2013 onwards, including National Action and Atomwaffen Division (Macklin, 2018).³ After

² Although there is some evidence to suggest that the founder member of *Fascist Forge* was involved in recruiting members of the extreme-right group known as The Base (BBC1, 2020).

³ In November 2019 a back-up version of *Iron March* was posted on the Internet Archive by a user by the name of ‘antifa-data’, a possible source being an archive linked to by a *Fascist*

Iron March was shut down for unknown reasons in November 2017, *Fascist Forge* was launched in May 2018.⁴ The ‘About Us’ section made direct reference to the forum being modelled after *Iron March* (Fascist Forge, 2018). As of early 2020, *Fascist Forge* went offline for a second time, having had a period offline in the Spring of 2019 (Lamoureux, 2019).

Ideologically *Fascist Forge* was informed by the works of US ideologue James Mason as set out in a series of essays written in the 1980s and later assembled in the volume *Siege*.⁵ From this starting point others have developed the ideas of Mason: key texts include *Next Leap*, *Zero Tolerance*, *A Squire’s Trial*, and the website *Siege Culture*. Mason set out a doctrine he termed Universal Order that moved beyond the essentially ‘positive’ vision of National Socialism to argue that the battle for national and racial survival was over and that supporters were living under the yoke of an all-encompassing ‘system’ intrinsically hostile to Whites. Conventional political ideology of any form was utterly rejected as being a product of the system and thereby designed to perpetuate the system’s power. This elitism and refusal to compromise effectively

Forge user on the website Mega.nz. This archive included a back-up copy of the *Iron March* forum as well as extensive collections of literature and images. Subsequently, several accounts on the forum were connected to real world identities of members through email addresses, IP addresses and other data (Lamoureux & Makuch, 2019).

⁴ The *Iron March* founder and chief ideologue Slavros, known to be a resident of Moscow, may have become subject to government pressure at the time of a wider split in the Russian extreme-right over the Russian annexation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine (SPLC 2019; see also Due Enstad 2018).

⁵ *Siege* has since been republished in several versions. For more on the book and its content see Johnson & Feldman, forthcoming.

divided Universal Order adherents from the wider extreme-right and any attempt at movement building. The document *Zero Tolerance*, published by *Iron March* founder Alexander Slavros, proclaimed fascism as adherence to ‘truth’, concluding therefore that any compromise position was impossible (Slavros, 2017; see also SPLC 2019).

As total as the system’s control is, Mason was convinced that it was heading towards an inevitable collapse. Less well-developed than the critique of the present system is the future set out by Universal Order. Mason suggested that the coming collapse would be a chance to begin again without ‘alien or renegade influence’, creating an organic purely White society. From a security perspective, the main concern with this idea is not the belief that society is collapsing, but that this is both necessary and desirable for any progress to be made. Therefore, in some instances, actions to accelerate the fall of the system are held to be justified (‘total attack’ in the language of *Siege*). Explicit references to violent action are plentiful in *Siege* (Johnson & Feldman, forthcoming). However, the overall tone, while militant, is at times more ambiguous than might be expected. At one point, Mason advocates dropping out of the system as the smarter option compared to open warfare (Mason, 1986). Likewise, within the broader ideological sphere, *Next Leap* briefly considers accelerationism before advocating as an alternative the use of ‘merciless destructive and creative force in order to overcome the Modern World’ (Iron March, 2015). Similarly, a post on the website *Siege Culture*, a blog promoting Universal Order ideas, is also circumspect: ‘We neither condone nor condemn the actions of others. We endure here solely to educate and spread the truth of Universal Order as revealed to the Elect among us.’ (Rebours, 2019)

These statements, however, need to be balanced against the extreme militancy and dehumanisation exhibited by these groups, as well as the apparent support and preparations for terrorism undertaken by members of groups influenced by Universal

Order fascism, including Atomwaffen Division, Sonnenkrieg Division, The Base, and Feuerkrieg Division (Sexton, 2019; Associated Press, 2018; BBC, 2019, 2020a, 2020b).

There is no question that the apparent militant nihilism of groups inspired by Universal Order represents a security threat.

Esoteric beliefs such as Racial Paganism, Esoteric Hitlerism, and some varieties of Satanism have long been linked to the extreme-right (Gardell, 2003; Goodrick-Clarke, 2003; Kaplan, 1998; Macklin, 2015; Senholt, 2013). *Iron March* was progressing towards a more fleshed out spiritual interpretation of fascism before it closed. In *Next Leap*, site founder Slavros set out the existence of a world and a metaphysical superworld (Iron March, 2015). The incorporation of ‘magic’ into the architecture of fascism legitimised the presence of esotericism within *Iron March* and other related spaces. In Slavros’s words, esotericism was not an attempt to bolt new ideas onto fascism, rather it was the result of the insights fascism provided, it was ‘fascism at its deeper roots’ (Iron March, 2015, p. 130).⁶ This renewed focus on esoteric belief was ported wholesale into *Fascist Forge* where members were encouraged to describe their religion on their personal profiles, resulting in a stunning array of niche

⁶ This is consistent with the Satanic panic that gripped Atomwaffen in 2018 as some members apparently embraced Satanist beliefs (Weil, 2018). In particular members of Atomwaffen were accused of being followers of the Order of the Nine Angles, a form of Satanism with historic connections to the extreme-right (Senholt, 2013).

and cultic beliefs including: ‘Arioperennialism’,⁷ Esoteric Hitlerism,⁸ and ATWA.⁹ Repeatedly posts made by key members asserted that *Fascist Forge* was avowedly anti-Christian, branding any form of Christianity a ‘Semitic desert cult’.¹⁰

Arguably, the attempt to replicate *Iron March* was not a success. *Fascist Forge* appeared to outsiders to be a hostile place and, as a result, may have become an ideological dead-end. Following its 2019 relaunch, some of the site’s own members recognised the forum as too exclusive and inward looking to develop into a meaningful community. The doxing of several *Iron March* members likely heightened concerns over engaging in fascist activism so publicly (Bellingcat, 2019).

Ideological Learning in Extremist Settings

Having set out the context for this case study – the background and ideological

⁷ Arioperennialism was summarised on another site as ‘the unwavering priority of Aryan blood and eternity over specific sectarian and historical preferences ... the radiant bloodline and genius of the Aryan has the potential to last forever if we successfully secure, repair and continue to evolve it to higher feats’ (Young, 2019).

⁸ The belief that Hitler was a divine entity, most notably fused with Hindu ideas and observations of the Indian caste system by Savitri Devi (Devi, 1958; see also Goodrick-Clarke, 2003; Leidig 2020)

⁹ An acronym for Air Trees, Water and Animals, an uncompromising form of environmentalism originating with Charles Manson.

¹⁰ Interestingly, Mason at some point identified as a believer in selected aspects of Christian theology, a stance which might potentially have seen him removed from *Fascist Forge*, which rejected all forms of Christianity. This may be a marker of just how far *Fascist Forge* went beyond the original incarnation of Universal Order.

formation of *Fascist Forge* and its relationship to other individuals, sites and groups – this section outlines the existing state of theory and knowledge on learning in extremist settings. Terrorism studies has an existing literature on learning and innovation (for summary, see Ranstorp & Normark, 2015, pp. 1-9), while further insight comes from general research on learning and those studies that address ideological learning in diverse settings. A range of approaches, data and cases have been used, and this has resulted in contrasting perspectives. We explain why we locate our case study within the small body of work that favours a community of practice approach to extremist learning, before setting out our analytical framework and its application.

Many studies on extremist and terrorist transmission conceptualise learning as a process undertaken by individuals (e.g. Hundeide, 2003; Pearson 2015; Wilner & Dubouloz, 2011), with some narrowing the focus to specific types of people, for example children who fall into the hands of militant groups (Horgan et al., 2017; Hundeide, 2003), novices who join ideological cells or networks (Everton, 2016; Kenney, 2017, 2018; Wali, 2017), or those who seek to identify with or model themselves on radical exemplars (Crone, 2016; Körner & Staller, 2018). Other studies have looked at learning from the perspective of groups, for example, with a focus on how recruits or converts acquire new knowledge and skills (Galonnier & de los Rios, 2016; Inge, 2016; Wiktorowicz, 2005), how charismatic leaders transmit their teachings to followers (Beekers, 2015; Gendron, 2017; Wali, 2017), or how groups learn from one another (Morrison, 2017; Ranstorp & Normark, 2015). One study suggests that terrorist learning occurs across diverse interdependent agents, including individuals, groups, and entire generations (Kettle & Mumford, 2017). Others focus more explicitly on intergenerational learning, for example, how children acquire religious or political beliefs and practices from older family members (Copeland, 2019; Horgan et al., 2017;

Lee & Knott, 2016; Scourfield et al., 2013), or on intra-generational peer transmission and skill development (Everton, 2015; Lee & Knott, 2017; Maher, 2014).

Just as studies focus on different agents, they also consider different contexts. Many see learning as happening in a collective setting, often in the context of a wider ideological group or network (Galonnier & de los Rios, 2016; Horgan et al., 2017; Kenney, 2017; Wali, 2017). Others have examined more solitary distance learning, for example over the internet (Gendron, 2017; Körner & Staller, 2018; Pearson, 2015; Stenersen, 2013). Studies also differ on outcomes: on what is learned and for what ends. Accounts based in terrorism studies have generally examined strategic and tactical innovation (Dolnik, 2007; Jackson et al., 2005; Kettle & Mumford, 2017; Körner & Staller, 2018; Ranstorp & Normark, 2015), including terrorist training (Forest, 2006; Stenersen, 2013) and malevolent creativity (Gill et al., 2013), though the importance of ideology has been acknowledged by some (e.g. Dolnik, 2007; Drake, 1998) along with the broader role of knowledge acquisition and sharing (e.g. Forest, 2006; Kettle & Mumford, 2017; Ranstorp & Normark, 2015). A minority of researchers have focused directly on ideological and social outcomes (e.g. Hundeide, 2003; Kenney, 2017; Wali, 2017). *How* people are drawn into and learn in extremist settings has also been treated (e.g. Khalil et al, 2019, 2020), with consideration given to imitation and shadowing (Hundeide, 2003; Kenney, 2017; Wali, 2017), practice and embodiment (Crone, 2016; Forest, 2006; Galonnier & de los Rios, 2016), and absorption of online content (Gendron, 2017; Körner & Staller, 2018; Pearson, 2015).

In this case study the focus is on extremist ideological learning via a web forum. Of the mechanics of extremist learning identified in the literature, four are of particular relevance here: instruction through explicit teaching, social learning through the

observation and companionship of others, practical learning by ‘doing’, and lastly, self-learning.

Explicit ideological teaching has tended to be carried out in well-developed organisational settings. For example, extreme Salafi groups in the UK, such as Al-Muhajiroun (Kenney, 2017, 2018; Wiktorowicz, 2005), Hizb-ut Tahrir (Wali, 2017) and the Brixton Mosque (Inge, 2017), which shared many beliefs and a common approach to ideological indoctrination if not ideas about violent jihad, made use of explicitly structured ideological teaching in the form of the *halaqah*, a formalised study circle composed of a small group of novices led by an instructor. In other cases, structured packages of lectures and written materials were made available online on websites or dedicated YouTube channels, with consumers guided through their use in programmes of ideological study, one example being Anwar Al-Awlaki’s ‘virtual knowledge bank’ (Gendron, 2010, p. 55). Traditional classroom models have also been attempted online. Focusing on bomb-making rather than ideology, Stenersen (2013) described a learning journey within Al-Qaeda from delivering bomb-making knowledge through formalised training within camps to an attempted distance learning bomb-making course delivered through online forums. The online course attempted to recreate some of the interactivity of the training camps by providing an instructor who could answer questions as the course progressed.

A further mechanism noted in the terrorism literature with particular relevance to ideology is social learning. Ideologies have often been treated as cognitive systems constituted of discrete concepts that could be transmitted straightforwardly to individual recruits through a process of indoctrination or acquired by novice seekers through the consumption of extremist literature, videos or online content (Knott & Lee, 2020). Research on terrorism and ideology, however, has also begun highlighting the social

and practical aspects of ideology, suggesting that extremists are often less interested in ideological specificities than they are in the wider culture, practice and habitus of the milieus in which they seek to embed themselves (e.g. Crone, 2016; Holbrook & Horgan, 2019; Khalil et al, 2019; Knott & Lee, 2020; Snow & Byrd, 2007). While formalised study can provide the ideological concepts and tools required to embed individuals in an extremist milieu, recruits also need to observe the behaviours and habits of those around them.

The literature on extremist transmission and innovation reflects the social aspects of learning as theorized by earlier scholars from Bandura onwards (Bandura 1971; for discussion see Lee & Knott, 2018, pp. 29-35). In her seminal study on *The Making of a Moonie*, Barker (1984) discussed the social factors contributing to (the often unsuccessful) recruitment and learning in the Unification Church, including ‘love bombing’, companionship and loyalty. She recognised the importance, not only of a sense of belonging, but of learning by doing and acquiring a sense of self-worth (Barker, 1984, p. 244). Hundeide (2003), who was aware of research by sociologists working on conversion and cults, was the first to draw explicitly on the concept of ‘communities of practice’ in the context of extremism. He saw its relevance for identifying the behaviours of individuals accepted into those extremist groups which required loyalty from their members. Hundeide (2003, pp. 107-108) drew critically on the 1991 study by Lave and Wenger (see also Wenger, 1998; Brown & Duguid, 1999) in order to investigate the process undertaken in becoming a ‘committed insider’ in an extremist organisation. The individuals he researched went from being newbies engaged in 'legitimate peripheral participation' in a community of practice to eventually being accepted as more skilled and committed members (Hundeide, 2003, p. 121; see also Horgan, 2009, p. 146). The environment was participatory and social, with the

mentality, style, and attitudes of insiders all transmitted through observation of others rather than formal instruction. This concept of social learning is also closely related to arguments about the effect of long-term exposure to extremist content, also referred to as enculturation (Holt et al., 2017) or normalisation (Munn, 2019).

The role of more experienced participants as exemplars for newcomers has also been highlighted in case studies of Islamist extremism. Kenney's observation of al-Muhajiroun in the UK noted the extent to which the group conformed to the community of practice model, with novices shadowing more experienced veterans, and 'learning from companionship' (Kenney, 2017, p. 6). Personal interactions between new members and those who were more experienced also built group solidarity and belonging. Similar relationships were also reported in Canadian skinhead formations (Gaudette et al, 2020), where interactions between online and offline worlds were reported. Less well-researched is how communities of practice in extremist settings operate in the context of an online milieu that lacks the physical proximity and social cues of such offline interactions.¹¹ Indeed, the distinction between online interactions in which ideas and beliefs are collectively learned and shared, and the use by isolated independent learners of resources made available by online groups or forums is yet to be fully examined. The relationship between these two distinct types of engagement to the concept of an online community of practice needs further discussion and elaboration. Studies of one well-known extreme-right web forum, Stormfront, have suggested that engagement between participants constitutes an online community (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; De Koster & Houtman, 2008; Thompson, 2001). Likewise, research from outside terrorism studies

¹¹ See Freiburger & Crane (2008) for a general discussion of social learning and terrorist use of the Internet.

has provided accounts of how corporate ‘virtual communities of practice’ can increase engagement, build trust and maximise knowledge-sharing (Gammelgaard, 2010; Haas et al., 2020). Less clear, however, is how the concept of ‘communities of practice’ may fare when applied to online spaces in which distrust and paranoia rather than collaboration and engagement are more the norm, as is the case in *Fascist Forge*.

Alongside social learning, but closely related, scholars have also noted the role of practice in extremist learning, with recruits encouraged in some settings to learn by ‘having a go’. This was a key aspect of the community of practice approach developed by Lave and Wenger. Participation in such a community was centred on skills acquisition and ‘learning as doing’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 5). The focus on practice, however, should not be thought to stand in opposition to one based either on social learning or on the transmission of ideas and beliefs. They are mutually engaged and supportive (Knott & Lee, 2020). Returning to Kenney’s study, in al-Muhajiroun, street preaching, or *da’wah*, provided a good opportunity for newcomers to learn what to say and how to say it by first observing other more experienced activists (Kenney, 2017, p. 7).¹²

Finally, less common in the terrorism literature has been the discussion of self-learning, particularly via the internet. In practical arenas, self-learning may be difficult and sometimes dangerous. Bomb-making for example is a highly technical skill fraught with risk. The narratives attached to lone actor terrorists frequently centre on the difficulties they encounter creating viable explosive devices (McLagan & Lowles, 2000; Stenersen, 2013). For ideology, independent learning is less high-stakes but no less

¹² See Crone (2016) for further examples and a theoretical justification for learning by practice in a jihadi context.

complex. It has been mentioned in militant autobiographies and lone actor narratives (Copeland, 2019). Self-accounts presented in court and police interviews also reveal evidence of it, such as those given by Norwegian terrorist, Anders Breivik (Önnerfors, 2017), and Roshonara Choudhry, who stabbed a UK Member of Parliament in 2010 after devouring ideological material online at home alone (Pearson, 2015). It is somewhat surprising then that more consideration has not been given in terrorist studies to the process of self-learning, in which independent individuals identify, sift, absorb, and sometimes act upon online resources from one or more sources. Further work is needed to establish whether such individuals consider themselves to be participants in virtual communities or merely individuals building independent ideological portfolios.¹³

The available literature leans towards a focus on operational over ideological learning, and on group-based instruction over self-learning. The remainder of this paper, focused on *Fascist Forge*, serves as a counter study which seeks to identify and analyse the mechanics of learning in a new context, that of the extreme-right online milieu. In our assessment of learning in this space, we ask the following questions: First, what does an in-depth case study of this extreme-right web forum contribute to our knowledge of the four aspects of explicit ideological teaching, social learning, learning as practice, and self-learning? Secondly, drawing comparatively on Kenney's ethnographic analysis of al-Muhajiroun, to what extent does *Fascist Forge* constitute an online 'community of practice', and how and why does learning in these two 'communities' differ? Finally, what is the role of ideology in forging an extreme online community of practice and in informing the kind of learning that takes place within it?

¹³ Research on lone actors and leaderless resistance touches on these matters (e.g. Berntzen & Sandberg, 2014; Sweeney, 2017).

Data and Methods

The data to answer these questions was sourced from the website *Fascist Forge*, which was available online from May 2018 to February 2019, and then again from April 2019 to early 2020 (Lamoureux, 2019; Lamoureux & Makuch, 2019).¹⁴ The site was structured as an anonymous online forum and divided into three sections: ‘The Forge’, a space to post resources and for general discussion topics; ‘The Crucible’, which featured resources orientated explicitly towards learning, including a space set aside for forum members to introduce themselves; and a section entitled ‘Club Forums’. Of the forums, the ‘Discussion’ and ‘Introduction’ sub-forums were the most heavily trafficked with 1,002 and 1,847 posts respectively (as of the end of November 2019). Although much of the site was open, private communications between vetted users were possible in a ‘members only’ area.¹⁵

Developing a broad picture of the *Fascist Forge* user base required building a dataset offering insight into the characteristics of participants. An introductory space was set aside for newcomers to introduce themselves to the wider *Fascist Forge* forum, using a loose template that invited information on how the user found the site, their

¹⁴ The *Fascist Forge* website, including introductions posted by newcomers, is archived online.

¹⁵ The members-only area was referred to in March 2019 in a discussion thread on ‘Approach to Newcomers’ (in post by user, id86); Lamoureux & Makuch (2019). In accordance with social science research ethics we stopped short of covert research, which in this case would have required adopting a pseudonym and masquerading as a genuine initiate. As a result, we were not able to access private areas. Unlike investigative journalists and security practitioners operating in this space, we were observers, not participants, and our research was confined to openly accessible material.

motivation for registering, goals, political history, interests and skills. In practice, posts rarely followed this format exactly, often to the annoyance of longer-standing members. In addition to these free-form introductory posts, fixed-format profiles included details on when that person joined, their age, and location (as well as their political and religious identities, see below). Not all members completed profiles, and not all profiles contained the same information. For example, details such as age were often replaced with numbers related to extreme-right numerology, e.g. 1488 or 88.

Introductory posts made between May 2018 and August 2019 were downloaded, resulting in 354 individual introductions (many of which included responses by other users). These formed the basis of the dataset. This number (354) is significantly smaller than the membership number claimed for the site overall: more than 1,300 by the end of November 2019 (see Counter Extremism Project, 2019). The latter may be an over-estimate; some posts may have been deleted; or some newcomers may have acquired membership status without first introducing themselves.

A first stage content analysis was undertaken, with individual posts coded for age, gender, location, political history, pathway to the site, and motivations of the user. As the data were often unstructured and incomplete, with individual users interpreting the template in different ways, neither the dataset nor the initial analysis can be said to offer a full and complete picture of the user-base. Nevertheless, as a broad set of indicators, they serve to give a general idea of the make-up of *Fascist Forge* users.

Identifying data on learning and learners was partially based on this initial phase of content analysis, but further rounded out with a second phase of analysis in which an in-depth qualitative approach was used. All 354 introductory posts were analysed and coded using an interpretive framework developed for an earlier project on ideological transmission in extremist contexts (Knott & Lee, 2020, p. 10) in which we identified six

dimensions transmission and learning: purposive, substantive, practical, social, temporal and spatial. With our research questions centring on *Fascist Forge* as a community of practice, we focused our attention on the practical and social dimensions of learning (on how newcomers learn and engage with extremist ideology, and the social dynamics at work in that process), although we were also mindful of their motivations for participating in this learning community (the purposive dimension). While we were interested in *what* users learned, we have not discussed this here to avoid repeating information presented earlier on the ideological formation of *Fascist Forge*. In addition to introductory posts captured in the dataset, we also drew on openly accessible ideological material sourced from other parts of the *Fascist Forge* website.

Fascist Aspirants: Who were they?

This section provides an overview of those making introductory posts on *Fascist Forge*. Although we have taken the posts at face value for the purposes of analysis, we recognise that information provided therein may well be an unreliable guide to the actual identities of users. For various reasons, these may be faked and the information untrue, exaggerated or deliberately misleading. The posts are less a guide to the actual identities of users and more a representation of how they chose to construct and present themselves for others on the forum.

Most newcomers (n=329) gave some indication as to their location. Forty different country locations were listed, although more than half of posters were based in the United States. The site was dominated by participants from English-speaking countries: the US, UK, Australia and Canada, somewhat consistent with previous work mapping extreme-right digital communities (Berger, 2018, p. 29). Non-English-

speaking countries did make up a sizeable portion of posts, at around a quarter of the total (n=83), suggesting at least some appeal outside the Anglosphere.

Just under half of posts (n=162) included some credible information on age.¹⁶ Ages ranged from 7 to 69, with the youngest users claiming to be 7, 10 and 11.¹⁷ The mean age was 21.3 years, and 35 users claimed to be under the age of 18. This suggests that the user-base for *Fascist Forge* was relatively young which is consistent with arrest data linked to Universal Order fascist groups (Associated Press, 2018; BBC, 2019, 2020; Counter Extremism Project, 2019). This should be viewed with caution, however, as older, more experienced users, may have been more cautious and less inclined to post personal information in a public forum.

Indications are that the user-base was almost exclusively male. This is probably explained by the content of the site, which was highly misogynistic.¹⁸ It is also evident from the names and profile pictures chosen by users, as well as the content of posts. Only one newcomer openly identified as female and this was met with substantial

¹⁶ Where information was vague (e.g. mid 20s) an estimated age has been included for the purposes of this analysis based on the midpoint of any range e.g. mid 20s = 25. Posts that featured extreme right or Satanist numerology, e.g. 333, 88, were discounted.

¹⁷ Based on the posts made these claims are doubtful and might be explained in other ways such as typos or deliberate lies, though a BBC documentary on 'Hunting the neo-Nazis' revealed one apparently senior user and propagandist to be just 15 years old (BBC1, 2020). Another user of *Fascist Forge* – convicted of terrorism offences in 2020 – had been under 18 at the time of his arrest (De Simone, 2020), and a leading figure of the ideologically similar group, Feuerkrieg Division, was identified as a 13-year-old from Estonia (DW, 2020).

¹⁸ Rhetoric of violence against women was clearly evident, for example, in a comment thread on 'Justification of Rape' from February 2019.

hostility from other users. It is perfectly possible that some of the other users may also have been women but choose not to disclose the fact.

Seventy-two users gave some information about the length of time they had been involved in the extreme-right. Accounts were often vague on details, for example differing on what type of involvement they took to mark their entry. Estimates suggest the duration of involvement varied from 40 years claimed by one user, to some (n=15) claiming to have been involved for a year or less. The mean duration was 4 years. However, this masks considerable variation, with a standard deviation of 5.8 years. The median duration was 3 years. This measure suffers from the same issue as age, with older and more experienced users potentially more reluctant to provide information.

In addition to information on age, gender and location, newcomers to the site were asked to specify their ‘ideology’ and ‘religion’ in the profiles. The majority associated themselves with general extreme-right political categories, with over 40 per cent (n=146) stating ‘National Socialist’ or ‘NS’, and a further 21 per cent (n=74) identifying as ‘Fascist’ (or a particular type, such as ‘Eco-Fascist’ or ‘White Identitarian Fascist’). Several made local or national connections by stipulating ‘American Futurism’,¹⁹ ‘Nordic National Socialist’, ‘Make Britain Great Again’, or ‘Australian National Socialist’. Beyond these were a wide variety of other identities including ‘Mosleyite’, ‘Ultra-Nationalist’, ‘Nihilistic Stoicist’, ‘Chaotic Anarchist’, ‘Falangist’, ‘Accelerationist’, ‘Volkish’ and ‘Third Positionist’.

In line with the particular history of *Fascist Forge*, a significant minority (7 per cent; n=26) stated ‘Universal Order’ as either an ideological or religious identifier. The

¹⁹ Futurism is particularly relevant to the legacy of Iron March which was often represented as a forum for futurism-inspired fascists (SPLC, 2018).

principal religious categories were ‘Esotericism’ (12 per cent; n=43), with the majority of these stipulating ‘Esoteric Hitlerism’, and ‘Paganism’ (10 per cent; n=36). Despite a superficial reading of the contents of the website and the introductions revealing an antipathy to Christianity, more than 10 per cent (n=37) of newcomers nevertheless claimed some kind of Christian identity, including ‘Catholic’, ‘Protestant’ and ‘Eastern Orthodox’, often with the consequence that they were later excluded from membership. A few claimed an affiliation to another mainstream religion (though not Judaism or Islam), or to what one poster referred to as ‘Paths of the Old Gods’ – ‘Wotanism’, ‘Odinism’ or ‘Asatru’ – but the other major identifiers were ‘Atheism’ and ‘Agnosticism’ (n=18 and n=26 respectively), with a few still ‘working on it’, ‘in-between religions’ or ‘none at the moment’.

Motivations for Involvement

Users were also encouraged to detail their reasons for seeking membership. The variety of ways they chose to do this made quantifying their motivations difficult but four basic motivations were identified: learning, teaching, community (e.g. discussion, speaking to ‘like-minded people’) and activism (e.g. forming local groups, engaging in direct action).²⁰ More than three-quarters of all users provided a reason for signing up; many listed more than one, so motivations are not mutually exclusive.

The key motivations for participating in the site were the desire to talk and meet with other fascists (49 per cent, n=175) and learning more about fascism (49 per cent,

²⁰ The evidence on why people registered on the website and their wider motivations was identified from data collected from the application of the framework described in the previous section – with specific reference to the purposive dimension.

n=175). This reflected the stated functions of *Fascist Forge*: in addition to continuing where *Iron March* left off, its purposes were ‘to make connections, share resources, organize and ultimately further the Fascist Worldview.’ It may also indicate the isolation felt by many users.

In answer to ‘Why you registered?’, newcomers wrote repeatedly of their desire to ‘be part of something’ and to ‘connect with others’. The following terms were commonly used: ‘like-minded’; ‘community’; ‘connect’/‘connection’; ‘network’; ‘share’. Most wrote in general terms, but some users identified the type of people with whom they wanted to engage, e.g. ‘Make some drinking and shooting buddies’ (id231); ‘I am joining to be among my brothers and sisters of our White European Race’ (id114).²¹ Although the stated desire to connect with like-minded people was often perfunctory, on occasions it was linked to shared political aspirations and a future orientation: ‘Ideally, I’d like to become a person who is more prepared for what’s coming, and more knowledgeable about what we’re working towards.’ (id197); ‘I hope that I can aid in bringing our plans of a New Aryan Order to fruition.’ (id217). Others made the connection between networking and activism: e.g. ‘I feel like I want to be more hands on in the movement. Like I mentioned previously Ive (sic) kind of been a floater and lurker, just learning and watching for years... I want to be part of a community.’ (id319).

In addition to their desire for connection, newcomers repeatedly stressed their desire to learn more about the ‘fascist worldview’, to improve their ‘understanding’ and

²¹ Individuals who posted introductions on the website have been identified with a reference number (e.g. id123) rather than by their pseudonym in order to minimise the possibility of identification by cross-referencing to other sites.

gain more ‘knowledge’.²² Although several felt the need to state their beliefs and demonstrate their ideological prowess, most were self-effacing in their readiness to improve themselves and learn from those more knowledgeable than themselves. Not infrequently this was expressed in terms of the desire for self-betterment or self-fulfilment. One wanted to ‘liv[e] up to my fullest potential as a Fascist’ (id155); another to ‘accomplish personal enrichment’ (id33). Others used terms such as ‘expand’, ‘better’, ‘gain’; ‘create’, ‘embrace’ and ‘deepen’ to express their motivation for learning. Many with relevant knowledge and skills were keen to teach as well as learn (7 per cent, n=25). They often used constructive and future-oriented terms such as ‘share’, ‘contribute to’ or ‘participate in’ building a community or worldview. Still others expressed the desire to become more active or to meet with others to develop a local cell (18 per cent, n=63).

The user-base of *Fascist Forge* was broadly young, male, of limited political experience, and primarily from English-speaking countries. Despite this there were also more confident and experienced political activists in the mix. Overall, the headline findings of this first stage analysis present a forum that identifies learning as a key objective both in how the website is designed and presented to users, as well as how

²² We note the self-conscious use of the phrase ‘fascist worldview’. Newcomers were frequently chastised by long-standing members for incorrectly referring to fascism as either an ‘ideology’ or a ‘movement’, both of which were said to miss the point of fascism as an expression of essential truths inherent in the universe rather than artificially constructed human values. Those committing this error were instructed to go to the learning centre for further instruction, and to read *Siege, A Squire’s Trial* and other key works.

users engage with it and understand their motivations. *Fascist Forge* is seen as a place to connect and learn.

Ideological, Social, Practical and Autonomous Learning in *Fascist Forge*

We return now to the four themes identified in the research literature on ideology and terrorist learning in order to assess the nature of learning in *Fascist Forge*: explicit ideological teachings, social learning, learning by doing, and self-learning.

Explicit Ideological Teachings

As we suggested in the discussion of its ideological formation and relationships, *Fascist Forge* could be said to be a narrow way rather than a broad church. That is, as a forum, it understood itself to be elite and exclusionary, to reflect the values of the Universal Order rather than fascism more generally, and to pursue correct knowledge and understanding attained by immersion in selected texts and tested by critique and examination. This was recognised as a minority interest: ‘this site is dedicated completely to wholly "esoteric revolutionary fascism", which only a small handful of people subscribe to. Also, this form of fascism is so extreme that it will drive away moderates.’ (id254)

With a commitment in its founding statement to take up where *Iron March* left off in sharing resources and furthering the worldview, a focus on transmitting and teaching the ideology was to be expected. This was highlighted by the presence on the site of a learning centre listing and providing links to key works. After posting their introductions, many newcomers were directed to the centre and instructed to read more deeply in order to gain a fuller understanding. There was a good deal of debate about the relative merits of key texts and about specific ideas, which was illustrative of the importance placed on ideological rigour. It was not unusual for long-standing members

to respond to a newcomer's belief statement with detailed discussion on topics such as nationalism, accelerationism, esotericism, perennial philosophy, Plato's *Republic*, anarchism or cultural Marxism.²³ Awareness of historical context as well as ideological differences was not uncommon in such responses: 'To truly understand *Siege* and Universal Order you must first understand the historic reasons for NS ideology, the difficulties NS ideology faces in the modern day and the reasons for *Siege* being written' (comment on post by id106). But, equally, they were ready to correct a newcomer, for example by jumping on intellectualism or 'psycho-rambling', or by challenging a particular ideological interpretation by labelling it 'obsolete' or 'soft'. Members often doubted the authenticity or ideological purity of newcomers, and followed up their introduction, for example, by quizzing them on the contents of *Siege* (comment on post by id351) or getting them to prove their occult credentials (comment on post by id207).

Newcomers were dealt with as individual candidates. They presented their case and subjected themselves to the critical responses of existing members, some abasing themselves as novices, others inviting a fight: 'Eat into me boys, I am ready for the shitstorm that's a-brewing.' (id252) No attempt was made to imitate offline learning settings, such as workshops, online group teaching, digital classrooms or the Salafist *halaqah* (Inge, 2017; Kenney, 2017; Wali, 2017), though a link was made to available lecture material, notably 'Fascism 101'. Instruction and correction were conducted individually rather than collectively, using a Socratic method, with the aim being to identify and hone authentic and politically correct initiates rather than to recruit a mass of foot-soldiers with loose ideological connections.

²³ It must be stressed that the phrase 'more senior, long-standing members' should not be taken to signify either age or maturity, only duration of involvement in the forum. See footnote 15.

The introduction phase was then followed by something more akin to a traditional educational model, with the use of an examination to test the knowledge and readiness of selected recruits (by that point a number had already been ‘liquidated’).²⁴ Once someone had proved themselves, either through their introduction or by being open to teaching and guidance, they were encouraged to ‘take the exam’. The exam had been part of the website from the outset, its purpose set out by the founder, Mathias, in early May 2018.

In the effort to create and maintain a high quality Fascist community, *Fascist Forge* requires all prospective members to complete the *Fascist Forge* Membership Exam in order to become a fully vetted member of the forum. The purpose of the examination is to separate the genuine and devoted from the unfit and incompatible. This exam will weed out the pretenders, phonies and LARPer²⁵s while being easily passable by those either already familiar with, or willing to learn about, the Fascist worldview. (Fascist Forge, 2018)

The exam consisted of 26 questions, mostly on knowledge and attitudes to Nazism, fascism, and racism (Lamoureux & Makuch, 2019). In the first phase of the website, before it went offline for the first time, information about the pass rate and the names of

²⁴ The language used for rejecting candidates from further involvement in the forum was inspired by Nazi ideology and practice. They were ‘liquidated’ or ‘gassed’ and referred to thereafter as ‘Mengele victims’.

²⁵ LARP stands for Live Action Role Play and is a derogatory term often used to call out another as simply playing at ideological engagement or activism. LARPing is often looked down on as a ‘geeky’ activity. The use of the term however, somewhat ironically, also relies on an expected familiarity with tropes and language common in traditionally ‘geeky’ subcultures such as video, roleplay and tabletop gaming.

successful candidates were openly accessible. It was clear from this that most of those who took the exam got through it. They had become ‘vetted member[s] of the forum’ and were then allowed access to ‘a section only available to users’ (Lamoureux & Makuch, 2019).

However, following the relaunch of the website, in what was probably intended to be a confidential exchange among senior members,²⁶ a debate ensued about the role of the exam both for testing the commitment of candidates and policing entry into *Fascist Forge* by ‘feds and journos’. In a thread beginning 11 February 2019 entitled ‘Approach to newcomers’, one member suggested that, ‘The exam should be harder. I suggest a college level philosophical/theoretical question, with a minimum of 250-500 words’ (id143). Others raised the possibility of holding structured interviews, with ‘technical questioning to test seriousness’ (id153), these having the advantage of requiring people to ‘think on their feet’ and not regurgitate what they’ve learnt from others on the site (id74).²⁷

Both the introductory posts and the exam were designed to draw out candidates’ ideological positions, to direct them to specific sources and to endorse key beliefs on fascism, nationalism and racism. They had a further purpose – and this brings us to the social aspect of learning in *Fascist Forge* – to help identify committed and authentic radicals and exclude those with ‘ill-intentions’.

²⁶ Evident from a comment made on 14 March 2019 by id74.

²⁷ This vetting tactic was also in use in *The Base* (BBC1, 2020).

Social Learning

Explicit ideological learning and examination took place on the forum, but this did not happen in a social vacuum. Much of the activity revolved around belonging and inclusion, or rejection and exclusion. Although there were no designated teachers and no formal pupil-teacher relationships, conceptions and practices of rank, reputation and hierarchy were in operation, and in some cases were built into the very design of the forum. As we will show, however, the social aspect of learning also extended to the development of skills and activism offline.

As the earlier discussion of their motivations showed, newcomers were drawn to the site for social reasons. They wanted to discuss ideas and learn from ‘like-minded’ individuals; they hoped to be part of something. In offline socio-religious organisations, as Barker (1984), Hundeide (2003), Kenney (2017) and others noted, this motivation was cultivated in the process of drawing in newcomers and helping them become more committed members. Kenney (2017, p. 6), for example, observed the importance of novices shadowing more experienced veterans and learning from companionship with peers. To what extent were similar processes observable in *Fascist Forge*?

As far as we could tell from the introductory posts, no formal shadowing, imitation or mentoring practices were instituted. Newcomers were not paired with more experienced users, nor were they subject to constructive cultivation. That does not mean, however, that no social learning took place. On the one hand, newcomers took social learning into their own hands. By observing others, they acquired the social etiquette of introducing themselves and opening themselves up to critique. It was this initial ‘lurking’ that allowed the more adept and observant among them to present themselves as suitable, committed and ready to move on. Many others either failed to absorb the etiquette or did not have the skills (linguistic or otherwise) to grasp the

ideological and social demands of the Forum. Some simply realised this too late: 'Sorry guys! I now understand what was the problem with my behavior and thinking' (id109); 'Guys, I understood my mistake. Give me a second chance.' (id207)

Little could prepare newcomers, however, for the critical barrage that their introductory posts would more than likely receive. Far from being a relationship of companionship, it was one of verbal abuse, with newcomers baited, mocked and subjected to humiliation, hate speech and name-calling. Some called the approach into question: one user, for example, declined to post an introduction writing, 'I'm a little confused as to why the reception is so hostile here' (idAnon). Others attempted a robust defence, often digging themselves in deeper, like the 13-year old 'Protestant National Socialist' (id90) who, when criticised for his religious convictions, came back with the comment that Hitler had believed the perfect Aryan to be Protestant, only to be told to go away and learn more about the anti-Christian nature of Universal Order. Senior members, however, were clear about the value of their approach: 'the "attacks" on new members should be seen as opportunity to explain or gain trust by the newcomer', said one (id55), with another commenting that 'ironic critiques currently used to challenge newcomers' intros will by default educate them.' (id74)

Newcomers could be in no doubt about the reputation, rank and roles of other users as these were clearly shown in their profiles, with beginners grouped as 'guests' or 'newcomers', rising to 'members' on passing the exam, and ultimately as 'extremists', 'enforcers' or 'propagandists'. At the peak of the hierarchy was the founder and 'Leader Supreme' (Mathias), with a high reputation and a post ranked at the top level (denoted by five dots on his profile). Although the specific purpose of these clusters was not made clear in comments posted in the open area, the identities, ranks and reputations of key individuals could have left new recruits in little doubt about who had status in the

forum – whether derived from length of membership, number of posts (reputation), or named role. Whether such status led to those individuals becoming exemplars to be imitated or followed is not known. However, to attract praise or even criticism from one of the top members must have felt like an achievement, even if it did not signify a meaningful relationship.

As we saw earlier, newcomers did not limit their aspirations to participation in ideological debate on the forum, but claimed to seek more active involvement offline, for example, through the development of local cells. One, for example, stated his ‘main goal here is to better organize and contact people in my area for meetups and the like’ (id84), one aimed ‘to discuss, prepare and coordinate real life action’ (id296), and another to ‘start a real-life fascist group like Atomwaffen’ (id214).²⁸ The drive to learn and participate in a small but active group with like-minded compatriots was repeatedly expressed by users in diverse locations, from California, Nebraska, Canada, Brazil, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Germany, Estonia and the South of England. The connection between ideology, social organisation and practice was illustrated by those who sought to participate in communities where they could ‘integrate this worldview into my lived experience more fully’ (id200) or could apply ‘National Socialism to Australian conditions’ (id333).

²⁸ That extremists like those on this forum sought to take the next step to fulfilling such goals was highlighted by investigative journals researching The Base, in which recruiters like Mathias (Fascist Forge’s ‘Leader Supreme’) participated in interviews with candidates for locally-based cells (BBC1, 2020).

Learning by Doing

The apocalyptic nature of the ideology, with its focus on the acceleration of societal collapse, called for particular expertise and behaviours. As one user said, he wanted 'To know when the day comes and be prepared for it' (id250). Important though it was, ideological learning was not sufficient on its own; it needed to be paired with training and experience in appropriate skills. Newcomers were asked to give an account of these, and it was evident that some skills were more highly valued than others, especially those linked to survivalism (with specific references to 'bushcraft', 'living off-grid' and 'wilderness' or 'outdoor survival'), and training in firearms. Thirteen individuals mentioned their military experience. At times, newcomers were either praised for having such skills or encouraged to acquire them. One was told to 'master survival skills for when the system inevitably falls apart. Locating and purifying water, collecting firewood, hunting, fishing, basic agriculture, basic carpentry, preserving food' (comment made to id125); another was told that 'your real world skills are nice. Perhaps studying the worldview/reading more is a good next step for you' (comment made to id141), showing the importance of balancing both practical and ideological learning.

In her article on violence, politics and the skills of the body, Crone (2016, pp. 600-601) linked the acquisition of Islamist extremist ideology with 'the transformation of embodied capacities'. A similar process was evident in *Fascist Forge* with newcomers valuing 'those who live as they believe' (id218), and asserting the need to 'train my mind, my body and spirit' (id107). A balanced portfolio of soft skills, such as reading, graphics, IT expertise and spiritual interests (such as meditation, astral projection, and interest in the occult) alongside the development of physical accomplishments, was endorsed.

Although some spoke directly of wanting to accelerate the collapse, exterminate enemies or carry out lethal violence, they were always suspected of being ‘feds’.²⁹ Much more common were those who stated their desire for personal accomplishment and fulfilment according to the worldview of radical fascism. However, what we saw in these introductory posts was not the reality of physical training and real-world action, but the *aspiration* to acquire and perform these for the cause. These newcomers were not ‘walking the walk’, as were those described by Kenney (2017) in his account of street activism in al-Muhajiroun, but ‘talking the walk’. The extent to which they might have been ready or willing to actively follow up cannot be known from these posts alone.

Self-Learning

A final feature of terrorist learning that we found to be somewhat underdeveloped in the research literature was autonomous or self-learning. In the ‘post-organisational far-right’ in an online milieu, this is especially important because the structures and mechanisms that we might normally associate with ideological indoctrination and operational training in extremist groups may have altered or be unavailable (Mulhall, 2018). Both recruitment and learning have to be understood in a digital context where, even if individual motivations are similar to those in offline extremism, the possibility of disengagement, browsing, masquerade and experimental play have to be factored in.

²⁹ The trope of the ‘fed’ as an outside agitator is a common one in the extreme-right online milieu, especially the ‘terrorgram’ community built on the dark social application, Telegram. Open calls for violence are often treated as suspicious and an attempt to entrap other participants in the milieu.

Understanding how individuals construct and comprehend their learning journey was helped in the case of *Fascist Forge* by the fact that newcomers were asked directly to say something about their ‘political history’. Their answers, like all autobiographical materials in extremist settings, are necessarily self-fashioned and retrospective (Copeland, 2019; Knott & Lee, 2020). They may stretch a truth or be entirely fictitious. Unreliable though they may be, they tell us something important about how journeys into fascism are told and how newcomers learn from one another to forge their political identities.

The typical story line was one of radicalisation, not in the sense of grooming but of becoming increasingly extreme, often moving from political liberalism or moderate conservatism through various right-wing positions to their current position as fascists. This was depicted in terms of movement through various ideological stances and identities.

- 'Stalinist -> Nazi -> the tanking of modern civilization and return to nature.'
(id43)
- ‘Classical Liberal ----> Flat Earther/Anti-Vaxxer ----> Fascist’ (id137)
- 'Patriotard -> muslim basher-> alt-right->national socialist-> currently looking into Universal Order’ (id337)
- 'I'm a typical case. I went through the so-called "Four Stages of Red-Pill."
Generic conservative, libertarian, radical Right (alt-Right), and Traditionalism
(Fascism).' (id23)

Although these journeys were experienced as personal, they drew on classic conversion tropes (Rambo & Farhadian, 2014), such as ‘searching’, ‘discovery’, ‘realization’, ‘awakening’, the ‘light bulb’ moment, and a sense of being consumed or ‘eaten up’ by

the ideology. One 'got hit with the truth big time and it all clicked for me' (id20); another 'realized the very pulse of this expression of the worldview allowed me to reach a higher consciousness' (id158). In a minority of cases, they were helped along this path by family members or peers (e.g. a National Socialist grandfather or Pagan upbringing), but more often they saw it as natural or predestined, whilst also being personally crafted: 'My path to Fascism has come organically through esoteric and occult work.' (id94); 'I personally never needed propaganda or anyone else's influence to awaken, and I'm sure the same applies to many here. If fate has determined that one will awaken, that person will.' (id38)

Reading and personal study were said to play a significant role in these journeys, the focus being on key texts like *Mein Kampf* and *Siege*, but with reference also made to audio-visual and online consumption, e.g. of Mosley's speeches, Discord servers and the *Iron March* website. Although most grasped the ideology in this way, a minority attributed their learning in part to their participation in gangs or extremist groups, such as Skinheads or Blood and Honor. Crucially though, as several intimated, they ended up on their own. As one said, 'those groups never satisfied me, so I have been walking the lone wolf route, being that movementarians can't grasp the mindset of violence, radicalism, and or taking action' (id348). In articulating the path of isolated individualism, this newcomer testified to the interrelationship between his personal journey and an ideology which calls for individuals to steep themselves in the particular worldview of Universal Order whilst dropping out of the system and renouncing the idea of fascism as a movement.

Fascist Forge: A Community of Practice?

The case study of *Fascist Forge* reveals some significant differences with the

established model of ideological learning in extremist groups based on communities of practice. Despite some similarities, such as the clear identification of different levels of status, and external links to introductory lecture material such as ‘Fascism 101’, *Fascist Forge* did not offer its users the opportunities for formal instruction, shadowing exemplars, gaining practical experience of activism, or the ideological nurturing seen, for example, in a community of practice like al-Muhajiroun (Kenney, 2017, 2018; see also Crone, 2016; Hundeide, 2003; Wali, 2017). Some of these differences can be explained by the technological context of an online forum. *Fascist Forge* participants did not engage in real-world, organised activism in the same way as those in al-Muhajiroun (or at least this was not something promoted in the open part of the website). They were not afforded the possibility of being paired with and shadowing more experienced members. Neither did they engage in group learning. In *Fascist Forge*, however, the absence of a formal framework for social learning – albeit one designed for an online setting – was also a function of its ideology. Universal Order ideology, with its values of elitism and individualism, and rejection of any attempt at organisation, was not well placed to support a nurturing learning environment. By choice, *Fascist Forge* presented a barren and hostile environment for newcomers, where they were expected to sink or swim depending on their resilience and willingness to accept the underpinning values on offer.

Is it appropriate then to argue for *Fascist Forge* as a community of practice? Would it not be better to understand it as an online resource for autonomous individuals who share a worldview and a desire to discuss it with others? *Fascist Forge* is clearly not like al-Muhajiroun, a strong community of practice with well-developed apprentice-veteran relationships and mechanisms for ideological and practical learning. Nevertheless, despite technological and ideological constraints, it provided newcomers

with opportunities for social interaction and learning to help them move from the ideological periphery to the centre. By lurking, they were able to witness and then imitate the self-presentation of high-status members and their engagement with others online. By experimentation, they were able to explore the kind of appeals and positions that gained favour within the forum, and to learn from the failures of others. Formal online learning was not on offer but, by observing the interactions that took place, newcomers were effectively able to sit in on an informal masterclass on how to look and sound like a Universal Order fascist online.

For these reasons, *Fascist Forge* could be said to constitute a weak online community of users engaged in limited social learning practices, with an orientation towards self-learning rather than organised pedagogy. Aspirants were able to pick up the basics of how to behave, but in-depth knowledge and commitment could only be won by deeper engagement with more complex and abstract material in recommended texts and by participation beyond the introductory level (in the members-only section of the site).

Conclusion – Ideological Learning in the Extreme-right Online Milieu.

The extreme-right online milieu that forms the basis for this paper is a complicated place, populated by thousands of online channels and users competing for influence and status. Users are faced with near infinite ideological choice, and so *Fascist Forge* was only representative of a small number of users interested in the most extreme interpretation of fascism available; it cannot be interpreted as a typical case representative of the entire milieu. Neither can the introductory posts of its users be assumed to be a reliable guide to their real-world identities (e.g. gender, age or location)

or their actual views, but instead should be seen as a representation of how they chose to construct and present themselves for others on the forum. Their testimonies and interactions did not focus on learning as such, but what they said about their motivations for participation and their ideological journeys, and how they said it, provided valuable data for an analysis of extremist learning online and a comparative application of the community of practice model. For ethical reasons, our analysis was limited to material that was openly available on the website. Furthermore, by choice our approach was qualitative and interpretive, leaving open the possibility that other researchers might use a different model of learning or frame of analysis and thus draw other conclusions. Despite these limitations, the analysis of *Fascist Forge* raises some distinct concerns about the role of learning in such contexts.

The first, and most obvious, is the accessibility of this material. *Fascist Forge* was an online forum that openly promoted an interpretation of fascism that was very extreme, and in doing so made freely available supportive ideological material as well as the necessary tools and concepts for identifying further material through independent search. The forum received a degree of mainstream media coverage, even while it was still active (BBC, 2019; Lamoureux & Makuch, 2019). The age profile of the users suggests that at least some were finding and interpreting this material early on in their extremist careers – this is endorsed by the young age of several users later convicted of terrorism offences (BBC, 2019; De Simone, 2020). While *Fascist Forge* was anything but a nurturing environment, it was nevertheless acting as a gateway to self-learning about *Siege*, *Iron March*, and the Universal Order. Arguably, for senior members, it also helped in the identification and preparation of committed newcomers (those with the right views and useful skills) for future ideological and practical engagement – whether online or offline.

A second area of concern is mutation. Kenney (2017, pp. 10-12) noted in his analysis of al-Muhajiroun that the group's beliefs and the insularity of its approach to ideological learning placed a limit on innovation. The beliefs of the group were considered to be immutable, and recruits were explicitly guided in how they should interpret texts and what lessons to learn. While there was an absolute insistence on ideological purity on *Fascist Forge*, there was little in the way of formal doctrinal instruction and little possibility for enforcement, given that users were free to discontinue or to surf elsewhere. Newcomers were left to get on with interpreting the texts as best they could and then expected to reach the 'correct' conclusions, or else face humiliation and verbal punishment from the community. The lack of formal guidance, together with the voluntary nature of online engagement, seems to open up far-greater potential for ideological deviation and innovation than might be the case in an offline extremist group like al-Muhajiroun. Put another way, while the fate of all the newbies who flamed out on their introduction is largely unknown, it would be surprising had they not incorporated at least some of the lessons learned at *Fascist Forge* into their personal ideological landscapes. Faced with such dense ideological material and little explicit guidance on interpreting it, the odds increase of recruits arriving at their own homebrew ideologies, with all the complications this may bring about.

Finally, and explicitly related to *Fascist Forge*, we know there was a deeper level to *Fascist Forge* engagement beyond the public facing forum. Investigative reporting and references within the data harvested from the site itself strongly indicate that *Fascist Forge* may have been something of a staging post and recruitment area for extreme-right groupuscules. Most tellingly, site founder Mathias was identified as participating in recruitment interviews for the Universal Order inspired group, The Base (BBC1, 2020). In recorded conversations, interviewers discussed potential new recruits

and the need for ideological shaping. This hints at a lengthier and more directed process of ideological learning for those seeking a deeper involvement.

Overall, there are traces of the community of practice model exhibited by *Fascist Forge*. However, the emergence of online extremist milieus suggests a need to reconsider the community of practice model for an online environment. *Fascist Forge* undeniably operated as an online resource for individuals looking to discuss and read more about Universal Order fascism, but it was more than that. It offered informal social learning, albeit in an unusually hostile context, with formal learning offloaded onto recruits who were expected to take responsibility for their own ideological indoctrination and skills development.

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