



## **DEHUMANIZATION, HATE SPEECH, AND VIOLENCE IN RIGHT-WING EXTREMIST ENVIRONMENTS**

**Date:** November 24, 2021

*Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.*

### **KEY EVENTS**

On November 24, 2021, Dr. Lisa Kaati, senior researcher at the Swedish Defence Research Agency, presented *Dehumanization, Hate Speech, and Violence in Right-Wing Extremist Environments* at the 2021 CASIS West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a group panel for questions and answers. Main discussion topics included extremists' use of social media to justify and incite violence.

### **NATURE OF DISCUSSION**

#### **Presentation**

Dr. Kaati's presentation focused mainly on how individuals, groups, and movements overlap in the digital space, as well as how the levels of toxic language used to dehumanize opponents and justify violence could be related to the presence or absence of social media platform moderation. Dr. Kaati also discussed how Siege Culture has been a common tool used to inspire and reach individuals who are likely to join the cause and how threat assessment in the digital space could help monitor, profile, and prevent the escalation of violence.

#### **Question Period**

During the question and answer period, Dr. Kaati discussed the importance of ethics in research relating to online extremism. Dr. Kaati also touched upon the rapid expansion of platforms and the increased public exposure to online extremism.

## BACKGROUND

### Presentation

Dr. Kaati began her presentation by emphasizing that to better monitor the evolving trends of online radicalization, it is imperative to examine social media data. However, collecting data comes with challenges, such as ethical regulations. The General Data Protection Regulation in Europe, for instance, makes it difficult to collect and analyze social media data. Furthermore, not all social media platforms are easily accessible and only certain data sources from Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter can be downloaded. Many of the data sets are shut down and no longer accessible, making it difficult for researchers to determine what parts are missing.

Data analysis can also present different challenges. For example, although algorithms help to synthesize large data sets into manageable volumes, they are unable to understand the meaning of the processed data. Therefore, technology is useful to filter and collect potentially relevant data, but it should then be followed by human analysis to understand its meaning.

Dr. Kaati's research on Stormfront, VNN Forum, Reddit, Twitter, 8kun, 4chan, Endchan, Gab, and Telegram demonstrated that the level of toxic language increases based on the level of moderation on these platforms. For instance, the VNN Forum and 8 Chan had higher levels of toxic language than on Reddit, and Reddit is relatively more monitored than the VNN Forum and 8 Chan. Research also showed that in Gab, the targets of toxic language were mainstream societies and public individuals, while the VNN Forum users targeted Jews and Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour for dehumanization.

In addition, Dr. Kaati found that conspiracy theories were weaponized to justify violence towards particular groups. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy theories about the New World Order increased on 4chan as a means of rationalizing violence. Hate speech on this platform targeted Jews as primary architects building the New World Order.

Toxic language was also used as a means to incite others to act violently. Dr. Kaati's work also explored the promotion of the Siege Culture doctrine and its use of toxic language as a mechanism of inciting violence. Siege was the title of a book written by James Mason, a famous American neo-Nazi. Siege Culture is grounded on the idea that a full collapse of the society is necessary to be able to

rebuild a white supremacist society. Siege Culture has garnered support across various neo-Nazi groups, with a significant increase of around 300 users in 2016 to more than 2000 in 2019.

Although extremist discourse is often fomented in the online world, it can materialize in the offline world as well. Dr. Kaati demonstrates an example of this by drawing on the 15-year-old Swedish boy that stabbed his teacher to death in August 2021. He was carrying a manifesto that glorified images of mass shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. His outfit, helmet, and weapon were reflective of Brenton Tarrant's, an Australian mass shooter responsible for the Christchurch Mosque shootings in March 2019. Likewise, previous offenders have been worshipped as saints and served as an inspiration for others to pursue a similar cause.

With increased accessibility and exposure to online extremism, it is important to incorporate threat assessment into online spaces of interaction to prevent radicalisation. One way this can be done is by building on previous research on the offline threat assessment domain and connecting psychology with digital communication to develop psychological profiling of online users.

In TRAP-18, leakage, fixation, and identification are the three identifiers for warning behaviours. Leakage refers to an extremist's motivation to talk about their plans, because it is a significant part of their goals. Fixation refers to users being singularly fixated on a cause that leads them to repeatedly discuss their outlook and plans. Lastly, they identify themselves as a warrior or with a previous offender. The case of Anders Breivik in Norway exemplifies this, as he wore an outfit that resembled a police officer or soldier to glorify himself as a warrior who is about to carry out an important mission.

### **Question Period**

Dr. Kaati discussed both the challenges and significance of research ethics in social media research. In Sweden, researchers submit their work to a national ethical board for review. Though this may be restrictive, it is a necessary system because it challenges the researchers to conduct ethical research. Figuring out a way to ethically conduct research using social media data is imperative because violent right-wing extremism often involves online discourses and behaviours.

On the topic of deradicalization, Dr. Kaati highlighted the need for a collective vision on the kind of internet we want moving forward. With a rapid expansion

of platforms with minimal moderation, there has been an increased degree of freedom and accessibility to share and consume online content. Constant exposure to online extremism could increase one's inclination to violence, even for those that are not necessarily motivated by an extremist cause. It is crucial to consider how we could uphold freedom of speech while counterbalancing the potential effects of reduced moderation levels across many of the social media platforms we see today.

## **KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION**

### **Presentation**

- The digital space consists of overlapping individuals, groups, and movements that create transnational influence.
- Toxic language, dehumanization of a target group, and promotion of Siege Culture have been utilized as tools to justify and incite violence.
- The level of moderation on online platforms is found to be related to the level of toxic language-use.
- Conspiracy theories have been weaponized to justify violence towards particular groups.
- There is a constant flow of new trends in promoting violent right-wing extremism online. Therefore, it is important to increase our capabilities to conduct threat assessment in the digital space.

### **Question Period**

- Research in violent right-wing extremism involves studying individuals and their behaviours, but ethical research is crucial in the study of online violent extremism.
- It is crucial to consider ways to uphold freedom of speech while counterbalancing the potential effects of the lack of moderation on social media.



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