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WORD BOMBS: THE USE OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS TO COUNTER DOMESTIC VIOLENT EXTREMISM

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NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

WORD BOMBS: THE USE OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS TO COUNTER DOMESTIC VIOLENT EXTREMISM

by

Jeremy J. Chedester

December 2022

Co-Advisors: Mollie R. McGuire
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**WORD BOMBS: THE USE OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS
TO COUNTER DOMESTIC VIOLENT EXTREMISM**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS IN SECURITY STUDIES
(HOMELAND SECURITY AND DEFENSE)**

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ABSTRACT

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACAB	All Cops Are Bastards
AI	artificial intelligence
AVE	anarchist violent extremist
AWD	Atomwaffen Division
BAU	Behavioral Analysis Unit
BIT	Behavioral Insights Team
BLM	Black Lives Matter
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DVE	domestic violent extremist
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
IGD	It's Going Down
incels	involuntary celibates
JTTF	Joint Terrorism Task Force
LGTBQ	lesbian, gay, transsexual, bisexual, and queer

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This thesis sets out to investigate how strategic communications can be incorporated into countering domestic violent extremist (DVE) violence in the United States. Strategic communications use messaging or counternarratives based on research and intelligence of the individual's or group's behaviors and perceptions to fulfill the organization's mission, in this case, decreasing violence.[1] There has been a steady increase in DVE activity in the United States recently,[2] and as a result, the spread of unrest and violence has left law enforcement unsure of how to counter it. To further exacerbate the unrest, anarchist violent extremists (AVE) have used dissidents to promote their anarchist ideology.[3] Right-wing organizations such as Proud Boys, white supremacists, and militias have been increasingly aggressive toward law enforcement and counter-protesters, leading to violence. To promote their ideology, extremists use social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit.[4] The U.S. government and law enforcement must proactively mitigate violence utilizing strategic communication strategies using counternarratives.

A. FINDINGS

In Chapter I, the literature review examines prior research in inoculation strategies, nudge theory, psychological and social approaches, and counternarratives to counter DVEs. Inoculation theory and nudge theory are integral to applying strategic communication in the United States due to First Amendment protections and psychological

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[1] Hani Khan, "What Is Strategic Communications?," *Simpplr* (blog), May 13, 2020, https://www.simpplr.com/blog/2020/what-is-strategic-communication/.

[2] Matthew Levitt, "Recent Trends in Terrorism and Counterterrorism: National Practices in Countering Violent Extremism," Washington Institute for Near East Policy Interviews and Presentations, November 16, 2017, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/recent-trends-terrorism-and-counterterrorism-national-practices-countering-violent.

[3] Dana M. Williams, *Black Flags and Social Movements: A Sociological Analysis of Movement Anarchism* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2017), https://muse.jhu.edu/book/67244.

[4] Philip Baugut and Katharina Neumann, "How Right-Wing Extremists Use and Perceive News Media," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 96, no. 3 (2019): 696–720, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699018803080.

reactance. The literature review shows that DVEs use social media to promote and radicalize vulnerable populations and others susceptible to manipulation. Emerging research shows social media tools like memes and social bots are used to promote extremism, but the same tools can also be used to respond to extremist online media. Literature and prior work into psychological and social behavioral methods, such as reasoned action theory, provide an analytical framework to understand how and why extremists believe and behave violently. Backed by scientific literature, using reasoned action theory as a scientific method for understanding extremist messaging and behavior, combined with work into counternarrative strategies, this thesis helps create a method for creating and disseminating strategic communications.

Chapter II discusses how radicalization toward extremism manifests in various forms and how strategic communication can help decrease violent ideology. The section explores narratives, how they work, their persuasiveness, and how emotions play a role in influence. Understanding narratives plays an essential role in recognizing the themes of extremists' messages and goals. Practitioners will be able to create effective counternarratives after they understand and identify the extremists' themes.

Chapter III explores how extremists currently use propaganda to promote their ideology, messages, and narratives. Propaganda can be in many forms, and analyzing extremists' images depicting approved violence, violent memes, and language will help practitioners identify themes to counter their messages. Because inoculation is a proactive way to decrease radicalization and create resistance to extremism in the United States, it should be done as early as possible and start, ideally, in schools and youth programs across the country.[5] Inoculation strategies are not disseminated with one event but with a series of messages over time. In addition to inoculation, this thesis explored nudge theory and the strategies from *Inside the Nudge Unit*.[6] Nudge theory provides an ethical framework for

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[5] Kurt Braddock, "Vaccinating against Hate: Using Attitudinal Inoculation to Confer Resistance to Persuasion by Extremist Propaganda," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 2 (2022): 240–62, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1693370.

[6] David Halpern, *Inside the Nudge Unit* (London, UK: Virgin Digital, 2015).

conducting communication strategies in the United States with libertarian paternalism as a guide for choice architecture and positive nudges.

In Chapter IV, this thesis examines how DVEs use social media to promote their ideology, what they think of the media, and how artificial intelligence (AI) can be used to counter online extremism. Examining how right-wing and left-wing extremists use social media, their preferred platforms, and the type of communication and propaganda they produce is needed for practitioners to develop counternarratives. There are examples and studies of how right-wing groups, especially white supremacists, perceive news media and adapt because of those beliefs. Extremists' use of social media was backed by statistical data and research that showed links to violent rhetoric and physical violence.

While delving into social psychological approaches, Chapter V investigates how emotional messages can influence people and cause positive or negative reactions. The theory of reasoned action, theory of planned behavior, and behavior prediction models are evaluated and led to the use of reasoned action theory as a template for determining how background information, beliefs, and intentions form behaviors and their subsequent actions. After implementing reasoned action theory, this thesis examines how to analyze extremists' narratives and construct counternarratives using a scientific and systematic method. Last, this section looks at some overall strategies to disseminate strategic communications.

In Chapter VI, four case studies are presented using DVE group examples from anarchists, Proud Boys, Boogaloo Boys, and Atomwaffen (AWD). Each case study looks at the group's ideology, violence, social media, and demographics to better understand the themes of the group messaging. The case studies provide examples of the behavior or violent act practitioners want to change and the belief behind the behavior. Next, using the Reasoned Action Theory model, knowledge of the group, and messaging theme, the case study provides an example of how to craft a counternarrative to decrease violence. The case studies conclude with specific examples of how best to disseminate strategic communications.

B.   CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This thesis intends to see how strategic communication strategies can help disrupt and decrease violence based on DVE ideology and intentions. Law enforcement must shift toward preventative measures and strategies, which have close ties to threat assessment strategies. The goal of threat assessment teams is to stop attacks before they occur. These methods can help build counternarratives and interventions with DVE groups and individuals. Law enforcement can use professionals already versed in addressing rhetoric and potential violence to implement strategic communications in their units.

Inoculation strategies, shown to be effective in several other countries, can cultivate resistance to extremist content, messaging, and radicalization. Because ongoing inoculation works best when introduced in the formative years of an individual's life, inoculation methods to fight violent extremism need to be part of the educational system to help shape healthy beliefs and a culture that rejects violence. The United States should begin supporting and funding educational strategies, curriculum, media outreach, and online messaging to fight violent rhetoric using inoculation strategies.

This thesis discusses nudge theory strategies to help guide practitioners using strategic communication to change violent behavior. Nudge theory introduces a partial ethical framework of libertarian paternalism to influence a change in negative behaviors. Libertarian paternalism provides Americans with a choice and attempts to achieve goals to change negative behavior. The government must start researching, implementing, and working toward evolving behavioral science strategies like nudge theory to address extremism. federal, state, and local governments must invest more in the study and development AI to counter violent extremism. This thesis provides examples of how Google, Facebook, and YouTube have used AI to recognize and block certain extremist content or language, yet there needs to be more strategic methods. Government research, ongoing evaluation, and adjustments are required for the fast-evolving technological capabilities. The United States must be a leader, influencer, and supporter of AI development and implementation in countering extremism.

This thesis recommends using investigators and analysts in conjunction with those who study DVEs or work on the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Joint Terrorism Task

Force (JTTF) to develop specific counternarratives for those espousing violence. Investigators can utilize undercover agents, online agents, informants, and social bots to disseminate counternarratives. Because professionals on these teams already have tools and guidance on how to implement preventative measures in potentially violent individuals, the transition to educating and implementing the use of strategic communication strategies would be seamless.

Governments must be cautious when disseminating counternarratives or other strategic communications due to extremists' psychological reactions to government messaging. Evidence shows that the government needs to play an indirect role if it cannot apply subversive strategic communications methods. A partnership with web, software, and app designers as well as corporations and community partners is essential and should incorporate psychological approaches that use heuristics, user engagement, attractive programming, and compelling narratives that influence DVEs.

Government resources, research, and investing could significantly contribute to understanding extremism, its themes, and how to counter violent rhetoric. Therefore, future research and scientific data need to be developed, explored, and modified as the extremist threat evolves. New and innovative methodologies need to be based on systematic and standardized practices, which help measure the success and failures of strategic communications tactics. Government leadership can help develop future strategies, tools, and dissemination methods in partnership with private entities and companies.

The recommended course of action is establishing policy and strategies to implement strategic communication to counter DVEs' violent ideology. Strategic communications can be accomplished through government support, research, intelligence, and partnerships with a commitment to strategic communication concepts. Together with behavioral scientists, special strategic communication units, public partners, credible messengers, and cyber, these partnerships will work to establish a modus operandi and policies, integrating strategic communication to counter DVEs. Therefore, inoculation strategies, nudges, and counternarratives need to become part of the U.S. government's policy to increase positive perspectives and decrease DVEs violence.

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Thank you, Commander Timothy Tannenbaum, for supporting me and arguing the importance of higher education for detectives to the Washington County Sheriff's Office.

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I.   INTRODUCTION

A.   PROBLEM STATEMENT

There has been a steady increase in domestic violent extremists (DVE) activity in the United States in recent years.[1] Unrest is exacerbated via social media by the concerns of the global pandemic, the economy, politics, technology explorations and inventions, climate change, and terrorism.[2] The spread of unrest and violence has left law enforcement unsure how to counter it.[3] To further exacerbate the unrest, anarchist violent extremists (AVE) have used the dissidents to promote their anarchist ideology.[4] Anarchists and right-wing groups have also clashed and engaged in violence, creating more divisiveness in the United States.

Right-wing organizations such as Proud Boys, white supremacists, and militias have been increasingly aggressive toward law enforcement and counter-protesters, leading to violence. On January 6, 2021, right-wing violence peaked at the U.S. Capitol building. Violence ideology has coincided with the proliferation of social media among right-wing groups.[5] Extremists use social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit to promote their ideology.[6] Mainstream social media companies have begun to scrutinize extremist's posts and their presence on their platforms but fail to mitigate

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[1] Levitt, "Recent Trends in Terrorism and Counterterrorism."

[2] UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee, *Update on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Terrorism, Counter-Terrorism and Countering Violent Extremism* (New York: UN Security Council, 2021), https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/content/update-impact-covid-19-pandemic-terrorism-counter-terrorism-and-countering-violent-extremism.

[3] Maura Conway, Ryan Scrivens, and Logan Macnair, *Right-Wing Extremist's Persistent Online Presence: History and Contemporary Trends* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2019), https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=835901.

[4] Williams, *Black Flags and Social Movements*.

[5] Talene Bilazarian, "Countering Violent Extremist Narratives Online: Lessons from Offline Countering Violent Extremism," *Policy & Internet* 12, no. 1 (2020): 46–65, https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.204.

[6] Baugut and Neumann, "How Right-Wing Extremists Use and Perceive News Media."

extremism propaganda and violent rhetoric.[7] Law enforcement has also struggled to address extremism while protecting First Amendment rights as extremists use social media to radicalize and promote their ideology.

The United States has confronted extremism with various strategies like psychological operations and propaganda against Islamic extremism and other foreign adversaries outside of the United States. Still, traditional, reactive law enforcement tools do not include counter-messaging strategies in preventing domestic violent extremism. This thesis introduces implementing strategic communication to counter DVEs in the United States. Strategic communication to counter DVEs is an emerging field of study in academia and policy debate.[8] According to Hani Khan, strategic communications use messaging based on research and intelligence of the group's behaviors and perceptions to fulfill the organization's mission.[9] Strategic communication can take many forms, and this thesis discusses specific strategic communication that law enforcement can employ to counter DVEs.

Exploring strategic communication with tactics in inoculation, nudge theory, and counter-messaging against DVEs requires further exploration and study. Law enforcement needs education and guidelines to utilize strategic communication to fight against violent extremism in the United States. Establishing a modus operandi and policy integrating strategic communication incorporating social media to respond to the increase in domestic violent extremism is integral in countering the increased violence.

B.   RESEARCH QUESTION

How can strategic communications be incorporated into countering DVEs in the United States?

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[7] Ariel Bogle, *Buying and Selling Extremism: New Funding Opportunities in the Right-Wing Extremist Online Ecosystem* (Canberra, Australia: Australian Strategic Police Institute, 2021), https://www.aspi.org.au/report/buying-and-selling-extremism.

[8] Bharath Ganesh and Jonathan Bright, "Countering Extremists on Social Media: Challenges for Strategic Communication and Content Moderation," *Policy and Internet* 12, no. 1 (2020): 6–19, https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.236.

[9] Khan, "What Is Strategic Communications?"

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. What Is Strategic Communication and Who Does It?

Strategic communication has taken many shapes over the years and has had several names. Propaganda strategies have been used for decades in almost every aspect of strategic communication, attempting to influence people's perceptions about various topics. Evaluating how the United States has used propaganda in countering extremism is essential to determining the effectiveness, applicability, and changes that need to occur for further use within the country. This paper examines what strategies have been effective or ineffective in the fight against terrorism. The literature review thus far shows emerging work in inoculation strategies, nudge theory, and counternarratives to counter DVEs. Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein's nudge theory is an integral part of applying strategic communication in the United States due to First Amendment protections.

In the following sections, the literature review shows DVEs are using social media to promote and radicalize vulnerable populations and others susceptible to manipulation. Extremists on the left- and right-wings are using a variety of social media platforms to spread discord. In addition, emerging research shows social media tools like memes and social bots are used to respond to extremist online media. There are studies to show the effectiveness against extremist propaganda when social bots integrate with counternarratives in social media platforms.

2. Propaganda

According to traditional scholarship, propaganda manipulates someone's beliefs or perspectives using various messaging strategies. The term "words have meaning" is a classic example of how when a person hears a word, they automatically associate that word, either positively or negatively, in how they hear or read it. Mustafa Canan, a professor at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, has written on propaganda and influence strategies. In "Countering Disinformation Propaganda: Reverse-Engineering the Experimental Implicit Learning Paradigm," Mustafa Canan and Daphne Canan addressed modern warfare strategies that look at the psychological impacts of decision-making when

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introducing disinformation.[10] The authors also discussed how disinformation strategies can be applied using artificial grammar learning, which correlates with word patterns in Twitter. Mustafa Canan and Anthony Akil discussed online propaganda in the context of cyberspace being a warfare domain much like a physical domain where traditional warfare occurs.[11] Canan and Akil argued when disinformation is promoted in influence campaigns, a person interprets the information using their active cognitive schemas, which ultimately affects decision-making and behavior.

While Canan discusses disinformation and propaganda in the warfighting domain of cyberspace, Peter Ford argues propaganda can radicalize and deradicalize extremists searching in cyberspace for extremist content. In "Combatting Terrorist Propaganda," Ford discussed how some countries have redirected people searching for terrorism propaganda to deradicalizing sites.[12] These deradicalizing sites address the influence of radical propaganda on those ingesting it and work toward re-educating those thinking of engaging in violent extremism.[13] William Hansen wrote a thesis called "Influence: Theory and Practice," in which he discussed the significant theoretical and practical foundations for psychology in propaganda and marketing.[14] Hansen's thesis evaluated the psychological and social reasons someone is likely to be open to behavioral suggestions and the social implications of that suggestibility. Propaganda studies provide contextual history for applying strategic communication and its effectiveness, various uses, and failures.

The role of propaganda in cyberspace has been an emerging topic of debate in how it influences people and the implication of its use in radicalization. Cyberspace is the home

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[10] Mustafa Canan and Daphne Canan, "Countering Disinformation Propaganda: Reverse Engineering the Experimental Implicit Learning Paradigm" (15th International Conference on Cyber Warfare and Security, Reading, UK: Academic Conferences International Limited, 2020), 1, http://hdl.handle.net/10945/65693.

[11] Mustafa Canan and Anthony Akil, "A Warfare Domain Approach to the Disinformation Problem" (15th International Conference on Cyber Warfare and Security, Reading, UK: Academic Conferences International Limited, 2020), 82–91, ProQuest.

[12] Peter Ford, "Combatting Terrorist Propaganda," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 15, no. 2 (2020): 175–86, https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2020.1780298.

[13] Ford.

[14] William G. Hansen, "Influence: Theory and Practice" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2013), http://hdl.handle.net/10945/34673.

of tools like memes and bots to counter extremism. Mustafa and Daphne Canan, Warren, Akil, and Hansen's works also touch on the psychological impacts of extremism and propaganda, thus connecting the theory of reasoned action and nudge theory. Ford's deradicalizing sites are symbiotic to Braddock's work in counternarratives, combining online strategies and deradicalization. Although the term "propaganda" has some negative connotations, especially in the United States, the methods and effects of information strategies like propaganda are instrumental for understanding and examining influence, nudging, and counternarratives. There are also more subtle approaches like Inoculation theory may help to prevent radicalization.

3.   Inoculation and Counternarrative Strategies

Dr. Kurt Braddock has done extensive research into the influence of propaganda, inoculation, and counter-messaging. Braddock is arguably a leading researcher and expert in counternarratives and their extremism applications. In "Vaccinating Against Hate: Using Attitudinal Inoculation to Confer Resistance to Persuasion by Extremist Propaganda," he proposed the use of attitudinal inoculation and researched its implications to promote resistance to left- and right-wing extremist propaganda.[15] He concluded that inoculation strategies enhance a person's ability to challenge extremist messaging and influence.[16]

In "Beliefs, Attitude, and Behavior Change: Leveraging Current Perspectives for Counter-Radicalization," Braddock discussed and explored various persuasion theories, frameworks, and practices applied to the study of counter-radicalizing efforts using messaging.[17] Braddock specifically addressed vulnerable populations and discussed how people change their beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. He also discussed issues of persuasion in a meta-analysis study, which measured and evaluated how a narrative can persuade or influence perspectives in "Meta-Analytic Evidence for the Persuasion Effort

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[15] Braddock, "Vaccinating against Hate."

[16] Braddock.

[17] Kurt Braddock, "Belief, Attitude, and Behavior Change: Leveraging Current Perspectives for Counter-Radicalization" (London: Great Britain Commission for Countering Extremism, July 31, 2019), https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=828430.

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of Narratives on Belief, Attitudes, Intentions, and Beliefs." The study produced mixed results, but the author argued that unidentified moderators may have been present.

John Horgan and Braddock produced "Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism."[18] The authors provided guidelines on developing and producing counternarratives that can decrease extremist ideology. The authors showed three components were needed to build counternarratives using psychological and communication theory. The first is analyzing terrorist narratives, the second is constructing counternarratives that challenge extremism narratives, and the third is disseminating the counternarratives to overcome persuasion barriers.[19] Braddock and John Morrison also discussed how to successfully implement counter-messaging campaigns in "Cultivating Trust and Perceptions of Source Credibility in Online Counternarratives Intended to Reduce Support for Terrorism."[20] The authors argued that the source of the counter messages needed to come from a trusted source, and cultivating trust is the first step to producing a significant change in countering violent extremism.

In the book *Weaponized Words*, Braddock applied the existing theories of persuasion to the range of communication methods used by extremists in propagating their messages through social media.[21] Braddock argued that strategic messages or communication methods are reliable tools to counter-message against violent extremism using persuasion messaging strategies. Braddock's counter-messaging strategy is crucial to the argument that strategic messaging is a possible and viable option to reduce domestic violent extremism in the United States. Braddock is undoubtedly not the only person

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[18] Kurt Braddock and John Horgan, "Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 5 (2016): 381–404, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1116277.

[19] Braddock and Horgan.

[20] Kurt Braddock and John F. Morrison, "Cultivating Trust and Perceptions of Source Credibility in Online Counternarratives Intended to Reduce Support for Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 43, no. 6 (2020): 468–92, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1452728.

[21] Kurt Braddock, *Weaponized Words: The Strategic Role of Persuasion in Violent Radicalization and Counter-Persuasion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

looking into counternarrative strategies and inoculation. Other academic bodies, think tanks, and government agencies are researching how to decrease violence due to DVEs.

Bobi Ivanov et al.'s study, "The Potential for Inoculation Messages and Post Inoculation Talk to Minimize the Social Impact of Politically Motivated Acts of Violence," also addressed inoculation in the fight against terrorism. The authors researched whether precrisis inoculation discussions can positively impact beliefs and opinions about a violent or hostile event.[22] The study results affirmed that people in the control condition who do not have inoculation discussions about an event do poorly compared to those exposed to inoculation strategies. Braddock's "Vaccination Against Hate" and Ivanov et al.'s work on inoculation mirrors each other in their theories that early intervention and preparing people for a message are practical tools of influence. Inoculation and counternarratives theories overlap while using theory of reasoned action, theory of planned behavior, and the model of behavior predication.

4.   Nudge Theory

Nudge theory draws from the economics of psychological and behavioral influence strategies. Nudge theory also introduces the term "libertarian paternalism" regarding influence and choice. *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* was written by University of Chicago's Richard Thaler and Harvard Law School professor Cass Sunstein.[23] This is the work that made nudge theory mainstream in academia. Almost any article that mentions Nudge Theory refers to Thaler and Sunstein's work on the topic.

Nudge theory's premise is that a nudge is a preferred method of influence because it guides people's behavior in a positive direction and in a way they will not later regret.[24] Thaler and Sunstein defined libertarian paternalism with the argument that it is possible and appropriate for the government and private groups to influence others to effect a

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[22] Bobi Ivanov et al., "The Potential for Inoculation Messages and Postinoculation Talk to Minimize the Social Impact of Politically Motivated Acts of Violence," *Journal of Contingencies & Crisis Management* 26, no. 4 (December 2018): 414–24, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12213.

[23] Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

[24] Thaler and Sunstein.

positive change while still respecting the right to choose.[25] Paternalism, used by Thaler, is the influencer wanting what is best for the influenced person. Libertarian is used in the context that although the person is attempting to be influenced, they ultimately still have the right and ability to choose for themselves.[26]

Exploring nudge theory in community policing strategies relating to extremism is an exciting opportunity. Professor Enshen Li's article, "Can 'Nudge' Salvage Community Policing against Terrorism?," suggested using nudge theory while trying to deradicalize Islamic extremists with the help of community police methods.[27] The University of Queensland professor argued that deradicalization is possible through indirect encouragement. The model requires community participation in the forefront and police in the background, substantiating Braddock's theory that a trusted source is necessary for counternarratives and influence campaigns. This article focuses on how governments should and should not be involved in nudge theory while also showing the effectiveness of its use in countering extremism. Li's philosophy of nudge theory falls in line with Thaler and Sunstein's vision of nudging. Li took nudge theory and merely applied it practically to community policing strategies. This approach is similar to what this thesis aims to achieve with DVEs.

Government investment and support are of concern in the arguments for and against influence campaigns, such as nudge theory, inoculation theory, counter-narratives, and propaganda. In 2015, President Obama signed an executive order called "Using Behavioral Science Insights to Better Serve the American People" to implement behavioral health strategies.[28] One of the goals outlined in the order was to improve information campaigns to the American people for a healthier America. Although not explicitly addressed, extremism challenges are partially why the government encourages and supports

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[25] Thaler and Sunstein.

[26] Thaler and Sunstein.

[27] Enshen Li, "Can 'Nudge' Salvage Community Policing against Terrorism?" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 0, no. 0 (March 5, 2021): 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1876035.

[28] Barack Obama, "Executive Order—Using Behavioral Science Insights to Better Serve the American People," White House, September 15, 2015, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/15/executive-order-using-behavioral-science-insights-better-serve-American.

behavioral health interdictions. In "Should Governments Invest More in Nudging," Shlomo Benartzi et al. discussed how governments look toward behavioral science techniques to address policy goals.[29] The article suggests that nudge interventions may help change a person's negative behavior without being coercive. The authors discuss nudge theory from a financial investment angle, showing that nudges are also economically responsible. Like the Li, the authors apply nudge theory to government use and ask if the government should conduct nudging more. This work also uses behavioral sciences to argue their position, much like Canan and Braddock.

While propaganda has historically been used for positive and negative influence campaigns by countries worldwide for decades, nudge theory focuses on positive nudges, using libertarian paternalism as a moral compass for the nudges. Propaganda can also use less subtle means of influence, while nudges use small interactions, resulting in more significant effects on behavior. Inoculation theory is similar to nudge theory because it uses motivational strategies to protect and prevent people from embracing radical or extremist messaging. Inoculation theory also embraces the technological advantages of using social media, much like counternarratives. Also, like inoculation, counternarratives provide an alternative perspective to recruiting, radicalization, and echo chambers of extremist content. Counternarratives typically occur as post-radical messages and are more reactive to extremism, while inoculation focuses on preventative measures to counter extremism. Indeed, to effect the most change in extremism, a combination of these theories, especially nudging, inoculation, and counternarratives, are needed in countering the increased propagation of extremist content in social media.

5.   Social Media and Domestic Violent Extremists

Social media is a critical method used in strategic communication in countering DVEs. Both left- and right-wing groups use social media to promote their ideology and communicate, creating echo chambers. Christopher Milburn, a Naval Postgraduate School student, wrote a thesis on DVEs and their use of social media: "Advance of the Black Flags:

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[29] Shlomo Benartzi et al., "Should Governments Invest More in Nudging?," *Psychological Science* 28, no. 8 (2017): 1041–55, https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617702501.

Symbolism, Social Identity, and Psychological Operations in Violent Conflict."[30] Milburn's thesis argues that the United States and DVEs are engaged in ongoing, direct conflict on social media. Milburn included an overview of the literature concerning communication principles and symbolism, followed by qualitative analysis of strategic communication samples to investigate how media-constructed group identity influenced attitudes and challenged adversaries.[31] R. T. Adek, Bustami, and M. Ula's paper, "Systematics Review on the Application of Social Media Analytics for Detecting Radical and Extremist Groups," looked at how radical groups mistreat social media platforms—Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, YouTube, Reddit, etc.—to promote their ideologies.[32] The authors analyzed social media applications and radicalization to understand different groups' trends and gaps. While these two papers discussed domestic extremism in more general terms, looking for gaps and how extremists use social media, other reports have focused on specific types of groups, like racially motivated groups. These works also use behavioral science approaches to understand and analyze extremism and the impacts of social media.

Müller and Schwarz discuss the link between social media and hate crime, using Facebook data in their article "Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime."[33] The research shows that right-wing anti-refugee messages on Facebook can predict violent crimes against refugees. The study also indicates that when distracting news events are on social media, violence decreases against refugees. Maura Conway, Ryan Scivens, and Logan Macnair's *Right-Wing Extremist's Persistent Online Presence: History and Contemporary Trends* examined how right-wing extremists promote their way of

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[30] Christopher D. Milburn, "Advance of the Black Flags: Symbolism, Social Identity, and Psychological Operations in Violent Conflict" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2015), http://hdl.handle.net/10945/47818.

[31] Milburn.

[32] R. T. Adek, Bustami, and M. Ula, "Systematics Review on the Application of Social Media Analytics for Detecting Radical and Extremist Group," in *IOP Conference Series. Materials Science and Engineering*, vol. 1071 (International Conference on Advanced Science and Technology (ICAST 2020), Bristol, UK: IOP Publishing, 2021), 1–8, https://doi.org/10.1088/1757-899X/1071/1/012029.

[33] Karsten Müller and Carlo Schwarz, "Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime," *Journal of the European Economic Association* 19, no. 4 (August 2021): 2131–67, https://doi.org/10.1093/jeea/jvaa045.

thinking, using social media and other online forums, and have done so for years.[34] The paper explained how extremists use social media to promote their ideology, radicalize others, and use it to intimidate others, and promote violence. DVEs are not all alike, but these two examples of right-wing extremists demonstrate how their use of social media is similar in their tactics and types of messaging. Next, this thesis looks at ways to interdict extremist messaging online and build a strategy for countering violence propagated by extremists.

In "Communicatively Countering Violent Extremists," Dr. Braddock argued that internet-based technologies have enabled extremist groups to propagate their messages, reaching a broader audience and increasing violence and extremism.[35] Braddock claimed that analysts, researchers, and policymakers must also use internet technologies to counter violent extremists and suggested focusing on communication-based strategies to disrupt extremists' ideology. In "Fighting Words: The persuasive effect of online extremism narratives on the radicalization process," Braddock discussed online extremism.[36] He argued that online extremism narratives are significant in the radicalization and proliferation of extremism in the United States. Braddock suggested that there are at least three factors needed to effectively counter extremism's spread online: (1) define terrorism and its related terms in domestic extremism, (2) establish that extremist narratives impact the communication of beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors that radicalize others, and (3) directly assess the content of those radicalizing messages to reveal the change in beliefs and attitudes of those radicalized.[37] A counternarrative can be constructed and infused into social media platforms used by extremists by assessing radicalized messages. Braddock echoed Muller and Schwartz's views on extremism and social media but becomes more offensive in strategies to use social media to counter extremism. While

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[34] Conway, Scrivens, and Macnair, *Right-Wing Extremists' Persistent Online Presence*.

[35] Kurt Braddock, "Communicatively Countering Violent Extremism Online," in *The Handbook of Communication and Security*, ed. Bryan C. Taylor and Hamilton Bean (New York: Routledge, 2019), 247–61.

[36] Kurt Braddock, "Fighting Words: The Persuasive Effect of Online Extremist Narratives on the Radicalization Process" (PhD diss., Pennsylvania State University, 2012), ProQuest.

[37] Braddock.

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Braddock explained how to implement counter-messaging extremists online, he did not address using specific tools online. Still, there is emerging research into utilizing artificial intelligence (AI) and countering extremism online.

6. Online Tools and Options for Using Strategic Communication

A study in 2020 called "Artificial Companions, Social Bots and Work Bots: Communicative Robots as Research Objects of Media and Communication Studies" demonstrated how social bots are a relevant field of media research and in messaging and counter-messaging.[38] Social bots are autonomous operating systems designed for communication with humans online.[39] While this focus targets how bots using AI can impact messaging, the University of Queensland has done several studies on how bots use counternarratives to fight extremism on different social media platforms.

In 2021, Kevin Blasiak, Marten Risius, and Sabine Matook from the University of Queensland, Australia, wrote two papers regarding social bots and counting extremism. In "Social Bots for Peace: A Dual-Process Perspective to Counter Online Extremist Messaging," the authors reiterated how online extremism is a significant concern for governments, social media companies, and civic organizations.[40] The authors explored the potential of countering radicalization online, using social bots as AI on social media platforms. The authors' research engaged dual-process theory, using social bots to intervene in extremist messaging.[41] The second paper, "Conceptualising Social Bots for Countering Online Extremist Messages," argued that current views on stopping extremist messaging by removing messaging are ineffective.[42] The authors suggested that cognitive

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[38] Andreas Hepp, "Artificial Companions, Social Bots and Work Bots: Communicative Robots as Research Objects of Media and Communication Studies," *Media, Culture & Society* 42, no. 7–8 (2020): 1410–26, https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720916412.

[39] Hepp.

[40] Kevin M. Blasiak, Marten Risius, and Sabine Matook, "'Social Bots for Peace': A Dual-Process Perspective to Counter Online Extremist Messaging" (Forty-Second International Conference on Information Systems, Austin, TX, 2021), 1–9, https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:6e37e03.

[41] Blasiak, Risius, and Matook.

[42] Kevin M. Blasiak, Marten Risius, and Sabine Matook, "Conceptualising Social Bots for Countering Online Extremist Messages" (Australasian Conference on Information Systems, Sydney, Australia, 2021), 1–9, https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:63e8e43.

and socio-technical factors impact how social media users respond to online extremist messages and develop a study based on that theory. The authors demonstrated that using social bots programmed to intervene extremist messaging with counter-messaging is a viable alternative in countering online extremism.[43] Exploring the application of social bots is one piece of the multi-pronged approach to strategic messaging in countering domestic violent extremism due to their prolific presence online. There are also ways in which messaging, created by humans, can affect change and influence extremists, such as creating memes in counternarrative and inoculation strategies.

Katherine Cisewski, a student from the Naval Postgraduate School, wrote "A Meme's Role in Information Disorder Campaigns: Designing an Experiment That Draws Correlations between Age, Education Level and Gender, and Participant Willingness to Interact with False Information."[44] Cisewski argued that memes used to promote extremist messages are an effective way to influence others. This paper looked at multiple platforms, including Twitter and other social media platforms, comparing how Russia and other countries or groups have used disinformation to spread political or social messages.[45] The paper also provided practical examples for creating memes that can change extremist's perceptions. Social media is a powerful tool used by extremists, this thesis suggests to use it to counter violent extremism. Like propaganda, which uses several different media outlet forms, research into media and other information platforms necessitates further investigation. Cisewski's approach to countering extremism using social media is similar to the University of Queensland methodology: They both provide a practical roadmap to creating special social media tools to counter extremism.

In *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making,* Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan argued that there are many reasons for the decrease of public trust, which affects democracy, including the propagation

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[43] Blasiak, Risius, and Matook.

[44] Katherine A. Cisewski, "A Meme's Role in Information Disorder Campaigns: Designing an Experiment That Draws Correlations between Age, Education Level and Gender, and Participant Willingness to Interact with False Information" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2021), http://hdl.handle.net/10945/67684.

[45] Cisewski.

of incorrect information through social media and TV as well as siloed social media groups.[46] This paper was from the perspective of countering mis-, dis-, and mal-information. This paper also touched on the critical issue regarding who should disseminate strategic information. Thaler and Sunstein also discussed how trusted sources and positive messaging are important in nudge theory. Wardle and Derakhshan's work on information disorder addressed how research and policymaking play a role in messaging by organizations, especially in the domestic arena and when using strategic communication with U.S. citizens. Previous literature discusses if and how we can use strategic messaging, but Wardle and Derakhshan discussed how policy for such strategies is required. A recurring theme in the previous literature review is how behavioral science helps to develop strategies to counter extremist psychology and sociology. Whether it is the more overt propaganda messages or the subtle nudges of Thaler and Sunstein, understanding who extremists are and what they believe is critical to countering these unconventional threats. We just need to start putting these practices to work using strategic communication.

D.   RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis evaluates if strategic communication can influence people and how it works. The first phase explores different theories related to countering extremist messages by first looking at how propaganda has played a role in developing and using information campaigns that change people's perceptions. This thesis analyzes the efficacy of nudge theory, inoculation theory, and counternarratives while countering extremist communication. Next, this thesis explores how DVEs use social media to promote their ideology, radicalize others, and act as echo chambers. The main focus of this section is to examine how social media narratives promote extremism and how to counter those narratives with alternative narratives, with a specific guide on how to construct counternarratives to decrease extremism and the pathway to violence. Constructing counternarratives will have two parts, first is to identify the themes used by extremists in their messaging. The second is to build counter-messages centered on the themes of

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[46] Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making* (Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe, 2017).

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extremists. Constructing counternarratives is based on Dr. Braddock and his colleagues' work in this area and studies from Ivanov et al.'s research in inoculation. These previous studies are applied to DVEs using reasoned action theory, theory of planned Behavior, and the model of behavior predication.

The next phase examines case studies and uses of strategic communications to counter four different groups' violent messaging, looking at the messages' tone, style, and feel. Using the reasoned action theory, this thesis reviews the groups' background and messaging contextual factors: culture, socioeconomic status, knowledge, religion, personalities, demographics, and messages encountered. This thesis also identifies the groups' behavioral beliefs, normative beliefs, and control beliefs. Looking at behavioral beliefs helps to determine the attitude toward behavior. Normative beliefs help identify perceived norms, and control beliefs help identify perceived behavioral control. Attitude toward behavior, perceived norms, and perceived behavioral controls will lead to behavioral intentions, thus leading to violent behavior.

Additionally, of interest in the thesis is online tools applied to strategic communication. This thesis explores social bots and their possible use in social media to counter-message against DVEs' messages and propaganda in the context of the themes and techniques identified throughout the research. This thesis is not about the ethics of conducting strategic communications. The strategies and theories used in this thesis have ethical and legal considerations in mind; however, they are not explicitly addressed. This thesis helps address whether strategic communication tactics are viable in fighting increasing domestic violent extremism in the United States. Possible policy recommendations and implications and a conclusion complete this thesis.

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II. STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION, RADICALIZATION, AND NARRATIVES

This chapter introduces and explains what strategic communication is in the context of its use in countering DVE.

As with any type of extremism, there is usually a period of radicalization, as this chapter discusses. There are many aspects to developing and learning the of strategic communication processes. In the context of this thesis, strategic communication is in the form of counternarratives to counter DVEs' narratives, themes, memes, images, and propaganda. This chapter also explores radicalization, narratives, and emotions, and introduces counternarratives as a tool for strategic communication.

The diversity of values, opinions, and beliefs that Americans possess is one of the defining characteristics of our country. Protecting our freedoms and constitutionally protected rights is imperative if we want to continue having the type of democracy the country stands for. Protection against violence is a constitutional right. In the United States, DVEs present an ongoing and evolving threat that often promotes violence. Extremists manipulate the values of our country by using constitutionally protected free speech to propagate their rhetoric of violence, intimidating others with their views and opinions through violent actions.

The United States must address extremist narratives and cannot stand by thinking that DVE rhetoric will dissipate when it continues to expand. In June 2021, the National Security Council presented its *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism.*

> Addressing domestic terrorism effectively, responsibly, and enduringly requires moving swiftly but sustainably; creatively but carefully; and decisively but deftly. Our approach will protect both the nation and the civil liberties of its citizens. Additionally, pursuing the goal of preventing, disrupting, and deterring acts of domestic terrorism means achieving the type of resilience that can prevent domestic terrorists from gaining traction and adherents in the first place. Resilience can take many forms. It can mean raising public awareness of how terrorists deliberately seek overreaction, which can help to avoid precisely that overreaction and instead thwart terrorists' own strategies. And it can mean, broader still, cultivating the type of digital literacy that can empower the American public to resist those who

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would use online communications platforms and other venues to recruit, radicalize, and mobilize to violence.[47]

Preventing, disrupting, and deterring acts of DVE can be implemented with strategies like strategic communication, helping to create resilience in the American population. The United States needs to counter extremism by addressing extremist violent rhetoric and communicating with the public to better equip them with robust tools to resist radicalization and deter violence.

The United States has confronted extremism with various strategies similar to psychological operations and propaganda against Islamic extremism and other foreign adversaries outside of the United States. However, psychological operations are inappropriate for use in the United States. Implementing strategic communication to counter DVEs in the United States is an emerging field of study in academia and policy debate.[48] Traditional, reactive law enforcement tools do not include choice-based counter-messaging strategies in preventing DVE violence from spreading. Appropriate ethical and legal types of strategic communication are needed if the United States wants to decrease extremism.

Hani Khan, a communication and marketing expert, said that strategic communications use messaging based on research and intelligence of the group's behaviors and perceptions to fulfill the organization's mission.[49] The proposed strategy for implementing strategic communication in this thesis is to decrease violence among DVEs and counter their violent rhetoric with counter-messaging or counternarratives. Strategic communication can take many forms using a variety of social psychological approaches; this thesis discusses specific strategic communications law enforcement can employ to counter DVEs.

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[47] National Security Council, *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism* (Washington, DC: White House, 2021), https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/National-Strategy-for-Countering-Domestic-Terrorism.pdf.

[48] Ganesh and Bright, "Countering Extremists on Social Media."

[49] Khan, "What Is Strategic Communications?"

This thesis explores strategic communication in inoculation, nudge theory, reasoned action theory, and counter-messaging against DVEs requires further exploration and evaluation. Law enforcement needs strategic communication education and guidelines to fight against violent extremism in the United States. Establishing a modus operandi and policy integrating strategic communication strategies, which incorporate social media and other tools to respond to the increase in DVE, is integral to countering the increased violence.

Law enforcement has had little guidance in developing or implementing communication strategies in the United States against DVEs. Hesitancy and challenges with strategic communication involve concerns around First Amendment rights, ethical considerations, unintended consequences, practical methods, and tactics. There are different kinds of DVEs and platforms from which the groups operate, making each forum and group a unique. Understanding human behavior and extremist ideology are imperative to counter-messaging strategies and influence. Identifying messaging themes, social identity, motivations, and goals of extremist groups are needed to influence a counter behavior are not familiar strategies in law enforcement. Researching reasoned action theory, understanding brain systems, and using social media effectively are all relevant to crafting messages to influence violent extremists and would-be extremists. How extremists communicate and share ideas is evolving; law enforcement must also evolve.

Because exploration and research of this approach are ongoing, careful consideration and implementation of these strategies are of utmost importance. The goals, policies, and guidelines must be specific and well thought out. These strategies aim to disrupt criminal activity, not infringe on First Amendment rights, or alter citizens' rights to believe what they want. The goals are not to discredit individuals or groups but to shift their focus and objectives away from violence.[50] Strategic communication is also best used with other entities, such as civil society, think tanks, non-profits, and the private sector.[51]

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[50] T. M. Wilkinson, "Nudging and Manipulation," *Political Studies* 61, no. 2 (2013): 341–55, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2012.00974.x.

[51] Ganesh and Bright, "Countering Extremists on Social Media."

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The most effective methods for strategic communication are a multi-pronged approach with multiple partnerships.

A. RADICALIZATION

There are several different explanations of what radicalization is and how it works. At its basic level, radicalization is the process of a person increasingly embracing extremist beliefs.[52] The process of radicalization entails an evolution in the beliefs and attitudes of a person toward embracing the views of an extremist group or ideology. Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko further define radicalization as a "change in beliefs, feelings, and behaviors in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defense of the ingroup."[53]

Extremism does not necessarily mean terrorism, but radicalization can lead to terrorism or extremist activities. With DVEs, it is essential to distinguish between extremism and terrorism; sometimes, the terms are used interchangeably; however, that is not accurate. Since the focus of this thesis is decreasing violence using strategic communication, the focus of radicalization and extremism in this thesis is in the context that radicalization leads to extremism, which can lead to violence. The other assertion of this paper is that the person who is radicalized or engaged in extremism has moved past legitimate forms of protest and freedom of speech and into violent protest or justification due to their ideological beliefs.

Extremism is a political or religious view that opposes society's fundamental values, justifying violence due to ideology.[54] For the government and law enforcement to intervene in extremism and radicalization, the extremist person or group must engage in violence or support violence, which is not protected by the First Amendment. Another distinction necessary to address is the differences between cognitive and behavioral

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[52] Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 3 (2008): 415–33, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550802073367.

[53] McCauley and Moskalenko, 416.

[54] McCauley and Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization."

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radicalization. Cognitive radicalization may not equate to violence. Behavioral radicalization is violent.[55] Since the behavior needs to be changed due to violence, focusing on behavioral change is essential and the focus of this thesis.

Radicalization, in most academic discussions, is recognized as a process. At the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), their Behavioral Analysis Unit (BAU) has defined the term "pathway to violence" using a staircase leading from grievance to attack.[56] Specifically, the pathway to violence starts with grievance and then escalates to ideation, research, planning, preparation, breach, and attack. The FBI identifies several reasons someone is on the pathway to violence: revenge for a perceived injury or grievance, a quest for justice (defined by the offender), a desire for notoriety or recognition, or the desire to solve a problem perceived to be unbearable.[57] Radicalization falls between grievance and ideation, which is where DVE narratives and rhetoric usually begin. Many radicalizations or pathways to violence are rooted in grievances or ideologies that lead to violence. Strategic communication needs to occur before violence.

Texas's Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management for Educators and Administrators have a similar staircase analogy with ideation at the bottom, then planning, preparation, and implementation.[58] The Association of Threat Assessment Professionals also has similar models, routinely teaching the FBI method but evaluating other methods.[59] In 2015, Mohammad Hafez and Creighton Mullins defined radicalization as a gradual

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[55] McCauley and Moskalenko.

[56] Molly Amman et al., *Making Prevention a Reality: Identifying, Assessing, and Managing the Threat of Targeted Attacks* (Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2022), https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/making-prevention-a-reality.pdf/view.

[57] Amman et al.

[58] Texas School Safety Center, "7.0 How Threat Assessment Works: Understanding the Pathway to Violence," Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management for Educators and Administrators, accessed June 3, 2022, https://txssc.txstate.edu/tools/tam-toolkit/understanding.

[59] Dave Okada, "Association of Threat Assessment Professionals," Association of Threat Assessment Professionals, accessed June 3, 2022, https://www.atapworldwide.org/.

process requiring the socialization of an extremist belief system that incorporates violence.[60]

The pathway to violence does not always run as a staircase, like the analogy seen with the FBI's or Texas State's example. However, the simplicity of the FBI's pathway to violence example is practical and easily digestible, which was its goal when they created it.[61] Radicalization is not necessarily a progression but a process. Braddock, a professor at American University, argued there are various pathways to radicalization; some are incremental and some are non-linear.[62] Identifying the factors of radicalization within the person or group is imperative if there are changes in the extremist's life because people are complex and ideologies bleed into one another.

Most forms of radicalization are determined by ideological, social, political, psychological, technological, and economic factors—many of these forms melt into each other and overlap.[63] In "Comparing Theories of Radicalization with Countering Violence Extremists," Keiran Hardy broke down each aspect that influenced radicalization.[64] Influences that shape *ideological* radicalization are determined by the extremist group's propaganda and core message, being understood and accepted by the individual.[65] The message is not always about violence, yet some groups' focus is on exacting violence. With *social* influences of radicalization, a significant component is the group's ability to manipulate, persuade, or sometimes coerce the person into violence based on social cues, expectations, and social identity.[66] *Political* influences rely on the perception of injustice,

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[60] Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 11 (2015): 958–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1051375.

[61] Amman et al., *Making Prevention a Reality*.

[62] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*.

[63] Hafez and Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle."

[64] Keiran Hardy, "Comparing Theories of Radicalisation with Countering Violent Extremism Policy," *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 15 (Summer 2018): 76–110, https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/srhreports/violent-extremism/violent-extremism/37.

[65] Hafez and Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle."

[66] Hafez and Mullins.

primarily due to the government, against the group or individual.[67] The effects of *psychological* factors are not as quickly defined or determined by a specific pathology. Still, they often have characteristics such as low self-worth, the need to seek a connection with others, and an inconsistent identity, all of which are significant to understanding the person.[68] *Technological* influences toward radicalization, such as social media or other internet-based platforms, are becoming more prevalent, and extremist groups have adapted to using those methods to influence others.[69] *Economic* factors have an interesting dynamic with extremism.[70] Being in poverty does not determine if someone will be an extremist. Despite economic and social inequality, people may feel a grievance toward those with power and money; as a result of psychological factors, social media, group dynamics, political perceptions, or economic factors, their beliefs, attitudes, and behavior will change as they adopt the extremist ideology. Once the person assimilates to the group's ideology, if violence-based, they will be more likely to engage in violence to further the group's cause or goals.

Anthony Stahelski, a psychology professor at Central Washington University who studies terrorism, cults, and psychology, suggested that when a person radicalizes, their identity changes to support the extremist group, thus making them more violent.[71] Most people want to feel like they belong to a social group, and research has shown the psychological benefits of social groups and identity.[72] Most people have multiple groups to which they belong, such as families, work, friends, etc. Socializing with more than one group reinforces that no group is the sole contributor to that person's identity. In an extremist group, having a single source of influence, manipulation, information, and

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[67] Hafez and Mullins.

[68] Hafez and Mullins.

[69] Hafez and Mullins.

[70] Hafez and Mullins.

[71] Anthony Stahelski, "Terrorists Are Made, Not Born: Creating Terrorists Using Social Psychological Conditioning," *Online Journal of Homeland Security*, March 2004, https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=446214.

[72] Donelson R. Forsyth, *Group Dynamics* (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2018).

ideology effectively conditions a person to the group's identity.[73] Extremist isolation can occur on several levels, such as online echo chambers, physical isolation from others, social group isolation, or decreasing others' influence through creating "us versus them" perceptions.

Radicalization could also be described as a persuasion and influence process as the individual becomes more entrenched in the beliefs of the extremist group. In *Weaponized Words* Braddock argued there are three consistent themes in the research and evaluation of radicalization.[74] The first is "radicalization is phasic in nature."[75] The discrepancy in the phases of radicalization is common. Still, most scholars agree radicalization amasses over time, and exposure to extremist groups occurs by psychological and social factors such as individual, social, or political influence. Second is "radicalization is characterized by an increased commitment to beliefs and attitudes consistent with an extremist ideology but not necessarily a parallel commitment to engage in violence on behalf of that ideology."[76] Third is "radicalization is driven by exposure to content that advocates beliefs and attitudes consistent with an extremist ideology."[77] This last process has four aspects: the identity negotiation model describes a person's progression in messages from the extremist group, separating themselves from other groups.[78] Social identity theory describes this as the "in-group" versus the "out-group."[79] The second is the motivational knowledge model. The knowledge model is the relationship between teacher and student; the teacher radicalizes the students and teaches them about group expectations. Third, the social network model includes social cues and relationships between the individual on the path to radicalization and the rest of the group participants. Last, the incremental commitment model comprises the individual's small, incremental steps while being radicalized. The group's ideology,

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[73] Braddock, "Fighting Words."

[74] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*, 31.

[75] Braddock, 31.

[76] Braddock, 31.

[77] Braddock, 31.

[78] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*.

[79] Milburn, "Advance of the Black Flags."

outlining their beliefs, attitudes, and goals, influences the person developing through radicalization, typically in a progression.[80] This last model shows how a growing proliferation of influence can radicalize a person, thus influencing their commitment to the violent ideology. This commitment toward the extremist ideology is projected in the individual's beliefs, attitudes, and actions.

Suppose the radicalization process toward extremism is to be countered with strategic communication. In that case, there must be an understanding of what a person is thinking and what cognitive and sociological steps they have taken to get them where they are in the process. Because people take different pathways and methods and are at various points during the radicalization process, individual and group social beliefs and dynamics need to be analyzed. Identifying and understanding the differences in how an individual moves from thinking a particular way to taking violent action for that belief is critical. An analytical framework that encompasses the individual and the societal/cultural level of involvement in extremism is needed if counternarratives are to be constructed and executed successfully.

One of the principal problems in influencing radicalized extremists is that some are difficult to influence. Some individuals are so entrenched in their beliefs they may not be affected by counternarratives. While researching social marketing, Robert Hornik and Kimberly Woolf argued that to pursue a change in a belief, the belief must be capable of changing.[81] While lack of total efficacy seems obvious, it is essential to acknowledge that strategic communication may not always work with extremists. While researching behavioral intentions, Martin Fishbein and Marco Yzer also addressed the concept that some people are unwilling or unmovable in their beliefs.[82] Fishbein and Yzer focused on health interventions but had conclusions similar to Hornik and Woolf: Even though

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[80] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*.

[81] Robert Hornik and Kimberly Duyck Woolf, "Using Cross-Sectional Surveys to Plan Message Strategies," *Social Marketing Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (June 1999): 34–41, https://doi.org/10.1080/15245004.1999.9961044.

[82] Martin Fishbein and Marco C. Yzer, "Using Theory to Design Effective Health Behavior Interventions," *Communication Theory* 13, no. 2 (2003): 164–83, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2003.tb00287.x.

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counternarrative interventions may not always work on everyone, they are effective in most cases and a tool to decrease violent extremist behavior that needs to be embraced and used in the United States.

B.   NARRATIVES AND HOW THEY WORK

Throughout society, narratives help build the foundations of our social construction and provide people with an understanding of where they fit in.

Emotional narratives and stories derive from people's experiences and other people's experiences they have heard about, which they will share with others.[83] Sometimes, stories are told across generations and have significant cultural importance. Narratives are characterized by a series of events with themes, characters, and plots.[84] Walter Fisher described narratives as an arrangement of life events by people who experience and interpret those events.[85] Narratives are symbolic actions or words in the form of fiction or real-life events. In the journal article, "Using Narrative Communication as a Tool for Health and Behavior," scientists studying behavior described narratives as a "cohesive or coherent story with an identifiable beginning, middle, and end that provides information about scene characters and conflict; raises unanswered questions or unresolved conflict, and provides resolution."[86] Narratives are a mix of entertainment and life knowledge and can be used to influence people, including extremists.

Narratives create a platform for people to portray their perspectives, their role in the world, and how they perceive others. Braddock described extremist ideological narratives as beliefs the group holds and endeavors to influence others to accept.[87] The narrative is the method of delivery of the extremist group's message. Extremist groups use

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[83] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*.

[84] H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[85] Walter R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987).

[86] Leslie J. Hinyard and Matthew Kreuter, "Using Narrative Communication as a Tool for Health Behavior Change: A Conceptual, Theoretical, and Empirical Overview," *Health Education and Behavior* 34, no. 5 (2007): 778, https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198106291963.

[87] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*.

narratives and stories to justify their ideology, explain their violence, and entice others to join their cause. Extremists want others to become part of their culture, using narratives and inspiration to promote their agendas.

In behavioral psychology, a schema describes thinking and behavior patterns, categorizing them into relational groups.[88] Schemas work as mental structures or frameworks to organize information, ideas, beliefs, culture, and other influences affecting an individual's life. Schemas also influence an individual's attention and ability to learn. Individuals notice things faster that already fit into their schema and decipher incongruities into their schemas as abnormalities or change them to fit into their schemas.[89] Schema *assimilation* is integrating new information into an established schema.[90] Schema *accommodation* is either changing or creating a new schema as a framework for new information or an experience.

Schemas organize an individual's preconceived ideas and new information quickly, which helps them understand the world around them. There are different kinds of schemas: personal schemas are a focus on someone you may know; social schemas, are people behave in social settings; self-schemas are knowledge about yourself; and event schemas are what to do and how to act in certain events or activities.[91] Schemas are also created when someone hears or reads a story or narrative. The brain constantly looks at information, makes connections, and analyzes it. A single word in a narrative or story instantly begins an association with other people, things, places, events, or feelings and how those things fit into the person's societal space.

For narratives to be more effective, they need to be short and quick, easy to understand, pleasing to the eye, and easily integrated into cognitive schemas. The attention

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[88] Andrei Boutyline and Laura K. Soter, "Cultural Schemas: What They Are, How to Find Them, and What to Do Once You've Caught One," *American Sociological Review* 86, no. 4 (2021): 728–58, https://doi.org/10.1177/00031224211024525.

[89] Mary E. Kite and Bernard E. Whitley, Jr., *Psychology of Prejudice and Discrimination*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016).

[90] Kendra Cherry, "What Role Do Schemas Play in the Learning Process?," Verywell Mind, September 14, 2022, https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-a-schema-2795873.

[91] Cherry.

spans of people are shorter than ever. In 2013, the average attention span was 8 seconds, compared to 12 seconds in a 2000 study.[92] The authors of *Like War* researched how to develop narratives online to draw people outside their echo chambers. Online echo chambers are places where people socialize with others that are like-minded. Echo chambers reinforce a person's own beliefs, views, and opinions, and they seek out information that mirrors their previous conceptions about the world.

The first rule the authors of *Like War* made was that messages or narratives had to be *simple*.[93] Short, emotional messages are best received. Effective narratives have to be absorbed almost instantly in an online environment. This theory also aligns with Daniel Kahneman's book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*.[94] Kahneman suggested when creating a persuasive message, like a narrative, it is ideal to enlist cognitive ease to enhance the acceptance of the message. Using complex language decreases the reader's acceptance of the information. Kahneman promotes writing messages in a memorable way, like putting the message in a verse. Messages that are memorable and in the style of a verse are also more likely to be believed. Images that are clear and easy to read contribute to cognitive ease. Influential messages that have cognitive ease also fit into cognitive schemas faster.[95] This theory is also consistent with research done by the Behavioral Insight Team in the book, *Inside the Nudge Unit,* which is later discussed in detail in Chapter IV.

Per *Like War*, the second rule for narratives is they need to *resonate*.[96] To better influence a person, narratives need to be constructed with a familiar theme or structure that will impact the person's beliefs. Finding something the person feels deeply about or has an emotional connection will embed that information into their psyche. If looking at an extremist group, finding universal themes or beliefs can be used to influence them.

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[92] Kai Ryssdal, "Goldfish Have Longer Attention Spans than Americans, and the Publishing Industry Knows It," Marketplace, February 11, 2014, https://www.marketplace.org/2014/02/11/goldfish-have-longer-attention-spans-americans-and-publishing-industry-knows-it/.

[93] P.W Singer and Emerson Brooking, *Like War: The Weaponization of Social Media* (Boston: First Mariner Books, 2018).

[94] Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

[95] Cherry, "What Role Do Schemas Play in the Learning Process?"

[96] Singer and Brooking, *Like War*.

Identifying themes helps practitioners not only understand the person or group's message better but also aids in developing a theme to create a counternarrative.

The third rule for narratives is *novelty*. Narratives need to be predictable. Too much predictability can be tedious, especially with short attention spans.[97] The authors argued that good storytellers tweak, bend, or break a traditional frame, causing the person to pay closer attention to what is going on but still be predictable in the end. Controlling the narrative determines the perception of right and wrong, truth and lies, and whether people are good or bad.

C. A NARRATIVE'S PERSUASIVENESS

Until recently, there has been minimal definitive proof that narratives influence people. Elissa Lee and Laura Leets conducted a study examining the consequences of storytelling by hate groups and their effects on adolescents.[98] Elissa and Leets's study found that adolescents were also affected by hate groups' narratives. The study showed that, after exposure to narratives, perceived high-narratives and implicit narratives were initially more influential than low-narratives and explicit narratives. Conversely, low-narratives and explicit narratives effects increased as time went on and were more stable over time. Evidence showed that individuals who disagreed with the low-narratives and explicit narratives resisted influence more than others. Researchers argued that the richness of stories makes them more persuasive and memorable.[99] Narratives help individuals judge the relevance of persuasive information using cognitive schemas.

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[97] Singer and Brooking.

[98] Elissa Lee and Laura Leets, "Persuasive Storytelling by Hate Groups Online: Examining Its Effects on Adolescents," *American Behavioral Scientist* 45, no. 6 (February 2002): 927–57, https://doi.org/ 10.1177/0002764202045006003.

[99] E. James Baesler and Judee K. Burgoon, "The Temporal Effects of Story and Statistical Evidence on Belief Change," *Communication Research* 21, no. 5 (1994): 582–602, https://doi.org/10.1177/ 009365094021005002.

In "The Influence of Narratives v. Statistical Information on Perceived Vaccination Risks," the authors looked at which was more influential: statistical data or narratives.[100] The study showed that statistical data appeared to be a powerful short-term influencer, but like Lee and Leets's research, influence with narratives appeared to be long-lasting. One of the problems with using statistics to influence extremists is that extremists are not always motivated by reasoned or logical thinking, which is a recurring concern. The goal of counternarratives is to influence as many people as possible, acknowledging that every person may not be influenced.

In addition to discussing narratives in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Kahneman thoroughly defined and discussed System 1 and System 2 thinking.[101] Online extremists encourage System 1 type "thinking," which is more emotionally driven, relies on instant gratification, and has a decreased cognitive load.[102] The implicit System 1 is activated with a visual stimulus, like an image, reducing voluntary control. System 1 makes conclusions based on those visual cues and is "fast thinking," requiring minimal use of cognition.[103] System 2 is for the slower, elaborate, detailed, and deliberate type of thought and processing.[104] System 2 takes effortful mental work and deals with choice and deliberate mental awareness. System 1 and System 2 influence how people process a stimulus, like online extremism.[105] These two systems are integral in forming attitudes and perceptions.

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[100] Cornelia Betsch et al., "The Influence of Narrative v. Statistical Information on Perceiving Vaccination Risks," *Medical Decision Making* 31, no. 5 (September 1, 2011): 742–53, https://doi.org/10.1177/0272989X11400419.

[101] Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*.

[102] Patricia L. Moravec, Antino Kim, and Alan R. Dennis, "Appealing to Sense and Sensibility: System 1 and System 2 Interventions for Fake News on Social Media," *Information Systems Research* 31, no. 3 (September 2020): 987–1006, https://doi.org/10.1287/isre.2020.0927.

[103] Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*.

[104] Kahneman.

[105] Lena Frischlich et al., "The Power of a Good Story: Narrative Persuasion in Extremist Propaganda and Videos against Violent Extremism," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence (IJCV)* 12 (2018): a644–a644, https://doi.org/10.4119/ijcv-3106.

In 2016, Kurt Braddock and James Dillard looked at narrative persuasiveness in meta-analyses.[106] The research showed that narratives influenced people, regardless of the type of material they consumed. Additional research on a narrative's persuasion indicates the influence depends on the type of mental models or cognitive schemas an individual creates.[107] Per Rick Busselle and Helena Bilandzic's research, there are three mental models: "Character models, Story world models, and Situation models."[108] Character models are a character's identities, behaviors, qualities, and ambitions in the narrative or story. Character models in a story or narrative relate to personal schemas, which is how we view others, and self-schemas, because of an individual's identification with a character in the story.[109] Story world models are the story's environmental, spatial, logical, and chronological parameters. The situational models make up the character models and story world and follow the characters for the story progression.

As previously discussed, narratives can maneuver around those impediments to counter psychological reactance, thus better influencing people. Historically, narratives are meant to pass on knowledge and enjoyments, not as a tool for influence, so they are more likely to be effective against reactance.[110] This narrative perspective also shares factors in nudge theory. In *Inside the Nudge Theory,* the authors described a strategy to make nudges personal, easy, and socially connected to the person.[111] When people know someone personally or identify with them in a story or narrative, they respond differently than if they have no connection or distance themselves from a person. Most people want to feel special, connected, and understood; extremist narratives that target those desires can provide that

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[106] Kurt Braddock and James Dillard, "Meta-Analytic Evidence for the Persuasive Effect of Narratives on Beliefs, Attitudes, Intentions, and Behaviors," *Communication Monographs* 83, no. 4 (2016): 44–467, https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2015.1128555.

[107] Rick Busselle and Helena Bilandzic, "Fictionality and Perceived Realism in Experiencing Stories: A Model of Narrative Comprehension and Engagement," *Communication Theory* 18, no. 2 (May 2008): 255–80, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2008.00322.x.

[108] Busselle and Bilandzic, 255–80.

[109] Cherry, "What Role Do Schemas Play in the Learning Process?"

[110] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*.

[111] Halpern, *Inside the Nudge Unit*.

sense of belonging or connection for people and ultimately influence them toward their beliefs.

D.   THE MANIPULATION OF EMOTIONS

After creating a counternarrative, one of the best outcomes is to have others share it and one of the best ways to get someone to share information is to elicit an emotional response. Emotions of anger, shock, amusement, and outrage regulate if the information is spread quickly and more often.[112] Although all emotional responses help further information, anger was the most powerful. Scientists tested emotional reactions in a study looking at 70 million messages on Weibo, a Chinese social media platform.[113] The study showed that anger spread the quickest and to the most people. They concluded that anger was more persuasive than joy. Anger is not always a bad thing. People can become angry about moral outrage and injustice, for example, which lead to positive behavior or actions. Abhorrence to violence by extremists can elicit moral outrage in many people, thus influencing and moving others away from violent behavior.

Reactance due to an emotionally stimulating influence is known as "emotional contagion."[114] Emotional contagion can happen without any direct interactions between people in cyberspace. There are no nonverbal cues while communicating online unless, of course, you are talking on camera. The studies show that reading online about how others responded initiated a similar response in others. Repeating those emotional responses created that same feeling, copied from one person to another. Emotional contagion enforces *Inside the Nudge Unit*'s framework for developing messages, which is later discussed in detail in Chapter IV.[115] The reactions people see or read online subconsciously cause a person to mimic those same reactions. How a person sees themselves inside societal groups

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[112] Jonah Berger and Katherine L. Milkman, "Emotion and Virality: What Makes Online Content Go Viral?," *GfK Marketing Intelligence Review* 5, no. 1 (2013): 18–23, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345698319_Emotion_and_Virality_What_Makes_Online_Content_Go_Viral.

[113] Rui Fan et al., "Anger Is More Influential than Joy: Sentiment Correlation in Weibo," *PLoS One* 9, no. 10 (October 2014): e110184, http://dx.doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0110184.

[114] Berger and Milkman, "Emotion and Virality."

[115] Halpern, *Inside the Nudge Unit*.

and sometimes in echo chambers, in turn, go on to affect others. Extremists use emotional contagion to attract people to their cause, and practitioners of strategic communication can use it to counter extremist messages.

E.   COUNTERNARRATIVES

Counternarratives are messages that oppose the themes of narratives, in this case, extremist narratives. As stated before, narratives can be in the form of any communication of extremist ideology or goals. It is crucial to identify the extremist message's theme while creating counternarratives, thus developing a counter message effectively.[116] Theme analysis requires the recognition of patterns in the message or narrative that offer some understanding as to why the message was created and what the message is attempting to relay.[117] The patterns in the message are called themes.

For example, black bloc anarchists with anti-fascist ideology may promote getting arrested after assaulting police to show support for their anti-government views. A counternarrative would challenge the belief that getting arrested is not the only way to show support for their cause, and it may be detrimental in the future if they want a career in specific fields. The theme to counter is the harmful act or the theme of the adverse action promoted by violence. The counternarrative does not call getting arrested by police stupid or ridiculous, yet it shows that another way of promoting their beliefs may be worthier in the long run. Triggering System 2 thinking makes the person pause to think about consequences and alternatives instead of blindly acting based on an emotional response. The goal should get the person to think about alternatives or create that window of doubt in their commitment to conducting violence.

Creating counternarratives takes an understanding of extremist themes and how influence occurs because of countering the extremist themes. Understanding themes is essential, yet the use of narratives for influence works because they reduce psychological

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[116] Braddock and Horgan, "Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives."

[117] Braddock and Horgan.

reactance, argumentation, and selective avoidance.[118] Emily Moyer-Guse also argued that narratives increase an individual's perceptions of vulnerability and self-efficacy. Kurt Braddock and John Morrison discuss how to successfully develop counter-messaging campaigns in "Cultivating Trust and Perceptions of Source Credibility in Online Counternarratives Intended to Reduce Support for Terrorism."[119] The authors argued that the source of the counter messages needs to come from a trusted source, and cultivating trust is the first step to producing a significant change in countering violent extremism.

Kurt Braddock and John Horgan provided guidelines on developing and producing counternarratives that can decrease extremist ideology. The examples used by Braddock and Horgan discussed Islamic extremism and terrorism. This thesis uses many of the same strategies but modifies them appropriately to be used domestically against extremists. Braddock and Horgan showed three components needed to build counternarratives using psychological and communication theory. First: analyze extremist narratives; second, construct counternarratives that challenge extremist narratives; and third, disseminate counternarratives to overcome persuasion barriers.[120] Braddock's, Horgan's, and Morrison's methods make developing counternarratives a systematic and standardized scientific process. The next chapter discusses propaganda, inoculation, and nudge theory.

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[118] Emily Moyer-Gusé, "Toward a Theory of Entertainment Persuasion: Explaining the Persuasive Effects of Entertainment-Education Messages," *Communication Theory* 18, no. 3 (2008): 407–25, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2008.00328.x.

[119] Braddock and Morrison, "Cultivating Trust and Perceptions."

[120] Braddock and Horgan, "Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives."

III. PROPAGANDA, INOCULATION, AND NUDGE THEORY

This chapter looks at the role propaganda plays in extremists' communication and promotion of their ideology and discusses how people who ingest extremist content and then share it become propagators of extremism. This chapter also examines the strategies of inoculation theory, which looks at how messages prior to someone getting radicalized can influence their reaction to extremist messages. Last, the chapter looks at nudge theory. Nudge theory is integral to strategic communication in the United States. Nudge theory and the strategies outlined in *Inside the Nudge Unit* establish an ethical framework, scientific methods, and a social psychological strategy to integrate strategic communication to successfully counter extremist messages.

A. PROPAGANDA

Due to social media, propaganda is swiftly evolving from its basic, limited dissemination to more prolific methods. There are countless examples of propaganda throughout history, yet this thesis focuses on the current propaganda problem. While we can learn from propaganda's history, propaganda discussed in this chapter is the kind everyone on social media can spread. People's ideas, opinions, and positive and negative thoughts are now instantly shared in our own propaganda machines on social media.

Propaganda is often most prolific in the form of images or short messages spread through social media. Most of the population in the United States uses social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.[121] In the article "We Are All Propagandists Now," Jennifer Mercieca argued that online discussions are replaced with images, memes, and statements that propagate our beliefs and opinions.[122] Mercieca calls social media a new propaganda model termed the "manufacture of dissent."[123] Everyone

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[121] Anthony Nadler, Matthew Crain, and Joan Donovan, *Weaponizing the Digital Influence Machine: The Political Perils of Online Ad Tech* (New York: Data & Society Research Institute, 2018), https://datasociety.net/library/weaponizing-the-digital-influence-machine/.

[122] Jennifer Mercieca, "We Are All Propagandists Now," Texas A&M Today, July 22, 2021, https://today.tamu.edu/2021/07/22/we-are-all-propagandists-now/.

[123] Mercieca.

connected to social media can create and spread propaganda. The more people use social media, the more they become prolific at spreading extremist information.

Researchers studied how social learning amplifies moral outrage on social networks.[124] The study suggested that social media users learn to express similar polarizing views through social learning. People see what others post and either repost those same views or post opposing positions and indignation. Reposts can either create echo chambers or fuel opposing views and opinions. Echo chambers are conditions, usually online or in news media, where beliefs are strengthened and reinforced by repetition without other influences or arguments.[125] Another component of echo chambers is when people look to their social media ecosystem to solidify already engrained beliefs through confirmation bias. Confirmation bias is when someone seeks information that reinforces the person's current beliefs or opinions about something.[126]

The internet is fast-paced and full of information: images are present in social media, news outlets, articles, other websites, and messages geared toward short attention spans.[127] Often, propaganda is spread through images that evoke an emotional reaction from those who see it. Jacques Ellul argues that propaganda is a form of influence disseminated to spread specific ideas and opinions.[128] The propagandist strives to spread that message to as many people as possible. Thus, the internet is the perfect environment for disseminating information, especially information with intent, like propaganda. Because people want information, especially in the current form of the internet, they are exposed to many opinions and messaging, which propagandists in the past would have

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[124] William J. Brady et al., "How Social Learning Amplifies Moral Outrage Expression in Online Social Networks," *Science Advances* 7, no. 33 (August 13, 2021): 1–14, https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abe5641.

[125] Matteo Cinelli et al., "The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 9 (March 2, 2021): e2023301118, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2023301118.

[126] Pablo Barberá et al., "Tweeting From Left to Right: Is Online Political Communication More Than an Echo Chamber?," *Psychological Science* 26, no. 10 (October 2015): 1531–42, https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797615594620.

[127] Canan and Akil, "A Warfare Domain Approach to the Disinformation Problem."

[128] Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965).

loved to obtain. Because of the quantity and fast ingestion of information through the internet, individuals use mental shortcuts and assumptions, which decreases the cognitive analytical process. With a single word or image, a person reacts emotionally to propaganda without further thought because of mental shortcuts in system 1 thinking. The person's perception of the propaganda, determined by their preconceived ideas and opinions, is shaped by their attitude toward the message.

Propaganda uses human psychology, language, and cognitive learning strategies to influence people. The propagandist intends to change how a person perceives information to align their view with that of the objective of the influencer.[129] With language, a phrase or word is interpreted based on an association. The word association can be reinforced or used to connect a positive or negative feeling to that word or topic. Propagandists use word connotations or word associations with known preconceived meanings to associate other positive or negative messages they are trying to convey. For example, "frugal" has a positive connotation, "cheap" has a negative connotation, and "economical" has a neutral connotation.[130] Similarly, social media influencers can manipulate the language they use to influence based on people's connotations of words.

Like word connotations, images have similar influential effects on people's perceptions by creating mental shortcuts due to prior knowledge or associations. DVE groups use propaganda through images, words, or symbols to promote their ideology. Anarchists with anti-fascist ideology have stickers, flags, and pictures online, identified by their red and black flags and the words "Antifascist Action." Proud Boys are recognizable with their distinct yellow and black colors and a rooster. Boogaloo Boys also have several forms of propaganda and identity images. One of the most famous images among Boogaloos is of Pepe the Frog holding a gun and wearing a Hawaiian shirt. White supremacists are notorious for one of the most disturbing forms of propaganda in their use

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[129] Anthony R. Pratkanis, *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion*, Rev. ed. (New York: W.H. Freeman, 2001).

[130] Elizabeth Hance, "Negative Connotation," Parts of Speech, accessed April 28, 2022, https://study.com/learn/lesson/negative-connotation-words-examples.html.

of the swastika. However, white supremacists have begun to understand the negative connotations of the swastika and have tried other images like the AWD. See Figure 1.

Figure 1.   Anarchist, Proud Boys, Boogaloo Boys, and Atomwaffen Symbols[131]

In addition to ongoing messaging, images, and rhetoric, DVEs also use singular events to spread propaganda. In 2019, Brendan Tarrant entered two mosques on a Friday

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[131]Adapted from Anti-Defamation League, "Atomwaffen Division (AWD)/ National Socialist Order (NSO)," ADL Backgrounder, accessed October 12, 2022, https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/ atomwaffen-division-awd-national-socialist-order-nso; "Rose City Antifa," in *Wikipedia*, September 15, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Rose_City_Antifa&oldid=1110456676; Nathan Comstock, "Run4Recovery 2017," Run4Recovery 2017, 2017, https://secure.qgiv.com/event/cityteam-run4recovery/team/804903/; and Sara Savat, "WashU Expert: Social Networks Enable Hate Movements, like Boogaloo, to Grow Rapidly," The Source, February 21, 2020, https://source.wustl.edu/2020/02/washu-expert-social-networks-enable-hate-movements-like-boogaloo-to-grow-rapidly/.

afternoon in Christchurch, New Zealand, and killed 51 Muslim worshipers.[132] The shooter live-streamed the killings and posted images of his weapons and manifesto. The shooter wrote messages on his rifle and equipment, which later spread across the internet. The shooter's messages on his equipment and weapons referenced other white supremacists' attacks and mass shootings.[133] The messages challenged other white supremacists to engage in violence like him. These images were inspiring propaganda for some and abhorrent for the rest of the world. See Figure 2.

Figure 2.   Christchurch Shooter's Posts Inspiring Further Violence[134]

The Christchurch mass shooting was undoubtedly not the first or last mass shooting event to be propagated by extremists. Still, it did lead to governments working to address the issue of social media propaganda related to extremism. After the Christchurch attack,

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132 Ford, "Combatting Terrorist Propaganda."

133 Ford.

134 Source: Josh Elliot, "New Zealand Shooter Covered Weapons with Names of Canada's Alexandre Bissonnette, Other Killers," Global News, 2019, https://globalnews.ca/news/5059136/christchurch-shooter-guns-names-new-zealand/.

the New Zealand and French governments coordinated the "Christchurch Call" to address future terrorist attacks and propaganda.[135] The Christchurch Call, adopted by 56 other counties, helped create laws to decrease extremist propaganda online, defined as "abhorrent violent conduct" and "engaging in a terrorist act."[136] Australia and Canada also passed similar laws, but the First Amendment hinders similar regulations that other democratic countries can implement. The United States needs to find alternative ways of combating extremist rhetoric within the parameters of the Constitution. Strategic communication is an alternative way to combat extremism while protecting constitutional protections.

There have been several strategies to counter online extremist propaganda, yet with poor implementation, direction, and methods. In 2019, Australia and the United States worked with Google to have ISIS propaganda removed online and hindered further production of Islamic extremism containing violence.[137] This strategy is an intriguing option, but there can be unintended consequences, like pushing extremists to use encrypted sites and more subversive techniques. Another option presented is a redirection method on extremist site searches. The Moonshot Countering Violent Extremism company has attempted to decrease white supremacist propaganda by redirecting search terms on Google.[138] Moonshot redirects users searching for white supremacist information by introducing short videos where ex-white supremacists explain the ideology as erroneous. The methods used to redirect extremist propaganda have close ties to strategic communication methods presented in this thesis. This approach is similar to strategies such as counternarratives and inoculation theory, which provide an alternative view of extremists and their intentions of violence. As with solving most complicated problems, decreasing extremism requires various approaches and tactics, including inoculation theory.

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[135] Ford, "Combatting Terrorist Propaganda."

[136] Ford, 178.

[137] Maura Conway, "VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM ONLINE IN 2019: THE YEAR IN REVIEW," *Vox Pol*, 2019, https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/Violent-Extremism-and-Terrorism-Online-in-2019-The-Year-in-Review.pdf.

[138] Neil MacFarquhar, "White Extremism Faces a Subversive Foe Online: Google Ads," *New York Times*, December 30, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/30/us/white-supremacy-moonshot-google-ads.html.

B.   INOCULATION THEORY

Extremism comes in all shapes and sizes, and not all people are in the same stage in the radicalization process. To counter extremism, we need to have multiple strategies that influence people away from radicalization during the various stages of their interest in extremism and the pathway to violence. William McGuire initially introduced inoculation theory in the 1960s.[139] McGuire suggested that people can resist persuasion, in this case, persuasion toward extremism, using a two-pronged approach. First, people must recognize extremists are influencing them, thus challenging their beliefs. Second, people must obtain information and ways to challenge the radicalizing source. Inoculation theory suggests that when people are told they are being radicalized and what the arguments will be from the radicalizers, they are less likely to be susceptible to radicalization. Like a flu shot that protects the body from being overwhelmed by a flu virus, inoculation messages will help protect the person from being radicalized.

To be the most effective, early and continuous inoculation intervention is paramount to decrease radicalization influences. In "Inoculation Theory of Resistance to Influence at Maturity," the authors proposed that inoculation needs to be introduced early in the radicalization process.[140] Inoculation strategies cannot dictate where the people are in the radicalization process. Still, people influenced early in the process have a greater chance of altering their current path. Inoculation can offer counterarguments the person will likely see in the future from radicalizers, and mere exposure to the radicalizer's methods will create safeguards against them.[141] Knowledge of the radicalizing process and ideology of the person or group is key to providing counterarguments in inoculation.

The counter-messaging in inoculation needs to allow the person to develop their own beliefs and opinions against the extremist messages after being informed of the

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[139] William J. McGuire, "Resistance to Persuasion Conferred by Active and Passive Prior Refutation of Same and Alternative Counterarguements," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, no. 63 (1961): 326–32.

[140] Joshua A. Compton and Michael Pfau, "Inoculation Theory of Resistance to Influence at Maturity: Recent Progress in Theory Development and Application and Suggestions for Future Research," *Annals of the International Communication Association* 29, no. 1 (2006): 97–146, https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2005.11679045.

[141] Compton and Pfau.

extremist's intentions. Ivanov et al. suggested that counterarguments need to be subtle at first to allow the person to look at and recognize alternative perspectives to the extremist message.[142] Strong messages from the extremist enable the influenced person to practice and develop more robust strategies to ward off the messages with a combination of inoculation messages and their own conclusions. The amalgamation of "defense motivations, presented material, and counterarguing practice" arms the individual with tools to better defend the belief in place.[143] Defense attorneys commonly use a similar strategy in trials to establish reasonable doubt. The attorney wants to plant the seed of doubt in jurors, providing alternative scenarios or counterarguments. Although the defense attorney's example is somewhat distasteful as a comparison, the inoculation influencer wants to prevent violence due to the person being radicalized instead of finding a way for an alleged criminal not to be held accountable for their actions. Inoculation influencers want to place that seed of doubt in the person potentially radicalized, creating a window for the person to see counterarguments against extremism.

1. Psychological Reactance Theory

Most DVEs believe the government is taking away their freedom and liberties through oppression or societal changes.[144] Psychological reactance theory is of note in the discussions of inoculation when discussing influencing extremists. Brehm described psychological reactance as "the motivational state hypothesized to occur when a freedom is eliminated or threatened with elimination."[145] For example, Boogaloos think the government is taking their gun rights. Anarchists with anti-fascist ideology believe their democratic choices are being taken away by a fascist militarized government. White supremacists believe their choices and opportunities eroded by minorities will eventually come to fruition. Right-wing groups like the Proud Boys feel their male sovereignty and

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[142] Ivanov et al., "The Potential for Inoculation Messages."

[143] Ivanov et al.

[144] National Security Council, *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism*.

[145] Jack W. Brehm, "Psychological Reactance: Theory and Applications," in *NA - Advances in Consumer Research*, ed. Thomas K. Srull, vol. 16 (Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, 1989), 72–75, https://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/6883/volumes/v16/NA-16/full.

freedoms are being taken away by an overreaching liberal government. Reactance theory rationalizes that when people perceive their rights to freedom are compromised, they react by protecting their independence and reestablishing their liberties. To decrease extremists' further entrenchment of beliefs, understanding the perspective of the DVE group or individual's fundamental beliefs will help reduce psychological reactance.

Inoculation messages start with warnings about the extremist's messages and tactics; reactance theory can be helpful when crafting those warning messages. In "Vaccinating against Hate: Using Attitudinal Inoculation to Confer Resistance to Persuasion by Extremist Propaganda," Braddock outlined ideas and inoculation research targeting extremist propaganda.[146] Braddock argued that messages can stimulate a psychological reactance if they contain warning communications of future messages threatening a person's freedoms or independence. Warning communications trigger alarm bells in the back of psychologically healthy people's minds. People are susceptible to counternarratives when their mental alarm bells happen, drawing them away from danger.

Word association and psychological reactance are powerful methods for developing counternarratives against DVEs. James Dillard and Lijiang Shen say that when counterarguing and anger are used in inoculation messages, reactance acts as a dual function in the person's response to extremist propaganda.[147] Inducing a strong emotional reaction in opposition to extremist propaganda is ideal and can work to fight the radicalization of people. Extremist propaganda uses emotional responses from people they are trying to inspire to motivate them; the government should do the same to dissuade them.

Inoculation studies in all types of messages and topics have shown their effectiveness in influencing people. Braddock had three hypotheses in his case study on inoculation in 2019.[148] The study was a "between-subjects" experiment conducted in the United States at Pennsylvania State University. The inoculation experiments were

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[146] Braddock, "Vaccinating against Hate."

[147] James Price Dillard and Lijiang Shen, "On the Nature of Reactance and Its Role in Persuasive Health Communication," *Communication Monographs* 72, no. 2 (2005): 144–68, https://doi.org/10.1080/03637750500111815.

[148] Braddock, "Vaccinating against Hate."

specifically testing left- and right-wing extremist propaganda. The hypotheses explored how inoculation methods affected extremists' psychological reactance, perceptions, and intentions. The following are the study's three hypotheses:

1. Hypothesis 1 (H1): Inoculation participants will experience greater psychological reactance in response to extremist propaganda than non-inoculated participants.

2. Hypothesis 2 (H2): Inoculated participants will perceive the source of extremist propaganda to be less credible than non-inoculated participants.

3. Hypothesis 3 (H3): Participants receiving an inoculation message about extremist group propaganda will report less intension to support the extremist group than non-inoculated participants.[149]

All three hypotheses were confirmed during the research, showing that inoculation is a viable method to decrease left- and right-wing radicalization.

As Dillard and Shen maintained, when messages contain counterarguing and anger, reactance is triggered; conversely, positive messages in inoculation promote positive feelings.[150] People like to share positive and negative emotions with other people, a method practitioners of strategic communication should use. Word-of-mouth conversations can be an impactful way to promote inoculation messages but are limited to those exposed to the ideas. Lindsay Dillingham and Bobi Ivanov suggested that inoculation may be an interactive process for encouraging and promoting the ideas developed in the inoculation message.[151] Inspiring and optimistic ideas can counter negative feelings of future threats in shared conversations if initiated by the appropriate message.

Ivanov et al. conducted a study for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), evaluating whether "precrisis inoculation-stimulated conversations" before a terrorist

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[149] Braddock, 4–5.

[150] Dillard and Shen, "On the Nature of Reactance."

[151] Lindsay L. Dillingham and Bobi Ivanov, "Using Postinoculation Talk to Strengthen Generated Resistance," *Communication Research Reports* 33, no. 4 (2016): 295–302, https://doi.org/10.1080/08824096.2016.1224161.

attack can positively affect the nation's belief that the government can be resilient after the attack.[152] A precrisis inoculation message was given to the participants in the study about the DHS before a scenario with a downed aircraft. The study confirmed that people exposed to the inoculation message had a more positive outlook regarding the nation's ability to respond to a terrorist attack. It also showed people were more optimistic about their perceptions for future travel, and it had less of an impact on their plans for air travel. The study showed that inoculation messages helped people believe the government could protect them from future attacks and generally had a more positive view of how the government responded to terrorist attacks. Ivano et al. also asked if the distribution of inoculation messages only worked with word-of-mouth exposures, thus limiting its overall effectiveness in proliferation. Although Ivanov et al. did not conduct further studies, current research suggests that while extremists use social media and the internet to promote their ideology, inoculation messages must be on that platform.

Evidence and studies from Braddock, Dillard and Shen, Ivanov et al., and many others support inoculation strategies and their effectiveness in changing perceptions and behaviors in extremism. Evidence from social sciences and studies shows the best way to have an enduring impact and resistance to extremism is by informing and educating the public with strategies to counter extremism.[153] Inoculation strategies are integral in the ongoing and long-term methods to decrease radicalization and extremism in the United States. Inoculation must become part of the U.S. messaging ecosystem to counter extremism.

2. Countries and Programs Using Inoculation

It is essential to recognize the failures and limitations in strategies like inoculation and strategic communication if other programs are going to succeed. Starting at an early age and incorporating inoculation strategies to counter extremism and disinformation needs to become more mainstream and part of everyday life in the digital age. Europe and other

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[152] Ivanov et al., "The Potential for Inoculation Messages."

[153] Meghan Fitzpatrick, Ritu Gill, and Jennifer F. Giles, "Information Warfare: Lessons in Inoculation to Disinformation," *Parameters* 52, no. 1 (Spring 2022): 105–17, ProQuest.

democratic countries have recently started implementing education in digital literacy. In 2018, the European Commission initiated a program to counter disinformation and extremist messages through education and inoculation. Before the European Commission started its program, there was emerging work from Scandinavian and Baltic countries in inoculation strategies regarding Russian influence campaigns. The high rate of media literacy and education, including inoculation strategies, have been proven effective by RAND Europe.[154] In 2014, Finland started teaching their citizens how to identify fake news; starting in primary and secondary education, students were given evaluations to test their proficiency in identifying disinformation.[155] Citizens were also taught to be critical of the information they saw and heard.

The United Kingdom has started programs to counter extremism and disinformation. The United Kingdom's Prevent Program has attempted to counter terrorist ideology through counter-messaging, similar to inoculation.[156] Program Prevent was implemented in 2011 to counter Islamic terrorism using the strategy of pursue, prevent, protect, and prepare. Although developing counter-messages with inoculation themes are not always viewed as a success, research suggests that counter-messaging strategies like those used in Prevent can work.

The U.S State Department attempted to initiate a counter-propaganda messaging campaign with "Think Again, Turn Away."[157] In 2013, the State Department recognized that the Islamic State was proliferating information and radicalization using online propaganda, like Insight and Dabiq. Think Again, Turn Away was a program meant to deradicalize would-be terrorists with counter-messaging. The program failed to have

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[154] William Marcellino et al., *Human-Machine Detection of Online-Based Malign Information* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA519-1.html.

[155] Marcellino et al.

[156] UK Government, *CONTEST: The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism* (London: Great Britain Home Office, 2011), https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=489190.

[157] Crystal L. McFadden, "Strategic Communications: The State Department Versus the Islamic State" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2017), http://hdl.handle.net/10945/55653.

evidence-based strategies or procedures and was not viewed as successful.[158] While the United States recognized the potential of counter-messaging strategies, it did not implement them consistently, use scientific methodologies, or execute the project effectively.

If these programs and the use of inoculation strategies are going to be successful, approaches based on science need to have systematic and standardized methods. Braddock's conclusion in "Vaccinating Against Hate" discussed two necessary factors in effective counter-messaging and inoculation strategies.[159] The first is providing empirical evidence that is data-driven and scientifically produced, using recognized procedures. The second is not interfering with constitutional rights and adversely affecting specific populations, which requires careful consideration to avoid targeting ideologies. Strategic communication requires approaches based on behavioral sciences and sociology concepts that have been tested and evaluated over time. If inoculation is to be used by the government, scientific methods are required, and careful planning is critical. It is also essential to recognize that one approach or strategy does not always work for everyone. Counter-messaging and inoculation strategies are just a couple of components in the fight to decrease violence in extremist ideologies. Inoculation may not work with someone thoroughly indoctrinated into violent extremism, but these methods have the most success before radicalization. Implementing inoculation is just one piece in the puzzle to interrupt the pathway to violence, but it is integral to its success. Inoculation helps create a path to consistently address radicalization in the United States; nudge theory can also help.

C.   NUDGE THEORY

Like inoculation theory, nudge theory has uses other than countering DVEs. Nudge theory is a behavioral scientific approach using choice architecture to help people make decisions that will better their lives. Nudge theory's premise is that a nudge is a preferred method of influence because it guides people's behavior in a positive direction and in a

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[158] Amanda Rogers, "'Think Again, Turn Away'…from Lousy Public Diplomacy," Middle East Research and Information Project, October 21, 2015, https://merip.org/2015/10/think-again-turn-away-from-lousy-public-diplomacy/.

[159] Braddock, "Vaccinating against Hate."

way they will not later regret.[160] Thaler and Sunstein literally wrote the book on nudge theory. Drawing from the economics of psychological and behavioral influence strategies, nudge theory introduces the term "libertarian paternalism" regarding influence and choice. Thaler and Sunstein defined paternalism as the influencer wanting what is best for the influenced person. Libertarian is used in the context that although the person is attempting to be effective, the individual ultimately still has the right and ability to choose for themselves.[161] To be successful, the freedom to choose is critical, along with influence, in strategic communication.

Thaler and Sunstein promote libertarian paternalism with the argument that the government and private groups can and should influence others to effect a positive change while still respecting the right to choose.[162] *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* made nudge theory mainstream in academia and is recognized as a legitimate method to influence people.[163] While nudge theory is not the complete answer to counter-messaging, like inoculation theory, some strategies and theories can help develop messages and influence the would-be DVE and help guide them away from violence. Nudge theory can also guide strategies in counter messages that are scientifically based. In the United States, where choice is a cherished right, nudge theory is a viable option for influencing strategic communication.

Nudge theory in community policing strategies relating to extremism has been used in other democratic countries and has shown to be successful. Li suggested using nudge theory while trying to deradicalize Islamic extremists with the help of community police methods.[164] He argued that through indirect encouragement, deradicalization is possible. The model requires community participation upfront and police in the background, substantiating Braddock's theory that counternarratives and influence campaigns require a trusted source. Braddock and Li's arguments focus on how and where governments should

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160 Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge*.

161 Thaler and Sunstein.

162 Thaler and Sunstein.

163 Thaler and Sunstein.

164 Li, "Can 'Nudge' Salvage Community Policing against Terrorism?"

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and should not be involved in nudge theory. Li took nudge theory and practically applied it to community policing strategies, carefully considering how nudge theory was incorporated into practice and who were the trusted sources. Practical applications of nudge theory help pave the way for future uses in other areas, like extremism.

As with Think Again, Turn Away, the United States has been interested in using behavioral sciences to help decrease extremism, even if they are not always successful. In 2008, President Obama appointed one of the authors of *Nudge*, Cass Sunstein, to be his regulatory advisor and later took steps to implement behavioral sciences in countering extremism.[165] In 2015, President Obama signed an executive order called "Using Behavioral Science Insights to Better Serve the American People" to implement behavioral health strategies.[166] Although not explicitly addressed, extremism challenges motivate the government to encourage and support behavioral health interdictions.

In "Should Governments Invest More in Nudging," the authors discussed how governments look toward behavioral science techniques to address policy goals.[167] The article suggested that nudge interventions may help change a person's negative behavior without being coercive. The authors discussed nudge theory from a financial investment angle, showing that nudges are also economically responsible. Like Li the authors applied nudge theory to government use and asked whether the government should invest in and conduct nudging more.

One of the best examples of how to use nudging is from the United Kingdom's Behavioral Insights Team (BIT), more commonly referred to by their peers as the Nudge Unit. Dr. David Halpern, one of the founders of BIT, wrote a book about the team and its strategies called *Inside the Nudge Unit.*[168] The BIT started with three strands of research. The first was the study of perception; how people interpret the world around them. The second was social psychology; how behavior is influenced by people and things around

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[165] Halpern, *Inside the Nudge Unit.*

[166] Obama, "Executive Order."

[167] Benartzi et al., "Should Governments Invest More in Nudging?"

[168] Halpern, *Inside the Nudge Unit.*

them. The third strand was on cognitive psychology; how people internally process thoughts.

BIT looked at different applications of cognitive psychology to enhance its mission. Amos Tversky and Dan Kahneman conducted further studies and evaluations of cognitive psychology, which looked at available heuristics.[169] Tversky and Kahneman researched people's mental shortcuts in everyday decisions based on their available heuristics. Heuristics are mental shortcuts, often based on biases, people take when making decisions quickly.[170] Understanding human behavior is integral to producing messages that will influence them. The BIT crafted some of its parameters and analytical framework based on how people process information.

One of the things that the BIT scientists did early in their work was to establish analytical frameworks and parameters to create experiments. Having parameters and specific methods are imperative in crafting messages to DVEs to not repeat past mistakes from other programs. The scientific process is critical to establishing validity and consistency in influence campaigns. To craft influence messages, they used the term MINDSPACE.[171] "M" stood for the *Messenger*, which is the group or person sending the message. Or the influencer. The messenger is especially relevant in the United States, where people do not like the government telling them what to do or how. "I" stood for *Incentives,* the mental shortcuts we use to make decisions. For example, people like to hear that meat is 80% fat-free versus containing 20% fat. "N" stood for *Norms,* defined as how other people influence our own decisions based on societal customs and models. Whether we like to admit it or not, especially Americans, what other people do impact our choices. We see this conformity in society with fashion, trends, music, entertainment, etc. "D" stood for *Defaults,* the theory that people will choose default options over making other choices in most cases. "S" stood for *Salient,* which are matters that are important to individuals.

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[169] Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice," in *Behavioral Decision Making*, ed. George Wright (Boston: Springer U.S., 1985), 25–41.

[170] Academy 4CS, "Availability Heuristic: It Must Be True If It's on the Internet!," *Academy 4SC* (blog), November 25, 2019, https://academy4sc.org/video/availability-heuristic-it-must-be-true-if-its-on-the-internet/.

[171] Halpern, *Inside the Nudge Unit*.

Whatever we perceive as necessary, we will prioritize automatically. "P" stood for *Priming,* which is directly related to inoculation strategies. Priming acts on influence by conscious or subconscious cues that are ideally presented before but can also coincide with the extremist message. Priming, also based on inoculation theory, can alter the person's perspective of the message they are about to receive. Also with the BIT, Dolan discusses psychological signals in the context of MINDSPACE. Words, sights, and smells are all strong psychological signals that can trigger or prime a person.[172] "A" stood for *Affect*, an emotional association that shapes a person's actions.[173] Affect also has correlations with inoculation. Like inoculation, which can use anger to stimulate attitudinal reactance, Affect messages can create a strong emotional response. Emotional responses can influence judgment and encourage cognitive shortcuts to influence extremists. Extremists use emotion in their propaganda and inspiring messages; influencers can counter with emotional messages like disgust, to thwart extremist propaganda. "C" stood for *Commitments.* People are concerned with public promises they make and will reciprocate those acts. Writing down commitments will increase the likelihood the person will follow through with them. Reciprocity is a strong motivator for some people; if we receive something, we naturally want to return that favor.[174] Commitments and Norms have strong sociological influences on most people's behavior. "E" stood for Ego, which means that people are likely to act in ways that make them feel better about themselves. Ego is an essential aspect of nudge theory due to the concept of libertarian paternalism. Because people feel good about their decisions, influencers can shape messages that will positively affect their lives, thus making the right decision more likely. Understanding these human psychological instincts can help those crafting messages understand how and why people act and then use that knowledge to develop effective counter messages. Of course, understanding the specific ideology of an extremist or their group is equally, if not more, important.

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172 Paul Dolan et al., *MINDSPACE: Influencing Behaviour through Public Policy* (London: Institute for Government, 2010).

173 Halpern, *Inside the Nudge Unit*.

174 Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* (New York: Collins Business, 2007).

There are other factors that nudge people to make decisions in their lives. BIT came up with yet another acronym to help them remember certain practical aspects of influence projects. The BIT created the term EAST, which became part of their strategy for changing people's behavior.[175] EAST stands for *Easy*, *Attractive, Social,* and *Timely*. People will tend to choose easier options versus complicated options, especially when motivated to do so. This philosophy aligns with things like default settings, for example, default programs for saving or insurance. Attractive means the person must be drawn or attracted to the nudge or influence. Social is identifying the person's social context, ecosystem, and their view of the world. Social context, especially in communicating with extremists or those interested in extremism, is essential for success.[176] To someone fully integrated into the extremist culture, Social may be one of the most significant factors to consider. Last, Timeliness is something to consider. With any counternarratives, the timeliness of the message is contextual to the extremist message yet introduces the alternative narrative when the individual is still developing their beliefs. If governments are to counter extremist messaging, especially when using social media platforms, they must be timely and in context with what is being communicated by the extremist.

Kahneman has researched how people think and process information in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*.[177] A way to attract people is by visually drawing their attention to something, stimulating their fast thinking. Attractive imaging or word choices can stimulate someone's fast thinking. These fast and slow types of thinking are directly related to the Easy and Attractive parts of BIT's strategies. Easy and Attractive things stimulate the fast thinking in a person, making them more susceptible to influence.

Nudges or any other type of strategic communication must reach people at the right time. Since we do not always know where people are on the pathway toward extremism and violence, we must assume that nudges will reach some people at the right time, understanding it will not affect everyone. Ideally, introducing nudges before the extremist

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[175] Halpern, *Inside the Nudge Unit*.

[176] George Michael, *Extremism in America* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2013), https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27295.

[177] Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*.

ideology or behavior becomes engrained is preferred.[178] The nudge is best when presented at a time most relevant to the unwanted behavior, thus changing it. With timing, the nudge or influence delivered at the appropriate time will overcome the negative behavior that extremists may regret in the future.

A counterargument to nudge theory or any communication strategy is that the government—federal, state, or local–may go down a slippery slope in their attempts to counter extremism. There are always unintended consequences in any intervention. Thaler and Sunstein help address the slippery slope argument by reminding us that nudge theory has value in itself and libertarian paternalism is based on changes for good.[179] Nudging to move someone away from violence is not inherently evil, so targeting violent behavior and not necessarily ideology is imperative. Sometimes, the ideology in itself, for instance, violence toward a minority in the case of white supremacists or black blocs, whose message is violent action, are examples of exceptions to address the belief system. The government still has to be careful in how they influence these ideologies, even if based on violence.

Another argument against government influence is the right of absolute choice. Nudges are choice-based because of libertarian paternalism, and that philosophy is carried over to counter-messaging or influence campaigns. Making a choice easier, attractive, in context to the group's social dynamics, and timely is all controlled by the influencer. Still, the person influenced ultimately has a choice. Transparency in choice architecture from influencers is critical, and Halpern argues it needs to be policy-driven.[180] If any influence is to be successful in societies where people do not trust their governments, the government needs to be transparent and accountable.

It is unlikely and unrealistic to believe that governments will do nothing to counter violence based on extremist ideology. Thaler and Sunstein maintain that choice architects, scientists, government or private companies, should do something.[181] Some argue that the

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[178] Halpern, *Inside the Nudge Unit*.

[179] Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge*.

[180] Halpern, *Inside the Nudge Unit*.

[181] Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge*.

government has gone too far in countering Islamic extremism after 9/11, but what would be the consequences of a zero response if they had not acted? The government's responsibility is to keep people safe; nudging can help pave the way for safety while maintaining people's right to choose. There are other consequences if people decide to engage in violence, which is why there are laws prohibiting violence.

IV. DOMESTIC VIOLENT EXTREMISTS AND THEIR USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The purpose of the chapter is to synthesize how extremists use social media, which increases their ability to recruit, radicalize, and encourage extremist beliefs. Extremists also use the internet to finance their operations and networks, exchange ideas, and mobilize.[182] This chapter discusses how extremists use and perceive social media, the media, and how we can influence them by also using social media through counternarratives. Last, this chapter examines some strategies using AI and social bots to counter online extremism and develop counternarratives for strategic communication.

A. BACKGROUND

Extremist online messages are a significant concern in the fight against extremism and hate in the United States. The United States is becoming more politically divisive and polarized faster than other democratic countries.[183] The impact of online extremism was brought up by the FBI when Director Wray stated, "social Media has become, in many ways, the key amplifier to violent domestic extremism."[184] Because of social media's amplification of extremism, Americans and the government have struggled to understand and counter the content on social media and the violence related to DVEs.

Social media has changed the way people communicate, the frequency with which they communicate, and the amount of information they consume, changing the social ecosystem of the world. People's identity online is often determined by what they share, and what they share comes from what they look at and who they listen to online. Social media started as a way to socialize with friends and family, yet for some, it has become a

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[182] Alexandra T. Evans and Heather J. Williams, *How Extremism Operates Online: A Primer* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022), https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1458-2.html.

[183] Jill Kimball, "U.S. Is Polarizing Faster than Other Democracies, Study Finds," News from Brown, January 21, 2020, https://www.brown.edu/news/2020-01-21/polarization.

[184] K. Bell, "FBI Director: Social Media Is 'Key Amplifier' of Domestic Extremism," Engadget, April 15, 2021, https://www.engadget.com/fbi-director-social-media-domestic-extremism-174115986.html.

platform for hate speech, radicalization, and conspiracy theories.[185] Twitter founder Evan Williams explained his goal for creating Twitter by saying, "I thought once everyone could speak freely and exchange information and ideas, the world was automatically going to be a better place. I was wrong about that."[186] Extremists have turned to social media to weaponize their information and influence people through the internet into how they see the world.

The internet has the power of communication equal to several billion newspapers.[187] The internet is where a broad range of ideas and opinions can be shared, which does not have to be negative. Still, the internet has also enabled the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation. There is no singular fact about something on the internet; there are multiple versions of facts and perspectives. People can see and believe what they want, finding the "correct facts" to support their preconceived ideas or opinions about something. Looking at different sets of facts can broaden people's exposure to ideas and thoughts. Yet, for some extremists, the internet and social media have created a space for echo chambers and further entrenchment into radicalization.

The familiarity and quantity of information ingested online influence believability and shape beliefs. Professors at Yale University conducted a study looking at how people interpret the information they see or read online.[188] They studied to see if people were more likely to believe a story, even an outlandish one, if they had previously seen the same information with similar facts.[189] The Yale study confirmed that people who had seen multiple reports of something saying the same thing believed the news, even if the story sounded implausible. They determined that what counted most was familiarity with the information—quantity and familiarity matter regarding believability online.

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[185] Singer and Brooking, *Like War*.

[186] Singer and Brooking, 17.

[187] Singer and Brooking, *Like War*.

[188] Gordon Pennycook, Tyrone D. Cannon, and David G. Rand, "Implausibility and Illusory Truth: Prior Exposure Increases Perceived Accuracy of Fake News but Has No Effect on Entirely Implausible Statements" (New Haven, CT: School of Management, Yale University, December 11, 2017), http://bear.warrington.ufl.edu/brenner/mar7588/Papers/pennycook-ssrn2017.pdf.

[189] Pennycook, Cannon, and Rand.

When someone decides to share information on social media, they become a part of influencing others regarding that information. If an individual values an opinion of a trusted person they see online, it does not matter what the information is; it will likely be positively accepted.[190] Most people do not think about what they share online; they see something that resonates with them, presumably from someone they know or admire, and share it. For some people, repetitive exposure to messages from those who are like-minded discourages other viewpoints and perspectives.[191] The decreased exposure to different views fosters more radical and extreme social norm acceptance.

For extremist groups, the internet is the space to recruit, radicalize, reinforce, and replace social norms in people. Alexander Evans and Heather Williams, with the RAND Corporation, argued there are three patterns in extremist internet use.[192] First, most extremist groups use the internet for their activities and connectivity with others. Second, extremists use the same platforms for activities the average person uses. Third, extremist groups will change how they use online applications and social media as new technology becomes available. Some groups have moved to higher security or encrypted applications to chat and strategize privately. Exposure to online violent extremist beliefs directly correlates to an individual propensity toward violence to support the group's beliefs.[193]

Extremists use a variety of social media platforms, and they often change depending on several factors. In *The Online Extremist Ecosystem*, the authors explain how social media platforms cater to various groups and ideologies.[194] Different social media platforms exist, such as "mainstream" platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Tumblr,

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[190] Berger and Milkman, "Emotion and Virality."

[191] Natalie Jomini Stroud, "Polarization and Partisan Selective Exposure," *Journal of Communication* 60, no. 3 (2010): 556–76, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2010.01497.x.

[192] Evans and Williams, *How Extremism Operates Online*.

[193] Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Radicalization: Social Media and the Rise of Terrorism" (Washington, DC: Foundation for Defense of Democracies, October 28, 2015), https://republicans-oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/10-28-2015-Natl-Security-Subcommittee-Hearing-on-Radicalization-Gartenstein-Ross-FDD-Testimony.pdf.

[194] Heather J. Williams et al., *The Online Extremist Ecosystem: Its Evolution and a Framework for Separating Extreme from Mainstream* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021), https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1458-1.html.

and Discord.[195] True to their name, mainstream social media platforms are popular, commonly recognized, and used. There are also "fringe" platforms, like Ruqqus, MyMilitia, Infogalactic, InfoWars, Parlor, Gab, and 4chan, which tailor to more polarized communities. For example, InfoWars and Parlor typically tailor to right-wing beliefs.[196] The third area of social media platforms is "niche" sites. Niche sites include Incel.net, American Nazi Party, The Daily Stormer, 8chan, The National Socialist Movement, Stormfront, It's Going Down, and Rapey.[197] Niche platforms tailor to a specific ideology. American Nazi Party, The Daily Stormer, and Stormfront are all white supremacist niche sites and platforms. "The National Socialist Movement" and "It's Going Down" are tailored to anarchists. Incel.net and Incel.co are tailored to involuntary celibates (incels). An incel is a male who believes they cannot have sexual relationships with a female, yet they desire relationships and are incredibly resentful because females do not appear to like them.[198]

The movement from open mainstream social media platforms makes countering extremists more challenging due to encryption and private chat rooms. Mainstream social media sites are the most heavily regulated, and niche sites are the least regulated regarding the allowance of extremist images, messages, and chat rooms. Before January 6, 2021, the "Stop the Steal" rally was disseminated on social media platforms such as Gab, Parlor, Telegram, Facebook, and TheDonald.win.[199] Facebook and Twitter started suspending or removing accounts of extremists and even President Trump due to rules regarding the spread of disinformation and violence. Many right-wing individuals moved away from the

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[195] Williams et al.

[196] Williams et al.

[197] Williams et al.

[198] Jill Mahoney and Colin Freeze, "The 'Incel' Community and the Dark Side of the Internet," *The Globe and Mail*, April 24, 2018, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-the-incel-community-and-the-dark-side-of-the-internet/.

[199] Craig Timberg and Drew Harwell, "Pro-Trump Forums Erupt with Violent Threats Ahead of Wednesday's Rally against the 2020 Election," *Washington Post*, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/01/05/parler-telegram-violence-dc-protests/.

more mainstream platforms to free encrypted messaging platforms like Signal, Telegram, Gab, Rumble, and MeWe.[200]

B.   RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM AND THE INTERNET

In the United States, the term "right wing" typically means the individual or group has more extreme political, social, or religious views than traditional conservative ones. The United States has two segments of right-wing extremists. The first, often identified as the alt-right, is based on white supremacy beliefs and behavior.[201] The alt-right has a neo-Nazi ideology, with groups like RAM, AWD, and the Base, to name a few. The other segment comprises anti-government individuals or groups like militias, and sovereign citizens, also known as the "patriot movement," with militia groups like Three Percenters, Patriot Prayer, Proud Boys, and Boogaloos.[202] These groups' ideologies may have one or more beliefs, such as anti-government, anti-abortion, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and anti-public lands. Still, they are taken to the extreme and often justify violence against those they oppose.

In the past, the right wing was not known for its online presence, yet in the past five to 10 years, they have become one of the most prolific social media users. Support for the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center takeover proliferated across social media, and extremists from all over the United States traveled to resist the government.[203] The 2016 presidential elections also kindled the right-wing movement with its divisiveness and increased volatile rhetoric online. Right-wing groups like the Proud Boys promote

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[200] Gais Hannah and Megan Squire, "How an Encrypted Messaging Platform Is Changing Extremist Movements," Southern Poverty Law Center, February 16, 2021, https://www.splcenter.org/news/2021/02/16/how-encrypted-messaging-platform-changing-extremist-movements.

[201] "Extreme Right / Radical Right / Far Right," Anti-Defamation League, April 5, 2017, https://www.adl.org/resources/glossary-terms/extreme-right-radical-right-far-right.

[202] Anti-Defamation League.

[203] Lindsey Bever, "How the Bundys' Social Media Machine Fed Their Political Movement," *Washington Post*, January 27, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/01/27/how-the-bundys-social-media-machine-fed-their-political-movement/.

themselves online, using memes and other social media tools, as a fraternity-like group based on physical violence and male chauvinist beliefs.[204]

Social media provides instant feedback and validation, encouraging extremists to promote their magniloquent language, adjust it, or make it more explicit. Extremist groups use language to push the boundaries of societal norms, often stepping over the edge into clearly repugnant views and comments.[205] Right-wing groups often push the boundaries of speech, "claiming freedom of speech rights" to promote their ideology and agendas.[206] In *Anti-Social*, Andrew Marantz explores how social media paved the way for the rise of the alt-right and right wing.[207] Promoters of right-wing extremists use social media via memes, YouTube videos, podcasts, and live streams to spread and radicalize others with misogynistic messages, racist comments, and conspiracy theories.[208] Social media provides radicalizers and propagators of right-wing material anonymity when they want, a platform when they want to be acknowledged, and amplification when they wish to create divisiveness. Right-wing groups use social media to proliferate inappropriate jokes, Pepe the Frog memes, and hate while suggesting they are joking and not to take them too seriously.[209]

Right-wing and alt-right individuals use language that is purposefully offensive as well as deceptive and ambiguous. Right-wing individuals emotionally affect others by

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[204] Julia R. DeCook, "Memes and Symbolic Violence: #proudboys and the Use of Memes for Propaganda and the Construction of Collective Identity," *Learning, Media and Technology* 43, no. 4 (2018): 485–504, https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2018.1544149.

[205] Thomas James Vaughan Williams and Calli Tzani, "How Does Language Influence the Radicalisation Process? A Systematic Review of Research Exploring Online Extremist Communication and Discussion," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 0, no. 0 (August 9, 2022): 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2022.2104910.

[206] J. Oliver Conroy, "Antisocial Review: Andrew Marantz Wades into the Alt-Right Morass," *The Guardian*, October 13, 2019, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/13/antisocial-review-andrew-marantz-alt-right.

[207] Andrew Marantz, *Anti-Social* (New York: Penguin Books, 2019).

[208] Singer and Brooking, *Like War*.

[209] Susan Benkelman, "How Pushing the Boundaries of Political Speech Can Reshape Society," *Washington Post*, October 25, 2019, sec. Review, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/how-pushing-the-boundaries-of-political-speech-can-reshape-society/2019/10/25/0780e0e4-d326-11e9-9343-40db57cf6abd_story.html.

making insults, creating conflict, and offending people. When asked about the content of their messages, Right-wing extremists often dismiss the validity of their statements by saying the comments were only on the internet and thus not real.[210] Right-wing extremists claim they want to make their rhetoric and beliefs align with mainstream views, using metaphors, irony, and sarcasm to delude the perception of direct insults.[211] Extremists want the world to view others the way they do, thus shifting and polarizing society toward their values and beliefs.

C.   HOW RIGHT-WING EXTREMISTS PERCEIVE NEWS MEDIA

Understanding how DVEs perceive the media, especially when it reports on extremist attacks, is worth exploring. Knowledge of the radicalization process, especially online, will help direct those making counternarratives to decrease radicalization that leads to violence. Considering how extremists perceive the information presented to the public is critical to determining what methods or language to use to counter their messages.[212] Nearly every company, business, or government entity uses media to present information. Strategic communication practitioners should use the media to disseminate their messages directed at extremists.

Kepplinger and Glaab suggested that right-wing extremists are likely to have an intense emotional reaction to news coverage regarding their beliefs and often interpret the news media differently than the average person.[213] Their feelings are personally affected by the negative news coverage, causing emotional and behavioral responses. As the media and, by extension, the average person views right-wing individuals negatively, the unintended consequence is that the right-wing individual becomes more embedded in their

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[210] Marantz, *Anti-Social*.

[211] Marantz.

[212] Williams et al., *The Online Extremist Ecosystem*.

[213] Hans Mathias Kepplinger and Sonja Glaab, "Research Note: Reciprocal Effects of Negative Press Reports," *European Journal of Communication* 22, no. 3 (September 2007): 337–54, https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323107079685.

beliefs and group.[214] Group dynamics, social cues, and mob mentality further entrench people into their group, developing an us versus them attitude.

Phillip Baugut and Katharina Neumann conducted studies regarding extremists' perceptions. In *How Right-Wing Extremists Use and Perceive News Media*, the authors explored how racially motivated right-wing groups use, perceive, and influence the media.[215] The authors first distinguished how extremists perceive media coverage compared to non-extremists. The first distinction is extremists are motivated by social or political issues, and their commitment to those issues is significantly greater than the average person.[216] Baugut and Neumann's second point is that extremists strategically use the media to promote their views and opinions. Extremists also use the media to recruit, mobilize support, and achieve violent goals.[217] Third, extremists are more likely to be featured in news coverage because of their beliefs and the sensational stories they create.

Extremists in a group will often feel personally insulted when negative media attention regarding one of their group members is shown. Using a qualitative interpretive approach, Baugut and Neumann found seven former right-wing extremist group members who had been high-ranking and reported on in the news. The first question was, "How do former right-wing leaders describe right-wing extremists' use of new media reports?"[218] Research results showed right-wing leaders looked at a broad range of news media, reframed it to their group's ideology, and then posted it to right-wing media sites, channels, and groups. In the results, the subjects in the study said that being able to alter, edit, and screen information before reposting it was integral to achieving a space for echo chambers. The participants explained that right-wing committees and groups are close-knit and protective of themselves.

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[214] Baugut and Neumann, "How Right-Wing Extremists Use and Perceive News Media."

[215] Baugut and Neumann.

[216] Silva Knobloloch-Westerwick, "Selection, Perception, and Processing of Political Messages," in *Political Communication*, ed. Carsten Reinemann (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2014), 507–26, https://nps.primo.exlibrisgroup.com.

[217] Wim van de Donk et al., *Cyberprotest: New Media, Citizens and Social Movements* (London: Routledge, 2004).

[218] Baugut and Neumann, "How Right-Wing Extremists Use and Perceive News Media," 700.

The second research question Baugut and Neumann set out to answer was, "How do former right-wing leaders describe right-wing extremists' perception of news media on right-wing extremism?"[219] The results from qt this question showed that right-wing individuals viewed news coverage as biased and unfavorable toward them.[220] Right-wing extremists viewed any negative attention on them by the news to be propagated by the government. Thus, right-wingers also rejected the government due to the perceived negative portrayal of their cause. The right-wing extremists felt that anything that came from the news was not to be trusted, so they should not be affected by the news. They believed they were the only people who knew the "real" truth and were invulnerable to media pressure from the government. Contrarily, they thought the rest of the population was overly affected or influenced by the media. This theory also shows how right-wing extremists view themselves as superior to those who are not in their group.

Baugut and Neumann then asked, "How do former right-wing leaders describe the emotional and behavioral effects of news media coverage of the right-wing extremist scene on right-wing extremists?"[221] This question had mixed results due to the different extremist media coverage goals. Some groups wanted to be viewed as highly moral and honest, while others wanted to be portrayed as militant, thus attracting those willing to engage in violence.[222] All of the extremists wanted to be viewed seriously and perceived as formidable. Another common theme was all right-wing extremists were angry at the media when they did not provide the message the extremist intended to send.[223] This example shows a correlation between this study with counter-messaging and inoculation.

In a unique finding, when the media focused on the punishment for the crimes committed by the right-wing extremist, there appeared to be a deterrence for further similar violence. Conversely, when the media focused on the identity of the extremist, it worked

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[219] Baugut and Neumann, "How Right-Wing Extremists Use and Perceive News Media."

[220] Baugut and Neumann.

[221] Baugut and Neumann.

[222] Baugut and Neumann.

[223] Baugut and Neumann.

to inspire future similar attacks.[224] This finding supports that messaging and news media impact how extremists behave and act. In addition, there is much to be gained from learning how extremists think about the media, thus providing law enforcement opportunities to use that knowledge to craft messages to counter their violent rhetoric.

D.   LEFT-WING USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE INTERNET

Most research regarding online radicalization focuses on Islamic extremists or right-wing extremists, yet left-wing extremist groups, like anarchists, have also embraced social media and the internet, promoting their ideology. There are several left-wing groups, but for this thesis, anarchists with anti-fascist ideology are the examples included. Anarchist groups recruit, radicalize, and encourage others to embrace their beliefs of violence. Anarchist groups also use the internet to finance operations, network, exchange ideas, and mobilize.[225] There are anti-fascist websites, black bloc blogs, and propaganda online supporting and radicalizing individuals.

Like right-wing use of the internet, left-wing groups are increasingly using the internet to promote their messages of violence. In 2018, an "antifascist website" search on Google resulted in approximately 159,000 online hits.[226] In "Trends in Anti-Fascists and Anarchist Recruitment and Mobilization," Ariel Koch explores how anarchists use social media and the internet to recruit, radicalize, and promote violence.[227] The author examined how left-wing extremists like anarchists are changing the landscape of the internet, music, and violence against others to recruit and mobilize others to engage in violence.

Koch also examines left-wing sites like It's Going Down (IGD), an anarchist website that describes itself as "a news platform for reports, podcasts, columns, and analysis of revolt and social movements from a revolutionary anarchist perspective."[228]

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[224] Baugut and Neumann.

[225] Evans and Williams, *How Extremism Operates Online*.

[226] Ariel Koch, "Trends in Anti-Fascist and Anarchist Recruitment and Mobilization," *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 14 (Spring 2018): 1–51, https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/134.

[227] Koch.

[228] Koch.

There are anarchist Twitter accounts nationally, such as the IGD Twitter account, and local anarchists' accounts, such as Rose City Antifa from Portland, Oregon. Testa, an associate of the Anti-Fascists Network, claimed the use of the internet and social media is a critical part of the anti-fascist cause toward violence and "is the propagation of information on mainstream media."[229] Not all the information in left- or right-wing sites or messaging is violent, yet much of the content is about resistance using violence against the opposition.

The use of social media with left-wing extremists promotes older materials, such as the *Anarchist Cookbook*, and current materials, including trends and successes in attacks against police.[230] Anarchists are typically younger than many right-wing individuals, and their abilities and online culture represent their generation's use of social media. Anarchists have gravitated toward encrypted applications to mobilize, strategize, and appear more aware of government oversight on mainstream social media like Facebook.[231] However, Twitter and other social media sites, websites, and chat rooms serve as a source of information sharing, radicalization, and mobilization in the same way that right-wing groups interact.

E.   STATISTICAL DATA FOR EXTREMIST ONLINE ACTIVITY AND ATTACKS

Statistics show an undeniable link between what extremists do online and how that translates to physical violence against others. The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism has extensively researched how extremists have used social media and online forums to promote their ideology and violence. The research looked at Profiles of Individuals Radicalized in the United States.[232] The data showed four critical findings based on the research. First, social media plays a significant part in extremism's radicalization process and promoting violence. In 2016, 90% of extremists

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[229] Koch, 7.

[230] "It's Going Down," It's Going Down, accessed July 15, 2022, https://itsgoingdown.org.

[231] Williams et al., *The Online Extremist Ecosystem*.

[232] Michael Jensen et al., *The Use of Social Media by United States Extremists* (College Park, MD: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2012), https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/use-social-media-united-states-extremists.

were influenced by social media, which played a role in their radicalization.[233] Second, lone actors engaged in extremist activities used social media 88.23% of the time in the radicalization process and mobilization to violence.[234] Third, surprisingly, user-to-user communication between extremists did not factor into the likelihood of someone committing acts of violence in the United States. Fourth, social media does not impact the success rate of extremist attacks yet substantially affects the radicalization and mobilization of extremist behavior or planned attacks.

Right-wing extremists engage in violence, with the most recent event at the time of this writing (in 2020) in Buffalo, New York. A young white male went into a primarily African American grocery store and started shooting people with an assault rifle. The shooter posted a 180-page manifesto detailing his racist ideological reasons for the assault.[235] Since 2015, right-wing extremists have caused 91 deaths and have participated in 267 plots or attacks.[236] Not surprisingly, in 2020, domestic terrorism incidents reached an all-time high, and right-wing extremists conducted the majority of incidents. About one-quarter of right-wing plots or attacks and approximately half of the deaths resulted from white supremacy ideology and behaviors.[237] Religious institutions, like Islamic mosques, Jewish synagogues, and black churches, have been the targets of right-wing extremists, with dozens of attacks in the last six years. The problems with DVEs appear to be worsening, and more people are affected by the violence than ever before.

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[233] Jensen et al., 1.

[234] Jensen et al., 1.

[235] Rakib Ehsan and Paul Stott, *Far-Right Terrorist Manifesto: A Critical Analysis* (London: Henry Jackson Society, 2020), https://www.academia.edu/42092816/Far_right_terrorist_manifestos_A_critical_analysis.

[236] Robert O'Harrow, Jr., Andrew Ba Tran, and Derek Hawkins, "The Rise of Domestic Extremism in America," *Washington Post*, April 12, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2021/domestic-terrorism-data/.

[237] O'Harrow, Jr., Tran, and Hawkins.

F. COUNTERING ONLINE EXTREMISM WITH ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

In addition to news reporting, social media, and the popularization of violence influencing extremist behavior, more advanced methods, such as AI, can be used to encourage or discourage extremist violence. AI is a synthetic grouping of neural networks.[238] These neural networks have the ability, controlled by a computer, to make connections that humans would traditionally have to do. Traditionally, computers relied on rule-based processing; if the computer recognized A, it must do B. These artificial neurons connect to several thousand other neurons, mimicking the brain's functions.[239] Every neuron is unique, with its ability to either be an initial provider of data or accept information and connections with other neurons further along in the process. These artificial connections are bolstered based on the depth of their pattern recognition.[240] The neurons can filter and separate large amounts of data, making connections, building pathways, and filling gaps. The more artificial neurons begin to form layers of patterns and identify gaps of information, the more they can build on the previous path and connections.[241] Every layer of artificial neurons enhances the ability to look at problems in greater detail. Initially, this process is human influenced and guided by the type of information presented to the system; then, as the machine builds upon its neuron compilation, it produces additional data.

Google and Facebook have extensively researched and experimented with AI to help decrease violent online rhetoric. In 2012, Google produced a study where they made nine layers of neurons, supplying the program with 10 million random images from YouTube.[242] The researchers allowed the program to conduct its own categorizing and

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[238] Singer and Brooking, *Like War*.

[239] Gideon Lewis-Kraus, "The Great A.I. Awakening," *New York Times*, December 14, 2016.

[240] Quoc V. Le, "Building High-Level Features Using Large Scale Unsupervised Learning," in *2013 IEEE International Conference on Acoustics, Speech and Signal Processing*, 2013, 8595–98, https://doi.org/10.1109/ICASSP.2013.6639343.

[241] Le.

[242] John Markoff, "How Many Computers to Identify a Cat? 16,000," *New York Times*, June 25, 2012, sec. Technology, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/26/technology/in-a-big-network-of-computers-evidence-of-machine-learning.html.

filtering, which resulted in an interest in cats. By distinguishing between cat and non-cat images, the program created an affinity toward cats without additional suggestions. This ongoing research and development of AI can be used as another tool to decrease violence by identifying language, images, and methods used by extremists and then countering them.

G. USING MACHINE LEARNING TO COUNTER EXTREMISM

Using AI to, at minimum, identify extremist language will substantially increase the ability of law enforcement and private companies to implement counternarratives and strategies like nudge theory and inoculation. Google and Facebook have also explored how language, especially harassing language, can be identified using AI. Google wanted AI to look for the tone, flow, and specific language to identify trolls on the internet.[243] The program looked for negative phrases and antagonistic messages. Identifying specific language, patterns, and themes is critical to countering online messages. The tools already developed can and should be used to identify and counter extremist messages.

Extremists mean to cause an emotional reaction in people online to inspire or radicalize them; addressing violent images is an integral component of counter-radicalization and extremism. To counter violent extremist videos, Google created a program to recognize and remove violent images before anyone could view them.[244] In 2017, Google reported they removed or blocked 80% of the extremist videos relating to violence from YouTube. While outright blocking images and messaging is not a focus of this thesis, using AI to identify and block messages is a strategic option for law enforcement and the U.S. government. AI can identify and use narratives to challenge online extremism. Using AI can substantially increase public companies' and law enforcement's capabilities and effectiveness in countering DVE. Recent research in AI has also shown how social bots can identify and provide counternarratives to extremist content.

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[243] Andy Greenberg, "Inside Google's Internet Justice League and Its AI-Powered War on Trolls," *WIRED*, September 19, 2016, https://www.wired.com/2016/09/inside-googles-internet-justice-league-ai-powered-war-trolls/.

[244] Singer and Brooking, *Like War*.

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H.   SOCIAL BOTS

Social bots are automated entities that use online platforms to interact with actual people online.[245] Social bots are automated computer algorithms interacting socially with a person using social media or online messaging. The first bots could only do unsophisticated tasks like posting content automatically without adaptation or influencing the program.[246] Now, bots can adopt strategies and impersonate humans by processing information. These sophisticated bots copy temporal content patterns and interact with people by conversing and answering questions.[247] Some bots make online friends, influence the group's dynamics, and generate trust and content.[248] Bots can also generate fake followers, promoting the perception that the person, group, or belief is more popular than it really is.

Bots have significantly increased in the last 10 years and have begun to substantially impact our thoughts and perception of things we see on social media.[249] With the explosion of social media also comes the attempts by others, like companies selling their products, social clubs, politics, and foreign countries, to change our perceptions and opinions. Some of these influences from other entities are in the form of bots. The use of bots varies greatly and has affected politics, groups, and social movements.

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[245] Stan Franklin and Art Graesser, "Is It an Agent, or Just a Program?: A Taxonomy for Autonomous Agents," in *Intelligent Agents III Agent Theories, Architectures, and Languages*, ed. Jörg P. Müller, Michael J. Wooldridge, and Nicholas R. Jennings, Lecture Notes in Computer Science (Berlin: Springer, 1997), 21–35, https://doi.org/10.1007/BFb0013570.

[246] Tetyana Lokot and Nicholas Diakopoulos, "News Bots: Automating News and Information Dissemination on Twitter," *Digital Journalism* 4, no. 6 (2016): 682–99, https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2015.1081822.

[247] Tim Hwang, Ian Pearce, and Max Nanis, "Socialbots: Voices from the Fronts," *Interactions* 19 (March 2012): 38–45, https://doi.org/10.1145/2090150.2090161.

[248] Hwang, Pearce, and Nanis.

[249] Kyumin Lee, Brian David Eoff, and James Caverlee, "Seven Months with the Devils: A Long-Term Study of Content Polluters on Twitter," in *Fifth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media*, 2011.

Nicholas Confessore et al. of the *New York Times* wrote an article on celebrities using social bots to enhance their profiles and influence public perceptions of them.[250] The report explained that the evolution of celebrity social influencers had expanded this demand. Studies have shown that most celebrities have purchased fake followers to show they have more followers than they do.[251] Bots are embedded in nearly all forms of social media and can influence others by reposting material, changing the conversation tone or content, and making online relationships with users. Like celebrities, DVE groups use influence to manipulate others, hoping to attract followers.

In the United States, the 2016 elections are an example of how bots may have changed perceptions and possibly the course of history. Social bots were discovered in 2016, changing online conversations and producing content about the elections. Approximately half of the information delivered and retweeted during the elections resulted from bots.[252] In a study examining social media and social bots, Alessandro Bessi and Emilio Ferrara determined that bots retweeted the same number of times as humans. They discovered that bots effectively produced content related to the elections and social concerns.[253] The Bessi and Ferrara study also determined that bots generated the most positive yweets regarding Donald Trump, creating a more positive perception of him during the election.[254] This type of positive messaging is similar to traditional commercials on television, which try to promote their products by creating a positive image of their product or by discrediting or creating a negative perception of the opponent.

To counter domestic extremists, we need to ensure any bots used to counter extremism have appropriate boundaries and specifications to protect constitutional rights. Bots can communicate with people online by pretending to be human. While interacting

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[250] Nicholas Confessore et al., "The Follower Factory," *New York Times*, January 27, 2018, sec. Technology, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/01/27/technology/social-media-bots.html, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/01/27/technology/social-media-bots.html.

[251] Confessore et al.

[252] Alessandro Bessi and Emilio Ferrara, "Social Bots Distort the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election Online Discussion," *First Monday* 21, no. 11 (November 7, 2016), https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v21i11.7090.

[253] Bessi and Ferrara.

[254] Bessi and Ferrara.

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with a human, the bot begins to analyze the conversation and then, if programmed, intervenes in the radicalization process, changing the narrative or direction of the conversation away from violence. The bot, when countering extremism, is designed and directed to engage with a person online based on their extremist language or direction toward violence and based on the person's violent ideology.[255]

Identifying extremists' use of bots to promote their ideology helps counter violent extremism by helping to craft counternarratives using strategic communication. Creating a negative perception of the government or opposing groups is also a tactic by extremist groups. In 2015, J. M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan conducted a study involving Islamic State of Iraq and Syria- (ISIS) supporting accounts. The study used 20,000 accounts associated with ISIS support, which showed that ISIS was using social media and bots to promote its ideology.[256] Berger and Morgan were not the only researchers connecting bots and terrorist groups. In 2016, Ferrara et al. looked at millions of Twitter accounts with extremist tweets and determined that social bots were responsible for making many of them.[257] Several studies identify extremist content, yet few have studied more offensive strategies using strategic communication, like the University of Queensland.

I.   UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND BOT RESEARCH (ONGOING)

This section looks at the University of Queensland's research as an example for exploring the effectiveness of using social bots to counter extremism. The University of Queensland researched extremists using behavioral sciences like dual-process theory and reactance theory and incorporating social bots.[258] The University of Queensland is studying countering online extremist messages using social bots to create

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[255] Emilio Ferrara et al., "The Rise of Social Bots," *Communications of the ACM* 59, no. 7 (July 2016): 96–104, https://doi.org/10.1145/2818717.

[256] J.M Berger and Jonathon Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter* (Washington, DC: Brookings Center for Middle East Policy, 2015), 2, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf.

[257] Emilio Ferrara et al., "Predicting Online Extremism, Content Adopters, and Interaction Reciprocity," *ArXiv:1605.00659 [Physics]* 10047 (2016): 22–39, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-47874-6_3.

[258] Blasiak, Risius, and Matook, "Conceptualising Social Bots."

counternarratives. The research is ongoing, so analysis, conclusions, and recommendations are still pending. Still, the research introduces intriguing methods and ideas for potential AI applications for extremist messaging. Much like the United States, Australia has included DVEs or, in Australia's terms, ideologically motivated violence extremists in their countering extremism strategies for 2022.[259] Australia's countering extremism policy outlines racially motivated violent extremists as a significant concern. Australia's approach is prevent, prepare, respond, and recover to counter extremism. Australia also specifically addressed the use of online technologies to respond to the growing ability of violent rhetoric propagated by extremists.

The University of Queensland used cognitive processing theory, typically used in behavioral treatment to help people with trauma get out of their cognitive loops or stuck thoughts, to study how human thoughts and behavior are affected by bots.[260] The University of Queensland theorized that social bots could counter extremist messages online and conducted tests to determine if bots were a viable tool to counter extremism. The University of Queensland also used dual-process theory, which utilizes the idea that information is processed in two ways: spontaneously implicit and consciously explicit.[261] Dual-process theory uses the System 1 and System 2 thinking processes (see Chapter II.C for detailed information) to develop messages to extremists in the study. The researchers also used reactance theory, which shows that different messages affect perceptions and attitudes.[262] These cognitive theories are essential to understanding counter-messaging strategies and help determine effective measures when incorporating social bots.

Most people on social media, looking at images, posts, and videos, use System 1 while they ingest the material. Dr. Robert Cialdini discussed how influence affects people

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[259] Counter-Terrorism Coordination Centre, *Safeguarding Our Community Together, Australia's Counter-Terrorism Strategy 2022* (Canberra, ACT: Commonwealth of Australia, 2022), https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/what-australia-is-doing-subsite/Files/safeguarding-community-together-ct-strategy-22.pdf.

[260] Matthew Tull, "What Is Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT)?," Verywell Mind, September 26, 2021, https://www.verywellmind.com/cognitive-processing-therapy-2797281.

[261] Timothy D. Wilson, Samuel Lindsey, and Tonya Y. Schooler, "A Model of Dual Attitudes," *Psychological Review* 107, no. 1 (January 2000): 101–26, https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.107.1.101.

[262] Blasiak, Risius, and Matook, "Conceptualising Social Bots."

in his book *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* and how most people rely on easily digestible material, which requires little thought or effort.[263] Cialdini discussed how source credibility, profile, and social proof influence people toward certain beliefs and behaviors. For example, social proof is the ability to see an action that someone is doing and view it as appropriate due to the belief that it must be acceptable if someone is doing it.[264] "Source credibility" is a term that implies a communicator's positive characteristics that affect the receiver's acceptance of a message.[265] These two examples show how the brain uses shortcuts to make conclusions based on the content it absorbs. System 1 relies on these mental shortcuts, typically activated in an online environment where there is a lot of "fast" material, taking a minimal effort to process.

The University of Queensland's research theorized that a fear stimulus, reactance theory, delivered by a social bot, would lead to a resultant attitude change.[266] Extremists manipulate images and messaging to elicit an emotional response, leading to radicalization.[267] Messages that cause people to react, using fear or threats, can trigger a reaction from a person and, given the right stimulus and context, can be more persuasive.[268] Stimulating System 1 leads to an evaluation in System 2 and a shift in attitude toward a more concrete belief.

The University of Queensland conducted the study in the context of domestic extremism in Australia. The focus of this study entailed right-wing extremism (RWE) and its type of messaging. Like the United States, in Australia, right-wing extremists use anti-immigration, anti-establishment, protection of Western or traditional values, and a strong state to focus on their grievances.[269] The researchers used messaging similar to right-wing

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263 Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* (Surry Hills, Australia: Collins Business, 2010).

264 Cialdini.

265 Carl I. Hovland and Walter Weiss, "Influence of Source Credibility on Communication Effectiveness," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (Winter 1951): 635–50, https://doi.org/10.1086/266350.

266 Blasiak, Risius, and Matook, "Conceptualising Social Bots."

267 Braddock, "Vaccinating against Hate."

268 Braddock.

269 Blasiak, Risius, and Matook, "'Social Bots for Peace.'"

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extremism to elicit participants' responses, triggering the two brain systems, and bot technology to counter-message.

In their study, the University of Queensland used two propositions. Proposition 1 (P1): "Changes in users' attitudes due to an extremist agent's messages are affected by the peripheral cue of the social bot (i.e., source credibility, social proof, profile) that counters the extremist message. Proposition 2 (P2): Changes in users' attitudes due to an extremist agent's messages are affected by the peripheral cue of the social bot (i.e., argument quality, motivation, and ability) that counters the extremist message."[270] In the study, participants looked at Instagram posts containing far-right conservative views and participated in the comments section. The comments section included several comments and warning messages about possible threats given via bots. Users could participate with commenters/bots like any other social media platform. The bots were programmed to trigger System 1 and System 2 and observe any changes in attitude between participants.[271] Four groups in the study had different exposure to messages (see Figure 3).[272]

After the four group participants were exposed to the treatment options, they participated in a survey that addressed their perceptions of extremist content. The model for dual-process intervention is provided in Figure 4.

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[270] Blasiak, Risius, and Matook, 4.

[271] Blasiak, Risius, and Matook, "'Social Bots for Peace.'"

[272] Blasiak, Risius, and Matook, tbl. 1.

Group 1	Exposure to 8 very conservative posting on RWE attitude objects, including system 1 bot comments without warning message
Group 2	Exposure to 8 very conservative posting on RWE attitude objects, including system 1 manipulation and system 2 warning messages
Group 3	Exposure to 8 very conservative posting on RWE attitude objects, including system 1 manipulation and system 2 warning messages posted by human users rather than a social bot
Group 4	Exposure to postings unrelated to RWE attitude objects, including system 1 manipulations and system 2 warning messages

Figure 3.   University of Queensland's Social Bot Intervention Treatments Model[273]
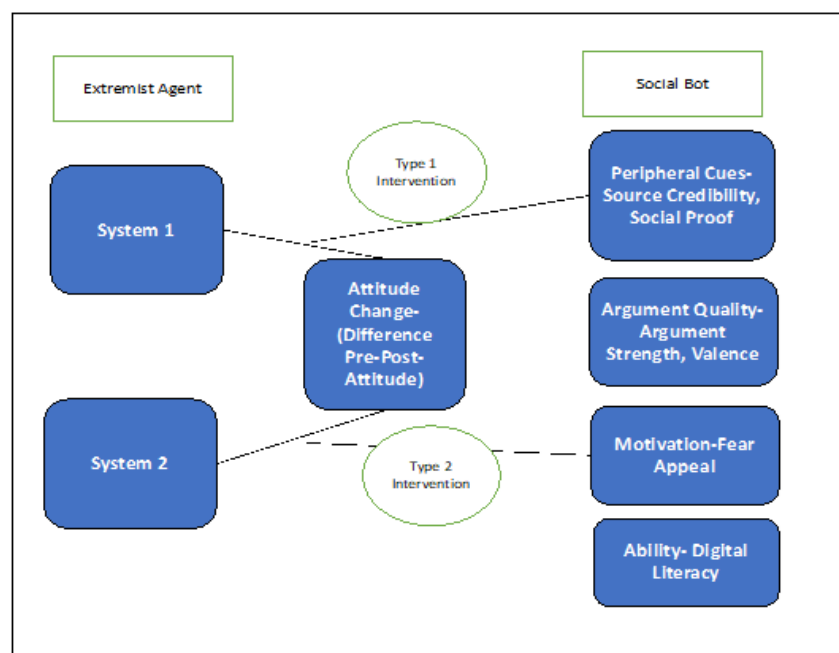

Figure 4.   University of Queensland's Research Model of Dual-Process Intervention[274]

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[273] Adapted from Blasiak, Risius, and Matook, 6.

[274] Adapted from Blasiak, Risius, and Matook, 5.

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The study aimed to ascertain user attitudes before and after social bot interventions.[275] Another purpose of the study was to introduce an alternative to the typically slow deradicalization process. Using bots to identify and intervene in extremist messages is fast and efficient. With the prevalence of extremists using online communications, radicalization, and echo chambers, social media companies and governments are starting to explore the possibility of using tools like social bots.

J.   RAND STUDY

In 2020, RAND researched the viability of using social bot technology to fight extremism. RAND sought to answer the question whether bots should be customized to counter extremism.[276] RAND argued that bots were effective in influencing people yet noted that the sender of the bot, whether a government or a private company, impacted the results. The social identity of the person or group targeted to be influenced and the influence ability of bots have limitations and is crucial to understand.

Because of social media's global reach, using bots, even domestically, affects the world because of the internet.[277] There are ethical and legal concerns that RAND addressed in their research related to bot use. The study suggested the data collected from bots must be collected and processed using current U.S. systems to protect privacy rights. Obeying current laws and regulations for data collection needs to be respected in the application of bots, and those implementing bots must seek permission or legal process from internet platforms and work together. Another recommendation from RAND is that government transparency is vital for community trust.

Evaluating the possible risks and opportunities with each unique deployment of bots helps guide the implantation plan and concept of operations.[278] There is a wide range of potential applications of bot technology to counter extremists online, so thoughtful

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[275] Blasiak, Risius, and Matook, "'Social Bots for Peace.'"

[276] William Marcellino et al., *Counter-Radicalization Bot Research: Using Social Bots to Fight Violent Extremism* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020), https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2705.

[277] Marcellino et al.

[278] Marcellino et al.

consideration of its purpose is essential. There are nearly always unintended consequences with any new idea or technology; the dangers and benefits of using bot technology should be weighed and recognized. Ongoing testing and evaluation are essential for long-term success. As bot technology, implementation, and exploration continue to evolve, the potential for its use to counter extremism is an appealing prospect along with other extremist interventions.

The increase in social media and its impact on people's lives continues to be a concern in the United States. In the United States, extremists' use of social media and online presence has escalated along with their growth in numbers, and with it comes manipulation, radicalization, and discord. Research into extremists' use of social media is becoming a national concern to those in government service. The 2021 *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism* showed the White House is demanding law enforcement do more to confront extremist rhetoric and violence.[279] Law enforcement must address extremism using several methods and strategies, including technology to assist them with strategic communication.

Research into bots and AI presents unique opportunities and challenges for law enforcement. Law enforcement should take advantage of developments in machine learning and models for online conversations in extremist social media accounts and messaging. Understanding why social media is essential to DVEs and how they use it and perceive the media, in general, will help create counter messages and strategies to decrease the spread of hate and violence. Developing insight into extremist themes and narratives can create consistency in developing processes, leading to bot and AI machine learning to assist in countering violent speech. Since bot and AI use in countering extremist messaging is still an emerging topic, evaluating the risks versus the reward is imperative for future success in implementing this technology. Future, more robust work along with policy guidance and procedures into bot and AI use in counter-messaging, is still needed.

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[279] National Security Council, *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism*.

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V.   SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES

This thesis uses social psychology approaches to evaluate, study, theorize, and learn about radicalization. Social psychology is a sub-group of psychology focusing on group behavior and their relationships, influences, behaviors, and interactions with others.[280] In radicalization, social psychology helps us learn about extremists' social workings and intergroup dynamics. Because extremist ideology and influences are often group-based, exploring how group influence affects behavior is critical. There are several different group dynamics and extremist's viewpoints that direct group perspectives. When people are engaged in extremism and surrounded by a group of like-minded people, their beliefs become more extreme. Group dynamics in extremism are similar to Clark McPhail's mob mentality, in which he posited that groups or crowds of people can encourage a group mentality that turns violent.[281] Mob mentality is described as "a large and disorderly crowd of people, especially bent on riotous or destructive action." [282] The United States saw the effects of mob mentality in 2020 when several extremist groups took advantage of the civil unrest, projecting their ideology into lawful protests.

Group dynamics play a significant role in the behaviors of the groups and individuals within the group; social psychology helps identify some of those characteristics.[283] Extremists' crowd dynamics lead to group polarization, where the extremism of beliefs is more significant in a group than individually. Another aspect of group behavior is that the group's decisions are more biased-based and less rational. Previously, this paper discussed System 1 and System 2 brain methods. In group dynamics, System 1 is activated, decreasing rational decision-making. The group acts as a volatile mass, caring more about the moment and less about the future. Group perceptions of who

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[280] Milburn, "Advance of the Black Flags."

[281] Clark McPhail, *The Myth of the Madding Crowd* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

[282] Gayook Wong, "The Psychology of Mob Mentality," *Psychology Today*, January 24, 2021, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/facing-trauma-together/202101/the-psychology-mob-mentality.

[283] Randy Borum, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories," *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2011): 7–36, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26463910.

is in their in-group versus who is in their out-group are defined by membership and group views. In-group behaviors will almost always be viewed positively and out-group behaviors, negatively. Individuals also feel less responsible for their actions in a group setting.[284] Suppose the individual acts violently in the name of the group or ideology. In that case, they feel as if they acted as a group, thus increasing the chances of acting more violently than if they were alone. Groups have unique rules, social norms, and expectations; they use social pressure and perceived peer pressure to create a cohesive, insulated, and committed group dynamic. People also join groups due to feeling rewarded within the group, seek to be a part of something special, and find a sense of meaning in their lives, and some groups provide that for them.

A. THEORY OF REASONED ACTION

Using analytical frameworks developed from social psychology approaches, this paper looks to Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen's theory of reasoned action to see how attitudes and behaviors affect human action.[285] The theory of reasoned action helps predict how people behave due to their attitudes and behavioral intentions. When a person decides to engage in a behavior, action is determined by their beliefs and attitudes toward that behavior; the belief has a specific strength or weakness, depending on how intensely the individual perceives the opinion. That belief can be reinforced or dissuaded by many influential factors, some of which are narratives.

Fishbein and Ajzen explored the idea that beliefs influenced behaviors. In 1968, they conducted experiments into how beliefs influence behaviors and if they could influence an individual's beliefs to affect their behavior. In 1972, Fishbein and Ajzen published their findings in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in an article called "Attitudes and Normative Beliefs as Factors Influencing Behavioral Intentions."[286]

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[284] McPhail, *The Myth of the Madding Crowd*.

[285] Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen, *Predicting and Changing Behavior: The Reasoned Action Approach* (New York: Psychology Press, 2009).

[286] Icek Ajzen and Martin Fishbein, "Attitudes and Normative Beliefs as Factors Influencing Behavioral Intentions," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 21, no. 1 (January 1972): 1–9, https://doi.org/10.1037/h0031930.

This research is vital because it establishes a knowledge base for the theory of reasoned action. Fishbein and Ajzen theorized that an individual's willingness to carry out a behavior relies on the person's attitude toward the act and the person's belief in how other people expect them to behave or act. Fishbein and Ajzen defined the perception of how an individual believes others expect them to behave as "normative beliefs."[287] Normative beliefs increase when the person's willingness to follow the norms is recognized.

The behavioral intentions and willingness to act or behave, combined with normative beliefs, all factor in to how a person's behaviors evolve. Depending on the situation, the emphasis may vary in each group, which may alter the end behavior. Perceived consequences also affect behavior, and a person's attitude toward the behavior or action is shaped in part by their perceived value in the act, weighted with the consequences.[288] Fishbein and Ajzen argued that one element that encourages a person's beliefs is based on what their peers expect them to do and the group's opinion of the behavior or act. Fishbein and Ajzen tested this theory by manipulating attitudes from the group that affected normative beliefs. The study showed that researchers could influence an individual's behavior by shaping their perception of what other people think about the behavior or act. This study also reinforced arguments about mob mentality, in which the group's influence and perceived attitude toward the behavior change the normative behavior.

To summarize, belief strength and belief evaluation affect attitude. Normative beliefs and motivation to comply (consequences) affect subjective norms. Attitudes and subjective norms affect behavioral intentions, and behavioral intentions lead to volitional behaviors. See Figure 5.

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[287] Ajzen and Fishbein, 1.

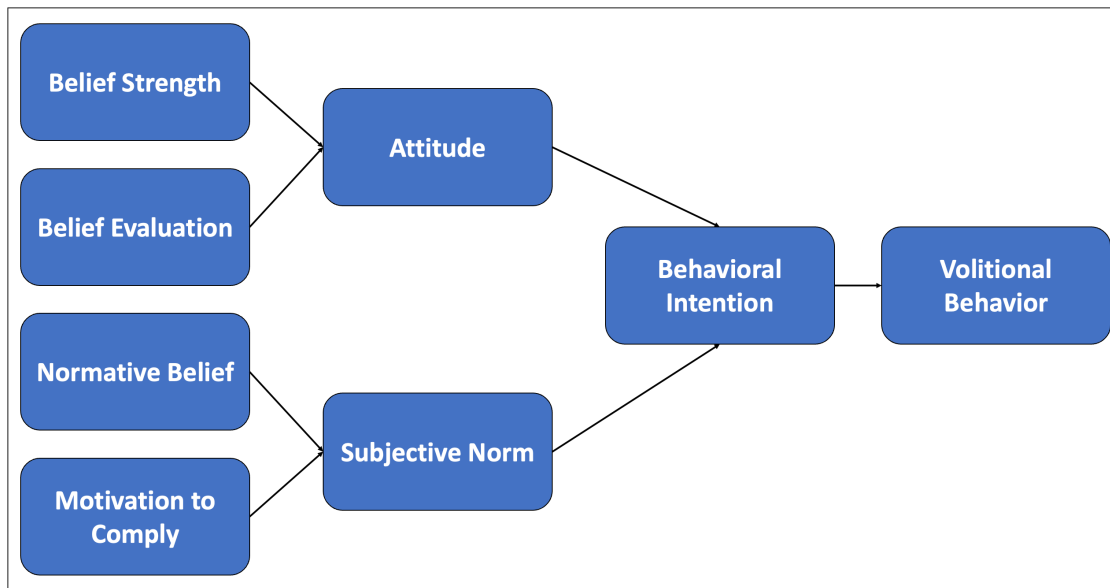[288] Ajzen and Fishbein, "Attitudes and Normative Beliefs."

Figure 5.   Diagram of Theory of Reasoned Action[289]

B.   THE THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOR

The theory of planned behavior is an addition or extension of the theory of reasoned action , introduced by Ajzen in 1985.[290] The extensions to the model include six different components, or variables, to the theory of planned behavior. The six components are "Belief Salience, Past Behaviors/habits, Perceived Behavioral Control versus Self Efficacy, Moral Norms, Self-Identify, and Affective Beliefs."[291] The theory of reasoned action and the theory of planned behavior are processing models showing that people make decisions based on beliefs, perceptions, intentions, and behavior. The theory of planned behavior considers non-volitional behaviors by evaluating the perceptions of control by the individual and assessing the perception of control addresses the complex goals and influences as a factor in an individual's behaviors. The theory of planned behavior shows

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[289] Icek Ajzen, "The Theory of Planned Behavior," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Theories of Cognitive Self-Regulation, 50, no. 2 (December 1, 1991): 179–211, https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90020-T.

[290] Icek Ajzen, "From Intentions to Actions: A Theory of Planned Behavior," *Psychology and Health* 26, no. 9 (1985): 1113–27.

[291] Mark Conner and Christopher J. Armitage, "Extending the Theory of Planned Behavior: A Review and Avenues for Further Research," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 28, no. 15 (1998): 1429, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.1998.tb01685.x.

that behavior is based on the individual's intentions and perceived behavioral control, centered on how easy or hard the behavior is to carry out. The connections between a person's intentions and behavior show that when a person wants to behave a certain way, they do. Still, the relationship between perceived behavioral control and behavior requires further evaluation. The link between perceived behavioral control and behavior shows that when a person believes the behavior or action to be attractive or desirable, they are more likely to engage in the behavior. Perception of an attractive or desirable behavior coincides with nudge theory because nudges must also be attractive and easy. However, nudge strategies are used to counter an extremist's behavior, not encourage it.

The theory of planned behavior (Figure 6) uses perceived behavioral control to determine the individual's behaviors.[292] Three behavioral factors determine a person's attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. The basis of perceived behavioral control is determined by how much perceived power the person has to act.[293] The perceived power is the means or ability and opportunity the person has to act out the behavior. The theory of planned behavior, combined with the theory of reasoned action, creates the intention, means or ability, and opportunity a person has to engage in a behavior. The extension of perceived behavioral control combines with the theory of reasoned action in the following way: belief strength and belief evaluation affect attitude. Normative beliefs and motivation to comply (consequences) affect subjective norms. Attitudes and subjective norms affect behavioral intentions, and behavioral intentions lead to volitional behaviors. Control beliefs and perceived power combine to affect perceived behavioral control. Perceived behavioral control affects behavioral intentions, which leads to volitional behaviors.

[292] Ajzen, "From Intentions to Actions."

[293] James Price Dillard and Michael Pfau, eds., *The Persuasion Handbook: Developments in Theory and Practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2002).
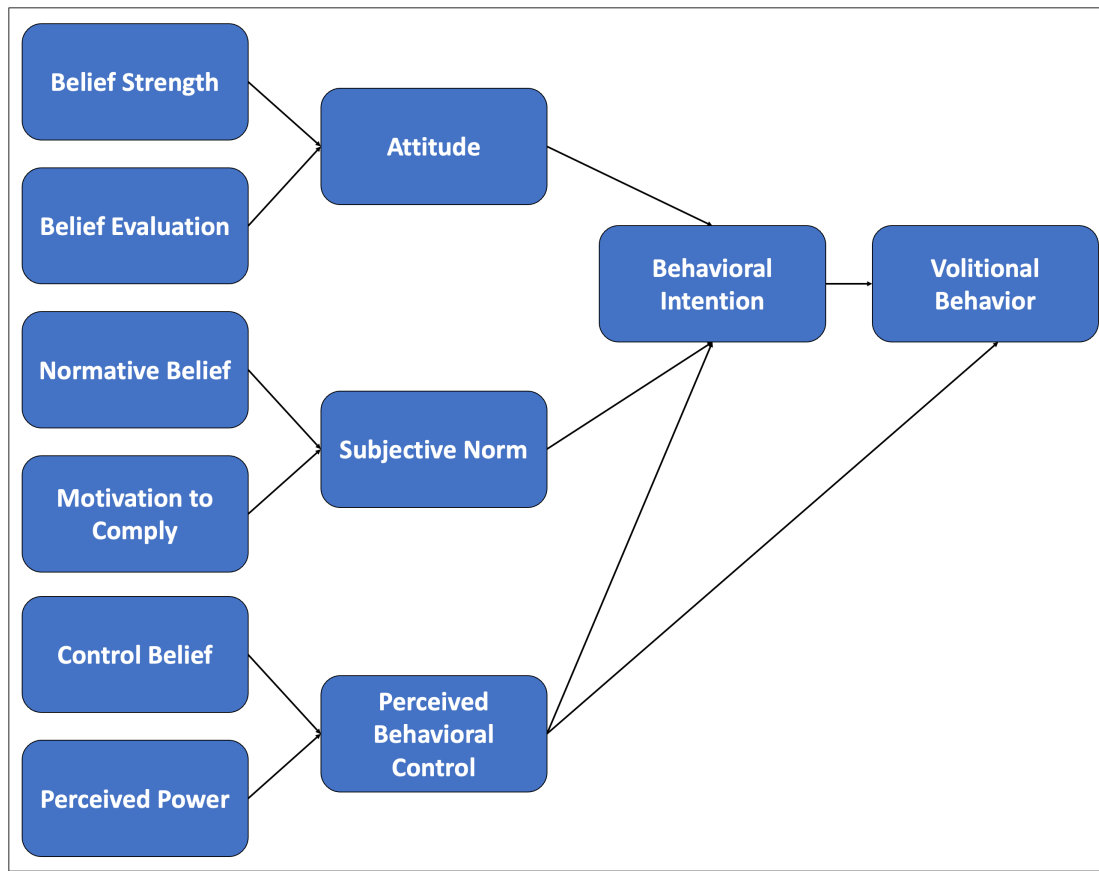
Figure 6.   Diagram of Theory of Planned Behavior[294]

C.   BEHAVIORAL PREDICTION MODELS

A fundamental principle in using reasoned action approaches is using variables to identify and explain behavior. Karen Glanz, Barbara Rimer, and K. Viswanath defined the term "reasoned" to show that if people think a particular behavior is good, they will continue to engage in that behavior.[295] The enhanced integrative model better shows how any behavior, whether rational or irrational, affects behavior. Glanz et al. discussed how background variables encompass such things as demographic variables, culture, socioeconomic variables, media, and individual difference variables. The background variables' influence suggests that they indirectly influence a person's behavior. However,

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294 Ajzen, "The Theory of Planned Behavior," 179–211.

295 Karen Glanz, Barbara K. Rimer, and K. Viswanath, *Health Behavior: Theory, Research, and Practice* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

those background variables may be directly associated with beliefs as they are the source of those beliefs, such as social media or websites.

Background factors under Fishbein and Ajzen's model include behavioral dispositions, which may consist of global attitudes, personality traits, self-esteem, emotions, and intelligence.[296] Informational factors include an individual's experiences, knowledge, and exposure to types of media. For example, someone who watches Fox News will likely have a different outlook on the world than someone who watches MSNBC. Fishbein and Ajzen suggest there are an infinite number of background factors, some of which include demographics such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, education, income, and religion.[297]

The intention-behavior relationship explains that people act on their intentions if they can; other factors, such as their environment or skill, may prevent them from completing their intentions.[298] The hindrance of someone's intention behavior is based on their ability, including their means and opportunity to engage in a behavior, and not on their intention. An example of intention behavior is the difference between someone saying they will commit violence against another but is physically or mentally incapable of committing that violent act. Resources, skills, opportunity, and ability to perform a behavior are considered *actual control*. Ajzen stresses that behavioral intentions can only come to fruition when the desired behavior is under volitional control.[299]

Another factor leading from intention to behavior is how strongly an individual wants to engage in the behavior. The amount of effort an individual has to put into a behavior, even with limitations or obstacles, is a factor in bringing the behavior to fruition.[300] Some express a desire to engage in a behavior yet lack the resolution to actually participate in the action. Psychology professors Dr. Reid Meloy and Jens Hoffmann

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[296] Fishbein and Ajzen, *Predicting and Changing Behavior*.

[297] Fishbein and Ajzen.

[298] Glanz, Rimer, and Viswanath, *Health Behavior*.

[299] Ajzen, "The Theory of Planned Behavior."

[300] Ajzen.

evaluated threatening communications and identified several factors of whether someone engages in violence or just expresses a desire to engage in violence. Meloy and Hoffmann suggested the pattern of communication, the intensity of the effort determined by how frequently the person posts information, leakage of the person's actual intentions, and the relevant content factors, like a personal connection or experience related to the person or group being threatened, are all factors that determine if someone engages in violence versus just posting messages.[301]

With intention, the integrative model (Figure 7) proposes three types of perceptions: attitude, perceived norms, and self-efficacy.[302] In the context of the integrative model, attitude is defined as how other people would view their behavior based on the person's perception. Perceived norms in the integrated model are the social pressures of a group placed on the individual engaged in the behavior. Self-efficacy describes how the individual perceives their capabilities to engage in the behavior. Self-efficacy is not the competence of the person, only their perception of their abilities. Historically, behavioral change theories have been utilized to change behavior toward action. In Glanz et al.'s examples, they outlined the use of behavioral prediction models to improve people's intentions to improve their health. With DVEs, practitioners want to decrease intentions toward violence, shifting their intentions and, thus, behavior away from their initially intended violence.

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[301] J. Reid Meloy and Jens Hoffmann, eds., *International Handbook of Threat Assessment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[302] Glanz, Rimer, and Viswanath, *Health Behavior*.
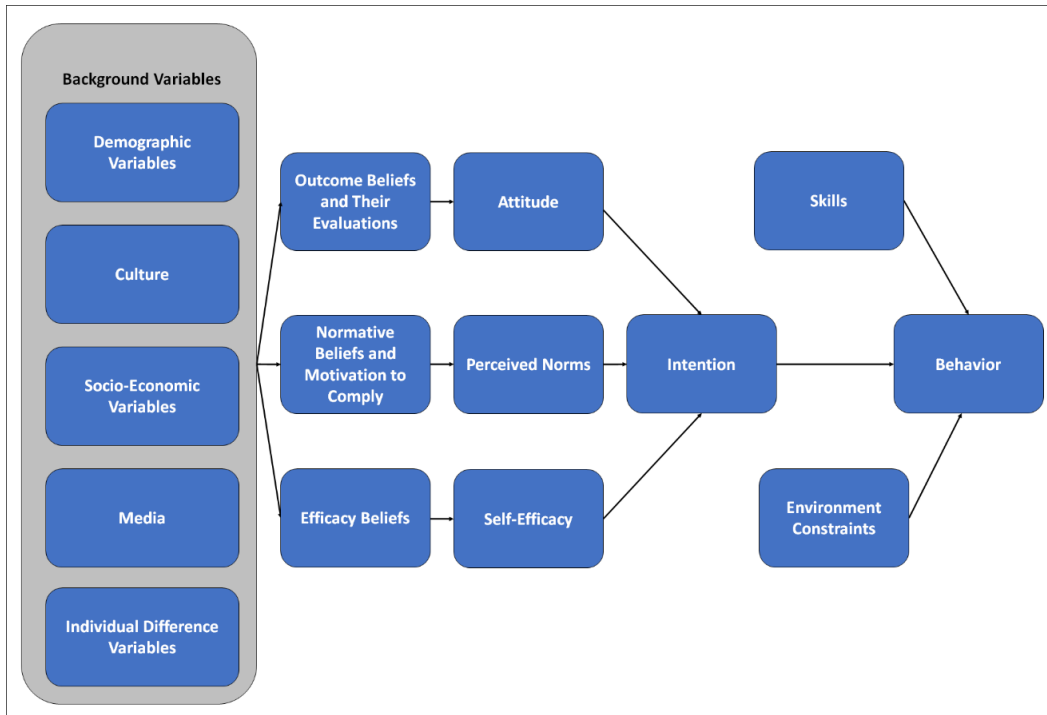
Figure 7.   Diagram of Integrative Model of Behavioral Prediction.[303]

D.   REASONED ACTION THEORY

Reasoned action theory outlines an even more significant relationship between contextual factors, beliefs, perceptions, intentions, and behaviors, an evolutionary result of the previously described social psychology approaches. Reasoned action theory combines the theory of reasoned action, the theory of planned behavior, and the behavioral prediction models derived from Fishbein and Ajzen's research.[304]

Reasoned action theory is the analytical platform this thesis uses to identify themes, beliefs, intentions, and ultimately behaviors of DVE in order to change the narrative and decrease violence. Fishbein and Ajzen described reasoned action theory as a human social behavior that follows reasonably and often spontaneously from the information or beliefs

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[303] Marco Yzer et al., "The Role of Distal Variables in Behavior Change: Effects of Adolescents' Risk for Marijuana Use on Intention to Use Marijuana," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 2004, file:///Users/j.chedester/Downloads/The_Role_of_Distal_Variables_in_Behavior_Change_Ef.pdf.

[304] James Price Dillard and Lijiang Shen, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Persuasion: Developments in Theory and Practice*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2012).

people possess about the behavior under consideration.[305] These beliefs originate in various sources, such as "personal experience, formal education, radio, newspaper, TV, the internet, and other media, and interactions with family and friends."[306] Fishbein and Ajzen suggested that it does not matter how the beliefs are created; factors and influences present a roadmap to how the decisions to behave or not to behave are made. According to the authors, beliefs do not have to be rational or based on facts in order to function as a cognitive basis for behavior development.

There are three components to reasoned action theory: The prediction of behavior based on the intention of the person; the explanation of intention based on the individual's attitude, perceived norms, perceived controls of behavior, and their primary beliefs; and lastly, the various factors from sources in the environmental background, contributing to a person's beliefs, intentions, and behavior.[307] In the book *Weaponized Words*, Braddock applied the existing theories of persuasion to the range of communication methods used by extremists using reasoned action theory to identify themes and create counternarratives.[308] Braddock's use of the reasoned action theory model is broken down into eight additional parts.[309] This thesis uses this version of the reasoned action theory model to identify themes of extremist messaging and propaganda and then develop counternarratives to those themes and prevent extremist violence. See Figure 8 for a diagram of reasoned action theory.

Background and Contextual Factors: Background factors include "culture, socioeconomic status, knowledge, religion, personality, demographics, and messages encountered" but have an endless list of influential factors, as Fishbein and Ajzen suggest.[310]

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[305] Icek Ajzen and Martin Fishbein, "Attitudes and the Attitude-Behavior Relation: Reasoned and Automatic Processes," *European Review of Social Psychology* 11, no. 1 (2000): 1–33, https://doi.org/10.1080/14792779943000116.

[306] Fishbein and Ajzen, *Predicting and Changing Behavior*.

[307] Dillard and Shen, *The SAGE Handbook of Persuasion*.

[308] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*.

[309] Braddock.

[310] Fishbein and Ajzen, *Predicting and Changing Behavior*.

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Beliefs, Attitudinal Norms, and Perceived Control: Beliefs and attitudes are directly related to behaviors and are created by the individual's perception of the reality in which they exist. People develop opinions based on their understanding of society and the world around them.[311]

Behavioral Beliefs Predict Attitudes about Behaviors: Behavioral beliefs and attitudes are characterized by an individual's unprejudiced view about themselves while engaged in specific behavior and the repercussions of conducting that behavior.[312] Beliefs can develop over time and become embedded into the person's psyche.

Normative Beliefs Predict Perceived Norms: The theory of reasoned action highlights beliefs characterized by a person's perception of what others think about a behavior.[313] The theory of reasoned action identifies normative beliefs predict perceived norms as "subjective norms."[314] Injunctive and descriptive norms are also part of this group. Cialdini described injunctive norms as behaviors that are viewed as acceptable or unacceptable.[315] Descriptive norms are behaviors that are expected to occur in a specific situation. Perceived norms are the amalgamation of injunctive and descriptive communal perceived peer pressure.

Control Beliefs Predict Perceived Behavioral Control: Control beliefs are the means and opportunities mentioned in the theory of planned behavior.[316] The means and opportunities are based on the individual's perceptions that they can perform a behavior. Perceived behavioral control is best defined as how easy or difficult the individual perceives the behavior is to carry out. Perceived behavioral control is also identified as "self-efficacy," as mentioned in the theory of planned behavior.[317]

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[311] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*.

[312] Braddock.

[313] Braddock.

[314] Ajzen, "The Theory of Planned Behavior."

[315] Cialdini, *Influence*, 2010.

[316] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*.

[317] Conner and Armitage, "Extending the Theory of Planned Behavior."

Behavioral Intention: Behavioral intention is the most reliable way to determine someone's behaviors.[318] As outlined in previous reasoned action theories, behavioral intentions are someone's willingness to engage in a behavior. Intention also encompasses an individual's effort toward the behavior. Charles Scott and Phillip Resnick argued that effort is one of the essential factors in carrying out a behavior based on intention.[319] If facilitators of strategic communication can predict behavior, they can create strategies to change behavior based on science.

Actual Control: Even if someone intends to act out a behavior, it does not mean they are necessarily able to do so due to skill or some other limitation.[320] Ajzen argued that if someone cannot carry out a behavior but intends to do so, it may change the perception of their control and influence their intentions in the future.[321] If someone wants to build an explosive device but does not know how to make it, their actual control is limited by their lack of bomb-making abilities.

Behavior: With behavior, prediction of the behavior is obtained by looking at specific behaviors versus groups of behaviors.[322] In *Predicting and Changing Behaviors*, identifying the behavior in terms of its "action, target, context, and time elements" are critical to identifying and changing the behavior.[323] Fishbein and Azjen also discuss how bias plays a part in self-reported behavior, arguing it is consistent with expressed intentions yet may not be as reliable as observed behavior.[324] There was a difference of 10% in self-reporting versus objective observation of behavior. Scientifically, it is better to observe the behavior instead of relying on self-reporting behaviors. The behavior is based on the previous seven or more factors.

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[318] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*.

[319] Charles L. Scott and Phillip J. Resnick, "Violence Risk Assessment in Persons with Mental Illness," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 11, no. 6 (2006): 598–611, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2005.12.003.

[320] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*.

[321] Ajzen, "From Intentions to Actions."

[322] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*.

[323] Fishbein and Ajzen, *Predicting and Changing Behavior*, 71.

[324] Fishbein and Ajzen, *Predicting and Changing Behavior*.
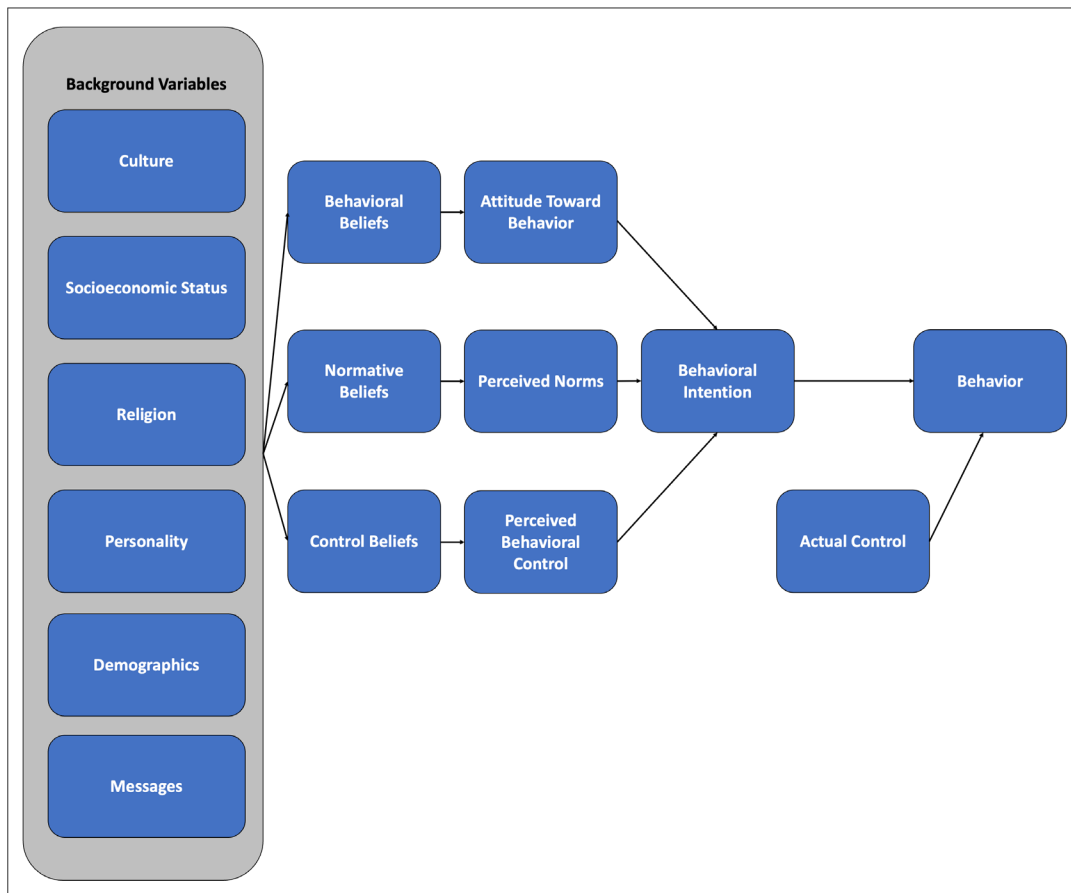
Figure 8.   Diagram of Reasoned Action Theory[325]

Reasoned action theory helps us to recognize extremist narrative goals by looking at their behaviors based on their attitudes, perceived norms, and their perceived control. Reasoned action theory will help us predict extremist attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. Understanding reasoned action theory, as well as the other theories previously discussed, will help guide us to create successful messages to counter extremist narratives. But first, we need to identify what narratives extremists use and how they persuade people to carry out violent extremist actions.

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[325] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*, 143.

E. IMPLEMENTING REASONED ACTION THEORY

Using reasoned action theory to identify interventions for DVEs is a scientifically based method conceived from decades of research. Reasoned action theory shows that by identifying message targets based on their background and associated contextual factors, facilitators will determine an individual's attitudes, intentions, and behavior as a basis of knowledge to craft counternarratives. In *Weaponized Words,* Braddock outlines a process to prevent radicalization, using counternarratives, starting with identifying a specific behavior that needs to be changed.[326] Braddock provides example of this theory using Islamic extremists and a white supremacist. This paper uses Fishbein and Ajzen's concepts of reasoned action theory and Braddock's, Horgan's, and Morrison's processes to identify the contextual factors, beliefs, intentions, and behaviors of DVEs to understand themes in their narratives.

After explaining the methodology of Braddock, Horgan, and Morrison in identifying behavior and themes and developing counternarratives, those same methods will be applied in four case studies on anarchists, Proud Boys, Boogaloos, and white supremacists, . There are three phases in the process of developing counternarratives. The first phase is analyzing extremist narratives, the second is constructing counternarratives, and the last phase is disseminating counternarratives.

F. ANALYZING EXTREMIST NARRATIVES

Analyzing extremist narratives starts by looking at the extremist group, their ideology, violence, social media or messaging use, and demographics. This analytical process examines DVEs' use of images, narratives, memes, or something else to communicate their beliefs. Next, the reasoned action theory model is applied to the individual or group to determine what beliefs and intentions affect the DVE's behavior. Identifying a behavior to change is part of the initial analysis, but further steps into the behavior are needed in constructing the counternarrative. Then facilitators of strategic communication should focus on the extremist narrative that promotes violence, therefore

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[326] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*.

protecting First Amendment rights and implementing libertarian paternalism methods. Facilitators need to look for themes in the extremist narratives, considering the tone, style, and meaning of the extremists' communication to understand how to create an effective counternarrative.

G.   CONSTRUCTING COUNTERNARRATIVES

The second phase involves developing counternarratives that will assist in cultivating effective messaging in three steps: identifying radicalization-related behaviors targeted for reinforcement or change, distinguishing targets at risk for radicalization by intention, and selecting radicalization-related beliefs to target.[327] Braddock has two warnings when it comes to crafting counternarratives: do not reinforce themes that the extremists hold, and if extremists use a narrative that has ties to an actual event, disrupt that narrative theme.[328]

The first step in countering extremists' violent behavior intentions is "identifying radicalization-related behaviors" needing to be changed.[329] The behavior that needs to be changed should be specific, clear, and measurable. The behavioral result also needs to be precise and quantifiable.[330] Specifying a particular unwanted violent action and having measurable goals are necessary to identify the behavior change. An example of having a measurable goal would be throwing fewer Molotov cocktails at police or a white supremacist not getting on white supremacist websites. The purpose of a counternarrative is to effect a positive influence by redirecting the unwanted behavior.

The second step is "distinguishing targets at risk for radicalization by intention, based on reasoned action theory principles."[331] This step helps facilitators identify why

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[327] Braddock.

[328] Braddock.

[329] Braddock, 153.

[330] Martin Fishbein, "Developing Effective Behavior Change Interventions: Some Lessons Learned from Behavioral Research," in *Reviewing the Behavioral Science Knowledge Base on Technology Transfer*, ed. Thomas E. Backer, Susan L. David, and Gerald Saucy, NIDA Research Monograph 155 (Rockville, MD: National Institute on Drug Abuse, 1995), 246–61, https://archives.drugabuse.gov/sites/default/files/monograph155.pdf.

[331] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*, 155.

the extremist is or is not engaging in the violent behavior based on their ability to engage in the behavior. The reasoned action theory diagram (Figure 8) shows two elements that dictate how a person engages in behavior: the individual's behavior, determined by their intention, and their control beliefs to carry out the behavior.[332] There are two variants as to why a person does not engage in a specific behavior based on reasoned action theory: one, an individual lacks the means or opportunity to engage in a behavior and two: an individual does not want to engage in behavior but still has the means and opportunity to do so.[333] Without either of these two variants, the unwanted behavior does not happen. Targeting either of these variants will result in a decrease or outright lack of the behavior. The facilitator of the counternarratives needs to identify the "beliefs, attitudes, norms, self-efficacy, and intentions" of the individual, recognizing the two variants to change the behavior.[334]

The third step is "selecting radicalization-related beliefs to target."[335] Directly tied to the belief is the violent behavior; the belief connected to the violent behavior and the ultimate goal of the facilitator to change. Dr. Fathali Moghaddam discussed how perceptions of unfairness and injustice motivate individuals to engage in violence due to extremist beliefs.[336] He argued that individuals may believe they do not have the same advantages or opportunities as others and can easily be recruited into extremist groups. When individuals believe they no longer have a voice in their community and begin to see others as an out-group, their beliefs can turn toward violent behaviors.[337] Extremists' perception of their in-group versus the out-group often determines how willing they are to engage in violence, as outlined in Chapter II.

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[332] Ajzen and Fishbein, "Attitudes and the Attitude-Behavior Relation."

[333] Fishbein and Ajzen, *Predicting and Changing Behavior*.

[334] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*, 155.

[335] Braddock, 156.

[336] Fathali M. Moghaddam, "The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration," *American Psychologist* 60, no. 2 (February 2005): 161–69, https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.60.2.161.

[337] Moghaddam.

While constructing counternarratives, it is important to follow the strategies outlined in previous chapters regarding inoculation theory and nudge theory, but using four principles from *Inside the Nudge Unit* is essential. *Inside the Nudge Unit's* EAST stood for easy, attractive, social, and timely. Counternarratives should make their messages easy to read, watch, or ingest; attractive to the extremists; socially contextual; and timely. For example, sending a counternarrative a month after a group encourages violence is too late. Inoculation theory discusses early messages' effectiveness as well as methods of emotional reactants to influence others. Nudge theory promotes the idea of libertarian paternalism, and facilitators of strategic communication should follow the Constitution by creating counternarratives that target violence and use methods described by Sunstein and Thaler.

Nudge theory and inoculation theory are overall concepts to follow while using reasoned action theory to provide a specific and scientific methodology to set goals for crafting counternarratives. Narratives can be countered at the group or individual level, for example, if a group posts a message about engaging in violence or an individual is talking about violence. In the contextual factors for the reasoned action theory diagram (Figure 8), an individual may better fit into those specific categories versus a group analysis, which may be non-specific.

H. DISSEMINATING COUNTERNARRATIVES

The final piece in constructing counternarratives is the dissemination of the counternarrative.[338] As previously discussed, cultivating trust in the United States through public offices is challenging. Transparency is critical if the government is presenting the information. Ideally, someone from the online community, from the platform on which the counternarrative is being distributed, is essential for dissemination. In the case of the anarchist narrative, if police present the information, it will likely cause psychological reactance.[339]

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[338] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*.

[339] Braddock, "Vaccinating against Hate."

A second method is encouraging counternarratives to go viral. Message's virality is only recently being studied; however, early research suggests there are three components.[340] The first is that if the information is useful, engaging, and practical, it is well received and shared. Second, people with high activation of emotions, like anger, happiness, disgust, or anxiety, are likely to share information. Last, messages with the ability to share or have the ability for people to participate are likely to be shared. For example, if a share or like button is attached to the message, it allows other people to participate.

The third component of dissemination is partnering with others who are credible.[341] Dissemination can be accomplished with confidential human sources, under cover law enforcement, prior members of the group who are still in good standing but do not believe in violence, or others the group might listen to. Others may be respected members of the community and leaders who want to decrease the violent aspects of the group ideology. Some organizations have used past members of extremist groups to relay the pitfalls of using violence to promote their ideology. Stories from prior members are meant to create an emotional reaction and a humanizing aspect to get those still in the group to identify with the storyteller. The final dissemination strategy is online influence. As stated in Chapter III, there is prior research using bots to produce deradicalizing strategies. The methods in this chapter can be programmed and used in AI to find and counter extremist language, memes, images, or themes. Online counternarratives can also be implemented with undercover agents or police officers with covert online accounts. New technologies are emerging daily, and law enforcement and the government must continually improve, innovate, and adapt technology to fight extremism and violence.

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[340] Berger and Milkman, "Emotion and Virality."

[341] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*.

VI. DOMESTIC VIOLENT EXTREMIST CASE STUDIES

This chapter is a compilation of four different case studies of DVEs' narratives and an example of how to make counternarratives. The case studies discuss the characteristics of an ideology if an individual is part of anarchists, Proud Boys, Boogaloo Boys, or AWD groups. The case study examples look at different ideologies that embrace violence at some level. The examples provide a roadmap of how to look at the characteristic of an individual's or group's beliefs and identify themes in their messaging that connect to their violent behavior. These case studies examine the ideology, violence, social media, and demographics of each group. The case studies are based on hypothetical people identifying as part of the four groups mentioned. The groups are not necessarily the focus; however, they add crucial ideological background and context to develop a counternarrative. After identifying the DVE's group characteristics, the case studies look at a hypothetical person, using reasoned action theory, to determine that individual's background factors, beliefs, intentions, and, ultimately, behavior.

The case studies demonstrate how to fill out the reasoned action theory diagram (Figure 8) to determine how background factors form beliefs, beliefs form intentions, and intentions create behaviors. Because this thesis is not using a real person as an example in this illustration, a hypothetical individual and the group's characteristics will suffice. Some of those are generalizations based on research and experience. This does not mean that all group members are alike, yet for the example in the extremist groups, the assumption is they are similar to these generalizations. Some of the reasoned action theory factors may be challenging to determine if a post is from the group social media page and not an individual's post. If one of the boxes in the reasoned action theory diagram is unknown, leave it blank and move on to what is known about the person or group.

Next, the case study looks at the extremist's narrative, which is a real narrative that someone has posted. Using the background knowledge of an individual who identifies as being associated with a specific DVE group, using the reasoned action theory diagram and information from the online post, the case study provides an example of a counternarrative and discusses how best to disseminate the narrative. The counternarrative also looks at

methods and theories from inoculation theory and nudge theory to assist in making the counternarratives. A counternarrative can be used on a group or individual's post. Following previous scientific methods, the case studies show the process of identifying a violent behavior and how that behavior was based on a specific belief and intention. By understanding how extremist beliefs form intentions and violent behaviors, strategic communication practitioners will be able to identify where and when to insert a counternarrative to decrease violence in groups like anti-fascist anarchists, Proud Boys, Boogaloo Boys, and AWD.

A.   ANTI-FASCIST ANARCHIST

1.   Anarchist Ideology

Anti-fascist ideology aligns with left-wing extremists like anarchists, who embrace anti-capitalism, anti-globalization, communism, and socialism. Anarchists and Anti-fascism is a movement or ideology not necessarily a group. However, there are groups of anti-fascist anarchists throughout the world. Various anti-authoritarian social movements are fueled by anarchist ideas in social, economic, and political dimensions.[342] Anarchism is defined as being "without rulers."[343] One of the most profound differences between protests by anarchists and other groups is the commitment to direct action, a primary weapon against authoritarianism.[344] Direct action is using physical effort to achieve a political or social goal. With anarchists, direct action usually involves lighting fires, throwing objects, Molotov cocktails, blockades, and autonomous zones.[345] Direct action is typically carried out by the aggressive street tactics of black bloc; they also protect non-violent aspects of anarchists like medics and mutual aid individuals.[346] Black bloc is a subgroup among anarchists, and they are the foot soldiers and primary aggressors in direct

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[342] Uri Gordon, "Anarchism and Political Theory: Contemporary Problems" (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2007), https://mirror.anarhija.net/lib.anarhija.net/mirror/u/ug/uri-gordon-anarchism-and-political-theory-contemporary-problems.c117.pdf.

[343] Gordon.

[344] Gordon.

[345] Williams, *Black Flags and Social Movements*.

[346] David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2009).

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action.[347] Because anarchists already oppose law enforcement in their ideology, when law enforcement arrives, many times in riot control formation, it promotes an already ingrained view of law enforcement as the enemy. Black bloc tactics and methods drive the anarchists' and antifascists' direct action and clash with the police, who are perceived as a Nazi, fascist regime. Action against fascists, whether law enforcement or counter-protesters, is the essential element of an anarchist, especially in a group dynamic or riot.

Anti-Nazi and anti-fascist anarchists' ideology looks to the past when anti-fascists fought the Germans in the 1940s.[348] They view nearly all current governments as the new Nazi state and view themselves as the new anti-fascist resistance.[349] Recognizing how anarchist anti-fascists view history and relate to the perceived current form of government is particularly important, especially to law enforcement.[350] This perceived heroic legacy feeds into anti-fascists' and anti-Nazi current views of government and is a point of pride in fighting against the government.[351] The anti-Nazi and anti-fascists' view of the government provides a historical group culture they can rely on as righteous justification for their violence.

2. Anarchist Violence

Anarchists show up at protests to confront law enforcement and counter-protesters because of their philosophy of a repressive government and the rejection or repulsion of right-wing groups.[352] Black bloc tactics include graffiti, blockades, projectiles (paintball guns have recently been implemented as weapons, soup cans, rocks, bricks, and containers

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[347] Graeber.

[348] Nigel Copsey, "Militant Antifascism: An Alternative (Historical) Reading," *Society* 55, no. 3 (2018): 243–47, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-018-0245-y.

[349] A. Terrance Wiley, *Angelic Troublemakers: Religion and Anarchism in America* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2014).

[350] Stanislav Vysotsky, *American Antifa: The Tactics, Culture, and Practice of Militant Antifascism*, Routledge Studies in Fascism and the Far Right (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2021).

[351] Gregory Wegner, "In the Shadow of the Third Reich: The 'Jugendstunde' and the Legitimation of Anti-Fascist Heroes for East German Youth," *German Studies Review* 19, no. 1 (1996): 127–46, https://doi.org/10.2307/1431716.

[352] Vysotsky, *American Antifa*.

with feces or urine), arson, and destroyed vehicles.[353] They carry firearms and have engaged in several shootings against counter-protesters. Anarchists bring guns and Molotov cocktails to protests because of the previous clashing with right-wing groups and police, who often come heavily armed.[354] Fires, which can be started with Molotov cocktails, gasoline, or other accelerants, break out in almost every confrontation between anarchists and police or others opposing them. Anarchists justify using these tactics against law enforcement and counter-protesters because members believe they are fighting a Nazi paramilitary force.[355] Peter Marshall explains anarchists' justification for violence: "Most anarchists have made a distinction between the violence of the oppressor and the violence of the oppressed and have justified the use of revolutionary violence to resist and eventually overthrow the organized violence of the state."[356]

Direct action for anarchists means confrontation with fascists, which is always direct and anti-authoritarian.[357] Pedro Zúquete describes the role of Direct Action in anarchists' philosophy in this way: "Attack is the refusal of mediation, pacification, sacrifice, accommodation, and compromise in the struggle. It is through acting and learning to act, not propaganda, that we will open the path to insurrection, although analysis and discussion have a role in clarifying how to act. Waiting only teaches waiting; in acting one learns to act."[358]

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[353] Vysotsky.

[354] Conrad Wilson, "Indiana Man Released on Bail for Attempted Murder Charge at Portland Protest Now Faces Federal Charges," OPB, June 1, 2021, https://www.opb.org/article/2021/06/01/indiana-man-released-on-bail-for-attempted-murder-charge-at-portland-protest-now-faces-federa-charges/.

[355] José Pedro Zúquete, "'Hell Yes, We're Fighting!' Revolutionary Anarchism's Call for Destruction and Creation," in *Extremism in America*, ed. George Michael (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2013), 58, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27295.

[356] Zúquete, 58.

[357] David Van Deusen and Xavier Massot, *The Black Bloc Papers* (Shawnee Mission, KS: Breaking Glass Press, 2005), https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/the-black-bloc-papers.

[358] Zúquete, "'Hell Yes, We're Fighting!' Revolutionary Anarchism's Call for Destruction and Creation," 50.

3. Anarchist's Use of Social Media

Anarchists use several social media platforms to distribute and promote their ideology to reach a broader audience. Anarchists use mainstream social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram to promote direct action and protest events to get as much participation as possible, but they rarely use Facebook due to privacy concerns.[359] Anarchists have increasingly become more cautious with their messaging, theorizing that law enforcement watches their posts and comments. Communication in the form of social media posts from anarchists relay when and where they will meet and also suggest expectations of violence from the group with phrases like "Direct Action or DA."[360] Social media posts from anarchists that state to "bloc up" indicates they are using black bloc to initiate criminal activity, thus all wearing the same color of clothes (black) and covering their faces. There can also be images of fires or soup cans; the fire reveals the promotion of starting fires, and soup cans mean bringing soup cans to throw at police or counter-protesters like Proud Boys.

4. Anarchist Demographics

In *Black Flags and Social Movements*, Williams discusses demographics among anarchists.[361] The average age of an anarchist is 25 years old, but there are a handful of middle-aged or more senior members.[362] Twenty percent of anarchists are female, and 80% are white.[363] Eighty-nine percent of anarchist males are white, and 73% identified as heterosexual.[364] Anarchists with Antifa ideology have a strong history of being supportive of lesbian, gay, transsexual, bisexual, and queer (LGTBQ) members and actively recruiting in diverse communities. There are anarchists/Antifa marches and events supporting gay

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[359] Sean Parson, "Breaking Bread, Sharing Soup, and Smashing the State: Food Not Bombs and Anarchist Critiques of the Neoliberal Charity State," *Theory in Action* 7, no. 4 (October 2014): 33–51, https://doi.org/10.3798/tia.1937-0237.14026.

[360] Milburn, "Advance of the Black Flags."

[361] Williams, *Black Flags and Social Movements*.

[362] Williams.

[363] Williams.

[364] Williams.

rights, which are predominantly non-violent. Historically, anarchists have been anti-religious, but that has shifted to non-religious to be more inclusive. The social class of anarchists is harder to identify because speaking of social class among anarchists is frowned upon. However, 33% of anarchists claim to be working class, and 66% identify as middle class.[365]

B. ANARCHIST ANALYSIS

Practitioners will start identifying a counternarrative strategy using similar methods described in *Weaponized Words*.[366] The first step is determining what **behavior** practitioners target in a group or individual; in this example the targeted behavior is the anarchist's practice of throwing Molotov cocktails at police.

The second part is determining if the attributed behavior is possible by anarchists based on their **intention, means or ability, and opportunity.** Since Molotov cocktails are easily made with a bottle, gasoline, Styrofoam, a piece of cloth, and a lighter, the assumption is that just about anyone has the means to make one. But not all anarchists are willing to throw Molotov cocktails at police and risk getting 10 years in prison. Yet, for this example, the assumption is that they intend to throw a Molotov.

The third part is determining which **belief** to target. Anarchists are notorious for chanting All Cops Are Bastards (ACAB), being anti-authority, and perceiving the current form of government as fascist and Nazi-like. Anarchists believe that if ACAB, they deserve to have Molotov cocktails thrown at them. Anarchists' beliefs, explained by Christopher Hewitt and Peter Marshall, are solidified by the need to engage in direct action and violence.[367]

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[365] Williams.

[366] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*.

[367] Christopher Hewitt, "Patterns of American Terrorism 1955–1998: An Historical Perspective on Terrorism-related Fatalities," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 12, no. 1 (2000): 1–14, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550008427546; Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism: Be Realistic: Demand the Impossible!* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010).

1. Reasoned Action Theory for Background Variables

Under background variables, **culture** is described as how someone was raised or who influenced them. **Culture** has many aspects, but for this illustration, the hypothetical parents are authoritarian, demanding, educated, and distant. Anarchists' **socioeconomic status** varies, but most are middle class. **Knowledge** is described as having pre-existing beliefs based on experiences of self and others. For example, someone who has had several poor interactions with law enforcement will likely have a negative view of law enforcement. In the past, **religion** was viewed more negatively by anarchists, but now it has been identified as non-religious instead of anti-religious. **Personality** traits vary, yet most extremists tend to have strong opinions, are not afraid to act, and feel a need to belong to something they perceive as special. For **demographics,** anarchists tend to be young with the average age being approximately 25 years old, especially those engaged in violence. Most anarchists are white males, but there is a strong contingency of females. In **messages encountered**, this is likely online information with anti-government or anti-police messages, a corrupt system, and a call to action. Contextual factors can be a wide range of things based on several factors that affect a person's beliefs. The above examples are possible background factors based on the reasoned action theory models, detailed in Chapter V.D and Figure 8.

2. Reasoned Action Theory for Beliefs

After determining background variables, beliefs are explored. **Behavioral beliefs** link the belief to a behavior. Anarchists want to resist a fascist government, exhibited by their disdain for law enforcement. An anarchist believes they have to use direct action or physical force to project their message. Anarchists justify their use of throwing Molotov cocktails due to their beliefs that law enforcement is part of society's problems. Anarchists feel when they protest or resist an authoritarian government, they have a voice, friends to support them, and a purpose in life. Anarchists believe their actions are justified because of their anti-Nazi heritage. Azjen and Fishbein defined the perception of how an individual believes others expect them to behave as **normative beliefs**.[368] In the Anarchist example,

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[368] Ajzen and Fishbein, "Attitudes and Normative Beliefs," 1.

normative beliefs are how a person thinks others in their group view the behavior of throwing Molotov cocktails because of their disdain for the police. Normative beliefs directly relate to **perceived norms,** group thinking, and mob mentality. The **control beliefs** are the person's perception of the likelihood they will have the means and opportunity to throw Molotov cocktails.

Behavioral beliefs lead to an **attitude toward a behavior.** Behavioral attitudes occur when a person believes their behavior will benefit them. Throwing a Molotov Cocktail at the police would be considered anarchist behavior because a member of an anarchist group must engage in direct action against the police. The anarchists' **perceived norms** would imply that because others in the group are engaging in direct action by throwing Molotov cocktails, they should too. **Perceived norms** can also be characterized as implicit peer pressure , but it does not necessarily have to be overt peer pressure, merely the perception of expectations of a behavior. **Perceived behavioral control** means the anarchist evaluates the actual power they have to throw a Molotov cocktail by identifying if they have the intention, the means or ability, and the opportunity to do so.

3.   Reasoned Action Theory for Attitude, Perceptions, and Behavior

Attitude toward the behavior, perceived norms, and **perceived behavioral control** all lead to the anarchists' **behavioral intention.** The anarchists have the intention, based on the attitude, that they should throw a Molotov cocktail because that is what an anarchist does, their peers are doing it, and they have the means and opportunity to make it and throw it. The **intention** of wanting to throw a Molotov cocktail at the police, and **ability,** turn into the actual **behavior** of throwing the Molotov cocktail at a police officer. See Figure 9.
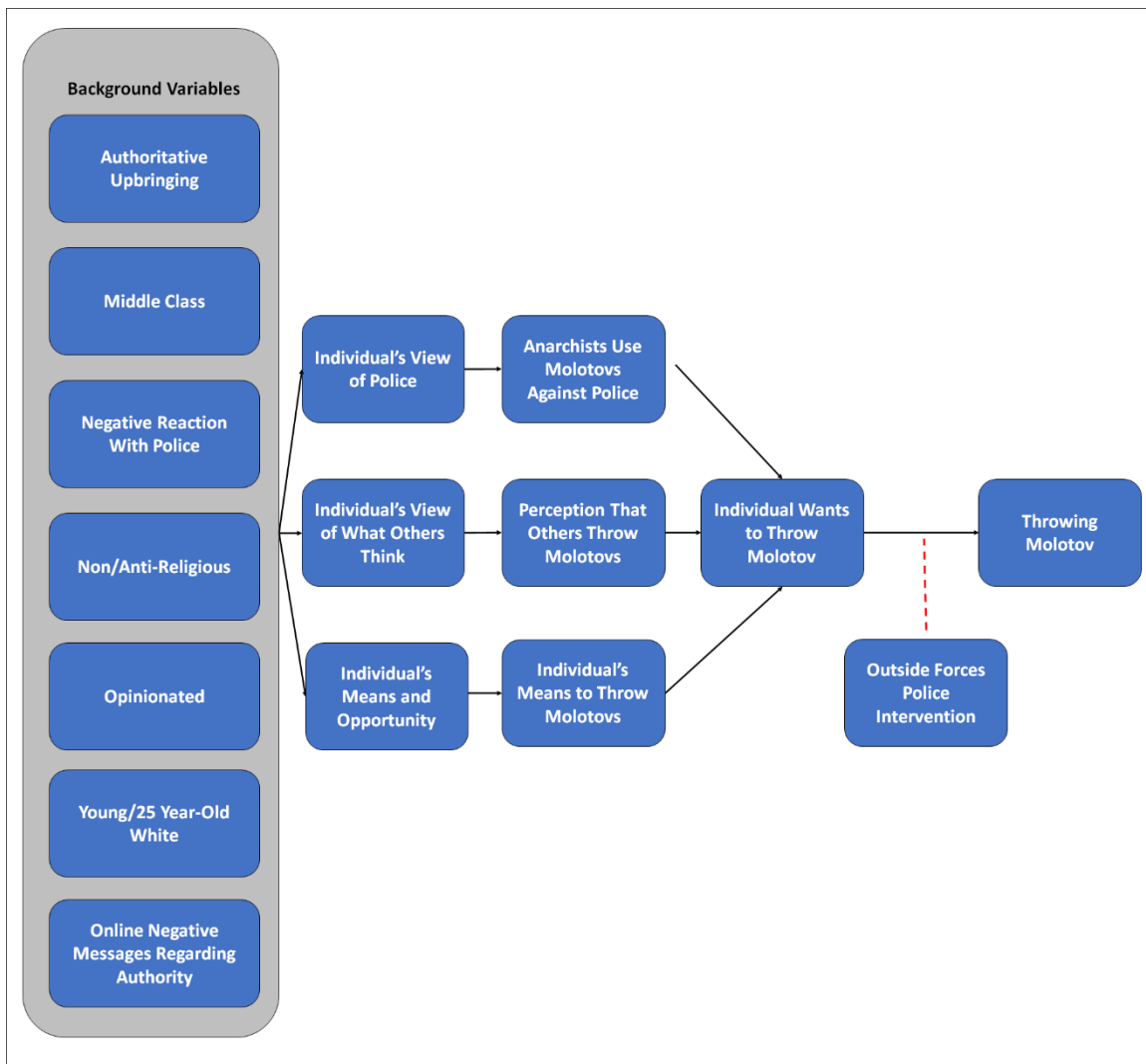
Figure 9.   Diagram of Reasoned Action Theory for Anarchists

In 2020, Molotov cocktails were being thrown at police all over the country during protests and riots. Anarchists posted images and messages encouraging others to throw Molotov cocktails at police; some were arrested for throwing them.[369] Figure 10 displays some of the images posted on social media by anarchists.

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[369] Aaron Katersky, "2 Plead Guilty to Throwing Molotov Cocktail at NYPD Car during May 2020 Protests," ABC News, October 20, 2021, https://abcnews.go.com/US/plead-guilty-throwing-molotov-cocktail-nypd-car-2020/story?id=80685867.

Figure 10.   Anarchists Molotov Cocktail Posts[370]

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[370] Adapted from Youssef Tadroos, "Keep Calm and Make A Molotov Cocktail," Keep-Calm-O-Matic, 2011, https://keepcalms.com/n/keep-calm-and-make-a-molotov-cocktail/; NBC News, "Watch: Molotov Cocktails Are Thrown At Police Officers In Portland Protests," September 24, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H86W82Bgpq4; kellyeloo58442, "Lets Toast the Rich with Our Choice of Cocktail," MyConfinedSpace, May 24, 2009, https://www.myconfinedspace.com/2009/05/24/lets-toast-the-rich-with-our-choice-of-cocktail/; and George Lawson, "Revolutions in the Contemporary World," *Fifteeneightyfour* (blog), July 25, 2019, https://www.cambridgeblog.org/2019/07/revolutions-in-the-contemporary-world/.

4. The Counternarrative

The first piece in developing a counternarrative is analyzing the extremist's narrative or message, identifying themes within the message.[371] The theme in these posts or messages is easy to identify: burn the police and the rich. The tone and feel of the narrative are angry, violent, and aggressive. This theme in the message is also consistent with anarchists and their preferred methods of violence.

The second part of developing a counternarrative is in the construction of the narrative.[372] In the case of throwing Molotov cocktails at the police, the goal is to replace that theme with another, providing an alternative to burning the police. Anarchists cast the police as villains, making them the enemy of anarchists. Social identity theory calls this the in-group versus the out-group.[373] Humanizing people, like police officers, is a way to de-vilify the narrative presented by anarchists. One way to do this is by talking about individual officers, their lives, friends, family, and hobbies. Another method is to talk about how burning public buildings does not hurt the police; it hurts taxpayers and people who may need the police in emergencies. Discuss how setting fire to police cars or buildings has disrupted those who needed help from an abusive relationship, someone that was raped, locating a child molester, or another violent crime that is abhorrent to everyone, including anarchists. Finding something that an anarchist would care about, thus challenging what they did as ineffective by targeting police, creates doubt about their actions. When an anarchist doubts the effectiveness of their violent acts, they are less likely to engage in that behavior.

C. PROUD BOYS

1. Proud Boys Ideology

The Proud Boys are an ultra-nationalist extremist group that has become more active and violent since its inception in 2015. The group is right-wing and vehemently anti-

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[371] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*.

[372] Braddock.

[373] Conner and Armitage, "Extending the Theory of Planned Behavior."

left. The group claims to be "Western chauvinists who refuse to apologize for creating the modern world."[374] The exclusively all-male and primarily white group claims they are protecting the West from the left that they believe hopes to destroy the values and beliefs of traditionally conservative white males. Gavin McInnes created the Proud Boys in 2015 as part of the alt-right wave empowered by divisiveness in the United States.[375] The Proud Boys, when confronting the opposition, which can be in the form of anarchists or any left-wing group or cause, dress in tactical gear and often openly carry firearms. They do not describe themselves as a militia, although members often socialize, communicate, and identify with militia groups like the Oath Keepers and the Three-percenters.

The Proud Boys originated in the United States but have spread globally, with groups in Australia, Canada, and other democratic countries. In 2021, the Canadian government designated the Proud Boys as a "terrorist entity," attributing their involvement in the violence at the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, DC, a contributing factor.[376] The Justice Department charged the current head of the Proud Boys, Erique Tarrio, and four other leaders with seditious conspiracy.[377] Several other members were accused of assaults and other crimes related to the events at the U.S. Capitol.

The Proud Boys deny being a white supremacist organization, yet they are often seen and heard agreeing with white nationalist memes, videos, movies, and white supremacist leaders.[378] In 2017, the Proud Boys stood with white supremacists in the "Unite the Right" protest in Charlottesville, Virginia. While Enrique Tarrio is Cuban-American and claims that the Proud Boys are open to all races, Joe Biggs, Tarrio's right

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[374] Gavin McInnes, "Introducing: The Proud Boys," *Taki's Magazine* (blog), September 15, 2016, https://www.takimag.com/article/introducing_the_proud_boys_gavin_mcinnes/.

[375] "Proud Boys," Southern Poverty Law Center, 2022, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys.

[376] Ian Austen, "Canada Formally Declares Proud Boys a Terrorist Group," *New York Times*, February 3, 2021, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/03/world/canada/canada-proud-boys-terror-group.html.

[377] Hannah Rabinowitz and Katelyn Polantz, "Tarrio and Other Proud Boys Leaders Charged with Seditious Conspiracy over January 6," CNN Politics, June 6, 2022, https://www.cnn.com/2022/06/06/politics/tarrio-proud-boys-charged-seditious-conspiracy-january-6/index.html.

[378] Southern Poverty Law Center, "Proud Boys."

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hand, routinely espouses outright racist views. McInnes has labeled Jada Pinkett Smith a "monkey actress" and shared a video called "10 things I hate about Jews."[379] White supremacists claim that the Proud Boys are the gateway to groups like the Base, Ram, and AWD, which are overtly racist.[380] However, the Proud Boys' violence seems to be based on political motivations and a group view that believes violence is the answer.

2. Proud Boy Violence

The Proud Boys share many similarities with traditional gangs regarding violence and how they recruit and retain members. Conflict and violence to promote their views appear to be motivating principles in the group.[381] Alt-right gangs encourage and participate in symbolic acts of violence.[382] The Proud Boys undergo initiation activities to be full-fledged members. To become a second-tier member, prospects have to name five types of breakfast cereal while they are punched and kicked by other members.[383] To reach the fourth tier in the group, members must "get arrested or in a serious violent fight for the cause."[384] Alt-right groups routinely engage in violence, such as bar fights and road rage incidents, that do not relate to their political and social views. Public displays of violence are encouraged by the group and reaffirm the individual's place in the group.[385]

Much of the motivation for alt-right group violence is derived from anti-leftist groups or views. If anarchists are engaged in violence, Proud Boys view their activities as an assault on their way of life and seek to engage in retributive actions against members of

379 Tom Dreisbach, "Conspiracy Charges Bring Proud Boys' History of Violence into Spotlight," NPR All Things Considered, April 9, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/04/09/985104612/conspiracy-charges-bring-proud-boys-history-of-violence-into-spotlight.

380 McInnes, "Introducing."

381 Samantha Kutner, *Swiping Right: The Allure of Hyper Masculinity and Cryptofascism for Men Who Join the Proud Boys* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2020), https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25259.

382 Matthew Valasik and Shannon Reid, "Distinguishing between Aggression in Groups and in Gangs: Are Gangs Always Violent?," in *The Handbook of Collective Violence: Current Developments and Understanding*, ed. Carol A. Ireland et al. (London: Routledge, 2020), 273–90.

383 Dreisbach, "Conspiracy Charges Bring Proud Boys' History."

384 Dreisbach.

385 Valasik and Reid, "Distinguishing between Aggression in Groups and in Gangs."

the opposition.[386] Because of their shared beliefs and shared enemies, members of the Proud Boys become unified as a cohesive group. Violence becomes part of the group identity, subculture, social interactions, behavioral beliefs, normative views, and attitudes toward others.

3.   Proud Boys' Use of Social Media

Proud Boys use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, 4Chan, and 8Chan to promote their beliefs, attitudes, and radicalize others. The University of Connecticut researched social media use in 2021, specifically Twitter, by the Proud Boys or those who supported them.[387] The University of Connecticut used SpaCY and NLTK SnowBallStemmer to search for words related to the Proud Boys. Both SpaCY and NLTK use artificial intelligence platforms that incorporate deep neural networks. The research showed that the Proud Boys are motivated significantly in Portland, Oregon, to counter anarchists with anti-fascist ideology, also known as Antifa, and stand up for traditional conservative American values. Based on Twitter comments, both those supporting the group and those opposing them, the Proud Boys are accused of gun violence, spreading right-wing and alt-right agendas, and promoting conspiracy theories based on right-wing views.

4.   Proud Boys Demographics

The Proud Boys is an all-male organization, one of its ideology's cornerstones. However, there are some ethnic minorities within the group, Enrique Tarrio being the best example and the organization's current president. Some feel Proud Boys have attempted to recruit young conservative minority males after McInnes's leadership.[388] After McInnes's racial comments, which portrayed the group as having white supremacist tendencies, Tarrio

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[386] Valasik and Reid.

[387] Md Fahim and Swapna S. Gokhale, "Identifying Social Media Content Supporting Proud Boys," in *2021 IEEE International Conference on Big Data (Big Data)*, 2021, 2487–95, https://doi.org/10.1109/BigData52589.2021.9672065.

[388] Manny Otiko, "Black, Brown 'Proud Boys' Provide Cover for Group's True Nature," An Injustice!, January 25, 2021, https://aninjusticemag.com/black-brown-proud-boys-provide-cover-for-group-s-true-nature-f2f40b18bf51.

became a public figure. In "Black, Brown Proud Boys provide cover for the group's True Nature," the author argued that the minorities in the group provide cover for the organization's true intentions.[389] However divisive the group's racial beliefs are viewed, the fact is most Proud Boys are white males.[390] The age range for is anywhere from 16 to older men in their 70s.

D.   PROUD BOY ANALYSIS

The counternarrative strategy remains the same for the Proud Boys as for anarchists. The first step is determining which **behavior** to target. During the January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, the Proud Boys played a significant role in the violence against Capitol Police.[391] Since they often engage in fighting, violence against public officials or the Capitol Police is the targeted behavior.

The second part is determining if the attributed behavior is possible by Proud Boys based on their **intention, means or ability, and opportunity**. Proud Boy culture embraces violence, which can be in the form of punching someone or a firearms attack.[392] Because Proud Boys embrace violence in their group, they have the means or ability and often the opportunity to engage in violence with or without other weapons. Yet, for this example, Proud Boy violence is in the form of punching Capitol Police employees, which does not require anything but the will to engage in violence.

The third part is determining what **belief** to target. During the January 6 insurrection, the Proud Boys believed that the election was fraudulent. President Trump asked them to "stand back and stand by," which they interpreted as being ready to take

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389 Otiko.

390 Southern Poverty Law Center, "Proud Boys."

391 Nathan Lucas, "Right-Wing Terrorism in America through the Lens of the Capitol Riot" (Hare & Bell Writing Contest, Johnson County Community College, 2021), https://scholarspace.jccc.edu/hare_bell/6.

392 Jason Wilson, "Hundreds Clash in Portland as Proud Boys Rally Descends into Violence," *The Guardian*, August 23, 2021, sec. U.S. news, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/aug/23/portland-oregon-clashes-protests-proud-boys-antifascist.

violent action.[393] Capitol Police stood in protection of the Capitol building, thus keeping the Proud Boys from going in and coercing politicians to change the election. The targeted belief is that Proud Boys needed to engage in violence to overturn the election in support of President Trump.

1. Reasoned Action Theory for Background Variables

Under background variables, **culture** is described as how someone was raised or the people they were influenced by. For this illustration, the hypothetical example will assume that most Proud Boys have a typical conservative, patriotic, rigid, and religious upbringing as part of their **culture**. Their **socioeconomic status** is described as working class to middle class. **Knowledge** is described as seeing police inaction toward left-wing protesters, like the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and anarchists. The Proud Boys may feel, similar to militias, that they have to step in for justice to be served. In the past, **religion** among Proud Boys is typically Christian. **Personality** traits vary, yet most extremists tend to have strong opinions, are not afraid to act, and feel a need to belong to something special. For **demographics**, they are a mix of younger and middle-aged males. Unlike many extremist groups, they have older members who engage in violence and encourage it. All Proud Boys are male, yet some women support the group in the form of girlfriends or wives, much like outlaw motorcycle gangs.[394] In **messages encountered,** this is likely online information with anti-government or anti-police messages, a corrupt system, and a call to action.

2. Reasoned Action Theory for Beliefs

After determining background variables, look at beliefs. **Behavioral beliefs** are identified as being a person's unbiased views toward the behavior of fighting with police to promote freedom. The Proud Boys believe their violent actions are justified because they promote freedom, secure elections, and are against liberal fraudulent control. **Normative**

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[393] Sheera Frenkel and Annie Karni, "Proud Boys Celebrate Trump's 'Stand by' Remark about Them at the Debate.," *New York Times*, September 30, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/29/us/trump-proud-boys-biden.html.

[394] Valasik and Reid, "Distinguishing between Aggression in Groups and in Gangs."

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beliefs are how a person thinks others in their group view the behavior of using force to change election results. As previously stated, **normative beliefs** directly relate to Perceived Norms, group thinking, and mob mentality. The **control beliefs** are the person's perception of the likelihood they will have the means, ability, and opportunity to engage in violence with Capitol Police to intervene in elections.

Behavioral beliefs lead to an **attitude toward a behavior**. Behavioral attitudes occur when a person believes their behavior will benefit them and, in this case, America. A Proud Boys attitude toward the violence against the Capitol Police would be a justified means to an end. The Proud Boys' **perceived norms** would mean that because others in the group are engaging in using force to gain access to the U.S Capitol building and lawmakers, the individual should too. Perceived norms can also be characterized as implicit peer pressure because the peer pressure or group expectation is perceived, not overt. **Perceived behavioral control** means the Proud Boy evaluates the actual power they have to engage in violence (size, ability to fight, or other tools) by identifying if they have the intention, the means or ability, and the opportunity to do so.

3.   Reasoned Action Theory for Attitude, Perceptions, and Behavior

Attitude toward the behavior, perceived norms, and **perceived behavioral control** all lead to the Proud Boys' **behavioral intention**. The Proud Boys have the intention, based on the attitude, that they should engage in violence because that is what America needs and what Proud Boys do; their peers are doing it, and they have the means or ability and opportunity to engage in violence and change the elections, to assure President Trump's second term. The **intention** and ability turn into the actual **behavior** of engaging in violence, throwing punches, and rushing the Capitol building. See Figure 11.

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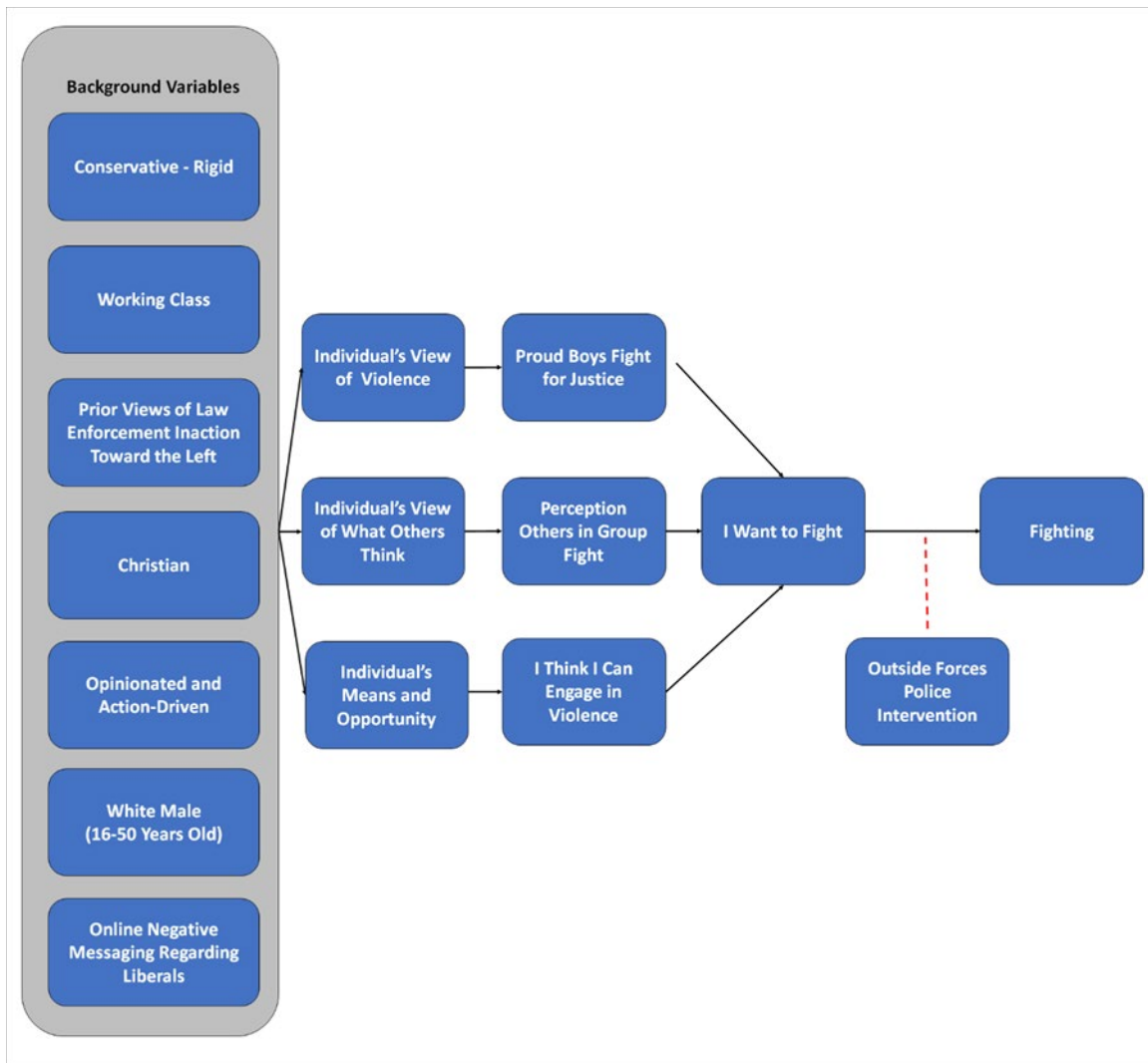
Figure 11.   Diagram of Reasoned Action Theory for Proud Boys

4.   Proud Boys' Narrative

After the elections in 2020, the Proud Boys supported President Trump's intention to overturn the results or discount their validity.[395] Conspiracy theories were also prevalent among right-wing groups and supporters. Joe Biggs, second in command of the Proud Boys, made several statements about engaging in violence (Figure 12). Biggs posted, "It's time for f***ing War if they steal this s***. … They're evil scum, and they all deserve to

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[395] Frenkel and Karni, "Proud Boys Celebrate Trump's 'Stand By.'"

die a traitor's death."[396] Another Proud Boy named Nordean posted, "When police officers or government officials are breaking the law, what are we supposed to do as the people? Discourse? What are we supposed to debate? No, you have to use force."[397]
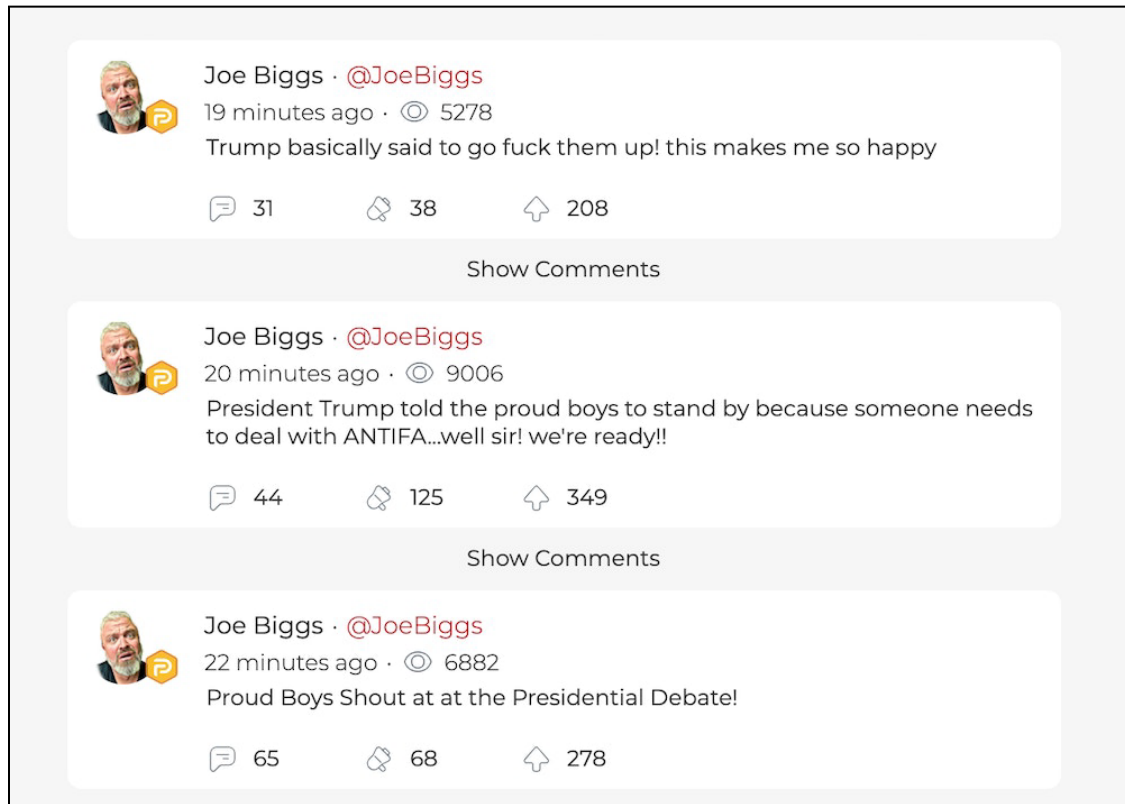
Figure 12.   Joe Biggs's Messages[398]

5.   The Counternarrative

Again, the first step is analyzing the Proud Boys' message or narrative and identifying the themes. Biggs relayed, "It is time for f***ing War if they steal this

[396] Dreisbach, "Conspiracy Charges Bring Proud Boys' History."

[397] Dreisbach.

[398] Source: David Gilbert, "'Trump Basically Said to Go Fuck Them Up': Here's How the Proud Boys Reacted to Trump's Comments," Vice, September 30, 2020, https://www.vice.com/en/article/n7wxxk/trump-basically-said-to-go-fuck-them-up-heres-how-the-proud-boys-reacted-to-trumps-comments.

s***."[399] Biggs refers to Democrats and liberals, who he believes "stole" the election. Again, like anarchists, Biggs identifies an us versus them or in-group and out-group mentality. Biggs continues and says they need to die a traitor's death. During the Capitol riot, right-wing individuals shouted to hang Vice President Pence and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.[400] Nordean further demonstrates the perspective that the Proud Boys' in-group is blaming police officers or government officials; the out-group and Proud Boys have to use violence to oppose them. The theme in these statements is consistent with violence against those responsible for "stealing" the election. Violence is described as a traitor's death or hanging, but any force or violence is justified under Biggs' and Nordean's statements and the theme of their comments.

Next is the construction of the counternarrative.[401] This counternarrative is complicated because the Proud Boys and many right-wing individuals believe that a large group, or about half of the country, is responsible for the theft of the election. Yet, because Biggs made the "traitor's death" statement, he was likely referring to Vice President Pence and other public officials perceived as not supporting President Trump. Normally, in developing a counternarrative, there could be an argument that since there has been no evidence the election was stolen, the ability to plant that seed of doubt in some Proud Boys would be a possible strategy. However, there have already been news reports, investigations, and hearings into the theory the election was stolen, so it is unlikely that the argument will be effective.

Another strategy to develop a counternarrative is to provide an alternative representation of the targets of the Proud Boy's message of violence.[402] A counternarrative should say that Vice President Pence is not a traitor and was merely following the law, accepting the results for what they were. Vice President Pence was not going against

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[399] Dreisbach, "Conspiracy Charges Bring Proud Boys' History."

[400] Timothy Bella, "Trump Said on Jan. 6 That Pence 'Deserves' to Be Hanged, Liz Cheney States in Committee Hearing," *Washington Post*, June 10, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/06/10/jan6-trump-pence-deserves-hanged-cheney-capitol/.

[401] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*.

[402] Braddock.

President Trump when he accepted the election result; if there had been election fraud, he would likely have promoted that argument with the president. Showing that Vice President Pence was afraid for his life and his family's life also humanizes the counterargument. It creates conflict within the Proud Boys that Pence's supporters made him fear for his life; he too is a Republican and voted the same as those demanding violence. Another angle to the counternarrative is the violence against Capitol Police officers. The Proud Boys portray a pro-police allegiance, and Biggs has publicly stated he was working with law enforcement.[403] Again, humanizing the impact of the Capitol Police violence on the individual officers shows how the violence affected the people the Proud Boys support. Neither the Capitol Police nor Vice President Pence are likely left-wing people, like anarchists with anti-fascist ideology, and therefore not the enemy of the Proud Boys.

E.   BOOGALOO BOYS

1.   Boogaloo Boys Ideology

The Boogaloo Boys, sometimes called the Boogaloo Bois, is more of a movement, much like Antifa is a movement or ideology within anarchists. The Boogaloo Boys movement has strong ties to right-wing politics. Yet, it also can be tied to left-wing groups like anarchists with Antifa ideology due to their anti-police beliefs.[404] Some absolute ideological traits that the movement do stand for are Second Amendment rights and accelerationist views of a pending civil war.[405] A third trait consistent in ideology is anti-government and anti-law enforcement. Boogaloo Boys members often participate in protests related to government dissidence and will participate in BLM or white supremacist

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[403] "FBI Enlisted Proud Boys Leader to Inform on Antifa, Lawyer Says," NBC News, March 31, 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/fbi-enlisted-proud-boys-leader-inform-antifa-lawyer-says-n1262578.

[404] Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, *Actor Profile: Boogaloo Boys* (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 2021), https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep34328.

[405] Bradley E. Wiggins, "Boogaloo and Civil War 2: Memetic Antagonism in Expressions of Covert Activism," *New Media & Society* 23, no. 11 (2021): 3179–3205, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820945317.

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protests.[406] The most distinct identifying aspects of members are their Hawaiian shirts, accompanied by tactical gear and weapons.

The Boogaloo Boys' movement's diverse "neo-Dadaist aesthetics" is driven by the desire for a divided country through civil war and disarray.[407] The destruction of the government as it is known today is consistent with anarchist ideology and the fight to resist an authoritarian government that oppresses people. The anti-law enforcement and anti-government sentiments of many individuals who espouse Boogaloo Boys' themes provide opportunities for other DVEs to bridge ideological divides based on a commonly perceived foe; bridging ideological divides increases the likelihood that DVEs' varying ideologies continue to adopt their themes.[408]

In 2020, an alliance among the Oregon Boogaloo Boys, BLM protesters, and Rose City Antifa, seemingly spearheaded by Boogaloo Boys' movement members, was attempted but did not last very long.[409] More recently, the movement has fractured into two distinct factions, with one side consisting of white supremacists while the other identifying as radical libertarians. Some movement members have recently condemned racism and white supremacy and have communicated their willingness to align themselves with any group, including BLM, that opposes law enforcement or seeks to overthrow the government regardless of race.

Additionally, the movement is traditionally associated with right-wing activism. The term "Boogaloo" refers to violent uprisings against left-wing political opponents, including anarchists and the Antifa movement. However, in Portland, Oregon, in 2020, the Boogaloo Boys unsuccessfully attempted to join BLM protesters and anarchists due to their

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[406] Shayan Sardarizadeh and Mike Wenkling, "George Floyd Protests: Who Are Boogaloo Bois, Antifa and Proud Boys?," *BBC News*, June 17, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-53018201.

[407] Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, *Actor Profile*, 1.

[408] Will Sommer, "How Instagram Turned an Upstate N.Y. Town Into a Dangerous Magnet for Militia Types," *Daily Beast*, November 29, 2019, sec. politics, https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-instagram-turned-an-upstate-ny-town-into-a-dangerous-magnet-for-militia-types.

[409] Tess Riski, "Portland Writer Examines the Rise of the 'Boogaloo Bois,' Who Also Hate Cops," *Willamette Week*, August 24, 2020, https://www.wweek.com/news/2020/08/24/portland-writer-examines-the-rise-of-the-boogaloo-bois-who-also-hate-cops/.

anti-police themes. After being poorly accepted by anarchists, the Boogaloo Boys turned to right-wing groups for support. They aligned themselves with the Proud Boys and Three Percenters militia groups.[410] As a result, Boogaloo Boys members' attitudes toward the left range from moderately to extraordinarily hostile, and many envision the movement as being directed primarily or substantially against left-wing groups. Again, because the movement is relatively new and lacks the ideological coherency of more mature movements, some members may consider themselves left-leaning libertarians who may have liberal or progressive social views while maintaining hostility toward left-leaning views about the role of government or gun control.

2. Boogaloo Boys' Violence

Boogaloo Boys members' have engaged in numerous violent acts in the United States using firearms and explosives. U.S. Air Force Sergeant Steven Carrillo, in June 2020, killed a Santa Cruz County, California, Sheriff's Office sergeant and wounded another deputy who responded to a report of a suspicious vehicle containing ammunition, firearms, and bomb-making materials.[411] Before his arrest, Carrillo reportedly wrote "BOOG" in blood on the hood of a car he carjacked. Carrillo owned a tactical vest bearing a patch with an igloo and Hawaiian-style print.[412] The movement has adopted several images, two of which are igloos and Hawaiian-themed attire.

In May 2020, the FBI arrested three Las Vegas–based domestic violent extremists after they conspired to destroy a public utility station or ranger station near Lake Mead as a "trial run" to confront the government by disrupting the U.S. economy. They discussed using improvised incendiary devices against law enforcement to cause chaos during lawful

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[410] "Statement on the Threat of Post Election Violence: Boogaloo," Oregon Coalition against Hate Crime, October 20, 2020, https://oregoncahc.org/tag/boogaloo/.

[411] Brandy Zadrozny, Ben Collins, and Andrew Blankstein, "Man Accused in Deputy Ambush Scrawled Extremist 'Boogaloo' Phrases in Blood," NBC News, June 11, 2020, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/man-charged-deputy-ambush-scrawled-extremist-boogaloo-phrases-blood-n1230321.

[412] Martha Mendoza and Stefanie Dazio, "California Sheriff: Gunman 'Very Intent' on Killing Police," AP News, June 9, 2020, https://apnews.com/article/california-police-us-news-sc-state-wire-ca-state-wire-9186215f571341b8e344a17402fa73e9.

protests related to the murder of George Floyd.[413] The subjects self-identified as part of the "Boogaloo Boys." They participated in a Nevada Boogaloo Boys Facebook group, which one subject indicated was for people who wanted to overthrow the government violently.[414] Even though Boogaloo Boys' alliances are somewhat vague, their desire to promote Second Amendment rights and their disdain for law enforcement and the government are prevalent and consistent.

3.   Boogaloo Boys' Use of Social Media

Many individuals use the Boogaloo Boys' concept, its lexicon, symbols, and style, within the context of First Amendment–protected activity, often as satire or commentary on current events. The Boogaloo Boys' posts and meme themes are versatile and attractive messaging methods for DVEs and others predisposed to violence. Since early 2020, multiple DVEs have applied Boogaloo Boys elements within the context of attacks, threats of violence, or plotting illegal activity.[415] One of the most common Boogaloo Boys memes is Pepe the Frog wearing a Hawaiian shirt and holding a rifle. Pepe the Frog, is popular with white supremacist members and is often used in their memes and jokes. There are several consistent overlapping themes between the movement, white supremacists, and other anti-government groups, making identifying themes and tactics challenging.

Though the use of the Boogaloo Boys' moniker is not representative of a more significant organized movement, the profusion of individuals and groups adopting or purveying the group's elements on social media provides opportunities for sharing propaganda, tactical or weapons guidance, and the potential establishment of both the virtual and real-world groups.[416] The Boogaloo Boys' Pepe the Frog, igloo, Hawaiian

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[413] Michelle L. Price and Scott Sonner, "Prosecutors: 3 Men Plotted to Terrorize Vegas Protests," Associated Press, June 3, 2020, https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-american-protests-terrorism-us-news-las-vegas-6223153093f08fa910c4ab445771b773.

[414] Price and Sonner.

[415] Laura E. Adkins and Emily Burack, "A Guide to the Symbols and Signs on Display at the Capitol Insurrection," *J Weekly* (blog), January 7, 2021, https://jweekly.com/2021/01/07/hate-on-display-a-guide-to-the-symbols-and-signs-on-display-at-the-capitol-insurrection/.

[416] Elise Thomas, "Boogaloo Bois: The Birth of a 'Movement', from Memes to Real-World Violence," *ASPI Strategist* (blog), March 30, 2021, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/boogaloo-bois-the-birth-of-a-movement-from-memes-to-real-world-violence/.

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shirt, and other displays of adherence are less indicative of membership in a single, overarching group and more consistent with the communication of a common belief of pro-gun and anti-government.

4. Boogaloo Boys' Demographics

The demographics of the movement are based on a review of articles, news stories, images, and other research methods, which show that most Boogaloo Boys are white males, with the majority appearing to be in their 20s. Socioeconomic status and religious information do not stand out among Boogaloo Boys. There also seems to be a draw toward Boogaloo Boys' ideology with those frustrated with law enforcement, the military, or their service.[417]

F. BOOGALOO BOYS' ANALYSIS

The Boogaloo Boys do not use long rants calling for violence; they use memes, phrases, and images to portray their messages of violence. But by understanding their ideology and words, practitioners will start identifying a counternarrative strategy.[418] Like the previous case studies, the first step is determining the target **behavior.** The Boogaloo Boys want a second civil war and despise law enforcement and the government. Their violence is consistently directed at government officials, so that will be the behavior to counter. Specifically, they use firearms and explosives to kill or harm government officials.

The second part is determining if the Boogaloo Boys' attributed behavior is possible based on their **intention, means or ability, and opportunity.** They are vehement Second Amendment rights advocates.[419] The Boogaloo Boys also embrace methods discussed in the *Anarchist Cookbook*, which describes how to make explosives.[420] Because all members have guns, the means or ability is always present. The intention and

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[417] Matthew Kriner and Jon Lewis, "The Evolution of the Boogaloo Movement," *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 2 (February 2021): 22–32, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-evolution-of-the-boogaloo-movement/.

[418] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*.

[419] Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, *Actor Profile*.

[420] Sardarizadeh and Wenkling, "George Floyd Protests."

opportunity to engage in violence increased during the 2020 civil unrest, and several Boogaloo Boys engaged in attacks against law enforcement and government officials.[421] In Nevada, a police officer and a security guard were gunned down in 2020; the Boogaloo Boys used the civil unrest to promote their anti-government ideology.[422] The Boogaloo Boys embrace gun violence and believe violence, especially against the government, is the way to start a civil war and start a new society.

The third part is determining what **belief** to target. The Boogaloo Boys believe the government, police, and authority are corrupt and must be destroyed to build a better society.[423] They think violence against the government will force others to see things like they do. Not all Boogaloo Boys engage in violence; those that do not are labeled "shit posters."[424] Many calls to action specifically call out those who just post online and do not engage in violence to shame and motivate them to engage in violence. Even though Brenton Tarrant, the Christchurch shooter, was not identified as a Boogaloo Boy, he used the same form of communication, sense of humor, and was online in the same forums as the group.[425] The Boogaloo Boys' **beliefs** that need to be changed revolve around violence against law enforcement and government officials.

1.   Reasoned Action Theory for Background Variables

Under background variables, **culture** is described as how someone was raised or the people who influenced them. **Culture** has many variables, yet someone who becomes a Boogaloo Boy will likely be raised around weapons and possibly an anti-government upbringing. However, this is only an assumption for this example based on personal

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[421] Thomas, "Boogaloo Bois."

[422] Thomas.

[423] Thomas.

[424] Aja Romano, "The Christchurch Shooter's Manifesto Used Memes to Spread Hate," Vox, March 16, 2019, https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/3/16/18266930/christchurch-shooter-manifesto-memes-subscribe-to-pewdiepie.

[425] Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Samuel Hodgson, and Colin P. Clarke, "The Growing Threat Posed by Accelerationism and Accelerationist Groups Worldwide," Policy Commons, April 20, 2020, https://policycommons.net/artifacts/1341638/the-growing-threat-posed-by-accelerationism-and-accelerationist-groups-worldwide/1953759/.

experience and knowledge. Boogaloos Boys' **socioeconomic status** is typically working class. Knowledge can be described as having several poor interactions with police, the military, or authority figures. **Religion** is unknown; there does not seem to be a dominant trait. **Personality** traits vary, yet most extremists tend to have strong opinions, are not afraid to act, and feel a need to belong to something special. For **demographics,** Boogaloo Boys tend to be younger males, usually in their 20s but some in their 30s.[426] Most are typically white, with some groups having ties to white supremacy and others supporting BLM movements. In **messages encountered**, this is likely online information with anti-government or anti-police messages, a corrupt system, and a call to action to start a civil war.

2. Reasoned Action Theory for Beliefs

After determining background variables, beliefs are explored. **Behavioral beliefs** are identified as being the Boogaloo Boys' views toward the behavior of violence toward the government. The Boogaloo Boys feel when they engage in violence against law enforcement, they have a common goal, friends, and a purpose in life.[427] The Boogaloo Boys believe their actions were justified because they must provoke civil war and create a new society. **Normative Beliefs** are how an individual Boogaloo Boy thinks others in their group view the behavior of shooting or bombing government officials. **Normative beliefs** directly relate to **perceived Norms** or implicit peer pressure to act. The **control beliefs** are the Boogaloo Boys' perception of the likelihood they will have the means, ability, and opportunity to attack government officials.

Behavioral beliefs lead to an **attitude toward a behavior**. A Boogaloo Boy's attitude toward the behavior of shooting or bombing a government official would be part of a the group goal to start a civil war. They believe the system needs cleansing and can accelerate that cleansing with civil war. A Boogaloos Boy's **perceived norms** would mean that because others in their group have engaged in violence against government officials, they should too. **Perceived behavioral control** means a Boogaloo Boy evaluates the actual

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[426] Thomas, "Boogaloo Bois."

[427] Matthew Kriner and Jon Lewis, "The Evolution of the Boogaloo Movement."

power they have to shoot or bomb a government official by identifying if they have the intention, the means or ability, and the opportunity to do so. Another critical aspect of **perceived behavioral control** is how determined the Boogaloo Boys are to act, thus overcoming obstacles.

3. Reasoned Action Theory for Attitude, Perceptions, and Behavior

Attitude toward the behavior, perceived norms, and perceived behavioral control all lead to a Boogaloo Boy's **behavioral intention.** Boogaloo Boys have the intention, based on the attitude, that they should harm government officials because that is how Boogaloo Boys, who want a civil war, act. Their peers are doing it, and they have the means and opportunity to use their guns and make explosives. The **intention** and ability turn into the actual **behavior** of an attack against a government official. See Figure 13.
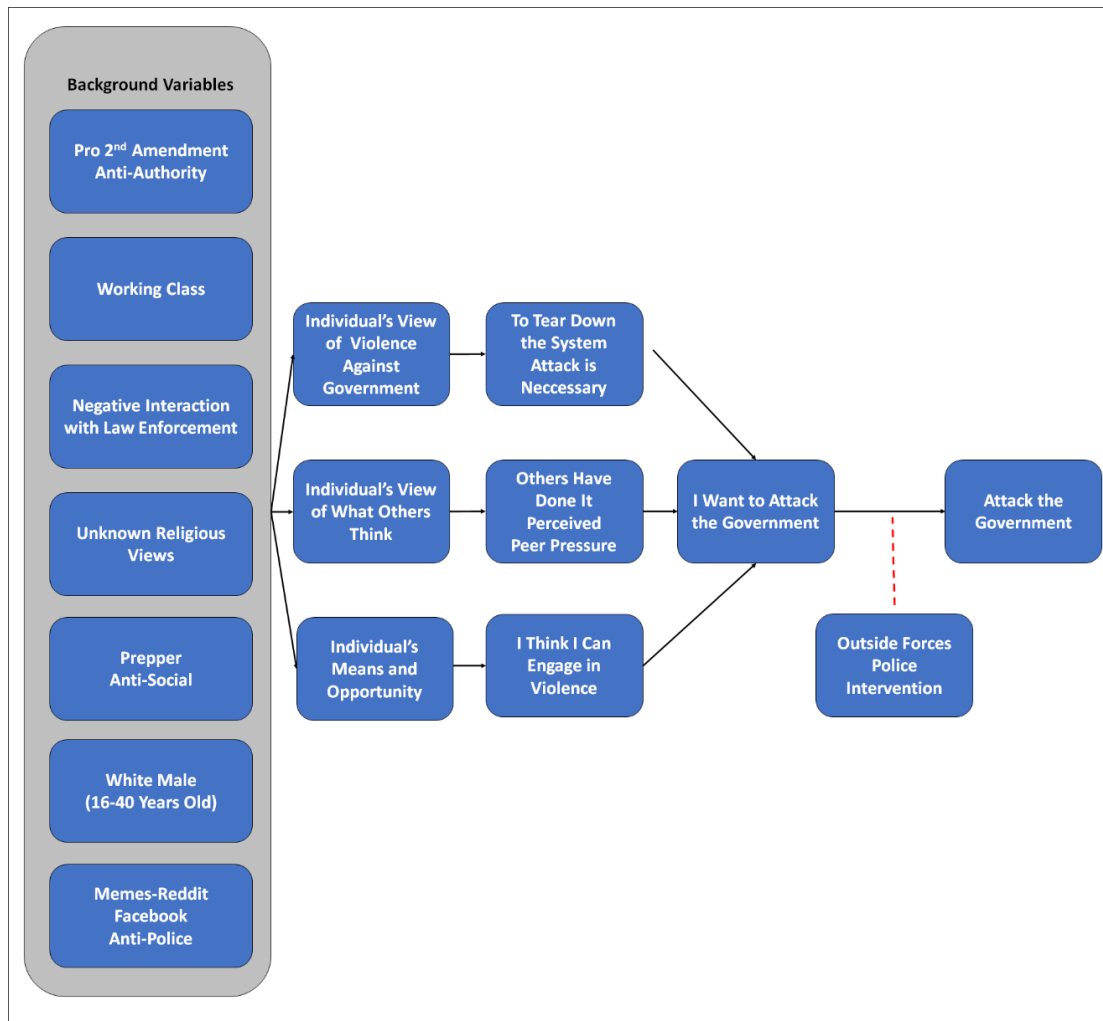
Figure 13.   Diagram of Reasoned Action Theory for Boogaloo Boys

4.   Boogaloo Boys' Narrative

The Boogaloo Boys use a variety of social media platforms, sarcasm, and memes to communicate, promote violence, and socialize. On Facebook, BoojieBastards: The Armory wrote: "Let's talk grenades, flash bangs, and other things you can throw at the enemy [government]. Let's just say that you didn't want to get the paperwork in order to possess certain things that go boom or can act as a room clearer/stunner."[428] The

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428 Whitney Kimball, "Report: Over 100 U.S. Militant Groups Have Been Promoting Second Civil War On Facebook," Gizmodo Australia, April 24, 2020, https://www.gizmodo.com.au/2020/04/report-over-100-militant-groups-have-been-promoting-second-civil-war-on-facebook/.

BoojieBastards comments were made in the context of COVID-19 restrictions and government lockdowns. Figure 14 depicts another civil war–related meme.

Figure 14.   The Thicc Boog Line's Messages[429]

5.   The Counternarrative

Identifying a theme in the Boogaloo Boys' narrative is the first part of creating a counternarrative. The theme of the Boogaloo Boys' narrative is violence against the government to accelerate a civil war. Instead of looking at the target of the their messages of violence, this example examines their end goal or theme: the acceleration of a second civil war. They believe that if they targeted the government, somehow that would trigger a civil war, and the American people would realize the attacks justified an uprising and civil

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[429] Christopher Mathias, "Amid the Pandemic, U.S. Militia Groups Plot 'The Boogaloo,' AKA Civil War, On Facebook," HuffPost, April 24, 2020, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/boogaloo-facebook-pages-coronavirus-militia-group-extremists_n_5ea3072bc5b6d376358eba98.

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war. For the Boogaloo Boys, their belief that attacking government officials is illogical, and their argument can be unraveled.

To create a counternarrative, this example argues that civil war will not be started merely by attacking government officials. An argument can be made that those attacking police or government officials were angry at them for other reasons and used the Boogaloo Boys' movement as a vehicle for their hate and not based on ideology. One of the most recent attacks with Boogaloo Boys ties is the plot to kidnap Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer.[430] Governor Whitmer had become a target of right-wing groups due to her COVID-19 response, where she enacted lockdown measures in the state.[431] Thirteen men were arrested, calling themselves the Wolverine Watch, for conspiracy to commit an act of domestic terrorism.

In Governor Whitmer's case, the attack was due to her COVID-19 restriction, not to start a civil war. When the members' fundamental beliefs are destroyed, their followers will question why they plan and attack the government. Humanizing the police or Governor Whitmer does not make sense in the Boogaloo Boys' case because their theme is misconceived and illogical. A stronger argument or narrative is the attack was made because they did not like the governor's ideas or strategies to fight COVID-19. Creating doubt triggers System 2 in the brain, causing a person to use more cognitive reasoning instead of a reaction or based on emotion. Presenting a counterargument that attacking the governor will not accelerate a civil war and may unite people with the government due to sympathy may be a way to dissuade further attacks. This argument breaks down their fundamental beliefs regarding the justification of civil war.

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[430] Thomas, "Boogaloo Bois."

[431] Paul Egan and Tresa Baldas, "'Deeply Disturbing': Feds Charge Extremists in Domestic Terror Plot to Kidnap Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, Create Civil War," *Detroit Free Press*, October 8, 2020, https://www.freep.com/story/news/nation/2020/10/08/militia-members-charged-plot-against-michigan-gov-gretchen-whitmer/5923650002/.

G. THE ATOMWAFFEN DIVISION

1. Atomwaffen Division Ideology

AWD is a relatively small but violent neo-Nazi white supremacy group. by Its organizer, Brandon Russell, created the group in 2015.[432] AWD, like the Boogaloo Boys, is an accelerationist group and believes that the social discord they promote will reshape society into a white-dominant utopia.[433] In "The Growing Threat Posed by Accelerationism and Accelerationist Groups Worldwide," the authors argued that accelerationism is the violent and the most dangerous type of ideology among white supremacists. AWD members believe the race war is inevitable and appealing because it will be the vehicle to take down the current system of government.

AWD, like many other white supremacist groups, has molded its beliefs after James Mason's "The Siege," Renaud Camus's "The Great Replacement," and William Pierce's *The Turner Diaries*.[434] AWD desires to remove or terminate racial minorities, Jewish people, and race traitors, including those who marry interracially, academics, journalists, and politicians. Its members typically believe an act of mass violence, like a shooting or bombing, will ignite a race war. AWD thinks that a race war, triggered by violence, would theoretically make white people recognize their enemy, defined by minorities and alleged race traitors, and join the "resistance" of fellow whites.[435] AWD, like anarchists and Boogaloo Boys, follows a leaderless philosophy and encourages "lone wolf" attacks. Its members and other white supremacists use social media and encrypted chat groups to communicate, radicalize, and sometimes coordinate their white supremacy agendas.

Under President Obama, white supremacists believed the narrative in "The Siege" and *The Turner Diaries* was taking place.[436] Conspiracy theories among white

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[432] Jacob Ware, *Siege: The Atomwaffen Division and Rising Far-Right Terrorism in the United States* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2019), https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2019/07/ICCT-Ware-Siege-July2019.pdf.

[433] Gartenstein-Ross, Hodgson, and Clarke, "The Growing Threat Posed by Accelerationism."

[434] Gartenstein-Ross, Hodgson, and Clarke.

[435] Gartenstein-Ross, Hodgson, and Clarke.

[436] Ware, *Siege*.

supremacists think President Obama was Muslim and a foreigner, which goes against their fundamental beliefs of creating a white utopia. During President Obama's presidency, between 2012 and 2016, there was a 600% increase in white nationalist Twitter accounts.[437] The trend continued when President Trump took office, yet for different reasons. President Trump's comments about building a border wall, deporting immigrants, and putting travel bans on Muslim countries are all themes white nationalists use and move to endorse those views.[438]

2.   Atomwaffen Division Violence

Violence among right-wing groups and the alt-right increased substantially between 2007 and 2017. There has been an increase of 1,450% in violent attacks by the far-right, which includes AWD members.[439] AWD was at its peak between 2015 and 2017 and is responsible for a memorable and significant loss of life among ethnic minorities. White supremacists worldwide, including AWD, worshiped Dylan Roof for his 2015 attack. Roof killed nine people worshiping at the Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina.[440] Roof released a manifesto, now popular among white supremacists, demanding a race war. Roof further exclaimed that African Americans were raping "our women and are taking over our country."[441] Roof is memorialized among white supremacists through memes, quotes from his manifesto, images, and the style of attack he conducted.

In 2018, on Shabbat morning, a neo-Nazi, radicalized by AWD's messages and ideology, attacked the Tree of Life synagogue, a Jewish synagogue in Pittsburgh,

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[437] Janet Reitman, "All-American Nazis: Inside the Rise of Fascist Youth in the U.S.," *Rolling Stone*, May 2, 2018, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/all-american-nazis-628023/.

[438] Greg Sargent, "Trump's Hate and Lies Are Inciting Extremists. Just Ask the Analyst Who Warned Us," *Washington Post*, October 29, 2018, sec. Opinion, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2018/10/29/trumps-hate-and-lies-are-emboldening-extremists-just-ask-the-analyst-who-warned-us/.

[439] Ware, *Siege*, 4.

[440] Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, "A Most American Terrorist: The Making of Dylann Roof," *GQ*, August 21, 2017, https://www.gq.com/story/dylann-roof-making-of-an-american-terrorist.

[441] Ghansah, 1.

Pennsylvania.[442] The attacker shouted as he entered the place of worship, "All Jews must die," before killing 11 people.[443] A Portland, Oregon, man stabbed three people, killing two and severely wounding another, on public transit due to racist Islamophobia in 2017.[444] A more notable attack in 2017 was at the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. AWD members were present during the rally while a car killed a counter-protester by purposefully running over them.[445] White supremacists often reference the attack as an example that someone does not need to know how to shoot or make an explosive to kill people.

3.   Atomwaffen Division's Use of Social Media

In addition to Dylan Roof, Brenton Tarrant is another person worshiped by AWD. Tarrant killed 49 people at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand.[446] The shooter live-streamed the act and posted his 74-page manifesto on 8chan, a social media site known for hosting white supremacist memes and chat groups. He posted to other white supremacists that it was "time to stop shitposting and time to make a real-life effort."[447] The shooter also used memes in his manifesto that has been used, copied, and stylized by AWD members.

4.   Atomwaffen Division Demographics

AWD demographics are much like Boogaloo Boys' demographics. AWD does a large amount of recruitment in schools starting with middle school-age white males, but

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[442] Ware, *Siege*, 4.

[443] Ware, 4.

[444] "Jeremy Christian Convicted of Killing Men Who Intervened in His Hate Tirade on Portland Train," CBS News, February 22, 2020, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jeremy-christian-convicted-of-killing-men-who-intervened-in-his-hate-tirade-on-portland-train-2020-02-21/.

[445] Frank Straub et al., *Advancing Charlotte: A Police Foundation Assessment of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department Response to the September 2016 Demonstration* (Washington, DC: National Policing Institute, 2018), https://www.policinginstitute.org/publication/advancing-charlotte-a-police-foundation-assessment-of-the-charlotte-mecklenburg-police-department-response-to-the-september-2016-demonstrations/.

[446] Romano, "The Christchurch Shooter's Manifesto."

[447] Romano.

most of its recruitment is on college campuses.[448] iIts leadership has historically been white males in their twenties. AWD has ties, due to James Mason, to Satanism and other unusual beliefs, yet some white supremacists are Christian, depending on the group's geography and culture.[449] Members come from a wide variety of backgrounds and families.

H.   ATOMWAFFEN ANALYSIS

AWD, a white supremacist group, believes they are superior to other races. Its themes are similar to those of a typical white supremacist, yet they encourage and engage in more violence than most other white supremacist groups. Using the previous methods as a foundation will identify a counternarrative strategy.[450] Like previous case studies, the first step is determining the targeted **behavior.** AWD has strong negative feelings and violent intentions toward minorities, Jewish people, and "race traitors." Unlike white supremacists of the past, AWD trains with firearms and explosives and engages in any violent means necessary to carry out their beliefs.

The second part is determining if the attributed behavior is possible by AWD based on their **intention** as well as their **means or ability and opportunity.** Because AWD does not have a specific method of attack, identifying the means and opportunity is challenging. Still, AWD trains with weapons, and recent events confirm they are using more firearms to carry out attacks in the United States.[451] Those who cannot obtain firearms have other means to carry out attacks, such as explosives or vehicles, as seen in the Charlottesville, Virginia.[452]

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[448] "Atomwaffen Division / National Socialist Order / National Socialist Resistance Front," Counter Extremism Project, accessed September 5, 2022, https://www.counterextremism.com/supremacy/atomwaffen-division-national-socialist-order.

[449] Counter Extremism Project.

[450] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*.

[451] "Atomwaffen Division," Extremist Files, 2022, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/atomwaffen-division.

[452] Straub et al., *Advancing Charlotte*.

The third part is determining what **belief** to target. AWD members believe the government, police, and society will become like the society described in *The Turner Diaries* and "The Siege." AWD thinks that violence against minorities, Jewish people, and the government is inevitable and necessary to carry on the white race. The AWD **belief** to target is not necessarily their fundamental racist belief, although preferred, but the belief that violence is necessary to carry out their goals of a white utopia.

1. Reasoned Action Theory for Background Variables

Under background variables, **culture** is described as how someone was raised or the people who influenced them. **Culture** has many variables, yet AWD members may be raised around racist parents or in an environment that embraces racism. AWD members' **socioeconomic status** is working-class. However, white supremacists come from all types of backgrounds and means. **Knowledge** is described as having several negative interactions with minorities, Jewish people, or others who support diversity. **Religion** can play into a person's white supremacy beliefs, but not necessarily. **Personality** traits vary, yet most extremists tend to have strong opinions, are not afraid to act, and feel a need to belong to something special. For **demographics**, AWD members are comprised of younger white males in their teens or 20 with violent tendencies. In **messages encountered,** influence will likely come from online information about white supremacy and readings of "The Siege," *The Great Replacement*, and *The Turner Diaries*.

2. Reasoned Action Theory for Beliefs

After determining background variables, beliefs are next. **Behavioral beliefs** are identified as being AWD's individual views towards the behavior of violence toward minorities, Jewish people, etc. An AWD feels when they engage in violence against minorities, they are protecting their world from the outcomes described in *The Turner Diaries*," "The Siege," and *The Great Replacement*.[453] **Normative beliefs** are a member thinks others in their group view the behavior of carrying out violence against minorities. **Normative beliefs** directly relate to **perceived norms** or perceptions of expectations in

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[453] Ware, *Siege*.

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how the group acts. The **control beliefs** are a member's perception of the likelihood they will have the means or ability and opportunity to attack law enforcement. The AWD member's beliefs revolve around being willing and able to carry out an attack.

Behavioral beliefs lead to an **attitude toward a behavior**. A member of AWD's attitude toward the behavior of attacking a minority would be consistent with messages they learned on the website StormFront.com and the three previously mentioned works.[454] They believe society needs "cleansing" and can accelerate that cleansing with violence. AWD's **perceived norms** would mean that because others in their social circle have engaged in violence, they should too. **Perceived behavioral control** means a member of AWD will evaluate the actual power they have to attack a minority by identifying if they have the intention, the means or ability, and the opportunity to do so.

3. Reasoned Action Theory for Attitude, Perceptions, and Behavior

Attitude toward the behavior, perceived norms, and a perceived behavioral control all lead to AWD's **behavioral intention.** AWD's violent intentions are based on the attitude that they should attack minorities to promote a white utopia. AWD's members or peers are conducting more attacks than ever, and they have the means or ability, and opportunity to use their guns and make explosives. The **intention** and ability turn into the actual **behavior** of an attack against minorities, Jewish people, or those wanting diversity. See Figure 15.

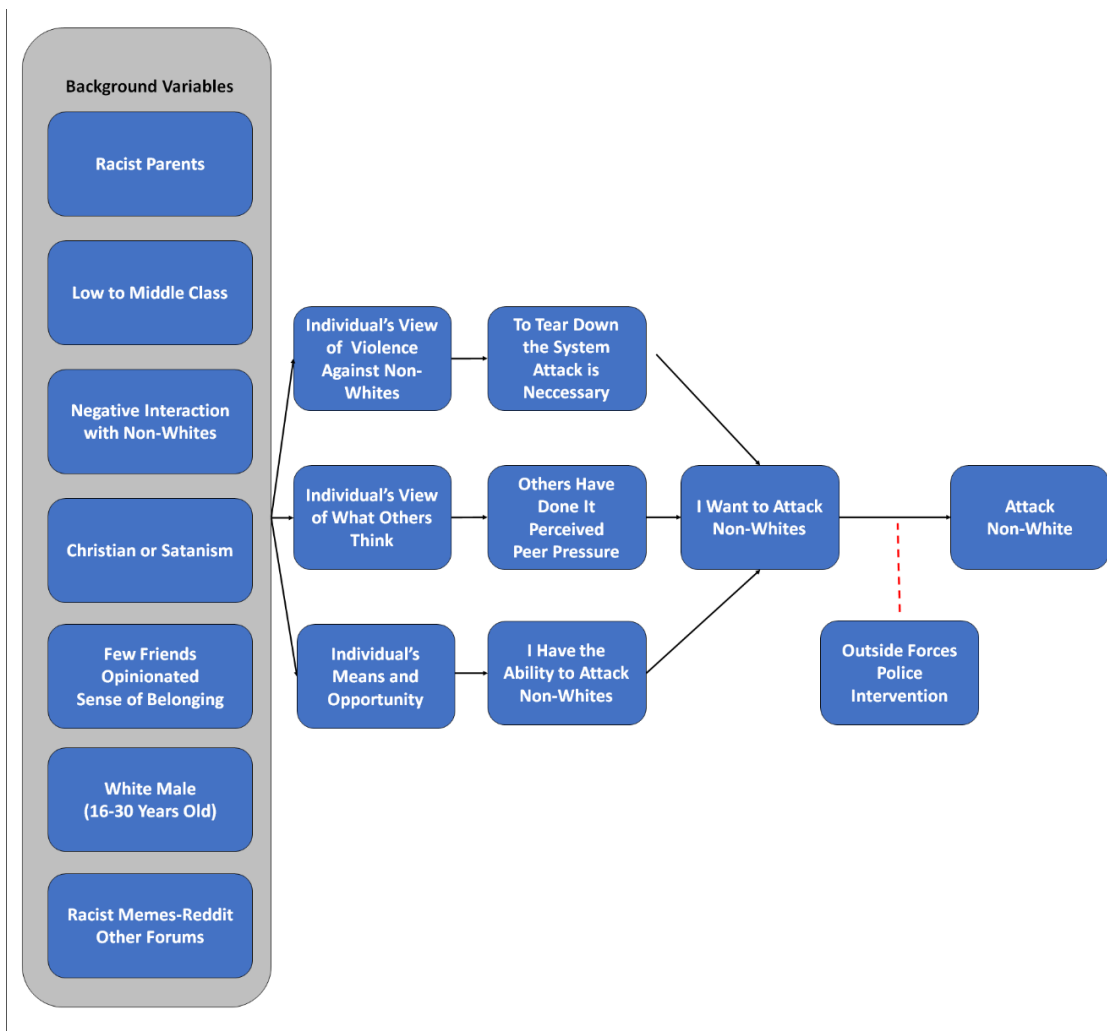454 "Extremism in the Classroom," Anti-Defamation League, July 20, 2022, https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/extremism-classroom.

Figure 15.   Diagram of Reasoned Action Theory

4.   Atomwaffens' Narrative

The Iron March forum is a known white supremacist online hangout.[455] Members of AWD post routinely about their beliefs. The following are two posts, one about the Orlando club shooting and the other a general post:

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[455] Counter Extremism Project, "Atomwaffen Division."

"I hate hearing about 'innocent people.' There are no innocent people in this disgusting modern world."– Brandon Russell, "49 F--- in Body Bags: Shooting in Orlando Gay Club," Iron March forum, June 14, 2016.

"Bulldozing bodies into mass graves is the obvious solution. But in all seriousness; what re-education doesn't fix, the sword will." – Brandon Russell, "What can be done about Degeneracy in the 21st century?" Iron March forum, June 14, 2016 [456]

AWD also posts violent images and propaganda, which demonstrate their beliefs and intentions. See Figure 16.

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[456] Southern Poverty Law Center, "Atomwaffen Division."

Figure 16.   Atomwaffen Messages[457]

5.   The Counternarrative

One of the problems with extremists is they are not easily dissuaded from their beliefs. A theme in AWD members' comments describe minorities as guilty because they are homosexual, Jewish faith people, minorities, or associated with them. In this case, the comments referenced all three possibilities, which is consistent with white supremacist ideology. The second post references "degeneracy," which means minorities in the white supremacist world, and something that *The Great Replacement, The Turner Diaries,* and "The Siege" reference.[458] To disrupt AWDs' narrative, practitioners need to break down

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[457] Source: Jakob Guhl and Jacob Davey, *A Safe Space to Hate: White Supremacist Mobilisation on Telegram* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020), https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/ 2020/06/A-Safe-Space-to-Hate2.pdf; Subcomandante X, "Atomwaffen Division Breaks Public Silence With New Recruitment Video, Propaganda," *American Odyssey* (blog), May 22, 2019, https://medium.com/americanodyssey/atomwaffen-division-breaks-public-silence-with-new-recruitment-video-propaganda-3596843f9da7.

[458] Ware, *Siege*.

binaries that appear in their ideology.[459] With AWD, the dualistic comparisons in their beliefs purposefully ignore information that would show their argument to be false. Counternarratives need to question the white supremacists' central comparison or binary: white people are superior to minorities, and white people are at a disadvantage now because of minorities. In the United States, AWD's violence is directed at African Americans and those of the Jewish faith. A counternarrative could show the common struggles of white and black people in the middle class. The common struggles argument would diminish the white vs. black image of showing that the enemy, African Americans, are not as different in their life struggles as white people. The most hardened members do not likely to accept this argument, and it has to be disseminated carefully. Too much of a comparison would likely cause the opposite effect, yet incorporating multiple races, not just whites and African Americans and highlighting the similar struggles of all races is one example. Again, like other strategies, personalizing and humanizing personal struggles creates a universal humanistic bond that most people can identify with.

I.   DISSEMINATION COUNTERNARRATIVES

The previous chapter discussed the general dissemination of counternarratives. Yet, there are specific considerations for each type of dissemination within DVE groups based on who they are, how they communicate, and what they are willing to accept. Anarchists, being anti-authority and anti-government, immediately discount any messaging from law enforcement or the government. They do not communicate details online unless on encrypted applications or private channels. However, anarchists will use mainstream social media to coordinate more significant events that may allude to violence, such as Twitter or Instagram-promoted events.

Proud Boys' beliefs toward the government are challenging. They believe in a right-wing-led government and have historically been pro-law enforcement. Government messaging would be possible, depending on the media outlet and who the individual, groups, or company would relay the counternarrative. Transparency via a right-wing-led

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[459] Braddock, *Weaponized Words*.

messaging outlet would likely promote the message further. They will use mainstream social media to coordinate more significant events that may allude to violence, such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram-promoted events. Yet, like anarchists, Proud Boys have also moved to encrypted applications and messaging services, making counternarratives on those platforms unrealistic.

Being anti-authority and anti-government, the Boogaloo Boys will immediately discount messages from law enforcement or the government. They will use mainstream social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, to espouse violence. Their coordination, chats, and smaller group activities are carried out through private channels, Discord, 4Chan, Reddit, or encrypted applications like Signal.

AWD communicates to their followers on their website, Iron March. Like the Boogaloo Boys, AWD and other white supremacists are on Discord, 4Chan, Reddit, and other fringe sites.[460] They talk in chat rooms, where only those invited can participate. The coordination and smaller group activities are done through encrypted applications like Signal or Telegram.[461] Dissemination cannot be done through law enforcement or government entities through public channels.

As previously discussed, law enforcement and the government need to create relationships with private companies, community members, and others who are likely to be credible sources that anti-government groups will consider listening to. Dissemination of counternarratives will likely have to be propagated by social bots, using social media company partnerships. Law enforcement may utilize confidential human sources or informants) and undercover officers to promote anti-violent messaging internally. Those tactics should be part of confidential source training and undercover training. The virality of the message and methods introduced by *Inside the Nudge Unit* is imperative for successful counternarratives. Virality factors include the usefulness of the content, emotional connection, and sharing ability. Nudge strategies include making the counternarrative easy, attractive, social, and timely. The strategy behind strategic

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[460] Counter Extremism Project, "Atomwaffen Division."

[461] Williams et al., *The Online Extremist Ecosystem*.

communication is a long-term or ongoing messaging strategy. Inoculation theory plays a vital role in ongoing messaging. The tactical element of disseminating counternarratives are who the messages are going to, as well as who and how the messages are distributed.

Although not previously discussed in this thesis, S. Shyam Sundar's modality, agency, interactivity, and navigability model provides research that showed that these four areas impact dissemination acceptance through digital media influences.[462] Using the research based on Sundar, others have explored the use of counternarrative dissemination. In "Cultivating Trust and Perceptions of Source Credibility in Online Counternarratives Intended to Reduce Support for Terrorism," the authors looked at what factors will affect the acceptance of counternarratives.[463] The research showed that psychological effects related to heuristics could be used to increase the acceptance of messages on social media platforms like Telegram, Signal, and WhatsApp. A person's engagement and interaction with the counternarrative increased the acceptance of the influence. The authors also argued that partnerships with web designers, software developers, and app developers are essential if the government is to develop counternarratives with user engagement, attractive programming, and compelling stories. The last point made by the authors was that trusted community partners and businesses needed to disseminate the counternarratives.

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[462] S. Shyam Sundar, "The MAIN Model: A Heuristic Approach to Understanding Technology Effects on Credibility," in *Digital Media, Youth, and Credibility*, ed. Miriam J. Metzger and Andrew J. Flanagin (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 73–100, https://betterlegalinfo.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Sundar-paper.pdf.

[463] Braddock and Morrison, "Cultivating Trust and Perceptions."

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VII. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

> The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate.[464]
>
> —Martin Luther King Jr.

A. OVERVIEW

This thesis set out to investigate how strategic communications can be incorporated into countering DVE in the United States. This chapter presents recommendations for using strategic communication, how to address future challenges, and how the government and law enforcement can implement the ideas offered in this thesis. The chapter recommends policy changes for the use of strategic communication for law enforcement and discusses the type of team to best implement it.

Chapter I begins with outlining the problem of DVEs in the United States and how their violence is problematic. The research question for the thesis is introduced; How can strategic communications be incorporated into countering DVEs in the United States? A short literature review regarding the research and theories that make up the thesis and how they are related are discussed. Finally, the research designed is outlined.

Chapter II discusses how radicalization toward extremism manifests in various forms and how strategic communication can help. The chapter explores narratives, how they work, their persuasiveness, and how emotions play a role in influence. Narratives play an essential role in understanding the themes of extremists' messages and goals. Only after understanding and identifying the extremists' themes will practitioners be able to create effective counternarratives.

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[464] Matthew Henson, "Struggle for Equality: Quotes from Martin Luther King, Jr.," Scholastic Newstime, March 7, 2010, https://web.archive.org/web/20100307174816/http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=4812.

Chapter III explored how extremists still use propaganda to promote their ideology, messages, and narratives. Propaganda can be in many forms, and analyzing extremists' images depicting violent memes and language will help practitioners identify themes to counter their messages. Inoculation is a proactive way to decrease radicalization and create resistance to extremism in the United States. Inoculation should be done as early as possible and ideally started in schools and youth programs across the country. Inoculation strategies are not done with one event but with a series of products, creating an environment for influence to get the best results. Inoculation provides an extra layer of strategic communication that should be an ongoing process. The chapter explores Nudge theory and the strategies of *Inside the Nudge Unit*. Nudge theory provides an ethical framework for conducting communication strategies in the United States with libertarian paternalism as a guide. *Inside the Nudge Unit* offers practical approaches to help people better their lives and in turn can be used to decrease violence based on DVEs' motivations. Incorporating nudge theory into strategic communication is one of the recommendations and in this thesis.

Chapter IV explores how DVEs use social media to promote their ideology, what they think of the media, and how AI can be used to counter online extremism. The chapter looks at how right- and left-wing extremists use social media, their preferred platforms, and the types of communication and propaganda they produce. Examples and studies detail how right-wing groups, especially white supremacists, perceive news media and adapt because of those beliefs. Extremists' use of social media is backed by statistical data and research.

Chapter V looked at several social psychological approaches. The chapter delves into how emotional messages can influence people and cause reactions. The chapter evaluates theory of reasoned action, theory of planned behavior, and behavior prediction models, which led reasoned action theory as a template for determining how background information, beliefs, and intentions form specific behaviors people carry out. After implementing reasoned action theory, the chapter looked at how to analyze extremists' narratives and construct counternarratives using a scientific and systematic method. Last, the chapter looked at some overall strategies to disseminate strategic communications.

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Chapter VI reviews four case studies using DVE group examples from anarchists, Proud Boys, Boogaloo Boys, and AWD. Each case study examines at the group's ideology, violence, social media, and demographics to better understand the themes of the group messaging. The case studies provide examples of the behavior or violent act practitioners want to change and the belief behind the behavior. Next, using the reasoned action theory model and knowledge of the group and theme, the case study provides an example of how to craft a counternarrative. Each case study concludes with specific examples of how best to disseminate strategic communications.

B.   RECOMMENDATIONS

1.   Government Implementation of Strategic Communications

This thesis was written to help explore and develop a pathway for law enforcement agencies and government entities to have a specific strategy and method for developing counternarratives. The intent of this thesis was to see how strategic communication can help disrupt and decrease violence based on DVE ideology and intentions. Strategic communications by government agencies and law enforcement have potential risks, especially if they stray from the parameters that ignore choice architecture and protection of First Amendment rights. Attacking and discrediting someone's beliefs outside of violence should be avoided, thus not interfering with First Amendment rights and Americans' protected rights to believe what and how they want, so long as it does not harm others. Strategic communication should be implemented in a way that will foster acceptance of the influential messages; failure to use trusted sources for dissemination of messages can cause the opposite intended affect.

Instead of constantly reacting to violent events, law enforcement must shift toward preventative measures and strategies, which have close ties to threat assessment strategies. Threat assessments occur when an individual makes a threat or is reported to intend to carry out an attack. In a threat assessment team environment, a multidisciplinary team comes together to develop strategies to intervene before the person carries out violence. The goal of threat assessment teams is to stop attacks before they occur. These methods can help build counternarratives and interventions with DVE groups and individuals.

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2. Government Investment in Inoculation Strategies

Inoculation strategies, shown to be effective in Finland and other countries, can cultivate resistance to extremist content, messaging, and radicalization; the United States must catch up in the fight against extremism. This thesis has briefly described some of the strategies from inoculation that translate to counternarratives. However, ongoing inoculation works best when it is introduced in the formative years of an individual's life. In the United States, inoculation methods to fight violent extremism to be part of the educational system to help shape healthy beliefs and a culture that rejects violence. Governments need to be transparent about inoculation approaches, educating the public on its benefits and how it is taught. European countries such as Finland have succeeded in providing inoculation messages regarding disinformation strategies in schools. The United States should begin supporting and funding educational strategies, curriculum, media outreach, and online messaging to fight violent rhetoric using inoculation strategies.

Strategic communication requires approaches based on behavioral sciences and sociology concepts that have been tested and evaluated over time. This thesis explores previous studies that are data-driven and scientifically produced, using recognized procedures to support inoculation methods. More studies are needed in the area of countering DVEs with influence campaigns. If inoculation is to be used by the government, scientific methods are required, and careful planning is critical. Federal, state, and local governments need to invest in inoculation, nudge theory, and studies in counternarratives.

3. Government Investment in Nudge Strategies

Behavioral science strategies have been part of the planning and strategy of the United States, yet specific methods in their use against extremism still seem to be lacking. Nudge theory introduces a partial ethical framework of libertarian paternalism to influence a change in negative behaviors. Libertarian paternalism provides Americans with a choice and attempts to achieve goals to change negative behavior. This thesis discusses nudge theory strategies to help guide practitioners using strategic communication to change violent behavior. The government must start researching, implementing, and working toward evolving behavioral science strategies like nudge theory to address extremism. The

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BIT from *Inside the Nudge Unit* provides the government with valuable strategies to help create messages to which extremists are receptive. The government needs to invest in the research and development of BIT strategies to counter extremism. The government needs to partner with universities, research centers, and think tanks to help create tactics using strategic communication that will influence extremists to change their violent behavior.

4.   Government Investment and Use of Artificial Intelligence

Federal, state, and local governments must invest more into the study and development of AI to counter violent extremism. In addition to assisting in the fight against DVE using social media, AI will also contribute to other aspects of homeland security in cyberspace. This thesis has shown some examples of how Google, Facebook, and YouTube have used AI to recognize and block certain extremist content or language, yet there need to be more strategic methods. There are some concerns that blocking content may inhibit intelligence gathering by security forces and force extremists to move deeper into unknown or encrypted applications.[465] Inoculation, nudge theory, and counter-messaging strategies can be used to influence extremists away from violence instead of pushing them into more subversive methods of communication.

The University of Queensland's study and RAND suggest that using AI in the form of social bots can be effectively used in strategic communications to counter online extremism on multiple platforms. Additional research must continue to develop and increase sophistication in social bot use. Government research, ongoing evaluation, and adjustments are required for the fast-evolving technological capabilities. The United States must be a leader, influencer, and supporter of AI development and implementation in counter-extremism.

5.   Special Strategic Communication Teams or Units

Many law enforcement agencies specialize in extremism and already have employees or positions that conduct threat assessments. These are also known as intelligence and analysis teams, behavioral health units, and threat assessment teams. In these teams, investigators and

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[465] Rachel Briggs and Sebastien Feve, "Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism," Public Safety Canada, December 21, 2018, https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntnl-scrt/cntr-trrrsm/r-nd-flght-182/knshk/ctlg/dtls-en.aspx?i=127.

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analysts work together to address individuals who espouse violence, intervening before violence occurs. Many teams work with mental health units, schools, the Department of Human Services, probation, the prosecutor's office, and many others in a multidisciplinary approach to decrease the chances of someone committing violence. This thesis recommends using these investigators and analysts in conjunction with those who study DVEs or work on a JTTF to develop specific counternarratives for those espousing violence. Because professionals on these teams already have tools and guidance on how to implement preventative measures in potentially violent individuals, the transition to educating and implementing the use of strategic communication would be seamless.

In the federal government, already established teams, like the FBI, JTTF, and other counter-terrorism units that specialize in both international terrorism and domestic terrorism could begin to implement strategic communication strategies in their units. JTTF investigators can utilize undercover agents, online agents, informants, and social bots to disseminate counternarratives. The task force environment, along with the members' training and experience in threat assessment and proactive measures, would make this implementation of strategic communication straightforward. Those who already work in domestic extremism are already ideally placed with the appropriate training and experience to learn how to create counternarratives, create community and business partnerships, and disseminate messaging appropriately.

6. Building Credible Messengers and Support

Governments need to be cautious when disseminating counternarratives or other strategic communications, due to many extremists' psychological reactance to government messaging. Evidence shows that the government may need to play an indirect role if it is unable to apply subversive methods of strategic communications. Prior attempts from the government to divert extremists have failed due to poorly executed or misunderstood strategies or direction. As the case studies demonstrate, most DVE groups will not accept messaging from known government entities, thus making the task of dissemination more difficult. Partnering with groups or companies outside of the government is crucial for successful dissemination of strategic messages.

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In addition to having multi-pronged approaches for dissemination tools like online strategies, informants, and undercover professionals, governments must build partnerships with private companies who can act as messengers and promoters of strategic communication. Such partnerships would include concentrating on technical communication strategies, product development, and accurate ways of dissemination?. These partnerships will be able to incorporate the thinking and perspectives of non–law enforcement professionals, increasing the ingenuity of digital knowledge of the younger generation. The government also needs to use the expertise of former extremists, community activists who believe in non-violence, and community partners to help understand the themes and messages of extremists. Having a multi-pronged approach to dissemination is critical in the distribution and acceptance of strategic communications.

The government and law enforcement need to fund and support the development and training of strategic communications with partner law enforcement agencies and private companies. Governments must create a centralized system and methods, some of which have been presented in this thesis, to guide online technologies and social media platforms usage of strategic communications. Governments should prioritize the dissemination of counternarratives and be cautious about creating new web platforms for collecting and storing information, thus obeying current laws and constitutional protections of citizens. The government should identify violent language, address it with strategic communication strategies, and disseminate the developed message. A partnership with web designers, software developers, and app developers is essential if the government is to create sites that utilize psychological approaches that use heuristics, user engagement, attractive programming, and compelling narratives that influence DVEs.

7. Government Involvement in Future Research and Investment into Data and Analysis

Government resources, research, and investments could significantly contribute to understanding extremism, its themes, and how to counter violent rhetoric. Future research and scientific data need to be developed, explored, and modified as the extremist threat evolves. New and innovative methodologies need to be based on systematic and standardized practices, which help measure the success and failures of strategic communications. In partnership with

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private entities and companies, government leadership can help develop future strategies, tools, and dissemination methods.

Detailed data analysis is required to effectively counter violence and violent rhetoric. Working with partners, governments need to use data analysis, psychology, and sociology to identify themes of extremists. There needs to be long-term research and analysis of extremist content, especially online, to develop the most effective ways to create counter messages. To increase research, analysis, and development of strategic communications, the government needs to be mindful of the ethical repercussions of monitoring and collecting data on Americans. The retention and analysis of online and open-source information need to follow current laws and regulations and work toward building trust between Americans and the government.

8.   Government Policies for Strategic Communication

To counter extremism. systematic and standardized practices and policy need to guide strategic communication. The recommended course of action is establishing policy and strategies to implement strategic communication to counter DVEs' violence. Strategic communications can be accomplished through government support, research, intelligence, and partnerships with a commitment to strategic communication concepts. Together with behavioral scientists, special strategic communication units, public partners, credible messengers, and cyber, these partnerships will work to establish a modus operandi and policies, integrating strategic communication to counter DVE.

As previously stated, these strategic communication strategies aim to disrupt criminal activity, not infringe on First Amendment rights or alter citizens' rights to believe what they want. The objectives are not to discredit individuals or groups but to shift their focus and goals away from violence. Forward-thinking strategies and policies need to be established to create an environment where strategic communications are the norm, not the exception. Therefore, inoculation strategies, government nudges, and counternarratives need to become part of the U.S. government's mission to increase positive perspectives and decrease DVE violence.

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