

3-9-2022

Fighting the Hydra: Combatting Vulnerabilities in Online Leaderless Resistance Networks

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Recommended Citation

Malone, Iris; Blasco, Lauren; Robinson, Kaitlyn; and National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center, "Fighting the Hydra: Combatting Vulnerabilities in Online Leaderless Resistance Networks" (2022). *Reports, Projects, and Research*. 24.
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Fighting the Hydra

Combatting Vulnerabilities in Online Leaderless Resistance Networks

**THE GEORGE
WASHINGTON
UNIVERSITY**

WASHINGTON, DC



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NCITE NATIONAL COUNTERTERRORISM,
INNOVATION, TECHNOLOGY,
AND EDUCATION CENTER

A U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY CENTER OF EXCELLENCE



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Suggested Citation: Malone, Iris, Lauren Blasco, and Kaitlyn Robinson. “Fighting the Hydra: Combatting Vulnerabilities in Leaderless Resistance Networks.” 2022. NCITE: Omaha, NE (March).

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About NCITE: The National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education (NCITE) Center was established in 2020 as the Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence for counterterrorism and terrorism prevention research. Sponsored by the DHS Science and Technology Office of University Programs, NCITE is the trusted DHS academic consortium of over 60 researchers across 18 universities and non-government organizations. Headquartered at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, NCITE seeks to be the leading U.S. academic partner for counterterrorism research, technology, and workforce development.

Acknowledgement: This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security under Grant Award Number 20STTPC00001-02. Iris Malone, Principal Investigator, was the primary author of this analysis. Significant contributions from NCITE Ph.D. Candidate Kaitlyn Robinson and M.A. Candidate Lauren Blasco contributed to this report’s production. All errors in reporting are those of the authors.

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Executive Summary

Why do contemporary Racially-Motivated Violent Extremist (RMVE) movements champion “leaderless resistance,” and how can practitioners combat this organizational strategy? To answer this question, we draw on insights from military planning to identify why this online network structure provides the RMVE community its primary source of power, or “center of gravity.” We then use this information to deconstruct the movement’s operational activities including its critical capabilities and critical requirements to perpetrate these actions. Based on these requirements, we identify key vulnerabilities to undercut the movement’s resilience and growth.

Leaderless resistance is an organizational strategy “that allows for and encourages individuals or small cells to engage in acts of political violence entirely independent of any hierarchy of leadership or network of support.” Fueled by a growing virtual reach, leaderless movements and groups based in the United States have flourished in the last decade. These entities can largely be divided into two categories: those that deliberately adopted a leaderless structure for its strategic benefits (e.g., Atomwaffen, the Base), and those that are organically leaderless due to the highly fluid nature of their network of followers (e.g., Boogaloo Bois, Groypers).

The online RMVE leaderless resistance network relies on three critical requirements to achieve their desired end goals: (1) common doctrine, (2) shared narrative, and (3) dense communication networks. Online communication networks, in particular, are critical to spread information, share key doctrinal concepts through common texts, mobilize followers, and radicalize individuals to take actions.

Given these requirements, we identify at least three vulnerabilities in these network structures:

1. Poor organizational cohesion and control,
2. Limited visibility of ideological narratives/influencers, and
3. Barriers to communication and coordination.

These challenges can undercut the perceived legitimacy, momentum, and growth of the movement. To exploit these vulnerabilities, we assess the effectiveness of several previously tested policy interventions including:

- *Law Enforcement-Based Interventions*: Proscription, Arrests, and Litigation
- *Community-Based Interventions*: Inoculation Theory, Counter-Messaging, Disengagement, De-Radicalization
- *Industry-Based Interventions*: De-platforming, Content Moderation, Redirect, and Hash-Sharing Directories

We assess that community-based and industry-based interventions are more likely to succeed than law enforcement-based interventions because the profound distrust of government in these communities limits the potential effectiveness of government-backed interventions and also creates a high potential for unanticipated, counterproductive effects.



1 Introduction

A defining feature of contemporary Racially-Motivated Violent Extremist (RMVE) movements inside the United States is the promotion of “leaderless resistance.” This strategy encourages individuals or local cells to carry out independent acts of violence without direct orders from a leader. Leaderless violence can be highly unpredictable, creating a significant challenge for law enforcement. RMVE rhetoric can incite violence with relatively little warning, and indirect and loose connections between members can make it hard to identify broader conspiracies or foil plots before they happen. Decentralized networks allow for high levels of plausible deniability, stealth, and secrecy. The end result is an “intelligence nightmare” that imbues these network structures with high resilience to state action.¹ Given these problems, how can practitioners effectively combat leaderless resistance networks?²

This report outlines a multi-layered systems approach to combating the threat of leaderless resistance within online racially-motivated leaderless resistance structures. This involves exploring the role of contemporary leaderless resistance movements inside the United States and identifying the critical requirements, strengths, and vulnerabilities these movements depend on to function. We then propose how to exploit these vulnerabilities by drawing lessons from different community, industry, and government experiences (e.g., historical FBI actions, Moonshot, Jigsaw, and EXIT-USA) that can be applied to leaderless resistance structures.

As a scope condition, this report principally focuses on how far-right RMVE movements inside the United States use “leaderless resistance” structures to achieve their political ends. We focus on far-right RMVEs given their recognized threat to U.S. national security, although far-left or nonviolent political organizations also frequently adopt leaderless resistance struggles (e.g. Occupy Wall Street, Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement).³ Racially-motivated militants principally include white nationalists (e.g., Atomwaffen Division, Patriot Front) who fight for a wide-ranging set of racially-motivated ends instead of anti-government extremists (e.g. Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, Patriot Militia Movement).⁴

2 What is Leaderless Resistance?

Leaderless resistance is an organizational strategy “that allows for and encourages individuals or small cells to engage in acts of political violence entirely independent of any hierarchy of leadership or network of support.”⁵ Groups or movements practicing leaderless resistance eschew vertical command structures and instead adopt loose, horizontal relations. Local cells and individual members act independently without direct instruction or coordination from a central authority.

¹ Louis Beam. “Leaderless Resistance.” *The Seditiousist* #12. 1992. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jeffrey-Kaplan/publication/233097025_'Leaderless_resistance'/links/549db77a0cf2d6581ab640a9/Leaderless-resistance.pdf

² Daniel Byman. “Can Lone Wolves Be Stopped?” Brookings Institution. March 15, 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/03/15/can-lone-wolves-be-stopped/>

³ For more on nonviolent leaderless resistance structures, see Erica Chenoweth. “The Future of Nonviolent Resistance”. *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (July 2020): 69-84.

⁴ We focus on RMVEs rather than anti-government extremists since the latter conforms to more standard hierarchical organizational structures.

⁵ Paul Joosse. “Leaderless Resistance and Ideological Inclusion: The Case of the Earth Liberation Front.” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19 (2007): 351.



The term leaderless resistance goes by several other names. Insurgency scholars describe this decentralized structure as “netwar” or “networked insurgency.”⁶ Terrorism scholars sometimes describe the individual perpetrators behind violence as “lone wolves” or “stochastic terrorists.”⁷ Social media sites like Facebook and Instagram call these resistance structures “militarized social movements.”⁸

A defining characteristic in a leaderless resistance network is the presence of a centralized doctrine but decentralized set of conduct. Followers adhere to a common set of ideological principles, which motivate their struggle and can legitimize the use of violent tactics to achieve these goals.⁹ Followers may carry out attacks using similar tactics (e.g., mass shootings) or cite similar grievances to motivate this violence (e.g., white genocide theory). They may communicate or coordinate with other cells through a web of dispersed and interconnected nodes, though they operate autonomously without central direction. This is distinct from a “hub and spoke” organizational structure where a central “hub” provides instruction and facilitates communication between independent cells.

Leaders can still be important actors in groups or movements with leaderless structures, providing generalized inspiration and ideological guidance. However, these leaders do not directly oversee the operations of cells or individual members.¹⁰

Groups and movements may adopt a leaderless structure for its tactical and strategic benefits. Leaderless resistance purposely dismantles traditional organizational structures to improve the movement’s odds of survival. The absence of traditional hierarchical command and control structures renders it more difficult for authorities to detect, infiltrate, and dismantle a movement. Since autonomous members do not depend on a central figure to function, the arrest of a major leader does not hamper an individual member’s ability to carry out attacks. Members choose their own targets and tactics and do not need a defined piece of territory to stage attacks.

3 Strategic Goals of Racially-Motivated Violent Extremists (RMVE)

What do RMVE movements want? Although RMVEs inside the United States broadly aim to promote white power, there is significant disagreement among extremists about what exactly that entails. Recognizing RMVE objectives is critical to understanding extremists’ strategic orientation and why they rely on leaderless resistance structures to achieve it. This section outlines three different strategic goals of

⁶ See, for example, David Ronfeldt, John Arquilla, Graham Fuller, and Melissa Fuller. *The Zapatista "Social Netwar" in Mexico*. Rand Corporation, 1999; Bruce Hoffman. *Insurgency and counterinsurgency in Iraq*. Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, National Security Research Division, 2004; and Steven Metz. "The Internet, new media, and the evolution of insurgency." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 42, no. 3 (2012): 9.

⁷ Ramon Spaaij. "The enigma of lone wolf terrorism: An assessment." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 9 (2010): 854-870; Phillips, Peter J. "Lone wolf terrorism." *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy* 17, no. 1 (2011); Daniel Byman. "Can Lone Wolves Be Stopped?" Brookings Institution. March 15, 2017.

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/03/15/can-lone-wolves-be-stopped/>; Joshua Clover. "Four notes on Stochastic Terrorism." *Popula*. April 3, 2019. <https://popula.com/2019/04/03/four-notes-on-stochastic-terrorism/>; Molly Amman, and J. Reid Meloy. "Stochastic Terrorism." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 5 (2021): 2-13

⁸ "An Update to How We Address Movements and Organizations Tied to Violence." Facebook. Nov. 9, 2021. <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/08/addressing-movements-and-organizations-tied-to-violence/>

⁹ Simon Garfinkel. "Leaderless resistance today." *First Monday* 8, no. 3 (2003).

<https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/download/1040/961#7a>; Matthew Sweeney. "Leaderless Resistance and the Truly Leaderless: A Case Study Test of the Literature-Based Findings." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42, no. 7 (2019): 617-635.

¹⁰ Phillip W. Gray. "Leaderless Resistance, Networked Organization, and Ideological Hegemony." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25, no. 5 (2013): 657-660.



the RMVE movement centered around (1) accelerationism, (2) nativism and identitarianism, and (3) neo-redemptionism. Section 4 follows with a discussion about how RMVE followers have adopted and refined a strategy of leaderless resistance to achieve these goals.

Accelerationism

At the most extreme are an increasingly growing number of “accelerationist” RMVEs who aim to establish a white ethno-state through an impending race war.¹¹ The website Iron March initially facilitated the spread of “accelerationism,” a philosophy inspired by the ideas of U.S. neo-Nazi James Mason that seeks to violently overthrow the liberal democracy.¹² These followers espouse an eschatological belief that a large-scale apocalyptic race war is imminent and that it is imperative to take action now to prepare for this battle. Members take inspiration from the novel *The Turner Diaries* in which a white supremacist revolution starts with a “Day of the Rope,” or large-scale number of mass lynchings carried out by right wing death squads.¹³ Examples of prominent accelerationists in the United States include the Atomwaffen Division and the Base, both of which were designated terrorist organizations by the Government of Canada in February 2021.¹⁴

Nativism and Identitarianism

Another subset of RMVEs champion anti-immigration and nativist policies. These individuals stem from the “paleoconservatism” movement, which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a backlash to liberal idealism. It rejected socio-economic welfare policies and promoted traditional values. In the 1990s, Peter Brimelow expanded on these ideas in his book *Alien Nation*, which argued America was – and should remain – a principally white nation.¹⁵ Brimelow later went on to found one of the earliest far-right websites known as VDARE in reference to Virginia Dare, the first white colonist born in America.¹⁶ In 2009, Richard Spencer created National Policy Institute, a far-right think tank, and launched a blog that would solidify key tenets of nativist ideology.

Spencer would go on to popularize the term “alt-right” to describe a set of white nationalist beliefs that centered on the preservation of “Western Civilization.” Broadly, the alt-right believes that “‘white identity’ is under attack by multicultural forces using ‘political correctness’ and ‘social justice’ to

¹¹ “White Supremacists Embrace “Race War”.” Anti-Defamation League. Jan. 8, 2020.

<https://www.adl.org/blog/white-supremacists-embrace-race-war>

¹² Jason Wilson. “Leak from neo-Nazi site could identify hundreds of extremists worldwide.” *The Guardian*.

November 7, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/nov/07/neo-nazi-site-iron-march-materials-leak>

¹³ Alex Goldenberg and Joel Finkelstein. “CYBER SWARMING, MEMETIC WARFARE AND VIRAL INSURGENCY: How Domestic Militants Organize on Memes to Incite Violent Insurrection and Terror Against Government and Law Enforcement.” Network Contagion Research Institute. 2020.

<https://networkcontagion.us/reports/cyber-swarming-memetic-warfare-and-viral-insurgency-how-domestic-militants-organize-on-memes-to-ignite-violent-insurrection-and-terror-against-government-and-law-enforcement/>

¹⁴ Cassie Miller. “There is No Political Solution: Accelerationism in the White Power Movement.” Southern Poverty Law Center. June 23, 2020. <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/06/23/there-no-political-solution-accelerationism-white-power-movement>. “Government of Canada lists 13 new groups as terrorist entities and completes review of seven others.” Government of Canada. February 3, 2021. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-safety-canada/news/2021/02/government-of-canada-lists-13-new-groups-as-terrorist-entities-and-completes-review-of-seven-others.html>

¹⁵ “Paleoconservatives decry immigration.” Southern Poverty Law Center. 2003. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2003/paleoconservatives-decry-immigration>

¹⁶ “Peter Brimelow.” Extremist Files. Southern Poverty Law Center. N.d. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/peter-brimelow>



undermine white people and ‘their’ civilization.”¹⁷ Alt-right followers separate themselves from mainstream conservatives, whom they see as too moderate and unwilling to protect the interests of white people.¹⁸ A less extreme version of the alt-right, often termed “alt-lite,” rejects the overt white supremacy and racism of the alt-right but embraces its misogyny and xenophobia.¹⁹

In Europe, the “Identitarian” movement makes similar nativist calls to ban immigration and use force, if necessary, to protect white populations. This movement takes its inspiration from Renaud Camus’ 2012 conspiratorial “Great Replacement Theory,” which suggested immigrants from North Africa would slowly replace the Caucasian population.²⁰ Brendon Tarrant’s 2019 attack against a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand referenced the “Great Replacement” theory as justification for his attack.²¹

Neo-Redemptionism

A third segment of RMVEs can be classified as neo-redemptionist, meaning they aim to reassert white control over politics. In practice, it entails the dismantling of existing civil rights protections and reversal of other policies to restore white dominance in politics.²² During the Reconstruction Era after the American Civil War, “Redeemers” counter-mobilized against Radical Republicans to push for a policy of “redemption” and the return of white supremacist policies.²³ Today, neo-redemptionists lobby for reversing affirmative action policies, voting protections, the teaching of “critical race theory” and other racially-charged positions. Anders Breivik’s manifesto justified his 2011 attack in Norway, which killed 77 people, through appeal to this grievance. He decried a political environment full of “anti-racist witch hunts” and the “ridiculous pursuit of equality” in legitimating his use of violence.²⁴

Together, accelerationism, nativism, and neo-redemptionism form a triumvirate of different strategic goals for the RMVE movement. Collectively, these desired end states coalesce into a broad effort to champion policies, politics, and politicians that support their ambitious desires to create a white ethno-state.

¹⁷ “Alt-Right.” Southern Poverty Law Center. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/alt-right>

¹⁸ “Alt Right: A Primer on the New White Supremacy.” Anti-Defamation League. <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/alt-right-a-primer-on-the-new-white-supremacy>

¹⁹ “From Alt Right to Alt Lite: Naming the Hate.” Anti-Defamation League. <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/from-alt-right-to-alt-lite-naming-the-hate>

²⁰ Norimitsu Onishi. “The Man Behind a Toxic Slogan Promoting White Supremacy.” New York Times. 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/20/world/europe/renaud-camus-great-replacement.html>

²¹ Sasha Polakow-Suransky. “The Inspiration for Terrorism in New Zealand came from France.” Foreign Policy. March 16, 2019. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/16/the-inspiration-for-terrorism-in-new-zealand-came-from-france-christchurch-brenton-tarrant-renaud-camus-jean-raspail-identitarians-white-nationalism/>

²² Ibram Kendi. “The Mantra of White Supremacy.” The Atlantic. November 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/11/white-supremacy-mantra-anti-racism/620832/>

²³ “Reconstruction vs Redemption.” National Endowment for the Humanities. N.d. <https://www.neh.gov/news/reconstruction-vs-redemption>

²⁴ Ibram Kendi. “The Mantra of White Supremacy.” The Atlantic. November 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/11/white-supremacy-mantra-anti-racism/620832/>



4 Historical Development of Leaderless Resistance Structures

While the term “leaderless resistance” is traditionally attributed to a 1992 pamphlet by white supremacist Louis Beam, it is, in fact, a much older phenomenon.²⁵ This section describes how the leaderless strategy employed by RMVEs in the United States emerged and developed into the online threat it poses today.

To preview, the growth of online leaderless resistance networks stem from the RMVE’s early adoption in the 1980s and 1990s of personal computers and the Internet to spread white supremacist ideas and literature. In the 2000s and 2010s, RMVEs employed new forms of social media – both mainstream social media and websites created specifically for white supremacists – to attract new followers and develop common ideologies and goals through virtual interactions (e.g., the sharing of memes). This new online environment facilitated the formation of far-right RMVE movements with decentralized organizational structures and fluid memberships. In this digital age, two primary forms of leaderless RMVEs emerged, differentiated by either their deliberate or organic adoption of the network structure.

Early Notions of Leaderless Resistance: From the Far-Left to the Far-Right

The Organization of Insurrectionary Anarchism

Decentralized resistance networks date back to at least 1879 with the formation of Narodnaya Volya (NV) in Russia. This early far-left movement aimed to overthrow the tsarist regime in Russia through the systematic assassination of top political officials. To evade detection and destruction, Narodnaya Volya organized itself in a series of local semi-independent cells across the country. The cells looked for direction from a secretive top Executive Committee, but otherwise did not interact with each other and tried to conceal their activities as much as possible.²⁶ NV’s operational success culminated with the assassination of Tsar Nicholas II in 1881. Its activities inspired a wave of what Alfredo Bonnano termed “insurrectionary anarchism,” or loosely-coordinated attacks by decentralized cells and individuals against common political targets.

Inside the United States, decentralized militant movements emerged at the beginning of the 20th century. In perhaps one of the earliest acts of “stochastic terror,” Leon Czogolsz assassinated William McKinley in 1901. Upon his arrest, he attributed his actions as taking inspiration from an Emma Goldman speech to use violent force, if necessary, to achieve real reform inside the United States.²⁷

A decade later, an Italian-American anarchist movement known as the Galleanists conducted several prominent bombing campaigns between 1914-1919 in New York, culminating with 30 nationwide mail bomb packages in 1919 and the 1920 Wall Street Bombing, which killed 40. To conduct these attacks, the Galleanists operated in a series of dispersed interconnected cells throughout the country. Few interacted directly with founder Luigi Galleani. Rather, they took inspiration and direction from a manual Galleani published in 1905, which justified the need for violence and provided instructions on how to create small

²⁵ Louis Beam. “Leaderless Resistance.” *The Seditonist* #12. 1992. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jeffrey-Kaplan/publication/233097025_Leaderless_resistance/links/549db77a0cf2d6581ab640a9/Leaderless-resistance.pdf

²⁶ Avrahm Yarmolinsky. Chp. 12 “The People’s Will.” In *Road to Revolution: A Century of Russian Radicalism*, 1956; David C. Rapoport, “The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism,” in Audrey Kurth Cronin and James M. Ludes, *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2004), 46.

²⁷ “Speech that prompted murderous assault on the president.” *Chicago Tribune*. Sept. 8, 1901. <https://www.lib.berkeley.edu/goldman/pdfs/GoldmanDemonizedinResponsetoMcKinleyAssasination.pdf>



explosives.²⁸ By 1920, police had managed to arrest many members and disrupt different cells across the country, undermining the group's operational capacity. However, its decentralized organizational structure illustrated the viability of these resistance structures in U.S. extremism.

Ulius Amos, Anti-Communism, and the Minutemen

Leaderless resistance in far-right circles began to materialize in the late 1950s as part of a burgeoning new far-right consciousness. Military officer Ulius Louis Amoss published an essay outlining the tenets of leaderless resistance in 1953 as part of his plan to combat the Soviet threat.²⁹ He emphasized that the U.S. needed to focus on subverting communism through small, decentralized cells in Europe rather than through traditional hierarchical structures, which could attract attention.

In 1960, Robert DePugh took these ideas to form an early far-right organization in Missouri known as the "Minutemen." DePugh was originally a member of the John Birch Society, a conspiratorial group that promoted the myth that the U.S. Federal Government was part of a communist conspiracy to overtake America. DePugh left the Birch society to take – as he believed – Bircher's ideas to their logical conclusion and prepare to fight off communists within the United States.³⁰ To this end, DePugh recruited far-right followers whom he would train in guerrilla warfare to fend off against external Communist invasion.

To avoid detection, the Minutemen adopted an early form of "leaderless resistance" across the Midwest. Participants did not know anyone outside their local cell, used pseudonyms to conceal their real identities, and held secret meetings to avoid infiltration. Although the group never conducted violent attacks, the Minutemen's organizational strategy reflected one of the first instances in which the domestic far-right extremists adopted a decentralized organizational approach.³¹

Louis Beam and the Internet

Louis Beam, a former leader of the Texas chapter of the Ku Klux Klan, is often credited with the popularization of the concept of leaderless resistance. In the early 1980s, Beam pioneered the use of personal computers to spread white supremacist ideas online. In 1984, Beam helped to create an online bulletin board, known as the Aryan Nations Liberty Net, where users could post and read white supremacist literature that was otherwise banned or difficult to access.³² Beam's use of computers to spread ideas, inspire action, and facilitate communication was revolutionary. As one scholar writes, "information and literature that was once difficult to obtain [had] been made readily available over the Internet to millions."³³

Other white supremacists adopted similar tactics. In late 1984 or early 1985, Tom Metzger founded the White Aryan Resistance online bulletin board to promulgate white supremacist ideas.³⁴ In addition to his

²⁸ Jeffrey D. Simon (2008) *The Forgotten Terrorists: Lessons from the History of Terrorism. Terrorism and Political Violence.* 20:2, 195-214

²⁹ A copy of Ulius Amoss' (1953) memo is available at

<http://www.publiceye.org/liberty/terrorism/insurgency/Leaderless-Resistance-Amoss/>

³⁰ *Principles of Guerrilla Warfare*, Robert DePugh. Published by the Minutemen, San Diego, CA, 1961.

³¹ J. Harry Jones, Jr. *The Minutemen*. Doubleday & Company, Inc.: Garden City, NY, 1968. 426 pages.

³² Chip Berlet. "When hate went online." In *Northeast Sociological Association Spring Conference in April*, pp. 1-20. 2001; Laura Smith. "Lone Wolves Connected Online: A History of Modern White Supremacy." *New York Times*. 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/26/us/louis-beam-white-supremacy-internet.html>

³³ Bruce Hoffman. *Inside Terrorism*. Columbia University Press: New York, 2003: 115.

³⁴ Chip Berlet. "When hate went online." In *Northeast Sociological Association Spring Conference in April*, pp. 1-20. 2001



online presence, Metzger hosted a television show on local cable, known as “Race and Reason,” that, at its height, reached viewers in 21 different states. Metzger’s White Aryan Resistance group also published a monthly newspaper and managed a telephone hotline, both of which distributed information and literature to white supremacist followers and skinheads.³⁵

By the early 1990s, several white supremacist online bulletin boards existed based in cities across the United States. These bulletin boards adapted to advances in technology, and webpages with racist and antisemitic information began to materialize.³⁶ In 1992, Beam published his famous essay on leaderless resistance.³⁷ In it, Beam emphasized the role that “newspapers, leaflets, computers, etc.” could play in coordinating the ideas and activities of otherwise independent “phantom cells.” He argued that, by adopting a leaderless structure, the white supremacist movement in the United States could withstand government efforts to undermine it. A “pyramid style” organization with a clear, hierarchical chain-of-command was vulnerable to detection, infiltration, and dismantlement. Beam writes that “A single penetration of a pyramid type of organization can lead to the destruction of the whole.” In contrast, a leaderless movement “presents no single opportunity for the Federals to destroy a significant portion of the Resistance.”³⁸

Though the notion of leaderless resistance had been circulating seriously among white supremacists since at least the 1970s,³⁹ Beam’s clear articulation of the idea and its publication online helped to inspire individuals to carry out independent acts of violence.⁴⁰ The essay was read by RMVE leaders and re-published, invigorating the concept of leaderless resistance with “newfound credibility” and ensuring that it “was no longer an isolated theory.”⁴¹

The Age of Social Media: Inspiring Leaderless Followers Online

Throughout the late 1990s and 2000s, the white supremacist movement continued to expand its virtual footprint. The far-right grew more reliant on the Internet as a primary means to expand its follower base

³⁵ “Tom Metzger.” Extremist Files. Southern Poverty Law Center. N.d. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/tom-metzger>

³⁶ Chip Berlet. “When hate went online.” In *Northeast Sociological Association Spring Conference in April*. 2001: 9-12.

³⁷ J.M. Berger. “The Strategy of Violent White Supremacy Is Evolving.” *The Atlantic*. August 7, 2019.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/08/the-new-strategy-of-violent-white-supremacy/595648/>

³⁸ Louis Beam, “Leaderless Resistance,” *The Seditonist*, no. 12 (1992). Accessed at <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~satran/Ford%2006/Wk%202-1%20Terrorism%20Networks%20leaderless-resistance.pdf>

³⁹ Jeffrey Kaplan. *Encyclopedia of White Power: A Sourcebook on the Radical Racist Right*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2000: 173-185. J.M. Berger. “The Strategy of Violent White Supremacy Is Evolving.” *The Atlantic*. August 7, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/08/the-new-strategy-of-violent-white-supremacy/595648/>

⁴⁰ For example, the 1995 bombing in Oklahoma City carried out by Timothy McVeigh and co-conspirators “paralleled exactly” the leaderless resistance framework, though the degree to which McVeigh had Beam’s concept in mind is debated. See Jeffrey Kaplan. *Encyclopedia of White Power: A Sourcebook on the Radical Racist Right*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2000: 173-185; Keith Schneider. “TERROR IN OKLAHOMA: THE FAR RIGHT; Bomb Echoes Extremists’ Tactics.” *New York Times*. April 26, 1995.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1995/04/26/us/terror-in-oklahoma-the-far-right-bomb-echoes-extremists-tactics.html>;

Laura Smith. “Lone Wolves Connected Online: A History of Modern White Supremacy.” *New York Times*. 2021.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/26/us/louis-beam-white-supremacy-internet.html>; J.M. Berger. “The Strategy of Violent White Supremacy Is Evolving.” *The Atlantic*. August 7, 2019.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/08/the-new-strategy-of-violent-white-supremacy/595648/>

⁴¹ Jeffrey Kaplan. *Encyclopedia of White Power: A Sourcebook on the Radical Racist Right*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2000: 177.



and spread its ideas both within the United States and to other countries.⁴² By 2000, several hundred white supremacist websites existed on the internet, a majority of which had direct links to other related websites.⁴³ One of the biggest hubs of white nationalist activity online, Stormfront, appeared in 1995. It housed a library of white supremacist literature and a host of links to white nationalist group websites. In 2001, Stormfront was re-designed as an interactive message board and thus transformed into “the first form of participatory social media for white nationalists.”⁴⁴

The rise of modern social media in the mid-2000s enabled white supremacists to share their ideas with a wider audience, beyond the set of users that found their way to Stormfront. Social media also quickened the demise of older organizations, like the KKK, that were slow to adapt to the changing virtual landscape. As older groups declined and splintered, new leaders emerged online and utilized social media to share their ideas and recruit followers.⁴⁵

This new online environment facilitated the formation of RMVE movements with decentralized organizational structures and fluid memberships. The RMVE community has capitalized on the ubiquity of Internet access to attract new members and develop common ideologies and goals through virtual interactions (e.g., the sharing of memes). Within the last decade, far-right content has migrated from obscure forums to mainstream websites, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.⁴⁶

Fueled by the RMVE movement’s growing virtual reach, leaderless movements and groups based in the United States have flourished in the last decade. These entities can largely be divided into two categories: (1) those that deliberately adopted a leaderless structure for its strategic benefits, and (2) those that are organically leaderless due to the highly fluid nature of their network of followers.⁴⁷ See Table 1 for a summary of these two types of leaderless movements.

The first category includes groups like the Atomwaffen Division (AWD), a neo-Nazi group founded online in 2015 by a Florida teenager. AWD was organized into a decentralized network of local cells, each of which were composed of several individual members.⁴⁸ Much of AWD’s ideology and strategy was drawn from *SIEGE*, a neo-Nazi text that advocated for a “leaderless, cell-structured terrorism and

⁴² Maura Conway, Ryan Scrivens, and Logan Macnair. “Right-Wing Extremists’ Persistent Online Presence: History and Contemporary Trends.” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism Policy Brief (October 2019): 4.

<https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2019/11/Right-Wing-Extremists-Persistent-Online-Presence.pdf>

⁴³ Val Burris, Emery Smith, and Ann Strahm. “White Supremacist Networks on the Internet.” *Sociological Focus*, 33, no. 2 (2000): 215-235.

⁴⁴ Daniel Byman. “Counterterrorism and Modern White Supremacy.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2021): 12.

⁴⁵ Daniel Byman. “Counterterrorism and Modern White Supremacy.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2021): 12.

⁴⁶ Maura Conway, Ryan Scrivens, and Logan Macnair. “Right-Wing Extremists’ Persistent Online Presence: History and Contemporary Trends.” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism Policy Brief (October 2019): 5-9.

<https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2019/11/Right-Wing-Extremists-Persistent-Online-Presence.pdf>

⁴⁷ This conceptualization of modern leaderless resistance structures is somewhat different from characterizations made by the existing academic literature. Scholars debate what exactly should be classified as leaderless resistance, and many studies have conflicting definitions. This report uses a more broad-based conceptualization of leaderless resistance than some existing academic studies. It does so because, even if actions like “lone wolf” terrorism are seen by some scholars to be conceptually different than leaderless resistance, the challenges that these activities create for law enforcement are very similar. This is particularly the case given that many violent actions carried out by RMVE leaderless entities and by lone wolf terrorists are motivated and/or coordinated online. For more information on the academic debate about defining leaderless resistance, see Matthew M. Sweeney. “Leaderless Resistance and the Truly Leaderless: A Case Study Test of the Literature-Based Findings.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 7 (2019): 617-635.

⁴⁸ Mapping Militant Organizations. “Atomwaffen Division/National Socialist Order.” Stanford University. Last modified February 2021. https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mapping_militants/profiles/atomwaffen-division



white revolution.”⁴⁹ The group aimed to inspire and prepare members to carry out violent attacks against the Jewish, Muslim, Black, and LGBTQ communities.⁵⁰

Table 1. Modern Leaderless Structures in RMVE

	Leaderless Structure	
	Deliberate	Organic
Description	Group/movement intentionally adopted a leaderless structure for its strategic benefits	Group/movement developed a leaderless structure organically due to its crowd-sourced development and fluid membership
Formation	Group/movement announced by a particular individual or group of individuals. Recruitment to this group/movement occurs online, and it can be selective. Followers adopt a central set of goals and ideological tenets.	Consumption of online content (e.g., memes) and widely available literature (e.g., <i>The Turner Diaries</i>) generates a shared sense of community and shapes an overarching ideology and set of goals. Any user can identify with the group/movement and contribute to its ideological development.
Tactics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinated campaigns (e.g., swatting) • Planned attacks carried out by group cells • Lone actor (“lone wolf”) terrorist acts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinated campaigns (e.g., Gamergate) • Lone actor (“lone wolf”) terrorist acts
Examples	Minutemen Atomwaffen Division (AWD) The Base	Boogaloo Bois Groypers Users of 8chan /pol imageboard

AWD’s members largely organized online, but they occasionally met in person at “hate camps” organized by the group to film propaganda videos and provide members with weapons training.⁵¹ After facing pressures from law enforcement, AWD disbanded and reemerged as the National Socialist Order (NSO) in July 2020. NSO adopted the same leaderless structure. In October 2020, NSO posted a video on Telegram that “encouraged followers to ‘educate [themselves]’, ‘identify allies and enemies’, and ‘act’ in order to ‘forge a new world’ from the ‘festering corpse of America.’” The video explicitly encouraged

⁴⁹ Jacob Ware. “Siege: The Atomwaffen Division and Rising Far-Right Terrorism in the United States.” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism Policy Brief (July 2019): 6. <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2019/07/ICCT-Ware-Siege-July2019.pdf>

⁵⁰ “Atomwaffen Division (AWD).” Anti-Defamation League. 2020. <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/atomwaffen-division-awd>

⁵¹ “Atomwaffen Division (AWD).” Anti-Defamation League. n.d.. <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/atomwaffen-division-awd>. A.C. Thompson,, Ali Winston, and Jake Hanrahan. “Inside Atomwaffen As It Celebrates a Member for Allegedly Killing a Gay Jewish College Student.” ProPublica. February 23, 2018. <https://www.propublica.org/article/atomwaffen-division-inside-white-hate-group>. “Atomwaffen Division.” Southern Poverty Law Center. n.d. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/atomwaffen-division>



individuals to carry out acts of violence, depicting the bombing of electricity infrastructure and a vehicle ramming protestors.⁵²

While AWD/NSO purposefully adopted a leaderless structure, another class of leaderless movements are organically decentralized due to the crowd-sourced nature of their formation. Examples include the Boogaloo Bois, which was not created by a single person but rather coalesced over time via discussions on fringe websites and channels. The idea of the “Boogaloo” – a term for the coming of a second civil war in the United States – appeared as early as 2012 and circulated on 4chan discussion boards. In 2019, it gained popularity on mainstream websites, such as Facebook and Twitter, and began coalescing into a movement.⁵³ Individual member posts and memes refined the group’s anti-government and anti-police ideology and helped create a shared set of objectives and tactics.⁵⁴

Anyone can join or identify with the Boogaloo movement. Many self-proclaimed Boogaloo followers are also members of other far-right organizations in the United States, including domestic militia groups. The fluid and open nature of Boogaloo’s membership has resulted in an ideologically diverse following, which includes white supremacists, libertarians, and Black Lives Matter supporters.⁵⁵ The Boogaloo movement online has inspired many followers to take action offline in support of Boogaloo objectives, including carrying out violence. For example, in 2020, a Boogaloo follower shot and killed two officers in two separate incidents in California.⁵⁶

There also exist individual extremists that do not identify with any named movement or group. In the past two decades, social media has played “a vital role in self-radicalization and inspiring lone actors.”⁵⁷ Researchers have identified dozens of white supremacist channels on Telegram that glorify “lone wolf” terrorist attacks against racial minorities and provide tactical advice, such as bomb-making instructions.⁵⁸ This online content has translated into offline violence. A study that analyzed lone actor terrorist attacks in the United States and Europe found that 68% of lone actors “read or consumed literature or propaganda associated with a wider movement” before the attack.⁵⁹

For example, several racially-motivated shootings and murders have been tied to 8chan, a website known for its discussion boards that share violent white supremacist content. In March 2019, an 8chan user targeted two mosques and killed more than 50 people in Christchurch, New Zealand after posting his

⁵² Simon Purdue. “The new face of terror in the US.” Open Democracy, October 29, 2020. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/new-face-terror-us/>. Bridget Johnson. “Physical Attacks on Electricity Infrastructure: Extremist Messaging, Plots, and Action.” Homeland Security Today, November 5, 2021. <https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/infrastructure-security/physical-attacks-on-electricity-infrastructure-extremist-messaging-plots-and-action/>

⁵³ Matthew Kriner and Jon Lewis. “The Evolution of the Boogaloo Movement.” Combatting Terrorism Center, West Point. CTC Sentinel 14, no. 2 (2021). <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-evolution-of-the-boogaloo-movement/>. Robert Evans and Jason Wilson. “The Boogaloo Movement Is Not What You Think.” Bellingcat, May 27, 2020.

<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2020/05/27/the-boogaloo-movement-is-not-what-you-think/>. “The Boogaloo Movement.” Anti-Defamation League, n.d. <https://www.adl.org/boogaloo>

⁵⁴ “The Boogaloo Movement.” Anti-Defamation League, n.d. <https://www.adl.org/boogaloo>

⁵⁵ “The Boogaloo Movement.” Anti-Defamation League, n.d. <https://www.adl.org/boogaloo>

⁵⁶ “The Boogaloo Movement.” Anti-Defamation League, n.d. <https://www.adl.org/boogaloo>. Melanie Woodrow. “Steven Carrillo charged in Oakland, Santa Cruz Co. officer killings linked to Boogaloo movement, federal investigators say.” ABC 7 News, June 21, 2020. <https://abc7news.com/steven-carrillo-damon-gutzwiller-pat-underwood-santa-cruz-county/6255122/>

⁵⁷ Daniel Byman. “Counterterrorism and Modern White Supremacy.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2021): 12.

⁵⁸ Jakob Guhl and Jacob Davey. “A Safe Space to Hate: White Supremacist Mobilisation on Telegram.” Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2020). <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/A-Safe-Space-to-Hate2.pdf>

⁵⁹ Paul Gill, John Horgan, and Paige Deckert. “Bombing Alone: Tracing the Motivations and Antecedent Behaviors of Lone-Actor Terrorists.” *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 59, no. 2 (2014): 430.



racist manifesto to the site.⁶⁰ In April 2019, a man radicalized on 8chan posted a livestream link to the site so that other users could view his planned massacre at a California synagogue. He said of 8chan: “I’ve only been lurking for a year and a half, yet, what I’ve learned here is priceless.” One user responded by telling him to “get the high score” and kill as many people as possible. Another user posted, “He at least did something, that’s respectable.”⁶¹ In August 2019, another 8chan user posted his racist manifesto to the website before going on to kill 23 people in an El Paso, Texas Walmart.⁶² One 8chan user responded: “The new guy deserves some praise, he reached almost a third of the high score,” referencing the number of people killed in the shooting.⁶³

Overall, these leaderless acts of violence – whether perpetrated by individuals loosely tied to a group, a movement, or to a broad ideology – represent a major threat. The Internet enables individuals to post, share, and consume extremist content at a pace that is difficult to moderate, trace, and pre-empt.

5 Critical Requirements and Capabilities

Extremist movements often rely on a key Center of Gravity (COG) to sustain operations.⁶⁴ A COG represents a critical source of power for any movement and is often the critical element needed to maintain not only relevance but survival. Traditional movements typically depend on COGs like a defined piece of territory, leadership, or pool of supporters to achieve their desired end states.

To achieve its end states, the RMVE movement relies on a leaderless resistance structure. In so doing, this network structure facilitates growing the movement, elevating racially-motivated ideas, and undercutting opponents through incremental acts of resistance. By eschewing traditional hierarchical command and control structures, it is harder to dismantle the RMVE movements and creates a separate set of policy challenges for practitioners. Instead, leaderless resistance makes progress towards these end goals through a strategic approach of “death by a thousand cuts.” While individual acts of resistance may not by themselves be enough to result in systematic change, they can collectively impose enough costs or pressures to result in change.

⁶⁰ Georgia Wells and Ian Lovett. “‘So What’s His Kill Count?’: The Toxic Online World Where Mass Shooters Thrive.” *Wall Street Journal*. September 4, 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/inside-the-toxic-online-world-where-mass-shooters-thrive-11567608631>. Emily Stewart. “8chan, a nexus of radicalization, explained.” *Vox*, August 5, 2019. <https://www.vox.com/recode/2019/5/3/18527214/8chan-walmart-el-paso-shooting-cloudflare-white-nationalism>

⁶¹ Georgia Wells and Ian Lovett. “‘So What’s His Kill Count?’: The Toxic Online World Where Mass Shooters Thrive.” *Wall Street Journal*. September 4, 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/inside-the-toxic-online-world-where-mass-shooters-thrive-11567608631>. Robert Evans. “Ignore The Poway Synagogue Shooter’s Manifesto: Pay Attention To 8chan’s /pol/ Board.” *Bellingcat*, April 28, 2019. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/americas/2019/04/28/ignore-the-poway-synagogue-shooters-manifesto-pay-attention-to-8chans-pol-board/>

⁶² David Neiwert. “Domestic terror in the age of Trump.” *Reveal News*, July 9, 2020. <https://revealnews.org/article/domestic-terror-in-the-age-of-trump/>

⁶³ Georgia Wells and Ian Lovett. “‘So What’s His Kill Count?’: The Toxic Online World Where Mass Shooters Thrive.” *Wall Street Journal*. September 4, 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/inside-the-toxic-online-world-where-mass-shooters-thrive-11567608631>

⁶⁴ Center of Gravity is typically attributed to Carl von Clausewitz and his book *On War* as “the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends.” The center of gravity subsequently influenced US strategic thinking and military doctrine as a way to craft operational responses against adversaries (e.g. Joint Pub 3.0, Doctrine for Joint Operations, and Joint Pub 5.0, Joint Doctrine for Campaign Planning).



The RMVE movement differs from other extremist threats because the movement’s center of gravity is decentralized and polycephalous (hydra-headed). Leaderless network structures imbue the movement with a sense of resilience and indestructibility. Arresting the leader does not remove an individual member’s ability to carry out attacks. Further, leaderless resistance encourages members to carry out attacks wherever and whenever. It creates the conditions for violence by providing independent units the tools to conduct operations on their own. This removes the need for a defined piece of territory to stage attacks. It also creates a high level of unpredictability in the timing and location of violent attacks.

RMVEs pursue two key lines of effort to achieve its goals through leaderless resistance structures. First, RMVEs want to attract and solidify support for white nationalism. They leverage dense communication networks to spread information, tactics, and techniques, mobilize followers, and radicalize individuals to take actions. This helps recruit and sustain popular support for the movement by crafting a mythology around the movement’s legitimacy and providing a sense of purpose.

Second, RMVEs want to inspire followers to take the initiative in conducting attacks. They produce aggressive information operations to spread the narrative and provide basic operational instruction on how to conduct violent attacks. They share key doctrinal concepts through common texts and communication platforms to teach each other when and how to conduct attacks. Accomplishing these lines of effort requires three critical components: common doctrine, shared narrative, and dense communication networks.

Table 2. Critical Requirements of Online Leaderless Resistance Networks

	Doctrine	Narrative	Communication Networks
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide sense of guiding principles on how to achieve goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide sense of common identity and purpose ● Communicate cause and mission ● Influence and attract followers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Share ITT ● Advertise ● Radicalize Followers ● Connect followers
Requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Coordinated Messaging ● Common Texts and Scripts ● Visibility of Prior Martyrs and Attacks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Common Texts and Scripts ● Martyrs ● Mythology ● Trademarks/Signals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Key Influencers (Critical Nodes) ● Communication Platforms ● Internet Access ● Trademarks/Signals
Tactics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Flooding/Amplification ● Fogging ● Doxxing ● Stochastic Terror Attacks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Red-Pilling” ● Live-Action Role Playing ● Memes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Issue Linkage (Gamers) ● College Campuses ● Internet Platforms
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Spread of Mis- and Disinformation ● Viral Videos/Posts ● Flash Demonstrations ● Physical Violence, e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Brendon Tarrant ○ Anders Breivik ○ Robert Bowers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● VDARE, American Renaissance, National Policy Institute ● Turner Diaries ● Ashli Babbitt ● Great Replacement Theory ● Sonnenrad ● Kekistan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp ● IronMarch, Fascist Forge ● Parler, MeWe, BitChute, Telegram, Odysee ● Chan Networks, Dark Web



Doctrine

Doctrine provides the RMVE movement a common set of guiding principles on how to achieve its goals. These instructional materials allow followers to independently conduct operations without direct coordination. The movement accomplishes this by sharing key texts, information, Tactics, and Techniques (ITT) across different communication platforms.⁶⁵

Key instructional texts can provide a “script” for violence. Paramount among these texts are Louis Beam’s *Leaderless Resistance*, William Pierce’s *The Turner Diaries*, and James Mason’s *SIEGE*. William Pierce’s virulently anti-Semitic novel *The Turner Diaries* is a fantastical text published in 1977 about a young revolutionary attempting to overthrow the current government. In the book, the young man is tasked with detonating explosives outside a federal building and ultimately flying a plane into the Pentagon.⁶⁶ *The Turner Diaries* was thought to influence Timothy McVeigh’s decision to bomb the Alfred P. Murrah Building in Oklahoma City due to the similarity in tactics.

A similarly instructional text are the writings of James Mason, a former member of Rockwell’s American Nazi Party (ANP). Mason joined the ANP as a teenager where he became a protégé of William Pierce.⁶⁷ Frustrated with the failure of the ANP to achieve success in politics, Mason gave up on the political process. Beginning in the 1980s, he published a series of *SIEGE* newsletters urging white supremacists to adopt terrorism and guerilla warfare tactics to bring about a race war and take down the U.S. government by force.⁶⁸ Mason’s work came to renewed prominence in 2017 when the Atomwaffen Division published an anthology of the newsletters and filmed an interview with Mason.⁶⁹ Mason’s ideas, often described “accelerationist” for their emphasis on triggering a race war and the downfall of the U.S. political system, have influenced numerous neo-Nazi groups, including Atomwaffen and the Base. *SIEGE* also inspired the creation of new communication platforms like Fascist Forge, a successor to IronMarch where members could congregate to share information, tactics, and technology with each other.⁷⁰

Beyond these texts, followers may take operational direction from previous martyrs and attacks. Internet networks can increase the visibility of transnational attacks and spread violence. For example, Brendon Tarrant’s manifesto reflected scores of Internet memes, terminology, and racial ideas gleaned from online platforms.⁷¹ Tarrant’s 2019 Christchurch shooting was live-streamed on Facebook as it happened,

⁶⁵ “Member states concerned by the growing and increasingly transnational threat of extreme right-wing terrorism.” United Nations Counterterrorism Committee Executive Directorate. 2021. https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil.ctc/files/files/documents/2021/Jan/cted_trends_alert_extreme_right-wing_terrorism.pdf

⁶⁶ “How the Turner Diaries Incites White Supremacists.” New York Times. 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/12/books/turner-diaries-white-supremacists.html>

⁶⁷ “Atomwaffen and the *SIEGE* parallax: how one neo-Nazi’s life’s work is fueling a younger generation.” Hatewatch. Southern Poverty Law Center. February 22, 2018. <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/02/22/atomwaffen-and-siege-parallax-how-one-neo-nazi-s-life-s-work-fueling-younger-generation>

⁶⁸ A.C. Thompson, Ali Winston, and Jake Hanrahan. “Inside Atomwaffen As It Celebrates a Member for Allegedly Killing a Gay Jewish College Student.” ProPublica. February 23, 2018. <https://www.propublica.org/article/atomwaffen-division-inside-white-hate-group>

⁶⁹ Luke O’Brien and Christopher Mathias. “The Maniac Neo-Nazis Keeping Charles Manson’s Race War Alive.” HuffPost. November 21, 2017. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/alt-right-charles-manson-atomwaffen_n_5a146921e4b03dec824892e6

⁷⁰ Joshua Fisher-Birch. “Will a Fascist Forge Successor Emerge?” Tech and Terrorism. Counter Extremism Project. 2020. <https://www.counterextremism.com/blog/will-fascist-forge-successor-emerge>

⁷¹ “In Christchurch, Signs Point to a Gunman Steeped in Internet Trolling.” New York Times. 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/world/asia/new-zealand-gunman-christchurch.html>



allowing him to broadcast his misdeeds.⁷² The publication of his manifesto was also thought to generate copycat events later that year in El Paso, Poway, and Norway.⁷³ Publicizing previous attacks demonstrates the feasibility of conducting these attacks and also serves a key “terror” tactic in advertising the movement’s aims and reasons for violence.

Decentralized resistance structures also create opportunities for followers to make progress towards their goals through alternative tactics like flooding and fogging. Fogging is a tactic in which RMVEs challenge existing explanations, facts, and narratives.⁷⁴ This seeds doubt and creates an environment for alternative narratives to compete. Online networks may describe mainstream narratives as inauthentic or illegitimate. Individuals can facilitate radicalization by spreading doctrinal messaging that causes users to begin questioning mainstream media as a legitimate source of information. Individuals may attempt to paint outliers or singular examples of questionable behavior as part of a broader trend. Individuals may also share anecdotal stories to create a sense of relatability and authenticity. These techniques, along with other types of local fallacies, can spread key doctrinal concepts and undercut oppositional messaging.

In contrast, flooding – sometimes referred to as swarming in the netwar literature – involves the rapid saturation of conversation spaces with particular narratives.⁷⁵ For example, the “Stop the Steal” narrative quickly escalated after the 2020 election as users posted particular new stories or videos on Facebook.⁷⁶ On YouTube, “videos containing ‘Stop the Steal’ or ‘#StopTheSteal’ garnered 21,267,165 views, 863,151 likes, and 34,091 dislikes” between September 1, 2020 and February 2, 2021.⁷⁷ Flooding can also occur in person through large-scale flash protests whereby followers show up at events to protest issues. There have been reports that Identity Evropa, Patriot Front, and League of the South have all used this tactic to raise attention for their cause.⁷⁸

Overall, the leaderless resistance doctrine provides guidance on how to use violence and attract attention to RMVE goals. However, it is only one critical component of the movement’s overall strategic approach.

⁷² Graham Macklin. “The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age.” CTC Sentinel. July 2019, Vol. 12, Issue 6. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. <https://ctc.usma.edu/christchurch-attacks-livestream-terror-viral-video-age/>

⁷³ Lizzie Dearden. “Revered as a saint by online extremists, how Christchurch shooter inspired copycat terrorists around the world.” The Independent (UK). August 24, 2019. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/australasia/brenton-tarrant-christchurch-shooter-attack-el-paso-norway-poway-a9076926.html>

⁷⁴ Martin Innes. “‘Fogging’ and ‘Flooding’: Countering Extremist Mis/Disinformation After Terror Attacks.” November 2021. Global Network on Extremism and Technology. <https://gnet-research.org/2021/11/08/fogging-and-flooding-countering-extremist-mis-disinformation-after-terror-attacks/>

⁷⁵ Martin Innes. “‘Fogging’ and ‘Flooding’: Countering Extremist Mis/Disinformation After Terror Attacks.” November 2021. Global Network on Extremism and Technology. <https://gnet-research.org/2021/11/08/fogging-and-flooding-countering-extremist-mis-disinformation-after-terror-attacks/>; John Arquilla, and David Ronfeldt. *Networks and netwars: The future of terror, crime, and militancy*. Rand Corporation, 2001.

⁷⁶ Craig Silverman, Ryan Mac, and Jane Lytvynenko. “Facebook Knows it Was Used to Help Incite the Capital Insurrection.” BuzzFeed News. April 22, 2021. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/facebook-failed-stop-the-steal-insurrection>

⁷⁷ “Stop the Steal – Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to the Insurrection.” Atlantic DFR Lab. February 10, 2021. <https://www.justsecurity.org/74622/stopthesteal-timeline-of-social-media-and-extremist-activities-leading-to-1-6-insurrection/>

⁷⁸ “Post-Charlottesville white nationalists double down on flash demonstrations over public rallies.” Southern Poverty Law Center. August 23, 2018. <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/08/23/post-charlottesville-white-nationalists-double-down-flash-demonstrations-over-public>



Narrative

Narratives are a critical component of leaderless resistance networks because they serve multiple purposes. They provide the movement a common sense or common identity and sense of belonging; communicate the group's cause; and help influence and attract followers. These narratives help morally justify the use of violence and support the group's cause.

RMVE narratives try to draw meaning out of an increasingly complex and uncertain world. By providing beliefs that rationalize an individual's grievance as legitimate, it addresses the psychological need for cognitive closure.⁷⁹ This can provide a sense of belonging and help radicalize potential followers. RMVE narratives present a legitimization strategy for the use of violence. Ideological messaging helps the movement create a sense of urgency and purpose behind extremist actions. It also helps indoctrinate and radicalize further supports by inculcating them in certain belief systems.

By framing the ideology in these ways, the narratives exploit motivational imbalances. Placing such a high emphasis on commonly acceptable traits like patriotism, duty, and serving the common good encourages individuals to overlook other concerns or considerations. The ideology is also able to effectively indoctrinate and radicalize supporters. By presenting a multi-tiered set of messages that become radical, the RMVE movement slowly and subtly introduces its core beliefs to potential supporters.⁸⁰

Common Themes and Narratives

The RMVE movement uses a number of different mediums to distribute its narrative and recruit followers. RMVE narratives slowly and subtly introduce core beliefs to potential supporters. The "alt-right pipeline" lures followers and exposes them to RMVE ideas until they come to accept fringe beliefs as a legitimating force for extremist activity.⁸¹ This radicalization process is known as "red-pilling," a movie reference to the 1999 film *The Matrix* in which Keanu Reeves' character "Neo" takes a red pill in order to learn the "truth" about reality.⁸² It is a gradual and multi-step process in which an individual is repeatedly exposed to extreme ideas until such ideas become normalized and internalized, sometimes referred to as the "normie-to-fascist" pipeline.⁸³

These redpill incidents can slowly accumulate overtime. Individuals first tend to slowly question and then reject mainstream political ideas, framing them as part of "PC" (Politically Correct) culture and critiquing "SJWs" (Social Justice Warriors) for promulgating them. There is then a slow embrace of traditionalist views, including anti-feminist beliefs, scientific racism, and at times anti-Semitic views.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Webber, David, Maxim Babush, Noa Schori-Eyal, Anna Vazeou-Nieuwenhuis, Malkanthi Hettiarachchi, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, Manuel Moyano et al. "The road to extremism: Field and experimental evidence that significance loss-induced need for closure fosters radicalization." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 114, no. 2 (2018): 270.

⁸⁰ "The Violent White Supremacy Issue." Jigsaw. <https://jigsaw.google.com/the-current/white-supremacy/>

⁸¹ Aidan Scully. "The Dangerous Subtlety of the Alt-Right Pipeline." *Harvard Political Review*. 2021. <https://harvardpolitics.com/alt-right-pipeline/>

⁸² Katie Notopoulos and Ryan Broderick. "The Far Right's Most Common Memes Explained for Normal People." *Buzzfeed News*. 2017. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/katienotopoulos/a-normal-persons-guide-to-how-far-right-trolls-talk-to-each>

⁸³ Robert Evans. "From Memes to Infowars: How 75 Fascist Activists Were "Red-Pilled." *Bellingcat*. 2018. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/americas/2018/10/11/memes-infowars-75-fascist-activists-red-pilled/>

⁸⁴ Lewis, Rebecca. "Alternative influence: Broadcasting the reactionary right on YouTube." *Data & Society* 18 (2018).



Another part of the RMVE leaderless resistance toolbox is the use of conspiratorial narratives as a way to create new meaning in the world.⁸⁵ Conspiracy theories serve as a “radicalizing multiplier” because they promise to reveal “hidden meaning” and satisfy an individual’s need for control. Common narratives reflect a combination of anti-state, anti-minority, and revolutionary beliefs.⁸⁶

Other narratives exploit fears about government meddling and overreach. Anti-state narratives date back to at least the 1950s with the John Birch Society and claims of a global communist conspiracy. Over time, fears of a communist conspiracy evolved into deep-seated fears about a “New World Order” and more recently a “Deep State” or secret set of elite cabals controlling the U.S. Government.

RMVE narratives are typically couched around racial fears, such as the narrative surrounding “white genocide theory.” These narratives reflect racial paranoia that espouse anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant worldviews. “The Great Replacement” theory exploits fear of diminishing white power. Within Europe, the refugee crisis and resulting rise in the nativist population has increased support for the “Eurabia” theory. This theory assumes there is an attempt to “Arab-ize” the European continent and diminish the power of white populations. These theories also tap into xenophobic fears about the outsider.⁸⁷ By reinforcing in-group and out-group dynamics, these theories can vilify outsiders as the reason for a loss of significance and sense of uncertainty and offer an alternative sense of safety and security for followers.

Table 3. Common RMVE Narratives

Common Narratives	Description	Examples
Anti-State	Beliefs about government overreach, meddling, and formation of alternative totalitarian government	Shadow Government, Deep State, QAnon, False Flags, New World Order
Demographic/Anti-Minority	Beliefs about “white genocide theory” and xenophobic sentiments	Great Replacement, Eurabia, Kalergi Plan, Scientific Racism
Anti-Semitic	Anti-Jewish beliefs promoting control	Zionist-Occupied Government, anti-Soros
Free Speech/Rights	Beliefs about restricting free speech and civil liberties	Social Justice Warriors (SJW), Political Prisoners, PC (Politically-Correct) Culture
Science	Beliefs questioning scientific theories, evidence	Scientific Racism, Anti-Vaccine Theories, Covid Disinformation
Accelerationist	Beliefs promoting a doomsday, race war	Cold Civil War, Day of the Ropes, Doomsday
Esoteric/Occult	Esoteric beliefs promoting pseudo-religious	Order of Nine Angles, Satanism
Historical Revisionism	Beliefs reframing the facts behind historical events	U.S. Revolutionary War (III Percenters), U.S. Civil War, The Holocaust, January 6

⁸⁵ Farinelli, Francesco. “Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism.” Radicalisation Awareness Network. 2021. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2021-04/ran_conspiracy_theories_and_right-wing_2021_en.pdf

⁸⁶ Ben Lee. “A Short Guide to Narratives of the Far-Right.” Center for Research and Evidence on Security Threats. N.d. <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/comment/a-short-guide-to-narratives-of-the-far-right/> Accessed 3 January 2022.

⁸⁷ Obaidi, Milan, Jonas R. Kunst, Simon Ozer, and Sasha Kimel. “The Great Replacement Conspiracy: How the Perceived Ousting of Whites Can Evoke Violent Extremism and Islamophobia.” (2021).



Humor, Meme-ification, and Role-Playing

In addition to amplifying these narratives, RMVEs increasingly use humor, especially meme-ification, as a means to disseminate beliefs and attract online followers. Online memes are a powerful communication tool because they simplify complex ideas into humorous frames of references. By couching racist and misogynistic views in memes, individuals can inject a sense of irony and plausible deniability.⁸⁸ For example, in an op-ed for Breitbart, Milo Yiannopoulos justified the memes as harmless “fun” and “simply a means to fluster their grandparents.”⁸⁹ It also creates ambiguity about whether followers actually believe in these ideas. This gives them the ability to evade any consequences for their words.

While extremist movements have used humor before, new technological tools have allowed them to reach a broader audience than ever before.⁹⁰ Memes help the alt-right project its messages to a broader audience, enabling them to go mainstream.⁹¹ A few extremist platforms like 4chan’s “/pol” (politically incorrect board) and Reddit’s “The_Donald” are the origins of some of the most viral and mainstream memes. In a study of 160 million images on Twitter, Reddit, 4chan, and Gab, researchers showed how extremists took images from more fringe communities like 4chan’s /pol board effectively disseminated messages through more mainstream platforms like Twitter and Reddit.⁹²

Memes can also create a sense of collective identity by creating private jokes, identifying symbols, and signals among members.⁹³ This can further entrench a sense of belonging and increase people’s ties to the movement. The Boogaloo Bois have effectively embraced the use of memes to promote their accelerationist views. For example, many of the phrases and imagery from *The Turner Diaries* remain common shorthand in the RMVE lexicon. “Day of the Ropes” or #DOTR is a popular phrase used to describe the day the government will be overthrown and a race war will start, characterized by public lynchings throughout the country. 1488 is also a common reference to the numerical combination of 14 (for the 14 Words) and 88 (shorthand reference to the 8th letter of the alphabet HH, for Heil Hitler).⁹⁴

In some cases, memes can go viral such as the NPC Meme, which makes fun of perceived “Social Justice Warriors.”⁹⁵ Pepe the Frog became so associated with alt-right messaging that it soon became labeled a hate symbol by the Anti-Defamation League in 2016.⁹⁶ More recently, the “Let’s Go Brandon” chant has become a viral term to project an anti-Biden message.⁹⁷

⁸⁸ Jason Wilson. “Hiding in Plain sight: how the alt-right is weaponizing irony to spread fascism.” *The Guardian*. 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/23/alt-right-online-humor-as-a-weapon-facism>

⁸⁹ Milo Yiannopoulos. “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right.” Breitbart. 2016. <https://www.breitbart.com/tech/2016/03/29/an-establishment-conservatives-guide-to-the-alt-right/>

⁹⁰ Michael Billig, “Humor and Hatred.” *Discourse & Society* 12, no. 3 (2001): 267-289.

⁹¹ “Memes are taking the alt-right message of hate mainstream.” *The Conversation*. 2018.

<https://theconversation.com/memes-are-taking-the-alt-rights-message-of-hate-mainstream-108196>

⁹² Zannettou, Savvas, Tristan Caulfield, Jeremy Blackburn, Emiliano De Cristofaro, Michael Sirivianos, Gianluca Stringhini, and Guillermo Suarez-Tangil. “On the origins of memes by means of fringe web communities.”

In *Proceedings of the Internet Measurement Conference 2018*, pp. 188-202. 2018.

<https://arxiv.org/abs/1805.12512>

⁹³ Francis de Satge. “The Central Role of Memes on Alt-Right Radicalization.” <https://thesecuritydistillery.org/all-articles/the-central-role-of-memes-on-alt-right-radicalisation-in-the-chaosphere>

⁹⁴ Milo Yiannopoulos. “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right.” Breitbart. 2016.

<https://www.breitbart.com/tech/2016/03/29/an-establishment-conservatives-guide-to-the-alt-right/>

⁹⁵ Julia Alexander. “The NPC Meme Went Viral When the Media Gave it Oxygen.” *The Verge*. 2018.

<https://www.theverge.com/2018/10/23/17991274/npc-meme-4chan-press-coverage-viral>

⁹⁶ “Pepe the Frog meme banned as a hate symbol.” *BBC*. 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-37493165>

⁹⁷ Talia Lavin. “The Death of Fascist Irony.” *The New Republic*. 2019.

<https://newrepublic.com/article/153346/death-fascist-irony>



In addition to meme-ification, the RMVE movement also disseminates its ideology by promoting “Live Action Role Playing” or LARP-ing. Live Action Role Playing is a concept from fantasy game culture in which individuals dress up or pretend play. Within the alt-right, LARP-ing is a way for individuals to engage in “mock” discourse and play in which they promote these ideas.⁹⁸ By pretending, followers again create a shroud of ambiguity and plausible deniability for their actions.⁹⁹

More recent investigations found different “roleplay” scenarios within prominent games like Roblox and Minecraft that promoted extremist ideas. For example, “one Roblox driving game invited players to ‘become a racist’ and simulate the murder of people belonging to ethnic minorities by running them over in a car.”¹⁰⁰ Following the 2017 Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, attendees claimed they did not actually espouse white supremacist beliefs but were role-playing. Similar denials emerged in the wake of the 2021 Capitol Riots. Attendees actively discussed the layout of the Capitol Building in the weeks following up to the January 6, 2021, event as part of a “role-playing” exercise.¹⁰¹

Martyrs, Myths, and Sacred Texts

A critical requirement for these narratives to work is a mythology of martyrs, myths, and sacred texts. These narratives often present a romanticized view of history to establish that conditions are today worse off than they once were. RMVEs promote a common set of manifestos and sacred texts to unify discussion around its core ideas. Within the United States, these core ideas often includes mythologized views of the Revolutionary War as “true patriots” or the Civil War as the “Lost Cause.” The Lost Cause is today a mobilizing force in neo-Confederate movements like Identity Dixie, which present a less ostentatious view of white supremacy in view of more “moderate” policy positions (such as statue).¹⁰²

References to historical injustices and martyrs also help mythologize the past and legitimate the utility of violence. Common references include the Revolutionary War, Civil War, and historical martyrs. When Timothy McVeigh was captured, he was wearing a shirt of Lincoln assassin John Wilkes Booth along with a Thomas Jefferson quote that “tree of revolution must be watered from time to time with the blood of martyrs.” Vicki Weaver’s death at Ruby Ridge and Ashli Babbitt’s death at the Capitol Insurrection

⁹⁸ Tuters, Marc: LARPing & Liberal Tears: Irony, Belief and Idiocy in the Deep Vernacular Web. In: Maik Fielitz, Nick Thurston (Hg.): Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right: Online Actions and Offline Consequences in Europe and the US. Bielefeld: transcript 2019, S. 37–48

https://mediarep.org/bitstream/handle/doc/13282/Post_Digital_Cultures_37-48_Tuters_LARPing_Liberal_Tears_.pdf?sequence=5

⁹⁹ Ben Zimmer. “LARPing: An Often Misused Term for Role-Playing.” Wall Street Journal. 2017.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/larping-role-playing-from-nerds-to-neo-nazis-1503673316>

¹⁰⁰ Carl Miller and Shiroma Silva. “Extremists using video-game chats to spread hate.” BBC. 2021.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-58600181>

¹⁰¹ Logan Jaffe, Lydia DePillis, Isaac Arnsdorf, and J. David McSwane. “Capitol Rioters Planned for Weeks in Plain Sight. Police Weren’t Ready.” ProPublica. 2021. https://www.propublica.org/article/capitol-rioters-planned-for-weeks-in-plain-sight-the-police-werent-ready?utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter#1040996; Laurel Wamsley. “On Far-Right Websites, Plans to Storm Capitol were Made in Plain Sight.” NPR. 2021.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/insurrection-at-the-capitol/2021/01/07/954671745/on-far-right-websites-plans-to-storm-capitol-were-made-in-plain-sight>; Ken Dilanian and Ben Collins. “There are hundreds of posts about plans to attack the Capitol. Why hasn’t this evidence been used in court?” NBC News. 2021.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/justice-department/we-found-hundreds-posts-about-plans-attack-capitol-why-aren-n1264291>

¹⁰² “Neo-Confederate.” Southern Poverty Law Center. N.d. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/neo-confederate>



both galvanized followers to mobilize to avenge their wrongful deaths.¹⁰³ These symbols can provide the movement a sense of purpose and attract followers.

Table 4. Common RMVE Martyrs, Symbols, and Texts¹⁰⁴

Martyrs	Symbols/Phrases	Texts
Robert J. Mathews	1488	Turner Diaries
Vicki Weaver	Sixteen Words	SIEGE
Ted Kaczynski	Sonnenrad	“Leaderless Resistance”
Timothy McVeigh	Hyperborea	Camp of the Saints
Anders Breivik	Day of the Ropes	Le Grand Remplacement
Robert Bowers	Pepe the Frog	Metaphysics of War/Revolt Against the Modern World
Brendon Tarrant	Kek, Kekistan	Alexander Dugin

Dense Communication Networks

The final critical requirement for leaderless resistance networks to work are dense communication networks. The networks are dense in the sense they involve redundant communication systems, amplify common messages, and are resilient to the removal of any one communication platform or critical nodes connecting these platforms. Communication networks allow followers to coordinate, advertise, and attract new followers. Networks are also key to share instructional materials and coordinate operations.

Traditional RMVE leaderless resistance networks had limited growth potential due to their reliance on physical networks to meet. While the contemporary RMVE movement still involves some physical networking (e.g., college campus organizations like the Koch-backed Young American Foundation or Charlie Kirk’s Turning Point USA), the movement increasingly organizes online.¹⁰⁵

Individuals often interact with these fringe views through these communication networks in three ways. First, individuals may gain exposure to fringe ideas through gateway social media platforms and algorithms. Second, individuals may become radicalized through interactions with social media influencers or core communities, who amplify fringe ideas. Finally, individuals may share materials and communicate with other RMVE supporters through specific messaging applications.

Communication Platforms and Algorithms

Online forums can expose individuals to extreme, but not fringe, content on news sites like NewsMax, One America Network, Breitbart, Daily Stormer, Gateway Pundit, Right Stuff, and American

¹⁰³ Jared Holt. “After the Insurrection: How Domestic Extremists Adapted and Evolved after the January 6 Attacks.” Atlantic Council DFR Lab. January 2022. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/after-the-insurrection-how-domestic-extremists-adapted-and-evolved-after-the-january-6-us-capitol-attack/>

¹⁰⁴ This is not a comprehensive list, but captures some of the most commonly-referenced martyrs, symbols, and texts referenced in RMVE networks.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Main. *The rise of the alt-right*. Brookings Institution Press, 2018.; “Turning Point USA.” Anti-Defamation League. N.d. <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/turning-point-usa>; Cynthia Miller-Idriss. *Hate in the Homeland*. Princeton University Press, 2022.



Renaissance.¹⁰⁶ A growing number of users also encounter more fringe views through gateway platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Tiktok, and Instagram. These platforms provide a critical requirement for the far-right to disseminate its ideas beyond a core audience. YouTube, Spotify, Tiktok, and other media sources also underscore a “digital support infrastructure” for the far right.¹⁰⁷

Mainstream platforms can also inadvertently serve as gateways to RMVE radicalization by tapping into networks of individuals already vulnerable to extremist ideas. For example, Discord originally emerged as an opportunity for the gaming community to communicate and coordinate gameplay with each other via voice, text, or video chat. Today, the RMVE network is active on Discord and recruits gamers. The RMVE network uses Discord because users can institute certain security protections and vetting measures to limit access. For example, Discords can require a user invite, entrance exam, or “proof of whiteness” to gain access.¹⁰⁸ Conversations on Discord generally promote the RMVE narrative rather than distribute instructional materials. Users tend to ask questions about extremist ideologies (fact-finding) and inquire about how to gain access to more materials.¹⁰⁹

Social media can also inadvertently facilitate exposure to radical ideas by using algorithms to suggest similar clubs, pages, or sites. As an individual begins to come into contact with extremist materials, social media can inadvertently accelerate this exposure.¹¹⁰ Creating “clickbait”-like videos or manipulating search engine optimization algorithms can also generate “strategic controversy” that boosts the number of views around a video. For example, a multi-hour debate between Richard Spencer and Carl Benjamin on scientific racism was briefly one of the most watched live stream videos on YouTube in 2018 before being taken down.¹¹¹

Social Media Influencers, Hashtags, and Critical Nodes

RMVE influencers and hashtags are critical nodes in a leaderless resistance network. Their social media platforms can introduce a common vocabulary, share doctrinal beliefs, and direct potential supporters to other platforms. By commanding such a large and attentive audience, influencers can connect different parts of these leaderless networks and grow the movement. One of the most common ways social influencers introduce these radical ideas to this is by bringing guests on YouTube shows. For example, Dave Rubin, a former host of the Young Turks YouTube show, launched his own channel “The Rubin Report” in 2013. The show has over 1.55 million subscribers and 340 million views. Although Rubin presents himself as a mainstream conservative, he uses his credibility to often bring on more prominent

¹⁰⁶ Main, Thomas J. *The rise of the alt-right*. Brookings Institution Press, 2018.; “Alt Right: A Primer on the New White Supremacy.” Anti-Defamation League. N.d. <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/alt-right-a-primer-on-the-new-white-supremacy>

¹⁰⁷ Jordan McSwiney, Greta Jasser and Dominik Hammer. “Alt-Tech and Online Organizing.” Global Network on Extremism and Technology. January 21, 2021. <https://gnet-research.org/2021/01/21/alt-tech-and-online-organising-after-the-capitol-riots/>

¹⁰⁸ Aoife Gallagher, Ciaran O’Connor, Pierre Vaux, Elise Thomas, and Jacob Davey. “The Extreme Right on Discord.” Institute for Strategic Dialogue. 2021. <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/04-gaming-report-discord.pdf>

¹⁰⁹ Aoife Gallagher, Ciaran O’Connor, Pierre Vaux, Elise Thomas, and Jacob Davey. “The Extreme Right on Discord.” Institute for Strategic Dialogue. 2021. <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/04-gaming-report-discord.pdf>

¹¹⁰ Derek O’Callaghan, Derek Greene, Maura Conway, Joe Carthy, and Pádraig Cunningham. “Down the (White) Rabbit Hole: The Extreme Right and Online Recommender Systems.” *Social Science Computer Review* 33, no. 4 (2015): 459-478.

¹¹¹ Lewis, Rebecca. “Alternative influence: Broadcasting the reactionary right on YouTube.” *Data & Society* 18 (2018).



alt-right guests such as Richard Spencer. By bringing on a wide variety of guests from both mainstream and extremist backgrounds, these YouTube shows can normalize the views of more extreme guests.

Other social media influencers use long-form videos, including hour-long conversations on YouTube and endless social media threads to create a sense of perceived relatability and authenticity. This allows them to introduce more extremist ideas and grow the movement. The YouTuber known as “Blonde in the Belly of the Beast” uses personal stories to explain how she reached specific political beliefs.¹¹² Joe Rogan’s podcast distributed via Spotify reaches an average of 11 million viewers per episode.¹¹³ While Rogan brings on common celebrities, politicians, and more mainstream figures, he also interviewed Milo Yiannopoulos, Gavin McInnes, and Alex Jones.¹¹⁴ He interjects his personal beliefs into conversations and leverages his comedic background to appeal to audiences. Dan Bongino’s podcast show, which garners up to 8.5 million weekly listeners, is also a prominent right-wing platform for more extremist views¹¹⁵

Table 5. Key RMVE Influencers and Platforms

Key Influencers	Main Program/Platform	Additional Platform Presences (as of Feb. 2022)
Richard Spencer	Radix	Twitter, DLive, Parler, Gab, Telegram
Jared Taylor	American Renaissance	Personal Website, Twitter (Banned), BitChute
Peter Brimelow	VDARE	Personal Website
Alex Jones	Infowars	Facebook (Banned), YouTube (Banned), Spotify (Banned)
Nick Fuentes	Odysee	Twitter, YouTube (Banned), Parler, Gab, Telegram
Carl Benjamin (Sargon of Akkad)	YouTube	Facebook, Instagram, YouTube
Tim Gionet (Baked Alaska)	YouTube then DLive	YouTube (Banned), DLive (Banned), Gab, Telegram
Stefan Molyneux	Free Domain Radio (Podcast)	Personal Website, YouTube (Banned), Twitter (Banned), SoundClod (Banned)
Dan Bongino	Dan Bongino Show (Podcast)	Podcast, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube (Banned)
Brittany Sellner (Pettibone)	YouTube	YouTube, Twitter, Telegram, BitChute, Odysee
Michelle Malkin	NewsMax TV	Blog, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram

In addition to key influencers, RMVE networks can strategically use hashtags to reach new populations. Some hashtags are straightforward references to well-known conspiracy theories, individuals, or events

¹¹² Lewis, Rebecca. "Alternative influence: Broadcasting the reactionary right on YouTube." *Data & Society* 18 (2018).

¹¹³ Emma Nolan. “Joe Rogan Loses Top Spot on Spotify Podcast Charts.” *Newsweek*. September 30, 2021. <https://www.newsweek.com/joe-rogan-dethroned-spotify-chart-new-gaming-podcast-sapnap-karl-jacobs-number-one-1634239>

¹¹⁴ Anna Merlen. “Joe Rogan is Everyone Else’s Problem.” *Vice News*. 2021. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/qjb89q/joe-rogan-is-everyone-elses-problem>

¹¹⁵ Why Dan Bongino is Building a Right-Wing Media Infrastructure. *Fresh Air*. January 6, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/06/1070960291/why-dan-bongino-is-building-a-right-wing-media-infrastructure>



such as #eurabia, #brendontarrant, or #dotr. However, some individuals use more generic hashtags so that their posts and videos show up in more traditional circles. For example, on Tiktok far-right videos are often tagged with #based, #conservative, or #trump. Others hijack hashtags associated with other movements such as #blm or use generic promotion schemes like #foryou, #foryourpage, or #fyp.¹¹⁶ These hashtags can cause extremist messages to appear alongside more conventional posts and again benefit from a perceived normalization.

Messaging Tools and Redundant Systems

Technology companies have responded to RMVE networks by de-platforming certain forums (e.g., 8chan), banning prominent users (e.g., Nick Fuentes), and content moderation which labels or removes posts deemed misinformation (e.g., “Stop the Steal”). In response, RMVE users have organized a series of alternative tech platforms to circumvent these regulations and continue to network with each other.¹¹⁷ Redundant communication systems ensure the movement’s resilience and continued survival. After Reddit shut down The_Donald channel, a new website emerged known as thedonald.win and then later renamed patriots.win. The .win is a domain name hosted by GRS Domains that can bypass conventionally-accepted hate speech restrictions.

New digital communities have effectively led to the globalization of the RMVE movement and an unregulated ecosystem for online leaderless resistance.¹¹⁸ Platforms like Gab, Parler, and Telegram enable dedicated RMVE followers and potential recruits to communicate with each other. Gab was originally forced offline by GoDaddy host in 2018 because the Pittsburgh synagogue shooter had posted he was “going in” and other anti-Semitic posts. It was later revitalized by “Epik” CEO Rob Monster who also hosts or provides domain registrations for Parler and 8chan.¹¹⁹ Similarly, Parler formed in 2018 with money from Trump donor Rebekah Mercer and acts as a Twitter clone.¹²⁰ RMVE followers flocked to the site due to its tolerance for hate speech. Telegram is an encrypted messaging app like WhatsApp or Facebook Messengers that is also increasingly popular among RMVE users. It principally allows users to text with each other. Since 2020, Telegram has seen a huge uptick in RMVE messaging¹²¹ For example, a channel dedicated to the New World Order conspiracy and Holocaust denial idea gained 90,000 users between February-October 2021.¹²²

¹¹⁶ Ciaran O’Connor. “Hatescape: An In-Depth Analysis of Extremism and Hate Speech on TikTok.” Institute for Strategic Dialogue. 2021. <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/hatescape-an-in-depth-analysis-of-extremism-and-hate-speech-on-tiktok/>

¹¹⁷ Jordan McSwiney, Greta Jasser, and Dominik Hammer. “Alt-Tech and Online Organizing after the Capitol Riots.” Global Network on Extremism and Technology. 2021. <https://gnet-research.org/2021/01/21/alt-tech-and-online-organising-after-the-capitol-riots/>

¹¹⁸ “The Violent White Supremacy Issue.” Jigsaw. N.d. <https://jigsaw.google.com/the-current/white-supremacy/>. Accessed 28 November 2021.

¹¹⁹ Bobby Allyn. “Lex Luthor of the Internet: The Man Keeping Far-Right Websites Alive.” NPR. 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/08/965448572/meet-the-man-behind-epik-the-tech-firm-keeping-far-right-websites-alive>; Rob Kunzia, Curt Devine, and Yahya Abou-Ghazala. “Epik is a refuge for the deplatformed far-right. Here’s why its CEO insists on doing it.” CNN. 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/09/business/epik-hack-ceo-rob-monster-invs/index.html>

¹²⁰ Jack Nicas and Davey Alba. “How Parler, A Chosen App of Trump Fans, Became a Test of Free Speech.” New York Times. 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/10/technology/parler-app-trump-free-speech.html>

¹²¹ <https://hopenothate.org.uk/an-open-letter-to-telegram/>

¹²² “Telegram warned of nurturing subculture deifying terrorists.” The Guardian. 2021.

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/oct/14/telegram-warned-of-nurturing-subculture-deifying-terrorists>



6 Strengths and Vulnerabilities in Online Leaderless Resistance

Given these critical requirements, we identify several key vulnerabilities to the RMVE’s use of leaderless resistance structures. The first class of vulnerabilities encompass the network’s reliance on a web of interconnected, but independent, units to coordinate operations. Specifically, we suggest that these organizational structures produce three key weaknesses: poor control over members, poor vetting procedures, and poor group cohesion. We summarize these vulnerabilities in Table 6.

Table 6. Strengths and Weaknesses in Online Leaderless Resistance Structures

Class	Network Feature	Strength	Vulnerabilities
Organizational	Leaderless	Adaptability and Resilience	Poor Control
	Underground/Clandestine	Secrecy, Stealth, and Plausible Deniability	Poor Vetting
	Local Initiative and Autonomy	Independence and Flexibility	Poor Cohesion
Ideological	Narratives	Sense of Purpose, Belonging, and Indefatigability	Content Distribution (Accessibility) and Receptivity
	Dense Communication Networks	Redundant and Resilient Coordination Systems	Critical Nodes, Coordination Barriers

Organizational Challenges

First, leaderless structures can result in poor control over members. By encouraging users to conduct violent attacks on their own initiative, the movement relinquishes control over the targets, tactics, and effectiveness of this attack. In some cases, this can be an advantage to the movement because it creates plausible deniability and allows the movement to evade responsibility for violence. However, it can also create a moral hazard problem if followers use violence in reprehensible ways. For example, Timothy McVeigh’s Oklahoma City Bombing triggered a backlash among the American Militia movement because his attack killed 19 children, a target generally deemed off-limits.¹²³ Unsanctioned – or morally reprehensible violence – can endanger the movement’s ability to retain existing members, attract new followers, and continue its fight.

Second, leaderless structures can result in poor vetting measures. Leaderless resistance structures are highly susceptible to infiltration. By propagating a “big-tent” ideology and opening membership to anyone who might be interested, the RMVE network sacrifices the ability to properly vet members. The anonymity of the Internet allows people to adopt personas and identities to match whatever a group is looking for.

¹²³ Bryan Robinson. “Experts: McVeigh won’t be a militia martyr.” ABC News. 2006. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=93065&page=1>



A final and related organizational problem is that leaderless resistance results in poor cohesion. Leaderless resistance encourages individuals to operate independently of one another. This means there is relatively little cohesion among members or unifying ties other than their commitment to a shared ideology. The consequence of this lack of cohesion is that members do not trust each other. This makes the group vulnerable to fragmentation, splintering, and in-fighting.¹²⁴ Since members do not trust each other, a commitment problem can arise. They cannot credibly commit to not divulge information about internal operations because other members have similar incentives to turn to the police. In turn, it allows outsiders to infiltrate these movements or co-opt existing members to become informants.

Ideological and Communication Challenges

Beyond these organizational vulnerabilities, leaderless resistance is also susceptible to several ideological and communication challenges. In practice, the RMVE's need to disseminate its ideology and doctrine to inspire follower actions represent a critical point of failure as well.

First, leaderless resistance narratives can falter if they are undercut by either counter-messaging or a perception of vulnerability and frailty. This can impede the movement's ability to legitimate the use of violence and provide a sense of urgency and momentum to the cause. For example, the failure of the January 6 insurrection had a demoralizing effect on the movement. The inability to prevent Joe Biden's inauguration cast doubt on the movement's ability to effectively organize. This led some members to defect and lead the group. The North Carolina Oath Keepers splintered from the mainstream Oath Keepers militia in 2021 believing the riots had crossed a line.¹²⁵ Elsewhere, elements of the chauvinistic Proud Boys organization quickly turned on Trump following the J6 events and mocked him as a "total failure," a "shill", and "extraordinarily weak."¹²⁶ The desire to be part of something bigger and better conflicts with the desire of individuals to be part of a losing campaign. This can lead to defections and people leaving the movement.

While it remains to be seen, the conviction in the Unite the Right Charlottesville trial may represent another blow to the perceived viability of the RMVE movement. The jury found the main organizers behind the Unite the Right Rally liable for \$25 million in damages.¹²⁷ The ruling seemed to signal that the federal government was willing to take a stronger stance in prosecuting RMVE extremism within the United States. This could act as a deterrent against future organizers.

Publicizing the failures of RMVE networks can also sow discord and lower morale among the group as to whether violence works. It can seed doubt as to whether the movement will be able to achieve its desired aims and potentially push fringe or weaker supporters to drop off from the movement.

A related vulnerability to the RMVE is its reliance on a unifying ideology to connect followers. This suggests that, if the ideology produced conflicting guidance on how to best carry out its message, then this could undercut the movement and sow internal divisions. Restrictions on extremist materials can make it harder for would-be recruits to discover key texts, manifests, and learn about these ideas.

¹²⁴ Paul Staniland. *Networks of rebellion*. Cornell University Press, 2014.

¹²⁵ Thomas Sherrill. "Local Oath Keepers Split from National following Jan. 6." Columbus News Reporter. 2021. <https://nrcolumbus.com/local-oath-keepers-split-from-national-following-jan-6/>

¹²⁶ Sheera Frenkel and Alan Feuer. "'A Total Failure': The Proud Boys Now Mock Trump." New York Times. 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/20/technology/proud-boys-trump.html>

¹²⁷ Neil MacFarquhar. "Jury Finds Rally Organizers Responsible for Charlottesville Violence." New York Times. November 23, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/23/us/charlottesville-rally-verdict.html>



Amazon, for example, restricted sales of *The Turner Diaries* following the January 6 attack.¹²⁸ It also restricted QAnon merchandise.¹²⁹

A final vulnerability in leaderless resistance is its reliance on dense communication networks. If networking platforms are harder to yield for communication and coordination purposes, then it will be harder for potential recruits to (1) access information, (2) share information, and (3) publicize or claim responsibility for their attacks. The RMVE’s movement to communicate increasingly online makes members more visible to monitoring and detection efforts. It also creates opportunities for private stakeholders to intervene and address the situation. Online surveillance mechanisms, especially when coordinated in conjunction with private companies, can enable law enforcement to detect these groups.

7 Policy Considerations to Combat Vulnerabilities

How can policymakers improve resilience against a hydra-headed network? Traditional counterterrorism procedures centered around law enforcement, litigation, and arrests do have some effect in hampering operational capacity; however, these measures are less likely to cripple a decentralized, leaderless movement than one which relies heavily on a particular leader or territory to operate.

This section outlines a series of policy options to combat critical vulnerabilities in leaderless resistance movements. We highlight case examples, where possible, to demonstrate the efficacy of particular interventions and also note how resistance structures may adapt to circumvent these interventions. We ultimately assess that community-based and industry-based interventions are more likely to succeed than law enforcement-based interventions. The profound distrust of government in these communities limits the potential effectiveness of government-backed interventions and also creates a high potential for unanticipated, counterproductive effects.

Table 7. Vulnerabilities and Policy Options

Vulnerabilities	Policy Options
Organizational Cohesion and Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Litigation ● Law Enforcement ● Informants ● Infiltration ● Ideological Divisions
Narrative, Perceived Momentum, and Focal Points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Redirect Methods ● Counter-Narratives ● Inoculation ● Content Moderation ● Deradicalization and disengagement
Communication Tools, Coordination Networks, and Critical Nodes (Influencers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● De-platforming ● Proscription ● Disengagement ● Industry Hash-Sharing Directories

¹²⁸ Nick Statt. “Amazon pulls white supremacist novel *The Turner Diaries* alongside QAnon purge.” *The Verge*. Jan. 12, 2021. <https://www.theverge.com/2021/1/12/22227049/amazon-the-turner-diaries-q-anon-purge-removal-capitol-attack>

¹²⁹ Jason Del Rey. “Amazon is removing some right-wing militia and QAnon merchandise.” *Vox*. Jan. 12, 2021. <https://www.vox.com/recode/2021/1/11/22224722/amazon-oath-keepers-3-three-percenters-hats-badges-merch>



Vulnerability 1: Organizational Cohesion and Control

There are several avenues through which law enforcement actors can effectively respond to the threat of racially-motivated violent extremism. First and foremost, traditional law enforcement operations remain a valuable tool to deter violent extremist plots. Coordination with journalists, far-right researchers, and informants can provide critical information about a group's procedures, members, and plans as they evolve. A prime example of these methods involves The Order, a white supremacist group active in the 1980s, which was brought down with information provided by a former member, Tom Martinez.¹³⁰ His cooperation with law enforcement culminated in "Operation Clean Sweep," where ten of The Order's members were arrested and imprisoned for racketeering and conspiracy charges.

The expanding digital footprint of leaderless resistance networks presents a unique opportunity for law enforcement to infiltrate groups and collect information. Such operations do not need to be costly or time-consuming. In Germany, for instance, an art collective attempted to identify neo-Nazi protestors at a Chemnitz event by asking the public to submit names of people they recognized in photos. The program took an unexpected turn when neo-Nazis "flocked to the site to search their own names..., supplying information about their networks, whereabouts and even their employers in the process."¹³¹ This event alone provided information about approximately 1,500 protestors in attendance.

However, law enforcement agencies must address RMVE and paramilitary extremists within their ranks in order to better bolster intervention efforts. The Center for Strategic and International Studies¹³² and the Center for Policing Equity¹³³ have documented numerous instances of law enforcement officers being complicit in or actively supporting groups involved in domestic terrorism. In response to this trend, law enforcement must identify, respond to, and remove officers who are in any way affiliated with violent extremist groups. This includes initial and periodic background checks, updating standards on inappropriate on and offline behavior, and conducting necessary investigations on associations with these groups. They must also develop robust institutional policies and practices that raise awareness on the issue and promote nondiscrimination and racial equity. This includes training personnel on recognizing radicalization, conducting investigations on misconduct allegations, and partnering with community members to assist in monitoring activity. Finally, law enforcement approaches may falter due to common mistrust of state authorities within the RMVE movement. Law enforcement actions can backfire, feeding into anti-state narratives and enabling the RMVE movement to capitalize on mistakes to attract new recruits.

Litigation

The freedoms of speech, association, assembly, and petition comprise the collective freedom of expression enshrined in the First Amendment. Apart from a few exceptions, the U.S. Supreme Court has upheld the view that all speech, including controversial hate speech, is protected under the First Amendment. Hateful sentiments that threaten or incite criminal action may be punished as a hate *crime* but not as categorical hate *speech*.¹³⁴ However, the advent of social media has increased public awareness

¹³⁰ Nancy Egan, "[The Order](#)," Britannica.

¹³¹ Isaac Stanley-Becker, "['Thank you, dear Nazis': A German art collective says it tricked neo-Nazis into outing themselves online](#)," *The Washington Post*, December 18, 2018.

¹³² Seth Jones, Catrina Doxsee, and Grace Hwang, "[The Military, Police, and the Rise of Terrorism in the United States](#)," CSIS, April 12, 2021.

¹³³ Kim Buchanan et al., "[White Supremacy In Policing: How Law Enforcement Agencies Can Respond](#)," Center for Policing Equality, 2021.

¹³⁴ Stephen J. Wermiel, "[The Ongoing Challenge to Define Free Speech](#)," American Bar Association, *Human Rights Magazine* 43, no. 4.



of the dangers of hateful rhetoric, and demands for punishment of hate speech have steadily increased. While it remains unlikely that existing protections for extremist rhetoric will be removed or altered, there are other mechanisms through which litigation can combat extremist organizations and their dangerous influences. The case of the Atomwaffen Division (AWD) illustrates the means through which groups can be dismantled without violations of the First Amendment.

In 2015, Brandon Russell announced the founding of AWD on the now-defunct Iron March forums.¹³⁵ In May 2017, Russell's roommate Devon Arthurs killed two of his other roommates, also members of AWD. Beyond Arthurs' arrest, law enforcement authorities found arms, explosives, and radioactive materials in Russell's possession. In September 2017, Russell pleaded guilty to unlawful possession and storage of explosives and was sentenced to five years in prison.

The imprisonment of AWD's leader prompted an ideological transition under the subsequent leadership of John Cameron Denton. Some members left the group after Denton radicalized the group to embrace accelerationism and Satanism.¹³⁶ Various other AWD members have been convicted for crimes outside of overt violence. In October 2019, police seized a cache of guns from Kaleb Cole, the leader of AWD Washington state, under the state's "red flag" law for individuals deemed to pose a risk to themselves or others.¹³⁷ Two months later, when police stopped Cole and other AWD members for speeding in Texas, Cole was charged with violating a court order associated with the red flag law, and the other passenger was charged with possession of ammunition and firearms while using a prohibited substance.¹³⁸ Denton, AWD's leader, was arrested and charged for his role in the organization's swatting campaign, and four other AWD members were indicted for harassing journalists.¹³⁹

Investigative journalists have also played an important role in revealing and disentangling the members and actions of extremist groups. In 2018, ProPublica exposed the identities of AWD's fragile central leadership, as well as members in 23 states.¹⁴⁰ This investigation provided essential information for law enforcement to link an AWD member to the murder of a 19-year-old gay Jewish man. Journalists' repeated infiltrations revealed critical details about the group's violent activities, ultimately contributing to its disintegration. Through these and other actions, law enforcement, investigative reporters, and the justice system successfully inhibited AWD's ability to organize and carry out attacks, forcing the group to disband in March 2020.

Several legal cases have prompted the disintegration of far-right groups due to high financial costs. For example, in 1988, three individuals associated with Tom Metzger's White Aryan Resistance pled guilty to murdering an Ethiopian civilian named Mulugeta Seraw. In a landmark civil trial, *Berhanu v. Metzger*, the Southern Poverty Law Center won a \$12.5 million verdict that asserted that Metzger, his son, and WAR were responsible for civil damages from Seraw's death.¹⁴¹ The verdict effectively bankrupted WAR, crippling its capacity to sustain operations. Similarly, in 2000, an Idaho state jury ordered Richard

¹³⁵"Atomwaffen Division." Southern Poverty Law Center. n.d. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/atomwaffen-division>

¹³⁶ "[Atomwaffen Division/National Socialist Order](#)," Stanford University Center for International Security and Cooperation.

¹³⁷ Mike Baker, "[Police Seize Guns From Man Thought to Be Neo-Nazi Leader](#)," *The New York Times*, October 17, 2019.

¹³⁸ Asia Fields, "[Suspected Washington leader of neo-Nazi group charged with violating gun ban under state's red-flag law](#)," *The Seattle Times*, last updated December 18, 2021.

¹³⁹ U.S. Attorney's Office Western District of Washington, "[Leader of Neo-Nazi group 'Atomwaffen' pleads guilty to hate crime and conspiracy charges for threatening journalists and advocates](#)," April 7, 2021.

¹⁴⁰ "[Atomwaffen Division](#)," Southern Poverty Law Center.

¹⁴¹ Brad Bennett, "['Remember Mulugeta': 30 years after SPLC lawsuit, life and legacy of man killed by hate group memorialized](#)," Southern Poverty Law Center, October 25, 2020.



Butler, leader of Aryan Nations, to pay \$4.8 million to Victoria Keenan and her son, who had been attacked, beaten, and shot by three security guards outside Butler's 19-acre property.¹⁴² Once again, a lawsuit bankrupted one of the largest white supremacist groups of the time.¹⁴³

Most recently, in November 2021, jurors found leaders of the deadly 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, liable for injuries to counter-protesters. The jury awarded the plaintiffs \$25 million in damages, to be paid by 13 individuals and five white nationalist organizations.¹⁴⁴ These punitive verdicts enforce a substantial financial cost of engaging in racially-motivated violence, crippling groups' abilities to sustain their operations and deterring others from pursuing violence to meet their ends.

Another innovative approach to targeting RMVE groups through the legal system involves categorizing groups as criminal organizations. While a departure from more established methods, the trial of the Golden Dawn party in Greece demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach. Founded in the 1980s, the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn political party experienced a renaissance of popularity amid the mass unemployment, austerity measures, and disillusionment following the 2009 Greek financial crisis.¹⁴⁵ In the 2012 elections, Golden Dawn secured 18 seats in the national parliament, which increased to 21 seats in 2014, making it the third-largest political force in Greece. Despite its public-facing brand as a legitimate political party, however, Golden Dawn's violent undercurrent ultimately led to its downfall.

Golden Dawn was organized in a paramilitary-like structure where members adhered to hierarchical commands and participated in military training. In September 2013, a Golden Dawn member killed anti-fascist rapper Pavlos Fyssas, triggering widespread public outcry and a law enforcement crackdown. Because the Greek constitution affords political parties unique legal protections, authorities instead targeted 68 key party members as leaders of a criminal organization posing as a political group. In the landmark October 2020 verdict, a court convicted 50 people of membership in a criminal organization, including 18 former politicians.¹⁴⁶ Others were charged with the attempted murder of Egyptian fishermen in 2012, assault, possession of weapons, and employing violence to remove political rivals, migrants, and communists.¹⁴⁷ While neo-Nazi and neo-fascist parties have not disappeared entirely from Greece, the fallout of Golden Dawn's conviction has crippled the group's ability to mobilize public support and orchestrate targeted attacks against their political enemies.

Proscription and Banning

Finally, U.S. practitioners may take direction from European governments to guide effective policy responses against the RMVE movement. Several European countries have banned association with certain far-right extremist groups in response to violence and public pressure. For the first time in its history, the British government banned an extremist organization, National Action, in December 2016. Since then, the UK has proscribed four other groups, including the Sonnenkrieg Division (February 2020), Feuerkrieg Division (July 2020), Atomwaffen Division (April 2021), and The Base (July 2021). These proscriptions make it a criminal offense to join one of these organizations, invite or express support for them, or organize any meetings connected with them, with a maximum of fourteen years in prison. It is also a

¹⁴² Sam Howe Verhovek, "[Leaders of Aryan Nations Found Negligent in Attack](#)," *The New York Times*, September 8, 2000.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Neil MacFarquhar, "[Jury Finds Rally Organizers Responsible for Charlottesville Violence](#)," *The New York Times*, November 23, 2021.

¹⁴⁵ "[Golden Dawn](#)," Counter Extremism Project."

¹⁴⁶ Niki Kitsantonis, "Court Sentences Leaders of Greece's Golden Dawn to Prison," *The New York Times*, last updated April 27, 2021.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*



criminal offense to wear clothing or display items that suggest support for the group, with a penalty of six months in prison and/or a maximum fine of £5,000.¹⁴⁸ Germany has also banned groups in response to periods of increased far-right mobilization, including the early-mid 1990s, early 2000s, and 2011-2012.¹⁴⁹ In 2020, Germany banned several additional far-right groups, including Combat 18, Nordadler, and Wolfsbrigade 44.

The enduring question is whether proscribing far-right groups is an effective counter-extremism strategy. An assessment on the UK's banning of National Action found that the action was "undoubtedly successful in its primary aim of dismantling NA organizationally."¹⁵⁰ However, while National Action's proscription deterred some members from further extremist activity, others simply joined different groups or reorganized as the System Resistance Network, which is not yet banned. An analysis in Germany determined that banning extremist groups had a "moderating effect overall on the propaganda, policies, and activities of the organized extreme right."¹⁵¹

Despite these successes, two key challenges persist. First, proscribing groups does not address the ideological elements of these far-right groups, many of which exist primarily online. Second, bans are "relatively blunt instruments" if they are enacted but not enforced.¹⁵² The current slow-moving process of proscription and banning neither keeps pace with group dynamics nor addresses their ideological roots.¹⁵³ Such actions must be reinforced with continuous efforts to dismantle both the on- and offline remnants of these networks, wherever they remain.

Vulnerability 2: Ideological Narrative and Influencers

The most elusive element in countering RMVE is its core ideology. The Department of Homeland Security's September 2020 Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence dedicates one of its four central goals to preventing terrorism and targeted violence, but the steps outlined in the plan place far too great an emphasis on methods that experts have long warned are inefficient and often poorly implemented.

Ideological radicalization and deradicalization are not linear processes, and the effects of intervention are not reliably visible or measurable. Deradicalization programs and counternarratives, two significant examples from the Framework, have their well-deserved places in counter-extremism strategies, but the efficiency of the former and the typical execution of the latter leave much to be desired. These approaches can be very effective, but their potential for success depends entirely on quality, committed implementation.

Disengagement and Deradicalization

A well-established form of intervention involves disengagement and deradicalization programs, which work to reduce radicalized individuals' involvement with extremism in physical, social, and ideological dimensions.

¹⁴⁸ "[Proscribed terrorist groups or organizations](#)," UK government, Last updated November 26, 2021

¹⁴⁹ Michael C. Zeller, "[Germany: Is banning far-right groups enough?](#)," OpenDemocracy, February 17, 2020.

¹⁵⁰ Graham Macklin, "'[Only Bullets will Stop Us!](#)' – [The Banning of National Action in Britain](#)," in *Perspectives on Terrorism* vol 12., no. 6, December 2018, p. 116.

¹⁵¹ Gideon Botsch, Christoph Kopke, Fabian Virchow, "[Banning Extreme Right-Wing Associations in the Federal Republic of Germany](#)," in *Right-Wing Extremism in Europe*, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, p.274

¹⁵² *Ibid*, p.273

¹⁵³ Jacob Davey, Milo Comerford, Jakob Guhl, Will Baldet, Chloe Colliver, "[A Taxonomy for the Classification of Post-Organisational Violent Extremist & Terrorist Content](#)," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, December 2021.



Disengagement refers to a behavioral change from offending to non-offending actions.¹⁵⁴ In contrast, deradicalization entails a “cognitive change from criminal, radical, or extremist identities to a non-criminal or moderate psychological state.”¹⁵⁵ Both approaches involve close, personalized work with radicalized individuals to address the grievances and circumstances that initially drew them into extremist circles.

Many programs provide housing, therapy, and medical assistance to mitigate the immediate needs that can feed into ideological grievances. Various programs also include consenting family members in disengagement and deradicalization processes in order to build a social support structure outside extremist networks and remind deradicalizing individuals that they have not been abandoned. These efforts help alleviate feelings of marginalization and helplessness that often sustain social connections with other extremists and, at their extreme, can drive individuals to violence.

Additionally, effective disengagement and deradicalization programs remove individuals from extremist milieus, both physical and social, and help to construct a personal identity and narrative divorced from prior extremist beliefs and life. During radicalization, individuals experience a “depluralization process,” wherein their core, personal beliefs are gradually reframed to align with extremist narratives (e.g., the moral permissibility of violence), values are redefined (e.g., “freedom” as extending only to the ideological in-group), and concepts are rejected (e.g., universal human rights). Repluralization refers to the process of dismantling these extremist narratives and redefining the values they pervert. Disengagement and deradicalization programs commonly incorporate counseling and ideological discussions to facilitate this process and forge a path forward.

Case Study: EXIT-Germany¹⁵⁶

EXIT programs emerged in the 1990s in Europe in response to the rise in extremist far right and neo-Nazi extremism. EXIT-Germany was established by criminologist Bernd Wagner and former Ingo Hasselbach in the summer of 2000. In addition to individual deradicalization programming, the program counsels institutions, communities, governments, and service providers on deradicalization program awareness, processes, and implementation.

EXIT-Germany challenges and counters extremist ideologies while actively engaging with the deradicalizing individual. In addressing the need element EXIT-Germany provides security and protection to clients who had long-term involvement and high-rank in extremist groups. They also provide psychological, educational, and employment support. To address the narrative aspect, the program providers facilitate personal reflection and introduce different perspectives on right-wing extremist movements and ideology to create an alternative worldview. For the network element, the program requires individuals to sever all connections to the group while also supporting family counseling. The program has contact with former right-wing extremists to motivate and mentor the deradicalizing individual.

A unique element of EXIT assistance is that the individual must be the first to reach out, demonstrating their genuine motivation to leave extremism behind. The program is widely accessible through phone, e-mail, text message, or letter. In addition, within this program, “exit” is not only leaving the extremist group—disengagement—but also when ideology and purpose of the group are challenged and become obsolete. According to their view, only a complete behavioral and cognitive split from the group will result in successful reintegration.

¹⁵⁴ Daniel Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization*, Contemporary Terrorism Studies, (New York: Routledge) p. 3.

¹⁵⁵ Daniel Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization*, Contemporary Terrorism Studies, (New York: Routledge) p. 3.

¹⁵⁶ “[EXIT-Germany: We Provide the Way Out](#),” EXIT-Deutschland.



A comparative study by the German Government between EXIT-Germany and the de-radicalization program by the German Internal Intelligence Service found that EXIT-Germany achieved lower recidivism and an almost four times higher overall number of received and handled cases. Since 2000, 500 individuals have completed the program with only a 3% recidivism rate.

Several best practices have emerged from decades of evaluating disengagement and deradicalization programs both at home and abroad. Among them are the involvement of former extremists, coordination across public service sectors, and ease of accessibility.

Involving former extremists at the early stages of intervention helps to establish credibility and build rapport with radicalized individuals seeking to exit the extremist milieu. Having already experienced the deradicalization process themselves, former extremists often take on mentorship roles. These former extremists are uniquely able to work with their radicalized mentees from a position of lived experience and understanding that cannot be otherwise taught.

Effective programs also coordinate across a variety of sectors, including healthcare, education, social services, and law enforcement, which must all operate in tandem to address multidimensional needs. Additionally, while law enforcement authorities play an important role in mitigating public safety risks throughout the deradicalization process, intelligence-gathering and surveillance of individuals should be curtailed whenever possible.

Finally, programs must be readily accessible to those in need. Radicalized individuals, as well as concerned friends, family, and community members, should be able to access support through hotlines, email, and in-person appointments with trusted and trained community leaders. There should be as few barriers as possible between individuals in need and the support, advice, or intervention they require.

The challenge of disengagement and deradicalization efforts demands both a broad national strategy to address violent extremism and localized interventions that place local resources and communities at the center of each operational stage. In order to achieve an appropriate balance between these two levels of focus, federal efforts should be directed toward empowering and working alongside established, productive organizations like the Free Radicals Project,¹⁵⁷ Life After Hate,¹⁵⁸ and Parents for Peace.¹⁵⁹ These and other private sector organizations have had considerable success in their efforts fighting extremism and radicalization in their many forms. Rather than spending resources recreating and overshadowing these groups, federal and donor funds should be directed toward successful private sector efforts to support their disengagement and deradicalization work. Developing a streamlined, central process to collect and provide both financial and operational support for existing, successful counter-extremism projects will more efficiently address the needs of at-risk individuals and should be an immediate priority.

Inoculation and Counternarratives

At its core, radicalization functions as a persuasion process: targeted individuals are exposed to narratives that, over time, alter their beliefs and attitudes to align with an extremist ideology. The challenge, therefore, is to disrupt this process and limit its effectiveness. One method of doing so is through attitudinal inoculation.

¹⁵⁷ Christian Picciolini. Last updated 2021. <https://www.freeradicals.org/>

¹⁵⁸ “Life After Hate.” Last updated 2022. <https://www.lifeafterhate.org/about-us-1>

¹⁵⁹ “Parents for Peace.” Last updated 2022. <https://www.parents4peace.org/about>



According to inoculation theory, individuals are more resistant to persuasion if they recognize an attempt to challenge their beliefs and are prepared with information to refute that challenge.¹⁶⁰ During attitudinal inoculation, an individual is warned that they will receive a message that challenges their beliefs (e.g., extremist content). After, they are provided information to oppose the original message.¹⁶¹ This format can be applied to a broad range of belief systems and prepares individuals to refute and defend against related extremist rhetoric if they encounter it in the future. More broadly, inoculation can effectively reduce susceptibility to fake news¹⁶² and reduce adherence to conspiracy theories.¹⁶³ Although more research is needed to evaluate the robustness and limits of inoculation, it nonetheless remains a valuable tool to counter extremists' efforts to spread and reinforce their narratives.

Case Study: The Danish Approach to Preventing Violent Extremism

The Danish approach to preventing and countering violent extremism has garnered international attention for its “soft security” approach. The program addresses all types of radicalization, based on “systematized multi-agency collaboration between various social-services providers” including the educational system, the health-care systems, the police, and the intelligence and security services.¹⁶⁴ The program does not replace more “hard security” approaches, but is related to cases where punitive action is not applicable, but a potential threat from an individual persists.

The Danish approach integrates top-down and bottom-up approaches. The national level comprises the Security and Intelligence Service and the Ministry of Immigration, Integration, and Housing. These actors cooperate with regional and local levels, at least in an advisory capacity. There are pre-existing networks of schools, psychiatric health care, social services, and police in most municipalities. Unique to the Danish approach is “Info-Houses,” which are “a framework for local cooperation between the police and municipal social service administrations and providers.” They are established in all twelve Danish police districts to assess concerns about radicalization, coordinate between actors, and refer at-risk individuals to necessary service providers.

There are three levels of the Danish “Prevention Pyramid:” the General level focuses on awareness and capacity-build for society, the Specific level prevents further radicalization of individuals and groups identified as extremist, and the Targeted level obstructs specific events by providing intervention to individuals assessed as extremist. General-level activities include providing information about radicalization to the public, conducting outreach to actors in contact with at-risk individuals, and dialogue workshops for schools. Activities at the Specific level include mentoring, educational and career coaching, guidance for parents and relatives of the individual. Targeted-level activities are similar but focus on individually-tailored programs to address the conditions that led to radicalization.

While the Danish approach experiences its share of challenges and criticism, overall, it underscores the effectiveness of locally-based interventions nested within national agencies. These are lessons to be drawn from the professionalization and institutionalization of this approach that has led to its success.

Counternarratives, another well-known practice in countering violent extremism, involve the dissemination of content that challenges common extremist narratives and talking points. One well publicized example of this strategy is the Department of State’s “Think Again, Turn Away” campaign,

¹⁶⁰ William J. McGuire, “The Effectiveness of Supportive and Refutational Defenses in Immunizing and Restoring Beliefs Against Persuasion,” *Sociometry* vol. 24, no. 2., June 1961.

¹⁶¹ Kurt Braddock, “Vaccinating Against Hate: Using Attitudinal Inoculation to Confer Resistance to Persuasion by Extremist Propaganda,” in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, November 25, 2019.

¹⁶² Stephan Lewandowsky, Sander Van Der Linden, and John Cook, “Can we Inoculate Against Fake News,” *Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats*, August 21, 2018.

¹⁶³ Eric Bonetto et al., “Priming Resistance to Persuasion decreases adherence to Conspiracy Theories,” in *Social Influence* vol. 13, no. 3, May 9, 2018.

¹⁶⁴ Eric Bonetto et al., “Priming Resistance to Persuasion decreases adherence to Conspiracy Theories,” in *Social Influence* vol. 13, no. 3, May 9, 2018. p. 7.



which sought to deter individuals from becoming foreign fighters for the Islamic State. Despite its many iterations and considerable budget, the campaign was criticized as overly sarcastic, ineffective, and alienating to its target audience.¹⁶⁵ The program's various shortcomings highlight three central aspects that counternarrative campaigns must carefully develop: the content itself, the messenger behind the content, and the anticipated response of the audience.

At its most basic level, effective counternarrative content appeals to the emotions of its audience. Violent extremists leverage grievances and dissatisfaction—feelings of resentment, marginalization, or a need to regain a sense of personal significance, for instance—to radicalize others. Successful counternarrative content responds directly to these sentiments not with snarky comments, but with compassion and understanding, in order to present relatable, familiar content that at-risk individuals are more likely to meaningfully engage with. Counternarrative campaigns must therefore be tailored to the specific types of information, values, narratives, and grievances most prevalent among its audience.

Counternarratives Case Study 1: Against Violent Extremism and Jigsaw¹⁶⁶

In October 2015, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue's Against Violent Extremism (AVE) network of former extremists and survivors of extremism partnered with Alphabet's Jigsaw, an incubator that uses technology to address global challenges to pilot three counter narrative campaigns. The three objectives of the project were to develop and disseminate counter-narrative content to target audiences on social media through small non-profit organizations; analyze the effectiveness of the social media platforms in reaching and engaging the target audiences; and provide guidance to small non-profit organizations on developing effective counter narrative content.

To target audiences interacting with far-right extremist content, the project partners with Exit-USA, a U.S.-based non-profit organization founded by former extremists that facilitates disengagement from the violent far-right.¹⁶⁷ The counter narrative campaign the EXIT-USA developed with AVE was designed to discredit far-right extremist groups, 'sow the seeds of doubt' among far-right extremist individuals, and promote their program as a "way out" for individuals and their concerned families and friends. It's four videos featured EXIT and AVE staff who were former extremists, where they shared their stories and debunked the "false truths" disseminated by groups. The reflective and sentimental tone of these videos provides a non-confrontational but potent challenge to the ideas extremist group's use to foment radicalization.

Analysis of the three counter narrative campaigns yielded several notable insights. First, while a different organization had higher video views overall, EXIT-USA's videos had the highest retention rate on average across all videos, underscoring the importance of sustained engagement. Second, Twitter garnered the highest number of total engagements across all campaigns, highlighting this as a useful platform for future campaigns. Finally, for the EXIT-USA campaign, Facebook generated the greatest quantity of impactful engagement, as demonstrated by the number of comments on the videos posted on the platform and the eight cases of individuals reaching out to EXIT-USA for deradicalization support via Facebook Messenger. Overall, even the antagonistic comments and reactions to the videos illustrate that directly addressing the ideas, concerns, and ideological elements of far-right groups effectively reaches the target audience and sows the "seed of doubt" and critical thinking that can eventually create a cognitive opening for deradicalization.

¹⁶⁵ Helene Cooper, "U.S. Drops Snark in Favor of Emotion to Undercut Extremists," *The New York Times*, July 28, 2016.

¹⁶⁶ Tanya Silverman Christopher J. Stewart Zahed Amanullah Jonathan Birdwell, "[The Impact Of Counter-Narratives](#)," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2016.

¹⁶⁷ "[We Can Help](#)," EXIT USA.



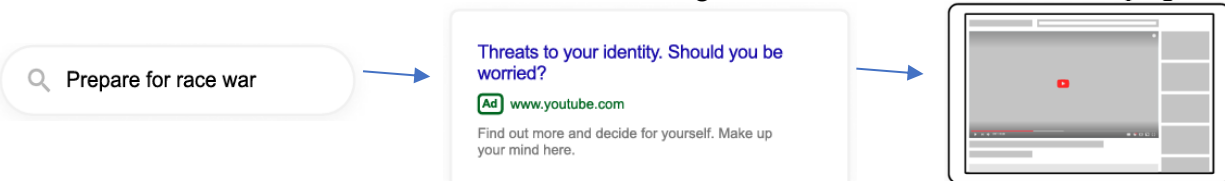
Effective counternarratives must also be presented by actors which the target audience view as credible and trustworthy. Former extremists and their family members, for instance, are generally recognized as credible counternarrative messengers.¹⁶⁸ Campaigns sponsored or disseminated by government agencies, law enforcement, or countering violent extremism practitioners are particularly likely to exacerbate feelings of marginalization. Additionally, extremists often tout government-sponsored counternarrative content as evidence of perceived political or social persecution. Effective counternarratives, therefore, are presented in a manner that minimizes their potential to reinforce extremist narratives.

Counter Narrative Case Study Case Study 2: Moonshot CVE & The Redirect Method in Canada

Moonshot CVE is a UK-based tech startup established in 2015. Their work centers around connecting individuals vulnerable to online radicalization to safer content, counselors, and other service providers.¹⁶⁹ Moonshot and Google's Jigsaw pioneered The Redirect Method in 2016, which uses targeted advertising to connect people searching the internet for violent extremist content with constructive alternative messages.¹⁷⁰

Moonshot launched The Redirect Method with the Canadian Centre for Community Engagement and Violence Prevention from February 2016 to March 2020. The campaign targeted individuals based on their Google keyword searches linked to extremist content and redirected them by placing ads for alternative content in the search results. Moonshot collaborated with local partners, former extremists, translators, and subject matter experts to create a 3-language (English, French, Arabic) database with over 72,000 keywords associated with violent extremism.¹⁷¹ If an individual searches for one or some of the keywords, the Redirect Model generates ads for non-confrontational but informative content.

Canada Redirect collected search traffic associated with a range of violent far-right groups to expand and refine their database to over 26,000 search terms in English and 31,000 in French. The campaign



achieved 155,589 impressions (number of times an ad appeared) and 2,234 clicks for violent far-right content. Moonshot also gathered users' demographic and geographic data and analyzed the content they were frequently searching for, including slogans and symbols (ex. "Hitler was right"), conspiracy theories ("Le Grand Remplacement"), and hate music.

This program revealed several insights on online counter narrative initiatives. First, users aged 25-34 were most interested in violent extremist content, demonstrating the importance of reaching this target audience. Second, individuals searching for far-right extremist content were more likely to engage with alternative content than individuals searching for Islamic State and Al-Qaeda-related content, illustrating the effectiveness of this method to redirect potentially far-right extremists. Third, music playlists had the most sustained engagement, indicating the types of content that interventions should deploy to counter extremist subcultures.

Finally, counternarrative campaigns must have a defined objective and measure of success: what is the ideal response to the counternarrative content? While desired outcomes vary between campaigns, common central goals include exposing audiences to appealing alternative content and directing them to deradicalization resources.

¹⁶⁸ Daniel Koehler, "Understanding Deradicalization," *Contemporary Terrorism Studies*, p. 105-106.

¹⁶⁹ "Work: A Global Perspective," Moonshot.

¹⁷⁰ "The Redirect Method," Moonshot.

¹⁷¹ "Redirect Method Canada Final Report," Moonshot, March 2021, p. 5.



Vulnerability 3: Dense Communication Networks

Content Moderation

The final vulnerability in leaderless resistance networks is their reliance on dense communication networks to coordinate. An important strategy then is to counter extremist networking is to limit individuals' ability to share and publicize their actions. Platforms may try to restrict videos, remove manifestos, or ban accounts promoting or disseminating propaganda after an attack or violent demonstration takes place. However, it is incredibly easy to manipulate and repost content to continue spreading it. Although Facebook Live removed the live video of the Christchurch shooting shortly after it occurred, many supporters took copies of the recording to YouTube, LiveLeak, BitChute, and various archival sites. Content moderators struggled to redact and remove the various posts, and users carefully manipulated the video by adding watermarks, changing the video quality, and re-recording the video to help evade easy detection.¹⁷²

Other evasion techniques include restricting comments to avoid potential reporting, communicating in private and hidden groups, creating multiple accounts, and using slightly misspelled hashtags to avoid algorithmic detection. An August 2021 investigation into extremist speech on TikTok found users quickly adapted to the banning of hashtags like #BrentonTarrant by using #BrentonTarrent instead. Similarly, while the Islamophobic hashtag #RemoveKebab was blocked, #RemoveKebob was not.¹⁷³ Social media platforms commonly employ algorithmic and human content moderators to look for “posts explicitly calling for white nationalism or white separatism,” permitting a glut of extremist content to slip by undetected as long as it avoids direct use of certain buzzwords and phrases.¹⁷⁴ Such a limited scope of content moderation allows groups and individuals to persist undisturbed on social media platforms despite constantly espousing dangerous or hateful rhetoric.¹⁷⁵

Deplatforming

Deplatforming refers to the banning of controversial figures or speech on social media platforms. This tactic of countering violent extremism has emerged over the last few years as extremist movements have utilized online platforms to operationalize their narratives, networks, and offline action. In 2019, Telegram and the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation completed two Action Days targeting Islamic State propaganda videos, publications, and social media accounts supporting terrorism.¹⁷⁶ The 2019 disruption had a profound impact: within one month, there was a 65.5% decline in the number of organic posts and a 94.7% decline in the number of forwarded posts.¹⁷⁷ While Islamic State supporters did migrate to alternate platforms, the group's ability to recruit, coordinate, and plan was diminished due to sustained action.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷² Maura Conway, Ryan Scrivens, Logan Macnair. “Right-Wing Extremists’ Persistent Online Presence: History and Contemporary Trends.” ICCT Policy Brief. October 2019.

<https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2019/11/Right-Wing-Extremists-Persistent-Online-Presence.pdf>

¹⁷³ Ciaran O’Connor. “Hatescape: An In-Depth Analysis of Extremism and Hate Speech on TikTok.” Institute for Strategic Dialogue. 2021. <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/hatescape-an-in-depth-analysis-of-extremism-and-hate-speech-on-tiktok/>

¹⁷⁴ https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/Double_Standards_Content_Moderation.pdf

¹⁷⁵ <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanmac/mark-zuckerberg-joel-kaplan-facebook-alex-jones>

¹⁷⁶ Amarnath Amarasingam, Shiraz Maher, Charlie Winter, “[How Telegram Disruption Impacts Jihadist Platform Migration](#),” Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats,” January 2021, p. 5.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 6.

¹⁷⁸ Brad Honigberg, “[Why Deplatforming Just Isn’t Enough](#),” CSIS, February 11, 2021.



Similar patterns emerge when deplatforming the far-right. A case study analysis on three deplatformed extremists on Twitter—Alex Jones, Milo Yiannopoulos, and Owen Benjamin—found that references to each influencer declined by an average of 91.77% after they were banned.¹⁷⁹ Deplatforming minimized these figures' influence, limited the spread of their anti-social and conspiratorial ideas, and reduced the activity and toxicity of their supporters.¹⁸⁰ However, sects of these communities consistently migrate to alternative platforms or new accounts to share more toxic, radical content. “Alt-tech” platforms, which include websites like patriots.win and apps like Gab and Telegram, function as safe havens for the deplatformed. This category of digital infrastructure is characterized by permissive Terms of Service and few content moderation rules, providing an atmosphere for extremists of nearly every vein to communicate and organize across the digital landscape.

To combat these vulnerabilities, leaderless resistance may leverage closed groups or Dark Web portals to hide their activity. However, Facebook and other social media platforms have devised methods to detect fraudulent or extremist activity. For example, Facebook can shut down a closed group if members repeatedly post or engage with fake news stories.¹⁸¹ If users report content inside the group, then Facebook can take it down for violating its Community Standards protocol.¹⁸² In extreme cases, social media sites might deplatform – or forcibly remove – organizations from their servers. In these cases, the prominent adaptation is for groups to move to more “Dark Web” sites such as the move from The_Donald Reddit channel to patriots.win.

Private platforms have the authority to circumvent freedom of speech laws to moderate and deplatform hate speech under Section 230 of the U.S. Communications Decency Act,¹⁸³ and research demonstrates that social media platforms play a pivotal role in curbing the spread of extremist content. In the wake of the 2019 Christchurch terrorist attacks, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern established the Christchurch Call, a pledge by governments and tech companies to counter violent extremist content online.¹⁸⁴ The Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) is a platform through which governments operationalize this pledge. It implements directives from the U.S., Europe, Australia, and New Zealand for extremist content removal, engages with over 120 tech companies, and updates its hash-sharing database of known terrorist-produced images and videos.¹⁸⁵ Platforms including Zoom, Tumblr, Amazon, and Discord have joined Meta, Microsoft, Twitter, and YouTube in contributing to GIFCT's hash-sharing database. Notably, TikTok has not yet joined.¹⁸⁶ While deplatforming is ultimately a short-term measure and should not be relied upon as a blanket solution, GIFCT and the Christchurch Call remain excellent examples of a sustainable and transparent approach that involves collaboration between the private sector, governments, and civil society.¹⁸⁷

¹⁷⁹ Shagun Jhaver, “[Evaluating the Effectiveness of Deplatforming as a Moderation Strategy on Twitter](#),” *Medium*, October 1, 2021.

¹⁸⁰ Shagun Jhaver, “[Evaluating the Effectiveness of Deplatforming as a Moderation Strategy on Twitter](#),” in *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, vol.5, no. 381, October 2021, p. 21

¹⁸¹ Jack Kastrenakes. “Facebook will punish groups for repeatedly spreading fake news.” *The Verge*. April 10, 2019. <https://www.theverge.com/2019/4/10/18304739/facebook-groups-reduce-misinformation-harmful-content-changes-messenger>

¹⁸² Gennie Gebhart. “Understanding Public, Closed, and Secret Facebook Groups.” *Electronic Frontier Foundation*. June 13, 2017. <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2017/06/understanding-public-closed-and-secret-facebook-groups>

¹⁸³ “[Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act](#),” *Electronic Frontier Foundation*.

¹⁸⁴ “[Christchurch Call](#),” *New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade*.

¹⁸⁵ Courtney C. Radsch, “[GIFCT: Possibly the Most Important Acronym You’ve Never Heard Of](#),” *Just Security*, September 30, 2020.

¹⁸⁶ “[Zoom Joins Meta, Microsoft as the Newest Member of Tech Industry Counterterrorism Group](#),” *Gadgets360*, last updated December 16, 2021.

¹⁸⁷ Brad Honigberg, “[Why Deplatforming Just Isn’t Enough](#),” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, February 11, 2021.



Case Study: Deplatforming Iron March

Iron March was a Neo-Nazi online forum established by a Russia-based individual dubbed “Slavros” in 2011 and disbanded in November 2017.¹⁸⁸ It was structured as a standard web forum that allowed users to read materials, view posts, share messages on board threads, and privately communicate. Iron March’s users became increasingly radicalized as they read and discussed texts such as *SIEGE*, *The Turner Diaries*, and *Mein Kampf*.

Iron March was a hub for international neo-Nazi groups during its six years of activity. It had about 1,200 regular users and a transnational reach with at least nine affiliated neo-Nazi groups, notably Atomwaffen Division in the U.S., National Action in the UK, and the Scandanavian Nordic Resistance Movement.¹⁸⁹ Slavros and U.S. Atomwaffen co-founders Devon Arthurs and Brandon Russell collaborated to recruit young people from Iron March. They also used the platform to coordinate their activities, such as stickering campaigns on university campuses.¹⁹⁰ There have been several murders, violent plots, and weapons charges associated with members of Atomwaffen and far-right individuals. These developments indicate how Iron March drew teenagers in through video games, and Atomwaffen leaders radicalized them to commit “active measure” roles.

When Iron March shut down, it had more than 195,000 public posts and 4,500 private conversations.¹⁹¹ The level of activity on the site corresponded to events related to the far-right in the U.S. and worldwide. Some Iron March users have speculated that Slavros received international pressure to disband Iron March after Arthurs killed two of his roommates who were also active on the site.¹⁹² Some former Iron March users have now migrated to the small but expanding site, Fascist Forge. The rise and downfall of Iron March is a vivid example of the role of digital sub-cultures in radicalizing and recruiting individuals, but also the potential for hacktivist groups and law enforcement to observe and expose these sites.

8 Conclusion

This paper introduced a multi-layered systems approach to deal with the challenge of online leaderless resistance networks. New digital tools have led to a globalization of RMVE which seems unlikely to disappear. However, the RMVE’s reliance on online spaces also creates a new set of vulnerabilities. These challenges can undercut the perceived legitimacy, momentum, and growth of the movement. Based on a historical examination of leaderless resistance structures and comparative case studies of policy interventions in the United States, Denmark, Greece, and other European countries, we identified several different policy considerations to exploit these vulnerabilities. Specifically, we suggest an effective counter-RMVE strategy should draw on previously tested policy interventions including:

- *Law Enforcement-Based Interventions*: Proscription, Arrests, and Litigation
- *Community-Based Interventions*: Inoculation Theory, Counter-Messaging, Disengagement, De-Radicalization

¹⁸⁸ Jacques Singer-Emery and Rex Bray III, “[The Iron March Data Dump Provides a Window Into How White Supremacists Communicate and Recruit](#),” Lawfare, February 27, 2020.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Alexander Reid Ross, Emmi Bevenssee, and ZC, “[Transnational White Terror: Exposing Atomwaffen And The Iron March Networks](#),” *Bellingcat*, December 19, 2019.

¹⁹¹ Jacques Singer-Emery and Rex Bray III, “[The Iron March Data Dump Provides a Window Into How White Supremacists Communicate and Recruit](#),” Lawfare, February 27, 2020.

¹⁹² Michael Edison Hayden, “[Visions of Chaos: Weighing the Violent Legacy of Iron March](#),” Southern Poverty Law Center, February 15, 2019.



- *Industry-Based Interventions*: Deplatforming, Content Moderation, Redirect, and Hash-Sharing Directories

We ultimately assess that community-based and industry-based interventions are more likely to succeed than law enforcement-based interventions because the profound distrust of government in these communities limits the potential effectiveness of government-backed interventions and creates a high potential for unanticipated, counterproductive effects.