Global Network
on Extremism & Technology

Cults and Online Violent Extremism

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July 2023

GNET is a special project delivered by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, King's College London.

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Inform would like to thank a number of colleagues who read the report and provided valuable feedback and suggestions: Emeritus Professor Kim Knott, Ruth Westoby and Edward Graham-Hyde.

The Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET) is an academic research initiative backed by the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), an independent but industry-funded initiative for better understanding, and counteracting, terrorist use of technology. GNET is convened and led by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), an academic research centre based within the Department of War Studies at King's College London. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as representing those, either expressed or implied, of GIFCT, GNET or ICSR.

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Recommended citation:
Newcombe, Suzanne, Sarah Harvey, Jane Cooper, Ruby Forrester, Jo Banks, and Shanon Shah. "Cults and Online Violent Extremism." London: Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), July 2023. https://doi.org/10.18742/pub01-138.

Executive Summary

The word 'cultic' is applied to a diverse range of online activity. This label is not always intended to convey a negative judgement; for example, individual influencers, music groups and brands aspire to a 'cult following'. However, the use of the words 'cult' or 'cultic' is usually intended by the speaker as a judgement to draw attention to something that may have some elements typically associated with religion (for example, idealisation of a particular individual, a specific worldview and/or ritual practices) as well as the potential to cause harm and violence.

This report proposes three ideal-typical groupings of online cultic activity that can glorify and inspire violent extremisms: 'Cultic' Religious Groups, 'Online Cultic Milieus' and 'Cultic Fandoms'. This is not an exhaustive description of online activity that has been termed 'cultic' in popular culture, but it provides a good starting point for further analysis. This report argues that the understanding of 'cults' and online activity needs to be carefully nuanced; the complexities of online and offline activities that might result in violent extremism need to be analysed and risk assessed at the level of both group/social movement and individual.

It is important to understand that there are a range of ways individuals interact with these cultic online environments that may or may not represent warning signs or pathways into violent extremism. A holistic understanding of both the nature of the cultic online milieu and an individual's engagement with that environment is warranted before making assumptions about the nature of any individual's engagement.

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1 Introduction

Language and terminology are in a constant state of flux and understandings of the concept ‘cult’ in both popular and scholarly culture are changing. The terms ‘cult’ and ‘cultic’ are used to describe phenomena as diverse as the self-promotion of Andrew Tate (the online influencer recently charged with rape and human trafficking),[1] the loose networks that facilitated the events in Washington, DC, on 6 January 2022 and online recruitment into Islamic State and other offline paramilitary groups. In contemporary contexts, cult rhetoric is also associated with positive status on social media, as influencers and brands aspire to have a ‘cult following’; being a little bit ‘cultish’ is also attention-grabbing and fashionable in some contexts.[2] ‘Cult’ can also be a technical academic term, but since the late 1970s social scientists have generally preferred to use the analytic category of New Religious Movements (NRMs) for groups popularly identified as cults in the media.[3]

Most popular uses of the word ‘cult’ assume that a group referred to as a cult is a social problem. After the 1978 events in Jonestown, Guyana, in which over nine hundred members of the Peoples Temple were either murdered or coerced into suicide,[4] many individuals and governments proposed lists of ‘cult’ groups that should be proscribed or at least on a ‘danger list’. However, there has never been a consistent way of identifying the differences between cultic groups and established religions, which also may have charismatic leaders and a propensity towards both in-group and out-group violence. Legislating for and against ‘good’ and ‘bad’ religious groups is extremely problematic.[5]

This report embraces the popular usage of ‘cult’ in online spaces to provide a more refined understanding of new online religious phenomena that are of social concern and have some association with violent extremism. The report argues that understandings of ‘cults’ and online activity need to be carefully nuanced; the complexities of online and offline activities should be risk assessed at the level of both group/social movement and the individual.

This report offers a more nuanced understanding of cultic activity online by proposing three groupings that may glorify and inspire violent extremisms: ‘Cultic’ Religious Groups, ‘Online Cultic Milieus’ and ‘Cultic Fandoms’. Each of these movements offers a different way

1 Williamson, L. and Wright, G. (21 June 2023) ‘Andrew Tate charged with rape and human trafficking’, *BBC News*. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-65959097.

2 A good explanation of the popular use of the term ‘cult’ is offered in Montell, A. (2021) *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism*, New York: HarperWave. However, Montell’s linguistic analysis, though popular in podcasts and social media discourse on cults in general, is not readily applicable to the online cultic activity discussed in this report. More nuanced recent scholarly discussions on cult rhetoric includes the articles in *Implicit Religion* (2021): ‘Special Issue: The Return of the Cult: Bad Religion in the Age of Trump and COVID’, Vol. 24 No. 2, guest edited by Thomas, A. and Graham-Hyde, E.

3 Barker, E. (2011) ‘Cults as a Social Problem’ in *Religion and Social Problems*, Hjelm, T. (ed). London: Routledge, pp. 198–212.

4 On the seminal reference point of this event in contemporary discourse, see Crockford, S. (2018) ‘How Do You Know When You’re in a Cult?: The Continuing Influence of Peoples Temple and Jonestown in Contemporary Minority Religions and Popular Culture’, *Nova Religio* (2018) Vol. 22 No. 2, pp. 93–114.

5 Richardson, J. T. (2015) ‘Managing Religion and the Judicialization of Religious Freedom’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 54 No. 1, pp. 1–19. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12172.

of being 'cultish' in the online environment. Needless to say, there are also other interactions between 'cult' and online spaces which are beyond the focus of this report, not least the phenomena of 'cultic' influencers (including celebrity pastors, imams, 'self-help gurus' and leaders of multi-level marketing schemes). While there are many religious groups found online that overlap with offline violent extremism – for example, Norse and Rodnovery[6] paganism and 'Islamist' ideology are regularly cited – in this report we focus on the Order of Nine Angles (O9A or ONA) as an 'ideal typical' example of a 'Cultic' Religious Group that has raised concern around violent extremism and is found in the online space. For the idea of 'Online Cultic Milieus' we focus on the overlapping nature of discourses of concern, focusing on QAnon and anti-vaccine (anti-vax) spaces, and highlight the wider identifying characteristics of these loose and fluid discussion communities that at times inspire offline violence. The final section focuses on 'Cultic Fandoms', arguing that these phenomena also should be understood as broad and varied in nature. For this we look at the fandoms associated with 'Columbiners', a term describing those focused on the 1999 Columbine, Colorado, school shooting, as well as those focused on the figure of Ted Kaczynski (1942–2023), otherwise known as the 'Unabomber', whose lifestyle, modus operandi and manifesto variously inspire a range of individuals and groups, as well as a thriving meme culture on mainstream social media platforms.

The complexity of these movements and the individuals who interact with them needs to be understood for accurate risk assessment of the likelihood of violence by groups or individuals. It is hoped that these categories will allow those analysing the potential of an online environment incubating violent extremists to understand the nature and variety of online milieus and interactions more holistically.

6 This term means roughly 'Slavic national faith' and is associated with a variety of pagan revivalist groups led by those who identify with Slavic ethnicities. As is also the case with Norse pagan groups, the propensity of these groups towards extreme nativism and potential for violence is extremely varied and it would be a mistake to assume all such religious groups are a security threat.

2 Method

In seeking to understand better the online landscape in regard to cults and violent extremism, Inform has employed its general principles of social science-based research that emphasise mixed methods and the triangulation of sources to approach as multifaceted an understanding of a group or movement as possible. Our methods are based in the social sciences, primarily in the discipline of sociology. Rather than being drawn from a specific research project or question, this report brings together the insights gained from a number of disparate enquires, particularly over the last four years, in which Inform researchers have been exploring the relationship between online environments, 'cultic behaviour' and violent extremism.

In order to gain a better understanding of these emerging social phenomena, researchers began by exploring academic journals and open-source materials found in both university libraries and online. Primary research typically includes analysis of materials produced by groups, their critics and commentators and may also include interviews with relevant academics, participants and former participants as well as participant observation in public spaces both online and offline. In some cases, research has also drawn upon unpublished materials (for example, from Inform's database and archives) that are not all electronically available or searchable. The key principle is one of triangulation of all accessible sources offering relevant perspectives on a given topic or movement.[7]

Inform was established in 1988 to collect, assess and disseminate information about minority religious movements and political/environmental fringe groups. Employing the methods of the social sciences, Inform is committed to providing accurate, objective and balanced knowledge as a basis on which individuals and organisations can make their own decisions according to their own values.[8]

The choice of case studies and proposed groupings is based on the sociological tradition of Max Weber, who used the German word *gedankenbilder* to highlight how 'thought images' or 'mental pictures' are necessary to structure and better observe the world around us. The groupings of 'Cultic' Religious Groups, 'Online Cultic Milieus' and 'Cultic Fandoms' are intended as heuristic tools or terms that allow greater nuance in analysis and discussion. It is fully recognised that activity relating to each of these groupings will blend into other categories. The choice of case studies for each section was driven by finding clear exemplars from the groups Inform has been asked to explore in recent years.

7 Full information on Inform's research policies can be found online. Available at: https://inform.ac/about-us/inform_policy/.

8 For more background on the organisation, see: Newcombe, S. and Harvey, S. (19 January 2021) 'Inform' in Crossley, J. and Lockhart, A. (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. Available at: www.cdamm.org/articles/inform.

Upon close analysis, a given example will often be found to overlap these analytical groupings. For example, although we use the O9A to explore a more typical religious group that operates with a specific ideology in an offline environment, O9A symbolism is often found in more loose 'Online Cultic Milieu' spaces outside those exploring its extensive ontological and ritual literature. Meanwhile, individuals who might be at risk of 'lone actor' violent extremism are likely to be creating an individual bricolage of beliefs, tactical knowledge and identifying aesthetics from several, if not all, of these groupings. Nevertheless, the landscape of cults and violent extremism can be better understood by mapping a variety of spaces and ways of engaging that have distinct characteristics.

3 Types of 'Cultic' Online Engagement

The analytical groupings of 'Cultic' Religious Groups, 'Online Cultic Milieus' and 'Cultic Fandoms' are intended to offer orientation and a point for further analysis. 'Cultic' Religious Groups is a category that is intended to focus attention on the online element of religious groups who also have an established offline presence. 'Cultic' here is used as the popular culture moniker that identifies a group that is of social concern; in this case, the Order of the Nine Angles has been identified as having some relationship with violent extremism. The grouping of 'Online Cultic Milieus' draws upon the sociologist Colin Campbell's description of a wider 'field' of 1970s subcultures in which individuals might move between 'Cultic' Religious Groups and explore other forms of rejected or socially 'deviant' knowledge. This description focuses attention on an environment that is not characterised by a distinct ideology, group identity or charismatic leadership, but rather forms a social space where individuals are able to explore various alternatives to the 'mainstream' and groups attempt to attract the interest of individuals to their causes. The final category of 'Cultic Fandoms' draws on the historical use of 'cult' as analytical category characterised by groups of people who have an intense interest in a particular subject alongside elements of online 'fandoms' where collective group identity can develop using online social spaces around a shared focus. In this framework, neither 'cults' nor 'fandoms' are necessarily socially deviant; by way of examples, consider the relatively uncontroversial cult of the Virgin Mary in Catholicism and fandoms around mainstream pop singers and bands. However, the groups chosen for this report illustrate more problematic aspects of this milieu, where events and individuals associated with violent extremism are the focus of attention.

'Cultic' Religious Groups

This first category, 'Cultic' Religious Groups, includes older, primarily offline religious traditions moving into the online space. These groups may have had existing problematic offline aspects before moving to online spaces. In many cases, interactions in the online environment have also created new ways that individuals who might be prone to violent extremism interact with these ideologies, practices and networks.

All religious groups are characterised by members interacting with their ideologies, practices and networks. Traditionally, offline 'cults' have often been depicted as 'high demand groups' that might have characteristics such as a charismatic leader, all-convert membership and demands for members to commit large amounts of time and money towards the group's aims and activities. Classically, cultic

groups are associated with encouraging members to cut ties with existing friends and family, to leave outside employment and to devote themselves fully to the group.[9]

However, in practice, once a group has been established for a number of years, there are usually a range of ways in which people engage with it, with some people being engaged in more 'high demand' contexts and others more superficially or temporarily engaged with the group or its ideology. The reasons behind these differing levels of engagement and of potential exposure to harmful practices and behaviour are varied. Important variables include the personal characteristics of an individual, the social structure of the group and the nature of its concerns, as well as the extent of social support external to the group and other traumatic or unsettling events for either a particular individual or wider society at any given time.[10]

It is important to keep in mind these complexities and the range of engagement in more traditional cultic groups when considering how individuals engage with groups when the latter move into online spaces. A paradigmatic example of a religious group with offline origins moving into online spaces that has caused concern by its relationship to violent extremism is the occult religious movement the Order of Nine Angles.

The Order of Nine Angles (O9A)

The Order of Nine Angles is a secretive religious movement that combines elements of occultism, Satanism and mysticism. It has also been linked to cases of far-right and neo-Nazi inspired violence. It was established in Britain during the 1970s by 'Anton Long', whose true identity remains unknown. Some scholars believe he is David Myatt, the founder of the neo-Nazi National Socialist Movement, although Myatt denies this association.[11] The movement is known for games around identity; although Anton Long remains a person of interest, the people claiming this identity may have changed. The O9A's foundational texts were published in the 1970s. The group was not very active online during the 1990s and early 2000s. However, from 2008, a large online presence was established and now its ideology and symbolism can be widely found on various social media platforms. Its literature has been associated with some offline violent extremist acts in open-source documents and media reports.[12]

Ideology

The O9A identifies as part of the Left Hand Path, which is conventionally associated with 'evil' or 'black' magic. It also blends elements of Satanism, neo-Nazism, neo-Paganism and esotericism in a unique way. It encourages its members to assist with the impending rise of a new superhuman civilisation. In our current period (termed an 'Aeon'), the superiority of Western civilisation has been weakened by Magian (the O9A's term for Jewish) and

9 For a comprehensive description of a more traditional understanding of offline 'cults', see ICSA (2022) 'What is a Cult?', *International Cultic Studies Association*. Available at: https://www.icsahome.com/articles/what-is-a-cult.

10 Barker, E. (1989) *New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction*. London: HMSO.

11 Nameless Therein (2021 [1998]) 'Interview with David Myatt (by Nick Lowles of Hope Not Hate in 1998) - Professional restoration' YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZZeuPoplu4

12 For example, see: HOPE Not Hate (18 June 2019) 'Jailed Neo-Nazi Satanists Were a Legacy of National Action, *HOPE Not Hate*, https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/2019/06/18/jailed-neo-nazi-satanists-legacy-national-action/ and 'Indictment,' United States v. Melzer, 20MG 5884 (S.D.N.Y., 4 June 2020), p. 2; 'O9A Ideology at Core of "RapeWaffen" Group Implicated in Recent Neo-Nazi Terrorist Plot,' SITE Intelligence Group, 24 June 2020.

Nazarene (Christian) forces. The group's literature teaches that these weaknesses can be overcome with 'magickal' practice and practical action.[13] Magickal is a term used by practitioners of contemporary occult ritual traditions to distinguish their religious practices and lineages from popular associations of 'magic', which consist of frivolous parlour tricks or stem from a pre-scientific form of ontology. Although widely associated with neo-Nazi and far-right extremism, a closer reading of the group's ideology shows that this is not an accurate characterisation of the ideology as a whole. Instead, its ideology advocates more general amorality and training that aims to enable the individual to overcome conditions that limit actualising will. While the ideology is associated with violent extremism, the form or political expression that this might take is not defined by the movement's literature.[14]

Central Practices

O9A initiates have complex and prescribed magickal processes to follow that are outlined in the Seven Fold Way, a path with seven grades through which to progress. The process is self-selecting and the students initiate themselves through various rituals and challenges. This includes strenuous activities, such as running twenty miles in under two and a half hours. The process also involves the adoption of 'insight roles' in which adepts – skilled apprentices – are encouraged to go undercover and join other organisations that challenge their existing conditioning. Such roles might include joining neo-Nazi or militant Islamist groups if the individual's natural tendency was to be averse to these groups, or the police force or military if the individual was predisposed against 'law and order'; these roles could also involve becoming a religious renunciate (e.g. a Buddhist monk or Catholic novitiate) if the individual's predisposition was against organised religion or stocking shelves in a supermarket (if opposed to mundane, blue-collar activity).

The O9A's literature does explicitly encourage a practice of incremental violence that starts with magickal practices and gradually progresses to petty criminality before harm to sentient beings is suggested. One aspect of the ideology that has gained attention is 'culling': human sacrifice. In some texts culling is described as a magickal practice by which the victim is not directly harmed physically, while in others direct murder is described (although often categorised as of only 'historical interest').[15] According to Della Campion, culling is best understood as a form of 'status elevation' to demonstrate that members of the O9A are 'superior to mundane people'.[16]

Symbols and aesthetics

The O9A's model of the cosmos is based on the Tree of Wyrd, which incorporates seven planets the energies of which can be manipulated through magick. The 'Nine Angles' of the O9A's name could refer to these seven planets, plus the entire system as a whole and the mystical as the eighth and ninth angles.[17] As part of its belief in bringing about the next Aeon, the O9A emphasises particular symbols

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13 Chloe 352, ed. Various dates. *The Dreccian Way*. n.p.: Order of Nine Angles. p .24.
14 Gartenstein-Ross, D. and Chace-Donahue, E. (2023) 'The Order of Nine Angles: Cosmology, Practice & Movement', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (ahead-of-print), pp. 1–21. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2186737.
15 Sauvage, C. ed. (2013) *Hostia: Secret Teachings of the ONA*. Order of Nine Angles. p. 79.
16 Campion, D. E. (2017) 'The Culling Texts: Mythology, Authority, and Human Sacrifice in the Order of the Nine Angles.' *La Rosa Di Paracelso* No. 2, p. 70.
17 Monette, C. R. (2015). *Mysticism in the 21st Century*. 2nd ed. Wilsonvill, OR: Sirius Academic Press. pp. 108, 111.

or entities that are in charge of completing the process. These include Vindex, Baphomet and others in the O9A's pantheon of dark gods and goddesses.

Notable characteristics

The O9A is best understood as a fluid new religious movement rather than a bounded, hierarchical group with a definable authority structure and membership criteria.[18] The connections between independent groups (termed 'nexions') are often deliberately obscure and it is also difficult to estimate the number of people involved. Individual nexions develop independent cultures and group dynamics. Some of the most publicised groups include the White Star Acception (WSA352) in the United States, the Temple of THEM in Australia and Secuntra Nexion in Italy.

The O9A's concept of membership is fluid and ambiguous. On the one hand, it sees itself as 'elitist' with demanding requirements. On the other, its writings are easily available online, which has created a following that is not connected to the core or founding members of the group. On discussion forums, those associated with the 'old guard' engage in lengthy, intellectually dense posts that show a deep knowledge of O9A ideology and symbols. On more recent social media platforms – such as Tumblr and Instagram, which lend themselves to visual media – the symbols are often used by individuals with only superficial reference to O9A philosophy. This appropriation of symbols may be blended with other beliefs, a do-it-yourself process that sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger refers to as bricolage.[19]

Conclusions / risk assessment

While the O9A's symbols remain potent and active, it appears that the most violent and criminal cases in the UK and USA involve neo-Nazi militants who do not necessarily have any direct links to the O9A's inner circle and who were already predisposed to far-right violence.[20] Individuals identifying with O9A symbolism might have other indicators of potential to actualise violent extremism that should be taken seriously by those responsible for risk assessment. The concern, therefore, is not so much with violence that has been organised and mobilised by the O9A at a movement level,[21] but rather what 'lone wolves' and specific nexions might do with O9A ideology in an age of online, self-radicalisation.

Online Cultic Milieus

During the pandemic, there was surprise voiced in the media about apparently new constellations of those interested in aspects of alternative spirituality and the conspiracy theories that challenged the consensus of scientific knowledge and its limits. With the pervasiveness of what has been termed 'online conspiracy theories' in popular culture, Colin Campbell's concept of 'cultic milieu' is particularly apposite.

18 Shah, S., Cooper, J. and Newcombe, S. (2023) 'Occult Beliefs and the Far Right: The Case of the Order of Nine Angles', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (ahead-of-print), pp. 1–21. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2195065.

19 Hervieu-Léger, D. (1998) 'The Transformation and Formation of Socioreligious Identities in Modernity: An Analytical Essay on the Trajectories of Identification', *International Sociology* Vol. 13, No. 2, p. 217.

20 Most of the examples highlighted in media reports can be accurately characterised in this way. HOPE Not Hate (2023) 'Order of Nine Angles: An Incubator Of Terrorism'. Available at: https://hopenothate.org.uk/chapter/order-of-nine-angles-an-incubator-of-terrorism/.

21 Gartenstein-Ross and Chace-Donahue, 'The Order of Nine Angles', pp. 1–21.

In 1972, prior to the anti-cult panic of the later 1970s, Campbell, a sociologist, introduced the concept of the 'cultic milieu' to describe the shifting sands of countercultural movements and identifications that characterised youth culture at the time. His model focused on the existence of a general environment inclusive of 'all deviant belief systems and their associated practices' that he identified as including 'unorthodox science, alien and heretical religion, deviant medicine' and things 'occult and the magical', including 'spiritualism and psychic phenomena … mysticism and new thought … alien intelligences and lost civilizations'. Importantly that environment also encompassed 'the collectivities, institutions, individuals, and media of communication associated with these beliefs'.[22] It is important to note that understandings of 'deviancy' in relation to the mainstream is contingent upon the norms and moral values of the particular time period and changes over time; many of the groups and ideas that were considered 'deviant' or countercultural to 'mainstream' British society in 1972 – for example, David Bowie, The Beatles and anti-war protests – are now very much 'mainstream'.[23]

Groups of those interested in 'underground' knowledge have long been noted to transcend distinctions of the political left and right, with David Icke a paradigmatic figure.[24] The term 'conspirituality' was coined in 2011 to refer to an often online subcultural environment where beliefs in '1) a secret group covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order, and 2) humanity is undergoing a "paradigm shift" in consciousness' converge.[25] While this constellation is present in what we term the 'online cultic milieu', this space of emerging and disappearing discussions is also wider than this definition. For the purposes of articulating the second of three ideal types of activity involving cults and online extremism, we have selected the anti-vax and QAnon-related movements, which illustrate important aspects of conspirituality and the 'online cultic milieu'.

QAnon and Anti-Vax Conspiracy Movements

There is nothing new about conspiracy theories or anti-vaccine sentiments. In 1831, there was immediate opposition to adopting the first smallpox vaccine. Riots and other disturbances broke out in several British cities during the smallpox epidemic, driven by the widespread belief among the poor that the disease did not actually exist, but was concocted by the government to provide bodies for vivisection experiments or simply to reduce the population.[26] There have been well-documented political conspiracies, at least as far back as the Roman Empire and, at certain times, narratives concerning conspiracies by various groups have been an accepted and public part of the political sphere.

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22 Campbell, C. (1972) 'The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularisation', *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* No. 5, pp. 119–36.

23 Frank, T. (1997) *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*. London: University of Chicago Press.

24 Asprem, E. and Dyrendal, A. (2015) 'Conspirituality Reconsidered: How Surprising and How New is the Confluence of Spirituality and Conspiracy Theory?', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 367–82; Robertson, D. G. (2016) *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age: Millennial Conspiracism*. London: Bloomsbury.

25 The term was first used in an academic context by Ward, C. and Voas, D. (2011) 'The emergence of conspirituality', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 103–21. It is now ubiquitous in both academia and popular culture. See, for example, the Conspirituality Podcast: https://www.conspirituality.net/ and Halafoff, A. et al (2022) 'Selling (Con)spirituality and COVID-19 in Australia: Convictions, Complexity and Countering Dis/misinformation', *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion*, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp. 141–167.

26 Richardson, R. (2000) *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 226.

However, a 'conspiracy theory' is more than just a theory that posits a conspiracy. The relationship between conspiracy theories, power and knowledge is the basis of much recent sociological work. Political historian Michael Barkun suggests that what ultimately defines conspiracy theories is the mobilisation of stigmatised knowledge – that is, claims that challenge the accepted epistemic authorities and are often based on forgotten, superseded, ignored, rejected or suppressed forms of knowledge.[27] It is important to remember that sometimes conspiracy theories are proved to be true (for example, plots by Islamist or far-right terrorists) even if at other times that has not been the case (for example, Senator Joseph McCarthy's Red Scare or the Satanic ritual abuse panics of the 1980s and '90s). The popular idea that conspiracy theories are necessarily paranoid and/or irrational does not stand up to close scrutiny.

QAnon first emerged in 2017 from online discussions about the anonymous 'Q', an individual who claims to be the conduit between the public and a secret military-aligned group. Q first posted on 4chan, an anonymous image board for fringe internet subcultures. Q found an audience on 4chan's /pol/ forum, continuing a trend of claiming to be a whistle-blower and drawing together pre-existing threads about conspiracies involving global elites. QAnon gained a mainstream following when its material was shared to Facebook, Reddit and Twitter.

Ideology

The 'online cultic milieu' is characterised by all forms of what Barkun termed 'stigmatised knowledge'. The content of this knowledge can be varied and contradictory. David Robertson has identified many of these beliefs as 'situational, dispositional and socialized'. He proposes that these kinds of beliefs are better understood as a range of options from which one can choose in a particular context, rather than a strict yes/no proposition or ethical framework that guides all action.[28]

Numerous studies have found a correlation between low trust in science and anti-vax sentiment.[29] Other interests in this online environment include UFOs and conspiracy theories about UFO cover-ups. Some of the beliefs found in the QAnon milieu include that the MRNA vaccines are bioweapons that contain microchips. Anti-vax sentiment is often part of a wider world-view in which the 'natural' is prioritised, alongside alternative health practices such as detoxification and purification. Anti-vaxxers might reject germ theory or might advocate 'natural immunity'. For those more spiritually inclined, illness might be embraced as a learning experience or as some kind of fate or karma.

Closely related to this mix of 'rejected knowledge' is a belief in a 'hidden hand'. This was articulated most clearly in the QAnon focus on the existence of an 'evil cabal' believed to control world governments and media, responsible for global poverty, division

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27 Barkun, M. (2003) *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 26–9.

28 Robertson, D. (6 January 2022) 'Like religion, conspiracy theories are more complex than just a set of strongly held beliefs', *LSE Religion and Global Society Blog*. Available at: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2022/01/like-religion-conspiracy-theories-are-more-complex-than-just-a-set-of-strongly-held-beliefs/.

29 Zarzeczna, N. et al (2023) 'Spirituality is associated with Covid-19 vaccination scepticism,' *Vaccine*, Vol. 41 No. 1, pp. 226–35. See also Lestar, T. (2023) 'COVID has highlighted the connection between spirituality and vaccine scepticism', *The Conversation*. Available at https://theconversation.com/covid-has-highlighted-the-connection-between-spirituality-and-vaccine-scepticism-203941.

and crime. This cabal is sometimes identified with specific people and has been purported to participate actively in ritual abuse of children, echoing historical antisemitic allegations of blood libel. Those more committed to QAnon milieus look forward to a 'Great Awakening', a wider public acceptance that the cabal exists, and the millennial 'Storm', the military-assisted defeat of the conspiracy that will usher in a new age.

In anti-vax discourses the 'hidden hand' generally focuses on 'Big Pharma', the blanket term for large healthcare and pharmaceutical organisations, which is believed to perpetuate illness for financial profit or population control. Although those vocally promoting such views are often decried as 'conspiracy theorists' as a term of abuse and dismissal, it is important to acknowledge that some aspects of this worldview are evidence-based. For example, Purdue Pharma, owned by the Sackler family, has now reached a settlement acknowledging culpability for its aggressive promotion of the drug OxyContin that was known to be highly addictive and a contributing factor to an ongoing opioid addiction crisis in the United States and elsewhere.[30]

Practices

A common theme across all groups that draw on stigmatised knowledge is the importance of 'doing your own research', educating yourself and reaching your own conclusions about the best course of action for you and your family. Individual, experiential knowledge is prioritised over top-down, 'scientific' knowledge. The imposition of the latter is challenged in both personal practice (anti-vaccination, natural health) and sometimes in public protests. Academic frameworks identify the importance of non-dominant forms of epistemic authority, including personal experience and 'assemblage' ('dot-connecting') for those involved in this milieu.[31]

While much of the practice of 'doing your own research' is done by individuals in isolation, the 'online cultic milieu' overlaps with groups and communities operating offline. For example, there are online support groups for parents that promote critical information about vaccinations alongside advice on nutrition, natural remedies and reducing toxins. Such groups also may organise courses and local meetings for parental support groups.

Sometimes such beliefs and practices overlap with more established 'offline' alternative new religions. For example, the now defunct Genesis 2 Church of Health and Healing promoted its 'healing sacrament' of Master Mineral Solution (MMS), a form of bleach called chlorine dioxide, which should be ingested daily and/or as a cure for specific diseases, including Covid-19.[32]

Outside such special-interest subgroups, this cultic milieu as a whole is unlikely to come together except in protests, rallies or demonstrations, which often have a wider remit, such as the anti-lockdown protests that occurred during the coronavirus pandemic or the Bilderberg

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30 Radford, A. (31 May 2023) 'Sackler family wins immunity from opioid lawsuits', *BBC News*. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-65764307.

31 Robertson, D. G. and Amarasingam, A. (2022) 'How conspiracy theorists argue: epistemic capital in the QAnon social media sphere', *Popular Communication*, Vol. 20 No. 3, pp. 193–207.

32 In July 2022, founder Mark Grenon and his three sons were charged with fraudulently marketing and selling MMS. See https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdfl/pr/leader-genesis-ii-church-health-and-healing-who-sold-toxic-bleach-fake-miracle-cure.

Fringe Festival of 2013.[33] Anti-lockdown protests were able to mobilise a disparate group of people, bringing together anti-vaxxers, far-right adherents and QAnon supporters with a focus on opposing received wisdom and established authorities.

Symbols and aesthetics

On the one hand, the 'online cultic milieu' as a whole does not have any shared symbols and aesthetics. However, when considering specific non-dominant theories and beliefs, shared language and identifying hidden symbols can form a key part of independent knowledge formation through assemblage and identification with an in-group that understands an esoteric symbolic message.

For example, some individuals in this milieu might focus on ideas of paradigm shifts, ascension, the fifth dimension, consciousness, awakening, the third eye and so on. Others might mobilise around terms such as 'health freedom', a more political position that leverages concerns about a loss of freedom and increase of government control. QAnon merchandise often features the letter Q, the slogan 'where we go one, we go all' (abbreviated to 'WWG1WGA'), the number 17, references to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and the phrases 'the storm is coming' and 'the great awakening'. Also common is American patriotism in the form of American flags and eagles. QAnon also presents itself as compatible with Christianity, with Q's posts utilising apocalyptic Christian imagery and martial symbolism in such pericopes as Ephesians 6:10–18.

Notable characteristics

There is no single, organised movement with clear boundaries when considering the 'online cultic milieu'. The majority of those who hold anti-vax sentiments do not join an organisation with membership criteria. They are more likely to explore ideas online, joining temporary online communities relevant to their emerging and shifting interests. There is no single leader of an anti-vax community but rather multiple figureheads, often online influencers, who form a 'counter-elite', an alternative source of authority.

Since those involved anticipate opposition from traditional authority figures, they communicate on diverse and changing platforms. Using QAnon as an example, Q first posted on 4chan and later gained a mainstream following when its material was shared on Facebook, Reddit and Twitter. Then, following suspensions from mainstream social media sites, QAnon content creators migrated onto alternative platforms, such as Telegram, Rumble and Odysee.

Conclusions / risk assessment

Many of the related movements exploring marginalised knowledge in the 'online cultic milieu' are reflective of real concerns. Some of the beliefs in this milieu are based on accurate evidence, while others are assembled from overlapping areas of 'rejected knowledge'. The risk these milieus pose to social stability and specifically for violent extremism is extremely varied and dependent on wider social contexts.

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33 van Eck Duymaer van Twist, A. and Newcombe, S. (2018) '"Trust Me, You Can't Trust Them": Stigmatised Knowledge in Cults and Conspiracies' in *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion*, Dyrendal, A., Robertson, D. and Asprem, E. eds., pp. 152–79. Leiden: Brill.

Several violent incidents involving QAnon supporters were listed by the FBI as examples of domestic violent extremism motivated by fringe political conspiracy theories. These examples informed the FBI's assessment that QAnon represented a potential security threat.[34] Following the Capitol Insurrection, QAnon criminal activity gained increased visibility, leading some national security experts in 2021 to declare the conspiracy theory and its attendant supporters and groups an emerging danger that could soon rival more traditional terrorist threats.[35]

Some commentators argue that the belief system held by adherents of QAnon – its dualism,[36] apocalyptic language,[37] and disconfirmed prophecies – are potentially responsible for violence committed by its adherents. Others have explored additional factors that, together with an acceptance of QAnon beliefs, correlate with violence. These include socio-economic and interpersonal crises,[38] trauma, drug abuse, mental illness and the perception of persecution, especially when such persecution is considered an existential threat and is combined with identity fusion and violence-condoning language.[39]

Unsurprisingly, Inform concurs with the authors of a 2021 editorial in *The Lancet*, who argued that anti-vax movements should be approached as a religious phenomenon, with people's beliefs understood and taken seriously in order to prevent further marginalisation: 'Lessons from studying cults' would be a constructive perspective, the editorial suggests.[40]

Cultic Fandoms

Traditionally one of the defining features of a cult has been the focus on a charismatic leader. The process by which a particular individual is elevated to the status of a hero or martyr can be understood as a parallel process to 'charismatisation', the way social scientists have described how the quality of charisma in leadership is a dialogical development that requires a receptive audience in the context of more traditional high-demand religious groups.[41]

Fans have an overwhelming liking or interest in a particular person, group, trend or idea. A 'dark fandom' is a group of people united by their fascination for people that carried out and/or events that

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34 FBI Phoenix Field Office (30 May 2019) 'Anti-Government, Identity Based and Fringe Conspiracy Theories Very Likely Motivate Some Domestic Extremists to Commit Criminal, Sometimes Violent Activity'. Available at: https://www.justsecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/420379775-fbi-conspiracy-theories-domestic-extremism.pdf; FBI (4 June 2021) 'Adherence to QAnon Conspiracy Theory by Some Domestic Violent Extremists'. Available at: https://int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/fbi-bulletin-on-q-anon-and-domestic-violent-extremism-june-4-2021/e587368b36687b6e/full.pdf.

35 Paresky, P., Goldenberg, A., Riggleman, D., Shapiro, J. and Farmer, Jr, J. (2021) 'How to respond to the QAnon threat'. Brookings. Available at: https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-to-respond-to-the-qanon-threat/; Suber, J. (10 June 2021) 'Examining extremism: QAnon', Center for Strategic and International Studies. Available at: https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-qanon.

36 Thomas, P. (20 October 2021) 'How QAnon uses satanic rhetoric to set up a narrative of "good vs. evil"', *The Conversation*. Available at: https://theconversation.com/how-qanon-uses-satanic-rhetoric-to-set-up-a-narrative-of-good-vs-evil-146281.

37 Blazakis, J. (21 February 2021) 'Op-Ed: Why QAnon's similarity to other cults makes it a significant national security threat' *Los Angeles Times*. Available at: https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-02-21/qanon-cults-capitol-attack-trump-threat.

38 Jensen, M. A. and Kane, S. (2021) 'QAnon-inspired Violence in the United States: An Empirical Assessment of a Misunderstood Threat', *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* (December). Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19434472.2021.2013292.

39 Ebner, J., Kavanagh, C. and Whitehouse, H. (2022) 'The QAnon security threat: a linguistic fusion-based violence risk assessment', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 16, No. 6.

40 Mylan, S. and Hardman, C. (2021) 'COVID-19, cults, and the anti-vax movement', *The Lancet*, No. 397, p. 1181.

41 Barker, E. (1993) 'Charismatization: The Social Production of "an Ethos Propitious to the Mobilization of Sentiments"', pp. 181–202 in *Secularization, Rationalism and Sectarianism*, edited by Barker, E. et al, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

culminated in an act of violence or atrocity. Online 'Cultic Fandoms' are leaderless, have a focus around individuals who have committed acts of extremist violence and are elevated by the fans to the status of charismatic hero figures or in some cases saints or even gods.

There is a long history of people being attracted to those who commit atrocities, including serial and mass killings. Interest in killers is nothing new – there have been individuals fascinated by Jack the Ripper, Ted Bundy, Charles Manson and Jeffrey Dahmer.[42] The mass shootings in the United States that gained media prominence in 1991 shifted the focus of these 'dark' public interests from serial killers to mass shooters. The concern is that such communities could be a breeding ground for copycats, who seek to emulate or surpass those atrocities. There are several high-profile examples of engagement with 'Cultic Fandoms' leading to or being connected to violent extremist atrocities. Examples include fans of Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma bomber who targeted a government building in 1995, and Anders Breivik, who shot and killed dozens in Norway in 2011.

A primary concern with reference to 'Cultic Fandoms' is those community spaces that promote the idealisation of specific violent incidences or individual perpetrators of violent extremism who are deified in what is termed 'saints culture'.[43] This third cultic arena is exemplified by the Columbine 'dark fandoms' and the figure of Ted Kaczynski.

Dark Fandoms of Columbine and Ted Kaczynski

A paradigmatic example of the dark fandom community is the various online discussion forums and gaming spaces focused on the 1999 Columbine school shooting in the United States, during which Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed 13 people. This inspired other copycats, including Lindsay Souvannarath and her accomplices, who planned a massacre (which was foiled) in Nova Scotia, Canada, in 2015. There are different degrees to which a fan can identify with the perpetrator of an atrocity and the fandom can take on a spiritual quality. The Columbine shooters referred to themselves as gods and some fans, including Souvannarath, have declared a spiritual connection to them.[44]

The figure of Ted Kaczynski (1943–2023) functions in a variety of ways within various digital communities. Kaczynski was an American domestic terrorist who detonated 16 bombs, killing three and injuring 23, between 1978 and 1995. His bombs were all intended for individuals whom he perceived to be fuelling the industrial-technological system, something he believed was so damaging to the environment that violence was the only answer. Although Kaczynski's ideology is arguably more appropriately defined as anti-technological, he is frequently read as a radical environmentalist due to his focus on wild nature over modern technology. Thus, his perceived environmental ideology has partly resulted in his popularity within eco-fascist subcultures, alongside his advocacy of the use of violence.[45]

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42 Barnes, N. (2015) 'Killer Fandoms Crime-Tripping and Identity in the True Crime Community', All Graduate Plan B and other Reports. p. 726 (Utah State University).

43 Macklin, G. (2022) '"Praise the saints" The cumulative momentum of transnational extreme-right terrorism' in *A Transnational History of Right-wing Terrorism: Political Violence and the Far Right in Eastern and Western Europe Since 1900*, edited by Dafinger, J. and Florin, M., pp. 215–40. Abingdon: Routledge.

44 Souvannarath, L. (2019) 'Podcast with interviews'. Available at: https://www.nighttimepodcast.com/episodes/lindsay-souvannarath-1.

45 Fleming, S. (2022) 'The Unabomber and the origins of anti-tech radicalism,' *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, pp. 207–25. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2021.1921940.

Ideology

Within 'Cultic Fandoms', people are united by their fascination of the people who carried out and/or the events that culminated in violence. In many media reports and statements by the individuals allegedly inspired by 'dark fandoms' and 'saint culture', it is unclear whether such individuals were attracted to the personality of the perpetrator, their ideological beliefs, their violent methods or any combination thereof. It is important to understand 'cultic fandoms' as incorporating a broad range of interests for individual engagement.

For example, among Columbine fans, a distinction can be made between empathy and ethics, where it is possible to empathise with the killers, but not agree with their actions (termed 'condoners'). Broll suggests that Columbiners can be separated into four types: 1) researchers (who search for and share information); 2) fangirls (typically teenage girls with a crush on the perpetrators); 3) Columbiners (dedicated fans who empathise with the shooters but do not necessarily condone their actions); and 4) copycats.[46] Most of those in Columbiner online spaces identify as researchers, often showing empathy towards the perpetrators expressing feelings of being isolated and bullied at school.

As an example of 'saints culture', fans of Kaczynski appear to use the environment as an ideological and tactical resource to justify extreme violence against enemies that are singled out on the grounds of identity. At the same time, Kaczynski fans borrow and manipulate elements of radical environmental thought that, in some cases, have led to violent extremism. The manifestos of Anders Breivik (2011), Brenton Tarrant (2019) and Payton Gendron (2022) all show familiarity with Kaczynski's writings as both ideological and tactical inspiration. Kaczynski's increasing digital presence in extreme far-right subcultures and on video-sharing platforms like TikTok highlights a growing popularity of extremist ideologies and violent individuals who are perceived to be advocates for the environment.

Practices: Content creation and aesthetics

Fans are not just consumers – they are producers of culture and knowledge. For instance, they interact with each other and produce fan art and fan fiction and organise fan conventions.[47] In dialogue in online spaces, such as Discord, in-groups are created through the exchange of esoteric knowledge and theories within the purview of the fandom.

It is also worth noting that fan behaviour combines personal celebrity adoration with collective action, which can sometimes be explicitly political. The ensuing collective identities sometimes express themselves in surprising ways. In the summer of 2020, 'K-Pop stans' (fans of Korean pop stars) mobilised through social media to support #BlackLivesMatter and protest Donald Trump's presidency by buying up tickets to a Trump rally in Oklahoma and not attending.[48]

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46 Broll, R. (2020) 'Dark Fandoms: An Introduction and Case Study', *Deviant Behavior*, Vol. 41, No. 6, pp. 792–804. For additional information see Rico, A. R. (2015) 'Fans of Columbine shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold', *Transformative Works and Cultures*, No. 20. Available at https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/671/545; Wright, B. L. (2019) *Don't Fear the Nobodies: A Critical Youth Study of the Columbiner Instagram Community*. Mississippi: Mississippi State University. Unpublished Master's thesis. Available at https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2568&context=td.

47 Barnes, 'Killer Fandoms Crime-Tripping', p. 6.

48 Coscarelli, J. (20 June 2020) 'Why Obsessive K-Pop Fans Are Turning Toward Political Activism', *The New York Times*. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/22/arts/music/k-pop-fans-trump-politics.html.

The Columbine fandom has long been popular on Tumblr and in various gaming spaces, such as Minecraft and Roblox, the latter of which enables fans to create their own pages and live-action games, each with their own aesthetics, and provides a space for fans to interact with each other. As well as consuming the various types of content that is available on the atrocity, fans have generated their own content, such as fan fiction, artwork and memes.

It was a meme that first connected Souvannarath with James Gamble, another of the planners of their foiled plot. She created an image of the shooters, posted it with the hashtag #columbine and Gamble responded. They messaged online and their shared love of Columbine escalated to planning a massacre.[49]

Kaczynski has a growing digital presence in both far-right extremist subcultures and video-sharing platforms like TikTok. This highlights a growing popularity for extremist ideologies and violent individuals who are perceived to be advocates for the environment. Images of Kaczynski vary considerably on different platforms. Within far-right extremist subcultures it has been noted that there is a prominent trend in the artwork of 'Saint Ted' to depict him wearing a skull ski mask, a feature common in siege culture.[50] Other platforms use more humorous and less threatening images. As part of the 'Terrorgram' Saint canon, Kaczynski's birthday, death day, and bombing dates are noted as significant by this digital community.

Notable characteristics
Having an interest in and connection with a 'dark fandom' or 'saint' does not necessarily mean an individual is likely to engage in copycat violence. An understanding of the different degrees of positive identification with perpetrators – from empathy to idealisation to deification – is also vital to understand the subtle boundaries between non-violent fans and potential copycats.

There are a range of ways in which copycats come to replicate the violence of those they admire. Here a distinction can be made between those who are inspired by the ideology and those who admire the operational elements of the original atrocity. Deeper engagement with tactics and operational considerations could be an indicator of more likely potential engagement with offline extremism. In Souvannarath's foiled Valentine's Day plot, she and her accomplices admired the shooters, wanted to replicate the impact of the Columbine shooting and also engaged with specific tactical planning.

Kaczynski's presence is very popular within siege culture and militant accelerationism,[51] specifically on Telegram channels such as 'Terrorgram', the term for a loosely connected network of militant accelerationists. However, fandoms related to Kaczynski exist across a variety of digital platforms and demonstrate varying levels of extremism, thus making the nature and extent of Kaczynski fans difficult to map. For example, Kaczynski fans have a strong presence

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49 Souvannarath, 'Podcast with interviews'. See also Monroe, R. (2019) *Savage Appetites: Four True Stories of Women, Crime and Obsession*, Scribner Book Company. An excerpt of this book appeared in *The Guardian*: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/aug/20/cult-of-columbine-how-the-high-school-shooting-motivated-a-murder-plot.

50 Molloy, J. (2 November 2022) 'From blood and soil to ecogram: A thematic analysis of eco-fascist subculture on Telegram'. Available at: https://gnet-research.org/2022/11/02/understanding-eco-fascism-a-thematic-analysis-of-the-eco-fascist-subculture-on-telegram/.

51 Macklin, '"Praise the saints"'.

on platforms like TikTok and Tumblr. As of March 2023, the hashtag '#tedkaczynski' had been viewed 58.9 million times on TikTok, with most videos being edited montages of Kaczynski that praise his work and label him a true eco-terrorist. The breadth of visibility for Kaczynski memes makes it very difficult to gauge the widespread demographics of the apparent fanbase.

Conclusions / risk assessment

When looking at cases of copycat violence perpetrated by those previously active in 'dark fandom' milieus, it is important to consider 1) whether the fan is personally drawn to the perpetrator; 2) if the fan shares the perpetrator's beliefs; and/or 3) if the fan condones the perpetrator's actions.[52] In the case of Souvannarath, for example, there was a recognisable conversion process involving her self-identity, her transformed worldview and her identification with a new community found within the online fandom environment. She also displayed all three violent tendencies. This was also the case with Tarrant, the Christchurch shooter, in reference to Anders Breivik.

Even when these factors are present, however, it does not necessarily mean a fan will perpetrate violence. It is also difficult to assess whether it was the fandom that was the cause of the violence or whether the individual was already determined to act before they joined a community. While more research needs to be carried out to explore these questions, the distinctions outlined above help our understanding of how incidents of mass violence may or may not be replicated.

52 These criteria draw on studies of religious conversion/deconversion and the social construction of identity, particularly the work of Brubaker, R. and Cooper, F. (2000) 'Beyond "Identity"', *Theory and society*, Vol. 29, No. 1, pp. 1–47. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1007068714468; Rahmani, M. S. (2019) 'Leaving Vipassana Meditation', pp. 130–41 in *Handbook of Leaving Religion*, eds Enstedt, D., Larsson, G. and Manstinen, T. T. Leiden: Brill.

4 Conclusions

This report has offered a more nuanced understanding of cultic activity online by proposing three groupings that may glorify and inspire violent extremisms: 'Cultic' Religious Groups, 'Online Cultic Milieus' and 'Cultic Fandoms'. Each of these online movements offers a different way of being 'cultish' in the online environment. The complexity of these movements and the individuals who interact with them needs to be understood for accurate risk assessment of the likelihood of violence by groups or individuals. It is hoped that these categories will allow those analysing the potential for online environments to incubate violent extremists to understand the nature and variety of online milieus and interactions more holistically.

It is important to note that a particular individual's online activity can crosscut these three descriptive categories; an individual may engage more or less superficially with any of the groups and milieus. Tracking the depth of an individual's engagement or the tightness of a group identity in a particular space may prove significant in exploring the likelihood of online activity translating into violent extremism.

To this end, we suggest looking in depth at the nature of a given individual's online activity. Some indicative questions drawn from the social scientific study of religious groups associated with violent extremism would include:

- In what way is a given individual engaging with identity construction, symbolism and ideology?
- Are individuals primarily interested in adopting 'edgy' symbolism?
- Is there a deep engagement with a complex existing religious ideology and/or other groups in the milieu that have established offline activities?
- Are online interests focused around 'marginalised knowledge' and distrust of established authority figures?
- To what extent does online activity focus grievances against a specific individual/group who could form a target for violent extremist action?
- Are the in- and out-groups clearly articulated? Are out-groups dehumanised?
- Is there a deep fascination for harmful practices and an interest in the tactical specifics of violent events? Or is there more a 'true crime' research focus?
- Are online discussions centred around empathy and understanding for the perpetrators of an atrocity with a hesitation to condone actions?

Also important to consider is the relationship between the online cultic environment and any potential offline communities:

- Are online activities associated with offline direct-action groups?
- Is there an underlying offline religious community that incorporates elements of ideology, practice and community?
- Are personal connections primarily online, intense and focused on direct-action planning in the form of copycat violent extremism?

Drawing from decades of sociological research into new religious movements, the attraction of any individual to an online cultic environment is likely to have a particular demographic slant; some groups within society are going to find the ideology more appealing than others. Although much research emphasises psychological vulnerabilities, new religious movement studies in contrast emphasise situational vulnerability. Often, an individual's interest in an extremist group or ideology is less a sign of inherent weakness than it is a consequence of existential angst, social isolation and a perception of lack of attractive alternative life paths.

It is also important to note the role that online community-building plays in de-radicalisation. An important mechanism of control in more traditional high demand groups is isolating channels of communication to prevent members from sharing negative experiences within the group with one another. Inform is aware of many cases in which members who had experienced harm in a particular organisation began to share stories online, developed a clearer understanding of damaging behaviour within the group and formed an alternative group identity with new community formations.

There are reasonable and evidence-based concerns that engagement in online cultic spaces will lead to copycat violence and other forms of violent extremism. It is important to remember that, by looking at the wider context of engagement with cultic online activity, these trajectories are rare. Engagement with the online cultic spaces in no way leads inextricably or irrevocably to violent extremism. A nuanced risk assessment, looking case-by-case at individuals and their engagement with various online cultic spaces is essential in estimating the nature and extent of the risk of violent extremism.

Policy Section

This policy section has been authored by Dr Nicola Mathieson, Research Director, at the Global Network for Extremism and Technology (GNET) at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) at King's College London. This section provides policy recommendations and is produced independently from the authors of this report. Recommendations do not necessarily represent the views of the authors.

This report examines the relationship between cults – more specifically 'cultic' activity – and online violent extremism. This report presents three ideal groupings of online cultic activity that can intersect with violent extremism: 'Cultic' Religious Groups, 'Online Cultic Milieus' and 'Cultic Fandoms'. The authors then provide case examples of each of these groupings including Order of Nine Angles, QAnon and anti-vax conspiracy movements and the dark fandoms of Columbine and Ted Kaczynski. As a consequence, this report detangles many of the assumptions and colloquial understandings of cults and cultic activity in order to provide technology companies and policymakers a clearer base from which to design interventions.

This policy section ensures that GNET reports provides actionable research outcomes that can inform and support technology companies and policymakers to identify and prevent extremist and terrorist exploitation of digital platforms. The policy section fulfils GIFCT's core pillar of learning to improve prevention and responses to terrorist and violent extremist attacks.

1. Technology Companies

This report has identified two core areas for action for tech companies:

- The term 'cult' is used colloquially to mean many different, and sometimes contradictory, things online. This report offers a more nuanced understanding of different types of cultic activity. This report can be used as a training resource for staff to better understand what cultic behaviour is and the intersection with extremism.

- Further, tech companies can draw on these groupings to develop better and more responsive policies that focus on risk assessments of potential violence. Each of the groupings requires a different approach.

- The groupings presented here demonstrate the vast complexities and diversity of cultic activity online. During the coronavirus pandemic, tech companies took action against QAnon; however, other cultic activity often falls below the threshold for content moderation. This report encourages tech companies to revisit their understandings of cultic activities and the potential harms of each of the groupings of the report, beyond simply moderating QAnon posts and supporters.

2. Policymakers

In addition to the report findings and their implications for tech companies, this report has also identified four core areas for action by policymakers:

- This report provides policymakers with more nuanced language with which to understand and approach the potential threat of cultic activities and online violent extremism. The authors advocate for understanding the complexity of these movements and a risk assessment approach to determine the likelihood of the emergence of violence.

- Inform's research on new religious movements emphasises the importance of situation vulnerabilities in drawing individuals into cultic environments. As noted in the report's conclusions, 'interest in an extremist group or ideology is less a sign of inherent "weakness" than it is a consequence of existential angst, social isolation and a perception of lack of attractive alternative life paths'. These findings thus present opportunities for intervention for policymakers.

- Inform is aware of individuals who have used online community-building to de-radicalise out of cultic groups. Whereas in more traditional high-demand groups, communications channels were limited to exert control, former cultic group members were able to access alternative information and stories of harm online that allowed them to form alternative group identities and community connections.

- The online landscape of cultic activity is a complex area with significant potential for violence. Policymakers should consider increasing investment in research bodies, such as Inform, which has decades of experience investigating cultic groups and behaviours in online environments.

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