Lone Actors in Digital Environments

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Introduction

On 9 March 2019, a 28-year-old Australian white supremacist murdered 51 people during Friday prayers at the Al Noor Mosque and the Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch. This was the deadliest mass shooting in the history of New Zealand and was carried out by a "lone actor". In the months that ensued the attack, four other young male white supremacists were all individually inspired by the Christchurch shooter, carrying out deadly attacks in the United States (Poway, California, on 27 April, and in El Paso, California, on 3 August), Norway (in Bærum, a suburb of Oslo, on 18 August) and in Germany (Halle, on 9 October). Such attacks continue to inspire future lone actors, e.g. a 16-year-old arrested in Singapore in 2021 who allegedly planned terrorist attacks inspired by the 2019 Christchurch massacre.

While there have been numerous right-wing lone actor terrorists over the years, this paper will look at these five cases of lone actors and their online posting behaviour prior to the attacks, to shed light on behaviours of lone actors in digital environments and the extent to which they were seemingly operating alone. These individuals were all embedded in white supremacist digital environments that potentially facilitate lone actor terrorism. This paper aims to provide an overview of digital environments and draw insights from qualitative research and monitoring of RWE online subcultures that reveals a shift towards a post-organisational reality, whereby online structures and subcultural milieus could be equally important for inspiring violence as connections to groups in the physical world.[1] In order to understand this emerging trend, it is important to recognise the online communities that violent right-wing extremists (VRWE) use to produce a sense of belonging, spread dehumanising propaganda and promote acts of violence.

1. Background

1.1 Right-Wing Extremism and Lone Actor Terrorism

Since the 1970s, right wing extremists have been advocating for the strategy of utilising lone actors, to further white supremacist goals. The dystopian novel *The Turner Diaries* by US white nationalist William L. Pierce is said to have inspired a number of right-wing terrorist attacks, including the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing[2]. In the 1980s, US neo-Nazi James Mason published a series of newsletters titled *Siege* which advocate for self-directed acts of terrorism carried out by "lone wolves"[3, 4]. In 1992, US white nationalist Louis Beam republished an earlier essay with which he popularised the concept of "leaderless resistance" – dropping rigid organisational structures in favour of small cells that work independently to carry out acts of violence. The idea was that lone actors or cells are more difficult to identify and hinder than more formal groups [5]. Around the same time, US white supremacist Tom Metzger promoted the term "lone wolf", which also argued against joining organisational structures and opting for autonomous strikes instead [6]. Thus, while lone actors might opt for carrying out terrorist attacks on their own simply out of necessity (because they may lack the social skills to join formal groups),[7] the notion of lone actor terrorism is widespread within RWE communities.

The ideology, which inspired the five lone actors that carried out attacks in 2019, can be defined as:

> "*A broad range of ideologies that essentially see violence as a legitimate tool to combat a political and ethnic 'enemy' (including individuals with different culture, religion, nationality or sexual orientation) seen as a threat to the own race or nation. Both are entangled in an active state of war over future existence.*"[8]

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[1] Guhl and Davey. "A Safe Space to Hate," 5.
[2] Berger, "The Turner Legacy," 6.
[3] Thompson, "Inside Atomwaffen."
[4] Johnson and Feldman, "Siege Culture After Siege," 5.
[5] Southern Poverty Law Center, "Louis Beam."
[6] Southern Poverty Law Center, "Age of the Wolf," 12.
[7] Schuurman et al., "End of the Lone Wolf," 773.
[8] Koehler, "German Right-Wing Terrorism," 51.

Attacks carried out by VRWE organisations have been declining in frequency in recent years. However, attacks carried out by lone actors have increased, accounting for two-thirds of fatal attacks between 2016 and 2019[9].

The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) uses the definition provided by the Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism project which defines lone actor terrorism as:

> *"The threat or use of violence by a single perpetrator (or small cell), not acting out of purely personal material reasons, with the aim of influencing a wider audience, and who acts without any direct support in the planning, preparation and execution of the attack, and whose decision to act is not directed by any group or other individuals (although possibly inspired by others)"[10].*

This definition acknowleges the possibility of lone actors being connected to others, yet understates the importance of connections through digital environments. Several authors have noted that online spaces and communities are crucial for consuming extremist content and finding like-minded people[11, 12] and that lone actors usually radicalise in offline and online radical milieus[13].

1.2 The Role of Digital Environments for Lone Actor Terrorism

Online environments that facilitate violent extremism, for instance by allowing socialisation, recruitment, or accelerated radicalisation[14], have been referred to as "virtual communities" or "radical milieus" – social spaces in which information is disseminated and involvement is encouraged[15, 16]. Lone actors also connect to virtual communities, sharing their worldviews and frames of interpretation[17]. In this case, while recent right-wing lone actor attacks are seemingly random and unpredictable, examination of these environments allows for opportunities of detection and intervention[18]. In this way, right-wing extremist online communities form critical loci for the study of contemporary right-wing extremist violence.

Digital environments are neither the only or main factor in lone actor radicalisation, nor do they produce radicalising effects deterministically. Instead, users should be considered active participants who select and embrace content[19], criticise one another, and contribute to existing narratives[20]. Digital spaces may also be attractive to lone actor terrorists because sharing of attack-related content increases reach and the ability to revisit attacks online lends them permanence[21]. Both the Christchurch and Halle shooters livestreamed their attacks – ensuring that the violence will be continually shared on right-wing extremist forums and allowing numerous supporters "participate" in the violence.

2. Digital Environments

The online presence of the far right stems back to the mid-1980s[22] and has increased since the late 2000s[23]. Since then, right-wing extremist activism has moved to the internet in the forms of websites, blogs, forums, imageboards, and social media. The threshold for online activism is low because participation is cheap and

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[9] Ravndal et al., "RTV Trend Report 2019," 9.
[10] Bakker and De Roy van Zuijdewijn, "Lone-Actor Terrorism," 9.
[11] Bouhana et al., "Lone-Actor Terrorism."
[12] Brown and Pearson, "Social Media, the Online Environment and Terrorism."
[13] Schuurman et al., "End of the Lone Wolf," 773.
[14] Smith and Talbot, "How to Make Enemies and Influence People," 100.
[15] Bowman-Grieve, "A Psychological Perspective," 2.
[16] Malthaner and Waldmann, "The Radical Milieu," 9.
[17] Bouhana et al., "Lone-Actor Terrorism."
[18] Schuurman et al., "End of the Lone Wolf," 774.
[19] Archetti, "Terrorism, Communication and New Media," 50.
[20] Brown and Pearson, "Social Media, the Online Environment and Terrorism."
[21] Brown and Pearson, "Social Media, the Online Environment and Terrorism."
[22] Conway, "Determining the Role," 13.
[23] Winter, "Online Hate," 40.

easy. There are also fewer social repercussions of screen-mediated activism, where hateful propaganda is produced and can be circulated fast and anonymously.

A 2019 report reveals a link between far-right online hate and violence, highlighting that registered users of Stormfront (the first far-right website founded in 1995) had murdered nearly 100 people between 1999 and 2014, 77 of which were killed by Anders Behring Breivik on 22 July 2011[24]. Breivik used the internet in all stages of his violent radicalisation, including consuming and circulating propaganda as well as parts of his attack preparations.

Breivik's manifesto revealed references to RWE subcultures and Islamophobic websites that link the European and US RWE scenes in a paranoid alliance against Islam. Breivik frequented a number of mainstream and extremist internet forums, including the anti-Islamic blog called Gates of Vienna, the website jihadwatch.org run by US white supremacist Robert Spencer, the Norwegian Document.no site and the writings of the Islamophobic blogger Peder Are Nøstvold Jensen known as "Fjordman"[25].

Since Breivik's self-radicalisation online, new digital environments have emerged that affect individual radicalisation processes[26]. A growing body of literature on political communication has highlighted the importance of social media platforms in spreading the views of RWE actors[27]. Tech-savvy extremists from a new generation born into the digital age are utilising multiple platfroms to forge communities and find social support to conduct acts of violence, including terrorism[28].

2.1 Online Platforms

In recent years, violent right-wing extremism has increasingly been characterised by young men who radicalise in transnational digital subcultures[29] and carry out acts of violence alone. The following section outlines the most relevant online forums, social media sites and live streaming technologies, both mainstream and fringe, that have been used or are still in use by RWEs, including lone actors.

Table 1: Relevant Social Media Platforms

Social Media
Facebook: The social media platform was used by the Christchurch shooter to live-stream his attack; the Poway and Bærum shooters attempted to do the same.
Youtube: YouTube can serve to normalise and amplify right-wing extremist discourse. The platform's recommendation algorithm can direct users down a "rabbit hole" – from consuming and commenting on milder to more extreme content on the platform. The New Zealand Royal Commission of Inquiry report on the Christchurch attack notes that the shooter had donated funds to the YouTube channel of Canadian white nationalist Stefan Molyneux.[30] The Bærum attacker, too, had spent a lot of time on YouTube absorbing white supremacist and antisemitic videos.
Twitch: Live-streaming platform popular within the video gaming community. The Halle terrorist livestreamed his attack here.
Telegram: A cloud-based instant messaging service. Telegram has limited content moderation policies, only banning the promotion of violence on public channels and the sharing of illegal pornographic material[31]. This made it attractive for a loose network of channels known as "Terrorgram" that distribute content glorifying RWE lone actors[32].
Gab: An alt-tech social networking service known for its RWE user base. The RWE lone actor of the 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue shooting, Robert Bowers, announced his attack on Gab.

[24] Winter, "Online Hate," 55-56.
[25] Bjørkelo, "Extremism and the World Wide Web," 42.
[26] Palmer, "How Does Online Racism Spawn Mass Shooters."
[27] Jacobs and van Spanje, "A Time-Series Analysis," 169.
[28] Singer & Brooking, "Like War," 10.
[29] Ravndal et al. RTV Trend Report 2019.
[30] Veilleux-Lepage et al., "The Christchurch Attack Report," 2.
[31] Guhl and Davey. "A Safe Space to Hate," 1.
[32] Hope Not Hate, "The Terrorgram Network."

Table 2: Relevant Imageboards

Imageboards
4chan: Anonymous imageboard which has been a central generator of internet culture, memes and slang since its inception[33]. It contains dozens of different boards focusing on all kinds of topics. 4chan's Politically Incorrect (or /pol/) discussion board has strong ties to VRWE ideology and has been referenced by mass shooters. However, it is important to note that while racist and antisemitic views are prevalent on /pol/, it contains other forms of content, too.
8chan / 8kun: Another anonymous imageboard. After certain content was banned on 4chan in 2014, 8chan saw an influx of users since it presented itself as the version more friendly in terms of free speech. The Christchurch, Poway and El Paso lone actors all announced their attacks on 8chan. After the El Paso attack, the site went down but was later rebranded as 8kun.
Endchan: Another anonymous imageboard, albeit less popular. The Bærum lone actor announced his attack on this board.
Meguca: An anonymous imageboard with a thematic focus on anime. The site was taken down after the Halle shooter uploaded his documents to this board.

Table 3: 2019 Right-Wing Terrorists with Known Online Presences

Location	Date	Terrorist[34] and Age at Time of Attack	Manifesto posted on	Livestream
Christchurch, New Zealand	15 March 2019	Brenton Tarrant (28)	8chan, /pol/	Facebook
Poway, USA	27 April 2019	John Earnest (19)	8chan, /pol/	Facebook (attempt)
El Paso, USA	3 August 2019	Patrick Crusius (21)	8chan, /pol/	
Bærum, Norway	10 August 2019	Philip Manshaus (21)	Endchan	Facebook (attempt)
Halle, Germany	9 October 2019	Stephan Balliet (27)	Meguca	Twitch

These 2019 right-wing lone actor terrorists are highlighted here because parts of their web-based socialisation appears to have occurred on "chan" forums where they also announced their attacks. Moreover, the ones following the Christchurch attack all appear to have been inspired by the Christchurch shooter Brenton Tarrant to some degree. Their engagement with the forums was not brief or superficial, but an evident embrace of a cyberculture they grew up with.

The Christchurch shooter posted frequently on 8chan[35]. A report by the Norwegian Police revealed that the Bærum shooter Philip Manshaus, who claimed to have been directly inspired by Tarrant, frequented 4chan and later 8kun[36]. Both Manshaus and the El Paso shooter Patrick Crusius told investigators they came to their views on the internet. Manshaus claimed that his neo-Nazi worldview was shaped by ideas he aquired

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[33] Hine et al., "Kek, Cucks, and God Emperor Trump," 3.
[34] While we agree that it is advisable to not publicly name the terrorists in order to deny them infamy, this paper is addressed not at the general public but at first-line practitioners. They should be provided with the necessary tools to identify common narratives within (V)RWE online environments and the names of the terrorists are part of this. Thus, they will be named from here on out.
[35] Munn, "Algorithmic hate".
[36] Klungtveit, "Terror-novels, 8chan and Norwegian neo-Nazis".

in online communities. For instance, "Breivik, Christchurch, Holocaust, Alt-right, Tarrant, 8chan and Incel" were among a list of words for which Manshaus searched online.

2.2 Cultural Specifics of Digital Environments

The International Character of Digital Environments

While most of the platforms mentioned originate from the US, the subcultural milieus on them are produced and supported by users across regions and continents. Digital environments facilitate the diffusion of VRWE ideas and values beyond national borders. Since English is the operational language in many online communities, the spread of VRWE ideologies transcends language barriers.

The combination of anonymity with limited moderation has made the Politically Incorrect board (/pol/) of the imageboard forum 4chan, a gathering place for an international community of right-wing extremist activists. 4chan was launched in October 2003 by Christopher Poole, a 15-year-old student at the time.[37] Since its inception, the combination of anonymity with limited moderation has made the imageboard site a hotspot for offensive humour, coalescing into political activism on multiple occasions. The decentralised, international hacktivist collective known as Anonymous emerged at 4chan and it has also served as the platform for broad political ideologies like the Alt-Right.[38] Targeted trolling campaigns, doxing and "raids"[39] are known counter-cultural strategies from imageboard users.

Today, 4chan features 69 boards dedicated to a broad range of topics, from Japanese pop culture, anime and manga to video games, music, literature, fitness, politics and sports. Some of 4chan's most important aspects are anonymity (there is no identity associated with posts) and ephemerality (inactive threads are routinely deleted).[40] One of the most popular containment boards is /pol/. The official stated purpose of (pol/ is the "discussion of news, world events, political issues, and other related topics". Since 2015, 4chan has increasingly been associated with white supremacy, with /pol/ as the main incubator.

According to an analysis from 2016, the US dominated in total threads created at /pol/ with the top five countries in terms of threads per capita being New Zealand, Canada, Ireland, Finland and Australia[41]. The flag of the country from which the user posted is included along with each post, based on IP geolocation. However, geolocation and nationality can be manipulated by using VPNs, for example, and are thus not necessarily trustworthy. Self-identification nevertheless gives an overview of the nationalities of the imageboard users – also called *anons* (abbreviated for anonymous). According to 4chan's own statistics, about half of the users (based on self-identify) are based in the United States, followed by the English-speaking countries of UK, Canada and Australia. While /pol/ is primarily an English-speaking board, users from many non-English-speaking countries (France, Germany, Brazil, Russia, and several Scandinavian and Eastern European countries) are also represented.[42] Some users post under flags containing Nazi symbols or the green-and-black banner of the invented Kekistan. Mimicking the German Nazi war flag, these symbols emerging in RWE internet culture are used to troll liberal outsiders and mark in-group identity to fellow *anons*.[43]

The relevance of the international character of digital environments for lone actor terrorism is underlined by the fact that an Australian attacking two mosques in New Zealand inspired terrorists in the US, Norway, Germany and Singapore. Moreover, the Halle shooter, despite being a German attacking a synagogue in Germany, addressed his audience in English, with both his "manifesto" and livestream. This suggests he was targeting an international audience.

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[37] Papasavva et al., "Raiders of the Lost Kek," 2.
[38] Papasavva et al., "Raiders of the Lost Kek," 3.
[39] Online trolling describes the act of posting inflammatory or insulting content to generate outrage from parts of the audience; doxing or doxxing refers to the practice of publicly revealing someone's personal information, potentially posing a security risk for that person; and in the context of imageboards, a "raid" refers to coordinated group attacks.
[40] Papasavva et al., "Raiders of the Lost Kek," 1.
[41] Hine et al., "Kek, Cucks, and God Emperor Trump", 3.
[42] Thorleifsson, "From cyberfascism to Terrorism".
[43] Neiwert, "What the Kek."

The Search for Belonging, Amusement and Heroic Masculinity

Online communities function as more than a site for reconfiguring right-wing extremist propaganda. For instance, since its inception, 4chan has been a central site for the production of internet culture and political activism. Attracting young users globally, it can be considered as a site for counter-culture that rejects mainstream conventional society deemed progressive and politically correct.

Research has shown how digital milieus can be a place to experience a sense of belonging, community, entertainment and meaning[44]. For some users, a digital milieu can provide a way out of isolation, existential pain and struggles and grievances experienced in the physical world[45]. Some right-wing extremist activists can be attracted to digital milieus for particular affective experiences afforded by the sites. At /pol/ for instance, the practice of engaging in cyberattacks for the "lulz" (fun) and to be amused and entertained at another's expense is a pull factor[46]. Combined with online behaviours such as shitposting, the act of posting provocative content to derail a conversation, the experience of transgressive amusement are central factors driving users to socialise online.

The findings of recent research on terrorism and ideology highlight that right-wing extremists are often less interested in ideological specificities than they are in the wider culture and dynamics of the milieus in which they seek to embed themselves[47]. This is not to suggest that ideology plays no role in the right-wing extremist online spaces, as has been demonstrated in subsequent sections. Beyond expressing notions of white supremacy and racism, VRWE ideas and symbols are highly gendered and notions of aggrieved masculinity are used by activists in calls for mobilising violent action. A central aspect of the right-wing extremist discourse is that White, Western masculinity is under threat[48] and that men across the globe are taking part in a heroic struggle to reclaim it. Right-wing extremist discourses are characterised by hyper-masculine ideals in which going from memetic warfare to violent race war in real life is glorified as a way to obtain status and fame. In the digital environment, while right-wing extremist ideologies matter, specific behaviours of the digital subculture, such as provocative posting practices and meme-making are important pull factors for engagement.[49]

The Promotion of Violence through Memetic Irony

Violent right-wing extremism in online communities relies heavily on memes and images to dehumanise minorities, spread conspiratorial hatred and glorify violence. Activists typically use *memetic irony* to spread ideas and to mask offensive and racist material[50]. Meme-making and memetic irony function as a gatekeeper, marking communal belonging to fellow '*anons'* and distance to 'normies', a pejorative slang label for individuals deemed to be conventional or mainstream.

An overwhelming part of the meme-culture in RWE digital environments contain dehumanising and racist imagery. While older fascist tropes are abundant, new symbols are borrowed from digital, alt-right and gaming cultures as well as popular cultural aesthetics, illustrating how memes entail a remixing of images in the production of meaning and identity[51].

The meme of *Pepe the Frog*, a humanoid frog cartoon character that has been appropriated by white supremacists since the 2016 US presidential election, is typically produced with symbols that reinforce white supremacist views. Another much shared meme on 4chans's /pol/ board is the antisemitic *Happy Merchant Meme*, a pejorative and stereotyped cartoon meant to depict a Jewish man with a black beard, long hooked nose, a hunched back, and crooked teeth, who is greedily rubbing his hands[52, 53]. The meme is routinely posted alongside texts discussing how Jews are behind societal ills (also see the section "Dynamics of

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[44] Phillips, "This is why we can´t have nice things".
[45] Dematagoda, "Revenge of the Nerds," 13.
[46] Phillips, "This is why we can´t have nice things".
[47] Khalil, Horgan and Zeuthen, "The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model," 2.
[48] Nagle, Kill all Normies," 3.
[49] Nagle, "Kill all Normies," 2.
[50] Bogerts & Fielitz, "Do You Want Meme War."
[51] Knobel and Lankshear, "*Online memes, affinities, and cultural production.*"
[52] Know Your Meme, "Happy Merchant."
[53] The image was first created by a white supremacist cartoonist and has been circulating in neo-Nazi circles since at least 2004 and have in recent years been adopted by the alt-right segment of the white supremacist movement.

Conspiracy Narratives" below). On right-wing extremist platforms, memes and other visual culture are constantly produced and reproduced by multiple users and play and instrumental role in political acculturation.[54] By trolling outsiders, shitposting and wrapping racism in layers of memetic irony, users enter a "play frame" of exploratory behaviour. The paradoxical play frame facilitates a psychological mindset in which some users treat the activities that are occurring as both true and not true, serious and non-serious at the same time.[55]

"I did it 4 the lulz", is a common explanation for laughing at dehumanising content directed at people of colour, Jews, Muslims, LGBTQ minorities, women or political opponents marked as 'racial traitors'. As cyber-fascist violence is promoted through memetic irony, it can render violence less real and less impactful on the life of victims as well as lower the barrier for participation and acceptance of violent behaviour[56].

Most importantly, not all digital environments mentioned are right-wing extremist per se. Instead, they have become gathering places for RWEs that use the affordances of the site to exchange ideas, recruit and incite violence. At 4chan's /pol/ board, for instance, racist and white supremacist expressions have risen significantly over the past years, with a 40% increase in racist content and 25% increase in violent language (including neo-Nazi propaganda) occurring between 2015 and 2019[57, 58]. Moreover, the absence of counter-voices on imageboards reinforce the "echo chamber" effect in which the tropes of white supremacist and violence are reinforced. This contributes to a normalisation of racist and hateful content and (for some) increases the willingness to commit acts of violence[59].

The Gamification and Memification of Terrorism

VRWE activists frequently draw on video gaming culture. The distinct trend has been titled the 'gamification' of violence. The concept refers to the "use of game design elements within non-game contexts".[60] The Christchurch terrorist, who was an avid gamer, included multiple references to video games in his manifesto with in-jokes about them: the figure game character *Spyro the Dragon* "taught me ethnonationalism" while (kid-friendly online multiplayer shooter) Fortnite "trained me to be a killer," he mocked, "and to floss on the corpses of my enemies" – the 'floss' being a dance move that can be performed by Fortnite characters.[61]

After the Christchurch terror attacks, right-wing extremist digital milieus such as /pol/ were rife with sympathies for Tarrant and users were encouraging others to engage in violence. The terrorist attacks were scored and rated like a video game.

Even now, Breivik and Tarrant are praised as the "Chads" (internet slang associated with the incel community describing stereotypical "alpha males") with both the highest "kill count", longest preparation and best performance. Reducing victims to numbers and circulating gamified memes of the atrocities has become integral to the glorification of fascist violence online.

The "manifesto" of the Halle shooter, too, exhibits gamified elements. At the end of one of his documents, he provides an achievement list, akin to those commonly found in video games, in which he outlines different goals, such as murdering his victims with different types of weapons. The tone of the list is kept humorous which stands in stark contrast to its subject matter. It is directed both at his in-group of RWE internet users and their memetic irony as well as at the out-group of "normies" and his victims whom he is trying to shock and intimidate. Additionally, when Balliet described his arsenal in his "manifesto", he attempts to increase engagement by teasing a "secret weapon" which would only be shown during the livestream. Such a gamified method bears resemblance to a common marketing tactic.

In the months after the Christchurch attack, hundreds of different memes praising Tarrant were quickly produced and circulated by users on /pol/. Eventually, they spread to other parts of the internet, such as the loosely-affiliated network of Telegram channels known as "Terrorgram"[62] or gaming platforms such as Steam

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[54] Macklin, "The Christchurch Attacks," 25.
[55] Thorleifsson, "From Cyberfascism to Terrorism."
[56] Crawford et al., "Memetic Irony and the Promotion of Violence within Chan Cultures."
[57] Thompson, "The Measure of Hate."
[58] Arthur, "We Analyzed More Than 1 Million Comments."
[59] Crawford et al. "Memetic Irony."
[60] Schlegel, "The gamification of violent extremism," 4.
[61] Macklin, "The Christchurch Attacks," 19.
[62] Hope Not Hate, "The Terrorgram Network."

or Discord. Some memes were developed out of already familiar "chan" culture and imagery such as the now-commonplace meme templates such as the Wojak Feels Guy, Pepe the Frog, or the "chad"[63] meme. These memes in turn were combined with symbols associated with the Third Reich and white supremacist codes such as "Blood and Soil" and 1488 (14 stands for the so-called "Fourteen Words", a white supremacist slogan stating "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for White children"; 88 stands for "Heil Hitler" (H being the 8th letter of the alphabet).

Tarrant is routinely praised as a "saint", by now a common designation used to venerate the actions of right-wing terrorists[64]. After the El Paso attack on 4 August 2019, when 21-year-old Patrick Crusius killed 23 people and injured 23 more, a similar "saintification" of the terrorist occurred. Users from different continents posted the following: "Saint Brenton Tarrant, Saint Patrick Crusius, Blessed John Earnest". This is an indication of how the *anons* themselves do not perceive the attack as a single, isolated event, but an interconnected chain of violent actions.

2.3 Conspiracy Narratives in Right-Wing Extremist Online Communities

Real conspiracies do exist and so merely assuming the existence of a given conspiracy is not necessarily objectionable. However, many conspiracy narratives online, particularly those popular within VRWE circles, do not try to explain aspects of reality but rather adapt reality to one's own worldview. Counterevidence is dismissed. Since these narratives do not meet the standards of scientific theories, some scholars avoid the term "conspiracy theories" and favour "conspiracy myths", "conspiracy ideologies" or "conspiracy narratives"[65]. For the sake of clarity, the term "conspiracy narratives" will be used here.

Often, conspiracy narratives claim malicious intent behind societal events and crises. For this reason, the alleged conspirators should be partially hidden yet clearly identifiable. As such, the group of conspirators is usually described in broad and vague terms[66]. Moreover, conspiracy narratives understand all world affairs in Manichean terms of good versus evil. At its core, this struggle is frequently imagined to have apocalyptic proportions. Since time is constantly running out and the victory of evil is always imminent, there is a perceived sense of urgency for adherents of conspiracy narratives. The notion that one's in-group is under threat can then lead followers of such narratives to resort to drastic actions, including violence against the identified group of conspirators and their pawns.

For instance, Breivik was motivated by the "Euroabia" conspiracy narrative, the notion that Europe is on the verge of being taken over by Muslims, and that this plan is supported by "internal traitors"[67]. The 2019 lone actor attacks were also influenced by conspiracy narratives (see the section *The Conspiracy Narratives of the "Great Replacement" and "White Genocide"* below). Additionally, the conspiratorial idea of evil, Satan-worshipping elites controlling an alleged deep state has encouraged multiple violent escalations of internet culture. Members of the QAnon conspiracy movement that originated on 4chan participated in the 2021 attack of the US Capitol building, an unprecedented assault on US democracy.

Moreover, a significant part of conspiracy narratives is dominated by the antisemitic notion of a Jewish world conspiracy. It argues that an all-powerful Jewish lobby is corrupting countries and threatening the existence of White people. While not every conspiracy narrative is necessarily antisemitic, there is a tradition dating back to the Middle Ages of using Jews as a scapegoat and to attribute blame for world events that are difficult to explain[68].

Right-wing extremist activists who radicalise online often refer to themselves as "redpilled". Borrowing from the film The Matrix, in which the hero is offered the choice to take a red pill in order to see reality for what it truly is, RWEs use the term to describe a political awakening, rejecting scientific knowledge and democratic processes in favour of a white supremacy worldview. The apocalyptic diagnosis emerging from the /pol/ forum is contained in two conspiracy narratives which dominate the ideology of white supremacists globally.

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[63] The term "chad" is commonly used in incel circles to describe men who are desired by women; one version of a "chad" meme portrays a stereotypically masculine cartoon character who is usually used to signify the "right" choices.
[64] Ben Am and Weimann, "Fabricated Martyrs."
[65] Lamberty. "Zwischen Theorien und Mythen."
[66] Byford, "Conspiracy Theories," 72.
[67] Bangstad, "Islamophobia."
[68] Rathje, "Money Rules the World," 55.

This refers to the "Great Replacement" and the "white genocide" narratives. These interlinked conspiracy narratives state that White people are being systematically replaced by non-White people[69].

Antisemitism is the "master frame" at /pol/ and by far the most prevalent form of online discrimination. A central conspiracy narrative on /pol/ is based on the idea of the existence of a Zionist-occupied government or ZOG for short. Another states that Jews use Muslims and non-White minorities as human weapons to destroy the White race, as part of the plan to achieve world domination. Old anti-Semitic hatred about Jews as disloyal figures seeking to destroy Western civilization by importing dangerous Muslims is coupled with an Islamophobic layer.

A study of /pol/'s visual culture[70] shows that the visual content reflects the perception of an endangered community that needs to be reborn through urgent violent means. The radicalised *anons* present themselves as heroic men willing to fight against the "Great Replacement". This narrative is routinely bound up with misogyny that plays a central mobilising role in the racist subculture. Likewise, users draw on memes and rhetoric from incel and manosphere subcultures to promote male sexual entitlement and a vision of a hierarchical, patriarchal ideal world in which White men are at the top[71]. In incel ideology, women are blamed as the cause of falling birth rates as they reject traditional gender roles and allegedly embrace mainstream feminism. The Christchurch shooter himself began his manifesto by emphasising that it all comes down to White versus non-White birth rates. Furthermore, dominant "feminist culture" is blamed for White men's sense of emasculation, loss of manhood and repression.[72] The White male supremacist ideology promoted through these narratives relies on and reinforces the fantasy that the Western world has always been and must remain a White geographical space.

Users encourage others to "take the action pill" – to move from memetic warfare in a digital media battlefield to committing violence in real life. While large-scale terrorist attacks are praised, low-scale violence is also encouraged. In the collected data, users are encouraged to engage in hate speech, to beat up minorities, or to throw Molotov cocktails at religious buildings or asylum centres. Carrying out acts of white supremacist violence and terrorism can lead to increased status, praise and "infamy" for the users.

The right-wing extremist version of accelerationism goes even further: it argues that the current system is irreparably corrupt and needs to be destroyed in order for a new (white supremacist) order to rise from the ashes[73]. Within right-wing extremist digital environments, memes about terrorists are often coupled with calls for accelerating chaos and collapsing the current system. In his manifesto, Tarrant referred to accelerationism explicitly and was convinced that his attack will exacerbate the fight over gun rights in order to spark a wider conflict. Meanwhile, in the US, a pro-gun movement also aims to accelerate a second civil war and/or race war. The so-called Boogaloo movement is loosely organised and heterogeneous, with factions ranging from neo-Nazi and white supremacists to seemingly anti-racist ones[74]. It originated on 4chan's weapons discussion board /k/ and is linked to several violent attacks in the US, as well as the plot to kidnap the US Governor of Michigan, Gretchen Whitmer.[75]

3. Lone Actor Output and Actions

3.1 Choice of Targets

The primary targets of violent right-wing extremism include: Jews, who are perceived to undermine White nations by fostering multiculturalism, liberalism, or open borders. Muslims, particularly with reference to the conspiracy narrative of a so-called "Islamisation" of Europe. Internal enemies – compatriots who aid migration, feminism or globalism[76]. For instance, Tarrant and Manshaus targeted Muslims. A day before the Muslim celebration of Eid al-Adha on 18 August 2019, Philip Manshaus shot and killed his stepsister (who

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[69] The narrative of the "Great Replacement" was popularised by the French author Renaud Camus in his 2012 book *The Great Replacement* and has since established itself in European and US (V)RWE discourse.
[70] Thorleifsson, "From Cyberfascism to terrorism."
[71] Ging, "Alphas, Betas, and Incels."
[72] DiBranco, "Mobilizing Misogony."
[73] Anti-Defamation League, "White Supremacists Embrace 'Accelerationism.'"
[74] Newhouse et al., "The Boogaloo Movement."
[75] Thomas, "Boogaloo Bois."
[76] Michael, "Right-Wing Terrorism."

was adopted from China) before driving to the Al-Noor Islamic Center in in Bærum, Norway. He intended to kill "as many Muslims as possible". Two elderly men from the mosque managed to overpower Manshaus.

While John Earnest attacked the Poway synagogue in California, he had also set fire to a mosque a month earlier. And Stephan Balliet attacked a synagogue on Yom Kippur, the holiest day in Judaism, then drove to a kebab shop to target Muslims, and wrote in his documents that he had initially planned to attack a mosque or an Antifa centre, but eventually decided against it because he considered Jews to be the root of all evil.

It is evident that the intersectional anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim and anti-immigration hostilities (integral to RWE online subcultures and reflected in the conspiracy narrative of the "Great Replacement") informed the target selection for the 2019 lone actor terrorists.

3.2 Leakages

When looking at several cases of lone actors, research shows that information leakage prior to the attack is common. In the case of the El Paso shooting, the mother of the attacker had contacted a local police department because she was concerned about her son possessing an attack rifle.[77] In the case of the Bærum attack, a friend of the perpetrator had contacted the Norwegian Police Security Service a year prior to the attack with concerns about his extreme views. The 17-year-old stepsister, Johanne Zhangjia Ihle-Hansen, who was killed by Manshaus due to her Asian background, similarly raised concerns over his racist views to her boyfriend. Manhaus' stepmother was deeply worried about his extremist views as well as news clippings of US terrorists were used to line a national flag that hung on the wall of his bedroom. The same day Manshaus killed his stepsister, his stepmother had decided to contact the police.[78] Moreover, all VRWE lone actors inspired by Tarrant pre-announced their attacks in online manifestos and posts (see 2.1 Online Platforms) explaining their racist and/or anti-Semitic worldviews.

3.3 Manifestos

Moments before his deadly attack of Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand, Tarrant posted a 74-page, 16 500-word manifesto on 8chan. Titled "The Great Replacement", his manifesto served as a reference to a conspiracy narrative outlined by Renaud Camus in his book 'Le Grand Remplacement'. [79] Tarrant justified mass murder as necessary to defend Europe against the ongoing "cultural and ethnic genocide" being inflicted by multiculturalism and mass immigration. In the post, he urged the "lads" to do their part "by spreading my message, making memes and shitposting as you usually do".[80]

Tarrant's manifesto included multiple shitposting references and disinformation intentionally designed to shock or confuse outsiders and entertain and inspire other *anons*. By incorporating references to individuals like PewDiePie and Candace Owens, Tarrant intended to troll mainstream media and their coverage of the atrocities and keep himself relevant in the news cycle after the attack.

Tarrant forged a link between digital and gaming subculture, white supremacy propaganda and terrorist action, urging the readers of his manifesto and viewers of the livestreamed atrocities to transform him into a meme, so he could spread his propaganda and inspire further action. Within hours after the attack, imageboard users celebrated the atrocities as an act of heroism and called for additional violence.

The memeification and gamification of terrorist violence occurring on RWE platforms in the aftermath of the Christchurch massacre served as an inspiration and a blueprint for other anons who would imitate the violence based on the examples carried out in New Zealand and popularised online.

In a post on the day of the terrorist attack, Manshaus shared a meme on Endchan where he put himself directly in the context of previous attacks. Manshaus praised Tarrant and considered himself "chosen" as his third disciple after John Earnest and Patrick Crusius, the other two 2019 RWE lone actors who had also stated they were directly inspired by Tarrant. Alongside the meme, he posted the text: "*My time is up, I was*

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[77] Radicalisation Awareness Network, "Lone Actors, Police and P/CVE," 3.
[78] Stoksvik, "Manshaus stephmother worried."
[79] Farinelli, "Conspiracy Theories," 11.
[80] Evans, "Shitposting."

chosen by Saint Tarrant after all … We can't let this continue, you gotta bump the race war threat in real life … it's been fun".[81] Manshaus tried to imitate the Christchurch terrorist for both ideological references (white supremacy), target selection (mosque and his step-sister of Asian background) and tactics. Unlike Tarrant, Manshaus did not produce a lengthy and detailed manifesto, possibly because he seemed to be in a rush to commit violent action.

3.4 DIY Aspect of RWE Lone Actor Terrorism

The DIY (do-it-yourself) aspect of lone actor attacks can be seen as another way in which the terrorists pursue status and attention. By innovating on previous attacks, they might hope to be the ones that encourage others to commit acts of terrorism. Most importantly for this, the DIY aspect is intended to showcase the feasibility and low threshold (low costs, low skill level) of RWE lone actor attacks.

For instance, according to one of the documents he uploaded, Balliet's main objective was to prove the viability of his self-built weapons. His arsenal consisted of a range of DIY firearms and explosives, some of which had 3D-printed components. His "manifesto" included detailed instructions on how to build such weapons. And while he did bring a more reliable commercial rifle, he deliberately stuck to his self-made weapons since he saw his attack as a proof of concept for future RWE lone actors. Balliet outright stated that he had sympathisers in mind that do not have access to factory-made equipment. In other words, for Balliet, the low-cost, low-threshold aspect of DIY weapons was a deliberate tactic for propaganda purposes.

DIY weapon-building manuals such as the ones written by the Halle shooter have been downloaded and uploaded elsewhere by other VRWEs, continually shared and readily available within digital environments such as imageboards or RWE Telegram channels.

3.5 Livestreams

During his attack, Tarrant live-streamed the atrocity on Facebook to reach a large audience with his message and affect political outcomes. This was the first time a terrorist attack has been filmed via livestream.[82] The video, while only viewed by 200 people during the massacre, quickly went viral. Acts of terrorism always have an audience in mind and livestreams both increase viewership and ensure the violence will be continually shared on far-right forums, allowing numerous supporters "participate" in the violence as a kind of "interactive radicalisation tool".[83]

While trying to reach a wide audience, the five right-wing terrorists considered by this paper evidently still wanted to appeal to their digital subcultural milieus. Tarrant told his viewers to "Subscribe to PewDiePie" during his livestream, a reference to a then-popular online meme about a YouTube celebrity. Similarly, the Halle shooter introduced himself simply as "anon" in reference to imageboard culture at the beginning of his Twitch livestream.

Although the lone actors probably opted for livestreams in order to achieve infamy, they are also self-conscious about their performance. For instance, Tarrant assesses his and his weapons' performance before the video ends.[84] More notably, the Halle shooter repeatedly felt sorry for himself during his livestream and called himself a loser when his attack did not go as imagined. He lamented that nothing better could have been expected from a "NEET" (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) and that he had proven that improvised weapons are worthless, thus failing at his personal main objective.

The reaction to Manshaus' and Balliet's attack was mixed in the subcultural milieus. On the one hand, online VRWEs ridiculed them for failing to kill a lot of people, contrasting them to the glorified Tarrant. On the other hand, sympathisers contended that, like Breivik before them, the attackers at least tried to fight the "Great Replacement".

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[81] Burke, "Norway mosque attack suspect."
[82] Macklin, "The Christchurch Attacks," 20.
[83] Wong, "Germany Shooting Suspect."
[84] Office of Film and Literature Classification Video Game Rating System, "Notice of Decision," 2.

4. Key Challenges

- **Transnational and collective networking.** Lone actor terrorists present challenges for the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE). Extremism has moved to the internet and online communities play a key role in processes of radicalisation towards violent extremism. These communities can incite and enable individuals globally and it is difficult to identify who these individuals may be. The political acculturation and radicalisation of so-called lone actors is an inherently collective and increasingly transnational process. Conspiracy narratives entailing racist enemy images and calls for violence are produced fast and anonymously by users scattered across countries and continents. Critical events and global crises are used as opportunities to radicalise, recruit and spread calls for moving from memetic warfare to actively accelerating polarisation and race war in the physical world.

- **Speed and size.** In a hyperconnected age, the monitoring of trends and developments of online right-wing extremist communities and their VRWE users is important but challenging, with new platforms, technological affordances, and subcultural styles of communications emerging at a great scale and pace. The sheer size of the digital world of memes, images and texts poses a challenge for P/CVE policies to prevent and counter terrorist attacks. The rapidness with which content is created and the mass of information makes continuous and real-time monitoring both resource-consuming and time-consuming.

- **Memetic cyberculture.** Memes are key to social participation and political acculturation in social spaces online – this is also the case for (V)RWE digital subcultures. VRWEs are skirting moderation efforts by constantly changing terms or symbols, adjusting them to censorship guidelines. This renders conventional moderation strategies ineffective.[85]

- **Counter-narratives.** P/CVE efforts have often relied on offering counter or alternative narratives, in particular to prevent radicalisation, rather than to attempt to "deradicalise". However, evidence suggests that counter-narratives might be more promising in countering hate speech than in countering violent extremism.[86] Moreover, closed online forums such as Telegram are more difficult to penetrate than mainstream platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.[87] Studies have also shown that those participating in VRWE online spaces are less likely than jihadists to engage with counter-narrative initiatives.[88] Furthermore, a textual narrative approach is an insufficient P/CVE tool within imageboard communities such as 4chan/pol/ as online posting behaviours and transgressive visual culture are more important than ideological specificities.

- **Data and information sharing.** The transnational character of the online communities equally poses a challenge for national governments and security agencies. Users located in multiple regions and countries are producing cultural scripts and subcultural trends that are inspiring violence elsewhere. The fast, transnational exchange of ideas and practices by users in right-wing extremist online communities thus require online monitoring and transnational cooperation. Yet, data and information shared across state lines and between states and technology companies can pose the challenge of protecting privacy.

- **Building trust.** While deconstructing and removing VRWE propaganda can be challenging, the early detection of planned violent attacks is just as difficult. It is established that the majority of lone actor terrorist attackers showed signs of leakage to their friends, families, colleagues or online and physical communities. Building up trust between the police and communities requires soft approaches that take time and effort and cannot be forced.[89]

5. Recommendations

Based on current research insights, discussions from RAN meetings and our own monitoring and analysis of right-wing extremist online spaces and VRWE behaviour, it is evident that better practice, more effective

[85] Liang and Cross, "White Crusade," 2.
[86] Ganesh, "Evaluating the promise of formal counter-narratives," 89.
[87] Ganesh, ibid.
[88] Davey, Birdwell and Skellett, "Counter-Conversations," 7.
[89] Radicalisation Awareness Network, "Lone Actors, Police and P/CVE," 4.

policies and further scholarly research is needed to understand and disrupt VRWE exploitation of the online ecosystem. The following section outlines recommendations for practitioners and policymakers for P/CVE measures against VRWE online milieus as well as avenues for further research.

Recommendations for Practice

1. **Online spaces must be understood as an extension of society**. Online behaviours and VRWE visual culture, from ironic meme-making to transgressive shitposting, need to be approached as online community-making and not at the level of static, "fixed-in time texts".[90] To understand fast changing VRWE subcultural practices, trends and narratives, constant and continuous monitoring of VRWE milieus by first-line practitioners and security agencies – from law enforcement, intelligent practitioners, researchers and civil society organisations – is essential. Frontline practitioners should be supported to spot hidden, coded or nuanced messages in the bulk of ironic and memetic posts in these online environments. It is key that knowledge about the fast moving right-wing extremist online ecosystem reaches relevant actors. Additonally, enhancing digital literacy of first-line practicioners could improve the chances of detecting leakage from potential VRWE lone actors.

2. **Law enforcement must take online threats seriously**. The gamification of violence and terror and calls for violence promoted through memes and trolling campaigns against individuals must be considered as the real threats they are. Affected people must receive the necessary help and protection and law enforcement should have guidelines on how to deal with such cases.

3. **More focus on male youth and the role of masculinity in right-wing extremist milieus.** The /pol/ imageboards that have been used by male white terrorists are premised upon the logic of aggrieved masculinity and the need for a heroic struggle in the name of white supremacy. Gendered stereotypes and notions of heroic masculinity and fame obtained through violence are used to appeal to men and male youth. As such, P/CVE programming towards this specific digital milieu should have a focus on youth/young adult, with practicners that are familiar with the digital subcultures and their styles of communication.

4. **Recommendation for the media: Avoid a "heroic" status for terrorists**. VRWEs are seeking broad media coverage to instil fear, propagate ideology and use memetic irony to troll outsiders and inspire insiders. Media should refrain from reproducing propaganda packages and images curated by the terrorist. This includes coverage of the trials in which perpetrators try to control the narrative in their favour.

Recommendations for Policy Making

1. **The technology industry must continue its strife to limit exposure to VRWE propaganda.** All digital platforms, including gaming platforms or messenger services with social media components, must continuously seek to eradicate violent content from their platforms and continue to develop effecitve tools to disrupt VRWE.

2. **Improve the rule of law on the internet.** Exposure to right-wing extremist propaganda should also be limited through online regulation. This requires cooperation between governments, technology companies and the law to prevent the misuse of new technolgoies to promote hate and violence in the online environment. However, efforts against VRWEs must not be exploited to limit the rights and freedoms of the general public.

3. **Raise awareness of right-wing extremist radicalisation and enhance digital literacy.** It is key that knowledge about VRWE online behaviours and styles of communication reach parents, care-givers and teachers. Such sharpened knowledge could improve the likelihood of authorities being informed of leakage signals. Family members and friends play a key role in terms of detecting and warning authorities about radicalisation processes. Thus, it is important that the relevant actors are familiar with the fast-moving VRWE online ecosystem and associated subcultural online behaviours.

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[90] Knobel and Lankshear, "*Online memes, affinities, and cultural production*," 219.

4. **Enhance democratic resilience.** Education that promotes norms for responsible behaviour on the internet should be used to enhance resilience to right-wing extremist conspiracy narratives and racism online. Critical thinking, too, has been found to be a protecting factor in reducing the impact of conspiracy narratives.[91]

Recommendations for Research

1. **Mapping the underlying drivers conducive to right-wing extremist radicalisation towards violent extremism.** We need more knowledge about the drivers of radicalisation, including both online and offline causes and risk factors. The terrorists highlighted in this report were between the ages of 19 and 28. While they carried out their attacks single-handedly, their being alone was relative as they all linked to VRWE subcultural environments online. We need more knowledge about the life experiences and circumstances of young users in right-wing extremist digital milieus and what makes some vulnerable to recruitment. Research should also take into consideration how experiences with social exclusion and psychosocial factors affect young people vulnerable to radicalisation.

2. **More research on gendered processes of recruitment and propaganda in right-wing extremist milieus.** The right-wing extremist digital milieus are highly gendered, with men and women participating in different ways. A focus on white men should not ignore the instrumental role played by women in these environements. Even if women rarely carry out lone actor terrorist violence, they are involved in propaganda circulation and recruitment. It is important to gain a deeper understanding of the notions of gender, masculinity, and femininity and how these are used and instrumentalised in calls for terrorist violence.

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[91] Farinelli, "Conspiracy Theories," 17.

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