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# ONLINE RADICALIZATION OF AMERICA'S MALE YOUTH

## Abstract

The United States has, in recent years, struggled with the rise of the Alt-Right. A wing of political extremism associated with extreme conservatism, racism, anti-Semitism, and sexist ideals, the target demographic is young, white, Christian males. Multiple mass shootings have been attributed to the ideology and, in tracing its roots, one finds the home of such ideologies to be on online forums such as Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan. This paper analyzes the lax rules and lack of moderation on these sites that makes them a safe place for hateful ideologies. In addition, it finds that the sense of community these potential murders find on such sites can urge them to their hateful acts. Through memes, in-jokes, and manifestoes, the Alt-Right has found a long-term home in these forums.

**Keywords:** Alt-Right, Reddit, 4Chan, 8Chan, Forums, Extremism, America

## INTRODUCTION

The United States has a problem. More and more young males are being radicalized online in forums such as Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan. Pulled further and further to the right, a spate of terror attacks in America perpetrated by these radicalized men have cost dozens of lives. Alt-right ideologies held by these extremists are rooted in neo-nazi, ultra conservative, Christian based views. They reject current governance and desire a state built on individual liberties and White supremacy. Part of the identity of these groups is their fringe beliefs, their outlets for these feelings are often online, where the spread of information is much more

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difficult to control (SPLC 2021, 2-5). Forums are often a safe haven for this speech; young men can gather and freely express their political and social views, but often this devolves into simple hate speech. Within these forums, people start to slowly devolve from political speech into outright White supremacy and hatred. Already a breeding ground for potential terrorism, some sites are eventually shut down, but others remain active, providing a gathering place for the radicalization of America's youth. The three forums outlined below are just a sample of the more mainstream sites dedicated to sharing alt-right beliefs. Reddit operates multiple subreddits dedicated to the issue, as one is shut down, users flock to another to continue sharing opinions. The number of members is staggering at times, thousands of young men posting almost non-stop on the forum. On 4chan and 8chan, similar forums for image sharing, further thousands of young Americans espouse hatred towards minorities, Jews, Muslims, and women. They mingle hatred with political talk and visions of an America where they enjoy even more power. Here it is argued that the loose moderation of these sites and their policies of allowing any speech not outright illegal, allows them to become the breeding ground for these ideas. Research into these forums support this theory, that memes, text posts, and manifestoes posted here are often inclusive of language that would otherwise be censored. An overview of the previous research done on these topics makes it clear that the websites are a haven for hate speech due to their nonexistent moderation and censorship rules.

## ORIGINS AND BELIEFS OF THE ALT-RIGHT IN AMERICA

Alternative right, or alt-right is a growing sect of political thought in the United States. Defined as "a set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that "white identity" is under attack by multicultural forces using "political correctness" and "social justice" to undermine white people and "their" civilization" by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC 2021, 1), the growing movement has already been the cause for numerous attacks on American citizens. The term itself was invented by leader Richard Spencer in 2008 to describe a new political ideology based on White, Catholic Christian identity. They espouse "traditional" values rooted in history and reject what they call liberalizing reforms. The pseudo-libertarian values the alt-right holds aim for anarcho-capitalism, that is eschewment of organized state in favor of open markets. Freedom from government is a main tenet, the ability for followers to make their own choices in regards to laws and

norms is of utmost importance, overreaching laws that are deemed to infringe on personal sovereignty are vilified (SPLC 2021, 1-3). It may seem as if an inordinate amount of scrutiny is placed on only a single demographic, young, White males, but this is the core of the alt-right movement. This is the group they pander and appeal to and this is the group most susceptible to their radicalization. Further, in America, White men are the demographic owning the most guns, putting them at highest risk to take violent action in accordance to their beliefs (Parker 2017, 2).

Spencer himself has said the target group is young males, fresh from university, and unhappy with their diminishing White identity. The "hyper-radicalized" world they are surrounded with places their identity at the bottom of the hierarchy, below immigrants, POC, LGBTQ identifiers, and religious minorities. They feel the loss of their supremacy keenly and seek to preserve the values that keep them in power. Therefore, white supremacy and neo-Nazi beliefs form the core of the alt-right. In politics, they staunchly support former president Donald Trump and congressional representatives such as Madison Cawthorn (R-NC11), Lauren Boebert (R-CO3), and Marjorie Taylor-Green (R-GA14), all of whom have espoused radical right wing beliefs in the past. Traditional conservative representatives are mocked as impotent and ineffectual, often referred to using slurs such as "cuckservatives", a mix between the terms cuckold and conservative used to describe Republicans who support minorities or Jews (SPLC 2021, 2-5) (Anti-Defamation League [ADL] 2019, 1-4). Still, the cause tries to steer away from overtly racist language in an effort to attract new followers who may not fully ascribe yet to the more extreme views, but this is not to say that these are not core beliefs (ADL 2019, 3). The loosely organized and secretive community is hard to trace at times, due to the anonymity that the internet provides. The surface beliefs are rooted in discontent with current politics, yet the deeper one gets, the more is revealed as to the true nature of alt-right beliefs (Hodge & Halgrimmsdottir 2020, 6).

As mentioned, the alt-right primarily appeals to young, white, Christian males. They target educated, upper-middle class youth, though draw in quite a few uneducated poor. The use of the internet to draw in these youths is of vital importance. Anonymous forums give future adherees the chance to espouse views without fear of personal backlash (Hodge & Hallgrimsdottir 2020, 4-6). Often, memes are used to convey beliefs, infusing racism and hatred with humor. Women are also a frequent target, memes mock them for either having too much sex or not freely providing it. Many alt-right believers view feminists and women's expanded rights as a threat to their manhood, and they use these

online communities to harass and dox women they feel infringed upon by. One notable occurrence was 2014's Gamergate, in which alt-right members of various online forums banded together to force women off of videogaming platforms. Viewing these as male only spaces, they used overwhelming hostility and threats or rape and death directed towards female gamers to reclaim spaces for men only. It is one of the first examples of a successful alt-right internet based campaign. This online aggression is a hallmark of the movement, and can be found in almost all of the forums in which alt-right men are active. They often co-opt popular memes and bend them to their will, making them into symbols of hate posted across various forums (ADL 2019, 4).

## THE FREEDOM OF REDDIT

Reddit is an online forum in which users can create sub forums called subreddits. Users can post threads, pictures, videos, and links then collect comments on these posts, and are allowed to upvote or downvote these posts and comments, signaling agreement or disagreement with the opinions expressed within. The more upvotes one collects, the higher one's karma, an arbitrary measurement of collective agreement with posted content. The subreddit r/AltRight was first formed in 2010 on reddit but only began gathering their first thousand followers six years later in 2016. In the following six months, the subreddit multiplied sixteen fold, having 16,007 followers by the time it was banned in January of 2017 for violating Reddit policy on hate speech and content. In the six months it was significantly active, the subreddit saw an astonishing amount of posts, mostly related to hate targeting minorities. In an analysis of the subreddit's content, Grover and Mark found that the most often targeted group were Jews, with almost one in every 100 meaningful words being Jew or Jewish. The subreddit had an array of slang and perjoritive terms used in addition to this, including Ashke-Nazi, kike, hebe, shekels, oy veys, and NaZionists. They found as well that the tone in most posts were anger, hate, anxiety, and sadness. The results of their analysis found that in the six months they studied, the emotions exhibited on the subreddit increased dramatically in intensity. Furthermore, the boundaries pushed in hate speech and concepts presented accelerated at an alarming pace. Anger was a predominant emotion shown in comments, often targeting Blacks or Jews, though not solely restricted to these two groups. Reddit's alt right subreddit rarely touched on political topics that first formed the ideology, but instead seemed to focus on the racial hatred and sexism (Grover & Mark 2019, 196-200).

Reddit's lax rules regarding self-identification allow users to mask their identities and post freely their deepest held beliefs. These thoughts may not be appropriate to be shared publicly due to potential for backlash so Reddit users feel comfortable posting in various subreddits given their anonymity. Another now banned subreddit, r/The_Donald, shows serious skewing towards alt-right ideologies. Named after former US president Donald Trump, the subreddit had 688,000 subscribers before being shuttered. Why do some of these subreddits have such enormous amounts of followers and how is Reddit a harbor for them? Reddit began as a niche website for news sharing and fandoms, but has since grown to include an exponential amount of topics from r/cats to r/paleontology. It acts as a gathering place for "geeky" people around the world, generally young men with some form of higher education interested in STEM, video games, and pop culture. Loose moderation allows niches such as r/AltRight and r/The_Donald to exist though, and often to gather enormous amounts of followers. Further, because of the policy of not censoring any speech that does not directly violate US law, they allow people to push boundaries. As long as there is not a definitive plan of violence against a certain group, users can theorize about rhetorical violence against minorities as much as they like. This is perhaps the most important contributing factor to its transformation into a sae space for the alt-right. The male dominated environment promotes a "toxic geek masculinity" on the site, where users extol their intelligence and sometimes superiority, making it a perfect breeding ground for far right ideologies, despite the general liberal nature of the site. Unpaid moderators on each subreddit are in charge of removing illegal content, though, due to the fact these moderators belong to the communities they moderate, the more extreme subreddits are often allowed to run unchecked, the moderators agreeing with even the most vile of opinions expressed there. Administrators working for Reddit are often unwilling or unable to curtail this, until outcry from other communities, often those attacked or brigaded by the hate filled ones complain enough to get the extremist subreddits quarantined or deleted. The unrestricted nature of the website makes it one of the foremost spots to disseminate alt-right views today (Massanari 2020, 179-189).

## A STEP FURTHER: 3CHAN AND 8CHAN

Announcing itself as the "darkest corners and seediest zones" of the internet, 4chan is an image sharing board with even fewer restrictions than Reddit. Created in 2003 by a fifteen year old in an attempt to create

an anonymous image sharing site to spread anime images and discuss pop culture. It devolved rapidly from there to a place for snapshots of murder victims, child porn, and early memes. It requires no email address or identifying info to create an account, users can remain entirely anonymous while interacting in various subforums related to a bevy of topics (Seidman 2014, 1-2). In 4chan's "Politically Incorrect" board, Rieger found a prevalence of hate speech related to alt-right ideologies. In fact, 12% of posts there related to the far right and included some form of hate speech, a substantially higher amount than in many other politically neutral boards. Similar to Reddit, an analysis of the targets of this hate were mainly Blacks and Jews, though a significant portion also focused on LGBTQ, immigrants, and those with disabilities (Rieger et al. 2021, 13-16). These findings only serve to further highlight the connections between the alt-right, hatred, and online communities. Demonization of government and populist ideologies were widespread, with a strong majority of posts far right leaning, and only a thin margin can be identified as leftist views, despite the site's origin as a haven for the far-left (Colley & Moore 2022, 7-8).

These views and shocking posts are allowed to proliferate due to loose moderation on the site. If the post or image does not violate US law, it's allowed to remain on the sight. Offensive material and extreme political beliefs are not illegal, therefore, they remain. Moderation is scant and condemned, images removed are likely to be reposted within hours across multiple other subforums and exalted due to its "edgy" status. Text posts are rarely removed unless they directly break the law, allowing potential terrorists to post vague texts related to plans and conspiracy theories about the future victims with no fear of backlash (Seidman 2014, 2). Bullying and trolling is also rife within the community, people's private information is often given freely and users band together to make life miserable for the enemies of the group (Colley & Moore 2022, 5-18). Users of 4chan's /pol/ forum, standing for politically incorrect, is the main home of alt-right adherees on 4chan. Colley and Moore found that they stand unified under a feeling of superiority over others, often posting about their intellectual ability and how they can see through the conspiracy theories put forth by the government. A main goal stated within the community is the need to "redpill", or radicalize others, bringing them into the alt-right. They examined the importance of influencers on the site, finding that efforts to radicalize others were not a collective effort but instead a show of individual belief (Colley & Moore 2022, 15). This is a reflection of most alt-right spaces; they are often loosely organized and individualistic. Though leaders do exist,

they do not lead a well organized group, simply serving as a figurehead instead for followers with varied beliefs to rally behind. Followers are well aware of this fact though and use it to their advantage. They hamper chances to study their community and try to sway research by posting certain messages or heading to other subforums to post their messages there, hoping to skew research. Additionally, they are fiercely protective of their own, often lauding terrorist attacks as "wins" or hiding potential perpetrators from authorities. They are loathe to report their own members therefore, when plans for attacks are announced, the potential terrorist is often egged on, or treated as a hero.

On April 27, 2019, as the Passover holidays came to a close, worshipers gathered in Poway Synagogue twenty miles north of San Diego, California and a right wing extremist waited to attack. John Timothy Earnest had been radicalized on the imageboard 8chan, modeled after 4chan. In fact, he'd used 8chan to post his manifesto earlier that day. This was not the first nor the last time 8chan would be accused of radicalizing a young man into commiting a terror attack, only a few months later another shooting was linked to the website. In El Paso, Texas, a 21 year old man was accused of opening fire in a Walmart, killing 20 people and injuring numerous others; he too was active on the forum. As a result of these and other international attacks, 8chan was removed from the internet (Rieger et al. 2021, 1). 8chan began as an alternative to 4chan, the creator, Frederick Brennan, saying it would be a haven of free speech. Unimpressed by 4chan's habit of removing some of the more inflammatory posts, Brennan sought to create a site in which the internet could serve the exact purpose Brennan thought it should, a place where people could say what they wished without fear of backlash or censorship. The 2019 attacks highlighted 8chan's niche on the internet, a place where extremists could talk openly and freely recruit others to their cause, a potential mass shooter's cyber home (Roose 2019, 1-2).

After the attacks, Brennan himself called for his website to be removed from the internet. Just one year beforehand he had sold the site to new owners, so had little control over whether it stayed up or not, but he recognized the danger his creation possessed. 8chan is entirely unmoderated, meaning there is no overseeing authority there to remove posts that cross legal lines of free speech and therefore, hatred and its ilk abound. Memes praising mass shooters and codes for crimes targeting minorities are used in excess, often functioning as a way to test who is "in" and who is "out" of certain communities. Literature extolling hate crimes and alt-right beliefs are shared openly. Multiple times 8chan has been accused of providing a haven for hate speech and neo-Nazis, and the

site has ignored multiple complaints of allowing political speech to fester into an alt-right echo-chamber (Roose 2019, 3-4). Images such as those of frogs holding Nazi flags and proclaiming the end of Jews and Muslims in America are rife, with users mingling these with support for Trump and a "new America". Memes are a significant method of information spread on 8chan, their simplicity is a boon for spread across platforms. In the time a cognizant rebuttal to the racist or sexist material can be written, the image can be shared to Facebook, Twitter, and other sites dozens of times. They are useful specifically because almost anyone can make them, they are easy to share, and even easier to understand. Often the inclusion of humor in 8chan's memes make skewering minorities a topic of laughter, rather than the serious topic matter that it truly is (Hodge &Hallgrimsdottir 2019, 6-9). Due to its long history with the alt-right, 8chan is considered deeply established in the sect's ideology. It is intrinsic to the identity of many members, and dozens of hours spent there is a prerequisite to belonging to the group, same as with Reddit and 4chan, the symbiotic relationship between the two means survival for either without the other is questionable (Hodge & Hallgrimsdottir 2019, 13).

## CONCLUSION

The alt-right began as a fringe anti-establishment view that gained traction in the United States during the candidacy and presidency of Donald Trump. Its hallmark is White supremacy and Christian views, with hatred towards minorities, Muslims, Jews, women, LGBTQ, and the left. It appeals greatly to young, White men who view expanded rights for the previously mentioned groups as an infringement on theirs; they long for a return to "traditional" values. The radicalization to these beliefs take place almost entirely online, especially on forum sites such as Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan. These message boards serve as a safe haven for alt-right believers, loose moderation and the proliferation of hate speech allow them to pursue the goals of the sect, radicalization of further members, cyber attacks on perceived enemies, and planning violent attacks in the real world. Memes and insider jokes and terminology allow them to perceive who belongs to the in group or not, with outsiders being bullied off the site. Real life terror attacks by those radicalized online have already claimed lives in America, but studying these groups presents insurmountable challenges. Their resistance to outsiders and the free-form nature of the sites they populate only impede their study and stopping. Without proper moderation and censorship of extremist beliefs, these sites will continue to provide a home to the alt-right and radicalize those who use them.

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