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Online Radicalization Case Study of a Mass Shooting: the Payton Gendron Manifesto

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Abstract

Scholarship on the radicalization processes that lead to violence has consistently suggested there are limitations to online radicalization models noting that offline connections to extremist groups are typically required, as well. As the extent to which people's social and political identities are increasingly online, this research investigates how content consumed online may correlate to rationales for violent action. Exploration of this thesis was carried out in a case analysis of Buffalo mass shooter Payton Gendron. Specifically, the manifesto he created prior to the attack overtly argues that his radicalization was informed entirely by online spaces, even listing the specific sites that were instrumental to his radicalization. The manifesto was evaluated in terms of where the content came from and the extent to which the document was plagiarized from specific online sources. Results suggest that the rationale provided for the attack was almost entirely sourced from the online sites Gendron claimed were foundational to forming his ideology. This suggests consistency between his claim to have been radicalized online and the radicalizing spaces online he frequented. Results are considered in the context of various deradicalization and radicalization prevention strategies.

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Introduction

On May 14th, 2022, 18-year-old Payton S. Gendron of Conklin, New York, drove his car more than 200 miles to a predominantly black neighborhood in Buffalo, New York. At around 2:30 p.m., Gendron arrived at a Tops supermarket wearing body armor, tactical gear and a helmet with a video camera attached. He utilized the camera to livestream the event and carried an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle because of its proven deadly nature. He began firing his assault-rifle in the parking lot of the supermarket, killing three victims. He then went inside the store where he killed a security guard and nine other shoppers before surrendering to police. Eleven of the thirteen victims were black (McKinley et al. 2022). The assault rifle used in the shooting contained writings referencing white supremacist killers, symbols, and memes

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further revealing his motivations (“Buffalo Shooter’s Weapons Covered in White Supremacist Messaging” 2022). Soon after the shooting, it was found that Gendron had created an online chatroom on the social media platform Discord. This room allowed access to an online stream of the events in Buffalo and volumes of racist writings including a detailed plan to shoot black people (Swaine and Albergotti 2022). According to the Anti-Defamation League (“Buffalo Shooter’s Weapons Covered in White Supremacist Messaging” 2022), Gendron also attempted to livestream the event through the game streaming platform Twitch but was unable to utilize the channel as his link was taken down immediately.

While it was clear by the choice of the location and targeted victims that this shooting was racially motivated, Gendron’s white supremacist agenda was conclusively confirmed when his authenticated 180-page manifesto emerged. One question, however, remained: What led the 18-year-old, who friends and family stated was not an extremist, to become radicalized to the degree of taking deadly action? This research will explore how internet and social media content appears to have informed his written justification for the attack. As a case, Gendron’s journey to extremism may suggest an instance where the online space was a more significant factor in radicalization offering implications for response and prevention.

According to Gendron’s manifesto, he derived his beliefs “mostly from the internet. There was little to no influence on my personal beliefs by people I met in person. I read multiple sources of information from all ideologies and decided that my current one is most correct” (P. S. Gendron 2022, 5)². He further states that while he supported many groups which may have influenced his actions, he had no direct membership in any and acted on his own volition. An important caveat worth noting is the fact that the reliability of Gendron’s accounting is beyond the scope of this study. Self-reporting is notoriously unreliable (Rosenman, Tennekoon, and Hill 2011) and the manifesto itself may have been constructed haphazardly with online material that was easily accessible to Gendron. Nonetheless, it remains noteworthy that online spaces are so centrally noted as a source of influence by Gendron himself with extensive integration of themes from the noted spaces. The focused nature of the attack is discussed by Prokupecz et al. (2022) who state that the attack was meticulously planned, involving multiple visits to the Tops supermarket in March 2022. This

² Gendron’s manifesto was removed from virtually all platforms and is not discoverable on reputable search engines; an authenticated version was downloaded for this research prior to broad removal of the content

included counting the number of white and black patrons along with a map of the interior of the market. They further note that despite the lengthy planning stage of the attack, Gendron's parents and others close to him did not suspect anything. His parents are described as friendly people who disavow his racist agenda. Gendron himself has mostly been described as quiet and withdrawn. While his paranoia during the COVID-19 pandemic was noted, he was not overtly racist or violent. In 2021, Gendron made a "threatening statement" at his former high school and was taken to the local ER for a psychiatric evaluation but was released soon after (Whitehurst and Tarm 2022). No mental health issues could be substantiated at the time. Without being flagged as a risk, Prokupecz et al. (2022) note he was able to legally purchase the Bushmaster XM-15 assault rifle used in the attack, which he illegally modified.

Radicalization is a complex process involving a myriad of influences. Claiming singular causes for an individual's radicalization is not a tenable position. In the case of Gendron, however, elements from his manifesto suggest internet content may have had a prominent position in the matrix of factors that led to a violent attack. As such, investigation of this case and establishing correlations between his stated rationale for violence and the online content he reported viewing is merited. While this is a discrete case study from a specific historical period (extensive online activity during a pandemic), implications from it can provide useful context for consideration of deradicalization strategies along with vulnerable areas for prevention. It remains difficult to identify what drives individuals to commit acts such as the Buffalo shooting, but what is known for certain is that radical and hateful content exists in a largely unchecked digital space. This study of Gendron's reported online influences analyzes the extent to which his stated rationale for the attack draws upon the potentially radicalizing content he accessed online. Assessment of this case can contribute to scholarship that informs prevention and deradicalization efforts including improved industry content controls, more effective counter messaging, information literacy education programs, and consideration of non-commercial social media development as corporate social media monetizes problematic content (Munn 2020).

Online radicalization

Before considering the role of online radicalization towards violent action, it is necessary to define the term “radicalization towards violent action.” There is extensive disagreement among scholars about the related definitions of radicalization, violent and non-violent extremism, and terrorism creating difficulty in making any kind of clear definitional statements. Additionally, the meaning of these terms change over time “as social, political, economic, and security dynamics have transformed over the last two centuries” (Winter et al. 2020).

Radicalization is broadly described as the process by which someone adopts radical views on political, religious, or social issues. While some who go through this process remain inactive while adopting a radical belief system, others take violent action based on their radical views (McBride et al. 2022). This distinction is important and has found considerable attention in the scholarly community, such as McCauley & Moskalenko’s “opinion and action pyramid” distinction (McCauley and Moskalenko 2008), or Neumann’s understanding of “behavioral and cognitive radicalization” (Neumann 2013b).

Broadly speaking, as Koehler (Koehler 2014) points out, the radicalization literature can be grouped into four schools of thought. Social movement theorists explain radicalization as a process driven by group dynamics and peer pressures, while the sociological school focuses on the individual, searching for a new identity in an environment perceived as hostile. Empiricists identify different types of extremists based on individual motivations and socio-economic backgrounds, while the psychological perspective considers socio-psychological impacts on push and pull factors regarding radicalization. Koehler adds another distinction by which:

...radicalization can be understood as a process of individual depluralization of political concepts and values (e.g. justice, freedom, honour, violence, democracy) according with those concepts employed by a specific ideology (2014, 125).

This view approaches radicalization as the internalized realization of an individual that their political concept exists in a vacuum without any alternatives.

One question that has received considerable attention over the years is whether these principles of radicalization are true for the digital space as well. The internet is probably one of the most significant technological innovations in human history, still developing and expanding, creating a digital world that is embedded in our real one. According to data from the World Bank (2021), internet access has increased from 1% of the world population in 1995 to 60% of the world population in 2020, with most of the developed world experiencing internet penetration rates between 85 and 100%. Many positive developments have come from this innovation, but it also has created a space for largely unregulated and unfiltered exchange of information between people around the globe. Right-wing extremists have been among the early adopters of the internet to share information and connect with like-minded individuals. As early as 1984, Louis Beam utilized a bulletin board system, known as Aryan Nation Liberty Net, to share propaganda and information about offline group meetings. From this very simplistic online information exchange tool, the internet developed increasingly sophisticated ways to provide a digital space for extremists to interact. This included the introduction of websites, chatrooms, online forums, and, eventually, today's social media platforms and apps (Bastug, Douai, and Akca 2020; Conway, Scrivens, and Macnair 2019).

In the terrorism literature, there appears to be broad consensus that the digital space is being used for radicalization, however offline engagement, such as meeting like-minded individuals in the real world, is still defined as a crucial element for successful radicalization. This is especially true if the end goal is violent action (Burke 2011; von Behr et al. 2013; Rieger, Frischlich, and Bente 2013; Pauwels and Schils 2016; Koehler 2014).

But as the digital space develops, so do the ways in which individuals engage with it, and it is reasonable to suggest that opportunities for online engagement have changed immensely over the past 20 years. In a recent article by Mølmen & Ravndal (2021), the authors investigate the role of the internet and social media as they relate to the radicalization process of three lone terrorist actors on the extreme right-- Peter Mangs, Anders Behring Breivik, and Dylann Roof. Their investigation is based on five causal mechanism driving radicalization, which are derived from key assumptions in the online radicalization literature: compensation (connecting offline vulnerabilities with online content), isolation (offline isolation leading to alternative socialization online), facilitation (easy online access to extremist individuals and content), acceleration (online radicalization process tends to be

faster than offline), echoing (amplification of radical views through online interaction with radical individuals and content), and action triggering (the moment that triggers a violent act). They found that “online radicalization as a solely online process [could not be identified] as offline detachment as well as offline vulnerabilities were impactful in all three cases [confirming] the consensus in existing research that the internet cannot drive the radicalization of individuals alone” (2021, 19). One caveat the authors mentioned is that the events of two of the studied extremists occurred over a decade ago (Peter Mangs arrested 2010, and Anders Behring Breivik arrested 2011), with even Dylan Roof’s 2015 attack occurring in a different online era. The rapid advancement of the internet, especially with social media, must be contextualized to the current digital environment.

While there is disagreement among researchers on whether radicalization exclusively online is possible, we must ask ourselves if this view of a distinct online and offline space is not outdated. Valentini et. al. (2020) have introduced the term “onlife extremism” as a response to the potentially outdated dichotomy of online activity vs. off-line or face-to-face interactions, which is based on Floridi’s (2014) idea of the blurring of the distinction between reality and virtuality. Even though research on internet-based radicalization is scarce (Conway 2017), it appears that the old distinction between exclusive online and offline spaces may no longer hold traction. This research seeks to explore how the consumption of radical content online can contribute to a justification for violence. In exploring this, however, it is important to acknowledge that “online and offline patterns on radicalization often occur simultaneously and are mutually reinforcing, and exclusive online radicalization of isolated individuals is exceedingly rare” (Lindekilde, Malthaner, and O’Connor 2019, 5).

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting isolation pushed people further into the digital world as a substitute for real-life interaction. This has created an interesting testing ground to see how the consumption of radical online content may have informed Payton Gendron’s ideology and actions. Gendron himself states that he “started browsing 4chan in May 2020 after extreme boredom, remember this was the outbreak of covid” (P. S. Gendron 2022, 13). This unique period, however, still creates challenges related to the differentiation of online and offline activity. We know that misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda are easily accessible to everyone and that algorithmic content recommendations make it easier for internet users to go ‘down the rabbit hole.’ Whether a person needs to be a loner before trying

to find socialization online or whether extensive online interaction reduces the capacity for offline interaction is beyond the focus of this analysis but is (potentially) mitigated, to some degree, by the specific circumstances of context. The COVID-19 pandemic created an unfortunate laboratory where online effects occurred in an accelerated environment with people, including Payton Gendron, compelled towards greater digital consumption.

Case Study Payton Gendron

The case of Payton Gendron is interesting in that it appears that the lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic created an environment which drew the shooter into radical spaces online that advocated for violent action. As noted previously, Gendron himself declares in his manifesto that he was radicalized online and that he had very little offline interactions with like-minded individuals. Since it is impossible to verify this statement, this study will focus on Gendron's justifications for violence as outlined in his manifesto. A range of other factors likely contributed to his actions; however, the manifesto remains as his public document that was distributed to project meaning onto the attack. As such, this analysis views the content of the manifesto as significant for its explanatory effects while not necessarily viewing the document as definitive in terms of its veracity.

Previous research on the Gendron Manifesto such as a text-similarity-analysis conducted by the Anti-Defamation League (2022) or the comparative manifesto analysis by Kupper (2022) note that Gendron appears to have heavily borrowed from content he found online as evidenced by the fact that substantial portions of his manifesto seem to be copied. Both early studies of his manifesto, however, focus on text similarity with the Tarrant manifesto. To date there appears to be a gap in a more comprehensive text-comparison analysis and there is no analysis on graphics used throughout Gendron's manifesto. This research complements these studies in conducting a more comprehensive text-similarity-analysis in an attempt to gauge Gendron's originality in writing, but also to connect his writing to the sources he claims were instrumental in his radicalization process. Additionally, this research attempts to source the vast amount of graphics found in the 180-page manifesto in an attempt to show that substantial portions of Gendron's manifesto were derived from other openly available sources.

For clarification, the manifesto itself consists broadly of four distinct parts. The first section of the manifesto (p. 1-13) serves as an ideological introduction to Gendron's belief system, most notably a question-and-answer section (p. 4-13) in which he conducts a sort of interview with himself about his motivation, radicalization process, along with ideological identification directed at his supporters and people who might oppose his beliefs and methods. The second section (p. 14-57) can be described as the ideological core of the manifesto, which is deeply rooted in typical white-supremacist tropes. Gendron describes various 'undesirable groups' such as 'Blacks', 'Jews', 'east-Asians', and 'Arabs and modern Turks', and also discusses the cultural and racial superiority of 'Whites.' Part 2 focuses on "Money: Fiat, Crypto, and Metal" which serves as an extension to his antisemitic worldview that all banks are controlled by Jews. The third section (p. 57-158) deals exclusively with "Weapons, Equipment, and Mentality of the Attacker." This reads like a 'Mass shooting 101' manual with Gendron going into meticulous details about the weapons and equipment he used, where to purchase these items (down to which sellers should be avoided and discount codes), including personal notes on almost all items listed. The fourth section (p. 157-180) is titled "Messages to Various Groups" and addresses conservatives, leftists, and non-whites on "white lands" with included "General Thoughts" on various related subjects. These include who is to blame for the current situation, the weakness of diversity, the inevitable radicalization of western men, his dissatisfaction with society, gun control, the need to execute the elites, and other items such as populist movements.

While all sections of the manifesto provide important insight and context into Gendron's stated motivations, it should be noted that this analysis will primarily focus on sections one, two, and four. The rationale for this focus is that these sections specifically provide insight into Gendron's ideology and the sources he claims informed that ideology. The third section ("Weapons, Equipment, and Mentality of the Attacker") is largely a technically focused section that discusses weapons specification, preferred ammunition, etc. This research does not discount the potential role weapons fetishism may have in turning radicalized beliefs into violent action, however this particular investigation is focused on exploration of the stated motivation for violent action rather than its actualization.

Method

Gendron overtly claims several online sources of influence in his manifesto. Specifically, he states, “I started browsing 4chan in May 2020 [...] From there, I also found other sites, like worldtruthvideos.website, dailyarchives.org, and dailystormer.cn” (P. S. Gendron 2022, 13). Gendron then lists Reddit as a frequented site and expresses an interest in the manifestos of Anders Behring Breivik and Brenton Tarrant. Given the almost boilerplate collection of common white nationalist sources, we speculated that content in the manifesto would be liberally borrowed and possibly even copied from these sources. With that in mind, this research utilized distinct approaches to answer the following three research questions:

RQ1: To what extent was this manifesto plagiarized from other sources?

RQ2: Was the content from which the manifesto was derived hosted on sites Gendron reported frequenting?

RQ3: Which themes were utilized in the graphical images presented in the manifesto?

1) Text similarity

Turnitin is a robust originality checker for texts that can assist in discerning from where content is sourced. Condurache and Bolboacă (2022) engaged in a significant study of authorship assessment software and conclusively found that Turnitin was soundly the strongest with “100% correct identification of all sources (in a text) and [...] 97% accuracy in assessment of reported similarity” (2022, 81) between texts. As a field leading resource for originality reports, Turnitin has also increasingly been used in academic scholarship where authorship and originality of a document is being investigated (McCulloch, Behrend, and Braithwaite 2022). In fact, Turnitin was used as the originality checker for Sun’s (2021) assessment of Nobel Laureate’s publications to assess the extent to which authors used others’ work in their published research. They explain:

Turnitin (www.turnitin.com), was used in the study to examine the matching texts of selected Nobel laureates’ publications. Turnitin matches uploaded files against a

massive database (200 million archived student papers, 17 billion web pages, and 90,000 journals, periodicals and books) and generates an ‘originality report’ for each submitted file. The report highlights matched texts and allows for tracking of a full matched source for further comparison and analysis. It generates an ‘originality score’ ranging from 0% [...] for a text without any trace of matching to 100% for a text that is completely copied from another source or sources (2021, 1224).

As this research investigates the extent to which Gendron’s self-identified online influences informed the rationale provided in his manifesto, Turnitin provided an ideal and operationally sound tool to reliably assess authorship. As previously noted, this investigation explores Gendron’s professed motivation for violent action, which is why only the first, second, and fourth sections of the manifesto were submitted to Turnitin. By generating a clear originality report for these portions of the document, a clearer picture can emerge detailing both what sources he drew upon and the extent to which those sources can be found in the manifesto. Such a report offers concrete data about the textual and ideological influence external sources had in the construction of a document (Sun, 2021).

2) Source of graphics

The manifesto utilizes numerous graphical elements and sourcing these would further provide insight into the extent to which Gendron’s rationale was derived from specific online spaces. For the analysis of utilized graphics, this research focused solely on the second section of the manifesto, as the first and fourth sections do not contain any pictures and/or graphs aside from one illustration on page 1 and another on page 180. The third section (“Weapons, Equipment, and Mentality of the Attacker”) does contain pictures of the discussed arms and equipment and it can be assumed that these are all stock photos from sellers, but they are not specifically relevant to the question of ideological radicalization focused on in this research.

Sourcing the images involves some unique challenges. Turnitin, for example, does not provide an image originality assessment and is exclusively focused on text. While Google provides a reverse image search option, all major social platforms have taken steps to limit links that lead to overt hate sites and content (Thompson 2022). As such, identifying where such images came from proves challenging when using mainstream search tools. With that in

mind, this research utilizes Yandex Image Search to source images. Based out of Russia, Yandex provides a search option without apparent limitations related to hate speech, conspiracy content, and misinformation. Research has validated this distinction with Yandex noted as producing search results without scrutiny against bias found on a Google search (Kravets and Toepfl 2022). Deeply problematic online content that is highly restricted elsewhere can be easily accessed on Yandex as it represents “a search engine hosted in a loosely regulated environment” (Steel 2015, 152). Unsurprisingly, Yandex has been found to allow for search results that contain blatant misinformation and conspiratorial content (Makhortykh, Urman, and Wijermars 2022). While the function of such a site on the internet is deeply concerning, it, nevertheless, provides an ideal tool to retrieve image locations using reverse image search for this study. The visual content in Gendron’s manifesto is universally inflammatory and potentially inciting; exactly the sort of content that mainstream commercial search engines would seek to make less discoverable. With Yandex, however, the links to such images are provided immediately upon search and without regard to the site hosting those images.

Additionally, it should be noted that the nature of image sharing on sites frequented by Gendron is collaborative, impermanent, and disjointed. For example, a graph from one image may be pasted onto a meme with further additions added by subsequent posters. Users frequently may delete or revise their previously posted images, as well. With that hindrance in mind, this research was able to scrape 62 images from the rationale sections of Gendron’s manifesto. An important caveat to note is that the images scraped cannot necessarily be considered discrete. The goal of this study is exploratory with the pulled images providing context on the locations they were broadly derived from when Gendron used them in his rationale. The images found can provide some context for this, but the intent of this study is not a forensic one focused on providing precise information on their original authorship.

After identifying the image and establishing the location(s) where the images can be found, information about the content was noted. Specifically, it was established whether or not the image was posted on one of the sites Gendron noted as having visited (4Chan, Reddit, World Truth Videos, Daily Archives, and/or The Daily Stormer/Stormfront). In instances where an image could not be linked back to any of these, a notation was provided (though it should be noted that the image may or may not have originated from these sources).

Furthermore, general categories of themes for the images were established to provide context on the image's intent in establishing Gendron's overall rationale. Specifically, Gendron's posted images all focused on racism (the inferiority of People of Color) and/or antisemitism (the belief that debased Jews "control the system"). The thematic content of the image was also noted as images used ranged from "facts," to charts establishing the "legitimacy" of data, to memes, and to comics.

Cumulatively, by establishing the extent to which the manifesto was plagiarized (in both text and images), the sources it came from, and the themes/form of the repurposed content, the linkage between material in Gendron's manifesto and his online activities can be better established.

Results

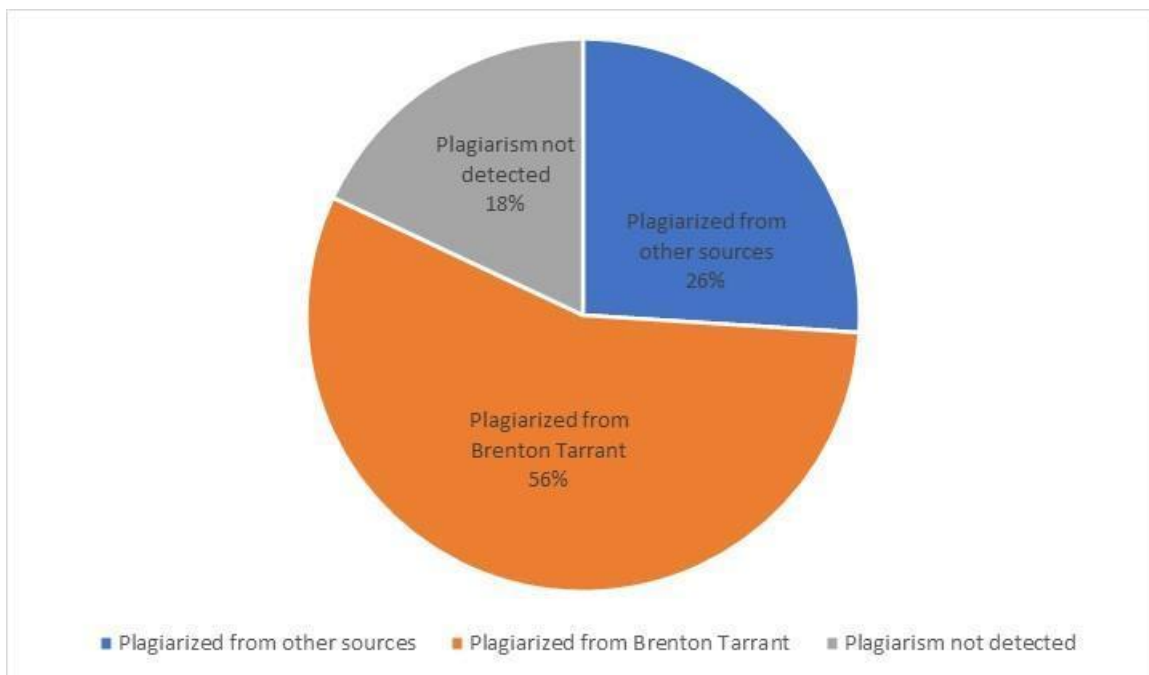
1) Text similarity

Text similarity reveals that the vast majority of the rationale portions of Gendron's manifesto were directly copied and pasted from online sources he identified as influencing his beliefs. Specifically, Turnitin results identified that 56% of Gendron's manifesto was directly copied from Brenton Tarrant's manifesto. Tarrant seems to have played an important role for Gendron in that he reviewed Tarrant's video stream and manifesto leading him to the conclusion that "I mostly agreed with him" (P. S. Gendron 2022, 13). It should be noted that while Turnitin is excellent at identifying plagiarized texts, the program has difficulty catching copied work where content may have been altered (preposition changes, word additions to a sentence, etc.). As such, the 56% identified should be viewed as a baseline with such extensive borrowing of material likely manifested beyond direct copy and pasting found.

Gendron also referenced the work of Anders Behring Breivik. While Turnitin failed to identify widespread reuse of Breivik's manifesto, a key section of Gendron's work is a word for word copy of Breivik. On page 157 near the conclusion of the document, Gendron utilizes Breivik's essential worldview by directly copying the statement that "modern leftism aims to create problems that don't actually exist, like patriarchy and white supremacy. Ask yourself what have progressives progressed? Teaching white children to hate themselves and their blood? Teaching non-whites to hate our people? Teaching that it's OK for anyone to be

anything, no matter the consequences?” (P. S. Gendron 2022, 157). Additionally, Breivik’s consistent theme of perceived non-white criminality (especially as it relates to conspiracies of sexually predatory behavior) is echoed throughout the manifesto.

Chart 1. Turn-It-In Similarity Results



Turnitin results also suggest that 26% of the content that was not directly taken from Tarrant’s manifesto was still detected as plagiarized from other online sources. Those other sources represent a sort of collage of hate content. No other individual source accounts for more than ten percent of the non-Tarrant material. Cumulatively, however, they represent over a fourth of the ideological sections of the manifesto. The sources this plagiarized content came from are instructive as many are specifically hate and extremism sites including odinist.org, me.me, freyjahof.com, factsareonhate.com, ummah.com, cazic-thule.net, whitefreespeech.com, the Vanguard News Network, Sons of the Light, Hate Wiki, the Gentile Defense League, and qanon.news.

Again, the nature of content in the white nationalist online ecosystem is that it is rarely static and migrates frequently. It cannot be discerned the extent to which he copied content directly from these sites or if the content was linked elsewhere in the online spaces he

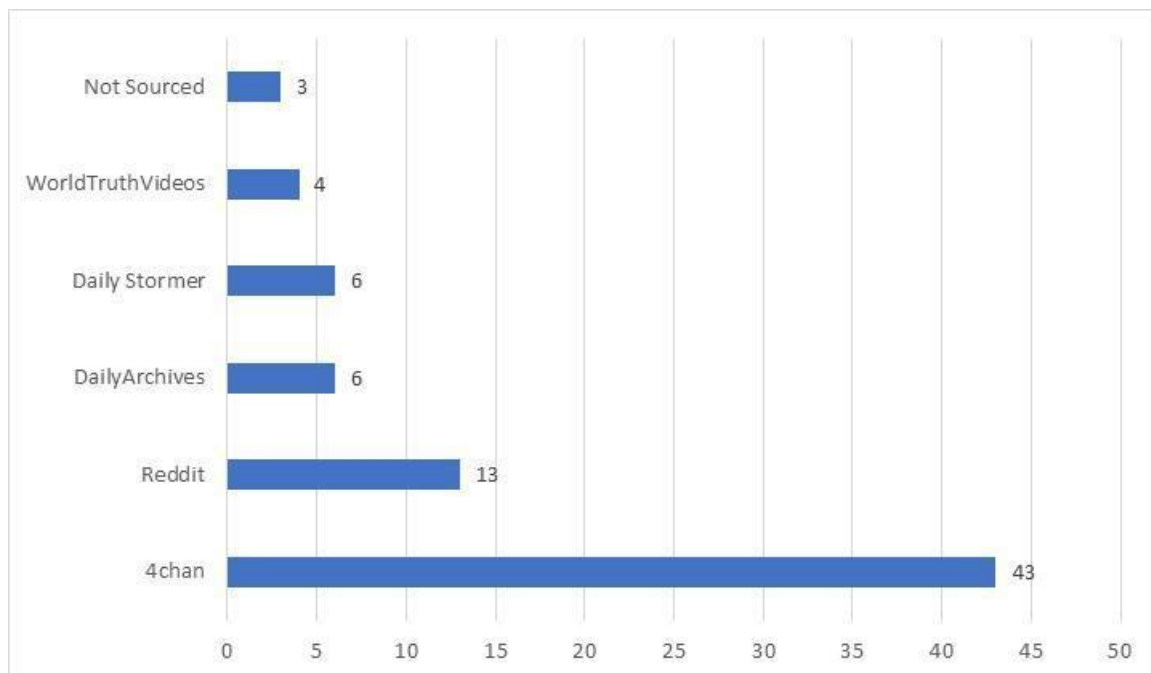
frequented. What these results demonstrate, however, is that (at minimum) 82% of the written content in his rationale came from sources that he directly mentions consuming or comes from sources directly adjacent to those he reported consuming.

2) Graphics

Results from the sourcing of images further reflect the derivative nature of Gendron's manifesto and the extent to which content came from the online sources he frequented. Of the 62 images investigated, only three were not hosted on a site he indicated frequenting (4Chan, Reddit, World Truth Videos, Daily Archives, and/or The Daily Stormer/Stormfront). Similar to the 18% of the written text that could not be sourced, it is entirely plausible that the images might have originated from the sites noted but are simply no longer hosted onsite.

In terms of frequency with which an image from the manifesto was hosted on a specific site, results suggest that 4chan was a primary source of visual support for the rationale hosting 43 of the images utilized.

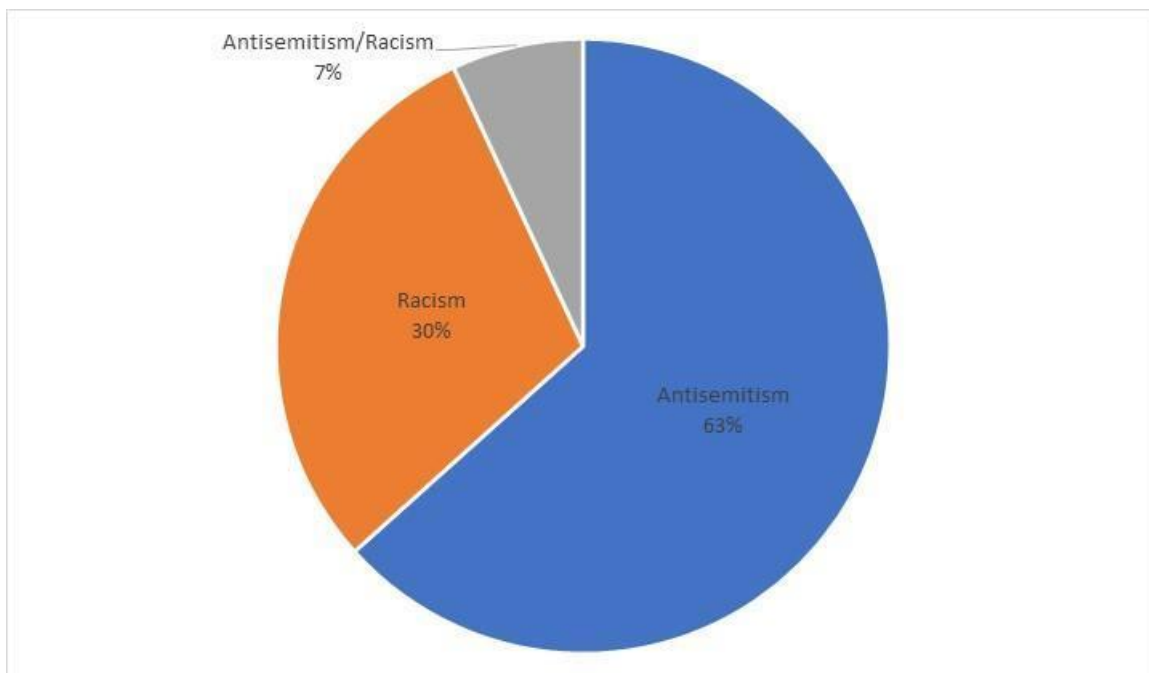
Chart 2. Frequency of Image Hosting by Source



Reddit hosted 13 of the images with DailyArchives and the Daily Stormer each hosting six of the images. WorldTruthVideos accounted for four locations hosting images from the manifesto. The extent to which 4chan was a primary source is also reflected in terms of the percentage of images hosted, with 58% of all sourced images found on the site.

The themes of the posted images in the rationale section of the manifesto were also analyzed. Image themes were consistent with a focus on racism (the inferiority of People of Color) and/or antisemitism (the belief that debased Jews “control the system”). 61 of the 62 images in these sections overtly expressed one or both themes with the only additional image being a “Nordic” symbol that has been co-opted by white nationalist and far right extremist groups. Total instances show a significant percentage of the included images focused exclusively on antisemitism. Of the 61 images falling into these categories, 39 focused on antisemitism, 18 focused on racism, and 4 focused on a combination of racism and antisemitism (with combined instances reflecting some variation of a belief that “powerful Jews are unleashing inferior People of Color to destroy the white race”). Looking at the thematic percentages suggests antisemitism as a primary focus of the manifesto when considering the images utilized.

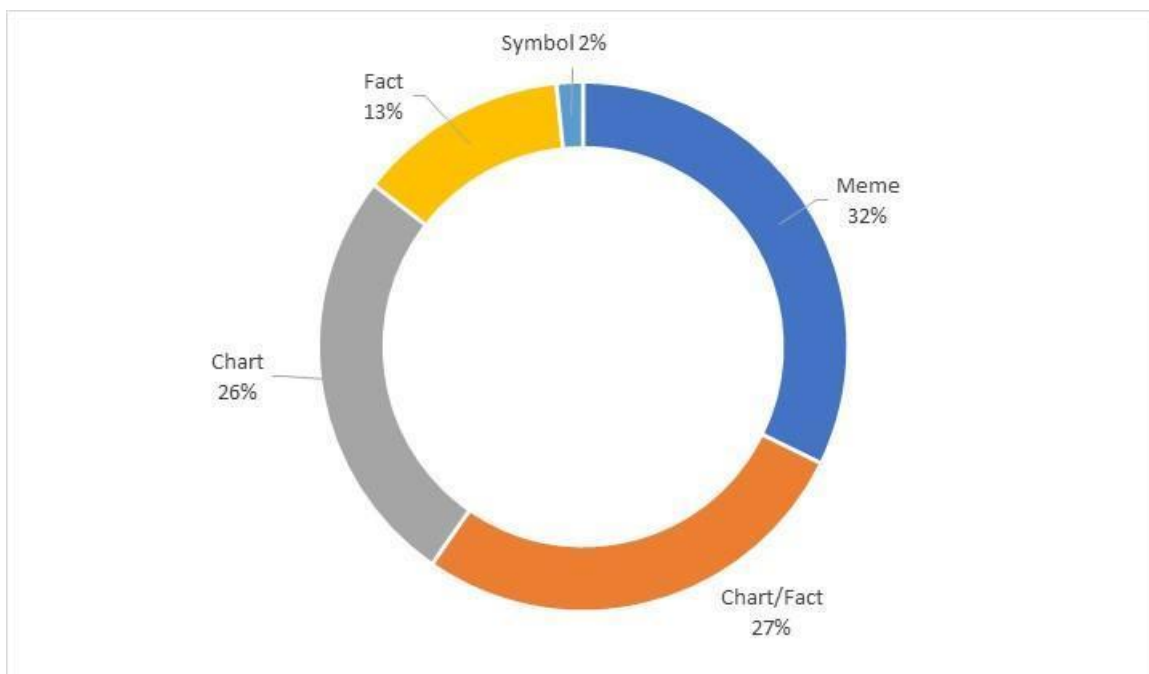
Chart 3. Image Themes



The content of the images was also evaluated to look at the frequency of content type selected for inclusion by Gendron. A particularly consistent theme of many of the images utilized is that they were presentations of “facts.” These “facts” were frequently spuriously sourced or are the results of inaccurately interpreted data, but Gendron presumably included them for purposing of justifying his actions. Such facts include fabricated statements from world leaders advocating “white genocide” or historical “facts” about marginalized groups lying about stories of their oppression. While categorization of image content cannot be considered discrete, there were numerous related images utilizing charts and graphs (typically from either misapplied or made-up data). Finally, the manifesto extensively integrated comic or meme content, as well (which Gendron specifically stated played a role in his radicalization).

There is apparent variety in visual content suggesting the appearance of a diversity of support for Gendron’s rationale.

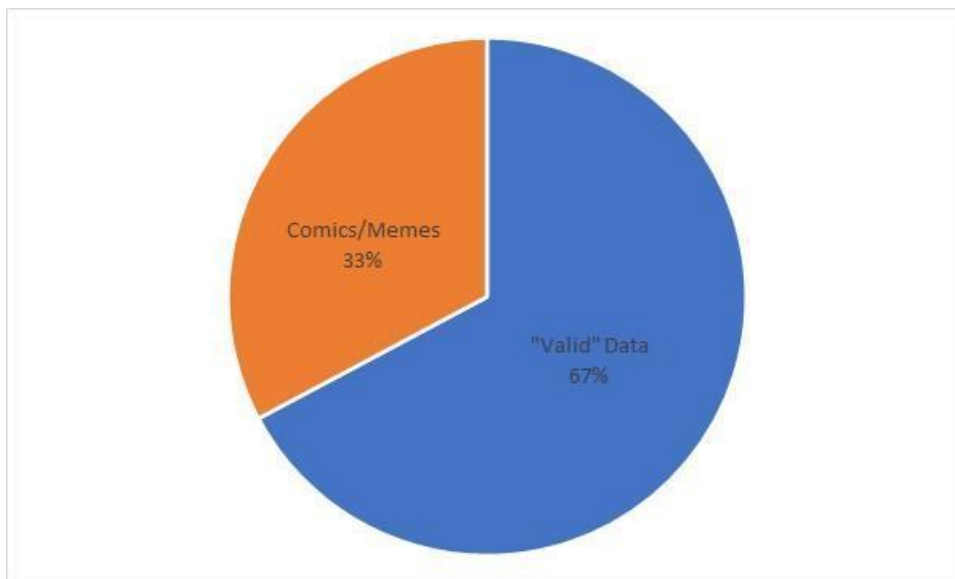
Chart 4. Type of Image Content



However, when content attempting to present “the appearance of empirical validity” (charts, graphs, historical facts, quotes from world leaders, etc.) are compressed into a single

category, the focus on legitimizing the manifesto (rather than using a humor-based meme approach) becomes clearer. This is consistent with previous research on radicalization messages as the abuse of statistics to show white supremacy and the intellectual inferiority of other groups has been a consistent theme of messages on this topic (Neiwert 2017).

Chart 5. “Appearance of Empirical Validity” Images vs. Comics/Memes



Cumulatively, analysis of textual similarity and graphics utilized in the manifesto reveals the work to be nearly completely derived from online sources. The sources the content comes from correlate to the sites Gendron claimed were central to his radicalization. As an apparent document of finality constructed prior to the attack, the manifesto suggests content from these online spaces were central to how Gendron wished the attack to be interpreted.

Discussion

The extent of influence that these online spaces had in Gendron's actions cannot be concretely ascertained, however the extensive correlation between the manifesto and the messages he reported consuming deserves consideration. The internet has become a playground for numerous criminal, radical, and dangerous entities begging questions of appropriate response to the digital space. Conclusive answers on Gendron's motivations and possible approaches

that would prevent future instances are beyond the scope of this study, however the clarity of case results begs reflection about structures that could potentially reduce or disrupt radicalization risks.

The growing field of countering violent extremism (CVE) is defined as the creation of prevention strategies to hinder engagement with and support of violence motivated by ideology (Williams 2020). This has become an umbrella term for programs that prevent violent extremist action and programs or interventions to deradicalize a person who has engaged in violent extremism (Koehler and Fiebig 2019). Related to Gendron's case, one might speculate whether he would have acted in the same fashion if he had not accessed the sites and forums hosting radical content. This study does not directly suggest overt policies or programming related to specific CVE initiatives, however the extent of the linkage between Gendron's rationale and the online materials he interacted with can provide context for programmatic consideration and future deradicalization research. While the limited scope of one instance should be taken into account, the lessons of a singular case can have meaningful and actionable broader implications (Priya 2021).

The circumstances of Gendron's apparent radicalization path have been noted for well over a decade. As early as 2011, the White House's counter radicalization strategy identified the internet and social media as major contributors to violent extremism. This subsequently led to the identification of three strategies to counter online radicalization that remain relevant: reducing supply, reducing demand, and exploiting cyberspace (Neumann 2013a). More recent studies have provided evidence for the contagion effect of extremist propaganda on the general population (Youngblood 2020; Ferrara 2017; Nacos 2009) and the complex connections among far-right online platforms and content (Kupper et al. 2022). Kettle and Mumford (2017) even developed a comprehensive framework on terrorist learning, to shed light on the processes by which terrorists build their ideology, skills and tactics.

Particularly compelling current scholarship is provided by Silke et al. (2021) who construct the Phoenix Model of Disengagement and Deradicalization. By identifying emergent themes in a comprehensive assessment of deradicalization literature, a structured perspective on what potentially could have facilitated disengagement in a case like Gendron emerges:

...major themes were identified in the shortlisted articles. Within these themes it was assessed that actor, psychological and environmental catalysts can play interconnected roles in an individual's disengagement and/or deradicalization (Silke et al. 2021, 3).

In a case such as Gendron's, where consumption of online content during a pandemic precluded offline interventions, Silke et al.'s identification of the "Actor Catalyst" (2021, 4) for deradicalization may have been less tenable in this instance. Most individuals who regularly interact with content online (even radicalizing content) still maintain contacts in the real world. Those offline connections can detect and intervene to stifle online radicalization. This could suggest how Payton Gendron's path to violent action was unimpeded by the face-to-face interactions that can serve as an Actor Catalyst to move away from radicalization. Another potential limitation of the Actor Catalyst in this case is that effective intervention requires actors capable of detecting and intervening in radicalization. Payton Gendron's parents seemingly were not aware of their son's online activities as he was planning the attack. He wrote in a post that was uploaded to Discord:

My parents know little about me. They don't know about the hundreds of silver ounces I've had, or the hundreds of dollars I've spent on ammo. They don't know that I spent close to \$1000 on random military shit. They don't even know I own a shotgun or an AR-15, or illegal magazines (Boburg 2022).

Silke et al. note that familial relationships and friendships outside of the radical network are especially noteworthy in scholarship considered for their Phoenix Model stating that interventions from these sources "significantly influence the violent decision-making processes, often deterring members from engaging in further violent activity. Separately, friendships external to the terrorist/extremist organization can provide the opportunity to develop external interests and networks" (2021, 6). In the Gendron case, it appears that these sorts of interventions were either limited by reduced offline interactions or by insufficient understanding of the potential effects of his online activity.

Silke et al. further note that existing literature identified environmental catalysts for radicalization including "spaces (that) have been flagged as potentially significant factors in a variety of models... Mosques, madrasas, schools, universities and prisons, for example, have

all been have been flagged as being potentially places of vulnerability and gateways for radicalization” (2021, 6). In Gendron’s case, this analysis would suggest the internet may have presented a similar sort of gateway. Noteworthy in Silke et al.’s study is the idea that counter-messaging from these same spaces can serve as environmental catalysts for disengagement. Counter-messaging exposes online users to content opposing extremist ideas. Briggs and Feve (2014) identify three types of counter-messaging including: *alternative narratives* promoting positive stories about inclusivity and tolerance, *counter-narratives* discrediting or demystifying radical content, and *government strategic communications* to report on positive government programs. They further call for a centralized and coordinated governmental unit or department to take the lead on counter-messaging (Briggs, Feve, and Obe 2014).

Currently, the United States does not have a centralized counter-messaging unit to oppose radical content online. Furthermore, the vastness of the online space makes any attempt at centralized counter-messaging programming potentially difficult to implement. A mosque, for example, can direct a focused campaign of messages countering radicalization in their specific community. A corollary to the billions of users and messages online may not be tenable leaving vulnerabilities that may lead to instances such as Gendron. Additionally, one must not ignore the increased online presence during the COVID-19 lockdowns and the immediate period after when many employees and schools remained remote. According to the PEW Teens, Social Media and Technology Report of 2022, 95% of teens use YouTube, 67% use TikTok, and about six in ten teens use Snapchat and Instagram. Daily teen internet use has seen an uptick from 92% in 2014-15 to 97% in 2022 with teens who indicate almost constant online activity almost doubling from 24% in 2014/15 to 46% in 2022 (Vogels, Gelles-Watnick, and Massarat 2022). Significant mental health implications were identified with this physical isolation that was facilitated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Xiong et al. 2020). Mental health “is often considered in terms of radicalization but is comparatively ignored in terms of disengagement or deradicalization processes” (Morrison et al. 2021, 36). Morrison et al.’s findings suggest that burnout associated with the stress of the radicalization process can serve as a catalyst for disengagement with individuals potentially opting out in favor of relief provided by friends, family, community engagement, etc. These sorts of “off ramps” from radicalization stress appear to have been less available to teens like Payton Gendron who were

online more than any time before leading to the sharing of near infinite amounts of information that is virtually impossible to surveil, control, and counter-narrate.

Governmental and regulatory interventions were similarly not available to prevent Gendron's reported content consumption. The U.S. is unique in comparison to other states as its First Amendment protections allow extremist or radical content if it doesn't constitute "a direct, credible 'true' threat against an identifiable individual, organization or institution; [meet] the legal test for harassment; or [constitute] incitement to imminent lawless action likely to occur" (Anti-Defamation League 2000, 3). Many countries can more readily restrict access to certain websites, locations, or content online, frequently arguing that controls outside the digital space should apply inside, as well. Even in countries with stricter controls on web content, however, online censorship has not been proven to be an effective tool to reduce the amount of extremist content online. Online content and exchange are simply too vast and fast-paced for regulation to ever catch up (Neumann 2013a). Additionally, most online content is hosted by private companies such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat etc. complicating any attempt at government control. Users in the U.S. have regularly sued over First Amendment rights, alleging that the government coercion over private companies is inappropriate and legally impermissible. While these cases have been dismissed in court, the lawsuits have fuelled ongoing debates over online content moderation (Samples 2019). Many view this type of control as an infringement of citizens' civil liberties and demand proper judicial oversight over these information collection processes. Due to expansive and continuously growing digital data, however, policymakers have a difficult time keeping up as they formulate rules about these processes (Neumann, 2013a). Hobbs and Roberts (2018) provide a thorough review of research on government censorship of online information, which suggests that it creates a backlash effect, by which censored information becomes more attractive to consume. While current cyber policing efforts may be fruitful to some extent (such as cybercrimes), hate speech in the United States is not illegal and therefore not enforceable meaning regulatory interventions were likely not available in Gendron's case.

Cumulatively, this study suggests Gendron's manifesto was profoundly informed by and copied from radical content online with few workable strategies for disengagement that would have been prevented this aspect of his radicalization. Nevertheless, it is incumbent upon researchers to consider approaches that could hinder potential instances such as this one.

A strategy that could provide a much-needed paradigm shift in internet usage is the broad implementation of media literacy programs relevant to social media. Such programs would need to be a significant educational focus for all learners. Current implementations of media literacy programs have either focused on the pre-social media space or focused on non-extremist related online dangers. As noted by Winter et al. (2020):

In recent years, educators and policymakers have recognized the unique risks and challenges posed by the Internet. Most efforts have focused on protecting children from predators and pedophiles, with the result that—in practically every school—kids are now being taught to avoid giving out personal details and to be suspicious of people in chat rooms. Little, however, has been done to educate young people about violent extremist and terrorist propaganda (Winter et al. 2020, 448).

Online radicalization dangers require nuance in explanation to learners. The breadcrumbs leading from seemingly benign content that can take one to dangerous online spaces need to be a strong focus of radicalization prevention through media literacy. This gap in media education is not abstract. A Stanford study looking at students in the United States found that 52% of students believe fake viral content, 66% could not identify the agenda of an online source, and 96% could not detect bias in online content (Breakstone et al. 2021). Without the ability to evaluate content, the algorithmic dumping of similarly problematic content into a user's social media feed creates a problematic loop. What is needed is a greater emphasis on teaching skills that encourage judgment making rather than rote and repeated acceptance of content consumed (Eisikovits and Feldman 2022). This sort of content awareness could help protect internet users, but major online platforms could support such an approach with diligence about content moderation and willingness to deplatform problematic content. Deplatforming is the removal of a social media account for breaking platform rules, frequently against hate speech or misinformation. While it might be assumed that such accounts will simply migrate to another platform with their followers, research suggests that content deplatformed from “Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and/or YouTube has stark consequences for the maintenance of a fan base, following and revenue stream... migrating to alternative social media may not offer as much” (Rogers 2020, 226). Robust online media

literacy coupled with responsible actions on content control from platforms could potentially hinder future cases like Gendron's.

The evolution of the function, focus, and ownership of social media also merits discussion in terms of radicalization prevention and potential deradicalization. The microblogging site Mastodon, for example, is open-source software that offers social networking services through self-hosted nodes. The advantage of this approach is that users have control over the content they see and the process of discovery of content is fully transparent in contrast to the monetized, proprietary algorithmic systems used by corporate social platforms (Chan 2022). While hate and extremist content exists on the platform, user preferences ensure that such content is significantly less discoverable (Robertson 2019) and would not appear in one's feed to encourage the "outrage engagement" common on commercial sites (Munn 2020). As Mastodon is open-source and non-commercial, there are barriers to joining related to technical skill and certain features users expect from social media may not be as robustly developed as on commercial sites. Another platform being developed by former Twitter employees is Bluesky which promises a decentralized social media experience where user controls can prevent the influx of extremist content, without a corporate algorithm that preferences outrage (Heath 2023). The possibility of social media evolving away from a model that makes hate and extremist messaging profitable merits consideration and development as a radicalization prevention strategy. Catalysts for disengagement (Silke et al. 2021) appeared to be lacking in Gendron's case as the apparent consumption of increasingly radicalizing content informed his stated rationale for the attack. An approach to the online space that seeks to embed appropriate catalysts for disengagement would appear to be merited.

Limitations

While the data presented in this study presents a strong argument for the possibility of substantial online radicalization in the case of Paton Gendron, there are limitations to this study that should be noted. Initially, while the consequences and circumstances of Gendron's radicalization merit study, this remains a singular case from a singular period where people existed almost exclusively online. The period of the pandemic increased online activities for

people while putting significant mental health stressors on them, as well. There are worthwhile lessons in evaluating this case, but it would not be prudent to assume generalizability to radicalization occurring outside of this context. Moreover, this analysis does not preclude the possibility that Gendron was, perhaps intentionally or unintentionally inaccurate in his claims to have fully formed his ideology in the online space. There may have been face-to-face meetings, memberships in offline organizations, or even physical contact with radicalizing messages/messengers. No such instances were noted in the document, but assuming that none occurred could potentially be problematic.

Broadly, however, the extent to which he believed the content of the manifesto content cannot be concretely established. A credible case could be made that Gendron was primarily motivated towards violence with only limited ideological motivation related to his actions. It is possible that the primary impulse towards the attack was external to the content he consumed. That is to say, the manifesto was, potentially, an extrinsic justification provided for an action that had intrinsic motivation. Suggesting this is the fact that the focus of the manifesto, in many ways, did not directly line up with the crime perpetrated. As noted, 64% of the images in the analyzed manifesto sections were antisemitic in nature, while the attack was on an African American community. The incongruity between the nature of the attack and his provided rationale was apparently even obvious to Gendron as he states:

Why attack immigrants when the Jews are the issue? Because they can be dealt with in time, but the high fertility replacers will destroy us now, it is a matter of survival we destroy them first. Why attack blacks if all high fertility immigrants are the issue? I will admit non-white hispanics are also replacers in the United States, and is also a problem White's will have to deal with. I can't possibly attack all groups at once so might as well target one (P. S. Gendron 2022, 12).

This justification seems, at best, facile given the content of the document and potentially speaks to ideology not necessarily providing a complete rationale for the attack. This potential limitation of the study also suggests a possible area of discussion and future scholarship. Radicalization initiated by structured groups with defined orthodoxy can offer the radicalized a greater sense of direction in their activities. There seems to be an ideological DIY character to the “lone wolf” radicalized online. The more discrete orthodoxy of

radicalizing groups is potentially absent in online spaces meaning that strategies for prevention and deradicalization will need to adapt accordingly.

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