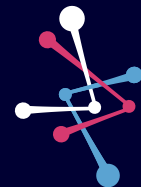


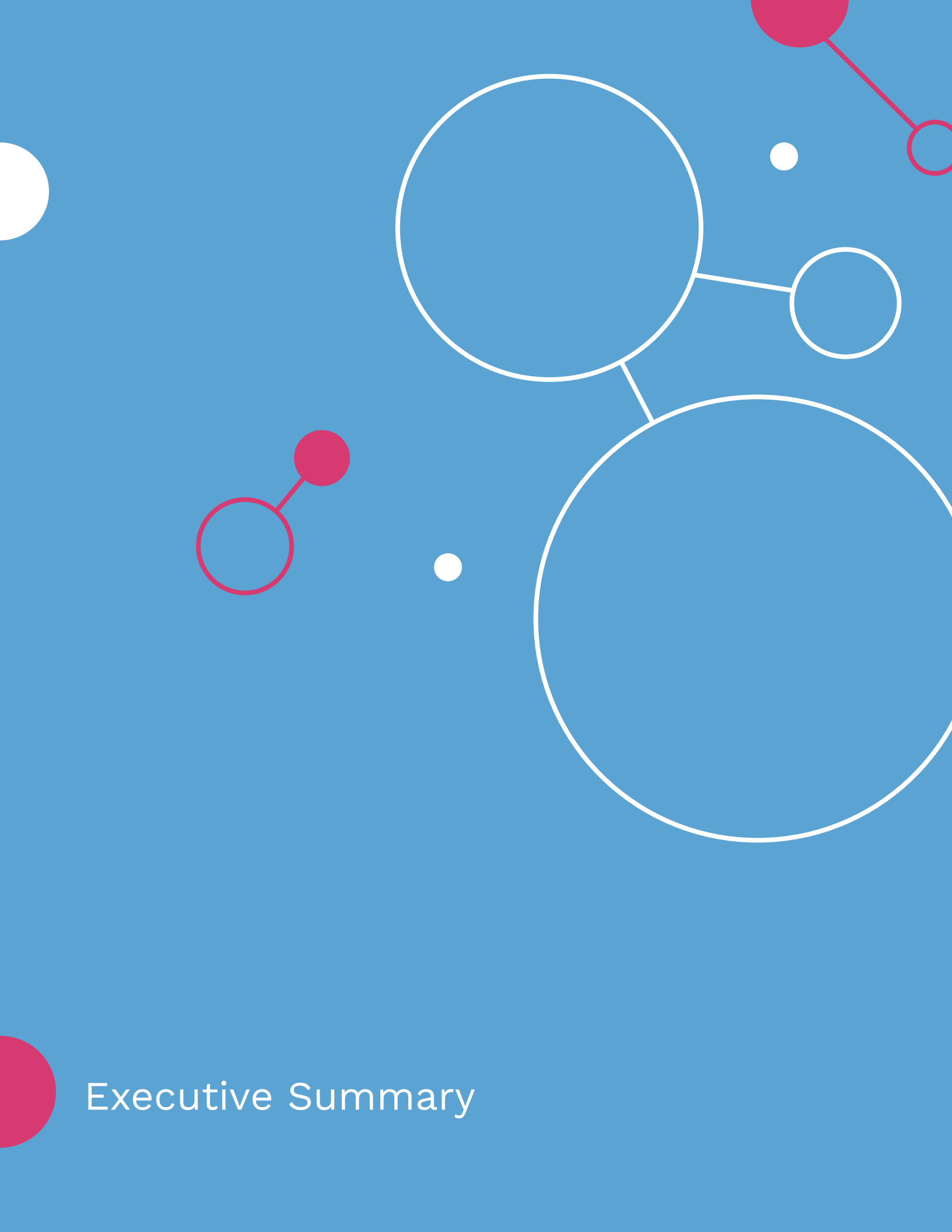
Far-Right Online Radicalization

A Review of the Literature

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Executive Summary

Executive Summary

- The adoption of extremist, far-right, and fringe beliefs is often referred to as “radicalization,” which was formulated post-9/11 to understand jihadi terrorism, a very different context from the far-right.
- Radicalization research is full of uncertainty.
 - + No specific type of person is vulnerable to radicalization and most people who commit political violence are not mentally ill or socially alienated.
 - + Radicalization is not caused by poverty, oppression, or marginalization.
 - + There is no single way in which people are “radicalized.”
 - + Viewing extremist media does not necessarily lead to adopting extremist beliefs or committing political violence.
- In contrast to the “red pill” model, radicalization is gradual. Recruits slowly adopt the identities, emotions, and interpretations shared by a community. They conceptualize their problems as injustices caused by others, and justify using political violence against them.
- The internet does not cause radicalization, but it helps spread extremist ideas, enables people interested in these ideas to form communities, and mainstreams conspiracy theories and distrust in institutions.
- We conclude that “radicalization” is not a useful frame for understanding the spread of far-right and fringe ideas online.
 - + It is analytically imprecise and morally judgmental.
 - + It doesn’t help us understand the role of media and digital technologies.
 - + It is inextricably tied to a global security infrastructure targeting Islam.
 - + It doesn’t account for the fact that fringe or far-right beliefs may change what people think is “true” and “false,” making it hard to find common ground.
 - + The focus on violence ignores other worrying effects of mainstreaming far-right and fringe ideas.

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Introduction

Introduction

Since Donald Trump emerged as a Republican presidential candidate in 2016, the predominant public reaction to the existence and prominence of far-right radicalism has been *shock*. Journalist David Neiwert, in his book *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump*, summarizes:

Almost as blindingly as Donald Trump appeared on the scene, so did an array of white nationalists and supremacists, conspiracy theorists and xenophobes, even Klansmen and skinheads and other violent radicals who for decades had been relegated to the fringe of the right-wing politics...Hadn't they gone extinct?¹

This reflects the standpoint from which media, popular culture, and academia have often approached radicalization: the assumption that to study the radical is to study the *other*. However, white supremacy and racism are hardly new phenomena in America.² Using the term “radicalization” suggests that there is something novel and exotic about the spread of ideas that, in many cases, were fundamental to the founding of the United States. What, then, is radical about far-right radicalization?

More recently, a 2020 *Time* magazine article about “online radicalization” began:

He called himself ‘Commander’ online. He was a leader of an international neo-Nazi group linked to plots to attack a Las Vegas synagogue and detonate a car bomb at a major U.S. news network.

He was 13 years old.³

This article also emphasizes the shock factor of white supremacy, amplified by the youthful age of the article’s subject. The article goes on to discuss Commander’s neo-Nazi group of young men from the United States and Europe who communicated through chat technologies Telegram, Wire, Discord and Riot. The leftist group Unicorn Riot published transcripts of these chats, concluding that “Vulnerable and alienated 13–19-year-olds searching for a sense of community and purpose can be lured into fringe online communities where they are groomed by older members for acts of terrorism against marginalized groups.”⁴ The central role of the internet in exposing, converting, and recruiting people, especially young people, into far-right and fringe beliefs, is undeniable. Several factors exacerbate this: the popularity of far-right and conspiratorial influencers, an ecosystem of hyper-partisan content that traffics in disinformation, the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories like QAnon,

the successful manipulation of the mainstream media by far-right groups, the amplification of such content by politicians, and the slow failure of social media companies to remove such content from their platforms.⁵

Too often, however, the political, economic, and emotional complexities that draw people to far-right and fringe beliefs are ignored in favor of simplistic narratives that suggest that exposure to YouTube, Parler, Telegram, or 4chan alone causes people to adopt extremist mindsets.⁶ Journalists, pundits, and technology scholars writing about radicalization describe a predictable narrative where an innocent young person, usually male, views extremist content online and is subsequently inspired to commit acts of political violence. But fifty years of communication research on the effects of media indicates that people are not simply brainwashed by media, no matter how extreme.⁷ This narrative also ignores that most people who view such content are *not* radicalized, and that of those who *do* adopt fringe beliefs, a very small number will commit acts of political violence such as the 2019 mass shooting in El Paso or the 2021 storming of the United States Capitol. However, adopting fringe and far-right beliefs may have other deleterious impacts, such as increasing support for authoritarian ideas, diminishing trust in public institutions, or decreasing support for prosocial public health efforts.⁸ Given that scholars in a variety of disciplines have been studying radicalization, extremism, and terrorism since the 1970s, what empirical research exists to help us make sense of these contradictory findings?

This literature review examines work on radicalization to situate, historicize, frame, and better understand the present concerns around online radicalization and far-right extremist and fringe movements. It is primarily concerned with this process as it occurs within the United States, but draws from scholarship from Europe, the United Kingdom, the Middle East, and elsewhere.⁹ We ask: what are the primary findings of the study of “radicalization” that can be applied to the adoption of fringe, conspiratorial, and far-right beliefs online? While this document draws from a broader literature, we focus on radicalization scholarship as a limiting boundary.

Notably, most of the literature on radicalization covers the global jihad movement and online jihadist radicalization.¹⁰ Indeed, “radicalization” became the dominant frame for studying terrorism after 9/11, as governments sought to prevent further acts of terrorist violence rather than forcibly targeting individuals once they had committed violent acts.¹¹ As a result, much of the radicalization literature is bound up in a global “countering violent extremism” (CVE) industry populated by academics, think-tanks, law enforcement and military personnel, and government representatives.¹² While there is certainly excellent scholarship in CVE, much of the literature produced within this security-driven framework has been used to justify surveillance of Muslim communities and other marginalized groups and has been widely criticized by civil liberties organizations.¹³ As The Brennan Center for Justice argues, CVE is “based on junk science” and is “ineffective, discriminatory, and divisive.”¹⁴ The CVE programs in question frequently attempt to identify “at risk” individuals in particular communities, presuming a pathway to radicalization that can be stopped early on in the process.

As we will see, these are contentious presumptions. Given this context, it remains an open question whether research focused on global jihad is relevant to far-right extremism.

This review is divided into five main parts. First, we ask *What is radicalization?* Scholars have defined radicalization either as “adopting extremist beliefs” or “committing political violence,” which clearly differ. Moreover, the very idea of the “radical” or “extreme” is normative and depends on the subjective understandings of who is speaking. We believe that the term “radicalization,” like “terrorism” and “extremism,” is imprecise and pejorative, which limits its analytic usefulness. Furthermore, an exclusive focus on political violence may limit recognition of other negative impacts of adopting far-right and fringe beliefs. Collectively, these limitations suggest that moving past “radicalization” may be necessary (see Part 6). However, in the context of the United States far-right, definitions of extremism which require hostility towards an outgroup and rejection of egalitarian value systems, such as white nationalism and male supremacy, are most useful for analysis. Thus, for the purposes of this literature review, we define radicalization as *the willingness to engage in violent, illegal political action to support ideologies that exhibit out-group hostility and the rejection of egalitarian and democratic values.*

Second, we ask *What makes people vulnerable to radicalization?* Research across disciplines has thoroughly disproven the existence of individual or psychological factors that make people more likely to adopt extreme ideas, become involved in extremist movements, or commit violence. Similarly, no causal links have been found between broad economic, cultural, political, or social conditions and an increased likelihood that people living in these conditions will embrace extreme ideologies or commit political violence. Instead, radicalization researchers have identified a wide array of factors that may contribute to endorsing extremist ideology or violent political action. Scholars of social movements have similarly attempted to understand why particular social movements engage in political violence but have only concluded that this difference is due to complex assemblies of actors, ideologies, interactions, and resources. However, social movement studies suggest radicalization is a gradual process, during which a recruit adopts the identity framing of the organization, coming to view problems as injustices, blaming others for these injustices, and rationalizing the use of political violence to address these injustices.

Third, we ask *How are people radicalized?* Most literature conceptualizes radicalization as a *pathway*, of which there are many different models. In fact, some scholars suggest that pathways to extremism or violence are so individual that tracing common factors to radicalization is, if not counterproductive, at least a waste of time. (Obviously, this finding is hard to act upon, with little impact on the world of CVE.) Other scholars argue that people become involved in extremist groups due to social ties, friendship, and/or kinship networks. Even so-called “lone wolves” are usually connected to larger ideological communities, typically via the internet. Pathways models have failed to find any predictive variables for terrorism, instead identifying a set of “puzzle pieces” which may, but may not, contribute to radicalization, with little synthesis of how these pieces work together. We close this section with a brief discussion of emergent approaches to radicalization which understand it as an

agentic process of meaning-making and affect, which is congruent with the framing approach discussed in Part 2, and potentially more productive than pathways approaches to understand fringe and far-right online movements.

Fourth, we ask *What is the role of the internet in radicalization?* “Online radicalization” is even more vague than “radicalization” and there is no agreed-upon definition. Despite this, considerable evidence suggests that the internet, and specifically social media, *does* play a role in the adoption of far-right and fringe beliefs, through exposing people to extremist ideas, enabling the creation of community around those ideas, and affording new discursive formations. These include frames, as discussed in Part 2, and affective structures, discussed in Part 3. In addition, far-right actors strategically use online discourse to encourage others to gradually adopt their framing, including the use of humor and irony and encouraging distrust of media and political institutions. In addition to discourse, scholars and pundits have linked several features of social platforms to radicalization, including recommendation algorithms, echo chambers, and online communities. From this scholarship we do not take a particular model of radicalization, but the understanding that the material elements of social platforms may afford radicalization.

Fifth, we interrogate the empirical *differences between radicalization into far-right belief systems and jihadi extremism*. The few comparative studies that exist in the European context suggest that pathways to radicalization may be similar for both young European-born Muslim men and far-right white working-class men. However, the recent increase in qualitative and cultural approaches to understanding far-right radicalization contrasts with a dramatic post-9/11 focus on jihadi extremism and radicalization, given that this context set up an anti-Islam, pro-military intervention framework for academic research. We argue that it is necessary to understand this context in which “radicalization” emerged as a framework, given the ties to military anti-radicalization efforts, the relationship between academic research and partisan debates, and the difficulty of applying critical findings to simplistic solution-oriented efforts. In contrast, most foundational work on American far-right subcultures comes from anthropology and sociology, while work on European far-right political organizations is more likely to use “radicalization” as a frame. We briefly summarize scholarship in both these areas, emphasizing the importance of understanding cultural approaches to far-right politics, as well as establishing the need to examine peripheral participation as well as committed participants.

Finally, we ask: *Is online radicalization a useful concept?* We outline six reasons why online radicalization is not particularly suited to understanding the spread of far-right and fringe ideas: it is analytically imprecise (as discussed in Part 1); it is overly normative; it lacks a robust theory of media effects and digital technologies; it focuses only on political violence, leaving out other reasons to be concerned with the spread of far-right and fringe ideas; it ignores the role of epistemology; and it is inextricably bound up with the global security infrastructure. In contrast, we mention a few scholarly concepts that might provide insights, including the literature on online communities, conversion, conspiracy theories, mainstreaming, and sociotechnical theories of media effects.



What is Radicalization?

What is Radicalization?

In its most basic form, “radicalization” describes the process whereby individuals come to adopt an “extremist” mindset or, more directly, escalate from nonviolent to violent political action over time.¹⁵ This terminology was relatively rare before 9/11, but the concept is now entrenched in state efforts to fight terrorism, government funding for such, and many corners of academia.¹⁶ However, research on radicalization routinely begins by noting that there is a lack of consensus regarding how its central term should be defined.¹⁷ This definitional ambiguity is one of the central obstacles in using “radicalization” to understand contemporary challenges. Though there are many definitions used by scholars and CVE practitioners, most of the differences between them are minor, reflecting the disciplinary language of their home fields rather than incompatible points-of-view on the meaning of radicalization.¹⁸ The diversity of definitions is less problematic than the fact that definitions that are quite distinct often get conflated in academic research, its policy applications, and popular discourse. In defining radicalization, the main substantive disagreement hinges on whether the term describes the process whereby an actor becomes disposed to the *use of political violence* (known as “terrorism”), the process whereby an actor *adopts a radical or “extremist” ideology*, or both.

Radicalization as Acts of Violence (Terrorism)

Most scholars describe radicalization as the process of adopting violent political tactics. Social psychologists Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko define political radicalization as the adoption of “beliefs, feelings, and behaviors...that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defense of the ingroup.” Their central research question is how this process happens, and how people and groups move towards committing violence for a political cause.¹⁹ However, believing in extremist ideas is not a prerequisite for committing political violence, given that some people commit political violence without a strong commitment to extremist ideology.²⁰ Social movement scholar Donatella Della Porta’s definition is similar: “Radicalization is a process of escalation from nonviolent to increasingly violent repertoires of action that develops through a complex set of unfolding interactions over time.”²¹ While the former definition is more in keeping with the social-psychological language of intergroup dynamics and the latter with the political-scientific language of

repertoires of action, these scholars agree that radicalization is *the process by which an individual or group becomes disposed toward the use of political violence.*

This begs the question of how we define *political violence* and *terrorism*. *Political violence* is any act of violence committed for political purposes by state or non-state actors, including murder, war, ethnic cleansing, and genocide.²² In the mid-70s, mass media and government actors reframed tactics of political violence, such as bombing, hostage-taking, kidnapping, and hijacking, from routine criminal matters to a new category of *terrorism*.²³ While “terrorism” is a contested term, in his highly-cited review of definitions, sociologist Jeff Goodwin defines terrorism as “the strategic use of violence and threats of violence by an oppositional political group against civilians or noncombatants, [which] is usually intended to influence several audiences.”²⁴ Unlike political violence, which might be rational or even justified, terrorist actions are typically framed in public and public-facing government discourse as intrinsically irrational, unjustified, and immoral.²⁵

In the United States, terrorism is defined by the federal government as “the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives.”²⁶ In contemporary terms, white supremacist-motivated violence like the mass shootings at a Wal-Mart in El Paso, Texas or the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania would meet this definition of terrorist actions, although neither were prosecuted as such.²⁷ This is because there is no statute criminalizing “domestic terrorism” in the United States. The FBI does recognize domestic terrorism, defining it as “violent, criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups to further ideological goals stemming from domestic influences, such as those of a political, religious, social, racial, or environmental nature.”²⁸ However, a US citizen or resident must be associated with a foreign organization designated by the federal government as terrorist to be convicted of terrorism.

Many critics argue against establishing “domestic terrorism” as a crime. The Brookings Institution maintains that a domestic terrorism designation would be “counterproductive,” given strict prohibitions on materially supporting terrorists, which hinder global efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate extremists.²⁹ Abolitionist progressives believe that such a designation would expand the carceral state and be used against vulnerable populations.³⁰ Regardless, domestic acts of political violence may enjoy wider support than their foreign counterparts; a recent survey conducted by the American Enterprise Institute found that 29% of Americans agreed that the use of political violence was sometimes necessary to protect America.³¹

Radicalization as Adoption of Extremist Ideologies

Other scholars define radicalization as the adoption of a “radical” or “extremist” ideology.³² In her widely-cited literature review of militant Islam in Europe, security studies professor Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen defines *radicalization* as “a growing readiness to pursue and support far reaching changes in society that conflict with, or pose a direct threat to, the existing order.”³³ While many similar definitions presume that adopting extremist ideology is a prerequisite for political violence, political scientist Abay Gaspar and her colleagues argue that this presumption has caused scholars to overlook many aspects of radicalization that do not map to securitized frameworks, presuming that ideological radicalization is simply a stop along a well-trod path. Instead, they advocate for research that investigates radicalization without violence.³⁴ Psychologist and security scholar Randy Borum further specifies that radical beliefs are not a proxy for violent action, that most people with extremist ideas do not engage in violence, and that many “terrorists” “are not deeply ideological and may not ‘radicalize’ in any traditional sense.”³⁵

This raises the question of how to define *extremism*. Peter Neumann, the founder of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, explains:

The term can be used to refer to political ideologies that oppose a society’s core values and principles. In the context of liberal democracies, this could be applied to any ideology that advocates racial or religious supremacy and/or opposes the core principles of democracy and human rights...The term can also be used to describe the methods through which political actors attempt to realise their aims, that is, by using means that ‘show disregard for life, liberty, and human rights of others.’³⁶

Neumann identifies extremist ideologies and behaviors as those that oppose the core principles of the social context they belong to. Similarly, social psychologists Kristen Klein and Arie Kruglanski define extremism as the synthesis of ideological zeal and profound convictions: “political opinions that deviate from those held by the majority, or those that are considered normative.”³⁷ This definition expands on economist Ron Wintrobe’s proposition that “the simplest way to think of an extremist is someone whose views are outside the mainstream on some issue or dimension.”³⁸ Thus for Wintrobe, Neumann, Borum, and Klein and Kruglanski, “extremism” is characterized as departure from the “norm” of the dominant culture. The second definition of radicalization, then, is *the process of adopting extremist ideology*, which is any ideology that deviates from the “norm.”

This understanding of *extremist* as synonymous with “radical” or “marginal” viewpoints depends strongly on one’s own point of view.³⁹ The debate in 2020 over designating entities as diverse as antifa (a political ideology that justifies violence against fascists), Black Lives Matter (an activist movement calling out structural anti-Blackness and state violence against Black people), and the Proud Boys (a membership-based organization with white nationalist and male supremacist views) as terrorist groups reveals the inconsistency here.⁴⁰ There are many cases in which extremist viewpoints are normal or usual, as in authoritarian regimes.⁴¹ And many communities based on fringe or marginal points of view, such as Flat Earthers or

New Age believers, cannot be characterized as extremist. *Violent extremism* distinguishes minority viewpoints that may lead to political violence or terrorism from those that do not.

More precise, non-normative definitions of extremism hinge on the disruption of the status quo or a focus on hostile action towards out-groups. The security studies scholar Sam Jackson, who studies right-wing social movements like the Oath Keepers, defines political extremism as “purposeful disruptive political activity that aims to replace or fundamentally alter the dominant political system.”⁴² Other contemporary scholars clarify that extremist points of view demonize or target another social group. For example, counterterrorism scholars Stuart MacDonald and Joe Whittaker maintain that an *extremist* is someone who “holds views that are not only on the margins of society but also foster hate toward an out-group or out-groups” whereas *radicals* “reject the status quo and believe that there should be sweeping changes.”⁴³ J.M. Berger, a fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, expands upon this, defining extremism as “the belief that an in-group’s success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group. The hostile action must be part of the in-group’s definition of success.”⁴⁴ This definition is perhaps the most useful for understanding far-right radicalization, as racist and even white supremacist ideas are hardly “radical” given historical and current political discourse in the United States.⁴⁵

Definitions in This Document

Thus, for the purposes of this literature review, we draw from Jackson, Berger, MacDonald and Whittaker to define an *extremist ideology* in the liberal democratic context as one which exhibits intrinsic out-group hostility and rejection of egalitarian and democratic values, and a *violent extremist ideology* as one which uses or justifies the use of violent political actions to accomplish those goals. Because *the adoption of extremist beliefs* is frequently conflated with *a willingness to commit political violence*, we attempt to untangle these threads whenever possible. As we will explain throughout this document, we do not believe that “radicalization” is a useful term for describing the processes by which people come to believe fringe or far-right viewpoints they encounter online. However, following the above, we define *radicalization* as “the process whereby a person comes to use or justify the use of violent political actions against an out-group and/or to reject egalitarian and democratic values.” Violence is thus a crucial differentiation.⁴⁶

This document is primarily concerned with radicalization into far-right extremism. Cas Mudde defines the *far-right* as “hostile to liberal democracy,” further subdivided into the *extreme right*, who reject “popular sovereignty and majority rule” (such as fascists), and the *radical right*, who accept democracy overall, but reject specific tenets of liberal democracy such as the separation of Church and State or universal suffrage.⁴⁷ This distinction is most relevant when considering far-right political extremism and populist radical right parties in Europe and elsewhere.⁴⁸ (The entrenched two-party system in the United States gives little opportunity for extreme, radical, or far-right groups to form their own political parties.

Instead, adherents to contemporary far-right ideologues engage in so-called “metapolitics,” or attempts to change overarching political discourse, rather than enacting political change through conventional political structures.⁴⁹ Thus, white nationalists attempt to mainstream their ideas through recruitment of like-minded individuals, media exposure, or integration into Republican party policies and politicians (most successfully during the Trump administration).⁵⁰ Thus, even peripheral or casual adoption of far-right ideas are connected to a larger political landscape that is integral to far-right radicalization.)

In practice, the far-right comprises a sprawling landscape of different people, groups, and organizations prone to quarrelling and infighting. They represent more or less extreme versions of antidemocratic beliefs, and their specific political commitments change over time.⁵¹ The term “alt-right” was created explicitly to put an educated, middle-class face on racism and legitimize it by distinguishing its participants from those in lower-class white supremacist groups.⁵² It has fallen out of favor since the deadly “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia and has been replaced by various splinter groups including the intellectual dark web, “anti-social justice warrior” content creators, and an alliance of people opposed to critical race theory.⁵³ We thus use “alt-right” sparingly to describe primarily online far-right movements that draw from internet culture and humor to appeal to young men.⁵⁴

Finally, terms like *radicalization* and *extremism* are often used quite differently in public discourse from their academic definitions. On a February 2021 episode of *Reliable Sources*, for instance, Democratic Representative Sara Jacobs defined *extremist ideology* as “one that is unable to take in competing ideas and reflect the truth. I think that’s exactly what we’re seeing here.”⁵⁵ This concept does not map to any of the academic concepts outlined above, yet it may reflect popular beliefs that extremism is “extreme”: unyielding, orthodox, and unwilling to change.

Implications of Definitional Ambiguity

Whether one views radicalization as the *development of an extreme ideology* or the *adoption of violent behaviors or tactics* should fundamentally change one’s perception of the scope, aims, and applications of the field. Empirical research on radicalization has not substantiated the intuitive claim that an extremist ideology has a causal link to political violence.⁵⁶ Thus, even if someone adopts a “radical” or “extreme” belief system, there is no increased likelihood of that person committing a violent act. If the goal is countering *violent* extremism, preventing ideological radicalization may have no impact on this violence. And if the adoption of radical ideology does not predict terrorism, and all evidence suggests that it does not, this raises political and ethical concerns about policing, criminalizing, surveilling, or otherwise intervening against the adoption of non-normative worldviews — concerns that play out in the Islamophobia that has plagued the development and application of radicalization research.

But, in practice, the critical distinction between *ideology* and *behavior* is routinely ignored. These perspectives are conflated when scholars or policymakers, often with reference to the plurality of ways the term is used, adopt an “and/or” definition of radicalization. Neumann’s above definition of extremism provides an example of this, as he defines extremism as applying to ideologies and/or tactics.⁵⁷ McCauley and Moskalenko similarly describe many forms of radicalization, including ideological radicalization, but limit their consideration to behavioral radicalization for “practical” reasons.⁵⁸ Of the eight scholarly and policy definitions surveyed by Borum in 2011, six discuss both behavioral and ideological dimensions of radicalization.⁵⁹ Kundani and Hayes’ report on global CVE policies argues that Dutch, British and US CVE initiatives culminated in a global counter-radicalization effort that continues to represent ideological beliefs and terrorism as linked.⁶⁰ Our assessment is that the ambiguities in definitions and approaches to radicalization complicate efforts to distinguish between beliefs and violence. It is unsurprising, then, that CVE efforts “vary dramatically” and “cannot define the specifics of what they are preventing, let alone how or why they are preventing it.”⁶¹

However, we also concur with Abay Gaspar and her colleagues that the ideological aspects of radicalization are worth considering regardless of whether they lead to political violence, particularly in the context of far-right radicalization. The spread of white nationalism, racist beliefs, and conspiracy theories has socially undesirable consequences even when these beliefs do not lead to physical violence. These include prejudicial actions towards marginalized groups of people,⁶² symbolic violence and hate speech,⁶³ vaccine hesitancy and refusal,⁶⁴ supporting authoritarian political ideas,⁶⁵ and undermining trust in democratic and scientific institutions.⁶⁶



What Makes People
Vulnerable to Radicalization?

What makes people vulnerable to radicalization?

The thorny definitional web described in the previous section leads us to two different questions: *what leads a person to commit political violence?* And *what leads a person to adopt an extremist belief system?* We distinguish between both in three areas of research: characteristics of people, characteristics of societies, and characteristics of social movements.

Individual, Psychological Characteristics

An early hypothesis of terrorism studies posited a psychological commonality between individuals who committed acts of political violence: a terrorist personality. However, consistent empirical research has found no meaningful link between individual psychology and violent acts. Subscribing terrorism to mental illness, psychopathology, or “personality traits” has not been substantiated.⁶⁷ Instead, research has shown that a diverse array of personalities engage in political violence, most of whom are entirely “normal.”⁶⁸ We return to psychologist Randy Borum, who argues that “forty years of terrorism research... has firmly debunked the notion that only ‘crazy’ people engage in terrorism and has yet to reveal a meaningful, stable, terrorist profile.”⁶⁹ In fact, a metareview of such studies concluded that terrorism was “perpetrated by rational, lucid people who have valid motives” but lack the resources to wage conventional warfare, such as military hardware.⁷⁰ A related point of view, the “Rational Agent Model” of terrorism, holds that a person may make a rational choice to use political violence in order to achieve their political goals, rather than being “radicalized.”⁷¹ Unsurprisingly, this conclusion, which actively works against popular characterizations of terrorists as “evil” or “mentally ill,” has not circulated widely in popular discourse.

Turning to ideology, the psychological traits typically linked to participating in activist groups or social movements are largely *social*-psychological rather than purely individual, emphasizing interactions between the individual and a larger community rather than focusing on certain psychological traits in isolation. For example, participating in social movements affects an individual’s sense of collective identity, or the sense of belonging within a social movement or activist collective.⁷² Aspects of collective identities, such as *perceived injustice*, *efficacy*, and *identity*, often bridge the gap between political motivation and action.⁷³ (Of course, “action” can mean any sort of collective participation.) Other social movements scholarship applies a theory from social psychology, “expectancy-value theory,” which suggests that people decide whether to participate in mobilization efforts partly due to their

expectations about others' behavior.⁷⁴ Like terrorism studies, social movements literature does not provide strong evidence that individual-level, psychological traits can predict participation in ideologically driven groups.

Structural, Systemic Causes

Another stream of research considers whether people engage in political violence due to structural imbalances in larger political systems, positioning propensity to violence as a product of a certain set of preconditions.⁷⁵ For example, scholars have investigated whether political violence results from a nation's economic inequality, rapid modernization, or authoritarian governance.⁷⁶ Researchers who examined the social environments in which terrorist movements emerged — usually outside the West — attempted to identify a common situational factor which caused people to engage in political violence. This work was inconclusive. For example, researchers established that poverty does not explain radicalization, as many participants in 1970s terrorist movements were solidly middle-class.⁷⁷ Neither do education, living standards, or the degree to which a country is economically developed predict the use of political violence.⁷⁸

Similar is the idea that terrorist movements emerge because of systemic social grievances, an offshoot of “strain theory,” which holds that people commit crime due to social factors like lack of income or education.⁷⁹ For example, people might join an extremist group because they feel alienated from mass society, or because the group they belong to suffers from systemic inequality. By joining a movement, people have an outlet for their grievances, lessening the psychological impact of the strain.⁸⁰ As criminologist Robert Agnew points out, this approach has three problems: it does not describe exactly how social strains lead to terrorism; it does not explain why some strains lead to terrorism and others do not; and it fails to clarify why only a very small number of people suffering the psychological consequences of systemic inequality join terrorist movements and an even smaller number commit acts of political violence.⁸¹ In general, these hypotheses fail because social factors are usually common to very large numbers of people, almost none of whom will participate in political violence.⁸² In his work on Islamic activism, Quintan Wiktorowicz notes that strain theory is still used in terrorism studies to understand Islamic activism as the result of cultural imperialism or the failure of secular modernization policies in Islamic countries.⁸³ He maintains that this emphasis has made it difficult to answer important research questions, such as why some structural conditions mobilize Islamic activism while others do not.

Are there, then, structural conditions that contribute to the adoption of extremist ideology? Turning to the far-right, much research has established that traditional racist organizations such as neo-Nazis or skinheads appeal primarily to poor and working-class white people experiencing economic hardship.⁸⁴ This might suggest that economic grievances cause people to adopt white supremacist ideas, similar to the argument that Donald Trump's nativist and misogynist rhetoric appealed to a “white working class” audience.⁸⁵ However, far-right organizations have always crossed class boundaries, as with the Ku Klux Klan, which at its

peak in the 1920s included law enforcement officials, politicians, merchants, physicians, and ministers.⁸⁶ Likewise, members of contemporary far-right movements such as white nationalists, QAnon conspiracy theorists, and supporters of the January 6, 2021 insurrection are economically diverse. A study of internet search activity found that so-called “alt-right” participants were highly educated and middle class.⁸⁷ Analysis of the January 6 insurrection by the University of Chicago Project on Security and Threats similarly discovered that participants were primarily middle-aged, almost all employed, and 40% held white-collar jobs. This is in stark contrast to previous purveyors of far-right political violence, who were mostly under 35, a quarter unemployed, and almost none in white-collar jobs.⁸⁸ This evidence suggests that *perceived* threat rather than actual economic threat is key, a finding that is supported by other literature.⁸⁹ Robert Pape and his colleagues found that the single biggest predictor of involvement in the insurrectionist movement was a fear that Black and Latinx people will have more rights than white people, a belief related to the white nationalist “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory. This theory holds that citizens of traditionally white countries with low birthrates are being strategically replaced by people of color and immigrants, threatening the safety of white women and children and economic prosperity. (The blame for this situation is typically placed on feminists, “social justice warriors,” “cultural Marxists,” and, of course, the Jews.)⁹⁰ Thus, perceptions of threats to white power are based on metanarratives and “deep frames” that circulate within far-right communities, rather than structural realities.⁹¹

Movement-Level Causes

Within sociology, social movements are defined by Sidney Tarrow as “collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities.”⁹² Since most social movements are non-violent, sociologists have tried to determine what distinguishes those that engage in political violence from those that do not. Unsurprisingly, this distinction is not singular, but a set of factors, including ideology, social context, availability of resources, the internal dynamics of the movement, and how other political actors like the state and political parties interact with the group.⁹³ For example, the emergence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq was due to adequate resources, widespread grievances, and a power vacuum left when American military intervention eliminated established authority in the country.⁹⁴ Della Porta summarizes the complexity of social movement theorists’ approaches to political violence: “Radicalization stems from complex and contingent sets of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutional actors....It takes place during encounters between social movements and authorities, in a series of reciprocal adjustments.”⁹⁵

Like political science, journalism, and communication, social movement studies is concerned with *framing*. According to frame theory, radicalization depends not only on complex, relational political dynamics, but how radical groups conceptualize themselves as collectives.⁹⁶ Drawing on pioneering sociologist Erving Goffman — whose work has also been taken up heavily in internet studies — framing consists of schemas which help individuals

organize their worldviews based on values and beliefs.⁹⁷ Thus, framing examines how groups construct and disseminate political, social, and religious points of view that justify the use of political violence and ideally attract potential participants. Beyond simply adopting a belief, the participant must be convinced to engage in activism — or, for that matter, political violence.⁹⁸ Thus, framing theory describes radicalization as a process by which a recruit gradually takes on the shared reality of the terrorist group, including reframing problems as injustices, assigning responsibility for such injustices to groups or actors, and constructing a justification for the use of political violence to counter such injustice.⁹⁹

Studies of framing thus investigate how content produced by extremist groups furthers such messaging. For instance, in a study of Iraqi jihadists, Mohammed M. Hafez analyzes narratives in insurgent videos, magazines, and audio, concluding that they tell a three-part story of “martyrdom narratives”: first, they depict Muslims as victims of humiliation and suffering by Western imperialists; second, they portray current Muslim regimes as ineffective and subjugated; and third, they portray an inevitable Muslim victory carried out by God-fearing, righteous Muslims.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, Kathleen Blee, an acclaimed sociologist of white supremacist movements, explains that white supremacist groups “attract followers by asserting that whites are victimized by Jews, nonwhites, and white antiracists, and face racial extinction due to high birth rates among nonwhites” (the “Great Replacement” theory discussed previously).¹⁰¹ Frequently, political events are formative in these movements, not only in inciting a collective response, but in taking on a sort of mythic quality; for the white power movement, the Oklahoma City Bombing and the Greensboro Massacre operated as these kinds of myths.¹⁰² A significant amount of scholarship on far-right framing has investigated how framing is mainstreamed through the conservative media system, even within mainstream or “alt-lite” outlets.¹⁰³ Blee also points out that far-right framing is in itself a form of terror or symbolic violence, as their portrayals of Jewish people and people of color are “intended to be immediately damaging to those who see them, as well as to instill fear.”¹⁰⁴

Social movement studies, however, may not always have the most appropriate frameworks to help understand white supremacy and far-right violence, given that much of this scholarship is based on studies of organized progressive groups. Blee notes that racist organizations like skinheads, neo-Nazis, and the Klan differ in many ways from traditional social movements: they are chaotic, disorganized, and transitory. Many people become skinheads or neo-Nazis not for ideological reasons, but out of coercion or fear, ties to friends and family, or the appeal of violence or drugs. Still others become involved in white supremacy due to incarceration or criminal activity (we discuss this literature later in Part 5: White Supremacist and Far-Right Radicalization).¹⁰⁵ Thus, members of these groups may engage in violence for very different reasons than choosing it from a menu of rational, political tactics. However, the groups that Blee studies also differ drastically from the members of primarily online far-right movements which may share ideological commitments with the Klan and neo-Nazis but be distinct in terms of social class, education, and, potentially, organization.¹⁰⁶ It remains to be seen whether social movement theory is useful to analyze groups like misogynist incels or QAnon, which are amorphous, almost entirely online, and resemble internet communities like fandoms in terms of their social dynamics.¹⁰⁷



How Are People Radicalized?

How are people radicalized?

Most research on radicalization shows that there are many different pathways a person may take to engage in violent political action.¹⁰⁸ The most mentioned factors include face-to-face socializing with a tightly-knit social group, which may be connected to a broader group via the internet; ideology, especially when presented by a trusted source; acceptance and socialization into the norms of the group; and identity, such as someone experiencing a crisis.¹⁰⁹ This is consistent with research on why people get involved in non-violent activism: they are socialized into it; they have prior experience with activist groups; they agree with the tactics the group uses; the group uses good recruitment tactics; the person is embedded in personal networks that reaffirm the values and attitudes of the group; and the person is at a life stage when they have the time and resources to participate in activism.¹¹⁰ While much of this work is based on studies of organized groups that do not participate in political violence, violent extremists are frequently part of broader social movements.

As they traced various pathways to radicalization, a subset of scholars began to investigate the role of social networks and relational ties in taking on extremist beliefs.¹¹¹ These approaches emphasized the importance of pre-existing relationships and small groups in facilitating the adoption of extremist ideology and, eventually, a willingness to commit political violence. We consider the findings of pathways research, the specific role afforded to groups and social networks in this literature, and the drawbacks to pathways approaches. We conclude with a discussion of radicalization as *meaning-making* and the role of affect in social movements.

Pathways and Pyramids

In contrast to simplistic models of radicalization, cross-disciplinary scholars argue that adopting violence as a political tactic is a process involving many social, cultural, and psychological elements. This research uses the language of *pathways* to understand radicalization developmentally, suggesting that there are many different paths by which people may incrementally become more likely to commit political violence.¹¹² These paths are gradual processes of assimilation in which people move from the margins of an extremist group to the center, ultimately resulting in the enactment of terrorist violence.

Several pathway models co-exist. One such pathway is psychologist Fatahi Moghaddam's *staircase* to terrorism, where each stair represents an increased commitment to political violence, but also contains opportunities for escalation and de-escalation.¹¹³ Social psychologists McCauley and Moskaleiko provide a multistep model to understand radicalization as a *pyramid*.¹¹⁴ They write:

From base to apex, higher levels of the pyramid are associated with decreased numbers [of people] but increased radicalization of beliefs, feelings, and behaviors. Thus, one way of thinking about radicalization is that it is the gradient that distinguishes terrorists from their base of sympathizers. How do individuals move from the base to the extremes of terrorist influence at the apex?¹¹⁵

While such models view radicalization as a linear process where a potential terrorist passes through a necessary set of steps, others, perhaps more persuasive, avoid such an approach.¹¹⁶ Political scientist Quintan Wikotorowicz's four-stage model of radicalization, for instance, involves a cognitive openness to new ideas, personal relations with activists, acceptance of legitimate authority in the activist group, and finally accepting political violence as a rational choice.¹¹⁷ The question of radicalization, then, becomes: how and why does a person develop increasingly extreme beliefs and feelings that authorize violent action?¹¹⁸ There are many other pathway models; McCauley and Moskaleiko identify twelve different variations.¹¹⁹

Importantly, these “bottom up” models stand in contrast to “top down” pathway models of radicalization adopted by organizations such as the Danish intelligence services and the NYPD, which presume that a person who is susceptible to radical ideas meets a “radicalizer,” gradually changes their behavior, cuts off social ties with people outside the organization, and finally undergoes a period of “moral hardening” in which they are desensitized to the use of political violence.¹²⁰ While this also involves a process, the process is initiated and pushed by a more senior group member. Such models are popular with government organizations since they suggest discrete strategies at each phase of radicalization: identifying radicalizers and cutting them off from influencing young people, encouraging friends and family to maintain social ties with susceptible individuals, and so forth. Thus, pathways models vary in the mechanisms by which individuals are radicalized (what the pathway consists of), whether the pathway is initiated by the radicalized (“bottom up”) or a radicalizer (“top down”), and whether the phases of radicalization must be passed through sequentially or not.

Social Networks and Relational Approaches

Pathways research has renewed interest in the importance of kinship and friendship networks. This relational perspective follows a similar turn in sociology, which argues that it is impossible to separate an individual from the complex social and transactional contexts in which they live, suggesting that society is dynamic and continuous rather than static or

fixed.¹²¹ This approach was forecast by della Porta, who concluded in 1995 that most militants in Italy and Germany did not decide to join underground organizations individually but were usually accompanied by “cliques of friends.”¹²²

Marc Sageman, a social psychologist, built upon this work in formulating his influential “bunch of guys” theory, which argued that a young person was likely to become a jihadist if they fell in with a group of like-minded friends, either because the entire “bunch of guys” joined a terrorist organization, or because one of their friends did. The typical narrative involves a young person adopting Islam, falling in with a group of radical political operatives, and developing close ties of friendship with them.¹²³ Thus, radicalization is a group effort, where strong bonds, emotional ties, and in-group dynamics play a key role.¹²⁴ Once the “bunch of guys” are socially affiliated with the jihad, Sageman’s model follows a pathways narrative, in which there is a “progressive intensification” of ideological beliefs and finally formal acceptance into a global jihadi movement.¹²⁵ While this model does not fully explain why a particular “bunch of guys” will radicalize while another will not, it de-emphasizes the top-down narrative of “radical imams” brainwashing innocent youth through networks of mosques.¹²⁶

Copious scholarly evidence finds that friendship and kinship also drive involvement in high-risk political and activist organizations, which may have more in common with extremist groups than typical social movements. For example, sociologist Douglas McAdam studied why people became involved in Freedom Summer, the 1964 voter registration drive that was both “high cost” and “high risk.” He found that a prior history in comparatively low-cost, low-risk activism could help integrate activists into the “world” of the movement itself and strengthened supportive network ties that further served to “pull” actors into the movement.¹²⁷ Sociologist Jocelyn Viterna investigated why women joined the Salvadoran Guerrilla Army (SGA) and found that network ties played an important role in motivating participation. The pathways to participation in the SGA varied widely, so much so that “the same causal factor that promotes mobilization in some people may actually inhibit mobilization in others.” For example, some women did not join the Guerrillas because they had children, while other women joined so that their children would understand the importance of struggle. Nevertheless, networks played an important role in participation in high-risk SGA activism because they built a sense of trust that helped to overcome other disincentives to participating in “dangerous activities.”¹²⁸ Moreover, as people become more enmeshed in radical politics, the group itself serves important social functions. Groups can be a source of bonding, enforce out-group animus, and encourage shared social norms through group pressure and conformity.¹²⁹ Radicalization is thus intrinsically enmeshed in social networks and relationships.

However, these insights do not explain so-called “lone wolves” who self-radicalize and are not recruited by or involved in more formal or organized groups. Political scientists Lasse Lindekilde, Stefan Malthaner, and Francis O’Connor argue that “lone actors” are not actually isolated, but may have contacts with other activists, groups, and especially virtual communities.¹³⁰ Rather than following processual pathways models, the lone actor’s path to committing political violence follows a “more complex and discontinuous” trajectory. A lone

actor may attempt to join an organization and fail, may be rejected by others, may become impatient with an existing organization and forge their own path, or in other ways represent a “partial or weak social embeddedness.”¹³¹ Indeed, terrorism researcher Bart Schuurman and his colleagues argue that it is precisely the existence of these weak ties that differentiates individuals who undertake acts of political violence from those who do not.¹³² As we consider the role of online community in the adoption of extremist ideology, such peripheral social connections become still more relevant.

The widespread acceptance of these network approaches (which may not all fall under the umbrella of pathways research) has increased the use of Social Network Analysis (SNA) by counter-terrorist organizations. SNA allows for sophisticated mapping of terrorist networks, integrating insights from online social networks as well as offline data from news reports, phone records, and the like.¹³³ However, this necessitates the surveillance of people who have nothing to do with terrorism, justifying large-scale dragnets that frequently focus on marginalized and minority groups like Muslims.¹³⁴ Moreover, simply understanding the connections between militants or activists still does not predict which, if any, of these individuals will escalate to committing political violence. As we discuss below, understanding radicalization as a gradual and social process still does not solve the problem of prediction so desired by government and state actors.

Problems with Pathways Approaches

We identify three problems with pathways approaches. First, these models treat radicalization as a much more complex phenomenon than previous scholarship, but empirical research applying these models has not succeeded in identifying variables that *predict* terrorism. They have, instead, identified a whole range of mediating factors, from individual level uncertainty and personal grievances,¹³⁵ to group, organizational, or movement dynamics,¹³⁶ to systemic or strategic sociopolitical factors.¹³⁷ While none of these mechanisms by themselves are sufficient conditions for violence, this scholarship shows that behavioral radicalization may correlate with a combination of factors. In light of this, and in distinction to the orderly metaphors of pyramids and pathways, Hafez and Mullins instead conceptualize radicalization as a puzzle, where the puzzle pieces are “grievances, networks, ideologies, and enabling environments and support structures,” each of which can vary greatly and result in different consequences for different individuals.¹³⁸ This, however, suggests that, as Quassim Cassam writes, there are “multiple highly personal and idiosyncratic pathways to behavioral radicalization... and no such thing as the radicalization process.”¹³⁹ He writes:

Schematic models of radicalisation can be illuminating, and some are, but their focus on general principles means that they are bound to fail to do justice to the full range of contingent and idiosyncratic factors by which individuals are influenced in transitioning from non-violence to violence. It only requires a cursory acquaintance with the disparate biographies of individual terrorists to grasp the limitations of the project of modelling behavioural radicalisation.¹⁴⁰

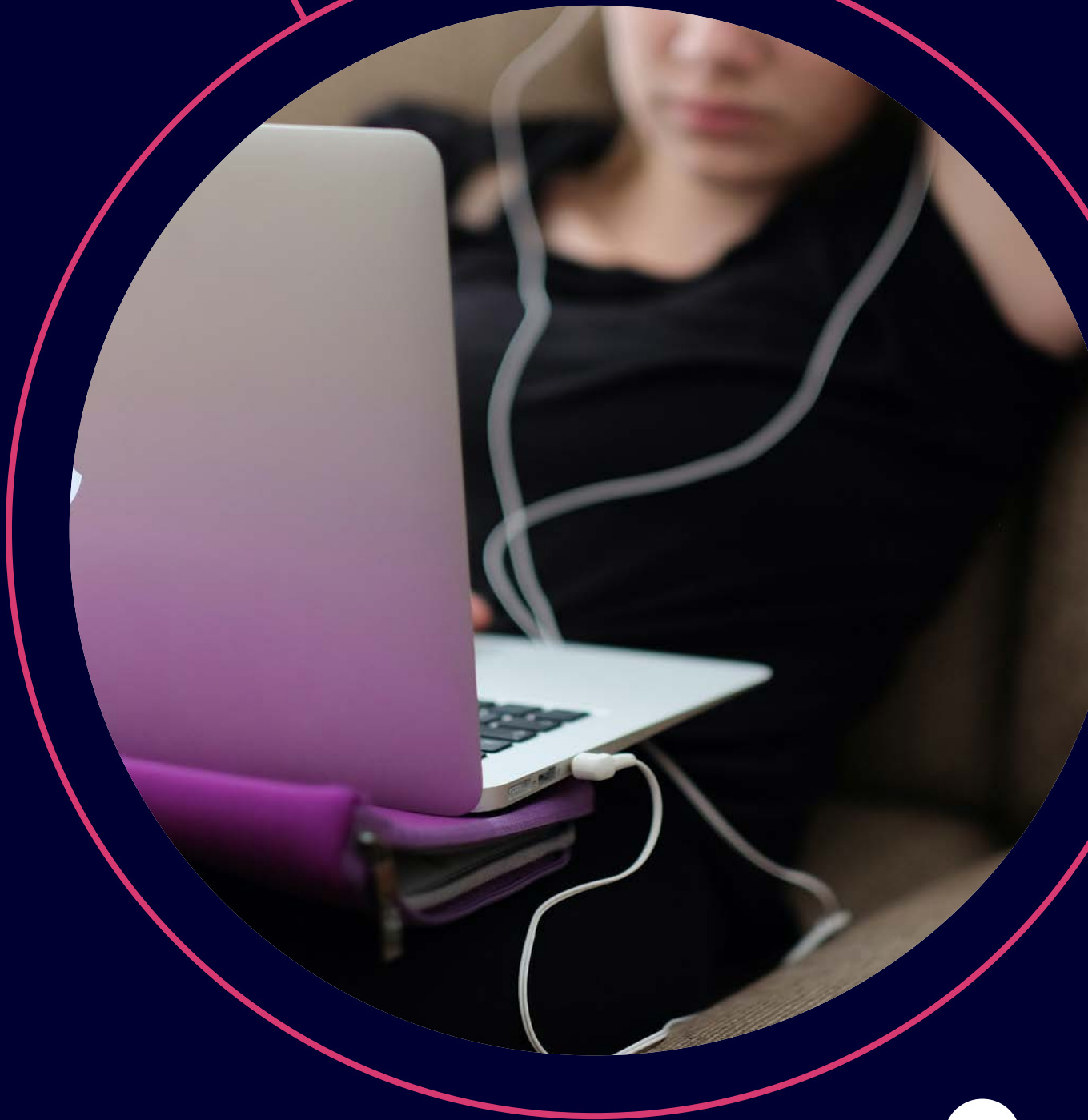
In other words, by providing more sophisticated insights into complex processes by which individuals come to espouse extremist beliefs, radicalization research intrinsically undermines the possibility of creating predictive or causal theories.

Second, in suggesting that several factors may work in tandem to radicalize behavior, pathways models facilitate interdisciplinary discourse, providing a framework for scholars interested in micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis to put their findings in conversation.¹⁴¹ However, many scholars agree that this scholarship has not been effectively synthesized; as a result, pathways approaches have generated a laundry list of factors that mediate radicalization, but not an account of how they work together.¹⁴² This brings us to the third point: it is very difficult to justify the political and ethical ramifications of eliminating radicalization if a seemingly endless set of factors is responsible, since they would require significant and intrusive surveillance to regulate and monitor. We will return to this in Section 6 when we discuss the limitations of online radicalization as a frame.

Radicalization as Agented Meaning-Making

A newer conceptualization of radicalization comes from sociologist Kevin McDonald, who draws from communication and affect theory to emphasize the role of the individual in radicalization: “not as something done to people, but as something produced by active participants, attempting to make sense of themselves and their world.”¹⁴³ To McDonald, radicalization is not a process by which an isolated young person is indoctrinated into an ideologically-driven organization, but a process by which a person takes on a way of *feeling* that “makes it possible to think certain things.”¹⁴⁴ His study of young people’s jihadi social media content finds that much of it seeks to convey shared emotions and sensations, both in terms of community and making sense of the world. The young people he follows increasingly divide the world into innocent/guilty and pure/impure. They learn to feel disgust and fear of the Other. They feel pleasure and pride in their identities, and camaraderie with their like-minded friends. For McDonald, pathways to radicalization are about “affective registers” and feelings rather than “social, political, or religious factors.”¹⁴⁵

We also see this emotional construction of social worlds within social movements. In studying animal rights activists, for example, sociologist Julian McAllister Groves observed activists formulating their own “vocabulary of emotions,” strategically managing their own emotional responses to animal cruelty to rationalize and legitimate animal rights activism to themselves and others.¹⁴⁶ Within alt-right and anti-feminist communities, the strategic employment of emotions in rationalizing and legitimating both activism and ideology can be seen in the framing of whiteness, maleness, and other privileged social identities as marginalized and oppressed.¹⁴⁷ Radical right and populist movements similarly leverage emotional affect in order to legitimate their activism and ideology, drawing on emotional responses ranging from anxiety and fear, to conspiracy and hysteria, to anger and rage, to a nostalgia for the “good old days.”¹⁴⁸ Thus, organizations may strategically construct “deep frames” and narratives to elicit emotional responses that support their political goals.



What is the Role of the Internet in Radicalization?

What is the role of the internet in radicalization?

If the term “radicalization” is nebulous, the term “online radicalization” is more so.¹⁴⁹ In their meta-analysis of academic literature, critical terrorism scholars Paul Gill, Emily Corner, Amy Thornton, and Maura Conroy write that the concept has an “abundance of conceptual problems,” faces “a striking lack of data,” and, most worryingly, has no clear definition. “Online radicalization” has been used to describe behaviors as varied as viewing extremist social media, accessing online information, and blogging about potential attacks.¹⁵⁰ Beyond basic conceptual problems, “online radicalization” is often presented in a simplistic way, as if access to the internet caused an individual to commit political violence. Frequently, computational studies that attempt to track “online radicalization” by crawling social platforms or searching for keywords do not include any definition of radicalization, taking for granted that extremist content will have deleterious effects.¹⁵¹

This lack of precision may be related to the lack of media researchers studying radicalization (with a few exceptions).¹⁵² Media and communication studies are the primary disciplines that have seriously considered the effects of broadcast and digital media. Yet there is no consensus as to what these effects are, how long they last, what they depend on, or even whether they exist at all.¹⁵³ Most obviously, if the internet caused political violence, the enormous uptake in internet access over the last 25 years would correspond to a similarly consequential uptake in political violence; luckily, that has not been the case. Data from the University of Maryland’s Global Terrorism Database shows that terrorist incidents gradually increased from 1970 until 1992, when they declined for a dozen years. Terrorism began to rise again in 2004 and abruptly spiked in 2014.¹⁵⁴ Deaths from terrorism, number of terrorist incidents, and the impact of terrorism overall have decreased for five consecutive years, primarily due to a decrease in armed conflict.¹⁵⁵

The absence of a simple causal link, however, does not mean that there are no connections between the internet, digital technologies, extremist ideologies, and political violence. The internet makes it easier for like-minded people to find each other.¹⁵⁶ White supremacist content that used to be difficult to find is now easily accessible and increasingly mainstreamed.¹⁵⁷ Organizations like Islamic State use social media to recruit participants,¹⁵⁸ while the vast majority of far-right interactions take place on social media platforms, using aesthetics deeply influenced by internet youth cultures.¹⁵⁹ And since 2016, disinformation

researchers have generated an extensive body of literature looking at how far-right activists disseminate their messaging into the mainstream media.¹⁶⁰

This literature generally does not use the term “radicalization,” and does not provide a definition of such. Instead, it engages deeply with the spread of extremist messaging, although not its uptake. These approaches pay close attention to the specificities of media, whether networks of hyper-partisan news sites, fringe online communities like Gab or 4chan, or mainstream social media. While a clear typology of “online radicalization” is yet to be theorized, in this section we look briefly at some recent work that traces the relationship between far-right radicalization, the technical affordances of social media platforms, and the emergence of persuasive techniques native to digital media.

Platform Affordances

Do specific technical affordances of social media platforms facilitate exposure to extremist ideas?¹⁶¹ Scholars tackling this question do not conceptualize social platforms as a set of network nodes and social ties that can be inspected for signs of extremist organizations. Instead, they focus on the role of digital networks and digital media in radicalization.¹⁶² Three sets of social platform affordances — recommendation algorithms, online communities, and partisan “echo chambers” — have been linked to online radicalization.

YouTube’s recommendation algorithm has been widely criticized for promoting far-right content.¹⁶³ The site recommends videos to users based on what they have watched or searched for, and anecdotal and empirical evidence shows that these videos grow increasingly extreme and fringe as the user continues down the rabbit hole. A user who begins searching for videos about Joe Biden, for instance, might be recommended videos about the far-right conspiracy theory QAnon. Philosopher Mark Alfano refers to this process as *technological seduction*, a process through which technical architecture “nudges the user toward certain prescribed choices and attitudes.”¹⁶⁴ For its part, YouTube has attempted to address this through constant tweaking of the algorithm. Perhaps because YouTube’s recommendation algorithms frequently change, computer scientists and computational social scientists are divided on the existence of a so-called “radicalization pipeline,” the process by which people are exposed to increasingly more extreme ideas.¹⁶⁵ However, other affordances of YouTube may contribute to the normalization or spreading of far-right beliefs; communication scholar Rebecca Lewis finds that mainstream conservative channels on YouTube connect to far-right channels through guest appearances and collaborations, amplifying and normalizing extremist viewpoints.¹⁶⁶

Even though some of these studies and op-eds use the term “radicalization,” none of them further a particular *model* of radicalization. Indeed, even if a pipeline is proven to exist, there is no evidence that simply viewing extremist content causes people to change their beliefs, yet alone commit acts of violence.¹⁶⁷ Instead, “radicalization” is used more as a discursive shorthand to convey the extreme nature of the content recommended. But this scholarship

generally lacks a robust theory of media effects that might prove a causal relationship between watching extreme videos and taking on extremist viewpoints, let alone committing acts of political violence.¹⁶⁸ Instead, it is simply presumed that extremist content leads to radicalization. As discussed previously, without any evidence that this is true, fixing the “radicalization pipeline” might not have any impact on hateful beliefs or terrorist acts.

In contrast, media studies scholar Luke Munn’s study of recommendation algorithms uses a pathway approach to radicalization to provide an alternative to the alt-right’s concept of “redpilling.”¹⁶⁹ From the science fiction film *The Matrix*, “taking the red pill” refers to, as Munn puts it, “a decisive moment of conversion, a single event that radically transforms the subject forever.”¹⁷⁰ (There is some empirical validity to this framing; developmental psychology and sociology share the idea of a “turning point event,” a moment in a person’s life course when “a particular event, experience, or awareness... results in changes in the direction of a pathway or persistent trajectory over the long-term.”¹⁷¹ This is worthy of further investigation.) Like longitudinal theories of media effects such as cultivation theory, Munn argues that radicalization is not a single moment of conversion but results from exposure to media content over a long period of time.¹⁷² This exposure results from algorithmic recommendations which steadily stream ideologically consistent content to the user and far-right online communities like Parler and Gab. Munn maintains that online radicalization proceeds in three stages: *normalization*, *acclimation*, and *dehumanization*. In the *normalization* stage, native internet media such as gifs and memes are used ironically to familiarize the user with extremist ideas while allowing them to maintain plausible deniability. *Acclimation* describes how a user is habituated and desensitized to racist or misogynist content, creating a new baseline for acceptability that moves further from the center to the fringe. Finally, *dehumanization* enables the user to see entire groups of people as Other, be they “invaders,” “social justice warriors,” or “cultural Marxists.” Munn’s study takes both the media environment and messaging into account when considering far-right ideological conditioning that takes place primarily online.

Because social media facilitates ongoing involvement, participating in far-right communities may contribute to an increased socialization into extreme ideas. Informatics scholars Ted Grover and Gloria Mark compared the Reddit /altright community with eight other political communities, finding that it increasingly contained “behavioral markers of radicalization” identified by researchers in forensic psychology.¹⁷³ Members of /r/altright showed “a clear fixation on racial concepts and ideas, primarily directed toward Jewish and Black people,” “elevated levels of hate speech and hostile language,” and “high levels of in-group and out-group identification markers.” While there is no causal link between typing comments reflecting racial hostility or out-group animus on an online message board and a commitment to political violence, online community interaction over time can still potentially contribute to an increase in comfort with extremist ideas.¹⁷⁴

Social media’s role in personalizing content, creating so-called “echo chambers” or “filter bubbles,” has also been blamed for radicalization. According to this theory, social media participants and search engine users grow increasingly partisan over time because they are

no longer exposed to diverse political viewpoints.¹⁷⁵ Similarly, once people begin to consume extremist content, their connections may “drift towards radicalization.”¹⁷⁶ Someone who searches for extremist content, for instance, will be served more extremist content.¹⁷⁷

On the other hand, there is copious evidence that social media and search engine ranking algorithms do not create partisan “filter bubbles.”¹⁷⁸ The conventional wisdom that people exposed to opposing political views will be more open to such viewpoints has been thoroughly debunked; rather, exposure to opposing political views may actually *increase* polarization (“the backlash effect”).¹⁷⁹ Most studies of echo chambers track links to news articles on Facebook or Twitter rather than involvement in online communities. Since there is a conservative “hyper-partisan” mediasphere which exists self-contained and separate from mainstream media, it may not be social media’s ranking algorithms but user preference which create monolithic political environments.¹⁸⁰ In other words, does social media shape extremist political beliefs, or are people open to extremist ideas more likely to investigate extremist content and join extremist communities? This is a deeply consequential, yet unanswered, research question.

Online Discourse

The popularity of social media and online communities has given rise to a set of frames, messages, or rhetorical strategies used by collective actors to spread extremist ideas, particularly the “alt-right.”¹⁸¹ Such far-right actors often brag about their ability to mainstream their beliefs; for instance, the /pol/ imageboard on the fringe website 4chan once claimed that they “memed Donald Trump into the White House.”¹⁸² The strategic use of media to popularize far-right ideas is not new. Several books by the pioneering sociologist Jessie Daniels chronicle the evolution of white supremacist media from photocopied zines to websites and message boards, showing clear consistency in their rhetorical strategies and messaging.¹⁸³ Her most recent work examines how social platforms contribute to the promulgation of far-right memes and discourse. The widespread discourse of “colorblindness” that characterized the early internet, a lack of moderation on social platforms, and white supremacists’ savvy use of disinformation are what cause the spread and amplification of white nationalist symbols.¹⁸⁴ In other words, both the technological and algorithmic affordances of social platforms and the disinformation strategies used by white supremacists contribute to mainstreaming far-right ideas.

One prominent strategy is the use of humor and irony, which is endemic to much web content but is particularly useful for far-right actors. Luke Munn (cited above) discusses the use of ironic humor to cloak very real racism and anti-Semitism throughout far-right communities.¹⁸⁵ This echoes previous work by Schwarzenegger and Wagner on extreme right satire on Facebook, Viveca Greene’s analysis of the “weaponization” of irony by the alt-right, and Kaarina Nikunen’s study of anti-immigrant activist use of irony during the European refugee crisis.¹⁸⁶ Broadly, this research demonstrates that the deployment of affect — satire, irony, detachment, or humor — by far-right groups facilitates the mainstreaming of right-wing

sentiments and provides plausible deniability for those dabbling in extremist ideas. This relates to the work of Kevin McDonald, discussed earlier, who frames radicalization as a process of adopting ways of feeling.

Another discursive strategy is fomenting distrust in mainstream media. Communication scholars Philip Baugut and Katharina Neumann's research draws on interviews with jihadists in different phases of radicalization to investigate how their relationship to the media correlates with ideology.¹⁸⁷ They conclude that extremism correlates with strong media distrust because extremist groups produce and consume oppositional media that blames mainstream media sources for negative treatment of the "in-group." Such processes shape the contours of the individual's media environment to create a network dynamic more conducive to processes of radicalization. This distrust of media is common in populist rhetoric, conspiracy theorizing, and, increasingly, mainstream American right-wing discourse.¹⁸⁸

It is worth discussing the literature on populism in greater detail given that populist far-right movements have had the most success mainstreaming their viewpoints.¹⁸⁹ While most scholars agree that the internet plays a crucial role in facilitating both the spread of populism and interactions between populist leaders and the public, the exact nature of online interactions between elite and non-elite populist actors and the character of populist ideologies circulated online are still debated. Easy circulation of information online is widely agreed to allow both populist leaders and the public to circumvent the mainstream media.¹⁹⁰ How exactly social media facilitates interactions between populist leaders and the public,¹⁹¹ however, remains contested. Though some scholars posit that social media serves as a "direct linkage" between populist leaders and the public, others characterize the relationship between populist leaders and the public as primarily consisting of "top-down" interactions, with leaders preferring highly top-down communication channels even when social media platforms make more multidirectional forms of interaction possible.¹⁹² And while a number of broad traits characterize populist ideologies online — including emphasis on the will of "the people"¹⁹³ and attacks on some faction of outsider elites — the nature and importance of these traits varies across partisan lines. Left-wing populists tend to direct attacks toward economic elites, while right-wing populists often focus on outsiders not considered to be a part of "the people." It is equally important to consider global variations in populist ideologies appearing online, including strong currents of centrist and theocratic populism in the global South.¹⁹⁴

Online radicalization scholarship suffers from both a lack of definitional clarity and empirical research. However, acknowledging that the internet does not cause radicalization does not mean we should discount its ability to facilitate or catalyze an individual's propensity towards political violence.¹⁹⁵ In other words, the internet is one contributing factor to radicalization. It may expose individuals to extremist ideas, especially over a long period of time. Far-right communities may engender out-group hostility and even dehumanization of others. It may foment distrust of democratic institutions and processes. Clearly, this area is ripe for investigation.



Are There Differences Between
Radicalization Into Far-Right and
Jihadi Extremism?

Are there differences between radicalization into far-right and jihadi extremism?

Most of the literature on radicalization comes from a post-9/11 focus on jihadi groups, particularly so-called “home grown” terrorists who committed acts of political violence despite being EU citizens.¹⁹⁶ In this section, we consider whether radicalization is equally useful for investigating groups on the far-right by looking at the similarities and differences between radicalization studies of both types of groups.

There are a few comparative studies of far-right and jihadi radicalization.¹⁹⁷ One school of thought studies the relationship between both groups, primarily in the European context. Counter-extremist researcher Julia Ebner embedded herself both in far-right militant and jihadi extremist groups in the United Kingdom.¹⁹⁸ She advances the idea of “reciprocal radicalization”—the idea that opposed extremist groups rely on each other’s rhetoric and actions to recruit members and justify violent escalation.¹⁹⁹ In other words, both far-right and jihadi groups employ apocalyptic visions of a terrifying future, positioning the “other side” as an obstacle to be eradicated before an ideal state is restored. For jihadists, this might be the Caliphate, while the far-right imagines the creation of a white ethnostate.²⁰⁰ Far-right attacks on Muslims thus inspire jihadi terrorism, and vice versa.²⁰¹ Despite their ostensible oppositionality, the two ideologies have much in common, sharing a Machiavellian way of thinking, a focus on an out-group enemy, a desire for social transformation, a reification of a glorified past, and a cult of heroism.²⁰²

Other European researchers argue that the *process* by which people come to adopt jihadi thought or far-right beliefs is similar. Sociologist Tahir Abbas maintains that young European-born Muslim men and far-right white working-class men share structural issues that make both groups vulnerable to radicalization, including “apprehensions over multiculturalism, dislocation, and identity conflict,” “a lack of hope,” “limited educational and employment opportunities,” and “hypermasculinity and hypersexuality.”²⁰³ (Refer to our discussion in Part 2 of the problems with identifying structural and systemic causes of radicalization.) In contrast, terrorism studies researcher Daniela Pisoui examined the pathways to violence of four German jihadis and three right-wing extremists and found that none were from low-income or economically deprived families, and all had access to education. Instead, she uses subcultural theory to lay out a gradual process in which each young man slowly adopted an alternative value system which “seriously questioned” the status quo, took on a desire to affect change, and developed personal connections to members of extremist groups. While the ideologies of the two groups of young men were different, their paths to inclusion were quite similar.²⁰⁴ Thus, preliminary research in this area suggests that the

ways in which young European men come to commit political violence is similar for both jihadi and far-right ideological commitments.

However, because the literature on jihadi radicalization has a very different history than the literature on far-right extremism, theories developed in one context may not be applicable to the other. First, we discuss the emergence of “radicalization” as a concept to understand and historicize the context in which radicalization studies developed. Then, we outline more recent work on far-right political violence. There is little work applying theories developed in the jihadi context to American far-right groups, and even less scholarship that rigorously examines their continued validity in the online environment of the far-right.

Jihadi Extremism

The September 11th 2001 attacks by al-Qaeda on the United States, the deadliest terrorist attack in history, transformed scholarship on terrorism. Post-9/11 approaches popularized the vocabulary of “radicalization” and “counter-radicalization” and integrated them into state-funded Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) initiatives, which remain hugely influential on both scholarship and policymaking today.²⁰⁵ Moreover, the focus of terrorism studies shifted to studying jihadi extremism in general, al-Qaeda in particular, and radicalization as a process of adopting jihadi ideologies. During the massive proliferation of scholarship on terrorism and extremism following 9/11, radicalization emerged as the dominant frame for understanding terrorism and extremism and drew interdisciplinary attention.²⁰⁶

Immediately after 9/11, efforts to understand the mindsets of those engaging in terrorism were seen as sympathetic to terrorism and thus was politically inadvisable.²⁰⁷ Indeed, politicians, pundits, and some scholars argued that there was something intrinsic to Muslim culture, or Islam more generally, that made its adherents more likely to engage in political violence, justifying aggressive military action.²⁰⁸ These arguments seemed to be motivated by xenophobia and Islamophobia and do not hold up to scholarly scrutiny.²⁰⁹ Most obviously, they do not explain the billions of Muslims who do not commit political violence, nor any forms of political violence that are committed by non-Muslims. “Radicalization” emerged as a preferred concept primarily because failed military action in Iraq and Afghanistan indicated that new approaches were required to combat terrorism. Arun Kundnani summarizes:

As the US ‘victory’ in Iraq gave way to a bloody war of counter-insurgency, and terrorist attacks took place in Madrid and then London, governments began to ask if ‘hearts and minds’ were as important as ‘shock and awe.’ No longer believing that killing and capturing could, by themselves, bring success, they looked for a new discourse that could better guide their counter-terrorist efforts.²¹⁰

Academics responded in kind.

It is important to understand this highly politicized context in which radicalization research developed for three reasons. First, there is a symbiotic relationship between academic research and military or governmental counter-terrorism policies. In other words, state support shifted to understanding terrorism as a process of radicalization because governments believed it would be useful in the global War on Terror. Not only did the 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid and London illustrate the limitations of the “shock and awe” approach to terrorism, but they popularized a distinct type of terrorism: domestic or “homegrown” terrorism. Islamic studies scholars Githens-Mazer and Lambert argue that homegrown terrorism was often considered more shocking because it emerged within Western communities, and thus generated a pressing cultural need for narratives “that explained how a ‘good Muslim boy’ (or a ‘good Asian boy’) became a suicide bomber.”²¹¹ Radicalization studies helped to meet this need.

Consequently, a great deal of research on jihadi radicalization is funded by and designed to assist in military and governmental efforts to combat global terrorism. While CVE is perhaps the best known and most formal of these partnerships, the counter-terrorism objectives of the United States and the West deeply influenced the broader academic effort to understand radicalization and counter-radicalization. As we will discuss, incorporating radicalization research into military, intelligence, and government initiatives to counter terrorism placed constraints on how such work was conducted, framed, and applied. While radicalization studies and CVE both represent themselves as part of the proactive and non-violent prevention of terrorism, most radicalization research remains enmeshed in a globalized, military effort to prevent radicalization and eliminate acts that are defined as terrorist or extremist by Western state actors. Rather than attempting to understand “objectively” how terrorism comes to be — or as objective as social science can be — radicalization research was, from the beginning, embedded in counter-terrorism discourse and subject to the needs of policymakers.²¹²

Second, because academic discourse often directly informs foreign policy and military strategy, it can become enmeshed in partisan and political debates. Sociologist Christopher Bail observed that the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment after 9/11 was at least partially due to fringe organizations on the far-right who were able to garner disproportionate media attention with “pseudo-academic” approaches to understanding terrorism. These organizations advocated for unilateral military intervention; vilified academics, liberals and less radical conservatives as terrorist “sympathizers”; and regularly engaged in “anti-Muslim polemics.”²¹³ Organizations as diverse as the Minutemen, the Middle East Forum, and the Federation for American Immigration Control thus co-opted academic language to propel nativist and nationalist counter-public discourse into the political mainstream.²¹⁴ More recently, debates over expanding CVE efforts to counter white supremacist movements, or labeling antifa or Black Lives Matter as terrorist organizations, are equally contentious.²¹⁵ Similarly, far-right scholar Cynthia Miller-Idriss notes that the United States, unlike similarly affected nations like Germany and New Zealand, has not invested in efforts to counter the spread of far-right messaging, despite broad consensus of their damaging potential, due to Republican reluctance and partisan gridlock.²¹⁶

Third, it is exceedingly difficult to critically apply the findings of radicalization scholarship due to the context in which it operates. The goals of counter-terrorism and CVE policies are typically incompatible with radicalization research which argues that people come to adopt extremist or fringe beliefs due to a complex confluence of social and cultural factors, and that there is not necessarily a causal relationship between extremist attitudes and a propensity towards committing violent acts.²¹⁷ While military or governmental approaches seek to find prescriptive solutions to radicalization, particularly in attempting to predict who may be most likely to commit violence, these motivations do not necessarily line up with empirical research findings — or the recommendations of researchers themselves.

Recently, public attention has moved from political violence committed by jihadi extremists to political violence committed by far-right groups including white nationalists, male supremacists, anti-Muslim groups, anti-Semites, anti-government extremists like militia members, anti-abortion groups, and conspiracy theorists. Such violence reached a 25-year high in 2021, with 94% of terrorist attacks and plots in the United States committed by groups and individuals with domestic grievances and 5% committed by jihadist groups.²¹⁸ However, the US government has shown far less willingness to use anti-terror techniques against such groups and has maintained a security strategy focused on jihadi extremism. This is changing. In June 2021, the Biden administration released the country's first National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism, which not only acknowledges the threat of such groups but moves away from CVE to a public health approach.²¹⁹ This approach is advocated by some contemporary scholars of radicalization, who emphasize community-based programs that extend across agencies over simplistic CVE efforts,²²⁰ as well as legal scholars and policymakers who advocate criminalizing domestic terrorism.²²¹ However, others do not support the expansion of “terrorism” to include the far-right, arguing, variously, that it will hamper deradicalization efforts, increase state carceral powers, and be misused against vulnerable groups.²²² In the next section, we examine the development of far-right radicalization as a research stream and discuss its most important findings.

White Supremacist and Far-Right Radicalization

Using “radicalization” to examine the far-right began in the mid-2000s as researchers used the concept to examine the re-emergence of radical right-wing parties in Western Europe.²²³ This trend intensified given the election of Donald Trump in the United States, the Brexit vote in the UK, and the ascent of populist parties in Austria, Brazil, Italy, Indonesia, and Poland, among other developments.²²⁴ While sociologists and ethnographers had spent years studying American and European far-right groups, including right-wing political parties, the Ku Klux Klan, skinheads, and neo-Nazis, few, if any, of these studies used the concept of “radicalization” or interacted much with terrorist studies and CVE practitioners.²²⁵

As extremism researchers turned to Western cultures and white radicals, there was a significant uptick in cultural and qualitative approaches to understanding radicalization. Reviews of terrorism studies since its infancy have noted the absence of field studies, interviews, and

methodological rigor in much of this scholarship, which frequently relies on media accounts and secondary sources.²²⁶ (There are significant exceptions to this including ethnographic studies of suicide bombers in Palestine and Sri Lanka,²²⁷ members of Hamas,²²⁸ and Islamic State militants,²²⁹ as well as research on primarily white organizations such as the IRA,²³⁰ the Basque separatist movement,²³¹ and the Italian Red Brigades.²³²) There are, of course, practical reasons for this. People who commit political violence are difficult to access; they may be dangerous; they may live in high-conflict areas; they have significant political motivation to manipulate interviews; they may disclose illegal activities, putting the researcher in a difficult position; there is a great deal of social stigma against speaking to many different types of extremists; and, again, there is a prohibition against seeming too sympathetic towards terrorists by taking their concerns seriously.²³³ However, these prohibitions and difficulties have not inhibited a recent increase in ethnographic, qualitative, and cultural research on far-right radicalization, much of which avoids the essentialist approaches that categorize post-9/11 literature on Islamic culture.²³⁴ Moreover, pre-2016 work on the far-right which does not use the term “radicalization” still provides useful insights on why and how people get involved in right-wing social movements and white nationalist groups.

We divide scholarship on far-right radicalization in two: European research which focuses on radical right political parties, and American research which primarily examines racist subcultures (recall Cas Mudde’s earlier division of the European far-right into the extreme right, who reject all tenets of liberal democracy, and the radical right, who do not, making them more amenable to mainstream political participation). As we mentioned earlier, since the 1970s, radical right groups in the EU have pursued traditional electoral politics to win seats in both local and EU parliaments, a process that has accelerated since the turn of the century. Because the US has an entrenched two-party system that is inhospitable to smaller parties, the far-right in the US has primarily existed as a disorganized set of subcultures, while a more organized effort seeks to push far-right policies into mainstream Republican politics.²³⁵ However, it is a stretch to describe voting for radical right candidates or participating in radical right social movements as “radicalization.” In many cases, these parties are large and popular. To do so would seem to undermine the ostensible alterity of “radicalization.”

Among the considerable scholarship on the European radical right in political science and sociology, scholars are split on why people support, vote for, or get involved in these movements.²³⁶ One body of scholarship takes a strain or grievance theory approach, as discussed in Part 2, which looks for common structural causes to explain why people turn to extremist ideologies or tactics. Researchers in this tradition argue that macro-level factors such as globalization, financial crises, or technological shifts lead to increased support for radical right parties.²³⁷ However, a number of empirical studies have found that radical right voters and participants are not necessarily economically disadvantaged; that two countries, or even two regions of the same country with similar economic circumstances, may have vastly different amounts of support for the radical right; that the most economically deprived

people do not participate in politics; and that the radical right may actually be more successful when cultural issues, such as identity politics, are emphasized over economic issues.²³⁸ However, supporters of radical right movements remain primarily male and working class.²³⁹ (There is no agreed-upon explanation for the considerable gender gap, as women are variously considered more liberal and more conservative than men, but the hypermasculine rhetoric of some radical right parties is surely a factor.)²⁴⁰

There are clearly deep linkages between anti-immigrant sentiment and support for radical right parties.²⁴¹ The “ethnic competition theory” holds that people vote for the radical right to avoid losing resources to immigrants. This may correlate to the presence of immigrants in a community, which may increase a perception of economic or status threat.²⁴² This is an active area of research with ever-evolving findings. For greater insights on the cultural power of radical right social movements, we turn to ethnographic and qualitative research on participants in both the radical and extreme right.

Social psychologist Bert Klandermans and political scientist Nonna Mayer’s 2006 volume *Extreme Right Activists in Europe: Through the Magnifying Glass* rigorously considers how elements internal to European culture facilitate the adoption of extremist politics. They find three broad reasons why people join extreme right groups: *identity*, *instrumentality*, and *ideology*. Extreme right movements appeal to people undergoing *identity* crises, replacing estranged friends and family with a new sense of belonging. They provide some people with *instrumental* benefits, such as prestige or friendship, while others join because they support the group’s *ideology*. Susceptibility to extremist views is often linked to interpersonal ties; most of their participants grew up in right-wing families, while others were influenced by teachers or military training. These propensities, however, were catalyzed by “some precipitating event” — perhaps like the “redpill moment” of the far-right — such as watching a speech by a charismatic leader, experiencing interpersonal “drama,” or living through a traumatic political event.²⁴³ They conclude that “extremists” are “perfectly normal people, socially integrated, connected in one way or another to mainstream groups and ideas. If they are isolated or marginalized, it is not so much the cause of their activism but more often a result of it.”²⁴⁴

Sociologist Cynthia Miller-Idris conducted similar fieldwork among far-right youth subcultures in contemporary Germany. In her 2009 book *Blood and Culture*, she argues that post-war Germany’s guilt over the Holocaust led to a rejection of national pride. Young people, reacting against this, are more likely to embrace national identity and nationalism.²⁴⁵ Her subsequent work has studied youth on the periphery of extremist scenes, arguing that for young people, “extremist engagement is characterized by a process of moving in and out of far-right scenes throughout their adolescence and young adulthood in ways that scholars have yet to fully understand.”²⁴⁶ Participation in far-right subcultures can ebb and flow, and frequently participants “age out,” though even brief engagements can result in violence towards racial minorities or the internalization of dehumanizing beliefs. She and her colleagues identified 12 categories of far-right involvement, only one of which included people who explicitly identified as members of a right-wing group. However, exposure to far-right

music, iconography, clothing brands, and style was so prevalent that even young people who rejected far-right ideals could discuss the “scene” in depth. This suggests that beyond “radicalization,” exposure to far-right youth culture is crucial in understanding how far-right ideas are spread and popularized.²⁴⁷ However, in contrast to simplistic media portrayals, her work also suggests that exposure to content does not necessarily lead to radicalization.

As Kathleen Blee writes, understanding this culture is essential to understand the popularity of the far-right in recent years:

As young Indian girls learn to wield daggers in defense of Hindu nationalism, Scandinavian neo-Nazis boys absorb the musical anthems of white power music, or German far-rightists adopt the soldierly stances they see as emblematic of a Nazi past, they are participating in and shaping a right-wing political culture that undergirds much of the recent surge in far-right movements. The import of such practices is difficult to discern from a distance, yet these are clearly vital to instilling a sense of group camaraderie and political passion that can sustain political activism on the far-right.²⁴⁸

In other words, far-right political movements are instantiated in the music, style, rituals, identity —and digital cultures — of far-right subcultures. As young people learn these practices, their connections to other participants intensify and they accept as normal the ideas and activities of the far-right. For instance, a study of the US White Power Movement music scene found that concerts, festivals, and websites constitute “free spaces” where “activists use music to communicate, materialize, enact, and sustain politicized movement activities.”²⁴⁹ The music scene makes white power political beliefs seem cool and appealing, while the events function as places where people can be openly racist, feel proud and pleased about their racist identity, and form affective bonds with others.

In the United States, far-right youth subcultures like skinheads and neo-Nazis are volatile and fragmented. Several studies have found that people who join these groups are not necessarily ideologically aligned — many of them learn their racist behaviors within the group—but are often attracted to the proximity to violence.²⁵⁰ In their report on the radicalization strategies of far-right white supremacist groups in the United States, Pete Simi, Steven Windisch, and Karyn Sporer use a sample of interviews with 34 former skinheads, KKK members, and neo-Nazis to investigate how and why people get involved in such groups and why some commit violence while others do not.²⁵¹ The report uses a push/pull model drawn from criminology to identify risk factors which make someone more likely to engage in deviant behavior, such as joining a white supremacist organization. “Push” factors (adverse conditions such as poverty or suffering abuse as a child) and “pull” factors (attractive aspects of the organization) work together to increase the likelihood of deviance. Pull factors mentioned by participants include the search for acceptance and belonging, attraction to the thrill of the forbidden, the belief that the group would protect them from violence, and a quest for significance to protect white culture. Notably, most of their participants (82%) were raised in families which espoused racist ideology. The report argues that there are many reasons why people in extremist groups do not engage in political violence like mass shootings: they prefer interpersonal violence; the organization they are involved with

condemns it; they have family or work obligations; they spend a lot of time drinking, doing drugs, or fighting rival gangs; they are unable to justify the use of violence against innocents; or they become disillusioned with inconsistencies between the organization's stated beliefs and the actions of members.²⁵²

Obviously, participants in these types of organizations differ from the anonymous participants on social media sites and message boards who comprise the loose coalition of youth-oriented, far-right interests referred to generally as the "alt-right." As we have discussed, the "alt-right" was originally founded to put a middle-class gloss on racist ideas, and alt-right figures like Richard Spencer and Andrew Anglin strategically aimed to differentiate themselves and their supporters from members of lower-class racist subcultures. The Charlottesville marchers, for instance, wore polo shirts and khakis, looking less like punks or robed Klansmen than a fraternity meeting or b-school reunion.

There are fewer scholarly investigations of why people participate in the alt-right. Samantha Kutner, a researcher at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, interviewed 11 members and 6 ex-members of the Proud Boys, an extremist group which has disavowed its extremism while repeatedly committing violent acts. Kutner's subjects stated that they joined the Proud Boys because they were attracted to its rebellious or counter-culture views, dissatisfied with mainstream conservatism, and liked the group's founder, Vice co-founder Gavin McInnes. The organization provided brotherhood and camaraderie and reinforced its members' sense of victimhood and precarity, providing them a masculine identity that they considered positive.²⁵³ Kutner describes participation in online extremism as *swiping right* (a reference to an affordance of the dating app Tinder to express interest in someone's dating profile). In this context, swiping right describes "the low effort way ideology is constructed online."²⁵⁴ A young man *swiping right* on the Proud Boys might search for them on Google or watch a YouTube video from McInnes. For many, this will be the end of their investigation; for others, this may serve as a gateway to more serious engagement with male supremacist groups or the far-right. Similarly, a young man may *swipe right* on self-improvement but find himself in redpill communities that promote male supremacist views.²⁵⁵ This is very similar to Miller-Idriss's categories of far-right involvement discussed above, and points to the need for research on peripheral participation in online far-right communities as a mechanism of mainstreaming.²⁵⁶

In a survey of American alt-right participants, researchers identified three themes in their answer to questions on why they support the alt-right: "1) threats to us, 2) return to the good ole days, and 3) faux news."²⁵⁷ These themes persist throughout this literature review. The perception of threats to white identity from immigrants, Muslims, people of color, and so forth, as encapsulated in the "Great Replacement Theory," appears to be a crucial part of participation in all forms of racist movements, as does a nostalgic desire for a former idealized state. The final theme involves a distrust in media as an institution, believing that it is anti-white, anti-conservative, or controlled by Jews, a belief also common to racist, conspiratorial, and right-wing populist movements. These findings suggest that people get involved in alt-right or online movements for similar reasons, and in similar ways, as they do far-right political parties, social movements, or subcultural organizations.

A final theory of why young people turn to extremist online movements comes from writer Angela Nagle, who hypothesized that the breakdown of traditional monogamous norms led to increased sexual frustration on the part of young men, leading them to embrace male supremacist movements, which are heavily intertwined with the modern alt-right.²⁵⁸ This hypothesis furthers the ideologies of male supremacist movements, who frequently draw from conservative texts about the importance of traditional sex roles in sustaining society.²⁵⁹ While there is no research on the marital status of male supremacists, Nagle's theory does not hold true for white supremacists, as married people are slightly more likely to espouse white identity views than single people.²⁶⁰



Is Online Radicalization
a Useful Concept?

Is online radicalization a useful concept?

This document is an ambitious attempt to knit together work from terrorism studies, social movement studies, radicalization studies, CVE, communication, criminology, media studies, and anthropology to better understand contemporary concerns around far-right online radicalization. While radicalization studies advance several generative insights on the mediating factors involved in adopting radical ideologies or behaviors, the findings of empirical research and the definitional ambiguities at the heart of radicalization research and CVE initiatives present analytic and political difficulties with which scholars need to confront for this to remain a productive site of scholarly engagement. In this section, we outline the problems with “online radicalization” and suggest some fruitful alternate directions for future research.

Should We Use “Online Radicalization”?

There are six problems we have with the term “online radicalization.” As a term, “online radicalization”:

1. Is analytically imprecise and conflates behavior and ideology;
2. Is normative and disregards that racist, misogynist, and xenophobic beliefs are popular in the United States;
3. Depends on a simplistic model of media effects and the internet;
4. Fails to attend to harmful effects of fringe and far-right behaviors beyond political violence;
5. Ignores the role of epistemology;
6. And is intimately tied to globalized security and CVE efforts.

First, even in scholarly work, the term “online radicalization” is imprecise and used to describe an enormous variety of actions and interactions involving the internet, from typing far-right keywords into Google, to watching “alt-light” YouTube videos, to livestreaming mass shootings. Most troublesome is the conflation of the adoption of extremist *ideology* and terrorist *behavior*. Research on radicalization has not found a link between the development of a radical ideology and the act of committing political violence. The literature on extremism has increasingly attempted to distinguish between violent and non-violent

extremism, understanding that the latter does not predict the former. This poses serious problems for radicalization scholarship, as the assumption that a link exists between ideological radicalization and political violence is what grounds the development of radicalization research and its incorporation into policymaking in the first place. It is, as radicalization scholar Jonathan Githens-Mazer argues, part of our “commonsense” understanding of terrorism.²⁶¹ As such, the lack of empirical evidence substantiating this link creates something of an existential crisis for the field, as well as the policy initiatives it grounds.

Second, the term “radicalization” is normative. Because “radicalization” was conceptualized against a post-9/11 backdrop, it is inextricably linked to a sense of Otherness. Whether we use “radicalization” to describe the process of being socialized into a community and taking on its belief system is not necessarily about any particular property of that community, but how sympathetic it seems to the person describing it. We must seek to understand the process itself without presuming incomprehensible alterity. Moreover, racism is hardly “radical” or “extremist” in the United States, especially considering the extensive efforts by far-right groups to normalize and popularize their messaging. “Radicalization” thus may not be useful conceptually to discuss the adoption of ideas that are historically foundational to the United States (like white supremacy) or increasingly part of mainstream discourse (like COVID-19 denial or the claim that Donald Trump won the 2020 election). We acknowledge this and are putting forward suggestions for future research that we hope can move past these limitations.

Third, the conventional wisdom around the relationship between online content and radicalization is deeply simplistic and unsupported by evidence, because people do not mindlessly adopt extreme beliefs after watching extremist media. Indeed, this idea resembles the “magic bullet” or “hypodermic needle” theory of media effects popularized during the 20th century which suggested that media messages were “magic bullets” which mesmerized passive listeners.²⁶² Long discounted by media and communication researchers, this approach to online radicalization is remarkably similar to the concept of the “red pill” held by a variety of groups, such as male supremacists.²⁶³ While members of far-right groups often talk about their “red pill moments,” it is more likely, as we have seen, that taking up such beliefs is a gradual process facilitated by on and offline relationships, emotion and affect, individual factors, message framing, and technical affordances. This subtlety is not captured by “online radicalization.”

Fourth, “radicalization” does not encapsulate the diversity of phenomena that interest contemporary scholars of online radicalization. As we have discussed at length, radicalization is usually applied to the process of adopting a counter-normative ideology and/or the process of engaging in political violence. However, researchers are increasingly concerned with how individuals and groups develop counter-normative ideologies like conspiracy theories or anti-vaccination beliefs, with less emphasis on terrorism as the justification for why these ideologies matter. The mainstreaming of white supremacy and far-right extremism has become a central preoccupation in the US and Europe, for instance, because of its growing influence on institutional and electoral politics as much as its links to political violence. Even if they do not lead to violence, the spread of white nationalism, racist beliefs,

and conspiracy theories have negative outcomes, such as increasing racial, religious, and ethnic prejudice and hate crimes; undermining public health efforts and increasing vaccine hesitancy and refusal; increasing support for authoritarian politicians and policies; and undermining institutional trust.

Fifth, interest in fringe anti-science beliefs like anti-vaccination and flat-Earthism have led to discussions of alternative “epistemologies” — frameworks for interpreting and evaluating knowledge — alongside interest in non-normative systems of belief. Scholarship on radicalization, fringe beliefs, and polarization all point to the central significance of media technologies in structuring the relationship between individuals and knowledge that allow for the cultivation of extreme or incommensurable political epistemologies.²⁶⁵

1. The process of adopting a counter-normative ideology, meaning a *system of belief* that deviates from those typically held in society;
2. The process of adopting a counter-normative epistemology, meaning a *way of interpreting knowledge* that deviates from that commonly held in a society;
3. The process of adopting an ideology or epistemology that explicitly advocates for intergroup violence or domination;
4. The process of adopting violent tactics to achieve political ends.

The contrast, or the relationship, between epistemology (how one evaluates truth or knowledge) and an ideology (a system of beliefs or a worldview) is rarely attended to within discussions of radicalization; social movement theory’s engagement with framing comes closest to explaining how ways of interpreting the world may link ideologies to very different actions. The two definitions of radicalization discussed in Part 1 thus conflate four separate processes which are both analytically and politically distinct:

For good reason, scholars may want to oppose each of these four processes. However, it is critical to note that, as we move from one definition to another, the political and ethical calculi that justify intervention, and guide appropriate responses, should change dramatically. The first view may apply to problematic forms of knowledge that have direct social or political consequences on the lives of others (like anti-vaccination), but may also apply to viewpoints that have no consequences on the lives of others, should be considered protected free speech, or are what more critical scholars would identify as “minor” or “subjugated knowledges” (those knowledges marginalized by dominant power relations).²⁶⁶ The second category raises similar questions about the ethics of intervention; it is hard to argue that people who reject climate science, for instance, should not be free to do so. The latter two definitions involve actions that are easier to condemn, but there is a difference between how one should treat the possession of such an ideology, its expression at the level of violent *discourse* (e.g., “hate speech” or networked harassment), and its expression at the level of violent *action* (e.g., “terrorism”).

Finally, radicalization is intrinsically related to state security apparatuses and globalized counter-radicalization initiatives. Work that continues perpetrating this frame may be taken up by these systems, potentially to increase surveillance and carceral infrastructures. Given the contentious political climate, in which organizations like BLM and antifa are just as likely to be labeled “domestic terrorists” as the Proud Boys or far-right militias, this is clearly worrisome. At the very least, researchers who continue to use this frame should be cognizant of its potential for abuse.

What Concepts Can We Use Instead?

Given our critiques of online radicalization, we briefly discuss areas of scholarship which may help us to better understand why people adopt fringe and far-right beliefs they encounter online.

Online communities. Research on the social processes by which people come to believe fringe but nonviolent beliefs such as anti-vaccination activism, conspiracy theories, creation science, or Flat Earthism demonstrates that inculcation into online fringe movements may be very similar to the ways in which people come to more violent online movements like white supremacy or male supremacy, especially in their use of media and internet technologies and niche online communities.²⁶⁷ Scholarship on online communities indicates that community membership is a process by which participants begin by watching or lurking, take on low-effort yet productive tasks, learn the norms of the group, and gradually internalize its practices and values.²⁶⁸ This process resembles some of the “pathways” models discussed in Part 3, and may help shed light on the broad spectrum of youth involvement in far-right groups discussed in Part 5. When investigating the phenomena that fall under “online radicalization,” drawing from scholarship in information studies, internet studies, and science and technology studies that focuses on the *online* is crucial.

Conversion. “Conversion” may be useful to describe the adoption of fringe belief systems. This follows from the study of cults and emerging religions, a very broad literature which has largely gone ignored by radicalization scholars.²⁶⁹ In his 2011 literature review of social science theories of radicalization, Randy Borum notes that radicalization scholars should pay special attention to understanding conversion as a process, although, like the red pill, it is often described by its adherents as an event. Conversion scholars have moved away from considering the convert to be “a passive target who has been damaged by trauma and/or has unfulfilled psychological needs, and whose will is overpowered by brainwashing” towards understanding the convert as “a rational actor and active seeker, whose decision to join is an act of uncompromised volition.”²⁷⁰ This deserves more study, especially considering that far-right movements are often, although not always, deeply rooted in Christian Evangelical culture, and the overlap between religious beliefs such as Creationism and fringe movements like the Flat Earthers.²⁷¹

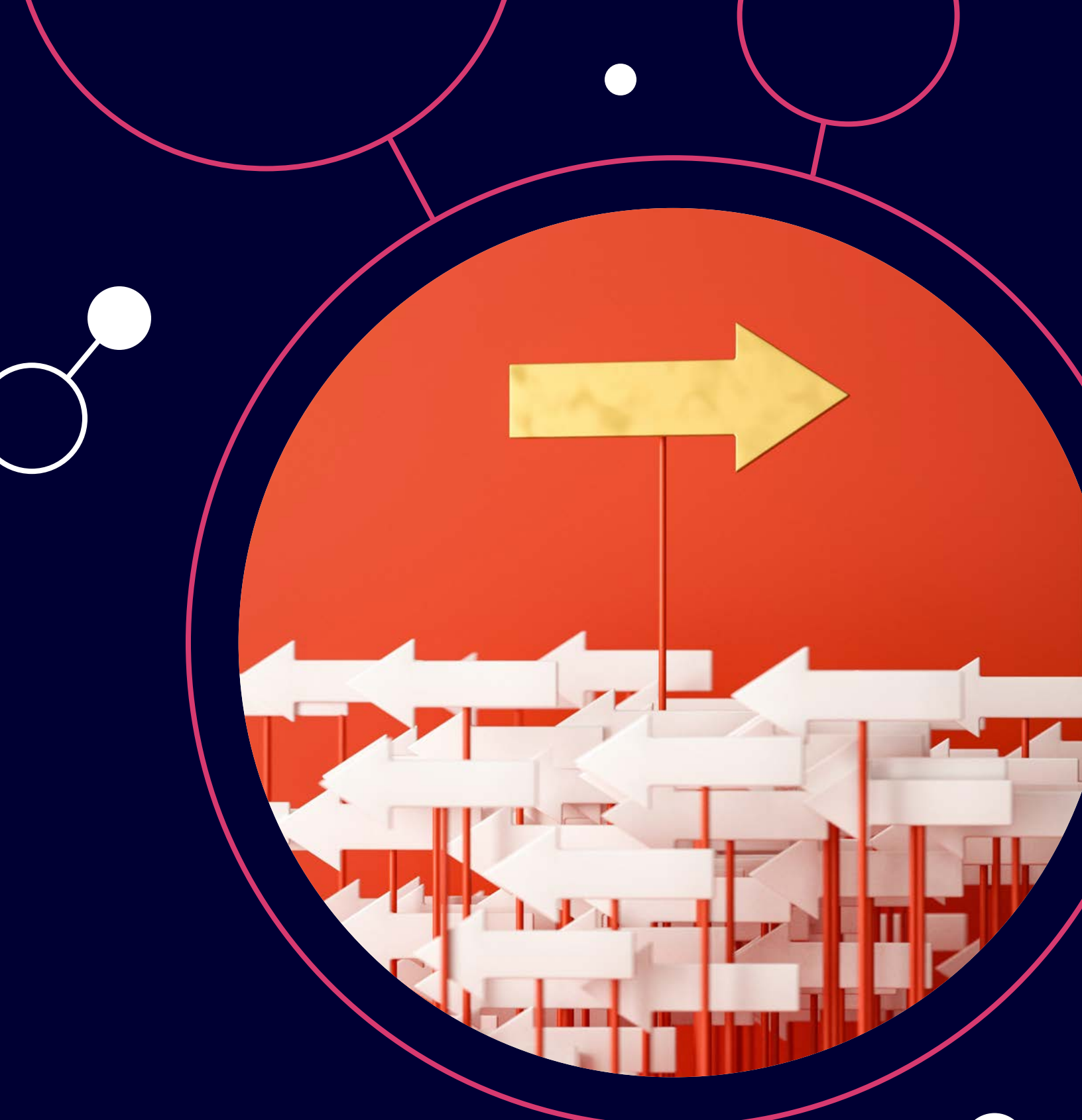
Conspiracy Theories. Another possible avenue for exploration is scholarship on why people believe conspiracy theories.²⁷² White supremacist, anti-Semitic, and male supremacist movements are all prone to conspiratorial thinking, and one of the greatest predictors of belief in one conspiracy theory is believing in another conspiracy theory.²⁷³ For example, researchers have found that people who believe in political conspiracy theories are more likely to disbelieve climate science, because rejecting climate science beliefs requires one to believe that global warming is a “hoax” perpetrated by scientists and the liberal media.²⁷⁴ Conspiratorial thinking is also commonplace among “anti-vaxxers,” Flat Earthers, and a variety of other fringe thinkers, most of whom congregate online.²⁷⁵ Understanding why people adopt such beliefs, particularly those that are epistemologically distinct from mainstream science or political thinking, may help understand how people adopt far-right beliefs that are predicated upon conspiracy theories as well.²⁷⁶ There is very limited empirical literature that connects conspiracy theories with radicalization, although the FBI notes that conspiracy theories may motivate domestic extremists to commit criminal and violent activity.²⁷⁷

Mainstreaming. Rather than thinking of the spread of far-right ideas as radicalization, we consider the mainstreaming of the extreme right in two ways: first, as the increasing prominence of extreme right viewpoints in public culture and among members of mainstream publics (sometimes referred to as “opening the Overton window” or “normification”); second, as the *institutionalization* of extreme right-wing viewpoints into political structures.²⁷⁸ But we can also consider it as part of a process like radicalization, as discussed by Munn and Alfano, in which a person becomes acclimated to the existence of extreme viewpoints, particularly through technological means.²⁷⁹ Given that the recent emergence of an hyper-partisan right-wing press has facilitated the spread of far-right ideas to more traditional media outlets and mainstream politicians, more investigation of the media ecosystem’s role in this normalization is necessary.²⁸⁰

Sociotechnical Media Effects. More sophisticated models of media effects may help us understand how the “online” plays into “online radicalization.” In previous work, the first author advocated for a *sociotechnical model of media effects* which she summarizes as:

First, that people make meaning from information based on their social positioning, identity, discursive resources, and skill set; second, that media messaging is often structured in particular ways to further a variety of agendas — whether it be increasing consumption of goods, increasing time on a website, or furthering a political viewpoint; and third, that the material settings of media consumption (for instance, newspapers, cable television, or social media) have particular technical affordances that affect both meaning-making and messaging. In other words, people can and do make meaning from media, but they cannot simply make any meaning. In networked settings, this is complicated both by the presence of connected others, and by the algorithms and advertising models that drive social media.²⁸¹

This model could be incorporated into future studies by understanding radicalization as a meaning-making process; analyzing extremist discourse for consistent frames and tropes; and investigating the affordances of different types of social media through which extremists meet each other and encounter extremist messages. Regardless, we believe that studies of online radicalization that lack a theory of media effects overlook a key part of the process, and ignore the role of social platforms, extremist messaging, rhetoric, and online community in radicalization.



Conclusion

Conclusion

We began this literature review with a simple goal: to find out what we could draw from radicalization scholarship to better understand the spread of far-right and fringe beliefs online. We conclude that “online radicalization” is a poor tool to use to solve this problem. The mainstreaming of right-wing extremist views is often framed as a crisis of democracy. We see this when considering the rise of the far-right on social media, where technologists and policymakers grapple with curbing anti-democratic ideas without stifling legitimate political speech. But we cannot view far-right groups as a threat because of the alterity of their ideology, group, or culture. Indeed, the views perpetuated by these groups, and the actors who hold them, are immanent within Western culture. Their success at mainstreaming their views is precisely because of this congruity. Because “radicalization” is born out of the post-9/11 Islamophobic crisis, it is unable to encompass these continuities. This document is a first step towards formulating new conceptual frameworks that better fit the present moment. We hope it will prove useful to scholars, activists, and policymakers trying to tackle the spread of hateful beliefs.



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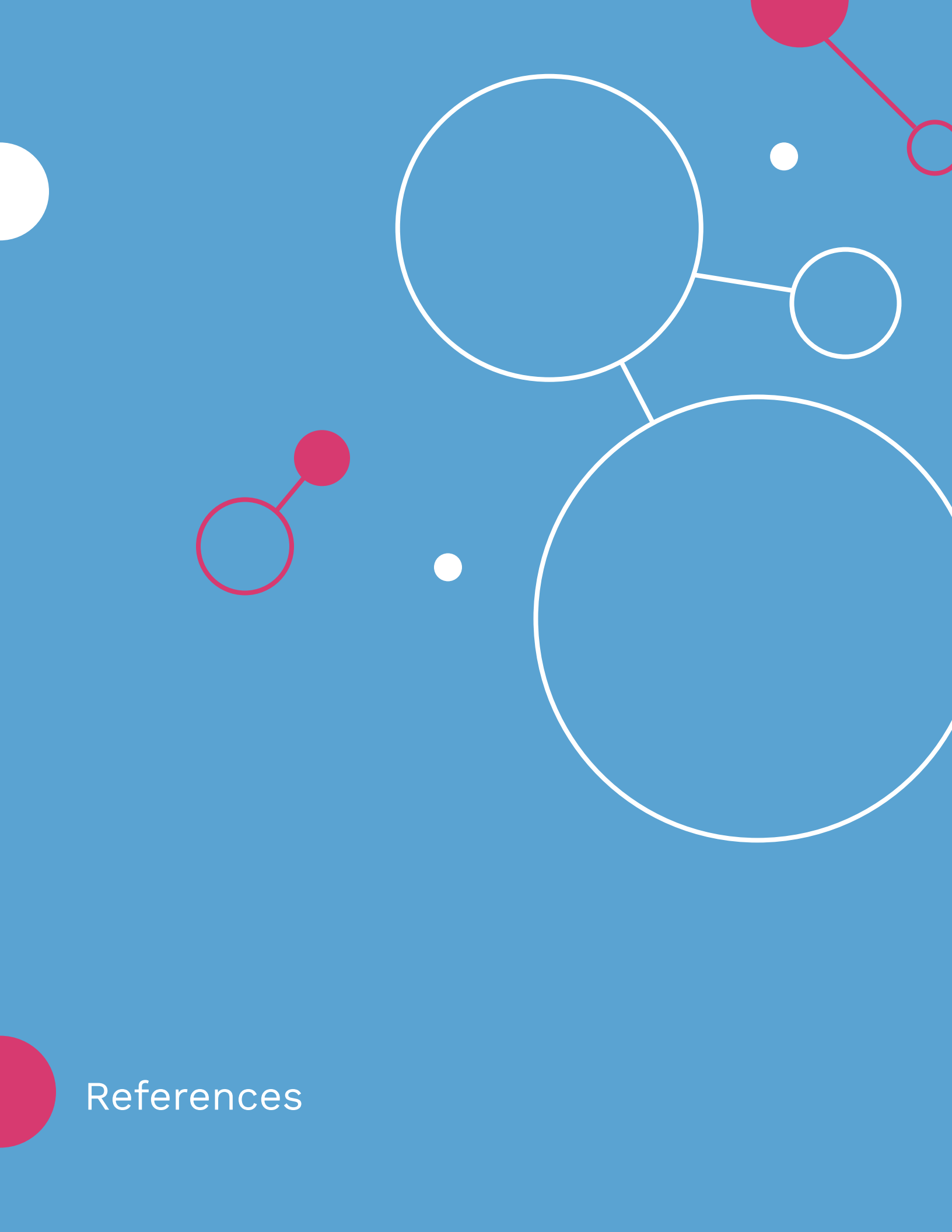
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